



Reflections for Parish Pastoral Councils

OPEN SPACE ~ OPEN HEARTS

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.
And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind,
and it filled the entire house where they were sitting*

- Acts 2:1-2

Imagine your parish church on a breezy spring day with all of the doors wide open to let the wind flow through. So it is when we come together as the People of God with the doors of our minds and hearts open - our eyes as windows raised to see God's will. It is then that the wind of the Spirit can sweep into our midst to make Pentecost a reality in our life together.

The consultation process that the Parish Pastoral Councils and the pastors of Brooklyn and Queens are now initiating has the potential to change hearts and renew our churches by allowing the wind of the Spirit to pour over us through a sincere and deliberate journey of discernment. This discernment begins with a posture of listening, but to listen we must first be open to the voices of others and the belief that in this engagement we can find a hint of God's will for us.

A central role that the Parish Pastoral Council fulfills is to create an open space, a forum, for this kind of discernment. It is difficult sometimes to empty ourselves from the pressing agendas of our own hearts and minds. As committed and involved parishioners, Parish Pastoral Council members come with strong feelings and convictions about the life of their parish. This conviction is important in building up any faith community, but strong agendas can also be a stumbling block to a true environment of listening and reflection.

As servant leaders within the parish, Parish Pastoral Council members fulfill their role by creating an open space for dialogue and listening, but this is only accomplished with an open heart that is prepared to be surprised, delighted and changed.

The one-to-one conversation campaign underway in many parishes right now provides an opportunity to build new relationships and to learn from fellow parishioners about their faith, values and convictions. These conversations provide a direct access to the hearts and minds of parishioners; hearts, minds and souls that have a unique relationship with God can provide insights that we could never have come to on our own.

When brought together these insights can provide a breeze that soon becomes a wind bringing new life, challenging our old assumptions and changing our own hearts in the process.

One practical suggestion during this time of listening is to share the conversations at your regular pastoral council meetings. Many otherwise productive meetings can become deadly when half of your time is taken with committee reports. As a leadership group whose primary task is consultation, it would stand to reason that the main focus of the meeting should be a sharing of the thoughts and feelings of parishioners as they are emerging in your conversations. Committee reports, if they are necessary, could be written and distributed ahead of time so that ample time is given in the meeting to share the salient issues that have emerged through the conversations. In this way, you can begin an ongoing habit of consultation and listening.

In all that we do, we must be attentive to the Spirit in our midst. We believe that the Holy Spirit is always with the Church, encouraging us and drawing us back to the foundation of our faith and out again to the world. The Spirit has the power to change our lives and breathe new life into our faith communities, but only if we remain open and allow the Spirit of God to breathe freely.

- Robert Choiniere