

ENHANCING CARE GIVING THROUGH LISTENING

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by

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DEDICATION

To Terry,

*My husband, who listens as I share the longings of my heart and  
always encourages me to follow my dreams*

&

To Jonah,

*Our amazing grandson, who has given new life to our family  
and has opened a new world of listening to us.*

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It not only “takes a village to raise a child,” but also to do most other worthwhile things in life. This page is written with love to my “village.”



## ABSTRACT

Project Director: Dr. Nancy Gorsuch. This project proposes that church congregations can be empowered to offer care and compassion more effectively by learning basic listening skills. Because listening is tied so directly to caring for others, church members must be taught to listen more effectively if the church is truly to become a community of love and grace. By learning to listen more intentionally, members can become more effective leaders, teachers, and lay ministers. In an effort to teach listening skills to as many persons as possible, a brief, one-session training was developed. The target group was teachers of high school students (grades nine through twelve). The training also included information about the students they teach. The teachers attended the training session and then met again after one month to evaluate the effectiveness of the training. The high school students completed pre and post evaluations of the listening skills of their teachers. The teachers completed pre and post evaluations of their own listening skills. The training was also given to a group of deacons in the church, who also completed the pre and post evaluations. The research discloses that a brief training is valuable in raising awareness for the need to listen more intentionally. Those participating in the training became aware of their behaviors which impede intentional listening. If congregations are to listen more effectively, a brief training can be an excellent beginning, but it must be combined

with other emphases on listening. The research also underscores for the members the need for listening, when they are not listening, what it means to listen, and how to refrain from giving advice when listening. Even if members do not become experts at using listening skills, they can still convey love, acceptance, and respect as they try to begin caring for others by listening.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project is to empower members of Broadway Baptist Church, Fort Worth, Texas, to care more effectively by learning how to use listening skills. My contention is that if members learn to listen to each other in a more intentional way, they will become more effective leaders, teachers, and lay ministers. The added benefit will be that these skills are transferable to every relationship and will enable members to become better listeners in all areas of their lives.

One does not have to be a minister long to know that all persons yearn for someone who will listen to them. This plea derives from all areas of the church. A member with mental illness says, “I don’t feel that I really exist anymore. Do you understand that? Do you hear what I am saying?” This cry comes from a teenager who says with resignation, “My parents just don’t listen to me.” From the woman whose husband has dementia comes the lament, “We used to talk about everything and now I don’t have anyone who really listens to me anymore.” The act of listening with intentionality conveys caring, understanding, and acceptance in a way that no other ministry can. All other ministries of the church must offer empathy which comes through listening, or they will simply be meeting basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter, and not the deeper need to know that one matters.

If you think back to last week, a conversation can probably be remembered where you are convinced that the person across from you was not listening. Perhaps it was a spouse, child, parent, friend, co-worker or church member.<sup>1</sup> When sensing the other was not listening, this person probably felt a sense of loneliness. Humans desire to live in relationship, one with the other. God created humankind to live in relationship--woman or man alone would live longing for another with whom to share. Listening takes up a major portion of each day, and, yet, for many of us listening is an undeveloped ability.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Banville has suggested that the need to be heard is so important that if listening were completely removed from daily life, people would probably begin talking to themselves. He even suggests the possibility that some forms of mental illness result from the feeling that no one is paying attention.<sup>3</sup> This need to be validated by being heard is not determined by wealth, vocation, or education; this longing is known by every human.

In 1976, a crosscultural survey showed that the average person in the United States converses twice as long as a person in Japan. Those persons from the United States conversed for six hours and forty-three minutes, while the Japanese conversed for three hours and thirty-one minutes. “Westerners speak first, listen second, and

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<sup>1</sup>Ronald B. Adler, Lawrence B. Rosenfeld, and Neil Towne, *Interplay--The Process of Interpersonal Communication* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1986), 131.

<sup>2</sup>Rebecca Z. Shafir, *The Zen of Listening: Mindful Communication in the Age of Distraction* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books/Theosophical Publishing House, 2000), 21.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas G. Banville, *How to Listen--How to Be Heard* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1978), 4.

observe third. Eastern cultures prefer a different order: observe, listen, speak.”<sup>4</sup>

Research shows that listening is the predominant communication tool used by most people. They spend at least 40 percent of each day listening, and, yet, they often do not do it very well.<sup>5</sup> Americans know how to talk, which in and of itself is not a bad thing. Talking becomes problematic when talking prevents one from listening.

I preached a sermon on listening several months ago and began with the old joke about listening. A psychiatrist who was about to retire had an office on the same floor as a new psychiatrist who was young and just beginning to practice. Each day the two rode down on the elevator together, and the young man was so surprised at the way the older doctor never seemed tired. He seemed to have plenty of energy. One day the young man said, “You know I am always in awe at how unfatigued you are at the end of the day. I am just beginning, but by the time I go home in the afternoon, after listening to clients all day, I am so tired. How do you do it?” The older man got a little smile on his face and said, “Who listens?”<sup>6</sup> When I told this joke, the laughter was half-hearted, at best. Could it be because this is such a painful subject for most persons? The congregation may have been shocked to think that someone entrusted to listen to a person’s inner most thoughts, like a psychiatrist, would treat listening so flippantly. The yearning for someone who will show acceptance by listening intently

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 131.

<sup>5</sup>Shafir, 14.

<sup>6</sup>Banville, 6.

is such a strong need, and making a joke about it only points up the lack of a listening ear in our lives.

Recently, Ann Richards, a former governor of Texas died. She was eulogized by the rich and famous, the poor and unknown. One newspaper writer said, "I have known two politicians who completely reformed the bureaucracies they were elected to head . . . Ann Richards did it by working hard to gain the trust of the employees and then listening to what they told her."<sup>7</sup> Similar words were also spoken about a current senator, Hillary Clinton. "She chose the most direct route to developing a relationship with voters--letting them know she wanted to listen."<sup>8</sup> What one finds is that, in all areas of life, folk are looking for a "listening ear." Whether it be politics, church, marriage, friendship, or business, one finds that in all areas of life, folk are hungry for listening.

Some will say that listening is a gift, and they do not have it. Listening is probably much like other abilities--to some listening does come more easily. They seem like naturals, but others have to work much harder at listening. My brother-in-law is a Certified Public Accountant (CPA); he is a math genius. He counts faster than can be imagined, adds long columns of numbers in his head, and remembers who played every card when playing games. Remembering numbers comes very easy to him, but other accountants and even CPAs are good at their jobs, but they have to work at it. Working with numbers is not a special gift with which they were born.

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<sup>7</sup>*Fort Worth Star Telegram* (Fort Worth, TX), 15 September 2006, B-11.

<sup>8</sup>Shafir, 222.

Listening is the same way--it takes practice for everyone, but for some who are not “naturals,” listening is harder and more of a challenge.

In the book of Luke (Luke 10.38-42, RSV) is the story of Jesus’ friends, Mary and Martha. When Jesus went to visit them, Mary sat and listened intently to him, while her sister Martha was up preparing dinner and making sure everyone was comfortable. Martha got rather upset with Mary’s refusal to help her make their guests comfortable. Church members will often report, “I am more of a Martha, I feel more comfortable up, doing something.” Some claim more kinship with Mary whose desire was to sit and listen to Jesus.<sup>9</sup> If people slow down long enough and take the time, even the Marthas can learn to listen with empathy.

Unfortunately, one of the places where people often feel the least listened to is at church. Christians talk about a God who listens and Jesus who listened, but a disconnect exists between what is said and what is believed and how people relate to each other. Many people share themselves to their hair dresser or bar tender, because they feel more comfortable talking there than at church.<sup>10</sup> Recently a young woman told me she was changing churches, because she felt that no one had truly gotten to know her; she felt that no one really listened to her at her church. She was going to try another church to see if it would be different there. Hopefully, it will be, but it is entirely possible that it will not.

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<sup>9</sup>Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray Without Ceasing--Revitalizing Pastoral Care* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006), 55.

<sup>10</sup>Morton T. Kelsey, *Caring* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 71.

Last spring, Broadway Baptist Church trained its first group of Stephen Ministers. The fifty hours of training is long and hard and not for the faint of heart. At the core of the training is the module on Listening Skills. When the new Stephen Ministers were commissioned, each one related how this newly found knowledge had transformed all their relationships. They said they had never realized how poor they were at listening. Family members and friends commented on the change that was evident in the way they had begun caring for others by listening.

This paper will explore the need for better listening skills: what skills can help people be better listeners, what particular disciplines have to say (or not say) about intentional listening, how one congregation responded when given the opportunity to learn to become better listeners, and some ways to help others offer the same opportunity to their congregations. My prayer is that congregations may learn to care by becoming a community of faith which offers God's love and grace through the gift of intentional listening.

Many kinds of listening exist. The focus of this paper is "therapeutic listening," in which the speaker is offered empathy and understanding by the listener, but each kind of listening is valuable and has its place.<sup>11</sup> Thomas Gordon calls this kind of listening "active listening," and others have used the same term. Some have preferred to use the term, "empathic listening." I have chosen to use the term, "intentional listening," to refer to empathic listening, which is best accomplished by offering care and acceptance through listening for understanding.

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<sup>11</sup>See chapter five for a discussion of the different kinds of listening.



Robert Shippey recently wrote *Listening in a Loud World*. In the following story, he admits his own struggles:

When it comes to holy listening, I write as one on the journey and not as an expert who leads the way. One of the more humorous moments in writing this book on holy listening occurred late in the process when I was up against the publisher's deadline for receipt of the manuscript. I was in a moment of creativity and was busily writing when my wife called. I could not be present because I was too addicted to my task. I kept writing ever so gently touching the keys on the keyboard and somehow thinking, "If I type quietly enough, she will not know what I'm doing." But Cheryl is perceptive. Finally, after a few minutes of conversation, she quietly said, "When you are through writing about listening and are ready to listen, call me." Wow! I got the message and was reminded that for all of my thoughts about listening, I still have a very long way to go.<sup>12</sup>

Shippey speaks for each of us--learning to listen is a process which takes practice.

Thankfully, God does not give up on us and gives us grace to keep on trying. May we be as kind to ourselves.

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<sup>12</sup>Robert C. Shippey, *Listening in a Loud World* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 10.

## CHAPTER 1

### LISTENING AS A PARADIGM FOR CARING

*More and more I've come to understand that listening is one of the most important things we can do for one another. Whether the other be an adult or child, our engagement in listening to who that person can often be our greatest gift. Whether that person is speaking or playing or dancing, building or singing or painting, if we care, we can listen.*<sup>13</sup>

Fred Rogers-- *The World According to Mister Rogers*

Unborn babies first use the sense of listening to become acquainted with the world outside the womb when they hear the sound of their mother's voice. Listening is also the last way one connects with the world in the final days before dying. Hospice workers tell families to talk with their loved ones, because the sense of listening is "the last thing to go." In between birth and death, listening is vital to all human relationships--spouse and spouse, parent and child, employer and employee, pastor and congregation, teacher and student, friend and friend, sister and brother--yet, most people have little training in how to listen effectively to another.

We live in a world full of talking, yet most of the time it is just talk, because it feels as if no one is really listening. Even though one can speak at a rate of one hundred and twenty to one hundred and fifty words per minute, the listening process goes much faster--five hundred words a minute. This is one reason that makes it hard

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<sup>13</sup>Fred Rogers, *The World According to Mister Rogers* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), 171.

to be attentive to a longer conversation, because most persons can listen so much faster than they speak.<sup>14</sup>

Answering machines make it easy for us to avoid talking to a “real person.” Getting help when calling businesses is difficult, because rarely do we hear the voice of a person, a recorded voice is more usual. The family dinner table is often a place where members talk on top of one another, rather than listening. Kathy Thompson, who teaches courses on conversation at Alverno College in Milwaukee, was quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* as saying that this nation has become a nation of interrupters. Thompson says, “At our house we warn new friends to be careful because we treat conversation like a competitive sport. The first one to take a breath is considered the listener.”<sup>15</sup>

People in the twenty-first century can be connected with others in so many ways--Ipods, cell phones, television, e-mail, and Internet, but much is lost because of the failure to engage in face-to-face interactions. This failure causes many connections to be superficial, and so much is lost when we are not looking at the other person.<sup>16</sup> Computers have made conversation impersonal. From church committee meetings to marriage proposals, every kind of interaction imaginable is conducted by e-mail. One writer has suggested that 93 percent of a speaker’s meaning comes to the

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<sup>14</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1998), 14.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>16</sup>Shafir, 244.

listener through gestures, voice tone, and facial expression.<sup>17</sup> Because of the multiple ways to connect with others, more relationships are being formed today, but the lack of depth prevents one from feeling truly connected to others.<sup>18</sup>

When seeking a listening ear, therapists, call-in radio hosts, and clergy persons are often the ones people turn to, because they are paid to listen. If a person cannot be heard anywhere else, maybe one of these will take the time to pay attention. Many go online seeking a listening ear in a chatroom.<sup>19</sup> A friend shared recently that he went online to a sports chatroom to talk about sports; instead, he found young teens who were at the site to find someone to talk with, because no one at home would listen to them. They were lonely and searching for anyone who would make them feel important by giving them attention.

For many, listening is taken for granted, because it is seen as such a basic skill.<sup>20</sup> Yet, listening is crucial, because it is one means of meeting the human need to be “recognized and acknowledged by others.”<sup>21</sup> Our spirits long to be heard-- “everyone needs to be heard and nearly everyone can listen.”<sup>22</sup> Michael Nichols, in the *Lost Art of Listening*, says that the loss of listening leaves us with “. . . an ever-

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 243.

<sup>19</sup>Taylor, *When God is Silent*, 15.

<sup>20</sup>Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995), 11.

<sup>21</sup>Adler, Rosenfeld, and Towne, 135.

<sup>22</sup>Robert Brizee, *The Gift of Listening* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993), 1.

widening hole in our lives. It might begin as a vague sense of discontent, sadness, or deprivation. We miss the irreplaceable sustenance of lending an attentive ear and of receiving the same in return, but we don't know what's wrong or how to fix it. Over time this lack of listening invades our most prized relationships. Within couples and families we unnecessarily hurt each other by failing to acknowledge what each other says. Whatever the arena, our hearts experience the failure to be heard as an absence of concern."<sup>23</sup>

Choosing to listen is an affirmation of the speaker.<sup>24</sup> Such a feeling of disappointment is present when one rushes home to tell someone about what happened at work, and no one will look up from the paper, television, or computer long enough to listen, or even worse, the house is dark and quiet because no one is at home. Our hearts sink when desperately calling a friend because of a problem we are experiencing, and the voice on the answering machine indicates no one is available--a message is left, and the call is never returned.<sup>25</sup> When we do not receive the gift of listening, we feel alone. For some, that is a "piercing pain."<sup>26</sup> For others, this pain can leave them so wounded and bitter and cause them to back away from all relationships.<sup>27</sup> On any day of the week, usually more "expert" talkers are engaging in

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<sup>23</sup>Nichols, 2.

<sup>24</sup>Adler, Rosenfeld, and Towne, 135.

<sup>25</sup>Nichols, 11.

<sup>26</sup>Earl Koile, *Listening as a Way of Becoming* (Waco, TX: Calibre, 1978), 29.

<sup>27</sup>Nichols, 13.

conversation than listeners.<sup>28</sup> The silence of not being listened to does communicate to us that we are not accepted.<sup>29</sup>

One psychoanalyst has said that, “Solitude, psychological solitude, is the mother of anxiety.”<sup>30</sup> The lack of listening can affect a person both emotionally and physically. With the world becoming smaller by the day, that persons learn to listen and listen well gains even more importance. The culture was once much more homogeneous--most people around us looked like us, spoke the same language, had a similar faith, and shared common values. In today’s world, we are more likely to work in bilingual offices, talk with someone from India when conducting business on the phone, and live next door to a Muslim family who worships at a mosque. The possibilities for misunderstandings have been multiplied because of the pluralistic society. This society presents wonderful possibilities, but also brings great responsibility for to become better listeners. Humans must remember that no matter how diverse the culture becomes, people everywhere still desire to be accepted and understood. Listening remains a primary way to offer this kind of empathy to another.

When given the gift of being understood, through listening, we are enabled to form deeper relationships and live happier, more effective lives. These deeper

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<sup>28</sup>Banville, 5.

<sup>29</sup>Thomas Gordon, *Parent Effectiveness Training* (New York: Peter H. Wyden, 1970), 37.

