

The *Studying Congregations* Tool Kit

# ASKING QUESTIONS



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### ***About Studying Congregations***

StudyingCongregations.org is the premier resource for understanding religious congregations in the United States. A collaborative project of leading scholars in the fields of sociology of religion, history, and practical theology, the strategies, resources and tools you will discover at StudyingCongregations.org have been designed specifically for theological educators, future religious leaders, and anyone else who wants to go beyond the received wisdom to discover what is happening in religious gatherings today.

This resource is offered to you as a gift of the Congregational Studies Team, an informal research group that has led the way in researching US congregations. Their work is generously funded by The Lilly Endowment.

*One of the best ways you can gain information from the members of your religious organization is to talk with them. Interviews allow participants to share stories, accounts, and explanations that can be valuable as you seek to understand how the organization really works.*

*Sometimes an interview is just an impromptu conversation before or after an event. You want to know more about what just happened or ask someone to orient you to what to expect. Perhaps you chat with someone about their history in the group or why it's important to them. These impromptu conversations may be only a few short minutes, but they should be guided by your curiosity and your effort to understand more deeply. And don't forget to include them in your notes.*

# FIRST, ASK YOURSELF...

## **Q: WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD I ASK?**

The questions you want to ask depend on what you are interested in examining in your study. Perhaps you're interested in understanding involvement and commitment in the congregation. You might want to ask questions about how long the person has attended, what first brought them to the congregation, why they continued to stay, and what their favorite and least favorite things are. Think about the concept you want to tap and ask yourself how you would know it if you saw it. If you are interested in "activism," what kinds of behavior, interaction, events, or ideas would demonstrate a pattern of activism? And what questions might help you know more about what activism looks like for the people you are interviewing?

## **Q: WHO SHOULD I INTERVIEW?**

If you have very specific bits of knowledge you need to fill in, interview the specific people who have that knowledge. Historical events? Interview the people who were there. Crucial decision? Interview the people on the decision making body. Experiences of newcomers? You get the picture!

If interviews are helping you to get the bigger picture of what this religious group is like, then you need to think about representativeness. First think about what you know about the ways people in the group may have different experiences. Perhaps it is generational, or highly involved people v marginal ones, or different ethnic groups. Then put together a list of potential interviewees that includes at least a few people from each of those subgroups.

## **Q: HOW MANY INTERVIEWS SHOULD I CONDUCT?**

That depends a lot on your resources of time and money. To pass muster in most social scientific circles, you would need at least 40-50 interviews, but scheduling, transcribing, and fully analyzing that many can be formidable. If your aim is more local understanding than professional publications, make your judgements accordingly. But do be sure that you have heard from all the important subgroups and have more than one voice representing each.



# DOING THE INTERVIEW.

Most interviews are recorded, but you will need to get your interviewee's permission to do that and discuss with them how you will use the recording. Will the person's information be confidential? Will you summarize what you hear from everyone without identifying anyone? Will you use pseudonyms and make their words anonymous? Or do you want to be able to be fully "on the record"? Most educational institutions will have official requirements for getting permission from "human subjects," so be sure to follow their procedures. If you aren't familiar with the ethical considerations in doing research that involves people's lives and reputations, the standard basic guidelines can be found in the [Belmont Report](#).

Schedule your interview in a place that will be comfortable and quiet and when you will have enough time for a relaxed conversation. Start with a broad question that will generally orient the conversation, and let that guide how you proceed. While it's good to have written out all your questions and have an idea of how you want the interview to flow, it is not necessary to read them verbatim or in a particular order. If they answer question #6 in the process of responding to question #2, that's just fine.

Remember that you are there to listen. Let them give the examples and answer the questions in ways that make the best sense to them. "Tell me a story about..." is a good way to ask for a specific example in an interview. "Tell me a story about how a member of the congregation connected with you when you first started attending," or "tell me a story about when you felt particularly connected to your faith."

At the end, thank them for their time and investment in the research, and tell them about what other research activities will be happening and what sort of report they can expect. You may also be surprised at how much they appreciate that you took the time to listen.

