

# PLANNING AND LEADING A BOOK DISCUSSION

## *It's as easy as 1, 2, 3!*

Good books are meant to be shared and discussed! Use this simple guide to plan and lead a book discussion in your congregation, home, place of business, or other favorite hangout. A book discussion group is a great way to get to know others and to share ideas, for fun and personal growth.

### **Step 1: Planning**

#### ▪ **Who will lead?**

Getting the discussion group off the ground will take the attention of at least one primary leader or a leadership team. The leader or leadership team will begin to think of purpose, publicity, participants, and place. And don't forget to begin with prayer. Invite God's presence in your planning and in the exciting moments of discussion and reflection that you and others will experience. Once a book discussion group is in full swing, the leadership of individual sessions can be passed around the group.

#### ▪ **What is your purpose?**

A book discussion group can be formed for many different purposes: fun, fellowship, support, faith enhancement, and personal growth. It is helpful for the leadership team to think about the overall purpose of the group.

Consider these questions when forming your group:

- Is the group designed to attract a certain age group or people with similar life experiences?
- Do you want to bring people with the same reading interests together (fiction, nonfiction, poetry, mystery, etc), or do you want to encourage diversity and read all types of genres?
- Is there a primary topic of interest? Or will the book chosen set the tone each week or month?
- Do you want to encourage groups of congregational members and friends to meet, or do you want to intentionally invite non-church members and neighbors to participate?
- Consider writing a simple mission statement for your book discussion group.

#### ▪ **How will you publicize?**

Your overall purpose will determine how you publicize your group, the participants you choose to invite, and the kinds of books you choose to discuss. If you plan to have congregational members be the primary participants in the discussion group, you probably have some form of general congregational communication you can use to publicize the formation of the group and ongoing meetings. If non-church people or neighbors are to be invited, you will need a form of personal invitation, such as a note, phone call, or e-mail. Be sure you have clearly communicated the purpose of the group, as well as the time and location of the initial meeting.

#### ▪ **In what place will you meet?**

Choose a place to meet that will allow the participants to be comfortable and free to talk openly. A home setting is often good, as it allows a host to extend hospitality. Refreshments of some kind help add to the welcoming tone. If you meet at church, be sure that the space is conducive to comfortable face-to-face contact. Public places like a local coffee shop may also be a fine choice for some groups, but careful of potential distractions that may detract from a full discussion.

## **Step 2: Choosing**

### **▪ Which book will we choose?**

If you have answered all the questions above, you are now ready to choose a book. Go back to your mission statement or discussion of purpose to determine what type of book you want to consider that would meet the goals that you have set for the group.

Some groups rotate the leadership of the group and let the new leader choose the next book. Other groups like to decide together which books to read and discuss. You may consider having group members bring recommendations, book catalogs from publishers, book review resources, or recommended reading lists to reference.

Also consider whether the group is comfortable and outspoken enough to find topics to discuss on its own, or whether it needs assistance directing the discussion. Augsburg Fortress has a large number of books that come complete with built-in study guides or reflection questions, such as the Lutheran Voices series, the Facet series, and many other individual titles. Simply check a title on our online store listing to see which books have study questions. Other books may be accompanied by a separate Leader Guide. Low-cost or free downloadable study guides may accompany some books as well.

If you like to “wing it” and create your own format for group discussion, any book will do. As your group develops trust with each other, you may move from reliance on scripted questions to free form discussions quite easily.

### **▪ When do I need to order the book?**

Will group members be responsible for finding and purchasing their own copies of the selected book, or will one member order enough copies for everyone? Keep in mind most books can be ordered and shipped in a couple of days, but occasionally a book will be temporarily out of stock, or permanently out of print. Don't wait until the last minute to place your order. You can usually order online, by phone, or in person at a local bookstore.

## **Step 2: Leading**

### **▪ How will I lead the group discussion?**

The group book discussion can take many different forms depending on your purpose, group size, and participants.

Keep in mind the following elements:

**Preparation**—Prepare ahead of time by doing the reading and have as rough or detailed an outline as your comfort level allows.

**Welcome**—You may wish to have a formal welcome provided by the host or leader. Prayer at the beginning of the meeting can also help to set a welcome tone and center the participants.

**Discussion**—Set a tone of welcome by reminding participants that all comments and opinions are valuable.

Encourage members to mark specific passages for easy reference. The discussion leader may also provide some study questions for participants to consider while they are reading the book. Those questions can be used to start the discussion when the group meets. Encourage members to make notes of style and content which seem important to them. Don't allow the discussion to wander too far from your purpose and objectives, as this could lead to frustration for some of your members. Ensure that there is an agreement for politeness among members some topics may lead to heated debate, and you will want to avoid any hurt feelings. Once in a while it may be good to invite each participant to give her or his perspective on something without comment or rebuttal from the group.

**Closing**—Stick to your announced closing time. The leader or host will need to be aware of the time, so you have adequate time to discuss the next gathering of the group if this hasn't been covered in the welcome time.

If appropriate, close with prayer.

A book worth reading is a book worth talking about!

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