

Testing Process

This document provides the material from two books -- *In Your Holy Spirit: Shaping the Parish through Spiritual Practice* and *Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church*

Testing (from *In Your Holy Spirit: Shaping the Parish through Spiritual Practice*)

In a testing process an issue is identified and a spectrum, scale, is created to reflect the views present in the community. For example:

The “testing process” can be done for a few minutes at coffee hour, at vestry meetings, in working teams and at parish community meetings. It will usually be most effective if done when the group is gathered and can respond and discuss the result, formally or informally.

Face-to-face processes are usually more effective in promoting careful listening and effective response. A rule of thumb might be to use a “testing process” about four times per year with the whole community and possibly ten times with the vestry.

We need to do less of this	We need to stay with the current amount	We need to do more of this
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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. It’s important for parish leaders and the congregation to understand that the testing process is *not* a way to shift decision-making authority to a vote of the congregation. The results do not mean that any particular change will take place.

Examples of useful areas to test: satisfaction with the amount of silence in liturgy; sense of understanding and competence with using the Daily Office; satisfaction with existing methods of Reflection; overall satisfaction with parish life.

Examples of ways of framing questions or the discussion that are *not* useful include setting up binary responses, such as, “I would prefer piano music to the organ at 10:30.” Similarly, you don’t want to test in areas where the group is not competent to respond.

Context matters. It might, for instance, be very useful for the rector to gather specific feedback about liturgical issues or her sermons from a small, trusted group of parishioners who know something about liturgy and about homiletics. This would not, however, be a useful exercise if expanded to the parish as a whole.

Testing Process (From Fill All Things)

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:

Too Much Involvement	About Right	Too Little Involvement
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The 80 parishioners at the meeting came forward to register their opinion. The result was:

Too Much Involvement	About Right	Too Little Involvement
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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.