<sup>30</sup>Quoted in Nichols, 29.

relationships give “outlets for our anger and frustration, richer ways to experience love and joy, and in short, find new dimensions of our humanness.”<sup>31</sup>

A failure has existed on the part of many to teach the importance of listening, as well as, how to listen. This failure can be attributed to home, school, business, and church. To remember that listening is a behavior, and as such, can be “taught, learned, changed, corrected, and re-learned” is important.<sup>32</sup>

In the home, parents fail to model what being a good listener means; many parents really do not listen to their children.<sup>33</sup> One problem is relearning what having “family time” means, learning what living “together” means. Living together is more than filling every available minute with scheduled activities or leaving children alone to fend for themselves. Teens state that one of the primary issues for them is loneliness.<sup>34</sup> Parents often feel that every encounter with a child should be a “teaching” moment, so they “teach and correct and deprecate and ridicule the messages they hear” from their children.<sup>35</sup>

Somehow parents have been given the message that their job is to “tell” their children all the things they are doing wrong and how to think and do the “right” thing.

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<sup>31</sup>Koile, 24.

<sup>32</sup>Carl H. Weaver, *Human Listening Processes and Behavior* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1972), vi-vii.

<sup>33</sup>Gordon, 83.

<sup>34</sup>Sam Hestorff, *YM2K-Youth Ministry for the Millennial Generation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2006), 6.

<sup>35</sup>Gorton, 83.

The pressure is on, and parents cannot relax--if they do not do it, who will? Another consideration is early exposure to computers or other electronic media. Infants are sitting in front of computers or television screens to watch "Baby Einstein" which is produced by Disney. Parents are thrilled, because young children (under one) are "mesmerized by these programs. Many parents seem to think that this will make their children smarter and help them learn important skills, faster."<sup>36</sup> Seemingly, parents have been duped into thinking that they are providing an educational experience for their babies, when in actuality, more learning would probably take place through interaction with a parent or other adult.

Rebecca Shafir, in *The Zen of Listening*, gives this warning, "might a lack of sufficient face-to-face real-time personal interaction create an emotional fallout that could shorten our life spans? Could we forget how to create meaningful relationships with family members and how to make friends off the Internet? Could our people skills become extinct? Might feelings of compassion and caring be only fond childhood memories? Might our children view compassion and caring as an awkward or disturbed behavior?"<sup>37</sup>

The failure to teach listening in the home can have life-and-death implications. For instance, learning to listen might mean fewer incidences of family violence. Researchers have found that if a parent is home for dinner, a "reduced incidence of

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<sup>36</sup>This information comes from my conversations with my daughter (who is the mother of a one-year-old) and her friends.

<sup>37</sup>Shafir, 15.



drug use, sex, violence, and emotional distress among teens” occurs.<sup>38</sup> Only one-third of families in the United States say they have their evening meal together on a daily basis.<sup>39</sup> The dinner meal once was the time when students learned to debate, listen critically, and take turns.<sup>40</sup> Value exists in an evening spent playing a board game as a family, a walk taken together, or sitting in the room with children as they play freely.

Banville has suggested that teaching children to listen means fostering an environment of “openness, love, and acceptance” so that parents and children can come to understand themselves and each other.<sup>41</sup> To offer the gift of listening to others, we must first have some understanding of our own feelings.<sup>42</sup> The home is the place where this process first begins. For parents to understand their importance in teaching children to listen to themselves and to others is imperative.

Many elementary and high schools have also failed to encourage listening, because they have placed an enormous emphasis on writing skills. With the movement toward “Whole Language Curriculum,” students have been encouraged to write, write, write. Spelling, grammar, and punctuation are not a high priority, only that students learn to put their thoughts and ideas on paper. Unfortunately, the emphasis on listening for information and to each other has not been stressed by

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>39</sup>Hestorff, 15.

<sup>40</sup>Shafir, 222.

<sup>41</sup>Banville, 83.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

teachers. They have forgotten that writing is enhanced when the authors listen to the world around them.<sup>43</sup> “Accent is placed on the cognitive factors of language, not on the effective or feeling factors.”<sup>44</sup> This is a generalization, and pockets may exist throughout the country where listening has been emphasized, but as a general rule that has not been the case. The ability to excel in other communication skills--reading, speaking, and writing--is dependent on the skills of listening and concentration.<sup>45</sup> Studies have shown that elementary students usually spend 57.5 percent of the time in the classroom listening, high school students--66 percent, and college--52 to 90 percent.<sup>46</sup> Even though much of their time is given to listening, little is done to teach them “how” to listen.

Seminaries and divinity schools, which train ministers for vocational ministry, have also failed to teach their students how to be effective listeners. Some students might get some training in listening skills, if they take a class in pastoral theology or counseling, or if they take a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE).<sup>47</sup> Yet, most of the emphasis in the pastorate is on speaking when “. . . both the tradition of the Christian faith and its daily ministry strongly bear out the fact that--culturally and

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<sup>43</sup>This information comes from my ten years of experience as a public school teacher in three states.

<sup>44</sup>Banville, 106.

<sup>45</sup>Shafir, 222.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Susan K. Hedahl, *Listening Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 15.

spiritually--ministers are expected to be listeners as a prior qualification for anything else they might do.<sup>48</sup>

In 1997, a group of ministers met in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to talk about listening. One participant voiced the question for the whole group, “Who will teach us to listen for God--and to each other?”<sup>49</sup> Out of that meeting came a class offered at Gettysburg Lutheran Theological Seminary.<sup>50</sup> The class was “. . . intrigued with what it meant to view ministry primarily as a listener rather than as speaker and doer.”<sup>51</sup> Sadly, this has not become a required class in every seminary or divinity school.

If ministers have not learned how to listen in their homes, schools, or seminaries, why would we think that, on becoming pastors, the skill to listen is automatically conferred? In many denominations, the “pastor” is seen as an expert on faith, theology, morality, and the significant issues of life. Because of this, it is easy for the pastor to fall into the trap of becoming a “talker” or “speaker” who thinks that all the congregants need is information on how to live life, rather than understanding the importance of the pastor as an effective listener. Ministers also may be uncomfortable with their own feelings and have difficulty listening to others express

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 95.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 3.

feelings.<sup>52</sup> If a minister has few skills as a listener, to model for the congregation what it means to listen will be difficult.

The failure to be “listening” churches affects ministries in a multitude of ways. A crucial failure is the lack of listening to young people in the congregations. One pastor in Boston led a group of clergy to take back a Boston neighborhood run by drug dealers. A young heroin dealer told him the following about the failure of Christians to be a listening presence in the lives of the churches’ youth: “I’m going to explain to you Christians, who are such good preachers, why you are losing an entire generation. Listen, this is really all about being there. When Johnny goes to school in the morning, I’m there, you’re not. When Johnny comes home from school in the afternoon, I’m there, you’re not. When Johnny goes out for a loaf of bread for Grandma for dinner, I’m there, you’re not. I win, you lose.”<sup>53</sup>

Many church members fail to take time to listen closely enough to know of the pain of others in the congregation. To pass one another and glibly offer a “hello” or “how are you?” but quickly walk down the hall without paying any attention to the answer is easy. One of the saddest moments for ministers is to hear of the divorce of a couple in the church and find that not one person in the congregation, including the pastor, knew about it. Then, when the pastor or congregant visits the couple, they sit

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<sup>52</sup>These observations have been noted during my fifty-plus years of life experience in the local church and fifteen-plus years of experience in theological education.

<sup>53</sup>Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 74. This story is printed in Eugene Rivers, “New Wineskins, New Models and Visions for a New Century,” in *An Unexpected Prophet: What the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church Can Learn from Youth Ministry--the 1999 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church and Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2000), 87.

and talk for an hour without ever mentioning their impending divorce. Little emphasis has been placed on listening in the Christian community.<sup>54</sup> If members sense that no one is listening to their deepest feelings, they are not likely to feel that the church is a place where they can be open and honest.

Listening skills could be used quite effectively in committee meetings in the church. Carl Rogers suggested that a conflict arises in a small group, institute this rule: "Each person can speak up for himself [herself] only after he has restated the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately, and to that speaker's satisfaction."<sup>55</sup> This would mean that committee members would have to try to understand the other members of the group. Congregations also fail to listen to each other during conflict in the church. Often, members decide what they think and become determined not to be swayed by the facts. Because listening can be learned, hope is present that individuals and churches will learn to be better listeners.

Some churches are trying to correct this problem. One of the ways churches have tried to teach congregants to listen is by instituting the Stephen Ministry. Stephen Ministers must complete fifty hours of training before a care receiver is assigned. A major component of this training is learning to listen. Persons are selected on the basis of their potential to minister as a Christian caregiver to persons in crisis, so the number of members trained as Stephen Ministers is usually a small percentage of the whole congregation.

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<sup>54</sup>Kelsey, 67.

<sup>55</sup>Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961), 332.

Other congregations have also begun ministries which require members to learn how to listen. One denomination knew of the plight of farmers in their area, so they trained more than one hundred people to listen to farmers. Listening centers were opened in a variety of places around the state, and farmers were told listeners were available.<sup>56</sup> This act of Christian care encouraged the farmers and gave them strength as they realized they were not alone in their plight. Members of another church, in an area affected by the closing of a large business, visited the members from the church who were involved. Their ministry was to listen and try to bring help if possible.<sup>57</sup>

Morton Kelsey writes about a church he served in southern California which has listening classes as part of their education program. The woman who started the classes said that, “. . . it was hypocrisy to speak of Christian love where there are no classes in listening.”<sup>58</sup> No one could teach in this church’s educational program who had not had the listening classes.<sup>59</sup> These are examples of churches that are trying to encourage the ministry of listening among some of their members.

Stephen Covey, in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, says, “Next to physical survival, the greatest need of a human being is psychological survival--to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated. He goes on to say that

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<sup>56</sup>John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills in Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 8.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Kelsey, 78.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

when one listens with empathy to another, the speaker is given psychological air.”<sup>60</sup> Just as life is dependent on the air breathed, healthy living does not happen without psychological air which brings affirmation and understanding.

Intentional listening is one way people can receive this psychological air.<sup>61</sup> This kind of listening is powerful and can be a means for helping the speaker make changes. A freedom exists in this kind of transforming care.<sup>62</sup> The listener empathizes in such a way as to become a “fellow traveler” with another.<sup>63</sup> Intentional listening is sacrificial listening, because the listener must give up the desire to take back the conversation; it means putting another first.<sup>64</sup>

Martin Buber writes about the “I-Thou” relationship which comes about when one enters into a mutual relationship of care and concern with another--to do less is depersonalizing and dehumanizing.<sup>65</sup> Miller and Jackson describe it this way: “You are so important to me that I want to understand exactly what you mean, and I’ll keep my own material out of it for now so that it doesn’t get in the way.” Most people will

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<sup>60</sup>Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 241.

<sup>61</sup>Shafir, 12.

<sup>62</sup>Nichols, 226.

<sup>63</sup>Gordon, 58.

<sup>64</sup>William R. Miller and Kathleen A. Jackson, *Practical Psychology for Pastors* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 53.

<sup>65</sup>Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1965), xiv.

like and respect you for caring enough to give them this gift. Good listening is caring.<sup>66</sup>

When offering the gift of listening, one possible outcome is a relationship of care and concern, but many people have less than five or ten minutes of intentional listening given to them each week.<sup>67</sup> When listening with understanding, “real communication” can occur, because we attempt to see things from the “other’s” point of view, rather than remaining stuck in what is perceived to be the truth.<sup>68</sup> Listening can be a creative process as one helps the other struggle with any and all of the issues life brings to us.<sup>69</sup> Leonard and Natalie Zunin write, “If every time we met someone we gave him [her] our full and complete attention for four minutes, come hell or high water, it could change lives.”<sup>70</sup>

Since listening is a way of caring for each other, that it should and can happen within a community makes sense. Though not easy, listening is also a way of building community.<sup>71</sup> Tilden H. Edwards says that “. . . community is ‘what everyone wants but almost no one is able to sustain well for long.’”<sup>72</sup> This kind of caring is common

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<sup>66</sup>Miller and Jackson, 53.

<sup>67</sup>Dean, 53.

<sup>68</sup>Rogers, *Becoming a Person*, 331-32.

<sup>69</sup>Brizee, 40.

<sup>70</sup>Quoted in Banville, 17-18.

<sup>71</sup>Shafir, 69.

<sup>72</sup>Gerrit Scott Dawson, Adele Gonzalez, E. Glenn Hinson, Rueben P. Job, Marjorie J. Thompson, and Wendy Wright, *Companions in Christ—Participant Book* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2001), 56.



in communities like support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, where participants discover they are not alone and where they find the “fellow travelers” who will listen.<sup>73</sup>

Listening can help build a sense of community, in which being respectful and patient is easy.<sup>74</sup> “Being listened to means that we are taken seriously, that our ideas and feelings are known and, ultimately, that what we have to say matters.”<sup>75</sup> God’s love and grace can form a group into a community.<sup>76</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that “Christian brotherhood [sisterhood] is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.”<sup>77</sup> Bonhoeffer also suggests that care and concern is communicated within the community by listening to each other.<sup>78</sup> When living in community with Christian sisters and brothers, catching a glimpse of God’s love and grace is possible. God did not create people to be alone, but to walk together. Christian community is a way of being together and giving

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<sup>73</sup>Shafir, 239.

<sup>74</sup>Hedahl, 69.

<sup>75</sup>Nichols, 9.

<sup>76</sup>Dawson et al., 58.

<sup>77</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper, 1954), 30.

<sup>78</sup>Howard W. Stone, *The Caring Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 45.

oneself to God.<sup>79</sup> Living in relationship with others enables persons to see and hear themselves most clearly.<sup>80</sup>

Listening has been a part of many spiritual traditions for a long time<sup>81</sup>--some groups just seem to listen better than others. Thankfully, Christians can continue learning and growing as listeners and can “open our lives to the fullness of God, the vitality of the community, and the calling of humble service.”<sup>82</sup> For Christians who want what happens on Sunday mornings to make a difference in the way they live, careful listening should be a way of life. Jesus was able to discern what each person needed. He knew when to listen, when to confront, and when to ask questions. When listening was needed, Jesus could listen beyond and beneath the words. He listened, and people felt loved and cared for; they felt understood and appreciated. If Jesus is the example, then Christians are called to be more effective listeners.

Because listening is tied so directly to caring for one another, church members must be taught to listen more effectively if the church is truly to become a community of love and grace. Nichols, says, “the power of empathic listening is the power to transform relationships.”<sup>83</sup> Most faith traditions purport that their call is to “transform lives,” and listening to one another is one way to fulfill that call. If listening is loving

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<sup>79</sup>Marjorie J. Thompson and Stephen D. Bryant, *Companions in Christ--Exploring the Way--Participant's Book* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2005), 49.

<sup>80</sup>Dawson et al., 56.

<sup>81</sup>Hedahl, 7.

<sup>82</sup>Shippey, 2.

<sup>83</sup>Nichols, 10.

and caring for one created in the image of God, then for the Christian, no other way exists than to listen to the deep longings of the heart of another. More effective listening within the church will help others to sense that a more caring and compassionate community exists.

CHAPTER 2  
A THEOLOGY OF LISTENING

*Be still and know that I am God.*  
Psalm 46:10

*Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is  
my son, my Chosen; listen to him!"*  
Luke 9:35

That people of faith understand the theological tenets which inform our belief that God has called us to offer love and care for each other by listening is imperative. The call to listen as a way of caring is born out of that call to care. This means beginning with an understanding of the call to listen which comes from what is known about God through one's own experience, the experience of others, and through the words of Scripture. The concern for and attention to a theology of listening is what makes pastoral listening distinct from other kinds of listening.

When I was in my twenties, I was in a Sunday School class where the teacher said, "As we go through this quarter we will share our personal theology." I panicked, because I thought to herself, "I do not have a theology! Do I? How can I share if I am not sure of my own theology?" I came to realize that persons of faith, especially those who have grown up in the church, do have theological beliefs whether they realize it

or not. They may be inherited beliefs or borrowed ones, but most likely they have beliefs.

People in the church often make statements which reflect the theological beliefs they hold. When a young person dies, you might hear, “God took him because he needed him more than I do,” or when a natural disaster strikes, “God did this for a reason, to teach us a lesson.” God gets blamed for the most interesting things. One can imagine God watches what happens among humankind and often mutters to himself, “Don’t blame me, I had nothing to do with that.” Recently a plane crashed killing forty-nine people. The co-pilot was the only survivor and reportedly asked a family friend, “Why did God do this to me?” Did the pilot really believe that God would purposely kill forty-nine people?<sup>84</sup> What kind of God would do that? Ascribing these occurrences to God is a way of trying to make sense of what happens in the world.<sup>85</sup>

In their book, *Thinking Theologically*, Howard Stone and James Duke call this kind of theology our “embedded theology.”<sup>86</sup> This is the theology that church members have brought with them. The authors go on to say that the next step is

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<sup>84</sup>Marv Knox, “Eternal Lament: Why Did God Do This?,” *Baptist Standard*, 18 September 2006, 5.

