

# Get to Know Your Congregation

by Linda Cannell (rev. 2012)

One of the problems in congregational development is the separation between the leadership team and the people. Once a church reaches about 100-150 in membership, certain structural changes can distance people from the decision-making processes of the church. However, if one accepts the dual nature of the church<sup>1</sup>, the people **must** be consulted about the ministry of the church and about their own ministries in and through that church.<sup>1</sup>

A survey of the membership may secure some information; however, surveys tend to be overused (because they are easy to use) and the results of the surveys are seldom used (therefore, people tend not to take them seriously). Public meetings, or “town-halls” are limited in the extent and quality of feedback elicited. The format tends to discourage individual responses—except from those who are publicly vocal. The opinions of the vocal minority tend to be seen as representative.

If we believe that the people are the church, that the church is, in some way, a community of faith, then we must find ways to hear from and dialogue with the majority, if not, all, of those involved with the church. A visitation-listening strategy is one way to get close to the people of God.

## Overview

In the early stages of the church it is possible for one person, or a small number of people, to visit the entire congregation on a regular basis for the purposes suggested in this document. As the church grows, other people will have to share the responsibility. The following procedure is workable:

1. Decide on the age groups you will visit. It is not out of the question to visit school age children and youth. They are, after all, part of the church today and not just members in waiting. However, there may be reasons why you will choose to visit adults.
2. Divide the congregation into visitation blocks, roughly 6-10 persons per block (depending on the size of your church and the available visitors). Generally, it is preferable to visit with people one at a time. However, in some instances you may have to visit couples together. Be prepared for the probability that one or the other will not be as open or as conversational when the spouse is present.
3. Locate your visitors (one visitor per block). These people should be approachable, easy in conversation and non-threatening. They should also have enough experience

The church is both an institution with organizational patterns and legal obligations and a more mysterious, biblically driven entity that this article will describe as the “people of God”. The Scripture has little to say about the institutional aspects of the church; but a great deal to say about the character God expects of the people of God.

Recommended reading: Mary Clark Moschella. 2008. *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press.

in the church to be aware of the background for questions and comments. The age of the person is not as important as his/her ability to listen, to be sensitive to body language, and to ask probing, appropriate questions. In some cases, you might find a husband and wife team who visit well together. Don't assume that every person on your board should be a visitor just because he/she is a leader in the church. Not all board members are good listeners. Some can be threatening, or perceived as too close to the status quo of the church. People perceived as “spiritual” or “pious” also may not be your best visitors. They can be intimidating; or, they may tend to label negative feedback as “unspiritual.” In some instances, the pastor may not be the best person to visit especially if there is a high degree of tension in the church that revolves around the pastor; or, if the pastor is a dominant or dominating person.

4. Organize an orientation session for the visitors. Use the section below, “For Those Who Visit”, as a handout and practice the suggested procedures. Ask them to complete their visits in a 3-4 week period or sooner. Be prepared for the signs of nervousness and hesitation as you ask them to visit other people for the purposes suggested in this document. Though the first time is threatening (because they don't know how people are going to respond), it is usually a positive experience; and because you should make these sorts of visits at least once a year, you will find your pool of willing visitors growing.
5. The purpose of these visits is not to gather files on people. In these visits, you are looking for areas of concern, gifts or talents that have been unrecognized, trends, and/or ministry possibilities. The visitors are to listen, ask questions, and synthesize information from several sources into one summary document for the church leaders to review. You, or a committee, will collect the summaries and develop a final synthesis of the information (see below “Preparing the Report”).

## Advantages For The Church

Certain trends and concerns emerge from these conversations. Usually, there are 4-5 major areas of concern or ideas for ministry, that surface. Use these ideas as springboards for planning and/or problem solving. There is usually an increase in positive feeling in the church. One of the major complaints of people is that they feel they are not being heard. They feel isolated from the sources of decision-making. Phrases such as “I don't know what they are doing;” “No one ever listens to my concerns/ideas” are common once a church reaches 150-200 in attendance—and the complaints persist as the church grows. As you talk with large numbers of people, large numbers of people begin to feel part of the ongoing development of the church, and these large numbers, now feeling positive, add to the sense of well-being of your congregation.

Resources are unearthed through these visits. You will discover talents and areas of interest that you didn't know existed—even among people you may have known for years. People who are not interested in becoming part of the traditional program structure of the church are free to express their own desires for ministry in this type of visit. Part of your planning, then, will be to find ways to mobilize the gifts and interests you unearth. You may discover needs—to be dealt with later in appropriate ways. You may find that people are not really growing in their knowledge and understanding of the Scripture and faith. You may find that there are some personal difficulties that need to be addressed. You may learn how people feel about the preaching and worship services. You may discover how the members regard the teaching ministries of the church. You may find that there is a great hunger for more significant relationships than exists in your church. You will find the process itself a stimulus for more significant communication among the leadership. A greater sense of actually working in partnership with the body of the church should be one result of these visits. This partnership should create a deeper sense of accountability and honesty; and it should lead to a greater degree of freedom from non-issues or peripheral issues.

