

## How to Conduct Church Health Assessment Interviews

By Jim Barber 2018

When a consultant is conducting a comprehensive church health assessment, the use of interviews can be one of the most strategic activities undertaken. The consultant has the unique opportunity to devise and ask interview questions that should significantly help him or her arrive at the most useful recommendations for the church. This document is written to help you achieve that end. The consultant should think and act according to the following: the purpose of interviews; who to interview; how to write tailored interview questions; where to conduct your interviews; how to conduct your interviews; and how to use your interviewing notes.

### The Purpose of Interviews



Think of your interviews as an essential bridge between preliminary information and your final recommendations to the church leadership team. The church's response to your Request for Data, the result of the Church Health Survey, and the demographic study should all inform your interviews. They should give you some sense of what you think your recommendations will be. But your interviews, if conducted well, will confirm, refine, reprioritize, add to, or eliminate your preliminary recommendations. They are a very important part of the church health assessment.

### Who to Interview

You want to interview a cross-section of people. Early in the health assessment process, you should request from your church contact person a group of people to interview and define specific time slots for each interview. Here is a recommended example list in a very specific order with allotted time for each. Of course, the list will be specific to each church based on its size, polity and programs.

Interviewee	Unique Purpose(s)	Time Allotment
<b>2-4 people that have been at the church less than two years interviewed as a group</b>	Discern the strengths of the church's assimilation practices	45 Minutes
<b>3 couples that have been at the church for 5 years or more</b>	Discern the culture of the church and its strengths and weaknesses	45 Minutes
<b>2-3 from Deacons as a group</b>	Same as above	30 Minutes
<b>Administrative staff of the church as a group</b>	Discern how organized the church is and its culture and if they have resources to perform their roles	45 Minutes
<b>Paid Ministry Staff Member such as Worship Pastor</b>	Culture of church, structure, staff oversight and development, morale	45 Minutes

<b>Paid Ministry Staff Member such as Children’s Ministry Director</b>	Same as above	45 Minutes
<b>Paid Ministry Staff Member such as Youth Pastor</b>	Same as above	45 Minutes
<b>Lay Ministry Team Leaders as a group</b>	Same as above	45 Minutes
<b>Facilities Tour with 2-3 most knowledgeable of facility and building programs</b>	History, future plans, cleanliness, maintenance, signage, safety, security, information needed to create a <i>Facilities Traffic Light</i>	1 hour depending on church size
<b>Board Chair if there is a General Board</b>	Culture of church, structure, right-sizing	45 Minutes
<b>Elders as a group with Pastor</b>	Culture, Structure, Morale. Hear their thoughts on how others have answered various questions. Their unity.	45 Minutes
<b>Elders without Pastor</b>	Their trust in him and his leadership. His capacity to lead in future.	15 Minutes
<b>Pastor</b>	Morale, vision for the future, role, openness to change	45 Minutes
<b>Total</b>		9.25 hours

A typical schedule is to interview for 3 hours on a Friday night and another 6-7 hours on the next day, Saturday. Ideally, do all of the interviews back-to-back so you can pick up on themes, common perceptions, and similar answers. The rationale behind the order above is that by doing the governance leaders last, you can use what you have heard in the earlier interviews to formulate questions to see if the leadership agrees with what others are saying or if they have another perspective.

### **How to Write Tailored Interview Questions**

To be the most prepared for each interview and get the most out of it, you should type out a unique set of interview questions for each interview. A list of approximately 8-10 questions that are well-written will generally fill a time slot of 30-45 minutes. The response from the church to your data request, followup discussions from that response, the results of the Church Health Survey, and the demographics study all give you raw material for good questions to ask.

These are some guidelines for how to write your interview questions:

- Prayerfully consider what you think 4 or 5 of your recommendations will be, and then construct test questions to see if the people you are interviewing agree with your conclusions. For example, if the Fellowship questions in the Church Health Survey indicate a lack of unity and conflict, and you expect to recommend the need for biblical reconciliation, ask several of you interviewees the same question such as, “How would you describe the unity of the church?”.

Or if the response to your data request shows a ten year decline in attendance, and you expect to recommend the need for overall revitalization, you might ask, “The attendance trend in your church has been downward for ten years. How do you explain that? Why do you think the church is losing more people than it is gaining?” That is a very open-ended question with many possible answers. If

you ask it of five different people or groups you may get five answers but you may also see a group of common answers.

