



Keeping Your Fellowship a Safe Place

ARTICLE BY MARK 'OLE' OLSON

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It is shortly after 8:15 a.m. and all the guys from our Friday Links Fellowship group have left the room just off the men's locker room here at the club where we hold our weekly meetings. I am staring out the window at the freshly mown eighteenth green, where I hope to finish my round with my buddies this afternoon. As I gaze on the beauty of this wonderful classic golf course, my mind replays the events of the last hour and I can only ask: "What just happened?"

Five minutes before the start of our meeting, Roger, a fairly new member of the group, motioned for me to come out into the hall for a chat. As we moved to a private spot in the locker room, Roger related a concern about a marital issue he had raised as a prayer request last week. He was upset that a club member who is not part of our group approached him on the driving range earlier in the week and told him that he was sorry to hear that Roger and his wife were having some struggles in their marriage. Roger indicated that he felt his trust had been betrayed and that he was not sure if he would be coming back to the group in the weeks to come. Oh my, I thought to myself. This can't be happening. I told Roger I was sorry to hear this and that I would remind the group at the start of our meeting of our explicit confidentiality pledge.

About 15 minutes into our discussion, Eric went off on a political rant about a news report he had seen on one of the cable news channels earlier that morning. I was able, I think, to redirect the conversation away from Eric's diatribe, but not before I noticed several guys sitting with their arms folded across their chests and squirming a bit in their chairs.

We were studying the Gospel of John and after we had read John 14, one of the relatively new members in the group, Harry, asked a question about verse 6, where Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Before anyone could say anything, Sam immediately and quite strongly announced that "Jesus is the only way to salvation and there are no other roads." Sam's adamant tone sucked the air out of the room. Harry, after gathering himself, asked Sam if he didn't think that his position was "a bit narrow-minded and intolerant of other world religions." Before things got out of hand, I jumped in and thanked Harry for his question. While it was an important question, it was get-

ting late in the hour, so I assured him we would take up the topic next week. We then closed with prayers and everyone left in a bit of a solemn mood without the usual chitchat and banter that usually accompanies everyone's departure.

Now you know why I was so flummoxed that morning while I stood at the window and watched the early morning dew sweepers making the turn. Maybe you've had one of those mornings as a Fellowship leader or participant where you've left asking, "What was that? How can I and the group deal with this, and how can we prevent it from happening again?"

One of the privileges of being connected with Links Players is the access we have to so many experienced staff members and Fellowship leaders who have been walking this road for a long time. They've stood at the window a few times, too. It is a stated aspect of the Links Players vision that we would provide, through Links Fellowships, "a reliable, safe source for God's answers to life's questions." Most days that's true. Other days it's hard to make sense of what just happened.

For this article, I turned to some of those "wise old heads"—even when they weren't that old. I asked questions and gathered ideas. I wanted to know the characteristics and attributes of a safe Links Fellowship and then examine what might be done to make and keep a Fellowship safe. We also explored a few threats to the safety of a group and what steps might be taken to avoid or at least blunt those threats. If what I've assembled with their help is a help to you, then my prayers for these words will have been answered. Maybe some of your prayers will have been answered, too!

One last thing before we dive in: Safety is no accident. Through the years, the leadership at Links Players has spent a lot of time considering priorities for a Links Fellowship. Here's some language

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they've written to describe the Fellowship experience: "Links Fellowships are designed to allow participants to explore the life and words of Jesus Christ through examination of the Scriptures, to pray together in support of each other's walk of faith, and to reach out to those in their club who need the heart change that salvation in Jesus produces." You can see how much openness is built into those words. Fellowships are about Jesus Christ first and foremost. But when we try to fast-track the process of a person's salvation or spiritual growth through pointing fingers or spouting platitudes or pulling out the soapbox, we don't provide others the chance to explore the Scriptures and be drawn to Jesus. So when we lead and speak with safety in mind, we do so to honor Christ first but also to honor those in the room. We need to do this ourselves, and we need to remind the participants in the Fellowship to do the same.

WHAT MAKES A FELLOWSHIP "SAFE"?

My first exploratory questions were obvious ones: How do we know a Fellowship is safe? And if it isn't, what can we do to make it safe? I didn't plan to assemble a "perfect ten" list, but this is what I discovered, one key point at a time.

