

Understanding God Sessions

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The Gospel, the glorious Gospel

Many of the most exciting and impacting churches in the world define themselves by a simple mission: to be a Gospel-centred, Gospel-communicating church. Here are words that capture this sense of mission:

'We as a church exist to penetrate the hearts and minds of the people in our city and beyond with the message of the Gospel'.

That's our job. It's what we do. It's why the church exists. To the degree that we succeed in accomplishing this mission, to that degree we succeed as a church. And although each church will have its own distinctive calling, style, emphasis, mantle and context - it is no longer a biblical church if it loses sight of this non-negotiable priority.

God Sessions and the Gospel

God Sessions is essentially one way of presenting the Gospel to unchurched people. It provides five tried and tested presentations of the Gospel that have the potential to effectively attract, appeal to and hold the interest of unchurched people, and also lead them to respond to Christ's salvation call on their lives.

Instead of trying to get people saved in just one presentation, it aims at getting people to come back again and again to hear more, so that over a few weeks relationships are built (that will more likely integrate them into the church), a

deeper understanding of the Gospel is ensured, mental barriers are overcome, and a solid response is made to Christ.

These five presentations answer five questions...

- 1) Is there more to life than this?
- 2) Is God real, and if he is, what's he like?
- 3) Who is Jesus, and does it matter anyway?
- 4) If I'm reasonably good, why do I need faith?
- 5) Where to from here?

There are two main approaches to doing God Sessions...

- *Use it in five consecutive Sunday Gatherings as an outreach series.*
- *Use it in an Alpha-format with a meal / presentation / conversation around tables approach.*

First approach: using it in Five Consecutive Sundays...

- This material serves as an excellent Sunday Message outreach series that does three things at the same time: 1) attracts and engages unchurched people with the Gospel, 2) enriches the Christians in your church with a deeper revelation of the Gospel and 3) equips (indirectly) Christians to share their faith attractively with their unchurched connections.
- In Common Ground Church we have at times used it as a Sunday message series. The way we used it this was ...
 - We started advertising the God Sessions journey 5 weeks in advance.
 - We created invites (see end document for the suggested content on the invites) and then mobilized our church to invite people to come to the first night.
 - We tried to get as many people as possible to come to the first night, which deals with the question, 'Is there more to life than this?' Then at the end of the night, we encouraged everyone to come for the four-week journey that follows, and to invite others too.
 - We shortened our Sunday Gatherings from 90 minutes to just over 70 minutes.
 - We were highly selective about songs sung, and we sang only two or three songs, putting no pressure on visitors to worship God but inviting them to join in at the level they felt comfortable. We chose songs that were Gospel-declarative and celebrative rather than touchy-feely or intimate in feel.
 - We still took up the offering but were emphatic about the fact that the offering was for members not visitors.
 - We encouraged our church to host people well after the meetings, especially by inviting people out to meals afterwards.

- We encouraged them to keep coming once the journey ended. And we sought to be thoughtful about all the new people (some new Christians and some still-not-sure-about-this-whole-thing people) who started coming to the Sunday Gatherings in the weeks following.

Second Approach: Using it in a meal-based Alpha-format...

This is far more intensive than the other approach because it includes a whole evening with a meal, and trained group facilitators.

It can be run repeatedly, even several times a year. Each course can be as small as ten people or as big as hundreds. In our church, we have experimented with breaking up the church into communities of a 150 Christians, and then mobilizing them to run a God Sessions course. But there are many ways to do it. Some churches feel that it is better to have one big annual one rather than several smaller ones in a year.

The intro night consists of a meal, a presentation, and an opportunity to, during dessert, to sign up for the four-week journey that follows. The other four nights consist of a meal, a presentation, and a conversation about the talk led by the group facilitator of each table over coffee/tea/biscuits.

The suggested length of times are: meal (30-40 minutes), presentation (about 50 minutes with singing/power points/multimedia/testimonies included), and conversation (about 30 minutes).