<sup>85</sup>Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2006), 112.

<sup>86</sup>Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 16.

“deliberative theologies” which are “. . . deliberately thought out. . . . a process of carefully reflecting upon embedded theological convictions.”<sup>87</sup>

Even though the Bible is not a “how-to” book on listening skills, finding the threads of God’s call to listen throughout the Bible is possible.<sup>88</sup> We can form a theology of listening which will inform this project. Initially we find existing threads which point to God’s great love for creation. These threads are the beginning of a theology of listening.

Throughout the Old Testament, God speaks “a word.” The job of the children of Israel was to listen.<sup>89</sup> Key words throughout the Hebrew Scriptures are: “said,” “listen,” “hear,” “called,” and “word.” The ear is primary to each of these. In Genesis, God “said” (spoke) creation into being.<sup>90</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor says, “the central Jewish declaration of faith is not ‘I believe,’ but ‘Hear, O Israel.’”<sup>91</sup> “The focus is on the ears, not the lips--on listening, not speaking.”<sup>92</sup> God’s speech was powerful and for the Hebrews to understand “the necessity of listening and receiving in order to live” was imperative.<sup>93</sup> Listening or failing to listen became a matter of life or death.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>Ibid.

<sup>88</sup>Brizee, 4.

<sup>89</sup>Taylor, *When God is Silent*, 48.

<sup>90</sup>Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, 29; in each verse “God Said.”

<sup>91</sup>Deut 6:4. The Shema, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.”

<sup>92</sup>Taylor, *When God is Silent*, 49-50.

<sup>93</sup>Hedahl, 20.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 19.

Susan Hedahl says a theology of listening must begin with, “we listen because God first listened to us.”<sup>95</sup> The gospel of John reports that “in the beginning was the Word,” paralleling Genesis 1, “Then God said.”<sup>96</sup> The Word of God is of utmost importance, for when we cry to God, the cry is merely a response to the God who has already spoken.<sup>97</sup> What an overwhelming feeling to realize that the God of the universe has chosen to listen to humankind--so little to ask that we listen to God and to each other. Abraham Heschel writes that “the fundamental thought in the Bible is not creation, but God’s care for God’s creation.”<sup>98</sup>

The Old Testament prophets called the people to listen and warned that the act of “not listening” could lead to death and destruction. The Word of God came to the prophet, and the prophet felt compelled to speak God’s Word to those who would listen. “For twenty-three years . . . the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened. You have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear, although the Lord persistently sent to you all his servants the prophets, saying, Turn now, every one of you, from his evil way and wrong doings. . . . Yet you have not listened to Me, says the Lord” (Jer 15.16, RSV).

Often the prophets’ words fell on deaf ears, but they kept trying, and this says something very important about God. God’s great compassion and love for God’s

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<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 95.

<sup>96</sup>Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004), 200.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid.

<sup>98</sup>Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 484.

children was the driving force behind the work of the prophets. This is the God who is involved and concerned.<sup>99</sup> This is the God who goes to great lengths to save the “one” who is lost.

In Isaiah, God’s divine comfort is expressed by suggesting that God is like a shepherd and a mother--the shepherd who cares for the flock and the mother who comforts her child.<sup>100</sup> Some think that the Old Testament is a witness to God’s wrath, but the prophets point to the God who never gives up on God’s children. They are given chance after chance after chance to listen because of God’s great love for them. To truly listen to “another” requires that we try to care in the same way that God cares for his children.

Crucial to a theology of listening is the knowledge that humans were made for fellowship with God and with each other. They were created for community.<sup>101</sup> In the creation story, in Gen 1:27, God created humankind in God’s own image, “male and female” God created them. “Though all persons reflect the image of God, they cannot be fully human as isolated beings . . . only as relational beings do we find our true identity as God’s image.”<sup>102</sup> No listening exists without community, without relationship. The Old Testament story is built on the relationship of God with God’s

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<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 485.

<sup>100</sup>Purves, 196.

<sup>101</sup>Hunsinger, 5.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid.



people and of God's people with each other. "The African word *ubuntu* (oo-boon-too) means 'I am because we Are.'"<sup>103</sup> This is truly living in community means.

When we move to the New Testament, listening becomes ". . . listening to God's word in the person of Jesus Christ."<sup>104</sup> Jesus arrives on the scene, and God announces his arrival with "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" (Luke 9.35, RSV). From the first time that Jesus appears in the New Testament, he is tied to the act of listening.<sup>105</sup> God chose to become one with humankind through the person of Jesus, God's son. In the Incarnation, God wanted to restore God's relationship with creation.<sup>106</sup>

Jesus modeled what living in relationship with others means by picking twelve friends with whom he would intimately share life. They would live together, take meals together, encourage and care for one another, and listen to each other. When Jesus comes and calls persons to live in community with others in the church, "he brings his friends with him. They may not be the ones we would choose for ourselves!"<sup>107</sup> The church is a community made up of all who love God and would follow Jesus. The church gets "messy" at times, because Christians are called to live

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<sup>103</sup>Marjorie J. Thompson and Stephen D. Bryant, *Companions in Christ--Exploring the Way, Leader's Guide* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2005), 73.

<sup>104</sup>Hedahl, 24.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>106</sup>Mike Ratliff, *Sacred Bridges--Making Lasting Connections Between Older Youth and the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 37.

<sup>107</sup>Thompson and Bryant, *Exploring the Way--Leader's Guide*, 76.

in community with all kinds of people--the saints and the sinners. At this very moment, Broadway Baptist Church is considering this very question--“How do we live in community with those who have made terrible mistakes in life? How do we welcome the outcasts?”

Even though each person may be different, they are not strangers, because they have their love for God in common.<sup>108</sup> The disciples were a motley crew, but through God’s love for them, shown in the face of Jesus, they became a caring community. Because of God’s call on our lives, we as Christians are connected one to the other; to be truly human means being called to live in community one with the other.<sup>109</sup>

When Jesus started picking the disciples, or any of the people with whom he would associate, he did not let the rules of the culture or religion keep him from accepting each person as a child of God.<sup>110</sup> Jesus did not pick friends because of “who” they were or “what” they did; he found friends among members of society who had lost hope and had little of the world’s treasures, and he found friends among those who had all that the world had to offer.<sup>111</sup> Jesus never discriminates between persons when offering God’s love by listening and caring.

When Jesus encountered the woman at the well, he took time to listen to her and to help her understand his message of love and grace (John 4.4-18, 27-30, RSV).

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<sup>108</sup>Ibid.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., 74.

<sup>110</sup>Ratliff, 17.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid.

When Martha became exasperated with Mary for not helping with the household duties, Jesus told her that it was important to sit and listen. There would be plenty of time for housework later, and people are more important than things (Luke 10.38-42, RSV). When the five thousand gathered to hear Jesus preach, they become hungry. Jesus heard their distress and fed them (Matt. 14.13-21, RSV). As Jesus was leaving Jericho, he encountered Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. Even when told to be quiet, Bartimaeus still called out to Jesus. Jesus heard the pain and exasperation in his voice and healed him (Mark 10.46-52, RSV). When the hated tax collector, Zacchaeus, went to see Jesus, he expected to watch from a distance. Instead, Jesus took time to go to his home and spend time listening to him (Luke 19.1-10, RSV). The woman who had been bleeding for twelve long years only wanted to touch the fringe of Jesus' clothes. His love and concern for all of God's children meant that he immediately knew she was near. She had been an outcast for so very long, and now she was looking into the face of love and grace (Luke 8.43-48, RSV). Jesus listened and cared for the disenfranchised, the lonely, and those without power. He always rejoiced over any part of God's creation which was redeemed and could find a way home to God's love.<sup>112</sup>

When trouble comes, we ask the question, "Is God big enough?" Can God really walk with us through the flood?"<sup>113</sup> God not only sent God's son into the world, but Jesus suffered and died. Because of love, God made God's self vulnerable on the

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<sup>112</sup>Shippey, 11.

<sup>113</sup>Dean, 115.

cross.<sup>114</sup> Jesus' death on the cross makes him the best companion for those who suffer.<sup>115</sup>

Jesus' care for those who are hurting and his own pain on the cross calls us to a ministry with those who suffer. Christians are to speak for those who suffer, they are to cry with those who are in pain, through the Spirit they can be the healing presence of God.<sup>116</sup> When we identify with Christ, we are "one with Christ, one with one another, and one with all of creation."<sup>117</sup> Paul writes in 2 Corinthians:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for our consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation (2 Cor. 1.3-7, RSV).

Paul's belief is that comfort in times of trouble is a means of God's grace for the community of faith.<sup>118</sup> Because God has called us to live in community, no one suffers alone.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>114</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>115</sup>Taylor, *When God is Silent*, 78.

<sup>116</sup>Purves, 201.

<sup>117</sup>Dean, 227.

<sup>118</sup>Purves, 198-99.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid.

Jesus, on more than one occasion, is adamant about the need to listen and the seeming paradox he finds in so many people--you have ears but you do not hear. In Jesus, God makes God's self known as a caring, compassionate friend who listens intently to those in need. To live like Jesus means offering this gift of listening to all those with whom we come in contact. When people listen and listen well, they become the presence of Christ to another, and they see the face of Christ in the other. Listening reflects a personal communal relationship with a listening God.<sup>120</sup>

Jesus offered comfort to the wounded and broken by offering them the gift of listening--taking time to show acceptance and listening to their cries of pain. Each person is called to offer this same gift to all of God's children. Each person both listens and desperately wants to be heard.<sup>121</sup> Hedahl sheds light on the critical ministry of listening: "The New Testament emphasis on hearing/listening is an attempt to encourage the listener to hear the good news, to listen to preaching and instruction for understanding and for life. It expands the Hebrew meaning of hearing/listening to indicate commitment to the one being listened to. In other words, true human listening is true salvation in Jesus Christ. Listening is more than obedient cognition: it is obedience to a relationship and to a person."<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup>Hedahl, 14.

<sup>121</sup>Brizee, 101.

<sup>122</sup>Hedahl, 21.

When persons are able to see the face of Christ in the face of every person, they become compelled to listen with love and compassion.<sup>123</sup> Robert Brizee affirms that “the church has a unique ministry of listening.” To listen to others with this kind of love and compassion is a gift which offers healing, freedom, and grace.<sup>124</sup> St. Benedict calls it listening with “the ear of the heart.”<sup>125</sup> When we listen with the ears of love, we are listening like Christ.

Brizee offers this invitation: “Come, join me in offering the gift of listening to others. Yes, it sounds strange. Yes, it feels funny. Yes, it may be embarrassing. Yet, the possibilities are wondrous. The fields are ripe for harvest. So many hunger and yearn to be heard, especially those whom we love most. We can make such a difference with relatively little effort.”<sup>126</sup> When we listen to others as Christ listens to them, we offer acceptance and love and approaches listening as a caring ministry to which God has called us. Listening is “Holy” work. Intentional listening is an “act of love--divine and human. Learning to listen is preparation for the astonishment of grace and love.”<sup>127</sup> This kind of listening becomes a prayer as we begin to hear the Spirit of God which is within each person.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>123</sup>Miller and Jackson, 55.

<sup>124</sup>Brizee, ix.

<sup>125</sup>Hedahl, 98.

<sup>126</sup>Brizee, 42.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>128</sup>Kelsey, 84.

CHAPTER 3  
LISTENING AS A PARADIGM FOR CARING IN THE  
DISCIPLINE OF PASTORAL CARE

*Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because Christians are talking when they should be listening. He who no longer listens to his brother [sister] will soon no longer be listening to God either. . . .*  
Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>129</sup>

When discussing pastoral care, acknowledging that complete agreement does not exist among those in the discipline as to who offers this kind of care is helpful. For some, pastoral care encompasses all care offered in the name of Christ, whether by lay person or minister. These advocates would suggest that if we adhere to the theological belief of the “priesthood” of all believers, then the care offered by any person in the church is “pastoral care.” Others would argue that “pastoral care” is the care given by the trained ministers in the congregation, and the care given by members of the congregation is “lay ministry.” Some make this distinction by calling care given by ministers “pastoral care” and care given by the laity “Christian care.”

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<sup>129</sup>Bonhoeffer, 97-98.

For the purposes of this project, “pastoral care” will be seen as care offered by any person of faith. When referring to pastoral care in this paper, I am writing about pastoral care within a Christian congregation. Howard Clinebell writes,

As the “pastorhood of all believers” becomes a reality in a congregation, laypersons escape from their “spectatoritis” and begin to fulfill their personal ministries. Their own spiritual growth is stimulated as they put their faith to work in direct service. The unmet human needs in every church and community are so numerous and varied that a pastor working alone can not possibly meet more than a small fraction of them. A church’s caring ministry to the community’s lonely, sick, aging, bereaved, home-bound, stranger, institutionalized, exploited, socially and economically oppressed, can be quadrupled by involving trained laypersons fully in caring work. When dedicated laypersons become informal pastors to their neighbors, associates, and fellow church members, they become the church--the body of Christ serving those in need.<sup>130</sup>

The whole congregation is to be involved in offering “pastoral care” as they “. . . strive to become a healing, growth-stimulating redemptive organism.”<sup>131</sup> This kind of caring is not the same as pastoral counseling offered by trained counselors. All members of the congregation are “wounded” by life in some way or another and can offer their “woundedness” as a way to help others. The very pain that we bear can be transformed into hope and healing when we are used to help another. Henri Nouwen has named these caregivers “wounded healers.”<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup>Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 2d ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 396. The term, “pastorhood of all believers,” is from Seward Hiltner.

<sup>131</sup>Ibid., 395.

<sup>132</sup>Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1972), 90, 95.



A logical question is, “How is pastoral care different from other kinds of caring?” Pastoral care is first and foremost about God and God’s care for all people.<sup>133</sup> Pastoral care is not about the person offering the care but about “. . . sharing in the priesthood of Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>134</sup>

“Pastoral caregivers get into trouble when they begin to think it all depends on them--the healthiest care is given knowing one serves in the name of Christ who was and is and will be.”<sup>135</sup> Howard Stone writes, “. . . the pastoral care relationship is the vessel--fragile and imperfect though it may be--through which the Word of God can address the other person.<sup>136</sup> All persons of faith are called to “. . . bear one another’s burdens, to intercede on behalf of others, and to build each other up.”<sup>137</sup> This ministry belongs to the whole body of Christ.<sup>138</sup> When we look for the presence of Christ in situations where care is offered, the care becomes “pastoral care.” To look for the ways God is at work in the lives of those who receive care and in the lives of those who offer care is important. The pastoral caregiver thinks “‘theologically’ when listening for theological themes such as faith, providence, grace, repentance, communion, vocation, creatureliness, the holy.”<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>133</sup>Purves, 199.

<sup>134</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>135</sup>Hunsinger, 13.

<sup>136</sup>Stone, 42.

<sup>137</sup>Hunsinger, x.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid.

<sup>139</sup>Hedahl, 84.

One way pastoral care is offered is through listening to God and to others. Learning basic listening skills is important for the pastoral caregiver in many areas of life. Listening to others is critical, but we should never forget that listening is also at the heart of the spiritual life.<sup>140</sup> When caring listening occurs, this listening is not the dispensing of information, but a growing, learning experience for both the speaker and the listener.<sup>141</sup> Christians must always begin by listening to God.

Listening is one of the most significant ways to offer care within the church.<sup>142</sup> The importance of listening is stressed, not only so that caregivers will listen to God and to those in crisis, but as a reminder that listening is crucial in all the ministries of the church--worship, fellowship, and missions.<sup>143</sup> Listening is important in committee meetings, in Bible study classes, and in moments of crisis. If members of the community of faith are to learn how to listen effectively and offer the gift of intentional listening, they must be taught. Pastoral care is at the heart of all that the church does. Pastors can be mediocre preachers if they offer their love to the congregation in a way the congregation understands. The best preachers can experience difficulties if they are perceived as disinterested and uncaring. I have observed that congregations often perceive pastors who use an excessive amount of humor as being unconcerned and lacking in compassion. Some pastors use humor

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<sup>140</sup>Ibid., 75.

<sup>141</sup>*When God is Silent*, 11.

<sup>142</sup>Miller and Jackson, 45.

<sup>143</sup>Purves, 6.

because of their own insecurities. Answering every question or inquiry with a humorous quip leads the congregants to believe that the pastor is not listening.

