

Facilitation

What is facilitation?

'Facilitation' literally means 'to make something easy'. In the context of Local Church Review (LCR) it means helping a congregation to work well together in the process of review and evaluation, and in discerning God's vision for them.

Facilitators do this by:

- Putting people at ease.
- Ensuring that healthy group dynamics enable everyone to participate in ways that are comfortable for them.
- Helping people to listen actively to others.
- Helping people to share openly with others.
- Helping people to use their unique perspective to enable the group to better understand their congregation.
- Encouraging people to discern what God might be saying through the Bible, through others, and in their own minds and hearts.

Facilitators achieve this through:

- Careful preparation.
- Skilful and sensitive leading of the sessions.
- Diligent analysis and recording of the outcomes of each session.

External or DIY facilitation?

In some cases LCR will be entirely facilitated by 'external' personnel from the Presbytery. In other cases – or for particular aspects of – LCR can be done also using a small team of 'internal' facilitators from within the congregation. There are benefits and drawbacks with both approaches.

Facilitators from within the congregation will know the people involved and may be able to use that knowledge to manage the group dynamics well. However, an insider may find it difficult to serve the needs of the group without getting involved themselves. Even if they are willing to sacrifice their own input to the discussion in order to enable the rest of the congregation to make a full contribution, they may not be viewed as neutral by others.

Using people from outside the congregation may reduce the likelihood of people feeling that the facilitators may be bringing their own agenda. However, external facilitators will need to work harder to get to know the people and understand how the group functions.

For many Presbyteries the decision regarding whether to include the use only their own facilitators or to include someone from within a particular congregations to the availability of suitable people.

Who can be a facilitator?

For someone to be an effective facilitator, they need to be committed to this process and be able to do the following:

- Plan and prepare the programme carefully.
- Put people at ease and be sensitive to individual needs and the dynamics of groups.
- Communicate clearly in giving verbal instructions and in writing reports.
- Be willing to set aside any agenda of their own and serve the needs of the group.

People who have these skills are often found in congregations, as they are skills that are required in other areas of life and in some jobs, so there may be more potential facilitators around than is initially apparent.

In addition, for people to facilitate effectively within their own congregation they need to be well regarded and have the trust of people. Whatever role facilitators normally have within the congregation, they will need to ensure that all involved know that every person's opinion is of equal value. If those in formal leadership positions are to be effective facilitators they will need to emphasise this.

Putting together a facilitation team

There are multiple benefits in having more than one facilitator.

Firstly, it spreads the workload. Different people can take the lead for different activities. That means less preparation is required by each person. Participants appreciate a variety in presentation style and voice.

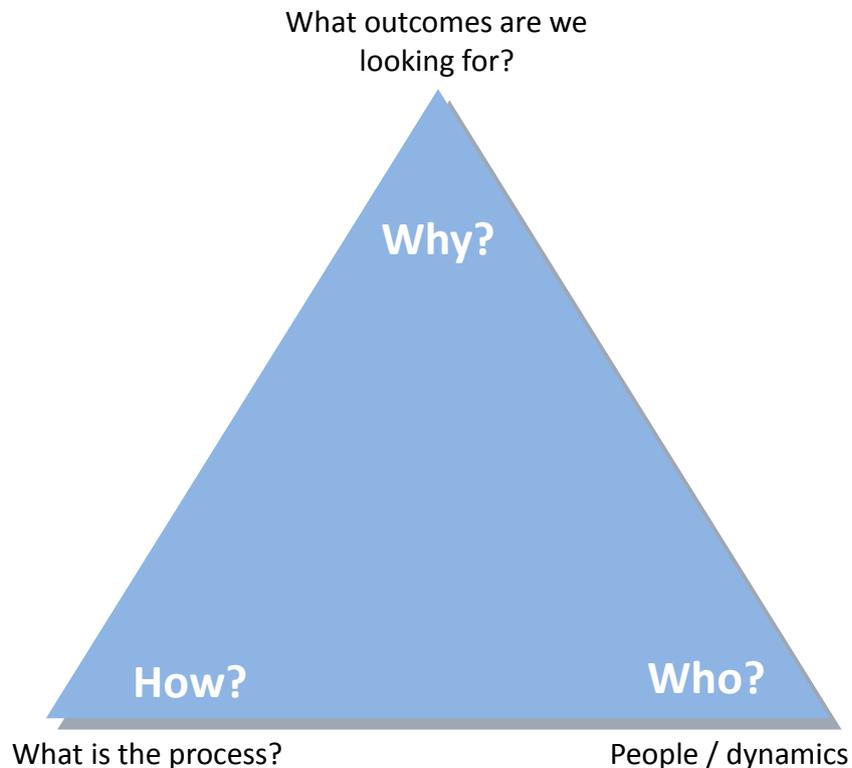
Secondly, having more than one facilitator also means that, while one person takes the lead on a particular activity, the other(s) can have their eyes and ears wide open, giving their full attention to how people are responding, observing whether they are understanding instructions and looking out for people who may be struggling to participate or people who might tend to dominate their group.

