How to … Run a Small Group

A group is more likely to succeed if:
* the members share a common idea or value
* members work and achieve things together
* members relate well to each other

Group Dynamics
The ideal size for a planning group is between eight and twelve. People tend to learn more from others, plan effectively, and form friendships when they work in small groups. How a group functions is crucial to the completion of the group’s tasks and the feeling of group members that time has been well spent. Look out for:

- **non-verbal expressions**: apart from what they say, what indications are people giving of their feelings and reactions e.g. gestures, tone of voice, body language, facial expressions, order of speaking?
- **feelings, attitudes and hidden agendas**: these have an important effect on the life and work of a group and must be taken into account. Sensitive observation of words and non-verbal expressions can give clues about feelings, but can be easily misinterpreted. If they see important, they should be checked with the person concerned, e.g. ‘You were frowning Paul. Do you agree with that decision?’

The following points must be seen to before the first meeting:
* Make sure the meeting is well advertised and open to everybody – check for disabled access.
* The venue must be organised. Refreshments are always a good idea, even if they are just plain biscuits they are appreciated!
* Appoint a timekeeper and clarify the reason for the meeting at the beginning so that people know what their goal is. Take head of the timekeeper and stop on time.

Leadership
Leadership should be seen as a service and should be rotated from time to time so that more people learn the skill; the leader enables the group and all group members to feel satisfied that they have achieved the goals they have set. This style of leadership makes members feel that:
* they have every chance to air their views
* they have been listened to and understood
* different ideas have been integrated to form a plan of action
* they are responsible for their decisions and actions

Behaviour in Groups
A series of books produced in Kenya – *Training for Transformation* – suggest that the ways we behave in groups can be understood better by looking at the characteristics of certain animals. If your group is not running smoothly it might be good to have a session – ideally with an outside facilitator – using all or some of the characteristics described below to assist analysis. Act out or read out the sketches below and ask each person which animal they identify with and to think of the strengths and weaknesses of each animal.

The Donkey is very stubborn and will not change his point of view
The lion gets in and fights whenever others disagree with its plans or interfere with its desires
The rabbit runs away or quickly changes the topic as soon as it senses tension, conflict, or an unpleasant job.
The ostrich buries its head in the sand and refuses to face reality or admit there is a problem
The monkey fools around, chatters a lot or shows off and prevents the group from concentrating.
The elephant blocks the way, and stubbornly prevents the group from making progress
The tortoise withdraws from the group, refusing to give its ideas or opinions
The cat is always looking for sympathy: ‘it’s so difficult for me’
The rhino charges around putting its foot into everything and upsetting people unnecessarily
The owl looks very solemn and pretends to be wise, always talking in long words and complicated sentences
The hippo sleeps all the time and never puts up its head except to yawn
The fish sits there with a cold, glassy stare, not responding to anyone or anything
The chameleon changes colour according to the latest opinion. It will say one thing to this group and something else to another

*Decision Making*

If you are trying to come to decisions by consensus, the following questions may be helpful:
* What are we trying to decide? (Be sure this is clear to everyone)
* What are the different possibilities? (Consider as many as possible & discuss the pros & cons of each)
* What suggestion or combination of suggestions do we choose?
* Who will do what, when, where and how?
* Factors that help decision making are
  
  Clear goals
  Clarity about who has responsibility for the decision
  Good means of stimulating and sharing ideas
  Effective ways of involving all group members
  Effective criteria for evaluating suggestions
  Prior agreement beforehand on what procedures will be most appropriate e.g. majority vote

*Adapted with permission by Shrewsbury Diocese J & P from CAFOD's Guidelines for Parish Planners