



NAVIGATING PASTORAL TRANSITIONS

A FIELD GUIDE SERIES FOR CONGREGATIONS AND PASTORS

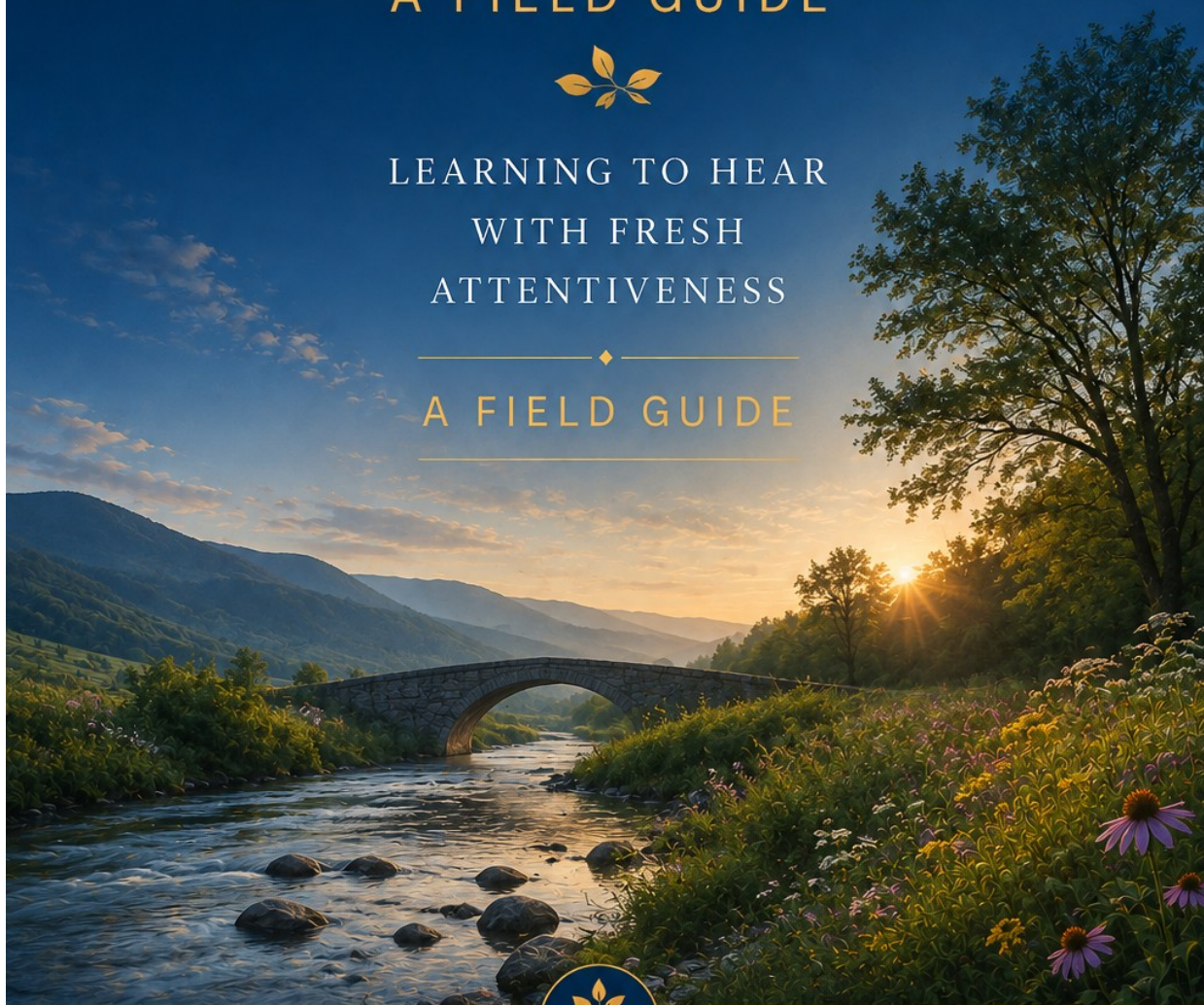
LISTENING

A FIELD GUIDE



LEARNING TO HEAR
WITH FRESH
ATTENTIVENESS

A FIELD GUIDE



HELPING PASTORS AND CONGREGATIONS
DISCERN THE WAY FORWARD—TOGETHER

Listening

Learning to Hear with Fresh Attentiveness

A Field Guide in the Navigating Pastoral Transitions Series

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About This Field Guide

Every congregation lives in a particular place.

That place is always changing.

People arrive and leave. Children grow up. Schools change. Businesses open and close. Neighborhoods take new shape. Housing becomes more—or less—affordable. New languages are heard. Old institutions disappear. New networks of relationship emerge. Hopes, pressures, losses, and possibilities gather just beyond what can be seen from inside the church building.

Congregations change too.

People who once carried leadership grow older. New members bring different experiences. Ministries that once flourished may no longer fit the community around them. New gifts surface. Questions once thought settled are asked again.

During a pastoral transition, there is a natural temptation to move quickly toward decisions.

What kind of pastor do we need?

What should our priorities be?

What should we put in our Ministry Discernment Profile?

Those questions matter.

But they come later.

Before we decide, we listen.

Having remembered its own story, the congregation now widens its attention to the present—listening first to one another, then beyond its walls: to neighbors, teachers, business owners, community leaders, first responders, healthcare workers, parents, young adults, longtime residents, newcomers, and people who may never enter the church's doors.

Listening is how assumptions give way to understanding.

This Field Guide is designed to help congregations practice that kind of listening.

It is not primarily a community needs assessment.

It is not a strategic planning exercise.

And it is not an indirect way of asking people how the church can attract more members.

It is an invitation to become curious.

Part One—The Field Guide—explores the spiritual practice of listening: within the congregation, beyond familiar voices, throughout the community, in demographic information, in places of pain and strength, and for signs of the Holy Spirit's activity.

Part Two—The Field Manual—provides practical resources for doing this work: listening exercises, conversation guides, a Neighborhood Listening Walk, a Talk to Five People journal, demographic reflection tools, and other resources that help congregations put listening into practice.

Throughout the Guide, references to these resources will help you move naturally between reflection and practice.

The purpose of both parts is the same:

To help your congregation become curious enough to hear what it does not already know.

Introduction

Before We Decide, We Listen

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Young Samuel’s words form one of Scripture’s simplest prayers.

They are also among its most difficult.

Listening sounds passive.

It isn’t.

Real listening requires us to loosen our grip on what we think we already know.

Samuel had to learn to recognize a voice he did not yet understand.

Peter had to listen when God challenged convictions he had assumed were settled.

The early Church had to listen as the Holy Spirit kept appearing among people they had not expected to include.

Again and again, the disciples discovered that faithfulness begins when certainty makes room for attention.

Jesus listened too.

Bartimaeus cried out for mercy. Jesus could see that the man was blind, yet he still asked:

“What do you want me to do for you?”

Jesus did not assume that seeing someone’s condition meant knowing that person’s desire.

At a well in Samaria, Jesus entered conversation with a woman whose life, religion, gender, and ethnicity gave others reasons to keep their distance. In the space opened by questions, truth and possibility emerged.

Listening is not incidental to Christian discipleship.

It is one of the ways we learn to recognize people.

And it is one of the ways we learn to recognize God.

Listening to Understand

Most of us listen while preparing our response.

Someone speaks and we begin sorting:

Do I agree?

What should I say?

What advice should I give?

What can we do about this?

Congregations do the same thing.

A neighbor describes loneliness and we start imagining a program.

A teacher describes stressed families and we wonder what ministry the church could offer.

A young adult explains why friends distrust churches and we begin defending the Church.

We have stopped listening.

Spiritual listening asks us to remain with the other person’s experience a little longer.

Tell me more.

What is that like?

What has changed?

What do you wish people understood?

Where do you see hope?

These are not complicated questions.

But they require humility.

We Cannot Love What We No Longer Understand

This movement begins with a crucial conviction:

Congregations cannot faithfully love a community they no longer understand.

A church may stand on the same corner for a hundred years and still know surprisingly little about the people living around it now.

Familiarity with a place is not the same as understanding it.

The congregation may remember what the neighborhood was.

Listening asks what it is becoming.

That is why this movement follows *Remembering*.

Remembering helped us ask:

What does our story teach us about who we are?

Listening asks:

What do we need to hear about where we are?

Only when those two understandings—identity and place—begin to meet are we prepared to discern vocation.

Curiosity Before Certainty

Throughout this Field Guide, we will return to one simple discipline:

Become curious before becoming certain.

Do not begin with answers.

Begin with attention.

Do not begin by asking what ministry the church should create.

Begin by asking what is happening.

Do not assume that pain is the only thing worth noticing.

Look for gifts.

Relationships.

Resilience.

Creativity.

Joy.

Do not assume the church is bringing God into the community.

God was there before we arrived.

The deeper purpose of listening is learning to recognize where Christ may already be at work.

Our task is not to invent God's mission for this place.

It is to become attentive enough to join it.

Chapter One

Listening to One Another

Hearing the Congregation Again

Listening begins close to home.

Before a congregation listens to its community, it needs to hear itself.

Not simply its leaders.

Not simply its most active members.

Not simply the people who attend congregational meetings.

The congregation.

People carry hopes.

Concerns.

Questions.

Disappointments.

Ideas.

Experiences.

Dreams.

Some speak easily.

Others rarely do.

A pastoral transition creates an unusual opportunity to hear them again.

Ask About Now

Remembering asked people to tell stories about what has shaped the congregation.

Listening changes the tense.

What are you noticing **now**?

What gives you joy in this congregation today?

What concerns you?

What are people talking about that leaders may not be hearing?

Where do you see new life?

What seems tired?

What do you hope we carry forward?

What do you hope we become willing to release?

What question do you wish someone would ask?

These are listening questions.

They do not require immediate decisions.

Their first purpose is understanding.

Listening Requires Trust

People speak differently when they understand why a conversation is happening and what will become of what they share.

Before inviting people to speak, explain who will hear their responses, whether names will be attached, how themes will be reported, and what decisions—if any—the conversation may influence.

Do not promise confidentiality that cannot be kept. Do not invite honesty and then punish people for offering it.

Trust grows when leaders receive difficult words without defensiveness—and return later to name what they heard.

Listening is not complete when the meeting ends.

A Story from the Field

A congregation held several small-group conversations during a transition.

Leaders expected people to talk mostly about worship, pastoral care, and the next pastor.

Instead, one concern appeared repeatedly.

People missed one another.

The congregation had resumed its programs after a disruptive season, but many of the informal relationships that once held people together had weakened.

No one had proposed “relationships” as a strategic priority.

No survey had asked about it.

People simply kept telling stories of isolation.

Eventually someone said:

“Maybe we don’t need to decide what to do about this yet. Maybe we first need to hear how lonely some of us have become.”

That was listening.

The Loudest Voice Is Not the Whole Congregation

Every congregation has people who speak readily.

Their voices matter.

But volume is not representation.

Listen to the homebound member.

The teenager.

The parent who rushes out after worship because a toddler has had enough church.

The person who joined three months ago.

The staff member who sees the congregation from a different angle.

The member who attends worship but avoids committees.

The person who has quietly stepped away.

Listening becomes richer as the circle widens.

Listening Does Not Mean Agreement

Hearing someone does not require adopting their opinion.

A healthy congregation can listen carefully to differing experiences.

One person may love something another finds frustrating.

Both experiences can be real.

The goal is not to determine immediately who is right.

The goal is to understand what people are experiencing.

Discernment comes later.

For Conversation

Whose voices do we hear most easily?

Who participates in congregational life but is seldom asked what they think?

What present-tense questions do we most need to ask?

What are we hearing repeatedly?

What might change if people trusted that they could speak without immediately being corrected or persuaded?

Chapter Two

Listening Beyond the Usual Voices

Who Are We Not Hearing?

Every community has a center.

It also has edges.

Churches do too.

Some people naturally find themselves near the center of congregational life. They serve on governing boards, lead committees, teach, sing, organize, speak, and know how decisions are made.

Others experience the same congregation from farther away.

Faithful listening asks:

Who is missing from this conversation?

Jesus Kept Widening the Circle

The Gospels repeatedly show Jesus paying attention to people others had learned not to notice.

Children.

Women.

Foreigners.

People with disabilities.

The poor.

The sick.

Those labeled sinners.

Those considered religious outsiders.

Jesus did more than speak to them.

He allowed encounters at the edges to become places of revelation.

That should make the Church wary of assuming that wisdom resides only at the center.

Ask Who Experiences the Church Differently

Consider people who have recently joined.

They notice things longtime members no longer see.

Ask them:

What surprised you when you first came here?

Consider young adults.

Ask:

What do people your age misunderstand about this church—and what does this church misunderstand about people your age?

Consider someone who stopped participating.

Ask, if the relationship allows:

What changed for you?

Consider community partners who use your building but do not worship with you.

Ask:

What do you experience about this congregation that we may not recognize ourselves?

These perspectives are gifts.

Sometimes uncomfortable gifts.

But gifts nonetheless.

Listening and Power

There is a subtle question underneath all of this:

Whose experience do we consider authoritative?

Congregations can unintentionally learn that some voices matter more than others.

Major donors.

Longtime families.

Officers.

Clergy.

People with education or professional status.

People who know how to speak the congregation's language.

Listening does not diminish these voices.

It simply refuses to let them become the only ones that matter.

No One Represents a Whole Group

A young adult cannot speak for all young adults. One newer member cannot explain every newcomer. One person who left cannot tell you why everyone leaves.

Invite particular people to describe their own experience, not to become representatives responsible for explaining an entire generation, race, neighborhood, or community.

Listen for both resonance and difference. Shared patterns matter, but so do experiences that do not fit the pattern.

Widening the circle should make the story more spacious—not replace one dominant voice with another.

A Practice of Invitation

People who have seldom been heard may not speak simply because someone announces:

“Everyone is welcome to share.”

Invitation sometimes needs to be personal.

“We would really like to hear your experience.”

“We haven’t heard from the youth about this.”

“You see our congregation differently than I do. Would you help me understand what you notice?”

Listening begins when people believe someone genuinely wants to know.

For Conversation

Who naturally influences conversations in our congregation?

Whose experience may be different from theirs?

Who has stopped participating, and what might we learn by listening without defensiveness?

Which generations or groups are underrepresented in our conversations?

What might people at the edges see that those at the center cannot?

Chapter Three

Leaving the Building

A Neighborhood Listening Walk

There are things you cannot learn about your community from inside the church.

So leave the building.

Walk.

Not to distribute flyers.

Not to invite people to worship.

Not to identify prospects.

Walk to notice.

Walk Slowly Enough to See

Many of us know our communities chiefly through a windshield.

We drive from home to church.

Church to grocery store.

Church to restaurant.

Church to home.

Walking changes scale.

You notice things.

Where are people sitting?

Where do children play?

Are sidewalks usable?

What languages appear on signs?

What businesses are crowded?

Which storefronts are empty?

Where is new construction happening?

Where are buildings deteriorating?

Where do people wait for buses?

Where do teenagers gather?

Where do older adults gather?

What public spaces invite people to stay?

What barriers divide one neighborhood from another?

What surprises you?

Don't Diagnose

A listening walk is not an inspection of the neighborhood.

You are not walking around identifying everything that is wrong.

That posture creates distance.

Instead, become curious.

What appears beautiful?

Where is creativity visible?

What suggests care?

Where do people seem connected?

Where are people investing time and money?

What tells you something about what residents value?

Notice pain.

Notice abundance.

Notice life.

Walk with Humility and Care

A neighborhood is not a display arranged for the congregation's education. It is someone's home.

Walk in public places. Respect privacy and property. Do not photograph people, homes, or signs of hardship without permission. Choose routes and practices that are physically accessible and safe for those participating.

When possible, walk with someone who knows the area and can help you notice what an outsider might misread.

The purpose is not to collect evidence from other people's lives. It is to become more attentive to a place you have been called to love.

A Story from the Field

For years, a church had talked about the families moving into its neighborhood.

Members assumed the greatest opportunity was children's ministry.

On a neighborhood walk, several people noticed what they had driven past hundreds of times.

Older adults were sitting alone on porches throughout the neighborhood.

Later, conversations with residents revealed that many had lived there for decades while their children had moved away.

The church had been looking for young families.

The neighborhood had been quietly showing them loneliness.

They had not needed a better program idea.

They had needed to walk more slowly.

What Did You Notice About Yourself?

A neighborhood walk reveals the observer as well as the neighborhood.

What did you overlook?

What made you uncomfortable?

Where did you feel at home?

Where did you feel like an outsider?

What assumptions did you make about people you never met?

Listening includes becoming aware of the lenses through which we see.

The Question to Carry

Do not walk asking:

What should our church do here?

Carry a simpler question:

What is happening here that we have not been noticing?

That is enough for now.

For Conversation

What surprised us?

What signs of life did we notice?

Where did we notice struggle?

Where do people naturally gather?

What assumptions did the walk challenge?

What do we want to understand better?

Chapter Four

Talk to Five People

Listening Through Relationships

You can learn much about a community without commissioning a study.

Talk to five people.

Not five church members.

Five people who experience your community from different places.

A teacher.

A business owner.

A first responder.

A teenager.

A parent.

A healthcare worker.

A nonprofit leader.

A longtime resident.

Someone who recently moved into the community.

Someone who works nearby but lives elsewhere.

The number five is not sacred.

The practice is simply meant to be possible.

Almost any congregation can do it.

Don't Interview Them About the Church

This is important.

Do not ask:

“What could our church do for the community?”

That question makes the church the center of a conversation meant to be about the community.

Instead ask:

What do you love about living here?

What has changed?

What makes life difficult for people?

Where do people find community?

What do you wish more people understood about this place?

Who is doing something really good that we should know about?

What gives you hope?

Then listen.

Resist the Ministry Reflex

Suppose a teacher says children often arrive at school hungry.

Do not immediately say:

“We could start a breakfast ministry.”

Ask:

“Tell me more.”

Who is already addressing this?

What creates the problem?

What have families said?

What would actually help?

Perhaps the school already has a strong program and needs volunteers.

Perhaps transportation is the real problem.

Perhaps food is only one expression of a larger challenge.

Listening keeps us from solving the wrong problem.

Do Not Turn People into Sources

A listening conversation is a relationship, not an extraction of useful information.

Tell people why you are asking. Receive a refusal without pressure. Ask permission before taking notes or sharing a story with others. Protect names and details that could expose someone without that person’s consent.

Do not promise a program, partnership, or decision the congregation has not made.

And do not disappear once you have received what you wanted to know.

Where appropriate, return to the people who helped you. Tell them what the congregation heard, what questions remain, and whether any next step is being considered.

Listening becomes trustworthy when people are received as neighbors, not treated as research subjects.

A Story from the Field

A church leader asked a local principal what the school needed most.

She expected an answer about supplies.

Instead, the principal said:

“Adults.”

She explained that many children needed reliable adults who would show up consistently—reading partners, mentors, people at school events, people who remembered their names.

The church had been collecting school supplies every August.

Useful.

Generous.

But the principal helped them hear something deeper.

The need was not simply backpacks.

It was relationships.

Write Down What You Heard

Afterward, record what surprised you.

Not everything.

What stayed with you?

What did you hear more than once?

What question are you carrying now?

When several people do this, patterns begin to emerge.

Don't rush to interpret them.

Listen a little longer.

For Conversation

Which five people could help us understand our community from different perspectives?

How can we approach these conversations without an agenda?

What questions invite stories rather than opinions about the church?

What are we hearing repeatedly?

What have we heard that surprised us?

Chapter Five

Listening to the Place

What the Numbers Can Help Us Notice

Stories matter.

So do numbers.

Demographic information can help congregations see realities personal relationships alone may miss.

Population growth or decline.

Age.

Household composition.

Income.

Housing.

Education.

Employment.

Ethnicity.

Languages.

Transportation.

Migration.

Statistics can reveal patterns invisible from the church parking lot.

But data does not interpret itself.

Numbers Generate Questions

Suppose the numbers reveal that many households in your community consist of one person.

What does that mean?

You don't know yet.

Older adults aging in place?

Young professionals?

Divorced adults?

College students?

People experiencing isolation?

People happily living independently?

The statistic is not the answer.

It gives you a better question.

Suppose the community has become significantly younger while the congregation has grown older.

Again, do not jump immediately to:

“We need a contemporary service.”

The data has told you nothing about worship preferences.

It has simply revealed a relationship you may not yet have.

The next move is listening.

Beware of Data Without People

Demographic reports can create the illusion that we understand a community because we possess information about it.

We don't.

A census category cannot tell you what someone loves.

A median income cannot tell you what keeps a parent awake at night.

A population projection cannot tell you where people find hope.

Data can help us notice.

People help us understand.

We need both.

Read Change, Not Just Description

Data Also Has a Point of View

Every data source reflects choices: what to count, how to define categories, which geography to use, and when the information was gathered.

A neighborhood can look different depending on whether its boundary follows a census tract, ZIP code, school district, municipal border, or the area residents themselves recognize as home.

Some categories clarify. Others flatten identities or conceal differences within a population.

Ask where the information came from, how current it is, what it includes, and what it cannot tell you.

Use data to sharpen attention, never to replace relationship.

One of the most useful questions demographic information can answer is:

What is changing?

Who is arriving?

Who is leaving?

What is growing?

What is shrinking?

What does the community look like today compared with ten or twenty years ago?

A congregation may discover that its mental picture of the neighborhood is several decades out of date.

That realization alone can be transformative.

For Conversation

What demographic changes surprise us?

Where does the data confirm what we have heard in conversations?

Where does it challenge our assumptions?

What questions does the information raise?

Who should we talk with to understand those numbers more fully?

Chapter Six

Listening for Gifts

What Is Already Strong?

Churches have become very good at identifying needs.

Needs assessments.

Community problems.

Service gaps.

At-risk populations.

All of these can help us understand suffering.

But if needs are all we see, we will misunderstand the community.

Every community contains gifts.

Wisdom, resilience, creativity, compassion, and hope are among the realities congregations miss when they look only for problems.

Listening learns to notice both.

God Was Here Before Us

Christian mission sometimes carries an unfortunate assumption:

The church possesses something the community lacks.

We have resources.

They have needs.

We have faith.

They need ministry.

But the gospel begins elsewhere.

God is already present.

Christ is already at work.

The Spirit is already stirring generosity, creativity, justice, compassion, reconciliation, and hope in places the church may not yet know.

Our first missionary question therefore becomes:

What is God already doing here?

Look for the People Who Make Things Happen

Who brings people together?

Who knows everyone?

Who notices when someone is struggling?

Which organizations are trusted?

Where do people volunteer?

What informal groups solve problems?

Who advocates for children?

Who cares for older adults?

Who creates beauty?

Who builds bridges between communities?

Who is already doing something the congregation admires?

These people are not potential recruits for the church.

They are neighbors from whom the church may have something to learn.

A Story from the Field

A congregation wanted to address food insecurity.

Members began discussing starting another food pantry.

Then someone asked:

“Who is already doing this well?”

They discovered a small community organization only a few blocks away.

Instead of creating a competing ministry, church members visited.

They listened.

They volunteered.

Eventually the congregation offered unused storage space and helped the organization expand.

The church never started a food pantry.

It joined one.

Joining may have been the more faithful ministry.

From Need to Abundance

Instead of asking only:

“What’s wrong here?”

also ask:

“What’s strong here?”

Instead of:

“Who needs our help?”

ask:

“Who is already helping?”

Instead of:

“What should we create?”

ask:

“What might we join?”

That shift changes mission from rescue to relationship.

For Conversation

Where do we see generosity in our community?

Who is already doing work we admire?

What relationships are creating hope?

Where do people demonstrate resilience?

What might change if we approached our community first as a place of gifts rather than needs?

Chapter Seven

Listening for Pain

Hearing Without Rushing to Fix

Listening for gifts does not mean ignoring suffering.

Every community carries pain.

Loneliness.

Poverty.

Housing instability.

Addiction.

Grief.

Violence.

Fear.

Racism.

Isolation.

Family stress.

Food insecurity.

Mental-health struggles.

Educational inequity.

People longing for places where they belong.

Christian compassion makes us attentive to suffering.

But compassion is not the same as immediately creating a program.

Hear the Person Before the Problem

When we turn someone's experience into a category too quickly, the person can disappear from view.

"The homeless."

"The elderly."

"At-risk youth."

"The poor."

"Single mothers."

Labels compress complicated lives into manageable problems.

Listening restores particularity.

What is your experience?

What has been hardest?

What do people misunderstand?

What helps?

Who has stood beside you?

