

QUESTIONING OUR DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

By Ted Barnes

Priesthood and Family Department of the Church

Imagine you're sitting at lunch with some friends discussing a movie you saw together. Then one of your friends says, "Who can tell me what the most important scene was in the movie?"

A bit confused by the question, you think for a moment and suggest that the last scene was probably the most important. "Well, that's a good comment," your friend says. "But it's not quite what I had in mind. Anyone

else? Let's hear from someone who hasn't shared yet."

You wouldn't talk this way among friends, but for some reason it seems to happen often in Sunday classes.

Instead of discussing gospel truths naturally and comfortably, as teachers we sometimes say things that in other settings would seem strange and even stifle conversation. We hope

that class members will feel that they are among friends and be comfortable sharing their thoughts regarding the principles they are learning. Such sharing can

invite the Spirit and enrich the experience for everyone.

How do we make sure our questions lead to more natural and meaningful discussion? There are some do's and don'ts that many teachers have found helpful: Don't ask questions that have obvious answers. Do ask questions that have more than one answer. Don't ask questions that are too personal.

It may also be valuable, before we start planning questions to ask in class, to ask ourselves a question: *Why am I asking questions in the first place?*

Why Do You Ask?

The motivation behind our questions makes a big difference. For



The most important question may be the one teachers ask themselves before they get to class.

example, do we sometimes ask questions because we have something to say but we want a class member to say it instead? We rightfully don't want to do all the talking, but we do want a particular point to be made, so we sometimes ask a question that we know will elicit the answer we want to hear. This mindset leads to questions that are really statements in disguise, like "How will avoiding pornography help you keep your thoughts pure?" or "Is it important to pray every day?"

There are situations in which it is perfectly appropriate to ask questions that are meant to draw out a particular answer. They can serve to emphasize a point or help the teacher advance the lesson. But questions like these are not likely to encourage meaningful discussions.

On the other hand, if we ask questions because we really want to know what is in our class members' minds and hearts and lives, then it will show in the questions we ask.

Questions that invite class members into a heartfelt conversation that fosters spiritual learning include questions like "As you read this verse,

what stands out to you?" or "What experiences have taught you to trust the Lord's promises?" or almost any question that begins with "What do you think . . . ?"

Consider these examples:

- The Spirit asked Nephi, "What desirest thou?" (1 Nephi 11:10).
- The Savior asked His disciples, "Whom say ye that I am?" (Matthew 16:15).
- And He said to Martha, "I am the resurrection, and the life: . . . Believest thou this?" (John 11:25, 26).

Each of these questions invited someone to share what was in his or her heart. And in each case, what followed was a powerful spiritual experience.

Questions Are an Expression of Love

Believe it or not, asking questions that foster discussion comes naturally to almost everyone—even to people who don't consider themselves good teachers. We do it spontaneously every time we have a meaningful conversation with friends or family—or just a chat about a favorite movie over lunch. But when we stand in front

of rows of expectant students, we suddenly forget all about what comes naturally.

So perhaps part of the trick to asking good discussion questions is to think to ourselves, "How would I ask this if we weren't in a classroom—if we were just sitting at home talking about the gospel as a group of friends? How would I invite them to share their insights and feelings?" Teaching isn't *exactly* like a casual chat among friends, but they have one thing in common: they should be motivated by sincere interest and genuine love.

So don't worry if you aren't yet skilled at crafting well-worded questions. Even if all you can do is love the people you teach, the Spirit will guide you, and you will get better and better at knowing what to say. "Charity never faileth," Paul declared (1 Corinthians 13:8), and that's true even for something as simple as a teacher asking questions in a class. ■

You can learn about six types of questions in "Ask Inspired Questions," *Teaching in the Savior's Way* (2016), 31–32, available at teaching.lds.org.