



Facilitating a Community Listening Session

United Methodist
Church – North
Carolina
Conference

Board of Church
and Society

This series provides congregations and individuals the skills to build and deploy justice ministries and advocacy methods. Other methods in this series include:

**Building a relationship with your elected representative*

**Writing a letter or email to your elected representative*

**Writing a letter to the press, blog or website*

**Organizing a rally or protest meeting*

**Building a congregational justice ministry*

**Proposing legislation*

**Parish based Community Organizing*

**Creating a Conference Resolution*

**Asset Based Community Development*

**Challenging legislators*

**Community Listening*

The Board of Church and Society provides advocacy and justice programs for congregations.

<https://nccumc.org/christianformation/church-and-society/>

General Intent of a Listening Session

The purpose of a Listening Session is to hear the concerns and problems of citizens subjected to an injustice, or a situation where they have been prejudiced or suffer some form of misfortune not of the own making. The Session is conducted in small groups of no more than eight people, facilitated by a skilled Facilitator and perhaps with a note-taker or recorder also present. The Listening Session is intended to uncover stories and information that provide the basis for future action to address those issues. This action should be undertaken by the persons sharing the issues or concerns, and the listening process must empower the individual to take action themselves with the support of others if necessary.

What we're looking for in a listening session:

- **Stories** – People share their “private pain” and hear the story of others
- **Energy** – Look for where multiple people are resonating with a story or issue
- **Leaders** – People that are interested in doing something about an issue

The Facilitator is required to ensure that the concerns and comments made by citizens are made in a non-threatening and secure environment, and where their self-esteem is at least not diminished but in fact enhanced, given that the individual's self-esteem may already be low.

There are several basic verbal skills a Facilitator can use to put the participant at ease, reduce their fear or anxiety, and enable them to speak in a clear and concise way. There are also some physical gestures and postures that demonstrate that the Facilitator is attentive and interested in the participant as a person. The Listening Session is not designed to solve a problem, or determine a solution but it will attempt to establish a goal and a path to addressing the issues.

Key Physical and non-verbal Behaviors

There are behaviors and mannerisms that display a confidence to the participants that you know what you are doing and that you are there to help them.

- Sit upright and display positive energy.
- Smile and maintain lots of direct eye contact with each participants.
- Use affirming postures that indicate you are listening and paying attention. These may include nodding and gesturing in a positive manner to statements being made.

Key Verbal Behaviors

These are statements used to elicit information; clarify information; acknowledge the participants position and concern as being valid; summarize the participants key statement elements; affirm the value of those statements, and confirm action to be taken.

Welcoming Statements

These are statements welcoming the group, and when directed at a participant, contains a greeting, and some form of affirmation to make them feel comfortable in what may be perceived to be a stressful situation. It may also include a small compliment about the participants dress or demeanor. An example

“Hello and welcome to this listening session, please tell me your name, where you live and summarize your issue or concern.

A facilitator response to the answer may include an affirmation and a thank you.

Seeking Information

These are questions that elicit information. There are two types of questions.

Closed questions call for an answer that is simply yes or no, like *“Do you have an issue you wish to tell us about today?”*

Open questions call for answers that are not simply yes or no but provide real information, like *“What issues would you like to share with us today, and give us some specific details of your story”*

Avoid closed questions, they simply need to be followed up with an open question anyway.

Clarifying

These are questions that a facilitator asks to seek a better understanding of a statement made by a participant. It may be phrased as a statement, but is followed by a question seeking affirmation by the participant that the clarification is correct, like.....

“You said that the employer told you that you were not entitled to benefits even though he had said you had a full time position. Are you sure there were no additional benefits he did not mention?”

Testing understanding

Here the facilitator is questioning a participant to ensure he or she understands a request for information or instruction. Example...

“I provided you with directions to the Social Welfare Office at City Hall, please repeat the address and directions from your home back to me so that we can both be sure you will be able to get there”

The facilitator can also test his or her own understanding of something that was described, by explaining it back to the participant.

Bringing In

This is the practice of getting another person to add to the conversation or make a comment. Typically it is directed at people who say little and need to be part of the discussion. Example...

“Sarah, Antonio made an interesting point about the lack of availability of bus schedules.... Tell us what your experience is of finding out the bus routes and schedules, and how does that match with what Antonio described?”

Building

This is similar to Bringing In.... but is either a suggestion by the Facilitator that builds on one already made by someone else, or is a request by the facilitator to the participant making a suggestion, or another participant to embellish the described already made. Example.....

“Jerry that was an excellent point you made there about how to ask about employment benefits in a job interview.... Give us all an example of how you would actually define the benefits you are interested in.”

“Melissa, you indicated you were also interested in obtaining information about medical insurance benefits, so in addition to what Jerry described, what other questions do you have that will gather information from a prospective employer about medical benefits that you are interested in?”

ADVOCACY BUILDING

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Summarizing

This can be used to summarize the comments made by an individual in response to the opening Seeking Information question, or can be used to summarize the comments of several people close to the end of a discussion. It is a way of bringing closure to a discussion. Example...

“Alan, what I heard you saying is that it is important for you to get more information about an upcoming interview so that you can prepare yourself better, plus to do that you would want to know the company’s website name and physical address because you would want to know how far away from home it is if you decided to actually work there.”

“Thank you for all your input folks. The main points we covered were the employment interview, the application form, the availability of transport to and from the interview, compensation needs, and your concerns about language and dress for the interview. Great points, and thank you all for your valuable input.”

Affirming

Affirming should be done continuously, as this helps to boost the self-esteem of the participants. This includes simply saying please and thank you, but also includes compliments and affirming good points made by the participants.

Confirming

Confirming is behavior that rounds off a discussion following a summary of the points made and can bring it to a conclusion... but also is a behavior that firms up a decision made to take action. Example...

“Ok Jake, you agreed to follow-up the issue of finding out about the bus schedules by contacting the bus company by Monday next week, and to send that information to Pete and Mavis. What other points do you think need to be added to that action step?”

The Group Listening Process

The process of Listening would typically follow this pattern...

1. Start with the **Welcoming Statements** and complete the **Introductions Process**. You should also explain the process of sharing information about your needs, concerns and issues regarding unemployment.
2. Focus a **Seeking Information** question on each participant separately, don’t simply open it up in the hope someone will say something.
3. Control the input by participants, and any subsequent discussion by using the **Clarifying, Testing Understanding, Bringing In, Building, Summarizing and Affirming** behaviors throughout the session.
4. Use **Confirming** behavior to ensure that action steps are understood and will be followed.
5. **Summarize** the inputs of each participant following individual input, plus at the end of the session. Summarize any decisions made and actions planned by repeating the details of each action to prevent vagueness and ambiguity.

Close the session with **Affirming** statements.

Be sure to make notes of points made and decisions taken.

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