What would make a meaningful difference?

Pain Requires Safety

To invite someone to speak about suffering is to accept responsibility.

Do not ask someone to disclose trauma for the congregation's education. Do not press for details. Do not assume a public conversation is the right setting for every story.

When what you hear involves abuse, danger, misconduct, safeguarding concerns, or needs that exceed the congregation's competence, listening alone is not enough. An appropriate pastoral, professional, denominational, or legal response may be required.

Be clear about the limits of confidentiality before a conversation begins.

Faithful listening honors a person's agency, protects the vulnerable, and knows when to seek qualified help.

A Story from the Field

A congregation wanted to help people experiencing homelessness.

Members began discussing meals, clothing, and hygiene supplies.

Then they invited someone who worked daily with unhoused people to talk with them.

She thanked them for their concern.

Then she said:

"Before you decide what people need, come meet them."

Several members did.

Their ideas changed.

Not because food and clothing were unnecessary,
but because relationships had complicated their assumptions.

They began encountering people, not merely a problem.

Sometimes Listening Is the Ministry

Churches are action-oriented.

That is often a gift.

It can also make silence uncomfortable.

Someone shares grief and we want to make it better.

Someone describes injustice and we want a solution.

Someone tells us something painful about the church and we want to explain.

Sometimes the first faithful response is:

"Thank you for telling us."

Listening communicates dignity.

Your experience matters enough for me not to rush past it.

Before Starting Something

When you hear about pain, ask:

Who is most affected?

Have we listened to them?

Who understands this issue deeply?

Who is already responding?

What would partnership look like?

What might we misunderstand?

What relationships need to exist before action would be helpful?

The goal is not inaction or endless study.

It is wise action rooted in relationship.

For Conversation

What pain are we beginning to hear?

Whose experience do we need to understand more deeply?

Where are we tempted to move too quickly toward solutions?

Who is already responding wisely?

How might listening itself become an expression of pastoral care?

Chapter Eight

Listening for the Holy Spirit

Recognizing What Is Emerging

After we have listened long enough, something begins to happen.

Patterns appear.

A concern mentioned by one person appears in another conversation.

Something noticed during the neighborhood walk connects with demographic information.

A congregational gift seems unexpectedly related to something happening in the community.

An organization you had never noticed keeps appearing in conversations.

A question refuses to go away.

Pay attention.

Discernment often begins with convergence.

Don't Force the Pattern

We like clarity.

So we can manufacture it too quickly.

Three people mention loneliness and we declare:

“God is calling us to start a loneliness ministry.”

Perhaps.

Or perhaps you need to listen more.

Recognition takes patience.

Ask:

What are we hearing repeatedly?

What surprises us?

Where do congregational gifts and community realities seem to touch?

Where are relationships already forming?

What seems to carry energy?

What keeps returning to our attention?

Where do we sense life?

Reflect. Listen. Recognize.

This rhythm is developed more fully in **Living God's Call Together**.

Reflect on experience.

Listen to one another and to the world around you.

Recognize patterns, gifts, invitations, and signs of God's activity.

Then respond.

During this stage of pastoral transition, resist rushing toward the last movement.

Spend time recognizing.

The quality of our response often depends upon the quality of our attention.

Test What You Think You Are Hearing

Convergence can reveal a genuine pattern. It can also mirror the questions you chose, the people you invited, or the answer you hoped to find.

Before naming an emerging direction, ask what does not fit. Whose experience complicates the pattern? What evidence points elsewhere? Which voices remain absent?

Return to people and say, "This is what we think we heard. Does it sound true to you? What have we missed?"

Discernment does not become weaker when an interpretation is tested. It becomes more trustworthy.

A Story from the Field

A congregation heard three seemingly unrelated things.

Older members spoke about loneliness.

A neighborhood leader described the disappearance of informal gathering places.

A local nonprofit said it had excellent programs but struggled to find welcoming places where people could simply meet.

Meanwhile, the congregation had been wondering what to do with a fellowship hall that sat empty most of the week.

No one had an answer yet.

Then, suddenly, the questions began to touch one another.

That is often how discernment begins.

Not with a plan.

With recognition.

Look for Christ

The deepest question is not:

Where is there an opportunity for our church?

It is:

Where do we recognize Christ already at work?

Where are people healing?

Where are strangers becoming neighbors?

Where is justice growing?

Where are people feeding one another?

Where are the lonely finding community?

Where is reconciliation occurring?

Where are people discovering hope?

Wherever those things are happening, the Church should become curious.

For Conversation

What are we hearing repeatedly?

Where are apparently unrelated observations beginning to connect?

Which congregational gifts seem to resonate with what we are hearing?

Where do we see people already creating life, healing, justice, or belonging?

Where might Christ already be at work ahead of us?

Chapter Nine

When Better Questions Appear

From Listening to Missionary Imagination

We often begin listening with the wrong questions.

That is not a problem.

One gift of deep listening is that the questions themselves begin to change.

A congregation may begin by asking:

“How do we get more young families into church?”

After listening, the question may become:

“What are young families in our community experiencing, and where are they finding support?”

That is a better question.

Or:

“How can we get teenagers into our youth group?”

may become:

“Where do teenagers in our community experience belonging, and where do they feel alone?”

Or:

“What ministry should we start?”

may become:

“What good work is already happening that we might join?”

Deep listening rarely produces immediate answers. Instead, it reshapes the questions. Old assumptions fall away, new relationships form, and possibilities emerge that strategic planning alone might never have imagined.

Better Questions Create Imagination

Here listening begins to awaken missionary imagination.

Missionary imagination does not begin with a brilliant program.

It begins by seeing differently.

Noticing.

Wondering.

Becoming curious.

Asking:

What if?

The stories and practices in **Reimagining the Church** explore this movement more fully—helping congregations notice overlooked possibilities and imagine how their particular gifts might meet the particular place God has given them.

Listening prepares the soil in which that imagination can grow.

Don't Ask How to Save the Church

Anxiety produces predictable questions:

How do we increase attendance?

How do we attract young people?

How do we raise more money?

How do we keep the church going?

These questions are understandable.

But they make the survival of the institution the center of discernment.

Jesus gives us a different center.

Love God.

Love your neighbor.

Follow me.

Seek the kingdom.

Listening moves us outward.

Instead of:

“How can our church survive?”

perhaps:

“What does love require of us here?”

That question can lead somewhere entirely different.

A Story from the Field

A congregation had spent years asking how to attract more people to Wednesday evening programs.

Attendance kept declining.

During community conversations, members repeatedly heard parents describe Wednesday evenings as exhausting: work, school, sports, homework, dinner, transportation.

Eventually someone laughed.

“We’ve been trying to solve the wrong problem.”

The question was no longer:

“How do we get people here on Wednesday?”

It became:

“Where are people already on Wednesday, and how might we be present with them?”

No program had been created.

But missionary imagination had begun.

Let the Question Work on You

Do not hurry to answer every new question.

Carry it.

Pray with it.

Talk about it.

Listen again.

Sometimes a faithful question is worth more than a premature plan.

For Conversation

Which questions did we bring into this process?

Which ones no longer seem adequate?

What new questions have emerged?

Where have our assumptions been disrupted?

What question seems most alive for us now?

Chapter Ten

Becoming a Listening Congregation

Not a Stage, but a Way of Life

The pastoral transition will eventually end.

Listening should not.

Listening is not simply another task to complete before calling a pastor. Congregations that continue listening after new leadership arrives remain attentive to the Holy Spirit within the congregation and the community.

That may be one of the most important discoveries in this entire movement.

Listening is not a project.

It is a congregational habit.

Keep Walking

Take another neighborhood walk next year.

The place will have changed.

Ask another five people.

Build relationships with school leaders, nonprofit directors, business owners, neighborhood associations, healthcare workers, and people whose lives intersect with your community differently.

Not because you need something from them.

Because they are your neighbors.

Keep Asking

What has changed?

What are we noticing?

Who has arrived?

Who has left?

What gives people hope?

What is becoming harder?

Who are we not hearing?

What gifts are emerging?

Where are relationships forming?

Where do we see Christ?

These questions should outlive the search committee.

Build Listening into Leadership

Imagine if every governing board meeting periodically included the question:

“What are we hearing?”

Not:

“What problem are we solving?”

Just:

“What are we hearing?”

Imagine leaders regularly bringing stories from conversations beyond the congregation.

Imagine community partners occasionally being invited to speak.

Imagine young people being asked what they notice.

Imagine demographic information being revisited every few years.

Imagine a congregation becoming known not primarily for what it says but for how carefully it listens.

Let People Hear What You Heard

Listening should leave a trace of accountability.

Share the themes the congregation has received without exposing private stories. Name what remains uncertain. Explain what will happen next—or say honestly that no decision has been made.

People are more likely to keep speaking when they know their words have not vanished into a committee’s notes.

Listening Changes the Listener

This may be the deepest truth.

We begin listening because we want to understand others.

In time, listening changes us.

Our assumptions loosen.

Our compassion grows.

Our questions become better.

Our neighbors become people rather than categories.

Our community becomes more than the place surrounding our building.

Mission becomes less about what we will do for people and more about how we might join them in what God is already doing.

That is why listening is spiritual formation.

It teaches the Church humility.

For Conversation

Which listening practices should continue after this transition?

How can listening become part of our congregation’s leadership culture?

What relationships do we want to continue nurturing?

How will we notice when our assumptions have become outdated again?

What would it mean for listening to become part of our congregation’s identity?

Epilogue

Now We Can Begin to Speak

We began by remembering.

We listened again to the stories that formed us.

We recognized values woven through our common life.

We remembered God's faithfulness.

We received difficult memories with honesty.

We rediscovered gifts.

We remembered that we have imagined before.

Through remembering, we began to understand:

This is who we are.

Then we turned around.

We listened.

To one another.

To voices we often miss.

To neighbors.

To teachers and business owners.

To children and older adults.

To community leaders and people who may never enter our church.

We walked.

We noticed.

We looked at numbers.

We listened for gifts.

We listened for pain.

We watched for patterns.

And beneath it all, we listened for the Holy Spirit.

Now a different kind of clarity begins to emerge.

Not certainty.

Discernment rarely gives us that luxury.

But understanding.

We know more about **who we are**.

We know more about **where we are**.

And perhaps we are beginning to recognize something about **why God has placed us here now**.

That is vocation.

Not a slogan.

Not a mission statement written by a committee.

It is a growing recognition of the relationship between the gifts God has entrusted to a particular people and the place God has called them to love.

Now we are almost ready to speak.

Almost.

From Listening to Language

Soon your congregation will be asked to describe itself.

Who are you?

What is your community like?

What gifts do you bring?

What challenges do you face?

What do you believe God is calling you toward?

What kind of pastoral leadership might help you enter that future faithfully?

Those questions become part of the work of developing a **Ministry Discernment Profile**.

Without remembering and listening, that document can become an exercise in public relations.

We describe the church we wish candidates would see.

We use attractive language.

We list programs.

We talk about what we want in a pastor.

But now you have something truer—and more substantial—to say.

You have listened.

You can begin telling the truth.

Not only:

“We are a welcoming congregation.”

But:

“Here are the stories through which hospitality has shaped us, and here is what we are learning about the people we have not yet learned to welcome.”

Not only:

“We care about our community.”

But:

“Here is what our neighbors have been telling us, here are the gifts we see around us, and here are the questions we are beginning to carry.”

Not only:

“We want a pastor who will help us grow.”

But perhaps:

“We are beginning to recognize where Christ may be calling us to grow in faithfulness, relationship, and service.”

That is a very different conversation.

Listen Before You Describe

The next movement will ask you to put words around what you have discovered.

Do not forget how you arrived there.

You remembered before you listened.

You listened before you decided.

You became curious before becoming certain.

Keep that posture.

Because the Ministry Discernment Profile is not simply a form describing a congregation to prospective pastors.

At its best, it becomes testimony.

It says:

This is who God has formed us to be.

This is the place God has given us to love.

This is what we have been hearing.

This is where we think the Holy Spirit may be leading us.

And this is the partnership in ministry we are now ready to discern.

The next Field Guide is:

Developing the Ministry Discernment Profile

Remembering gave us our story.

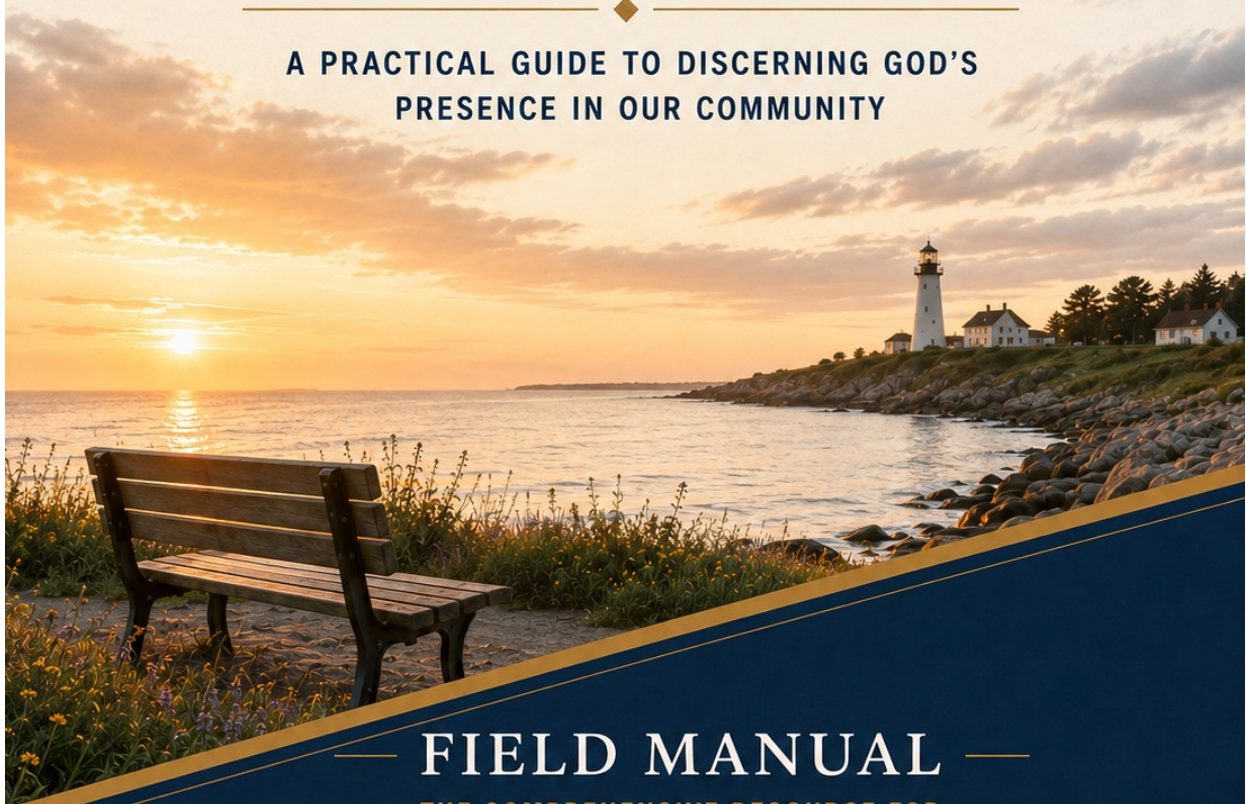
Listening helped us understand our place.

Now we begin to find the words for the vocation emerging where story and place meet.



LISTENING FIELD MANUAL

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO DISCERNING GOD'S
PRESENCE IN OUR COMMUNITY



FIELD MANUAL

THE COMPREHENSIVE RESOURCE FOR
EVERY STEP OF THE LEADERSHIP JOURNEY



LISTEN DEEPLY

Hear the stories, hopes,
and needs of neighbors
and community.



DISCOVER TOGETHER

Seek God's movement
in our community with
curiosity and humility.



DISCERN FAITHFULLY

Listen for where God's
love is already at work
and how we can join in.

A RESOURCE OF THE NAVIGATING PASTORAL TRANSITIONS SERIES

Listening Field Manual

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Introduction

Learning to Listen Before We Decide

Congregations are accustomed to doing things.

We organize.

Plan.

Teach.

Serve.

Worship.

Feed people.

Care for neighbors.

Solve problems.

When something is not working, our instinct is often to ask:

What should we do?

During a pastoral transition, that instinct intensifies. Uncertainty stirs anxiety, and anxiety reaches for a plan. We want to know where we are going, what kind of pastor we need, and how quickly we can move forward.

Listening asks us to loosen our grip on that urgency—at least for a while.

Before asking what we should do, we ask:

What is happening?

What are people experiencing?

What has changed?

What are we not seeing?

Who are we not hearing?

What gifts are already present?

Where is there pain?

Where do we see life?

What might God be inviting us to notice?

Questions like these ask more of us than good intentions.

They require practices.

This Field Manual turns that intention into practice.

From the Field Guide to the Field

The *Listening Field Guide* explores the spiritual posture of listening. Its central discipline is simple:

Become curious before becoming certain.

This Field Manual carries that discipline out of the page and into congregational life.

It will ask you to listen to people within the congregation.

Then to notice whose voices are missing.

It will send you outside the church building to walk the community slowly enough to notice what you normally pass by.

It will ask you to talk with people—not to tell them about your church, but to learn about their lives and their experience of the community.

It will help you look at demographic information without allowing numbers to become substitutes for people.

It will teach you to notice gifts as carefully as needs.

It will help you listen to pain without immediately turning another person's struggle into your congregation's next project.

And eventually, it will help you bring all those different kinds of listening together and ask:

What patterns are we beginning to recognize?

Notice the wording.

Not:

What have we decided?

Not:

What program should we start?

Not even:

What should our next pastor do?

Listening comes before those questions.

Listening Is Not Research About Other People

Some of the resources in this Manual may look like research tools.

There are conversation guides.

Demographic worksheets.

Observation exercises.

Community maps.

Listening journals.

Pattern exercises.

But a congregation is not conducting a research project on its neighbors.

You are learning to be present differently.

That distinction matters.

A community is not an object to be studied in the hope of producing a better congregational strategy.

Your neighbors are not a market.

Their problems are not ministry opportunities.

Their stories are not information for your planning process.

They are people.

They possess wisdom.

They have gifts.

They understand things about the community that you do not.

Many are already doing work that matters.

And God was present in their lives long before your listening team arrived.

The task is not to figure people out or reduce them to findings.

It is to become curious enough to encounter them.

Listening Is Not Waiting for Your Turn to Speak

We often think we are listening when we are actually preparing a response.

Someone says:

"There isn't much for teenagers to do around here."

Immediately the church mind begins working.

Youth center.

After-school program.

Game night.

Volunteer recruitment.

Funding.

We have moved from hearing a sentence to designing a ministry before we have even asked what the speaker meant.

Try something different.

"Tell me more about that."

Perhaps the person is concerned about recreation.

Perhaps transportation.

Perhaps loneliness.

Perhaps young people have plenty to do but nowhere they feel they belong.

Perhaps teenagers themselves would describe the problem differently.

You do not know.

So ask.

Then listen again.

Throughout this Manual, you will encounter a recurring discipline:

Observation before interpretation.

Understanding before response.

Curiosity before certainty.

That discipline may sometimes feel inefficient.

It is.

Listening is slower than assuming.

It is also far more likely to lead you toward the truth another person can actually recognize.

Pay Attention to Your Reflex to Help

Churches are filled with people who want to help.

That is a gift.

It can also interfere with listening.

We hear hunger and think food pantry.

Loneliness becomes fellowship program.

Children struggling in school becomes tutoring.

Homelessness becomes shelter.

The instinct may be generous.

But if we move too quickly, we can reduce people to their needs and ourselves to their rescuers.

The resources in this Manual will repeatedly ask you to slow that reflex.

When you hear about a need, ask:

Who understands this better than we do?

Who is already responding?

What gifts do the people experiencing this bring?

What relationships already exist?

What have we not yet understood?

Sometimes faithful response will eventually mean beginning something new.

Sometimes it will mean joining something already happening.

Sometimes it will mean using the congregation's resources differently.

Sometimes it will mean advocating.

Sometimes it will mean building a relationship.

And sometimes the faithful response may simply be continuing to listen.

You do not have to know which one yet.

Listen for Gifts as Carefully as Pain

Congregations can become very good at identifying community problems.

Poverty.

Loneliness.

Housing.

Mental health.

Food insecurity.

Isolation.

Educational challenges.

Addiction.

Those realities matter.

But a community described only by its problems has not been heard very well.

Look again.

Who creates beauty?

Who connects people?

Who cares for children?

Who knows everyone on the block?

Where do people gather?

Who organizes things without holding an official position?

Which organizations have earned trust?

What businesses function as informal community centers?

Where are people generous?

Who knows how to get things done?

What traditions hold people together?

Where is courage?

Where is joy?

Where is resilience?

Where is hope?

This is not a technique for putting a positive spin on difficult realities.

It is a more truthful way of seeing.

Every community contains pain.

Every community also contains gifts.

Faithful listening attends to both.

Listen for God

There is another reason we listen.

The congregation is not simply trying to understand its environment.

We believe God is already acting.

That conviction changes the entire exercise.

We do not go into the community carrying Christ to a place where Christ is absent.

We go looking for signs of Christ's presence.

Reconciliation.

Healing.

Generosity.

Justice.

Creativity.

Belonging.

Compassion.

Courage.

New life.

Sometimes those signs will appear within the congregation.

Sometimes beyond it.

Sometimes through organizations with no connection to the church.

Sometimes through people whose theology is very different from ours.

Sometimes through people who would never describe what they are doing as God's work.

Our task is not to control where God may be found.

Our task is to become attentive enough to notice.

How to Use This Field Manual

You do not need to use every resource in this Manual.

Different congregations will require different depths of work.

A congregation that already has strong community relationships may need something different from a congregation that knows almost no one beyond its members.

A small congregation may accomplish some exercises through informal conversations.

A larger congregation may need several listening teams.

Adapt the tools.

Do not abandon the disciplines underneath them.

A useful core pathway is:

Listen Inside → Widen the Circle → Walk → Talk to Five People → Look at Data → Notice Gifts and Pain → Look for Patterns

The chapters follow that movement.

Chapter One — Listening to One Another helps you hear the congregation in the present tense.

Chapter Two — Listening Beyond the Usual Voices asks who may be missing from the conversations.

Chapter Three — Leaving the Building provides tools for the Neighborhood Listening Walk.

Chapter Four — Talk to Five People moves from observation into relationship and conversation.

Chapter Five — Listening to the Place helps you use demographic and community information as a source of questions rather than conclusions.

Chapter Six — Listening for Gifts helps you recognize strengths, assets, relationships, and people already contributing to community life.

Chapter Seven — Listening for Pain helps you hear suffering without rushing toward rescue.

Chapter Eight — Listening for the Holy Spirit brings the different streams of listening together and begins looking for patterns.

Chapter Nine — When Better Questions Appear helps you recognize how listening has changed the questions you are asking.

Chapter Ten — Carrying the Listening Forward asks how these practices can shape the Ministry Discernment Profile, the pastoral search, and congregational life after the transition ends.

Companion Resources and When to Use Them

Living God's Call Together is the natural companion when listening begins to become discernment—especially in Chapters Six, Eight, and Ten. Turn to it when the congregation is ready to move from recognizing gifts and patterns toward a shared vocation and a faithful response.

Reimagining the Church is the natural companion when listening opens missionary imagination—especially in Chapters Three, Nine, and Ten. Turn to it when the team needs help seeing its place differently and exploring possibilities without defaulting to familiar programs.

You may move back and forth among them.

Listening rarely unfolds in a straight line.

Before You Begin: A Listening Covenant

Before beginning the exercises in this Manual, gather the people who will lead the listening process.

Read these commitments aloud.

Discuss them.

Add to them if necessary.

Then covenant together:

We will become curious before becoming certain.

We will listen to understand before deciding how to respond.

We will distinguish what we observe from what we assume.

We will seek voices beyond those we normally hear.

We will listen for gifts as carefully as we listen for pain.

We will not treat people as problems to solve or opportunities for our congregation.

We will not use listening conversations to recruit, persuade, or promote the church.

We will not promise responses the congregation has not authorized or cannot provide.

We will respect privacy and ask permission before sharing another person's story.

We will allow what we hear to challenge what we thought we knew.

We will return to people with what we believe we heard whenever that is possible and appropriate.

We will listen for signs of God's activity without assuming that we already know what God is doing.

We will pray for the humility to be changed by what we hear.

Then ask one final question:

Which of these commitments will be hardest for us?

Do not rush past the answer.

