

IBD Strategy

Mark Ashton

Investigative Bible Discussions as an Evangelism Strategy

In October, 1996, the Lord began to lead the University of Illinois InterVarsity chapter into a different paradigm for evangelistic focus: Utilizing Investigative Bible Discussions as the primary and central tool for reaching U of I students with the gospel of Jesus Christ. This paper will outline the reasons why this has the potential to be such an impacting strategy as well as the practical aspects of creating and maintaining such a ministry.

What in an Investigative Bible Discussion?

An Investigative Bible Discussion is a gathering of 1 or 2 Christians with 1-15 non-Christians, who weekly discuss a Biblical passage about the life of Jesus. A good IBD has the intention of exposing non-Christians to the person of Jesus, and moving them toward faith in him. Generally, IBDs run for 4-12 weeks and officially meet for 30-45 minutes.

What is an Investigative Bible Discussion (IBD) strategy?

For decades, we have been utilizing IBDs within InterVarsity as one means to help people come to know Jesus. At the U of I, IBDs have been a part of follow-up of various evangelistic events and have been started now and then within friendship clusters to introduce people to Jesus.

More recently, as opposed to utilizing IBDs as one part of a bigger plan for campus witness, we have chosen to make IBDs the big plan for witness while using other events and training to heighten the effectiveness of IBDs. We have chosen to encourage as many students as possible to lead IBDs with their friends, classmates, teammates or other affinity groups that they are involved in. We are also working with students and staff to lead IBDs with contacts from NSO and other outreach events that we sponsor. There has been a big difference for us in just having a few IBDs and capitalizing on IBDs as a strategy.

Here are some differences between having a few IBDs and making IBDs primary and central:

- Whenever we think of outreach events, we ask the question “How will this improve our ability to reach students through IBDs?” If it won't, we don't do the event.
- IBD leaders are given good training to begin IBDs and ongoing assistance from chapter leaders assigned specifically to that task. Their task is legitimized as a ‘real’ leadership role in IV.
- Staff and student leaders spend significant time and energy investing in IBD materials, strategy, leaders and training.
- We consciously set goals for training, numbers of IBDs, incorporating IBDs into NSO and the rest of the chapter, evaluation and improvement.

Here at the University of Illinois, we had 57 IBDs in the last year. This is from our undergraduate ministry which had a total of about 400

students involved. This means that about 20% of our students were leading IBDs.

Last year, we were blessed to see 37 conversions. This is about double the number that we have seen in any of the last 5 years. Most of the students who became Christians were in, or had been in an IBD. Of course, conversions are an act of the Holy Spirit moving in somebody's life, but God often chooses to bless faithful, effective, fervent witness with conversion. The IBD strategy has been a key component to that kind of witness here at Illinois.

Why is an IBD strategy effective?

It affirms evangelism as a process. Very few people will become Christians within 60 minutes of their first exposure to a clear presentation of the message of Christ, yet this is what many evangelistic models presuppose. We have found that it is usually three months to two years between the time somebody is clearly exposed to the gospel and they become a follower of Christ. In IBDs, students get multiple weekly exposures to Jesus, which gradually fills out their understanding of him. It also keeps them thinking about Jesus in the long-term, rather than just a single-shot. IBDs bring Christians alongside non-Christians in this process to help them move toward Christ over time.

It capitalizes on the relational nature of effective evangelism. IBDs utilize a highly relational discussion oriented process that validates the importance of a person to God. During the IBD, relationships are deepened as people discuss more personal, spiritual things. In an IBD, all of the members look to the Bible for what it has to say about Jesus and life. Christians and non-Christians work together in this endeavor, rather than pitting these friends against each other in philosophical debate. IBDs serve to build quality friendships, which create a safer environment to wrestle with spiritual issues and place your faith in Jesus.

It provides a context to discuss spiritual things. Often, because of the privatized nature of western culture, people do not discuss spiritual things. There is not a good forum where seekers and skeptics can bring their objections and questions to have them intelligently answered. An IBD provides just such a context. Although the objections of the skeptic may not be directly addressed during the study, it becomes an appropriate place to raise issues after the discussion. Often a group gathered for a 30 minute IBD will stay 1-3 hours discussing pertinent spiritual issues in this natural environment.

It is highly adaptable. Although studies always focus on the gospel message and the person of Jesus, studies can be chosen to fit the students who are in the study. A study filled with nominally-religious engineers could look quite different from a postmodern group of English majors. Studies can be chosen week to week to fit the most relevant issues of group members as well as where they are spiritually.

