

# Reading Guide and Discussion Questions for: The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters By Priya Parker, Penguin Publishing Group

## Outcome of reading together

Why: We gather and host - a lot.

Outcome: Identify the factors that go into gathering successfully/purposefully and transformational.

Develop a shared language and framework around gathering (so can help one another and cong)

Implement: Lean into the intentionality and purpose - what outcomes are we seeking to achieve. Tool for managing multiple values.

Equipping leaders in the congregation to use this framework.

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## Chapter 1

**Key Point: A Category is not a purpose.** A category can masquerade as a purpose.

In church when does category masquerade as a purpose (especially ritualized) - p. 8 and p. 11

People attach meeting to the gathering and to the form of the gathering

It is powerful when the form and the purpose align.

Current vision/mission statement: which/how do the values help us or not in making decisions?

### **Discussion:**

In our congregation, what are some examples of a category masquerading as a purpose?

What are some examples of intentional gatherings that have a clear purpose?

What are some caught in between?

What are factors that contribute to the difference:

**Key Point: Commit to gathering about something (have a purpose).**

## How to develop and test the purpose of a gathering:

**Is it compelling and interesting - stick it's next out a little bit? (p. 17)**

**Does it refuse to be everything to everyone?**

What are the ingredients for a sharp, bold, meaningful gathering purpose?

**Specificity** p. 17

**Uniqueness** p. 18 - 19, the passover example

**Disputable** - 19 help make decisions (specificity)

## Key Point: Moving from the what to the why (p. 21)

**Zoom out (connect to a larger purpose... meaning) (p. 21)**

**Drill Down** - drill the why until it helps design (p. 22 and the chart)

**What larger need of the world does your/the gathering address? p. 23**

Reverse engineer an outcome - p. 23... *how will we be altered by the experience?*

When there really is no purpose... then just hangout and be casual.

Discussion: What is our version of that - *just hang out?* (24)

## The Chart (p. 25-26)

### Two Challenges to gathering with purpose: Multi-tasking and Modesty

Half-purposes (articulated and unarticulated) that make a gathering try do many things  
Vs Something.

Whom am I (modesty) and not wanting to impose (p. 31)

#### **Discussion:**

At our church, what are some examples of multi-tasking and getting watered down?

What are some examples of modesty and not wanting to impose?

What are factors that help move past this?

## Conclusion: Purpose is your bouncer (p. 33)

**Discussion:** case study with a gathering in a ministry area using the 1st section of the assessment tool. Share with the group. – 2 groups and share: (not do in staff)

## Art of Gathering - Chapter Two: Close Doors

### Part One: Who is this for?

You will have begun to gather with purpose when you learn to exclude with purpose...The thoughtful gatherer understands that inclusion can in fact be uncharitable, and exclusion generous.

#### 1. Who is this for?

Who is this gathering for first?

Who not only fits but helps fulfill the gathering's purpose.

#### 2. Who is this not for?

Who threatens the purpose?

Who, despite being irrelevant to the purpose, do you feel obliged to invite? *Bob*

In trying not to offend, you fail to protect the gathering itself and the people in it...When I talk about generous exclusion, I am speaking of ways of bounding a gathering that allow the diversity in it to be heightened and sharpened, rather than diluted in a hodgepodge of people.

#### 3. Whom should we invite and why?

What is the match? Are they wanting to attend for the right reasons?

Do they really have a genuine interest in connecting with this community/gathering/purpose?

With certain types of gatherings, over-including can keep connections shallow because there are so many different lines through which people could possibly connect that it can become hard to meaningfully activate any of them.

### Discussion:

*In our church, where is employing these criteria easier and more difficult?*

*What conflicting values make this a challenge (or potential reframe)*

*How do we exclude well?*

Using a gathering to activate - (diversity, relationships...to activate purpose)

Where do we see this at OSLC?

Announcement and Invitations: Defining, criteria for use, and how to use together.

#### 4. How many people should we invite ? (pg 51)

- 6 Conducive to intimacy, high levels of sharing, and discussion through storytelling.
- 12-15 Small enough to build trust and intimacy. Large enough to offer a diversity of opinion and to allow for mystery and intrigue or constructive unfamiliarity.  
*The table moment - no longer fit around a table.*
- 30 Starts to feel like a party. Has a distinctive crackle of energy and sense of possibility. Generally too big for a single conversation.
- 150 Ideal conference size. Intimacy and trust is still palpable at the level of the whole group and before it becomes an audience. Everyone can still meet everybody and is the natural size of a tribe.

What is the impact on growth, connecting people and group size at OSLC (small groups, worship, formation ministries - what have we experienced).

#### Part Two: Where - A venue is a nudge

##### 1. What is the script of our space?

The environment should serve the purpose...the people walk into the space will immediately fall into a type of behavior. Figuring out the venue is about deciding how you want to nudge those present to be the fullest versions of themselves and the best guests.

