

## **Tips on Leading Small Group Discussions**

Sometimes on retreats or prayer meetings, youth leaders are called upon to lead discussions in small group. The subject matter of these discussions may vary from topics of social justice, philosophy, religious ideology, and relationship with God just to name a few. Despite the diverse spectrum of discussion topics, here are a few tips to leading a discussion in a small group.

### **Outside of the Group**

**One-on-ones:** If the situation allows you, try to talk individually with your group members outside of the sharing space. It does not have to be a deep life affirming conversation but could simply be a conversation about how Taylor Swift is the best songwriter in the world. By creating a personal connection with each member, you are giving them a chance to trust you as a friend. It is much easier to create personal friendships one-on-one than in a group of strangers.

**Social Gathering:** Try to spend time outside of the group. By having fun together outside of the group, your small group members are growing closer together as friends and slowly build up trust and comfort with one another

**Be Prepared:** As the leader of the small group, you should have background knowledge of the discussion topic. Prepare and review questions ahead of time that you would like to ask your small group. Questions that incorporate daily life are usually the best since they allow members to personally relate the discussion to their own lives.

### **During the Group Meeting**

**Atmosphere:** Try to keep a relaxed atmosphere. Be a little goofy. Laughter and corny jokes help break the ice and allow members to feel more at ease. Once members start to feel comfortable with each other, they tend to open up a little more.

**Introduction:** Give a brief introduction to the discussion topic at hand. If you are feeling nervous, you can prepare your introduction beforehand. If you are feeling ambitious, you can create an activity that allows your members to think a little deeper about the topic such as a guided meditation or a reflection.

**Names:** Names are especially important. Remember everyone's name. Use whatever memory techniques you can. Knowing someone's name shows that you are making an effort to care for them personally.

**Questions:** After you ask your questions, do not be afraid to answer first to set an example for the group. Try to avoid asking yes or no questions since that may limit discussions, but rather ask questions that allow members to expand on their feelings. If you need help with asking the right kind of questions, try reading this article under the follow up section.

**Follow Up:** After listening to a member's answer, ask personal follow-up questions to encourage them to keep thinking and talking. Encourage other members to ask questions as well. This shows that you are interested in their opinions and interest tells someone that they are valued.

**Silence:** Silence can be a time for group members to think and gather together their thoughts. Do not be afraid of silence. Allow time for your group members to stay in silence. Then after the appropriate time (this is a judgment call on your part) you can move on to the next question.

**Disagreements:** If disagreements arise in the group, allow them to be discussed. Do not take them personally and show respect to both sides of the argument. It is your role as the leader to be impartial and facilitate the conversation. Maintain an environment of respect and acceptance especially during disagreements.

**Tangents:** It is okay for your group members to laugh and enjoy themselves with off-topic conversation. Laughter brings people together. But always remember the bigger picture. When it is appropriate, try to steer the conversation back to the discussion topic, but do not feel like it is mandatory. If you deem that continuing on the tangent is beneficial to the group (again this is a judgment call), then continue. Sometimes, it may be that the discussion topic is not the best for the group and something else arises. The Spirit works in mysterious ways.

**Wrapping up:** Give your members a chance at the end to respond to what they have heard in the discussion. Ask them for any additional thoughts that arose while listening to others speak or their overall reaction about the discussion. Then if you can, try to summarize what you have heard during the entire discussion and how it moved you. Or you can ask someone in the group to do the job for you. Finally ask for input and feedback.