It is comfortable for non-Christians. For most non-believers, it is much easier to go to a dorm room down the hall than to church, and easier to hang out in the lab than go to a campus outreach event in a classroom

or lounge. Because most IBDs are among affinity groups, the member knows all of the people in the study.

Since non-Christians are in the majority, they do not feel stupid, or uninformed (as they may in a typical Christian small group), but rather can freely speak their mind. In addition, the conversational structure allows non-Christians to discover Jesus for themselves. They do not feel preached at or coerced. Rather, they fall in love with Jesus as they read about him in the pages of scripture.

It is a natural format for Christians to do evangelism. Because you are all looking together at God's word for the answers, it takes all of the pressure off of the Christian to know all of the answers, or to be a great presenter. The word of God speaks for itself. Besides that, Christians who have a hard time bridging conversations to discuss spiritual things have the perfect setting where people expect to discuss spiritual things in an open setting!

It works with any size chapter or campus. IBDs bring the gospel to where the people are. Since IBDs target the relational networks of one or two students at a time, it is effective grassroots evangelism. Multiply this small target group by many students leading IBDs and you can have as strong an impact as your chapter is large! A good goal to begin with is to have one IBD for every small group that your chapter sponsors. Even the larger campuses (which are typically harder to reach) can use IBDs effectively by targeting people groups that their students are already involved with.

The Bible communicates the gospel effectively. "You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God." (1 Peter 1:23). God has spoken to us through his written word. We would be fools not to use it in presenting Jesus! The IBD uses this precious resource in a powerful way to reach the mind of unbelievers.

Nuts and Bolts - Leadership for an IBD strategy

The IBD strategy must begin with a sense among the staff and student leaders that this is what God has called them to utilize for their campus. Your first step is to seek the Lord together in prayer and determine as a leadership team whether this is of the Lord or just another good idea.

Next, it is critical to determine the leadership of the plan. Naturally, in the beginning stages, it will take a great deal of staff initiative - in partnership with student leaders- to carry the vision and implement the specifics of the plan. If the staff are not integrally involved in the initiation of the strategy, the results are likely to be mediocre.

At the U of I, evangelism specialist Mark Ashton works closely with the staff, execs and especially the student IBD coordinators to oversee the coordination of the effort to have IBDs on a large scale. In addition, each chapter designates one leader (an IBD coordinator) whose main leadership responsibility is to recruit, train, encourage and oversee IBD leaders. These are the front lines people who really stir the pot, cast the vision and enable insecure students to become leaders. They personally talk to every potential leader that they can think of to consider leading

an IBD and to affirm God's ability to use them in this situation. These IBD coordinators usually also lead an IBD themselves.

As far as the actual IBD leaders, we have two distinct types. The first type is students and staff who follow up contacts from NSO or outreach meetings. This leader needs to be an assertive initiator with strong people skills. We train our leaders to go after follow-up of these contacts with the same vigor of a small group leader following up people in her dorm the first week of school.

During our spring leadership selection process, we set aside one IBD leader for each segment of campus (about 7-8 total) who has the same qualifications as a Small Group Leader and a heart for lost people. Their 'small group' for the year is made up of non-Christians who sign up for IBDs during NSO.

These groups tend to be more difficult to lead than the second type, because the leader has to build relational bridges as well as lead a good study. The people in the study need to click with each other and perseverance is critical to hold together a group that does not have any other natural affinity.

The second type of group is far more common. These groups are put together according to common geographic location or interest. They may be from the same dorm floor, fraternity, band, sports team, lab, social club, work environment etc. The leader simply invites the different people from this group who already know each other to do a Bible discussion together. About half of these situations are group situations (with 3-10 attending weekly) and about half are one-on-ones. Since relational bridges are already built, it is easy in these groups to get directly to Jesus during the discussions.

Most of this second type of leaders are people who have no other leadership position in InterVarsity. Most have never led a Bible Study before and most are Freshmen/Sophomores. We have found that Frosh make excellent leaders because they tend to be more relationally connected with non-Christians than our upperclassmen and they tend to have more time to invest in leading an IBD.

Nuts and Bolts - Training IBD

Training is integrated into many of our current structures plus we have specialized training for IBD leaders. Leading IBDs is a part of Bible and Life curriculum in the 'Joy of Following Jesus' track as well as the 'Joy of Bible Discovery' track. In all of our on-campus evangelism training, IBDs is one of the sessions we emphasize. These venues are open a first exposure and a catalyst for students to consider IBD leading as an option for their personal witness.

