

Congregation: How To

8 Event Design Patterns for a Transformative Gathering



I've just come from the 2019 Enspiral Retreat, our community's big annual gathering. This year's retreat was primarily hosted by [The Hum](#) (me and Nati), with the support of some awesome co-hosts from Enspiral.

In [microsolidarity](#) terms, Enspiral is my "congregation": a mutual aid community that's small enough for everyone to know everybody else, and big enough to cultivate courage and resilience and impact. This annual gathering is a foundational pillar of our congregation.

Our community has been gathering like this for the past 8 years, so we've developed some real sophistication in how we do it.

There's a growing number of people who want to gather in this way, so I'm going to document some of the key elements of the event design. I'm writing as a host, for other event hosts. This is a highly subjective list, but to me feels like some of the most important ingredients for creating an atmosphere of trust and fun and personal-development-in-the-company-of-others

I'll start with an objective overview of what happened, then pull out some of the design patterns.

What happened

Here's a brief outline of the event:

- 65 people meet on Friday morning.
- We stay at Aroha Valley Farms, a new retreat venue an hour away from Wellington City, run by our friends at [EHF](#).
- Most people stay onsite in tents for Friday and Saturday nights.
- We eat healthy delicious mostly organic and local vegetarian meals prepared with love and care by Enspiral's amazing catering crew Home Cooking Plus.
- Day 1 opens with a welcome, setting context & confirming our shared intention for the time together.
- Participants break out into "Retreat Crews": a small group of 5 or 6 people who meet periodically thru the event.
- The bulk of our agenda is co-created by participants using a method called [Open Space Technology](#).
- We have a structured session after dinner for people to share and get to know each other, and unstructured time for people to have a glass of wine and make new friends.
- Day 2 is full of Open Space sessions, and the Retreat Crews re-convene again once before dinner.
- After dinner we have another structured sharing session, followed by unstructured hang out time.
- After Sunday breakfast we have the final Retreat Crew check in, and conclude with a closing ceremony.

This year, we also had a gathering of Enspiral Members in the 2 days immediately before the main retreat. In Enspiral lingo, "Members" are the governing shareholders of the Enspiral Foundation. Compared to your average community participant, we have a deeper commitment to the collective project, and more shared trust. The Members Gathering brought 24 of us together to reconnect, hold some governance conversations, and prepare to receive the broader community at the big retreat.

So that's the "broad strokes" overview. To understand what makes this event really special though, we need to take a subtler look at some of the design elements.

1. Participant-Created Agenda

The majority of our time together is filled with whatever conversations, workshops and activities that people want to host. To produce this co-created agenda, we use a technique called Open Space Technology, a simple post-it driven method. Perhaps next time we'll use [Autopia](#), a new app for co-created gatherings developed by Stephen Reid from Enspirial.

The method is simple: with 5 time-slots and 6 meeting spaces, we had room for 30 sessions. So roughly half the 65 participants get to host a session on a topic they care about, and every session is attended by whichever participants are attracted to it.



While the method is simple, it reliably produces a profound *lived experience* of collective intelligence emerging without centralised authority. As a retreat host, my job is *not* to curate a list of "inspiring speakers" who give talks on some predetermined theme. Instead I'm opening up the space for whatever emerges from the desires and curiosities of the participants.

In addition to the formal "Open Space" sessions, we have the informal open space that arises from a spacious agenda. We plan for long mealtimes, ample breaks, and minimum time spent in sessions where everyone is expected to pay attention to one thing. These unstructured times create "bumping space" for meeting new people, taking naps, and having serendipitous encounters. The freedom emphasises the agency of each participant: choose your own adventure.

Concentric Hosting

While there are some special hosting roles required to make this event function smoothly, we don't have a binary distinction between "hosts" and "guests". The retreat is co-created, it's about participation, not consumption, so no-one is 'just a host' or 'just a guest'.

In retrospect, it seems we have a kind of "concentric hosting" approach. Let me explain the circles-within-circles:

1. Nati and I anchored this event: we did most of the logistics, selling tickets, coordinating with the venue & cooks, running the finances through our company [The Hum](#), etc.
2. We had close support from 4 co-hosts who shaped the narrative theme and the calling question. They also looked after discrete tasks like coordinating transport, giving extra support to the parents & children, and facilitating the Open Space agenda.
3. The Enspiral Members form another hosting ring, about 20 people paying extra attention to the experiences of the remaining participants.

