

ONE-TO-ONE “RELATIONAL MEETINGS” and SIX PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

The field of community organizing offers a great tool for building or deepening relationships within our congregations as well as in the broader community. ***The one-to-one is a natural but uncommon conversation with someone you want to know, or know better.*** It's *natural* because it flows from your curiosity and your conversation partner's responses, rather than using a set of pre-determined questions. It's *uncommon* because it requires intense listening and courageous inquiry as you focus primarily on going deep into your conversation partner's story and resist turning it too much toward yourself. You'll find that you and the person you're visiting have things in common; you should acknowledge that with brief accounts of your own experience, building trust and connection. But always return your focus to your partner with a question that can lead them deeper into their story.

Remember that your objectives for having this conversation are simple and transparent. These objectives are listed in descending order of importance. In other words, #1 matters above all:

1. You want to establish or deepen a relationship with this person.
2. You want to learn some significant things about them, what makes them “tick”, what they value, who they really are, and what has brought them to this point in life.
3. You might find that you and your conversation partner have commonly held interests, goals or values that can lead you into new opportunities for collaboration.
4. Through your attentiveness and inquiry this person might learn some things about him or herself that they didn't realize were true, leading to new clarity and self-appreciation.

Your conversation should last 30 – 45 minutes. If your partner wants to learn more about you, he or she can schedule another time for that. If you both decide in advance that you want to share equally, allow for an hour and a half, with one taking the lead for the first half and reversing the roles for the second half. This requires discipline about time and intent. Focusing on one person at a time allows each to feel deeply heard. It's also what makes this kind of conversation uncommon and remarkable.

As noted earlier, you shouldn't go into the conversation with a bunch of pre-determined questions. However, it is wise to have one or two ice-breaker questions in mind. You might start with something like: “What drew you to the position you're in?” Or, “what constitutes ‘family’ for you these days?” From there, follow your curiosity, as well as the their response and direction, to get you deeper into their story, their values, vision, life and motivations. This move to go deeper takes courage, a willingness to really listen and to ask what will feel like some risky questions, as well as to reveal some things about yourself. If you don't take risks and go deep early on, you'll get into a pattern of asking surface-type questions, and your partner will be reluctant to share with you on a deeper level.

One way to determine what follow up questions to ask is to listen for the “breadcrumbs” or “pearls” people naturally drop that can lead you to a real treasure about who they are. These clues often come in the form of what seem like throw-away comments dropped when answering a question; comments like, “let's see, it was shortly after my divorce,” or “my mother had just died and I was living in Tucson...” Rather than gloss over the reference, dare to ask something about the thing they just mentioned in passing. It indicates to them that you're really listening, that you have courage, and that you truly care about the experiences, thoughts or feelings that mark significant moments in their life.

Also, be attentive to your gut-level resistance to probing deeper. Rather than hold back, take the risk of asking courageous questions. Instead of being an invasion of privacy, which is what you fear, courageous questioning actually builds trust and gives the person permission to share something deeply significant. To avoid turning this into therapy, offer no advice or analysis. Ask what they make

of this aspect of their story, or share something about yourself that relates to their experience.

Sometimes, a ways into the one-to-one, you might need to introduce a new line of questioning, if the conversation gets dry or when you want to move in a different direction. Just don't get bogged down with the idea that you have to cover a lot of territory. Going deep into a few areas of their life, by following a natural course of conversation, is the real key. The following types of questions will encourage your conversation partner to go deeper into their story. (It also helps to insert follow-up questions like "why is that?" or, "can you give me an example?" or, "what was that like for you?")

Introduce one or two of these topics as needed. *Never* try to cover all this ground in one conversation!

- What brings you the most joy in your work?
- What are the greatest hurdles or challenges?
- What kind of impact do you want to have?
- How's it going — that work of making an impact?
- What is the biggest challenge you have faced in your life?
- How did you handle that challenge?
- How is that challenge still affecting you?
- What role has faith [or community, family, friends, or mentors] played in your life and work?
- What accomplishment or project are you most proud of?
- What assets did you bring to that enterprise?
- What did you learn (especially about yourself) in the process?
- What has created real disappointment for you in terms of wanting to make something happen?
- What were your (especially internal) barriers to success?

