

# GET THEM TALKING

## A GUIDE TO FACILITATING LINKS FELLOWSHIPS

**W**e've all been there, trapped in a conversational gathering with a dominant player. Here is a person who does not realize that a healthy discussion involves give-and-take, with questions and ideas flowing from both sides (or all sides, if the group is comprised of any more than two people). This domineer, as innocent as he may be, just keeps talking.

You might forgive such behavior one time, especially if you don't know the person. But in the hours that follow, you start to do the math: Four of us sat in the room for an hour. Equal shares would mean each person talked for roughly 15 minutes. Of course, in any group there are talkers and listeners, and their personalities disrupt the equilibrium. Two talkers may take 21 minutes each and two listeners just nine. And depending on relative expertise, we might all defer to "the smartest guy in the room."

Group dynamics is no simple equation. There are people involved. But perhaps that is why we all seem to be keenly aware of the person who takes over. She has a lot to say and she's going to get it all out, whether or not this is the right audience right now.

Maybe this is why a lot of adults don't want to lead small groups of other adults. They don't want to facilitate discussions and have to cut in on those who won't shut up, or halt those who are out of line, or correct those who are mistaken. No one wants to be the bad guy—and this is often where small group leadership takes you. Except for this: Everyone else in the group is thankful for a good facilitator. They are grateful when the discussion is held in balance and ideas flow freely but not loosely. We all want to hear what others have to say, but we want to hear them say it well. It's the good facilitator who makes this happen.

At Links Players, where the core of what we do is support Links Fellowships in local golf clubs, we challenge men and

women to get together and talk about things that matter. By this we mean things that matter to them—business and family and golf, for instance—and things that matter more greatly—the state of one's soul and their connection with God, who offers eternal life through Jesus Christ. For this to happen well, the Fellowships need good facilitators. In fact, it is for this reason that many people hesitate to start a Fellowship at their club. They don't feel qualified to lead a group like this. But we believe many men and women can learn to be good facilitators, and we hope this article equips you to take up this important work and improve at it as the weeks and months go by.

### Healthy fellowship

Groups of people come together for many different reasons. Among our favorites is a round of golf. We make a tee time, call our friends, and meet up as a foursome. The conversation—be it hearty banter or gentler catch-ups—starts on the practice range, carries over to the first tee, and continues throughout the day. We laugh with one another, commiserate with each other's bad shots, connect the enjoyment of this round to rounds of the past, and close the day with hopeful "next times." The context is understood, and the boundaries of conversation help keep things in order.

But consider how you would respond if, just as you are about to hit your tee shot on a little par-3 on the back nine, one of your playing partners suddenly says, "I am so glad I've got you all here today, because I want to show you something that's got me really excited!" Then he proceeds to pull out some brochures and product for a new multi-level sales endeavor and dives into his well-rehearsed spiel. You and the others in your group might not be able to suppress your groans. It's not that you don't like your friend, and it may not even be that such sales schemes bother you all that much. But your buddy has changed the context, your

**ARTICLE BY  
JEFF HOPPER**

As the editor of the Links Daily Devotional, I also often write the longer articles we produce for our readers. However, you will notice that I consistently use the plural "we" in this article, which is perfectly apt because the ideas you find here come from the collective brain of our Links Players team.

expectations of the day have been tossed aside, and you just want to hit your shot.

When we come to any gathering, whether for sport or business or reminiscing or ceremony, we come with expectations. The same is true for a Links Fellowship. What is going to happen here? Will this be worth my time?

So let's begin here: A Links Fellowship is meant to be a discussion, not a presentation. Astronaut Kathryn Sullivan became a leading scientist conducting a team of researchers. She coached them to talk with each other. "Converse means exchange with," she told them. "It does not mean transmit at." We like that!

In a Links Fellowship, everyone is encouraged to contribute. We might even say that is the *agenda* of a healthy Links Fellowship—to make sure each person leaves having had the chance to interact in a way that gets their questions addressed (though not always resolved) or their experience shared.

It is true the gospel message is our overall agenda at Links Players. We want everyone to hear what God has done for them through his Son and how they can respond in faith to receive salvation. But Links Fellowships are not meant to be a church service or evangelistic event where one speaker takes over. Instead, Links Fellowships give each participant—no matter where they are in their understanding of Jesus, the Bible, or the language of believers—a chance to connect.

Of course, we cannot control every person's reaction. Some people will visit a Fellowship one time and never come again. They may not like the people in the group or the fact that the Bible is the main talking point; they may just not be ready to leave their "old life" and step into a new one. What we don't want is for them to stay away because the conversation is dominated by one talker or is dysfunctional in the way the people talk to each other.

