

Listening with our ears, not our mouths

Twelve-step groups have a rule against crosstalk. It's a good rule for churches, too.

by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [May 10, 2017](#) issue



Thinkstock

“This is going to be hard for me,” said Mary, an energetic member of the congregation who had asked me to assist in a project described as “taking the pulse of our church” and “planning for the next chapter of our life.” Though I had known Mary for less than an hour, I was inclined to agree. She was clearly an extrovert and a bright person who thrived on a rapid-fire exchange of thoughts and ideas.

What Mary figured would be tough was following the “no cross talk” guideline I had proposed as the modus operandi.

“No cross talk” is a standard practice in 12-step or recovery groups. It works like this: when a person in the group talks about his or her recovery, or the temptations faced or the hope and healing found, others in the group do not address the person directly or comment on what’s been said. Only the person who has the floor speaks (within an agreed-upon time limit). Others listen.

“Dave,” for example, introduces himself and launches into whatever it is he needs to say about the topic of the meeting. He doesn’t talk about a previous speaker’s comments. He speaks only for himself. When he finishes, Dave may thank the others, and they may respond with “Thanks, Dave.” That’s it. Another speaker begins, or there may be silence until someone else is ready to speak.

“No cross talk” means that people don’t make comments that may cause the person speaking to feel unsafe or inadequate. Comments like “I don’t think you really understand,” or “When you’ve been around longer, you’ll get it,” or the one often heard in church conversations, “We’ve tried that before.”

The no cross talk rule means not only that no one judges or corrects a speaker but that no one jumps in to take care of the speaker. The person who speaks may become tongue-tied with frustration or shame. They may break down and weep as they speak of past or present failures. Someone may pass the Kleenex, but no one rushes in to say “Oh, I’m so sorry” or “Really, it’s not that bad” or gives the distressed person a hug. Such signs of support may be offered when the meeting is over.

When people refrain from advice or ever so slightly judgmental comments, they create a safety zone. And when they hold back from taking care of a person in distress, they’re encouraging accountability. Every person has come to work, to speak her or his own truth.

If there is no advice given, no fixing or judging, and no caretaking, what is it that the group *does* offer? Listening. Deep listening. Someone is heard—without comment, without rebuttal, without affirmation or applause. It turns out that this is a gift. As David Augsburger puts it, “Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable.”

At Mary’s congregation, I gave the 15 or so small groups two questions to work with, with the no cross talk rule in effect. The questions were “Where do you sense God’s presence in the life of our church today?” and “Where do you think God is calling us to go in the future?” The groups were to take the questions one at a time and give each person the opportunity to speak for up to three minutes while the others listened. One member of the group was to take notes on the comments, but without recording who was speaking. If someone felt a need to respond verbally to a speaker, I suggested he or she say “Thank you” (and no more) when the person was

finished.

It's a gift to be heard without comment, rebuttal, or applause.

When we took a break Mary rushed over to me. "That was amazing," she said. "In our group some people spoke who never say anything. Great comments, too. Wow, what insight! And, honestly, it was such a relief to not have to say anything, to just listen. I think we heard one another in a new way—at least I know I did."

Using "no cross talk" in the church makes the table around which we gather safe and inclusive. We dismantle established hierarchies and pecking orders. Those who seldom speak tend to feel safe, while those who tend to speak often get exactly the same opportunity and attention as everyone else. The element of who will win or prevail is eliminated. Moreover, everyone gets to listen, to ponder the words they have heard, and to listen for what the Holy Spirit might be saying to the church through another's words. The practice is particularly valuable in the early stages of planning or discernment. In later stages, participants must make choices and set priorities. But getting everyone engaged at the beginning makes a difference in the rest of the process.

The use of "no cross talk" can serve well in other settings too. In Bible studies, a leader might adapt a *lectio divina* approach to scripture by saying, "Let's try this with no cross talk. We will read the passage aloud once, then take a moment in silence for everyone to read it again to themselves. After that we will go around the circle. I invite each person to share a word or phrase from today's passage that has jumped out at you. No comments, just the words from the passage that grab you or intrigue you.

"Then we'll read the passage aloud one more time and go around the circle again. This time I invite you to respond to this question: What do you hear God saying to *you* in today's reading? Remember, no cross talk! Don't address the speaker or comment on what they say. I'll let you know when your three minutes are up. Your job is to speak for yourself and then, when someone else is speaking, to listen carefully."

The process doesn't preclude providing some useful background information about a biblical passage, either in written form before the session or as an introduction to the session. But the background information should be brief. The idea here is to move from "this is the meaning of this passage" to "How do you hear God speaking

to *you* through this reading?"

There is a theological conviction behind this no cross talk practice. We're listening not only to what others are saying but also to what God is saying to us and what God is saying to the church. In a standard discussion, with its rapid-fire and often judgmental responses, our egos can become so engaged that we can't hear what God may be saying. In the thoughts shared without cross talk, in the silences between speakers or while listeners wait, and in the attentive and nonjudgmental listening of others, God has a chance to get at us, to get a word in our conversation. We may receive the prompting and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

At the end of the day Mary said, "It wasn't as difficult as I thought it would be, that no cross talk thing. I enjoyed just listening. But there was something else to it, more than just hearing each other in a new way. Somehow, when we didn't need to worry so much about the outcome or try to control things, it was like we were letting God be part of it; like we were letting or asking God to, well, be God."

A version of this article appears in the May 10 print edition under the title "The 'no cross talk' rule."