

# Sharing in the Spirit

## Groups That Work Gracefully

### *First Things First*

I can't really believe how much we've accomplished," remarked the college chaplain. "Usually at these regional planning meetings we waste most of our time disagreeing with each other! How did we manage to do this?"

At one level, the answer to her question lies in the mystery of human interaction. In many ways, meeting others gracefully in groups must be "caught, not taught." People catch this spirit of graceful meeting by actually experiencing it, usually because the leaders of the group have learned how to invite people into a respectful space, open to the spirits of the others gathered, and open to the presence and action of holy Spirit. An atmosphere of this quality helps people to interact more effectively, whether it be in accomplishing a task, making decisions, sharing personally, or even resolving conflicts.

At another level, the answer to her question wasn't really much of a mystery. The group facilitator was using some tried and true practices for group meetings that are likely to work, if religiously followed. The building blocks of such group spirit are actually quite simple—though the temptation abandon them is constantly present: 1) appropriate norms for conversation; 2) a group meeting pattern that builds trust, encourages full participation; 3) a group meeting pattern that leaves room for "the Spirit to get a word in edgewise," as a friend puts it.

### *Appropriate Norms for Conversation*

Meetings don't work, often, because people don't listen. Having explicit norms for conversation helps create a space where respect can flourish. Too often we're so busy being right we have no time to listen to each other's souls. Taught from early childhood to form and defend our own opinions, we step on the soapbox as soon as we meet something contrary to our own viewpoint. We want to debate or debunk, defend or deny rather than taking the time to listen beyond or behind the other person's words to the movements of the heart that give rise to those words. And so we become bogged down in what Deborah Tannen calls 'the argument culture,' recreating the mayhem of the radio talk shows in our denominational conventions, church meetings, family gatherings, and personal conversations. By now, it's a familiar and often tedious set of standoffs: pro-life vs. pro-choice, pro-gay vs. 'family values', new age vs. 'authentically' Christian. Everything gets to be pro and con, us and them. Then both sides wonder, "How can those people believe such stuff?" Impatient with "such nonsense," we no longer take the time to look, to listen, and to learn. We no longer have the patience for "bearing with one another."

### *Group Norms for Sharing*

Clearly stated norms for sharing help participants understand, right from the beginning, what kind of behavior is being encouraged. This helps establish both initial trust and a shared framework. Norms, of course, can always be changed or added to as the group deepens its life. Here are a few commonly used group norms for sharing.

*Listen, and let each other finish*  
*Listen deeply for the passion behind the other's words*  
*Value differences in belief and experiences*  
*Don't "hog" --- let everyone have a turn*  
*Don't "frog" --- jump away from the topic*  
*Don't "soapbox" --- rather, speak about your own experience*  
*Respect confidentiality*

The first three are the most important norms. The others simply amplify their power. The discipline of letting others have their full say without interrupting, debate-style, gives others respectful space to formulate thoughts and express convictions. Most of us can't say what we mean in one quick, clear statement; we need a bit of time to mutter our way to clarity. When the listener can maintain *interior* silence as well—not forming

clever comments or winning arguments, but keeping the mind open and receptive—we may hear even familiar opinions and sentiments in surprisingly new ways. By bearing with others through such a simple conversational ritual we increase the possibility of knowing them more truthfully.

If we've "set a guard" over our own lips we are more able to listen deeply for the other person's passion, beyond the buzz words, phrases, or even ideas that set off our own disagreements and disagreeableness. Rather than taking to the barricades at the first sign of a contrary idea or unfamiliar experience, we may be able to explore respectfully what's behind the first rush of words. What in this opponent's life experience leads to these convictions? What values stand behind this stance? Once we move to the realm of experience and value, we may discover mutual concerns we never imagined. The pro-lifer and pro-choicer may realize that they both care passionately about quality of life for children. The family-values defender and gay-marriage proponent may both be passionate about the importance of commitment and consecrated sexuality. Biblical fundamentalist and modernist may both care deeply about hearing God speak through Scripture. Discovering such mutuality may not settle any arguments. How we feel about our opponents may, however, be changed immeasurably for the better. The very nature of our discourse may be transformed from acrimony to real debate.

Such norms may seem ideal for a sharing group, but too "touchy-feely" for decision-making, debate, or conflict-laden conversation. Nothing could be further from the truth. Decisions will happen more easily, for example, if ideas have *not* been shot down disrespectfully, if *everyone* has been heard respectfully before a vote is taken, and if there is some measure of *respect* for the opinions of those who lose the vote. And in situations of conflict, such norms can make the difference between a successful outcome and an outright brawl.

### ***Fundamentals of Group Life***

The norms work so powerfully because they put into practice the fundamental requirements of successful group life. When *any* group meets, there are always four major forces at work:

**Inclusion:** Active steps to make it easier for people to feel included are important, not only when a new group forms, but **every time it meets**. The need of every participant is to feel that they can be included as a valued member of the group, at the level they choose to participate. Will they have a voice? Will what they say be dealt with respectfully? Will what they contribute be taken seriously? The anxiety that somehow they will not "fit" here is high, consciously or unconsciously, in most people, whenever they enter a new group situation.

