

More Tips for Leading Effective Discussions

Discussions are an integral part of youth ministry. Young people like being given the chance to express themselves and to seek out the opinions of others. They enjoy insightful and interactive discussions. They dislike being talked down to or having a discussion manipulated toward a predetermined end.

Good discussions give young people the opportunity to think about a question and decide how he or she feels about the topic. By encouraging participation in meaningful discussions the you can help young people to open up, to find expression for those things they long to share, and to help them discover a community that is open to them and their ideas & dreams.

Here are some helpful hints for leading a discussion:

- Be familiar with the subject matter. Take some time in advance to prepare or review the kinds of questions you want to ask.
- Give a brief introduction to the subject matter if it has not already been done. Then ask the group questions, beginning with easy or non-threatening ones. Then move on to the more difficult or specific questions.
- Be sure to address everyone in the group by name. If the participants are not already familiar with one another, be sure they have name tags.
- Ask focused or specific questions. Try to frame your questions in the context of their lives. How something would affect their lives or the lives of their family or friends will elicit much more response than something theoretical or disconnected.
- Encourage the participants of the discussion to ask questions of one another. This will keep from having the focus continually come back to you and maintain the conversational tone of the discussion.
- Explore how the participants feel about the topic. This will keep the conversation interesting and meaningful and away from simply reporting the facts.
- Avoid questions that require a simple yes or no for an answer. If yes or no questions are necessary be sure to ask why or why not. The best tactic is to ask open-ended questions such as, "If you had to..." "What do you think the most effective way..." "If it were up to you how would you have handled..." "What do you think or feel about this?"
- Understand and be comfortable with silence. This might seem contradictory to maintaining a good discussion. But there will be times when the participants will fall silent. It is good to know that this happens because they might be taking some time to think about their response. Another reason for silence is they may not have understood what you asked. Be aware and alert to their body language and facial expressions in order to respond properly. Clarify when necessary.
- Avoid evaluating people's answers with comments like "good answer," "nice point," etc. Help the other participants understand why responses should not be evaluated. This will serve to keep the atmosphere open and objective.
- When you ask questions, be sure to ask in kind and non-confrontational ways so as not to put anyone on the spot.
- Do not take disagreements personally; these are simply opportunities for the group to think about a variety of views on an issue.
- Be orderly and on target. Beware of tangents; people should eventually be able to call the group to task when they stray from the topic or when the group gets too noisy.
- Give everyone a chance to talk, but don't exhaust the topic. Watch for signs of boredom.
- Throughout the discussion, and particularly at the end, summarize all that has been said, to check whether or not the subject was covered thoroughly and everyone had the opportunity to have their say. A variation on this idea is to ask if there are any participants who would like to summarize.