

A Guide to Listening Forums

What is a Listening Forum?

Listening Forums provide a safe environment within which young people are able to voice their concerns, ideas and affirmations with their peers and the leadership of the Church. Listening and sharing in such a context assists young people in ongoing reflection and development of their ideas as well as actively contributing to the life of the Church. A vital aspect of the Listening Forum process is the “active listening” of those in leadership positions and fulfilment of one of the goals of the Year of Youth – authentic and personal engagement by Church leaders in the challenges and successes in young people’s lives.

Why hold Listening Forums as part of your Year of Youth celebrations?

The Year of Youth invites the whole Church into prayerful discernment about the important and life-giving presence of young people in the local Church and society. It calls for dialogue and active engagement focused on the reconnection and renewal of a new generation of young people in the life of the Church. **Listening Forums can be an integral first step in dialogue and active engagement of young people.** Listening to the struggles and triumphs of young people will undoubtedly assist in future planning of celebrating successes and supporting challenges; recognising the movement of the Holy Spirit; including the voice of young people in decision-making; and identifying New Horizons for Spreading Joy.

“The Church also wishes to listen to your voice, your sensitivities and your faith; even your doubts and your criticism. Make your voice heard, let it resonate in communities and let it be heard by your shepherds of souls. St. Benedict urged the abbots to consult, even the young, before any important decision, because “the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best. (Rule of St. Benedict, III, 3).”

Pope Francis. Letter to Young People for the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.

How to hold a Listening Forum

Considerations before you begin:

- **What is the purpose of your Listening Forum?**

Young people are wide and varied, and so are the many things they have to say! Identifying your purpose will help you to structure an effective forum. Are you wanting to gain a general idea of what’s important to young people? Or are you wanting to explore one particular topic? Are you interested in all young people, or one particular target group? You may even need more than one listening forum...

- **Who are the Young People?**

Identify the young people you are holding the forum for. Consider: age (*high-school, post school, young adults*), background, stage of life (*school, university, workforce, single, married, young parents*), current level of engagement (or disengagement) with faith and the Church. If you are holding a general forum you may need to consider how to best address the concerns of a varied group. When you have identified your target group, make sure you have a method of invitation that will reach your target group and that your forum will be of interest to them.

- **Who are the Church Leaders?**

Identify the most relevant and important Church leaders for this group to be speaking to. Consider: The Bishop, Parish Priests, Religious, Pastoral Associate, Youth Ministry Coordinator, Parish Council, Principal, Manager, President, Group Leaders etc. If you are focussing on a particular topic, it might be appropriate to include an expert or leader in that field (*i.e. if speaking about Refugees & Asylum Seekers it would be useful*

to have a local chaplain to refugees or someone who works with New Entrants in the community). These leaders may also be helpful to provide insight and guidance throughout the forum.

TIP: *Don't overload the room with too many leaders, as this could be intimidating to young people and not be an effective use of time. One – Three leaders is plenty to hear the message of young people. You might develop a strategy for feeding back the voice of young people to other leaders after the forum is held.*

- **How will you ensure a safe environment for open discussion?**

Consider things such as venue, time, number of adults, types of leaders and a competent facilitator to create an environment where participants feel safe to openly participate. Creating a safe environment is crucial for enabling open discussion and therefore for the integrity of the forum.

- **Who will facilitate?**

A good facilitator is essential to a successful forum. Your facilitator should be someone who can relate to the audience (preferably a younger person if possible, or someone who relates very well to young people), with a bit of energy, who can help to create a safe and open environment, whilst maintaining direction and keeping time.

- **What will be the length of your session?**

Consider the size and make-up of your audience and the breadth of the topic. Time may be dictated by other factors, in which case the length of time will dictate the format and breadth of topic. You want to ensure adequate time for discussion and sharing, but also keep things moving forward.

- **How will you capture what is said during the session?**

Many wonderful ideas, thoughts, stories and concerns will be shared. You don't want the church leaders to be writing these down as they need to be showing attention to the young people and actively listening and responding in the moment. Consider how will you ensure these rich ideas and thoughts are not lost?

Some ideas:

- Video and/or Audio Recording of the Forum
- Butchers Paper for participants to record ideas during the small group discussions
- Active Listeners: Ask 3 or 4 people to participate as Active Listeners (these are not participants). Their role is a discrete one with the primary purpose being to actively listen and take notes – essentially to capture the thoughts, ideas and concerns shared during the session. These active listeners might provide a summary of what they heard at the end (*see example 2 below*).

- **Briefing the Church Leaders**

It is vital to brief the invited leaders on the purpose of the forum and their integral role. Ensure they understand the need to be present, engaged and listen. Outline their opportunity to respond, but encourage this to be in a way as to summarise their understanding of what they have heard, rather than an opportunity to provide their own thoughts – although this may be appropriate in some cases, but not the key function of their response.