Hedahl suggests a “. . . vacuum of listening education for those in pastoral leadership ministry” has existed.<sup>144</sup> She suggests that discussions on listening have been confined to the areas of the contemplative and pastoral counseling, when in actuality ministers’ success in all areas of ministry can hinge on their listening skills.<sup>145</sup> The same can be said of every Christian caregiver. She also suggests that pastors, much like the general population, have little training in the use of good listening skills<sup>146</sup> unless they have taken Clinical Pastoral Education which emphasizes intentional listening.

I was curious about a book entitled *The Effective Pastor*. Would the author consider listening to be a necessary skill for the pastor? No mention was made of the importance of listening. The competence of the pastor was more about leadership.<sup>147</sup> Clinebell, in *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, does provide a model for training laypersons in the use of listening skills--attending, listening, and empathetic responses.<sup>148</sup> He writes that the success of such a ministry depends on the “selection

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<sup>144</sup>Hedahl, 1.

<sup>145</sup>Ibid., 7-9.

<sup>146</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>147</sup>Louis W. Bloede, *The Effective Pastor* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

<sup>148</sup>Clinebell, 394-415.

of teachable trainees and the rigor of the training program.”<sup>149</sup> That these skills could be taught, at some level, to a larger group seems a possibility.

An older book on pastoral care, *The Christian Pastor*, by Wayne Oates lists an index of “Parishioner Approval of Eight Ministerial Activities,” and listening never makes the list. Giving people advice is there, as well as sermon preparation, work for the church at large, attending church meetings, office work, visiting nonmembers, and visiting members.<sup>150</sup> He does mention that a minister’s capacity to listen to the griefs of the congregation is cathartic.<sup>151</sup> Most of the discussion of listening is in the context of pastoral counseling, but he does have a section on “The Phase of Listening and Exploration” in which he writes that “listening creatively is an art in itself.”<sup>152</sup>

Morton Kelsey, in *Caring*, makes a strong case for the importance of listening in all of life, including the church. He says that listening “. . . enables us to love, and our love gives us the opportunity to enable others to come to their potential.”<sup>153</sup> Kelsey includes a section on listening skills and believes they should be taught to everyone in the church, because only a few are gifted in listening, the rest must learn.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>149</sup>Ibid., 404.

<sup>150</sup>Wayne Oates, *The Christian Pastor* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 105.

<sup>151</sup>Ibid., 167.

<sup>152</sup>Ibid., 203.

<sup>153</sup>Kelsey, 85.

<sup>154</sup>Ibid., 72-85.

In *The Skilled Pastor*, Charles Taylor lays out a plan for training pastors, laypersons, or professional clergy in helping situations, in the use of listening skills, theological assessment, and the use of religious resources.<sup>155</sup> Because it takes a number of weeks to complete the program, this plan could be overwhelming for most lay pastoral caregivers who desire to learn how to listen more carefully and offer empathy to others. For a broad-based listening skills training model, that the training be brief and the number of skills be kept to a manageable level is crucial.

A recent pastoral care text by Carrie Doehring offers a whole chapter on listening.<sup>156</sup> Even though her book was written for those called to the ministry of pastoral care,<sup>157</sup> the skills are transferable to Christians who are called to caring relationships and caring ministries within the church. Her chapter, “Theological Reflection,” could be very helpful to persons as they offer care and are called to help other persons in crisis reflect on where they find God in what has happened.<sup>158</sup>

In this brief overview of pastoral care, we can find help for those who want to offer the gift of listening within the community of faith. Even though some forget the importance of listening for ministers, many pastoral counselors and theologians take it very seriously. They understand the importance of ministers learning how to use intentional listening in all areas of ministry.

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<sup>155</sup>Charles W. Taylor, *The Skilled Pastor* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), xi.

<sup>156</sup>Doehring, 35-46.

<sup>157</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>158</sup>*Ibid.*, 111-31.

CHAPTER 4  
THE PHYSIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL  
DYNAMIC OF LISTENING

*The process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and  
responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages.*

Definition of Listening  
International Listening Association<sup>159</sup>

*Listening is an attitude of the heart, a genuine desire to  
be with another which both attracts and heals.*

J. Isham<sup>160</sup>

To offer the gift of listening, our minds and bodies must work together. What is required is the ability to see, hear, and feel with our whole being.<sup>161</sup> When we receive sounds into our ears, and the sounds are transmitted into electrochemical impulses and transmitted to the brain, then a decision is made to either pay attention to the sounds or ignore them. Listening begins as a physiological phenomenon and quickly becomes psychological.<sup>162</sup> Listening is a crucial need for each person. Our well-being is influenced by a myriad of factors--physical health, spiritual health, and

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<sup>159</sup>Hedahl, 4.

<sup>160</sup>Shafir, 237.

<sup>161</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>162</sup>Adler, Rosenfeld, and Towne, 131.

emotional health. These factors are intertwined, with one affecting the other. If the need to be heard is not met, all aspects of one's health could be compromised. The mind and body must work together if intentional listening is to happen.<sup>163</sup> Shippey writes, "The degree to which we can listen is the degree to which we can understand, and the degree to which we can understand is the measure by which we enjoy living."<sup>164</sup>

Many physiological factors exist, some of which are also psychological, which can impede our ability to listen attentively. Physical tension, anxiety, pain, and depression all make it difficult to listen with intentionality.<sup>165</sup> Most people like to believe that their mind can keep on working just as well no matter what is going on with their bodies, but fatigue and boredom can also affect our ability to listen.<sup>166</sup> This is one more reason to get a good's night sleep, because we must be "awake and alert" to listen well.<sup>167</sup>

Physiological factors can keep us from listening, but the body can also benefit from intentional listening. During a typical day, millions of brain cells die, but research shows that listening increases the flow of blood to the brain and invigorates

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<sup>163</sup>Shafir, 244-45.

<sup>164</sup>Shippey, 1.

<sup>165</sup>Shafir, 214, 244.

<sup>166</sup>Hedahl, 38.

<sup>167</sup>Shafir, 213.

it.<sup>168</sup> If people thought that listening could keep their brains healthier, more people would probably be investigating how they could learn these skills. Another benefit is that heart rate and blood pressure are lowered when speaking or listening with empathy and understanding.<sup>169</sup>

One study with patients about to undergo surgery had the anesthesiologist visit one group, only giving a quick explanation of the surgery and projected recovery time. The other group was visited by an anesthesiologist who spoke warmly, listened to the patients' concerns, and answered questions in detail. The second group recovered sooner and was discharged from the hospital an average of 2.7 days earlier than the first group. This suggests that the ability to heal can be improved by intentional listening and our immune system can be strengthened.<sup>170</sup> Several studies have shown that persons who feel connected to others have lower death rates.<sup>171</sup> A number of years ago, reports suggested that red wine could help one be more healthy-- now reports suggest that the health benefits can be attributed to the circumstances surrounding the drinking of the wine. Usually, wine is consumed in the company of others, where conversation and sharing are present.<sup>172</sup> Rather than the medicinal

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<sup>168</sup>Ibid., 201.

<sup>169</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>170</sup>Ibid., 238, 246-47.

<sup>171</sup>*Bottom Line* magazine, as quoted in Shafir, 237.

<sup>172</sup>Dean Ornish on "Fresh Air," quoted in Shafir, 239.



properties of wine, perhaps it is the relational atmosphere created when wine is shared with friends.

Isolated people with no one to listen to them experience chronic stress, depression, and decreased immunity. When they have a listening presence in their lives, they often find that life is not so overwhelming. Listening helps lessen the number of self-inflicted injuries and suicide attempts. Patients and caregivers who participate in support groups also have better survival rates and are less depressed. They find that the listening which occurs in the groups helps them feel more positive, willing to contribute to others, and more patient with strangers.<sup>173</sup> Participants in a support group for the caregivers of persons with dementia report that the ability to come together and share with others who understand what they are going through has made all the difference in their ability to cope with the stress of caring.<sup>174</sup>

Nichols says, “Few motives in human experience are as powerful as the yearning to be understood.”<sup>175</sup> Not being heard can bring feelings of alienation, anger, frustration, and loneliness.<sup>176</sup>

When we are listened to it helps us feel understood, because as the listening process occurs, we feel that what we say matters and is taken seriously.<sup>177</sup> Often it is

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<sup>173</sup>Ibid., 244.

<sup>174</sup>I lead this group in my church, Broadway Baptist Church.

<sup>175</sup>Nichols, 9.

<sup>176</sup>Koile, 117.

<sup>177</sup>Nichols, 9.

not possible to know what we are missing until no one exists to listen us or take us seriously.<sup>178</sup> Older people who are suddenly widowed miss the listening presence of their spouse. Their adult children often complain that when visiting with Mom or Dad, “they just want to talk my ear off.” Mom or Dad is hungry for someone who will give them an hour of undivided attention.

To be an effective listener, we must have our basic needs met, we cannot give to another what we do not possess. Abraham Maslow hypothesized that five categories of basic needs exist: physical, safety, belongingness/love, esteem/self-respect, and self-actualization/understanding/aesthetic pleasure.<sup>179</sup> He said that the self-actualized person, one who has lower level needs met, is one who can then realize his or her potential and offer the gift of listening to another.<sup>180</sup> This means that many people may not be able to offer intentional listening to others, because they are so focused on meeting their own needs.<sup>181</sup>

Therapist Carl Rogers opened the door to listening.<sup>182</sup> Before the 1950s, professionals would often listen only long enough to form a diagnosis so they could decide what treatment was needed. Rogers found that it was important for the listener

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<sup>178</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>179</sup>Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper, 1970), as cited in Rodney J. Hunter, ed., *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 691.

<sup>180</sup>Ibid.

<sup>181</sup>Banville, 53.

<sup>182</sup>Brizee, 14.

to enter the speaker's world with understanding and "unconditional positive regard." When the therapist offered acceptance and understanding, the client could then feel free to talk about problems and feelings.<sup>183</sup> In his book, *Parent Effectiveness Training*, Thomas Gordon, who was a colleague of Rogers, took his approach and offered it to everyone as "active listening."<sup>184</sup> Rogers describes his experience this way:

A number of times in my life I have felt myself bursting with insoluble problems or going round and round in tormented circles or, during one period, overcome by feelings of worthlessness and despair. . . I have been able to find individuals who have been able to hear me and thus to rescue me from the chaos of my feelings . . . who have been able to hear my meanings a little more deeply than I have known them. . . I can testify that when you are in psychological stress and someone really hears you without passing judgment on you, without trying to take responsibility for you, without trying to mold you, it feels damn good. . . . It has permitted me to bring out the frightening feelings, the guilt, the despair, the confusion. . . . It is astonishing how elements which seem insoluble become soluble when someone listens. How confusions which seemed irremediable turn into relatively clear flow-streams when one is heard.<sup>185</sup>

To really listen is to offer the gift of acceptance. Acceptance and understanding are affirming and can enable persons to make changes in their lives. In a conversation between Buber and Rogers, held at the University of Michigan in 1957, they discussed this kind of acceptance.<sup>186</sup> In a therapeutic relationship, an acceptance of persons as they are and at the same time recognizing the potential

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<sup>183</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>184</sup>Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>185</sup>Carl R. Rogers, "Some Elements of Effective Interpersonal Communication," talk given at the California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, CA, 9 November 1964, 4, as quoted in Koile, 129.

<sup>186</sup>Rob Anderson and Kenneth N. Cissna, *The Martin Buber-Carl Rogers Dialogue* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 90-95.

within them must be present.<sup>187</sup> Rogers suggests that the help one receives or the changes one makes from such an understanding, accepting relationship is a by-product of the caring, rather than the goal.<sup>188</sup> Gordon says that the “language of acceptance” is what a professional counselor does to help a counselee open up and share freely. He believes that for anyone to offer this same kind of acceptance by learning active listening skills is possible.<sup>189</sup>

This kind of acceptance can help others feel loved. Accepting one “as is” is a profound way to show love.<sup>190</sup> Great power exists in love. “It can promote the growth of mind and body, and is probably the most effective therapeutic force we know for repairing both psychological and physical damage.”<sup>191</sup> Covey writes, “Next to physical survival, the greatest need of a human being is psychological survival--to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated.”<sup>192</sup>

Intentional listening not only connects one to the other, but strengthens the sense of self. The gift of listening helps persons to clarify thoughts and feelings and listen more closely to themselves.<sup>193</sup> The ability to share pain and resentment and

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<sup>187</sup>Ibid., 94.

<sup>188</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>189</sup>Gordon, 30.

<sup>190</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>191</sup>Ibid.

<sup>192</sup>Covey, 241.

<sup>193</sup>Nichols, 10.

make ourselves vulnerable to another can have a healing effect.<sup>194</sup> As we share what has been kept inside, it is possible to begin to process what has happened, and then is when healing can take place. People often eat compulsively, drink too much, or work continuously so that they can remain unaware of painful feelings, but deal with them directly is much healthier.<sup>195</sup> This can be done in a caring relationship through intentional listening. When two people communicate or listen intently to each other, listening becomes therapeutic<sup>196</sup> and can be energizing.<sup>197</sup> When listeners were asked how they felt after being listened to, following are some of the responses:<sup>198</sup>

1. A feeling of relief
2. That my opinion counts
3. Like someone cares about me and my point of view
4. Appreciative and a little guilty for feeling so good afterward
5. It makes me feel important.

This kind of listening is not easy and requires time and effort. This listening takes courage to try willingly to understand another person in this way. Often people are frightened about entering into this kind of listening relationship, because they fear that, not only will the speakers make changes in their lives, but that they, as the

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<sup>194</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>195</sup>Hunsinger, 89.

<sup>196</sup>Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, 330.

<sup>197</sup>Nichols, 215.

<sup>198</sup>Shafir, 91.

listener, will be changed by the experience of listening to another with acceptance and understanding.<sup>199</sup> Listening is risky work, but the benefits for the listener and the speaker outweigh possible side effects.

In C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*,<sup>200</sup> the children meet Mr. and Mrs. Beaver who tell them about the great Aslan. Susan asks if Aslan is safe. Mr. Beaver replies, "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good." Listening to another may mean that the listener will be called to make changes that feel "unsafe," but are "good." As frightening as making changes can be, at times, the listeners may find that taking the risk to listen to another can bring about needed changes in their own lives. Within the church many need the gift of listening, and members are called to meet those needs; yet, allowing our fear to make us ignore another's need for a listening friend is easy.

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<sup>199</sup>Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, 333.

<sup>200</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier Books, 1971), 75-76.

CHAPTER 5  
LISTENING SKILLS

*In Greece we are too poor to have psychiatrists.  
And so we have friends instead.*  
Melina Mercouri<sup>201</sup>

The previous chapters have suggested why people listen, where people listen, to whom people listen, and what happens when people listen, and now it is time for the “nuts-and-bolts” of listening--how to listen. What are the skills which make for a good listener and what skills are crucial if we are to listen intentionally? First, the listener must want to listen.<sup>202</sup> This sounds like an easy first step, but the truth is talking is much easier, and for the listeners to only listen long enough to plan what they want to say is not unusual.

Hearing is automatic, but listening is not; if sound waves are present, one’s ears pick them up.<sup>203</sup> Many different kinds of listening are used in the course of a day. Andrew Wolvin and Carolyn Coakley have developed a taxonomy of listening functions which include: discriminative listening (distinguishing the auditory and/or visual stimuli), listening for comprehension (extends from the discrimination of the

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<sup>201</sup>Mercouri, as quoted in Clinebell, 400.

<sup>202</sup>Weaver, *Human Listening*, 82.

<sup>203</sup>Adler, Rosenfeld, and Towne, 130.

stimulus to an understanding of the message), therapeutic listening (also called empathic, which gives the speaker the opportunity to talk through a problem to the speaker's own solution of it), critical listening (requires a listener to evaluate what is being said), and appreciative listening (to enjoy or gain a sensory impression from the material).<sup>204</sup>

The taxonomy of listening is helpful for listeners, because it is a guide in “. . . understanding their own listening behavior and in developing strategies for functioning more effectively with the different purposes.”<sup>205</sup> One must decide to listen. Often those persons who are good talkers make the best listeners, because they are aware of what is expressed through “posture, gestures and tone of voice.”<sup>206</sup> This is not speaking about those persons who are taken with the sound of their own voices and talk incessantly. For most, listening is a holistic experience in that it is the “. . . integration of all of our working senses and seldom relies on assigning meaning from only one sense.”<sup>207</sup>

Every conversation is an opportunity to listen, but not necessarily an opportunity for intentional listening. Times exist when persons are asking for information and only want to receive the needed help.<sup>208</sup> Polite, small talk should only

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<sup>204</sup>Andrew D. Wolvin and Carolyn Gwynn Coakley, eds., *Perspectives on Listening* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1993), 19-21.