It may tell you something important about the listening ahead.

A Practice Before You Go Any Further

Try this together.

One person reads:

"A lot of older people around here seem terribly lonely."

What is your first response?

Write it down.

Now look at your answer.

Did you propose something?

Explain something?

Agree?

Disagree?

Tell a similar story?

Name a ministry the church could provide?

Try again.

This time respond only with a question intended to understand.

Perhaps:

'What have you noticed that makes you say that?'

Listen to the answer.

Then ask another question.

That is the practice.

It sounds simple.

It may be one of the hardest things in this Manual.

A Prayer Before Listening

God who speaks and God who listens,

quiet our need to know before we have heard.

Free us from the assumption
that we already understand our congregation,
our neighbors,
our community,
or what you are doing among us.

Give us curiosity.

Help us hear voices we have overlooked,
notice gifts we have failed to see,
receive pain without turning away,
and recognize life where we did not expect to find it.

Keep us from rushing to fix
what we have not yet understood.

Teach us to listen long enough
for our assumptions to be challenged
and our questions to change.

And through all that we hear,
make us attentive to Christ,
already present,
already acting,
already calling us toward one another.

Amen.

The work begins close to home.

Before listening to the neighborhood, the data, the community leaders, or the people beyond the congregation,
begin by listening again to the people sitting beside you.

Chapter One

Listening to One Another

Hearing the Congregation Again

The first movement of listening does not carry the congregation into the neighborhood.

It turns us toward one another.

Before asking what the community is experiencing, a congregation must hear the present-tense lives of its own people.

Not only what they remember from twenty years ago. Remembering has already helped us receive those stories.

Now the questions change tense.

What are people experiencing today?

What gives them life?

What concerns them?

What are they noticing that leaders may not see?

Where are they finding hope?

Where are they weary?

What are they wondering about the future?

The purpose of this chapter is not to conduct a survey and convert the answers into priorities. It is to create trustworthy ways for people to speak—and to discover that they have truly been heard.

The resources in this chapter move from **planning the listening process**, to **asking good questions**, to **facilitating conversations**, to **recording what was heard**, and finally to **reporting it back faithfully**.

Do not rush through the last step.

People are far more likely to speak honestly when they discover that their words did not disappear into the room.

FM-1.1

Congregational Listening Plan

Purpose

Use this worksheet before beginning congregational listening.

The goal is not simply to decide when to hold a meeting. It is to think carefully about **whose voices you need to hear, how different people can participate, and how you will receive what they tell you**.

A listening process that hears only the people who normally attend congregational meetings will mostly confirm what leaders already know.

Begin by widening the circle.

1. What Are We Trying to Understand?

Complete this sentence together:

During this listening process, we want to understand _____.

Keep the answer broad enough to invite discovery.

For example:

We want to understand what people are experiencing in the congregation now—their joys, concerns, hopes, questions, and observations about our common life.

Avoid beginning with an agenda such as:

We want to determine our three priorities for the next pastor.

That comes later.

For now, listen.

2. Whom Do We Normally Hear?

List the people or groups whose voices are already well represented in congregational conversations.

What gives these people access to congregational conversations?

- ☐ They hold elected leadership positions
- ☐ They attend regularly
- ☐ They serve on committees
- ☐ They participate in adult education
- ☐ They are longtime members
- ☐ They are comfortable speaking publicly
- ☐ They have close relationships with congregational leaders
- ☐ Other: _____

Their voices matter.

The question is whether they are the only voices you hear.

3. Whom Might We Be Missing?

Consider:

- ☐ Children
- ☐ Youth
- ☐ Young adults
- ☐ Parents of young children
- ☐ New members
- ☐ Longtime members
- ☐ Homebound members
- ☐ People who participate online
- ☐ People who attend worship but little else
- ☐ Staff members
- ☐ People who have reduced their participation
- ☐ People who have recently left
- ☐ People who use the church building but are not members
- ☐ Others: _____

Which of these voices are particularly important for us to hear?

Who might need a personal invitation rather than a general announcement?

4. How Will People Be Able to Participate?

One method will not work for everyone.

Consider using several.

- ☐ Small-group conversations
- ☐ Individual conversations
- ☐ Telephone conversations
- ☐ Home visits
- ☐ Written responses
- ☐ Online conversations
- ☐ Online response form
- ☐ Youth conversation
- ☐ Staff conversation
- ☐ Conversations following worship
- ☐ Other: _____

Ask:

Does the way we have designed the process unintentionally determine whose voices we will hear?

A Tuesday morning meeting, for example, may work wonderfully for retirees and exclude almost everyone working during the day.

An evening meeting may create exactly the opposite problem.

Listening requires more than opening the door.

Sometimes we have to go where people are.

5. What Will We Tell People Before They Speak?

Trust requires clarity.

Before beginning, participants should understand:

Why are we listening?

Who will receive what is shared?

Will individual names be recorded?

How will comments be summarized?

What confidentiality can we honestly promise?

How will the congregation hear what was learned?

Do not promise anonymity or confidentiality unless your process can actually provide it.

6. Who Will Listen?

Identify people who can receive differing experiences without immediately defending the congregation, correcting the speaker, or explaining why something happened.

Listeners:

Before beginning, every listener should understand:

Your task is not to answer.

Your task is to understand.

7. How Will We Know When We Have Listened Widely Enough?

There is no perfect sample.

You are not conducting academic research.

But ask:

Have we heard from people of different ages?

Different lengths of participation?

Different levels of involvement?

People who are enthusiastic?

People who are discouraged?

People near the center?

People nearer the edges?

What perspectives still appear to be missing?

Before You Begin

Complete this sentence:

We will know we have listened well when _____.

Keep this plan. Return to it after the listening process.

You may discover that the people you failed to hear are as important as the things you heard.

FM-1.2

Present-Tense Listening Questions

Purpose

Remembering asked the congregation to look backward in order to understand the stories that formed it.

Listening turns our attention toward the present.

These questions are not intended to be asked all at once.

Choose those that fit the conversation.

The best question is often the one that opens a story.

Beginning Questions

What gives you joy in this congregation right now?

What do you especially value about being part of this congregation?

What feels alive?

Where do you see people caring for one another?

What has encouraged you recently?

Questions About What People Are Noticing

What seems to be changing?

What are people talking about that congregational leaders may not be hearing?

What seems stronger than it was a few years ago?

What seems more difficult?

Where do you notice energy?

Where do you notice weariness?

What surprises you about the congregation right now?

Questions About Concern

What concerns you?

What do you think we may be avoiding?

Where do you think people are struggling?

Is there something important that is difficult for us to talk about?

What do you worry we might lose?

Questions About Hope

What gives you hope?

Where do you see new possibilities?

What gifts do you see in people that we may not be using very well?

What would you love to see become possible?

What do you hope we carry into the future?

Questions About Release

What may have served us well but no longer fits who we are becoming?

What are we continuing mostly because we have always done it?

What might we need to release in order to make room for something new?

Questions About the Transition

What are you experiencing during this pastoral transition?

What has been harder than you expected?

What has been helpful?

What do you hope the congregation learns during this time?

What do you hope we understand about ourselves before calling our next pastor?

One Question Worth Asking

Near the end of almost any listening conversation, ask:

What question do you wish someone had asked you?

Then listen to the answer.

Follow-Up Questions

You usually do not need another prepared question.

You need curiosity.

Try:

Tell me more about that.

Can you give me an example?

What was that like for you?

What makes that important?

When did you begin noticing that?

Has that changed over time?

What do you wish others understood about it?

Do not use follow-up questions to steer people toward the answer you hoped to hear.

Use them to understand what they are trying to tell you.

FM-1.3

Small-Group Listening Session Guide

Suggested Time

60–75 minutes

Suggested Size

6–10 participants

Smaller groups generally allow more people to speak.

Materials

copies of the Listening Covenant

selected listening questions

note sheets

pens

name tags if useful

simple refreshments if appropriate

Before Participants Arrive

Arrange chairs so people can see one another.

Avoid a classroom arrangement if possible.

Identify:

Facilitator: _____

Listener/Recorder: _____

The recorder should capture themes and significant observations rather than producing a transcript.

Unless participants have been told otherwise, do not attach names to comments.

Opening — 5 Minutes

Welcome participants and explain the purpose.

The facilitator might say:

We are in a season of listening. We are not here tonight to decide what the congregation should do or what kind of pastor we should call. We are trying first to understand what people are experiencing in our congregation now.

We want to hear what gives you joy, what concerns you, what you are noticing, and what you hope we will carry with us into the future.

Different people may experience this congregation differently. We do not need to resolve those differences tonight. We need to hear them.

Explain how notes will be used and what confidentiality can and cannot be promised.

Opening Prayer

Listening God,
you know us more fully than we know ourselves.
Quiet in us the need to defend, explain, or persuade.
Give us curiosity about one another,
courage to speak truthfully,
and grace to receive what others have experienced.
Help us hear not only the words we expect,

but the words we need to hear.
Through Christ, who meets us in one another.
Amen.

Listening Covenant — 5 Minutes

Invite participants to agree to these practices:

We will speak from our own experience.

We will listen to understand rather than to answer.

We will not interrupt.

We will not argue with another person's experience.

We will allow disagreement without requiring resolution.

We will make room for people who speak less easily.

We will not repeat personal stories outside this conversation in ways that identify the speaker without permission.

We will resist solving problems before we understand them.

Ask whether anyone needs clarification before continuing.

First Round — 15 Minutes

Begin with questions that allow everyone to enter easily.

Choose one or two:

What gives you joy in this congregation right now?

What do you especially value about being part of this congregation?

Where do you see life or energy?

Invite each person to respond.

Do not require everyone to speak, but make room for everyone.

Second Round — 20 Minutes

Move toward deeper observation.

Choose two or three:

What are you noticing about the congregation right now?

What concerns you?

What seems tired?

What are people talking about that leaders may not be hearing?

What has changed?

What do you hope we carry forward?**What might we need to become willing to release?**

The facilitator should use follow-up questions sparingly.

Do not turn the session into an interview.

Let participants speak to one another as well as to the facilitator.

Final Round — 10 Minutes

Ask:

What question do you wish someone had asked tonight?

Allow silence.

Someone may name the most important subject of the evening.

Then ask:

Is there anything you came hoping we would hear that has not yet been said?**Closing — 5 Minutes**

Thank participants.

Explain again what happens next.

Do not promise a particular action in response to what was heard.

Promise only what you can deliver:

We will bring what we have heard into the larger listening process. When that work is complete, we will report back to the congregation about the themes we heard and the questions we are carrying forward.

Closing Prayer

God of every voice,
thank you for what has been spoken
and for what remains difficult to say.
Help us receive one another with humility.
Keep us from rushing toward easy conclusions.
Teach us to recognize your Spirit
in the stories, questions, hopes, and concerns
we have heard tonight.
Give us patience to keep listening.
Amen.

FM-1.4

Congregational Listening Notes

Purpose

Use one sheet for each listening session or conversation.

Do not attempt to record everything.

Listen for what matters.

Conversation

Date: _____

Setting: _____

Number participating: _____

Listener/Recorder: _____

What Did We Hear?

Important observations:

What Seemed to Carry Energy?

What Concerns or Weariness Did We Hear?

What Hopes Did We Hear?

What Might People Be Ready to Release?

What Surprised Us?

What Did We Hear More Than Once?

What Did We Hear That Did Not Fit the Emerging Pattern?

Do not discard an experience simply because only one person expressed it.

What Questions Are We Carrying?

Whose Voice May Still Be Missing?

Important Discipline

Before leaving this page, look again at your notes.

Circle anything that is an **observation**.

Underline anything that is an **interpretation**.

Put a star beside anything that is actually a **proposed solution**.

Those are three different things.

For now, keep your attention on what you heard.

FM-1.5

Reporting Back What We Heard

Listening Is Not Complete Until People Know They Were Heard

Congregations sometimes conduct listening sessions, collect notes, hold committee discussions—and say nothing more.

Participants begin wondering:

What happened to what we told them?

Did anyone read it?

Did it matter?

Was the decision already made?

Reporting back does not mean agreeing with every comment.

It means demonstrating that people's words entered the congregation's discernment.

Step One — Gather the Listening

Bring together notes from all congregational listening conversations.

Do not begin by voting on what matters most.

Read.

Listen again.

Ask:

What did we hear repeatedly?

What seemed to carry energy?

What concerns appeared?

What hopes appeared?

What surprised us?

Where did experiences differ?

What did we hear only once but should not lose?

What questions emerged?

Whose voices remain underrepresented?

Step Two — Name Themes, Not Winners

Avoid language such as:

"Most members want..."

unless you have data that genuinely supports that conclusion.

A listening process is not necessarily a poll.

Instead say:

We heard considerable gratitude for...

Several conversations raised concerns about...

We heard differing experiences of...

A recurring hope was...

One perspective we do not want to lose was...

We realized we still need to understand...

This language is more truthful.

Step Three — Protect People's Stories

Do not share a memorable story merely because it makes your report interesting.

Ask:

Could the person be identified?

Did they give permission?

Does the congregation need this detail?

Can the insight be communicated without exposing the person?

The more vulnerable the story, the greater the care required.

Step Four — Include Difference

Do not smooth away disagreement.

Suppose some people say:

"Our congregation feels like family."

Others say:

"It is difficult to become part of this congregation if you haven't been here for years."

Those statements do not cancel each other.

Together they may reveal something important.

A faithful report might say:

We heard deep appreciation for the close relationships within our congregation. We also heard from some people who experience those same close relationships as difficult to enter. We want to understand that tension more fully.

That is far more useful than choosing which group is correct.

Step Five — Name What You Still Don't Know

A good listening report includes uncertainty.

We heard this, but we need to listen further.

We did not hear sufficiently from young adults.

We realized we have very little understanding of why some people have stopped participating.

Several comments raised a question we had not considered.

These are not failures.

They are evidence that listening is working.

Step Six — Tell People What Happens Next

Be clear.

Perhaps the next step is listening beyond the usual voices.

Perhaps it is the Neighborhood Listening Walk.

Perhaps congregational listening will now be placed alongside community conversations and demographic information.

Perhaps no decision will be made yet.

Say so.

We are not ready to decide. We are still listening.

That sentence can be a sign of mature leadership.

A Suggested Congregational Listening Report

What We Heard

During the past _____ weeks, we listened through:

Approximately _____ people participated.

We Heard Gratitude For

We Heard Concern About

We Heard Hope For

We Heard Different Experiences Of

We Were Surprised By

Questions We Are Now Carrying

Voices We Still Need to Hear

What Happens Next

Before Moving On

Gather the listening team.

Put the reports and notes in front of you.

Do not ask:

What should we do?

Not yet.

Ask instead:

What have we heard that we did not know before?

Then:

Whose experience might still change our understanding?

That second question takes us naturally into the next movement of listening:

Listening Beyond the Usual Voices.

The congregation has begun to hear itself.

Now it is time to ask:

Who are we not hearing?

Chapter Two

Listening Beyond the Usual Voices

Who Are We Not Hearing?

Every congregation has voices that reach the center easily.

They attend meetings.

Serve on committees.

Speak during discussions.

Respond to surveys.

Know the history.

Understand how decisions are made.

They may be thoughtful, faithful people whose voices deserve to be heard.

The problem is not that we hear them.

The danger comes when the voices we hear most often begin to sound, to us, like the voice of the whole congregation.

Some people participate differently.

Some rarely attend meetings.

Some are uncomfortable speaking in groups.

Some are new enough that they do not yet know whether their observations are welcome.

Young people may assume adults are not really asking.

Homebound members may no longer be present when congregational conversations occur.

Staff members may hesitate to speak honestly when their employment is connected to the institution being discussed.

Some people have gradually moved toward the edges of congregational life.

Others have already stepped away.

They may see things those near the center cannot.

Faithful listening requires more than opening a meeting and announcing that everyone is welcome.

Sometimes we have to ask:

Who are we not hearing?

Then we go looking—not for agreement, but for the perspectives that could change what we think we know.

The resources in this chapter will help you identify whose voices are shaping your understanding, notice who may be missing, invite people into conversation, listen carefully to those who have stepped away, and examine how power affects whose experience gets heard.

FM-2.1

Who Is Missing?

Mapping the Voices Around Us

Purpose

This exercise helps the listening team see whose voices are already close to the center of congregational life and whose voices may be farther away.

This is not an exercise in labeling people.

It is a way of examining **our own listening habits**.

Use a large sheet of paper, whiteboard, or several sheets of newsprint.

Draw four concentric circles.

In the center write:

Voices We Hear Regularly

In the next circle:

Voices We Hear Occasionally

Then:

Voices We Rarely Hear

And in the outer circle:

Voices We May Not Hear at All

Step One — Begin with Groups, Not Names

Consider groups within and around the congregation.

For example:

governing-board members

committee leaders

staff

longtime members

newer members

children

youth

young adults

parents

single adults

older adults

homebound members

online worshipers

people who attend worship but little else
 people who participate in ministries but not worship
 people who use the building
 former members
 people who have reduced their participation
 community partners

Add categories particular to your congregation.

Now place each group approximately where it belongs.

Do not spend time arguing about exact placement.

The pattern matters more than precision.

Step Two — Look at the Center

Who is closest to the center?

Why do we hear these people easily?

- ☐ They hold leadership positions
- ☐ They attend regularly
- ☐ They participate in meetings
- ☐ They know congregational leaders
- ☐ They are comfortable speaking
- ☐ They understand church language
- ☐ They know how decisions are made
- ☐ We deliberately seek their opinions
- ☐ Other: _____

Now ask:

How much of what we believe about the congregation is based primarily on these voices?

Step Three — Look Toward the Edges

Which groups appear in the outer circles?

Why might we hear them less often?

Do not answer too quickly.

Possible reasons may include:

- ☐ Meeting times
- ☐ Transportation
- ☐ Work schedules
- ☐ Childcare
- ☐ Health or mobility

- ☐ Hearing or accessibility
- ☐ Language
- ☐ Technology
- ☐ They are rarely personally invited
- ☐ They do not believe their perspective matters
- ☐ Previous experiences taught them not to speak
- ☐ They do not identify strongly with the congregation
- ☐ They are uncomfortable in groups
- ☐ They have become discouraged
- ☐ We have never thought to ask
- ☐ Other: _____

Step Four — Notice What You Do Not Know

Choose three groups from the outer circles.

For each, complete:

We know that...

We assume that...

We have actually heard from them that...

You may discover that the second line is much easier to complete than the third.

That matters.

Step Five — Choose Where to Listen Next

Which voices could significantly deepen or challenge our understanding?

How might we listen to them in a way that fits their circumstances rather than requiring them to fit ours?

A Question to Carry

Who might experience this congregation differently from those of us sitting in this room?

FM-2.2

Congregational Voice Audit

Who Is Shaping the Story?

Purpose

The previous exercise asks who may be missing.

This one examines the listening process itself.

Use it after several listening sessions have occurred.

Do not attempt to create statistical representation.

The purpose is simpler:

Are we hearing enough different perspectives to recognize when our picture of the congregation may be incomplete?

Review the Conversations So Far

Number of people who have participated: _____

Now consider the perspectives represented.

Age and Life Stage

Have we heard from:

- ☐ Children
- ☐ Youth
- ☐ Young adults
- ☐ Adults raising children
- ☐ Midlife adults
- ☐ Older adults

Where is the greatest gap?

Length of Relationship with the Congregation

Have we heard from:

- ☐ People here less than two years
- ☐ People here 2–5 years
- ☐ People here 5–15 years
- ☐ Longtime members
- ☐ People whose families have been here for generations

What might newer people see that longtime members do not?

What might longtime members understand that newer people cannot yet know?

Level of Participation

Have we heard from:

- ☐ Weekly worshipers
- ☐ Occasional worshipers
- ☐ People active in several ministries
- ☐ People active in one ministry
- ☐ People who rarely attend anything beyond worship
- ☐ People who participate mostly online
- ☐ People whose participation has declined
- ☐ People who have stopped participating

Which group is easiest for us to hear?

Which is hardest?

Leadership

Have we heard from:

- ☐ Current governing-board members
- ☐ Former governing-board members
- ☐ Committee leaders
- ☐ People who have never held office
- ☐ Staff
- ☐ Volunteers without formal titles

How much of our listening has occurred among people already involved in leadership?

Congregational Experience

Have we heard from people who:

- ☐ Feel deeply connected
- ☐ Are enthusiastic about the congregation
- ☐ Feel uncertain about the future
- ☐ Have experienced conflict
- ☐ Have felt overlooked
- ☐ Have considered leaving
- ☐ Have recently joined
- ☐ Have recently returned
- ☐ Have become less involved

One Important Question

Look at the whole audit.

Then ask:

If the people we have not heard were in the room, what might they say that would complicate the story we are currently telling about ourselves?

Do not answer for them.

Use the question to identify the next conversations you need to have.

FM-2.3

Personal Invitation Guide

Going Beyond the General Announcement

Congregations often announce:

"Everyone is invited to participate in our listening sessions."

Then mostly the same people participate.

An open invitation is important.

It is not always sufficient.

Some voices require a personal invitation.

Why Personal Invitations Matter

A person may not participate because:

"I didn't think you really meant people like me."

"I assumed the regular leaders would handle it."

"I don't like meetings."

"I didn't think anyone wanted to hear what I had to say."

"I haven't been around much lately."

"I wasn't sure I was still considered part of the congregation."

A personal invitation communicates something different:

Your perspective matters to us.

Whom Will We Invite Personally?

Name people or groups you particularly hope to hear.

Why is their perspective important?

A Simple Invitation

Use your own words.

Something like:

"We're spending time listening to people across the congregation about what they are experiencing now. We realized we tend to hear most easily from people who are already involved in meetings and leadership. I would really value hearing your perspective. Would you be willing to talk with me?"

Or:

"You don't need to come to a meeting. Could I buy you a cup of coffee sometime and mostly listen?"

The invitation should be genuine.

Do not tell someone:

"We need the youth perspective."

That can make the person feel like a representative of an entire generation.

Say instead:

"I'd like to hear what you experience."

If They Say No

Thank them.

Do not persuade.

A declined invitation is not a problem to overcome.

You might say:

"Of course. I just wanted you to know that your perspective matters."

Leave the door open.

If They Agree

Choose a setting that works for them.

Ask a few questions.

Listen.

Do not make the conversation longer than necessary.

And remember:

You invited them because you wanted to hear them.

Do not spend half the conversation explaining the transition process.

FM-2.4

Listening to People Who Have Stepped Away

Hearing Without Defending

Some of the most important voices may belong to people who are no longer close to the congregation.

They once participated regularly.

Now they attend occasionally.

Or not at all.

Perhaps they quietly drifted away.

Perhaps they left after a conflict.

Perhaps life changed.

Perhaps the congregation changed.

Perhaps their faith changed.

Perhaps they never made a conscious decision. They simply stopped coming.

Do not assume you know why.

The Purpose Is Not to Bring Them Back

This must be clear before making contact.

If the hidden purpose of the conversation is:

How can we get you to return?

you are not listening.

You are recruiting.

The purpose is:

We realized your experience may help us understand something we have not understood. If you are willing, we would like to listen.

They owe you nothing.

Should We Contact Them?

Before reaching out, ask:

Is there an existing relationship that makes contact natural?

Would the invitation feel caring or intrusive?

Is there unresolved conflict that makes another person a better listener?

Are we prepared to hear criticism without defending ourselves?

If the answer to the last question is no, wait.

Invitation

A simple invitation might be:

"We've been listening to people about their experience of the congregation, and I realized we haven't heard much from people who have become less involved. I don't want to make assumptions about your experience. If you would ever be willing to talk, I'd appreciate hearing what you noticed and what changed for you. There is no expectation that you return. I'd simply like to understand."

Then allow the person to decide.

Questions

If they agree, try:

What did you value about your time with the congregation?

When did your relationship with the congregation begin to change?

What was happening for you then?

Was there anything about the congregation that contributed to that change?

What do you wish we understood about your experience?

Was there a moment when someone could have responded differently?

What do you think we do not see about ourselves?

What would you want us to learn as we prepare for the future?

Not every question will fit every conversation.

Follow the person, not the worksheet.

When You Hear Something Difficult

Do not say:

"That's not what happened."

Do not say:

"I'm sure they didn't mean it that way."

Do not explain the policy.

Do not defend the pastor.

Do not correct the timeline.

You may know another side of the story.

That is not the purpose of this conversation.

Try:

'Thank you for telling me.'

Or:

'I didn't know you experienced it that way.'

Or:

'What do you wish had happened instead?'

Listening to someone's experience does not require agreeing with every interpretation.

