

Interfaith Dialogue

A Manual for Facilitators and Sponsors



This manual is adapted from the work of Elizabeth W. Flynn,
educator, author and advocate of the Interfaith Lay Dialogue movement
in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

❖ *Leading group conversation*

Advise participants that, despite its name, this is not a “conversation” nor a discussion – there is no questioning by facilitators or participants, no comments on statements made. As a facilitator, when you introduce your own memories, keep in mind the following categories of memories, observed by Dubois:

- physical senses of smell, taste, sound, sight, touch
- experiences shared with other children, such as games, special events
- activities in the home and family
- experiences in church, synagogue, school, etc.

You should include some of these elements in your shared recollections, since your recollections serve as a model for the group.

Keep in mind the overall goal of your sessions together – deepening understanding of others’ beliefs and religious practices – but start the first round of Group Conversation with simple statements about where you grew up and who lived in your house when you were little. **Make your first contribution as short and simple as possible.** The next “round” of contributions may concern a memory of a family meal. Sometimes facilitators start this second round with a brief description of a holiday or holiday meal at home – what did it sound, smell, taste and look like?



Steps for Conducting Group Conversation



1. *Coordination with co-facilitator.* You and your co-facilitator will have planned this session together in advance of the meeting, deciding on the topics and which of you will speak first. You can help one another by observing the faces of participants and their body language, helping bring in the latecomer and the shy, deflecting the too-long talker, and ending with a transition to the next activity.
2. *Introduction.* The facilitators and the group form a circle, with facilitators sitting at opposite sides of the circle. One facilitator explains to the group the purpose and procedure of Group Conversation, since participants may be interested in hearing a little about the history of this activity.
3. *First round.* Point out that “for this first round, we will go around the circle clockwise and I will go first.” You might start by saying, “I think we might enjoy finding out where each of us grew up – was it in the city? . . . the suburbs? . . . on a farm? . . . And who lived in your house?” Without waiting for an answer, you would continue with your own statement. As you finish, look to the person on your left and say, “Where did you grow up?” Everyone in the group speaks in turn.
4. *Second round.* After completion of the first round, either facilitator asks the next question, such as, “This time around, let’s talk about a family meal you remember from when you were little. “I remember. . . .” Again, each person speaks in turn.
5. *Third round.* If there is time for a third round, you might ask about the first time you remember realizing that someone you knew belonged to a different faith. For this round, it is not necessary to speak in turn.

If the group is larger than eighteen, you may need to limit Group Conversation to two rounds. While additional rounds are generally helpful, a large group may tire of hearing so many statements and forget much that was said.

During Group Conversation, facilitators should watch for the following:

- **The too-long talker.** Tactfully interrupt and redirect to the next speaker.
- **A spirit of competition or discussion.** If you observe other participants react with a desire to compete or discuss a statement during Group Conversation, ask the participant how he felt or what he did in a situation similar to the one being described. Keep on the level of experience.
- **Time limits.** Don't dwell too long on one category after the first round. If others are obviously eager to speak about the topic, you will not want to cut them off, but if the group is fairly large, people will tire of the experience.
- **Repetition of names.** Are people identifying themselves when they speak? If not, encourage this in subsequent activities to help participants learn each others' names.
- **Keep it young.** Do not allow participants to "grow up" too soon.

After completing the Group Conversation exercise, you may then proceed to the Mirroring Exercise, which helps participants to become more active listeners.

B. Active Listening: Mirroring Exercise

As a facilitator, you may notice that, despite your care in giving instructions, some people do not follow them. This is rarely deliberate, but is simply an example of people failing to listen well. If the group is to obtain the maximum benefit from their sessions, it is obviously important that they be able to listen carefully to one another.

Format: Sub-groups of 3 - 5 individuals Duration: 30 - 35 minutes Premise: Before presenting his own thoughts, each speaker must "mirror" or paraphrase the views of the immediately preceding speaker.

