

# Groups at the Hyde Park United Methodist Church!

## A Facilitator's Handbook

*Written by Gary Uremovich*

At Hyde Park UMC we are committed to having groups! We know that individuals need connection with others in order to grow spiritually and emotionally! In fact, we are convinced that it is impossible to grow spiritually without this connection with others.

If you are reading this, you are probably thinking about helping lead, facilitate, or guide a group. Thank you! You are about to embark on a mission that will be both challenging and rewarding. Our goal is to develop a variety of small groups at both campuses. Thank you for being part of this essential part of our community of faith.

Groups are a wonderful and key component of our mission at the Hyde Park. At the Portico, our congregational mission is to encourage authentic **CONVERSATION** and bring a sense of **CONNECTION**.

Groups are an essential component of spiritual growth at both the Main Campus of Hyde Park as well as at the Portico. Groups are not only a place where people can connect – but it's a place where the Holy Spirit can perform an incredible work on who we are!

If you look at the United Methodist Website.(  
<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/disciples-making-disciples-life-transforming-small-groups>) you will discover that groups have always been an essential feature of the Methodist movement! While the groups we have today differ from before they still have some similar characteristics.



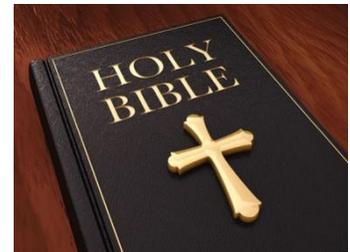
“The **Methodist movement** was not a church at the start. The early Methodists offered three types of groups to help Christians become better followers of Jesus. These were not to replace, but in addition to regular church attendance. John Wesley saw three group settings as essential for spiritual growth.

- **The Society Meeting** was the largest of the three groups. Methodists would gather each week for instruction and preaching from John Wesley, Francis Asbury, or another early leader. This is similar to our church congregational meetings every Sunday.

- **The Class Meeting** was a small group of about a dozen people who shared life together. At their weekly meetings each member of the Class answered the question, "How is it with your soul?" Attendance in a Class was mandatory for admittance to a Society meeting. We no longer have mandatory group meetings! But the importance of coming together in smaller groups (than the church meeting) still applies. We all need a place where we can share our joys and frustrations. We all need a place where we can answer the question 'how is it with your soul'!
- **The Band Meeting** was a very small group of approximately 5 people who would confess their sins and struggles together. These would typically be same-sexed groups of men or women. Members would talk specifically about their temptations, successes, and failures. Not every Methodist was part of a Band." As you can imagine, this was a very intimate group – what we might call an 'accountability' group. There is still a need for all three of these types of groups today.

## Scriptural Mandate

Even more importantly than a denominational or congregational mandate for groups is the biblical imperative. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a group as 'a number of people or things that are located, gathered, or classed together'. Jesus tells us that a group can be 2 or 3 people! Obviously, there can be many more – but don't let the size define the impact that a group can have. In Matthew 18:20 Jesus says "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" NIV. The key is the intentional meeting together of several people with Jesus as the invited guest.



There is a tendency for us to dismiss the value of meeting together in groups. Coming together in groups is life-giving and empowering. Hear what the author of the Book of Hebrews says that Christian should "...not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another..." Hebrews 10:25.

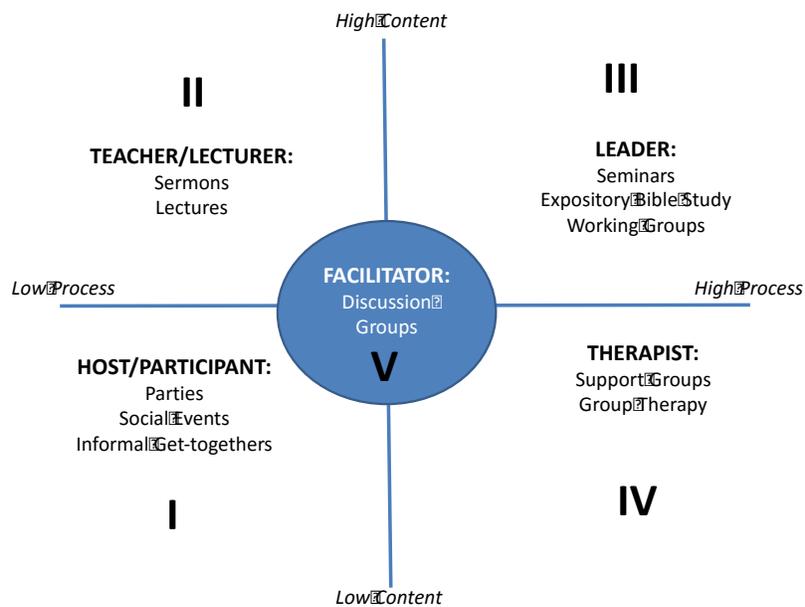
Here is a wonderful quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together*:

Listening is one of the most precious gifts we can give to one another. Stop for a moment and recall your own feelings when you last felt truly listened to...  
 Listening says to the other person: "I care for you, I respect your uniqueness. How you feel and what you say matters to me. And in order to make this clear, I'm willing to set aside my own concerns, give you space to share yourself and offer you my focused attention. I want to try to understand the inexhaustible mystery of your inner world.

