

Listening Team Manual
Presbytery of the James
Commission on Ministry
Church and Pastor Relations Committee
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About this Document

This document provides guidelines for organizing, training, and implementing a Listening Team.

Abbreviations used in this document:

COM = Commission on Ministry
CPR = Church and Pastor Relations Committee
LT = Listening Team
POJ = Presbytery of the James

I. Getting Organized

The process begins when a request comes to CPR indicating that a church needs some help.

1. The request can come from a pastor or a Session, or through the Executive of the Presbytery.
2. The chairperson of CPR talks with the person through whom the request has come.
3. A member of CPR and the church's COM liaison (see section X.) meet with the affected church's Session to discuss what an LT is and does.
4. If the Session has not already done so, the Session then votes on whether or not to use an LT.

II. Qualities Needed in Listening Team Members

In building an effective LT, team members need to have particular qualities. These include:

1. Be of mature Christian faith
2. Able to listen with patience
3. Objective, open-minded, and willing to hear conflicting points of view
4. Able to summarize what another person is saying

Other considerations:

1. Someone on the LT should be able to write a report for the LT to present to COM and the Session of the church that is seeking assistance.
2. Generally, an LT is made up of Ruling and Teaching Elders; however, it is not required that all be Elders. If a non-Elder offers particular expertise, that person should be considered.
3. Previous members of CPR or COM may be considered for service on the LT.

III. Finding Appropriate People to Serve on the Listening Team

Depending upon the size of the worshipping congregation that seeks assistance, a team of three (3) to six (6) persons is formed. Ideally, these persons come from the region around the requesting church. The CPR moderator and CPR committee members find people with the qualities listed in Section II. above by:

1. Asking pastors and Christian educators for the names and contact information of persons who possess the above-mentioned qualities, targeting members of churches closest to the church seeking assistance.
2. Networking with people known by the CPR moderator and asking for recommendations.
3. Asking current members of COM and/or CPR to serve

When a potential LT has been assembled, the CPR moderator does the following:

1. Sends an email to each recommended person
2. Describes what an LT is (without mentioning the name of the affected church)
3. States a date by which CPR hopes to have the team formed
4. Follows up with a phone call to each candidate

IV. Formation of a Team

Once the requisite number of persons has agreed to serve on the LT, the CPR moderator (or person designated by the moderator) does the following:

1. Sends each team member the documents “Description of a Listening Team” and “Guidelines for Meeting Together.” to be read before the training meeting (see Appendix W on the presbytery’s website, and see Section V.).
2. Determines a mutually convenient date when all team members can meet for training.
3. Schedules the training meeting.

V. Training Meeting

LT members may meet via Zoom or in person for training. The person leading the training should do the following:

1. Open the meeting with prayer.
2. Conduct introductions, giving all an opportunity to share (briefly!) their name, their church’s name, something about themselves, and motivation for serving on an LT.
3. Ask if anyone has questions about the concept of an LT.
4. Introduce the topic of “listening”:
 - Ask: For what do we listen?
 - Specifically mention: opinions, emotions, data, and faith perspectives
 - Ask: Why do we listen for the above items?
 - Ask: What do you think is appropriate, and inappropriate, in a listening session?
5. Demonstrate listening and summarizing (example below):

Congregant: “The pastor is insensitive to the needs of the congregation.”

LT member: “Can you tell me more?”

Congregant: “Two months ago, my mother had surgery and the pastor did not go to the hospital or visit afterward, even though I told the pastor about it. I was really angry that the pastor cared so little.”

LT member: “You are disappointed at the pastor’s lack of responsiveness to your mother’s illness.”

6. Provide background on the church that needs help; describe what has happened and the situation for which the LT is required.
7. Ask for questions; provide answers.
8. Conclude meeting with brief time of sharing joys and concerns; offer prayer.

