

The Spirituality of Work
Educators

**A six-session
small group guide**

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Small Group Guidelines

Ground Rules

Here are some guidelines for your gatherings. Your group leader will help facilitate.

1. **Our goal** is to grow together into a deeper intimacy with Christ and to connect our faith with our work. Keeping this goal in mind will help us get there!
2. **Confidentiality.** What's said in the group stays in group, unless you have the permission of the person who spoke it.
3. **Start on time—and end on time.** Your group leader will try to pace the sessions, but everyone can help by arriving promptly and being attentive to time.
4. **Discussion involves everyone.** Make it possible for everyone – even those who are naturally more quiet – to take part. Don't share a second time until everyone has had an opportunity to share the first time.
5. **Remember your manners.** Avoid dismissing the thoughts of others, don't laugh at others when they've shared (unless they've just told a joke), and no putdowns of any kind.
6. **Share from your own experience and speak for yourself.** Don't try to problem-solve for another person or tell them what to do, but you can share what you have found helpful in your own life.
7. **It's OK to agree to disagree.** It's just a fact of life that everyone has different opinions. If the group has differing thoughts on an issue, there's no requirement that everyone agree. Respect everyone's opinions and where they are at in their journey.
8. **Turn off mobile phones** before the group begins! Put your electronic lives on hold for this short time to be fully present to others.

Leader Guidelines

Thank you for being willing to help lead your group and make this a great experience for everyone! Here are some things to keep in mind as you do so:

1. **Ensure good hospitality.** Members of your group may be new to a small group experience or the larger community. Facilitate introductions and be sure everyone feels welcome.
2. **Go over the ground rules** at the beginning of the series, and quickly review them at the start of each session. Some of the material is challenging, since it explores how the Gospel challenges us to change our lives. Make sure that the below ground rules are followed so everyone feels comfortable in the group.
3. **Gauge the dynamic of your group.** If necessary, you (or another designated facilitator) may need to gently facilitate to keep the group on schedule, remain on-topic, and/or allow all voices a chance to enter the circle. You may feel timid interrupting someone, but this can be a very important role that helps the whole group. Apologize in advance when reviewing the ground rules with the group. However, don't put people on the spot by compelling them to share.
4. **Facilitate answering reflection questions.** Sometimes sharing times can be a little awkward waiting for people to initiate. You can rotate around the circle, but we recommend that you try something called the "popcorn" method. One person starts, and when they are done sharing they choose the next person (who is always allowed to pass and pick another person). We have found that in practice this works very well, sometimes adding a little levity.
5. **Listen to the feedback from the group along the way.** Pace the time for the different sections based on the total time available and what works for your group.

Transforming Work Frustrations

Opening Prayer

Read this prayer aloud together:

Creator God, you worked to create the world and you are still working and laboring on our behalf today. Help us to cooperate with your grace so that we may grow as disciples who are doing the work that you need done in our world. Amen.

Sharing

Did you do anything consciously to act as “salt” or “light” at work last week? Please share.

Background

Read this passage aloud, with each participant reading a paragraph. Anyone who prefers not to read is welcome to pass.

All work is inevitably linked with toil, hardship, and frustrations. In every teaching setting there is accountability. There are concerns about promotions or scheduling considerations. There are personality conflicts. "Let's face it, frustration is inherent in teaching," says Carolyn Reinertson, who has been teaching reading and language arts in primary grades for 23 years.

The spirituality of work encourages teachers to try to improve situations and eliminate problems when possible. In fact, it recognizes that teachers can complain about the frustrations of their work without destroying its spiritual meaning. Even when it comes to the paycheck, the spirituality of work does not mean accepting unjust wages. At all times an active spirituality of work finds a way to build on the negatives and perhaps even find in them a glimmer of new life. As work is a participation in God's ongoing creation, it is, in a certain sense, a collaboration in Christ's redemption.

"Sometimes I am misunderstood," says elementary

school principal Ruth Ann Derbas. "I sit at my desk and wonder how Jesus would act in the same situation. Deep down I know that I am an educator. It is my ministry and I am good at it. But at those times I pray for courage. If a tough situation came around a week later, I would go through the misunderstanding again."



Despite the great benefits of our organized educational institutions, there are some frustrations that come with them. The school may limit what a teacher can do in a given situation. "Sometimes I have to fight the institution in order to deliver education," Elizabeth Collins continues. "I suppose this a problem common to many occupations. I work in spite of the institution sometimes, rather than because of it."

