



Group Facilitation Guidelines

The small-group facilitator plays a crucial part in the Walking Toward Eternity faith formation program. Understanding the role of a facilitator and following these simple guidelines will help you lead fruitful discussions for your study group.

I. EXPECTATIONS OF A FACILITATOR

The facilitators help the Core Team set the tone for the study group. As a facilitator, you will be expected to:

- Attend the Facilitator Orientation Meeting.
- Learn to lead a simple group exercise of *lectio divina* (taught in the Orientation Meeting).
- Carefully prepare each lesson in advance.
- Commit to praying for the participants in the study each week.
- Attend every study session or arrange for a substitute.
- Arrive on time and help to set a welcoming tone for the group.
- Facilitate discussions according to the guidelines provided.
- Bring your *Walking Toward Eternity* Journal and a Bible to each class session.
- Dress appropriately for meetings (modest church attire is a good guide).

A facilitator is not a catechist, a Bible scholar, or a counselor. The facilitator's job is not to teach or advise, or even to answer questions. The facilitator welcomes group members and guides them through the lesson, aiming to give everyone a chance to participate and keeping the discussion moving, focused, and on time.

*The facilitator does not make a discussion good.
He or she makes a good discussion possible.*

II. PURPOSE OF THE WALKING TOWARD ETERNITY GROUP DISCUSSION

Each session of *Walking Toward Eternity* begins with a small-group discussion based on insights gleaned during the previous week's homework. A brief group meditation on a pertinent passage of Scripture sets the tone. Open-ended discussion questions guide participants through each day's Journal entries. These questions focus attention on the nature of the particular topic being discussed, often contrasting the world's view of it with God's view. Participants are encouraged to share examples and insights gleaned from their own experiences and from their time spent meditating on Scripture that week.

III. TIPS FOR FACILITATING A SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSION

Tip #1: Be Prepared!

Set aside a time and place, four days a week, to read the Scriptures and answer the questions in the *Walking Toward Eternity* Journal. Start early in the week, so you won't be rushed if something comes up.

Before each class starts, review your notes and plan how you will guide the discussion. If desired, supplement questions in the Journal with your own questions designed to assess the progress of the group or to fill extra time as needed.

For example, as people gather you might ask:

“Did you struggle to keep your scheduled time, or did you look forward to it?”

“Describe your experience. Did you sense God speaking to you in the meditation?”

“As you did the homework each day, how did your times of meditation connect with the rest of your day?”

Are participants slow to offer insights? Rephrase a question or ask an open-ended question such as:

“What was your favorite verse on Day 1? Why?”

“Did you come across any additional verses that helped your understanding of this week’s topic?”

“What did you find most challenging on Day 3?”

Tip #2: Set the Tone: Act as the Host

A good host always has a goal for an event, even if it’s simply to make sure people have a good time at a dinner party. The host is always “on,” solving problems, identifying needs, and serving others.

On the first day, tell everyone what to expect: that this is a time to share what they gleaned over the course of the week from the Scripture passages and to bring their own experiences to bear on the topic. Assure them that they will not be asked to share things they prefer to keep private.

Be welcoming and enthusiastic. Set a good example by striking a careful balance between sharing and listening. Look out for the needs of group members before your own needs, and encourage others to share before you do.

Tip #3: Lead the Way: Act as a Trail Guide

A trail guide knows where the group is going and how to get there. Your goal will be to keep the discussion moving and to make sure everyone has a chance to contribute. Keeping this goal in mind throughout the discussion is an important part of being a good facilitator.

If the discussion breaks down or moves toward an unnecessary tangent, step in and regain control. You are the leader; the group will expect you to move them along.

Staying on time and on topic can be difficult in a small group. A good trail guide leads the group to the best vistas while navigating around less important sights and dead ends.

Start and end on time, every time. Assign someone in your group to watch the clock. Mark both a halfway point in your Journal and the question you’d like to be up to five to ten minutes before the end of the session, and have the person tell you when each point is reached.

Tip #4: Encourage Others: Act as a Cheerleader

A cheerleader brings enthusiasm, reassurance, and confidence to the group.

Watch for clues that a timid person has something to say. Encourage that person without putting him or her on the spot.

Prepare a few generic questions or an example from a current event that you can use to stimulate conversation. Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.”

If you know that someone is pleased to have taken a step the previous week with encouraging results, consider asking him or her ahead of time to share the experience with the others during the discussion.

Tip #5: Direct the Discussion: Act as a Traffic Cop

A traffic cop enforces the rules. This person maintains a smooth and equitable flow of conversation and works to avert collisions.

When starting, explain to the group members that because your goal is to keep the group on time and on topic, questions not related to the topic—however interesting—will be “parked” until there is time to discuss them.

To start a discussion of a particular day’s readings, ask a general question related to the first question or set of readings. For example, “What verse about the meaning of love really stood out to you?”

