



PROGRAM IDEA: FILM DISCUSSION GROUP

by Michael Bausch

The booming business in videocassette rentals and box office receipts points to an excellent youth educational opportunity: enjoy a film with a small group and then discuss the film afterwards.

Organizing a film discussion group is simple: set aside an evening once a month and go to a film together (group rates are often available) or rent a film and watch it in someone's living room. Those homes with stereo video cassette machines hooked to large speakers tend to be favorites!

Once the date and location are set, the next job is to select a film. It's important to realize that "just any old film" won't do: the film needs to have some "redeeming social importance", that is, it must contain some lessons for us to discuss in the context of a church discussion group. While any film lends itself to discussion, I'd prefer something like "Tender Mercies" to "Beverly Hills Cop" because genuine human interest films provide better material for a church group discussion than many glitzy box office blockbusters. The films that seem to attract large audiences these days tend to have less depth of plot, more violence, and weak characters. Films more suitable for church discussion groups are those that depict complex characters, loving relationships, and realistic life situations.

A good source of film reviews is your Sunday paper, in which film and video recommendations are often made, and in *The Christian Century* magazine, which reviews and recommends films for religious audiences.

The films themselves are often available through your public library system at a lesser charge than from video stores, though obviously the charges are minimal wherever you rent the film.

Before viewing a film in the group setting, the night's discussion leader might make some suggestions about what to watch for, including cinematic technique (like noting the way the photographic choices amplify a scene's feeling), symbolism (how in some films cloudy skies and rainstorms indicate a change in the film's mood), the use of language (is the profanity a genuine part of a character or simply a gratuitous way to "grab" a certain audience), Christian themes (including instances of grace, sin, forgiveness, life/death/resurrection, redemptive love), character development, and story line.

Following the film, while light refreshments are served, invite the group to recall vivid scenes, significant dialogue, striking characters, and any feelings the film elicited. Observations about any symbolism, the ethical dilemmas faced by the characters, and any Christian symbolism or themes add depth to both the discussion and an understanding of the film.

As you would imagine, the discussions add to the experience of the film as the group allows the images and messages to soak into its consciousness, and as the group learns to speak of learnings and observations. Lessons will continue to emerge during the following days, and group members often speak with one another weeks later about further insights

gained from their shared cinematic experience.

One of the best discussions I've participated in followed the powerful and emotionally draining film "Fatal Attraction." The group voted to see that one, with the leader a bit unsure! While on the surface the film might be "unsuitable" for viewing by a church group, the experience elicited much discussion about the importance of honesty, marital fidelity, careful sexual behavior, and personal morality.

Other films I have watched and discussed in a church group setting are: "The Trip to Bountiful", "Amazing Grace and Chuck", "Cocoon", "Cool Hand Luke", "Children of a Lesser God", "The Kiss of the Spider Woman", "Tender Mercies", "Rain Man", "Dad", "Beaches", and "Steel Magnolias".

Viewing and discussing films in small groups is an excellent way to discuss contemporary culture, ethical themes, and life story in the context of Christian faith. The participants learn how to enhance their experience with film, and the small group experience serves to bring church members and friends closer together in an enjoyable and educational way.

About the Author:

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