Among such frustrations, teachers will most often mention paperwork. "The bureaucratic paperwork can be weighty," explains Kathleen O'Donnell. "For example, our district does not have a full-day kindergarten program, and thus many first graders are unprepared to handle the expectations of the institution. I have to decide how many and which children will repeat first grade. Maybe with some specific extra help a child could avoid repeating. No matter what I decide there is a long process to follow. There are services on a district level which might benefit a child. This means a 14 page form. There are many children in this category."

Teachers are also often frustrated by administrative personalities and procedures that seem too business-like, not attuned to the uniqueness of the individual teacher and the needs of the students. "In teaching, as in every other job, there are conflicts with administrators," says Kenneth Bartos. "For example, I might be evaluated on the basis of one or two visits to my classroom. The many other things I do with students are overlooked. At those times when I feel like I am being treated impersonally, I think about the reasons why I am a teacher. I fall back on my spirituality."

"Education has too often been made into a business," complains Kathleen O'Donnell. "The educational process has been reduced to measurable products. Some people in the system presume that learning can only be viewed as numbers, charts and graphs."

"At the same time that society has high expectations of teachers, it also thinks that teachers work a short day, never on weekends, nor during the summer," says high school teacher Rebecca Ann Hilgedick. "Our society expects a teacher to do something worthwhile during the day, but it doesn't appreciate all the preparation that is necessary to do that. Our society is asking for better education, but it doesn't value educators."

The spirituality of work offers the virtues of time management as a partial response to these frustrations. "Hustle and full-court press at work are virtues," says Charles DiSalvo. "There is important work to be done. We have short, very short lives. So I go to work and I hustle. My time is very important to me and as a Christian I am responsible to make work as productive and fruitful as possible. A teacher can be friendly, yet follow some simple principles: Deal with paper as quickly and definitively as possible. I try to handle each piece of paper only once. My other rule is to have an early-morning planning session with myself and set my priorities for the day. Of course, a student may knock on the door at any time. I have to use my best judgment. I might deal with the person immediately or make an appointment for later."



Institutional frustrations are not confined to the particular school in which the teacher works. One example is the frustration many feel because of the disparity between their pay and the importance of their work. "Regardless of what any so-called education reformers might say, every teacher is underpaid," opines Kenneth Bartos. "This is true in the public sector, especially in the lower grades. It is very true in the private school systems."

Because of the wage scale, many teachers hold part-time second or third jobs. "Sometimes the moonlighting detracts from what should be the main focus of a teacher's attention," says Kenneth Bartos. "I take small jobs on the side but the work is never steady. I usually teach a summer course in a nearby state. The course doesn't pay much, but it is predictable. Teachers don't usually leave their jobs

to go to another school. They quit to go into a different business."

"I do not consider myself economically poor," says Wayne Renderman, "but there are many times when my family has to think twice about purchases where other people might forge ahead. My wife has to work. For financial reasons I dropped out of teaching one time and worked for a steel company. I found that the pressures of lesson plans and student discipline merely gave way to the pressures of processing orders and quoting accurate prices over the phone. I remained with the steel company for only three months. I wasn't in love with that line of work. There was an opening back at the high school and I decided to go back to the teaching I loved."

Reflection

1. Name a frustration that you struggle with in your current job. What attitude or behavior could you adopt toward this frustrating situation that might allow God's grace to break through?
2. What are some sacrifices you make in the normal course of your job that you can offer up to God?
3. What helps you to stay focused on the call to be a teacher filled with wisdom and kindness despite the paperwork or bureaucratic hoops you must jump through?
4. What grace do you need to ask God for in your work in order to allow it to become less frustrating and more fulfilling?



Scripture Reading

Read this passage aloud.

Romans 12:9-18, 21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Reflection

1. When, in your work, is it difficult to “be ardent in spirit and serve the Lord”?
2. How are you called to overcome evil with good in your profession?
3. What helps you to hold fast to what is good when you are tempted to give into apathy or despair?

Action Response

Consider this question for your week ahead. It does not need to be discussed now with the group, but we will reflect on it briefly next week.

What might you do differently this week at your job when you are confronted with a particular frustration?

Closing Prayer

Read this prayer aloud together:

Jesus, our Lord and our Teacher,

You worked tirelessly on behalf of the dignity of all,
especially those most often
neglected, forgotten, or outcast.

You know what it is like
to try to bring love and compassion
into an imperfect world.

Teach us how we are called to serve like you.

Show us how you would have us fight for justice.

Grant us hope and perseverance

when we are tempted to lose hope.

May we do what we can to bring about
your reign of justice and love..

Amen.