

The Garrison-Martineau Project

Organizer' s Handbook

Blessed are the organizers, for they will get things done.

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1. Welcome to Organizing.



Congratulations! You have decided to join an elite world -- -- the world of organizers. Without you, Garrison-Martineau dialogue is not possible. You make it happen.

As you know, the heart of The Garrison-Martineau Project is a simple idea: two believers, two nonbelievers, and a trained facilitator getting together to share food and conversation. The good news is that The Garrison-Martineau Project dialogue sessions don't require large crowds. No expensive auditoriums need to be rented. No expensive publicity is required. This is a totally doable for a small organization. The bad news that it's not your usual "hold an event and see who shows up". If only Christians show up, you've got a problem. If only atheists show up, you got the same problem.

As you've probably figured out by now, the trick to hosting a Garrison-Martineau event is bringing the right people together at the right time. This manual is intended to teach you the tricks of the trade, the shortcuts that make it possible, and a few of the things we've learned along the way.

2. Hosting a Pilot Session

For your first Garrison-Martineau dialogue, we recommend calling it a pilot and keeping it small, just two groups. Since each group has two believers, two nonbelievers and one trained facilitator, this means that a pilot session only requires 10 people: four believers, four nonbelievers, and two trained facilitators. (NOTE: ALWAYS ALWAYS ALWAYS get a few extras to come – someone always gets sick or forgets. It's perfectly ok to have groups of 5, instead of four if everyone shows up!)

Garrison-Martineau headquarters is committed to helping local groups start up dialogue. We can send out a trained facilitator to your pilot session and arrange to have the second facilitator trained. This means that you really only need to find nine people: four believers, four nonbelievers and someone willing to be a trained facilitator, who we will train. We hope that this enables you to spend your time building connections with dialogue partners. Here's how it's done, one step at a time.

1. Notify Garrison-Martineau headquarters.

Let us know you're thinking about hosting a session. We can help. You can contact us at either 650-949-3192 or by e-mail at stsam@garrison-martineau.com. One of the things we can help with is putting your event into our automated RSVP system – people can RSVP online and you can get email notifications! Automated reminders will be sent to the people signed up. We can also assist in training facilitators.

2. Build support for the dialogue in your group.

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Talk to some of the other folks in your group. Identify people who would be likely participants and would be willing to help. Consider showing our promotional video at your next meeting.

3. Find partners on the other side of the theological spectrum.

If you're a Christian, search using the Web to see if there's an atheist or humanist group near you. Whether or not there is an atheist or humanist group nearby really depends on whether a leader was available to start the group, however, most larger cities in the United States have one. If nothing else, you should contact the local Unitarian Universalist church. If you're an atheist, identify nearby churches. In either case, send out a letter introducing yourself and inviting them to join you in dialogue. Sample letters have been included in this document.

Always address your letters to a person. Never rely on the Web forms sending messages to info@church.org. If no one responds to your e-mail, you have no idea who to contact and the church secretary won't know how to direct your call.

If you don't receive a reply to your invitations, follow-up with a phone call one week later. Hint: almost all invitations require a follow-up. It's not personal, it's just that your invitation got lost in the clutter of their daily life. Many of them will be interested and will remember their interest when you call. When you call, tell them you are calling to make sure that they thought the invitation and to find out if they have any questions. Most will say, it's a good idea, but they're too busy. If so, ask them if they can recommend another organization, for whom such a project would be "right up their alley".

How many invitations, should you send out? You only need a few people for a pilot session and one or two leaders can surely invite others. However, many of the same leaders are already busy working on other things. Generally, only 10% of Christian pastors will be willing to spend time inviting Christians to your dialogue. This is primarily because being a pastor is their paid eight to five job, and they aren't getting paid to help you, not necessarily because they think it's a bad idea. Don't be discouraged. But do send out quite a few invitations. I recommend that 40 invitations be sent out to Christians. If it's a large church, be sure to send invitations to some of the smaller pastors. Often the head pastor is busy doing other things. Generally, a larger percentage of atheist leaders will be interested in working on organizing a dialogue. I suspect that this is because atheist leaders were usually volunteers. While their time is limited, they are more free to experiment with new projects.

4. Meet with your Partners and Plan the Pilot



This can be done over lunch, on a conference call or by dropping by their office. Decide together on an appropriate date, and identify either the location or a person to arrange the location. We recommend a weekend date for your first pilot. Although we have arranged dialogue sessions on weeknights, it can be helpful for your first session to not have folks preoccupied with running home afterwards. You have a bit more leeway on timing and scheduling on a weekend.

