Consultation and discernment tools for churches and deaneries

This handout offers practical ideas for creating thoughtful, balanced consultation at different levels within deaneries.

Shared principle
Before discussion, ask everyone individually to consider their response. Try to find a way to collect the responses and group them into themes before opening the conversation. This prevents the first speaker from framing the whole discussion and creates space for quieter voices.

This is particularly useful for mixed groups of clergy and lay leaders, situations where hierarchy may influence contributions, and larger synod gatherings.

As you work together prayerfully consider: Where is the energy? Where might God be leading?

1. Emmaus Road Conversation: reflect on what God may be saying

What it is: A structured conversation based on the Emmaus Road story (Luke 24), helping a group move from describing current reality to prayerfully discerning where God may be at work.
How to do it:

1. Ask participants: **What are we noticing in our churches, communities and deanery?**
2. Then ask: **What puzzles, concerns or discourages us?**
3. Invite reflection on: **What scriptures, experiences or signs of hope help us make sense of what we are seeing?**
4. Finally ask: **Where might Christ be walking alongside us and calling us next?**
5. Record emerging themes and areas of convergence rather than seeking immediate decisions.

Best used for: Early-stage discernment, making sense of complex situations, and helping groups listen for God's activity before discussing specific solutions.

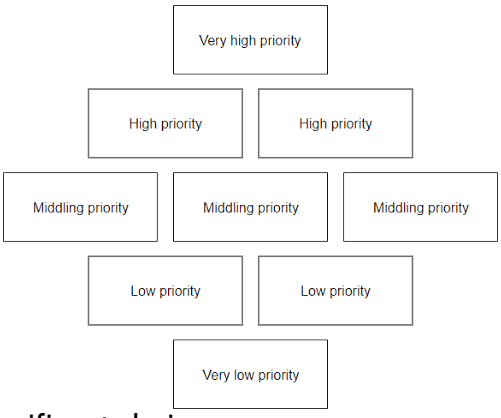
2. Consolation and Desolation: test what gives life

What it is: A discernment tool from the Ignatian tradition that helps groups notice their spiritual response to different possibilities. Rather than asking what people prefer, it asks where they experience signs of God's life-giving presence.
How to do it:

1. Present a possible future direction, proposal or priority.
2. Ask participants to reflect silently before discussion.
3. Under **Consolation**, record where people experience faith, hope, joy, peace, energy, freedom or a sense of calling.
4. Under **Desolation**, record where people experience anxiety, fear, narrowing of vision, loss of purpose, resentment or discouragement.
5. Discuss what patterns are emerging across the group.
6. Ask: **What might God be drawing us towards, and what might need further testing or prayer?**

Best used for: Spiritual discernment where there are several possible options, testing significant changes, and helping groups distinguish between personal preference and a shared sense of God's leading.

3. Diamond 9: rank priorities



What it is: Participants rank nine ideas, statements, or priorities in a diamond shape: one most important at the top, two next, three in the middle, two below, and one least important at the bottom.

How to do it:

1. Provide nine options, or ask the group to reduce a longer list to nine.
2. Invite participants to discuss or sort the options into a provisional diamond.
3. Ask the group to test the placement of each option, especially those where views differ.
4. Agree the final ranking together, recording the reasons for significant choices.
5. Note which priorities are shared and which differences may need further discernment.

Best used for: Prioritising competing priorities, making differences visible, and moving from a long list to a small number of shared priorities.

4. Start, Stop Continue: review current practice



What it is: Participants consider what the deanery should keep doing, stop doing, and start doing.

How to do it:

1. Ask everyone to write individual responses under the three headings: **Keep or Continue**, **Stop**, and **Start**.
2. Collect the responses and place them under the relevant heading without debating them immediately.
3. Group similar responses into themes, keeping the wording visible where possible.
4. Invite the group to discuss what the themes suggest about current practice.
5. Choose a small number of actions, including what will be maintained, changed, or tried next.

Best used for: Reviewing current practice, identifying quick improvements, and creating a balanced conversation that recognises strengths as well as changes needed.

5. 2x2 Matrix Prioritisation: weigh ideas against criteria

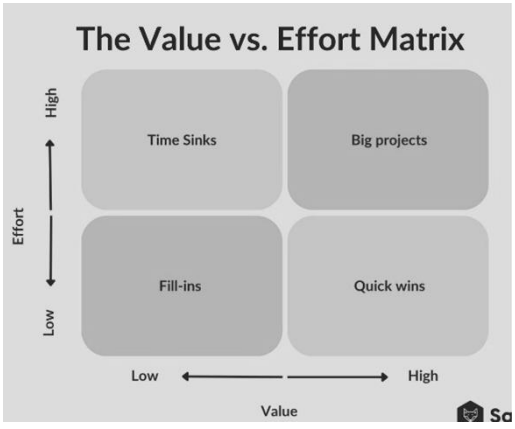
What it is: A way to balance ideas against two sometimes competing criteria

How to do it:

1. Put two axes on a flipchart: **e.g. High Impact ⟷ Low Impact; Easy to Implement ⟷ Difficult to Implement**
2. Invite people to place ideas onto the matrix.

This helps distinguish:

- "great idea but unrealistic"
- "quick win"
- "major strategic priority"



Particularly useful for: deanery synod discussions where lots of suggestions emerge.

6. What Must Be True?: test a future proposal

What it is: The group explores the conditions required for a possible future scenario to succeed, rather than arguing immediately for or against the idea.

How to do it:

1. Present a specific scenario, such as: "In five years' time the deanery operates as a much more collaborative network of parishes."
2. Ask: **"What would need to be true for that to succeed?"**
3. Capture responses under capabilities, behaviours, relationships, resources, and any other useful categories.
4. Identify which conditions are already present and which need developing.
5. Ask who could help create each missing condition and agree the next practical questions or actions.

Best used for: Testing proposals, planning change, exploring future ways of working, and identifying enablers before deciding whether to support an idea.

7. Dot voting for congregations: sense priorities quickly

What it is: Participants vote on a clear set of ideas or options using a set number of dots or votes.

How to do it:

1. Present a clear number of ideas or options, with each one described in the same level of detail.
2. Give each person the same number of dots or votes, explaining that they may put all their dots on one priority or spread them across several.
3. Ask people to vote individually, without influence from neighbouring conversations.
4. Count the dots visibly and record the result.
5. Use the result as an indication of collective priority, not as a substitute for discernment or further discussion.

Best used for: Larger congregations, quickly identifying priorities, narrowing a long list, and giving everyone an equal visible opportunity to register support.

Choosing the right tool

Tool	Best for
Emmaus Road	Early stage engagement, grounded in scripture
Consolation and Desolation	Testing spiritual responses rather than personal preferences
Diamond 9	Ranking priorities and making differences visible.
Keep, Stop, Start	Reviewing current practice and identifying balanced improvements.
2x2 Matrix	Evaluating ideas against two important criteria
What must be true?	Practical future planning and identifying enablers.
Dot voting	Quickly sensing priorities across a large group.