

Listening Meetings

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1. Method:

In a listening meeting, 5-10 people gather in the home of a host. (They have all been invited there by the host, so they all already know each other. This helps identify existing social networks.) Refreshments are served at the time the meeting is supposed to start; this provides a relaxed atmosphere and provides a buffer for those who are late to the meeting.

After 10-15 minutes the facilitator calls the meeting to order and explains the purpose of the meeting, and proposes the first question. The answers are written down on index cards by the facilitator, who will later type these abbreviated answers in a more grammatically proper form. A printed list of all questions has been distributed to all participants either at the meeting or previous to the meeting. (No surprises.)

For the first question, we have a rule to break the ice: discussion begins with the first person to speak, and only one answer can be given, and then proceeds around the circle clockwise. (This prevents a few extroverted folks from taking all the easy answers.) Of course, one can always “pass” but we come back to them later. After all have had an opportunity, any other answers are brought forth. Usually this establishes the pattern of taking turns and need only be done on the first question. The facilitator also takes a turn to share, as they are also a participant.

When all ideas are exhausted, and with the group's approval, the facilitator moves to the next question. Three questions will often take 90 minutes.

Option: at the close of the meeting the cards are laid out on a table. Colored dot stickers are distributed (available in business supply stores) so that each person has the same number (usually 4). Then they prioritize the ideas which they believe are the most important by putting one of their dots on that card.

2. The Questions

The questions keep the discussion positive and on track. If a person begins to be negative, the facilitator brings them gently back to the question; criticism or comments like “That will never work!” are identified by the facilitator at the beginning as both rude in a listening meeting and not allowed. We do not discuss the ideas or make plans; we just take turns sharing and listening. Our purpose in a listening meeting is positive with the goal of building relationships with and awareness of the value of the present and the future. Our purpose is NOT to evaluate, judge, investigate, or critique anyone or anyone's hopes or ideas. Our purpose is understanding, not accountability.

The questions I generally use in a church are:

1. What's great about our church now? (Identifies strengths & current priorities)

2. This question was shared in three versions to encourage people to imagine:

A. What would you like to see happen in the church in the next five years?

B. If a time machine took you forward five years, what would be neat to see?

C. A benefactor has left the church a gift of \$150,000 in their will. What should we spend it on?

(If paying off debt is given, then say that after all debts are paid this much is left over. If “Invest it” is the answer, say that the \$150,000 is the profit off the investment. When you select a figure, select one as large or larger than the church's annual budget.)

3. Who are the people in our community that we need to reach out to? *(Many groups will incorporate those in need in their ideas; others will go on a spending spree, and need this question to orient them beyond themselves.)*

3. Source

This format was used by the Quincy (Illinois) Superintendent of Schools to gather information and develop a community consensus of priority with regard to the future of the school system in 1993. I adapted it to church settings and used the same format with great success at Pawnee United Methodist Church as a means of quickly understanding the needs and values following my appointment to this new church. It was also used at MacMurray College to gather data for the Board of Higher Education and Campus Ministry in 1995 as well as other settings as diverse as college student groups and nursing home employees.

4. Advantages

If the host invites people to a meeting in their home, you get an automatic common viewpoint; these people are already friends and comfortable with each other. You can also immediately identify the social networks involved in the church. Who influences who?

Generally, people become enthused about their own ideas and are willing to work as a group of friends to bring them to pass. They leave the meeting believing that some of these things could happen, resulting in a positive experience.

Often the most interesting ideas are those shared from previous church experiences. Sometimes these just take the breath away and the whole group sighs.

The entire exercise accustoms people to listening to other peoples' ideas in a positive frame of mind. As they see others nodding their heads, they realize that a diversity of viewpoints exist and that they do not speak for the majority. They even practice accepting other people's ideas and their right to have them. This builds a mood of permission to allow others to work toward the achievement of differing goals.

If the facilitator tends to talk too much, writing ideas on the cards keeps that person busy. As a group member, the facilitator also shares.

The facilitator can ask questions, for more information or clarification, and even restate the idea in order to facilitate a group consensus. (I hear you saying ... Is that what you mean?)

The listening meetings build a shared vision of what is possible, and model the non-competitive cooperation needed to make dreams come true.

When the pastor is the facilitator, the participants notice the listening and the uncritical acceptance and come to believe that the pastor will listen to them, accept them, and will be instrumental in helping their hopes & dreams come to pass. This really helps the pastor to be perceived as "one of us" and "on our side." In Reality Therapy/Control Theory terms the facilitator is added to their picture album/quality world as an ally to the achievement of what they want most in their spiritual life. The listening meeting format quickly builds a group consensus.

Generally, the question about spending the money will generate the most creativity, and identify long deferred maintenance needs. A 10% increase in annual giving will generate those funds over ten years, so these projects are actually realistic and practical.

FOR MORE INFORMATION on Listening Meetings, please contact:

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