

LEADING A DISCUSSION GROUP

One of the most important and difficult parts of any cultural or study program is having a well-organized, orderly, and mobile discussion. In this aid sheet, we will try to explain the correct procedure for leading a discussion and for imparting the greatest amount of knowledge possible to your members.

A discussion is defined as the process of oral thinking and communication by a group organized toward a common understanding or solution. The ultimate objective in the discussion is truth. It is important to remember that it is not a debate, but a mutual sharing of ideas.

A discussion subject is usually one which provides a question of opinion or judgement.

Facts are not discussable---they only provide a basis for discussion. The questions posed in a discussion should relate to the "why" of events, rather than to the "how" of events.

For example, when discussing the situation in the Mideast, it is much better to discuss why

the Arabs and Israelis are in conflict than to discuss the battles of the Six Day War and what happened at the last skirmish with Jordan. In this way, you will be dealing with the core of the problem and not with a symptom of the problem.

The discussion process is basically dependent upon all the members of the groups participating. It is a democratic process in which all may speak freely and equally and in which all viewpoints are respected. It is important that all be given a chance to speak and that no single person dominate the discussion.

The five steps in a well conducted discussion are:

1. Beginning the discussion
2. Defining the issues and presenting facts and background material.
3. Keeping the discussion relevant
4. Progressing from the original idea to one which perhaps relates to it subtly.
5. Conclusion or statement of the solution to the problem.

The leader is responsible for setting the stage for the discussion, presenting basic material

... of facts, group in order, and giving direction to the group's discussion. The leader should at all times be able to follow and indicate the structural outlines of the discussion. When the group leaves the central idea or the discussion bogs down, he should return it to the central theme.

The first job of the leader is to clarify the immediate purposes of the discussion. They should be thoroughly defined. A tentative plan of discussion should be made in advance. This plan should concern "where the group is going." This plan doesn't have to be adhered to strictly, but it is essential as a basis for discussion.

The background of discussion can consist of a short summary, by the leader, of the problem with some facts and a few varying opinions. It can be in the form of an adult speaker, such as a city police chief preceding a discussion of juvenile crime. It can be a summary of a book by a member of the group. This opening should be brief and informal.

To start the discussion and avoid the "dead silence" that often comes at the beginning of

When leading a group, the following ideas can be used:

1. A question can be directed to a member of the group at random, preferably a more articulate one for openers.
2. A helper can be used - a group member who has prepared a question in advance in order to break the ice.
3. The leader can ask the speaker a question to get things rolling.
4. Encouraging general casual conversation to allow the group to warm up and then gently leading it into the discussion itself.
5. Describing a striking example of the discussion issue by referring to a current incident.

After the discussion has begun, the leader should keep it moving by keeping in mind the main issue and by the use of suggestions, questions, and examples. He should then encourage the shy members to speak and should ask them direct questions. When there is a lull in the conversation he should call on members of the group by name to offer a comment. The questions asked should be controversial and should never be capable of being answered by a simple yes or no.

The leader should never dominate the discussion and should rarely offer his own opinion to the group. He should serve as a moderator and try to get others to express their opinions of the subject. When the discussion has run out of steam or when a certain aspect of the topic has been thoroughly discussed, the leader should guide the group on to a new aspect or should begin to summarize the topic to end the discussion.

The participants in the discussion group should try to remain unbiased and fair to all the ideas presented to them. They should try to be logical in their assessment of the ideas of others and in formation of their own ideas. They should listen to the ideas of others carefully. The leader should remind the participants of these points if they are not being carried out.

When the topic has been fully explored, the leader should ask for summarizing comments on the subject. The conclusion should relate of course to the original problem and should have some sort of relevance to future actions by the group. For example, the group could conclude

that they should take some action to end the problem. This could be done if some current problem, such as poverty in the U.S. or the Israeli refugee problem is being discussed.

The group members could decide to undertake a project such as money raising for Israel or volunteer work in the inner city. Another type of conclusion is one which involves future conduct of the members in their individual lives.

This is relevant if a topic such as prayer or Jewish education of the Bible is being discussed. If a holiday is being discussed, perhaps the group will conclude that certain rituals have special meaning for us today and we should make a special effort to observe them. Or, the group may merely decide to meet again to discuss the problem. If the problem being discussed cannot have any conclusion, such as if it has been only an exchange of ideas on

a specific topic, then no summary is needed.