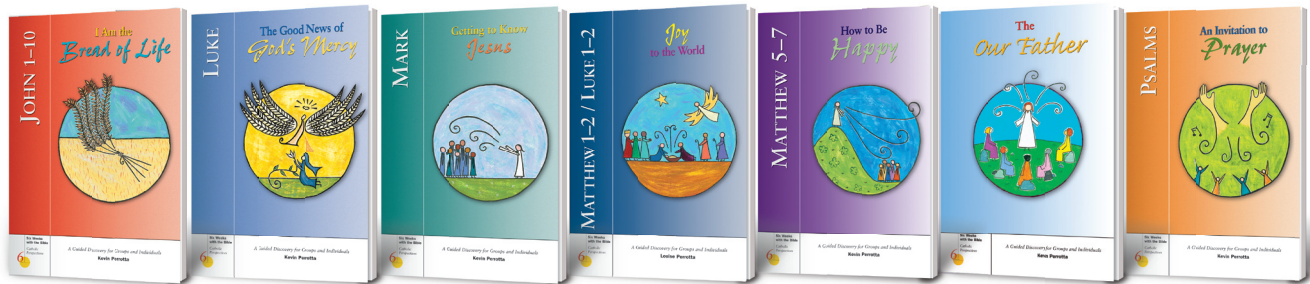


Leader's Guide

Six Weeks with the Bible Parish Program



Introduction

Thank you for volunteering to lead your *Six Weeks with the Bible* discussion group. This Guide provides suggestions to help make your group experience the best it can be.

Additional Support

Since no two groups are alike, these guidelines are broad and do not address all the dynamics of small group discussions you may encounter. In addition, we can answer questions about the content of the Six Week books and make further suggestions about handling problems in groups. Theologians and scripture scholars on our staff can give you specialized help. **Contact us with any of your questions at sixweeks@loyolapress.com.**

Purpose of the Group

The group you are leading has a particular purpose. You and other parishioners are getting together to help each other grow in faith. Your work as a leader is to create the conditions where this can happen.

Note what the group is *not*. It's not a Bible study. It's not a support group. It's not simply a social get-together. It has elements of study, support, and fun, but the deeper reason for these meetings is to help each other find God in your lives.

This will happen if members of the group have a meaningful, comfortable experience of *community*; have a personal encounter with the Word of God in *Scripture*; *reflect* on Scripture and ask what it means for their lives; and *share* these reflections with others and listen to their reflections.

Your Role as Leader

Your role is to facilitate this process of reflection and sharing, which in turn builds a small community. You are not the expert. You are not there to solve problems that come up. To do this job, you don't need to be highly knowledgeable about the Bible and Church teaching, and you don't need to be an expert in group dynamics. You are first and foremost a member of the group. You are the member who has taken on the responsibility of convening the group and doing what is necessary to guide the discussion and sharing.

You are qualified to do this job if you are a person of faith who is welcoming, confident, organized, reliable, and interested in growing in your faith while helping others do the same. If you proceed with openness and sincerity, the Holy Spirit will guide and support you.

Always Keep This in Mind

The one thing to always remember is that Christ is present in your group. It's not your job as leader to make something happen. Christ is there in your midst, and the Holy Spirit is doing the necessary work in the hearts of those who are gathered in his name.

You might say that one of your main jobs is to get out of the way of what God is doing. Your role is to help others recognize the presence of Christ in your sharing, in reading Scripture, in prayer, and in your fellowship as a group.

A Few More Things to Keep in Mind

The most important ground rules for the group meetings flow directly from the fact that Christ is present in your group. To recognize Christ, the people in your group must know they are respected, supported, and cared for.

Respect. Everyone in the group is to be treated with the utmost respect. The reflections and sharing of the group members is the way in which Christ will be present in the group.

Listen. The greatest gift the members of your group can give each other is to receive what they say. As leader you can model this intent listening.

No judgments. No one is to make judgments about what other people in the group say and do. The group is to be a place where people can safely say what they want without being corrected.

Confidentiality. Nothing anyone says in the group is to be shared with anyone outside it.

Setting the Tone for Your Group

One of your most important functions is to create a warm and welcoming atmosphere for the group. Hospitality includes taking care of the practical details, setting out clear expectations for meetings, and doing anything else necessary to eliminate confusion.

Practical details

At the first meeting, or before if possible, come to a clear understanding about meeting times and places. Will the group meet in the same place or rotate among members' homes? How long will the meetings last?

Clear expectations

Discuss the purpose of the group. Ask people to talk about what they want from the meetings. If expectations differ, help members settle on a purpose all can agree on.

