

Guide to a Community Listening Process

By [Joy Skjegstad](#) & [Heidi Unruh](#), authors of [Real Connections: Ministries to Strengthen Church and Community Relationships](#) (Judson Press, 2021)

A **community listening process** is an intentional effort to have conversations, connect with local ministry partners and get to know people in the community around the church. Broad listening provides a general picture of the assets, dreams and needs in the community. The process may also include deep listening to gather input on a specific issue or program.

While this process can be supplemented by surveys and other data-gathering strategies, community listening has a key element of personal engagement.

Why: People in the community have important ideas, insights, struggles, goals, and gifts. If you want to do ministry *with* people, not just *to* them, you have to get to know them and value their perspective. Good listening shows your care and respect for people. Listening opens the door to greater trust, ownership and personal relationships.

A listening process is also about discovering where God is already at work in the community. It often leads to “aha!” insights for more strategic ministry that is grounded in the community’s assets and interests, and that doesn’t duplicate existing efforts. Listening builds connections with people and organizations already invested in the neighborhood. It may also challenge the church’s blind spots and assumptions about the community.

When: A congregational listening process is especially beneficial:

- As part of an intentional effort to shift to a more relational focus overall.
- Early in the process of planning a new community ministry program or outreach.
- To get to know the people who live in the neighborhood around the church.
- When developing a collaboration with community partners.
- While responding to a crisis or big change in the community.
- To assess how the church is perceived in the community.

There is also an ongoing element to listening, as you keep seeking input, meeting new people, responding to new opportunities for ministry, and strengthening collaborations.

Who leads: Aim to have a team of four to six people facilitate a community listening process (with additional helpers as needed). Listening processes could be led by an existing church group, or by a specially formed Connections Team (described in chapter 11 of *Real Connections*).

Try to engage people in the congregation who have a natural connection with the focus of your listening. For example, if developing a partnership with a nearby school, invite members who are educators or who work with the church’s youth to help with listening activities.

Who to listen to: Aim for a diverse cross-section of the community. Reach out to **leaders** (of organizations and associations), **insiders** (local people with knowledge, experience or connections), and **bridgers** (people connected with the church who live or work in the community).

Possibilities for good contacts include: school personnel, elected officials, law enforcement, business leaders, social entrepreneurs, youth leaders, community organizers, leaders of organizations (nonprofits, arts organizations, social service agencies, neighborhood associations, support groups, community centers, healthcare providers, bail bonds, other churches), and long-time residents.

How: There are a wide range of options for customizable listening activities, including:

Interviews. Start with people who have knowledge, experience, leadership, or networks to help you understand the community and build connections. Bring two people—one to ask the questions, the other to take notes. Interviews are valuable for building potential collaborations.

Conversations. In some contexts, you can go door to door; or talk with people in a gathering place like a coffee shop or laundromat. Ask simple questions as conversation starters. This allows you to get perspectives from a broad range of residents.

Focus groups. Bring people together (six to ten is optimal) who represent a demographic group, or who are connected with a particular issue, and ask questions. For example, a group of teens (maybe through a local youth-focused nonprofit) share about their interests, challenges and hopes; or people involved in affordable housing to discuss the work being done, gaps and future goals. This is a useful option for churches without the volunteers to do extensive interviewing.

Table groups. Organize representatives from various community organizations into groups of three to five people, to discuss questions for a set time, and then report main themes. (Optional: shuffle groups and ask new questions.) This activity gets people talking to each other, and allows all voices to be heard. This activity can be helpful in processing difficult issues in the community.

Community meetings. If another group is holding a community event on a particular issue, attend and listen in. Showing up as a learner demonstrates you care and helps build relationships.

Site visits. With permission, visit an organization to observe and have informal conversations with people there. Example: eat lunch at a middle school, soup kitchen, or senior center, and visit with people over the meal. This can be combined with an interview of an organizational leader.

Block party. Organize a fun neighborhood event that builds connections and incorporates intentional listening. Ideas include a Listening Table for interviews; a video booth to record people telling stories about the community; or roving listeners who ask people questions.

What to ask: Adapt and add to these basic questions, relevant to your context and goals.

- What has happened in the community in the past year that you are most excited about?
- What are a few things you enjoy or appreciate about this community?
- What is your biggest concern about this community? What are the unmet needs?
- How would you like to see people working together to make life better here for everyone?
- One thing people need to know about this community is _____.
- What local groups or organizations have you been involved with?
- Our church wants to learn about the community and get to know more people who live here. What do you think is a good way of getting connected? Where should we be listening?

Questions for input on a specific issue (like youth, housing, jobs): *What is one thing that could make a difference with _____? Who else is working on _____? What is your experience with _____ in this community?*

Questions for feedback on specific community ministry programs: *What do you like most and least about this program? What ideas or suggestions do you have? Who might be a good partner for this ministry?*

After listening: At each listening activity, appoint people to collect main ideas. The listening team can then process this information to identify recurring themes and important insights. Needs and problems tend to capture attention, so be sure to focus also on strengths and gifts. Share these learnings in some way with church leadership and with the congregation. This reflection is likely to generate new ideas for collaboration and ministry, and questions for further listening.

Listening in the community goes hand in hand with listening to the Spirit. Be prayerful and open to what God may be saying to your church through this process.