Beyond this initial exposure, we have three key times for training students in IBD leadership. The first is on the first Saturday after classes begin in the fall. We work to mobilize students here to do effective follow-up of NSO contacts and to work hard to develop strong relationships in their affinity groups. These two factors will greatly determine the opportunities for our 25 IBDLs who are committed to leading some kind of a group at the beginning of the year.

We have training for leaders after our fall outreach thrust as well (usually early October). Many students discover at this time friends who have spiritual interest. Their appropriate intentional follow-up is to do an IBD. However, many of these students (some frosh, some returning students) do not have the training or resources needed for IBD leadership. For them, we do a training event just after the outreach thrust.

The biggest of our training is IBD mega-training day. It happens the first Saturday of the second semester. It is great timing because the best time to start IBDs is early February (second best is early October) and since school just started, nobody has conflicts of classes, retreats, or going home. We take about four hours and spend half of the time talking about God's plans and heart for the lost. We do a manuscript study (Isaiah 55 and Acts 8 were our last two), have testimonies from current IBD leaders and new Christians, teach about how to lead IBDs, do role plays and pray together. About 60-80 students come to this training and a third to a half end up leading IBDs.

If there is a student or two who want to begin a discussion and our official training does not fit their schedule, either Mark or the IBD coordinators will do personalized training for them at any time.

Ongoing meetings are available during the semester for encouragement, training and celebration. There are at least two gatherings per semester of current leaders to swap stories, pray together, and get training in some aspect of evangelism, leadership, or Bible Study. At the end of each semester, we have a celebration/party for our leaders where we eat, tell stories, interview new Christians and worship God.

Nuts and Bolts - Resources

Information about how to lead the IBDs can be found on InterVarsity's web page, or in the book *Introducing Jesus* by Peter Sczerro. The web resource is "How to Lead an Investigative Bible Discussion" by Mark Ashton and is also available via mail (see address info at the end of this paper)

Most of the Investigative Bible Discussion Leaders are working with studies from the packet "Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?" by Mark Ashton. It is available from Mark, or can be downloaded from the InterVarsity web site for free. More experienced leaders write their own studies as they get interested in particular Jesus stories or want to address particular needs of their group.

Other resources that have been used are *Introducing Jesus* by Peter Sczerro (IVP), *Jesus the Reason* by Jim Sire (IVP) *Basic Christianity Life Guide* by John Stott (IVP) and *Believe and Have Life* by Dave Suryk (DILL Press).

Nuts and Bolts - Chapter Structures

In order to be successful, the IBD strategy must be well integrated into other aspects of chapter life. During New Student Outreach, we have two follow-up options. One is to be in a normal Small Group and the other is to be in an IBD. Both are carefully explained at every event that we sponsor. It is clearly communicated to the seeker that he/she is welcome and has a place with InterVarsity.

All year round, we will encourage a partnership between small groups and IBDs. Every SGL will be encouraged to have their group begin at least one IBD during the year. Their small group will have a time every week to discuss and pray about this outreach extension of their small group. In addition, some may make cookies, have combined social events or hold prayer vigils for the IBD that they are sponsoring.

In October, Cliffe Knechtle comes to our campus. This year, our Cliffe outreach will be a three-pronged effort. First, we will have every small group do surveys to assess interest and invite people to the Cliffe events. Next, we will bring those people to the public proclamation events where Cliffe is speaking. Finally, we will begin IBDs the following week with the people whose curiosity was piqued during the outreach week. We hope to start 20 or more IBDs the following week.

In November, our area will hold it's multi-track weekend training event. One of the tracks is for non-Christians. We will encourage all of our IBD leaders to invite and even pay for their friends to come to this event as a step to increase their knowledge of Jesus, get questions answered and possibly make a decision to follow Jesus.

During leadership selection January-March, the small group leader selection team will also select the IBD leaders who will follow-up the NSO contacts during the following fall.

Besides all of this, we continually utilize chapter structures such as Large Groups, e-mail lists and prayer meetings to communicate vision, instill passion and recruit prayer for the IBD leaders and members. We encourage our IBD leaders to invite their friends to chapter socials, retreats and chapter training weeks in order to introduce them to Christian community, worship and encounters with God.

Finally, IBDs are used as the main follow-up structure for any outreach large groups, dorm talks, dinner discussions, question tables or other outreach events that we may have.

The Future - Making Improvements

Like any evangelistic strategy, IBDs have some weaknesses. As we discover them, we are trying to improve upon the things that are weak while capitalizing on the strengths.

