

Facilitating Local ‘Spiritual Conversations’

**A guide for parishes to engage in active listening and
speaking from the heart**

Facilitating any meeting or gathering can be tough. There are many voices, some louder and some quieter. We want to offer some guidance that will help ensure that any gathering within the parish is able to create a space where there is both active listening and speaking from the heart. We want to ensure that the most important voice in this whole process is not lost or forgotten, the voice of the Holy Spirit.

This first local phase of the worldwide synodal process is about people and their experiences. The central concern of this guide for parishes is: how do we get people to both speak and listen? It is intended as a guide not a prescription; there are other ways for the parish to enter into this process of gathering, listening and discerning.

What we are seeking to engage in is very different from corporate or political processes with which many might be more familiar. The aim of a corporate or political process is about consultation, determining what we want to see or do. The synodal process is not about consultation but spiritual conversation and discernment. The purpose is not to come with a goal or agenda in mind, but to come with a spirit of openness, ready to listen and share with one another so that we might better discover what the Holy Spirit is saying.

This Synod poses the following fundamental question:

A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, ‘journeys together.’ How is this ‘journeying together’ happening today in your local Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our ‘journeying together’? (PD 26)

All our local spiritual conversations ought to have this question as its main focus. We are trying to discover and articulate the ways in which we are already growing and can continue to grow as a synodal Church, a Church that ‘journeys together’.

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Notes to help prepare for local 'Spiritual Conversations'

a) WHO

In preparation for a parish gathering try to spend some time (5-10 minutes) writing down an 'Audience Profile' i.e. who is taking part. If you are not sure who is likely to come, perhaps write down the desired audience. Perhaps begin by answering these questions:

- Who are they?
- How experienced are they?
- What are they hoping to get out of the gathering?
- Is there anything they are likely to be sceptical or concerned about?
- How many people is it appropriate to invite to make sure each person has the time to both listen and to speak?

b) WHEN & WHERE

Take some time (5-10 minutes) to plan when and where might be appropriate to host such a gathering. Using the suggested schedules as a guide, draw out your total available time, decide on whether to have more/fewer or longer/shorter breaks. Figure out how much time you need for various elements especially prayer and sharing, do you need to give more or less time depending on the size and profile of the group you'll likely have attending. Perhaps reflect on the following questions:

- Is it more appropriate to have a gathering on a weekend or weekday? Daytime or evening (for shorter sessions)?
- Is the best location somewhere in the parish (i.e. parish hall or presbytery), somewhere connected to the parish like a local school or hosted in a more intimate setting like the home of a trusted parishioner(s)?

c) PRAYER

Spiritual conversations normally begin by actively listening to oneself and to what the Holy Spirit is doing at the outset. This involves time for silent personal prayer and reflection, which can take one of the following forms:

1. A brief introduction invites participants to share with the group one or two words that describe their interior state at that point.
2. A longer time of personal prayer and reflection over the question at hand or their response to a passage of Scripture. At the end of this prayer period, you can decide what you will share with the group.

Use the guidance included in this pack to help you to prepare for how you will use the periods of prayer as a way of preparing the hearts of those who will be involved in these gatherings.

d) SHARING

Each person is invited to reflect and then speak about the central question of the Synod or other questions more specifically related to the Synod themes of 'Communion, Participation and Mission' (cf. the **Questions** document).

Each person should have up to 5 minutes max to speak. Perhaps consider using a visible timer. The focus is to listen to others, rather than simply thinking about what you want to say. Open your heart and your mind to listen to the one who is speaking. Between each person, take a 30 second pause to recall what was said. The facilitator can nominate someone to start, then participants can share one after the other. Once everyone has shared, or however many you choose, a longer break can help participants absorb what was said, take a breather, and if involved in a longer session return for the second round.

In the second round of speaking no one is obliged to speak, and participants speak spontaneously without any particular order. However each person can only share once

in the second round. This round is generally shorter than the first. This is not a time for discussing or refuting what someone else says, nor for bringing up what you forgot to mention in the first round. Rather, it is an opportunity to ask questions like:

- How were you affected by what you heard?
- Is there a common thread in what was shared? Is there something missing that you had expected would be said?
- Were you especially touched by a particular sharing?
- Have you received any particular insight or revelation? What is it?
- Where did you experience a sense of harmony with others as we shared with one another?

This second round especially enables the group to realise what unites them. It is here that signs of the action of the Holy Spirit in the group begin to manifest themselves, and the conversation becomes an experience of shared discernment.

*(Notes about spiritual conversations adapted from
'Global Colloquium of the Jesuit Education Network; La conversation spirituelle')*

Note

You will see on page 5 that we have only given two meeting frameworks (whereas the prayer document offers 4 templates, 1-hour, 2-hours, half day and full day).

This is to allow you the most flexibility to determine what is best suited to your parish. You might feel it best to have a number of short evening meetings involving various groups or you may wish to hold a half or whole day meeting.

In order to facilitate the longer meetings, our suggestion is that for a half day meeting you might use the 1-hour framework, holding three 1-hour meetings on Communion, Participation and Mission respectively.

For a full day you might wish to use the 2-hour template meeting, holding three 2-hour meetings on Communion, Participation and mission respectively.

Framework for facilitating local ‘Spiritual Conversations’

Schedule 1 (for a 1-hour period)

1. Welcome the participants and begin with a short period of prayer, which should include a fitting passage from Scripture (10 minutes)
2. Introduce or appoint someone to take notes (2 minutes)
3. Ask for a volunteer as a timekeeper (2 minutes)
4. Set the expectations and describe the process (6 minutes)
5. Period of sharing (30 minutes)
6. Invite members to share a prayer of thanksgiving, perhaps including a song (10 minutes)

Schedule 2 (for a 2-hour period)

1. Welcome the participants and begin with a short period of prayer, which should include a fitting passage from Scripture (10 minutes)
2. Introduce or appoint someone to take notes (2 minutes)
3. Ask for a volunteer as a timekeeper (2 minutes)
4. Set the tone for the Discernment Circle and describe the process (6 minutes)
5. First round of sharing (40 minutes)
6. Break (15 minutes)
7. Second round of sharing (40 minutes)
8. Invite members to share a prayer of thanksgiving, perhaps including a song (5 minutes)