1. Fellowship members can freely, openly and honestly talk about things that matter to them about their faith, their life, and the intersection of the two. The Fellowship ought to strive to create an emotionally safe environment where the person sharing will not be condemned or made fun of and where every person's thoughts, opin-

ions, ideas, and feelings are respectfully heard. Randy Wolff, former South Central region director and current Links Players board member, describes this as a place where each person can come and "take the mask off."

2. Group members must have an expectation of confidentiality so that "what is said in the room stays in the room." Obviously, judgment comes into play here. If a member makes a point about a Scripture passage that captures your heart, going home and telling your spouse about it might edify you both. But personal matters, often showing up in prayer requests, should be kept private unless the person sharing states otherwise.

3. There may be a diversity of religious (and non-religious), cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds in attendance, and each member, regardless of their background, should be treated with respect and dignity. What's important here is to remind your regulars that visitors can change the dynamic; you want to be sensitive when newbies are in the room.

4. Beware of controversial topics while the whole group is meeting. These include politics, "hot button" social and cultural issues (abortion, gay rights, the death penalty), and controversial denominational or theological issues (e.g., Is Jesus the only way to salvation?, old earth vs. young earth creation, predestination/election). To keep Jesus at the forefront, it is better to talk with individual members about such issues outside the group.

5. **Group members are encouraged to participate in and contribute to the discussions on a relatively “equal” basis**, and there is an understanding in the group that those opinions are desired, appreciated, and valued. Scripture speaks of designated leaders with reliable character and the gifting of the Holy Spirit. It is good to have such people in your Fellowships, and their voices should open the meeting and wrap things up. But Links Fellowships are facilitated discussions, not Sunday sermons, so questions and comments should be welcomed from all.

6. In dealing with difficult interpersonal issues that might arise because of the dynamics of a small group, it is helpful to keep in mind, as Jeff Cranford, the president of Links Players, cautions us: “We need to **act with ‘gentleness and respect’** as 1 Peter 3:15 teaches us.” Nearness is both an advantage and a danger point for small groups. Treating each other as Peter taught increases the advantage and mitigates the danger.

7. **Members should be encouraged to ask questions and be curious without fear of being belittled or disparaged.** Schoolyard rhymes aside, the wrong words really do hurt people, and leaders should put themselves in the place of protecting members from harm.

8. **Pure acceptance and trust of one another helps develop authenticity and vulnerability** that leads to more open and sensitive discussion. With this in mind, both leaders and members can help one another along by employing encouraging responses, such as, “I like that,” “I’ve never thought of it that way before,” “You sure experienced that deeply,” “What a great example of faith,” or even, “Can we pray for you right now?”

9. **Members should strive to build deeper relationships with fellow group members** both inside the Fellowship and during times outside the Fellowship. Playing golf together, dining with spouses, and even traveling together can deepen understanding and support for one another, which are vital elements in feeling safe.

10. **Members make a commitment to the Fellowship**, striving to attend regularly and making it a priority to participate in a meaningful way. Although it may seem like a small thing, regular attendance builds familiarity with the “rules” of the group; likewise, thoughtful participation establishes familiarity with the other members of the group. Both these familiarities contribute to the overall safe environment of the Fellowship.

KEEPING A FELLOWSHIP SAFE

Throughout this article, I have been referring to Fellowship leaders. In truth, Fellowships may have several different kinds of leaders, and it’s a great idea to share the lead duties in a Fellowship, including invitations (reaching out to encourage new participants), communication (keeping people informed about the coming meetings), and facilitation (overseeing the meeting itself). However, when it comes to setting the boundaries, the tone, and the example for a safe Fellowship, the task falls to the facilitator.

First, let’s establish what a facilitator does. The overarching role of the facilitator is to guide the discussion during the meeting. If the Fellowship is using the Links Devotional’s Friday Bible study, as many groups do, the facilitator oversees the reading of the devotion itself and of the accompanying Scriptures. The facilitator also asks the questions and keeps the responses on track. While the facilitator is a listener more than a teacher, he or she will also be a gatekeeper of



READING THE CUES

Bill Mast, Minnesota Area Director for Search Ministries, encourages facilitators to be attentive to the non-verbal clues that are being displayed by members during a Fellowship’s meeting. Body language such as defensive crossed arms across the chest, a chair moved out of the circle or moved back from the table, or the constant checking of a cell phone, are but a few of the myriad of non-verbal messages one must be able to spot and then determine how to re-engage the person who is on the verge of “checking out.”

