



Recovering
the lost art
of Listening

A FOCUS GROUP OUTREACH GUIDE



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OUTREACH GUIDE

The potential of the focussed, community conversation strategies are enormous. Here are just a few of the benefits:

1. Get invaluable insights into the felt-needs and concerns of the unchurched specific to each neighborhood in your community.
2. Provide a very powerful, yet non-threatening method of outreach for your members that helps them build new relationships with their unchurched neighbors.
3. Image your church as people who care enough to listen and meet real needs in the community.
4. Plant seeds for the Gospel and provide an Alpha-type environment for non-christians to ask questions.
5. Increase attendance from the immediate and residual word-of-mouth exposure to new people in your community.
6. Build natural bridges and relationships to launch home groups, cast community vision, or spinoff any number of neighborhood ministries.
7. Spawn an “outreach movement” that can easily and naturally replicate itself through your community.
8. Build a very comprehensive research system that gives you a very complete picture of the needs and issues in your city.

FOCUSSED CONVERSATIONS.

The Focus Group has always been an important tool of Breakthrough Media. It was first used mainly as a research tool to uncover the felt needs of the unchurched, but later we saw its exciting potential as a direct form of outreach:

In one evening, in one neighborhood, 9-12 unchurched people have a very rewarding, enjoyable evening with your outreach team, deep issues and concerns are explored, you touch and understand the pulse of people in your community, people are left with a positive image of your church, seeds planted lead some to become Christians, many later become a part of a new home group in their neighborhood, several visit your church next Sunday.

Think of it this way. Here's a standard bridgebuilding process:

- Level 1: Awareness (person is aware of you or your church)
- Level 2: Contact (you've had some kind of initial contact)
- Level 3: Acquaintance (enough contact established to remember you)
- Level 4: Relationship (mutual sharing, desire to continue)
- Level 5: Intimacy (sharing of deep concerns, feelings, aspirations, etc.)

The unique aspects of Focus Groups are that they jump quickly to the 5th level. All at once you're having a very intimate conversation with individuals who were most likely total strangers the day before.

Our experience doing Focus Groups are always positive...by the end of the evening we can't get people to leave! The unspoken question on everyone's mind, "I don't want this to end, where do we go from here?" It becomes a very rewarding experience for both the unchurched and your team.

Invitations are made by your members to their unchurched acquaintances or by neighborhood canvassing. We ask neighbors to participate in an evening to share their insights on the needs of their own community. Even if they cannot attend, awareness and positive image is made of a church that cares enough to get involved. But we've never experienced any problem finding plenty of people who love to get involved.

You can quickly grow this outreach program through an 'on-the-job' mentoring process. It goes like this: First a pastor or outreach director takes an intern along with them and they do two or three focus groups together. The approach is easy to learn and after a few sessions the intern is ready to go to a different neighborhood and start another. If you want to grow faster take two people under your wing each time and split off by twos. You can then network together to share ideas and issues in a regular gathering or online discussion group.

These conversations should remain uncomplicated as an open, Spirit-directed environment with no agenda other than listening, showing love and honor, and nurturing authentic understanding. As needs are uncovered, in the initial "Conversations" settings, they could become springboards for the spinoff of more specific need-addressing (second-tier) ministries, such as home groups, neighborhood or community groups, healing support groups, "embassies" of reconciliation, marriage encounters, family finance workshops, and community service projects.

If you train Focus Group Outreach Teams to do this in multiple neighborhoods (diverse audiences types, diverse formats, diverse topics), and had them going on regularly, the level of bridgebuilding in the community could be tremendous. If the process were supported with good training and communication tools, it's easy to imagine a quiet grassroots undercurrent building and penetrating whole communities. It can happen. Training would easily and naturally take place "on the job" and it would not take too much time to see the multiplying factor take over. This provides a real, practical strategy for your church to become a "church without walls" in your city.

Getting To Know The Unchurched Through Focus Group Conversations.

DEFINITION: A Focus Group is simply a focussed conversation conducted for the purpose of exploring specific topics with a specific audience.