##### 2. Does our chosen space embody the reason for our convening?

(Alternatively: How can the chosen space embody the reason for our convening? – how might the room be reconfigured/redesigned?) When a location inspires a client and makes them feel closer to their purpose, it makes my job as a facilitator much easier, as they are already halfway there.

##### 3. How can our space displace people?

Simply put, how does this space break people out of their habits and ordinary routine? How does the space contribute to a sense that something special is about to happen and create a sense of expectation?

#### 4. Are there good perimeters in our space?

Gatherings need perimeters. A space for gathering works best when it is contained. Make sure the “energy isn’t leaking out.” A contained space for a gathering allows people to relax, and it helps to create the alternative world.

#### 5. Does the size of the gathering’s space serve our purpose?

Is it too big? Too small? How can we use furniture, white boards, decoration, etc. to adjust the space to feel more appropriate? Or, is there another space that would work better? Would it make sense to use different spaces for different parts of the gathering?

**6. Density** What is the appropriate density for the gathering/space - and shifts in the gathering? (chart on 69). Square feet of your party space by the number to get your target number of guests to get a vibe:

	Sophisticated	Lively	Hot
Dinner Party	20 sq ft	15	N/A
Cocktail Party	12	10	8
Into the night/dancing party	8	6	5

If you have 400 square feet and want a sophisticated dinner party - then 20 people, if you have 400 square feet and want a hot dance party = 80 people.

#### Discussion:

1. What are the scripts of our spaces?
2. How do our perimeters hold or leak energy and (flex with #'s, type of event)
3. What are our space assets and challenges when gathering
4. What are some things we do intuitively with our space to address this...

Quote page 54: The room is doing 80% of the job.

Where are some areas that we leverage space to help fulfill purpose, where does our space create some challenges?

## Chapter 3 - Art of Gathering

**Don't be a chill host: The desire to host while being non-invasive.**

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**Abdicating leadership** (hosting half-way through)

**Generous Authority** A willingness to be disliked in order to make guests have the best experience of the gathering.

**Don't leave enforcement to your guests.**

**Protecting your guests**

Anger is focused and Gratitude is diffused

Anticipating and intercepting people's tendencies when they are not considering the betterment of the whole of the group or the experience (p. 86) – warding it off.

**Equalize your guests**

**Connect your guests**

**Authority turns ungenerous**

Factors that can lead into this:  
Whose needs are being met? (multiple needs)

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**Discussion:**

An experience of being hosted really well

In our context, what values or factors can lead to challenges in hosting as Priya suggests.

Are there certain gathering forms that are easier/harder for this in our context?

Navigating hosting when we have multiple roles.

Our context:: Examples of what's worked and not worked

*Page 105: if you are going to hold your guests captive, you better do it well*

## Art of Gathering: Chapter 4 - Transport to an Alternate World

Gatherings should transport guests to a temporary alternative world.

Pop-Up Rules vs Etiquette:

- Pop-up rules are perhaps the new etiquette, more suited to modern realities.
- Rule-based gatherings, controlling as they may seem, bring new freedom and openness to gatherings.
- In an etiquette-based gathering, the ways of behaving flow from your identity and define who you are. In a rules-based gathering, the behaviors are temporary.
- Etiquette can serve a purpose to maintain pleasantness and politeness and good behavior. But sometimes as a particular etiquette code grows entrenched in a culture, it crowds the possibility of other ways of behaving that might be more appropriate for certain moments.
- Whereas etiquette can foster a sense of repression, gathering with rules can allow for boldness and experimentation.
- Etiquette is about sustaining unchanging norms, pop-up rules are about trying stuff out.
- Etiquette allows people to gather because they are the same. Pop-up rules (a rules-based gathering) allows people to gather because they are different - yet open to having the same experience.
- The proper use of rules can help you get so much more out of a gathering because it can help temporarily change behavior.
- Rules are also a gamble... it's a risk into creativity and freedom (rigidity for freedom)

Discussion:

Where have we experienced pop-up rules (or an alternative setting that naturally creates them) and what was it like? What are some pop-up rules that have become cultural/more than just 1x. Becomes what you do at that place/gathering.

Viral = pop-up rule that gets traction

In Church::

Tradition/Etiquette

New people to Church

How to practice pop-up rules/when

Sharing the love of Christ to transform lives - and pop-up rules

## **Phones (p. 132)**

It's rare for groups of people to do things together for a sustained amount of time. We all carry with us the technical capacity (a smartphone) to be anywhere, to check out of the present time or space. This means we could always be doing anything. So the active choice to do *one* thing and to do it with a fixed set of people is significant.