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Experience has shown that the vast majority of people in the church genuinely want to serve the Lord. They are often frustrated by the limitations and unresolved real or perceived difficulties in traditional program structures. Some, especially younger adults, are not drawn to the institutionalized church. But, the majority of people will express themselves constructively and positively when approached in ways described in this article. If you approach people positively and with a genuine willingness to hear their ideas and concerns most, if not all, will respond thoughtfully.

## Preparing The Report

Likely, you will have used one of three approaches in gathering the data and impressions that will be part of the report:

1. You will have visited a selected number of people in the congregation

order to test the pattern of trends, concerns, ideas, and so on. Generally, visits with a representative sample of the congregation (about 25-30%) will give you a reasonably good impression of the thoughts and feelings of the whole. However, do not assume that you know your church on the basis of a sample of visits. To personally visit even 25% is better than the usual ways we attempt to secure feedback; but keep building your number of face-to-face contacts.

2. You will have visited the majority, if not all, of the people in your church yourself – if it is a small church.
3. You will have elicited information using the “visitation block” approach described above.

The visits should have produced a number of insights, impressions, and concrete ideas, which will have been summarized in writing. You can (1) ask someone who is skilled in assessing and synthesizing data fairly and objectively to prepare a final report that categorizes and organizes the information from the summaries under headings suggested by the information itself (while guarding the confidentiality of the respondents); or, (2) prepare the final report yourself.

As you prepare the report, include the subjective impressions as well as the objective. In certain situations, feelings can be facts. Look for patterns and recurring themes. If it helps, color code the patterns and themes so that you can find them easily as you prepare the final report. You will likely produce a report of about 8-12 pages in length.

Then, you may choose to review the report with the leadership team (or the leadership team supplemented by members of the visitation team) in order to identify key issues and/or questions. (See below for guidelines to follow in debriefing the report.) With open minds and openness to the Spirit of God, draw out some initial impressions. You might see some small oversights or details that have loomed large in the mind of the people because of neglect. Deal with these quickly since often it is the seemingly small concerns that are the source of significant discontent.

Whether or not you choose to process the report first with a smaller group, it is wise to debrief the report in various contexts as soon as possible after the visits; or your work will fall into the same category as a useless survey! For example:

1. Use the small group networks of your church to test ideas or impressions from the report. Invite these small groups to be part of the planning and brainstorming you will need to do in order to implement ideas.
2. Meet key people in the church informally and talk about various impressions from the report.
3. Visit a variety of people from the congregation informally to talk about impressions and ideas from the report.
4. Visit senior members of the congregation to assess the reaction of those who are part of the history of the church.  
Create intergenerational groupings to involve the youth and older children in the process.
5. Summarize the main findings from the report in 2-3 pages. Post them, include them in the bulletin, and/or mail them out to the congregation. Indicate some of the steps you are taking to act on the responses of the people.

6. Meet with the leaders of the various programs in the church, and as many of the other participants who wish to be involved, in order to debrief concerns or ideas pertinent to that program.
7. Use your public meetings (e.g., services and/or business meetings) to feature the work that has been done because of the visits. For example, highlight a ministry that began because of suggestions from the people. In other words, large group meetings are not generally the places for problem solving and planning, and it would be boring to simply read the report to the gathered public.
8. Tackle the negative issues (or people) that surfaced through the process. Most churches have at least one “resident Pharisee.” You will need great discernment both to recognize and deal with such people. Ask for guidance from those you consider wise.<sup>1</sup>

Through this process, you have encountered the people of the congregation face-to-face and included them in the processes of evaluation and change. It takes more time to work with a congregation in this way. However, the long-term benefits make the visitation process worth the effort.

### **As You Debrief the Report**

1. It would be wise to have someone other than yourself proof read the report. If the size of your church necessitated the use of a visitation team, ask them if the points, or headings, are consistent with the perceived trends, issues, concerns, and so on, raised in their interviews. Ask them to look for overlap between any of the points in the report (e.g., one or more points might be better organized under another major category).
2. As you debrief the final report with various groups, seek to determine the relationship between symptoms and underlying real problems. In other words, can you discern an as yet undefined problem lurking behind several of the observations that have emerged from the interviews?
3. Determine how the report will sound to the relevant church groups. Are the observations and insights clear and concise? Is the order of the points raised logical? For example, are provocative issues placed first when it might be better for them to be raised after some less threatening observations have been made? Which issues are unnecessarily provocative?
4. Are conclusions and recommendations given in the report? In other words, will the relevant group have some positive steps to consider? Does the report leave room for others to raise questions, or provide additional comment?