### Leaders, teachers, and facilitators

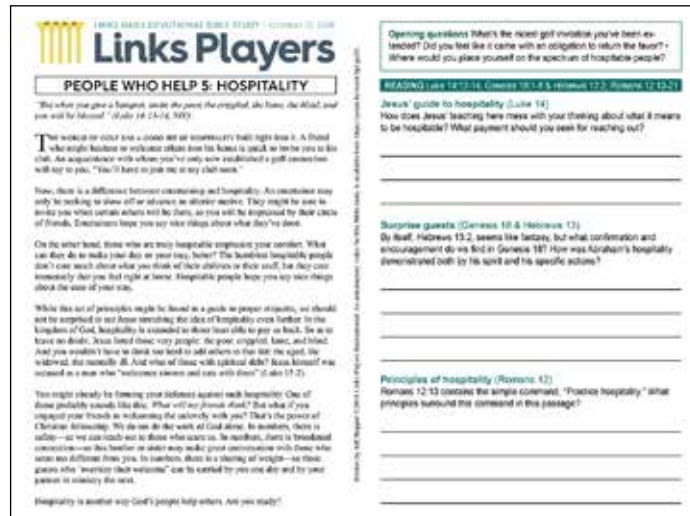
When we coach those who lead or are considering leading a Links Fellowship, we call them something obvious: leaders. They are usually the one or two people who take responsibility for the Fellowship. This can mean organizing the group, arranging for the meeting location, communicating with the group, connecting throughout the week with members of the group about their

personal needs, and even setting up golf for the group. What it does not necessarily mean is that the leader is the Fellowship's facilitator when they sit down for their regular meeting. Someone else may be better at this than the designated leader, and that's just fine. In fact, a good leader will know when someone else is a better facilitator and they will support and encourage the facilitator in the work they are doing.

Now, let's establish another distinction. When we say that someone facilitates a Links Fellowship, we do not ordinarily mean that they *teach* the group. A teacher is someone who comes with a prepared lesson and a plan to disseminate the information in that lesson for much of the time. A teacher may take questions and allow for a certain measure of give-and-take, but overall the teacher is the one driving the content of the gathering.

In a Links Fellowship, it is the lesson that drives the discussion. This is why we encourage Fellowships to use the Bible study sheet that comes with each Friday's Links Daily Devotional (most Fridays also include an introductory video, which in itself can be a model for discussion over presentation). With this lesson in hand, the facilitator may prepare for the conversation by anticipating possible side questions or bringing in additional related Scripture passages, but the questions in the study already invite participants to chip in. In fact, the opening questions ask golf or personal experience questions, allowing even the person with little or no Bible knowledge to join the discussion.

Here are two additional thoughts about teachers. First, if a Fellowship expands beyond 15 or 20 participants, the normal dynamics of group discussion are lost (experts say the usual number at which this happens is 17). At this point, for a gathering to be most effective, a designated teacher is probably needed, because a wide-open conversation becomes unwieldy. We have a few Fellowships like this. If this happens to your Fellowship and you go looking for a teacher, try to find one who still understands the skills of a facilitator, so they are not rattled by the occasional question or story from a member of the group. Second, you may have qualified Bible teachers in your smaller Fellowship, and their input can be invaluable when it comes to tough matters of interpretation or theology. But these teachers need to know that they are members of a discussion group and that engaging everyone in the discussion allows them all to think



The Links Daily Devotional Friday study includes the devotion the left, opening questions on the top right, Scripture reading, and study questions. Find at [linksplayers.com/devotional](http://linksplayers.com/devotional).

theologically, with some maybe doing so for the first time in their life!

### Making others better contributors

The end goal of good facilitation in a group that meets regularly, as Links Fellowships do, is to make each person a better contributor. How can you make this happen? Let's explore three ways.

First, you want to be sure that each person is comfortable in joining the conversation. It's not uncommon for a visitor to sit quietly, even after two or three visits. This is easier to get away with if the group is bigger, but with a group of eight or nine, say, it will become obvious rather quickly that this person *isn't saying anything*. This is one of the big reasons for the opening questions in our Friday Bible studies. They are the kinds of questions most anyone can answer: non-threatening personally and non-controversial in a group. Use these questions and others like them to let people know they can join the conversation, even if they are new to the group.

Second, you should get to know your Fellowship's participants beyond the confines of the Fellowship's gathering. This is especially important if you are the Fellowship's leader and/or facilitator, but any established member of the group can take up this task. Eat with each other, play golf together, or just stick around after the Fellowship meets and ask some personal questions. These don't have to be intrusive questions—just things like, “Tell me about your family” or “How did you get started playing golf?” or “Where do you and your spouse like to go on vacation?” The power of these personal connections is that they allow the person to become comfortable talking to you. And if they grow comfortable in this way, they are more likely to keep talking out loud when they come to the Fellowship.

