

Testing Process

From *Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church*, Robert A Gallagher, Ascension Press, 2008. Used with permission. May be used for parish education and training. May not be sold.

Listening

Benedict writes of listening carefully with “the ear of your heart” and wants what is received in the listening to be “put into practice” or accepted “willingly and carried out vigorously.” It is about translating what we have heard into action. This process of listening and responding is obedience.

An assumption in organization development (OD) is that information that is engaged will create pressures and expectations in systems, that information has a catalytic effect in organizational change. OD consultants have all heard the advice to “let the data speak.”

If we are to hear God, the society we live in, one another, and ourselves the parish needs structures, processes and a climate for listening. If the data is to “speak” the parish needs to be a listening community that nurtures listening people.

We need concrete ways to do that listening and responding. There are several ways parishes might “listen to the world.”

Each year use a different method to engage in a disciplined contextual analysis. One year do a broad analysis that identifies the forces and trends that impact the parish. What is happening in the wider society (global, national), in the region, in the wider church? As part of this process invite your city/town planner to come to the part of the process related to regional trends. Another year look at a way of segmenting the population by values orientation or generational groupings. How does this show itself in the congregation? What groupings will be most drawn to this particular parish?

Many parishes have study groups that explore issues present or emerging in the society or church. That’s a way to help the parish stay sensitive to trends. Or we might ask members with experience in various sectors of society to share their view of the trends. Listen to people from health care, government, education, and business. Expect them to do some research so that what they share is based in its own listening process.

Another form of study group would be to have leaders read a book that relates to some issue the parish needs to address. It might be around spiritual life, the parish as an emotional system or membership growth. The process would need to include some reflection about the parish’s related patterns and an attempt to apply the ideas in the book to the parish. As a consultant I was asked to lead such a session in two parishes using Peter Steinke’s *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*. The one parish had an acknowledged pattern of reactivity when people disagreed with a direction. The other had an unacknowledged pattern of overloading life with too many good things to do and ending up burdened and frustrated because they had a hard time saying “no.”

There are forms of prayer and worship that play a role. 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. For example, help people learn how to imaginatively engage the offertory of the

Eucharist with the whole of their life. Or, teach and have people practice a form of contemplation and intercession that attends to the broader society. Relate this to the Prayers of the People in the Eucharist. Work with the congregation on offering thanks for the signs of God's movement in society. Beware of the tendency for prayers related to the world to be focused on what people see as the "negative" part of their life.

Another way of using prayer to listen to the context is to conduct a contemplative walk around the town or neighborhoods the parish serves. Walk in silence. Invite participants to simply listen, see, and feel. Return to a meeting place to share what you have experienced. Explore any surprises, places of pain or joy. Celebrate the Eucharist or say an Office.

There are also structures, processes and a climate involved in learning to listen to the parish community. When leaders talk about "communication issues" in the parish they usually mean - "How can we communicate from the top, or center, to the rest of the parish?" While we do want to do that well it's the wrong starting place. The first issue is how the parish community can better listen to itself. Leaders have a responsibility to help the community communicate with itself and to take what is explored into account as they make decisions in vestries and committees. The leadership will want to establish listening processes within the vestry and other

Another practice that can be used regularly is a "testing process." This is used in setting boundaries on how emerging issues will be engaged.

The process in too many parishes is one of listening and responding to the most anxious, cynical and passive people in the community. The clergy, wardens, the vestry, or even a whole parish community can get so caught up in trying to please or pacify a few people that disproportionate time, energy and resources get tied up in issues that are not really in the parish's best interest. This misdirection also usually leaves a resentful undercurrent in the community while not really addressing the anxiety of those who raised the initial concern.

Even when leaders know who is raising an issue, without a broader listening process they usually do not know whether it is an interest of just those people or of a wider segment of the community.

A "testing" process helps a community cope with situations in which a few persistent voices press a concern or idea that would have an effect on the community's life. What they are saying may represent a widely shared view or it may simply be their view. Those expressing the issue may not really know how many they represent. Imagine the informal one-on-one coffee hour discussion. Someone is making the rounds, letting others know about an important problem in the parish. People are listening and even nodding. Is it agreement or politeness?

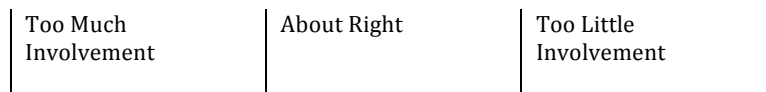
The use of a "testing process" requires leaders to use sound judgment in deciding when the process is likely to produce valid and useful information as well as help the community manage its anxiety. Overuse may result in an increase in the community's anxiety, less listening, and ineffective action. However the danger in most parishes is not overuse but the absence of any way for the community to define itself in relationship to emerging issues. A rule of thumb might be to use a "testing process" about four times/year with the whole community and possibly ten times with the vestry.

The “testing process” can be done for a few minutes at the community’s coffee hour, at vestry meetings, in working teams and at community meetings. It will usually be most effective if done when the group is gathered rather than in a paper survey. Face to face processes are usually more effective in promoting careful listening and effective response.

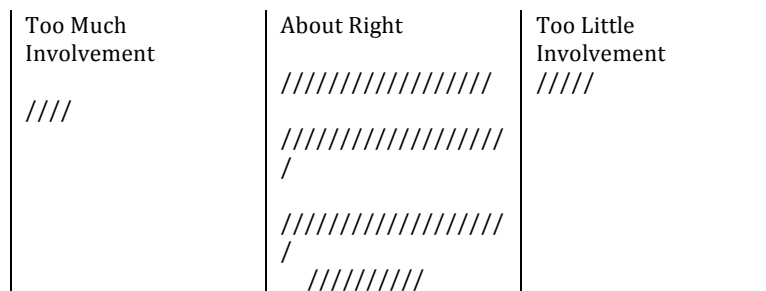
A possible process is to identify the issue, and put it on a spectrum of some sort. Have people indicate where they are on the spectrum, and summarize the result, along with what the next step will be, if any.

For example, in a parish where several people had been complaining about the extent of the parish’s involvement in the arts.

A spectrum was created regarding the parish’s involvement with the city’s art community:



The 80 parishioners at the meeting came forward to register their opinion. The result was:



There was no judgment that those who had raised the issue were “wrong,” only that most people in the community had a different opinion. Those who had raised the issue saw that their position was not widely shared.

It was not just the pet project of the rector and a few members. This involvement had wide ownership. The process allowed the community to know its own mind. The anxiety in the community about “people being upset” was put into perspective. No next steps were needed.

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