



BUILDING/COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Introduction

Your church — the congregation and the building — has a valuable role to play in the life of your community. There are people, groups and organizations that would love to work with you and use your space; they just don't know about you yet!

Unless they belong to your congregation, community leaders may not realize that you have attractive space and amenities, and they probably don't know much about who you are or what you care about. This activity will help your church bridge that gap by inviting key stakeholders into your building and engaging them in a conversation to surface new ideas and opportunities for your church to collaborate with community partners.

For a successful conversation, make sure that your church has:

- Reviewed all the spaces your building(s) offer and inventoried their **amenities** (see “Mission: Rediscovery,” “Amenities Checklist” and “Campus Tours”).
- Articulated **key talking points** about your values, mission and vision that can resonate with a variety of people (see “Messaging Your Mission”).

STEP 1

Convene Your Outreach Team

Your outreach team will consist of three to five volunteers from the staff and congregation. A pastor should be part of this team because they are often a de facto community liaison for your church, but ideally a layperson should lead the team. Volunteers can expect to put in one to three hours of work every week for six to eight weeks. Members who are natural connectors (and widely connected) are great folks to tap for this. The team should plan to touch base for 30-60 minutes in every week leading up to the conversation.

Decide on a couple of days and times to host the conversation, and budget about two hours for the event. Each community is different, but generally weekday late afternoons are a sweet spot — your guests can leave their workplace early, participate in the conversation and still get home in time for dinner. First thing in the morning (after school drop-off) can also work; your invitees could come to the church on their way to work.

STEP 2

Reach Out!

Using the initial list of current and potential partners as a starting point, identify organizations, groups and individuals that would be natural conversation partners in imagining new possibilities and partnerships for your church. Identify logical representatives of larger organizations and gather contact information.

These conversations can happen with 10 to 20 attendees. You'll want to invite at least twice as many people as you hope will show up, so build an outreach list of 30-40 invitees. Invite folks with diverse perspectives and experiences to the conversation. Think about:

- Groups and organizations that serve the constituencies you care about.
- Groups and organizations that share your values and vision.
- Groups that already use your building.
- Local tribal groups and/or Native American advocacy organizations.
- Your mission partners.
- Local government representatives (council members, planning commission, etc.).
- Civil service organizations (public libraries, emergency management, law enforcement, etc.).
- Local funders (community foundations).
- Heritage organizations (historical societies, preservation organizations).
- The business community (Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, Lion's Club).
- Health and human service organizations (hospitals, clinics, shelters, United Way).

Refer to the final step of the "Mission: Rediscovery" exercise to build your outreach list.

After building the list, assign members of your team to reach out to people, inviting them to the church for a tour and conversation. **Make sure you give your invitees at least three weeks' notice of the event.**

Prioritize phone calls; they are more personal and allow your team to build or strengthen relationships with community members (emails don't do that).

Once everyone has been called and invited, you can send out a more formal invitation via email. Be sure to follow up with folks to make sure you have an accurate head count.

STEP 3

Prepare for Company

Company is coming! This is your opportunity to welcome your neighbors into your building, show off all the excellent resources you have, and tell them about the great work you do. Make sure your spaces are clean and decluttered.

Develop a tour route with talking points for your campus; the tour should take no longer than 45 minutes and should show your guests the entirety of your campus. You may not stop in every room, but your guests should be able to at least peek into most of your spaces. Use “Campus Tours” to help define your route and talking points. Identify two volunteers who can lead tours through the campus; if you expect more than 12 attendees, you can split up into two separate groups (one leaving earlier, one leaving later).

Decide which room you will use for the conversations; usually the parlor or fellowship hall works best. Set up the room for small-group conversation with five to six guests (plus one or two team members) in each group. As a team, develop a list of questions based on what you want to learn from, and about, your guests. The “Building/Community Questions” list is a good starting point. Each member of the team should be prepared to lead the conversation with community members or to take notes.

Make sure you have light refreshments for your guests to enjoy as they wrap up their tours and sit down for a focused conversation. Show off your famous hospitality! This might be an opportunity to tap your hospitality committee or other members who are gifted at making people feel welcome.

STEP 4

Welcome Your Guests

Send your guests a reminder the week of the event (they might need a nudge). As they come to your building, have folks on hand to greet them with enthusiasm. Don't forget to have your guests sign in so you can follow up with them later.

If you are giving only one tour, take your guests on the tour as soon as they all arrive but no later than 10 minutes after the event start time. Assign a volunteer to take any stragglers through a fast-paced tour when they arrive. If you are giving multiple tours, start your first tour after the first eight to 10 guests arrive and the second tour no later than 10 minutes after the event start time.

After all the tours are done, give the guests a few minutes to grab refreshments and chat before you ask them to join a small group for the conversation portion of the event. The questions you have are a jumping-off point; if the conversation takes some unexpected turns, that's OK as long as they relate to the congregation and community. The discussion should last about 45 minutes. Make sure a team member takes notes for each group.

As you wrap up, let your guests know whom they can contact at the church with any questions about using your space, potential collaborations, or how others can connect with the team. The day after the event, be sure to send a thank-you email to each of your guests.

STEP 5 Debrief

Schedule a debrief meeting with your team within a week of the event. Ask team members to make copies of (or type up) their notes from the small-group conversations so that you have a comprehensive picture of what the community said. Use the following questions as a starting point for your discussion:

- What went well? What was the high point of the event?
- What would we do differently?
- What was the most interesting thing we heard? What “aha” moments did we have?
- Which folks are we most excited about following up with?
- Of the recommended conversation partners, to whom are we most interested in talking?
- What do we feel called to do next? What are some action steps we can take?
- Based on these conversations, what should our church do and explore in the next month? Three months? Six months?

The team should report back to the Church Council and congregation with key learnings, questions and ideas that have been raised. Notice which ideas generate energy among the congregation and which members are excited to hear about the conversation; this will help you discern your next steps.

Lather, Rinse, Repeat

Now that you’ve done it once, you can do it again! Follow up with folks who were suggested as potential collaborators and invite them in for a tour and conversation (either individually or as part of another group of stakeholders and neighbors). Make this community/building conversation a regular practice of your congregation — at least once a year — to check the pulse of your neighborhood.