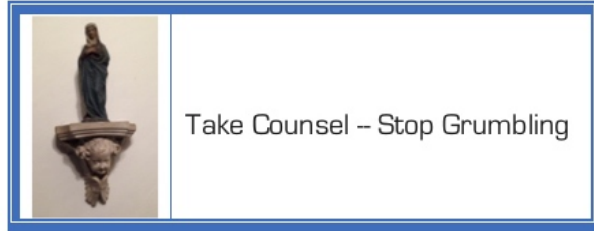


## Ways of avoiding “taking counsel”



We want to mention four listening processes that we see as deficient. Whether intentionally, or through incompetence, they are ways parish leaders avoid “taking counsel.” In the first three the problem isn’t so much with the methods themselves as their being used as primary ways to listen; being done without also using a variety of other methods that are more effective at trust development, producing valid and useful information, and building an open and humble parish community life. We have a fifth item on the list. It’s not even a bad listening process. It’s straightforward avoidance.

1. The open-door policy
2. One on one conversations
3. The “traditional” meeting
4. Façade surveys
5. Avoid or get rid of people who make you uncomfortable

There are cases where leaders use them inadequate processes, consciously or unconsciously, to keep a tight rein on things. The leader, or leadership group, gets to listen, interpret, and decide what to share or act upon. There is too limited a role involving the wider congregation, those with specialized expertise, and those with a broader base of experience we see in some past wardens and retired priests. We are avoiding listening while appearing to be listening.

This troublesome behavior may be an excessive need to be in control or it might be the result of inadequate training and experience. The first can be helped with spiritual guidance and psychological therapy. The second with training and coaching by organization development practitioners.

In each case we are avoiding allowing the community to hear its own voice. They don't hear one another speak. They don't have the opportunity to influence one another.

### 1. *The open-door policy*

It's fine for the rector to say there is an open-door policy. "If you want to talk about something please come by, we'll have coffee."

The problem is that for the most part those who take advantage of it have come to complain or as a cover for counseling. It doesn't really tell you much about where the parish as a whole is. It places too heavy a burden upon the priest. It can easily feed a distorted picture of parish life and for some clergy feed their sense of isolation.

### 2. One-on-one conversations

Needed in confidential matters. Also, when the priest is following the norms of how to manage conflict (See the "Grumbling & Conflict" PDF on the "Take Counsel – Stop Grumbling" web page). It's very effective and necessary when conducting spiritual life interviews with new members. And a fine thing to do for a social conversation at the coffee shop.

Using it as a primary method to gather information on the state of the parish is incompetent and smacks of a need for excessive control. It keeps the priest, or other leaders, at the center of the wagon wheel. The leader is the one who gets to hear and assess all the information. Clergy having one-on-one meetings with each vestry member, or the vestry going out to have one-on-one meetings with a large number of parishioners, is a poor use of the leader's time and interferes with health community development.

This one is especially deceptive because each individual may find themselves feeling "heard." They may miss the fact that such listening is often manipulative as it avoids enabling the parish community to hear one another and interferes with the emergence of a collective voice.

### 3. The "traditional" meeting

We gather, there's a prayer, we hear reports, we ask questions. Maybe it's time to elect vestry members and delegates. There's another prayer and the meeting ends.

You can make it easier to avoid by conducting meetings so the "front" tightly controls information flow, arrange the physical space so people don't see each other's faces, and do everything in a reports and presentation style with some Q&A.

Sometimes it's easiest to see the problem by looking at alternatives. For example:

- We spend time on at least one of the reports doing a large group ["Likes – Concerns – Wishes" process](#).
- Around at least one question facing the parish community we use an inclusive and participatory process – sub groups talk, they report to the whole group, the rector (and wardens) say "Here's what we are hearing." There's an opportunity for people to respond, "Yes, that's it except you're missing this."
- We use a "testing process" on some issue. A brief process, think 5 – 15 minutes. An issue is identified and a spectrum, scale, is created to reflect the views present in the community. The testing process is a way to find out where the larger community stands on certain questions or issues. It helps both the community and the leadership get a sense of where the group is collectively. [A PDF: The Testing Process](#)

#### 4. Façade surveys

##### *Don't even look at them*

A rather effective way of avoiding "taking counsel." Do a survey. Don't have a "survey-feedback" process in which the group sees the results immediately. Make sure the surveys are gathered to be reviewed by the clergy or maybe the clergy and the wardens. Then don't look at them.

##### *Bury the important issues in a flood of trivial questions*

This often gets used when leaders fear that significant conflict is about to break into the open. It's a Level 1 or 2 conflict management strategy being used at a higher level. The need is for a trained, experienced external consultant to take charge of the process. That will include getting useful and

valid information out in a way that can be productive in managing the conflict. The survey is an attempt to pre-empt the external intervention. It's done just before external consultants or a bishop arrives on the scene. Such surveys often include a lot of questions likely to get a positive response.

*Manipulate the survey to ask questions likely to get the result you want*

The current parish leaders have decided to de-emphasize spiritual practice and press members toward more social activism. They don't have a spiritual map that sees these things as interdependent in a total pattern of spiritual life. So, they don't want questions about spiritual practice in the survey.

*Pose the issues so as to avoid responsibility*

There are some in the parish beginning to mistrust the rector's judgment. The questions on the survey don't ask anything about the rector but pose things in terms of "the clergy team."

*Effective surveys* – there is a link on the "Taking Counsel – Stop Grumbling" site to "Survey Feedback."

## 5. Avoid or get rid of people who make you uncomfortable

Many parishes lack the deep health of life in Christ because they have developed a habit of avoiding things and people that make them uncomfortable. We avoid listening to what we don't want to hear.

Occasionally it's blunt and visible. As in the parish meeting when a retired priest offered a thought about a safety issue and was crushed by the dismissive response of the Interim Priest-in-Charge. Years later he was still saying, "If you're old and retired, they don't want to hear you."

The same parish had something of a hidden practice of nudging out people who made the clergy or powerful lay leaders uncomfortable. When faced with a couple getting divorced he asked the wife to look for another parish. She wasn't as polished or as big a pledger as her husband.

There is a conflict styles assessment tool, called TKI – Thomas-Kilmann Instrument. It's available from Consulting Psychologists Press (CCP). Those of

us in the Order of the Ascension that do parish development consulting and training have used it with hundreds of parishioners over the last 50 years.

The TKI identifies five styles or modes – avoiding, accommodating, compromising, competing and collaborating. Most of us have a favorite and second favorite. Also, a weak spot. Parishes vestries are often made up of people inclined to avoid or accommodate. They can easily be pushed over when other, more assertive, leaders want to get rid of someone or push someone into the shadows. No one spoke up when the Interim bullied the older priest. And some leaders with a competing style may be excessively controlling if they lack a compensating collaborating mode or a strong capacity to be aware of their feelings, managing their emotions, and express empathy.

Notice the difference between these approaches and those of Benedict and the best practices rising from organization development and group development experience. Take a look at the PDFs on “Benedict’s Methods for Taking Counsel” and “Effective Organization Development Methods for Gathering and Using Information”