**That's the point and the magic. In a world of infinite choices, choosing one thing is the revolutionary act. Imposing that restriction can actually be liberating. Actually choosing to do this.**

## Art of Gathering - Chapter 5 Never Start a Funeral with Logistics

Discussion: This chapter connects to a lot of what we do on a regular basis. After reading and discussing, in your ministry area (our ministry area) - identify a few things to specifically practice and report back - Create a case study for ourselves.

### Priming: Before your event starts, it has begun.

Any gathering begins the moment guests first learn of it. The window of time between the discovery and the formal beginning is an opportunity to prime your guests.

\*Difference between **corralling** and **preparing** people:

Consumer to contributor - getting the most out of our guests (p. 146)  
Hosting people all the way to the gathering. Building anticipation

The purpose of priming is to signal the tone and mood you're going for at your gathering.

**The 90 percent rule:** states 90 percent of what makes a gathering successful is put in place beforehand.

\*The scale of the ask - the scale of the preparation and the ask of the guests.  
Any special behaviors - how to prime the pump before they come.

Every gathering benefits or suffers from the expectations and the spirit with which guests show up. (151)

### Priming isn't hard to do

Priming for your gathering can be as simple as a slightly interesting invitation, as straightforward as asking your guests to **do something instead of bring something**.

Asking guests to contribute ahead of time - changes their perception of it. Vs perform a task that is less about the task and more about getting into the mood.

**Workbook** (a: connect with and remember own sense of purpose as relates to gathering  
b) And something to help share honestly about the nature of what they/gathering is Addressing. - and creates connections between guest/facilitator.

## **A Gathering is a social contract**

Priming matters because a gathering is a social contract, it's in the pregame window that this contract is drafted and implicitly agreed on. *A social contract for a gathering answers the question, "What am I willing to give - physically, psychologically, financially, emotionally, and otherwise - in return for what I expect to receive?"*

Bluntly: think through social contracts of gatherings (and differences in traditions/culture, thinking house you grew up in and in-laws). *It is impossible to not have this - think of the energy we spend trying to figure this out sometimes.*

First: Host has a chance to frame the event. This is where your unique and specific event purpose comes into play.

Funeral (p, 156-157) – yikes, that is specific.

Being invited into a world, not just an event.

### **\*Naming as Priming (158)**

The invitation. What it signals to your guests of what is being asked of them. (p. 159-160) and also the medium

**\*After Kindling, kindle** - sustain the excitement and for some guests be explicit (the anti-bucket list).

### **Ushering**

Between priming and preparation comes ushering. **Ushering** refers to managing your guests' transition into the gathering you have created.

**\*Passages and Doorways** (let's talk about this) (p. 164)

One way to help people leave their other worlds and enter yours is to walk them through a passageway, physical or metaphorical.

Watch for the pre-event when they are there (p. 167) - Sunday School, Smoregeboard Pre-ritual....

## **Psychological threshold**

170: How can you create a transition of this kind - a passageway that tunes out the prior reality and captures people's attention and imagination - you create a starting line and help guests cross it as a collective (p. 170)

**Missed opportunities** (for example: when we are stuck waiting)

**Ushering** - Audiences remember the 1st 5% and the last 5% and a climatic moment.

After guests are ushered into your event it's time to launch. The opening is an important opportunity to establish the legitimacy of your gathering because attention is at its highest at the outset.

**\*Don't kill the attention of mourners - the Cold Open**

\*Open Cold

Don't start with logistics or any type of housekeeping items, focus on the purpose of your gathering. Do not hand over the keys to the sponsors (announcements)

**Honor and awe your guests.** Welcome and to be glad to be there.

Awe (bigger than them) Honor - above you. (p. 180)

**\*Fuse your guests.** Turn your group of attendees into a tribe.

A pledge — how can we do this? (182) – call and response  
I'm glad your here....

The importance of a group seeing one another. (p. 187)  
How many can relate to that....

\*Stitch the group together –

**Go above and beyond**

\*Within your opening, try to **embody** the reason you felt moved to bring this group of human beings together.

Invite into the experience

# The Art of Gathering 6: Don't Bring Your Best Self to My Gathering

Best Self vs Real Self

**Gatherings can be designed for what we want.** Design for real ness and learning something new

**15 Ways to make a conference or gathering suck less**

**Mix of modeling and design for managing the toasts/realness**

Concept of the 15 toasts:invites 15 people and asks them to speak/toast with a certain leading sentence. For example “a good life is..”

**Ground rules** - Chatham House Rules:

**House of Genius** - gathering around solving problems, not selling successes (Presentations on what did not work) -

**Sprout spaces not stump speeches:** Sprout speeches not stump speeches — Avoid asking people to speak about or share their usual pre-planned, baked spiel they always do at events like the one you're creating.

**Share experiences not ideas** — Ask people to share what they've been through not what they think about a situation. For example ask them to share about a decision they made that impacted their life.