It requires allowing their experience to be heard.

Afterward

Record themes, not gossip.

Ask permission before sharing anything identifiable.

And ask yourself:

What did this person help us see that we might never have seen from the center of congregational life?

FM-2.5

Power and Voice Reflection

Who Gets Heard When People Speak?

Inviting more people into the room does not guarantee that all voices will carry equal weight.

Every community has patterns of influence.

Some are formal.

Some are informal.

Some are healthy.

Some are barely noticed.

This exercise asks the listening team to examine those patterns without blaming particular people.

Part One — What Happens in Our Conversations?

Discuss:

Who speaks first?

Who speaks most often?

Who tends to speak last, if at all?

Whose opinions usually receive immediate attention?

Who can disagree without risking much?

Who might experience disagreement as risky?

Who is frequently interrupted?

Whose comments are often explained away?

Who knows the vocabulary and procedures well enough to influence the conversation?

Who may have something important to say but not know how to enter the conversation?

Part Two — Whose Experience Gets Believed?

Imagine two people describing the same congregation.

One says:

"This is the most welcoming church I have ever known."

Another says:

"I have never really felt like I belonged here."

Which statement is true?

Perhaps both.

Ask:

Which person are we more likely to believe?

Why?

Do we sometimes protect our preferred story about the congregation by discounting experiences that do not fit it?

What kinds of experiences are easiest for us to dismiss?

Part Three — Whose Criticism Carries Weight?

Consider:

Does criticism from a major donor receive more attention?

From a longtime member?

From an officer?

From a young adult?

From someone who rarely attends?

From a staff member?

From a newcomer?

You do not need to pretend all criticism is equally wise.

But ask:

Do we evaluate the content of what someone says, or do we first evaluate the status of the person saying it?

That distinction matters.

Part Four — Who Knows How to Speak 'Church'?

Churches have language.

Polity.

Theology.

History.

Acronyms.

Procedures.

People who know that language can navigate the institution easily.

Others cannot.

Ask:

Do our conversations require people to understand our institutional language before they can participate?

How could we make important conversations more accessible?

Part Five — Create Better Conditions for Listening

Choose three practices your listening team will use.

- ☐ Invite quieter voices before returning to frequent speakers
- ☐ Allow silence before responses

- ☐ Use small groups
- ☐ Offer individual conversations
- ☐ Provide questions in advance
- ☐ Provide written ways to respond
- ☐ Ask leaders to speak later rather than first
- ☐ Avoid unnecessary church jargon
- ☐ Make meetings physically accessible
- ☐ Provide childcare when appropriate
- ☐ Provide remote participation when useful
- ☐ Ask explicitly for perspectives that differ from what has already been said
- ☐ Other: _____

A Difficult Question

Complete privately before discussing:

A voice I personally find difficult to hear is _____ because
_____.

You do not need to share the person's name.

The important question is:

What happens to my listening when I have already decided how much credibility someone deserves?

That is worth carrying into every conversation.

FM-2.6

Listening Across Generations

Don't Ask People to Represent Their Age Group

Generational categories can be useful.

They can also become stereotypes.

"The young people want..."

"The older members don't like..."

"Parents today..."

"Gen Z thinks..."

Be careful.

No teenager represents all teenagers.

No eighty-year-old speaks for everyone over seventy.

Listen to people, not categories.

With Children

Children notice more than adults sometimes imagine.

Ask simple questions:

What do you like best about church?

When do you feel like you belong?
What do you wish adults understood?
Where do you see people helping each other?
What would make church a better place for children?
Do not turn this into a theology exam.

With Youth

Try:
When does church feel most real to you?
When does it feel least real?
Do adults here listen to young people?
What do adults misunderstand about people your age?
What questions do you wish the church talked about more honestly?
Where do you see people your age finding community?
What gives you hope?

With Older Adults

Do not use older members only as repositories of history.
Remembering already honored their memories.
Ask present-tense questions too:
What are you noticing now?
What gives you hope?
What worries you?
What changes do you think we need to be willing to make?
What are younger people teaching you?
What do you hope this congregation becomes after you are gone?
That final question may open a remarkable conversation.

Across Generations

Consider bringing generations together after listening separately.
Ask:
What did you hear from another generation that surprised you?
What do you think they understand that you don't?
What do you wish they understood about you?
The purpose is not to eliminate differences.
It is to create curiosity across them.

FM-2.7

The Missing-Voice Follow-Up Plan

After completing the exercises in this chapter, return to the listening team.

You now know more about whose voices are missing.

Do something about it.

Voices We Need to Hear More Clearly

Why?

How will we listen?

Who has a relationship that could make the invitation natural?

Why?

How will we listen?

Who has a relationship that could make the invitation natural?

Why?

How will we listen?

Who has a relationship that could make the invitation natural?

What Will We Do Differently?

Because of what we learned in this chapter, we will change the listening process in these ways:

What Are We Still Assuming?

Name at least one assumption about a group or perspective that needs to be tested through actual conversation.

We have been assuming _____.

Who could help us discover whether that assumption is true?

Before Moving On

Listen for What Changes the Story

The purpose of widening the circle is not to create a perfectly representative sample.

It is to make the congregation's understanding more truthful.

That means you should pay particular attention when someone says something that does **not** fit the story you have been telling.

If nearly everyone in leadership says:

"People here feel deeply connected,"

and three people near the edge say:

"I never figured out how to belong,"

do not average those statements into a meaningless middle.

Become curious.

If longtime members say:

"We have always welcomed change,"

and newer members say:

"Every new idea seems to encounter resistance,"

become curious.

If adults say:

"Our young people know they are important here,"

and young people say:

"Adults never ask us what we think,"

become curious.

The unexpected voice is not necessarily the correct voice.

But it may be the voice that reveals where you need to listen next.

Write one sentence your team heard during this chapter that complicated your understanding:

Now write the question it created:

Keep that question.

Listening is doing its work when the congregation becomes less certain about assumptions it once considered obvious.

So far, most of our attention has remained inside or near the congregation.

The next movement changes our location.

We leave the meeting room.

We walk outside.

Not yet to interview anyone.

Not to distribute information.

Not to decide what the neighborhood needs.

Simply to pay attention.

The next question is:

What might we notice if we walked through our community slowly enough to see it?

Chapter Three

Leaving the Building

The Neighborhood Listening Walk

Church buildings quietly shape the way congregations see.

We know where people enter.

We know which rooms are busy.

We notice when the parking lot is full.

We know where the roof leaks and which classroom needs paint.

Spend enough time inside a building and, almost without noticing, we begin to experience the whole community from the church outward.

The Neighborhood Listening Walk turns that line of sight around.

For a little while, the congregation steps beyond its own property and enters the community with no assignment except attention.

You are not going out to evangelize.

You are not conducting a needs assessment.

You are not distributing church information.

You are not looking for ministry opportunities.

You are certainly not deciding what the neighborhood needs.

You are learning to notice.

That sounds simple.

It is not.

Most of us move through familiar places efficiently. We drive the same roads, stop at the same stores, and notice what touches our own lives. What falls outside that narrow beam, the mind fills in with what it already believes it knows.

A listening walk interrupts the spell of familiarity.

Walk slowly.

Look.

Listen.

Notice people.

Notice places.

Notice what has changed.

Notice where people gather and where they do not.

Notice beauty.

Notice neglect.

Notice signs of investment and signs of struggle.

Notice barriers.

Notice what makes you curious.

And throughout the walk, keep three things separate:

What did I notice?

What did I assume?

What do I wonder?

That distinction is at the heart of this practice.

Related resource: *Reimagining the Church* develops this place-based way of seeing more fully. Its reflections on community, vocation, and the flourishing of a particular place are especially useful after the walk, when the team is ready to interpret what it noticed without turning observations into quick solutions.

FM-3.1

Neighborhood Listening Walk Planner

Purpose

A Listening Walk should feel open and curious, but it should not be careless.

Use this resource to decide where you will walk, who will participate, and how you will prepare.

The purpose is not to cover as much territory as possible.

The purpose is to become attentive to a small part of your community.

Choose the Area

Where will we walk?

Why did we choose this area?

Is this:

- ☐ The area immediately surrounding the church
- ☐ A residential neighborhood
- ☐ A commercial district
- ☐ A school area
- ☐ A downtown area
- ☐ A rapidly changing area
- ☐ An area where many congregants live
- ☐ An area where few congregants live
- ☐ An area we think we know well
- ☐ An area we know very little about
- ☐ Other: _____

Before Finalizing the Route

Ask:

Are there sidewalks?

Are there accessibility concerns?

Are there traffic or safety concerns?

Will everyone in our group be able to participate?

Would another form of observation be more appropriate for participants with mobility limitations?

Do we know someone who lives or works in this area who could eventually help us understand what we observe?

Size of the Walking Teams

Small groups generally notice more.

Suggested size:

2–4 people

Large groups can become conspicuous and tend to talk with one another rather than observe.

Number of teams: _____

Participants:

Time

Date: _____

Beginning time: _____

Ending time: _____

Plan for approximately **45–60 minutes** of walking and at least **30 minutes** afterward for reflection.

Meeting Point

Where will everyone gather before the walk?

Where will everyone gather afterward?

Walk at More Than One Time

A neighborhood at 10:00 Tuesday morning may be a different place at 5:30 Friday afternoon.

If possible, consider a second walk.

Possible second date/time:

What might be different then?

Before Leaving

Every participant should understand:

We are not going out to confirm what we already believe about this community. We are going out to discover what we have not noticed.

FM-3.2

What to Notice

A Field Guide for the Walk

You do not need to complete every question.

These prompts are intended to sharpen attention, not turn the walk into a scavenger hunt.

If everyone walks with their heads down filling out forms, you have missed the point.

Look around.

People

Where do you see people?

What are they doing?

Where do people seem to gather?

Where do people linger?

Where do people appear to pass through quickly?

Do you notice different generations?

Families?

People alone?

Workers?

Who seems visible?

Who might be present in the community but not visible during this walk?

Place

What kinds of places do you pass?

- ☐ Homes
- ☐ Apartments
- ☐ Schools
- ☐ Parks
- ☐ Businesses
- ☐ Restaurants
- ☐ Churches or other religious communities
- ☐ Government buildings
- ☐ Healthcare facilities
- ☐ Social-service organizations
- ☐ Vacant buildings
- ☐ Construction
- ☐ Public gathering spaces
- ☐ Other: _____

What appears well cared for?

What appears neglected?

What appears new?

What appears to be disappearing?

What is being built?

What is being repurposed?

Movement

How do people move through the area?

- ☐ Walking
- ☐ Driving
- ☐ Bicycling
- ☐ Public transportation
- ☐ Other: _____

Does the environment make walking easy?

Where are the barriers?

Can children move safely?

Can older adults or people with disabilities move easily?

Where does traffic divide the community?

Where do paths connect it?

Language

What words do you see?

Look at:

Signs.

Storefronts.

Bulletin boards.

Murals.

Banners.

Advertisements.

School signs.

Community notices.

Graffiti.

Yard signs.

Public art.

What languages appear?

What messages appear repeatedly?

What seems important enough for people to put into public view?

What does the public language suggest people care about?

Belonging

Where can someone simply be without needing to buy something?

Where do people appear welcome to linger?

Where might children gather?

Teenagers?

Older adults?

Where might someone who is lonely encounter other people?

What places seem to create community?

Barriers

What physical barriers do you notice?

What appears to separate one part of the community from another?

Roads?

Railways?

Fences?

Housing patterns?

Distance?

Transportation?

Something else?

Do not assume you know what these barriers mean.

Notice them.

Signs of Life

Where do you notice:

Beauty?

Creativity?

Play?

Care?

Investment?

Generosity?

Community?

What made you smile?

Signs of Struggle

What appears difficult?

Where do you notice deterioration?

Isolation?

Vacancy?

Physical barriers?

Again:

Do not diagnose.

A boarded building is a boarded building.

You do not yet know its story.

What Surprised You?

What Made You Curious?

FM-3.3

Walk with Respect

What Not to Do

A Listening Walk is an exercise in attention.

It is not permission to treat other people's neighborhoods as an exhibit.

That distinction becomes especially important when participants are walking through communities different from their own.

Do Not Photograph People Without Permission

Someone sitting on a porch, sleeping outdoors, playing with children, working in a yard, or waiting for a bus is not part of your documentation.

Their life is not congregational data.

If you want a photograph of a public place, ask whether people can be identified and whether the photograph is really necessary.

Often it is not.

Do Not Photograph Pain as Scenery

A deteriorated home may be someone's home.

A tent may be someone's shelter.

A neglected property may carry a story you do not understand.

Pay attention without turning another person's difficulty into an illustration.

Do Not Trespass

Stay in public spaces.

Do not enter private property to get a closer look.

Do not peer into windows.

Do not treat curiosity as permission.

Do Not Diagnose

You may see something and think:

"Homeless."

"Poor."

"Unsafe."

"Gentrifying."

"Drug problem."

"Bad neighborhood."

Those are interpretations.

You may eventually discover that some are accurate.

But the walk does not give you enough information to know.

Record what you actually observed.

Do Not Recruit

If someone speaks with you, be friendly.

But this is not the time to hand them church literature.

Do not turn an ordinary encounter into a sales opportunity.

If someone asks why you are walking, answer simply and truthfully:

"We're part of a congregation nearby, and we're trying to pay better attention to our community."

Then listen if they want to talk.

Do Not Promise

Someone may tell you about a community problem.

Do not say:

"Our church could fix that."

Or:

"We should start something for that."

Try:

'Tell me more about what you've seen.'

You are still listening.

Do Not Turn People into Categories

The person you encounter is not "a homeless person," "a young person," "an immigrant," "a senior," or "a struggling parent" for purposes of your exercise.

They are a person.

If conversation happens naturally, meet them that way.

One Rule to Remember

Walk through the community as though you are entering someone else's living room.

Because in a real sense, you are.

FM-3.4

Listening Walk Journal

I Noticed — I Assumed — I Wonder

This may be the most important worksheet in the chapter.

Complete it individually before discussing the walk with anyone else.

I Noticed

Write only what you actually observed.

Examples:

Three people were sitting outside the convenience store.

We passed two empty storefronts.

The playground had several families using it.

There were no sidewalks on three blocks.

Your observations:

I Assumed

Now write what you found yourself interpreting.

Examples:

I assumed the people outside the store had nowhere else to go.

I assumed the empty storefronts meant businesses were struggling.

I assumed the playground was an important neighborhood gathering place.

I assumed the lack of sidewalks made walking difficult.

Your assumptions:

I Wonder

Turn assumptions into questions.

Instead of:

"There is nowhere for people to gather."

Try:

Where do people in this neighborhood gather?

Instead of:

"Businesses are struggling."

Try:

What has been happening with businesses in this area?

Instead of:

"Families really value this park."

Try:

Who uses this park, and what role does it play in community life?

Your questions:

Look Again

Choose one observation.

What I noticed:

What I immediately assumed it meant:

What else might it mean?

Who could help me understand it?

That last question matters.

Eventually, good observation should lead toward relationship.

FM-3.5

Debriefing the Walk

What Did We Notice?

Gather soon after the walk.

Do not wait several days.

Begin with individual reflection before group discussion so that the first confident speaker does not determine what everyone else thinks they saw.

Round One — What Surprised You?

Each person completes:

Something I noticed that I did not expect was...

Share around the group.

Do not discuss yet.

Listen.

Round Two — Signs of Life

Where did you notice:

People gathering?

Beauty?

Creativity?

Care?

Investment?

Play?

Connection?

What appeared strong?

Round Three — Signs of Struggle

What did you observe that raised concern?

Be disciplined about language.

Ask:

Did we observe this, or are we interpreting it?

Rewrite interpretations as observations when possible.

Round Four — Assumptions

What did you catch yourself assuming?

Where might those assumptions have come from?

Personal experience?

News?

Congregational stories?

Reputation?

Fear?

Familiarity?

Something else?

Round Five — Questions

What do we now want to understand?

Who might help us understand it?

A Useful Discipline

Create three large sheets:

WE NOTICED

WE ASSUMED

WE WONDER

Place observations under the appropriate heading.

If someone says:

"Young families are moving into the neighborhood,"

ask:

What did we actually observe?

Perhaps:

"We saw several adults with young children."

Then place the first statement under **We Assumed** and write:

"Are more families with young children moving into this area?"

under **We Wonder**.

This may feel overly careful.

It is teaching an important congregational habit.

End Without Solving

Before closing, someone will probably say:

"You know what we should do..."

Smile.

Write the idea down if necessary.

Then return to listening.

You do not yet know enough.

FM-3.6

Walk Again

Seeing the Same Place Differently

One walk provides a glimpse.

It does not reveal a community.

Before drawing conclusions, consider walking again.

Change the Time

If you walked during the day, return in the evening.

If you walked on a weekday, return on a weekend.

First walk:

Date: _____ Time: _____

Second walk:

Date: _____ Time: _____

What changed?

Who was visible the second time who was not visible the first?

What places were used differently?

What assumptions from the first walk became less certain?

Change the Guide

Better yet, walk with someone who knows the area from the inside.

A resident.

Business owner.

Teacher.

Neighborhood leader.

Community organizer.

Youth worker.

Police officer.

Postal carrier.

Someone whose daily life gives them a different view.

Do not ask them to give you a formal tour.

Walk together.

Ask:

What do you notice here that we probably don't?

What has changed?

Where do people gather?

What do people here care about?

What do outsiders misunderstand about this area?

Who should we know?

That last question can begin opening the next stage of listening.

Compare the Walks

Something we noticed both times:

Something that appeared very different:

Something our local guide helped us understand:

Something we are now less certain about:

Someone we would like to talk with:

FM-3.7

The Congregational Blind Spot Exercise

What Have We Stopped Seeing?

Sometimes the most difficult community to observe is the one immediately around the church.

We have seen it too often.

Stand Outside the Church

Before beginning another walk, gather outside your own building.

For several minutes, say nothing.

Look.

What can you see from the church property?

What can you hear?

Who passes by?

What happens across the street?

What buildings or spaces are nearby?

Now Ask

How many of those places could we name?

How many people in them do we know?

What has changed within sight of this building during the past five years?

What have we barely noticed?

Look Back at the Church

Now cross the street or move far enough away to see the church as a neighbor might see it.

What do you see?

What does the building communicate?

Is the entrance obvious?

What does the signage say?

What might someone assume happens here?

What might communicate welcome?

What might communicate distance?

Do not redesign the sign.

Not yet.

Just notice.

One Final Question

If we disappeared from this location tomorrow, what relationships—not programs, buildings, or services—would the surrounding community notice were missing?

Sit with that question.

Do not force an answer.

FM-3.8

From Walking to Conversation

Turning Curiosity Toward Relationship

A Listening Walk should leave you with questions.

If it leaves you only with conclusions, walk again.

Review your journals.

List the questions that appeared repeatedly.

Questions We Are Carrying

Now ask:

Who might know something about this?

For Question 1:

For Question 2:

For Question 3:

Look for People, Not Experts

The person who can help you understand does not always have an official title.

Perhaps it is:

a shopkeeper who has been there twenty years.

a teenager who walks the neighborhood every day.

a parent waiting outside the school.

a librarian.

a server in a restaurant.

a teacher.

a parks employee.

a longtime resident.

a new resident.

a community organizer.

a police officer.

a bus driver.

a nonprofit worker.

a barber.

a beautician.

a postal carrier.

a neighborhood association leader.

Someone who simply seems to know everybody.

Ask:

Whose everyday life gives them a view of this community that we do not have?

Names or possibilities:

Don't Turn the Question into an Interrogation

You do not need to say:

"Our observation team identified an apparent deficiency in public gathering spaces and we would like your assessment."

Please don't.

Have a conversation.

"We've been walking around the neighborhood and realized how much we don't know. Where do people around here tend to gather?"

Then listen.

One answer will probably lead to another question.

That is exactly what you want.

Before Moving On

What Did the Walk Do to Us?

The most important outcome of the Neighborhood Listening Walk may not be anything you discovered about the neighborhood.

It may be what you discovered about yourselves.

Perhaps you realized how quickly you interpret what you see.

Perhaps you discovered that the neighborhood is more alive than you imagined.

Perhaps you noticed pain you had driven past for years.

Perhaps you discovered businesses, organizations, gathering places, art, relationships, or community assets you never knew existed.

Perhaps you discovered that the congregation's picture of the community is ten years out of date.

Or perhaps you simply discovered how much you do not know.

That is not a disappointing result.

It is a very good beginning.

Gather the team and complete these sentences:

Before we walked, we assumed...

Now we are less certain about...

We were surprised by...

We want to understand more about...

Someone we now realize we should listen to is...

The walk has taken us from familiarity toward curiosity.

Now curiosity needs relationships.

It is time to stop observing people from a distance and begin listening to people whose experience of the community can teach us something we cannot learn by ourselves.

Not fifty people.

Not a scientific sample.

Start with five.

Five conversations.

Five different windows into the place you share.

And enter each one with the humility to say:

You know something about this community that we don't. Would you help us understand?

Chapter Four

Talk to Five People

Listening Through Relationships

Walking changes the field of our attention.

Conversation changes the meaning of what we noticed.

During the Neighborhood Listening Walk, you may have noticed a crowded park, an empty storefront, a busy school, new apartments, people waiting for buses, a neighborhood changing more rapidly than you expected.

You probably also discovered how quickly observation becomes interpretation.

We see something.

We decide what it means.

The discipline of the walk was to stop ourselves long enough to say:

I noticed...

I assumed...

I wonder...

Now we take those wonderings to people.

Not because any one person can explain the community.

No one can.

But every person knows the community from somewhere no one else can stand in quite the same way.

A teacher sees one part of it.

A teenager sees another.

A business owner sees another.

A parent, police officer, librarian, social worker, apartment manager, longtime resident, new resident, healthcare worker, restaurant server, community organizer, and school bus driver may all live in the same community and experience very different realities.

Each carries knowledge the listening team does not possess.

So begin simply.

Talk to five people.

Not five people likely to confirm what you already think.

Choose five people whose different vantage points might reveal what has remained outside your sight.

Do not interview them as experts.

Do not ask them to tell you what the church should do.

Do not recruit them.

Be curious.

You know something about this community that we don't. Would you help us understand?

Then listen.

FM-4.1

Choosing Five People

Five Windows into the Community

Purpose

This exercise helps each participant choose five people whose experiences of the community are different enough to broaden understanding.

The number five is not magical.

It is manageable.

Five conversations are enough to move us beyond our own assumptions without turning listening into a research project.

If ten members of the congregation each talk to five people, you will have heard fifty different perspectives.

But begin with five.

Don't Choose Five Versions of the Same Person

It would be easy to choose:

the mayor,

the school superintendent,

the chamber president,

the nonprofit director,

and the police chief.

Those might be excellent conversations.

But they are all people whose positions require them to think about the community from a leadership perspective.

Listen more widely.

Consider people such as:

teacher

student

teenager

parent

business owner

restaurant worker

first responder

healthcare worker

librarian

nonprofit leader
neighborhood resident
apartment resident
longtime resident
recent arrival
local employer
employee
school counselor
coach
artist
community organizer
social-service worker
civic leader
barber or beautician
childcare provider
postal carrier
someone who works nights
someone who commutes elsewhere for work
someone who has raised children here
someone who recently moved here
This is not a checklist of demographic categories.
Look for **different vantage points**.

My Five People

Person One

Name or description: _____

Their relationship to the community:

What perspective might they have that I do not?

Person Two

Name or description: _____

Their relationship to the community:

What perspective might they have that I do not?

Person Three

Name or description: _____

Their relationship to the community:

What perspective might they have that I do not?

Person Four

Name or description: _____

Their relationship to the community:

What perspective might they have that I do not?

Person Five

Name or description: _____

Their relationship to the community:

What perspective might they have that I do not?

Look at Your Five

Now ask:

Do they all look at the community from approximately the same social location?

Do they all hold leadership positions?

Do they all belong to organizations?

Do I already know what I expect each person to say?

Who is missing?

If your five people are too similar, change the list.

One More Question

Who knows this community in ways that rarely appear in official community conversations?

That person may belong on your list.

FM-4.2

Inviting the Conversation

Keep It Simple

People may become nervous if you say:

"Our church is conducting a community assessment and I would like to interview you."

That sounds like work.

And it may create expectations you do not intend.

Try ordinary language.

A Simple Invitation

"Our congregation is trying to listen more carefully to our community. We realized we spend a lot of time talking about the community without necessarily talking with people who experience it differently than we do. Would you be willing to have coffee with me sometime? I'd mostly like to listen."