People need to feel well hosted. The venue needs to be set up beautifully. Live music or non-cheesy music play during the meal time. The food is yummy. Although the first meal is covered by the church, the other four meals require a payment when people enter. However some churches insist on paying for all meals (and certainly free food is a draw-card).

On the first night people are free to sit everywhere, but from the second week onwards people sit at a set table. The way we allocate people is based on the sign-up forms they fill out (see later in this document). The main rules for allocating people are 1) keep friends together 2) try gather people of like age and interest and 3) make sure that there are more visitors than Christians at each table.

Each table consists of 1 or 2 group facilitators, and possibly (but not preferably) 1 or 2 'helpers' (who are Christians who come because their non-Christian friend refuses to do it without them).

We discourage Christians from doing the course for themselves unless they're facilitators or helpers, since our experience is that over-enthusiastic Christians

can be very unhelpful. This is because non-Christians feel intimidated by them. That's why we try to have a majority of unchurched visitors at each table.

If many Christians, who are not facilitators or helpers, do want to do the course, then we sometimes create tables that consist of exclusively Christians. But we ask that they commit to coming the whole time, because our experience is that it is these tables that have the highest drop-out rate, and empty tables in the room undermine what we're trying to do.

The difference between the God Sessions and Alpha material

- Alpha presents the Gospel in the first three weeks, and then moves on to discipleship material. God Sessions only touches on discipleship material in the last two, and gives a more extended exploration of the Gospel throughout.
- God Sessions hands out booklets that provide answers to the major objections to the Christian faith.
- God Sessions is much shorter.
- God Sessions has a less hard-hitting intro night, seeking not to convert them in this first night, but to get them to commit to doing the journey.
- God Sessions material has a very different feel and style. It is less formal and not 'Anglican' or 'British' in feel.

Some rules for a great Alpha-format God Sessions

Preparation:

- o Have a vision-casting moment in your church 5 or 6 weeks beforehand to mobilize your church or part of your church. Then keep drip-feeding the vision.
- o Pray towards it. In your prayer meetings, give regular attention to it.
- o Lead it through the home group leaders of your church. If the home group leaders are not sold on it, then they won't motivate their groups to really invite people either.
- o Create momentum by getting people in home groups to share about all the people they are inviting.
- o Have facilitators training for all potential facilitators and helpers one week before event. We encourage everyone to do it, just in case they do end up sitting at a table.

The nights:

- o Create a warm atmosphere.
- o Only after intro night can you allocate facilitators for sure. Up until this time we tell all potential facilitators to do the training anyway, and

dependent on how many and on what kind of people sign up, we will ask them to lead a table.

- o Have no more than 3 Christians per table. Tables of 8 or 9 are a good number.
- o Discourage Christians from doing the course unless they are facilitators or the friend they invited will only do it if they come along.
- o Really depend on the Holy Spirit in adjusting things as you go along.

The talks:

- o Rather have less than more speakers. Preferably, have just one speaker so that the crowd build a sense of relationship with, and therefore and openness to, him or her.
- o Use the speakers who communicate with unchurched people best.
- o Keep emphasizing that this is a journey where there is no pressure to respond, but we certainly believe that God is moving us toward a response.
- o Try make other key leaders in your church the MC so that, if these people do eventually integrate into the church there are more leaders with whom they feel some kind of connection.

The facilitators:

- o Make sure they all attend the training that happens a week before. The training material is a separate document called 'Group Facilitators Training'.
- o Preferably use the most gifted home group leaders in your church to facilitate tables. Encourage them to delegate the leadership of their own home group to other leader-in-training in this time.
- o Use people who are solid in their faith and who have a natural warmth with people. Do not allow socially awkward people, or people that do not know how to relate in any way to non-Christians, to be facilitators.
- o Encourage facilitators to invite people from the table to a meal outside of the God Sessions night before the end of the course. We have found this to be greatly effective.

