



## Encountering Christ through the Synodal Process in the Archdiocese of Baltimore

### FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

#### OVERVIEW

*The following information is meant to help those facilitating discussions as part of the Archdiocesan Synodal Process. Successful group facilitation is not the easiest or most intuitive process for many people. These are some basics aimed at making the group consultations successful and productive.*

#### THE FACILITATOR

Facilitator vs. leader. While groups need a certain amount of direction and guidance, the main goal is to make sure the discussion is respected for what it is and kept safe within the group. While steps should be taken to insure the discussion doesn't meander aimlessly, we need to remember the Holy Spirit is ultimately guiding the discussion.

- One of the best skills a facilitator can have is that of a listener. Listening well accomplishes two goals - it affirms the value of what the speaker has to say and demonstrates the humility and interest of the listener. We often become so focused on helping people find their voice in a group that we forget to encourage others to practice good listening skills. The facilitator also sets the example of good listening skills for the other members of the group.
- Facilitators are not there to serve as counselor or confessor. The goal of the facilitator should be to encourage the discussion, not analyze it or solve what are perceived or actual problems. Even if you know the answer, you should resist responding because others will likely ask questions believing you speak for the parish/diocese.
- Avoid the "Why" questions. Questions that begin with "Why..." (i.e. "Why did you do that?") often convey a negative or judgmental connotation to the listener. Stick to the questions provided in the supportive resources and use the 10 Synod themes to help keep the discussion focused and productive.

#### THE GROUP

- For any group to be successful the participants need to "buy into" the process. This comes in the form of agreement to the ground rules (see below), commitment to respect, and an understanding that the facilitator is there to guide the discussion and keep it "on track".

- Often in such settings there is one or two people who tend to dominate the discussion. The facilitator should find ways of engaging others to insure no one person's voice overpowers the voices of others and the discussion.

## THE TOPIC

- Answering the Synod's fundamental question should be the focus of the discussions taking place. To evoke responses to the question (and to stay on topic), the facilitator should utilize the accompanying "teaser" questions, as well as the 10 themes, which can be found in the supportive resources.
- Should participants get off topic, the facilitator should simply listen and acknowledge the speaker before steering the group back to the fundamental question/topic at hand. Speakers wishing to share feedback or input that isn't relevant to the topic may be invited to do so through their pastor or by contacting the diocese. It is the facilitator's role to insure the group remains engaged with the topic.
- The facilitator should not be afraid to break in or re-align the focus of the group if it has wandered too far afield of the original topic. Staying on task will help all the participants better appreciate the benefits of group discussion.

## GROUND RULES

- Every group needs "Ground Rules" established prior to discussion. These may include:
- Respect. Each group member has a right to their opinion and a right to share it. Disagreement or varying opinions should be encouraged, but always framed by respect and charitable discussion. Ad hominem attacks and arguments are not to be tolerated.
- Privacy. Participants should be asked to refrain from mentioning the names of others while sharing feedback/input and reminded that the note-taker is recording their feedback for inclusion in the summary produced to the Archdiocese.
- Nonjudgmental. Participants need to feel they won't be judged for what they say, feel or may have done. That is not the purpose of a small group process. Participants that feel they will be judged or criticized will not feel empowered to share with the group.
- Quiet. Sometimes we feel it necessary to fill silence with words and discussion. Often in group discussions there needs to be times of silence for ideas and thoughts to sink and be considered. We shouldn't feel compelled to fill these moments with more words and ideas.

## CONCLUSION

*The ultimate success of the group will depend on the management of the discussion. Circle discussion groups can be sources of compassion, understanding and healing. Care must be taken to see they don't become opportunities for arguments and derision. The value of circle group discussions has been proven over centuries in many varied cultures. Trust in the Holy Spirit to do the "heavy lifting" in the discussion!*