Or:

"We're trying to understand our community better, and I thought you might see things we don't. Would you be willing to talk with me for half an hour?"

If someone asks what you are trying to accomplish, be honest:

"We're in a pastoral transition, and before we start deciding what our future ministry should look like, we're trying to understand our congregation and community better."

What Not to Say

Avoid:

"We're trying to figure out what our church should do for people like you."

Or:

"We're looking for new ministry opportunities."

Or:

"We're trying to determine the needs of the community."

Each of those statements places the church in the center before the conversation has begun.

If You Don't Know the Person

Sometimes someone else should make the introduction.

Ask:

Who already has a relationship?

Could they say:

"I'd like you to meet someone from our congregation who is trying to understand the community better. I thought the two of you would enjoy talking."

Relationships open doors more naturally than cold interviews.

If They Say No

Thank them.

No explanation is necessary.

No persuasion is appropriate.

Listening begins by respecting people's freedom not to participate.

FM-4.3

Talk to Five People Conversation Guide

Before the Conversation

Remember your purpose:

Understand, not persuade.

Bring a notebook if the person is comfortable with you taking notes.

Do not spend the conversation staring at it.

Whenever possible, listen first and write afterward.

Begin with Relationship

You do not have to begin with a formal question.

Talk.

Learn something about the person.

How long have they lived or worked here?

What connects them to the community?

Then become curious.

Core Questions

You do not need to ask every question.

Choose those that fit naturally.

What Do You Love?

What do you love about living or working here?

Follow with:

What makes that important to you?

Where do you experience that?

Has that always been true?

Listen for gifts before asking about problems.

What Is Changing?

What changes have you noticed in the community?

You might follow with:

What seems better?

What seems harder?

Who is most affected by those changes?

What do you think people are still adjusting to?

What Makes Life Difficult?

What makes life difficult for people here?

Do not immediately ask what the church should do.

Ask:

Who experiences that most?

What do people do when that happens?

Who understands this problem particularly well?

Who is already helping?

Where Do People Find Community?

Where do people around here find connection or belonging?

You might ask:

Where do teenagers gather?

Families?

Older adults?

People who are new?

Where do people meet one another naturally?

Has that changed?

What Do Outsiders Miss?

What do you wish people who don't know this community understood about it?

This question may reveal assumptions you did not know you carried.

Who Is Doing Good Work?

Who is doing good work around here that more people should know about?

Follow with:

What makes their work effective?

Why do people trust them?

Who else should we know?

Write down names.

These may become important relationships.

What Gives You Hope?

What gives you hope about this community?

Do not treat this as a polite closing question.

Hope tells you something about what people value and where they see life.

One Question That Often Opens the Door

Near the end ask:

What am I not asking that I should be?

Then be quiet.

The answer may take the conversation somewhere you did not expect.

FM-4.4

The Art of the Follow-Up

Stay with the Story

Good listening depends less on having many questions than on noticing where one answer invites another.

Suppose someone says:

"It's gotten harder for families here."

You could move to the next prepared question.

Don't.

Ask:

'Harder in what way?'

They say:

"Everything takes so much time."

Ask:

'Tell me more about that.'

They talk about commuting, childcare, school schedules, aging parents, multiple jobs, and having almost no unstructured time.

Now you understand something very different from what you might have assumed from:

"It's gotten harder for families."

Useful Follow-Ups

Keep a few simple questions available:

Tell me more.

Can you give me an example?

What was that like?

When did you begin noticing that?

Has that changed?

What do you think is behind that?

Who else sees this clearly?

What do people misunderstand about it?**What makes that important to you?****Follow the Energy**

Listen for moments when:

the person becomes animated.

pauses.

laughs.

becomes quieter.

says, "This may sound strange..."

says, "Nobody ever asks about..."

says, "The real problem is..."

says, "What people don't understand is..."

Those moments may deserve another question.

Don't Follow Every Thread

Curiosity can become interrogation.

You do not need to understand everything in one conversation.

If something feels personal, allow the person to decide whether to continue.

You can say:

'You don't need to talk about that unless you want to.'

Listening includes respecting boundaries.

FM-4.5

Talk to Five People Journal**One Page for Each Conversation**

Complete this as soon after the conversation as possible.

Conversation

Person: _____

Date: _____

Their relationship to the community:

What Did I Hear?

What Do They Value About This Community?

What Changes Did They Notice?

What Difficulties Did They Name?

Where Did They See Gifts or Strengths?

Who or What Organizations Did They Mention?

What Gives Them Hope?

What Surprised Me?

What Challenged an Assumption I Carried?

What Do I Want to Understand Better?

Who Else Did This Conversation Make Me Want to Meet?

Listen to Yourself

Complete:

Before this conversation, I thought...

After this conversation, I wonder...

That movement—from certainty toward curiosity—is one sign that you listened.

FM-4.6

Ethical Listening

Receiving Another Person's Story with Care

People may tell you more than you expected.

A conversation about the community can become a story about:

family.

employment.

loneliness.

housing.

racism.

school.

violence.

faith.

poverty.

health.

loss.

church hurt.

relationships.

You asked someone to speak.

Receive what they offer with care.

Tell People Why You Are Listening

Do not conceal the congregational purpose.

They should understand that you are part of a church listening process.

Ask Before Taking Notes

Say:

"Would you mind if I jot down a few things so I remember accurately?"

If they prefer that you not, don't.

Do Not Record Without Permission

Do not secretly record audio or video.

Written notes are usually enough.

Protect Identifiable Stories

Suppose someone tells you:

"I nearly lost my apartment last year because my rent increased by \$400."

The important observation may be:

Housing costs are creating significant pressure for some residents.

You probably do not need to report:

"The woman who works at the pharmacy almost lost her apartment."

Protect people.

Ask Permission Before Sharing a Story

If a particular story would genuinely help the congregation understand something, ask:

"Would you be comfortable with me sharing that story with our listening team?"

Clarify whether their name may be used.

If there is doubt, anonymize or leave it out.

Do Not Promise Action

Someone says:

"We really need somewhere for teenagers to go."

Do not say:

"Maybe our church can do that."

Say:

'What do teenagers do now?'

Or:

'Who is already thinking about that?'

You are listening.

Know When Listening Is Not Enough

Occasionally someone may disclose information involving immediate danger, abuse, exploitation, or another matter requiring appropriate professional, safeguarding, denominational, pastoral, or legal response.

A listening exercise does not override those responsibilities.

Do not promise absolute confidentiality that you may not be able to maintain.

The Field Manual will return to these boundaries more fully when we address **Listening for Pain**.

FM-4.7

Don't Ask What the Church Should Do

At Least Not Yet

This discipline deserves its own page.

Community conversations often end with:

"What do you think our church should do?"

It sounds generous.

It may be premature.

The question assumes that the most important outcome of listening is something the congregation will create.

Instead ask:

Who is already doing something important about this?

What seems to be working?

Where do people already find support?

What would you want someone who cares about this community to understand?

Who else should we talk with?

These questions keep the congregation in a learning posture.

Practice

Someone says:

"A lot of older adults around here are isolated."

Your first ministry idea:

Set it aside.

Ask three listening questions instead:

Someone says:

"There isn't much for teenagers to do."

Your first ministry idea:

Set it aside.

Ask:

Someone says:

"Housing is becoming impossible for working families."

Your first ministry idea:

Set it aside.

Ask:

The Discipline

Ideas are not forbidden.

Write them down if you need to.

But do not let an idea end your curiosity.

A ministry idea is not evidence that you understand the situation.

Keep listening.

FM-4.8

Five Conversations Synthesis

What Are We Beginning to Hear?

After completing your five conversations, review your journals individually before meeting with the larger listening team.

What Appeared More Than Once?

What Appeared Only Once but Seems Important?

Where Did People Agree?

Where Did They Experience the Community Differently?

Do not force agreement.

A teenager and a retired resident may experience the same community very differently.

Both experiences matter.

What Surprised Me?

What Assumption Became Less Certain?

What Community Gifts Did I Hear About?

People:

Organizations:

Relationships:

Places:

Traditions or practices:

What Pain or Difficulty Did I Hear?

Who Is Already Responding?

What Gives People Hope?

Who Else Should We Hear?

My Three Most Important Questions Now

Notice the heading.

Not:

My Three Conclusions.

Questions.

FM-4.9

Bringing Fifty Conversations into the Room

Listening Across the Congregation

If ten people each talked with five people, you now have fifty conversations.

Do not turn them into fifty reports read aloud.

Look for patterns without flattening difference.

Step One — One Observation Per Card

Give each listener several cards or sticky notes.

On each card write one important observation.

Examples:

People repeatedly mentioned transportation.

Several people described the public library as a gathering place.

Young adults talked about difficulty forming friendships.

Three people mentioned the same neighborhood organization.

Several people described the community as generous during crises.

One observation per card.

Step Two — Put Everything Up

Place all cards where everyone can see them.

Do not organize them yet.

Read silently.

Step Three — Begin Grouping

Which observations seem related?

Move them together.

Do not name the groups too quickly.

Allow patterns to emerge.

Step Four — Look for Difference

Now ask:

What does not fit?

What contradictions appear?

Which observations came from perspectives we rarely hear?

Do not discard the outliers.

They may be important.

Step Five — Name Questions, Not Ministries

For each emerging cluster, write a question.

Suppose several cards concern housing.

Do not write:

Affordable Housing Ministry

Write:

What is happening with housing, and who is most affected?

Suppose several cards concern youth.

Do not write:

Youth Outreach

Write:

Where do young people experience belonging in this community, and where don't they?

Suppose several cards mention loneliness.

Do not write:

Fellowship Program

Write:

Where are people experiencing isolation, and what kinds of relationships already help create connection?

You are still listening.

FM-4.10

Who Should We Thank?

Listening Creates Relationships

These conversations are not transactions.

People gave you time.

They shared experience.

They helped you understand the community.

Thank them.

A short handwritten note may be enough:

Thank you for taking time to talk with me. You helped me notice things about our community I had not seen before. I especially appreciated your perspective about _____. We are still listening, and your conversation will be part of what we carry forward.

Do not turn the thank-you into a church invitation.

Just say thank you.

Consider Continuing the Relationship

Some conversations will naturally end.

Others may open a door.

Someone may say:

"You should come see what we're doing."

Go.

Someone may introduce you to someone else.

Meet them.

Someone may invite you to a community meeting.

Attend.

Not because you are collecting more data.

Because listening can become relationship.

And relationship changes the way a congregation belongs to its community.

People We Want to Stay Connected With

Why?

Who will maintain the relationship?

Do not create an institutional contact list and assume that equals relationship.

Someone must actually know someone.

Before Moving On

What Did People Teach Us That Walking Could Not?

The Neighborhood Listening Walk taught us to see.

These conversations teach us how easily seeing can be misunderstood without relationship.

Perhaps you walked past an empty building and assumed decline.

Someone told you a new business is coming.

Perhaps you saw a crowded park and assumed families gather there regularly.

A parent told you they use it because there is nowhere else children can safely play.

Perhaps you noticed an organization you had never heard of.

Five different people told you it is one of the most trusted institutions in the community.

Perhaps you thought the community's greatest challenge was poverty.

People kept talking about loneliness.

Perhaps you expected people to describe what was wrong.

They kept telling you what they loved.

This is why we talk to people.

Now gather the listening team and ask:

What did people tell us that we could never have learned simply by looking?

What did we think we understood that now seems more complicated?

Who did we discover is already doing good work?

What gifts did people help us see?

What questions are becoming more important?

Do not lose those questions.

We are about to add another kind of listening.

Numbers.

Population.

Age.

Housing.

Income.

Education.

Employment.

Transportation.

Migration.

Demographic change.

Data can reveal things that five conversations cannot.

But data carries its own danger.

A number can look authoritative enough to end curiosity.

Don't let it.

The next discipline is:

Let the numbers help you notice. Then go back to people to understand.

Chapter Five

Listening to the Place

What the Numbers Can Help Us Notice

We have listened to people within the congregation.

We have deliberately widened the circle.

We have walked through the community.

We have talked with people who experience the place from different vantage points.

Now we add another voice.

Data.

Population.

Age.

Households.

Housing.

Income.

Employment.

Education.

Language.

Transportation.

Migration.

School enrollment.

Together, these numbers can reveal patterns that no single conversation can hold.

They can reveal that a community we think of as aging is actually becoming younger.

They can show that housing costs have risen far faster than household income.

They can reveal a growing population whose first language is not English.

They can show that many people who live nearby work somewhere else.

They can help us see changes that occurred gradually enough that we barely noticed them.

But every number stops at the threshold of a human life.

A statistic can tell you that the percentage of single-person households is increasing.

It cannot tell you whether those people are lonely.

Data can show that a neighborhood has become more ethnically diverse.

It cannot tell you whether people experience that diversity as belonging, separation, celebration, tension, or some complicated mixture of all four.

School enrollment can tell you how many children live in the community.

It cannot tell you what parents worry about at two o'clock in the morning.

Income data can identify economic pressure.

It cannot tell you how a family manages it.

Numbers describe patterns.

People live them.

So throughout this chapter we will hold onto one discipline:

Data helps us notice. People help us understand.

The goal is not to create a demographic profile impressive enough to include in a report.

The goal is to allow another kind of listening to challenge what we think we know about the place where God has planted us.

FM-5.1

Community Data Checklist

What Might Help Us See the Place More Clearly?

Purpose

You do not need every statistic available about your community.

More data does not necessarily produce more understanding.

Gather information that can help you notice significant patterns and changes.

Begin broadly. Then pay closer attention to what raises questions.

Population

Look for:

- ☐ Current population
- ☐ Population five years ago
- ☐ Population ten years ago
- ☐ Projected population if reliable information is available
- ☐ Population density
- ☐ Areas of growth
- ☐ Areas of decline

Current population: _____

Ten years ago: _____

Change: _____

What do we notice?

What do we wonder?

Age

Look at the distribution rather than simply the median age.

- ☐ Children
- ☐ Teenagers
- ☐ Young adults
- ☐ Adults in midlife
- ☐ Older adults

What age groups are growing?

Which are declining?

What surprised us?

Households

Consider:

- ☐ People living alone
- ☐ Married households
- ☐ Households with children
- ☐ Single-parent households
- ☐ Multigenerational households
- ☐ Nonfamily households
- ☐ Household size

What seems to be changing?

What questions does this create?

Housing

Consider:

- ☐ Home ownership
- ☐ Rental housing
- ☐ Apartments
- ☐ Multifamily housing
- ☐ Housing costs
- ☐ Rent changes
- ☐ Home-value changes
- ☐ Vacancy rates
- ☐ New construction
- ☐ Age of housing stock

What do we notice?

Who might help us understand what these numbers mean in daily life?

Income and Economic Life

Consider:

- ☐ Median household income
- ☐ Income distribution
- ☐ Poverty rates
- ☐ Employment
- ☐ Major employers
- ☐ Types of employment
- ☐ Unemployment
- ☐ Commuting patterns

Be careful with these numbers.

Income does not tell you the worth, generosity, stability, or quality of life of a person or neighborhood.

Use economic data to raise questions, not classify people.

Education

Consider:

- ☐ Educational attainment
- ☐ School enrollment
- ☐ Public schools
- ☐ Private schools
- ☐ Colleges or technical schools
- ☐ Graduation rates where useful

What patterns appear?

What do we need educators themselves to help us understand?

Race, Ethnicity, Language, and Cultural Change

Consider:

- ☐ Racial and ethnic composition
- ☐ Changes over time
- ☐ Languages spoken at home
- ☐ Immigration or migration patterns, where reliable data are available

Do not turn categories into assumptions about people.

Ask instead:

What cultural changes are occurring in the community, and whose voices do we need in order to understand them?

Questions:

Transportation

Consider:

- ☐ Average commute
- ☐ Public transportation
- ☐ Walking
- ☐ Bicycling
- ☐ Households without vehicles
- ☐ Major commuting destinations

What does transportation make easy?

What might it make difficult?

Other Information Particular to Our Community

What else might matter here?

Keep the Question in Front of You

For every category ask:

What does this help us notice that we might otherwise have missed?

FM-5.2

Choosing the Right Geography

What Do We Mean by 'Our Community'?

Before gathering numbers, decide what place you are actually trying to understand.

This is harder than it sounds.

A church has a street address.

That does not necessarily define its community.

Members may come from several ZIP codes.

The congregation may identify strongly with a town while sitting just outside its boundaries.

A school district may create more meaningful community relationships than municipal boundaries.

A highway may divide two neighborhoods that appear adjacent on a map.

A rural congregation may understand its community by county, while the people themselves identify with several smaller communities.

The geography you choose changes the story the data tells.

Possible Boundaries

- ☐ Immediate neighborhood
- ☐ Census tract
- ☐ ZIP code
- ☐ Municipality

- ☐ County
- ☐ School district
- ☐ Several adjoining neighborhoods
- ☐ Congregational service area
- ☐ Other: _____

Our Church Is Located In

Neighborhood: _____

Municipality: _____

County: _____

ZIP code: _____

School district: _____

Where Do Our Members Actually Live?

Approximately what percentage of the congregation lives:

Within one mile? _____

Within five miles? _____

More than five miles away? _____

Do significant numbers commute into the congregation from another community?

What Community Do We Talk About?

When members say:

"Our community..."

what place do they usually mean?

Is that still an accurate description?

What Geography Did We Experience During the Listening Walk?

Does that match the geography represented in the data we are gathering?

Compare When Necessary

Sometimes the most revealing approach is comparison.

For example:

Immediate neighborhood

compared with

larger municipality

or

school district

compared with

county

What looks different depending upon the boundary?

A Question Worth Asking

Are we defining the community by where the congregation's members live, or by where the congregation itself has been placed?

Those may not be the same.

Both matter.

FM-5.3

Reading Change Over Time

Then — Now — Direction

A snapshot tells you what a community looks like at one moment.

Transition is easier to see when we compare moments.

Do not ask only:

What is our community like?

Ask:

How is our community changing?

Choose several indicators that seem significant.

Indicator One

Category: _____

Then — approximately ten years ago

Now

Direction

- ☐ Increasing
- ☐ Decreasing
- ☐ Relatively stable
- ☐ Unclear

What do we notice?

What do we wonder?

Indicator Two

Category: _____

Then

Now

Direction

- ☐ Increasing
- ☐ Decreasing
- ☐ Relatively stable
- ☐ Unclear

What do we notice?

What do we wonder?

Indicator Three

Category: _____

Then

Now

Direction

- ☐ Increasing
- ☐ Decreasing
- ☐ Relatively stable
- ☐ Unclear

What do we notice?

What do we wonder?

Look for Movement, Not Just Size

A small number can still represent significant change.

A large number can remain remarkably stable.

Ask:

What has changed most dramatically?

What has changed slowly enough that we may not have noticed?

What has remained surprisingly stable?

What change did our community conversations already help us notice?

What change did the data reveal that no one mentioned?

That last question may tell you where more listening is needed.

FM-5.4

Data-to-Questions Worksheet

Never Let a Number Have the Last Word

This is one of the central practices of this chapter.

For every statistic that seems important, resist the temptation to explain it.

Turn it into a question.

Example

The number says:

The percentage of people living alone has increased.

We might assume:

More people are lonely.

Instead we wonder:

How do people who live alone experience community and connection here?

Who might help us understand?

People who live alone, apartment managers, senior organizations, community groups, local gathering places.

Our Data Point One

The number says:

Our first interpretation was:

What else might it mean?

We wonder:

Who could help us understand?

Our Data Point Two

The number says:

Our first interpretation was:

What else might it mean?

We wonder:

Who could help us understand?

Our Data Point Three

The number says:

Our first interpretation was:

What else might it mean?

We wonder:

Who could help us understand?

The Discipline

Whenever someone says:

"The statistics prove..."

become curious.

Statistics may demonstrate a measurable pattern.

They rarely explain why the pattern exists or what it means to the people living within it.

FM-5.5

Data and Conversation Cross-Check

Put the Numbers Beside What People Told You

Now bring together two kinds of listening.

On one side of the table, place what you learned from conversations.

On the other, place what you learned from data.

Do not ask which one is right.

Ask how they illuminate one another.

Where Did the Data Confirm What We Heard?

People told us:

The data showed:

Together they make us wonder:

Where Did the Data Complicate What We Heard?

People told us:

The data showed:

The tension is:

Who should we listen to next?

Where Did the Data Contradict Our Assumptions?

We assumed:

The data suggests:

What do we need to understand?

What Did the Data Reveal That No One Mentioned?

Why might people not have mentioned it?

Who might experience this reality most directly?

How could we listen to them?

What Did People Tell Us That the Data Cannot Show?

Do not overlook this section.

Some of the most important things you have learned may never appear in a demographic report.

FM-5.6

Reading Data Without Stereotyping

A Number Describes a Pattern, Not a Person

Demographic categories are useful precisely because they group people.

That is also their danger.

A statistic says:

35 percent of households have children.

It does not tell you what any particular family needs.

A statistic says:

The median age is increasing.

It does not tell you what older adults value.

A statistic says:

Twenty percent of residents speak a language other than English at home.

It does not tell you whether they feel included in community life.

Categories become stereotypes when we stop listening to the people inside them.

Practice

Complete these statements.

The data tells us:

The data does not tell us:

The data tells us:

The data does not tell us:

The data tells us:

The data does not tell us:

Watch Your Language

Be cautious with statements such as:

"Young people want..."

"Low-income families need..."

"Older people prefer..."

"Hispanic families value..."

"Single people are..."

The data almost certainly did not tell you that.

People are more complicated than demographic categories.

Ask Instead

What do we know?

What are we assuming?

Who have we actually heard?

Whose lived experience could complicate this picture?

FM-5.7

Community Change Map

Where Is Change Happening?

Some community change is easier to understand when placed on a map.

Use a printed map of the area you identified in FM-5.2.

You can also draw a simple one.

Mark places where you have noticed significant change.

Housing

Where is housing being built?

Where are rents or home prices changing significantly?

Where is older housing concentrated?

Business

Where are new businesses appearing?

Where are businesses closing?

Where are commercial areas changing character?

Schools and Children

Where are schools located?

Where are enrollment patterns changing?

Where are childcare facilities, recreation areas, or other places important to families?

Transportation

Where are major roads?

Transit routes?

Walking routes?

Transportation barriers?

Community Institutions

Mark:

schools

libraries

parks

healthcare

nonprofits

government services

religious communities

community centers

major employers

other gathering places

Now Mark the Church

Where is your congregation in relation to all of this?

What changes are occurring closest to you?

What changes are occurring where you have few relationships?

Where might geography be shaping who can easily participate in congregational life?

Don't Turn the Map into a Target Map

You are not identifying where the church should "reach."

You are trying to understand the place.

The people represented on the map are neighbors, not prospects.

FM-5.8

What the Numbers Cannot Tell Us

Go Back to People

Before leaving the data, make a deliberate inventory of its limits.

The Numbers Cannot Tell Us...

What people love about living here.

What people fear losing.

Where someone feels at home.

Why a family moved here.

Why another family left.

What a teenager thinks adults misunderstand.

Why someone drives thirty minutes to attend a particular school, church, restaurant, or community organization.

Who people trust.

Where neighbors help one another.

What makes someone lonely.

What gives someone hope.

Where racial or cultural differences create friendship.

Where they create separation.

Which community institutions have earned trust.

What stories people tell about this place.

Where people recognize beauty.

What people pray for.

Where Christ may already be drawing people toward healing, belonging, justice, generosity, and hope.

Those things require relationship.

Complete the Sentence

The most important thing our demographic information cannot tell us is...

Who Could Tell Us More?

What Conversation Should We Have Next?

FM-5.9

A One-Page Community Snapshot

What We Think We Know So Far

This is not the final description of your community.

It is a working snapshot.

Date it.

You may understand things differently six months from now.

Our Listening Geography

Significant Population Changes

Significant Age or Household Changes

Significant Housing Changes

Significant Economic or Employment Patterns

Significant Cultural or Language Changes

Transportation or Geographic Patterns

What the Data Confirmed from Our Conversations

What the Data Complicated

What Surprised Us

What We Still Do Not Understand

People We Need to Hear

Questions We Are Carrying

Keep this page.

You will return to it when we begin looking for patterns across everything you have heard.

FM-5.10

Data Reflection with the Listening Team

What Changed in Our Understanding?

Gather the listening team.

Place the Community Snapshot where everyone can see it.

Begin with silence.

Then ask each person to complete:

One thing I learned about our community that I did not know was...

One assumption I carried that the data challenged was...

One thing people told us that I now understand differently is...