BENEFITS. *Some practical benefits of a Focus Group are...*

1. **Fast.** A group interview can be organized and conducted relatively fast.
2. **Low Cost.** Not much expense involved.
3. **Reduced Distance** between the audience examined and the client who uses the information. It gives the client a chance to get a first-hand intimate look at the people they are trying to reach.
4. **Flexibility.** You work from a list of topics and are free to adapt and explore.
5. **Accuracy and Clarification.** You can clarify the questions and probe for precise answers.
6. **Intragroup Stimulation.** The group can build on each others thoughts to stimulate their own thinking.
7. **Understandable Results.** The survey report is in a form that is easy to understand. Verbatim transcripts, tapes and summaries can be read and listened to over and over.

PREPARING FOR YOUR FOCUS GROUP

Understanding the Problem.

1. What do we want to know?
2. Start by translating the problem into as many questions as comes to mind.

Prepare an Outline. The topics are more important than exact questions.

Recruiting People.

Audience. What target audience are we trying to know? Balance out your target audience with the different audience sub-segments which make it up.

Size. Small groups lose stimulation. Large groups are difficult to manage. Six to Ten people is typical.

Sources. Once the audience type is clearly established you can locate and invite them through selected church members.

Discuss the recruiting procedure with your selected church members and ask them to give you some information on their possible recruits before you give approval to invite them.

The Invitation. Provide a standard invitation (see sample) for them to use to insure that every recruit gets the same information.

The Site. The host can be another member of your church, but preferably not a recruiter. Select a host home that has a comfortable meeting room well away from the entrance. The host will then be able to greet latecomers without disturbing the meetings.

Equipment. A tape recording of the session is a must. Your group will forget it's there. Use the tapes provided. On the 90 minute tapes you will have one side for each of the 45 minute sessions. Enough comfortable seats for everyone. Clipboards, pads and pens for each person if you are not sitting around a table. Name Tags can be helpful but not mandatory.

Refreshments. Provide coffee, soft drinks, tea, water and finger food for your breaks. The drinks can be out when they arrive for some icebreaking conversation prior to the session.

Inviting through your members. A church usually invites people through their members. Gather your people together and cast the vision for all that the focus group outreach program can accomplish.

Then hand out the invitations and explain the process. Provide notepaper and ask them to write down all of the unchurched people they can think of. Give them categories to prompt their thinking (neighbors, relatives, coworkers, service people, or people they know from places where they shop, etc.).

Ask them to make a list and prioritize it. Generally, we would not offer a monetary incentive. We want people to think of it as community service. The goal of the focus groups is to uncover needs, create vision, and discover how a visionary church can contribute to community transformation. Because of the participant's own understanding of the community we simply want to brainstorm with them and gain new insights as a group of fellow neighbors and citizens.

The casual atmosphere, refreshments, and meaningful conversation can be very inviting to most people. The focus groups certainly end up being a very rewarding time for everyone. You need to convey that kind of experience from the onset.

You should first ask those you are inviting for a general commitment and then let a coordinator work out the specific time and place for each participant.

The Focus Group Session

STYLE. There are at least three main styles of conducting a focus group:

1. **Non-directive.** The moderator asks the questions but stays out of the discussion, being careful not to reveal his own views. This does not mean he cannot follow up on responses with more probing questions.
2. **Directive.** Here the moderator is more involved in the discussion, leading and controlling, and not afraid to reveal his own thoughts.
3. **Sympathetic.** This is the “Phil Donahue” style, the moderator identifies as much as possible with each person, playing the advocate where appropriate, and sometimes relating responses as if he were an unchurched person himself.

You may want to be flexible enough to change styles when it seems beneficial.

One of the most important things to remember as moderator is to never be defensive no matter how tempting. Never try to preach or correct what you feel are unwarranted views of the church or the faith. Let the group interact and save your opinions for private conversations and spinoff settings.

Arrangement of group. The only consideration here is to arrange more talkative people to the right and left of the moderator, allowing eye contact with the less talkative.

Control. Try to keep the discussion on track as much as possible. If some interesting side topics come up, jot them down for later exploration.

Try to keep the participation balanced, encourage hesitant ones and don't let others dominate. On important issues you might even go around the circle allowing each person an opportunity to respond in turn.

