

Family Suppers: A Community Listening Project

A city-wide conversation with youth and their families about the issues that affect them and community-based solutions that work

In the Beginning...

Family Suppers were started in the spring of 2013 to engage north Nashville families and communities in dialogue around education. Contributors to the organizing and this outline of our work included people from the Children's Defense Fund Nashville Team, Gideon's Army, Metro Nashville Public Schools, and the Urban League of Middle Tennessee. The Children's Defense Fund team has adapted the Family Suppers Training Manual for CDF's National Observance of Children's Sabbaths.

Conversations focused on parental involvement, community engagement, and student academic achievement and success. In a series of six dinners, we were committed to listening to youth, families, and community members, learning from their experiences, and creating a plan of action in response to participant feedback. We believed that, by listening, we could understand the needs of students and families in Metro Nashville Public Schools in ways we had not been able to understand in the past. By listening, we hoped participants would feel supported, heard, and empowered to take action as community organizers and advocates for themselves and their children in the public school system.

The Family Suppers turned out to be great learning experiences for the facilitators as well as the supper participants. What we experienced was far beyond our expectations—in only a moment we became a family, eating, laughing, and building relationships through friendly conversation and storytelling.

Listening without projecting our own perceptions and needs, we were able to hear participants' deepest thoughts, understand student perceptions of the issues they face in school, and get a wealth of ideas for how the community might be more effectively involved.

Why Listen? Listening is the heartbeat of movement building

If we want to create social change, we have to stop talking, open our hearts, and listen without judgment or assumptions.

When we listen, hear, and respond, our efforts to improve parent-school and student-school relations are organic and grassroots in nature. We move away from becoming "advocates" (literally "those who speak for") and support families as they take their power, own their experiences and needs, find their voices, and take collective action to make the changes they want to see for their community's children and youth. With Family Suppers, participants gather in the name of success for all students.

Together, participants can see their value as individuals as well as the influence they can have in the school system if they work together, support each other, and advocate collectively for what they believe their children need.

Purpose of the Family Suppers

“The purpose of hosting Family Suppers is to find common ground amongst participants to work together and achieve collective goals on behalf of the community’s youth.” Rasheedat Fetuga, Gideon’s Army

Imagine a community where all members work to understand each other, celebrate together, and support each other during family and community times of need. The way to initiate the building of community is through first finding common ground. Finding common ground requires community members to ask questions of themselves and each other.

1. How are we alike?
2. How do we differ?
3. How do we complement each other in our differences?
4. What experiences do we have that are universal for us all or for at least a majority?
5. What are our needs?
6. Which of our needs are the same or similar?
7. What are the solutions to meeting our community needs?
8. How can we work together to make sure our common needs are met?

These questions outline the formula for community change. The deep listening that occurs during Family Suppers creates fertile ground for community-building and collective organizing that transforms the community and its members in the process.

It’s all about change...of self and community

When hosting Family Suppers, participants and facilitators take the first step in organizing their community for transformative change.

In the process of building community, community members transform as individuals—becoming stronger, strengthening their support systems, expanding their understanding, and broadening their reach within the community.

There is a bridging of the gap between the personal lives of the participants and their lives and struggles as members of a larger community. This reduces and even eliminates burn-out and drop-out because participants see how their community-building and organizing efforts enhance their own lives on a personal and familial level.

With a focus on personal transformation, participants metamorphose into stronger, more reflective leaders who have experienced radical breakthroughs and shifts in paradigms, thus opening the floodgates for the community to experience revolutionary change where individuals mirror what they seek to create in the community.

This level of community-building and organizing creates a movement that is relationship-centered, built on the assets of the community, focused on the present, and is closely, if not exactly, what the community envisions. This kind of change is both powerful and irreversible. This is the change we envisioned when creating the Family Suppers model.

How It Works:

Family Suppers start out with a wonderful but simple dinner that participants share together. The entire event is usually about an hour-and-a-half to two hours long. We hosted our dinners on Tuesday evenings from 5:30PM-7:00PM, but you may host yours during the time that is best suited for your participants.

The welcome and dinner last for about 45 minutes.

After dinner, the event transitions into a discussion led by prepared facilitators in small groups.

At the end of the small group discussions, one to two people from each group report to the whole group. Once everyone has reported, a facilitator will guide the group in selecting next steps.

Usually next steps include one action and a follow-up meeting date. Actions could be anything from a community building project, to participatory research on the impact of zero tolerance policies, to an initiative to get more parents in the community involved in their children's education—the sky is the limit! If you are running short on time, it is okay to schedule a follow-up meeting and determine next steps then, but it is best to schedule your agenda to include time to determine some level of action so that participants leave with a sense of satisfaction and empowerment knowing that they have something tangible they are coming back to work on and accomplish together.

