

Diocesan Listening Sessions

Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio

Themes, Observations, & Recommendations

May and June, 2022

Primary themes:

1. A continued desire for transparency and better communication, along with an increased willingness to speak honestly about the wounds from relationships with past bishops (not just Bishop Breidenthal). While there were a few complaints that the standing committee scheduled the listening sessions on a holiday weekend, the sessions were mostly well-attended, many people (including many persons of color) appeared to be empowered to speak freely, and there were thank-you comments and other expressions of gratitude that these listening sessions were offered.
2. An across-the-board desire to do more with systems theory, with a marked increase in willingness to surface and talk about Bishop Breidenthal's alcoholism disclosure in the context of larger issues/problems. Using systems theory, how does one person or one entity become the "identified patient," or symptom bearer, when there are deeper problems in the system? How can that person/entity be handled more skillfully, and how can the system manage anxiety in healthier ways? Approaching the problem as a *systemic* problem empowers the diocese to address deeper dynamics, avoiding the pattern in which a problem person is corrected (or leaves the organization) only to be replaced by another problem person.
3. Most everyone who attended the sessions seemed to be in the "proceed now" camp, with regard to the bishop search.
4. Two particular issues persisted, as may have been expected, as themes: 1) the continued frustrations of folks outside of Cincinnati who perceive an urban/rural disconnection, with miscommunication and low trust; and 2) some continued dissatisfaction in the wake of the collaboration between the diocese and the cathedral, and only a tentative awareness that the collaboration has been dismantled.
5. A desire for a new bishop who will be pastoral to congregations across the diocese, with a resumption of bishop visits and other personal connections to congregations. This was expressed in the context of appreciative comments about the interim bishop's pastoral efforts.

Some additional thoughts as you continue to listen:

Keep in mind that “poor communication” likely continues to be about both the mechanisms used *and* the amount of trust put into information coming out from the Diocesan office. Communications across a system as complex as the Diocese of Southern Ohio will always require both a clear method (email, letters, social media, etc.) and intentional engagement on the part of those being communicated to. Continued work on trust will help folks lean in to receiving information.

The increased number of POC attendees, and the increased comfort with open discussion of the alcoholism issue and the systems surrounding it point to good work by Standing Committee and others, and are an encouraging, observable shift from last year’s listening sessions.

Recommendations:

- Be public and up-front about the dismantling of the collaboration. This is a great opportunity to workshop and discover how information travels in S. Ohio and to be very clear that the Bishop’s Office and Standing Committee are listening and responding.
- Continue work on formal and informal communication. We recommend Standing Committee (and others engaged in communication efforts) not rely solely on formal communication such as email blasts and social media posts. If there is a piece of information that is essential for the diocese to know consider also calling key stakeholders, and encouraging word of mouth communications among the groups most invested and/or affected.
- Related to improved communication, clearly establish expectations of work that will be done on the presenting issues in these discrete stages:
 - Before the formal call process
 - During the call process
 - Items to be saved for the new bishop to oversee
- Consider further offerings for those who would like to learn more about systems theory, self-differentiated leadership, and identifying deeper systemic issues that are below the waterline.

Dear Standing Committee,

Stephen and I are so grateful for the opportunity to facilitate listening in your diocese as you shift some attention from processing the past toward beginning to imagine a new and exciting future for Southern Ohio. I observed Standing Committee members who were present, worked hard to listen, and did the very hard work of absorbing critique and anxiety without defense, for the purpose of loving your people. This continued stance of non-anxious listening is serving you well, as evidenced by the progress that we observed in these listening sessions, compared to last year's sessions. If you simply continue to do this in your role, much good will come of the call God has placed on your lives to serve on Standing Committee right now in this extraordinary time.

New Realm is honored to have been included in this process. If there is a way we can be of service as you journey further toward your next Bishop Diocesan, and the future God is preparing for your diocese even now, please let us know. Attached to this report you will find notes taken in each session. I would advise you to read through them if you have not yet done so. Look for themes and emotional heartbeats of each session, and I ask you to avoid any urge to linger too long over criticisms. One of the core principles of attachment and trust building in human systems is the capacity of a system to hear criticism and pain, and to validate it without lashing out at the complainant or even a deep need to defend. You are establishing yourselves as a body that has capacity to do this well, and this has and will continue to support trust building efforts and relational growth across your diocese. We see this evidence in this year's work together, and I have faith it will continue as you move forward.

I will continue to hold each of you, and The Diocese of Southern Ohio in my prayers in the days and months ahead. I am happy to talk further about any of these observations.

With care and gratitude,

The Rev. Canon Alissa Newton
New Realm Consulting