Don’t be afraid of silence. Try praying a Hail Mary or Our Father while you wait for someone to respond to your question. If that doesn’t work, try rephrasing the question rather than answering it yourself.

Is someone dominating the group? Think of kind ways to curb their enthusiasm.

Use body language to reinforce your message. When the “chatty” participant pauses, thank him or her for the insight, then turn your body toward another, physically indicating a stop in traffic and a green light for others.

If that isn’t enough, you might also try verbally redirecting the discussion, especially if the discussion veers into an area that is only loosely related to the topic at hand. “That’s an interesting point, John, thank you for sharing. Now to get back to faithfulness—did anyone have anything else to add before we move on?”

If the excessive or unconstructive sharing continues, speak with that person privately after the session, and ask him or her to help you get others to participate.



Ten Commandments of a Small Group

1. Be prepared.
2. Come on time.
3. If you did not prepare, allow others to speak before you do.
4. Listen to others and respect their right to keep personal matters private.
5. Stick to the topic and questions at hand.
6. Never ridicule or cut down another’s answer.
7. When you disagree, do so with respect and charity.
8. Don’t fear silence.
9. Don’t share confidences outside the group.
10. Enjoy yourself!

Alphabetical “Rules of the Road”

Be Audible.

Be Brief.

Be Christ-centered.

Don’t Double-Dip! (Give your input, then allow others to speak.)



Tip #6: “Let Go, and Let God”

Remember, a facilitator is not a teacher or a counselor. You are not responsible for answering questions about Scripture or theology, or for solving personal problems. It is OK to say simply, “That is an interesting question! I wish I could answer it, but we’re getting off topic, and I need to move us on now.” Or, “I’m so sorry we can’t address that here; let’s talk about that after class.” Or, “Perhaps you should speak to Father about that.”

Prepare your lessons, do your best, pray for God’s help—and then enjoy hearing what others contribute from their experiences with the Word.

IV. FACILITATING SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSIONS FOR WALKING TOWARD ETERNITY

A. Session One (30-40 minutes)

1. Review the logistics.
 - a. Get to know each other. Begin with brief introductions or a fun icebreaker if desired.
 - b. Take care of any logistical details requested by your Core Team.
 - c. Suggest that everyone write their names in the front of their Journals. Turn to page 8 and fill out the Small-Group Assignment information.
 - d. Explain that in future sessions, you will meet before the DVD presentation. Today you will explain how to use the Journal and review the guidelines for the group discussions.
2. Explain the materials and small-group process.
 - a. Walk group members through how to do the homework, using the instructions on Journal pages 9–11 as a guide. Stress the importance of doing a little bit each day to allow the Word to sink in and take root. Setting aside a regular time and place can help achieve that goal. Make sure everyone has a Bible and knows how to look up verses.
 - b. Ask if anyone has questions about the homework or the DVD presentation. If you can't answer a question, promise to find out by asking a member of the Core Team.
 - c. Reiterate the goal of the small-group discussion time: to share insights from Scripture and experience the meaning and importance of the topic under discussion. You will be praying for each other, and occasionally you may choose to share a victory or ask for support—but that is not the focus of the group time.
 - d. Explain the Ten Commandments of a Small Group and the Alphabetical Rules of the Road.
3. Practice *lectio divina* in a group setting using **Ephesians 3:14–21** before returning to the main meeting room. Guidelines for leading a group exercise of *lectio divina* are on page 12 of the Journal.
4. Return to the main gathering room for the closing.

B. Sessions Two Through Eight (40-45 minutes)

Planning tip: Divide the time available into the amount of time you would like to spend on each day's reading, and note your time goal for reference at the end of each day. Allow more time for Day 4 than for the others.

1. Review the past week.
 - a. Session Two: How did everyone manage with the homework? Encourage those who have difficulty making the daily time or looking up the verses.
 - b. Sessions Three through Eight: Was everyone able to take the step they committed to? No details are necessary. Offer to pray for those who need encouragement.
2. Turn to the Meeting Day page for the appropriate session and follow the instructions. Your time will be divided between (1) a short opening group exercise of *lectio divina* and (2) discussion of the insights gained during the previous week's reading and meditation.
3. Group exercise of *lectio divina*: instructions are on page 12 of the Journal. Each week, use the Scripture passage that is in bold type in #1 on the Meeting Day page.
4. Discuss insights gleaned from the homework. Four very general questions are provided to help jump-start a discussion of insights people have gained on the week's topic. **Each question is repeated at the top of a sidebar of the day to which it pertains, so participants can make additional notes based on the discussion.** This allows you to guide the discussion by moving through the Journal pages one day at a time. If you find yourself with time to fill, the Meeting Day page closes with several optional additional questions.
5. Return to the meeting room in time for the DVD presentation.