Tending the Garden: Planning and Customizing your Event

In this video, Imagining America member and UNI Communication and Media professor, Danielle McGeough provides guidance about how to decide why and who to gather.

Why: Decide why you are gathering—commit to a bold and strong purpose.

The goals outlined at the start of this packet should provide you with some guidance as you commit to your purpose; however, you may choose to create your own purpose for your particular storytelling circle.

To do this:

- Give your group a name and write a description detailing the mission of the group. (For example: Gather to Grow The CME’s Storytelling Circle for Healing from Racial Trauma).
- Make the purpose of your gathering specific, unique, and disputable. Three strategies for doing this are:
  - Ask why you’re doing it. Every time you get to another deeper reason, ask why again. You may use the worksheet at the end of this section to develop a why that is up to seven layers deep.
  - Ask: What are the larger needs in the world/community for your gathering to address?
  - Reverse engineer an outcome: Think of what you want to be different because you gathered, and work backward from that outcome (Parker, 2019).

Who: Decide on the size of your gathering as well as who you will invite to your gathering.

Recommendations regarding size:

- Eight to twelve people is an optimum number to engender a lively and inclusive conversation.
- Storytelling circles with twelve to twenty people still allow you to build trust and intimacy.

Who to invite to your gathering:

- Consider your purpose. Invite people who will help you fulfill the gathering’s purpose.
- A few notes on exclusion:
  - Thoughtful exclusion helps clarify the purpose of your gathering and communicates to guests the importance of the purpose.
  - When explaining to people why they aren’t invited, go to your purpose. A purpose is not personal.
  - Good exclusion activates diversity. In her book, The Art of Gathering, Priya Parker explains: “Diversity needs to be activated. It can be used or it can just be there” (p. 45).

Where/How: In this video, Dr. McGeough discusses face-to-face versus virtual settings and how to make the most of where you host your story circle. Decide whether the gathering will be face-to-face or a virtual gathering.

If face-to-face, consider where you will gather. Choose spaces and locations that resonate with your deeper goals. Consider these aspects of a the space.

- Perimeter: Gatherings need perimeters. A contained space for gathering allows people to relax, and it helps create the alternative world that a gathering can, at its best, achieve.
- Area: The size of a gathering’s space should serve your purpose. A space that is too large or too small will make your participants uncomfortable.
If your gathering is virtual, consider how to create a sense of place within the virtual setting. Many of the tips for creating meaningful face-to-face gatherings also apply to virtual gatherings. Here are a few tips specific to virtual gatherings:

- Prior to the gathering, send participants an email that clearly states expectations for participation as well as some basic information about the platform used. (Example: We will mute participants unless they are speaking).
- Encourage people to keep their video on. Set this expectation prior to the meeting. Sometimes, however, participants have to turn off their video due to weak Internet connectivity or for privacy reasons. Make “video on” the expectation and check in individually with those who might be having connectivity issues. For those with privacy issues, you may provide ideas about how to maintain privacy: face the camera toward a wall or provide instructions on how to change the Zoom background.
- Whatever virtual platform you use, provide instructions to help participants set their desired name. You may wish to ask all participants to set only a first name or invite participants to include their preferred pronouns, neighborhood, or other information after their name.
- Consider playing music to set the tone before the storytelling circle begins.
- Have a set of questions that invite casual conversation before the gathering begins. (Example: Tell me a highlight of your day).

When: Considering when to host is as important as where and how. Select a time that will work best for the desired participants.

- How will the choice of when the gathering takes place affect who participates?
- Who will be at work at this time?
- Who will have church or community obligations?
- Can pairing your gathering with another event increase access? For example, could more working mothers participate if the event were to take place as a part of a school function?

Citations
Seven Layers of Why specific, unique, and disputable Purpose

Instructions: Begin by answering the first question, Why are you hosting this story circle? Then, with your answer in mind, ask why is this important? You do not need to go all seven layers deep. Keep asking why until you have reached a purpose that is specific, unique and disputable.

Why have you decided to host this story circle?

Why is this important?

And why is that important?

And why is that important?

And why is that important?

And why is that important?