VI. Preparing for, and Meeting with, the Session of the Church Seeking Help

Prior to undertaking the tasks below, a moderator of the LT needs to be selected. This selection may be left to the moderator of CPR or the moderator may be elected by the members of the LT. Ordinarily, the moderator of the LT is someone who has served previously on an LT.

Prior to the LT meeting with the requesting church's Session, the LT moderator:

1. Polls the LT for all the times when they can meet over the upcoming three-week period; selects out common dates and times.
2. Asks the requesting church's pastor to find, from the list of available dates and times provided by the LT, a date and time when the entire Session could meet with the LT.
3. Before the meeting of the LT and the Session, asks the pastor or the Clerk of Session to send to the members of the Session the "Description of a Listening Team" and "Guidelines for Meeting Together" documents.
4. Invites LT and Session members to a joint meeting at the date and time determined in #2.

At the combined LT/Session meeting, the LT moderator:

1. Thanks the Session for meeting and explains why the LT is present.
2. Invites LT members to introduce themselves; encourages emphasis on experience or training that has equipped them to be on the Team.
3. Invites Session members to introduce themselves.
4. Explains the LT process (suggested wording below):

A Listening Team is a trained resource team from the Commission on Ministry of the Presbytery of the James. We seek to be Christ-centered as we listen to you. We will not impose solutions, but we hope to help seek understanding and prayerful solutions. We seek to provide safe space for people to speak and listen and will engage in a process designed to build trust and mutual respect. The Listening Team will write a report summarizing the issues and making recommendations to the Session, which the Session may accept, amend or reject. What you specifically say will be confidential.

5. Asks for questions, being sensitive to the fact that a Listening Team often is a new concept to Session members.
6. Reads aloud the document, "Guidelines for Meeting Together." (This is done in recognition that people process information differently and to emphasize the process that will be used. Have a different person read each section. When finished, ask for questions.)
7. Asks the Session members to raise their hands if they will abide by the "Guidelines" that were just read. (This is done because a verbal "yes" or "no" is not as effective as raising hands; raising hands makes people more accountable.)
8. Asks the Session, if it has not already approved the LT, to vote now on whether or not to have an LT come in to help.
9. Notes that at this meeting, or later, the pastor or the Clerk of Session may submit Session minutes or other pertinent information or documents to the LT for it is consider in its deliberations.

VII. Holding Interviews with Persons in the Church's Congregation

Prior to interviewing members of the congregation, the LT—in a separate meeting—decides:

- Should only the pastor and the Session be interviewed?
- Should the interview process be opened up to include the congregation and other staff members?

If members of the congregation and other staff (besides the pastor) are to be interviewed, these tasks are done ahead of time:

1. A member of the LT sets up a scheduling template with fillable slots. (The free version of Sign-Up Genius or comparable software are recommended for this process.)
2. Typical congregational interview sessions last 20 minutes, with a 5- to 10-minute break between interviews. (The pastor is given a longer interview time.)
3. Interviews may be conducted in person or via Zoom.
4. Time slots (appointments) are based on when two members of the LT can be available to interview together. (Experience has shown that to fully understand and record the issues, the process works best if two members of the LT interview either one individual or one married couple/one family at a time. One LT member writes notes and one leads the interview.)

An interview session includes the following:

1. Opening with brief prayer.
2. Introduction of the two-person team.
3. Description of the purpose of an LT.
4. Adherence to the schedule (and effort to keep each interview to 20 minutes).
5. Request to the congregant(s) to introduce him-, her-, or themselves and talk about their involvement in the church.
6. Invitation to the congregant(s) to share his, her, or their concerns.
7. Closing with brief prayer.

VIII. Collating the Material Obtained in the Interviews

LT tasks during and after interviews include the following:

1. As the interview process is going on, the LT meets periodically to share, using the notes taken during interviews, the issues that they have heard in the interviews they have conducted to date.
2. When all the interviews have been completed, the LT meets to lay out and discuss all the issues they have discerned.
3. The LT then discusses possible recommendations to be presented to the Session.
4. An LT member volunteers to write a draft of the Team's report.