The biggest difficulty that we find is that our retention rate of people coming back week after week is not nearly so strong as we would like. For the Christian leading the study, this can be very frustrating. To the leader, IBD is often a highlight of their week. For the typical member, though, it is one thing on the list of things they would like to do - but not a high priority. If it is a tough academic week, or another more exciting option comes up, the member may forget or skip the study, leaving the leader with less people attending than expressed genuine interest.

In order to address this issue, we are trying numerous strategies. The first is to prepare the IBD leaders that this is a normal reality - not to be taken personally. Knowing that this is normal keeps the IBD leader from discouragement and frustration. The second is to try to make the

discussions so compelling that they cannot resist coming back. A third idea is to choose a first study that will help students want to be spiritual seekers and come back because of that desire. (We plan to write a study on the parable of the sower to accomplish this).

Another problem with IBDs is that they do not necessarily introduce students to the Christian community. Certainly, this is the biggest weakness of IBDs. A student could go through a semester of studies, but only get to know the Christian that is leading the study. Since a vibrant Christian community is one of our strongest apologetics, we would be remiss in developing a strategy which leaves it out.

Leaders who are well connected and have good social skills can informally overcome this barrier by introducing people to friends and inviting them to hang out in a mixed group of Christians and non-Christians. Also, when a small group adopts an IBD, there can be combined social or athletic events to help build some bridges. This year, we will focus on the small group-IBD partnership as the main way to introduce IBD members to Christian community. IBD leaders are also encouraged to bring their members to appropriate social events, Large Groups and retreat settings in order to introduce their friends to Christians a bit more.

The final difficulty with IBDs is that they can become a mere academic exercise. Analyzing the text, asking questions and discovering Jesus are all wonderful, but it can take more to help move the information from the head to the heart. We are beginning to utilize some high-touch events in conjunction with the IBDs to help make a difference here. In March, we encouraged our IBD leaders to invite their members to a dinner/discussion called 'Beyond Ink and Paper – Experiencing God.' We had dinner, performance music, a hilarious video clip, a short picturesque talk and table discussions with the IBD groupings. For the 40 who came, the response was outstanding - the tenor and content of the meeting helped move people to think more personally about the material. It also helped them evaluate where they were spiritually and move toward a decision.

Although an IBD strategy is not without downfalls, we have found these difficulties less cumbersome than the difficulties of other outreach strategies and are beginning to learn how to overcome them.

The Future - Beyond the U of I

IBDs are probably the most effective and underutilized tool that InterVarsity has for doing fruitful evangelism. Although utilizing IBDs has been around as long as InterVarsity, I am convinced that using them as the lynchpin of an evangelistic strategy will be the best plan for many InterVarsity chapters in the future. They can work on any kind of campus, with any size chapter and are a powerful way of bringing the gospel to a lost generation.

I think that we should especially consider using them at large state universities which do not have the kind of cohesive structure and intertwined relationships that typify small liberal arts schools. At the state school, IBDs allow you to get into niches of campus that may never come to you. They begin at a grassroots level. They are personal, genuine and loving in the way they treat lost students. They will

expand with the size of your chapter. They are comfortable for Christians and non-Christians. They value the person and their process of coming to faith. They work.

Appendix A - a Year Long Schedule

For those of you who learn better from a bulleted schedule rather than a paper, here is what a typical IBD strategy year may look like:

Spring

- Select Leaders for NSO IBDs, Select IBD Coordinator

August

- Put IBDs on all contact cards for NSO
- Hold IBD Leader Kick-off meeting

September

- Begin NSO IBDs
- Hold first IBDL meeting

October

- Help SGLs gain vision for IBDs coming from their small group.
- Work with Outreach Thrust to begin first major round of IBDs
- Recruit for weekend training event "Considering Christianity"

November

- Do "Considering Christianity" weekend
- Have IBDL meeting
- Hold High touch event to help people move toward decision

December

- Have IBDL celebration
- Recruit Frosh, new leaders for January Mega-Training

January

- Hold Mega-Training
- Work with SGLs to support IBDs

February

- Begin next major round of IBDs
- Have miscellaneous outreach events/tables to find interested members
- Select leaders for NSO IBDs, Select IBD Coordinator
- Have IBDL meeting

March

- Hold an event designed to help the IBD member move to a decision

April

- Have IBDL meeting
- Help IBDs gain some closure, decisions, and summer/fall plans

May

- IBDL celebration, Evaluate for next year's improvements.

For more info contact:

Mark Ashton
mashton@prairienet.org
217/367-5198
314 E. Daniel
Champaign, IL 61821