PART 2

Sycamore Teachers Workbook

Facilitation Training
Creating Space for Conversation

Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools
18 August 2026

SYCAMORE

Melbourne Archdiocese
Catholic Schools

Contents

p3 Welcome

p4 Opening Prayer

p6 Teaching and Facilitating

p7 The Shape of a Sycamore Session

p8 Sycamore in the Classroom

p9 The Three Pauses

p10 Choosing Your Questions

p12 Six Helpful Facilitation Skills

p13 Responding to Difficult Questions

p14 Practice Round & Observer Grid

p15 Facilitating a Diverse Staff Group

p16 Your Group Agreement

p18 Session Planners: 2026 Pathway

p20 Responding to Common Challenges

p21 Putting the Plans into Practice

p22 Support & Contacts

Using this workbook

This is a working document, not a book to read. Most pages ask you to write something — unexpected or challenging questions, a name, a date, a decision. The pages you complete today are the ones you will actually use in September.

Part 1: Introduction to Sycamore covers the programme itself — the films, the pathways, the vision. Keep the two together.

Register your group

If you are coordinating a Sycamore group, sign up and register it. You will get the Coordinator Manual, alternative discussion questions, print-ready publicity and offline film downloads: https://www.sycamore.fm/register/

Welcome to Part 2

In Part 1, we explored the vision and structure of Sycamore. Today we will focus on the role of the facilitator: welcoming participants, creating space for honest conversation and responding sensitively to the questions that emerge.

The films provide the main teaching content. The facilitator's role is not to deliver another lesson, but to help colleagues engage with the films and reflect on their own questions and experiences.

Good facilitation involves asking thoughtful questions, allowing time for people to respond, receiving different perspectives with care and inviting contributions without putting anyone under pressure. These practical skills can be developed through preparation, practice and reflection.

This workbook is designed to support you in developing these skills and planning your first sessions.

By the end of today you will have

- practised facilitating a real pause, and had it observed
- considered how you might respond to three challenging questions
- drafted a group agreement for your own group
- begun planning the first five sessions of your 2026 pathway
- identified the practical decisions to make with your school

One thing to hold on to

You do not need to have every answer ready. Good facilitation begins with attentive listening, genuine curiosity and a willingness to give people time to reflect.

Opening Prayer

> *Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful*
> *and kindle in them the fire of your love.*
> *Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created.*
> *And you shall renew the face of the earth.*
>
> *Let us pray.*
>
> *O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit instructed the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever rejoice in his consolation. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*
>
> Traditional invocation of the Holy Spirit

A moment for reflection

Take three minutes in silence and write down the names of the people you hope will come to your group. Keep this page and return to it at the end of the pathway.

The people I am praying for

SECTION ONE

Nurturing a Facilitative Approach

Teaching and facilitating: different emphases

Teachers already bring many valuable skills to facilitation: attentiveness, preparation, sensitivity to a group and the ability to ask good questions.

A Sycamore conversation, however, may require a slightly different emphasis: less explaining and directing, and more listening, inviting and allowing space. The aim is to help participants explore the questions together rather than to assess their responses.

The comparison below is an invitation to notice which classroom habits may need to be used differently when facilitating an adult faith conversation.

Classroom emphasis	Facilitator emphasis
Fill the silence	Let it run to four seconds
Correct what is wrong	Receive it, and let the group answer
Cover the content	Follow what the group gives you
Assess the response	Be curious about the response
Manage the room	Host the room
Know the answer	Be comfortable not knowing

Reflection

Which of the approaches on the left comes most naturally to you?

What might I need to approach differently?

The shape of a Sycamore session

The suggested shape remains broadly consistent and can be adapted to the time and context available.

1. **Gather**

   Where possible, begin with food and drink. Simple hospitality helps people arrive, settle and begin to feel welcome; it is an important part of the session rather than merely a preliminary.

2. **Welcome**

   Briefly explain what will happen, how long the session will take and that nobody is required to speak. Respect that choice throughout the session.

3. **Film and three pauses**

   The film and its discussion pauses form the heart of the session. Stop at the pauses you have selected and allow the group sufficient time to consider the question before anyone responds.

4. **Close**

   Draw the session to a clear close. You might acknowledge something that emerged, thank everyone, offer a short prayer and finish at the agreed time.

Fitting a session into the school timetable

40-minute lesson

A full session just fits: about 25 minutes of film plus three short discussions of roughly five minutes each.

50 minutes to an hour

Considerably more fruitful. Room for hospitality and for the discussions to breathe rather than being cut short.