- **What will happen to the concerns, ideas, affirmations raised?**

To ensure the forum is not just a talk fest, and to affirm that the voices of these young people have been heard, consider what will happen to the ideas and concerns after the forum has been held. Make sure this is communicated to the young people at the end of the session. Some ideas:

- Church leaders could commit to undertaking a task as a result of listening to the concerns - even if this is to review and reflect on what has been said – or they may be more inspired on the day to commit to taking up a more specific task.
- The feedback from this session could be passed on to another group: Year of Youth Committee, Pastoral Council, State Committee, Diocesan Youth Office etc.
- Form a working group to follow up ideas raised on the day
- Share thoughts and ideas raised with the wider community
- Hold a follow-up forum(s) to take up particular ideas?

Example Format One:

Prayer & Welcome (15 minutes)

- Opening Prayer
- Introduce Facilitator, Leaders, Active Listeners etc.
- Outline process for the day
- Outline what will happen to the feedback received today
- Outline guidelines for an effective forum (openness, respect, keeping to time etc.)

Discussion (20 minutes)

Split larger group into smaller groups and provide each group with a particular question to discuss

Feedback (25 minutes)

Representatives from each group to provide feedback to the larger group

Break (10 minutes)

Discussion (15 minutes)

Returning to small groups, ask the groups to discuss matters of concern and/or thoughts and comments that could be brought to the attention of the leaders present.

Feedback (20 minutes)

Representatives from each group to provide feedback to the larger group

Response & Vote of Thanks from Leaders (10 minutes)

Church Leader(s) to respond with a summary of what they have heard from the session, and any particular insights that might be appropriate in the context. They might also like to make any commitment they can at this point to carry forward any ideas and concerns, as well as a vote of thanks to the participants.

Closing Prayer (5 minutes)

Total Time: 2 hours

Example Format Two

Opening Prayer & Welcome (5 minutes)

- Opening Prayer
- Introduce Facilitator, Leaders, Active Listeners etc.
- Outline process for the day
- Outline what will happen to the feedback received today
- Outline guidelines for an effective forum (openness, respect, keeping to time etc.)

Stimulus (5 minutes)

- Video; Song; Presentation; Personal Sharing....some sort of interesting input on the topic at hand to set a context and to get ideas, stories and personal experiences of the participants flowing.
- If you are having a general forum you may consider using the Year of Youth video:
<http://youth.catholic.org.au/year-of-youth>

Small Group Discussions (10 minutes)

- Break your larger group into smaller groups. Have a clear idea of how you are going to do this so it doesn't eat into the discussion time.
- Give groups a question to discuss to help guide discussion and get them talking.
- Church leaders participating in your forum may like to join a group, or move around the room to listen to what is being said at this stage.

Invite 4-5 people to share their personal experience (2 minutes each – 10 minutes total)

- Consider how you might do this in advance in order to maximise time and not waste it on selecting people.

Invite Leader(s) to respond briefly to the experiences (2 minutes)

- Remind leaders (prior to beginning of forum) that this is a listening exercise and encourage their response to include an understanding of what they are hearing. It may be necessary for the leader to give information or clarity to what is being discussed, but this should not be the central focus of their response.

Small Group Discussions (continued for another 5 minutes)

- Allow continued discussion in small groups. The personal experiences and response from leaders may have triggered other thoughts and feelings to be discussed in small groups, or to finish off what was being said at the close of the first small group discussion.

Small Group Feedback (20 minutes)

- Representatives from each small group to feedback main points of discussion to the larger group.

Young People to write their actions on sticky notes (5 minutes)

- This is a listening forum, but it is important to empower young people to take action themselves as well.
- Encourage young participants to commit to an action they can do themselves in response to what they have heard and discussed today (i.e. take up the issues further with their local leader; speak to relevant groups in the community; join relevant groups in the community; pray; seek further understanding etc.)
- Have them stick them in a dedicated space and encourage young participants to read some of the other actions as well.

Response from Leader(s) (5 minutes)

- Remind leaders (prior to beginning of forum) that this is a listening exercise and encourage their response to include an understanding of what they have heard. It may be necessary for the leader to give information or clarity to what is being discussed, but this should not be the central focus of their response.
- Encourage where possible for the leader to make a commitment to the young people present to an action as a result of the discussion – even if this is to consider what they have heard further.

Summary from Active Listeners (5 minutes)

- Active Listeners give feedback to the group to summarise what they have heard/collated

Explain what will happen to feedback from today's session (1 minute)

- This is an important step to ensure that participants don't feel like it was only a talk fest and that they have not really been heard. This may include confirmation of what the leader has been able to commit to on the day.

Closing Prayer (2 minutes)

Total Time: 75 minutes