Your intent is to get them talking about more than facts, figures, names and events; to explore:

- What their ambitions and dreams are;
- What makes them angry, sad, or joyful;
- Why they are attracted to certain people, organizations, or communities;
- What has grabbed them most along their familial, educational, professional or faith journey;
- Why they spend their professional and personal time the way they do;
- What values and relationships they are willing to take risks and make sacrifices around;

After the conversation, you should be able to determine some basic things about the person you visited. To help you remember, jot some notes in order to retain the essence of the conversation – but only afterwards. (Taking notes during alters the nature of the encounter.) You won't know the answers to all of these, but you'll know some things in a deep way about a few of them:

- What does this person care most about and why?
- What motivates them?
- What do they get excited talking about?
- How do they spend their time and why?
- What assets does this person have and where do they get to exercise them?
- What relationships does this person have and value and why?
- What specific concerns or ideas does this person have?
- Why is this person a member of this organization or community?
- What would make this person feel very honored if they were invited into it?

Six Practical Applications and Adaptations of the One-to-one Relational Meeting

1. Congregational Listening Seasons

In order to contribute to a greater spirit of community, and to help discern the future direction of a congregation's mission and ministry, a season of listening can be initiated. Sometimes referred to as an *Inreach*, the Listening Season is a focused and disciplined five- to six-week effort. A team of trained visitors conducts multiple One-to-one visits with members and regular participants in the life of their congregation. The concerns, ideas and themes that emerge from those visits are shared widely, through publications and through public gatherings. One-to-one visitors, those visited, staff and elected leaders collaborate to determine what collective next steps ought to be taken as a result.

A Listening Season can have a number of positive impacts, such as:

- Congregations becoming intentionally more relational. As people get to know one another, those who may have been feeling isolated or left out are more likely to join in activities with their new friends, meet additional people, and become more involved in the life of the faith community.
- Congregations finding and developing new leaders. As people take greater interest, the size of the leadership circle within the congregation increases. Through deeper relationships, people challenge each other toward greater potential and growth. The work is now done by many versus a few.
- Congregations becoming more visionary. A clearer and fuller understanding emerges as to where the congregation is now and where it can go in the future. By listening to and understanding the concerns of participants, then working to address those concerns in communal effort, people are inspired to invest in a hopeful future.
- Congregations getting involved ecumenically and in their community of context. By listening to people's whole lives (not just their "church selves"), congregations perceive their potential role for working effectively in the world and alongside others of different faiths, cultures and backgrounds. A hunger grows to really get to know neighbors and influence the shape of the larger community.

2. Neighborhood Outreach

The main concept from the One-to-one to take into a Neighborhood Outreach is the relational approach. Too often our forays into neighborhoods are based simply on the concept of invitation: we're doing this; you should come. Or, we assume that we have the only real good news to share: we know this Jesus person; let us introduce him to you. The relational One-to-one approach, applied to a Neighborhood Outreach, leads with the premise that our neighbors have stories, assets and concerns that are of interest and value to us. And, this approach acknowledges God already at work among our neighbors and that the risen Christ goes ahead of us, often appearing to us in the form of our neighbor!

It's not realistic, though, to try and conduct 30-45 minute One-to-ones while going door-to-door in your neighborhood. Plus, it's wise to go two-by-two on these visits, and one of you should be taking notes; these facts also change the dynamics. So devise a small set of get-to-know-you questions that encourage briefer encounters that still let your neighbors know you're interested in their whole selves and the things you share in common as co-members of the community in which your church functions.

Your Outreach Team should decide exactly how to introduce yourselves at the doors of your neighbors, but here's an example that honors the concepts outlined above:

"We're from Hope Church and we're out this weekend getting to know our neighbors. We're hoping to learn what feelings, thoughts and concerns you have about the neighborhood we're all a part of. Can we visit with you for a few minutes?"

Likewise, you should decide just what set of questions (and how many) you want to include when you go door-to-door, but here are a few examples:

How long have you lived in the neighborhood?

What do you like about living here?

What concerns do you have about living here?

Is there a story you're willing to share about how that issue has affected you?

What ideas do you have about addressing that/those concern(s)?

What role do you think churches can and/or do play in the life of the neighborhood?

Do you attend a place of worship? [If so...] What draws you to that place?

We're making a point to pray for our neighbors. Do you have prayer concerns we can lift up?

Just like in a fuller One-to-one, if the neighbor seems interested in sharing with you on a deeper level, invest a bit more time. (Remember, though, that you've got lots of visits to make while you're out.) If they seem to love the idea of your praying for them, consider praying together as you conclude your visit. Otherwise, make it clear that their prayer concerns will be included in an upcoming worship service.

You can build in the opportunity for future engagement, depending on the level of interest the neighbor shows for such possibilities. For example, you can conclude your brief encounter with a question like: "If we at Hope Church decide to host a community conversation about, or take action on [the issue you mentioned], would you be interested in participating?" If they say yes, get their contact information and promise to follow up with them. If they say no, thank them for their time and move on.

