

Leading a Guided Conversation

A guided conversation provides a way to conduct an informal assessment of the ministry of the church. Though not as scientifically reliable as a thoroughly validated survey or written assessment tool, the guided conversation can provide leaders with a way of getting feedback and identifying ministry priorities without the formality of a survey.

The disadvantages of a guided conversation include the following:

- Because comments made in a conversational setting are not anonymous (as they would be in a survey), participants may be less likely to say what they really think about certain subjects.
- Because guided conversations are not scientifically formulated or validated (as they would be in a quality assessment tool), the results are more subjective.
- While assessment tools can be completed on the participant's own time and in one brief sitting, guided conversations have to be scheduled to coordinate with multiple schedules and will generally take 3-4 times the amount of time.
- Personal feelings, emotions, and relationships are a part of all guided conversation groups and have unavoidable influence on responses made by those who are participating.

In order to lead a guided conversation, consider the following steps and guidelines:

1. Prepare a meeting place with comfortable chairs in an arrangement that allows for every person to see each other face to face. Create a relaxed and casual environment. Meeting could take place in someone's home if space is sufficient. Consider providing light refreshments and plan for the meeting to last 1.5 to 2 hours.
2. Recruit 2-4 separate groups of people to participate. Each group will be led in a separate conversation using the same basic series of questions. Members of the Revitalization Team may participate in the focus group as a contributor or as a listener only. If members of the Revitalization Team participate, they should only serve as a contributor in the group to which they belong (ex., Median Adults) and be a listener in the other group(s) that they may attend.
3. Each group should be 8-12 in number. The number of people involved should enable a large enough group for good conversation to take place, but small enough so that every person in attendance feels as though they have opportunity to speak.
4. Since multiple groups will be used, consider using some form of classification to form the groups. For example, the groups could be Younger Adults (20-40), Median Adults (40-60), Senior Adults (60+). Grouping adults in this way will enable the leader to compare how each of these demographics responds to questions differently.
5. Use the following ground rules for the conversation:
 - a. Everyone should feel the freedom to participate and speak freely in response to the questions.
 - b. All responses should be directed to the issue "on the table" at the moment.
 - c. Keep responses directed to the issues and away from focusing on individual persons.
 - d. Be mindful of giving everyone an opportunity to participate. Feel free to say what is on your mind while giving others the chance to respond as well.
 - e. Although some issues may stir deep emotions, maintain personal self-control at all times.

- f. Criticism is welcome but should be constructive (accompanied with ideas for improvement), directed to the issue and not to an individual, and offered with grace and humility.
 - g. Remind the group that while it is important for each person to share what they would like to share, each response should also be as concise and focused as possible in order to keep the conversation moving forward and so that as many topics can be given attention as possible.
6. Enlist someone to serve as a recorder for the conversation. This person should not plan to participate in the discussion but should instead make note of key points and items mentioned during the group's time. The same person may serve as the recorder for all of the group meetings. The facilitator/leader of the group discussion should not serve as the recorder.
7. The Facilitator/Leader should welcome everyone to the meeting, lead in prayer, and go over the ground rules. Make sure that everyone knows everyone in attendance. Begin the meeting by letting everyone go around the room and tell the group how long they have been a part of the church and what they love most about being a part of the church. This should help relax people and get the conversation going.
8. Monitor the time carefully and be prepared to transition the group through to the next topic of conversation.
9. Conclude the meeting by giving each person the opportunity to respond to a final question: Out of everything discussed, is there a theme, an area of ministry, or an identified need that seemed to be the most obvious to you? What is your biggest "take-away" from this conversation?
10. As soon as possible following the meeting, review the responses from the recorder and make note of any of your own personal observations.
 - a. Take note of any recurring themes during the discussions.
 - b. Identify areas of similarity and areas of differences between the three groups of people who participated.
 - c. Develop an initial reaction list of priorities that emerge from the discussion. What were the main themes? What did the groups value differently? What challenges were identified as the greatest areas of need? What were areas of agreement across the board?
 - d. Compile the notes into a more formal report and have copies available for review and discussion at future Revitalization Team meetings.

Suggested Question Threads

Discussing Spiritual Health

- In what spiritual disciplines do you believe members of our church regular engage?
 - How does our church do a good job in encourage spiritual disciplines (Bible reading, prayer, personal worship, family devotions, etc)?
 - How could we do a better job of encourage spiritual growth in our church?
 - What are the challenges with the current opportunities we offer for discipleship?
- What expectations do church members have when they attend a worship service in our church?
 - If someone attended our church for the first time, what would they notice as a high priority or high expectation in our church?
 - If someone attended our church for the first time, what might they view as something that receives little priority or expectation in our church?

