

Strategies for Asking Questions

Asking questions well is a skill that is required throughout the catechetical process. Good questions both promote reflection on a specific theme or topic and help learners integrate new information into their current knowledge base. Although there are many kinds of questions, most fall into three categories: factual, interpretive, and evaluative. A *factual question* is a non-threatening, general question that elicits factual information, for example, “What did Jesus say to the blind man?” An *interpretive question* helps the learner make connections and allows for a personal interpretation of events, for example, “Why did Jesus ask Peter three times if he loved him?” An *evaluative question* is perhaps the most involved kind of question as it asks the learner how they might incorporate the topic or event into their own experience, for example, “What difference does your faith in Jesus Christ make to you?” Regardless of the type of question you might be using, be mindful of the following tips:

Take five. When asking questions, leave time for reflection before inviting others to share. By taking time, you’ll honor the needs of those who require more time to process their answers and encourage the extroverts in the group to explore their own thoughts before speaking. Also, work from lower-risk, non-threatening questions to the higher-risk questions. By having the learners first answer several questions that are not as self-revealing, you will establish a safe environment for honest disclosure.

Trust the group. Encourage groups to come up with questions of their own. From the learners’ questions you will be able to learn quickly what

they did or did not understand, what touched them, and what challenged them the most. Sometimes we can simply use the learners questions to guide the classroom discussion by inviting the group to respond.

Avoid leading questions. Leading questions, such as “Don’t you think Peter made a mistake when . . . ?” suggest a “correct” answer. A more evaluative question would be, “Why do you think Peter denied that he knew Jesus?” Leading questions cut off the possibility for real reflection and do not give others the chance to develop their own thinking.

Be present and attentive. Presence makes us keenly aware of each individual in the group. Such awareness will help us identify a learner who has not shared. By being present and attentive to the group we are with, we can ask those who are quieter to share their thoughts. Many times people simply need an invitation to share.

Be clear. Form questions that use the vocabulary and knowledge set of the group. Stating questions concisely and clearly is an important part of being effective with this learning process. In addition, questions that ask for only one thing are much more easily understood by the learner.

Open-ended questions. Avoid using questions that require a simple yes or no answer, such as “Did you like that Scripture story?” These questions rarely produce the thought or discussion that could take place by using an open-ended question, such as “What did you like about the Scripture story?” Open-ended questions challenge the learner to think about their answer and support it with details.

