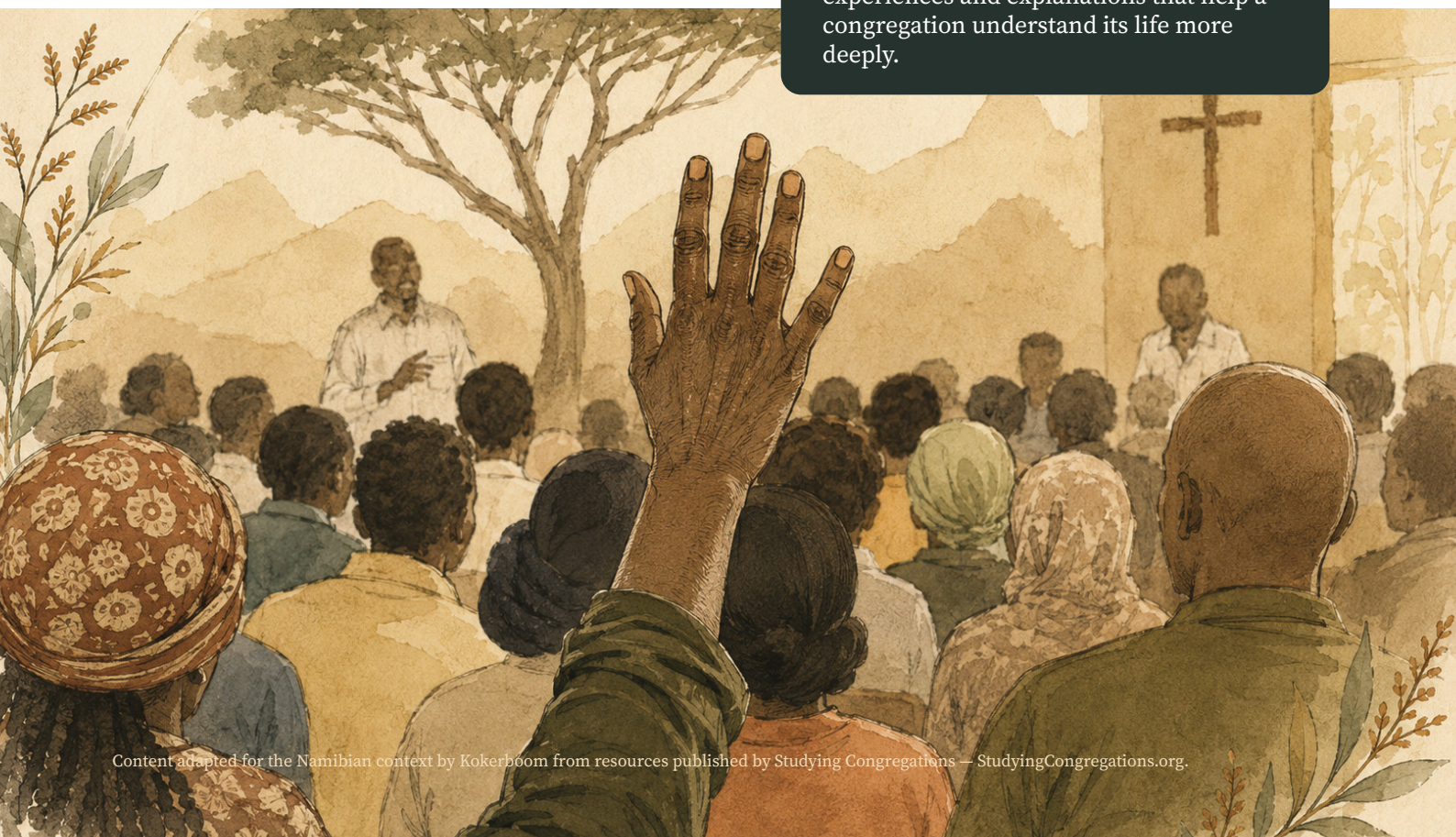


Asking Questions



Studying Congregations

Interviews allow people to share stories, experiences and explanations that help a congregation understand its life more deeply.





First, Ask Yourself...

Kokerboom

One of the best ways you can gain information from the members of your religious organization is to talk with them. Interviews allow participants to share stories, accounts, and explanations that can be valuable as you seek to understand how the organization really works.

Sometimes an interview is just an impromptu conversation before or after an event. You want to know more about what just happened or ask someone to orient you to what to expect. Perhaps you chat with someone about their history in the group or why it's important to them. These impromptu conversations may be only a few short minutes, but they should be guided by your curiosity and your effort to understand more deeply. And don't forget to include them in your notes.

Q: What questions should I ask?

The questions you want to ask depend on what you are interested in examining in your study. Perhaps you're interested in understanding involvement and commitment in the congregation. You might want to ask questions about how long the person has attended, what first brought them to the congregation, why they continued to stay, and what their favorite and least favorite things are. Think about the concept you want to tap and ask yourself how you would know it if you saw it. If you are interested in "activism," what kinds of behavior, interaction, events, or ideas would demonstrate a pattern of activism? And what questions might help you know more about what activism looks like for the people you are interviewing?

Q: Who should I interview?

If you have very specific bits of knowledge you need to fill in, interview the specific people who have that knowledge. Historical events? Interview the people who were there. Crucial decision? Interview the people on the decision making body. Experiences of newcomers? You get the picture!