And... ACTION!

Now that you understand the nature of Family Suppers, why they are important, and how they work, it is time for you to make it happen. Planning a Family Supper is a lot easier than you may think. All it takes is a little cooperation and planning to host a successful event. Let's plan it out!

STEP ONE: Recognizing and Reversing the Margin and Center. The first and most important aim of the Family Suppers model is to center the voices, experiences, wisdom, solutions, and power of those who are traditionally unheard, undervalued, disrespected, and disregarded but who have the most insight to offer into the challenges they experience and solutions they envision. The companion piece is for those who are typically centered and heard, with traditional forms of power, status, and privilege in the community, to intentionally move to the margins with a commitment to listening to, learning from, and partnering with those who have just moved from the margins to the center. Margins and centers are usually formed according to age, education, race and ethnicity, income, and positions of power. Asking those typically centered to recognize their location and to intentionally move to the margins is not a criticism or attack but an opportunity—one that is essential for the authentic success of the Family Suppers Listening Model.

Attentiveness to margin and center will impact all aspects of planning the Family Suppers Listening Sessions. **Planning from the start must include individuals or groups authentically situated on the margins as well as any traditionally centered. So a first step is recognizing whether you are centered or marginalized, and if centered, seeking out planning partners from those traditionally marginalized communities to whom you will listen and from whom you will learn.**

As planning progresses, recognizing and reversing center and margin means that habits of offering the resources of the traditionally centered organizations ("We have a lovely large sanctuary and fellowship room with a big parking lot; we would love to host the gathering there!") are checked in favor of meeting in spaces accessible to and "owned" by those typically on the margins who are the



CHRISTIAN WORSHIP RESOURCES

voices to be heard—which may mean taking public transportation to a community room in a low-income housing project.

Authentic speaking and listening doesn't happen when holders of traditional power and status create the terms and frame the conversation. For example, a "Listening Session" where the pastor of a middle- to upper-income congregation invites members of her/his congregation to speak will not generate the stories of struggle or the visions of system change Family Suppers seek to highlight or the authentic speaking and listening that Family Suppers aspire to. A principal inviting parents and teachers to a Family Supper likewise replicates power dynamics that get in the way of authentic speaking and listening. By contrast, a youth group or student group issuing invitations to a Family Suppers Listening Session in which the clergy, elders, principals, and teachers were the listeners and the young voices were centered offers possibilities for new, important, and honest speaking and listening that then guides partnership in working toward solutions and visions that the young people identified.

Changing the way we are used to doing things and interacting may be uncomfortable, may include well-intentioned missteps, and may take more time to establish right relationships, but it is a worthy, meaningful, and lasting element of the Family Suppers model.

Determine who you are planning the event for and why. Are you planning this supper for congregation members to discover ways for your congregation to be more engaged in the community? Are you a teacher planning a supper with families and community leaders to find solutions around student drop-out or entrance to college? Or maybe you are a concerned student who wants to address youth violence in your community, city, or school. Your purpose and your target audience will determine your planning so it is best to identify these two things and even put them in writing before moving to the next step.

STEP TWO: Create a planning committee. If you are a member of an organization hosting a Family Supper for other members, it is much easier if an established group within that organization hosts the event. However, forming a new group can prove to be equally as successful. If you are an individual, you may gather friends or connect with other organizations. This is a creative process that allows you to determine what is best for you and your community. Again, the way you set up your planning committee depends on your purpose and target audience. It will also depend on whether you are an individual seeking partnerships or part of an organization with members already in place to help.

In creating your planning committee, you want to have 5-10 members depending on the size of your event. You may also need additional volunteers to assist with things like getting the word out and facilitating groups at the supper.

Now that you have a planning committee:

1. Determine the theme and target audience
2. Select a time and date
3. Find and reserve a location
4. Plan the agenda
5. Plan, write, and print questions



CHRISTIAN WORSHIP RESOURCES

6. Create a budget and plan the menu
7. Develop an outreach plan
8. Create flyers (optional)
9. Distribute flyers (optional)
10. Develop an invitation list of people to call
11. Order or purchase food
12. Prepare food (or pick up food if it is catered)
13. Create and print sign-in sheets
14. Purchase supplies (table decorations, markers, note paper, etc.)
15. Facilitate the overall meeting and keep time
16. Host the sign-in table
17. Serve food
18. Facilitate groups
19. Record notes
20. Type notes and distribute to participants

Creating an Agenda

If you plan a two-hour event, this is what your agenda might look like:

5:30-5:40 Welcome and Introduction of the *planning committee*

During this time, people are arriving and signing in. You can welcome guests, introduce the planning committee, have an icebreaker, or have guests introduce themselves. To avoid reinforcing traditional hierarchies or customs (e.g. introducing oneself by name and occupation), invite each person to introduce themselves by the name that they would like to be called and one “gift” that they bring to the gathering.

