THE PARISH PAPER
IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS
EDITORS: DANA HORRELL AND CYNTHIA WOOLEVER—WWW.THEPARISHPAPER.COM
August 2019—Volume 27, Number 8

Learn More about Your Congregation through Focus Groups

For church leaders seeking to better understand their congregation, it pays to listen. Everyone knows the value of one-on-one conversations, yet it might not always be the most efficient use of time for a busy leader. In these situations a focus group can help. Simple in design, it honors the experience of congregants in the stories they tell, the questions they ask, and the concerns they express.

What Is It?

A focus group typically consists of eight to ten participants who meet for ninety minutes to two hours of discussion led by a trained moderator. Typically, a narrow range of persons is invited to contribute, such as those who share a common demographic (such as age, race, or income) or similar interests or a similar relationship to the topic at hand. For instance, to learn more about a congregation's music programs, do not include both music leaders and musicians in the same focus group.[1]

The Moderator's Role

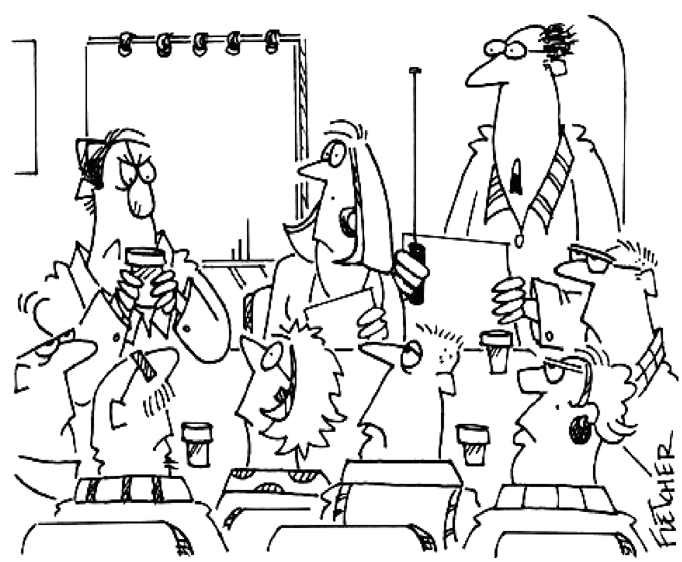
A good moderator is key to success. Should this person be an insider or outsider? Well-resourced churches might have no problem hiring a trained professional from outside to do the job. However, if cost is an issue, the pastor or another church leader could play this role as long as the moderator prepares well, knows the basics of group dynamics, and is committed to fairness. While an outside moderator can be expected to have no particular investment in the outcome of the discussion, a self-aware insider who is committed to neutrality could get the job done for a fraction of the cost of hiring a professional.[2]

Whether insider or outsider, a good moderator must be able to listen well, paying attention to what is said and paraphrasing or restating the participant's comments when necessary to reflect that he or she has been heard. It helps to have an excellent short-term auditory memory, remembering comments made early in the group and correlating them later with comments made by the same participants. Finally, the best moderators know how to establish a rapport with group members in a short time and think on their feet, using the information the group generates to determine the best line of questioning later.[3]

Typically the moderator prepares a discussion guide ahead of time. Questions are mapped out in advance yet kept open-ended so that the conversation can go in any number of directions. Move from the general to the specific in asking questions, and record answers on a flip chart or have someone take notes.

Getting Started

To organize a focus group, first define the problem or research question, and then write a statement of the group's purpose. For example, "This focus group will explore ways to shape our music ministry by understanding the experience of those who take part in it." Second, identify a sampling frame (who are the participants?) and identify a moderator. Next, invite your participants. It doesn't hurt to overbook your ideal number of participants by at least 10 percent.



FOR THOSE WHO MIGHT NOT HAVE HEARD MARVIN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE DISCUSSION, LET ME RESTATE... "WHY DON'T THESE DANGED FOCUS GROUPS EVER HAVE GOOD COFFEE?"

Once you have gathered the focus group, welcome the participants, briefly state the purpose of the group, and break the ice by having people introduce themselves and their experience with the issue. One idea would be to have each person tell a story related to the question under discussion. Next, let people know what questions will be asked and what you will do with the data. At this point, introduce a few ground rules for discussion. Lisa Hinz, extension professor at the University of Minnesota Extension, provides a sample list of ground rules for group discussion that can be utilized in focus groups.[4]

Next, begin asking your questions using a discussion guide. For example, in the case of a youth music program, plan to start out with simple questions such as: (1) How long have you been involved in this program? (2) What kind of music do you like? (3) How do you get to the program? (4) What, if any, challenges do you run into with participating every time? (5) What would you like to learn? The purpose is to get people talking about things that will give clues that can shape the ministry approach.

If unclear about how to start, try asking a fairly general question that anyone can respond to, and ask each person to share. As moderator, make sure everyone participates. This can be accomplished by having group members reply either in random or specific order. It is ideal if everyone responds to each question, but let the group know it is acceptable to pass. One trick to ensure that people are selected randomly is to use a pack of three-by-five cards with names on them, pull a name of two or three persons and ask them to respond.

Evaluating the Data

When it comes time to analyze the data, the amount of data collected can seem overwhelming. To make the job easier, look back to the original purpose of the meeting and the questions asked. There are four ways of analyzing the data. For best results, choose the method before conducting the group. The data can be analyzed based on:

1. Transcription: Write down everything that was said and analyze the transcript.
2. Recording: Make an audio or video recording of the meeting and create an abridged transcript for analysis.
3. Notes: Take notes on flip charts or ask some to serve as a recorder, using audio or video recordings only to double-check accuracy.
4. Memory: Present the results of the group to church leaders immediately after the session is over, relying primarily on personal recall.

The first step in analyzing involves looking for themes in the material, sometimes called "coding." A simple way to code data is to review everything said during the session to determine if it constitutes an answer to any question the moderator asked. This "cut and paste" exercise may unearth hidden themes in the material.

The next step is content analysis. There are seven general guidelines for analyzing the content: 1) consider the actual words used; 2) consider the context for the response; 3) consider the consistency of the responses over the course of the interview, whether answers stayed the same or shifted over time; 4) consider the frequency of comments, 5) their intensity, 6) or how vague or specific they were; and finally 7) find the big ideas or larger patterns that may have emerged. This analysis can form the basis for a written report. [5]

A Powerful Tool

Focus groups can be a powerful tool for understanding the congregation. Yet every technique has its limitations. Unlike surveys, which rely on a random sample of the population studied, a focus group cannot reveal exactly how many people in the community feel a certain way about the subject, though it can go a long way toward painting a picture of the population studied. To check and substantiate what was heard in a focus group, try holding multiple interviews with diverse groups in the congregation.[6] The power of the focus group lies in its ability to use the safety and protection of the group to bring private thoughts into the open. Listening to others can be a vital first step toward understanding.

1. Thomas L. Greenbaum, *The Handbook for Focus Group Research*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 2.
2. Ibid., 68–69.
3. Ibid., 77–79.
4. Lisa Hinz, "Setting Ground Rules for Productive Discussions," University of Minnesota Extension, https://extension.umn.edu/public-engagement-strategies/setting-ground-rules-productive-discussions.
5. Thomas Justice and David Jamieson, *The Facilitator's Fieldbook* (New York: American Management Association, 1999), 201–10.
6. Scott Thumma, "Methods for Congregational Study," in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, ed. Nancy Ammerman et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 208.