Material that shall be included in the LT's report:

1. Members of the LT and the churches they represent
2. Listing of the Christian commitments honored in the work of the LT
3. Description of the situation at the church that requested help

4. Information about the congregation about whom the report is written, including pertinent background information that led to the present situation.
5. Recommendations for the Session.

The draft of the report is reviewed multiple times until all members of the LT are satisfied, then:

1. The LT report is sent to CPR for its review.
2. When CPR is satisfied with the report, it is sent to COM for review and a vote to accept or deny it.

IX. Presenting the Report to the Session and the Pastor

After COM votes, and if it votes to accept the report, the following happens:

1. A private meeting with the pastor and some or all of the LT should take place before a meeting with the Session, with the understanding that the report is confidential until the Session meets.
2. At the Session meeting, copies of the report are given out ONLY in person by some or all of the LT at a Session meeting where the report of the LT is on the agenda.
3. The report is presented by reading its sections aloud from either hard copies or a PowerPoint display.
4. The LT answers questions that may be posed.
5. The LT makes clear that the Session chooses what to adopt and what is communicated to the congregation. (The entire report should NOT be sent to the congregation; however, it is important that essential elements are shared and that what is shared is Christ-centered. The Session may invite the LT to be part of the presentation to the congregation.)
6. The LT may request a follow-up meeting with the Session to hear what progress has been made, particularly if the Session adopts recommendations that have time limits.

X. Role of the COM Liaison

1. The liaison is a representative of the COM who may also serve on the LT.
2. If not a member of the LT, the liaison attends the initial meeting with the Session, as well as the meeting in which the LT presents their report.
3. The liaison offers support to Session in their implementation of the LT recommendations, connecting them to POJ policies, guidelines, and other resources as needed.
4. Following the conclusion of the LT interviews and report, the liaison follows up with the Session and pastor periodically to discern how LT recommendations are being implemented.
5. The liaison documents all engagements between the church and the liaison monthly in the COM's liaison report.

Additional Documents

1. "Description of a Listening Team, Appendix W, Presbytery of the James"

2. "Guidelines for Meeting Together"

People like to know what is expected of them when we meet together in Christian community. An exercise that helps people absorb the following guidelines is to do the following.

Please read over the guidelines below by having different people reading aloud each of the guidelines. The easiest way to do this is to go around the table or circle with each person taking one guideline to read. Mark with a star * the items that you believe are essential to having a productive discussion. Then mark with an X those items that you will have difficulty doing. Discuss first the items that you think are essential. When everyone has had a chance to speak, discuss which ones are difficult to do. At the end of the discussion, please indicate your willingness to abide by the guidelines by raising your hand.

1. I will pray to be open to the Holy Spirit's leading and ask myself, "What is Christ calling us to do?"
2. I will listen as if the other person could be right.
3. I will ask myself what is best for the whole church and not just for me.
4. I will treat everyone with respect.
5. I will not interrupt or talk to a neighbor when someone else is talking.
6. I will use "I" language. Using "you" or saying "everyone knows" promotes disagreement. Please speak only from your experience and beliefs. Do not speak for others. Do not seek to change anyone else's mind.
7. I will treat others with respect.
8. I will never talk about other people, what they said or did. We may not have understood what a person said or have enough information.
9. If I feel irritated or angry with another person, I will ask for more information either during the meeting or after the meeting in order to gain clarity and maintain relationship. It is appropriate to say things like, "I would appreciate your elaborating on this point____," or "I find that when you said _____, I found myself uneasy. Could you please say more?"
10. If someone reveals something of personal nature, I will not try to fix it. It is okay for people to express hurt, disappointment, fear, compassion, or hope.
11. I will speak up and leave room for others to speak. I will not dominate a conversation nor withhold what I think and feel.
12. I will follow the directions of the Listening Team members and not take it personally if the team members ask us to move on to another item.
13. I will not participate in forming or participating in factions within the church.