You can tell participants about the event, why you planned it, what you hope to accomplish by the end of the night, and how the event will flow.

5:40-6:15 Dinner and Informal Conversation

Participants eat and enjoy conversation. You may play music or just enjoy the sounds of laughter and relationship building!

6:15-6:20 Transition

Clear tables. Participants can stay at their tables and participate in small group discussions or participants can be divided into groups and guided to their appropriate locations.



CHRISTIAN WORSHIP RESOURCES

6:20-7:00 Small Group Conversations

Facilitators explain the power of the small group discussions and creating community change. Participants are led in discussion with pre-constructed questions that guide them to identify their major concerns and ideas for solutions.

7:00-7:20 Whole Group Reporting

Small groups report their answers to the open-ended questions back to the larger group .

7:20-7:30 Select a Priority and Schedule Next Meeting

From the information given during small group reporting, participants select a priority issue to focus on collectively and schedule a follow-up meeting to begin planning and action. It is optional whether your team provides food at future meetings. Be sure to communicate to participants whether you will serve food or not.

7:30 Closing and Dismissal

Thank participants for coming. Collect all small group notes from facilitators. Dismiss participants in a way that affirms collective wisdom, communal decision-making, and creative collaboration.

Planning for Discussion

You will develop your questions in three parts. Below are examples to help you create your own questions around the topic that is relevant to your event.

Part One: Identify Participant Motivation (examples from the Nashville Family Suppers)

1. What was your motivation for being present for this discussion tonight?
2. What is your relationship with Metro Nashville Public Schools? How are you impacted by the quality public education in Nashville?

Part Two: Define the Problem

Academic Achievement Focused Questions (examples from the Nashville Family Suppers)

1. What do you think is the greatest factor affecting student achievement in Metro Nashville Public Schools?
2. What do you think would be the most immediate cause of high student academic achievement in Metro Public Schools? How do you see these things being done in your family, school or community?
3. What needs to be done to increase student academic achievement? (Students, School, Family, Policy)
4. What do you see happening in the school system to increase student academic achievement?
5. How have these solutions affected student achievement? What have the results been? What still needs to be done?
6. What negative school experiences did you have as a child? How have these experiences affected your level of engagement in your child's education? (Deeper Level Question)

Child/Youth Well-Being Focused Questions (examples for the 2021 Children's Sabbath Family Suppers)

7. What do you think is the greatest factor affecting child and youth well-being in our community?
8. What do you think would be the most immediate factor in positive child/youth well-being in our community? How do you see these things being done in your family, school, or community?
9. What needs to be done to increase child and youth well-being? (Students, School, Community, Family, Policy)
10. What do you see happening in our community to increase child and youth well-being?
11. How have these solutions affected child and youth well-being? What have the results been? What still needs to be done?
12. What experiences did you have as a child that supported your well-being or made it difficult to thrive? How have these experiences affected your understanding of how we can help all children thrive? (Deeper Level Question)

Part Three: Identify Solutions

Examples from the Nashville Family Suppers:

1. What kind of power do you feel you have to help students in Metro Nashville Public Schools succeed?
2. What can the public school system do to increase parental engagement in schools across the district?
3. Let's review, summarize and prioritize the issues we identified. What solutions do you think will be most effective in addressing your two highest priority issues?

Examples for the 2021 Children's Sabbath Family Suppers:

1. What kind of power do you feel you have to help children and youths thrive in our community?
2. What can our community do to increase child and youth well-being?
3. Let's review, summarize and prioritize the issues we identified. What solutions do you think will be most effective in addressing your two highest priority issues?

Notes:

- All questions should be open-ended. This means that there will be no questions where participants will answer "yes" or "no." We are facilitating discussion, and yes/no questions can bring a really great conversation to a screeching halt.
- Each group will respond to about 6 questions.
- All questions must be carefully developed in advance by Family Supper organizers.
- Questions usually start simple and continue with questions that require participants to reflect deeply to answer.
- Print the questions on flipchart paper in advance for each group so participants can have a visual aid to help with discussion.