Finally, at the end of your visit, once you've established that your visit is relational in nature, there's no harm in leaving a brochure about your church or a flyer about an upcoming event which is genuinely tailored for visitors. Just don't make *that* the focus of your conversation, but rather make it clear that *they* are the focus of your visit.

Especially combined with the results from a congregational Inreach, a Neighborhood Outreach can provide you with rich insights into your context and more ideas and potential partners for addressing the issues that matter most to you and your neighbors.

3. House Meetings

House Meetings *are not* a substitute for doing One-to-ones in your congregation, nor for going out door-to-door in your neighborhood in a relational manner. House Meetings *can* supplement those activities or be a follow up to them. They can attract people who are reluctant about the perceived intensity of a One-to-one, or catch neighbors' interest who weren't at home when you came visiting.

House meetings can be conducted in a number of ways, and cover a variety of topics. But they share the relational nature and the community-building priority of the One-to-one. And they give the opportunity for many leaders to play a role or to emerge in the process.

When targeting congregational members or regular participants, personal invitations work best, extended by the host of the House Meeting to a set of people with whom they already have some natural connection. Perhaps they invite everyone from church who lives in their immediate neighborhood or zip code. Or maybe they're young parents who invite other young parents to their home. You get the idea. Besides doing the inviting, hosts should get actual commitments from people, in order to convey a sense of importance about the event, and so they know how many to expect.

When targeting neighbors or other community-of-context members (like merchants or teachers or public servants), a pastor or congregational president might write a letter of invitation and intent that House Meeting hosts hand-deliver with a verbal encouragement to attend (or a personal note if you end up leaving the letter when your neighbor is out.)

House Meetings have similar purposes to One-to-ones and a Neighborhood Outreach, depending on whom you invite. So create activities that build relationships and provide opportunities for people to express their hopes and concerns, ideas and assets. It's even a good idea to build one or two One-to-one encounters into the House Meeting agenda; Guided One-to-ones* give people a few pre-planned relational questions to explore with a partner. Small group conversations can explore commonly-held concerns. Large group interactions can surface ideas for action, foster courage, collaboration and hope, and set goals, next steps and commitments for moving forward together.

Some House Meetings can be hosted at church or in other public settings. The point is to provide a variety of venues so that as many people as possible will choose to participate. Regardless of where they're held, make hospitality a high priority. And serve refreshments!

****Guided One-to-one questions (pick a few, then give pairs 15-20 minutes to share):***

- *Where did you grow up and what was it like? [This is a good ice-breaker.]*
- *What got you into your current job or role? [This goes deeper, but is still introductory.]*
- *What's the most important thing that's going on in your life right now?*
- *Tell me about a really difficult time or situation in your life, and how you coped.*
- *Where are you in your faith journey; what brought you to this point; where are you headed?*
- *What impact do you want to have on your community, and how's that going?*

4. Listening posts

In addition to doing congregational One-to-ones, Neighborhood Outreach, and perhaps a set of House Meetings, you can have some good results if you set up short-term Listening Posts in strategic venues around the community. The idea is to have a person or a team attracting passers-by to a table or bench to engage in relational conversation. Use provocative or whimsical questions posted on a table tent, placard or sign to draw people in. Or, simply engage people verbally in a non-threatening manner.

Especially when it comes to public Listening Posts, it's important not to proselytize, nor to promote any particular ideology or politically charged issue. This is about building relationships and fostering a spirit of community through hospitality and appreciative inquiry.

Depending on what you hope to learn or gain from these encounters, you can combine the relational aspects of the One-to-one with the information-gathering format of the Neighborhood Outreach and the community-building approach of the House Meeting.

Listening Posts can be set up during the coffee hour between or after church services, if your intent is to reach church-goers. Or, perhaps your church has a community outreach program, such as a pre-school or daycare, a food pantry or a drop-in center. Without making clients feel obligated to respond, friendly Listening Post facilitators can engage a cross-section of responders in conversation, with an emphasis on getting to know them and valuing their ideas and concerns.

Beyond your own church setting, Listening Posts can be conducted in other community gathering spaces, such as laundromats, community, youth or senior centers, parks, coffee shops, shopping malls,

waiting areas, etc. When conducting Listening Posts in spaces that are operated by businesses or government agencies, it's essential to collaborate with those community partners so that they can trust your motives and provide you with the space, permission and appreciation you need.

5. Visiting community leaders and public officials

Churches can and ought to play a vital role in the life of a community. Getting to know other community “players” on a relational level will contribute to the effectiveness of your church in playing its vital role. The One-to-one can be adapted when getting to know business and institutional leaders as well as public servants and elected officials.

