



# Commonweal

*Tips for Meeting Planning & Facilitation*



# TIPS FOR CONVERSATION PLANNING & FACILITATION

## > WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

Anyone interested in thoughtful, expansive, intelligent dialogue on issues that matter—whether political, theological, cultural, or artistic—is welcome to be a part of the Commonwealth Local Communities and the dialogues that arise within them. Readers and nonreaders of *Commonweal* may participate, as the range of topics we've selected for the Conversation Starters concern all kinds of people. The ancient philosopher Aristotle said, "It is the mark of an educated mind to entertain a thought without accepting it"—indeed, a diversity of backgrounds, beliefs, and perspectives often yield the most fruitful and rich conversation. Thus, we encourage all participants to offer their opinions respectfully while also generously considering opinions that do not match their own, especially on controversial or charged topics.

Practically speaking, we recommend groups of 10-25 for a well-rounded conversation; any larger can become unwieldy and any smaller can be hard to sustain—though there are exceptions to both of those possibilities.

## > WHAT IS THE CONTENT OF THESE MEETINGS?

These groups are for learning about and discussing far-reaching topics in local spaces. Your conversations may focus on the recent issue of *Commonweal Magazine*, it may focus on recent news or events, or you might take advantage of our Conversation Starter Series. Through the feedback of our original CLCs, we've selected topics that are especially weighty and relevant—and given the significance of the topics in the Conversation Starters, we hope that charity, clarity, and civility of discourse are the hallmarks of these discussions.

Our program outlines eight topics, which span the breadth of political, religious, cultural, and artistic concerns. The 2017-2018 program includes: *The American Catholic Vote*; *The Environment*; *The Church & The LGBTQ Community*; *Music in the Church*; *Interreligious Dialogue: Judaism & Christianity*; *The Death Penalty*; *Consumerism & Christianity*; *Symbol & Ritual*.

Each topic comes with supplementary material, including:

- An introduction to the issue's history and current relevance
- Reading materials to deepen familiarity with the topic
- Discussion questions to help you unpack the readings
- Suggestions for further reading if the group—or an individual—is inclined

We hope that these materials provide a solid backdrop upon which a groups' conversation can flourish. Though we've provided a schedule of topics, these can be discussed in any order, skipped, or added to

by consensus of the group. A group can decide to focus on one particular reading or question or make some of the suggested readings a priority, and many groups supplement with or focus their meetings on topics that come from the current issue of *Commonweal Magazine*.

Additionally, we recommend (though this is not a requirement for success) gathering over food or a meal. Light refreshments seem to encourage comfort and take unnecessary pressure off the conversation.

## > WHERE DO THESE MEETINGS TAKE PLACE?

*Commonweal* recommends finding large, comfortable spaces for conversation, as environment inevitably has an influence on mindset and moods. We suggest church gathering rooms, coffee shops, libraries, or living rooms as ideal spaces for these group discussions. Of course, locations can shift—especially as groups grow or change—but we recommend making comfortable, quality space a priority.

## > WHEN DO THESE GROUPS MEET?

The precise time, date, location, and frequency is entirely up to you as a group. We recommend once per month with exceptions throughout the summer and near major holidays—which is why our program contains only eight months worth of topics. If your group decides to meet with more frequency or more months out of the year, you will need to determine additional discussion topics for those gatherings.

## > HOW DO MEETINGS RUN? HOW DO THEY GET SCHEDULED?

The best discussions have a little structure, which is a big reason we've decided to compile these resources for you. In addition to using our program, we suggest that each meeting having a discussion *facilitator*. That role is, simply, to pose the first question, help stir up ideas when there are lulls, and be an active leader in inviting others to speak and share. The facilitator does not need to be an expert on the topic of that meeting, by any means, and this responsibility can be assigned different each month or belong to one consistent person.

In addition to a meeting facilitator, it is imperative to have good communication as a group. We recommend having *one point-person for communications* that does not rotate. This role includes sending out emails or making phone calls a week (or more) before the meeting with a confirmation of the location, time, and discussion topic clearly stated. This person should also be willing to be in touch with *Commonweal* when there are new sign-ups in their particular community. Though this role is not a major time commitment, it is a huge asset to the success of these groups.

Overall, we recommend establishing a common vision for your CLC at the first meeting of each year, including a discussion of food or budget, possible locations, the schedule of topics, the role of meeting facilitator and the point person for communications, and any informal rules a group may want to set for fruitful and charitable discussions.