Budget and Menu

Your budget will determine your menu and how many people you can feed. Even simple meals are enjoyable and appreciated by participants. For our Family Suppers, we served chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans, and rolls. We had punch and also served cookies or cake slices for dessert.

Inviting Guests to Your Family Supper

Getting guests to attend your Family Supper can be fairly easy if you start in advance. If you are targeting members of your organization, you may want to create an online invitation or a meetup on www.meetup.com. If your supper is at a school, you may be able to use the school's automatic calling system to robo-call parents. If you are inviting members from a congregation or a collection of congregations, adding the event to the congregation's bulletin or newsletter may be the most effective tool. If you are generating participants from the community as a whole, you may want to deliver flyers door-to-door and possibly even gather RSVPs from people as you speak with them.

It is always a good idea to ask guests to RSVP so that you can plan ahead for the number of people who will be attending. Some people prefer to plan for an estimated number of people and do not ask for specific RSVPs. The choice is up to you.

Purchasing Supplies

There are not many supplies needed to have a successful Family Supper. Organizers can use table cloths and decorations if wanted, but planning is definitely needed to make sure there are plates and eating utensils, cups, napkins, serving dishes and utensils, printed questions, sign-in sheets, tables and chairs, ink pens, paper for note taking, large easel pad/flip chart paper with tape, markers, and any literature you may have on your organization or the issues that will be discussed during the supper.

Facilitating Great Conversations

Family Supper group discussions take place in small groups of 4-5. This number is flexible, but to make sure everyone is listened to and heard, we recommend that you keep your small group numbers at seven or fewer.

Facilitated group conversations are very powerful conversations based on deep listening and human connections. Participants listen to each other for the sole purpose of listening, understanding, and connecting. Together, participants imagine the possibilities and creative solutions to both old and new problems they face in their lives as part of a larger community.

During the welcome at the beginning of the event, the large-group meeting facilitator sets the stage and identifies the reasons for discussion and the outcomes hoped for. Once participants are in small groups, the small-group facilitator describes her understanding of the overall group objective and the specific goal of the session. The facilitator then reviews the questions and rules. The rules are flexible and should encourage participants to create a safe/brave space where everyone feels they can actively participate and bring their whole selves, and where communication is meaningful and effective.

It is best when participants are encouraged to answer questions one at a time, listen without the intention of responding, and wait until a person is finished speaking before speaking. Participants will get equal time to answer questions depending on the number of questions and the time allotted for conversation. The facilitator should also discuss proper ways for participants to respond when there is conflict, or when participants do not agree. When prioritizing issues the goal is to reach a consensus. Participants who cannot follow the group rules can simply be asked to participate as observers.

The Art of Facilitation

Meeting facilitators are probably the most important piece of the Family Suppers puzzle. The goal is to leave the event with issues identified and solutions to work toward. The event facilitator will make or break the process that helps each group reach its goals.

Good Facilitators:

1. Listen and do not skew the conversation by commenting
2. Drive the energy of the group and stimulate discussion
3. Encourage the group to generate ideas
4. Foster curiosity and excitement in the group
5. Stimulate dialogue
6. Keep the momentum flowing toward the ultimate objective
7. Manage time and do not let discussion run out of control
8. Listen! Listen! Listen!

Tips:

- Have name tags for participants so that you can call the names of participants who are contributing less or not at all. Call their names and ask questions or ask for feedback.
- Review the questions in advance.
- Record the questions on flip chart paper.
- Make sure everyone contributes to the conversations. You may have to gently ease participants into the discussion.
- Don't let the conversation derail or take a wrong turn. It is your role to keep the discussion moving. If someone has an unrelated issue or one they keep returning to, let them know that they are heard, but that you have to move on and keep the discussion moving. You can always come back if there is time.

After Group Discussion: A Summary

When small group dialogue is completed the following occurs:

1. Small groups report back to the larger group.
2. Participants reflect on the issues and solutions prioritized by the small groups and offer feedback.
3. Participants consider "Next Steps," which may include:
 - Planning a follow-up meeting
 - Selecting an issue and a set of solutions as a large group to work on during the follow-up meeting
 - Developing individual or small group plans for action that address the issues
4. The group either determines their next step as a large group, or each group or participant will have a few minutes to communicate their "Next Steps." This is a part of the meeting that must be pre-planned and timed to ensure maximum effectiveness.
5. Schedule the follow-up meeting.

As you can see, the Family Supper model is a phenomenally effective process that leads participants to action through reflection and collective decision-making. Now that you know how to plan and facilitate a Family Supper, you have no time to lose! Start planning now!