<sup>205</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>206</sup>Adler, Rosenfeld, and Towne, 141.

<sup>207</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup>Adler, Rosenfeld, and Towne, 147-48.



be an occasion to respond with polite, small talk.<sup>209</sup> When a person is asking for a helping hand, help should be given, rather than intentional listening.<sup>210</sup> When paying attention, a listener can assess the conversation and decide what kind of listening is needed. The best listeners do not think of listening as a goal to be attained, but rather, a process--a journey with others as they share part of their lives.<sup>211</sup> Listening is about “respect, compassion, and fairness.”<sup>212</sup> The world would be a kinder, gentler place if more people could catch a vision for what listening to each other means.

The skills discussed below are BASIC listening skills<sup>213</sup> and have been organized in this way for the purposes of this paper. Many authors have written in-depth books on listening skills, but this project is a plan for a brief listening skills training event. Due to its brevity, it is necessary to only include those skills crucial to empathetic listening.

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<sup>209</sup>Banville, 205.

<sup>210</sup>Gordon, 92.

<sup>211</sup>Shafir, 26.

<sup>212</sup>Nichols, 251.

<sup>213</sup>The bibliography provides resources for a more extensive discussion of listening skills.

### **The Setting**

The setting for an intentional listening encounter is important. Do not begin such a conversation if there is not time to finish.<sup>214</sup> The speakers will feel that they are not important and that what they have to say is not taken seriously. Try to create an environment free from distractions--cell phone, television, telephone, children, and computers, to name a few. Give the speaker undivided attention by not moving around or looking away.<sup>215</sup> The environment should also be comfortable and relaxed and a place where the speaker can be assured of confidentiality.<sup>216</sup>

### **Presence**

In one church, I knew a very kind and caring woman, the kind of person others like to be around. If a crisis presented, she was one of the first on the scene to bring food and offer help. She was a wise, insightful person, and everyone wanted to talk to her, but she was always in a hurry. Her friends and acquaintances never felt that they could have a “real” conversation with her, because she was always rushing out the door to the next thing on her schedule. When present with her, friends often felt “unfinished” conversation existed which needed to happen. It felt something like leaning forward to begin, then finding she had jumped up to leave and was not there, and just continuing to fall forward on one’s face.

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<sup>214</sup>Gordon, 190.

<sup>215</sup>Adler, Rosenfeld, and Towne, 140.

<sup>216</sup>Stone, 44.

To offer the gift of presence is to be present physically, but also to be present emotionally and spiritually. The listener should stay focused on what the speaker has to say. Listeners may think they are covering their distraction, but the speakers usually pick up on the fact that the listeners are not offering their full selves in conversation.<sup>217</sup> The listener can verbally express interest and concern, but also should express interest nonverbally by looking and acting interested. Look the speaker in the eye, lean forward, and do not “fidget.”<sup>218</sup> Offering presence means paying attention, not in a rigid way, but in a relaxed way so the speaker will sense the listener’s willingness to listen.<sup>219</sup>

Helpful to note as one prepares to listen is that women and men generally use their eyes and faces differently when communicating. Women tend to be more expressive than men--smiling more often and offering more pleasant and positive messages.<sup>220</sup> Some evidence exists to suggest that the formation of close relationships, where in-depth talking and listening occur is easier for women. Men may feel, at times, that developing this kind of closeness is a sign of weakness, and they do not have other men in their lives who model this kind of a listening relationship. Men often have plenty of acquaintances, but most of the sharing stays on the surface.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>217</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>218</sup>Adler, Rosenfeld, and Towne, 140.

<sup>219</sup>Thompson and Bryant, *Exploring the Way, Participant’s Book*, 51.

<sup>220</sup>Paul J. Kaufmann, *Sensible Listening* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1994), 81.

<sup>221</sup>Thompson and Bryant, *Exploring the Way, Leader’s Guide*, 75.

For persons of faith, offering the gift of “presence” is to walk on “sacred ground,” because the person who shares is a “child of God, made in the divine image.”<sup>222</sup> When we choose to enter this kind of caring relationship, we can be confident that God is present.<sup>223</sup> Buber tells of a time in his life when he failed to be “present” for another. It happened years ago, but he has never forgotten.

. . . after a morning of “religious” enthusiasm, I had a visit from an unknown young man, without being there in spirit. I certainly did not fail to let the meeting be friendly, I did not treat him any more remissly than all his contemporaries who were in the habit of seeking me out about this time of day. . . I conversed attentively and openly with him--only I omitted to guess the questions which he did not put. Later, not long after, I learned from one of his friends--he himself was no longer alive--the essential content of these questions; I learned that he had not come to me casually, but borne by destiny, not for a chat but for a decision. . . . What do we expect when we are in despair and yet go to a man? Surely a presence by means of which we are told that nevertheless there is meaning.<sup>224</sup>

### **Listening/Responding**

Once the distractions are gone and the listening environment is set, what happens when the other begins to speak. To get comfortable with silence is important for an intentional listener. Living in a loud world provides so much “background” noise that when silence does occur, the listener is almost startled. When the speaker goes silent, for the listener to keep listening is important; something is probably going on inside of the speaker. Stay focused on the speaker.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>222</sup>Ibid., *Exploring the Way, Participant's Book*, 51.

<sup>223</sup>Ibid.

<sup>224</sup>Buber, as quoted in Hunsinger, 53.

<sup>225</sup>Shafir, 129.

Intentional listeners need to remember that “not talking” is a response.<sup>226</sup>

Offering very simple responses are appropriate to show that the listener is hearing what has been said, “oh,” “yes,” “uh huh.” These responses do not necessarily communicate understanding, but they will encourage the speaker to continue talking.<sup>227</sup> The fear of “not knowing what to say” is usually very real for those persons learning to listen intentionally. These simple responses can relieve the listener of feeling that every minute must be filled with profound responses which communicate deep understanding.

When one enters into a listening experience, the speaker comes with her own feelings, intentions, attitudes, and thoughts.<sup>228</sup> The listeners also have their own feelings, intentions, attitudes, and thoughts, and interpret what they hear from their own perspective. Because of this, to check for understanding from time to time is important. This is done to make sure that the listeners are hearing what the speakers are really communicating.<sup>229</sup> If a listener summarizes and the speaker says, “No, that is not what I meant. Here is what I was saying,” it is a good thing, because both persons are now clear on what was intended.<sup>230</sup> Sometimes listeners feel like failures when they do not “get” what the speaker said. When listening, “the receiver does not

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<sup>226</sup>Ibid., 136.

<sup>227</sup>Banville, 186.

<sup>228</sup>Savage, 16.

<sup>229</sup>Gordon, 50-51.

<sup>230</sup>Hunsinger, 69.

send a message of her own--such as an evaluation, opinion, advice, logic, analysis, or question. She feeds back only what she feels the sender's message meant--nothing less, nothing more."<sup>231</sup>

Reflecting back to the speaker what was heard by summarizing helps the speaker organize thoughts and begin to understand problems better.<sup>232</sup> Paraphrasing responses are statements which say to the speaker, "Did I hear you correctly?"<sup>233</sup> If the speaker says, "During worship my children just fidget, and talk, and bother each other. Then I have to stop praying and start getting them to act right. It just ruins worship for me. I probably need to stay home. I don't know what I should do. I am not sure why I feel this way. I didn't think I would be this kind of parent,"<sup>234</sup> the listener could respond, "You mean that worship seems to be wasted time right now, because you are spending all your worship time disciplining your children and it makes you feel like a bad parent." This is merely a way for listeners to be sure they have heard correctly, and it says to the speakers, "What you have to say is important. I am listening."

If the listeners have not heard correctly, the speakers have to think through their feelings and express exactly what they are feeling.<sup>235</sup> Paraphrasing or reflecting

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<sup>231</sup>Gordon, 53.

<sup>232</sup>Clinebell, 76.

<sup>233</sup>Banville, 171.

<sup>234</sup>Taylor, 42.

<sup>235</sup>Banville, 171.

back is repeating the message you have heard in your own words;<sup>236</sup> it is not parroting the exact words the speaker has said.<sup>237</sup> Good reflection does not begin with the word “I.”<sup>238</sup> If the speaker says, “I feel like I am going crazy,” a parroting response would be, “So you feel like you are going crazy?” When that kind of response is read, it sounds very silly, and that is exactly how it feels to the person who is sharing.

The listener also needs to hear the feelings behind the speaker’s words. For the listener to sense as accurately as possible the intensity of the feelings expressed is important.<sup>239</sup> Sensing the feelings of the speaker is a deeper kind of reflection on what has been said<sup>240</sup> and “. . . conveys interest and caring.”<sup>241</sup> This kind of reflecting means the listeners must think about the feelings expressed by the speakers. This reflecting says to the speakers that the listeners are willing to work at understanding what they have to say.

In listening to the woman whose children misbehave in church, a reflective statement with feeling might be, “It sounds as if you are frustrated and angry with your children’s behavior in church because it keeps you from worshipping. You also seem disappointed in yourself as a parent.” Gordon uses an image which is very

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<sup>236</sup>Shafir, 137.

<sup>237</sup>Adler, Rosenfeld, and Towne, 142.

<sup>238</sup>Miller and Jackson, 59.

<sup>239</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>240</sup>Ibid., 62.

<sup>241</sup>Hunsinger, 74.

helpful when thinking about a caring conversation. Picture the speaker holding a ball. If the listener begins, “. . . asking questions, giving advice, teaching, moralizing . . . ,” then, in effect, the listener has taken the ball from the hands of the speaker.<sup>242</sup> The goal of effective listening is to keep the ball in the hands of the speaker. If the ball is taken away, get it back in the speaker’s hands as quickly as possible.

When listening intentionally, asking clarifying questions is acceptable. Sometimes when additional information is needed, asking closed-ended questions is acceptable, questions which will “. . . elicit the specific, concrete information needed for understanding.”<sup>243</sup> Try to keep this kind of question to a minimum. Generally, it is best to ask questions which are open-ended and require more than a “yes” or “no” answer such as:<sup>244</sup> “What is working well in your new job?” One should be clear about the need for questions, because sometimes questions are used to give advice or to criticize.<sup>245</sup> If questions are to be helpful, they should not lead the speaker in a completely different direction away from the initial reason for the conversation.<sup>246</sup> The purpose of questions is to better understand the speaker and his views.<sup>247</sup> Try not to ask question after question, one right after the other.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>242</sup>Gordon, 48,

<sup>243</sup>Hunsinger, 73.

<sup>244</sup>Stone, 51.

<sup>245</sup>Adler, Rosenfeld, and Towne, 145.

<sup>246</sup>Ibid.

<sup>247</sup>Shafir, 126.

<sup>248</sup>Taylor, 39.



### Acceptance/Empathy

When listeners truly try to understand how other persons think and feel, they are offering the gift of acceptance. This gift can produce anxiety on the part of listeners, because when opening up to the ideas and feelings of others, the potential for change always exists, not only for the speaker, but for the listener as well.<sup>249</sup> The listeners may have difficulty making themselves vulnerable in this way.

When persons feel accepted, they experience a freedom to be truthful about themselves.<sup>250</sup> For intentional listeners to remember that acceptance does not necessarily mean agreement is crucial.<sup>251</sup> Carl Rogers says, “We know from our research that such empathic understanding--understanding with a person, not about him--is such an effective approach that it can bring about major changes in personality.”<sup>252</sup> Miller and Jackson define acceptance in this way: “. . .to accept is to give all your attention and energy to the process of understanding what the person means and to reflect that meaning back to the person accurately. It is being open, allowing the other person to be as he or she really is, without using masks or filters. It is listening without judging.”<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>249</sup>Gordon, 60-61.

<sup>250</sup>Ibid., 32.

<sup>251</sup>Hunsinger, 56.

<sup>252</sup>Rogers, 332.

<sup>253</sup>Miller and Jackson, 55.

Listening empathically helps one appreciate the way the speaker looks at the world. This kind of listening allows the listener to become, for a while, a “companion” on the way with the speaker. Such listening can produce feelings of deep caring.<sup>254</sup> In *Basic Types*, Clinebell quotes Heinz Kohut who says, “Empathy is the accepting, confirming, and understanding human echo evoked by the self. It is an essential psychological nurturant without which human life as we cherish it cannot be sustained.”<sup>255</sup> An unknown writer describes empathy this way, “To see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another.”<sup>256</sup> Christians call this “unconditional love” and persons of faith are called to care in this way.

### **Roadblocks to Listening**

Listeners have already been warned about talking too much--they should also refrain from giving advice.<sup>257</sup> The place of listeners is not to tell speakers what to do or feel.<sup>258</sup> If the speaker simply wants advice, plenty of people willing to offer that, but those willing to offer intentional listening are much fewer in number. Quickly offering advice can be heard by speakers as a way of not taking them seriously.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>254</sup>Gordon, 58.

<sup>255</sup>Kohut, as quoted in Clinebell, 77.

<sup>256</sup>Adler, Rosenfeld, and Towne, 146.

<sup>257</sup>Nichols, 64.

<sup>258</sup>Brizee, 27.

<sup>259</sup>Stone, 50-51.

Many people find that they are excellent “fixers.”<sup>260</sup> They can tell others exactly how to solve all problems.

The listener should not try to psychoanalyze without a license. Many people have watched one too many television shows and think they can decide what is really wrong with the other person.<sup>261</sup> The motive may be “to help,” but listeners should work at not interjecting their assessment of “the problem.”<sup>262</sup>

To listen intentionally is to allow speakers to talk without feeling the need to top their story. One can always think of an experience or problem that is similar, and most people have the inclination to want to “share.” Again, this sharing is usually done because of the belief that the speaker can in some way be “helped” by knowing that the listener has had the same exact experience.<sup>263</sup> When listeners begin talking about their problems, suddenly the conversation has shifted and is no longer about the persons who are speaking.<sup>264</sup> This kind of “sharing” is also done to make a connection with the speaker, but rarely is that goal achieved. When the listeners begin sharing, they have, in effect, taken “the ball” out of the hands of the speaker and have kept it for themselves.

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<sup>260</sup>Shafir, 128.

<sup>261</sup>Ibid.

<sup>262</sup>Ibid.

<sup>263</sup>Ibid., 125.

<sup>264</sup>Stone, 53.

Carl Rogers says one of the biggest barriers to listening is the desire to evaluate; “. . . your primary reaction is to evaluate what has just been said to you, to evaluate it from your point of view, your own frame of reference.”<sup>265</sup> Rather than putting oneself in another’s place, the listener often wants to evaluate from personal experience. It takes setting aside one’s own way of viewing things.

Another problem which keeps listeners from offering empathy is stereotyping the speaker which can bias the way one listens to certain kinds of people.<sup>266</sup> A good listener will give each person a chance before making decisions based on preconceived ideas--“all athletes are dumb, all cowboys are hicks, all women are emotional, all men are clueless.” Some stereotypes are based on race, gender, and age.<sup>267</sup> When we stereotype, we assume that we know what persons mean because of who we “think” they are. These assumptions keep listeners from really hearing what others are longing to share.

Listeners must also be careful about offering reassurance. Reassurance is a way of promising what the listeners cannot produce.<sup>268</sup> Avoid responses such as telling a parent of a runaway child, “The police will find him soon, don’t worry,” or a young person whose girlfriend has broken up with him, “She will come back, don’t worry.” One cannot know these things, and offering hollow reassurances is not

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<sup>265</sup>Rogers, 331.

<sup>266</sup>Koile, 80.

<sup>267</sup>Shafir, 57.

<sup>268</sup>Stone, 51.

helpful. Along with these kinds of responses is the offering of platitudes--“God never gives us more than we can bear,” or “Into each life a little rain must fall.” Such trite statements are not personal<sup>269</sup> and rarely convey a message of care and concern.

Miller and Jackson have a list of roadblocks to listening which can be helpful to those who desire to be aware of those things which would keep them from offering the gift of listening. They are: “ordering, directing, commanding, judging, criticizing, disagreeing, warning, threatening, arguing, lecturing, blaming, reassuring, sympathizing, consoling, withdrawing, distracting, humoring, changing the subject, agreeing, approving, praising, shaming, ridiculing, name-calling, interpreting, analyzing, moralizing, preaching, telling them their duty, and persuading with logic.”<sup>270</sup>

Intentional listening is hard work, and many never try because of the fear of being a “bad listener.” Often feelings of fear prevent people from listening with empathy. If listeners can learn not to be so hard on themselves, and if they can learn to relax, discovering the parts of themselves which prevent them from effectively listening to others is possible.<sup>271</sup> Encouraging listeners to keep on trying is important, because intentional listening is such a precious gift, and it nourishes one’s sense of self-worth.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>269</sup>Ibid.