Careful listening – the ability to hear and understand what the other person is saying – is far from easy. Many things impede our ability to do so. Even people who know each other well frequently misunderstand each other, and people who do not know one another, particularly if they come from different cultural backgrounds, may have considerable difficulty.

❖ *Overcoming obstacles to listening and understanding*

Some factors which hinder us from listening and comprehending others include:

- **A physical inability to hear the speaker:** In a group situation, the arrangement of the group or setting may prevent some people from physically being able to hear; a speaker may be very soft-spoken, or some participants may

have impaired hearing. Participants in these situations sometimes hesitate to disturb the proceedings and let pass that which they have not heard or have misunderstood.

- **Inattention:** Participants may be inattentive because they are anticipating what they will say when it is their turn, or are thinking about a statement the speaker previously made. This type of inattentiveness is common and understandable, but results in limited attention to the speaker.
- **Individual mental filters:** Each incoming statement has to pass through the filters of the listener's past experiences, ideas, opinions and emotions. These filters may aid, distort or even block out our reception of communications.
- **Prejudging or stereotyping the speaker:** Stereotyping, similar to individual mental filters, affects how we view the statements of another participant. We may believe we already know how a speaker is going to feel or think about a topic, and therefore make inaccurate assumptions or inferences about the meaning of a statement, gesture or facial expression.
- **Defense mechanisms:** To live in this world, it is necessary to protect ourselves against many things which seem threatening. Our beliefs are precious and important to our well-being. If we hear what we perceive as an attack on our beliefs, we are apt to resort to a fight-or-flight state. In the interfaith discussion format we are obviously not going to do either in a literal sense, but we do it mentally. We may simply "not hear" what is said, our filters may distort it, or we may hear it, resent it, and for a brief space hear nothing else that is said, as we concentrate on our resentment or possible rebuttals.
- **Conflicting messages:** Our perception of communications is multi-channeled. We not only hear words being spoken, we also hear the tone of voice and see the bodily postures and facial expressions of the speaker. Sometimes the words say one thing to us, but for a variety of possible reasons the other channels are receiving a different message. We may respond to a mixture of two or more of these conflicting messages and misunderstand the actual message the speaker intended.
- **A strange universe of discourse:** In discussions of religious activities and beliefs we naturally use the words and phrases of our own religious background. These constitute an "insiders' language" and can easily be misunderstood by an "outsider." When we listen to a speaker from another cultural or religious community, we may hear words we simply don't understand but hesitate to question, or we may think we understand, since it is a word or phrase we also use, but it may carry a different meaning.
- **A desire to make the speaker comfortable:** We do not wish to appear critical in any way, and fear that by questioning the speaker as to her meaning we

may seem to denigrate her ideas, or fear our ignorance may be seen as disinterest. Therefore we often nod and smile and think, "I'll look that up later." The opportunity passes to discover the meaning of this particular speaker, which may not be revealed by simply looking it up.

- **Interesting insight:** Something said by a participant may trigger an association or insight that has personal meaning. This too can cause a distraction, prompting us to spend "mental time" away from the group, thereby causing us to miss other things being said. Participants can be encouraged to make note of interesting associations, insights, questions or emotions of any kind that are triggered, and encouraged to go back to their notes for personal reflection and discernment of issues or questions to bring back to the group at an appropriate time.

None of the above reasons are based on disinterest or a simple disregard for others. They happen to all of us at times, even when we are trying to do a good job of listening.

Mortimer Adler, a doyen of the discussion process, said:

It's important to remember that listening is not a passive activity. Unless your mind as well as your ear is involved, you aren't really listening. Your job is to reach out and catch what is in the mind of the speaker – just as the catcher in a baseball game must actively stretch for the ball the pitcher has just thrown If someone says to you, "Shall I tell you why I love you?" or, "We're thinking of promoting you to Vice President," you stop daydreaming and really listen to what that person has to say. If you can bring even a small degree of that intense motivation to other conversations and meetings, all other rules become secondary.