Follow-up:

- o In the week before the last night meet with facilitators to discuss:
 - o Feedback: what has worked? What could we do better next time?
 - o Follow-up plan: Remind people that they are responsible for the follow-up of the people at their table.
 - o Possibly, a single table - if they have really taken to each other - can form a brand new group. If not, the table leader needs to help people find an existing home group they can join. But never just send them there, always go along with them. Sometimes a person is not willing to go to a group, but is willing to visit on Sundays and keep contact. Whatever ways we can help them we must.

Here is an example of the sign up form used on the Intro Night if an Alpha-format is used...

Please fill this in if you would like to attend the course...

Your name:	Who invited you:	Circle your age: 15-25 25-35 35-45 45-55 55plus
Is there anyone you would like to be seated with next week?		
<i>So we can connect you with the right table, tick the box in each row that best describes you:</i>		
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I am <u>not</u> part of a Christian faith community.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I am part of Common Ground church.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I am involved in another Christian faith community.</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I would call myself a committed Christian.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I would call myself a Christian, but not that committed right now.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>I would not call myself a Christian.</i>

The God Sessions style of communicating

Most of us are familiar with the once-off, usually ‘in-your-face’ proclamation of the Gospel. We get a gap at saying the Gospel and we come right and say it loud and proud, calling people to repent. That kind of preaching has its place of course, but it is not the kind of communication that is best suited to a relational, process approach, especially with educated, sceptical people present.

The suggested God Sessions approach is...

- 1) We ask lots of questions to get people thinking. We want to follow Jesus’ style of sometimes asking questions and not providing answers.
- 2) We stimulate dialogue. We want people to interact with and respond to what we are saying. We want people to feel free to question what we are saying, and to even disagree with what we are saying. By allowing them to question us, the space is made for us to also question them: ‘What makes you say that?’
- 3) We communicate the Gospel as ‘a rumour of another world’. We give the evidence for the Gospel, but we remember that our evidence is not ‘hard’ (as in there is such absolute certainty about what we are saying, that reason alone, not faith, is needed). The evidence we point to is more ‘soft.’ We appeal to people’s intuition, we point to the uniqueness of the Bible and of Christ. We appeal to their sense of wonder and imagination. We tell them our stories. We remember that people cannot ‘disprove’ descriptions of spiritual reality, any more than we can ‘prove it’. We speak of our

experiences. We encourage people to try for themselves and see for themselves if it is true. We're totally convinced by the Gospel of course, but we're respectful of those who aren't.

- 4) We encourage a process, a journey. Some people will believe what we say right away. Others will be less convinced, with varying levels of hostility or scepticism. We bank on the lengthier exposure to community and spiritual truth and respectful discussion to chip away at their defences.
- 5) We present the mysteries that the Bible affirms. We say that we believe it to be true, but that we respect people if they don't immediately or ultimately believe it to be true.

For preachers who are used to Sunday preaching styles, this is a whole new style of communication. It doesn't come easy, but it certainly is a skill to develop that could help many people who are far off from the Gospel to eventually respond to it.

It is very important that the speakers do a few practice runs before giving it on the actual night. As an example of how to do these talks, listen to the mp3s of Terran Williams (of Common Ground Church) doing some of the God Sessions talks.

The God Sessions Invite

Get a graphic designer to design an invite (A6 sized invites do well) with words to this effect...

On one side, in dark and bold the words, '**Got questions?**' In the background (behind the 'Got questions?' wording) in very faded writing, scatter the following questions over the full surface area: *Is there more to life than this? Is God real, and if he is, what's he like? Who is Jesus, and does it matter anyway? If I'm reasonably good, why do I need faith? Is there something I'm meant to do with my life? Isn't belief in God delusional? How could a loving God allow suffering? What about all the other religions? What about those who have never heard? How can I trust the Bible?*

On the back side, write words to this effect...

- 'Join us and explore some of these questions a little more. Kicking off with live music, great food and warm company, we'll then hear a compelling presentation that tackles the question, 'Is there more to life than this?' The night also serves as an intro to an optional 4-week journey, God Sessions.'
- Be sure to mention date, time, place, and RSVP details.
- End with the words, 'Look forward to seeing you there.'