Besides the non-verbal cues, there are verbal cues to be aware of besides the audible words spoken by a member. For example, what is the tone of the person’s voice? Is it strident? Is it soft or hesitant? What is the pace or speed of the speaker? Is it rapid? Is it slow and drawn out? Is it clear that the speaker has thought out what he is communicating or is it just some rambling thought coming off the top of his head? All these non-verbal cues can help the facilitator determine if a member is uncomfortable with the discussion or even whether a member is headed toward creating a “threat” to the group.

sorts. This means the facilitator keeps comments from going far afield, returns the group to the study and to Scripture, defers controversial topics until a later time, and intervenes to prevent members from disrespecting one another.

In the early days of any Fellowship, the facilitator should set the ground rules by explicitly announcing to the group that they will adhere to a principle of confidentiality, especially with regard to the sharing of personal matters, be they in a person's past or present. The group expectation for confidentiality must be set early at an extremely high level. Without confidentiality, the Fellowship will not attain the vulnerability that deepens relationships.

Early on and as the Fellowship continues, the facilitator should model behavior that is consistent with confidentiality. Such behaviors might include re-emphasizing, either explicitly or implicitly, the expectation of confidentiality as well as "stepping out" and sharing personal stories that model vulnerability. If others see the Facilitator willing to "bare his soul," they will likely be more willing to share their personal feelings and thoughts. As Tracy Hanson, Ladies Ministry Coach at Links Players, describes it: "Vulnerability begets vulnerability."

During discussion, the facilitator should err on the side of silence and be a listener more than a speaker in order to allow group members the opportunity to speak and share what is on their minds. As well, the facilitator should try to ask questions; and rather than "giving answers," he or she should help the Fellowship work toward the answer. This does mean that the facilitator will allow some theologically suspicious comments to slip through. Allowing them to be voiced contributes to the safe environment. However, it is also important that the facilitator or other recognized leader in the group addresses erroneous statements before the Fellowship con-

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- RANDY WOLFF -

cludes for the day. This, too, is a matter of safety, as members need to be assured that this is a not an arena where "anything goes." The Scriptures, and the Lord's voice though them, are the absolute guide.

With regard to personal matters, the facilitator should model behavior that does not try to "fix" another person's problem during the meeting. Rather, the facilitator should strive to show empathy, and perhaps share a personal story that suggests that he or she has encountered or dealt with a similar problem. Outside of the Fellowship time, the facilitator or other group members certainly would be free to share resources or recommendations, but within the group's meeting time, "fixing" is not recommended.

Marty Jacobus, California Desert Region Director for Links Players, suggests that "even the structure and logistics of the group can lend themselves to making the group a safe place." Having an "open door" policy where the Fellowship welcomes everyone conveys a message that "we're all equal—just the way Jesus sees us." Using a specific format, whether it is the Friday Links Devotional or the study of a particular book of the Bible, gives structure to the group, so that members know what to expect at each meeting. As well, having a defined beginning and ending time helps members structure their day so that they will know that if they set aside an hour for the meeting, the rest of their day's schedule will not be adversely impacted by attending the

meetings. As a result, there is not any kind of threat to their other daily activities. If the Fellowship is one that encourages its members to do some preparation prior to the meeting, the facilitator should tell everyone that if someone is not prepared, it is perfectly acceptable for that person to say: "I didn't get time to do my homework this week."

Not all aspects of building a secure feeling among a Fellowship's members come during the meeting time. Randy Wolff suggests that one of the keys to enhancing the safety of the group is relationship building. The facilitator and other leaders should strive to have as many weekly "touches" with group members as possible, either collectively or individually, through the use of email, phone calls, texts, or lunch/coffee get-togethers. More than this, the leaders should encourage group members to work at building relationships with other group members. Besides one-on-one relationship building, group gatherings (a BBQ or a service project) or golf outings might also serve to build relationships. According to Randy, "As those individual relationships become stronger, the trust factor within the group will grow as well; and as trust grows, so does the overall safety that each member feels in the group."