<sup>270</sup>Miller and Jackson, 48-50.

<sup>271</sup>Nichols, 87.

<sup>272</sup>Ibid., 16.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONGREGATIONAL CONTEXT

The thesis of this project will be evaluated by selected members of Broadway Baptist Church where I currently serve as Minister of Congregational Care, having been a minister there for over eleven years. Broadway Baptist Church was organized in 1882, and is just south of downtown in Fort Worth, Texas.<sup>273</sup> The church is separated from the central city by Interstate 30. It is a regional church in that members come from many areas of the metroplex: Denton, Weatherford, Arlington, Southlake, Cleburne, Granbury, the Mid-Cities, and Burleson. In earlier years, the church was surrounded by a neighborhood of stately homes. When the citizens living in the central city began moving to the suburbs, Broadway found that it was no longer in a residential neighborhood, but had become an innercity church. As the homeless population grew across the country and in Fort Worth, Broadway found that many of its neighbors were persons who were homeless.

The church did consider moving to the suburbs when J. P. Allen was pastor. Other churches around Broadway were moving--St. Stephen's Presbyterian, now located near Texas Christian University, was once across the street from Broadway

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<sup>273</sup>James Leo Garrett Jr., *Living Stones: The Centennial History of Broadway Baptist Church*, vol. 1 (Fort Worth, TX: Branch-Smith, 1984), 1.

Baptist. The church entered into a discussion of whether to move or not. They put a large map of the metroplex in Fellowship Hall and asked church members to place a pin on their homes. What was discovered was that people did not come primarily from one neighborhood, but came from all over the area. No particular place existed to move which would be closer to most of the members.

When the church decided to stay downtown, the congregation was led to consider ministries which would meet the needs of the neighborhood around the church. At this time, Broadway Baptist Church began its Christian Social Ministry, the Baptist Center, which is still a vital ministry of the church.<sup>274</sup> Through the years, the specific ministries of the Baptist Center have changed to meet the ever-changing needs of the community. Some of the ministries that have been offered through the Baptist Center include: well-baby clinic, eye clinic, food pantry, sack lunches, International Friends, adult clothing room, children's clothing room, after-school program, and preschool.

In the nineties, the neighborhood around Broadway Baptist Church began to change once again as the revitalization of downtown Fort Worth and the near south side brought people back into the city to live. Pennsylvania Place Apartments was built next door to the church. The monthly cost of these apartments reflects a mix of market value and subsidized rent. A few blocks from the church are historic apartments which have been renovated and rent at prices which make them affordable only to professionals. The neighborhood of the church is now a diverse neighborhood

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<sup>274</sup>Ibid., 635.

with a Mental Health-Mental Retardation living site, homeless shelters, subsidized apartments, mid-priced apartments, and upscale living accommodations within walking distance.

Projections suggest that by 2010, fifteen thousand people will be living in downtown Fort Worth.<sup>275</sup> In the fall of 2006, another large development of upscale condominiums began selling about five blocks from Broadway Baptist Church. Once again, the church is being called upon to adapt and change to meet the needs of the community in which it finds itself.

Broadway is a diverse congregation--politically, economically, and theologically. The educational level is high, with most of the members having attended college. Many individuals in the church have seminary degrees or have at least attended seminary (most of them went to Southwestern Seminary). As diverse as the church is in some ways, it is not very ethnically diverse. Most of the members are Anglo with a smattering of other ethnic groups--Hispanic, African American, Russian, and Cambodian. Broadway Baptist Church has members of all ages, with a heavier concentration of people in their fifties, sixties, and seventies.

A large group of singles, especially in the forty-to-eighty age group are in the church. Many are single again because of divorce or single because of being widowed. Young families with preschoolers and elementary children attend. About 135 children, birth through fifth grade, are enrolled in Sunday School and 130 in the

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<sup>275</sup>Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce phone conversation on March 5, 2006.



youth area, sixth grade through twelfth grade. The average attendance in worship is five to six hundred. The church budget for 2006-2007 is \$1.8 million dollars.<sup>276</sup>

Worship is central at Broadway Baptist Church, which is evident by the church's commitment through the years to a strong pulpit ministry. Many excellent preachers have been called to Broadway--John Claypool, J. P. Allen, Stephen Shoemaker, and C. Welton Gaddy, for example. Broadway's gothic architecture, with its stained glass windows, calls for a more traditional, liturgical style of worship.

Broadway also has an excellent music ministry. In 1996, the church installed a new organ with over ten thousand pipes. This amazing instrument has allowed the church to expand its offerings to the community through "The Broadway Series" music programs performed throughout the year. The church also has a graded choir program for children three years old through twelfth grade.

In 1995, the church began the "Agape Meal" on Thursday evenings. This meal, served in the Fellowship Hall, is for persons who are homeless. The meal is served fifty weeks throughout the year. The church members now serve about 200-250 people each week. This is a "meal with dignity" with the food being served family style on tables covered with tablecloths. Each table is hosted by a Broadway member (sometimes people from other churches come to serve and act as hosts at the tables). A worship service is a part of the evening, but the guests do not have to attend in order to eat--the food comes first. After the worship service, communion is served for any who desire to participate. An interesting phenomenon of the Agape Meal is

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<sup>276</sup>This information is according to church records.

that many of the guests who have come for years now feel that the church is “their church.” A number of persons have now become members because of the ministry of the Agape Meal.

Meeting the needs of such a diverse group of people presents its own set of challenges. Middle-class America does not understand the pain of being homeless in this country. Even though many in the church have accepted the challenge of making a difference in the lives of these neighbors by meeting their immediate needs and finding ways to address systemically the problems of poverty and homelessness, some still do not understand why the church needs and wants to minister in this way.

Broadway Baptist Church is a study in contrasts. Some members are as far to the right as you could go and some as far to the left, with a good many in between. Some members do not think the Agape Meal should even be offered, while others have joined because the church offers such a ministry. On any given Sunday, one might hear a violinist with the Fort Worth Symphony playing in worship and sit beside a person who is homeless and lives in one of the homeless shelters down the road.

Broadway Baptist Church has many wealthy people, and they give generously. If a need is presented to the congregation, they can be counted on to meet the need. The church takes up special offerings throughout the year, with one being a hunger offering which is usually around \$25, 000. The members give money to designated accounts, as well as budget offerings, to help support the missions and ministries of the church.

The church owns a camp on Eagle Mountain Lake. The campground is used for a variety of retreats and camps. Each year a silent retreat is held, vespers services, artists' days, and a variety of other opportunities for worship, fellowship, education, and missions are offered.

The caring ministries of Broadway are strong and have been made stronger by the introduction to the church of Stephen Ministry. Many opportunities exist to care for those in need within the congregation. The reality of an aging congregation constantly presents new needs which must be met. Some other caring ministries are family care groups, Cheer Groups (visiting those who can no longer attend church), Bread Breakers (intergenerational groups which meet for dinner for four months).

The church has been through some significant conflict in the past ten years. During one crisis, the deacons found that they really did not know how to talk to one another. A professional conflict resolution mediator was brought in to facilitate the discussion. He helped provide a means by which the deacons could talk and work through difficult issues.

Because of the diversity at Broadway, that members listen to one another is even more imperative. With people from so many backgrounds, making mutual assumptions about one another is easy. Even with the differences within the membership, church should be a place where each person can be taken seriously and know that someone will listen. For moderate Baptists, Broadway Baptist Church has been an oasis in the desert for many years.

CHAPTER 7  
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT  
IN THE CONGREGATION

*Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also  
what it takes to sit down and listen.*

Winston Churchill

The purpose of the project is to teach listening skills to members of the congregation so they can use them as a way of caring for each other. I acknowledge that some have a gift for listening, but I believe that all who are willing can learn rudimentary skills and use them at some level, if only to talk less and listen more. The hope is that by teaching listening skills to a significant number of people, the church would be perceived as a more caring congregation. Teachers in the high school Sunday School department were given the opportunity to learn skills for intentional listening and to critique and evaluate this effort to communicate love, compassion, and empathy by using those skills. The students in the high school department have helped by evaluating the listening offered by their teachers before and after the training.

Finding curriculum for the teaching of listening skills is possible, but not one of the modules which was reviewed attempts to teach basic listening skills in one

session.<sup>277</sup> My experience with this congregation has proven that enlisting a large portion of the congregation to sign up for training which lasted for a period of weeks would be difficult. Members might sign up, but the consistency of attendance would be low. The brevity of the training was planned as a way to encourage members to attend. My desire was to simplify the skills taught, not to trivialize them.

Since the training is brief, I believe that having an easy way of remembering the listening skills which were taught was important. The words should immediately remind the participants of how to listen more effectively. For the key words to be words already familiar to most people seemed important. The words chosen were STOP, LOOK, and LISTEN.

STOP--Take time to give the other your undivided attention. Giving your undivided attention is hard work, do not even begin if you do not have the time.

LOOK--Look into the face of the other. By using facial expressions, show your interest. Use as few words as possible, "Oh," "Yes," "I see." Silence is perfectly acceptable, as well. When looking into the face of another, one can offer the gift of acceptance. As the Native American Proverb says, one can walk a mile in another's shoes.

LISTEN--Carefully listen to what is shared. Repeat what you hear in your own words, along with the feelings that are expressed. Do not offer advice, hollow reassurances, or try to fix every problem, just listen.

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<sup>277</sup>Clinebell, Stone, and Taylor.

For the purposes of this project, a determination was made that a small group of the congregation would be chosen and given the opportunity to participate. Youth often complain that no one listens to them, so the teachers of high school youth were invited to participate. The training module included a section about the generation of youth presently in the high school department. The idea being that if one is to listen well to a particular group, knowing about them is important. What would one expect to hear from the youth of today--the millennial generation?

The vision beyond the scope of this specific project is that many segments of the church will be offered the opportunity to take the listening skills training. The training module would include sections on each particular group in the church. For example, if being presenting to teachers of senior adults, the module would include a section on senior adults, including their issues, needs, and what one might hear when listening to them. All of this would be done in the hope that the church would then be perceived as a more caring congregation.

### **Pre-meeting with Teachers**

Along with the youth minister, eight teachers teach in the ninth through twelfth grades. I met with them when they gathered in late summer as they were preparing for the new church year. The meeting took place in late August with most of the teachers in attendance. At that meeting, the components of the project and the timeframe were presented. The group was polled to determine the best day for the training, and the majority wanted to meet on a Saturday morning. The next week a

letter was sent to the teachers informing them of the training date on Saturday, August 26, from 9:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m., along with the consent forms required by the university and a stamped envelope so the forms could be returned. A follow-up e-mail was sent to the teachers reminding them of the training.

At the same time, a letter was sent to the students in grades nine through twelve, along with the consent forms required by the university and a stamped envelope so the forms could be returned. On Sunday, August 20, during the time the high school group met together before going into their classes, they were informed that, after Sunday School, anyone who was willing and had their consent forms or had mailed them in, could take the “Student’s Pre-Evaluation” (Appendix A). Sixty-five students are enrolled in the high school department with an average attendance each Sunday of fifty. Approximately twenty students completed the evaluation at that time.

### **Training One**

The first training was on August 26, 2006, 9:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m., and the meeting was held in a room at the church. Three teachers and the youth minister attended. Most of the other teachers e-mailed, stating the reasons they could not attend. Several asked if another training session would be held, and they were told that another training time would be planned (see Appendix C).

At the training, the teachers filled out the “Teacher’s Pre-Evaluation” (Appendix B). Both training sessions were structured in the same way, with the first part of the meeting given to a presentation and discussion about the Millennial

Generation. The youth they teach are a part of this group, and the intent was that this part of the module would help the teachers think about their students and how to listen most effectively to them.

When contemplating the best way to teach listening skills, I considered a number of different methods. Because of my experience as a participant in the Stephen Ministry listening skills training, making the training as experiential as possible seemed the most effective way to teach the skills. Exercises were included in the training, so the participants could actually practice what was discussed (Appendix H). Several of the exercises involved “role playing.”

### *Observations*

Doing the exercises with such small groups was difficult. The teachers observed that role playing with people they knew so well was difficult. Their familiarity with each other seemed to embarrass them, because they laughed a lot. They entered into the first part of the training about the millennial generation, asking questions and discussing the information presented (see Training Module which follows this section). They were very careful not to talk about specific students.

One of the most surprising pieces of information to them was the fact that today’s teens list loneliness as one of their biggest issues. A discussion ensued about how the church contributes to the loneliness of teens. The group offered suggestions as to ways the church could help. The youth minister was present, and she took note of this conversation.



This group spent time discussing the ideas presented about this generation's tendency to form "Friendship Clusters," where coed groups gather around shared interests. One teacher disagreed with the idea that most students have a group with which identify, and no longer is there simply the "in" crowd and then "everyone else." She felt that an "in" crowd still exists, especially at Broadway Baptist Church, and she was concerned, because she feels some students have no group with which to identify.

One man in the first group shared that his wife was a good listener, but he was not. He said he did not have the patience needed to listen well. One of the most difficult things for the group was the idea of not offering advice or trying to "fix" everyone's problems. The group worked on this in the exercises. That they felt much more comfortable "helping" by offering advice was apparent. The desire to "fix" others' problems seems to come very naturally. My initial reaction was that they felt the need to be more "helpful," because of the age and inexperience of the teens. After the third training, I realized that this was an erroneous assumption.

One participant has been a teacher in the high school department for many years, and she said that one of her greatest disappointments is that she feels she has a good rapport with the students and always makes it clear that they can call her at any time, but in all her years of teaching, not one student has taken her up on that.

### **Training Two**

After the first training, a number of places in the module needed to be "tweaked." Primarily, it was a matter of rearranging the information so that the

module would fit together better (see Appendix C). The second training was held on September 7, 2006, 6:00-10:00 p.m., with the group meeting in the same room as training one. Five teachers attended. Two of them were middle school teachers who asked if they could attend. This accounted for six of the eight teachers--one called to say his grandmother had died, and he could not be attend. The other teacher attended a later training, so seven out of eight high school teachers, two middle school teachers, and the youth minister received the training (see Appendix C).

Five participants attended the second training--three men and two women. This training was on a Monday evening and all of the people in attendance had come from work. They seemed a bit lethargic, and I wondered if they were just tired or if the fact that there were more men in the group had anything to do with the way they participated. I wondered, because often men have less experience in role playing and other kinds of interactive exercises and may feel more self-conscious about these kinds of exercises. One of the women in attendance is a public school teacher in a local high school. She was very interested in the discussion about the millennial generation, and she strongly agreed with the information which was presented, especially the description of the "Friendship Clusters."

### *Observations*

The two women who were present seemed very engaged with the process, but the three men were less so. They talked about their need to listen better, and one even said his wife wanted him to participate, because she thought it would be beneficial for

their relationship. I was disappointed after the training session, feeling as if my thesis was not valid and that the teaching of listening skills was not going to matter to the church at large. A realization dawned that even with the brief training, it was still going to be a voluntary ministry and not everyone would want to try it. Some people may not be interested in trying to be a better listener. They would say they were, but they do not seem willing to put forth the effort needed to make it happen. Some people believe they are already very good listeners and have no further need of training, while others may be reluctant, because of the fear of making themselves vulnerable to another person. Each training session reinforced for the me my need to practice, practice, practice. Intentional listening is hard work.

After the disappointing feelings following the second training, I did some serious reflecting on the process and made several decisions. First, a refocusing of the project needed to occur. I was sidetracked by the work on the millennial generation, and that was not the focus of the project--the focus should be more clearly on listening skills. Why not drop the two-hour part of the module on the different groups in the church? Practically speaking, how would one teach the deacons, for instance, about every group they might encounter when working with the members of the church?

Second, the decision was made to try this with another group. The deacons were invited to participate in a training session for listening skills on Monday, September 25, 2006, 6:30-8:30 p.m. The third change was in the training module itself. More information was added to the listening skills training, and a section was

added to help the participants become more comfortable with the experiential nature of the training. The importance of actually experiencing the skills was stressed, and the participants were asked to try to leave their inhibitions at the door and fully give themselves to the training.

### **Training Three**

When the time came for the first exercise, participants were asked to find a person in the group they did not know very well. The hope was that they would be less self-conscious. I planned to model a role-playing exercise for the group and talked with one participant and asked if she would be willing to help. When talking with the group, most of them had experienced role playing and did not think seeing a demonstration was necessary.

