

# WHAT IS A 1-1/RELATIONAL MEETING?

**And why it's a non-negotiable community practice for ministry leaders.**

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I get asked a lot if there is a common characteristic among the successful church planters and redevelopment leaders that I know or coach.

And there absolutely is.

In my opinion, it has nothing to do with their theological or political location, Enneagram type, race, gender, geography, or sexual orientation – the folks I work with are wildly diverse in those ways.

So, what is one crucial thing that all of these leaders share?

**They know how to build real, no-BS relationships with unaffiliated people.**

They have a natural capacity or a learned competency for authentic connection with folks who are not part of their religious organizations – the “nones” and “dones” that our recent studies are so rightly obsessed with.

## **EVERYBODY KNOWS THE RIGHT ANSWER, BUT...**

That relationships are essential is, of course, not an esoteric bit of knowledge. We all know that “relationships” is the right answer.

### **You give a one-question exam:**

- 1) What is the church?
  - (a) Relationships
  - (b) Buildings
  - (c) Money
  - (d) My own agenda and rigidity projected onto other people and God

You give that exam and everybody gets 100%. Everybody knows the right answer is (a) Relationships, but here's the thing: **not everybody knows how to do the right answer.** To be blunt, many lay and clergy leaders simply do not know how to connect with people outside of their church cultures.

### **But here's the good news: the great majority of folks can learn how.**

This article has the singular goal of teaching one basic practice to shift your ministry orientation outwards, toward building new relationships with new people. This practice is called the relational meeting, or the 1-1.

## COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND THE 1-1

I learned about relational meetings as a young pastor, just a couple years out of seminary, when I attended a weeklong community organizing training. Community organizing is a multi-layered process focused on increasing the participation and power of diverse people in a community in order to generate collective will for social change.

The relational meeting, a fundamental part of community organizing, is a short (30-45 minute), one-to-one, in-person conversation meant to uncover, explore, and share the animating stories, core values, and motivating interests of each conversation partner.

**The goal of a 1-1 is to figure out the “why” of the person you’re talking to by inviting them to tell you.** On an average day, we spend a lot of our time in “what” conversations: we exchange pleasantries, rehearse our resumes, report our track records, seek or provide advice, etc. That’s all well and good, but the relational meeting is not any of those things. It’s not a commercial for our new project, an interview, or a pastoral counseling session, either.

A relational meeting is a brief, in-depth exploration into why someone is the way they are: **what they give a damn about and why, what keeps them up at night and why, what they hope against hope for in life and why.** It’s also an opportunity to share those same things about yourself and to look for overlaps. And maybe, depending on the connection, perhaps eventually at another 1-1 in the future, to explore whether you might work together on a common project. Urban Village Church, the multi-site congregation I helped to plant, used the relational meeting practice to dream, launch, and expand a new way of being church in Chicago. Over and over again, lay and clergy planters sat down for 1-1s at coffee shops in neighborhoods across the city. And they still do. We’re talking thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of relational meetings over their first 7 years. The 1-1 has become Urban Village Church’s standard way of discerning vision, practicing evangelism and discipleship, and engaging mission and justice. For the church planters I now coach, relational meetings are a non-negotiable.

## HOW TO ACTUALLY DO A 1-1

Here are the basics: a blend of what I’ve learned over the past 16 years of ministry from community organizations like Industrial Areas Foundation and Community Renewal Society.

## SETTING UP THE MEETING

- 1) Make a list of everyone you know in your city, town, village, or whatever your ministry context is.** That’s right: why not start with

everyone? Put everyone you know on your list. (This was a suggestion I got years ago from the Rev. Junius Dotson, a church planter who is now the General Secretary of Discipleship Ministries, an agency of The United Methodist Church). These will be the people you reach out to first. If the idea of that list is simply too overwhelming, make a list of the leaders of important organizations in your community – the schools, social service providers, businesses, cultural groups, etc.

**2) Choose ten of those people and email (or call) them to ask for a meeting.**

Invite a range of people. Offer your credential and your connection, clarify what you're inviting them to and why, and ask them to respond if they're available. Some of them will immediately respond; some of them won't. It's totally fine to follow up on an email invitation a week later. Schedule the meeting and the meeting location.

Here's one of my basic invitation templates:

*Hi, Principal Morris, I'm Trey Hall and I'm a new pastor in the neighborhood. My friend Emily Jones (insert the name of your personal connection, if there is one) knows you and mentioned some of the cool things you're doing at Coleman Elementary School. As pastor of \_\_\_\_\_, I'm really interested in meeting up with folks who are doing cool things in the city, and I wonder if you'd have 45 minutes to grab a cup of coffee and talk sometime over the next month. My treat. Let me know what your calendar's like and we'll find a time that works. Peace, Trey*

## DURING THE MEETING

**3) At the beginning of the meeting, restate your credential and context, and be clear that you'll honor the time set aside.** *Thanks again for taking 45 minutes out of your day to talk. As I said when I contacted you, I'm part of a church that takes community relationships very seriously, and Emily Jones told me that you're someone I should get to know.*

**4) Then move into the main part of the meeting: the conversation itself.** Resist the temptation to default to the aforementioned conversation patterns that the relational meeting is not. Your goal is for the conversation to be memorable, to stand out from the hundreds of other conversations that happen in a week. **So ask good questions, follow up with more good questions that invite folks to consider the "why" of the answers they just gave, and share meaningfully about your own commitments.**

At first, navigating the balance of deep listening, probing questioning, follow-up, and story sharing will feel clunky. But don't worry. The more relational meetings you do, they more natural they will become to your practice of

ministry.

