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Getting the Most out of Group Discussions

Church Without Walls Team

There are times when working together in groups, whether in leadership teams, or entire congregations can be beneficial. This can include

- When you need to gather a lot of information quickly
- When you want to gather as many insights as possible
- When you want to generate ideas or unlock creativity in the group
- When you need to make decisions or identify priorities which affect the whole group

Within congregations this can happen at any time, but *Future Focus* and *Stewardship* campaigns are examples of when you might want to work in larger groups.

What is facilitation?

The process of preparing for, and running these group sessions is often called *facilitation*. 'Facilitation' literally means 'to make something easy'. In the context of helping a congregation or group to work well together to achieve the objective of the sessions it means:

- Putting people at ease.
- Ensuring that healthy group dynamics enable everyone to participate in ways that are comfortable for them.
- Helping people to listen actively to others.
- Helping people to share openly with others.
- Helping people to use their unique perspective to enable the group to better understand their congregation and its mission.

- Encouraging people to discern what God might be saying through the Bible, through others, and in their own minds and hearts.

Facilitators achieve this through:

- Careful preparation.
- Skilful and sensitive leading of the sessions.
- Diligent analysis and recording of the outcomes of each session.

External or DIY facilitation?

Group discussion sessions can be facilitated by someone from within the group, or you may want to invite an external facilitator to help. There are pros and cons with both approaches.

Facilitators from within the congregation will know the people involved and may be able to use that knowledge to manage the group dynamics well. However, an insider may find it difficult to serve the needs of the group without getting involved themselves. Even if they are willing to sacrifice their own input to the discussion in order to enable the rest of the congregation to make a full contribution, they may not be viewed as neutral by others.

Using people from outside the congregation may reduce the likelihood of people feeling that the facilitators may be bringing their own agenda. However, external facilitators will need to work harder to get to know the people and understand how the group functions.

For many congregations, the decision regarding whether to use their own facilitators or someone from outside will come down to whether they have suitable people within the congregation who would be willing to take on this role.

Who can be a facilitator?

For someone to be an effective facilitator, they need to be committed to this process and be able to do the following:

- Plan and prepare the programme carefully.
- Put people at ease and be sensitive to individual needs and the dynamics of groups.
- Communicate clearly – in giving verbal instructions and in writing brief reports.
- Be willing to set aside any agenda of their own and serve the needs of the group.

People who have these skills are often found in congregations, as they are skills that are required in other areas of life and in some jobs. In addition, for people to facilitate effectively within their own congregation, they need to be well regarded and have the trust of people. Whatever role facilitators normally have within the congregation, they should ensure that all involved know that every person's opinion is of equal value. If those in formal leadership positions are to be effective facilitators, they will need to emphasise this.



Putting together a facilitation team

Even in a small congregation, there are multiple benefits in having more than one facilitator.

Firstly, it spreads the workload. Different people can take the lead for different activities. That means less preparation is required by each person. Furthermore, participants appreciate a variety in presentation style and voice.

Secondly, having more than one facilitator also means that, while one person takes the lead on a particular activity, the other(s) can have their eyes and ears wide open, giving their full attention to how people are responding, observing whether they are understanding instructions and looking out for those who may be struggling to participate, or people who may tend to dominate their group.

Another advantage of the team approach is that, while no one person may have all the necessary skills, a small team may feel that, together, they have all the qualities that are needed. For example, one person may be happy to lead sessions, but would prefer not to write reports; someone may be happy to take the role of observing from the edge and gently intervening to guide or support, but be unwilling to take a more upfront role in giving instructions.

In a small congregation, if they have the necessary skills between them, two people will be adequate. In bigger congregations, a larger team may be preferred.

The overall approach

Effective facilitators give careful attention to each of the following three areas. They have each of them in mind as they plan, as they prepare and as they facilitate.



Giving instructions

The ability to give clear instructions is a crucial part of facilitation. To do this, the facilitator must be crystal clear about why the particular activity is being undertaken, what the intended outcomes are and the steps involved. If not, it is unlikely that they will be able to help others understand effectively! Here are a few tips:

- Before leading a session, 'walk through' the whole programme in your mind and ensure that you have clear, helpful instructions memorised (or written down) for each step.
- Always give one instruction at a time.

- As far as possible, anticipate and answer people's questions before they are asked. (Why? What? How? What if?)
- Check that everyone has understood. This is done by asking, but also by observing facial expressions and body language.
- If an activity does not proceed as intended, move quickly to ensure that it does. If confusion or misunderstanding is widespread, don't hesitate to call for the whole group's attention again. If there is one group or an individual who seems to be stuck or heading in the wrong direction, draw alongside and help – or ensure that one of the facilitation team does.

Getting the most from the process

- The facilitator should not be part of a group, but should be available to assist all the groups.
- Groups should comprise five to seven people; if the groups are larger, there will be a few people active and the others feeling bored!
- Groups should comprise people who have a spread of length of time in the congregation(s).
- Are you going to involve children/young people? If so, think about the timing of the event – a weekday evening could end too late for those with school the next day. If children are not involved, it could be useful to arrange crèche facilities to allow parents with young children to attend.
- Think about the room layout. Is it useful to have tables to write on? Will everyone have to be able to see a screen? Is it easy to gather and talk in groups? Café Style set up is both practical and relational (see over the page for the diagram).

