

The League of Nations Union.

A British Organisation founded to promote the formation of a World League of Free Peoples for the securing of International Justice, Mutual Defence, and Permanent Peace.

President: VISCOUNT GREY OF FALLODON, K.G.

HINTS

FOR

STUDY CIRCLE LEADERS

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"Idealism is the belief that moral forces are finally dominant."
"Character is the crown of an education."

SIR R. FALCONER, *President, Toronto University.*

STUDY CIRCLES.

THEIR ORIGIN.

It is about fifteen years since Study Circles were first introduced into this country from America. A great deal of experience has been acquired, the strong and weak points of the method have been made clear, and the permanent value of work along study circle lines demonstrated. But it is of real importance that those who propose to form study circles should understand that they are based upon a definite educational principle which demands specific conditions for its effective application.

WHAT A STUDY CIRCLE IS NOT.

There have been very loosely organised and unskilfully conducted groups to which the name "study circles" has been given, when really they had no title to that description at all. They have not produced the results which might reasonably be expected from a well-organised study circle, and thus disappointment, or even complete disbelief, in the study circle method has arisen. On the other hand, the good effects of the work done have not been recognised, as would have been the case if the group had been accepted for what it actually was—namely, a debating society, discussion group, essay club, or class, as the case might be. In either event there has been confusion of ideas, aims, and methods, with the result that a valuable piece of educational machinery has, in many cases, been spoilt or scrapped. On the other hand, difficulties have often been created by a dogmatic and rigid adherence to orthodoxy in details, overlooking the fact that the study circle method is essentially elastic and can be adapted to any local conditions, so long as the main principles are recog-

nised and adhered to. Many people have been frightened into supposing that they "could never do it," or that a study circle is a dull and pedantic business, thoroughly boring to everybody but the painfully studious or the unnaturally brilliant. Therefore, it is plainly desirable that, before the study circle method is either tried or rejected, we should grasp the essential principles so as to avoid either carrying on something else under the name of study circle, or failing to adapt, as completely as possible, a real circle to local needs.

WHAT A STUDY CIRCLE IS.

Broadly speaking, a study circle may be defined as a small group of friends (generally six or eight in number; never, if possible, more than twelve) who meet regularly, say weekly, for a specified number of occasions (ordinarily for the three months before and after Christmas) for the systematic discussion of a definite subject with the help of a specially prepared text book, and under the guidance of one of their number whom they have appointed their leader. In the intervals between the meetings each member devotes some time to the study of that section of the book which will be discussed at the next meeting. At the meeting itself each member makes his, or her, own distinct individual contribution to the discussion, opening up a definite point if previously asked by the leader to do so, and, in any case, taking a fair share in the proceedings. A contribution, however small at first, to the discussion by every member is essential to success.

There seems to be nothing very formidable in all this, and, indeed, there is nothing. The more informal and friendly the atmosphere, the better the result. So long as the work is thorough and reasonably methodical, freedom is the very essence of a good study circle.

THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE.

At a lecture each member of the audience tries to acquire from the lecturer as much knowledge of the subject as he can absorb. The lecturer gives, the audience receives. With a study circle every member, during the week, must acquire for himself some knowledge of the section of the subject due for discussion at the next meeting, and must impart that knowledge, or point of view, to

the whole group. The full co-operation of everyone concerned is indispensable. Only by this means can everyone be stimulated to real mental activity. The simple process of asking questions, or comparing points of view, criticising, or emphasising statements that have been made, and checking or adding to facts that have been adduced will deepen the impressions that each member receives far more than the mere reading of a book, or listening to a lecture. But what is of far greater importance is that each member should form the habit of doing his, or her, own thinking. To achieve success, the members must be left not only in possession of a number of facts, but able to arrange and compare them, to form sound judgments, and to express clearly their own thoughts. They must learn how to complete the knowledge that they themselves have gained by adding to it from other people's resources, and then how to use the knowledge they have thus acquired. Above all, they must develop the power of weighing and paying due respect to other people's opinions while maintaining, or modifying, their own.

THE CIRCLE ITSELF.

(a) *The Text-Book.*

In the study circle there is no lecture or reading of a paper. The section of the text-book under discussion takes its place. That is why it is not easy, and in most cases is frankly impossible, to use for study circle purposes a book that has not been specially written and edited for the purpose. The book should be divided in such a way that each section affords enough material for discussion at one meeting, but not too much. Each section ought to lend itself to discussion under two or three well-defined heads, and to have its due place in the development of ideas throughout the book, not presupposing more than previous chapters have made clear, and not anticipating matters that come more logically later on in the whole discussion. There should also be a fair distribution of facts and argument in each section, so that the circle may neither be faced with a mass of fact which is, in the nature of things, practically undiscussable, nor with a long series of generalisations, neither illustrated nor supported by relevant facts. For these reasons it is not

desirable to take a number of unrelated, or only slightly related, pamphlets as a basis for a study circle. It is even less wise to take a bare syllabus, except in the case of a very advanced circle, each member of which has already read a number of standard books on the subject under review.

