

The Art of Facilitating

by Dave Kahle

First, let's lay some groundwork.

You're not going to teach.

Let's understand that from the beginning. If you have visions of yourself preparing meticulously crafted outlines of your piercing insights into scripture and then holding your group spellbound as you expound on your knowledge and touch them with your insightful applications to their lives...forget it.

Wipe the slate clean. Forget any lingering ideas that you have gathered from the hundreds of Sunday school classes, pastor-led meetings or institutional worship services to which you've probably been subjected. That institutional setting, with one person expounding their version of the truth to rows of truth-absorbers, is a model that was acceptable in the past, but is no longer relevant to the needs or style of the bulk of your friends and neighbors.

The 21st century world is crying out for high-touch, interactive, individually relevant experiences hitched to immediate answers to questions. Your job is to help provide that.

To do that, you can't teach. You must *facilitate*.

What's a facilitator?

Imagine this. A group of people is sitting around a living room, discussing a passage of scripture. One describes a moment in her life when that passage cleared up some confusion and gave her a clearer insight into how to handle a difficult situation in her family.

As she talks, another of the group grows excited. That's exactly the problem she's facing in her family! She listens carefully to the description of the situation, the insight, and the way the other group member experienced resolution. "That's it!" she thinks. "A new insight! Hope for a difficult situation." She feels like the Holy Spirit spoke directly to her need through the words and the life experience of the other group member.

And she was right. That's exactly what happened.

Now, imagine lots of that kind of experience happening throughout the evening.

Got the picture? Good. Your job is to help make that kind of thing happen.

As the group facilitator, you create an atmosphere that allows the Holy Spirit to work through the lives and voices of the group members, ministering to one another and learning from each other. You show the group members how to do that, and you help them do so.

You see, it's not important that you teach. It is important that the group members learn. And they'll learn best when the Holy Spirit speaks to their needs through one another.

You help that happen. You're a Holy Spirit helper. A facilitator.

So, exactly what is your job?

Simple: to make yourself unnecessary.

You'll know you've been successful when the group gets so good at interacting, relating at deeper levels, and including every group member, that they can do it without you.

In other words, you're doing the exact opposite of many institutional teachers, who build organizations around themselves to the point where nothing can happen if they aren't there.

Develop a clear picture in your mind of what your group would look like when it has arrived at this level of maturity. That picture should look something like this:

Group members would share scripture and challenge each other to think deeply about it, and to act on it. There would be an atmosphere of love and acceptance, and everyone would sincerely want to hear what everyone else had to say. No one person would dominate the discussion, and everyone would be involved. People would share deep issues and concerns and report on what God was doing in their lives.

In short, the group would be a conduit for the Holy Spirit working through each individual's life to minister to each person and to stimulate each other to grow. It would be a predictable arena for the practice of all the biblical "one anothers."

Think of two goals: (1) To create a place where individuals grow spiritually through interaction with the Holy Spirit and one another; (2) To create a group that stimulates that growth without your intervention.

Do you have a clear picture in your mind? Good. Your job is to make that happen.

OK, it's not quite that simple

There will be a number of challenges on the journey from where you are now to that image of where you want to be. Let's group them together by identifying three distinct segments of that journey.

The beginning phase of the journey is characterized by a sense of timidity. Group members are often tentative and guarded, noticeably waiting to take their cues from the group leader, and sharing in only the most superficial ways. Ask for prayer requests and someone will ask for prayers for Aunt Bertha who is struggling with a bad cold.

This is the most challenging and demanding phase of your work. The early events in the life of the group will cast a pattern for the future. You'll need to establish the atmosphere and attitude at the same time you begin to draw people out.

Phase two occurs when the group has become comfortable with one another, people are sharing their thoughts, and some patterns have developed. Bill always talks about this, Mary only responds to these kinds of questions, John is always the first person to speak, etc.

It's easy to remain at this level. But you are still far short of the goal. Your challenge here is to prod the group to deeper levels of communication and new patterns of interaction. Some groups never make it beyond this level.

Phase three is the Holy Grail. The group becomes more concerned for one another, members share more deeply held needs and joys regularly, and the Holy Spirit obviously uses individuals to reveal power in the scripture.

The interaction is intense, comforting, relevant, inclusive and unpredictable. Comfortable patterns of interaction fall by the wayside. And the group does it, pretty much, without you.

Here's the point. Realize that if your group is going to attain your vision for them, they will proceed in an uneven, zigzag basis through these phases. Your job is somewhat different at each phase. But in all cases, you prod and direct them through to the next level.

