

## A few structures and processes to facilitate listening

### *Community Meetings*

“Some parishes have started having community meetings three times a year. These are opportunities to have all those willing to gather focus on one significant issue. I’ve seen parishes do it around things such as hospitality, membership growth, and finances. The meetings are usually about ninety minutes long. They may include “channeling” (gathering prioritized lists of issues to address and moving them into a channel for action) and “testing” processes or some other way to gather information related to the topic.”<sup>i</sup>

“The parish community needs regular meetings over the course of the year. At times the whole parish, at other times a congregation within the parish. That will depend on the issues to be engaged. These meetings need to make use of the methods known to facilitate dialogue and listening. Having three or four such meetings each year provides the opportunity to engage more people in the significant questions of the community’s life.

It is important that these not turn into “town meetings” with their image of a contentious and argumentative spirit. It’s also important that they not undercut the responsibility of the rector and vestry for decisions they have to make. They are a chance for leaders to test things with the community and for the community to hear its own voice. The effect of such regular gatherings is usually increased trust and commitment.”<sup>ii</sup>

### *Around the circle*

“This is a useful method of allowing everyone to be heard and is something I’ve used with up to 45 people. Participants speak in turn around the circle. The comment is to be brief and on one point. The method helps equalize the voices in the room so the more hesitant are heard along with the more assertive. It can be especially useful when dealing with controversial issues.”<sup>iii</sup>

### *Breaking into small groups*

It helps avoid groupthink and usually restores the groups’ energy to have people break into groups of 2 or 3. Keep it simple and brief. “We’ve heard the proposal. Let’s break into groups of three with people sitting next to us. How about we spend 5 minutes seeing what questions we each have.”

### *Inviting the group to assemble*

People are milling about, there’s a line for coffee, the treasure and rector are off to the side in an intense conversation. One of us would raise our hand in the air. And in a few seconds there was silence and attention given to the leaders of the meeting. We have heard that it’s a method used by the Girl Scouts. You’ll also find it described on-line.

You do need to teach people how to use it.

1. When the group leader raises their hand high. You raise your hand in the same way. Rather quickly as each person does that everyone is aware that we are about to begin.
2. So, when you see me raise my hand, you stop talking and raise your hand.
3. Your back may be to the leader, so when you see other hands being raised, raise your hand and stop talking.

Some parishes use a bell to assemble people. What you’re trying to replace is yelling, or banging on a table, or the worse method of all, yelling “The Lord be with you.”

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<sup>i</sup> Robert Gallagher, OA, *Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church*. (p. 136). Ascension Press, 2008

<sup>ii</sup> Robert Gallagher, OA, *In Your Holy Spirit: Shaping the Parish Through Spiritual Practice*, (p. 102), Ascension Press, 2011

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Gallagher, OA, *In Your Holy Spirit: Shaping the Parish Through Spiritual Practice*, (p. 103), Ascension Press, 2011