Our goal should be to encourage each other in our spiritual and emotional growth. This manual will provide you with some of the tools needed for you to facilitate a group. You will discover that there are many types of 'groups' in which you may desire to facilitate or lead. Our goal at the Portico is to have a cadre of facilitators that can help facilitate groups.

## Group Leadership

As we begin to explore the various types of groups we discover that there is a diverse range of group types. One way is to recognize the continuum between **content** and **process** within various group formats. The role of the group leader or facilitator depends on how the setting is based on the level of content and how much focus is based on the interpersonal process.



- I. **Host/Participant:** In this informal setting there is no 'leader' or 'facilitator.' However, there will be someone (or a team) who takes on the role of the host.



They also become participants. It is an informal 'get-together' with the goal of building relationships. This is an important part of the Christian community. Making connections! In fact, we are to have an intentional approach even to our informal meetings.

We need to intentionally avoid 'cliques' and move towards the stranger. Jesus says, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." (Matt 18:20 NIV). Notice it is the intentionality – 'in My Name'. When we meet together informally as Christian we have also invited Jesus to join us.

**II. Teacher/Lecturer:** this is the typical lecture format which we are comfortable with in an academic setting or even a Church service. We have a teacher who conveys facts and information. This consists of mostly content with little (if any) group process. We are observers and not really participants. This means that the person presenting must bring content that allows the observers to feel intellectually and emotionally engaged. Sometimes this works – often we never really feel engaged and as we walk out of the service we forget everything we just heard. Has that happened to you?'



**III. Group Leader:** these setting is usually led by someone with content knowledge (an expert) or who has experience in that area. This person can also lead a focused discussion – so they have process skills . This gifted person has a combination of content knowledge as well as skills in group process. Seminars or Discipleship Groups fit into this format. I have been a group leader in various seminars including New Member Classes, Seminars in Health Care, Seminars in Mindfulness, Verse by Verse Bible Studies, etc. This is based on the skills of the person designated as the group 'leader' because of their official role, training, or experience. The expectations of the group is that this person 'knows what they're doing'! I'm glad we don't all need to be experts in order to facilitate groups! The Holy Spirit has gifted all of us in unique ways that allow us to be involved in group ministry.

**IV. Therapist:** Support groups are often led by an expert in group process with little formal` content. While they may not be a therapist they are using the group's therapeutic effect – bring healing and encouragement. In this setting, the important component is allowing open communication between participants. The leadership here requires skills in group process and providing encouragement and guiding discussion themes. It is amazing how therapeutic it can be just to meet together with others experiencing the same things that I have experienced. Sometimes these groups are led by the professionally trained or those who are trained volunteers.



V. **Facilitator:** This happens to be the most frequent type of group meeting we have in the Hyde Park United Methodist Church and the Portico Campus. The leaders of these groups are volunteers who do not usually have formal training or



experience in content or group process. However, they have demonstrated skills in leading a discussion on content from an expert (through a prior lecture, sermon, book, or video). Our usual group approach at Hyde Park UMC fits this approach. Some groups will have a video, workbook, or pre-arranged questions for discussion. Some may even have a 'leader's manual' for each meeting.

Remember. A **facilitator** is someone who engages in the activity of **facilitation**. They help a group of people understand their common objectives and can assist them in achieving these objectives; in doing so, the **facilitator** remains "neutral" and does not (usually) take a particular position in the discussion. It is important to realize that facilitators bring a central approach to groups – they do not lecture, monopolize discussion, or provide professional counseling. Instead, our facilitators are intentional in allowing the Holy Spirit to move within the group meeting.

## Creating a Welcoming Environment

As discussed in the last section, there is a continuum between content and process within various group formats. Facilitators, in the Portico's ReAction Group endeavor, are guides in the process of reflection on material already provided (during the sermon). Your goal is not to add more material or to explain the sermon. Instead, the goal is to provide an opportunity for those interested to discuss and apply what has already been heard.

What can you do to ensure a welcoming and open group?

1. **Introduce yourself and anyone new to the 'group':** 'My name is ... and I am one of the facilitators for this discussion group.' Be sure to make eye contact with those attending and smile. You can ask if there is anyone new who would like to introduce themselves or to be introduced by a friend? Try not to call people out?



2. **Remind Everyone About Group 'Etiquette'!**

- Each group member is encouraged to participate; no one dominates.
- One person speaks at a time; the rest listen and discern.
- No one is called upon; discussion does not go "around the circle."
- Everyone's contribution is important.
- Advice and criticism are not acceptable.
- Occasionally, others can ask clarifying questions or speak encouragement to other group members.

