

Asking Open Questions

Leading a Small Group Toward Spiritual Growth Video Series

"What did you get for question one?"

Silence.

Is Betty going to answer? What about Jan? Nancy? Dana?

"I got 'forgives all our sins, heals all our diseases, redeems our life from the pit, crowns us with love and compassion.'"

"I also said 'satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagles.'"

"Thank you, Jan. Anybody get anything different?"

"No? Then question two..."

This is often the kind of conversation that starts a Bible study small group discussion. But it's a conversation that falls short of what we know can happen in a dynamic small group.

Whether you're an experienced small group leader or just starting out, the kinds of questions you use make a difference in the quality of your group discussion.

In the video "Preparation," second in the series *Leading a Small Group toward Spiritual Growth*, we discussed how a leader sets the tone for her group. How can you prepare your group for more than Question & Answer as you move through your Bible study or reflection questions?

You'll probably experience a shift as the group participants learn a new way of relating. In one model, the group leader asks the question while participants read aloud their recorded responses. But filled with conversations like you just read, such a small group time rarely draws out deep conversation.

Leading a small group toward spiritual growth approaches meaningful conversation among the group as strategic. It allows your group members to process new information and digest what the Holy Spirit is teaching them.

This conversation is not focused on the leader, although she plays an important role guiding the group through thoughtful questions.

So what can you as a small group leader do to develop a peer discussion—one in which you aren't viewed as the teacher but where the participants dig deeply together into how biblical truth informs a walk of faith?

Asking open questions is a vital skill that you can develop.

Open Questions

Read these three discussion questions on the concept of personal strength and weakness, and consider how you would answer them:

- Do you fear weakness? Are you ashamed of your weakness?
- How does Paul describe the weaker members in our community in 1 Corinthians 12:22?
- How have you found 2 Corinthians 12:10 to be true in your own life? "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Which question involves more thought and conversation?

The first question is a **Yes/No question**. Because yes/no questions are typically answered in a one-word response, they don't invite discussion or dialogue.

The second question invites a specific response, so it is known as a **Leading question**. Because the question suggests that the group leader is looking for a specific "correct" response, the quality of the conversation depends on the participant's confidence in her answers. Once the correct response has been given, there is no need for further comment by the other group members. So the discussion moves from leader to one participant and straight back to the leader. Leading questions usually shut down group discussion and do not invite reflection.

The third question is an **Open question**. While it does point the participant to a passage of Scripture, it also encourages personal reflection. Open questions push the group to move beyond the initial observation "What does this say?" and encourages them to consider "What does it mean?" and "How does this apply to my life?"

So how do you as the leader develop good open conversational questions for your group?

You may already have a study guide in mind with homework questions for your group. Looking at those questions will give you practice recognizing and even revising questions for your group discussion.

Here's some practice to get you started:

1. **Observation Questions:**

Many studies begin with observation questions, which usually answer "What does it say?" Observation questions are often leading. They can be helpful to personal study because they encourage the participant to read well. But they don't lead to good discussion.

If possible, develop an open question surrounding the main idea of the text instead.

Example 1: Read Psalm 103

- Which of God's "benefits" or "kind deeds" does the psalmist instruct us not to forget?
- What does God do with the sins of those who revere Him?

These questions are observation. They have a specific answer in mind. They help a person study the Bible text. But when it comes to a group discussion, a leader might ask instead, "Which of God's character qualities mentioned by the psalmist is meaningful to you today?" or "How do the psalmist's words help you understand how God can love you unconditionally?"¹

2. **Yes/No Questions:**

Does the study include questions geared primarily to Yes/No or one-word responses? If so, reword them to invite the participants to share by asking a "Why?" "How?" or "What do you suppose?" question instead.

Instead of "Have you ever . . .?" try asking, "What situations have led you to . . .?"

¹ "Anchored by God's Love," *An Anchor for the Soul: Selected Studies in the Prophets and the Psalms* by Kay Daigle, (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press), 18.

3. Closed and Open-ended Questions:

Do questions in your study lead to specific responses, those that sound like there is a right or wrong answer? Consider replacing such a question with one that digs more deeply into the issues. Ask the group to share examples of how the principle has played out in their lives.

- How has God provided you strength in the last year?
- When did you sense God's presence in a powerful way?
- Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. What actions are most difficult for you when you need to love someone who is unlovable?
- Choose one aspect of love that means most to you as you consider how God loves you. Why is it most meaningful?²

Writing and asking open questions is a learned skill you develop as part of your own growth as a leader. Just being aware of the need can be a catalyst to shift your group's dynamics. It takes time to develop relationships so that the group feels comfortable sharing their responses.

It also requires time for the group culture to shift from Question/Answer to guided discussion. Give participants time to process questions. When you ask a question, allow for a time of silence.

Silence often means that the group needs time to process what is being said or to digest a question. The more comfortable you become with silence, the more your group will come to accept it as part of the process.

Our prayer is that your group grows beyond "What did you get?"

Open questions allow your group to wrestle with a Bible text and with their own spiritual condition, promoting spiritual depth and growth in the lives of the women whom you lead.

² Ibid, 17.

Beyond Ordinary Women Ministries is here to help further your leadership skills.

- Watch our three-part video series [Leading a Small Group toward Spiritual Growth](#) for conversation and tips on becoming a great small group leader.
- Look over our list of [Small Group Leader Resources](#) for further help with all kinds of leadership skills.
- Many of our [blog posts](#) have “small group” and “leadership” tags and can be easily found on the list of most used topics in the margin.
- Check back with us online frequently as we add to our leader development resources often.