So the gathering of 65 is not an undifferentiated group. Rather, we have 2 in the middle, supported by 4 co-hosts, who in turn are supported by the other 20 members. This creates a wonderfully healing kind of abundant hospitality.

In addition to looking after the functional tasks like transportation and time-keeping, the people closer to the centre also have a greater sense of responsibility for the **culture** that we co-create.

"Modelling and mimicking" explains a lot of social behaviour. Basically, we copy each other. People with more social capital, status, and visibility tend to get copied more than those with less.

So those of us near the centre pay close attention to the behaviours we are modelling, knowing that we are likely to be mimicked by each expanding circle: we're careful to listen well, to celebrate people, to be vulnerable with our emotions, to be considerate.

This "sets the tone" for people in the outer circle, who are less familiar in our space, and looking for cues to answer "how should I show up here?" New people are welcome to just relax and be hosted, and they are also invited to step in and exercise their agency to create the experience they want to have.

This participant feedback illustrates what it is like to arrive as a new-comer into this space:

"I loved this! One of the best events I've been to in the world. The after glow is still with me and I feel I was so held in a real, purposeful community. What a treasure!"

Calling Question & Narrative Theme

I don't think it is enough to simply bring cool people together. To really get somewhere, it helps to have a "calling question" (to borrow some language from the [Art of Hosting](#) crowd).

In the months leading up to the event, as hosts we tuned in to what questions seemed to be most "alive" in our community. Eventually we settled on the calling question for this retreat: *"how can we support each other to do more meaningful work?"*

The calling question creates a sense of focus through all the complexity of an emergent co-created event. *If in doubt, if you are overwhelmed or we've lost sight of the destination, return to that calling question. If you care about this question, then you're in the right place.*



This question was enhanced with a narrative theme, a little touch of theatre running throughout. In this case, we developed a nautical metaphor. Our quest for meaningful work became an ocean crossing, requiring navigational methods, wayfinding, and sensitive instruments. Retreat Crews were named according to different boats: like the schooner, ketch, and waka. All our boats together form a fleet: the safest way to navigate through stormy weather. We had a captain's hat from the costume box, so each day we could pass the hat to the "Captain of Logistics" - if you have a question, look for the person with the hat.

These shared metaphors are fun, and they help to produce the shared identity, that coherent sense of "us".

Kernel of Trust

I think that producing this "us"-ness, this shared identity, is what retreats are for. Ideally it's an "us" that everyone can see themselves in. We're aiming for a kind of inclusion that celebrates our differences, not erases them. One of the most important components of this harmonising work is: **trust**. I won't share the most precious parts of myself until I trust the people around me.

I only know how to grow trust gradually: starting with a small kernel of people who know each other well, and then inviting new people in a few at a time.

This year about 30% of the retreat participants were newcomers. With this 70-30 ratio, most people already know "how we do things around here", their existing relationships and past experiences provide orientation. In previous events we've pushed this ratio to 50-50, and it was much harder to create a sense of coherence, intimacy, and safety.

If I were starting a new congregation again from scratch, I'd limit the first gathering to maybe 12 or 20 people max, to establish this trust kernel before expanding to include many more people. For the kernel, I'd be looking for people with experience of participatory culture, high emotional intelligence, and some degree of pre-existing relationship with each other. The focus is small scale coherence first, then that core can invite people to the next gathering.

In Enspiral, the trust kernel is centred around the Members, who have long standing relationships of trust, grown through years of struggle, celebration and loss.

Retreat Crews

I have a design question that accompanies me to any event: *what about the lonely people?*

In my perspective, random unstructured socialising is an extremely suboptimal way to produce meaningful new relationships. I'm pretty outgoing and confident, and still I have a much easier time making new friends if there is some structured encounter that helps me get over the initial awkwardness of being a stranger. It can be a minimal form: just a question, or a game, or an exercise.

There's a simple design we use at Enspiral, that I love so much, I wish it were reproduced in every conference, retreat, class, festival, or event that involves more than 20 people. We have different names for it, like "home group" or "squad", or in this case, the "Retreat Crew".