Suggested Schedule. Most recruits will be pleased if you let them know how long the session is expected to last so that plans can be made accordingly. It is also good to give them an idea of the structure of the evening. Following is one suggestion on how it could be scheduled:

- 7:00 Arrival time, coffee and getting acquainted
- 7:15 Opening remarks and Part One
- 8:00 Refreshment break
- 8:15 Part Two
- 9:00 Closing remarks and departure

How Many Focus Group Interviews Are Needed?

For the highest degree of accuracy and insight most agree that you should conduct interviews until the moderator can *anticipate* the responses. Most likely you will compromise somewhat on that goal. However, if you take the thorough approach you will undoubtedly obtain a wealth of information about your target audience.

If you chose to establish neighborhood focus groups as a regular form of outreach you can periodically change the focus of topics you explore. An ongoing outreach of this type can continually complement, inform, and transform all your evangelistic efforts as well as the people involved.

The Topical Outline For Focus Group Discussion

Here is just one example of a typical focus group agenda. Focus Groups can take completely different forms and themes. They can be community vision creating sessions, specific problem/solution sessions, etc. There's no limit to the topics and creative formats you can use.

We suggest that you divide your session into two parts (with the refreshment break between) which we will call Session One and Session Two. Your discussion should generally follow the outline below and the questions provided are offered to stimulate your thinking. Be flexible enough to follow the most interesting paths. Probe for real honest and revealing responses.

SESSION ONE

OPENING THE SESSION. The moderator's initial remarks define the ground rules and set the tone. An example might be:

"Tonight we are going to be talking about some topics that I think you will find intriguing. We are going to explore your thoughts and feelings on ...(highlight some of the topics).

"But first, I have a few favors to ask. One is that you speak up and only one person speak at a time. As you can see we're taping this and if you speak too softly or two people speak at once it will be too difficult to hear later.

"another thing is, PLEASE, say what you think. We are just as interested in negative comments as positive, in fact the negatives are sometimes more useful.

"Oh, and to put you at ease, the tape recorder is just for our benefit, (we're not good note takers) and there is no hidden camera. Use the notepads for jotting down quick thoughts and first impression for later.

"Now let's go ahead and get started. Perhaps it would be good to go around the table and get to know a little bit about each of us—your occupation, your family, etc. Let's start with me. My name is..."

The process of having each person tell about themselves serves more than just getting acquainted. It establishes identities on tape with their relevant background information. If someone introduces themselves in a limited way, you should ask for some additional information. If you do not already have this information make some notes on each person and keep it handy for the session.

SESSION ONE / PART ONE

LET'S BE HONEST ABOUT LIFE.

A. Our Dreams

“For most of us life vacillates between dreaming about what life could be, to actually experiencing frustrations in our daily routine. It would be helpful to us to hear what some of your aspirations for life are. What are those things that you look forward to with great anticipation.

“What are you hoping for in the near future, say this year?

“What about long range, say five to ten years?

“Are there any major things you want to accomplish in your lifetime?

“If you could imagine the most ideal set of circumstances for your life, what would it be like? What would you be doing?

B. Our Frustrations

“Having explored our dreams, let’s discuss our disappointments and frustrations? Can you tell me what are some of your more common frustrations or hassles?

“What problems do you deal with on a continuing basis?

“Or, put more simply, just what seems to occupy your mind most of the time? (probe for specifics)

“Aside from daily problems, what reoccurring yearnings or emotions do you sense, such as loneliness, lack of purpose, boredom, feelings of being under pressure, express the emotions or needs that you feel most often.

“Now let’s connect this line of thinking back to our dreams we talked about earlier. What would you say is the primary need that you have in your life at this time that could be hindering you from reaching your dreams?”

SESSION ONE / PART TWO

LET'S BE HONEST ABOUT THE CHURCH.

A. Image perceptions of Cell Churches

“Ok, let’s now take a somewhat different approach. In order to understand how a church can meet real needs in a community we must start with where they are and specifically with how the community views them.