Third, make it your goal for each person to become increasingly able to contribute on a spiritual level. As a leader, this should begin with prayer for the members of your group. You can ask the Lord to increase the spiritual discipline and knowledge of each member, no matter how new or mature they are in the faith. You can also encourage this by supplying appropriate materials and encouragement to look at them or read them through. Does your newbie have a Bible? You may need to buy her one, and then show her where to start in reading it. You might also share devotional books or email links of intelligent videos to watch. Of course, we encourage you to get everyone

in your Fellowship subscribed to the Links Daily Devotional. This allows them to read along every weekday, and this can be the basis for conversation any day of the week.

### Good comments and bad ones

One reason small groups can be set up as teacher-learners groups rather than facilitated discussions is that the “experts” fear what others might say. *What if someone says something heretical? What if they ask a question I can't answer? What if they stray off topic?* Like we've already acknowledged, working with adults—who have a mind of their own—can be intimidating. But let's examine these scenarios and see what might be done about them.

*Heresy.* Some Christians don't like anyone to use the word “heresy” anymore. There's good reason for this: Too many people have been excommunicated or killed for heresies that probably weren't. That's Ugly Fact #908 from church history. But throwing out biblical teaching because church history has departed from it is like throwing out your favorite recipe because your 12-year-old daughter botched it. It's not the recipe that's bad!

Heresy is called out in the Bible mainly as two things. First, there

are those who reduce the power of the work of Christ on the cross, saying that his atoning intervention is not alone enough to save us. Second, there are those who preach the gospel for their own selfish, monetary gain—these teachers are called heretical.

But honest, off-base questions should not cause us to fear. Instead, Paul wrote to the Corinthians, there is reason to welcome them. In his in-

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struction about the Lord's Supper, he included this: “There have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval” (1 Corinthians 11:19). That is, disagreement among believers is not always the grave concern we think it is. Instead, disagreement provokes us to investigate the Scriptures and seek help from those who are knowledgeable at interpreting them, so we can arrive together at a conclusion about what is right.

This open discussion is wonderfully valuable in a culture that both advances all kinds of sentimental ideas about God and says that we should not in polite company talk about religion and politics. When we provide a safe place for people to come together and ask their questions and float their theological ideas, we are offering a great service! We can remind the group that our basis for reaching understanding is the Bible, and the first

thing we'll do when we hear disagreement between two people or between what is being said now and what has been taught before—whether about who God is or what he does—is turn to the Bible and see what it tells us.

So we don't have to fear heresy or any lesser disagreement. We can welcome the comment, for it sets us up, as Paul said, to show which ideas have "God's approval."

*"Unanswerable" questions.* The character of a good facilitator comes with an essential ingredient: humility. This is true first when we subjugate our teaching instinct to that of provoking good discussion. But it is also true because we may be looked to as an expert and find that we are asked questions we cannot answer. In that moment, we can make up something that sounds good (an act of pride), or we can say humbly, "I don't know the answer to that question. Can you give me a week to look into it and see what I can find?" In this way, no question is unanswerable; it just may be that we have to do some exploring to get to the answer.

Here is another important bit of truth in this matter, though. We have already alluded to the way people may want to have their questions "answered." To some, an answer is nothing short of a resolution. The answer they want is a definitive one. This is different than having your question *addressed*. If a curious child asks you what causes some animals to mate for life while others do not, you may say in response: "I don't think we can know why that is." This is an answer—and likely the best we will ever be able to offer—but it is not a resolution in the sense that we now know why some animals mate for life while others do not. In the end, we may find ourselves doing the same thing with some biblical and theological questions. We may have to accept that the answer we seek is unknowable this side of heaven (and maybe even then!); but if we come to this conclusion after honest inquiry, we can indeed say we have addressed the question.

*Off the topic.* Further down, we are going to explore the matter of "problem adults," which include those who intentionally disrupt the conversation or those who inadvertently filibuster it. But for now, let's talk about those who honestly go astray. And that is quite literally what we mean. Some people are simply

prone to taking the nearest rabbit trail. They wander off topic in their questions or comments. In such cases, it is helpful to have a couple of go-to tactics at the ready. The first is to say, "I'm not seeing how this is connected to what we've been talking about this morning. Can you help me out?" On occasion, the speaker will make a cogent connection. More often, they will make an apology, and you can dive back in to the previous flow of the discussion. Second, you might say, "I don't want to interrupt you, but I don't think we're going to have time to go in that direction today. Let's stay with the material on the page and see if we can go where you're headed in the future." It can be significant to follow up on this exchange after the meeting. You may hear what the person had to say, and

that is the end of it. Or you could recognize that the off-topic comment today will make for a great topic by itself in a coming meeting of the Fellowship.