Agree on the level of commitment to the group. It's highly desirable if members agree to attend all the scheduled meetings or give advance notice if they cannot attend. It's difficult to be comfortable in a group if the membership changes from week to week.

Ground Rules for the Meetings

Discuss and agree on the basic ground rules. The group should be clear about the following:

Preparation. Agree that everyone will come to the meeting prepared, having read the material in the book.

Schedule. Assure everyone that you will make certain that the group begins and ends on time.

Format. How will the meeting be structured? For example: open with prayer, read the Scripture passage aloud, discuss the passage, ask questions about it, share personal reflections, close with prayer.

Participation. It's expected that all will share. You will make sure that there's time for this.

Listening. Don't judge. Don't problem-solve. Don't interrupt. No cross talk. Christ is present in the sharing of all the members of the group.

Encouragement. Respond to each other's sharing with affirmation and positive feedback.

Confidentiality. What is said in the group stays in the group.

Listening and confidentiality are especially important. People will be comfortable in the group if they know that they will be heard and that what they disclose about themselves will be confidential.

Refreshments

Do not neglect food and drink. Refreshments are a near-universal requirement for a successful adult faith-sharing group. Discuss who will provide snacks. Don't forget to make provision for healthy snacks.

Be a Model of Hospitality

Set the tone for the group by being welcoming, positive, encouraging, and cheerful. Be the first to arrive and the last to leave. This is especially important when members of the group do not know each other well and are not sure what to expect. Your visible presence as a warm leader calms anxieties.

Leading Discussions

Your first task as a leader is to create an atmosphere of warm hospitality and establish the ground rules necessary for a good faith-sharing discussion. Your second task is to facilitate this discussion. Remember that the Holy Spirit is at work in the group. It's not up to you to make something happen, but you may need to deal with a few issues and fears that could hinder the Spirit's work.

Intimidated by the Bible

It's likely that some if not all the people in your group are apprehensive about discussing Scripture. Most Catholics think they don't know as much about the Bible as they should. Some are embarrassed by this. Others think that only highly educated experts can really understand Scripture. It's likely that some in your group will arrive thinking that they are in over their heads and that they don't have much to say when it comes to interpreting Scripture.

These fears are not without a basis in fact. Acknowledge them. We can always learn more about Scripture. And knowledge of the political, religious, and social circumstances of the time is often very helpful in understanding what a passage in the Bible means.

You can alleviate these fears by stressing the following points.

Scripture is more than words on a page. The Church believes that the Bible is the Word of God. When we read it, we are encountering Christ. It's a living spiritual force that is active in our hearts now. We can rely on the Holy Spirit to work in us and make clear what we need to know at this moment.

This is Bible discussion, not Bible study. Our main goal in this group is to help each other grow in faith. We are doing this by reflecting on our lives in light of the Word of God in Scripture and sharing these reflections with each other. We don't need to have an exact and detailed understanding of Scripture in order to do this. Every Christian can share his or her faith. Every Christian can engage Scripture personally if he or she does it prayerfully with openness to the Holy Spirit.

The Guide to the Reading section in the book is very helpful. Every Six Weeks with the Bible book contains a guide with background information and commentary on each reading. This should answer most questions.

Looking for the “Right” Answer

Some people in your group may be uncomfortable with the open-endedness of faith sharing. Different ideas about the meaning of a Scripture reading make them nervous. They want to know the “right” answer. What does “the Church teach” about this?

Emphasize the following.

Uncertainty is OK. The Church has very rarely said anything about the exact meaning of any passage of Scripture. Scholars debate the meaning of many passages. Sincere Christians can interpret Scripture differently and still be able to help each other grow in love of God and service to others. The Church has lived with ambiguity for 2,000 years. We can do it in our group.

In faith sharing, there are no wrong answers. In our group we are sharing about our lives in light of Scripture. Our experience is always authentic. It’s always “right.” We need to keep our focus on this sharing, not on the exact meaning of the Scripture reading.

Some answers can be found. We can draw on expertise from outside the group to answer questions about Scripture interpretation, Church teaching, doctrine, and theology. If such questions threaten to take up too much time, they should be tabled for discussion after the meeting. Feel free to contact us at Loyola Press for further assistance at sixweeks@loyolapress.com. We will have one of our scripture or theology scholars respond to your query and offer specialized help.