Another advantage of the team approach is that, while no one person may have all the necessary skills, a small team may feel that, together, they have all the qualities that are needed. For example, one person may be happy to lead sessions, but would prefer not to write reports; someone may be happy to take the role of observing from the edge and gently intervening to guide or support, but be unwilling to take a more upfront role in giving instructions.

If they have the necessary skills between them, two people will be adequate to work with smaller congregations. When working with larger congregations, a bigger team may be preferred.

The overall approach

Effective facilitators give careful attention to each of the following three areas. They have each of them in mind as they plan, as they prepare and as they facilitate.



Giving instructions

The ability to give clear instructions is a crucial part of facilitation. To do this, the facilitator must be crystal clear about why the particular activity is being undertaken, the intended outcomes and the steps involved. If not, it is unlikely that they will be able to help others understand effectively! Here are a few tips:

- Before leading a session, 'walk through' the whole programme in your mind and ensure that you have clear, helpful instructions in your mind (or written down) for each step.
- Always give one instruction at a time.
- As far as possible, anticipate and answer people's questions before they are asked (Why? What? How? What if?).
- Check that everyone has understood. This is done by asking, but also by observing facial expressions and body language.
- If an activity does not proceed as intended, move quickly to ensure that it does. If confusion or misunderstanding is widespread, don't hesitate to call for the whole group's attention again. If there is one group or an individual who seem to be stuck or heading in the wrong direction, draw alongside and help – or ensure that one of the facilitation team does.

Getting the most from the process

- The facilitator should not be part of a group, but should be available to assist all the groups.
- Groups should comprise five to seven people; if the groups are larger there will be a few people active and the others feeling bored!
- Groups should comprise people who have a spread of length of time in the congregation(s).
- Are you going to involve children/young people? If so, think about the timing of the event – a weekday evening could end too late for those with school the next day. If children are not involved, it could be useful to arrange crèche facilities to allow parents with young children to attend.
- Any exercises requiring group discussion or responses will benefit from a room layout like the one in the picture below (Figure 1). Working around tables in this café style (sometimes called banquet style) format is essential as:
 - If people are comfortable, they are more able to focus on the discussions and activities at hand.
 - At a talk or a lecture (or when listening to a sermon) most of the input is from the front so it makes sense, for comfort and to enable people to hear, that seating is facing the front. In LCR most of the input comes not from the front, but from the participants themselves. This layout means that people are able to face each other comfortably, and to hear and be heard easily.
 - Many exercises will involve recording information in some way. Having a surface to write on is essential.
 - Sitting around a table together means no-one is in charge. Everyone there is equally important to the process.