Double period, twilight or retreat

Eighty minutes allows real depth. Two films may be used, with a proper break and time for conversation between them.

Plan your own timings

ARRIVE / FOOD	WELCOME	FILM STARTS
PAUSES	CLOSING PRAYER	FINISH

Sycamore in the classroom

Sycamore was developed with schools in mind. One of its core advisers is an experienced RE teacher and Head of Sixth Form at a Catholic school.

Each session can be run more or less "out of the box" with minimal preparation: an accessible presentation of one aspect of the Catholic Christian faith, followed by discussion questions for the class to use in small groups. Most of this workbook applies equally to a staff group and a class — but three things are worth deciding before you take Sycamore into a lesson.

Which year levels?

Sycamore works best with those aged 14 and over. It is recommended for students aged 14–16, and above all for those aged 16–18. It may suit some classes of 13–14 year olds, but is not recommended below that age.

In Australian terms this points to Years 9 and 10, and most fruitfully Years 11 and 12. Confirm the year-level mapping locally before planning.

Who leads the small groups?

Follow the normal Sycamore pattern of splitting into small groups for the discussion periods. If you have no trained leaders, run the discussion as a whole class, or split into buzz-groups of three or four — small enough to work without guidance.

The ideal, though, is to train students as Sycamore leaders: in a class of thirty, perhaps five student leaders. This becomes a real incentive to raise up leaders in the school, giving them training and transferable skills. You can build your own programme and accredit it in a way that makes it attractive to join.

Where Sycamore can sit in a school

- Supplementary lessons for particular themes in RE and Ethics
- Core curriculum for senior General RE, across one or two semesters
- Continuing professional development for staff
- Faith formation and small groups for staff, parents or students — before school, at lunch, or after school

School pathways and full module lists: https://www.sycamore.fm/pathways/d-school-pathways/
Running a discussion group: https://www.sycamore.fm/training/how-to-run-a-discussion-group/
Planning: https://www.sycamore.fm/planning/ · Training: https://www.sycamore.fm/training/
New to Sycamore? https://www.sycamore.fm/about-sycamore/why-start-a-group/

The three pauses

Every film pauses three times, with a set of suggested questions for you to use. You can use them as written or adapt them sensitively for your particular group.

Each film is built the same way: an introduction, then three teaching segments from Fr Stephen — the second and third opening with vox pop street interviews — and a closing testimony. The discussion questions appear on screen at the end of each segment. That is your cue to stop the film.

The questions belong to the segment, not to a formula

Set A is not always an icebreaker and set C is not always the "deep" one. Each set is written for whatever that particular segment covered. In *Film 7: The Gift of Faith*, for instance, the first set opens on trust — what makes us trust some people more than others, and who we trust most. Read the session guide before you run the session so you know what is actually being asked.

The question that appears in every single set

"What other ideas or questions strike you from this part of the film?"

Every set of questions, in every film, ends with this one. It is your safety net. When the written questions do not land, when the group has gone somewhere unexpected, or when you have simply lost your thread — this question is often helpful, because it hands the choice of subject back to the group.

The real skill is selection

Each pause gives you roughly four questions and you will have time for one or two. Deciding which — before the session, not during it — is most of what preparation means for a Sycamore facilitator. Mark your choices in the session guide and leave the rest as spares.

Full session guides for all twenty films, with question sets, YouCat readings, scripture and key ideas:
https://www.sycamore.fm/start/session-guides/

Choosing your questions

Open the session guide for your first film and decide now which question you will lead with at each pause.

My lead question for session one

One per pause, chosen from the written set — or your own, if you have a better one for the people actually in your room. Test it against this: could someone answer honestly without revealing more than they are ready to?

Session guides for every film: https://www.sycamore.fm/start/session-guides/

PAUSE A

PAUSE B

PAUSE C

Two helpful questions

"What struck you?" — it asks for a reaction, not an opinion, so nobody has to have a position.

"Does anyone see it differently?" — it makes disagreement an invited, normal thing rather than a confrontation.

Questions to avoid

- Anything answerable with yes or no
- Anything with a right answer you are waiting to hear
- "Don't you think…?" and "Wasn't that interesting?" — these are statements wearing a question mark
- Two questions at once; the group will answer the easier one

SECTION TWO

The Craft of Facilitation

Six helpful facilitation skills

Each one has a practice prompt. Try it in a real conversation this week — a staff meeting, a dinner table, anywhere.

1. **The four-second silence**

   Ask the question, then count slowly to four internally before speaking again. This gives participants time to think and makes it more likely that someone else will respond.

   Practise: ask one question today and count before speaking again.