### **Not all truth is equally valuable**

In a recent discussion surrounding the way women are increasingly reporting the abuses they have suffered, Christian author Drew Dyck encouraged those praising them on social media to stop commending them for "speaking *your* truth." Why? Because it makes truth subjective. Your truth is deemed to be different than my truth. "If someone was assaulted," he wrote, "and is telling the truth (and the vast majority are!), they are speaking *the* truth."

We cannot agree enough that the way we measure truth is critical. This even applies to Links Fellowships.

Because the discussions in Links Fellowships is personal and conversational, participants may speak of things from their

## **THE ATHEIST AMONG US**

**In a Fellowship in California, the leaders decided that they wanted everyone to facilitate. So they passed the baton from week to week.**

**And then one day it landed in the hands of the atheist.**

**That's right. This Fellowship had for many weeks seen an unconvinced member sit among them. He was no "swine." He wasn't trying to undermine the group's idea and beliefs. But he was not a believer himself.**

**Still, he showed up and participated, week in and week out, just like the others. So when it came around to his turn, they allowed him the opportunity.**

**And region director Dereck Wong reports that this guy may have done the best job of all! He certainly did the most preparation. He had a lot to learn if he was going to lead a discussion from the pages of a book he fully doubted. But because the Fellowship was based on facilitation rather than teaching, this guy knew that when the hour came, he was also going to get a lot of help. The men around him would fill in the blanks. He just had to supply them.**

particular experience and presume that what they have encountered is true for everyone. They would admit that that's not actually what they believe—few things are true for *everyone*—but their *de facto* adherence to the lessons of their own experience does not allow them to see things circumspectly. More dangerously, they may hold the lessons of their experience above the lessons of Scripture.

You have probably heard someone say that “all truth is God’s truth.” But this does not make all truth equal in worth. That your spouse loves you and that you prefer Titleist golf balls may both be true statements, but they are not in the same league with regards to worth. Even when we say that God is wholly true and his Word can be wholly trusted, we would not suggest that the value of 1 Corinthians 16:21 (“I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand”) and 1 Corinthians 16:22 (“If anyone does not love the Lord—a curse be on him. Come, O Lord!”) carry the same weight.

What all this means is that sometimes as a facilitator, you will be placed in the position of offering discernment to your Fellowship about which things matter most. God’s Word takes precedence over human experience, for instance. And the prescriptive passages of Scripture—those that expect something of us—may prove of greater importance than the descriptive ones—those that tell us about something. This need to be discerning and interject with mid-discussion judgments that place one person’s statement above another’s will keep you on your knees, asking the Lord to make you alert in the Fellowship’s conversations and in tune with his own heart.

### **Problem adults**

At the beginning of this article, we have recognized that one thing that hinders someone from taking a leadership role in a Links Fellowship (or any other group) is that there is no easy way to deal with

adults who get out of line. When you are the parent or the boss or the pastor, an authority is given to you by way of the title and position. But a Links Fellowship is not like this, not when the idea is for the discussion to be “open.”

So let’s make something clear as we near the final analysis. The discussions in Fellowships (and almost anywhere, actually) are not completely open. In social settings, a sense of decorum or decency may limit the scope of the conversation. People understand this. Somewhere along the way, they have been given the ground rules of “civil discussion” and most people adhere to them, depending on the setting. For this reason, it is not inappropriate to lay some ground rules for your Fellowship, too. You may talk about some or all of these with the whole group; others may be addressed one-on-one with the offending party (again you’ll find yourself praying for discernment).

*Those who are not earnest.* In an article several years ago, we wrote about those who are earnest seekers. We made the point that we are willing to engage in discussion with anyone who will listen and respond earnestly, no matter their background or current theological positions. In fact, we may never come to agreement with such a person, but we can find out a lot about them and their beliefs along the way, just as they can find out much about us and ours.

But Jesus was also clear that we should not cast our pearls before swine. There are those who simply want to challenge us, discredit us, and even intentionally harm us. They have no true interest in hearing us out. This can show up in a Links Fellowship in the form of snarky questions intended to trap or embarrass you. In the Gospels, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were such people, and Jesus called them out for their false teaching and murderous scheming. (Conversely, he gave credence to Pontius Pilate’s philosophical questions, even though he knew Pilate would not be convinced in the end.)