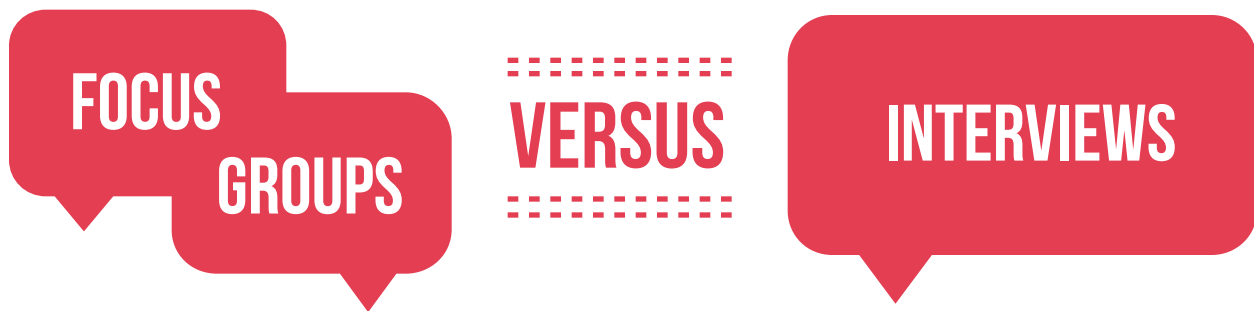
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**After the interview.** If your interviewee has agreed to be recorded, you will need to decide how to use the recording. If you have an ample budget and/or lots of time, you may want to invest in a full transcript of all the interviews you do. If not, use the recording to make extensive notes and partially transcribe the most significant portions. In any case, as soon as possible after the interview, make notes about what you heard and review the recording to make sure it is complete. Technological failures have been known to happen!

# SOME ALTERNATIVES.

In some instances, you will want to interview a specific cross-section of people and get parallel responses to the same exact questions so you can do statistical analyses of the results. When you already have a fairly focused area of inquiry and have a good sense of the range of differences you are likely to find, you can be much more directed in your questions. In a "Structured Interview," questions are planned, written in advance, and asked in that exact wording during the interview. These can be simple yes or no questions, or have a format that allows for an open-ended response. In a "Schedule-structured interview," the interview questions are basically a verbal questionnaire, where there are set questions with a list of fixed responses. These types of interviews are regularly used in telephone polls or opinion surveys. This form is most useful if you have a lot of topics to cover in limited time, or if a substantial portion of your interview subjects have reading difficulties.

The approach recommended above is "Semi-structured," in that you will have pre-planned, written questions, but you will expect and encourage variations in the order and content of the interview, as the occasion arises.



Focus groups and individual interviews have a lot in common — you're interested in asking questions to a set of people, and want to hear their candid responses. Individual interviews allow the respondent the privacy to answer without others within the community judging his or her response. Focus groups, on the other hand, allow respondents to hear each other, spurring on discussion topics that an individual may not have thought of herself.



**Tools of the Trade.** Technology today has made recording interviews very affordable. Visit the website ([www.studyingcongregations.org/blog/tools-of-the-trade](http://www.studyingcongregations.org/blog/tools-of-the-trade)) to learn more about some of our favorite tools of the trade: from digital recorders, video cameras, notebooks and more. Our research team shares some of their favorite tools of the trade in a special blog series.

# FOCUS GROUPS.

Sometimes focus groups are thought of as a quick way to interview several people at once, but they are more than that. Focus groups are the product of a collective effort and take on a life of their own. One response can elicit a memory from another. One viewpoint can spark a lively debate, with multiple ideas being expressed that might not come out in an individual interview.

Like interviews, focus groups can either follow a structured and focused interview protocol or be more open-ended and generalized (“Let’s talk about your impressions of worship in this congregation”). Either way, you are asking questions but also creating an event where people talk through ideas and experiences.

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**Size and composition.** A good focus group will generally have between 6 and 15 participants. It is usually helpful to have some variety among them. However, on some sensitive issues, you may want to limit participants to people who have shared a particular experience or belong to a particular subgroup. If you have reason to believe, for instance, that a group of newcomers is experiencing difficulty in being accepted, it may be helpful to convene a group where they can talk just with each other.

See the interview tool for detailed instructions that will help you think about who to include and what questions to ask.

**Planning the event.** Like an interview, think carefully about a comfortable time and place. Since this is a group event, however, you may want to include a meal or refreshments.

A good focus group needs a good leader who can encourage participation and keep the conversation on track. That means both familiarity with the research goals and the intended protocol of questions and skill in group dynamics.

If you want to record the event, be sure to test out your equipment in advance. Recording a group can be tricky. And remember to start your conversation by explaining the purpose of the research, how you will use the information, and getting permission to record.

**Getting the record straight.** Whether or not you record, you will want to have notes about what was said as well as about the group dynamics. That means that you will also need a recorder who is neither the leader nor a participant who can take good notes. Even if you are making a sound or video recording of the event, you will want notes that help you identify speakers and add the subtleties that sound alone may miss.

Add the notes and transcripts from your focus group to the other data you are gathering. Reviewing all your notes for themes will help you begin to answer the larger questions you are pursuing.