

GETTING TO KNOW OUR NEIGHBORS ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

Holding conversations with neighbors can provide church leaders with vital information about the community. A one-on-one interview takes the process a step further by structuring the conversation around a set of questions prepared in advance so that church leaders can focus on what matters most: tailoring ministry that is most appropriate for this neighborhood, these people, and this time.

Listening: An Essential First Step

Joy Skjegstad, who consults with churches on community ministry, finds that many churches prefer to skip the listening step and simply launch into a new project. “It is faster to plan programming without it, because listening takes time.”¹ Church leaders also tell her that they find it intimidating to meet people they do not know, especially when people in the community come from different ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, or religious backgrounds than church members. Finally, Skjegstad suspects that some church leaders do not want new information to contradict their long-held assumptions, arguing that “community listening can be a humbling process. People in the community may tell you things you don’t want to hear.”²

Faith-based community organizers consider one-on-one interviews to be an essential tool in getting to know the neighborhood. The Reverend Dennis Jacobsen, an Evangelical Lutheran pastor and community organizer, observes that organizing efforts can falter without relationship building. The one-on-one interview is a primary way to achieve this goal. “Organizing misses its calling,” Jacobsen writes, “when it becomes a swirl of frenetic activity, . . . running past and over human beings. One-on-ones slow things down, restore needed focus, and serve as a reminder of the human dimension of this work.”³

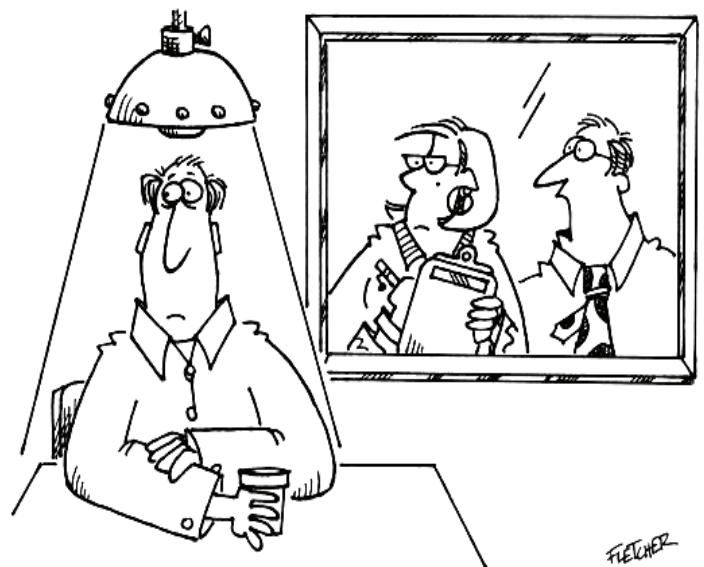
Interviewing Basics

Interviews come in three styles: structured, unstructured, and semi-structured. If you want to get to know

the person or community, try an *unstructured interview*. Start with a broad question about your interviewee’s experience and then let the conversation flow in whatever direction it will. However, if you want to assess a community’s needs or analyze a particular problem, a *structured interview* may serve the purpose better. In this case, ask questions about specific issues. At the extreme end of the structured format, this interview may resemble a verbal questionnaire with answer options limited to yes or no answers. The *semi-structured interview* strikes a compromise between the two styles, utilizing predetermined questions while allowing respondents to use whatever language they are most comfortable with or allowing them to wander from the topic as it suits them.⁴

A basic unstructured interview may be the easiest type of interview to perform. Social scientists Andrea Fontana and James Frey offer the following seven steps for preparing for and carrying out an interview.

1. *Access the setting.* How do you “get in to” wherever the interview will take place? This question must be asked because interviews typically do not take place on your own



“I STILL THINK WE SHOULD HAVE GONE WITH AN UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEW.”

turf but in the field. How you access the setting depends on the group you are studying. One researcher-author had to buy a motorcycle and hang out where Hell's Angels were known to gather in order to interview them for a book he was writing. While this may be an extreme case, it illustrates a point: in order to interview someone, you need to enter their setting, not invite them to yours.

2. *Understand the language and culture.* An interpreter may help you understand the person you interview, but that is no guarantee you will understand the culture. If you are non-Hispanic, it may feel puzzling to answer a volley of questions about whether you are married and other personal questions about familial relationships. Yet the family holds a key place in Hispanic culture. Ignoring this reality may result in “mis-translation” even if you have a great interpreter.

3. *Decide how to present yourself.* Whether you dress up or dress down may be subject to misunderstanding. Dressing up may create suspicion among some populations such as undocumented immigrants or blue-collar workers, who might misinterpret your intentions. On the other hand, if you are interviewing parishioners in a Sunday morning church setting at a Black church, dressing down might be seen as disrespectful to God. Best practice in many cases might be to try matching your dress to that of the person being interviewed.

4. *Locate an informant.* You may need someone who can act as a guide to the local culture and its distinctive idiom. In one low-income neighborhood in Syracuse, New York, a woman known as “the mayor” of the neighborhood regularly welcomes her neighbors for evening gatherings on her front porch. She would qualify as a good informant.

5. *Gain trust.* Gaining trust may serve as an important prelude to getting someone to talk about themselves. Trust may not be such an issue for someone known to be outspoken on public issues, but it may be more essential if the interview concerns sensitive matters.

6. *Establish rapport.* Developing a strong connection between you and the person you interview, can open the door to a deeper dive into important information. Establishing rapport might not be crucial in some cases. For example, if your goal is to survey as many people as possible on a given issue, establishing a strong connection might take too long. Neighborhood surveys do not typically require deep rapport with everyone you poll.

7. *Collect the data.* How will you record what you find out? The most thorough techniques (video or audio), may seem the best, yet they might be the most intrusive.

In some cases, note-taking may even have an off-putting effect, so you might try taking mental notes and writing it up in private soon afterward. Best practices for collecting data include (1) taking notes regularly and writing them down immediately; (2) writing everything down even if it seems unimportant; (3) trying to be inconspicuous in talking notes; and (4) analyzing your notes often.⁵

The Roving Listener Style

Broadway United Methodist Church in Indianapolis offers one example of how to conduct interviews in the neighborhood. The church hired a “roving listener” to wander through the neighborhood and spend time with people he encountered. This person focused not on neighbors’ needs but on their gifts, passions, and hopes for the community. The interviewer asked these questions:

- What three things do you do well enough that you could teach others how to do?
- What three things would you like to learn?
- Who, besides God and me, is going with you along the way?⁶

Nothing beats a direct one-on-one interview for learning about the community and building relationships. Sometimes we may be surprised by the willingness of our neighbors to express their faith in personal, direct terms outside the worship setting. One researcher, who conducted one-on-one interviews for a faith-based community organization, tells about a neighbor who wanted to pray for her interviewer as the conversation concluded. “Lord Jesus,” she said, “help us work together to change things here. Thank you for this new friend. Give us your Spirit and your power, and we will turn this city around.”⁷

1. Joy F. Skjeggstad, *Seven Models for Community Ministry* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2013), 12.

2. *Ibid.*, 13.

3. Dennis Jacobsen, *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 60.

4. Scott Thumma, “Methods for Studying Congregations,” in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, ed. Nancy Ammerman et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 206.

5. Andrea Fontana and James Frey, “The Interview,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman Denzin and Yvonne Lincoln, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 654–56.

6. Paul Nixon, *Fling Open the Doors: Giving the Church Away to the Community* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 22–23.

7. Richard Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 165.