The exercises accounted for more than fifty minutes of the training. Intellectually understanding how to listen was easy, but quite another thing to put it into practice. An additional exercise was added, because it was felt that making a more natural progression of the skills to be used in listening would make the training clearer.

The first exercise helps the participants get the idea of what it feels like when people do not listen. Of course, most people have experienced that before, but it was a reminder. The second exercise had the participants listening and not talking at all. This was done in an attempt to get them thinking about listening and not having to always say something. The third exercise was done to teach the skill of paraphrasing

or reflecting back what was heard. This exercise was the “Did I hear you correctly?” part. Exercise four was to help the participants learn to listen for feelings and to reflect back content and feelings when listening. They were provided with a list of possible feelings to help them get started (Appendix I). This progression of the skills needed for intentional listening seemed to be logical and more understandable.

The group was made up of the following people. One of the high school teachers, who is also a deacon, could not come to one of the other teacher trainings, so she signed up for training three. Seventeen people signed up, and two staff persons asked if they could attend. One of the deacons called several days before the training to ask if she could bring two other people from her office. She said they were very interested in the topic. Out of the nineteen possible attendees, thirteen came. Of the six who did not show up, one person had just been released from the hospital, and one called and said he had to work at the last minute; the others forgot.

### *Observations*

Great energy was present in this group. They asked questions and discussed freely. I walked around when the group was doing the exercises and when finished, they asked about different issues related to listening. They seemed to be taking the whole process very seriously.

During the first exercise, when one person speaks and another is the distracted nonlistener, I heard one woman say, “No, listen, this is really interesting.” She realized her partner was not present with her, and she was desperately trying to get her

to pay attention. One person kept trying to get the attention of her partner by continually moving her face to try and get in her partner's line of vision.

This group also admitted to being “fixers.” Some even said they did not realize how prone they were to wanting to give advice. In listening to the group as they participated in the exercises, they were telling the truth. Even during the last exercise, after talking about listening skills all evening, some still were trying to “fix” the speaker. Seemingly, they have been the “fixers” for so long, they really could not think of anything else to say. The energy in this group was contagious. They seemed interested, and they gave themselves fully to the process. Because of this group, the listening skills training sessions finished in a much more positive way, and I felt much more hopeful.

The participants in the first two groups were told that, after a month, they would meet to fill out the post-evaluations (Appendix B) and to reflect on the experience. Since the third group was added to the original project, they did not have a month between the training and the post-evaluation. The post-evaluation consists of the same questions on the pre-evaluation. Since all the evaluations are anonymous, the data will reveal any differences which have come about since the training. The collected data is shown on the graphs in Appendix J.

## **Reflection Groups**

### ***Teachers' Training***

On Wednesday, October 3, 2006, the high school teachers and youth minister were invited to a meeting at 7:00 p.m., following the Wednesday evening service. Of the nine who participated in the first two sessions, five came. They began by answering the post-evaluation (Appendix E). Then they were asked to reflect on the experience.

One Sunday School teacher shared an experience she had with a teen. The young person shared some personal troubles she was experiencing. The Sunday School teacher said that she ordinarily would have given advice, but because of the listening training, she simply tried to listen. Later the teen came back and thanked the Sunday School teacher for helping her and for ‘listening.’”

Another woman mentioned that she had been able to use the listening skills in her work situation as well. She is a person who finds it easy to talk. She said that in relating to a new person at her job, she was able to just listen. The new employee is having trouble with another one of the employees in the office, and the listening participant was so glad she only listened, because she realized listening was the best way to be of help.

One of the participants mentioned that she realized she needed to help the students in her Sunday School class learn to listen to each other better. Another teacher agreed that this would be very helpful to the teens they teach. One participant admitted that not giving advice to the students is still hard. All the other participants

agreed that they have the same problem. One man shared that he had learned early on in his marriage to refrain from giving advice. He said many times all his wife wanted was a “listening ear.” This participant also gave credit to his co-teacher for the way she models good listening skills with the students they teach.

Some discussion followed about the lack of energy in the second training session which was held in the evening. I shared that I thought it might be because they were coming from work and were tired. One participant suggested that perhaps they were still in the “problem-solving mode” used in their work and did not make the transition to listening mode. I am not sure of the reason for the low energy, I only know that the participants seemed like observers who were on the outside looking in to the group. The evening went well overall. I probably made it bigger in my mind, because I felt responsible for the success of the evening, since the participants were giving me an evening of their limited free time.

I also asked for any feedback about how the module could be strengthened. No one responded. Having an anonymous evaluation form for the participants to evaluate the training sessions would probably be helpful. The participants are kind people and probably did not want to say anything that might even seem negative, because of their relationship with me. They have been very supportive in this whole process. The other four teachers who could not attend were asked to answer the post-evaluation and offer any feedback on the next Sunday. The students were also asked to fill out the post-evaluation on Sunday, October, 8, 2006 (Appendix D).



### *General Participants*

Because the third group was not a part of the original plan for the project, that reflection group was held only two weeks after the training. They met on Sunday, October 8, 2006, immediately following worship. They began by filling out the post-evaluation (Appendix F). Four of the thirteen came, but a number of them told me they would be out of town. I had to track them down and get them to fill out the evaluation. They were very willing; I just had to find them.

One of the participants shared about an encounter she had with a woman while visiting her daughter at college. At a meeting she attended with her daughter, she had a conversation with another parent. The participant said she “simply listened.” She was surprised at the way the other person opened up and shared. The listener said she really did not have to do much at all, but the woman was very appreciative when the conversation was over. This participant observed that listening to a stranger, someone you will not see very often, is easier. It was clear to her that, because of the lack of commitment, she could be much more accepting of a person she would see infrequently. Her observations were interesting to hear, since experts in this field say exactly the same thing.<sup>278</sup>

One of the women participants related this story, which happened soon after the training. While talking with someone and trying to listen carefully, she found herself beginning to give advice as she tried to “fix” the problems of the other person.

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<sup>278</sup>Banville, 180.

She said, “I stopped immediately and went back to listening. If the training did nothing else for me, I will remember to try not to give so much advice.”

Two of the participants shared that they felt intentional listening was desperately needed in the church. These same two participants shared that they feel that the lack of listening is a real problem in the church. They believe that many people feel removed from what goes on in the church and consequently feel that they are not being heard. They agreed that listening is an affirmation “that you are.”

One woman, who works for a large national company, indicated that they now do a large part of their communication by phone and e-mails. In the past, they would fly all over the country to meet face-to-face. She talked about how difficult their new way of communicating can be, especially if she does not know one of the members of the project team personally. So much of the communication, when speaking and listening, is done nonverbally. This group also talked about the gender differences. Some of the women expressed feelings that “generally,” they believe men have more difficulty being present so as to listen intentionally to another. A number of the participants shared that the training was very helpful and raised their awareness.

### ***General Observations***

One of the difficulties of implementing a ministry of listening with the larger congregation is that it takes time and commitment. The persons who want to talk to us are not always the persons to whom we desire to listen. Talking about how Jesus took

time to listen to all kinds of people and about how Jesus responded with love is easy, but incorporating those behaviors into our own lives is not so easy.

When inviting church members to participate in the listening skills training, I wanted them to understand the depth of commitment needed for this kind of listening. To remember that the person to whom we listen is a child of God, created in the image of God, worthy of love and respect is helpful. If we can keep that foremost in our minds, the reasons for listening might outweigh the more difficult aspects of such caring.

Even after speaking at length about listening skills and then practicing the skills, seemingly, the participants still could not trust the process of listening to another. They do not believe listening will really work. They do not trust that, by using these skills of reflecting content and feelings with empathy, people can come to their own solutions for problems, or that people will feel heard and helped simply through the act of listening.

Listening skills can be used in the congregation on many levels. An overall “climate” of listening can be created if members of the congregation are open. This would mean that members listen first before talking, refrain from interrupting, reflect back content to be sure they have heard correctly rather than making assumptions based on what they “thought they heard,” and develop an openness to listen when differences of opinion occur. Often members are so afraid they will not be able to express their opinions or ideas that they just keep talking rather than taking time to listen. They come to church from a world full of noise, and “changing gears” is

difficult, making it hard to slow down and be patient. Sometimes persons at church may talk so much, because they really have no one in their lives who will listen, and when they get to church, it is as if they have a “captive audience.” All opportunities for listening in the church are not “problem solving” conversations. At times, members just want someone who will listen to their thoughts and ideas.

Sunday School teachers offer a particular kind of listening. This is different from the listening offered in a one-on-one conversation. They can use some of the skills including: eye contact, focused attention, taking student’s comments seriously, showing care and concern, and creating an environment where students feel free to be honest and where students know they are respected. These same teachers do have opportunities to talk with students outside of class, and then they can use other listening skills such as refraining from talking, body language to show they are interested, and reflecting back content and feelings--with empathy.

### **Graphs**

The data gathered by the evaluations has been put onto five graphs (Appendix J). The graphs show the question numbers and an average of the score given for each question by the participants. Evaluations were completed by the teachers, students, and general participants (Appendices A and B for samples of the student, teacher, and general participant evaluations).

### **Teacher Self-Evaluation**

This graph shows how the teachers scored their own listening skills. The scores of the men and women are combined on this graph, which shows pre and post scores. On every question, with the exception of number four, the teachers scored themselves higher after taking the training. Question number four is about giving advice, and they scored themselves lower after taking the training. One reason for this is that the training raised their awareness about this issue. Most of the teachers admitted that they did not realize how much they tried to give advice. This could account for the lower score after the training. A score of five is “all of the time,” and after the training the teachers rated themselves between a four and five on eight out of ten questions, so they seemed to be quite confident about the skills which were evaluated. I realized that the evaluation only asked participants to evaluate themselves on some of the skills needed for intentional listening. No questions related to paraphrasing and reflecting back content and feelings.

### **Student Evaluation Vs. Teacher Self-Evaluation**

This graph compares how the students rated the teachers and how the teachers rated themselves. The students rated the teachers higher than the teachers rated themselves on seven out of ten questions. The students rated the teachers somewhat lower than the teachers rated themselves on questions three, five, and six, but the differences were small. Overall, teachers and students indicated that the teachers do a good job of listening. No score was lower than a three on any question. When I asked

the students to participate in this project, I did not go into detail about what the training for the teachers would entail. It probably would have been helpful in their evaluations for them to understand exactly what the teachers were going to be doing. The high scores on the pre-evaluation indicated that they felt very positive about the listening they are receiving from their teachers.

### **Student Evaluations**

This graph indicates how the students scored the teachers on the pre and post-evaluations. On questions one, five, and nine, the students scored the teachers exactly the same on the pre and post-evaluations. Overall, the scores were very high which indicates that the students feel their teachers are good listeners. Once again, the lowest score is on the question about “fixing” problems. This seems to indicate that students sense that for teachers to refrain from offering help in solving problems is difficult. No other score was under a four which is “most of the time.”

### **Female/Male Comparison**

This graph compares all adult males and females who turned in an evaluation-females and males in the teacher group and the general group. Males scored themselves higher on six out of ten questions; yet, in the training, the men were quick to talk about what poor listeners they were. The males scored themselves lowest on questions three and four which, once again, have to do with giving advice and fixing problems. The possibility exists that this is a culturally conditioned difference in males and females. Females and males both scored themselves highest on questions

five and six which have to do with taking students seriously and creating an environment where students can be open and honest.

### **Listening Skills Male/Female Comparison**

This graph is interesting, because it compares scores of men and women on both evaluations. Men and women scored themselves higher on the post-evaluation than on the pre-evaluation on most questions with the exception of question four. Drawing definite conclusions about gender differences without more data is difficult. I will continue to look at this as I teach more groups in the congregation.

### **General Participants Evaluation**

This compares the pre-evaluation and post-evaluation of the third group, the general participants. They rated themselves higher or the same on every question of the post evaluation except number four, which is a question about giving advice, and number two, which is a question about giving undivided attention. Once again, I think that the training raised their awareness of how often they give advice and consequently, they scored themselves lower on the post-evaluation on the question about advice.

On question ten which is about showing care and compassion, they rated themselves the same on both evaluations. Of those in this group that I know, I would agree that they are a caring and compassionate group of people. For the most part, this group rated themselves from “more often than not” to “all the time.” Number nine turned out to be a faulty question. On the pre-evaluation, the question said, “I feel that

listening is not one of my strengths.” The participants answered the question, rather than indicating how they feel. If they felt that listening is not one of their strengths, they should have answered with a four or five; instead, they answered with a one or two. So when they read the question, “I feel that listening is not one of my strengths,” they looked at the answers and thought, “Not at all, it is not one of my strengths.” This created a great disparity in the scores on question nine in the pre and post-evaluation. I changed the question to read, “I feel that listening is one of my strengths.”



## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

*We have been given two ears and but a single mouth, in order  
that we may hear more and talk less.*<sup>279</sup>  
Zeno of Cilium

I decided on this topic as I began to realize how ineffective members of the church are at listening to each other. The finger I point at others leaves three pointed back at myself-I am not the listener I desire to be or need to be. After my research and the implementation of the project, I am still convinced that my thesis is valid. The church will be a more caring and compassionate community if it offers a mutual gift of listening.

Morton Kelsey has strong words to say about the Christian's need to learn to listen and the responsibility of the church to make it happen. "I wonder if it is possible truly to profess Christianity and the practice of love if we have not tried in some way to sharpen our skills in listening. I wonder if a Christian parish church is offering genuine Christian education if it does not provide training in listening skills and offer listening classes for children and adults."<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>279</sup>Adler, Rosenfeld, and Towne, 140.

<sup>280</sup>Kelsey, 79.

This project clarified several issues surrounding the plan to help churches train members to listen. One, even if the training is one session, it would still have to be voluntary, and I am not sure how many members of the congregation would choose to participate. Some have no interest; others are already stressed by life and wonder how they would find the time. Some are worried they might be forced to listen to someone they do not like, but for a bigger group than might be imagined, it is their own issues which inhibit their abilities to offer the gift of listening to another. They cannot get past their own needs so they can see the needs of others. But the listening nature of the congregation would be improved if even a small percentage of the congregation would seek to be better listeners.

Now for those who do choose to participate in the listening training, can they learn to listen well with one two-hour session? Some are gifted with the ability to listen, and after two hours they would be able to begin implementing what they learned. For most, two hours would raise their awareness and, hopefully, create in them an interest for more training. I think the participants in the three training sessions I offered will be much more aware of the need to listen, know when they are not listening, understand what it means to listen, and refrain from so much advice-giving or trying to “fix” problems. If they can do those things, I think they are on their way to being better listeners.

This kind of training can be a beginning step in raising congregational awareness about the need for listening. Pastors could also preach on the subject of “Listening to Each Other” and then take every opportunity to talk about the need for

listening to each other. The pastor or other staff members could lead Bible studies on “The Listening Jesus.” The suggestions in chapter seven could also be implemented in committees and other groups within the church.

Providing opportunities for times of silence during worship or other meetings of the church will also raise the awareness of the congregation. Providing these opportunities is the beginning point, because listening will never exist if all we do is talk. When we enter into periods of silence, we open our hearts and minds to the presence of God and make ourselves available to be God’s presence to another by listening.

Five years ago, when Broadway Baptist Church’s present senior pastor came to the church, he put a “Discipline of Silence” into the order of worship. At first, people seemed a bit uncomfortable, but now people comment on how meaningful that time during worship is for them. This time could be the only time during the week when they have a chance to sit in silence. The senior pastor has been slowly lengthening the time for this part of the service, and currently the silent time is four minutes long.

Opportunities for listening to persons with problems exist within the context of the church. Elderly members who can no longer come to church and those who realize they cannot do the things they once could have needs. Many are struggling with life-changing decisions--should I move near my children, should I move into a care facility, who will I get to care for me, or how do I pay for care? Folk with these issues need someone who will listen with care and compassion.

Couples who are trying to juggle the pressures of work, family, and church need a listening ear. Who understands the pulls on their time and energy? Does the church just ask more and more rather than understanding? Who will help them learn to listen to their children? I rediscovered the book, *Parent Effectiveness Training* by Thomas Gordon, while researching this paper and realized that the book is still a very helpful way of relating to children. On Tuesday mornings, I am leading a group of young mothers in the study of this book. They are thirsty for friends who will walk with them on the road of parenting.

