

Excerpt 5: Group Leader's Handbook

Role of the Group Leader

Some educational assumptions have been made in the planning of this course. The fundamental assumption is that adults learn best when there is an interaction between the faith tradition which we inherit and the practice of personal faith and ministry in one's own life. Group reflection on this enables the appropriation of the faith tradition as it is focussed by questions that keep coming up in one's personal discipleship and ministry. At the same time, the practice of ministry is informed by the faith we have received.

The group leader has an important role in the reflection process. The aim is to facilitate the best possible engagement between the tradition and the present context of the participant's ministry. So the group leader is not primarily someone who passes on information. The leader is there to see that the members of the group, who are on their own journey of faith, are able to make the links between their own experience and the story of the Christian faith. That requires some skill and sensitivity. As people engage in reflection they find themselves asking questions about the tradition and being challenged about their ministry. They need a good leader who can walk with them on that journey of discovery, one who respects the tradition that we have received, knows about ministry, and can assure those participating in the course that the journey is full of delightful surprises as well as the occasional puzzle and confusion.

The course was written with the intention of enabling people to be introduced to a range of biblical, historical, doctrinal and ethical areas so that they build up a coherent map with which to operate. It is important that these areas are "covered". This is largely done through the preparatory reading that participants are expected to do, but time should be allowed in each group session to look at some of the questions that are posed in the course material or that arise from reflection on it.

At the same time, covering the ground is meaningless if people cannot see its relevance or do not know why they are covering it. That is why the second part of each session shifts the focus from the material they have been reading to the present situation. Participants are asked to share with the group some "critical incident" from their life since the last time the group met. Only one such incident will be needed for each session, so not all participants may have an opportunity to provide one in each unit. This will need to be kept in mind during subsequent units if the group continues with the course.

Obviously the nature and depth of such incidents cannot be pre-determined. Members of the group must be free to share whatever they wish. They will probably need to be reassured that "critical incident" does not mean some major crisis; it can be as simple as a chance meeting in the supermarket, or at home, or a new insight that stimulated their own personal growth. What matters is that there is something in the incident that raises a question about how their life in God is practised.

There are a couple of simple ground rules about these incidents that need to be established at the start:

- the purpose of relating the incident is solely to make connections between one's own faith and the Christian tradition and see how the one can illuminate the other.
- no information shared in the group is to go beyond the group. For the same reason, as much anonymity as possible should be exercised in reporting any incident, remembering that it is being reported not for its own sake, but for the possibilities it offers of reflecting on our lives as people of God. The discussion is not a counselling session or about solving a problem.