



FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

Tough to Say

Which of these phrases is hardest for you to say?

Tami Rudkin | posted 1/12/2003

Which of the following phrases are the most difficult for you to say? Why?

"I am sorry."

"You were right. I was wrong."

"I'll try harder next time."

"I love you."

"I really messed up."

"Will you forgive me?"

Small-Group Elephants

How to discuss difficult topics in community

Peri Sandifer | posted 9/27/2010

I strolled into my singles small group one evening anticipating all sorts of fun and a great discussion. After eating and visiting, all of us settled in to watch that week's session of our Video Bible Study.

Andy Stanley effectively communicated the value of keeping margins in our romantic relationships, and the consequences of living a "margin-less" life. Once the video ended, the discussion questions began. The first one that popped up was, "How much margin is in your current relationship?" After about a minute of no one breathing, the leader displayed the next question. But it drew cricket chirps, as well.

Frankly, I wasn't surprised. Sex, addiction, divorce, and other taboo topics are hard to discuss in small groups. People might be willing to talk about them in reference to others, but they are usually unwilling to share a lot of personal details. And yet sharing personal details and talking about difficult subjects is a necessary element of small groups.

As small-group leaders, we have the responsibility to challenge and spur our group members to grow spiritually. And that means we will sometimes be required to address the elephants lurking in the room that nobody wants to see.

Fortunately, there are few ways to address such topics without causing too much consternation.

Begin the Discussion with a Related Icebreaker

When dealing with a heavy topic, addressing it in a "light" way first can help break the intensity of an ensuing discussion. For instance, if you know the group will be discussing sex and sexuality one evening, play a game before the study where you have each person write a love song reflecting his or her life. Let the participants pass the songs around, or you read them out loud, and then let the group guess which song belongs to which person.

Not only will this give your group a chance to have fun, but it introduces the topic of romance in a non-threatening way. Later, when the discussion gets going, you can ask individuals to recall

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their songs and see how they relate to the discussion—which allows for an easier flow to the conversation.

Use Gamestions (games mixed with questions)

There are a lot of discussion questions that feel threatening and can cause people to remain silent. One way to get around this is to create a game that allows God's truths to be discussed in a way that lessens the intensity of the topic.

For instance, say you are leading a study on sexual purity—a potentially awkward topic for sure. Instead of posing questions directly, have each member write out a fortune-cookie statement based on the topic. For example, "Time in hay will always make you pay." Then let people read their "fortunes," if they are willing.

Again, this allows your group members to think about the concepts presented in the study—and how they apply to their lives—but in a non-threatening manner. And during this little game, you can insert discussion questions to keep the conversation going.

Be Vulnerable

Vulnerability demands vulnerability. As leaders, we cannot ask others to discuss what we will not discuss about ourselves. In being vulnerable, you do not have to divulge every detail. But being open will help your group members see that you are real and willing to be real with them. This enables them to lay aside their fears of being vulnerable.

Affirm People

Many people do not want to address "discussion elephants" because they feel guilty or ashamed about their actions in relation to such topics. As small-group leaders, it is important for us to encourage people and remind them they are valuable to Christ—and to us. No answer they give is going to drive away you or separate them from Christ.

Another thing to remember on this topic is that it is not our job to judge anyone as Christians, but to love everyone.

Don't Force Conversations

If the options listed above don't work in opening up a sensitive discussion, then move another direction. Do not threaten the safety people feel within your group. Instead, pray and allow God to open another avenue where this topic can pop up again during a time when members are more prepared to discuss.

Elephants are heavy—there's no doubt about that. But they have to be moved. As a small-group leader, the task of addressing heavy subjects is not easy, but it is not impossible. With a twist a fun mixed in to the study, you can plan for a talkative night.

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