

Synthesis of feedback from the Pastoral Council Listening Sessions

Major Themes:

1. People frequently feel they are not being listened to, even when time is made for listening.
2. People in the Church need to be willing to implement changes based on the feedback they receive.
3. Old ways of "doing Church" are not working as people's lives, experiences, and priorities change, but the Church is not adequately responding to this.
4. Building trust is easier in the local community than within the hierarchy.
5. People tend to trust people in the Church before trusting the institution of the Church.

Elaborations

Not Feeling Listened To

This was one of the major themes of discussion. For many respondents, that they did not feel listened to was the primary point they wanted to make.

Those who are involved in the Church express frustration that they are not listened to when they give their opinions to the Church. Often, they would give feedback of feeling hurt, and their hurt was ignored, or the Church grew defensive, trying to say, "Look at all the good we've done." Particularly, this came up on issues related to social justice, to racial justice, and to the Church's sexual abuse crisis. This occurs on the parish level, and we are working to improve that. It also occurs on the Archdiocesan and USCCB levels.

Further, it was expressed that often, it feels as though the Church pretends to want feedback but does not take the feedback in an actionable way. That can make giving feedback not feel worth it, especially when certain topics are off-limits for feedback. The Church does not want to discuss doctrinal issues, which is understandable, given that the teaching of the Church is revealed by God. But given the Church's tendency to shut down that kind of discussion, it makes many people reticent to give feedback in other contexts. It was strongly suggested that things that are open to discussion be made clear. If a Church leader is unwilling or unable to change their position on a given topic, they should not ask for feedback, or if they do, they should be very clear that their position is unlikely to change. Appearing to want feedback and making no change based on feedback weakens trust.

Further, if there is an area the Church wants feedback on, the Church needs to consciously ask for it. People are not used to giving feedback because of they do not feel the Church will take it. Therefore, if Church leaders want feedback, they need to ask for it, and then follow up that it was received and share what has come out of it. Most people are not just going to offer it without prompting.

In addition, people feel more listened to at the parish level than the Archdiocesan level. Knowing the pastor, the pastoral associates, and the rest of the pastoral team allows people to feel they can give us feedback more than those who are more distant from them, such as the Archdiocese.

Lack of Participation

First, it can be difficult to hear from people who are not participating, so we took a look at why they were not participating. Five primary themes came up.

These could be summarized as 1) Schedules 2) Wounds 3) Changes 4) Misunderstanding, and 5) Exclusion.

1. For some, particularly young people, schedules are tough. For young families, the fact that both parents are working ("daycare is raising my kids") makes Sunday the best opportunity to spend quality time with their kids, not a time when they want to go to Church. Participating in Mass is a time commitment that just might not feel doable. This also comes up with young adults without children. Many work inconsistent schedules, including weekends, or sixty-to-seventy-hour weeks, meaning time or energy to go to Mass might not be there.
2. For another group, there are deep hurts that people continue to struggle with. These hurts are caused by various things. The sex abuse crisis came up repeatedly and was the most common issue. Other hurts include people who were divorced and unable to receive communion, people who perceived bad pastoral practice in complex situations such as the removal of Fr. Walter Cuenin at Our Lady's, and people who felt ignored in times of need, such as the death of a family member.
3. A third group is disenfranchised due to changes in the Church and the parish. Some changes were caused by COVID, and some changes were caused by turnover in staff and volunteers. Some attend Mass online where they preferred the music or preaching.
4. A fourth group is disenfranchised because they misunderstand Church teaching and practice. They may say "I can't participate in an organization that believes thing X," and people invested in the Church would realize they thought the Church believes something it does not. This could mean a misunderstanding on a moral or doctrinal question. One specific issue that arose relates to the way the Church uses its financial and real estate resources.
5. A fifth group explained that parish culture can feel exclusive. When a ministry is well-established, people can feel reticent to join that ministry. This could be because of social groups in a ministry or because of groups or leaders not wanting or welcoming new ideas or insights. If a person feels excluded from ministries due to this kind of perceived cliquishness, they may disconnect from the parish altogether.

Parish Communication

Word-of-mouth remains the most effective way of getting people involved in the Church. Good liturgy promotes people talking about the Church and parish in a positive way. Coffee hours after Mass promote that and help people feel connected to the parish.

People strongly suggested the parish take advantage of the Internet. A good website, a good email setup, and good social media are useful things to getting people involved. More people are reading the Internet than the bulletin now. This change – that people prefer the Internet to the bulletin – is a change for the Church in general.

It was strongly recommended that we be welcoming to people coming to the church for funerals, baptisms, marriages, etc. Regulations can be interpreted as distractions or hoops, rather than as welcoming, to people who have made the effort to reconnect with the church. These are situations when people approach the Church, with people that seem open to the Church, so we need to take advantage of them. This reinforces the point made above that people have more trust in our local institution, where we can work with people to help them through regulations, than with the Archdiocese or the Vatican, which is seen as laying rules and burdens on people.

Listening Across Boundaries

We also spoke about ecumenical and interreligious work in Newton. We found that there were some issues in town, like social justice, safety, and concern for children that most people could agree on. Our collaborative's work with local synagogues on helping Afghan refugees was highlighted as something we could build on.

Parish Culture and Initiatives

The parish's phone call and card project at the beginning of COVID was well-liked. The priest and pastoral staff staying line to shake hands and chat after mass is well-liked. The collaborative prioritizing a culture of community was affirmed. The coffee hour after mass was celebrated.

In general, the people in the pews like the liturgical style. Some people have left because they do not like the music or other liturgical issues. The reports indicate that people who left because of liturgical issues have not left the Church, but just the collaborative, but we are unable to verify that outside of what was reported.

The culture of service was emphasized as important to the Church's mission. Among the most popular service groups are the Honduras Committee, the work to support refugees, meals to the food insecure at holidays, the Society of Saint Vincent DePaul, and the outreach and homebound ministries, which visit and send cards to the sick and homebound.

Summary

1. People need to feel listened to if they are going to want to participate, and currently, they largely do not.

2. If feedback is requested, people must be willing to make changes based on the feedback.
3. Many people, especially young adults and young families, are struggling with old ways of “doing church”. This does not mean that everything the parish does is unpopular, but that we are struggling to reach those who are younger.
4. People trust Sacred Heart & Our Lady Help of Christians more than they trust the Archdiocese of Boston.
5. The institution of the Church does not command trust simply by virtue of its title. When a mistake arises in the Church any level, parish or higher, people are willing to disengage.