- Ask questions from your convictions about what a healthy church looks like.
- Ask open-ended questions that are designed to get the interviewees to talk. If your question can be answered with a simple yes or no, that is not open-ended. If you do ask a yes or no question, be sure to ask them to explain why they said yes or no. The example above about the attendance trend is a very open-ended question with many possible answers. If you ask it of five different people or groups you may get five answers but you may also see a group of common answers.
- Ask them to tell you what they do in the church. Think of questions to ask that are unique to their role. For example, if they oversee a ministry, ask them to tell you if they have a team, how they recruit ministry participants, how they conduct training, the purpose of their ministry etc.
- Ask them to describe the relationships among the paid staff or among the governance board.
- If the church has small groups, ask if they participate (yes or no). If the answer is yes, ask them to give you the strengths and weaknesses of groups in the church.
- Always make your last question something like, “Is there anything that you hoped that we would talk about that I have not asked yet? Is there anything you think I should know?”

### **Where to Conduct Your Interviews**

Ask the person that is coordinating and scheduling the interviews for you to give you one comfortable room in the church with a table where you will conduct all of your interviews. A conference room with a table is much better than office with a desk. It is helpful for everyone to know that all of the interviews will be conducted in one place. It is also helpful for you to not have to move from room to room, to have a table to spread things out on, and to have it be temperature and humidity controlled. Lastly, the room should have a door that closes to allow for confidential conversations. (See more about offering confidentiality in #6 below).

### **How to Conduct Your Interviews**

The following are **ten guidelines** to follow that will make the conducting of your interviews most effective. These are listed in order to guide your time and actions:

1. Ask the church leadership to provide a host leader from the governance/leadership team that is there at all times to greet people as they arrive and put them at ease. You might also want to give them instructions to call interviewees if they do not show up on time.
2. As interviewees enter the room, introduce yourself, smile, greet them by their name, and confirm their role in the church. Ask them if they know why you are there at the church and then, no matter what they say, give them a very brief overview about how you have been asked to conduct what is called a church health assessment and that interviewing people from the church is a very important part of that.

3. Before you begin each interview say that you would like to pray to commit the time to the Lord, and then pray. Remain in a prayerful spirit throughout all of the interviews.
4. Use your prepared, tailored questions for this person or group. But, at the same time, be Spirit-led. For example, if in your previous interviews you have heard something 2-3 times, see if this person or group agrees with what you heard.
5. Promise them confidentiality, i.e., that you will not repeat something and assign their name to it, unless they bring forth a matter of morality that the leadership team must hear about.
6. Take notes. As you write this will do several things. It will help them see that you are interested. It will make them realize that you expect them to talk. It will also give you something to reference before you finalize your recommendations.
7. Watch for body language. People “say” more non-verbally than verbally. Do they understand what you are asking? Are they relaxed? Agitated? Do they maintain eye contact? What kind of tone of speech do they express? What are they saying by their posture?
8. Do not be surprised by emotional reactions. Some may get angry, or cry, or express remarkable joy. Be supportive and understanding as you seek to listen well and take notes.
9. Monitor your time and save time to be able to close with the last open-ended question stated above (“Is there anything that you hoped ...”). This may mean skipping some of your prepared questions. But it is better to ask the open-ended closing question and hear them out rather than checking off your prepared list.
10. Thank them for their time and input and move on to the next interview.

### **How to Use Your Interview Notes**

After 8-10 hours of interviews or more, you may have as much as 10 pages of notes or more. It is best to review these as quickly as possible while the conversations are fresh. If you are on an out-of-town consulting weekend, and you complete your interviews Saturday afternoon, plan to have some down time but then come back to your notes that same evening. As you scan through the notes, you are looking for the following:

- Do the notes confirm your preliminary recommendations? How?
- Do the notes soften what you thought you would recommend to the point that you should not recommend it?
- Do the notes lead you to somehow edit your previous recommendations somehow?
- Do your notes lead you to make a recommendation about the facility?
- Have you learned something from the interviews that calls for another recommendation you had not even considered before? What is that new recommendation?
- Do the notes suggest that you should reprioritize your recommendations? How?