Ground rules

It is useful to have some 'ground rules', which everyone agrees to abide by, and this should be introduced during the introductory part of the session. While each situation may call for different rules, some examples of what might be included are:

- **Respect** – everyone has a unique perspective based on their own set of experiences. We must all respect each other's contributions.
- **Active listening** – not only do we listen to each other, but we listen intently, eagerly seeking to understand what the other person is communicating. It is a privilege to listen to another person.

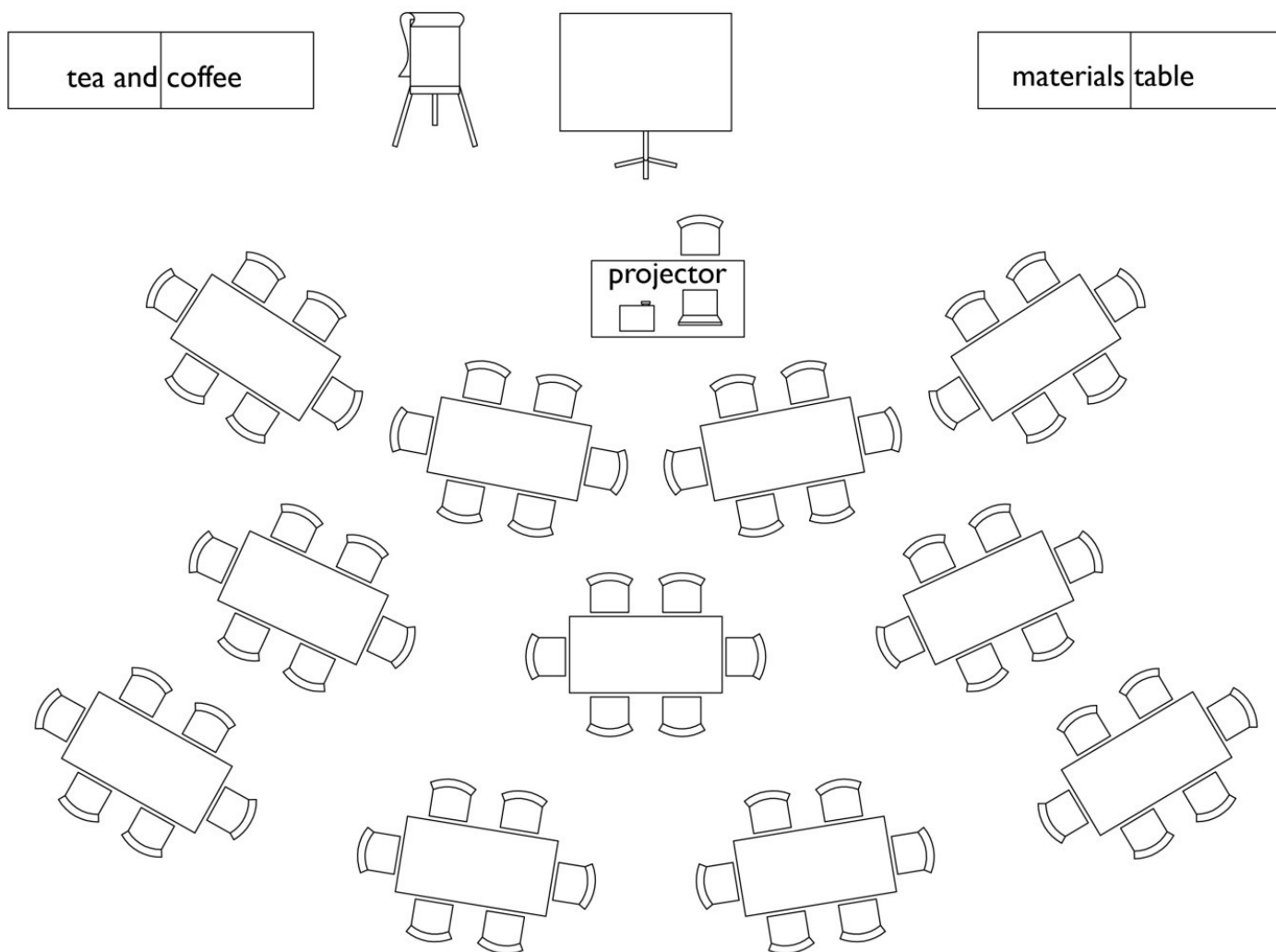
- **Only one person in a group speaks at any one time** – there should not be side conversations.
- **Everybody should have an opportunity to contribute** – if necessary, the facilitator may insist on a 'nobody speaks twice until everybody speaks once' rule. If this is used, it is important to emphasise that nobody should feel 'put on the spot' or forced to speak when they would rather remain silent. Ensure that people know that they can say 'I have nothing to say at this point' without embarrassment.
- **Switch off mobile phones** – unless people really need to have them on in case of a possible emergency call, in which case they may be able to put them onto a vibration-only mode.

It can be helpful to list these on a flipchart sheet, which remains visible throughout the session. It is important that everyone is comfortable with these from the outset, and some time should be given to allow amendments or additions to be made (e.g. an agreed finish time, etc).

Although this may seem to take up valuable time, it helps ensure smooth running of the sessions and can actually be a time-saver.



Café Style Setup



About the author

The Church Without Walls Team are involved in resourcing several processes which deal with change management in congregations, including *Future Focus*.

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