Ideally, trained leaders from your congregation will set up actual One-to-one meetings of the 30-45-minute duration with the kinds of community leaders you want to know. When that's the case, simply use the regular approach of getting to know that person on a deep level, about their values, vision, life and motivations. If, at the time of such a visit, your congregation is starting to focus in on a particular issue or neighborhood concern, you can include questions about that matter in your conversation, and share briefly what you've already learned or are considering. Just don't let that issue overshadow a truly relational encounter, especially if this is the first One-to-one visit with the person.

When meeting with elected officials or others with high levels of community authority, there is wisdom in having more than one visitor participate in what is sometimes referred to as a “Power One-to-one.” This is so that the encounter can remain “your” meeting rather than getting co-opted by their agenda, and so that there are multiple witnesses to what you hear and learn in your visit.

You'd be surprised how elected and other public officials appreciate having visitors who show genuine interest in what drew them into public life, what values they have, what their hopes and dreams and disappointments are, apart from the politically-charged or partisan environment in which they spend most of their time. Sure, at a later date you might be coming back to them regarding a particular issue about which you may disagree. But building on a relational foundation makes accountability and tension easier to navigate and fosters the opportunity for respect even in the midst of conflict.

6. Research Visits

When your congregation, or a coalition of groups from your community, is ready to take on an issue of concern in order to improve conditions and do justice, the One-to-one can be adapted in doing Research Visits. If you've been diligent about getting to know public officials and other community players leading up to this point, then when you go to those people to gather information and look for allies for your cause, you've got a head start on the process. So now, seek out meetings with those who you perceive to have valuable information for forming your issue strategy, or those who you believe to have some of the power it will take to get the results you're hoping to achieve.

Research Visits are built mainly around questions related to the issue you're exploring. They also are relational in that you're after not just data, but the ideas and values of the person with whom you're visiting. In addition, depending on their level of influence, you're discerning whether they will be an ally or an obstacle in your quest for change.

Like in a Power One-to-one with a public official, Research Visits generally should include more than one visitor, maybe even a team of visitors. This makes it more of a meeting than a visit, and you should have a clear, timed agenda and assigned roles in order to keep it on track and to model a shared leadership approach.

The kinds of research questions you ask will depend on what issue you're exploring. Some examples follow. But, in the spirit of being relational, and to help you discern where this person is likely to line up in relation to the issue, always include some questions that are aimed at them – at their values, vision and motivation. If you haven't already done a pure One-to-one with this person, spend even more time focused on them.

In one community, research visitors were concerned about matters of hospitality (and lack thereof), especially toward people of color and new immigrant residents. Here are some of the questions they asked those with whom they met in Research Visits:

- *What is your ethnic background?*
- *What generation of immigrant are you?*
- *[If minority] How have you been treated in this community?*
- *What type of community do you want this to be in terms of diversity?*
- *What is happening, positively or negatively, regarding diversity in the community?*
- *What are the obstacles for new immigrants and people of color?*
- *What are practical solutions to make this community more inclusive and welcoming? [If they focus on programs, get them to talk about practices and policies instead.]*

If your group has already considered specific steps to create the kind of change you want to see happen regarding a particular issue, you can be more direct in asking about support from the person you're visiting, and others who they may know. Briefly describe the issue strategy you're considering, then ask questions like:

- *Would you support such a move?*
- *Why or why not?*
- *Who [else] would support it, and why?*
- *Who would oppose it, and why?*
- *Who have you worked with around this or related matters?*

A couple caveats about Research Visits:

1. This isn't the venue for getting commitments as to whether someone will stand with or oppose you when you take action. That comes later, and requires a different set of tools and strategies. In the Research Visit, you're doing an initial "taking of their temperature," learning what they know, and building your relationship with them.
2. It doesn't usually benefit you to ask public officials what they think churches can or should do about any given issue. They tend to respond with advice, like preaching thematic sermons or doing focus groups or starting up charitable projects or programs. Hopefully you're interested in effecting longer-term public solutions. But public officials often can't (or don't want to) think outside the box of how churches have traditionally been engaged in their communities. They might even use the question "what can churches do?" to recruit you to carry out their pet project or program, which will deter you from addressing root causes and long-term solutions.

This resource was compiled by Rev. Susan Engh, ELCA Program Director for Congregation-based Organizing. Leaders who want to delve deeper into any of the tools or trainings covered or mentioned here should contact Rev. Engh at 800-638-3522, ext. 2731 or by e-mail at susan.engh@elca.org.