It is probably best to address these people—and they are actually rather rare—apart from the group. You may be so bold as to say, “I’m not sure you’re a good fit for this group. We’re going to keep going to the Bible as our foundational resource. If it doesn’t work for you, you might find it easier to do something else.” Of course, you can always add a deferential, “But tell me if I’m wrong about what you’re looking for,” which might help soften the conversation.

## **Fellowships are meant to be a safe environment for new people to ask questions and find out what the Bible says about God and Jesus.**

*Those who voted for Donald Trump.* Did that get your attention? In truth, we don’t care whom you voted for. And that’s the point when it comes to Links Fellowships. We’re about Jesus. What can people hear about Jesus when they are with us? There are ways that religion and politics intersect, but they don’t always do so cleanly, and they don’t

usually crossover well when names—such as Donald Trump, or Hillary Clinton, or Barack Obama, or anyone else you want to name—are attached. So here’s our plain and simple recommendation: Keep politics out of your Fellowship.

One of the reasons for keeping your Fellowship politics-free is that Fellowships are meant to be a safe environment for new people to ask questions and find out what the Bible says about God and Jesus. That means people of every political persuasion. So when a person of one political position comes to your group and hears someone from the other side pontificating about the wonders of their candidate and the evils of the other, it’s a recipe for ill will. Not only will the visitor feel unwelcome now, they will uninvite themselves in the future.

Sadly, some Christians are more willing to welcome those of

other faiths than those of other political parties, and if you give these people voice, you may miss a gospel-giving, disciple-making opportunity. It's a good idea to remind your group of this occasionally, because it's not just presidential politics that can get in the way; community and even club politics can draw dividing lines that we don't want to allow to interfere with what our Fellowship is about: the reconciling of God and man.

*Long talkers.* Finally, we do well to recognize those who have a habit of rambling or just taking up too much of the conversation. This may be acceptable on occasion. Certain members of your Fellowship may have real expertise in the topic of the day. Other days you may have a very small group. Or maybe a hard personal circumstance means you need to afford someone a good listen. But your group—and sometimes even your visitors—will know the difference between a special circumstance and the person who gives ten details when two will do.

You might deal with the long talker in the flow of the conversation or one-on-one. If a long talker is waylaying a good discussion, you might cut them off, saying something like, "I'm going to interrupt you here because I'm keeping an eye on our time and I know others have things to say, but is there a key idea you want us to hear before we move on?" That is be good for the day, but if you are going to stop this habit, you will probably also have to talk to the person away from the group. This can be a hard conversation, because long talkers may be filling a need to be heard that they are not getting elsewhere—especially if they live alone. But again, you might help your facilitation inside the group by what you do outside the group. Meeting the long talker for lunch a time or two might allow this person to be heard and limit their talking during the Fellowship itself.

## Adding to your Fellowship

Finally, let's consider one last aspect of building excellent conversation. It's based on the simple principle that the best discussions are made up of a variety of healthy voices. Familiar friends can grow so used to hearing one another that the don't listen so well to each other anymore. The flow of input becomes a stagnant pond.

So what do we need? Fresh voices. This can be accomplished in a couple of ways.

First, you want to be a Fellowship that is always inviting others to join you. Even people with little background in the Bible or religious discussion can reenergize your Fellowship, because they come with a different perspective and new questions. They'll challenge your "old hats" to put on new thinking caps, find Scriptures they had forgotten about, and renew their desire to see unbelieving men and women come to Christ.

Second, you might bring in a special guest—someone with an uncommon testimony or specific expertise. They might be active in a local benevolence ministry, such as the Rescue Mission, or they may be a pastor who has just returned from Israel. You might know a doctor or professor who blends faith and science with reverence for God and respect for research. Or you might just ask a faithful follower of Jesus, whose prayer life would be an encouragement to you all, to come and share stories of how God has met her needs for decades on end.

Here's one last reminder that you want to facilitate conversations that are safe. You don't need to stir up controversy with guests who have an ax to grind or a pitch to give. Choose your experts wisely and your Fellowship will agree that their words were a benefit to you all. 🙏

## LOOKING 'ROUND THE ROOM

An effective communicator can improve the conversation for everyone by taking an inventory of those who have come.

- Who's here today? Is there anyone who needs an extra welcome or an introduction to the others?
- Who are the speakers I will need to slow down? Who are those I'll need to encourage?
- Do we have all 'insiders,' allowing us to dig deeper in this study? Or do we have some new attendees, so that we emphasize the questions most everyone can answer?
- Who needs some extra conversation once the meeting is done?
- Who would respond to being encouraged to invite others to join our Fellowship next time?

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