

Getting to Know a New Congregation

By Robert A. Harris, Leading Ideas, June 10, 2015

I believe that one of the most important gifts a new pastor can give to the congregation in the first year and beyond is to be clear about *not knowing*. Be open and curious. Lead with questions. Learn as much as you can.

A method I have used is to interview congregational leaders and others who wish to be interviewed. Using this simple interview process really helped me understand a new congregation. It is important to interview a broad

representation of leaders using the same or similar questions. Note that I say *interview* them. Use the interview as a springboard for conversation. There is nothing like a face-to-face conversation to get to know people and help them get to know you. You will see their body language, sensing the emotions behind their responses. They will see that you are really interested in their perception of their congregation and their suggestions for you. Further, you can ask good follow-up questions or skip questions as appropriate.

I have found that people like being interviewed. Most people like to give the new pastor their take on things. Interviews demonstrate that you are genuinely curious about this congregation and its people. You want to get to know them and what makes them tick. You aren't someone who has dropped in with a pat formula to improve them. You're not punching a time-clock. You are really interested in them.

What's a broad representation of leaders? In smaller congregations, it might be ten people, but in larger congregations, I encourage interviewing at least 25 to 35 leaders. Start by interviewing the governing board. Tell the congregation that you can be most effective as their pastor when you get to know them in some depth. Invite people to ask you to interview them. Take notes while you are listening; it affirms to your interviewees that you are really paying attention.

I have typically interviewed people one at a time, but have sometimes interviewed couples, and in a few instances, I have met with adult education classes and existing small groups. Stress to individuals and couples that their answers will be confidential. Remember, your primary purpose is to get to know them. However, explain to them that



their responses will possibly be compiled with others' responses into a report or series of reports to the board and congregation.

Trust me. Doing these interviews really works. The key to using the 11 questions below or your variations of them is to be relaxed and curious. Trust your instincts, relax, and enjoy the conversation!

1. Tell me about a time when you felt especially proud of some members or leaders of your congregation, when you felt they were really following Christ. What makes this incident stand out in your mind?
2. Whom do you especially respect as leaders? Why do you hold them in high regard?
3. Tell me why you're glad you are a member of this congregation. Why did you join this congregation instead of another one?
4. How has being part of this congregation helped you and members of your family grow in faith? Please give me some examples of experiences or classes that made a difference. How did you change?
5. Tell me a story about when congregation members resolved a conflict or difference effectively. What do you think the congregation learned from this experience? How effectively do leaders and members handle differences now?
6. What have you especially valued about your pastors and other congregational staff? (Be specific.) Do any sermons, initiatives, or attributes of your previous pastors come to mind?
7. Tell me about a time when you were disappointed with members or leaders. What happened?
8. Complete this sentence: "God is calling this congregation to be ..."
9. What do you think God wants your congregation to emphasize in the next three to five years?
10. What else do I need to know in order to thrive in this congregation and community?
11. Do you have any other concerns or suggestions?

Robert A. Harris is author of [Entering Wonderland: A Toolkit for Pastors New to a Church](#) (Rowman and Littlefield, 2014) available through [Amazon](#). This article is adapted from material in that book and used by permission of the author and publisher.