Journey into Compassion

A Study Series
Acknowledgements:

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This is a study series on compassion using the book *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* by Nouwen, McNeill and Morrison. The series is divided into six, one hour sessions, making it fitting for a Lenten study series. The sessions are designed for small groups using ritual and structured sharing. The goal is to deepen our practice of compassion toward one another and the world.

Please read this Facilitators guide before starting the study series. To aide in your success it is suggested that there be two co-facilitators for each group.

Each session is supported by Session Guides and Participant Handouts. Session Guides are meant to be used by the facilitators and include, in blue, further notes for the facilitators use in managing the session.

Handouts for group members have been prepared and are ready for printing.

For those who are able to connect to the internet, links to have been included when additional resources are suggested.

Our hope is that this study series is helpful in promoting a deeper understanding of the role of compassion in our Christian lives. If you have suggestions on how this might be improved or questions about its use, contact the Division of Peace and Justice of the Episcopal Diocese of Kentucky at meabrams@bellsouth.net. We are very interested in your feedback after you have completed the series. Please share with us your comments.
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A Study Series

Sessions Topics

Session I  Group formation and Beginning
Discussion of Compassion

Session II  Introduction and Chapter 1

Session III  Chapters 2 and 3

Session IV  Chapters 4, 5 and 6

Session V  Chapters 7 and 8

Session VI  Chapters 9 and Conclusion
Thank You

Thank you for taking on this task. Being a facilitator is demanding work. It is also and ultimately a joyful and life-giving opportunity. You are not alone. God's Spirit works on us and through us, even when we appear ill-prepared or disorganized. Prayerful presence is the most valuable form of preparation. Fostering openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit cannot be underestimated, for it is this Spirit (already present in the lives of your companions) that is directing the process. It is the Spirit acting on us and through us that transforms.

The shared structure of the six sessions of this series is as follows:

- Gathering time
  - Play music
  - If possible invite group to come early for greeting and “catching up.” Snacks could be provided.
- Opening Worship
  - Music ends and candle is lit to signal the session is beginning and participants should be seated.
  - Scripture reading and prayers
- Opening sharing
  - Participants share regarding the reading and home assignments
- Activities
  - To further the understanding of the reading for the week.
- Soul Work
  - To personalize the reading and activities
- Conclusion
  - Wrap-up
  - Reading and homework assignments
- Sending Prayer
  - Prayers to strengthen and encourage
  - Share the Peace

Each session element is given a suggested time to aid the facilitator in keeping the session to the hour allotment.

Suggestions for Framing the Sessions

Your primary task as a facilitator involves opening and maintaining a reverential environment. By their presence of heart and mind facilitators do much to set the tone for open and heartfelt sharing. A listening attitude, which generates a deeper and broader understanding, is always more fruitful than debating points. This gentle listening presence, which encourages participants to freely express their own experience, demonstrates reverence for everyone in the circle.
The Group Covenant

While the Group will develop its own covenant - underlying principals should reflect:

- RESPECT - Inviting participants to pause before and after each individual sharing, leaving room for silence. (even awkward silence is holy ground.)
- Reminding people NOT to interrupt, interject or contradict one another
- Encouraging those who are not speaking to practice wholehearted listening
- Challenging everyone to share and listen from the heart; beyond ideas or opinions.
- Identifying the difference between “Hearing” and “Scared Listening” Everyone has something to teach us, especially those we are tempted to dismiss.
- TRUST - Confidentiality is a must -

Sacred Listening (Listen with the “Ear of the Heart” (Rule of St. Benedict)

In order to foster a reverential attitude toward listening, moments of dialogue are formal and structured. This will be challenging for some. When facilitators carefully attend to fostering a prayerful environment, the process of dialogue should flow naturally. Facilitating the sessions will involve initiating the process, keeping everyone focused, being attentive to time, and making sure that all are included. Sessions lead participants from shared silence, to active listening, to sharing, all in the context of ritual and prayer. This process involves symbols and questions designed to lead us toward communion. Participants practice moving into deeper places, listening and sharing from the heart. The process includes a variety of dynamics for sharing, as well as symbols, questions, prayers, and other tools for dialogue. It takes time and effort to build trust and create an environment conducive to the deeper listening and heart-sharing we call dialogue.