One statistic I am tempted to interpret too quickly is...

One person or group I now want to hear from is...

Then Ask Together

What seems to be changing most significantly?

Where do we have strong evidence?

Where are we still relying mostly on assumptions?

Where do our conversations and data reinforce one another?

Where do they create tension?

What do we need to resist concluding?

That last question matters.

Write the answer somewhere visible.

Before Moving On

A Community Is More Than Its Needs

By now you have accumulated a considerable amount of information.

You have heard concerns.

You have seen demographic changes.

You have noticed places of struggle.

You may already be thinking:

Housing.

Loneliness.

Youth.

Transportation.

Food insecurity.

Childcare.

Older adults.

Schools.

Mental health.

Community division.

Stop for a moment.

If the picture you are developing of the community consists primarily of problems, you have not finished listening.

Look again.

What is strong?

Who is creative?

Who brings people together?

Where are people already helping one another?

Which organizations have earned trust?

What informal networks hold people together?

Who knows how to get things done?

Where is generosity already flowing?

What traditions create belonging?

Where is beauty being created?

Who is doing remarkable work with very little recognition?

The data may help us see where pressure exists.

It may also reveal vitality.

New businesses.

Educational resources.

Cultural diversity.

Community institutions.

Growing populations.

Patterns of investment.

But numbers alone still cannot tell us where the deepest gifts are.

For that we return to people and relationships.

The next movement is deliberately different from a traditional needs assessment.

We will not begin with:

What's wrong with our community?

We will ask:

What's strong?

Not:

Who needs our help?

But:

Who is already contributing?

Not:

What should our church create?

But:

What gifts, relationships, wisdom, and work are already present—and what might they teach us about what God is doing here?

Chapter Six

Listening for Gifts

What Is Already Strong?

By this point in the listening process, you have almost certainly heard about problems.

That is almost inevitable.

Ask people about their community and they will tell you about housing costs, loneliness, schools, traffic, poverty, aging, mental health, childcare, addiction, employment, polarization, transportation, or whatever pressures are particular to their place.

Those realities matter.

Listen to them.

But if we listen only for what is wrong, the picture will darken until it no longer resembles the whole community.

Churches are particularly susceptible to this because we have been formed to help. We see a need and immediately begin imagining a response.

The neighborhood needs something.

The church has something.

Ministry becomes the movement from the people who have resources toward the people who need them.

Sometimes that is appropriate. Hungry people need food. People without safe shelter need housing. A person in crisis may need immediate assistance.

But no community is merely a collection of needs waiting for a church to arrive.

They are also filled with gifts.

People know things.

People make things.

People organize.

People care for neighbors.

People raise children.

People create businesses.

People make music.

People repair houses.

People coach teams.

People teach.

People advocate.

People cook.

People solve problems.

People create beauty.

People know whom to call.

People show up when someone is sick.

People lend tools.

People organize meals.

People create informal networks that no community directory will ever reveal.

Some of the most important community leaders have no title at all.

So this chapter asks you to listen differently.

Not:

What is missing?

But:

What is already here?

Not:

Who needs help?

But:

Who has gifts?

Not:

What can our congregation do for this community?

But:

What is this community already doing, and what can we learn from it?

And eventually, a more theological question:

Where might God already be at work through the gifts of this place?

FM-6.1

Community Gifts Inventory

Learning to See Abundance

Purpose

Begin by reviewing everything you have gathered so far:

congregational listening notes

missing-voice conversations

Neighborhood Listening Walk journals

Talk to Five People journals

demographic information

community maps

This time, read them with one question:

What gifts are already present?

Do not begin with needs.

People

Who did you encounter or hear about who seems to have particular gifts?

What gifts did you notice?

- ☐ Hospitality
- ☐ Leadership
- ☐ Teaching
- ☐ Organizing
- ☐ Caring
- ☐ Advocacy
- ☐ Creativity
- ☐ Entrepreneurship
- ☐ Mentoring
- ☐ Conflict mediation
- ☐ Connecting people
- ☐ Practical skills
- ☐ Community knowledge
- ☐ Generosity
- ☐ Other: _____

Names or descriptions:

Associations

What groups bring people together?

These may be formal or informal.

Consider:

neighborhood associations

sports leagues

parent groups

book clubs

veterans' groups

arts organizations

civic clubs

support groups

gardening groups

recreation groups

cultural associations

volunteer networks

online community groups

informal gatherings

Groups we have noticed:

What do they contribute?

Institutions

What institutions already contribute significantly to community life?

Schools.

Libraries.

Businesses.

Healthcare organizations.

Nonprofits.

Government agencies.

Colleges.

Religious communities.

Parks.

Museums.

Community centers.

Institutions we have noticed:

What gifts do they bring?

Places

Where does community happen?

What makes these places work?

Who feels at home there?

Traditions

What community traditions create identity or belonging?

Festivals?

Sports?
Markets?
Celebrations?
Parades?
Arts events?
School traditions?
Cultural practices?
Holiday gatherings?

What do these traditions tell us about what people value?

Informal Networks

Where do people help one another without an organization coordinating it?

Who seems to know when someone needs help?

How does information travel?

Who connects people?

These informal networks may be among the most important assets you discover.

FM-6.2

Who Makes Things Happen?

Finding the People Behind the Programs

Organizations are easy to see.

Relationships are harder.

A community directory may tell you who runs an organization.

It will not necessarily tell you who people trust.

Ask the people you have been listening to:

Who gets things done around here?

Who knows everybody?

Who do people call when something happens?

Who brings people together?

Who do people trust?

Who seems to know what is happening before everyone else does?

Who quietly takes care of people?

Listen for names that appear more than once.

Connectors

Who knows people across different parts of the community?

What makes them a connector?

Conveners

Who can bring people together?

What gives them that ability?

Caregivers

Who quietly notices when people are struggling?

How do they respond?

Bridge-Builders

Who has relationships across differences that often divide people?

What can we learn from them?

Creators

Who brings new ideas, art, businesses, projects, gatherings, or possibilities into the community?

What seems to give them energy?

Advocates

Who speaks for people or issues that are easily overlooked?

Who listens to them?

Quiet Leaders

Who has influence without a formal title?

How did we learn about them?

A Question for the Listening Team

Which people would we never have discovered if we had talked only with official community leaders?

That is one reason listening widely matters.

FM-6.3

What's Strong?

Practicing a Different First Question

This exercise helps the listening team notice how quickly deficit language shapes our imagination.

Read each situation.

Notice your first instinct.

Then ask a different question.

Situation One

A neighborhood has many older adults living alone.

Our first concern:

Now ask:

What strengths might already exist among older adults in this community?

Who knows the neighborhood's history?

Who has time, wisdom, skills, relationships, or experience that others may value?

Situation Two

A school serves many families experiencing economic pressure.

Our first concern:

Now ask:

What strengths are present in these families, the school, and its surrounding community?

Who is already supporting children?

What are families already doing for one another?

Situation Three

Teenagers say there is little for them to do.

Our first response:

Now ask:

What are young people already interested in, creating, organizing, or doing?

Where are they already gathering?

What gifts do they bring that adults may not be noticing?

Situation Four

A neighborhood has experienced significant cultural change.

Our first concern:

Now ask:

What new gifts, traditions, languages, relationships, businesses, foods, celebrations, and perspectives are becoming part of this community?**Practice with Something You Actually Heard**

A concern we heard:

Our immediate interpretation:

Now ask:

What strength, gift, capacity, relationship, or resilience might we be overlooking?

Who could help us see it?

The Discipline

This is not positive thinking.

It is not pretending pain does not exist.

It is refusing to describe people only by what they lack.

FM-6.4

Community Assets Map

Putting Gifts on the Map

Return to the map you used in Chapter Five.

This time, do not mark problems.

Mark gifts.

Use symbols, sticky notes, or whatever method works for your group.

People

Where are people with important community knowledge or relationships?

Associations

Where do people organize themselves?

Institutions

Where are institutions contributing to community life?

Gathering Places

Where do people naturally meet?

Creative Spaces

Where are art, music, food, recreation, learning, or entrepreneurship happening?

Caring Networks

Where are people caring for one another?

Places of Hope

Where did people tell you they see something good happening?

Now Look at the Map

Where are gifts clustered?

What areas appear disconnected?

What gifts did we not know existed?

What relationships already connect the congregation with some of these assets?

Where do we have no relationship at all?

One Important Caution

Do not turn the assets map into a resource inventory for church projects.

You are not asking:

How can we use these people?

You are asking:

What can these gifts teach us about our community?

People are not resources for the congregation.

They are neighbors with whom relationships may grow.

FM-6.5

Community Partnership Inventory

Who Is Already Doing Good Work?

During the Talk to Five People conversations, you asked:

Who is doing good work around here that more people should know about?

Return to those answers.

Organizations or Groups Mentioned

What do they do?

Who mentioned them?

Why do people appear to trust them?

Does anyone in the congregation already have a relationship with them?

What do they do?

Who mentioned them?

Why do people appear to trust them?

Does anyone in the congregation already have a relationship with them?

What do they do?

Who mentioned them?

Why do people appear to trust them?

Does anyone in the congregation already have a relationship with them?

Before Imagining Partnership

Do not begin with:

What could they do with us?

Begin with:

What could we learn from them?

Who could make an introduction?

What might we ask?

Try:

"Several people have mentioned the work you're doing. We'd love to learn more about it."

Then go listen.

If Partnership Eventually Emerges

Let it grow from relationship.

A healthy partnership is not:

"We have volunteers. You have clients."

It begins closer to:

What are you trying to accomplish?

What have you learned?

What gifts do you bring?

What gifts might we bring?

Is there something we could do better together than separately?

You may not know the answer for some time.

That is fine.

FM-6.6

Hidden Gifts

What Doesn't Appear in a Community Directory?

Some gifts are easy to identify.

A hospital.

A school.

A nonprofit.

A community center.

Others remain nearly invisible unless you know people.

A woman checks on four older neighbors every morning.

A retired carpenter repairs things for people who cannot afford the work.

Teenagers organize pickup basketball games and make sure younger children get included.

A restaurant owner quietly feeds people who cannot pay.

A teacher keeps extra clothing at school.

Someone knows which family needs groceries before anyone asks.

A neighborhood group communicates through text messages whenever someone needs help.

A barber listens to people all day and knows what the community is talking about.

These gifts rarely appear in demographic reports.

Ask Around

During future conversations ask:

Who quietly makes this community better?

Who takes care of people without much recognition?

Who has a skill everybody seems to know about?

Who brings people together?

Where do neighbors help one another informally?

What We Discovered

What Makes These Gifts Possible?

Relationship?

Trust?

Proximity?

Tradition?

Generosity?

Shared experience?

What Could the Congregation Learn from Them?

Not copy.

Not absorb.

Learn.

FM-6.7

Gifts People Bring to Their Own Challenges

Listen for Capacity, Not Only Need

When people describe difficulty, listen for what they are already doing.

Suppose someone says:

"Childcare is really hard around here."

Ask:

'How are families managing now?'

You may hear about grandparents, neighbors, friends, informal exchanges, older siblings, churches, schools, or creative work arrangements.

Those responses do not mean childcare is no longer a problem.

They reveal capacity.

Suppose someone says:

"A lot of older people are isolated."

Ask:

'Who seems particularly good at keeping people connected?'

Suppose someone says:

"Families are struggling with food costs."

Ask:

'What are people already doing to help one another?'

Practice

A challenge we heard:

What are people already doing in response?

What skills are they using?

What relationships are helping?

What resilience did we notice?

Who understands this from lived experience?

What could they teach us?

Remember

People experiencing a problem are not empty vessels waiting for outside expertise.

They often possess considerable wisdom about the problem because they live with it every day.

Listen to that wisdom.

FM-6.8

Congregational Gifts Meet Community Gifts

Look for Resonance, Not Projects

Now we begin bringing two parts of the transition journey into conversation.

Through **Remembering**, the congregation explored the stories that formed it.

Through congregational listening, you have heard what gives people life now.

Through community listening, you are discovering gifts beyond the church.

Place them beside one another.

Do not design ministries yet.

Look for resonance.

Gifts Within the Congregation

What does this congregation seem particularly able to offer?

What do people enjoy doing?

Where is there energy?

What knowledge or experience exists among members?

What relationships already extend into the community?

Gifts Within the Community

What strengths have we discovered?

What people or organizations carry energy?

Where are relationships already strong?

Where Do We Notice Resonance?

Congregational gift:

Community gift:

What makes the connection interesting?

Congregational gift:

Community gift:

What makes the connection interesting?

Resist the Next Step

Someone will probably say:

"We could..."

Perhaps you could.

Write the idea in the margin if you must.

But return to the question:

What are we recognizing?

There will be a time for response.

This stage is still about recognition.

FM-6.9

Where Is God Already at Work?

A Theological Reflection on Community Gifts

Gather the listening team around the Community Assets Map.

Begin with silence.

Then read:

God acts. We recognize. We join.

This conviction, explored more fully in *Living God's Call Together*, changes the way we understand mission.

We are not asking only:

What useful resources exist in our community?

We are asking something deeper:

Where do we recognize signs of the life God desires for the world?

Look for Signs of...

Healing

Where are broken lives or relationships being restored?

Belonging

Where are people finding community?

Generosity

Where are people giving themselves for others?

Justice

Where are people working to make life more equitable or humane?

Reconciliation

Where are people crossing divisions?

Creativity

Where is something new being imagined or created?

Compassion

Where are people paying attention to suffering?

Hope

Where are people refusing to accept that difficulty has the final word?

Do Not Require Religious Language

The people doing these things may not describe them as God's work.

Some may belong to other religious traditions.

Some may claim no religious faith.

Recognition does not require us to claim ownership over their work.

It asks whether we can become humble enough to recognize goodness beyond ourselves.

A Question for Prayer

What if some of the people we have been thinking of as people we should serve are actually people through whom God has something to teach us?

Sit with that question.

FM-6.10

The Gifts We Nearly Missed**A Reflection Before Moving On**

Complete individually.

A person whose gifts surprised me:

Their gift:

An organization I knew little about:

What I now appreciate about its work:

An informal community network I had never noticed:

What it contributes:

A place I now see differently:

Why:

A group I had been thinking about primarily in terms of need:

Gifts I now recognize:

Something the community may be able to teach our congregation:

Something I recognize as a possible sign of God's activity:

Before Moving On

Gifts Do Not Erase Pain

There is a temptation at this point to swing too far in the other direction.

We have challenged deficit thinking.

We have deliberately looked for abundance.

We have recognized gifts, relationships, strengths, resilience, creativity, and hope.

Good.

Now do not use those gifts to minimize suffering.

A resilient family can still be exhausted.

A generous neighborhood can still experience poverty.

A gifted teenager can still be lonely.

A strong community organization can still be overwhelmed.

People can possess remarkable gifts while living with injustice, grief, isolation, violence, economic pressure, discrimination, illness, or fear.

Listening for gifts and listening for pain belong together.

Without attention to gifts, we may turn people into problems.

Without attention to pain, we may romanticize resilience and fail to hear suffering.

Faithful listening requires both.

So before moving on, place two sentences beside one another:

We are beginning to recognize these gifts in our community:

We are also hearing pain that we need to understand more deeply:

Do not ask yet how to fix it.

The next chapter will ask for a harder discipline.

Can we hear pain without turning away?

Can we receive someone's experience without immediately converting it into a ministry?

Can we distinguish compassion from rescue?

Can we recognize when listening itself is appropriate—and when listening is no longer enough?

And perhaps most importantly:

Can we allow people who experience pain to remain people with gifts, agency, wisdom, and voice?

That is where we turn next.

Chapter Seven

Listening for Pain

Hearing Without Rushing to Fix

Listening for gifts changes the way we see a community.

It reminds us that people are never simply collections of needs. Communities contain wisdom, creativity, resilience, relationships, generosity, leadership, and hope.

But gifts do not erase pain.

As you listen, people will tell you about things that hurt.

Loneliness.

Housing insecurity.

Family stress.

Poverty.

Racism.

Addiction.

Mental illness.

Violence.

Grief.

Fear.

Schools under pressure.

Young people who feel invisible.

Older adults who feel forgotten.

Families stretched beyond their capacity.

People who work hard and still cannot make ends meet.

People who do not feel welcome in places that claim to welcome everyone.

Some pain will announce itself immediately.

Much of it will remain quiet until trust gives it words.

And when churches encounter pain, something happens almost automatically.

We want to help.

That instinct comes from somewhere good. The Christian life forms us toward compassion, mercy, justice, generosity, and service.

But the desire to help can outrun the understanding that makes help faithful.

Someone tells us about loneliness and we imagine a fellowship program.

Someone describes food insecurity and we begin discussing a food pantry.

Someone tells us teenagers have nowhere they feel they belong and we start designing a youth program.

The idea may even be a good one.

But we do not know yet.

Listening for pain requires a particular kind of restraint.

It asks us to stay with someone's experience long enough to understand more of it before converting what we hear into something we can do.

That does not mean we become passive in the face of suffering.

There are circumstances in which immediate action is required. Abuse, imminent danger, threats of harm, safeguarding concerns, and other situations may require professional, pastoral, legal, denominational, or emergency response.

But most of what we encounter during community listening will not present itself that way.

It will come as a story.

Our first responsibility is to receive it.

Hear before you help.

FM-7.1

Listening to Pain

Receiving the Story Before Naming the Problem

Purpose

This resource helps listeners remain present when someone describes a difficult experience.

Pain can make listeners uncomfortable.

We may respond by offering reassurance.

Giving advice.

Telling a similar story.

Explaining why something happened.

Suggesting resources.

Changing the subject.

Or immediately trying to solve the problem.

Instead, begin with presence.

When Someone Tells You Something Difficult

Try:

Tell me more about that.

What has that been like for you?

How has that affected your life?

What do you wish people understood about this?

What seems hardest?

What has helped?

Who has been there for you?

What do people often misunderstand about this?

Not every question needs to be asked.

Follow the person.

Resist the Reassurance Reflex

Someone says:

"Since my husband died, I can go days without really talking to anyone."

It may be tempting to say:

"You should come to our senior fellowship."

Perhaps eventually that invitation would be welcome.

But first:

'What are those days like?'

Or:

'Where do you find connection now?'

Or simply:

'That sounds very lonely.'

Stay with the person.

Listen for More Than the Problem

Even in painful stories, listen for:

relationships.

strength.

resourcefulness.

faith.

courage.

resilience.

wisdom.

hope.

People should not become smaller in our imagination because they trusted us with something difficult.

After the Conversation

Ask yourself:

What did the person actually tell me?

What did I assume?

What did I feel an urge to fix?

What did I learn about the person's strengths?

What do I still not understand?

FM-7.2

Hear Before You Help

Separating Experience from Response

Use this exercise with the listening team.

Situation One

Someone says:

"There are older people in this neighborhood who hardly see anyone."

What We Heard

What We Immediately Wanted to Do

What We Still Need to Understand

Who Could Help Us Understand It?

Situation Two

A parent says:

"Childcare is killing us. We spend almost as much on childcare as we do on rent."

What We Heard

What We Immediately Wanted to Do

What We Still Need to Understand

Who Could Help Us Understand It?

Situation Three

A teenager says:

"There's really nowhere around here where we can just hang out."

What We Heard

What We Immediately Wanted to Do

What We Still Need to Understand

Who Should We Ask?

Notice that the teenager should probably be one of the answers.

Use Something from Your Own Listening

What we heard:

Our first response was:

What we do not yet understand:

Who experiences this directly?

Who is already responding?

What should we ask next?

The Discipline

Do not suppress good ideas.

Record them somewhere if necessary.

Then set them aside.

A response becomes wiser when understanding comes first.

FM-7.3

Listening Without Taking Over

From Rescue to Relationship

Helping can create an unintended hierarchy.

We have something.

They need something.

We know.

They do not.

We act.

They receive.

That is not the only way service works, of course. Sometimes people genuinely need something another person can provide.

But when that pattern becomes the congregation's habitual way of seeing the community, neighbors can slowly become recipients rather than partners.

Examine the Language

Complete these common church sentences:

"Those people need _____."

"We should provide _____."

"They don't have _____."

Now ask:

How do we know?

Who told us?

Have we spoken with people who actually experience this?

What gifts might our language be overlooking?

Change the Questions

Instead of:

What can we do for them?

Try:

What are people already doing?

Instead of:

What do they need?

Try:

What are they experiencing?

Instead of:

What can we provide?

Try:

What relationships might need to grow?

Instead of:

How can we help?

Try:

What would people experiencing this say would actually be helpful?

Instead of:

What ministry should we start?

Try:

Who is already doing good work, and what could we learn from them?

A Harder Question

Do we need to be the ones who solve this?

Sometimes the answer may be yes.

Sometimes it will be no.

Sometimes the congregation's faithful role will be to support, advocate, partner, contribute space, share money, offer volunteers, introduce people, or simply strengthen work someone else is already doing.

Mission does not require the congregation to own everything it joins.

FM-7.4

Who Understands This Better Than We Do?

Listen Closer to the Experience

When a pattern of pain begins to emerge, move closer to the people who actually experience it.

Do not begin by gathering church leaders to speculate.

The Concern We Are Hearing

Who Experiences It Most Directly?

Have We Actually Listened to Them?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Somewhat
- ☐ No
- ☐ We are not sure

Who Works Closely with This Reality?

Consider:

teachers

social workers

healthcare providers

counselors

community organizers

nonprofit leaders

first responders

advocates

school staff

legal-aid workers

neighborhood leaders

people with lived experience

Others:

Who Is Already Responding?

Who Has Earned Trust?

Who Should We Listen to Next?

Questions to Ask

What do people misunderstand about this?

What have you learned from working with it?

What responses are actually helpful?

What responses look helpful but aren't?

What is already working?

Where are the gaps?

Who else should we hear?

That last question should continue following you through the listening process.

FM-7.5

Pain Is Particular

Don't Turn Stories into Categories Too Quickly

A category can help us recognize a pattern.

It can also erase the person.

"Homelessness."

"Addiction."

"Loneliness."

"Mental health."

"Poverty."

"At-risk youth."

"The elderly."

"The disabled."

"Single parents."

These words may describe real conditions or populations.

They do not describe a human being.

Two people experiencing homelessness may have almost nothing else in common.

Two lonely people may need completely different kinds of connection.

Two families experiencing poverty may have different strengths, challenges, histories, and hopes.

Practice

Choose a concern you have heard repeatedly:

What category have we used to describe it?

Now return to the actual stories.

What differences do we notice?

What strengths disappear when we use only the category?

What individual experiences complicate the category?

Change the Language

Instead of:

the homeless

try:

people experiencing homelessness

Better yet, when appropriate, describe what people actually told you.

Instead of:

the elderly are isolated

perhaps:

Several older adults told us that after they stopped driving, maintaining friendships became much harder.

Now you know something more particular.

And particularity creates better questions.

What happens to people's relationships when they can no longer drive?

That is a question you can investigate.

"The elderly are isolated" is mostly a label.

Keep People Visible

Whenever the listening team begins speaking in categories, ask:

Whose actual story are we talking about?

You do not need to identify them publicly.

You need to remember that the category contains people.

FM-7.6

Listening Boundaries

When Listening Is Not Enough

Most community-listening conversations are ordinary human conversations.

Some are not.

A person may disclose something involving:

abuse.

neglect.

exploitation.

immediate danger.

threats of harm.

a safeguarding concern.

a serious mental-health crisis.

criminal activity.

another situation in which professional or legal responsibilities may apply.

A listening exercise does not suspend those responsibilities.

Do Not Promise Absolute Confidentiality

Before sensitive conversations, do not say:

"Anything you tell me stays between us."

You may not be able to keep that promise.

A more responsible commitment is:

"I will treat what you tell me with care and won't share your story casually. If you tell me something that indicates someone is in immediate danger or raises a safeguarding responsibility, I may need to seek appropriate help."

The precise responsibilities of clergy, staff, volunteers, counselors, educators, and other professionals vary by role and jurisdiction.

Know the requirements that apply to you.

If Something Serious Is Disclosed

Do not investigate.

Do not interrogate.

Do not attempt to determine whether the story is true.

Listen carefully enough to understand what is being disclosed.

Then follow the appropriate safeguarding, professional, pastoral, denominational, emergency, or legal process that applies.

Before Beginning Community Listening

Identify:

Pastoral contact:

Safeguarding contact:

Appropriate professional resources:

Emergency procedures:

Denominational resources if applicable:

Know Your Role

A listening-team member is not automatically:

a therapist.

social worker.

lawyer.

case manager.

crisis counselor.

investigator.

