

Faith Journeys

Personal Introduction: This was a group process that I was introduced to while serving as an intern at Zion Lutheran Church in New Hartford, NY. I participated in the process with the church's Pastor (Roger Byswenger) in one cohort group that he facilitated, and then I was asked to facilitate a group following that experience. I am piecing this information together from some materials I had collected at that time as well as my own best recollections.

Purpose: To encourage group members to consider how God has been active in forming their faith, and to help members claim their own faith experience and gain confidence in their ability to share their faith stories with others.

Overview: The facilitator will invite six or seven people to join a Faith Journey Group for a period that offers one session for each member to share their faith stories plus one meeting for an introductory session (seven people in the group—including the facilitator—would require an eight meeting commitment). It is important that participants recognize that this is a commitment to attend each session in order to create cohesion and a purposeful flow to the sessions.

During the course of the sessions each participant will have the opportunity to offer a 30 – 40 minutes presentation of how their faith has grown throughout their lives (ups and downs are expected). After the participant has offered their story, other members of the group affirm their faith story and note where they have seen God involved in that person's life through the story they had shared.

At the introductory session the foundations will be established for this process, ideas will be offered for how a person might present their stories, confidentiality will be emphasized, and participants will be scheduled for when they will share their stories.

Specifics:

- 1) The facilitator identifies and invites participants to join in a Faith Journey cohort group. We did this through written letters that explained the process and the commitment (*see attached sample letter*). Since it is very important that the group members attend each session, it was important to have a RSVP commitment from those invited to join.
- 2) **Introductory session:**
 - a. Keep it somewhat light and informal (refreshments are always nice!)
 - b. Begin with prayer.
 - c. Briefly explain the process to the members and assure them of:
 - i. assistance in preparing their faith journey stories,
 - ii. grace in presenting and receiving them,
 - iii. and confidentiality regarding them.
 - d. The facilitator will then help the group brainstorm a list of characteristics or attributes of God. This list may later be added onto. Each week it will be posted in the meeting room and briefly reviewed.
 - e. Help participants understand what a faith story might look and sound like:
 - i. Might be a timeline of the speaker's life that highlights church and faith events (both highs and lows)

- ii. Might involve photos to share with members (or not)
- iii. Might include props, souvenirs, books, records, or other symbols of your life and growth
- iv. Provide questions that might help participants prepare to share their stories (*see attached handout*):
- v. Emphasize that this is *not* going to be a “speech” or an “oration” ... it’s just about sharing with friends.
- vi. Let group members know that it will be helpful for everyone to have a schedule of when each person will share. Also let participants know that the facilitator will share their own faith journey story at the next session so all will have seen and heard at least one example of how a faith story might be presented. (*see attached handout for scheduling participants’ sharing times*).
- vii. Bear in mind... While a person is sharing it is important that we allow them to say what they want to say without interjecting ourselves, coaching, or “directing” the speaker. We will let the person speak until they indicate that they are done (or when the timer goes off), and *then* it will be time for others to comment.
- viii. Following hearing the faith story, group members will be encouraged to share with the speaker (*see attached handout*):
- ix. The facilitator should emphasize that—because we may be hearing some things that are confidential—it is extremely important that we commit ourselves to maintaining the confidentiality of the presenters. These are *their* stories, and only *they* have the right to share their stories with anyone else. That means that we don’t repeat them to anyone outside of this group. Some facilitators have used a written Confidentiality Agreement (*see attached example*) in order to assure that each member understands the confidentiality expectations of the group
- x. Allow participants to ask questions regarding the introductory session, share concerns, and set up a schedule of speakers for each session (*again, see attached*).
- xi. Offer encouragement and support...
- xii. Close in prayer.

3) **First Sharing Session**

- a. The facilitator welcome members
- b. Open in prayer
- c. Very briefly remind members of the flow of the session:
 - i. We will review the characteristics of God we brainstormed because we want them fresh in our minds as we listen and try to see where God has been at work in the speaker’s faith journey.
 - ii. The selected person will share their faith story for up to 30 – 40 minutes or until they come to the end of their story (whichever comes first)
 - iii. During that time the listeners are to remain silent and allow the speaker to move along at their own pace.
 - iv. A timer will be set for the maximum amount of time the speaker is granted to speak at the session (typically 40 minutes) ... a person will indicate when the

timer reaches about ten minutes from the maximum time allowed so the speaker can begin wrapping up or close as needed. If the speaker is done early... so be it. No pressure, no shame.

