

The *Studying Congregations* Tool Kit

STEPPING BACK TO WATCH AND LISTEN



This resource is made possible by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. Visit www.studyingcongregations.org for further research and resources.



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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 most obvious and available methods for studying a congregation is direct observation. But making this really useful requires that you turn your ordinary participation and attention into a more systematic exercise. You will need to take a step back — to see the things you take for granted and wonder about the things that aren't done as well as what is. Observing the same kind of event several times may be especially useful for discovering the implicit rules of who, what, where, when, and how. Things we do together really do acquire a predictable pattern, and before you can introduce changes, you have to understand the existing rules of the game.

THREE KEY THINGS.

1

Which events. Depending on the focus of your inquiry, you may need to observe worship services, committee meetings, community events, or something else. Think about where you are most likely to see things that are relevant to the questions you are asking.

2

Your presence. Make sure that relevant participants know you are there and why. Ask permission if you are observing an event that would not ordinarily be open to outsiders. Then find a place that allows you to see the action, but not be too far removed. And decide how you will take notes. In some settings that won't be a problem, but in others, you may need to limit your note taking to a few unobtrusive "jottings" that will jog your memory when you write up your notes later.

3

Being there. If you are an insider to this group, be careful to really notice the things you normally take for granted and ask yourself what someone else might notice instead. If you are an outsider, don't be afraid to ask questions about what you see. Either before or after the event, engage participants in conversation about the things you might not have understood or that seemed especially striking to you.



SOME TIPS.

- * Don't try to record everything. Depending on the focus of your study, you may have specific kinds of interactions that are of interest. For instance, how do younger and older people interact and participate differently? Or how do children participate?
- * Pay attention to non-verbal expression, physical surroundings, and emotional tone, as much as to the words. Spaces, decorations, movement, and feelings can tell you a lot. You might sketch a picture of the room, where people are seated, and who is sitting where, and what happens around the edges.
- * For more detailed suggestions about what to observe, take a look at our Observation Protocol for ideas and questions to think about. Available at www.studyingcongregations.org.
- * **And don't forget...** Your notes! As soon as possible after your observation, gather your jottings and notes and any other material you picked up. Set aside time to write up a detailed account of what you saw and heard and felt. The notes from all your observations and other forms of data gathering will be the prompts that help you begin to see the larger patterns you are looking for.

