



## **THE OASIS BOOK CLUB MODEL**

“Someone’s finally figured out that the homeless can read.”

In the summer of 2009, the existence of a Boston-based book club with both homeless and housed members attracted a good deal of national and local media attention. Since then, a number of churches and individuals have attempted to emulate what has been done in Boston by the Oasis Coalition of Boston (‘Oasis’). Oasis is a small, Boston-based nonprofit whose mission is to serve the homeless and marginal communities of the area through programs that seek to recognize the shared humanity of the homeless and the housed.

What follows is an effort to distilling the experience we have had into a few simple rules, to share our experience for the benefit of other organizations and individuals interested in what has become something of a homeless book club movement.

### **1. OBVIOUS DO’S AND DON’TS**

- It’s primarily a book club for the homeless and formerly homeless. The club may benefit from having members from the general population as long as they don’t overwhelm the rest.
- It’s about inclusiveness—recognizing what connects us rather than stressing what divides us.
- The essential purpose is to reinforce the concept of self-worth through fostering the social relationships that develop when participating in a worthwhile and sometimes challenging enterprise.
- No one individual ‘owns’ the book club. It’s a democracy in which the entire group addresses ideas, concerns, and issues.
- Don’t over-emphasize the difference between the homeless and the housed, but don’t assume there isn’t one.



## 2. VENUE

The first thing you need is a venue. The ideal venue will be somewhere already frequented by members of the impoverished community—perhaps a shelter, drop-in center, church, library, or some other form of civic/community building. Ideally, the site will be close to public transportation and/or within walking distance of sites where services are already offered to the marginalized. The venue has to be quiet (to permit uninterrupted conversation); it needs to be warm/cool enough, and it requires access to a restroom. Generally, a group needs always to meet in the same space at the same time so that people know where to go.

## 3. DO WE OFFER FOOD?

It's supposed to be a book club, not a lunch club. There is no hard and fast rule. If you serve a meal, some participants may come for the food alone. You may think that's fine but if it happens, it may undermine the book club and create something else. The Boston group has found coffee/tea and cookies/donuts to be the right level of refreshment. However, other groups have expanded their food offering to include occasional breakfast sandwiches and even full breakfasts for participating members.

One approach would be to begin with coffee, tea and donuts, see how the group develops, and then exercise some discretion in deciding to add to the mix.

## 4. HOW DO WE START?

A preliminary step might be to reach out to organizers of existing programs serving the marginal community so that you can explore the idea with people who are already 'in the business.' However you do it, the first thing you have to do is establish that there is some interest in the venture in your community/area. To do this, you need to do outreach and you need to do it with humility—ensuring that you listen to what people say to you rather than focusing on what you want to hear. You can visit meals programs to talk to people and get the word out.

Having done the outreach, ideally you want to establish a small core group of dedicated members/organizers, preferably three people but two may do. At least one should be from the homeless or marginal communities and/or well connected within them.



It may take time to build up interest in a group so you should allow some lead time—perhaps four to eight weeks—once you are ready to go. Of course, if you can start with a group of three or four, you might want to start the group for a few weeks and then invite others to participate, so they can join something already established.

You might want to have chosen your first discussion book even when you are just starting to spread the word. It makes the whole thing more tangible, less vague. (See “How to choose a book,” below.)

#### 5. HOW MANY MEMBERS DO WE NEED?

There’s no magic number. A conversation requires two but bear in mind that some people will fail to show, so you probably want at least six. An ideal number, allowing for absences, might be eight to ten, so that you will be reasonably assured of a group large enough to keep discussion going and raise differing viewpoints but small enough to let each member be heard.

#### 6. HOW DO MEETINGS WORK?

You need to establish the duration for the meeting. Some time limit is good, perhaps two hours.

A book club is a social activity and you need to allow time for general conversation. The best book clubs are not just about the books. It can happen, sometimes, that the books take a back seat.

You can begin with refreshments or have them halfway through. Coffee and donuts seem to oil the wheels of conversation so before can be better.

Everyone present needs to remember that there are NO PUPILS and NO TEACHERS. (Though, in a sense, everyone is a teacher.)

Discussing a book will inevitably lead to discussion of personal experiences and topics that are, in an immediate sense, outside the book itself. There is nothing wrong with this—it means that the voice of the individual is heard. Of course, if discussion strays too far from the topic, the group can assert itself and bring matters back to the subject in hand.



No one should be forced to participate—encouragement may be needed, but there is no expectation.

## 7. DO WE NEED A FACILITATOR?

A book club needs to be about shared ownership and mutual encouragement, especially bearing in mind that you will be dealing with differing levels of education and literacy—and that’s just amongst the homeless. A facilitator, or someone taking on the role, can easily undermine this crucial principle. Perhaps that’s the difference between a good facilitator and a bad one. To get started, it is probably essential to have someone knowledgeable about the homeless community who is able to take on the facilitator role and to be a continuous presence at meetings.

A group can easily lose cohesion and purpose, especially in its early stages. Early on, someone will need to rein in the discussion, set boundaries and rules about behavior, language, etc., as well as discourage individuals from hogging all the air time. It may occasionally help for someone to start conversation going by raising a question such as, “Is this character credible? Is this aspect of the plot credible? What are the weaknesses in the author’s portrayal of X?” etc. A question rather than an assertion is a good way to begin any discussion.

As a club becomes established, other members may step into the facilitator role.

## 8. EXCLUSION

This is an uncomfortable topic given that the whole thrust of the book club is inclusiveness. However, there are clearly situations where the behavior of one individual threatens the viability of the group, and that is the litmus test. One example: a single temperamental outburst may be acceptable, but persistent outbursts are not.

Some mutual irritation is inevitable—as it is in any book club—and it needs to be met with mutual tolerance but there is, and should be, a limit.

## 9. IDEAS FOR FUNDING

Book clubs require a quiet space for a conversation, limited light refreshments, and books. There’s not much money involved and a few individuals, a church, or some other voluntary, commercial, or civic body can easily cover the cost. For expenses,



assume \$12 per book, ten members and eight books per year. If you can get them donated, great; if not, assume about \$1,000 annually for books and about \$500 for coffee and snacks. You probably want about \$500 of funding initially committed.

## 10. CHOOSING THE BOOKS

The precise choice of books is important. Especially in the early stages, it is important to choose books with which members can identify—so give thought to books about poverty and homelessness.

Beach literature does not generally make for good conversation, whereas ‘decent’ books tend to do so. What constitutes ‘decent’ is up to the group itself—classics, memoirs, science fiction, mysteries, biographies, short stories, or major contemporary fiction are good genres.

Book choices should be made after surveying the group as a whole, and it’s probably wise to vary the genre of successive choices. Remember, you can suggest a book without necessarily liking it, though it can be helpful (although not necessary) if one or more members of the group has read and liked a choice in the past. No one member should be seen as exercising a disproportionate influence over book choice.

## 11. AND REMEMBER...

When you invite someone to join the group you are inviting them to join a book group where everyone is welcome. In the end, however, it is a book club first and foremost for the homeless and marginal and, if the comfortably housed threaten to become the majority, then the group will be failing in its declared purpose.