

# **Tips on Starting a Conversation... and Keeping it Going.**

**Consider these 10 tips for creating a comfortable small-group atmosphere – a necessary quality if you want all students to enjoy participating.**

## **1. Encourage your students to verbalize their views and feelings, however unorthodox they may be.**

**Nothing hinders a discussion faster than when students don't feel safe to say what they feel. If they get shot down by you or the members of the group, they'll be less likely to share next time. Students new to the faith (or not yet in the faith) need a place to process their religious views without feeling self-conscious.**

**D-Groups should be a place where students can be honest about what they're thinking and feeling – no matter what's on their minds. 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 genuine and lasting discoveries about God.**

## **2. Be grateful for every answer.**

**Yes, every answer. Leaders can also stifle discussion by inadvertently making students feel silly or dumb about their responses and comments. Your job is to create a safe place for students to say whatever they want – and be appreciated for it. Sure, if you work with students, you'll need to gently redirect the tangents that pop up about every five minutes. But it's generally better to encourage freedom of speech.**

**To encourage this freedom, set a ground rule that when someone is speaking, they have the floor – they should not be interrupted. When they are finished, anyone else may share their opinion as long as it is not critical of anyone in the group. To help students visualize this, pass around an object to hold in order to have the floor.**

**As students feel free to say what's on their minds, they will trust you and the group (and themselves) more, creating an environment for growth.**

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

**Avoid setting a question-answer-question-answer pattern. Here's a better way to start a discussion: 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 in this direction by asking, "Why do you think about that?" and "What do the rest of you think?" Don't let it rest with the first answer, but encourage discussion. Draw students out by asking questions whose answers aren't so obvious.**

**Occasionally play devil's advocate and question students' responses – especially if they tend to give typical "church answers." Challenge church kids to go deeper and examine their own faith, rather than live the one that's been handed down to them.**

### **4. Keep the discussion moving.**

**A D-Group session that does not move along at a good pace tends to get dull. This often occurs when one or two students monopolize the discussion while the rest of the group nods off. Be aware of this and quickly move on to the next question or topic. If you have a student who genuinely wants to further discuss an issue, set up a time to talk at another time. Avoid turning discussion time into a one-on-one dialogue that everyone else observes.**

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

**Be aware of what's going on with your students as they come to your D-Group. During your small group time, notice when a student begins speaking, but gets interrupted. Try to go back to that student and offer a second chance to share. Look beyond those who are monopolizing the discussion, and deliberately ask other, quieter students for their responses.**

**Encourage their participation without putting them on the spot, and affirm them regardless of their contribution to the discussion.**

**Your goal is to make every student feel that they are an important member of the group, and this means discerning when to lay aside your agenda for a group member who needs your attention and/or support.**

## **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 linger in the air for a while. And let the students know that you're comfortable with the silence and willing to wait for discussion to begin.**

**Two things will happen if you jump in right away. First, you will interrupt any thoughtful reflection, and second, students will learn that you'll always rescue them, setting a pattern that is hard to break. Small groups are for students to struggle with their thoughts. You, as the leader, need to provide the time and space to facilitate that.**

**Silence is often an answer in itself – or can be a necessary prelude to a deeply felt response. Of course, 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 difficult questions back to the group.**

**If you're intimidated by a student with a tough question, join the crowd! Yet that very question, tough as it may be, 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.**

**Help your students examine what they believe by constantly asking for their thoughts and opinions. You may get some wild answers, but the students will be encouraged to think for themselves rather than look to you for the answers. You will also benefit by understanding where your students are in their spiritual journey.**

## **8. Let your students self-correct its tangents.**

**The technique of turning a question back to the group is also a remedy for wild tangents. Don't just tell the student that he or she is wrong (and possibly stifle a student's participation) – ask instead, "What do the rest of you think?" Chances are 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.**

**People grow in their understanding of the faith as they refine their ideas in dialogue with other Christians. In the small-group setting, students work out their theology best by discussing their thoughts with each other and with you. As a leader, refrain from giving the right answers, for in this way you create a greater opportunity for learning.**

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

**Sooner or later, a student will come to her small-group meeting with a specific problem that needs to be addressed in the context of the small group. It may be an unresolved conflict between group members, a friend who wants to know more about Christ, a recent death, an impending divorce. Now is the time to put aside your agenda and deal with the issue.**

**This shouldn't happen every week, however. If it does, you can either spend more time with individual students outside your group time, or lengthen your meeting to include a longer sharing time. If students know they will have time to share what's on their hearts, they will be more able to focus on your small group study. Leading a small group requires judgment to decide when an issue is critical enough that you need to deal with it instead of leading your planned discussion.**

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

**This is sometimes the best part of leading a small group. Your weekly preparation (which challenges you to stay grounded in the Word) as well as the students' feedback can profoundly influence your own spiritual development. As a leader you are essentially asking students to "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). But as this verse suggests, it's the reality of Christ in your life, not your own personal perfection, that will have the biggest impact on your students. Sometimes students experience the reality of Christ better by observing your struggles rather than your strengths. Students are greatly impacted by the**

**leader who takes the risk and becomes vulnerable, demonstrating their own need for the love and grace of Jesus Christ. Of course you will need to discern what is appropriate for sharing with your small group; but the more your students see that you struggle too, the less intimidated they will be by your spirituality and leadership.**

**Ministry breeds maturity, and your ministry as a D-Group leader will help you to “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). As you nurture and care for the spiritual lives of your students, you will inevitably grow in your own spiritual life – becoming more the person Christ intends you to be. You will say with Paul, “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Philippians 3:12). Perhaps this is the greatest gift you can give your students.**