

The Sisterhood Remix:

*A panel discussion for women in a “fishbowl” format
by Chanta’ N. Barrett*

Format

A “fishbowl” format for an event is one in which a group of people is seated in the center of the room, facing one another, having conversation amongst themselves on a given topic, while the remaining event participants are seated around this center circle, listening in to the conversation to hear the different perspectives represented. Event participants are then engaged in Q&A or open conversation at the conclusion of the “fishbowl” conversation.

This particular multicultural and intergenerational event using the fishbowl format includes six panelists: three panelists should be ages sixty and above while the other three should be between the ages of eighteen to thirty. Every effort should be made to have a panel that represents many cultures. The format also requires a moderator who introduces the panelists, asks questions, and keeps things on track and on time. Finally, the event should last approximately two hours (no longer), including time at the end for Q&A or comments from the attendees.

Rationale

- *Multicultural: This format allows participants to hear the voices that are a part of American culture; this better equips those of us in ministry to truly be of service and support to these communities.*
- *Intergenerational: to hear both the unique viewpoints which come from maturity and wisdom as well as those stemming from youthful enthusiasm. The mid-ranged generation is left out of the panel because there is a different dynamic that is created within the grandmother/granddaughter context than the mother/daughter one. (Seniors tend to have a little more patience with young adults, and young adults tend to not feel it necessary to “prove themselves” to seniors the way they may with people of their own parents’ age.)*
- *Moderator: She must be able to discern and interpret statements made by the panelists in case their answers aren’t as clearly communicated to the participants as they need to be. The moderator must be able to explain it more thoroughly while maintaining the integrity of the panelist’s statement, or be able to ask the panelist clarifying questions to allow the panelist to reword her own statement. The moderator must also be conscious of time to keep the discussion moving, and keep the discussion on topic.*

Topics

Our first Sisterhood Remix focused on relationships between women across racial lines. Other topics to consider could be forgiveness, jealousy, insecurity, anger, male and female communication and equality, the “superwoman syndrome”, depression, and so forth.

Creating the Questions

You will need to establish questions for the panelists based on your topic. The questions need to be carefully crafted to achieve the goals of the event: open and honest conversation around critical topics. Because the fishbowl event is limited to two hours, you will not be able to have too many questions: You want to allow time for thoughtful responses by the panelists and deep conversation. Four questions are more than enough to keep the conversation going. The first three questions are all designed to lead towards the final question, which should be the heart of the matter.

For instance, our first Sisterhood Remix addressed the topic of race. We wanted women to share how we could maintain a spirit of sisterhood across cultural lines while living in a racially-charged environment.

To move the conversation into deeper levels through the questions, here are the four questions we used in this Sisterhood Remix:

1. *What does sisterhood mean to you?*
2. *Who is your sister? Can she be younger, older, from a different culture or faith?*
3. *What stands in the way of us coming together and seeing one another as sisters?*

4. *While in the midst of the racial turmoil that has come to a head in our country, and knowing that you have survived it before, how were you able to preserve your views of sisterhood? What suggestions do you have for us to maintain unity with one another through this current struggle?*

It's crucial for the moderator to have strong listening skills and to be able to lead the conversation. Sometimes panelists can get a little off-topic so the moderator will have to steer the conversation back on track. Sometimes a panelist may express herself in a way that isn't clear to the audience; the moderator may need to restate the panelist's comments in a different way or ask clarifying questions.

Securing and Preparing the Panelists

Be sure to invite your chosen panelists far enough in advance of the event to confirm their participation, and have a "plan B" list of additional panelists in case one of your confirmed panelists needs to back out at the last minute. Also, after you've confirmed your panelists, obtain brief bios and head shots of each panelist to use in publicity of the event.

Once the questions have been established, the panelists should receive them a few weeks prior to the discussion so they will have the time to contemplate their answers.

Publicity

Promote your event using social media, websites, email promos, and so forth. Include photos and bios of the panelists, as well as thirty-second video clips asking questions of various women and girls that begin to lift up some of the facets of your event topic.

Room Set-up

To create the "fishbowl" feel, have the panelists seated in a circle at the center of the room, facing one another—they may be at a round table or in chairs. Have participants then seated in concentric circles around this center circle, so that everyone may see and hear the panelists.

Although you don't want decorations to become a distraction, some simple table centerpieces or posters/wall hangings will help create a welcoming space.

Refreshments

Feel free to have refreshments available but, again, keep it simple. Promote a healthy atmosphere with light snacks such as fruit, vegetables with hummus dip, and so forth. Ice water containing slices of lemon, lime, oranges, or cucumber makes a slightly fancier, very refreshing beverage.

We are now ready to have our event!

Chanta' N. Barrett, member of Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, served as a seminarian intern with American Baptist Women's Ministries from September 2014 through May 2015. She designed the Sisterhood Remix Fishbowl event described above. The feedback from participants has encouraged Chanta do another one, exploring a different topic to be addressed by multi-generations and multi-cultures. You have permission to use the guidance above to plan a similar event.