

A Listening Parish: Improving the Green Line

The task is to improve the structures, process, and climate that help a parish community listen to itself, the world, and God. The “green line” image comes from *The Relationship Cycle in Organizations*. The parish needs concrete and reliable ways in which the hopes and concerns of members and leaders can be heard and addressed appropriately.

If we are to hear ourselves, God, the society we live in, and each other the parish needs structures, processes and a climate for listening. The parish needs to be a listening community that nurtures listening people.

1. Structures, Processes and a Climate for Listening to the World

- a. A disciplined contextual analysis each year by parish leaders.
- b. Study groups that explore issues present or emerging in the society or church.
- c. Members with experience in various sectors of society sharing their view of the trends
- d. Train and coach the congregation to include in their prayer life the concerns of the workplace and civic life along with those of the family and self
- e. Conduct a contemplative walk around the town or neighborhoods the parish serves.
- f. Follow up with people who visited the parish but did not return. Interview them.

2. Structures, Processes and a Climate for Listening to the Parish Community

- a. Each year have the leadership group explore the dynamics, the strengths, the opportunities in relationship to the primary task and core processes
- b. Establish a “channeling process” that allows the parish to gather people’s concerns, new ideas, and insights about emerging issues. Have the vestry use it two or three times each year.
- c. Develop the habit of setting boundaries on how emerging issues will be addressed and as appropriate “testing” issues as they emerge. The process in too many parishes is one of listening and responding to the most anxious, cynical and passive people in the community.
- d. Testing Process
- e. Encourage the practice of people only speaking for themselves.
- f. A listening climate can be encouraged by training people in how to use processes of faith sharing, circle discussions, and discernment that require respectful and careful listening
- g. Nurturing the community’s competence for being together in silence and stillness is an essential aspect of establishing a listening community.
- h. Have several parish town meetings each year. Have one that is a full day or day and a half
- i. Use external consultants

3. Obedience to One Another

The Latin word “oboedientia” comes from a root concerning hearing. Obedience is about hearing and responding to what we hear. In the people, circumstances and things of community life we are able to listen for God, for God’s will, God’s rhythm, God’s spirit.

Obedience is about caring for those with who we are in community. Joan Chittister’s translation of the Rule goes “Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the prioress and abbot but also to one another ...” (Chapter 71) and later, “...try to be first to show respect to the other (Romans 12:10) supporting with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body or behavior, and competing in obedience to one another” (Chapter 72).

4. Communication as a Face-to-Face, Two-Way Process

In many parishes when there is talk about “communication” what is meant is communication from the leaders to the members, e.g., newsletters, sections of the web site, etc. When leaders receive complaints

about “communication” in the parish the discussion frequently moves to how the leadership can increase the methods and amount of information being shared with parishioners. What’s needed to improve communications is a broader view of what is happening. To what extent is it that the leadership needs to change how it offers information and what is offered? To what extent is it that members need to be directly challenged to pay attention to the information already available? Even more important may be exploring how the communication takes place - try expanding the occasions of face-to-face, two-way communication, e.g., testing processes at coffee hour, regular parish town meetings that include a channeling process and a process for the community to focus its attention on some matter of common interest.

To increase the amount of face-to-face, two-way communication there are several things you can do:

- Use survey-feedback processes rather than a survey-closed discussion processes. Four rules of thumb – 1). If you survey people report the results back to them; don’t gather information that only a leadership group then explores; 2). Report back in a face-to-face manner; have an open meeting; 3). Don’t ask for data you are not really open to hearing and acting on; and 4). You increase the relationship between data gathering, analysis, setting direction, and taking action when you do it all at the same time; a day long parish town meeting in which data is collected and explored by those present increases the community’s energy for follow through; avoid the compulsion to survey everyone on the membership roles (the costs are rarely worth the pay-off and such processes separate the data from responsibility or action.)

Survey-feedback processes do require small group follow up activities, working groups begun at an open meeting can stay with the project for a few months and leaders will need to monitor movement and make adjustments.

- Develop your ability to decide on when it is appropriate to just receptively listen and when there is a need for conversation
- Use the methods, e.g., use testing processes, channeling processes, have parish town meetings, use external consultants from time to time,

5. List of Core Methods

- 1) Understanding and using survey feedback vs. doing surveys
- 2) Leadership/vestry conferences with a skilled external consultant
- 3) Use of core methods and skills – communication, negotiating, group process
- 4) Routine processes of channeling and testing

Never passive methods – “my door is always open,” suggestion box, standard surveys, power point

The document draws on earlier unpublished work – “Benedictine Spirituality and Congregational Development”. Also see related material in “The Benedictine Promise” in *Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Parish Spirituality*, By Robert A. Gallagher, Ascension Press, 2008 and Chapter 5 of *In Your Holy Spirit: Shaping the Parish Through Spiritual Practice*, Robert A. Gallagher, Ascension Press, 2011

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