

Group Sync Gifts Summary

This document is a summary of what came out of a Group Sync sponsored meeting on January 10, 2016. Many people do not know what Group Sync is or what we do. We differ from most other lay groups in the church. We do not decide what groups will be created nor do we approve others' proposals for new groups. Instead, we look for what interests church members might like to pursue in a small group setting. We may solicit leaders for groups for which people have expressed an interest. We also offer support to virtually any existing group that is sponsoring an event that might be enriched by a brief discussion. Examples of these might be a meeting about church finances, a presentation by an outside speaker, the recent film series, and discussions like those held when we were considering becoming a Reconciling Church, or any other event where people might benefit from an opportunity to connect around the event sponsored by NUMC. Our hope is that leaders can assist group members to develop more meaningful and lasting connections with each other.

We invited group leaders to come and share their group facilitation gifts, skills, and experiences. If you are reading this document, you may have: attended that event, be an experienced group facilitator at NUMC or be leading a group for the first time. This document is not intended to be an instruction manual for group facilitation. It is intended to help affirm what you already know, offer new ideas to try or help to put some of your skills and abilities into a context for how we all can

facilitate more meaningful connections between members of NUMC through small group experience.

Gifts

First we asked people to share their gifts for group leadership. The list included:

1. Being a 'non anxious' presence for group members.
2. Setting ground rules for participation in the group that help to create a safe atmosphere for sharing experiences and feelings with others. Chief among these was an expectation of confidentiality: i.e., that group members avoid sharing the experiences of others with people outside the group.
3. Listening carefully to: what is said, how it is said, the feelings in and behind what is said and also to what is not said.
4. Make every effort to encourage members to say something, even if only a little, during the first group meeting. The purpose of this is to attempt to make it easier for all members to continue to participate actively. It may be especially important for shy or introverted individuals to help them continue to participate in the discussion.
5. Patience with group members and acceptance and affirmation of them.
6. Attention to the atmosphere of the meeting space. Comfort, privacy, absence of intrusions etc.
7. Empathy, compassion and intentional fostering of an atmosphere of safety.

8. If the discussion is around written material or a movie, a willingness to prepare by reading or watching ahead of time. One member mentioned that they read the material twice before leading a group.
9. Insuring that everyone feels "seen" in the beginning of the group by having people learn others names and perhaps introducing themselves and saying something about themselves in the first meeting.
10. Reassuring members that there are no "bad ideas," and fostering an atmosphere that discourages judgements of other members of the group. This includes encouraging group members to use "I" statements rather than "you" statements that might imply that one member knows what another is thinking or feeling or feel judgmental to that person.
11. Paying attention to how each group and the last group ends. This could include leader or participant prayer, a prayer circle where everyone has an opportunity to offer up a prayer, a question about what each members 'take away' from that experience has been or other strategies that provide for a ritual for closure of the group.
12. The possibility that in leading a group we may discover our own gifts for leading groups for the first time or develop a more complete understanding of them.

Strategies

Next we asked people to share useful strategies for leading groups. The list included:

1. Start and end on time. Doing so can avoid putting people in scheduling binds or irritating members of their family. It was noted that if people experience minor irritation about matters like this, they may not share them. If they accumulate, people may simple discontinue the group experience and the leader may never know why.
2. Never lecture the group.
3. As mentioned above, establish starting and ending rituals for the group.
4. Emphasizing facilitation over leadership. Invite and empower members to respond to each other rather than being more directive of the group process. As long as the group appears to be pursuing a good discussion, allowing the group to run itself may make the experience more meaningful and strengthen the connections between members.
5. Monitoring both the group process and the content of the discussion simultaneously. This will always be a judgement call on the part of the leader. If there is a meaningful discussion underway but it deviates from content that the group developed around, when and why does the leader attempt to redirect the group back to the content?

Difficult Situations

We asked participants to share strategies for how they deal with difficult group situations. The list included:

1. Whenever a leader is working with a 'difficult' participant, it is important to acknowledge their value and respect them as group members.
2. It is important to recognize when a members fear or denial may be resulting in participation that is difficult or disruptive to the group.
3. The group member can be addressed directly: i.e., "Let's take a few minute to talk about and we can come back to this later."
4. Invite people to comment close to the end of the group about anything they may have been thinking but they didn't say. This strategy can be more important if the leader suspects that something happened in the group that may have distressed one or more members. It could avoid having a member leave the group and having their concern "fester," leading to withdrawal.
5. If a group member is engaging in a long monologue, dominating the group, try picking out one thing they have said that may be more relevant to group content and invite other members to respond to it. The intent is to try to value the participation and engage the other members to interrupt the monologue and engage all members of the group again.
6. Use physical touch as you gently attempt to include others in the discussion when one member is dominating the discussion.

7. If conflict develops in the group:
 - a. Remind people of ground rules with particular emphasis on the use of "I" statements as mentioned above.
 - b. Ask to group to participate in a few moments of silence and reflection about what has happened before they begin to participate again.
 - c. Ask people to name the feelings behind the words they are saying.
 - d. Try to insure that all members are engaged in active listening to each other and resolution of the conflict if possible. Avoid being the conflict resolver in your leader role if possible.

We found that as we shared our gifts, strategies and experiences that we have a great deal in common as group leaders. We also found that we have our own individual styles and different things that we feel are essential to a good group process. The diversity of these things is evident in the many ideas listed above. If you are new to group leadership, it will be important to develop a style of leadership that feels comfortable to you. We also have many talented group leaders in our congregation. Seeking out a member or an experienced leader to mentor you or co-lead a group with you, can be a great way to begin.