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Get agreement on who will be bringing which participants. Usually the Christian leaders bring the Christian participants and the atheist leaders bring the atheist or humanist participants. Figure out who will be willing to be a facilitator.

5. Arrange the Location

The location can be anywhere all participants would feel comfortable. While it may be convenient to meet at the local Baptist Church, some atheists might not feel comfortable attending there. This decision should be up to the local leaders. I have met in community centers, restaurants, private homes, and when appropriate, in churches. The local Unitarian Universalist church has been very helpful and was identified early on, as neutral ground.

6. Get your Facilitator Trained

A training manual is available online, however, we recommend having the facilitator trained in an interactive session with someone who has been a facilitator. Garrison-Martineau headquarters can help arrange a conference call for the training. The training usually takes about an hour to an hour and a half.

7. Host the Event

Arrange for your Garrison-Martineau dialogue host's kit to be sent to you. This kit will include name tags, participant feedback cards, participant handouts and a host report form. Arrive at your location, half an hour early. As people arrive, make them a name tag and give them handouts and feedback cards. You can prearrange which people should go in which group, if you'd like, but this has a lot of hassle, and it is generally impossible to predict the tone of any group. People you think will have an interesting conversation sometimes merely have ordinary conversations, and people you think shouldn't be together sometimes have amazing conversations. Random selection works just as well. We recommend just assigning people to groups on a first-come first-served basis as they arrive.



Before you begin, gather everyone together, and give them a quick orientation. Their participant handouts, gives the outline of the format. We recommend going through the format with everyone at the beginning, and then breaking them into their smaller groups.

You should have food at the event. Food is a natural social lubricant. Depending on the time of your event, this could mean lunch, dinner or simply snacks and desserts. You could ask your partners to bring some food, potluck style or, you could arrange for food and have all participants chip in some nominal fee to help cover the cost. Easy options include sandwich platters, pizza delivery and snack platters, but feel free to use your imagination. You might consider recruiting a helper, who could be available to manage the food.

Afterwards, gather people together again, and get a report from each facilitator. This doesn't have to be very elaborate. Usually each facilitator simply says that their group was wonderful.

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However, getting people together at the end gives them a sense that they were a part of something important and give them a proper sendoff. Be sure to collect the feedback cards at the end of the session. These cards enable you to contact people for future sessions.

Be sure to run on time! People will have other commitments following your session. If you run late, these people will have to walk out in the middle of your program and will change the social dynamic!

8. Thank-You Cards

Be sure to send thank you cards, especially to your partners, and, if someone helped arrange the location and food, to that person or persons as well. If you have time, consider sending a thank you card to every participant. Often, participants provide better word-of-mouth than leaders and these participants will be key to enabling you to hold other dialogue sessions. Letting them know that their participation was valuable can make a difference.

3. Hosting Larger Sessions


After a successful pilot, you'll probably want to run larger sessions. This is generally very similar to hosting a pilot session with a few challenging quirks. Larger sessions means more groups and more people to keep track of. You will need to maintain an RSVP list for both believers and nonbelievers. You will need to make sure you don't have too many believers and not enough nonbelievers or vice versa. (Our online system can help you with this!) If you use the automated system, an automated reminder notice will be sent out a week in advance. If you prefer traditional methods, make sure you give folks a reminder call. Due to the complexity of organizing folks, we recommend limiting sessions to no bigger than five groups total (you can of course, host fewer than five groups). Be sure to send out a reminder message about the dialog event one week beforehand. This reminder could be either e-mail or a quick phone call.

The more people you have involved, the more likely it is the someone will be sick or absent the day of the event. Groups of three don't work as well as groups of four. This is because the odd man out will feel as though he has to represent all of Christendom or all of Atheism/Humanism. To avoid this problem, we recommend scheduling groups of five instead of groups of four with either three believers, and two atheists, or three atheists and two believers, not including the facilitator. This means, if you're planning four groups you need 20 participants and four facilitators. This way, you can still have groups of at least four, even if several people don't make it. Please note that the facilitator's training manual explains how to deal with groups of either four or five.