Facilitators Pre and Post Meeting

When possible it is suggested that there be two facilitators for each group. In order to limit additional planning meetings between sessions, a brief (10-minute) pre and post-session facilitator’s gathering may be helpful. Directions and supplies for each session are outlined in the materials. Facilitators should be in touch before each session in order to:

- prepare themselves in prayer
- review the materials
- place copies of handouts on participants chairs
- gather necessary symbols or supplies
- delegate tasks. (readers, and facilitators roles)

The pre-session preparation involves a check-in, session overview and a moment of reflection. The post-session includes a moment of grateful quiet, or prayerful review of the session, and a look ahead to the events or tasks of the coming week.
THE SETTING

Meeting Space You will need a quiet space small enough to foster a sense of intimacy. Avoid high-traffic areas or noisy environments.

Circle of Chairs - Sessions begin and end with the same circular dynamic—a circle of chairs around the central table. The circle should be wide enough to accommodate everyone comfortably and allow participants to see and hear each other easily. Body language is an important indicator of the trust and comfort level in a group. Remind everyone to maintain the integrity of the circle, with no one seated outside, behind, or above the rest. Whether they are sharing or listening, everyone should respect the subtleties of this circular, inclusive dynamic.

Scared Space

Small Table - The central focusing table holds a cloth, candle, bible, cross and any other symbols the group uses. You may decide to add a decorative cloth or flowers to enhance the environment.

Candle - An unscented candle should burn during the session, to indicate the fiery, living presence of the Holy Spirit among and between us. This candle sits at the center of the table to shed light on the group’s presence to the process and to one another.

Bible - Keep a bible on the small table. Be sure you have found and bookmarked the selected readings for the session!

Cross - For Christians a cross is a graphic illustration of the depth of God’s love; a visible reminder of the reality of suffering and the presence of injustice; a sobering indication of the cost of other-centered living; and our liberating gateway into the Reign of God. Keep a small (hand-held) cross on the table at each session. As with all symbols, opt for natural, hand-crafted or sustainably-produced items over mass-produced, synthetic versions.

Chime (Singing Bowl or Small Bell) - Bells wake us up, sound the hours, chime in celebration, toll in warning, and call us to prayer. Punctuating the reflection and shared prayer with the chime will help maintain a reverential tone. At various points, you will strike a chime or ring a small bell to lead the group into silence and call people to attention, inviting everyone to listen. A quiet chime might be a gentle reminder that “time is up” just finish your thought and let the next person speak.

Music for the Soul - With the power to move us, to calm and focus us, to motivate and inspire us, music, in its truest form, is a creative spiritual expression. In its truest sense, music is a form of prayer. Music reflects God’s creativity and our diversity. Some of the sessions have suggestions for specific selections for use during worship, but the choice of music to be played during the “Gathering Time” is up to the facilitators. Reflective, background music or soft repetitive chants are ideal for this process. Another way that the group can become co-creators of the process is to ask participants to suggest or to share reflective music.
Sacred Listening and Sharing

Guidelines for Sharing

The goal of this series is a “heart sharing” in which both listeners and speakers are changed. As facilitator, you may wish to include some of these in your group’s covenant to return to when misunderstandings need to be resolved.

• Leave room for other voices.
• Only God is allowed to judge.
• Listening is a form of prayer.
• Respect silence—it speaks volumes!
• Try to understand rather than be understood.
• Dialogue is an end in itself.
• Share your truth with kindness.
• Speak to build up rather than to tear down.