Finally, timing is everything. A first-time visitor to a Fellowship—especially if it is a smaller group—presents a unique but challenging opportunity. According to several of the region directors, if a visitor does not feel safe during the first visit, there is a good chance the visitor will not come back a second time. Jeff Cranford suggests having an "early warning system" in place, whereby the facilitator is made aware of new attendees in advance of their arrival, so he or she can be attuned to any particular sensitivities of the visitor. In addition, armed with this advance knowledge, the facilitator can better control the Fellowship discussion in order to avoid any

potential situations that might cause the visitor to feel “unsafe.” The facilitator can always use these visiting scenarios to remind the whole Fellowship of the ground rules of gentle respect and confidentiality in personal matters.

THREATS TO A FELLOWSHIP AND HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM

Because each Links Fellowship is unique in nature due to the makeup of its membership, the “dangers and threats to the safety of the group” are quite varied. However, here are a few potential threats that, while not universal, nevertheless tend to reoccur in small group settings.

The Hogger. We all know this person: the one who has an opinion on every possible subject and is not afraid to share it, regardless of how many times or for how long that person has spoken during the group session. He is verbose and can ramble on...and on...and on. For a person who is more introverted or maybe newer to the group, the Hogger can be intimidating and become a deterrent to

everyone feeling they can share, either because valuable time already has been chewed up by the Hogger or because they feel that their comments may not be as valuable.

One way to deal with the Hogger is to use a series of non-verbal cues to try to give a hint to the Hogger that it is time to wrap up his thoughts and allow someone else to participate. A seasoned facilitator might even interrupt strategically, saying something like, “Let’s take that one point you’ve just made and see what others think.” This way, the Hogger is heard but cut short.

If the real-time interventions are unsuccessful, then the facilitator should consider a “sidebar” with the Hogger to discuss this issue away from the Fellowship. At that time, the facilitator should underscore to the Hogger that his comments are welcomed, valued, and helpful. But the Hogger should be made aware that since the group’s time is limited, there are others in the group who have equally important things to share but who are unwilling to speak up because of the Hogger’s monopoly.

The Pontificator. A close cousin of the Hogger, the Pontificator pronounces the answer or solution to an issue and defies anyone to challenge her or provide a valid alternative point of view. As a result, open and candid discussion is stifled. In essence, she has discounted the value of anyone else’s opinions, thoughts, or contributions on a given topic. Again using “gentleness and respect,” the facilitator must approach the Pontificator to try to impress upon her the notion that there may be alternative views available and that other group members are entitled to express their views. Although those views may conflict with hers, nevertheless the Fellowship dynamic allows for a “we agree to listen” ethos. In the event that the Pontificator is unwilling to engage in meaningful and respectful “give and take,” the facilitator may have to take more direct steps in order to preserve a healthy environment among the other Fellowship members.

The Ideologue. This is the “person with an agenda.” Jeff Cranford warns of this person because, rather than genu-

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Some Fellowships are more ready for tough topics than others. How can we help this happen? Jeff Hopper, editor of the Links Daily Devotional, wrote about this possibility in an article titled “Handling Thorny Issues,” which you can find at linksplayers.com. In the article, Jeff suggested a four-part plan.

First, prefer. This is the very thing we have been exploring in terms of approaching and addressing one another with gentleness and respect. As a leader, listen well, and encourage your members to do the same. If you do this regularly, you will be respected yourself when it comes time to say, “Let’s hold that topic for another day.”

Second, defer. A facilitator should never hesitate to inform the Fellowship that the topic can and will be explored at another time. Explain that some time is needed to do some thinking and research on the topic.

Third, refer. In this stage, the leaders (and perhaps others) refer to “experts” on the topic, through reading and research. Finding out what others have to say and bringing their thinking to the table can help ease the personal stake members of your group might have and serve to keep the conversation safe. Facilitators may also use this time to craft a series of principles or givens that everyone can agree on that form the basis for our salvation. The idea here is to affix these essentials over and above the lesser topic at hand.

