



Interviews in church services

TN16 Training Notes series: Communication

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A public interview can be a powerful means of communication, as TV chat shows prove.

A good interview is visual, live, and all about people. It is partly unscripted, thereby giving it a certain sense of excitement – anything can happen next. The people being interviewed, or what they are talking about, are chosen because they are of specific interest. And the chemistry of interviewer and interviewee interacting with each other makes for compelling viewing.

So why do many churches fail to use interviews in services? Here is a simple guide to their value, and how to make them successful.

As an occasional variation from solo speech, live interviews can be highly effective in allowing people to be involved in what is being put across (the eavesdrop concept), and so learn from and apply what they hear.

There are many possible uses. Here are four examples:

- You have a visiting mission partner wanting to explain briefly about their work and to encourage people to pray and give. A dynamic interview can have much more power than a short talk, especially if the person is not gifted at speaking.
- You arrange a spot in the service where a small group of young people report back on a recent weekend-away or other event. A good interviewer can bring out the kind of information that people want to hear and help the young people feel they have achieved their aim.
- A special church meeting is coming up and you want a really good turn-out. A good 5-minute interview with the Minister or others will grab people's attention and interest far more than a typical announcement.

- Why does a sermon have to be a monologue? An occasional 20-minute interview of one or perhaps two people on the biblical topic for that day will be a refreshing change, and may well prove highly effective in helping people to learn.

But perhaps you have heard church interviews that were painful, stilted, or which simply did not work. Although the medium is one churches should exploit, it does not follow that you will use it well. Most church interviews fail to reach their potential, all because the interviewer has not learned a few key lessons.

A good interviewer can get something very worthwhile out of almost anyone, so that is why these notes focus on interviewer rather than interviewee. To be a good interviewer requires a certain skill, some experience and an understanding of technique. What follows can at least provide some help on the last of these points.

Five suggestions for the interviewer

1 Sort the practical details

Almost anything that goes wrong when you are up-front communicates more powerfully than the message you are trying to put across.

So if anyone has forgotten to switch on their radio microphone, if the fixed mics are at the wrong height when you interview 9 year old Laura, if you take 45 cringe-making seconds to get the group correctly arranged on the dais, or if you sit in arm chairs so low that only the front row of the congregation can see you, you have a problem.

So, think! What needs to be where? Who needs to know exactly what is happening when? Have you got the right equipment and layout? Can people see your faces? What might go wrong?

It is the interviewer's responsibility to check all this (unless your church has some kind of stage manager). Rehearse if necessary – especially if the interviewee is not used to your building or has never done anything like this before. But beware over-rehearsal or everything feels unnatural; which leads to the next point.

2 Relax those taking part

Memorising lines or reading a script has no place in an interview. So the whole thing is risky – that is part of its value.

But, to go well, all parties need to behave naturally. Otherwise you end up with a stilted conversation that lacks the magic of a good interview. That is not easy in front of a congregation.

The interviewer needs to relax the interviewee(s). If I am asking the questions, I tell the other person beforehand that if they dry up or talk too much or muck it up in any way, I'm the one who has to sort it all out on the spot. So there is no need for them to worry! All that is happening is that they are going to chat with me. That is what it is all about, so focus on me not on the congregation. I'm the only one who has to worry!

But if I am not relaxed myself, it will show in my mannerisms and in my voice; then I am hardly going to relax them. This comes with practice, but my aim is to look at the interviewee all the time (see No. 5), smile encouragement to bring them out, and help them forget the congregation is there.

3 **Never script the interview in advance**

This may sound scary but is essential. The interviewee should be told the main questions the interviewer will probably ask, or at least the first few, so things can get under way; but it comes across much more powerfully if it is a natural conversation between two people, rather than a play.

The interviewer needs of course to have the main structure in mind, especially if you only have four or five minutes to do the whole thing in a church service. You need to have done your homework carefully, knowing far more about the other person than will come out in the interview itself.

But given thorough preparation, try not to use any notes because these ruin the dynamic. If you cannot remember three basic questions, write them on the palm of your hand! But there must be freedom to ask a question that arises out of the previous answer, rather than stick to the next one on a pre-arranged list.

4 **Keep each contribution short**

An interview is a conversation, not a cue for long speeches. One long answer to a question ruins the dynamic.

It is the interviewer's responsibility to cut in if the interviewee is going off on a tangent (listen to the Today programme on Radio 4), bring out a clearer point if what is being said seems confused, and move on once a point has been made. It is not a good interview if one person asks 'So, Mable, whereabouts in Africa are you off to next week?' followed by a five-minute reply.

The one asking the questions needs to know when to cut in (a prearranged hand signal may be helpful for some interviewees), how to change the questions if they are not eliciting much in the way of reply, and what kind of follow-on questions to ask (these cannot be prepared of course). Which means the interviewer has to listen all the time and react on the spot.

5 **Speak to each other**

I have left the most important lesson of all to last. I rarely see this done properly in churches but it transforms the interview.

Interviewer and interviewee should face each other and ***always speak to each other***. The interviewee never needs to turn to speak to the congregation, and the interviewer only does so for any introduction or closing explanations. Watch the professionals if you don't believe me.

An interview is a private conversation with key-hole listeners, not speeches to an audience. What makes it so fascinating is the chemistry between the two people. This is ruined if either party turns to the audience and addresses them. The congregation should not be there!

If I am interviewing I tell my interviewee that I shall be willing them to keep looking at me. If they glance away I shall be using every trick I can think of to bring them back to me again (body language, use of their name, interrupting if necessary). While they are speaking I shall be using facial expressions to show my interest, agreement, surprise or whatever and, above all, smiling encouragement at them.

Interviewing is a skill. I would expect a church to use a small group of interviewers rather than sharing it round to let lots of people have a go.

It needs someone who has done their homework, has ensured that all the practical details are right, and has told the interviewee what they need to do. The interviewer should be listening all the time, be coming in with on-the-spot questions or comments to keep the conversation alive, and be perfectly relaxed and seen to be enjoying it all.

Handled well it can be compelling. If you do not already use this in your church services, give it a try from time to time in a number of different settings. But learn these simple lessons so you will be off to a good start.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN16. They cover one aspect of a possible training event for churches on communication in speech, or on up-front presentations in church services. See Article A19, *Speaking so that people listen*, for leaders and preachers, plus Training Notes TN1, *Preparing to read the lesson*, TN47, *Breathing life into the intercessions*, TN93, *And now for the notices*, and TN123, *Speaking-to-camera tips*, for advice on related topics..

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN16 under Communication.

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