**It is wise to debrief the report in various contexts as soon as possible after the visits, or your work will fall in the same category as another survey gathering dust somewhere!**

### **Training the Visitation Team**

*Reproduce the following as a handout for a training session you will conduct for those who will be visitors.*

## **For Those Who Visit**

You have been asked to visit a group of people involved in the life and ministry of this congregation. We wish to receive feedback from as many as possible about the ministry of the church, and about their ministry and growth in and through this church. Each visit will take approximately one hour. Please complete your visits in the next 3-4 weeks.

### **As You Plan For Your Visits**

1. Make appointments with the people on your list. Visit your people one at a time. Only when this is impossible, should you visit more than one at a time (for example, if it is necessary to visit a couple). When you make the appointment, say that you wish to visit in order to chat with them about their perceptions of the life and ministry of the church. You want to hear their ideas and concerns. Tell them that the majority of members and adherents are being visited for this purpose. Meet your people in a comfortable, relaxed environment. You may meet them in their home, in a comfortable room in the church, or anywhere that will facilitate ease and openness in conversation. Avoid meeting places where you will be interrupted or distracted. If you are meeting a person with young children, anticipate that you will need to have someone look after the children for the duration of the visit, or provide toys and activities for the children.
2. Be an attentive listener. Ask open-ended questions that encourage people to make thoughtful responses without feeling that you are looking for some right answer. Familiarize yourself with the suggested questions (see below). Before each interview, select or prepare about five (5) key questions that will guide your conversation. Know what you are looking for. However, be alert and flexible enough to allow the visit to move in directions you may not have planned. Other questions will emerge spontaneously through the visit. Write these questions down for use in other visits if you feel they have been helpful in stimulating the conversation.
3. If a response is unclear or if you feel there is more detail that is needed, ask probing questions without being rude. Avoid rushing the interview. Keep your own body language relaxed, unhurried, and open.
4. Decide how you will keep a record of the ideas, concerns, information you receive. If you have a digital recorder, record information and impressions after the visit. If you choose to use a recorder, ask permission to record the conversation before the interview begins. Affirm that all responses are confidential and no names will be mentioned in the final report that results from all the visits. It is usually better not to take notes during the visit unless you are with someone who would not be bothered or with someone who is giving you so many ideas that you have to ask his/her permission to write them down. It is less threatening and distracting if you can keep mental notes of the major impressions and insights you receive, and record them immediately after the interview. If you must, jot down key words and phrases as reminders; or ask the person if it is OK for you to write down something he or she has just said.



## As You Visit

1. Create or choose a comfortable, relaxed, hospitable environment. Listen carefully, ask open-ended questions; listen for patterns in thought, attitude, and experience. Be sensitive to non-verbal cues. Ask questions that give the impression that several responses are possible but that his/her viewpoint is desired. Don't be afraid to use probing questions (see below). However, be sensitive in the timing and phrasing of these questions. Let your body language communicate respect, warmth, and acceptance. Be flexible. Give yourself the freedom to set your questions aside in order to pursue an opening suggested by the responses of the person you're meeting. This is not a verbal questionnaire! The five questions are simply to get you started and to allow you to jump into another topic when ready. You are listening carefully to what your respondent is saying and where necessary asking questions to help him or her elaborate.

2. You will probably spend the first 20-25 minutes in casual conversation to allow yourselves to relax and feel comfortable with each other. It is probable that the person you are visiting will be hesitant or even suspicious. Most people are visited only when the church needs money or volunteer workers. The person has to be assured that it is OK to talk with you, that you are really there for the reasons you gave, that you are an OK person. As you begin with more specific questions, assure the person that their confidentiality will be respected. The Board or leadership team of the church will receive general impressions, concerns, ideas and trends from the collected records of the visits with no names attached, unless desired by the interviewee.

3. As you become more specific, use opening questions that will invite the person to talk about the church in general. Use one or two of the following to move the conversation into her or his perceptions of the church and its ministry. Then listen, and ask questions that are suggested by his or her responses.

"How long have you been coming to . . .?"

"Why did you come to this church?"

"What experiences have you had here that have been positive for you?"

"What do you wish had been different in your time here?"

"Are you getting to know people here? How is that happening?"

"What are your general impressions of the church?"

"To what extent have you been involved in the decision-making processes here? Is it important to you that you have a say in this church's business and ministry?"

"To what extent is the congregation involved in planning and decision making? To what extent do you feel they should be involved?"

"How would you describe the communication channels in this church?"

"What ideas do you have on how effective idea exchange can be developed between the staff, elders, pastor, congregation?" (Use whatever terms are appropriate for your church.)

"If I asked you to draw a picture of the organization of this church, what would your picture look like?"