Anxiety about Sharing Personally

It’s quite possible that at least some people in your group have never shared personally in a group context. They haven’t talked about themselves to anyone except family, close friends, and perhaps a confessor or therapist. Some will plunge in fearlessly. Others will hesitate. Their uneasiness will often show up in a conviction that “I don’t have much to say.” “I don’t pray enough.” “I don’t know anything about Scripture.” “My faith isn’t like yours.”

Be reassuring and invite people to share, but don’t dismiss such convictions or challenge them too aggressively. For these people, the experience of being in the group may mark the beginning of an awakening of spiritual awareness. By listening to others share, they will learn to recognize the presence of God in their own lives. By the end of your meetings, they may have learned how to put their faith experience into words and share it with others.

You can gently encourage them to share what they are able to share. Work on making the group a warm, hospitable, and secure place. Trust the Holy Spirit to work. Remember, it’s God’s group, not yours.

Six Pointers for Leading Discussions

Soon enough, the people in your Six Weeks with the Bible group will get comfortable with each other, get over opening-night jitters, and start sharing freely and easily. You can facilitate. You support the discussion and protect it from pitfalls.

Keep the discussion flowing. Sometimes this means bringing up a new topic when conversation lags or redirecting the discussion when it gets off on a tangent. But sometimes it means holding back. You don't have to immediately intervene every time there is more than three seconds of silence. The group is responsible for itself.

Validate and encourage. You can help create a warm and safe atmosphere by acknowledging people's sharing. Encourage people who are hesitant. If someone shares something deeply personal and difficult, thank them and acknowledge their courage to be open. Be careful about allowing this to become formulaic. Your comments should be sincere and spontaneous, not artificial and predictable. You don't have to comment on everything.

Be positive. People should be encouraged to be honest and real in their sharing. They should talk about what's really on their minds. However, the group discussion is not a place to complain about the parish, grumble about politics, or lament one's lot in life. You may occasionally encounter a naysayer. It's best to respond by picking out something in his or her sharing and putting a positive twist on it. ("Thank you, Carol. With all that going on in your life, it sure is good that you're here. We're all glad you're here.")

Intervene when necessary. The case that most often calls for intervention is that of the person who won't stop talking. The decision to intervene can be a delicate one. You don't want to be heavy-handed and cut someone off prematurely, yet one person cannot be allowed to dominate the group. You can often tell that it's time to step in when you notice others becoming restless. At that point, intervention would be a service to the group.

Before you intervene, decide who you are going to call on. Then establish eye contact with the talker for several seconds, wait for a pause, and then speak their name and thank them. ("Frank, thank you for sharing that, but I'm going to ask you to hold that thought for now. We want to make sure everybody gets a chance to speak tonight. Barbara, how about you? Would you like to share a bit about what this reading means to you?")

Defer problems until later. Complex questions will likely come up from time to time. What does the Church teach about faith and works? Did Paul write the Letter to the Ephesians? Why do the Gospel accounts of the Crucifixion differ in many details? Some discussion of such questions is fine. Too much such discussion distracts the group from its purpose. Get back on track by saving these questions for later discussion. After the meeting, talk to the people involved and decide how these questions will be answered.

Someone in the group might share personal problems that seem to require professional help. Use your good judgment. You might encourage the person to talk to the pastor or to members of the parish with the expertise to help. It might be desirable for you or someone else in the group to seek outside help. Be mindful of confidentiality. What's said in the group is private; it cannot be shared with anyone outside the group without the person's permission.

Be a member of the group. The members of the group might be tempted to treat the group as “your” group. They look at you when they talk. They wait for you to do something when discussion lags. They defer to you. Your comments on a matter are treated as the final word. You might enjoy all this and begin acting as the group’s honored director, not its leader.

Some direction is necessary to create the safe space necessary for the group to function. Too much direction can stifle it. Don’t forget that you are one member of the group who happens to have some practical responsibilities. Don’t just facilitate the sharing of others, participate freely yourself. Don’t fill every silence, and don’t comment on everything. When you can, retreat into the background.

Final Thoughts

Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” This promise is why your parish is building small groups through the *Six Weeks with the Bible* program. Jesus is present at Mass, in the sacraments, in Scripture, in the universal Church, and many other places. But he is present in a special way when small groups of Christians gather in his name, especially so when groups gather to read the Word of God in Scripture and respond to it.

Jesus’ presence is manifested in the respect we have for each other, in our intent listening, and in our frank and honest sharing. Together in small groups, we help each other grow in love of God and each other. This is a spiritual power that is as real as anything in our lives. Your most important job as a leader is to trust this power. You can’t contain it, and you can’t predict it. You simply create the conditions for it and watch it unfold.

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