Be Inclusive

Keeping everyone involved and making space for talkers and thinkers to listen and share, can be a constant challenge. These suggestions may be helpful:

• When impromptu dialogue occurs between several group members remind the group that we are not here to debate or change each other’s mind. You may say “Our time is limited, and we need to hear from everyone.”
• Instruct people to take turns when responding to a question, and gently invite the quieter people to share.
• Observe body language and notice when someone is ready to contribute.
• Invite everyone to pause and make space for those who need to think through their thoughts before speaking. If someone is dominating the dialogue try these responses: “Let’s remember our ground rule about making space for everyone to talk.”
• Acknowledge people as they indicate they would like to share, so the speaker knows others are waiting to enter the dialogue.
Structured Sharing

- Use the chime to open a period of silence.
- Offer the penetrating question suggested in the materials.
- Invite people to ponder for a few moments. Selecting whoever offers to go first inviting him/her to share from the heart.
- (If you chose to use a cross, candle or another symbol pass it to the speaker), let them offer a reflection, a question, or an insight.
- Keep time and gently remind people with the chime then they are “running over”
- After pausing briefly, pass the symbol to a neighbor on the left or the right, inviting this person to share a reflection, a question, or an insight.
- The one receiving the symbol holds it quietly before responding.
- If this person elects not to share at this time, s/he simply holds the symbol quietly, before handing it to the next, immediate neighbor in the circle.
- The symbol passes from hand to hand around the entire circle, inviting all who feel inspired to share a reflection, a question or an insight.
- After the symbol has come full circle, place it on the small table.
- Invite anyone who did not share, to pick up the symbol and offer a reflection, question or insight.
- Re-place the symbol in the center and repeat the process till everyone who has not spoken has had another opportunity to share.
- Invite everyone to enter into silence.
- If time permits, open the sharing to the whole circle, passing the symbol to anyone who feels moved to make an additional contribution.
- Close with a period of quiet reflection, in silence or use reflective music.

Open Sharing

- After a silent pause, extend a broad invitation to anyone who feels moved to share from the heart.
- Each person is invited to speak once.
- Use an invitational phrase to encourage people to share from their hearts, for example: “The floor is open!”
- Invite a quiet pause between responses.
- Thank everyone for sharing and listening, then close with silence.
CAUTION: Structured Sharing and Holy Listening MAY Provoke Resistance!

A highly-stimulated, and competitive culture urges us to get our ideas across, make a point, and endeavor to persuade or convince. In the fast-paced marketplace of ideas and opinions, we are familiar with debate: how to dissect, counter and retort. However, as a society, we are unaccustomed to silence, and we are NOT accomplished listeners. Pausing for silence, restraining our urge to respond, reverent listening, and non-discursive sharing, all can feel passive, slow, and even pointless. At first, this kind of formal, deliberate sharing (with its rituals, rules, pauses, silence and limits on direct interaction) may seem restrictive, artificial or rigid. Heart sharing and holy listening may be particularly frustrating for people who find it easy to verbalize and harder to listen. It can be equally challenging for people who are less inclined to share their thoughts. With practice, participants will grow more comfortable with silence and fall naturally into the rhythm of pausing, sharing struggles, and listening. The process should flow more smoothly as people learn to slow down, make room for each other, and space for quiet attentive presence. Encourage participants to be patient. Remind everyone that silence is also a form of sharing, our deepest level of communication, our first “sacred” language.

Embrace Gospel Challenges to Social Realities

Participants may wrestle with the challenges of following Jesus with integrity in the face of current realities. There may be times when people express concerns that the process proposes a direct challenge to some current political or ideological perspectives. This is not surprising since compassion deals directly with the practical implications of discipleship and our Gospel mission. If participants are uncomfortable with the challenges proposed in the process it may be helpful to ask:

• What is being said about the care of the poor and the implications of the Gospel message?
• How do the questions and activities connect with Scripture, and the traditions and social teachings of our Church? What other compassionate responses might be justified based upon the Gospel message?

Adapted by permission from JustFaith Ministries from their Engaging Spirituality: Co-Facilitator Manual. For more information on JustFaith Ministries please visit http://www.justfaith.org.