3. **Consider using 'ice-breakers' for a small group or a group with many new**



**faces:** Being able to talk about something that is fun and non-threatening is very helpful for creating a fun and welcoming setting. It might be asking what is their favorite dessert, or movie, etc. Avoid anything that can inadvertently encourage overly religious statements or questions that contain the obvious answer (such as what is your favorite book - the Bible, obviously). Obviously, if you only have a 30-minute meeting you might not have time to have an ice-breaker.

4. **Set the context/setting for the group:** briefly discuss the purpose, why it's important, and when it will be finished (and stick to it!). 'Welcome to our after service Reaction Group! The Portico's Mission is to encourage authentic CONVERSATION, bring a sense of CONNECTION, and to envision COMMUNITY CHANGE. We are here to reflect on the message we just heard and what resonated with us. We'll spend just 30 minutes in discussing your reaction to what you just heard.'

5. **Be comfortable with silence.** Ask open ended questions... and wait! The main theme of the message was.... What response did you have either emotionally or spiritually? Any experiences come to mind? What comment or quote meant the most to you...? After asking the question....wait!



6. **Reflect people's own words.** Really listen – and reflect or restate what they've said. This is a powerful way of letting someone know that they are being heard. Be curious and engaging. This will keep the discussion open and 'welcoming'. Many people have limited opportunities to be heard. What a blessing to be heard by another human being! Stop trying to think about what you are going to say – and let people know you heard them!

## Encourage Participation

1. **Plan:** Have a plan and make it clear to those attending. You need to know what you will do when you get there! The goal is for each member of the group to feel included in the discussion. There is only a portion of the pie that anyone can eat. We need to be considerate! Simple? Not as easy as it sounds!
2. **Friendly:** Be curious and friendly! Encourage humor and laughter. "A cheerful heart is good medicine" for groups as well as for individuals (Prov. 17:22). When people laugh together, they usually share more openly together, too.
3. **Authenticity:** Be real! Authenticity is contagious. People sense whether you're being superficial or wearing a facade. Just be who you are!
4. **Listen:** reflect, restate, summarize. Let participants know that you really heard what they were saying. As mentioned before – this is therapeutic!
5. **Observe:** "Read" body language! Eager to talk? Anxious? Concerned? Confused? Uncomfortable? Bored? You are there to see how the dynamics are going. If you sense someone needs to say something – invite them to take the opportunity!
6. **Engage:** Invite others to participate. 'We've heard from several (or a couple of) people already – what about someone else who hasn't had a chance to share?' Use eye contact or invite those apparently receptive verbally.
7. **Trust:** we can (and should) depend on the Holy Spirit! I am convinced that God wants us to be open, warm, and sharing! Allow Him to do the real leading of the group! This takes a lot of the pressure off of you – it's His group!
8. **Conversations:** Realize that this is only the beginning of a 'conversation'. This may be the first time someone has shared something spiritual or personal in a group setting. The ice has been broken! We don't need to provide a closure to the conversation! In fact, we want it to continue! This is only the beginning of the movement of the Holy Spirit in the lives of your group members.



## 9. Monitor your listening skills:

- always have eye contact with the person who is talking.
- never shuffle papers or look around the room while another is talking.
- don't look at your watch when someone begins to share.
- maintain a posture is that of receiving—arms are not crossed, leaning slightly forward, and having your body appear "open" to listening.
- don't add to or embellish what someone else has tried to share with what you think they mean, possibly adding your own examples.

10. **Practice:** the fact is, the only way to get comfortable and 'good' at facilitating a group is to do it! The more frequently you facilitate a group – the more comfortable you will become and the more you will be used for God's purposes. You don't need special skills or knowledge – just experience.



## What if...

I am sure that all of us have been in a group that had something uncomfortable happen. It might have been an awkward statement, someone who takes over the discussion, a theological disagreement, or an angry outburst. A common fear of every new facilitator is that something like this might happen and you won't know what to do! Don't fret! We want you to be comfortable and confident as you lead your groups. You can always contact your small group coach if ongoing issues come up.



Here are just a couple of possible scenarios that you might occasionally run across.

1. **The Dominator:** This is someone who has a lot to say – and won't stop sharing! They take over the group. Thank the Dominator for sharing and mention that there might be someone else who would like to share. Indicate that we want everyone to have an opportunity. Reminding the group of the etiquette of sharing time is often effective.
2. **The Theologian:** this is a person who loves to discuss theology – even when it is not appropriate. For example, an entire group session could be taken up with discussing free will versus predestination. At the end there would still be no solution! When someone brings up a theological hot button you might say – 'very interesting topic, unfortunately, we don't have enough time to talk about this right now. Could we discuss it together after the group?'

3. **The Distressed:** Our mission is to minister to those in need, such as the homeless, lonely, or dejected. Occasionally, we may have someone come into our group after that may be in emotional, spiritual, or physical distress. It is important for the facilitator to recognize someone that needs more than can be provided by a short group session. A person that is obviously upset or disturbed should be spoken with within a more private setting by two people (male and female). This can be done either separate from the group or after the group meeting, depending on the urgency of intervention. If needed, a staff person or pastor should be consulted.

### **Staff and Lay Leaders for Small Groups**

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