If interviews are helping you to get the bigger picture of what this religious group is like, then you need to think about representativeness. First think about what you know about the ways people in the group may have different experiences. Perhaps it is generational, or highly involved people v marginal ones, or different ethnic groups. Then put together a list of potential interviewees that includes at least a few people from each of those subgroups.

Q: How many interviews should I conduct?

That depends a lot on your resources of time and money. To pass muster in most social scientific circles, you would need at least 40-50 interviews, but scheduling, transcribing, and fully analyzing that many can be formidable. If your aim is more local understanding than professional publications, make your judgements accordingly. But do be sure that you have heard from all the important subgroups and have more than one voice representing each.



Doing the Interview

Most interviews are recorded, but you will need to obtain the interviewee's permission before doing so and explain how the recording will be used. Will the person's information remain confidential? Will you summarise what you hear without identifying anyone? Will you use pseudonyms to protect participants' identities? Or will the interview be fully "on the record"?

Educational institutions may have formal requirements for obtaining consent from research participants, so be sure to follow the relevant procedures. If you are unfamiliar with the ethical considerations involved in research that may affect people's lives and reputations, consult the standard principles outlined in the Belmont Report.

Schedule the interview in a comfortable, quiet place and allow enough time for a relaxed conversation. Begin with a broad question that helps orient the discussion, and allow the conversation to guide how you proceed. It is useful to prepare your questions in advance and think about the general flow of the interview, but you do not need to read them word for word or ask them in a fixed order. If the participant answers question six while responding to question two, that is perfectly acceptable.

Remember that your role is to listen. Allow participants to offer examples and answer in ways that make sense to them. "Tell me a story about..." is often a helpful way to invite a specific example. You might ask:

"Tell me a story about how a member of the congregation connected with you when you first started attending."

At the end of the interview, thank the participant for their time and contribution. Explain what other research activities will follow and what kind of report or feedback they can expect. People may appreciate the opportunity to be heard more than you realise.

After the Interview

If the participant agreed to be recorded, decide how you will use the recording. With sufficient time and resources, you may choose to produce a full transcript. Otherwise, use the recording to prepare detailed notes and transcribe only the most significant sections.

As soon as possible after the interview, write down what you heard and review the recording to make sure it is complete. Technology can fail, so do not delay this step.



Some Alternatives

In some instances, you will want to interview a specific cross-section of people and get parallel responses to the same exact questions so you can do statistical analyses of the results. When you already have a fairly focused area of inquiry and have a good sense of the range of differences you are likely to find, you can be much more directed in your questions. In a “Structured Interview,” questions are planned, written in advance, and asked in that exact wording during the interview. These can be simple yes or no questions, or have a format that allows for an open-ended response. In a “Schedule-structured interview,” the interview questions are basically a verbal questionnaire, where there are set questions with a list of fixed responses. These types of interviews are regularly used in telephone polls or opinion surveys. This form is most useful if you have a lot of topics to cover in limited time, or if a substantial portion of your interview subjects have reading difficulties.

The approach recommended above is “Semi-structured,” in that you will have pre-planned, written questions, but you will expect and encourage variations in the order and content of the interview, as the occasion arises.

FOCUS GROUPS VERSUS INTERVIEWS

Focus groups and individual interviews have a lot in common — you’re interested in asking questions to a set of people, and want to hear their candid responses. Individual interviews allow the respondent the privacy to answer without others within the community judging his or her response. Focus groups, on the other hand, allow respondents to hear each other, spurring on discussion topics that an individual may not have thought of herself.

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Focus Groups

Sometimes focus groups are thought of as a quick way to interview several people at once, but they are more than that. Focus groups are the product of a collective effort and take on a life of their own. One response can elicit a memory from another. One viewpoint can spark a lively debate, with multiple ideas being expressed that might not come out in an individual interview.

Like interviews, focus groups can either follow a structured and focused interview protocol or be more open-ended and generalized (“Let’s talk about your impressions of worship in this congregation”). Either way, you are asking questions but also creating an event where people talk through ideas and experiences.

Size and composition.

A good focus group will generally have between 6 and 15 participants. It is usually helpful to have some variety among them. However, on some sensitive issues, you may want to limit participants to people who have shared a particular experience or belong to a particular subgroup. If you have reason to believe, for instance, that a group of newcomers is experiencing difficulty in being accepted, it may be helpful to convene a group where they can talk just with each other. See the interview tool for detailed instructions that will help you think about who to include and what questions to ask.

Planning the event.

Like an interview, think carefully about a comfortable time and place. Since this is a group event, however, you may want to include a meal or refreshments.

A good focus group needs a good leader who can encourage participation and keep the conversation on track. That means both familiarity with the research goals and the intended protocol of questions and skill in group dynamics.

If you want to record the event, be sure to test out your equipment in advance. Recording a group can be tricky. And remember to start your conversation by explaining the purpose of the research, how you will use the information, and getting permission to record.

Getting the record straight.

Whether or not you record, you will want to have notes about what was said as well as about the group dynamics. That means that you will also need a recorder who is neither the leader nor a participant who can take good notes. Even if you are making a sound or video recording of the event, you will want notes that help you identify speakers and add the subtleties that sound alone may miss.

Add the notes and transcripts from your focus group to the other data you are gathering. Reviewing all your notes for themes will help you begin to answer the larger questions you are pursuing.