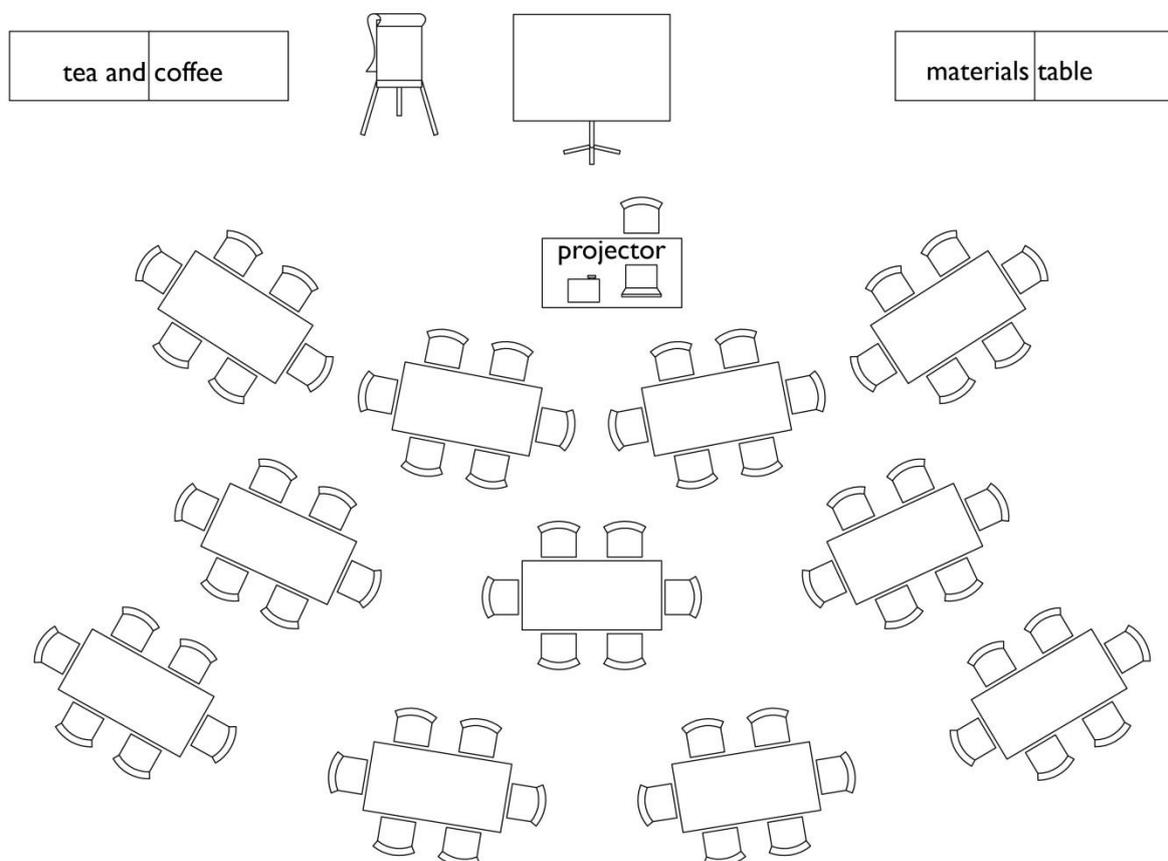


Figure 1

Ground rules

Explain the following 'ground rules' during the introductory part of each session (fully during the first session, with a reminder during the following sessions):

- **Respect** – everyone has a unique perspective based on their unique set of experiences. We must all respect each other's contributions.
- **Active listening** – not only do we listen to each other, but we listen intently, eagerly seeking to understand what the other person is communicating. It is a privilege to listen to another person.
- **Only one person in a group speaks at any one time** – there should not be side conversations.
- **Everybody should have an opportunity to contribute** – if necessary the facilitator may insist on a 'nobody speaks twice until everybody speaks once' rule. If this is used, it is important to emphasise that nobody should feel 'put on the spot' or forced to speak when they would rather remain silent. Ensure that people know that they can say 'I have nothing to say at this point' without embarrassment.
- **Switch off mobile phones** – unless people really need to have them on in case of a possible emergency call, in which case they may be able to put them onto a vibration only mode.

It can be helpful to list these on a flipchart sheet, which remains visible throughout the session. It is important that everyone is comfortable with these from the outset, and some time should be given to allow amendments or additions to be made (e.g. an agreed finish time, etc). Although this may seem to take up valuable time, it helps ensure smooth running of the sessions and can actually be a time saver.

A privilege and a responsibility

People who have been involved in facilitating congregations often say that they have felt privileged to be part of discerning God's purposes. It is challenging and yet, usually, encouraging. Guiding a congregation through this process is certainly a serious responsibility but, by adopting the principles above and preparing prayerfully and carefully, experience has demonstrated that it is almost always a positive experience for all involved. Indeed, for some congregations, it has been transformative, leading them into an exciting new phase of life and mission.