- In what ways does our church demonstrate great dependence upon God?
 - If someone observed our church for a month, would they see a great dependence upon God or would they observe greater dependence on something else?
 - Based on outside observation, what might others say that the church depends upon?
 - What could we do as a church to demonstrate and practice greater dependence upon God?
- What role does prayer currently play in the way our church approaches ministry?
 - What could be done in order to make prayer a greater focus of our ministry?
- In any given week, what percentage of people who attended worship that Sunday invite someone to attend church the next week?
 - In your opinion, what are the reasons why this percentage is not higher?
 - What would be some ways that this percentage could be increased?
- In any given week, what percentage of people who attended worship that Sunday give a clear verbal witness of the gospel to someone during that week?
 - In your opinion, what are the reasons why this percentage is not higher?
 - What would be some ways that this percentage could be increased?
- What are some adjectives would you use to describe our worship services on Sunday?
 - How would you prefer to describe our worship services? (If different from your first response)?
 - What do you think the results would be if our worship services were more like your preferred description?
 - What steps would we need to take in order to experience worship services that fit this description?
 - What challenges would need to be met in order to experience worship in this way?
 - What are some steps/actions we could take to increase participation in our worship services?

Discussing Effective Leadership

- How would you describe the main purpose of our church?
 - What ministries or activities in our church do the best job relating to that purpose?
 - What ministries or activities in our church could use improvement in relating to that purpose?
- If you were speaking to someone interested in finding a church home, what would you be excited to talk about first? What about our church would you secretly hope that they didn't ask about?
- What is the goal for the state of our church in five years?
 - Can most people in our church identify a goal that we are moving toward? Why or why not?

- Can most people in our church communicate the strategy that we are using to move toward a goal? Why or why not?
- To an outside observer, what would the goals of our church appear to be? What observable indicators would give them that impression?
- How would you describe our church's attitude toward change?
 - What are some steps that help people in our church become more open to change?
 - What are some reasons why people in our church are resistant to change?

Discussing Relevant Strategies

- In what ways has the community around our church changed in the last 10 years?
 - In what ways has our church done a good job of adapting to the changes in our community?
 - In what ways could our church improve in adapting to the changes in our community?
- What is something that makes our church unique in our community?
- Do you believe that people can easily find a place of service within the ministry of our church?
 - Why don't more people serve?
 - What could we do as a church to make service more accessible and attractive?
- What is the primary purpose of Sunday School (Life Groups, Community Groups, Small Groups, etc.) in our church?
 - How well does our Sunday School fulfill that primary purpose? What could be done in order to help the Sunday School fulfill that primary purpose at a higher level?
 - What are some secondary purposes that should be given more attention in our Sunday School?
 - What changes would need to be made in order to help our Sunday School fulfill its purpose?
- If you were to approach a random person in our community who does not attend church and ask them what they think about our church, what response from the list below do you think they would be most likely to give and why:
 - I have never heard of that church
 - I have heard of it, but I don't know anything about it or have an opinion
 - A favorable response because . . .
 - An unfavorable response because . . .
- A family moves into the community from out of town. They call the church and ask about the best way for them to develop friendships with people in your church. What would you tell them?
 - What reasons would you give for answering in that way?
 - What if the family had teenagers?
 - What if the family had grade school children?
 - What are the challenges in your church to outsiders looking to find friends?
 - How can those challenges be addressed?

- What age groups (ex., 40-49 year olds) or family status groups (ex., Parents of Preschoolers) are most noticeably missing from our church?
 - Are these groups present in our community?
 - What possible explanations could you make for the absence of this group?
 - What ideas would you have for intentionally reaching out to this group and creating an environment where they would be more likely to be involved?

- Think through a typical calendar of weekly/monthly/annual activities, ministries, or programs in our church.
 - Which of these do you believe are still full of life and actively contributing to the ministry goals and vision of the church? Why?
 - Which of these do you believe still have potential but need significant adjustments in order to actively contribute to the ministry goals and vision of the church? Why?
 - What adjustments would you see as potential ways to revive these activities, ministries, or programs?
 - Which of these do you believe can no longer actively contribute to the ministry goals and vision of the church?
 - What steps should the church take in order to honor the past impact that these ministries have had on the church but move forward toward actions that will actively contribute to the goals and vision of the church?

Resources:

44 Questions for Congregational Self-Appraisal (Lyle Schaller)