Toolkit: How to Lead a COSROW Listening Session

Introduction:
A listening session is designed to collect information from participants about their experiences, observations and ideas about a particular topic or issue. A COSROW listening session can focus on the experiences of women in their personal lives, local congregations, districts or annual conferences. When you advertise the listening session, ensure that you include information about who is invited, the topic of the discussion, and any followup the committee intends to complete.

Logistics: Most listening sessions should last between sixty and ninety minutes, giving time for participants to share and reflect on only five or six questions. The space should be laid out with the primary goal of having comfortable, engaged participants: tables, rows of chairs or even pews can work well. Use a microphone and sound system for any group of more than 25 people, and ensure that all participants can hear and participate easily. Pass out paper and pens for additional comments or questions.

Whom to Invite: We recommend inviting men, women, clergy and lay people to your listening session so that all who participate can learn together. However, a listening session for specific groups offers a chance to explore the experiences of particular women in greater depth; for example, a session of clergywomen, or Korean-American women could describe their unique challenges with greater clarity.

Determine before the listening session if you will take demographic information about the participants. Will you count how many people participate, their gender, age, racial/ethnic or clergy status? Would other information help illuminate the experience of particular groups in your conference? Demographic information should be collected only when it will be used to better understand patterns and themes which emerge from the participants.

Leadership: Each listening session should be led by a facilitator and a note taker. Always have separate note takers and facilitators. The facilitator should focus on hearing from participants, keeping the conversation flowing, and not responding to the issues raised. Consider using a talking stick, raised hands or other facilitation technique to ensure that any participant can take a turn speaking. When facilitating, avoid yes/no questions and focus upon open-ended questions. Expect silence between answers and immediately after each question is posed. Try counting to 8 during each silence: this is long enough to give participants time to reflect, but not so long as to appear disengaged.

The note taker does not need to take verbatim (every word) notes but should record what is said, and not their impressions or interpretation of the observations raised. Other members of the COSROW committee can attend to listen but should remain intentional about focusing upon the participants who are not regular members of the team.

Post-Session Reflection: After a listening session, the facilitator, note taker and any members of the committee who attended to listen should create an appendix to the notes which includes any reflections and observations about the session or participants. Also include any comments or stories they personally did not share during the session, and comments about any particularly surprising, disturbing or exciting comments shared by participants. In reflecting upon the notes, the committee should seek to share reflections, identify common themes, and note any patterns or common questions that were raised.
Always Pray: beginning and ending a listening session in prayer will keep the focus upon empowering God’s work in our community and grace in our lives.

**Participation Covenant:**
A listening session covenant will help participants feel comfortable and safe enough to share, thereby improving the quality of your collected insights. These “ground rules” are only recommendations; adapt this covenant in whatever way best suits to your particular group.

At the beginning of a listening session, read your covenant to the group, and write on large easel paper or a chalkboard to help participants understand and remember the covenant.

- **Speak from your own experience** and knowledge. Use “I” language.

- **No cross talk.** Our plans are to hear and share our experiences, not solve any problems today. Our stories or experiences might seem to contradict or be wildly different; that is normal. We want to hear the many unique experiences that occur within this community.

- Please **raise your hand** to indicate that you would like to speak.

- Please remember to make space for each person to participation – if you’ve recently spoken, **consider writing down your next thought.**

- Our time is limited: PLEASE use your **notepad** of paper to write down any answers or sharing that we might not have time to hear.

- **Be clear, be brief:** Your stories matter, but we hope to hear from as many people as possible. When you share, please consider telling us your conclusions, not the entire path to get there.

- **Please stick to the question.** There is more to talk about than we can cover, and if you came with a particular story you really need to share, please write it down. This is particularly true when we discuss lay AND clergy women.

- Although this discussion centers around women’s experiences, we know that women’s experiences are also affected by **considerations of race, class, education, language, immigration,** and socio-economic status. Do not hesitate to comment upon these things – WHEN THEY ILLUMINATE the lives of women in this annual conference and your church.
**Recommended Questions:**
*Remember, in an hour you will probably have time to only cover between 5 and 10 questions. Do not save the most important questions for last, or you will not have sufficient time for them.*

**Status of Women:**
- What struggles do lay women face in our church and AC, particularly pertaining to leadership?
- What might be done to prepare and encourage more lay women to take leadership positions in churches and our conference?
- What struggles do clergy women face in our church and AC, particularly as it pertains to leadership?
- What do clergy women need for support, training and encouragement to grow as leaders?
- What support, training or opportunities would help you be a better leader?
- How did you become involved as a leader?
- Who encouraged or invited you into leadership?
- How have you been supported as you learned to be a leader?

**The General and Annual Conference Commissions:**
- What does the General Commission do well? What is appreciated? What is helpful?
- What does the General Commission do that is unique and would not be accomplished by others?
- How is the General Commission Perceived? What have you heard people say?
- What does your Annual Conference COSROW do? What have they done well? When have they been helpful?

**Ideas and Recommendations:**
- What would help move women toward a more full and equal participation in the life of the church?
- What does the general church need to know about women in the church?
- What do men and women need to do together to help encourage equality in leadership?

For assistance planning your listening session, contact Audrey Krumbach, director of gender justice and education at akrumbach@gcsrw.org or by phone.