The Retreat Crew is a small group, say 4-8 people. We allocated people so everyone is in one crew. They return to the same crew periodically through the course of the event, once or twice per day for 40 minutes or an hour. These small group conversations guarantee that everyone can be seen and heard. It's a space for shared reflection, to digest the complexity of a highly stimulating event. These small groups prevent people from "falling through the cracks"; it's much less likely that anyone is going to suffer from a sense of loneliness, or confusion. If someone is disoriented or distressed, their crew will notice and get them the support they need.

Reduce Context Inequity

The “trust kernel” has a down side, I call it “context inequity”.

The people who have been in the community for a long time have very high shared *context*; whenever we gather, there are stories, lingo, and past intimacies that accompany us, always present just below the surface. Newcomers do not have any of this context, which can be very alienating if not handled carefully.



So we use a few design elements to flatten the context-inequity:

- We make the Members visible during the opening session: *these people have been around for a while, so talk to them if you want to under-*

stand the community, or if you have a question, or want an introduction to someone.

- We put one or two Members in each Retreat Crew to guarantee that everyone will have a relationship with at least one high-context person who can help them navigate.
- Over the years we've developed our own unique terminology and jargon. This can easily block people from participating, if they don't understand what we mean with one of our weird words. We use a hand signal to prevent this: if someone uses an unfamiliar word, you can make a C-shape with one hand to ask for Clarification. The Members do this to each other, to normalise the act of asking for clarity.
- Lightning talks: on the first evening, we had 7 or 8 people each give a 5 minute talk to share examples of what life is like in this community. This creates a shared point of reference for all participants.

Making all this context explicit for the newcomers means it is much easier for them to participate on equal footing with the rest of us. And it's an important way for the community to see itself, to remember who we are, and notice how we've grown since the last retreat.

Ritual

Part of what we're doing in these retreats is undoing our individualist conditioning, and growing into a more relational way of being. Ritual is a powerful ingredient in this process. We inherit, borrow, invent, and co-create rituals for different objectives.

In my view, the Enspiral Retreat is mostly about creating new relationships, refreshing existing ones, opening people to new possibilities, and inspiring each other to be the better version of themselves. So we invented an evening ritual to support these objectives.

We called it the Listening Party. Noise restrictions meant we couldn't have a party-party, so we had a "listening" party instead, which is more about **being heard** rather than what you're sharing per se.

It's not a dialogue, but a stage where you can stand, share something important to you, and enjoy the extraordinary presence and listening from everyone in the room. We created a balance of intimacy and lightness, with a mix of vulnerable personal stories, songs, and readings.

In the end, we settled somewhere between 'open mic night', and 'group therapy session'. For smaller gatherings, our rituals are more intimate, reaching deeper into more sensitive territory. For this largish event with many new people, the balance felt about right.

Succession

Almost none of the event design was invented by this year's hosting crew. 90% of what I've explained here, we inherited from previous hosts. Thanks to JV, Silvia, Alanna, Billy, Vivien, Beka, Ants, Sligo, Gina, Chelsea, Mary, Lucas, Sandra and everyone else that has paddled this boat before us! My gratitude extends to all their teachers, and the elders before them.



Lineage goes forwards as well as back. For one of the final gestures of the retreat, when everyone was gathered for the closing session, I visibly removed the “hosting hat” and asked: *who is willing to take this hat for next year’s event?* After a few moments, John raised his hand and committed to holding the next one (contingent on some other folks co-hosting with him).

This visible act of succession felt liberating for me. It’s a challenge to the implicit presumption that the people who hosted this one will probably host the next one. Literally passing the hat on to another Member is a demonstration of the En-spiral approach to shared leadership. Our leaders are not special people, they’ve just stepped into a special role for a moment. We’re suspicious of concentrated power, and have learned that power is healthier when it keeps moving.

Conclusion

Well that got longer than I anticipated! There you have it, 8 event design patterns for congregation gatherings:

1. Participant Created Agenda: choose your own adventure
2. Concentric Hosting: distributed responsibility and intentional culture
3. Calling Question & Narrative Theme: shared focus and shared metaphors
4. Kernel of Trust: small-scale coherence before growth
5. Retreat Crews: so nobody is lonely or lost
6. Reduce Context Inequity: so newcomers are included
7. Ritual: for growing into a more relational way of being
8. Succession: for shared leadership

I'd love to hear what happens if you remix some of these design patterns into your events. If you're an event host, I'd love to swap recipes with you! And if you want to bring some of the Enspiral flavour into your next retreat or conference, drop me a line, as we have excellent hosts distributed across many parts of the globe.