“ We’re going to begin by exploring our perceptions of certain type of churches which are generally called “cell churches”. (give a general definition)

“ Have you ever heard of cell churches before?”

“What is your first impressions of this kind of church?”

“What aspects of a cell church do you think would be most appealing?”

“Why?”

B. Local

“Let’s bring it closer to home, what image do you have of (name your church)?”

“ Were you aware of the church before you were invited to this meeting?”

“If so, in what way did you come to know about it?”

(break for refreshments)

SESSION TWO/ PART ONE

*LET'S BE HONEST ABOUT **THE CHURCH AND THE COMMUNITY.***

“Let’s begin our second session by discussing the value of a church to the community.
What do you see as some of the benefits that a church can be to the community?”

“What would you consider to be the church’s primary role in the community?”

“In other words, what is the most important thing that a church can provide or do for the people of a community?”

LET'S IMAGINE...

“Now let’s approach it a little differently. Here’s a chance for us to be real creative.
If you could create from your personal vantage point the perfect church or at least the best you could imagine, what would it be like?”

“What kind of ministries would it have in the community, for the family, for different ages, special needs, etc.

“What kind of activities would it have?”

“What kind of facilities would it have?”

“What kind of leaders would it have?”

“What would the worship services be like? What would you add?
What would you leave out or de-emphasize?”

“What kind of teaching would it provide? What topics?”

“How could it make sure that it meets needs relevant to your life?”

“Do you think this kind of church is possible?”

“If this kind of church is both right and desirable, how could we make it happen?”

SESSION TWO / PART TWO

LET'S BE HONEST ABOUT THE CHURCH AND ME.

“Now I think it would be good to bring it down to our own personal experience. I want you to know that your honesty and openness especially here can have a profound impact on changing the direction of the church and helping many people in our community in the future.

“What do you see as the reasons you are not involved with a church at this time?

“What reasons are the most important?

“Can you imagine for a moment what set of circumstances or what reasons would cause you to get involved with a church? (typical responses: for the kids, for fellowship, for teaching on dealing with life, to find new friends, get right with God, etc.)

“Can you think of something that would actually cause you to make it a priority in your life?

“Now for our last and probably most important question, I would like you to participate with me in a little imagination exercise. Imagine for a moment that you were sitting in a quiet place in your home and Jesus Christ was sitting with you.

“What would you ask him?

“What would you ask him to do for you?

“Thank you very much for your time helping with this project. I know we have learned a lot of things tonight that will help our churches be more relevant in ministry in the community and in people just like you. Thanks so much.

“Please feel free to stay for awhile to discuss anything that’s on your mind or just to visit. I believe there are some refreshments still on the table. Thanks again.”

Sample Invitation Covers...

An Invitation
to Be Yourself.

We want to.
Listen to You.

Sample Invitation inside text...

Help Keep Us Honest.

Honesty about life, for us, means not playing church, and looking honestly at life's problems and issues. Our goal is to embrace life in all its beauty and potential, to approach our needs, our concerns, our dreams together, secure in a healthy respect and love for each member of the community.

We want very much to be that kind of church, but we need your help. Because of your perspective on people and life in our community we want to invite you to join us along with a few other members of the community for an informal time of exploring our life together in _____(city)_____.

On ____ (date) ____ we will arrive shortly before ____ at the home of _____ located at _____.

We will limit the time to about two hours (honestly). Oh, and some good food will be served, too.

We are looking forward to meeting you and together finding new and even surprising ways we can make our lives, our families, and our community better by simply being honest about life.

SAMPLE THANK-YOU NOTE

We suggest that a handwritten thank-you note be sent to each participant immediately following the session.

Thank You.

I want to thank you personally for your willingness to participate in our recent community research project.

It was good to have the opportunity to get to know you. We sincerely hope that you enjoyed the time together as much as we did.

We extend an invitation to visit us at any time and if I or the church staff can be of service or ministry to you in any way, please don't hesitate to ask.

Pastor John W. Smith
Grace Community Church

Partner with us.

Please let us know about the results you have using Focus Groups in your community.

If you have any questions call or email me. I'd be glad to talk with you about this incredible tool for outreach and community transformation.

Blessings!

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