

# LEADING DISCUSSIONS

## Starting a discussion, and keeping it going... 10 tips for creating a comfortable small group atmosphere– so all students will enjoy participating.

### 1. Encourage your students to verbalize their views & feelings, however unusual they may be

Nothing kills a discussion faster than when kids don't feel safe to say what they feel. Small groups should be a place where kids can be honest about what they're thinking and feeling –no matter what's on their mind. What students discover for themselves remains with them far longer than anything you tell them. Be slow to correct them, but, instead, let them think through their own responses. This is usually a better way for them to make real and lasting discoveries about God.

### 2. Be grateful for every answer.

Leaders can also stifle discussion by making students feel stupid about their responses and comments. Your job is to create a safe place for kids to say whatever they want and be appreciated for it. Sure, you'll need to gently redirect the tangents that pop up every three minutes. But it's better to encourage freedom of speech. Your kids will trust you (and themselves) more.

### 3. Don't be satisfied with the first response to your question.

Avoid setting a question–answer–question–answer pattern. Ask for several responses to your question, then provoke the speakers to dialogue with each other. That is, move them from merely answering toward discussing or conversing with each other, not just with you. Start the ball rolling by asking "Why do you think that?" and "What do the rest of you think?"

### 4. Keep the discussion moving.

A Relig class that does not move along at a good pace tends to get dull. Notice when kids are starting to lose interest, then quickly move on to the next question.

### 5. Be alert to the individuals in your group.

Be aware of what's going on with your kids as they come to your small group. Reserve the first few minutes of your small group for small talk and sharing. During your Relig class, notice when a student begins speaking, but stops. Look beyond those who are monopolizing the discussion, and deliberately ask other, quieter students for their responses. You'll never stop some personalities from standing out in your group; others will insist on staying in the background. That's okay. Your goal is to make every student feel that he or she is an important member of your group, whether or not that person contributes a lot to the discussion.

### 6. Don't be afraid of silence.

If your question gets no immediate response from a student, don't feel you have to jump in and answer it yourself. Let the question sit for a while. Silence is often an answer in itself– or can be preceded by a deeply felt response. If every question you ask is met with prolonged silence, you may need to take a hard look at the kinds of questions you're asking.

### 7. Turn tough questions back to the group.

The very tough question can give you a chance to get a lively discussion going. Don't think you have to try to answer it– try turning the question back to the group instead: "Good question. What do the rest of you think?" The students will be encouraged to think for themselves rather than to look to you for answers. If a question remains unresolved, now and then challenge your small group to find the answer by your next meeting.

### 8. Let your group self-correct its tangents.

Turning a question back to the group is also a remedy for wild tangents. Ask, "What do the rest of you think?" As students give their input, the group will correct itself. This also encourages your students to dialogue with each other instead of directing their dialogue toward you.

### 9. Stay flexible to the group's needs.

A student may come to the Relig meeting with a specific, significant, and often immediate concern that needs to be addressed in the small group. It may be an unresolved conflict between group members, a friend (perhaps there that night) who wants to know more about Christ, a recent death, a divorce. Put aside your agenda and deal with the issue. This shouldn't happen every week, however. Decide when an issue is sufficiently critical that you need to deal with it instead of leading your planned discussion.

### 10. Be prepared to learn from your group.

This is the best part of leading a small group. Your weekly preparation, as well as the students' feedback, can deeply influence your own spiritual development. It breeds maturity, and being a Relig leader will nurture your spiritual life as well as the spiritual lives of your students.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

If you want kids to feel safe enough to share themselves deeply with others in their small group, then it's up to you to establish trust and confidentiality. Some small-group leaders use a written or verbal agreement, committing members to that whatever is shared in the group stays in the group. They don't tell their parents or their boyfriends the particulars of what they hear in their small group, and you don't tell your spouse. If what you hear from a student during a meeting of your small group makes you think that a one-to-one talk would be appreciated or helpful, it is no breach of confidence for you to meet with the student later that week and talk personally.

There are critical exceptions to this rule. If a student confides anything that even hints at physical or sexual abuse, Relig is required by state laws to report that information to law enforcement authorities. Inform Tony immediately if you hear of self-destructive or addictive behavior of students in your small group. We will help the young people connect with resources.

If confidence is broken in your group, deal with it immediately so that trust can be reestablished. Meet privately with the group members who were involved, either individually or together, depending on circumstances. Your goal is to help kids learn when to share personal information with a third party, and when to keep such information to oneself.

## **ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS      QUESTIONS THAT GET RESPONSES**

Whether they're personal questions, topical questions, or faith questions, the way you ask them can make the difference between lively small, group discussions and dead ones.

### **1. Avoid yes or no questions.**

Stay away from questions that begin with "Is there ... ?", "Are they ... ?" or "Do you think ... ?" Instead ask more why questions. Run your questions by a friend before your small-group meeting & see if they're dead-end yes-or-no questions, or they provoke exploration, opinions, discussion.

### **2. Don't ask questions that assume an answer.**

Asking "How does Jesus show his anger in this passage?" assumes that a) Jesus is angry, and b) there is a right answer you want your kids to discover. The problem with such questions is that they tell students too much without leaving students room to discover answers and insights themselves. A better question: "What is Jesus feeling in this passage? Why do you think he feels this way?" Leads to a much more interesting discussion.

### **3. Write questions that are relevant to your kids.**

Some good questions will come to your mind during the meeting, but spend some thinking time before the meeting- about where your kids are, what their maturity level is, what in the session is particularly relevant to your students and thoughtfully write out most of your questions. Kids are more likely to talk if questions clearly reflect issues in their own lives- and what they learn from the discussions will be more valuable to their spiritual journeys.

### **4. Learn how and when to ask direct questions.**

Direct questions may lead to meaningful dialogue, but only with the right people at the right time. The wrong time to ask direct and personal questions is probably the small group's first meeting. Try the less threatening and open it up to the group in general instead of directing the question to an individual. As your small group grows in trust and openness between members, you can gradually use more direct questions to challenge your kids personally.

### **5. Ask questions that deal with feelings as well as facts.**

Your goal is to engage your students' hearts as well as their minds. It's usually safer to deal with issues objectively rather than personally. Yet the longer your small group meets, the deeper and more personal your questions can become.