

Facilitation tips in virtual Zoom:

What we learned by facilitating discussion on *The Chosen* for adult small group

Meeting facilitation timeline: The one-hour meetings typically followed the same opening ritual, then 1 of 2 structured patterns. We followed Pattern 1 for the first 4 weeks, and Pattern 2 for the next 4 weeks.

Summary: The group of 15-20 participants did not all know each other at the start. Each week, they grew in their comfortability and vulnerability with one another. Undoubtedly, the sessions grew more meaningful, connective, and impactful with each week.

Opening ritual:

- Facilitation team logged in 20-30 minutes before the meeting to test technology, review the agenda, and pray together.
- Facilitation team opened the waiting room 5-8 minutes before the meeting and greeted participants as they came in.
- Meeting started 2-3 minutes after designated start time with a simple opening prayer. We rotated opening prayer responsibility across participants to build a sense of ownership of the meetings.

Pattern 1: Breakout groups

- **15-20 minutes:** Opening “circle question” to serve as group introduction/ icebreaker and get to know each other. We allowed this to take longer the first few weeks, because building trust was foundational. Questions we used taught us something about one another but were low-pressure enough not to be stressful, i.e. “What’s your name/parish, and...
 - What’s something in the last week that brought you joy?”
 - Who is someone in your life that has helped you get through the pandemic?”
- **25 minutes:** Separate into 2 breakout rooms to discuss prepared questions.
- **15-20 minutes:** Large group sharing back together in one room. Participants were asked to share highlights and graces from the breakout room discussion.
- Closing prayer led by the pastor

Pattern 2: Large group discussion

- **25-30 minutes:** Opening “circle question.” After 3-4 meetings of getting to know each other, we transitioned to using the circle question time for group discussion content, i.e.:
 - Which character/moment (from the past week’s episode) has stuck with you? Why?
 - Or: We opened with a Zoom poll question to diversify facilitation method, i.e. “Select which character had the greatest impact on you.” Whichever had the most votes became the springboard for our conversation.
- **20-25 minutes:** Returning to pre-planned discussion questions with large group
- **5-15 minutes:** Closing by inviting participants to share prayer intentions
- Closing prayer led by the pastor

Pros/Cons of Facilitation Methods:

Breakout groups:

- Good for facilitating deeper discussion in smaller groups.
- But, if the participants in a breakout group didn't already know each other, they were less inclined to go deeply in discussion, anyway.

Suggestion: Use this strategy when you want to go deeply in discussion, and participants have built a foundation to be comfortable being vulnerable with each other.

Zoom polling questions:

- Introvert-friendly: Anonymous sharing is a way to do a quick temperature check of the group.
- A good option for breaking up long times of talking to hold participants' attention.
- Learning curve: More to learn for facilitators and for group members unfamiliar with Zoom. We had one tech glitch: Polls didn't always work for iPad users.

Suggestion: Integrate poll questions if the facilitation team is willing to learn how to use them and the group would be receptive to them.

Opening/closing prayer rituals:

- The group was amenable to rotating who would offer the opening prayer each week. It built community ownership and buy-in for the group in a low-threshold way.
- The facilitators began inviting people to share personal intentions around the mid-point of the 8-week series. By that point, the group was more comfortable being vulnerable and personal with one another. By the end of the series, these moments of sharing became profound moments of discipleship for the group, as people shared more about their personal lives, or made connections between the session's topic and where they felt called to grow in their relationship with God.
- Having the pastor lead the closing prayer added a level of formality and care for the community that the group appreciated.
- This group is exploring the option of having a reunion 1 month after the 8-week series, in which they could have a more formal prayer service as a wrap-up. The series felt like it could use some measure of closure.
- Depending on the level of formality in the group, the facilitator could also incorporate other measures of sacred space in the prayer rituals (i.e. everyone lighting a candle in the opening prayer and extinguishing together at the end)

Suggestion: Find ways to incorporate group prayer and intentions to deepen the level of discipleship in the small group experience.

Ideas of creative ways to break the "digital wall" and connect your group with real-life special touches (trickier to implement, but high impact):

- Mail hand-written welcome notes, or thank-you notes, to all group members at the start/finish.
- Assemble gift bags of hospitality refreshments to mail, deliver, or pass out participants when you see them at Mass, in advance of that week's discussion.
- Gift participants with candles they can each light at home during your sessions.