(b) *The Leader.*

While it is obvious that the leader of a study circle must keep a little ahead of the circle so far as actual knowledge of the text-book goes, it is not required that he should be more learned than the members of his circle. In fact, it is preferable, from many points of view, that leader and members should all be on much the same level of knowledge; otherwise the leader tends to lecture, or otherwise dominate the circle, and the members get into the way of accepting what he says without criticising either his accuracy or his soundness. If they feel that he is very superior to them in knowledge, they will be shy of bringing forward facts of which they are not absolutely sure, or of expressing opinions which they think he might regard as wrong or foolish. On the other hand, they will lean too much upon him, asking him questions about points of fact which it would do them much more good to hunt up for themselves, or getting his opinion when they ought to be thinking things out on their own account.

What is essential is that the leader should be at pains to grasp the *method* of study circle work (attending a training circle, if possible, before leading one of his own), and that he should have both a clear head and a sympathetic spirit. His aim should be never to talk himself so long as he can make his members do so, never to tell his circle what he can, by skilful but not aggressive questions or suggestions, make them tell one another or go away and find out for report at a later meeting, and always to bring *every member* into the full light of the circle. This last function is the real test of the good leader. It demands tact, so that the talkative member may be repressed without feeling sat upon, and the shy member drawn in without being forced or scared. A leader should know enough of his members to recognise the *kind* of contribution to expect and encourage from each; this one is good at maps, that

one revels in historical data, the other is excellent at summarising what has been said during the discussion at the previous meeting, or on the point from which the circle is just passing. Frequent summaries, by the leader himself, or, better still, by members of the circle, greatly help the circle to "get somewhere," always providing that they are genuine summaries and not statements of what might have been said or ought to have been said. The good leader manages to keep the discussion on an easy conversational level, avoiding public speeches from any of the members and equally a scrappy, disjointed series of remarks from all. Maintaining a serious piece of work, he will, at the same time, welcome the illumination of humour. And all the while he will manage to be the least conspicuous member of the circle.

(c) Procedure.

The leader should always prepare, one or two weeks ahead, the outline of the work to be done at each meeting, fixing in his own mind the general aim of the discussion, and the two or three salient points to be brought out in achieving it, while covering fairly completely the section of the text-book to be read for that meeting. He should arrange at each meeting with various members, each to open up at the next meeting one of the points he wishes brought out. By these means it will be possible to guide the discussion along orderly and logical lines when the time comes, without too much intervention on the leader's part. The leader may find that the psychology of his circle may differ from his own, and that points which he had intended to take in the order "A, B, C," may most naturally come into discussion in the order "A, C, B." But he must be ready to follow the circle's line of thought, while keeping his own purpose clear. He must decide whether a point raised is a digression or worthy to be brought into the discussion. Even if the circle does wander a little, it is far better to watch for a point of contact with the true line of thought, and thus bring the circle back, than to break in abruptly, though sometimes nothing will avail but a sharp pull up, and a definite return to the proper line. It is most important that in framing the points for discussion and assigning them to members to open at the next meeting, the leader should see that the

points themselves are discussably phrased, and that all the members clearly understand what is meant by them; otherwise there will be constant confusion when the time for the actual meeting arrives. In the discussion itself, the leader should see that no important fact is overlooked and no useful point of view neglected.

Although outlines of study will be available, each leader must make his own if his circle is to be a success. The whole point of his work is that he adapts the method to the personalities and the group-consciousness with which he has to deal. Therefore, though a series of outlines ought always to be consulted if possible, and may prove extremely suitable on the whole for the circle concerned, the leader will probably find it necessary to modify them a little in detail; and if he has not really made his own, he will find great difficulty in getting a good discussion going simply because, however good the outlines are, they have never really "come alive" in his own mind.

The business of the leader is to prevent a vague, rambling talk in place of a purposeful and useful discussion, and he should try, as far as possible, to bring each point to a definite issue. He will probably find, however, that it is sometimes not possible to bring the circle to any unanimous conclusion. That is not the primary aim. Certainly there should be no attempt to force the circle to the conclusion which the leader for his own part, considers the logical or desirable one. Sometimes it may be best frankly to admit that on a given question the circle cannot come to any conclusion at all until additional information has been gathered by the members, or a later part of the book brought under consideration. That will not happen as a general rule, but it is a healthy thing for a circle to find that it must go more deeply into a question than it had at first intended, or that there are two quite equally tenable points of view on a certain matter, and that not all the members take the same.

(d) The Members.