Joan Dickstein, one of the Philadelphia interfaith dialogue facilitators who is a skilled listener, points out the importance of active listening:

In reducing the conflict potential generated by inaccuracy and insensitivity, barriers to effective dialogue are frequently lowered when the principals offer and are themselves afforded the mindful diligence of reflective listening To offer one's full attention to another is to confer dignity, encourage thought, and endow with importance. It is both art and skill, (that) can be enhanced by practice, and is the parent of all virtues in communication. (18)

It is difficult to really listen attentively all the time, and yet it is critically important in a group dedicated to seeing and understanding differences, commonalities, and distinct points of view.

One way to help a group practice listening is a simple exercise devised by Carl Rogers, often called "Rogerian Mirroring." Many participants may have done this exercise before, but it is worth repeating in any new group. Since the subject selected as the topic for the practice session may be chosen from among many issues relevant to interfaith dialogue, the participants should have no feeling that time is being wasted.

❖ *Leading the mirroring exercise*

There is only one “rule:” **Before presenting his own thoughts and feelings, each speaker must “mirror” or paraphrase the views expressed by the immediately preceding speaker.** To “mirror” does not mean to repeat the other’s precise words, of course. It is only necessary to reflect their meaning.

The topic assigned by the facilitators for the mirroring exercise should be something about which most people have fairly strong feelings, but it need not be highly controversial. For instance, you may ask the participants to state their views on interfaith marriage or you may ask them, “Do you think there is a difference between being a ‘holy’ person and being a ‘religious’ person?”

Each member should have an opportunity to mirror, which means that the first speaker will be given a turn to mirror at the end. When all have had a turn to both speak and mirror, and the exercise has concluded, give participants an opportunity to talk over the experience. Facilitators may assist by asking questions such as:

- Did you find this easy or difficult?
- What made it so?
- What did you notice?
- What are the implications for our sessions together?

Participants will often comment, “It was difficult when a speaker talked for a long time” or, “I found it harder than I expected to remember correctly,” or “I found myself thinking about what I was going to say.” Very often groups start off very carefully, remembering to mirror, but as the conversation proceeds, mirroring is forgotten and you may hear someone say, “Yes, but. . . .” That is a sure sign that the rule was forgotten.

Optional use of an observer: One member of each small group may act as an “observer” whose function is to see that the “rule” is followed. The role of the observer may rotate among members of the group. If the facilitators elect to proceed without observers, it is the responsibility of everyone in the group to watch for adherence to the rule and interrupt when a speaker fails to comply.

In addition to helping participants more actively listen to one another, the mirroring exercise also reminds participants to pause after a contribution by another member of the group. Joan Dickstein observed:

A major barrier to effective listening is the tendency to reply quickly, thereby preventing the sender from completing or changing his message. A **short pause** accomplishes several objectives in improved communications. First, opportunity is provided for the speaker to ponder his own comment, to alter, add or delete information. Second, the responder is given time to rephrase, reflect or summarize what he has heard with greater accuracy. An added nuance: it does not escape the speaker that his remark has been accorded the respect of a thoughtful silence. (19)



Steps for Conducting the Mirroring Exercise



1. Facilitators decide in advance on the topic, group size, whether the exercise is to be carried out with or without observers, and the number of rounds.
2. The exercise and its purpose is explained to the entire group, and subgroups are formed.
3. The rule is emphasized, the topic assigned, and if an observer is to be used, one person in each group is asked to volunteer.
4. If observers are to rotate, the facilitators interrupt the groups when it appears that everyone else has had a turn to speak. The observers then become participants, and another member of their group serves as observer.
5. An opportunity is provided for participants to reflect on the process, discuss their experience, including its difficulties, value, etc.

❖ *Future use of mirroring*

At the conclusion of the mirroring exercise, facilitators may inform participants that the mirroring technique may be used in future sessions if they sense a misunderstanding among participants. This statement, together with the mirroring exercise, will help establish an important group norm: *We make a serious effort to understand one another.* Developing a norm of good listening is important to the success of the dialogue.