

Quick to Listen

For Better Discussions in Our Churches

“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak...”

—James 1:19

For forty years, Pastor Church Resources has worked to promote a culture of encouragement, discernment and relationships in churches and classis within the CRCNA. Few skills are more foundational to our work than the skill of listening well. Yet, as simple as it sounds to listen well, we find congregations consistently getting into trouble because they struggle to practice listening at the scale and depth required. For this reason, we want to share with you one of our favorite tools to encourage better listening in congregations: a *talking piece* for a *listening circle*.

A talking piece itself is often unremarkable. A talking piece can be any physical object easily passed from person to person in a room: like a stone, a stuffed animal or a soft ball.

But what the talking piece represents is both remarkable and simple. What's simple about a talking piece is its premise:

Whoever holds the talking piece is invited to speak. Whoever does not have the talking piece is invited to listen. What's remarkable about the talking piece is that it reliably reduces anxiety,

While listening has been a core Christian practice since the New Testament, the use of a talking piece and listening circle has been particularly developed and shared in the last fifty years by Indigenous communities in the United States and Canada.

invites participation and increases trust among the people who use it.

From youth group to Coffee Break to committee meetings to council, a talking piece can provide a simple but effective structure to transform meetings into listening circles where participation is valued and trust is nurtured.

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How to Use a Talking Piece

- 1 Pick the Moment.** As leader of a group, select one part of the meeting where you would hope for wide participation or where you might expect some strong emotions to surface..
- 2 Select a talking piece.** Some choose an object merely because it is nearby. Others select an object with some symbolic meaning like a stone representing our strong foundation in Christ.
- 3 Prepare the question(s).** The prepared question(s) will guide everyone's response, so they should be well-considered. They could be questions from a Bible study lesson. Or, they could be something related to your meeting's agenda. For example...

Example One: Hear from Everyone: Before opening discussion on an item of business before a committee, ask each person to respond.

“What have you been thinking about as you prepared to come to this meeting?”

Example Two: A Check-Out: At the end of a meeting where there has been meaningful (or heated) discussion, ask people to respond to one or more of the following questions:

“What did you observe that you want to thank God for?”

“What did you observe that you regret or lament and that you want to ask God's mercy for?”

“What do you hope for the future of our group?”

4 Explain the Rules:

1. Only the person with the talking piece may speak.
2. No interruptions or commentary from the group.
3. You may decline to speak by saying “pass” when the talking piece is handed to you.
4. The talking piece will be passed around the circle once, and everyone will have one opportunity to respond to the question(s).
5. Listen to understand, not to argue.

5 Listen:

1. Tell the story of the talking piece.
2. State the question.
3. Pass the talking piece.
4. Start listening.

