



Leading Groups in Prayer

Listening groups

'Listening is never easy. Many times it is easier to play deaf. Listening means paying attention, wanting to understand, to value, to respect and to ponder what the other person says. It involves a sort of martyrdom or self-sacrifice, as we try to imitate Moses before the burning bush: we have to remove our sandals when standing on the 'holy ground' of our encounter with the one who speaks to me. Knowing how to listen is an immense grace, it is a gift which we need to ask for and then make every effort to practice.'

Pope Francis - 50th World Communication Day 2016

Often as part of a retreat we will encourage participants to share in small groups, or in the larger group. For many people there is a value in being able to speak out their experience of prayer, even if it was not what they hoped for. Also those who listen are often impacted by what has been shared by others.

For that to happen listening groups need to be a safe space where people can share without interruption, questions, or advice from others (even good or well meaning advice).

When people share the fruit of their prayer time, their reflections on their conversation with God means we are on sacred ground.

When people share in the group as a whole, you as the retreat leader should model good listening and can better manage any other comments or responses. When breaking into small groups you need to give enough guidance and structure to support the groups so they can manage themselves.

Think about when to use groups – if you break people into groups immediately after their prayer time they will be more settled into a listening space, if you do it after a coffee break they might find it harder.

A retreat in a parish where everyone knows each other will be different to a retreat with people who don't know each other.

This way of listening and sharing is not familiar to most people, acknowledge that – you can ask people how they found it to simply listen and what it was like to be listened to.

When breaking people into groups, or asking them to share in pairs you may want to suggest:

- We share only what we are comfortable sharing of our experience with God in our prayer. Feel free to share nothing
- Everything shared is confidential to that group and that time – again working in a parish this will be a different experience for people
- Consider giving a guiding question or two to help people know what to share, this also helps others to manage the group if needed e.g. if there was one word or image that sums up your prayer experience what would it be? What do you want to say to God following that prayer time?
- In listening to the person sharing, we honour the other's experience and value the gifts offered, allowing ourselves to be enriched in the process.
- We are likely to have a response to what someone has shared but we focus our attention on what God might be saying to us through the voice we are hearing at that moment
- Allow space between each sharing, God is at work in the silence too! The silence can allow us to hear and come to a deeper understanding of what has just been said. It also gives us a chance to gather our thoughts about our own sharing so that we don't end up planning what we will say when others are speaking.

If everyone has shared all that you wish to you can simply sit in prayerful silence

In Practice this looks like:

- Pause - We take a few minutes to arrive into this space with each other and God. We collect our thoughts.
- Share - We take turns to share something of our prayer experience,
- Thanks - We express our gratitude for the gift shared with a simple 'Thank -you'
- Pause - To honour what has been shared and then the next person shares