Your role evolves as the group matures

Unlike a traditional teacher, who continually repeats the same processes of preparation, presentation and assessment, your role changes as the group matures.

At first, in the early stages of the group's growth, you're very active and very visible. This is hard work. The intensity and degree of your involvement, if you're successful, begins to decrease over time. Eventually, after some unpredictable duration, you become just another member of the group.

So, as a rule, your involvement must eventually decrease for the group's interaction and maturity to increase.

Where to begin?

With a great deal of prayer, of course. Pray for each group member by name. Pray that God will use the group interaction as a mechanism to help each person grow. Pray that you'll be perceptive and sensitive.

Then start to prepare.

First, do everything you ask the group members to do. For example, if they are to come in with some scripture to read, make sure you read it also. If they are to bring cookies to share, you bring cookies, too. If they are to think of one way God has worked in their lives in the past month, you think of one way, also.

By doing what they do, you experience the study, or at least a part of it, from the perspective of the participants. That's helpful. Also, you send a signal that you are just like them, striving to learn and grow in the same way they are. You begin to eliminate whatever perception they might have in their minds that you are someone special-a pastor substitute. As long as some of the group members think of you or anyone else in the group in a more exalted sense, they will not be free to exercise their own giftedness and priesthood. So, you must work to eliminate any such perceptions in their minds.

Once you have prepared yourself, prepare the environment. No pews here. Meet in a home-someone's basement or living room. Arrange the seats in a circle, or the closest thing to it. Don't get too uptight about how clean or neat everything is. Martha Stewart will not be attending. No need for fresh flowers on the coffee table. Turn off the TV, unplug the phone, shoo the cat into the other room and put the dog out.

You're trying to create an environment where people are comfortable and communication is not obstructed.

Now to the heart of the matter

At some point in every group meeting, the members need to engage God's work and words think about it, discuss how it could apply to them, and then make appropriate commitments to changed behavior as a result. This is so important.

One way to initiate that process is to cause the group to interact with scripture. There are dozens of ways of doing this.

Here's a menu of possibilities:

1. Read a passage and dialogue about it.
2. Use a published study guide.
3. Have everyone read a passage before the session and then discuss it.
4. Have each person share a passage that impacted him or her during the week.
5. Do a topical study.
6. Read a book of the Bible together.
7. Read a spiritual book together.
8. Ask a question, and have people bring biblical answers to it.

Regardless of the exact method, all of these techniques rely on a certain process. The group members (1) interact with the scriptures, (2) talk about it, and (3) decide to do something about it.

These are classic methods of stimulating personal growth and interaction. But let's not forget another age-old method that pre-dates scripture study.

Sharing God's work in people's lives

We come to know about God in two basic ways: through scripture study, and through experience with Him working in our lives and the lives of those around us.

Your small group can be a powerful mechanism for helping people to see how God is working in the lives of the members of the group. Sometimes, the understanding of how God works (worked) in someone's life can be a more powerful lesson than anything out of scripture.

So, you may want to consider building some time into your agenda for prompting people to share descriptions of how God has worked with them.

Think about asking a series of questions to stimulate that thinking. You can assign them as homework, to be prepared before the session, or ask them during the session itself.

Here are some questions that will stimulate this kind of sharing:

1. How were you converted?
2. Have you felt any prompting from God this week? If so, what?
3. Can you recall one instance of God dramatically answering a prayer? Will you describe it?
4. Have you ever seen God working in miraculous ways? Will you describe it?
5. Has God prompted you to make some change in the last month? What and how?
6. What spiritual issues are you thinking about these days? What do you think God wants you to learn regarding those issues?

A radically old concept

"When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church"(1 Corinthians 14:26).

There's a novel idea for a small group meeting! Suppose the individuals in your group became so involved with one another that they sought out something to share with the group-something that would build someone up, strengthening individuals and the group itself.

They might prepare this before the meeting, or it might come to them through the power of the Holy Spirit at the meeting. If your group could get to this point, you could do away with agendas completely, and allow the Holy Spirit to run the gathering, trusting Him to work through the sharing of the individuals assembled.

Your group might eventually look like those of two thousand years ago!

Reprinted by permission from The Cotton Patch Papers (published monthly and available for the asking from Dr. Lynn and Linda Reddick with Open Church Ministries, 912-865-9811, email: info@openchurch.com). Excerpt from How to Facilitate a Small Group Bible Study by Dave Kahle. Dave currently serves as the Michigan coordinator for the Network of Open Church Ministries. To learn more about facilitation, order the book; or have Dave come and speak to your group. Either way, call him at 1-800-331-1287.