You will still want to continue working with your partners. You'll probably also want to continue making connections with new partners. Be sure to send invitations out to past participants and ask past participants to invite others they think might be interested. Try to pick dates in conjunction with your partners so that it will be easier for you to find participants on the other side of the theological spectrum.

4. Things You Might Run Into

Your partners can't recruit others

 You may find that your partners are enthusiastic about the project, but don't seem to be able to generate others to participate. Don't despair. Sometimes leaders see the value of dialogue, but don't think that their organizations will and may be afraid to champion it. Or, they may not be effective salesmen. Usually, this problem will pop up in the sessions following a pilot. This simply means you need a wider range of partners. Your current partners can still be useful. They can, after all, be facilitators and provide good references for others but you will need other partners to help invite participants. It usually takes a couple tries before you find the right partners. Keep at it and you will soon find someone who is excited enough to go to bat for the project. Also try to identify past participants, who can help you spread the word. One lay person can be as if not more effective at inviting other Christians than a pastor.

You lose your location

Try to confirm your location, a week or two ahead of time. Every now and then, of course, you find that something has happened to your reservation. Don't panic. If all else fails, you can usually find another location, if nothing else, an available restaurant. Consult with your partners and find out if they have any ideas. It is very easy to explain to people that there has been a last-minute change. Everyone can sympathize with the situation. You will not look bad. However, you absolutely must contact everyone who is coming to make sure that they get the word of the new location. Use phone calls, and don't simply rely on e-mail, although you can send e-mail as well. Ask people to confirm that they got the message by replying to your e-mail or calling you back. Request that the original location redirect any people who happen to show up there by mistake.

5. Sample Invitation Letters

These sample letters can be found in text format on our website at www.garrison-martineau.com

Dear Pastor,

Last month I heard about this program which facilitates small group dialogue between believers and nonbelievers as a way to help us break down stereotypes and community barriers and I'm interested in setting one up here. This is a unique growth opportunity for members of your community to share the beauty of their Christian experience in a safe place, practice good listening skills and breakdown interpersonal barriers -- a great way, in the words of one past participant, "to become more like Jesus".

Apparently, the project began in California and has sponsored a number of sessions around the San Francisco bay area & even one in South Carolina. Participants have included Presbyterians,

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Baptists, Charismatics, Catholics, Atheists, Humanists, Independents and even a Pagan --- all sharing their stories and making connections! I'd like to offer this opportunity here. Would your community be interested in working with me on a small pilot?

The project essentially puts people into groups of five: 2 believers, 2 nonbelievers and a trained facilitator. The first hour is dedicated to allowing everyone to share their personal story and the second hour is dedicated to helping people understand the different social concerns people in the group have and the human experiences which shaped and informed their views. I'm thinking a pilot would be two groups.

I myself am a member of the local humanist organization and am looking for some Christian partners interested in working with me on this. The Garrison-Martineau Project board includes religious people. Pastor Laurie Dickerson at Broken and Mending (510) 579-5039 or Pastor Bruce Stryd at Thornton Ave Baptist (510) 797-7910 would be happy to speak with you about their experiences with the project in California. More information is also at their website at www.garrison-martineau.com Please give me a call.

Dear atheist/humanist leader,

Last month I heard about this program which facilitates small group dialogue between believers and nonbelievers as a way to help us break down stereotypes and community barriers and I'm interested in setting one up here. This is a unique opportunity to be heard and present the human face of your concerns. A recent Christian participant said that she saw "walls break down and Christians shedding their fear of atheists." Let's create the world we all long to live in - one where atheists, humanists and other minorities are viewed as mainstream, integral members of the community.

Apparently, the project began in California and has sponsored a number of sessions around the San Francisco bay area & even one in South Carolina. Participants have included Presbyterians, Baptists, Charismatics, Catholics, Atheists, Humanists, Independents and even a Pagan --- all sharing their stories and making connections! I'd like to offer this opportunity here. Would your community be interested in working with me on a small pilot?

The project essentially puts people into groups of five: 2 believers, 2 nonbelievers and a trained facilitator. The first hour is dedicated to allowing everyone to share their personal story and the second hour is dedicated to helping people understand the different social concerns people in the group have and the human experiences which shaped and informed their views. I'm thinking a pilot would be two groups.

I myself am a member of a local church and am looking for some atheist/humanist partners interested in working with me on this. The Garrison-Martineau Project board includes both religious and nonreligious people. more information is also at their website at www.garrison-martineau.com Please give me a call.