
ARTICLE #7: WHY ARE SMALL GROUPS SO IMPORTANT?

SMALL GROUPS – THEY'RE ESSENTIAL

WHY?

Can you describe five teachings that were instrumental in transforming your life? How about five people? It's easier to describe five people because we are relational beings and what we learn is more often "caught" than "taught". While large group teachings are foundational to *knowledge* of faith, it is as children are encouraged to ponder, wonder, imagine, and problem-solve in the context of small groups that they *begin to own their faith* and are *drawn to a walk with Christ*.

CREATING GROUPS

- 1 *Same* students each week to foster relationships
- 2 *Same* sex students (in elementary grades) to eliminate competition & differences
- 3 *Same* leader so the they have fewer students to know, are more able to specifically pray, encourage, and measure spiritual growth
- 4 With erratic attendance in the summer use that time to get to know the kids & determine groups,
- 5 Write names on name tags w/different color sharpies to identify their groups

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR DISCUSSION

- 6 Leader considerations:
 - o *Object* is to get the students thinking so the Holy Spirit can guide them to arrive at their own convictions
 - o *Quit* before they start to get restless - interest levels will vary from week to week so be sensitive to their attention span.
 - o *Focus* on questions that promote discussion - Avoid those that require regurgitation
 - o *Commitment* to love the kids and build relationships
 - o *Patience* – relationships take time & intentional investment

- o Small groups begin when the students walk in the door – don't wait until the designated time to connect
- o *Listen* more than talk, i.e., become a student of the students
 - What are they ready for?
 - What matters to them?
 - How do they feel about themselves?
 - What is their world view?
 - What specific scripture meets their personal needs?
 - Study the lesson in the “shoes of your students”
 - Tailor the group to your specific kids
 - Consider questions that will challenge your students to put the truth to work in their lives this week
- o *Be real* and age-appropriately vulnerable w/struggles, victories, excitement about the word, etc. – obviously requires a growing personal walk

7 Group dynamics

- o Relational
 - accepting, free to share ideas
 - don't force it
 - Eye contact & respond w/interest
- o Participatory - Consider ways to get all kids involved to some degree
 - Start w/"felt" needs as point of contact & work toward spiritual needs - Jesus always initiated w/ personal need, not His agenda
 - Talk about lives, use non-threatening get to know you activities
 - Let students' response & readiness guide the process
 - Never condemn an opinion
 - Pursue each subject by asking
 - What is your present situation?
 - Why? Asking, “why?” helps to solidify their understanding

- How does it affect?
 - What do you understand? What don't you understand? What do you want to understand more?
 - What can you do about it?
 - What's the first step?
- o Problem-solving
 - “Do you think...?”
 - Factual questions for purpose of emphasizing their need
 - Answer a question w/a question to make learner think for himself
 - View questions as prime opportunities for personal learning rather than interruptions
 - o Non-threatening questions
 - What's your favorite TV relationship? Why is it your favorite?
 - What do you like to do for fun? Why is it fun for you?
 - What's your favorite time of year? What is it about that time of year that makes it your favorite? What do you like to do then?

CREATE GOOD QUESTIONS

- Use questions that allow for sharing of information & thoughts & have many right answers.

Example: 2 Cor 13:5 calls on us to examine or test ourselves

1 Cor 4:3 clearly states to not examine ourselves

- Teach the antitheses as if it were the thesis. (Obviously if they don't disagree with you, stop it quickly and re-teach as needed. Even preschoolers can pick up on blatant wrong thinking)
- Ask them how a particular truth might apply either to life in general or to a specific situation – hypothetical or real. Ask, “What might this look like...?”

- Use a third party statement or quotation (real or imaginary) with which to react – movie quotes, TV ads, news articles, etc.
- Have them interact using a different point of view – “How would you respond if you were...?” Take the perspective of the donkey during Christ’s triumphal entry, the little boy with the 5 loaves and fishes, a member of the crowd, etc.
- Set up a real-life situation & ask how the principle might apply to that situation. Any exceptions?
- Ask the difference between what you distilled from the text & something they are familiar with.

Example: 1 Cor 9 says Paul seeks to be all things to all people. Does this mean it doesn’t matter how he acts?

- Play Devil’s advocate and challenge a position of general acceptance.
- If passages are unclear or could be interpreted differently, ask what students believe the passage really says – avoid recitation (This would obviously be used w/upper elementary)
- Share an age-appropriate personal experience as to how the passage applies to you and ask the students to do the same. (This can be used at any age)
- Set up an apparent contradiction and ask the group how to resolve it.

DISCUSSION TIPS

- Keep questions short and simple. Rephrase if necessary.
- Put forth the question and then WAIT a minimum of 10 seconds in silence. It gives students time to think and creates a positive stress on participation. (If they know they just have to wait you out, they won’t answer.) If no answer, re-ask or re-phrase the question and wait. It may take time and some uncomfortable moments, but it will be worth it in the long run.
- Summarize what was said in 1-2 sentences and relate it back to the topic if needed.
- Determine whether to challenge, affirm, show reservation, call for clarification, or move on to another question or point.

- Create an atmosphere of “we are discovering this together” rather than “know it all”
- Don’t be afraid of giving up some control to reap the benefits of greater student involvement. We want to challenge them to think and it happens best when they are engaged in discussion.
- Please share the questions you generate, either by email steinmank@xenos.org or by writing them on the feedback form at the end of the lesson.