

Small Group Leader Do's and Don'ts

Do...

- Be inclusive of everyone. Use first names whenever possible: "Mary, do you feel the same way?"
- Create a relaxed atmosphere. Believe in the goodness of people and the Holy Spirit working in the members. Don't be anxious. The Lord will do the work.
- Encourage the expression of feelings and not just ideas. Feelings are good indicators of our values.
- Be respectful and supportive of each member, their ideas, and feelings. Be careful to avoid forcing your own viewpoint.
- Confidentiality is essential. Remind the group that what is said during the meetings should not be shared with others outside the group.
- Get to know each person at your table personally. Each person should be made to feel that he/she is there for a very important reason. Their absence would really be missed.
- Make sure that each person is heard. Often smaller conversations may take place at the table once one person is finished sharing. Ask all the members to listen to each other.
- Be comfortable sharing your own faith story. This will help the group members to feel more comfortable sharing their own. The feelings are more important than all the details involved. You can have high hopes that teens will be confidential, but don't promise something that cannot be guaranteed.
- Be aware of body language. Watch to see if anyone is sitting away from the table or doodling. She/he may be feeling left out, uncomfortable with what is being discussed, or bored. Don't reprimand, just invite him or her to sit closer and be part of the group, without making it a big deal.
- Use open ended questions, rather than questions that require yes or no answers:
 - "Why do you think that way?"
 - "What experiences have given you that idea?"
- Share leadership. The table is the leader's responsibility, but the goal is solidarity as a group.
- Use summarizing skills:
 - "Who understands what Jessica is saying?"
 - "I heard us say..."

Don't...

- Don't anticipate what is to come. Help the candidates let the day unfold. Avoid saying, "You'll really like what we are doing next." It puts too many expectations on the team.
- Don't bombard candidates with questions. Often an introvert will need time to process. Encourage them to take their time in discussing what they wish to share.
- Don't over-lead or talk too much. Avoid teaching, sermonizing, or spiritual jargon unfamiliar to the group members.

- Be comfortable with silence. Allow people to relax and become comfortable with one another. Introductions, a little individual background, and humor will help break the ice at the beginning.
- Don't let one person dominate the conversation. Invite the quiet ones into the conversation. If someone is dominating, say things like, "Thanks for sharing so much, Emily, but right now we need to hear from Greg." If the problem persists, take him or her aside and gather his or her assistance in drawing others out.

The opposite problem is if no one is talking or they are giving short answers. This can really drain a small group leader. Be patient; sometimes the group just needs time to get acquainted with each other and build the trust element. Often, smaller parishes have this problem with teens who have grown up with each other and are reluctant to share on a personal level. Keep asking questions, but it is more important for the group to be comfortable with each other first. Try to find some common ground: school sports, activities, movies etc.
- The object of the small group is not emotionalism, or for people to cry. There is real danger in an expectation of how someone should react or not react, or a judgment that someone 'didn't get it.' The small group leader's job is to facilitate discussion, share their own faith story and help others to see where God is present and working in their lives, not getting them to share intimate stories with the group. Be careful of wanting to know the details of the story, rather than how God is working.
- Each teen will be at a different place in their faith life. A teen may not even believe in God or question the belief. Each person's question is as valuable as those who have adult-like faith. Accept each person where he or she is, rather than where the leader thinks the candidate should be.

Helpful Questions for Facilitating Sharing and Discussion

- To draw out a silent member:
 - "Does anyone who hasn't spoken have a comment?"
 - "Roger, what do you have to add?"
- To suggest the need for sharing personal experience:
 - "Does anyone know of instances where this has been true?"
- To keep sharing focused on the subject:
 - "We've wandered a bit. Can someone bring us back to our focus with a comment about the question?"
- To prevent a few from monopolizing the discussion:
 - "Excuse me, Joe. Before you continue, may I ask if anyone has a comment on the point Joe has just made?"
 - "Jane, since we have only a few moments left, could you share your experience briefly so we may hear from others, too?"
- To suggest the need for closing the sharing time:
 - "May I ask if anyone has a final comment to make before we close?"
 - "Would someone like to close us in prayer?"