**Shared experience** is the antidote for inclusion anxiety. Active steps to foster "safe" sharing are important in the beginning of group life. As groups meet regularly, active steps to get the sharing started remain important. People naturally start on safe ground, discussing neutral subjects like the weather, sports, or non-controversial news, discerning what, and how much, they can trust in this new situation. Specific "check in" exercises at the beginning, and focused questions for sharing, help this process move along.

**Trust** grows naturally out of shared experience, deepens over time, and can be helped by focused questions set by the leader. Having been heard and honored at the beginning, people are more willing to risk a bit more in sharing. Skilled leaders will gradually deepen the level of sharing by continuing to model the style of sharing desired for this meeting — and intervening respectfully when people stray from it to suggest that the group stick to the norms.

**Task or Purpose:** The task purpose needs to be stated *not once, but with every session*. Purpose is the common ground that draws the group together. The task will need to be clearly stated, in these or words of the leader's own devising: When the task is unclear or unfocused, group interactions almost automatically become less trusting, and often conflicted.

## *A Group Meeting Pattern*

### *Open to the Spirit*

Each session should follow a simple pattern, each part of which helps create a safe, supportive space for listening, sharing, doing work, and letting heart and mind be open to the Spirit. If the group meets regularly, it may be helpful to practice various forms of group prayer such as centering prayer, conversational prayer, prayerfully guided visualization, and group liturgical prayer. *It is vital to more than perfunctory time to the times of prayer and silence*, inviting participants to a genuine inner openness to the Spirit's presence.

**1. Gathering:** Whenever possible, it is highly desirable to have a room large enough for the group to sit in a circle. Refreshments, and a time for people to mingle informally help make participants feel more welcome.

**2. Orientation/Statement of Purpose:** It is helpful to begin with a welcome and a statement of the overall purpose — even if this is not the first session. A brief agenda, announcing what the specific focus will be today and the steps to be taken during the session, helps people not feel taken by surprise.

**3. Invocation and Silence:** The explicit invocation of the Spirit acknowledges the desire of the group to be open to inspiration and guidance. It's very helpful to invite people to extended silence during which they can *make a clear, prayerful intention for good to happen in this meeting*. Lighting a candle can symbolize the continuing presence of the Spirit throughout the meeting. One group literally leaves a chair empty "for Jesus" as a constant reminder.

**4. Check-in:** Each time a group meets, it is "new." Even in well-established groups, it is helpful to have a "check-in" time—some simple question, easily answered, so that everyone present has a chance to speak: *What's one hope you have for this meeting?*

**5. Focus of the meeting,** whatever that may be: personal, sharing, discussion of a topic, doing a task, resolving a conflict, receiving information through a presentation.

**6. Internalizing the learning:** Leave time, toward the end of the meeting, for people to ruminate on what's happened, and, if appropriate, respond to what's happened in the meeting. A simple focus question can be helpful, varied according to the purpose of the meeting: *What's one thing you're taking away with you? One feeling you leave with? One thing we've accomplished? One thing we've still got to resolve?*

**7. Final Prayer and Silence:** It's important to let this internalization process be consciously connected with the Spirit. With an appropriate verbal prayer, begin and end a time of silence in which people are invited, in their own way, *to commend the actions of this meeting to the Spirit's continued influence— to let the meeting "go" into God's providential working.*

Meetings that follow these norms, respect these fundamentals of group life, and use a "liturgy of the meeting" that acknowledges the presence of the Spirit are more likely to flow successfully. People are less likely to feel excluded, disrespected or marginalized. Moments of unanticipated inspiration are more frequent. Compassion and respect are more likely to abound. The greatest temptation is, over time, to neglect the norms and pattern, letting our ordinary cultural habits take over. Casual spontaneity in conversation begins to erode listening till others finish, the need to get business done cuts short the prayer time or drop the check-in. Resist this temptation—and let Spirit abound!

—*Robert Corin Morris*

## **SHARING IN GROUPS**

### **Some Patterns and Habits that Encourage Openness**

*Personal sharing thrives on three major factors:*

- a) shared experiences.*
- b) a feeling of trust generated by common factors in experience.*
- c) feeling included, welcome, non-judged and relatively safe in the group.*

*Habits that help these to happen:*

1. **DO** speak personally, from your own experience. Say “I feel”, or “I experienced”, and share in as much detail as you can, so others can get inside your experience.

**DON'T** generalize: “People feel”, “everybody knows”. Everybody doesn't! This makes people stop to figure out whether they agree with you or not.

2. **DO** share the feelings and experiences you've had rather than emphasizing opinions. Experiences invite people into your life.

**DON'T** make your opinions the major focus of your sharing. Opinions tend to push people toward agreement or disagreement.

3. **DO** listen with your whole self. Share what “resonates” for you in another's experiences -- similar feelings or experiences.

**DON'T** Give advice: “I know just what you should do.” “I had that problem and I did....”  
**Don't** try to problem-solve: “Have you done this? Have you tried that?”

*Sharing experiences in groups is not the same as discussion or decision-making,  
and runs by different rules.*

*The goal is shared experience, not ideas or help.*

*Shared experience itself opens the door  
for each person to discover and claim their own feelings and values.  
This can lead to more productive opinion-sharing and decision making later on.*