

USING SURVEYS TO GUIDE DECISION MAKING

In *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations*, Cynthia Woolever points out the many factors that can drive the congregation's decisions, including its understanding of theology, guidance from favorite Bible passages, God's Spirit present in discernment and prayer, and traditions particular to the congregation and its history. Unfortunately, a fifth factor, information or data about the congregation and its community, often gets left out. Data-driven decision making can often steer the assembled faithful away from disastrous results.¹

When to Use a Survey

A survey is one tool for getting basic data about the congregation or its surrounding community. Surveys are questionnaires designed to provide relevant facts about a group that leaders care about and perhaps work with every day. Surveys can provide basic facts about the customers who use a program or service, or they may provide a sense of what they think about different options to improve it.² Before designing a survey, first try to determine whether it's possible to get the information using another method. For instance, web-based demographic services such as Mission Insite can provide congregations with demographic information about the community without the need for a survey. However, if you have more particular questions need to be answered, a survey may be just the thing.

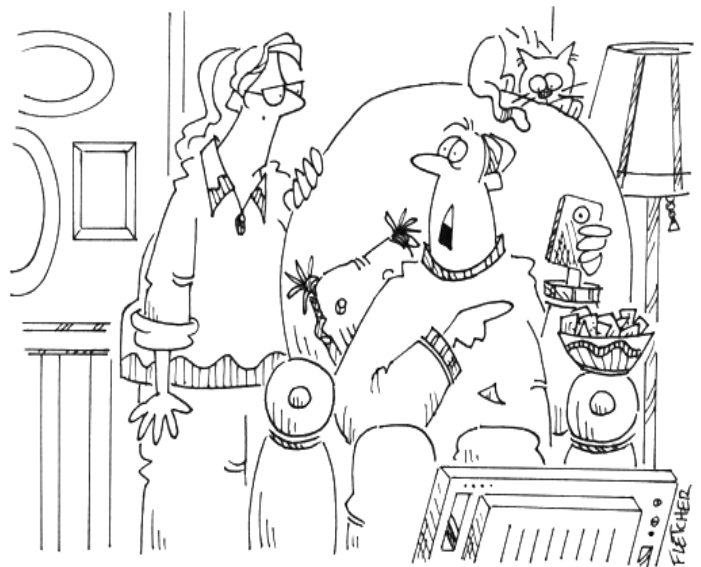
Creating Your Survey

Surveys can be done by phone, email, or in person. For a group of thirty or more, a simple survey can be used to gather the needed information. It need not be elaborate. A paper and pencil survey, administered in person, might be sufficient in many cases. Online platforms such as Survey Monkey, Survey Console, or Survey Gizmo can provide services for email surveys and also provide

assistance in designing surveys. Survey Monkey provides extensive resources for online surveys, including how to design a survey, how to get people to respond, and how to evaluate responses. Consult them or ask an expert before designing the survey.

The following suggestions may help in getting started.

1. See whether someone else has already gathered the information, which may determine whether a survey is needed and what should be asked.
2. Talk to persons who already have strong opinions about a given topic and who can help with shaping the questions.
3. Get advice from a polling expert or visit an online polling platform to get help in writing the questions.
4. Do a focus group or talk one-on-one with several persons to get a better sense of what to ask.



"IT'S A PHONE SURVEY ABOUT
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YOU WANT TO HANDLE THIS?"

5. Determine how to get the information to potential respondents—in person, by phone, or by email.
6. Select a target audience and find ways to sample this group so that the results are representative.
7. Do a pilot survey to test the questions.³

When designing the survey, be sure to group similar questions so that the survey is easy to follow. Ask the same question in a series of surveys in order to build a baseline. Keep the survey as short as possible, and ease into it by making the first question easy to answer, saving difficult or sensitive questions for later. Be specific and explore only one idea at a time, clarifying anything that could be interpreted in multiple ways. Ask only questions that are relevant to the topic, and avoid yes and no questions, which often fail to capture nuances in people's views. Avoid using a matrix, which is a survey design that requires people to focus on multiple questions at once. Use words, not numbers, in designing answer choices. For instance, "slightly likely" or "extremely likely" are better than numbers like two and four to indicate preference.⁴

Deciding Who to Survey

Deciding who receives the survey depends on how large your group is and what you are trying to determine. If your group is 250 or fewer, you should survey the full population by making sure that everyone receives the survey. If the group is larger, it is better to sample, or select from, the entire population. If so, then each person should theoretically have an equal chance to get the form. One idea: flip a coin or toss a die to choose where to begin on the list, and then select every second, third, or fourth person until reaching the end. Alternatively, undertake what is known as a stratified sample. Subdivide the group into distinct subgroups (for example, by age, race, where they live, and how long they have been using the program or service) and then select persons from each subgroup using a method that allows you to randomize. This method works well with a highly diverse population.

Try to avoid at all costs what is referred to as an "accidental sample." For instance, imagine choosing to survey whatever group happens to be at hand, such as the next twenty people who walk through the door or a group that gathers at a particular location each day. While the selection may seem random, it can be impossible to tell whether the group has gathered ran-

domly or has a specific reason for being where they are at the moment. In this case, they constitute a distinct subgroup and not a sample representative of the whole population.⁵

Preparing Your Report

The main purpose of a survey, or any other data-gathering tool, is to guide decision making. A final report can inform the process by explaining clearly the relationships between the data and the issues at stake, anticipating questions that members might ask, and proposing options for moving forward. In presenting to a group, you can use graphs, tables, or charts to summarize information. Additionally, the narrative part of the report, cast in the congregation's own language and grounded in its experience, may carry more weight than numbers alone. It's important to keep detailed statistical reporting to a minimum in the group presentation.⁶

Data Is Key

We are all familiar with surveys. Who hasn't been invited to take a survey after joining an online community, purchasing a product, or visiting the doctor? Yet familiarity with this tool might cause it to be easily overlooked. A narrowly focused survey designed around a locally relevant set of questions may provide just enough information about the congregation, its subgroups, or the surrounding community to avoid costly mistakes or misunderstandings.

1. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why, Second Edition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 8.

2. Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger, *Public Participation for the 21st Century* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2015), 217.

3. "Survey," The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, <http://ncdd.org/rc/item/1559/>.

4. "The Nuts and Bolts of Creating Surveys," SurveyMonkey, <https://tinyurl.com/y7f4f7bg>.

5. Scott Thumma, "Methods for Congregational Study," in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, ed. Nancy Ammerman et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 218–20.

6. For more on analysis and presentation of data, Thumma, "Methods for Congregational Study," in *Studying Congregations*, 229–239.

* This article has been adapted from Dana Horrell's book, *Engage! Tools for Ministry in the Community* (Fortress Press, 2019).