**Be ready for the shadow theme** — good life - good death, allow for the flip side of life

**Strangers/Outsides** - can create more space for change. Invite strangers — It may be easier to confess to strangers. They bring out a temporary reordering of a balancing act. Example Theodore Zeldin invited 400 strangers to his birthday party. Instead of food they had “Courses of Conversations.” People rotated to different areas and answered questions. Starters were “How has your priorities changed?” **Fresh Eyes (share a story that no one else knows)**

**Be specific in the invitation** - Be specific in what you want in the room and what to leave out of the room you are gathering in. For example. “We're interested in the half baked parts of you, we don't need to hear your resume, We already know how great you are. “

**Show by example - Show your guests how to participate.** Listen when others are speaking. When it is your time to share, tell an even more personal story or a deeper level than expected

**Risks** — Create a risk of not sharing. For example with the 15 Toasts, the person that shares the last toast has to sing it. **The theme you have must invite people to intimacy but the depth of intimacy is their choice.**

## **Discussion:**

From Priya's suggestions and ideas: think of a recent event that utilized some of these factors, how did it transform the gather? Think of an event that could have used some of these factors - what might have changed in the gathering?

## **Art of Gathering - Chapter 7**

Make good use of what divides us in our gatherings (p. 225)

Controversy (the right kind) Have the right heat and it provides energy, life and can be clarifying.

**It can help you answer:** what do you want to do, what you stand for and who you are.  
Good controversy can make a gathering matter.

**Do not, not talk about sex, religion and politics**

**Cage Matches aren't just for wrestlers**

People don't want to talk about controversial topics because they don't want to "ruffle feathers" or they think it is too risky.

**The elevation of harmony over everything else merely makes a gathering dull.** Is harmony our greatest value? Avoiding anything that stirs the pot?

At church: values

Welcoming  
Build and Nurture Relationships

Church- values, values:

Good controversy is the kind of contention that helps people look closer at what they care about, when there is danger and benefit of doing so. It helps us reexamine what we hold dear, our values, priorities and non-negotiables.

**Design events with good controversy- IF good can come of it.**

**Good controversy doesn't just happen.** It is generative vs preservative, moves us towards something better than the status quo.

P. 234 – move controversy from implicit to explicit (ritualize it) – like in the cage match.  
(dosomething.org)

Creating a container for controversy - a liminal space (How to do this in church, what church rituals or holidays?)

### **Heat Map, Safe Spaces and Ground Rules**

We can design gathering or a part of our gatherings to discuss controversy by creating a heat map of topics. (church pp. 237) and what to do with them.

What are people avoiding that they don't think they're avoiding?

What are the sacred cows?

What goes unsaid?

What are we trying to protect? Why?

**Calls and Workbooks** - pre work to plan and prepare (prepares the host and the guest)

Call your participants ahead of time and build trust so you can ask the tough questions.

What needs to be addressed, what isn't being said... (p. 239)

*Send a workbook for them to answer the tough questions and let them know their answers will be stated at the gathering anonymously.*

**Safe Rules** — At the gathering ask participants what they need to feel safe to share/discuss the controversial topics.

Enforce those rules during the gathering.

Encourage dialogue.

Encourage going below the surface.

RESPECT rules - Eric Law (some congregations have rules for all gatherings)

### **What is the gift? What is the risk?**

Seeking heat (or it is coming your way) is inherently risky. When you can put some process or structure in place, the benefit outweighs?

One of my take aways is no open forums (need to register so can get some

Prewrite and we can host better).

**What is the gift of this gathering?**

**What is the risk of this gathering?**

**What is the gift in broaching this issue? And what is at risk? Is it worth it? And can we handle it with care?**

## The Art of Gathering: 8: Accept that the end is near

### How to End

As much thought in ending as in beginning - loop back to purpose and invitation  
Issue a last call

End while you are still ahead (keep hosting - don't fizzle out p. 257)

Don't Outsource the Meeting: Do it in the room collectively (vs individually in the parking lot)

Anatomy of a closing (p. 258-259)

### Inward:

what was the meaning of the event, remind them of what transpired, what did we create/do?

Connects the participants one last time - builds the group

### Outward: separations and re-entry

From this world - what do I want to take back into my other world (p. 262)

- re-entry - How are you preparing people to go back out to the world? Especially if an intense experience (back to the intense experience chapter 7) p. 266

Are you asking them for a commitment or how to take what they learned back to work or their communities? A closing could identify how you want to behave outside of the gathering.

P. 270 – the token/gift/symbol (impermanent moment into a permanent memory)

Ways to close: p. 275-276 (blessing, moment to think) ENGAGE people in the work of closing - that recalls the purpose - experience and carry out.

Do logistics second to last. Never end on them.

Incorporate a meaningful thank you and actually close the gathering.