2. **Open, not leading**

   "What did you make of that?" invites a range of responses. "Wasn't that interesting?" tends to invite agreement. A small change in wording can make a significant difference.

   Practise: catch yourself asking a leading question and rephrase it aloud.

3. **Don't answer everything**

   "I don't know — has anyone else thought about that?" can be an honest and helpful response. The facilitator does not need to answer every question and can invite the group to reflect together.

   Practise: say "I don't know" once this week without apologising for it.

4. **Draw in the quiet voice**

   "Maria, I'd be interested in your thoughts — only if you would like to share." Invite rather than insist, and make it easy for someone to pass.

   Practise: notice who has not spoken, and invite them by name.

5. **Hold the dominant voice**

   "That's really helpful — let's hear from someone who hasn't had a chance yet." A warm, timely redirection can create space for other voices.

   Practise: redirect a conversation without anyone feeling shut down.

6. **Close cleanly**

   Acknowledge something specific that you heard, thank the group and finish on time. Reliability helps to build trust from one session to the next.

   Practise: end a meeting exactly when you said you would.

Responding to difficult or personal questions

Difficult, personal or unexpected questions may arise at any stage of a Sycamore pathway.

1. **Welcome it**

   "I'm really glad you asked that." Mean it — the group is watching how you receive it far more closely than they are listening to your answer.

2. **Ask what kind it is**

   Sometimes a difficult question is primarily a request for information; at other times it may arise from a painful personal experience. A person may need to feel heard before the group moves towards explanation or discussion.

3. **Acknowledge it and agree how to return to it**

   If the question cannot be explored fully at that moment, acknowledge its importance and agree when or how you will return to it.

4. **Come back to it**

   Return to the question as agreed, perhaps at the next session or in a follow-up conversation. Doing so shows that it has been taken seriously.

Questions you may encounter

- Suffering — "where was God when…"
- Science and faith
- The abuse crisis
- Other faiths, and none
- "I don't believe any of this"

For example, "Why does God allow suffering?" may be a theological question, but it may also arise from bereavement or another painful experience. Respond gently, notice what may lie behind the question and be prepared simply to listen.

A colleague who says, "I don't believe any of this," has offered an honest contribution. Receive it respectfully and resist any pressure to correct or persuade them immediately.

Consider three questions you might find challenging

And a first sentence for each — not an answer, just how you would open.

Practice round

Twelve minutes, in threes. Swap after each round so everyone facilitates once.

Facilitator

Run pause B of Film 2. Four minutes. Use your own question if you wrote one.

Participant

Respond naturally, drawing on any genuine questions or doubts you may have.

Observer

Observe without joining the discussion. Use the grid below and notice how silence is handled.

Observer grid

What to watch for	What you noticed
How long was the longest silence?	
Who spoke most? Who did not speak at all?	
Did the facilitator answer a question they could have passed to the group?	
Was any question leading rather than open?	
One thing that worked well	

Feedback: the observer speaks first, begins with one thing that worked well and keeps the feedback brief and specific.

Facilitating a diverse staff group

A staff group may include practising Catholics, other Christians, people of other faiths, and colleagues who are uncertain, disengaged or do not hold a religious belief.

Because colleagues continue to work together, and the group may include line managers, honest contributions can feel personally or professionally exposing. Clear expectations, respectful listening and appropriate boundaries are therefore especially important.

Nobody has to speak

Say it out loud in session one. Then honour it without comment when someone passes.

Welcome a range of responses

Show from the beginning that honest questions and different perspectives will be received respectfully.

We respect the privacy of what is shared

Develop this expectation together, while making clear that normal safeguarding responsibilities still apply.

Model appropriate openness

A brief, honest response can model the kind of conversation being invited, without requiring deeply personal disclosure.

A second set of questions — designed for Catholic groups

Every one of the twenty films has an alternative set of discussion questions, written for groups whose participants already have a stronger Christian background. In a staff room of practising teachers these will often be the better choice, and many facilitators prefer them.

They sit with the wider leaders' resources here:
https://www.sycamore.fm/planning/resources/
You will need to register your group to access them — see https://www.sycamore.fm/register/

If you are running this with students

Everything above still applies, plus your school's normal safeguarding and pastoral procedures. Agree in advance with your leadership team what you will do if a student discloses something during a session — before it happens, not after.

Your group agreement

Draft it here, then build it *with* your group in session one. Ten minutes well spent.