4. Sometimes/often your questions will produce responses that will lead you to ask related questions. Do not be so tied to a set of questions that you can't be flexible. Also, listen 'between the lines' and be alert to the person's tone of voice and body language. If you sense that there is something behind a response that has to be coaxed out, ask gentle probing questions. You might use phrases such as the following:

"So, you seem to be saying that . . ."

"Could you expand on that a bit more?"

"I'm sure that there are many things we could do to improve in this area. What ideas do you have?"

5. Use questions that will unlock the feelings and perceptions of the persons you visit. Select one or two of the following as a way to get you into this area; then depending on what you hear, probe further into the issues they raise as they respond to your questions.

"How would you describe the strengths of this church?"

"What is your understanding of worship (or prayer, or Bible study, or....) for this church?"

"What have been your experiences in meeting people in this church?"

"In what ways do you feel that you are growing in your knowledge and understanding of the Scripture through the teaching ministries the church? Or not. Do you want to? In what ways are you being challenged to grow in these areas?"

"If you had the freedom to express anything to the leadership team of this church, what would you say?"

6. Ask questions that will lead the person to talk about his or her gifts, interests, experiences in ministry and desire for ministry.

"What responsibilities have you had in other churches? What volunteer work have you done?"

"To what extent have you had opportunity to minister in and through this church?"

"What experiences have you had in ministry through this church?"

"What experiences have you had in other situations?"

"What were some of your likes or dislikes in those situations?"

"What do you enjoy doing?"

"What do you find difficult?"

"What types of people do you enjoy working with?"

"What types of people do you find it difficult to work with?"

"If I asked people you worked with to describe you, what do you think they would say?"

"What aspects of ministry interest you the most? Work with people? Tasks?"

"What do you feel your strengths/abilities/interests are?"

"If you could do anything for the Lord, what would it be?"

"What would help you to develop in your ministry?"

"Identify strengths and weaknesses in your ministry area—materials, relationships, communication effectiveness, and so on."

"What immediate changes would you recommend in order to increase the effectiveness of the ministry in which you're involved?"



7. Ask questions that probe their perceptions about the nature of ministry. Select one or more from the following to stimulate conversation in this area.
  - "What do you know about this organization? What do you wish you knew?"
  - "How would you describe the general mood or climate of this (church)?"
  - "How do the young people/children feel about this church?"
  - "What ministry ideas or dreams would you like to share with the church?"
  - "What needs do you feel the church should be addressing?"
  - "You have been working in a particular program in the church. What improvements, if any, would you suggest? What seems to be going well in the program?"
  - "How are people invited for ministry involvement here?"
  - "How have you been approached in the past? How did you feel about that?"
  - "What priorities do you feel are reflected in the church's budget?"
  - "What specific areas of development would you like to work on over the next few months? What would you enjoy learning how to do—or do better?"
  - "To what extent do you feel you know what is happening in the church? Do you have suggestions to further improve the communication within the church?"
  - "Do you know of people in the church who might be willing to act as resource or support people for others in ministry? How would you suggest we contact them?"
  - "What is your perception of the resource materials you use in your program area?"
  - "What limitations, if any, have you discovered about the facility or procedures as you've worked in your program area?"
  - "What changes have you noticed over the years that you have been part of this church? How would you describe those changes?"
8. If you are visiting a leader in the church:
  - "What have you found to be the most effective ways to stimulate and encourage the people in ministry?"
  - "On what basis are people chosen and approached for ministry opportunities? How are people equipped for their ministry?"
  - "Where do leaders presume that ministry takes place?"
  - "What are the constant realities you find in working with volunteers?"
  - "What reasons do people give when they say they want to leave a program?"
  - "To what extent do the people share in the decision-making processes in this church? To what extent is it important to involve members of the congregation in decision-making?"
  - "How does the leadership evaluate the various ministries of the church? How does the leadership get feedback about the functioning of the programs?"
  - "What priorities do you feel are reflected in the church's budget?"

You might find that some of your visits will lead you into discussions of major problems or concerns. Don't avoid these discussions unless they become destructive. Most people do not want to destroy the church or its people. Some may feel, for example, that the church isn't friendly. Ask them why they feel that way and ask for suggestions. Some might express concerns about the leadership of the church. Again, don't avoid the comments. Ask them why they feel that way, invite suggestions, and look for a way to allow the issues to be raised. Those who express significant concerns will usually do so constructively. If you feel

uncomfortable you may invite the person to address his or her concerns to that person in the church who is in the position to deal with them. You might find yourself in a situation that requires more time and counsel than you can give. Make an appointment to return to the issue; or put the person in touch with someone with more skill than you possess. It is probable that your discussion will include spiritual concerns. Encourage conversation that allows both of you to reflect on your spiritual growth. You will have enough sensitivity to field the difficult things. You would not have been asked to do this task otherwise.

**This could be one of the most important things we do as a church this year. Thank you for your part in making our desire to hear and involve the people of the church a reality.**