

Facilitation Guidelines for Sharing Perspectives on Current Events, Media, Social Injustice

Version: Online/Telephone

Purpose:

- A measured strategy for facilitating discussion about complicated and competing emotions, thoughts, assumptions, theologies and/or experiences;
- To build shared understanding and connections on personal and communal experiences;
- To explore how different perspectives point us toward new ways of thinking, feeling, and being and to reflect on how tech-mediated communication can lead us to ways of experiencing the world anew;
- To share knowledge about or teach others to use or gain facility with technology that is helpful for staying connected in times of physical distancing;
- To open spaces for difficult conversations that tend to be avoided;
- To practice imperfection, vulnerability, and healthy messy dialogue in spiritual communities

Time: No more than 1.5 hours (consider the difficulty of sitting for long periods of time)

Materials:

- Computer or phone to connect to Zoom, Skype or another online platform
- Internet availability
- Two-minute timer (watch, phone, egg timer, etc.)
- Chime
- Chalice (matches, candle) Ask each participant to set up a personal chalice (even if just a candle). For example, consider turning a coffee mug or cup upside down and placing a candle on top.
- Music to set the tone

Preparing for Online Small Groups:

Invite those who are not familiar with online groups to dial in 30 minutes prior for an orientation to using the technology. Consider covering:

- How to mute/unmute when not speaking or speaking
- How to edit your name/pronouns when using video chat
- The importance of using a quiet space where you're not interrupted
- How to "raise hands" virtually to pose a question or get the moderators attention
- How to use a "chat room" (include privacy options)

We encourage you to consider sending a document in advance that outline guidelines that promote healthy conversations. Focus attention on special requirements for online/video/phone communication, before the meeting begins, so everyone knows what to expect and how to respect the space.

We suggest facilitators to pre-plan 2-3 questions for the group and set aside a 90-minute block of time for sharing. The best questions are open ended and invite perspective taking. See below for suggestions.

Will you record the meeting? If so, make sure all participants are aware of this, and share with them how and with whom the recording will be used, prior to beginning the recording.

Facilitation Agenda:

Set up	Check your video and audio, find a well-lit comfortable place to sit (especially for video users) set up your chalice, timer, and chime
0:00-0:10	Welcome & Centering (music, reading, breathing/centering exercise)
0:10-0:15	Setting up the exercise
0:15-0:45	First Round/Opening Question
0:45-0:55	Break
0:55-1:25	Second Round/Follow-up Question
1:25-1:30	Closing (music, reading, breathing/centering exercise, celebrating the group)

Tip for using music in your session

Music can set a desired “tone” to small group sessions. At least one day prior to your session, identify the music you wish to use and embed/insert the music into a PowerPoint (PC users) or Keynote (MAC users) slide, or experiment with using Google Slides or Spotify. If you are using Zoom/Skype, you should “share” your screen with the participants during the session so the music plays on participants' computers (be sure to click the “share sound” button before you activate the sharing function...that will send your sound directly to listeners’ computer speakers). See the “Help” tab on your computer for additional instructions.

0:00-0:10 Welcome & Centering

1. Introduce yourself as a facilitator. Ask each person to share their name/pronouns only.
2. Create a worshipful space. Ask participants to center themselves (feet on floor, close eyes, etc.) Take at least FIVE deep breaths.
3. Invite participants to bless the technology being used for the sacred work of building Beloved Community. Perhaps something like, “as you touch your screen/device, may the work we do using this technology bless the world”.
4. To the group: “Repeat these words softly and at a slow pace as if chanting a mantra. We will repeat this phrase for about one minute: “I” (facilitator silently counts to three between each word). “Am” (pause). “Here” (pause). “Now.” Repeat this chant for about 1 to 1.5 minutes. At the one-minute mark, the facilitator should stop chanting aloud, and allow the group to fade out in a natural fashion.
5. Ask the group to light their chalices: Read these words:

“Loving spirit of this very moment,
 We are thankful that you are with us during these moments of wondering
 and doubt,
 When we forget that dreams are not born in an instant,
 But must be nurtured,
 Must be chosen over and over.
 When the world is telling us that we are dreaming too large,
 Too wild, too unrealistic, or even
 Too small...
 Remind us, gentle patient Spirit,
 That any dream worth waiting for
 Is worth working toward.”

[Adapted from Marta I. Valentin, *Voices from the Margins*]

0:10-0:15 Setting up the exercise: Serial Witness

Explain, briefly, the question that is on the agenda for the meeting. [*Ex: We are here tonight to talk about how each of us is responding to the coronavirus that is shaping all our lives, or, we are here to share our thoughts and feelings about the book we all read/movie we all watched/podcast we all listened to/piece of art we all viewed, etc., as well as the ways we see privilege, oppression, creativity, and justice reflected therein.*]

Explain why we use this process.