Listening faithfully includes knowing when the person needs someone with different expertise.

One Important Distinction

There is a difference between:

This story makes me uncomfortable

and

This situation requires intervention.

Do not confuse them.

Pain does not automatically require you to take control.

But genuine danger should not be spiritualized into "we're just listening."

FM-7.7

What Is Ours to Carry?

Listening Without Becoming Responsible for Everything

Listening exposes us to realities we may previously have been able to ignore.

That can become emotionally heavy.

A team may begin feeling responsible for every problem it encounters.

That is neither sustainable nor faithful.

After Difficult Listening, Ask

What are we carrying emotionally?

What story has stayed with us?

Why?

Are we feeling:

- ☐ Sadness
- ☐ Anger
- ☐ Guilt
- ☐ Fear
- ☐ Helplessness
- ☐ Urgency
- ☐ Responsibility
- ☐ Hope
- ☐ Gratitude
- ☐ Other: _____

Distinguish Compassion from Ownership

We can care deeply without assuming:

We must fix this.

Ask:

What belongs to the person or community?

What belongs to professionals or community organizations?

What belongs to public institutions?

What might belong to the congregation?

What do we simply not know yet?

Pray Before Planning

Sometimes the appropriate next step is not a meeting.

It is prayer.

Not prayer as avoidance.

Prayer as a way of placing before God what we cannot carry alone.

FM-7.8

Before Starting Something

A Discernment Gate

Eventually the congregation may decide to respond to something it has heard.

Before launching a ministry, program, initiative, partnership, or service, stop here.

The Concern

What are we responding to?

How Do We Know It Exists?

- ☐ We observed it
- ☐ People told us
- ☐ Demographic data supports it
- ☐ Community organizations identified it
- ☐ People directly experiencing it identified it
- ☐ Other: _____

Have We Listened to People Most Affected?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not enough

What did they tell us?

What Gifts Do They Bring?**Who Is Already Responding?****Have We Talked with Them?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

What did we learn?

Would a New Church Program Duplicate Existing Work?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Possibly
- ☐ We don't know

Could Partnership Be More Faithful Than Starting Something New?**Why Does the Congregation Want to Respond?**

- ☐ Compassion
- ☐ Justice
- ☐ Existing relationships
- ☐ Congregational gifts
- ☐ Clear invitation from community partners
- ☐ Anxiety about church growth
- ☐ Desire for visibility
- ☐ Need to "do something"
- ☐ Other: _____

Be particularly honest about the last three.

Are We Prepared for a Relationship or Only a Project?

Do We Have the Gifts and Capacity?

Are We Being Invited?

What Still Needs to Be Understood?

If several answers remain unclear, do not force a response.

Go back and listen.

FM-7.9

From Pain to Partnership

What Would It Mean to Stand Alongside?

The language of "helping" often places one person above another.

The language of partnership changes the posture.

Consider something you have heard repeatedly.

The Pain or Challenge

People Experiencing It

Gifts They Bring

People Already Responding

What They Say Is Needed

Gifts the Congregation Might Bring

What We Would Need to Learn

What Would Mutuality Look Like?

How Might the Congregation Be Changed by the Relationship?

That last question matters.

If mission always imagines that the community will be changed while the congregation remains unchanged, we may still be thinking of ourselves as rescuers.

Relationship changes everyone.

FM-7.10

Bringing Pain into Prayer

A Practice of Compassion Without Possession

Gather the listening team.

Place before you the concerns you have heard.

Do not use names unless permission has been given and the setting is appropriate.

Allow silence.

Then name the realities simply.

We have heard about loneliness.

We have heard about families under pressure.

We have heard about people afraid they will lose their housing.

We have heard young people wondering where they belong.

We have heard people carrying grief.

Use the actual concerns of your community.

After each one, allow silence.

Then pray:

**Compassionate God,
these lives do not belong to us.
These stories are not ours to use.
These burdens are not ours to control.**

**Teach us to care without taking over,
to listen without turning away,
to act when action is required,
and to wait when we do not yet understand.**

**Keep us from seeing neighbors only through their wounds.
Help us remember their gifts,**

**their wisdom,
their courage,
their relationships,
and their hopes.**

**Where suffering calls for justice,
give us courage.**

**Where someone needs skilled help,
give us humility to seek it.**

**Where others are already doing good work,
teach us to honor and support them.**

**Where relationship is needed,
make us trustworthy neighbors.**

**And where you are already at work,
give us eyes to recognize you.**

Amen.

Before Moving On

Hold the Gifts and the Pain Together

We have now listened in several directions.

We have heard the congregation.

We have sought voices that were missing.

We have walked the neighborhood.

We have talked with people.

We have looked at data.

We have listened for gifts.

We have listened for pain.

Do not leave any of those pieces behind.

The community is not its demographic profile.

It is not its problems.

It is not its assets.

It is not the five people you interviewed.

It is not what you observed during one afternoon walk.

And the congregation is not simply the story it tells about itself.

Each practice has given you one window.

Now the windows begin to overlap.

A concern raised inside the congregation may also have appeared in community conversations.

Something you noticed during the walk may make more sense after looking at demographic change.

A gift named by one person may have been named by four others.

An organization you barely knew existed may keep appearing.

A congregational gift discovered during *Remembering* may unexpectedly resonate with something you are hearing in the community.

A question may refuse to go away.

Do not manufacture meaning.

Do not arrange the evidence until it says what you hoped it would say.

Bring it together.

Look.

Listen.

Pray.

Ask:

What seems to be appearing more than once?

Where are different kinds of listening converging?

What does not fit?

What are we still missing?

What might we be hoping to find?

And underneath those questions is the one that gives this whole process its theological center:

Where might the Holy Spirit be inviting us to pay attention?

That is the work of the next chapter.

Chapter Eight

Listening for the Holy Spirit

Recognizing What Is Emerging

You have done a great deal of listening.

You have listened within the congregation.

You have sought voices that were easy to miss.

You have walked the community.

You have talked with people whose experience differs from your own.

You have looked at demographic information.

You have listened for gifts.

You have listened for pain.

Now the listening deepens and changes its register.

Not more information.

Discernment.

The question begins to shift from:

What are we hearing?

toward:

What are we beginning to recognize?

That shift matters.

Christian discernment is more than collecting information and extracting a wise decision from it. We listen because we trust that God is already active in the congregation and the community, and because we hope to recognize something of that movement.

This is the conviction that runs through *Living God's Call Together*:

God acts. We recognize. We join.

That means we do not need to invent a mission impressive enough for God to bless.

We do not need to manufacture a vision.

We do not need to turn every community need into a church program.

We pay attention.

We bring together what we have heard.

We look for convergence.

We notice what keeps returning.

We pay attention to gifts, relationships, energy, pain, possibility, and questions.

We also pay attention to what does not fit.

And we pray.

This is where listening becomes discernment.

But there is an important caution.

Human beings are remarkably skilled at finding what we hoped would be there.

If we already want to begin a children's ministry, every conversation about families can begin to look like confirmation.

If we believe the congregation should become more involved with homelessness, every observation about housing can begin pointing in that direction.

If we want the next pastor to rebuild the youth program, every mention of young people can become evidence.

That is not discernment.

It is confirmation.

So this chapter will help you bring the listening together without forcing it into conclusions.

The task is not yet to answer:

What should we do?

It is to ask:

What seems to be emerging, and how might we test whether we are seeing it faithfully?

FM-8.1

Bringing Everything to the Table

Gathering the Listening

Purpose

Before looking for patterns, gather the material you have accumulated.

Do not depend on memory.

Put the evidence in front of you.

Bring:

- ☐ Congregational listening notes
- ☐ Missing-voice conversations
- ☐ Neighborhood Listening Walk journals
- ☐ Talk to Five People journals
- ☐ Five Conversations synthesis sheets
- ☐ Community demographic information
- ☐ Community Change Map
- ☐ Community Assets Map
- ☐ Listening for Gifts exercises
- ☐ Listening for Pain exercises
- ☐ Questions collected along the way
- ☐ Other: _____

If you have also completed the *Remembering Field Guide and Field Manual*, bring the most important findings from that work.

You are not starting from scratch.

The congregation's remembered identity and its present listening belong in conversation.

Arrange the Material

Create several areas:

WHAT WE HEARD WITHIN THE CONGREGATION

WHAT WE HEARD BEYOND THE CONGREGATION

WHAT WE NOTICED ABOUT THE PLACE

GIFTS

PAIN

CHANGES

RELATIONSHIPS

QUESTIONS

Do not interpret yet.

Sort.

First Reflection

Walk around the room silently.

Read.

Then complete individually:

Something I had forgotten was...

Something I am surprised to see again is...

Something that seems to appear in several places is...

Something that does not fit the story I expected is...

A question that keeps returning is...

Do not discuss immediately.

Allow everyone to look before anyone explains what the material means.

FM-8.2

The Pattern Wall

What Keeps Appearing?

Purpose

The Pattern Wall helps a group see connections across different kinds of listening.

You will need:

a large wall or several tables

index cards or sticky notes

markers

Step One — One Observation Per Card

Review your materials.

Write significant observations on separate cards.

Examples:

Several parents described exhaustion.

The number of single-person households has increased.

Three people named the library as an important gathering place.

Younger members said they want relationships across generations.

Several community leaders named the same nonprofit as highly trusted.

Longtime members repeatedly described hospitality as one of the congregation's strengths.

Housing costs appeared repeatedly in community conversations.

The neighborhood walk revealed very few public gathering spaces.

Keep the statements descriptive.

Do not write:

We need a family ministry.

That is a response.

Do not write:

God is calling us to address housing.

That is already a conclusion.

Write what you actually heard or observed.

Step Two — Put Everything Up

Place the cards where everyone can see them.

Read silently.

Do not organize yet.

Step Three — Begin Grouping

Ask:

Which observations seem related?

Move cards together.

Allow groups to emerge.

Do not name them too quickly.

One card may belong near more than one cluster.

That is fine.

Step Four — Notice the Sources

For each cluster ask:

Where did this come from?

- ☐ Congregational listening
- ☐ Community conversations
- ☐ Neighborhood walk
- ☐ Demographic data
- ☐ Community gifts
- ☐ Community pain
- ☐ Remembering
- ☐ Other: _____

A pattern appearing across several different forms of listening deserves particular attention.

It is not automatically God's call.

But it deserves attention.

Step Five — Give the Cluster a Descriptive Name

Not:

OUR NEW FAMILY MINISTRY

Try:

Families Experiencing Time Pressure

Not:

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Try:

Need for Places of Belonging

Not:

YOUTH PROGRAM

Try:

Young People's Desire for Connection and Voice

Keep the language descriptive.

You are recognizing before responding.

FM-8.3

Convergence Map

Where Are Different Realities Touching?

Patterns become especially interesting when several things begin to converge.

Consider four areas:

Congregational Gifts

Community Reality

Existing Relationships

Energy

Congregational Gifts

What does this congregation already do well?

What gifts appeared during *Remembering*?

What gifts have members named during the present listening process?

Community Reality

What significant realities have emerged through conversations, observation, and data?

Existing Relationships

Where does the congregation already have meaningful relationships?

Who already knows whom?

Energy

Where do you notice genuine energy?

Not obligation.

Not:

"Somebody ought to do something."

Where do people's eyes light up?

Where do people already give time?

Where does curiosity keep returning?

Now Look for Convergence

Possible Convergence One

Congregational gift:

Community reality:

Existing relationship:

Energy:

What makes this worth noticing?

Possible Convergence Two

Congregational gift:

Community reality:

Existing relationship:

Energy:

What makes this worth noticing?

Do Not Require All Four

Sometimes only two or three elements will be present.

Perhaps there is a strong community reality but no congregational gift.

Perhaps the congregation has a gift but no meaningful relationship.

Perhaps relationships exist but there is little energy.

Those absences matter.

They may be telling you:

Not yet.

Or:

Not us.

Those can be faithful discoveries.

FM-8.4

What Doesn't Fit?

Protecting Discernment from Confirmation

This may be one of the most important exercises in the Manual.

Once a pattern begins to appear, deliberately look for evidence that complicates it.

Suppose the listening team begins saying:

"Families with young children are clearly our future."

Stop.

Ask:

What did we hear that does not fit that conclusion?

Did we hear from families themselves?

What did older adults say?

What did young adults without children say?

What did community data show?

What might we be hoping this pattern will confirm?

Test an Emerging Pattern

Our emerging pattern:

Evidence supporting it:

Evidence complicating it:

Voices we have not heard sufficiently:

Assumptions we may be making:

What we hope is true:

What we fear may be true:

Ask the Hard Question

If this pattern were not true, what evidence would we expect to see?

Do we see any of that evidence?

Another Hard Question

Are we recognizing something that is emerging, or arranging the evidence around something we already wanted to do?

Sit with the question.

Discernment requires enough humility to discover that our favorite idea may not be the invitation.

FM-8.5

Listen for What Is Absent

Silence Can Also Tell Us Something

Patterns are formed not only by what appears.

Sometimes absence matters.

You expected young adults to talk about worship style.

They did not.

You expected community leaders to mention the church.

They did not.

You expected members to identify a particular ministry as central to congregational identity.

Almost no one did.

You expected people to name poverty as the community's greatest concern.

They kept talking about loneliness.

Absence is not proof.

But it can create a useful question.

What Did We Expect to Hear?

Did We Hear It?

- ☐ Frequently
- ☐ Occasionally
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Not at all

Why Did We Expect It?

What Might Its Absence Mean?

What Else Might Explain the Absence?

Who Could Help Us Understand?

Do not turn silence into evidence too quickly.

Perhaps you asked the wrong people.

Perhaps you asked the wrong questions.

Perhaps the subject is difficult to discuss.

Perhaps it simply is not as important as you thought.

Become curious.

FM-8.6

Test What You Think You Heard

Return to People

One of the best protections against self-deception is simple.

Go back.

You have gathered information.

You have noticed patterns.

Now return to some of the people who helped you see them.

Say:

'We've been listening to people across the congregation and community. This is something we think we are hearing. Does this sound true to you?'

Then tell them briefly what you think you heard.

Ask:

What have we missed?

What are we misunderstanding?

What would you say differently?

Who might experience this another way?

Who else should we ask?

Emerging Pattern

We think we heard:

People We Will Return To

What They Said

What They Confirmed

What They Complicated

What We Had Wrong

What We Still Need to Understand

A Sign of Good Listening

If returning to people changes your interpretation, do not be disappointed.

That is exactly why you returned.

FM-8.7

Reflect → Listen → Recognize

A Discernment Practice

Living God's Call Together offers a simple movement:

Reflect → Listen → Recognize → Respond

At this point in the transition, resist rushing toward the fourth movement.

We are working primarily with the first three.

Reflect

What have we learned about the congregation through *Remembering*?

What stories have formed us?

What values appear repeatedly?

What gifts seem enduring?

What parts of our identity may need to be released?

Listen

What are we hearing now?

Within the congregation:

Beyond the congregation:

Through the place and its data:

Through gifts:

Through pain:

Recognize

Where do these things seem to meet?

What keeps appearing?

Where is there energy?

Where are relationships already present?

What seems unexpectedly alive?

What question will not leave us alone?

Stop

Do not complete **Respond** yet.

Leave a blank space.

Respond: _____

There will be a time for that.

For now, allow recognition to deepen.

FM-8.8

Where Do We Recognize Christ?

Looking for Signs of God's Activity

Christian discernment makes a theological claim:

God is not absent from the places we have been listening.

So ask carefully:

Where have we encountered something that looks like the life Christ calls forth?

Not because everything good must be claimed by the church.

Not because we need to attach religious language to other people's work.

But because Christian faith trains us to recognize certain signs.

Healing

Where are people helping what is broken become more whole?

Reconciliation

Where are people crossing divisions?

Belonging

Where are people creating places where others know they matter?

Justice

Where are people confronting conditions that diminish human life?

Compassion

Where are people refusing to ignore suffering?

Generosity

Where are people giving time, money, skill, space, attention, or themselves for others?

Truth-Telling

Where are people naming realities others would rather avoid?

Creativity

Where are people imagining possibilities that did not exist before?

Hope

Where are people acting as though difficulty does not have the final word?

New Life

Where does something appear to be growing that no one could have planned?

Now ask:

What if our task is not to bring God into these places, but to recognize God there?

And then:

What would it mean to draw nearer?

Do not turn the answer into a program.

Notice the invitation.

FM-8.9

Remembering and Listening Meet

Vocation Has a History and a Place

The transition journey did not begin with Listening.

Before this movement came **Remembering**.

You listened to congregational stories not because the future should reproduce the past, but because memory helps reveal identity.

Now place those memories beside what you have learned about the present.

From Remembering

A story that still seems important:

What did that story reveal about who we are?

From Listening

Something we are hearing now:

Where They Touch

Does something from the congregation's remembered identity resonate with something happening in the community now?

How?

Example

Perhaps a congregation remembers that decades ago it became a place of hospitality for families arriving in a rapidly growing town.

The exact ministry no longer exists.

But during Listening, the congregation discovers that the community is again receiving large numbers of newcomers.

The question is not:

Should we restart the old program?

The more interesting question is:

Could hospitality to people finding their place be part of who we have been—and who God may still be calling us to become?

The form can change.

The vocation may remain.

Our Possible Connection

Then:

Now:

The deeper gift or value connecting them:

What this makes us wonder:

This is one place where memory becomes interpretive rather than nostalgic.

FM-8.10

What Are We Hoping to Find?

Naming Our Bias Before It Names the Future

Every listening team enters discernment with hopes.

That is normal.

Name them.

I Hope We Discover...

I Am Afraid We May Discover...

I Already Believe This Congregation Should...

I Have a Ministry or Direction I Personally Want Us to Choose...

Something I Would Be Disappointed If We Released...

Something I Would Be Relieved If We Released...

You may keep these responses private.

The purpose is self-awareness.

Now pray:

God, do not let my hope become evidence.

Do not let my fear become wisdom.

Do not let my preference become your call.

Give me freedom to recognize what is actually before us.

FM-8.11

Emerging Recognition

What Can We Say—Carefully?

After completing the exercises in this chapter, the listening team may be ready to name several emerging recognitions.

Use provisional language.

Not:

God is calling us to...

Try:

We are beginning to recognize...

Not:

Our community needs...

Try:

We have heard repeatedly...

Not:

Our future ministry will be...

Try:

We are curious about the convergence between...

Emerging Recognition One

We are beginning to recognize...

Evidence from congregational listening:

Evidence from community listening:

Evidence from data or observation:

Relevant gifts:

Relevant relationships:

What complicates this recognition?

What still needs to be tested?

Emerging Recognition Two

We are beginning to recognize...

Evidence:

What complicates it?

What still needs to be tested?

Emerging Recognition Three

We are beginning to recognize...

Evidence:

What complicates it?

What still needs to be tested?

Do Not Require Three

You may have one.

You may have five.

You may have none yet.

If nothing seems trustworthy enough to name, the faithful conclusion may be:

We need to listen longer.

That is a conclusion.

And sometimes a very good one.

FM-8.12

A Prayer of Recognition

Seeing Without Grasping

Gather around the Pattern Wall or the materials you have assembled.

Allow several minutes of silence.

Then invite people, without explanation, to name something they have begun to recognize.

After each statement, respond:

Spirit of God, help us pay attention.

When everyone who wishes has spoken, pray:

**Holy Spirit,
you were here before we began listening.**

**You were present in stories we remembered,
in voices we nearly missed,
in streets we had stopped seeing,
in strangers who became conversation partners,
in numbers that challenged our assumptions,
in gifts already being offered,
and in pain entrusted to our hearing.**

Keep us from mistaking our preferences for your leading.

**Keep us from forcing patterns
where there are only fragments.**

**Give us courage to notice what surprises us,
humility to test what we think we see,
and patience when the way is not yet clear.**

**Where Christ is already healing,
reconciling,
welcoming,
creating,
challenging,
and making life possible,
help us recognize him.**

**And when the time comes to respond,
give us wisdom not merely to begin something,
but to join faithfully what you are already doing.**

Amen.

Before Moving On

Discernment Changes the Questions

Something important may now be happening.

When this listening process began, the congregation probably carried questions.

Perhaps:

How do we attract younger people?

What ministries should we start?

What does the community need?

How can we grow?

What kind of pastor should we call?

Those questions are understandable.

But after listening, some of them may no longer sound quite right.

Perhaps the question is no longer:

How do we attract young adults?

but:

Where are young adults already creating community, and what are they teaching us about belonging?

Perhaps it is no longer:

What can we do about loneliness?

but:

Where are people already creating relationships across isolation, and what helps those relationships grow?

Perhaps it is no longer:

How can our church serve the neighborhood?

but:

Where are our congregation's gifts, our neighbors' gifts, and God's activity beginning to meet?

That change in the question is not a detour from discernment.

It may be one of its most important fruits.

Sometimes we know that listening has changed us because we have better answers.

Sometimes we know because we can no longer ask the old questions in the same way.

That is where missionary imagination begins.

Not with a brilliant program.

Not with a strategic plan.

With a different question.

We are not going to design those possibilities yet.

First we need to notice what has happened to our questions.

Gather the questions you carried into this process.

Place them beside the questions you are carrying now.

Then ask:

What can we ask now that we could not have asked before we listened?

That is the work of the next chapter.

Chapter Nine

When Better Questions Appear

From Listening to Missionary Imagination

Listening changes what we know; deep listening changes the questions knowledge allows us to ask.

At the beginning of a pastoral transition, congregations often carry questions that are understandable but centered largely on the institution.

How can we grow?

How do we attract younger families?

How can we get people to come back?

What programs should we offer?

What kind of pastor will help us reach the community?

How can we get more volunteers?

How can we increase giving?

Those questions are not necessarily wrong.

They are simply too small to bear the full weight of discernment.

After the work you have done, you know more now.

You have listened to the congregation.

You have sought voices you might otherwise have missed.

You have walked the neighborhood.

You have listened to people who experience the community from different vantage points.

You have examined data.

You have looked for gifts.

You have received stories of pain.

You have begun asking where the Holy Spirit may already be at work.

If all that listening returns you to exactly the questions you carried at the beginning, something—or someone—has probably been missed.

Listening should disturb some questions.

It should deepen others.

And, now and then, it should give birth to a question no one knew to ask.

That is where missionary imagination begins.

Not with answers.

With better questions.

Reimagining the Church explores this conviction at greater depth. Missionary imagination grows when congregations learn to see differently: to notice what others overlook, recognize gifts rather than begin only with deficits, become curious about their particular place, and imagine possibilities that emerge where vocation and community meet.

This chapter is not asking you to create those possibilities yet.

It is asking you to notice the questions that could make them possible.

FM-9.1

The Questions We Brought with Us

Before Listening Changed Them

Purpose

Return to the beginning of the Listening process.

What questions were people asking then?

Do not improve them yet.

Write them as honestly as you can remember them.

Questions About the Congregation

Questions About the Community

Questions About the Future

Questions About the Next Pastor

Questions About Growth or Decline

Questions About Ministry

Now Look at Them

Which questions still seem important?

Which now seem less important?

Which were based on assumptions that listening challenged?

Which were mostly about preserving the congregation?

Which questions would we now ask differently?

Do not criticize the congregation for the questions it carried.

They were the questions available before you knew what you know now.

The point of listening is not to prove that earlier questions were foolish.

It is to make better questions possible.

FM-9.2

Instead of — Try

Practicing Better Questions

Questions shape what we are able to see.

A question can narrow imagination before a conversation begins.

Or it can open a door.

Practice the difference.

Instead of:

How can we get more people to volunteer?

Try:

Where are people already giving their time and energy freely, and what makes that work meaningful to them?

Instead of:

Why don't our neighbors use our building more?

Try:

Where do people in this community already feel comfortable gathering, and what makes those places work?

Instead of:

How do we bring more children into the church?

Try:

What are children and families experiencing in this community, and where are they already finding support, friendship, play, and belonging?

Instead of:

What outreach program should we start?

Try:

Where are people already responding creatively to the life of this community, and where might relationship with them lead us?

Instead of:

How can we make people care about the church?

Try:

What do people here care deeply about, and what might their commitments teach us?

Instead of:

How can we use our building better?

Try:

What kinds of space help life, relationship, creativity, healing, or community flourish here?

Notice the difference.

The new questions do not simply disguise a church-growth strategy.

They genuinely change the subject.

Now Try Your Own

Instead of:

Try:

Instead of:

Try:

Instead of:

Try:

Ask

What became visible when we changed the question?

FM-9.3**Questions That Open and Questions That Close****Learning to Recognize the Difference**

Some questions contain their answer.