- v. When the speaker is finished, the group members will share where they saw God at work in the speaker's life, characteristics of God that they saw at work in the speaker's life, and offer affirming statements and reflections.
 - d. Very briefly review the characteristics of God the group identified at their last session.
 - e. Have a group member set the timer, and the facilitator begins their story.
 - f. At the close of their story, the speaker allows the members of the group to note how they saw God at work in the sharer's story. During this time the sharer is to receive the affirmations of their faith journey without deflection, additions, or other comments (now it's *their* time!)
 - g. Facilitator thanks the sharer (in typical sessions) and reminds group of the agreement regarding confidentiality.
 - h. Facilitator reminds group of who will be sharing next and offers support and encouragement to that person (possibly extending to helping them prepare during the week if they need or wish)
 - i. Facilitator—or another member of the group—closes in prayer.
- 4) The above becomes the **pattern for subsequent sessions** with each member having the opportunity to share and the facilitator helping the group maintain appropriate and respectful behaviors and boundaries during the sessions.
 - 5) Following the last session of the cohort group the facilitator may wish to offer thanksgiving for the work they've done together, the stories they've shared, and the way their stories have impacted one another's lives. It is important to note that this is the close of the group, and that they may have the opportunity to participate in—or perhaps even *facilitate*--another group in the future.
 - 6) The facilitator may note group members with the skills, theology, and sensitivities to be good group facilitators themselves. In this case the facilitator (perhaps with the input of the pastor) might offer to coach a person to be a facilitator of another group themselves. In this manner, this ministry can grow exponentially throughout the church, offering many members the opportunity to share and hear the stories of others in the congregation.

Questions That Might Help You Form Your Faith Story...

(This is not a test or an essay...

You are not required to speak to every one of these questions...

they are only intended to spark your creativity and guide you if some are helpful.)

- 1) When do you first remember going to church?
- 2) Who took you to church, VBS, Camps, Sunday School or other programs? What were your first impressions of those programs?
- 3) How important was faith and/or religion in your family?
- 4) Who were the major influencers in your faith (for the better or worse)? This might include Sunday School teachers, youth group leaders, Pastors, camp counselors, or friends, relatives, etc...
- 5) Were there certain moments or events in your life that stand out as “mountain-top experiences”?
- 6) What were some of the low moments (valleys?) in your faith life, and—if you know—*why* do you think they were such low points?
- 7) Speaking of mountains and valleys, have there been plateaus where you seem to stay at the same level for long periods of time (or desserts, or oases)?
- 8) Were there books, movies, motivational speakers, songs or other things that really spoke to you in your faith life?
- 9) Were (or *are*) there *places* in your life where you felt (or *feel*) closer to God?
- 10) What about “life-changes” (moving from one place to the next, new schools, marriage and/or separation, sicknesses of yourself or others, new jobs, etc...) that brought your life and faith in new directions?
- 11) Did you ever change churches or denominations? If so why, and were you happier because of the change?
- 12) Did your faith ever have a “growth spurt”?
- 13) Did you ever have a “conversion” experience?
- 14) Did you ever reject the Christian faith (if so why and how long... and what brought you back)?
- 15) Have you ever experienced a healing, intervention, or spiritual presence that you consider a miracle in your life?
- 16) What kinds of activities do you participate in that seem to nourish your faith today (devotional reading, prayer, choir, service groups, hiking, etc...)
- 17) What do you think are the main reasons that you attend the church that you attend now?
- 18) How might your life be different without faith in Jesus?
- 19) What makes faith important in your life right now?

Offering Feedback Following Hearing A Faith Story

(The really big thing is that this is not a time to turn away from the presenter or the presenter's story to our own story... this is a time to affirm God at work in the presenter's life.)

- 1) Where I think I saw God working in the presenter's life (according to their story)?
- 2) What are some of the characteristics of God (as per the list we brainstormed earlier... or that this story reminded me to add to the list) that came to mind as I heard parts of the speaker's story?
- 3) What were some affirming moments or images that I heard the presenter share that really resonated with the speaker's life as far as I have known them?
- 4) Offer thanks for the person sharing; perhaps something specific (For example: I really appreciated your willingness to make yourself vulnerable. Or, thanks for sharing about your fears, it's nice to know I'm not the only one. Or, thanks for sharing about your healing, it's good to remember that God still works in miraculous ways!)

And remember.. the really big thing is that this is not a time to turn away from the presenter's story to our own story... this is a time to affirm God at work in the presenter's life... Or did I mention that already 😊.

Faith Journey Scheduled Speakers

Week One: Introduction (No Scheduled Speakers)

Week Two: Facilitator Shares _____

Week Three: _____

Week Four: _____

Week Five: _____

Week Six: _____

Week Seven: _____

Week Eight: _____

Week Nine: _____

It is very important that the speaker be prepared for the session they are scheduled for. In case of illness or other emergency, please contact the facilitator of this group at your earliest convenience so the session can be rescheduled. Thanks!

Confidentiality Agreement For Members of the Faith Journey Group

In the Small Catechism, when Luther examines the Eighth Commandment—which says “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor”—Luther notes that this means: “We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about neighbors. **Betray or slander them, or **destroy their reputations**. Instead we are to **come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret *everything* they do in the best possible light.**”**

(Augsburg Fortress, 2016; emphasis added)

A part of the process of sharing our faith journey stories is making ourselves somewhat vulnerable to others. Each “sharer” will make their own decision about just how vulnerable they are willing to make themselves to this group (and that is good and right, and exactly as it should be).

The corresponding piece is that each of us who are blessed to hear the stories of others must commit ourselves to protect the other by holding their story in strict confidentiality.

That means that:

- 1) We will not share parts or the whole of the story of another member of this group with anyone outside this group without the “owner” of the story’s specific permission.
- 2) We recognize that is not up to us to determine which parts of the sharer’s story it is permissible to pass along to others.

My commitment is that I will attempt to follow this confidentiality agreement not only to the letter of the agreement but also in spirit, for the sake of my brothers and sisters in Christ.

Signed _____ **Date** _____