

Testing Process

In a testing process an issue is identified and a spectrum, scale, is created to reflect the views present in the community. When used regularly this helps in setting boundaries on how emerging issues will be engaged.

For example,

We need to do less of this	We need to stay with the current amount	We need to do more of this
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The testing process can be done for a few minutes at coffee hour, at vestry meetings, in working teams and at parish community meetings. It will usually be most effective if done when the group is gathered and can respond and discuss the result, formally or informally. Face to face processes are usually more effective in promoting careful listening and effective response. A rule of thumb might be to use a “testing process” about four times/year with the whole community and possibly ten times with the vestry.

The process in too many parishes is one of listening and responding to the most anxious, cynical and passive people in the community. The clergy, wardens, the vestry, or even a whole parish community can get so caught up in trying to please or pacify a few people that disproportionate time, energy and resources get tied up in issues that are not really in the parish’s best interest. This misdirection also usually leaves a resentful undercurrent in the community while not really addressing the anxiety of those who raised the initial concern.

Even when leaders know who is raising an issue, without a broader listening process they usually do not know whether it is an interest of just those people or of a wider segment of the community.

A testing process helps a community cope with situations in which a few persistent voices press a concern or idea that would have an effect on the community’s life. What they are saying may represent a widely shared view or it may simply be their view. Those expressing the issue may not really know how many they represent. Imagine the informal one-on-one coffee hour discussion. Someone is making the rounds, letting others know about an important problem in the parish. People are listening and even nodding. Is it agreement or politeness?

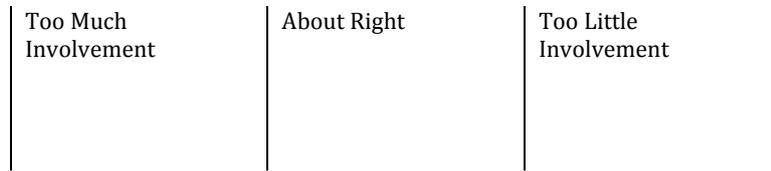
The use of a testing process requires leaders to use sound judgment in deciding when the process is likely to produce valid and useful information as well as help the community manage its anxiety. Overuse may result in an increase in the community’s anxiety, less listening, and ineffective action. However the danger in most parishes is not overuse but the absence of any way for the community to define itself in relationship to emerging issues. A rule of thumb might be to use a “testing process” about four times/year with the whole community and possibly ten times with the vestry.

The testing process can be done for a few minutes at the community’s coffee hour, at vestry meetings, in working teams and at community meetings. It will usually be most effective if done when the group is gathered rather than in a paper survey. Face to face processes are usually more effective in promoting careful listening and effective response.

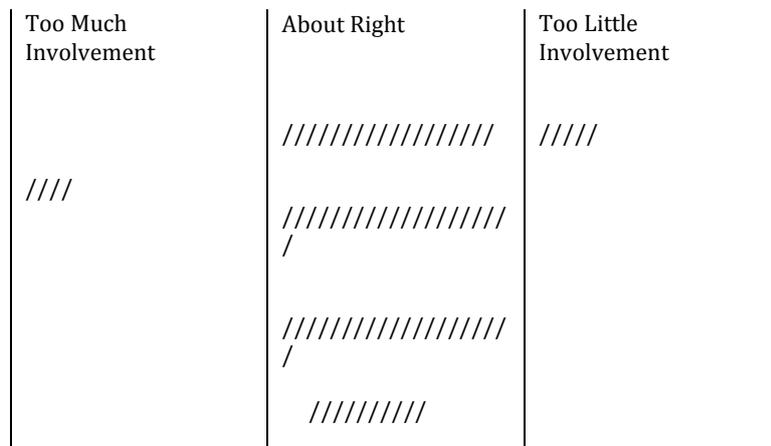
A possible process is to identify the issue, and put it on a spectrum of some sort. Have people

indicate where they are on the spectrum, and summarize the result, along with what the next step will be, if any.

For example, in a parish where several people had been complaining about the extent of the parish’s involvement in the arts a spectrum was created regarding the parish’s involvement with the city’s art community:



The 80 parishioners at the meeting came forward to register their opinion. The result was:



There was no judgment that those who had raised the issue were “wrong,” only that most people in the community had a different opinion. Those who had raised the issue saw that their position was not widely shared.

It was not just the pet project of the rector and a few members. This involvement had wide ownership. The process allowed the community to know its own mind. The anxiety in the community about “people being upset” was put into perspective. No next steps were needed.

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