Don't you think we need a stronger youth program?

The speaker has already decided what should happen.

Other questions are so narrow that they allow only familiar possibilities.

Should we restart the Wednesday night program?

Perhaps.

But first ask something larger.

Where are young people forming meaningful relationships now?

That question may take you somewhere entirely different.

A Closing Question Often...

assumes the problem

assumes the solution

centers the congregation

limits possible partners

seeks confirmation

rushes toward action

An Opening Question Often...

begins with curiosity

allows surprise

pays attention to people

looks for gifts

notices relationships

makes room for several possibilities

can change the people asking it

Practice

Question:

How can we get young adults back into worship?

What does this question assume?

Write an opening question:

Question:

Should we start a ministry for lonely seniors?

What does this question assume?

Write an opening question:

Question:

How can we make our church more visible in the community?

What does this question assume?

Write an opening question:

Our Own Question

What does it already assume?

How could we open it?

FM-9.4

From Problem to Possibility

Without Pretending the Problem Is Not Real

Missionary imagination does not require us to rename every problem as an opportunity.

Pain is real.

Injustice is real.

Loss is real.

But the way we frame a problem influences the possibilities we can imagine.

Suppose you hear:

"A lot of people here are lonely."

The problem matters.

But instead of moving directly to:

How can the church solve loneliness?

ask:

Where are people experiencing genuine belonging now?

What helps strangers become friends here?

Who is particularly gifted at connecting people?

What makes some places feel welcoming while others do not?

What gets in the way of relationship?

Now the problem has not disappeared.

But the field of imagination has widened.

A Pain We Have Heard

Our Immediate Problem Statement

Questions About Existing Gifts

Questions About Relationships

Questions About What Is Already Working

Questions About Barriers

A Better Question

Do not answer it yet.

Carry it.

FM-9.5

What If?

Giving Imagination Permission to Move

There is a particular kind of question that can loosen a congregation's imagination:

What if...?

It is not a proposal.

It does not require a motion.

It does not require a budget.

No committee has to approve it.

It is simply permission to imagine.

What if the people we thought needed our help became our teachers?

What if the most important ministry relationship already exists but we have never recognized it?

What if our building is valuable for reasons different from those for which it was built?

What if the community's greatest gift is something the congregation does not possess?

What if the ministry God is inviting us to join is already being led by someone outside the church?

What if the congregation's small size gives it possibilities that a larger congregation would not have?

What if something we think of as a weakness is actually creating space for something new?

What if the future does not require recovering the past?

Write Ten

Do not evaluate them.

Do not discuss feasibility.

Write.

What if _____?

What if _____?

What if _____?

What if _____?

What if _____?

What if _____?

What if _____?

What if _____?

What if _____?

What if _____?

Now Look

Which question made someone laugh?

Which seemed impossible?

Which created energy?

Which made someone uncomfortable?

Which will not leave you alone?

Do not confuse excitement with discernment.

But pay attention to energy.

FM-9.6

The Question Beneath the Question

What Are We Really Asking?

Sometimes institutional questions conceal deeper questions.

How can we attract younger families?

may contain:

Will this congregation have a future?

How can we increase giving?

may contain:

Can we sustain what we have built?

What kind of pastor do we need?

may contain:

Who can make us feel hopeful again?

Those deeper questions deserve to be heard.

Our Question

Why Does This Matter to Us?

Ask again:

Why does that matter?

And again:

What are we really worried about?

Is There Fear Beneath the Question?

Grief?

Hope?

Institutional survival?

Genuine curiosity about God's call?

Rewrite the Question

Now that we understand what lies beneath it:

The purpose is not to eliminate anxiety.

It is to keep anxiety from secretly writing the congregation's future.

FM-9.7

Vocation Meets Place

Bringing Remembering and Listening Together

The *Remembering Field Guide* asked the congregation to listen to its stories.

Not to reproduce them.

To interpret them.

A sacred story matters not simply because it happened.

It helps us understand who we are and how we might live now.

Congregational stories can function similarly.

Now place what you learned through **Remembering** beside what you have learned through **Listening**.

A Gift or Vocation We Recognized in Our Stories

Something We Are Hearing in Our Present Community

Where Do They Touch?

Ask a Question at the Intersection

Not:

How can we restart what we used to do?

Ask:

What new expression might this enduring gift take in this particular place now?

Our question:

Another Intersection

From our story:

From our community:

A question that emerges:

This intersection between vocation and place is fertile ground for missionary imagination.

It honors the congregation's story without allowing nostalgia to determine its future.

FM-9.8

Ask Someone Who Doesn't Know the Answer

Let Questions Travel

Good questions become better when they leave the committee room.

Choose one emerging question.

Take it to people whose experience could complicate it.

Our Question

Ask Someone Within the Congregation

Who?

What did they say?

Ask Someone in the Community

Who?

What did they say?

Ask Someone Directly Affected

Who?

What did they say?

Ask Someone Already Doing Related Work

Who?

What did they say?

Now Rewrite the Question

Did the question become:

- ☐ More specific
- ☐ More complicated
- ☐ More interesting
- ☐ Less centered on the church
- ☐ More relational
- ☐ Something entirely different

What changed?

A good question should be able to survive contact with people who did not help write it.

FM-9.9

The Question Test

Is This Question Worth Carrying?

Take each major question that has emerged and test it.

Our Question

Does it begin with curiosity rather than a predetermined answer?

☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

Does it arise from something we actually heard?

☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

Does it take community gifts seriously?

☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

Does it keep people visible rather than reducing them to needs?

☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

Does it make room for existing community partners?

☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

Does it connect in some way with congregational gifts or vocation?

☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

Could the answer surprise us?

☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

Could the answer be something the congregation does not lead?

☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

Could this question change us?

☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

Does it invite further listening?

☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

If Most Answers Are 'Not Yet'

The question is not bad.

It probably needs more work.

Rewrite it:

FM-9.10

Three Questions Worth Carrying

Do Not Turn Them into a Strategic Plan

After all the listening and reflection in this chapter, choose no more than three questions.

These are not goals.

They are not initiatives.

They are not priorities.

They are questions worth carrying into the congregation's continuing discernment.

Question One

Why has this question become important?

What did we hear that gave rise to it?

Who should continue participating in this conversation?

Question Two

Why has this question become important?

What gave rise to it?

Who should continue participating?

Question Three

Why has this question become important?

What gave rise to it?

Who should continue participating?

Then Ask

Which question feels most alive?

Which question makes us most curious?

Which question might require us to change?

Which question are we tempted to answer too quickly?

That may be the one to carry longest.

FM-9.11

A Missionary Imagination Exercise

What Could Become Possible?

Now—and only now—allow yourselves a little imagination.

Choose one of your three questions.

Write it at the top of a large sheet.

Our question:

Then ask:

If we did not have to create a program, what could become possible?

If the church did not have to lead, what could become possible?

If we began with relationships instead of resources, what could become possible?

If we joined something already happening, what could become possible?

If we used gifts we already possess, what could become possible?

If we learned from people we usually think we should serve, what could become possible?

If we tried something very small, what could become possible?

Do not choose yet.

Imagine.

The purpose of imagination is to enlarge the field before discernment narrows it again.

For congregations that want to practice this way of seeing more deeply, *Reimagining the Church* offers stories and exercises designed specifically to cultivate missionary imagination—to help congregations move from institutional problem-solving toward curiosity, abundance, experimentation, and attention to what God may already be doing.

FM-9.12

A Prayer for Better Questions

Gather the listening team.

Place the three questions you have chosen in the center of the group.

Read them aloud.

Do not discuss them.

Allow silence after each.

Then pray:

**God of every beginning,
we came carrying questions.**

**Some were born of hope.
Some were born of fear.
Some were shaped by memory.
Some were shaped by our desire
to preserve what we love.**

**You have led us into stories,
streets,
conversations,
numbers,
gifts,
pain,
relationships,
and questions we did not know to ask.**

**Thank you for what has become clearer.
Thank you also for what has become less certain.**

**Free us from questions
that already contain the answers we want.**

**Give us questions large enough for surprise,
humble enough for listening,
particular enough for this place,
and faithful enough to lead us toward you.**

**When we are tempted to rush toward solutions,
deepen our curiosity.**

**When fear narrows our imagination,
widen it.**

**When we believe we must create the future ourselves,
remind us that you are already there.**

**Teach us to recognize.
Teach us to wonder.
Teach us to join.**

Amen.

Before Moving On

Listening Has Done Its Work When We Are Different

We began Listening because a congregation in transition needs more than its own assumptions about itself and its community.

But the purpose was never simply to collect information.

Listening is formative.

It changes the listener.

You may now know more about your neighborhood.

That matters.

You may understand demographic changes you had not noticed.

That matters.

You may have discovered community organizations, informal leaders, gifts, pain, and relationships you knew little about.

That matters.

But something deeper may also have happened.

Perhaps you have become slower to say:

They need...

Perhaps you are more likely to ask:

What do they know that we don't?

Perhaps you have become less interested in starting programs and more interested in building relationships.

Perhaps you have discovered that the congregation is not the only place where gifts are found.

Perhaps you have begun recognizing God's activity beyond the boundaries of the church.

Perhaps a question you once thought was urgent no longer seems very important.

Perhaps another question has appeared that you cannot yet answer.

Good.

Listening has not failed because it has left you with questions.

It has prepared you for discernment.

The temptation now will be to turn everything you have learned into conclusions.

Resist that for one more chapter.

Before the congregation carries this work forward, the listening team needs to gather what it has heard into a form that is clear enough to share without pretending to know more than it knows.

What patterns can we name?

What questions should remain open?

What should the congregation hear?

What should the next pastor know?

What belongs in the Ministry Discernment Profile?

What must not be reduced to a report and forgotten?

And how do we make sure that listening does not end simply because this stage of the transition does?

That is the work of the final chapter.

Chapter Ten

Carrying the Listening Forward

From What We Heard to What Comes Next

Listening can become another church project.

A committee is formed.

Conversations are held.

Neighborhoods are walked.

Demographic reports are studied.

Notes are collected.

Patterns are identified.

A report is written.

The report is presented.

Everyone says, "This is really interesting."

Then the report slips into a folder.

Six months later, the congregation is making decisions exactly as it did before anyone began to listen.

That would be unfortunate.

Because the deepest fruit of Listening is not the information you gathered.

It is the way attention has begun to reshape you.

You learned to distinguish what you observed from what you assumed.

You learned to ask people rather than talk about them.

You learned that data can reveal patterns without explaining people's lives.

You learned to look for gifts as carefully as you look for needs.

You learned to receive pain without immediately turning it into a project.

You learned to recognize people and organizations already doing good work.

You learned to test your conclusions by returning to people.

You learned that the congregation's story and the community's story can illuminate one another.

You learned to ask where the Holy Spirit might already be at work.

And perhaps you discovered that after listening, you were asking different questions.

Do not file those practices away.

Carry them forward.

The formal movement called Listening is ending.

Listening is not.

FM-10.1

What We Heard

Creating a Listening Summary

Purpose

The listening team needs to give the congregation something more useful than a stack of worksheets and something more honest than a list of conclusions.

Create a concise summary of what you heard.

The purpose is not to explain the community.

You cannot.

The purpose is to say:

Here is what we heard.

Here is what we noticed.

Here is what surprised us.

Here is what we are beginning to recognize.

Here is what we still do not understand.

Our Listening Process

Briefly describe what you actually did.

We listened within the congregation by:

We sought voices that might otherwise have been missed by:

We listened beyond the congregation by:

We learned about the place through:

What We Heard Repeatedly

Gifts We Recognized

Within the congregation:

Within the community:

Within community organizations and relationships:

Pain We Heard

Changes We Noticed

What Surprised Us

What Challenged Our Assumptions

Where We Saw Different Kinds of Listening Converge

What Remains Unclear

Questions We Believe Are Worth Carrying

That may be enough.

Do not bury what matters beneath twenty pages of reporting.

FM-10.2

What We Can Say — and What We Cannot

Reporting with Humility

Listening produces knowledge.

It should also produce humility.

The listening team may have spoken with many people. You still have not spoken with everyone.

You may have excellent demographic information. It still does not tell you what individuals think.

You may have found strong patterns. Exceptions still matter.

Before presenting your findings, complete this exercise.

We Have Strong Evidence That...

We Heard Repeatedly That...

We Are Beginning to Wonder Whether...

We Heard Different Perspectives About...

We Do Not Yet Understand...

We Did Not Hear Enough From...

Therefore, We Should Not Claim...

This is not weakness.

It is intellectual and spiritual honesty.

Watch the Language

Instead of:

The community wants...

try:

Several people we spoke with emphasized...

Instead of:

Young adults believe...

try:

The young adults we heard from repeatedly described...

Instead of:

The neighborhood needs...

try:

We heard concern about...

Instead of:

God is calling us to...

try:

We are beginning to wonder whether God may be inviting us to pay particular attention to...

Language can preserve humility.

Use it.

FM-10.3

Sharing What We Heard with the Congregation

Create Conversation, Not a Presentation

The congregation should hear what has been learned.

But avoid turning the listening team into experts reporting their findings to passive recipients.

Invite the congregation into the listening.

A Possible Gathering

Create several stations around the room.

Station One — What We Heard

Short quotations or anonymized observations from conversations.

Station Two — What Is Changing

A few significant demographic patterns.

Station Three — Gifts

People, organizations, places, relationships, and capacities discovered during listening.

Station Four — Pain

Concerns heard repeatedly, presented carefully and without exploiting individual stories.

Station Five — What Surprised Us

Assumptions challenged by the listening process.

Station Six — Questions We Are Carrying

The emerging questions from Chapter Nine.

Allow people to move through the material.

Read.

Talk.

Wonder.

Then Ask

What surprises you?

What confirms something you have noticed?

What challenges something you believed?

What do you want to understand better?

What seems important enough that we should keep listening?

Do Not Ask Yet

So what ministry should we start?

That question will come soon enough.

First let the congregation encounter what was heard.

FM-10.4

Listening into the Ministry Discernment Profile

Let What You Heard Shape What You Say

The next stages of the pastoral transition will require the congregation to describe itself.

This is one reason Listening matters.

Without listening, congregations often describe themselves from memory, aspiration, or institutional habit.

They say:

"We are a welcoming congregation."

Listening asks:

How do we know?

They say:

"We care deeply about our community."

Listening asks:

What relationships demonstrate that?

They say:

"We want to reach young families."

Listening asks:

What did young families actually tell us?

They say:

"Our community is changing."

Listening asks:

How?

The Ministry Discernment Profile should not describe the congregation the way it wishes to be seen.

It should tell the truth about the congregation, its place, and the questions it is carrying.

What Have We Learned About Our Congregation?**What Have We Learned About Our Community?****What Changes Matter for Future Ministry?****What Gifts Seem Particularly Important?****What Relationships Matter?****What Challenges Should We Describe Honestly?****What Questions Should a Prospective Pastor Know We Are Carrying?**

What Should We Resist Saying Because We Cannot Support It?

Keep these notes.

They belong beside you when the congregation begins writing its Ministry Discernment Profile.

FM-10.5

What the Next Pastor Should Know

Passing Along More Than a Report

A new pastor should not have to begin learning the community from zero.

Nor should the congregation hand the pastor a report and imply:

"We studied the community. Here are the answers."

Give the next pastor something better.

Give them the listening.

People Worth Knowing

Who helped us understand the community?

Who are the connectors?

Who are trusted leaders without formal titles?

Organizations Worth Knowing

Places Worth Experiencing

Relationships Worth Continuing

Questions Worth Carrying

Things We Still Do Not Understand

Places Where We Think the Pastor Should Listen Personally

Do Not Hand Off Relationships Like Files

If a congregation has developed a meaningful relationship with a community leader, do not simply put the person's name on a list.

Introduce the pastor.

Have coffee together.

Walk the neighborhood together.

Visit the organization.

Relationships are carried forward relationally.

FM-10.6

What Belongs in the Search Process?

Listening Should Shape Whom You Seek

Eventually, the congregation will begin discerning new pastoral leadership.

Listening should affect that process.

Not by producing a narrow job description:

"We discovered loneliness, so we need a pastor who runs senior ministries."

That would miss the point.

Instead, ask what kind of pastoral leadership can help the congregation continue the posture it has begun learning.

Our Listening Suggests We Need a Pastor Who Can...

- ☐ Listen before acting
- ☐ Become curious about a place
- ☐ Build relationships beyond the congregation
- ☐ Recognize community gifts
- ☐ Work collaboratively
- ☐ Join existing community efforts without needing to control them
- ☐ Help a congregation interpret change
- ☐ Hold pain without rushing toward easy answers
- ☐ Ask good questions
- ☐ Help people discern God's activity
- ☐ Encourage experimentation

- ☐ Lead through relationships
- ☐ Other: _____

What Experiences Might Help a Candidate Demonstrate This?

What Stories Might We Ask Candidates to Tell?

What Questions Might Reveal How They Listen?

Do not search for a pastor who already knows the answers to your community.

Search for someone capable of learning it with you.

FM-10.7

What Must Not Be Lost

The Listening Handoff

Transitions are dangerous places for institutional memory.

A committee completes its work.

A new committee forms.

Documents move.

People change roles.

Knowledge disappears.

Before the Listening team concludes its formal work, decide what must be carried forward.

Documents to Preserve

- ☐ Listening Summary
- ☐ Community Snapshot
- ☐ Community Change Map
- ☐ Community Assets Map
- ☐ Emerging Recognition worksheets
- ☐ Three Questions Worth Carrying
- ☐ Ministry Discernment Profile notes
- ☐ Other: _____

Information That Should Not Be Preserved

Not every note should become part of the congregational archive.

Destroy or securely dispose of material containing unnecessary:

personal disclosures

identifying information

sensitive stories

confidential notes

speculation about individuals

Listening does not create ownership of people's stories.

Relationships to Continue

Person or organization:

Congregational relationship-holder:

Next step:

Person or organization:

Congregational relationship-holder:

Next step:

Questions to Carry Forward

Who Is Responsible?

Do not write:

The church.

Name people.

Good intentions without ownership disappear quickly.

FM-10.8

A Listening Rhythm

Making Attention Part of Congregational Life

The congregation does not need to repeat this entire Field Manual every year.

But it should develop practices that keep it attentive.

Consider a Simple Rhythm

Perhaps once each year:

Walk the neighborhood again.

What changed?

Talk to five people again.

What are we hearing now?

Update a few important demographic indicators.

What direction is the community moving?

Visit community partners.

What are they learning?

Review the Community Assets Map.

Who or what has appeared since the last time?

Ask the congregation:

What are you noticing?

Our Listening Rhythm

We will revisit community listening:

- ☐ Every six months
- ☐ Annually
- ☐ At another regular interval: _____

Practices We Want to Continue

- ☐ Neighborhood Listening Walk
- ☐ Talk to Five People
- ☐ Community partner conversations
- ☐ Demographic review
- ☐ Congregational listening conversations
- ☐ Community Assets Map
- ☐ Other: _____

Who Will Keep This Alive?

When Will We Revisit It?

Listening becomes part of congregational culture when it is no longer something only a transition team does.

FM-10.9

A Final Listening Audit

Did We Actually Listen?

Before declaring the work complete, ask some uncomfortable questions.

Did We Listen Mostly to People Like Us?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Sometimes

What voices remain underrepresented?

Did We Listen for Gifts as Carefully as We Listened for Problems?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Sometimes

Evidence:

Did We Allow People to Complicate Our Assumptions?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Sometimes

What changed because of something we heard?

Did We Listen to People Directly Experiencing the Concerns We Discussed?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Sometimes

Where do we still need to listen?

Did We Treat Community Organizations as Partners or Potential Resources for Our Church?

Did We Protect People's Stories?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ We need to review this

Did We Rush to Solutions?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Sometimes

Where?

Did Listening Change Any of Our Questions?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Which ones?

Did Listening Change Us?

If the answer to that last question is difficult to identify, do not panic.

But do not ignore it.

Return to the work.

FM-10.10

From Listening to the Ministry Discernment Profile

A Handoff Worksheet

The Listening movement does not produce the Ministry Discernment Profile by itself.

But it gives the congregation essential material for writing one truthfully.

Complete this worksheet and carry it into that process.

About Our Congregation

We have learned:

About Our Community

We have learned:

About the Relationship Between Congregation and Community

We have learned:

About Change

We have noticed:

About Gifts

We recognize:

About Pain

We have heard:

About Partnerships

We discovered:

About Our Vocation

We are beginning to recognize:

About Our Future

We are carrying these questions:

About the Pastoral Leadership We Need

We believe a pastor entering this context will need to be able to:

Do not polish these sentences for publication.

Not yet.

Carry the substance forward.

The work of writing comes next.

FM-10.11

Listening Team Covenant for What Comes Next

We Will Not Stop Paying Attention

Read each statement together.

If it represents the commitment you want to make, place a check beside it.

- ☐ We will distinguish observation from assumption.
- ☐ We will talk with people rather than primarily about them.
- ☐ We will seek voices that are easy for us to miss.
- ☐ We will listen for gifts as well as pain.
- ☐ We will treat demographic data as a source of questions, not conclusions.
- ☐ We will honor people as neighbors rather than targets for church growth.
- ☐ We will look for people already doing good work.
- ☐ We will prefer partnership to unnecessary duplication.
- ☐ We will protect stories entrusted to us.
- ☐ We will test important conclusions by returning to people.
- ☐ We will allow listening to change our questions.
- ☐ We will remain open to the possibility that God's activity may be easier to recognize outside our congregation than inside it.
- ☐ We will not assume that the congregation must lead everything it joins.
- ☐ We will carry what we have learned into the Ministry Discernment Profile and pastoral search.
- ☐ We will keep listening after the transition is over.

Something We Want to Add

FM-10.12

A Prayer for the Road Ahead

Gather the people who have participated in the Listening process.

If possible, place the Community Change Map, Community Assets Map, Listening Summary, and the three questions you are carrying in the center of the gathering.

Allow silence.

Then pray:

**God who speaks through Scripture,
through memory,**

through neighbors,
through strangers,
through places,
through questions,
and through the quiet movement of your Spirit,
thank you for what we have heard.

Thank you for people who trusted us with their stories.

Thank you for neighbors whose gifts we had not seen.

Thank you for those who challenged what we thought we knew.

Thank you for people already healing,
creating,
serving,
organizing,
welcoming,
reconciling,
and hoping in this place.

Forgive us where we listened only for what confirmed us.

Forgive us where we saw needs before we saw people.

Forgive us where we imagined ourselves as the answer
before we understood the question.

Keep our curiosity alive.

Keep our relationships growing.

Keep our questions open long enough
for wisdom to emerge.

As we move toward new pastoral leadership,
do not let us seek someone who will simply bring us answers.

Give us a pastor who will listen with us,
learn this place with us,
love these neighbors with us,
and help us recognize where Christ is already ahead of us.

You act.

Help us recognize.

Give us courage to join.

Amen.

Before You Close the Manual

One More Question

You have completed the formal work of Listening.

There is one final exercise.

Go outside.

Stand in front of the church.

Look across the street.

Look down the road.

Listen.

Think about the people you met.

The places you walked.

The stories you heard.

The gifts you discovered.

The pain people entrusted to you.

The assumptions that became less certain.

The questions that became more interesting.

Then ask:

What do I see now that I did not see before?

And then:

Who do I know now that I did not know before?

The second question may reach deeper than the first.

A congregation can study its community without ever becoming part of its life.

It can collect data without forming relationships.

It can map assets without knowing the people who carry them.

It can name needs without learning to love the people who carry them.

Listening is meant to carry us somewhere else.

From assumptions to curiosity.

From observation to relationship.

From deficits to gifts.

From answers to better questions.

From imagining what the church might do for its community to recognizing what God may already be doing among its neighbors.

And from there, perhaps, toward vocation.

Living God's Call Together can help the congregation continue the deeper work of discerning that vocation through the movement:

Reflect → Listen → Recognize → Respond.

Reimagining the Church can help when those emerging questions begin calling for missionary imagination—when the congregation is ready to explore what faithful participation in God's work might look like without simply reaching for the programs it already knows.

But for now, do not rush.

You have learned something more fundamental.

You have learned to listen.

Carry that practice into the Ministry Discernment Profile.

Carry it into the search for new pastoral leadership.

Carry it into the relationship with the pastor who comes.

And long after the transition is over, keep walking out the door.

Keep asking questions.

Keep meeting people.

Keep noticing.

Because the community will keep changing.

The congregation will keep changing.

And God will still be there before you arrive.

God acts. We recognize. We join.