And fourth, confer. Now it’s time to sit down and talk. Let me say that again: Talk. Not debate or argue or preach. The biggest goal in such conferring is to find out what the other side thinks and why. If we do this well, we may all go away changed, not so much in what we think about the topic, but in how respectfully we think of one another.

inely wanting to come into relationship with other members of the group, the Ideologue has a different purpose. Those purposes could include: 1) attempting to foist a political ideology onto group members or convert as many members as possible to the Ideologue's point of view; or 2) attempting to recruit and offer business opportunities or charitable entities to group members.

Ideologues are often new to a Fellowship, and the facilitator must be quick to discern the presence of the Ideologue and deal with him as quickly as possible. A facilitator might consider meeting separately with this new member and engaging in conversation in order to detect his reasons for joining the group and the authenticity of his interest in group fellowship. As with other threats, sometimes the facilitator may have to be direct with the Ideologue before the group's dynamics are harmed. The facilitator should clearly lay out the implicit ground rule that the group is not a place to find potential converts, business partners, investors, buyers, or contributors, and that as long as the new member is willing to abide by the ground rules and contribute to the group as it works its way through Scripture and its application to life's experiences, there will be seat at the table for him.

Alongside challenging characters, equally dangerous to the safety of a Fellowship are certain topical areas. I alluded to some of these earlier:

- **Politics.** Politics commonly introduce a distraction when people gather for other reasons. When those reasons—such as the study of Scripture and the unity of fellowship in discussion and prayer—are greater than politics, the distraction can become soul-threatening. Adamantly taking up the “conservative” side can drive “liberal” thinkers from the room (and vice versa) be-

fore they've had a chance to see Jesus. Christians should engage in political thought and bring Scriptures to bear on society's decision making processes, but they should avoid talking politics when it stands to interrupt their witness for Christ.

- **Hot Button Social/Cultural Issues.** While sexual ethics, abortion, the death penalty, and other challenging topics can be addressed from biblical perspectives, these issues also factor into big debates in our pluralistic society. When we jump headlong into these matters without knowing the background of everyone in the room, we stand a chance of initiating arguments that drive some from the circle of conversation.

- **Theological/Denominational Issues.** You'll have people in your group from many streams of the Christian faith (and maybe other faiths, too). To get caught up in historically unresolved doctrines, such as election vs. free will or the age of the earth, keeps us from forging connections over the certainties of our faith.

To avoid being led down the potentially destructive path upon which these topics could take us, it is critical for the facilitator to prevent the discussion from getting sidetracked here. On the one hand, the facilitator should acknowledge that these issues are important and might certainly be of significant concern to one or more persons in the group, but that these issues are better discussed and explored in another setting outside the Fellowship. Such outside meetings might include getting to know where a person is coming from experientially or finding out why someone thinks this topic is especially important. In the moment, the facilitator should strive to redirect the group's discussion back to the topic of the day. In the end, according to Dereck Wong, SoCal/Las Vegas Region

Director, “The focus must be on Scripture.”

Dereck suggests a very direct and simple response when the discussion veers off track into a “quagmire” area: Move the discussion back to where it belongs in terms of the lesson for the day and simply say: “We all agree to disagree, but we can agree on Jesus, and let's not lose sight of that singular fact.”

Even in the realm of discussion about Scripture, there can still be theological or interpretive issues that arise. The facilitator ought to start from the premise that when there is disagreement on these matters, members should acknowledge the disagreement but still treat one another with gentleness and respect. Tracy Hanson suggests that we need to “hold truth with grace” and to remember that our relationship with the person is more important than proving one's truth theologically. In the end, according to Tracy, “Grace trumps theology.” We cannot win an argument if we have first lost our friend.

GOING FORWARD

That's a lot of learning. Back to the present, as I prepare for next week's meeting, I feel more confident that I now have some additional tools and techniques to use in making our Fellowship's meetings a better experience and to continue to develop a group culture of safety.

Our goal as Links Players is to change the conversation at our clubs by introducing the wonder of Jesus Christ to those who do not know him. We must welcome them into a safe place to do this, as many have been hurt by or heard bad things about traditional religious settings. Though we are groups of human beings and we will make mistakes, Links Fellowships should always strive to “win the respect of outsiders” (1 Thessalonians 4:12), earn the right to be heard, hold fast to Scripture, and communicate the heart of our Savior. 🏡