

The Ministry of Conversation

An excerpt from *Tools for Mentoring Talking Christianly Module* by Joy Schroeder

Have you ever been the new person in a room? Has the group talked around you as if you were invisible? Have you ever wondered how to have a conversation with someone (a romantic interest, maybe) after the initial “Where are you from?” or “How was your day?” If so, then you are acquainted with the need for the “ministry of conversation.”

When St. Patrick evangelized Ireland in the fifth century AD, he established Christian communities. The believers spread the gospel through storytelling, prayer for the people’s needs, and engaging people in conversation (Hunter 21). Community life included worship, work, prayer, ministry to seekers, and meaningful conversation—especially with one’s “soul friend” (peer mentor). Every guest who came into the community was daily provided the ministry of conversation by one or two people, fulfilling a core aspect of the community’s hospitality (Hunter 52-53).

Offering conversation is hospitality in words. Hospitality is a posture of the heart. You carry it with you wherever you go. Hospitality is doing what you can to make other people comfortable, especially people you haven’t previously met or who are new to a group. Make new people your focus.

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Hebrews 13:2

When you reach out to people new to the group, you minister to Christ in a special way.

I (Christ) was a stranger and you invited me in.... Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. Matthew 25:35, 40

Show sincere interest and consideration to the people you are most familiar with—your friends, co-workers, and family. At meals, in small group, or over coffee, offer the ministry of conversation with good questions (ideas below), good listening, and sharing your own life. Build community with conversation.

Necessary attitudes about conversation:

- It is up to you to **take the risk** of introducing yourself and others to new people, initiating conversation, and including people in the conversation group.
- It is up to you to **assume the burden** of making the other person feel comfortable. With kind, thoughtful questions, you can put the spotlight on them, not you.

Someone’s name is the most important word in the language.

- Work hard to learn names. Write them down later. Say them at least three times during the conversation.

- If you forget people's names, it's all right to ask them to remind you. You can also ask for their name from someone else.

Show an interest in everyone.

- Choose to show interest, based on each person's intrinsic value as created in God's image.
- Mentally stay on track. Do not let your mind wander, even if you do not find the topic personally interesting.
- Make your body show interest, and your heart will follow. Maintain eye contact, and listen.
- Love is a feeling to be learned; expect God's grace as you choose to be interested.

Listen well.

- Listen with your eyes by maintaining eye contact. Resist becoming distracted and looking at something or someone else.
- Listen by leaning slightly forward or nodding to convey interest.
- Listen actively. Reflect back what you hear them say in order to make sure you understand. "What you're saying is.... Is that right?"

Include everyone in a group.

- When you speak, include everyone with your eyes.
- Engage everyone by asking a question to someone across from you instead of just talking to the person right next to you.
- Avoid telling inside jokes or stories that not everyone in the group is familiar with, unless you stop and catch everyone else up on the story.

Make introductions. Those who love first, win.

- Initiate introducing yourself to people you do not know.
- Ask questions to learn two or three things about them.
- Say their name often. This will give you a greater chance of remembering it.
- Introduce them to others.
- Look at the people you are introducing them to so they can hear the new name.
- "Hello, my name is _____. What's your name?" "John." "I'm glad to meet you, John. (Ask a couple of questions.) Have you met Alice? Alice, this is John. John, this is Alice. (Tell Alice what you learned about John.)"
- Hopefully, Alice will ask John a "follow-up" question to keep the focus on him (examples below).

Play catch.

- Think of conversation as a game of catch; ask questions that will give people something to throw back. In order to keep the conversation game moving forward, they should throw the ball back to you by asking, “So, what about you? What’s new at your job?” Unfortunately, they may not have that skill yet. But you do. So if you are the one answering a question, throw the ball back. Keep the conversation ball in the air.

Good Questions

Start with common questions that most people are comfortable with, and as you get to know them, progress to questions that invite more significant sharing. When you invite people to share about themselves, it shows that you sincerely care.

Open-ended questions require more than a one-word answer. Use open-ended questions and statements as much as possible.

Closed-ended questions can be answered in one or two words.

Follow-up questions are open-ended questions that draw out more information. After your first question, take something that was said and ask a follow-up question to keep the conversation moving.

Closed-ended questions with follow-up:

- Where are you from? New Orleans. What are some of your favorite things about New Orleans?
- How are you? Good. What makes today a good day?
- How was your day? Busy. What is a busy day like for you?
- What’s your job/major? How did you get into that occupation/major?
- What brought you here? Or How did you find this church/group? What do you hope to gain from this?

Open-ended questions with follow-up:

- How did you get interested in architecture? Tell me about the project you’re working on now.
- Tell me a little about your family. What is something you enjoy doing with them? (Stoltzfus 18)
- Also follow-up with
 - o “Tell me more...”
 - o “What do you mean by...”
 - o “Give me an example of what you mean...”
 - o “What happened first/next...”

More open-ended questions and statements:

- Tell me about your summer.
- What do you enjoy the most about...?
- What is the most challenging/rewarding part of your job/major/class?

- Tell me what's going on with work/family/school.
- How did you two meet?
- What is on your mind this week? What are you thinking about?
- Tell me about one great joy and one sorrow you've experienced this year. (Stoltzfus 18)
- What is an event that shaped you as a person? (Stoltzfus 18)
- Tell me about someone who has had a significant influence on your life, and how. (Stoltzfus 18)

Be prepared before you go into a meeting or meal with friends. Think of three questions to ask or things to talk about—events in the news, something you read.

For lists of questions, see *The Complete Book of Questions* by Garry Poole. Also see <<http://www.toolsformentoring.com/resources/small-group-helps/relationship-builders/>>

Sources

Hunter, George G. III. *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000.

Stoltzfus, Tony. *Coaching Questions*. Self published <www.Coach22.com>, 2008.