Here are some potential starter questions, culled from trainings over the years:

- *Tell me the story of how you became a \_\_\_\_\_. Biography is best place to start, but push hard on the particulars; don't let it stay superficial.*
- *What does that mean for your life now?*
- *What's the main thing you're up to in your organization?*
- *Who are your s/heroes?*
- *You seem angry/passionate/convicted about that. Where did that come from?*
- *What are you going to do about that anger/passion/conviction?*
- *If money were no object, what would you do?*
- *What's next for you?*
- Go for a spark or a probing question that risks troubling the easy information exchange that we're used to. For example, someone might risk asking a pastor: *"I've read some studies that say the church is increasingly irrelevant to young people and will be dead in another generation. Do you think that's true?"* That's a very different kind of question from "tell me about your church." Ask big questions that have punch and verve.

**Don't forget: during the conversation, you should find natural places to speak about your story, interests, and values. The 1-1 is not an interview.**

## ENDING THE MEETING

**5) Five minutes before the end of the meeting, you'll want to move to finish meaningfully.** It's okay – actually, it's great! – if you have to finish a really good conversation that could go on for hours. Resist the temptation to stay at the table for a long time. Finishing the meeting on a high note increases the likelihood that you'll meet again in the future.

- Ask your conversation partner if they have any last questions for you.
- **This is essential: ask your conversation partner if they know anyone else that you should be talking to.** Ask the question and then be quiet and wait. More often than not, they'll suggest a couple people. Then ask if they'd be willing to e-connect the two of you. This is how you get more 1-1s for the future.
- If you sense that there is some potential for future connection with your conversation partner, mention how interesting the meeting has been and then ask if you could follow up in a couple months for another conversation.

## AFTER THE MEETING

- 6) **Record your conversation partner's basic information** with whatever technology you use to keep track of contacts. Note any compelling things or important resonances that that came up in the 1-1.
- 7) **Follow up with an email the next day** to thank your conversation partner and see if anyone else has come to mind that you should reach out to. If they haven't yet e-connected you with the people they mentioned at the end of the 1-1, ask them directly to do that.
- 8) **As you're doing 1-1s regularly, figure out how to scan and organize** the increasing "data" you're getting from the meetings in order to discern next steps for current and future projects.
- 9) **Repeat.** Keep reaching out with more invitations for more 1-1s. You should never run out of people to talk with.

## SO, HOW WILL YOU SPEND YOUR TIME?

I promise you that if you begin to do 1-1s as a weekly practice of ministry or leadership, you will become a better leader.

**I'm not being hyperbolic when I tell you that I don't know of one person who didn't grow significantly when they started doing 1-1s on a regular basis. Many of their churches and organizations started growing in numbers and depth, too.**

I *do* know lots of clergy and lay leaders who don't do 1-1s. They spend more time in their offices, behind their computer screens, managing their social media streams, than they do in the community – and the result is that they and their congregations suffer.

In most contexts, there is a "positive" correlation between the amount of time the leader spends on solely internal matters and the inability of their new project to launch or the decline of their current project.

When I train clergy groups on relational meetings, invariably I hear from some people that they don't have the time to be out doing 1-1s, that they are unbelievably busy, that such a practice is for those who have the luxury of spare time or different kinds of churches. I try to gently call BS on that claim. (It's interesting that these people are usually the same leaders who are "too busy" to spend serious time putting together a compelling sermon every week. One wonders what they do have time for). The truth is, of course, that we each have the same amount of time as everyone else in the world. And, speaking for clergy, it's largely us who decides how

we'll spend it.

**What would it look like for you to build relational meetings into your standard operating procedure as a leader?**

Right now, do an honest assessment of how you generally spend your work or ministry time each week. Break it down into percentages. Take a good, honest look at your stewardship of time, and see how you might start by giving 10% of your work week to 1-1s. That'd be like four or five 1-1s a week.

As you do more 1-1s, you'll certainly build new relationships in the community, but you'll also find other parts of your work coming alive with an energy and insight that wasn't there before.

- That tricky sermon you're architecting? Instead of sitting behind your computer for another hour, do a 1-1 and see how the sermon gets unlocked.
- That long-term mission plan? Instead of writing it all by yourself, do some 1-1s to see how others would frame the vision.
- That new project that you hope will take off? Instead of developing the blueprint with an internal committee, do some 1-1s in the community you're hoping the new project will take off in. See how that changes the focus and timeline.

Over my years of ministry, I've developed a personal mantra:

***When in doubt, do a 1-1.***

It's never failed me yet.

Trey Hall is a part of The Epicenter Group. He coaches planters and pioneers in the US, UK, and Europe, and is currently helping the Methodist Church in Britain develop strategy and practice for new church starts. For more practices and reflections around church planting and redevelopment in post-Christendom/post-Christian contexts, check out Trey's blog: [recoveringcontrolfreak.org](http://recoveringcontrolfreak.org).