The reason for limiting the numbers to eight, or at the most twelve, will by this time have become apparent. If a larger number are admitted there will not be the same freedom, thoroughness, or complete participation. It is

better to have two small circles than one large one. Groups already existing for other purposes form a good basis for circles, for if all the members are friends, or at least known to each other to begin with, things are more apt to go well from the outset. The more diverse the experience, outlook, and temperament the circle comprises, the more serviceable and useful it is likely to prove, provided the standard of education and intelligence is not too dissimilar. Members should undertake to come regularly and punctually. The length of time for each meeting should be fixed at the outset of the series (an hour and a quarter, or an hour and a half, is generally about the right length) and this should be scrupulously observed. It keeps the discussion crisp and enables members to get away punctually without feeling that they are missing an important part of the discussion or breaking up the circle. Unless a member can undertake at least to read the section carefully each week, it is better that he should be advised not to join. To come to a meeting without making any preparations is worse than useless, because it spoils the general keenness.

No lecture or public meeting on the League should be allowed to pass without the gathering of a circle from those present who would like to pursue the subject further.

THE TRAINING OF LEADERS.

It is sometimes asked whether a circle is possible without a leader. Good work is not possible without a leader. Neither is it possible if different people take the leadership from week to week, as will be obvious from all that has been said above about the work of the leader. Even within the life of one circle running for twelve weeks the leader will be gaining experience at each session which will enable him to handle the circle as no casual leader could.

If half-a-dozen people in a given neighbourhood can be got together to be trained as leaders, and a leader of experience secured to train them, a very short period of intensive work will put them in a position to make a fair start with circles of their own. The best way is to hold one meeting for the discussion and explanation of the method. At the end of this the trainer will make assignments for the first meeting of the circle, into which those who are

being trained will form themselves. He will also arrange for each member of the circle to lead it for one meeting, making sure that the one who is to lead it will come to the previous meeting prepared with assignments to give to other members for the next meeting. The trainer will himself lead the first and last meeting. Each meeting will consist of an hour spent in the actual circle, and another spent in discussing with the trainer the method pursued by the leader for that evening. After all have had their turn at leading, and the trainer has conducted the last circle, there should be one more meeting in the form of a final conference on methods, literature, &c. If the members can, by making a special effort, meet two or three times a week, the whole of the training can be got through in some three weeks, and half-a-dozen circles started under good leadership. If it is not possible to get a trained and experienced person to train the group, the group can, at any rate, do their best to train themselves by working on similar lines. In such a case, however, it is most necessary that, if at all possible, the whole group should visit some centre where they can see a really good circle at work. Or perhaps it may be more easy to get an experienced leader to come to the group for the first evening to explain the method. If he can also manage to run the group as a circle for an hour in the same evening, having previously sent the members assignments and made sure that they will have prepared the section of the text book, so much the better.

SUBJECTS FOR STUDY.

Unless members have already acquired a sound knowledge of the Covenant, including the constitution of the League and its powers, it will, undoubtedly, be wisest to devote at least four, and preferably twelve, meetings to the Covenant itself. Otherwise members will find themselves handicapped in their study of some special aspect of the Covenant, or of international problems, by their ignorance of the exact way in which the League functions, and the precise powers given to it under the Covenant. The aspects of the League for which text books are at present available are:—

1. The League and its Guarantees.
2. The League and Labour.

3. The Economic Aspect of the League.
4. Mandates and Empire.
5. The League and the East.
6. The Future of the Covenant.

The courses are so arranged that each of these subjects can be taken in four meetings, but eight, and even twelve, meetings can profitably be devoted to each if desired.

In addition to these, arrangements have been made for courses on

- Political Ideals.
- New Geography.
- History of the 19th Century.
- India.

BOOKS AND OTHER AIDS TO STUDY.

For a fee of 2s. per member, covering a session of twenty-six weeks, the League of Nations Union will forward for each meeting, to the leader, a copy for each member of the outline of study on the subject chosen. The outline will deal with the section of the text book arranged for that meeting. It will contain :—

1. Headings into which the section of the text book to be read can be most easily divided.
2. Questions intended to provoke discussion.
3. Questions suitable for home-work and for testing the amount of knowledge acquired.
4. Books to read.

If, as is hoped, home-work is undertaken by any members, the Union will correct and comment on three or four of the contributions from each circle.

Any questions sent in by a leader will be answered as soon as possible.

A hand-book on the Covenant will probably be available by the time circles begin to meet, as well as a new and up-to-date edition of "The Covenant Explained" (1s. post free).

Text books on the various aspects of the League have been specially written by the following authors, and are obtainable from the Union at 1s. each, post free :—

1. The League and its Guarantees. Professor Gilbert Murray.

2. The League and Labour. C. Delisle Burns.
3. The Economic Aspect of the League. Norman Angell.
4. Mandates and Empire. Leonard Woolf.
5. The League and the East. Professor Arnold Toynbee.
6. The Future of the Covenant. G. Lowes Dickinson.

A bibliography can be obtained from the Union, price 1d., giving full particulars of books which deal in greater detail with the League and kindred subjects.

If application is made to the Union, arrangements will be made, wherever possible, for an intensive course of training for study circle leaders, provided ten or more leaders can meet together in one place for this purpose, on three or four consecutive days.

It will be a great access of strength to the movement if all study circles on the League or kindred subjects will report to the Union, specially at the end of a session, the progress made and the difficulties encountered.