Starting points

- Nobody has to speak; passing is always fine
- We respect the privacy of what is shared
- We can disagree without correcting each other
- No question is too basic or too awkward
- We start and finish on time

OUR GROUP AGREES THAT

A note on the closing prayer

Offer it, do not spring it. "I'm going to say a short prayer to finish — please join in or just sit with it, whichever you prefer." This allows colleagues with different beliefs to remain included and respected.

SECTION THREE

Planning Your Pathway

Session planners

Use these pages to begin planning the 2026 pathway. Complete what you can today and note anything that needs to be agreed with your school.

1 · The Existence of God (Film 2)

Consider: this topic may invite debate. Allow different views, then bring the conversation back to experience — "what has made you wonder?"

DATE | **VENUE** | **CO-FACILITATOR**

HOSPITALITY | **MY OPENING QUESTION**

2 · Who is Jesus? (Film 4)

Consider: although the material may be familiar to some, avoid assuming a shared level of prior knowledge.

DATE | **VENUE** | **CO-FACILITATOR**

HOSPITALITY | **MY OPENING QUESTION**

3 · The Holy Spirit and the Church (Film 5)

Consider: the word "Church" may evoke strong or complex responses. Allow space for both institutional experiences and personal faith.

DATE | **VENUE** | **CO-FACILITATOR**

HOSPITALITY | **MY OPENING QUESTION**

4 · The Gift of Faith (Film 7)

Consider: this session may encourage colleagues who feel uncertain about faith to contribute. Receive their reflections with particular care.

DATE | VENUE | CO-FACILITATOR

HOSPITALITY | MY OPENING QUESTION

5 · The Power of Prayer (Film 8)

Consider: this topic may invite reflection and silence. Allow people time to think before moving the conversation on.

DATE | VENUE | CO-FACILITATOR

HOSPITALITY | MY OPENING QUESTION

Looking beyond these five

These five sessions make up Term 2. The programme continues through Terms 3 and 4 with a further ten films, beginning with The Light of Christ and concluding with Mary and the Hope of Heaven. You do not need to plan those today; focus first on making a realistic start.

Publicity and invitation

A personal invitation is usually more effective than a general announcement. Consider who might benefit and invite them directly. Registered coordinators can access print-ready posters and postcards at https://www.sycamore.fm/register/

Responding to common challenges

Most groups encounter some challenges. They do not necessarily mean that Sycamore is not working.

Only three people come

Three people can still have a valuable conversation. Adapt the session where necessary and treat it as an opportunity to learn what will work well in your setting.

Nobody says anything

The question may need to be reframed. Try something more accessible, allow time for thought, or offer a brief example before inviting responses again.

One person dominates every week

Respond early and sensitively. A quiet conversation outside the session may be more effective than repeatedly redirecting the person in front of the group.

Someone becomes upset

Stop, acknowledge it, and offer a break. Do not press on because the session plan says so. Follow up individually afterwards, and follow your school's pastoral procedures if it goes further.

The technology fails

Register your group and download the films in advance where possible. Keeping an offline copy on the laptop provides a useful backup if the school wifi is unreliable.

People stop coming after week two

Ask one of them, kindly and directly, whether there was a particular reason. Timing, communication, hospitality or the content itself may all be factors, and their response can help you adjust future sessions.

You are not doing this alone

The Sycamore Leaders' Forum is an active, generous community of people running exactly this, and members can offer practical encouragement and experience: https://www.facebook.com/groups/sycamore.leaders

Putting the plans into practice

> *"An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others."*
>
> Evangelii Gaudium §24, Pope Francis

Use the questions below to identify what you can decide today and what may need to be agreed with your school leadership team.

1. Who is my co-facilitator?

Where possible, work with a co-facilitator. One person can guide the conversation while the other attends to the group.

2. Which term, and which slot?

Identify a realistic term and time slot, and agree the dates with the relevant colleagues.

3. Who might participate in the first group?

Consider who might benefit from the pathway and how they could best be invited.

ONE PRAYER INTENTION FOR THIS WORK

Support and contacts

Register your group

Coordinator Manual · alternative discussion questions for different contexts · print-ready publicity · offline downloads of all 20 films · the live Sycamore map · networking with other leaders.

https://www.sycamore.fm/register/

The films and session guides

https://www.sycamore.fm/videos/
https://www.sycamore.fm/start/session-guides/

Your MACS pathway

https://www.sycamore.fm/pathways/d-school-pathways/macs-year-1/

Training and planning

https://www.sycamore.fm/training/
https://www.sycamore.fm/planning/

Get in touch

We are delighted to hear from teachers and school leaders using Sycamore — including when it is not going to plan.
https://www.sycamore.fm/contact/

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> *"Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors to Christ."*
>
> St John Paul II, 22 October 1978