We are using a conversation format because we want to be sure that everyone has a chance to speak and to be heard. It is especially painful when we gather to talk about inequality if patterns of inequality show up in our process and are not acknowledged. This process helps us create a structure for each other, to make sure everyone has equal time and full attention of the group.

Explain how it works.

There are a few guidelines that guide our conversation:

1. Only one person speaks at a time, and only when you are called on in turn. We will each have two minutes to share what is on our hearts and minds.
2. No interruptions while another person is speaking.
3. If you are not ready to speak when you are called on, ask to pass, and we'll come back to you after everyone else has spoken.
4. Confidentiality. You are not allowed to share the stories other people share unless they give you specific permission to do so.
5. Double confidentiality. Because we want folks to feel free to take risks and share what is on their hearts and minds, we also ask that you not approach people later about comments they make here, unless they give specific permission to do so.

As you share:

1. Speak from your heart. Talk about your feelings and emotions. Trust the moment and be as honest as you can.
2. Listen without judgment. Keep an open mind, even if you disagree with what is being said.
3. Speak spontaneously. Do not “plan ahead” what you are going to say. If you are planning ahead, you are not listening to the speaker.
4. We will pause for about 10-15 seconds between each speaker to honor what was said, and also to give the next speaker time to gather their thoughts.

Facilitator: Ask one question at a time, and go around the group calling on people until everyone who wants to answer has had a chance (if you offer all the questions at once, some people will choose the “easier” questions and avoid going deeper. Don't give them that option). After two pre-determined rounds of two minutes per person, you might invite participants to respond to insights or new thoughts that were sparked by another speaker, saying something like, “Are there other insights you'd like to share with the group?” [Still, no cross-talking. Monitor your time.]

Options for Discussion Topics

Option One Focus: Check-in on the topic of your choosing (e.g.) related to the concerns of this moment.

Option Two Focus: Viewing, reading, or listening to something (together or separate) followed by a shared process and discussion of that content.

OPTION ONE: Discussion Questions (e.g., check-ins, pressing topics, etc.)First Round of Questions

1. How is your soul (humanness) feeling now? Or,
2. What feelings/emotions are causing you tension now? Or,
3. What are you struggling with now? Or, where did you surprised by kindness or compassion recently?
4. What are you noticing about...
5. Other questions....

Second Round of Questions

1. What do you need in order to move forward (tonight, this week) and stay engaged with this problem?
2. What are you learning about how we need to shift our cultural traditions, or our group/personal assumptions? Where are you seeing hope?
3. What would you like to see from others in our community?
4. What does progress look like to you?

OPTION TWO: Discussion of a Film, Book, Shared ExperienceFirst Round of Questions

1. Where did you resonate/identify/disconnect in this piece? Or,
2. What feelings/emotions were brought up by this piece? Or,
3. What did you struggle with in this piece? Or,
4. What are you noticing about...
5. Other questions....

Second Round of Questions

1. What are you led to do/think/be differently as a result of this experience?
2. Where are you seeing hope?
3. How does this connect to our community?
4. What further learning is required now?
5. (For closing round:) Who would you like to acknowledge in this moment? Were there any thoughts that challenged you to think in a different way? Or,
6. (For closing round:) What was an especially affirming experience you had in this conversation?
7. Other questions....

Caveat: Consider using this same format but identify a poem (or a line from a poem), a 25-30-word excerpt from a blog, news clipping, or perhaps an evocative photograph to spark discussion. As you choose alternative formats, remember physical challenges people bring to group learning (hearing or vision impairments, etc.)

Need an Open Forum Discussion Alternative?

Sometimes groups find that this facilitation strategy is too constraining. Instead of a second round of questions, consider moving into an open format of discussion. Always stay within the framework of “listening not judging”. If you decide to open up the discussion, make sure that everyone has an opportunity to share a “next steps” or “take away” type of reflection. End discussion with five minutes remaining, to complete the process with a Closing. Always celebrate how the group has engaged with the topic before leaving. Set a time for future discussions.

1:25-1:30 Closing (for both options)

Reminder about confidentiality AND double-confidentiality (you may not approach a person about what they said unless they give you permission to do so).

Invite people to hold each other in their hearts as you share these closing words:

“In this community, we hold hope close. We don’t always know what comes next, but that cannot dissuade us.
 We don’t always know just what to do, but that will not mean
 That we are lost in the wilderness. We rely on the certainty
 Beneath, the foundation of our values and ethics. We are the people who
 return to love like a North Star and to
 The truth that we are greater together than we are alone.
 Our hope does not live in some glimmer of an indistinct future.
 Rather, we know the way to the world of which we dream,
 And by covenant and the movement forward of one right action
 And the next, we know that one day we will arrive at home.”

[*We Hold Hope Close* by Rev. Theresa I. Soto, in *Spilling the Light*]

Blessed be. Amen. Go in peace and love. (Extinguish the chalice(s).)