Who will listen to society's disenfranchised and powerless who come to church seeking someone to listen and offer them understanding? Some are persons who are homeless, those struggling with mental illness, or others who want to live life differently. Yet, all need someone who will listen, someone who will understand. It is not always just an individual need, but can become a corporate need when the church becomes embroiled in conflict. In the Baptist tradition, one only needs to look around at all the Baptist churches to know that conflict often escalates to a boiling point, causing churches to split and form new congregations. One of the major reasons this happens is because no one can or will listen to the other. Church splits can be caused by people who cannot stop talking long enough to listen, but they always end with a group of people who have lost their trust in and respect for each other.

The list could go on and on, there is no end to the ways that a church can use the ministry of listening to offer care and compassion. Even if members do not become experts at using listening skills, they can still convey love, acceptance, and

respect as they try to begin caring for others by listening. This is a journey which begins with one step, and who among you is willing to come along?

APPENDIX A

PRE-EVALUATION FOR STUDENTS

Grade \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions about your Sunday School class using a scale of 1-5.

1. Not at all
2. Sometimes
3. More often than not
4. Most of the time
5. All the time

1. My teachers show care for me by looking at me when I talk. \_\_\_\_\_
2. My teachers show care for me by giving me their undivided attention. \_\_\_\_\_
3. My teachers listen without trying to fix my problems. \_\_\_\_\_
4. My teachers give advice in helpful ways. \_\_\_\_\_
5. What I have to say is taken seriously in my Sunday School class. \_\_\_\_\_
6. I can share honestly in my Sunday School class. \_\_\_\_\_
7. My teachers let me know they care about me and my feelings. \_\_\_\_\_
8. My teachers understand me and show their care by listening to me. \_\_\_\_\_
9. Every person in my class is urged to show care by listening to each other. \_\_\_\_\_
10. I feel that my Sunday School class is a place where I feel cared for and respected. \_\_\_\_\_

## LISTENING PRE-EVALUATION FOR TEACHERS

Female \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions about your Sunday School class using a scale of 1-5.

1. Not at all
2. Sometimes
3. More often than not
4. Most of the time
5. All the time

1. I care for my students by giving them direct eye contact when they speak. \_\_\_\_\_
2. When a student talks, I give her/him my undivided attention. \_\_\_\_\_
3. I listen to students without trying to fix their problems. \_\_\_\_\_
4. I offer advice to students sparingly. \_\_\_\_\_
5. When students speak, I take what they have to say seriously. \_\_\_\_\_
6. I try to create an environment in my Sunday School class so that each student feels he/she can be open and honest. \_\_\_\_\_
7. I let students know I care about them and their feelings. \_\_\_\_\_
8. I show care for my students by listening to them. \_\_\_\_\_
9. Students are urged to care for each other by listening to each other. \_\_\_\_\_
10. In my class, I create an environment of care and compassion so that every student feels that he/she is respected. \_\_\_\_\_

LISTENING SKILLS  
PRE-EVALUATION

Female \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions using a scale of 1-5.

1. Not at all
2. Sometimes
3. More often than not
4. Most of the time
5. All the time

1. I use direct eye contact when speaking with others. \_\_\_\_\_
2. When talking with others, I give them my undivided attention. \_\_\_\_\_
3. I listen to the concerns of others without trying to fix their problems. \_\_\_\_\_
4. I offer advice sparingly when listening to others. \_\_\_\_\_
5. When people speak with me, I take what they have to say seriously. \_\_\_\_\_
6. I try to be open and honest when listening to others and want them to feel free to do the same. \_\_\_\_\_
7. When listening, I let others know I care about them and their feelings. \_\_\_\_\_
8. I show care for others by listening to them. \_\_\_\_\_
9. I feel that listening is one of my strengths. \_\_\_\_\_
10. I show care and compassion to others when speaking with them. \_\_\_\_\_



APPENDIX B

POST-EVALUATION FOR STUDENTS

Grade \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions about your Sunday School class using a scale of 1-5.

1. Not at all
2. Sometimes
3. More often than not
4. Most of the time
5. All the time

1. My teachers show care for me by looking at me when I talk. \_\_\_\_\_
2. My teachers show care for me by giving me their undivided attention. \_\_\_\_\_
3. My teachers listen without trying to fix my problems. \_\_\_\_\_
4. My teachers give advice in helpful ways. \_\_\_\_\_
5. What I have to say is taken seriously in my Sunday School class. \_\_\_\_\_
6. I can share honestly in my Sunday School class. \_\_\_\_\_
7. My teachers let me know they care about me and my feelings. \_\_\_\_\_
8. My teachers understand me and show their care by listening to me. \_\_\_\_\_
9. Every person in my class is urged to show care by listening to each other. \_\_\_\_\_
10. I feel that my Sunday School class is a place where I feel cared for and respected. \_\_\_\_\_

## LISTENING POST-EVALUATION FOR TEACHERS

Female \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions about your Sunday School class using a scale of 1-5.

1. Not at all
2. Sometimes
3. More often than not
4. Most of the time
5. All the time

1. I care for my students by giving them direct eye contact when they speak. \_\_\_\_\_
2. When a student talks, I give her/him my undivided attention. \_\_\_\_\_
3. I listen to students without trying to fix their problems. \_\_\_\_\_
4. I offer advice to students sparingly. \_\_\_\_\_
5. When students speak, I take what they have to say seriously. \_\_\_\_\_
6. I try to create an environment in my Sunday School Class so that each student feels he/she can be open and honest. \_\_\_\_\_
7. I let students know I care about them and their feelings. \_\_\_\_\_
8. I show care for my students by listening to them. \_\_\_\_\_
9. Students are urged to care for each other by listening to each other. \_\_\_\_\_
10. In my class, I create an environment of care and compassion so that every student feels that he/she is respected. \_\_\_\_\_

LISTENING SKILLS  
POST-EVALUATION

Female \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions using a scale of 1-5.

1. Not at all
2. Sometimes
3. More often than not
4. Most of the time
5. All the time

1. I use direct eye contact when speaking with others. \_\_\_\_\_
2. When talking with others, I give them my undivided attention. \_\_\_\_\_
3. I listen to the concerns of others without trying to fix their problems. \_\_\_\_\_
4. I offer advice sparingly when listening to others. \_\_\_\_\_
5. When people speak with me, I take what they have to say seriously. \_\_\_\_\_
6. I try to be open and honest when listening to others and want them to feel free to do the same. \_\_\_\_\_
7. When listening, I let others know I care about them and their feelings. \_\_\_\_\_
8. I show care for others by listening to them. \_\_\_\_\_
9. I feel that listening is one of my strengths. \_\_\_\_\_
10. I show care and compassion to others when speaking with them. \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C

### THE SCHEDULES FOR THREE TRAINING SESSIONS

#### ENHANCING CAREGIVING THROUGH LISTENING

#### **Listening Training**

#### **Schedule**

August 26, 2006

8:45 – 9:00	Food and Fellowship
9:00 – 9:15	Welcome and Introduction
9:15 – 9:30	Pre-Test Evaluation of Listening Skills
9:30 – 10:15	What you need to know about adolescents but were afraid to ask [Part I].
10:15 – 10:25	Stretch break
10:25 – 11:00	What you need to know about adolescents but were afraid to ask [Part II]
11:00 – 11:55	Listening Skills 101
11:55 – 12:05	Stretch break
12:05 – 12:45	Listening Skills 101
12:45 – 1:00	Wrap Up

## LOVING NEIGHBOR: LISTENING TO EACH OTHER

**Listening Training****Schedule**

September 7, 2006

5:45 – 6:10	Food and Fellowship
6:10 – 6:20	Welcome and Introduction
6:20 – 6:30	Pre-Test Evaluation of Listening Skills
6:30 – 7:00	What you need to know about adolescents but were afraid to ask [Part I].
7:00 – 7:10	Stretch break
7:10 – 7:45	What you need to know about adolescents but were afraid to ask [Part II].
7:45 – 8:30	Listening Skills 101
8:30 – 8:40	Stretch break
8:40 – 9:15	Listening Skills 101
9:15 – 9:30	Wrap Up

## LOVING NEIGHBOR: LISTENING TO EACH OTHER

**Listening Training****Schedule**

September 25, 2006

6:15 – 6:45	Food and Fellowship
6:45 – 7:00	Welcome and Introduction
7:00 – 7:10	Pre-Test Evaluation of Listening Skills
7:10 – 7:45	Listening Skills 101
7:45 – 7:55	Break
7:55 – 8:25	Listening Skills 101
8:25 – 8:30	Wrap Up

## APPENDIX D

### LISTENING EXERCISES

#### EXERCISE 1

Find a partner and decide who is A and who is B. A will begin by sharing a happy experience from the last week. B will have written instructions for this exercise. A has three minutes to share. After A has shared he/she has two minutes to reflect on how she/he felt while speaking.

(The written instructions say: When your partner begins talking look disinterested by looking the other way, slouching in your chair, checking your fingernails.) After he/she has shared a little bit, interrupt to tell your story, give advice, try to fix it even if they really have nothing to fix. In general, be as disinterested as possible.)

#### EXERCISE 2

Because we often think more about talking than listening, the next exercise will help us begin to get used to listening without feeling the need to talk so much. With your partner, continue you're a and B designation. B will begin by sharing an experience from the last week when something good happened. You will have five minutes to talk. A is to give his or her undivided attention, only using one word responses, "yes," "oh,"--primarily listen in silence. I will tell you when the five minutes is up, switch and let A share while B listens.

The whole group will share about this experience.

#### EXERCISE 3

Paraphrasing exercise--See APPENDIX E for the prompts. Find a partner and decide who is A and who is B. Role play the situation in the prompt and the listener will paraphrase what he or she heard. The speaker will respond to the paraphrase. Each person will have five minutes.

**EXERCISE 4**

Get into groups of three. Decide who is A, B, and C. First, A shares, and B is the listener, C is the observer. The second time B shares, C is the listener, and A is the observer. The third time, C shares, B is the observer, and A is the listener. Each speaker will have five minutes, with three for reflection. The observer is to listen, do not talk. When the five minutes are up, the observer will have three minutes to share his/her observations about how well the listener listened.

Here are the situations for A, B, and C in Exercise 4.

A--You just found out you lost your job, you have no insurance, and your spouse is sick.

B--You have an offer for the job of a lifetime, but it will mean uprooting your family and you have children in high school.

C--Your elderly parent just died, and you have been left to handle all the business and it is a mess.

When finished, we will share reactions to this exercise with the whole group.



## APPENDIX E

### PARAPHRASING PROMPTS

I know I should not feel this way, but I get so angry at my husband. He is getting dementia, and I have to tell him everything over and over and over. He puts the food in the cabinet, and it spoils. I feel like I am constantly putting things back where they belong. We used to have such a great relationship, talking and sharing, but now he does not remember anything I say. I feel like an awful wife for saying this.

I used to love my work and all the people who worked with me. About two months ago, they hired a new person and things are so different now. She tells our boss how great she is at her work and even has taken over some of the things which I have been doing. The hard part is everyone is so fooled by her behavior. My boss actually believes her.

I have always been a person of faith. I grew up in the church and have gone all my life, but I am beginning to have some doubts. How could a loving God let all those little children die in the hurricane? I saw some of them pleading for someone to save them, trying to swim to shore and no one would help. I was hurt and could not help, but I have nightmares about it all the time. I cannot get the sight of those bodies covered by little white blankets out of my mind.

I love my children, but to be perfectly honest, they are driving me crazy. They have so much homework every night, and they cannot seem to do any of it on their own. I come home from work and fix dinner, and then I do homework for the next four or five hours. My husband works from three to twelve, so he is never there to help. Yesterday my son came home and got mad at me, because I told him a wrong answer. I am a terrible mother.

## APPENDIX F

### FEELING LIST FOR THE TRAINING MODULE

Sad

Excited

Happy

Angry

Pleased

Joyful

Afraid

Anxious

Relaxed

Nervous

Frustrated

Furious

Unconcerned

Ecstatic

Mad

Hopeful

Puzzled

## APPENDIX G

### SUGGESTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE LISTENING

#### **DO NOT:**

Give advice.

Try to “fix” it.

Offer platitudes (You made your bed and now you have to lie in it).

Offer hollow reassurances (Everything will be fine. You do not have to worry.).

Ask question after question which can be answered with “yes” or “no.” (Are you happy about that? Did you have an operation? How long have you been married?).

Interrupt the speaker to ask a lot of questions.

Sit with your arms crossed or turn away from the speaker.

Interrupt the speaker to tell your story.

#### **DO:**

Get rid of distractions (cell phones, radio, television, computer, other people).

Pay attention.

Use your body language to show that you are interested (eye contact, smile, nod, lean toward the person).

Reflect what the speaker says (reflect content, feelings, spiritual concerns).

Ask a few clarifying questions.

Take the time necessary to hear what the speaker has to say.

Remember to STOP, LOOK, and LISTEN.

APPENDIX H  
THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION

*Adolescents in America are ultimately left with little guidance or example in the area where they need it most: human relationships. . . . adults aren't addressing young people's yearning for intimacy, for contact, for connections that prove they matter.*  
Nell Bernstein<sup>281</sup>

The “Millennial Generation” is generally made up of people born between 1982 and 2000.<sup>282</sup> They are the youth in our churches, the children age six to twenty-four, who are growing up in a world that seems to exhibit more and more violence toward them. The reasons for this violence are not clear, but one message it may send to teens is that they are not valued by our society.

Erik Erikson called adolescence a “moratorium,” a time between childhood and adulthood when young people are figuring out who they are and why they are.<sup>283</sup> Their major developmental task during these years is to become their own person, separate from their parents.<sup>284</sup> Kendra Creasy Dean suggests that adolescence is no

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<sup>281</sup>Nell Bernstein, “Learning to Love,” *Mother Jones*, October 30, 2001, 3 [on-line article]; available at [www.motherjones.com/mother\\_jones/JF95/bernstein.html](http://www.motherjones.com/mother_jones/JF95/bernstein.html); Internet, as quoted in Dean, 222.

<sup>282</sup>Hestorff, vii.

<sup>283</sup>Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1963), 263.

<sup>284</sup>*Ibid.*, 260.

longer a time of moratorium, because adolescents no longer have this “safe time” to develop and mature.<sup>285</sup> Rather than a moratorium, today’s youth are pushed into adult roles which produce great stress in their lives. They feel “threatened and overwhelmed,” and the stress is producing stress-related illness.<sup>286</sup> Some youth feel they do not have role models for what it means to be an adult, because many adults are trying so hard to be youthful.<sup>287</sup> Students feel stress because of school, relationships, and family. Since 9-11, students now have to worry about whether or not they will have to fight in a war. They are also more anxious, and consequently, more stressed, because of the fear of being killed by terrorists here in America.

One problem which adds to their stress is lack of sleep.<sup>288</sup> Lack of sleep is caused, because they are overscheduled. It is also often caused by “multitasking.” To keep up, they must “multitask” which means doing multiple tasks at one time--doing homework, working on the computer, text messaging their friends, and talking on the telephone all at the same time.<sup>289</sup> If they do not “multitask,” how can they get everything done in a mere twenty-four hours each day?

The youth of the millennial generation are stressed out from pressure to succeed--to make good grades, pick a worthy vocation, and get into the best

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<sup>285</sup>Ibid., 81.

<sup>286</sup>Hestorff, 24-25.

<sup>287</sup>Dean, 78.

<sup>288</sup>Dan Lambert, *Teaching that Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 44.

<sup>289</sup>Hestorff, 16.

schools.<sup>290</sup> Many students in high school today feel they must make better than a 4.0 average if they are to get accepted by a good college. When the I was in high school, teachers would have argued that it was impossible to make “higher” than a perfect 4.0; today the best colleges demand it.

Unlike many generations of youth in the past, the millennial generation cannot be characterized easily. They are “jocks, preps, punks, Goths and geeks.”<sup>291</sup> In the past, uniformity was the way to be a part of the group; everyone wanted to be the same.<sup>292</sup> Today’s youth are very different, and each one is looking for a group to which they can belong. Go to the local mall and watch--the teens you see will be pierced, clean-cut, tattooed, and preppy.<sup>293</sup>

Today’s young person is connected to others by the World Wide Web. One survey found that students spend nine to fourteen hours a week on the Internet.<sup>294</sup> Youth want to make connections, and that is one reason that they now form into “Friendship Clusters.” These are small groupings of students. Clusters are not about being popular; they are about finding a place to “belong.”<sup>295</sup> Finding membership in such a cluster is like finding a family where youth feel safe from outside threats. They

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<sup>290</sup>Lambert, 42.

<sup>291</sup>Barbara Kantrowitz and Pat Wingert, “How Well Do You Know Your Kids?” *Newsweek*, 10 May 1991, 36.

<sup>292</sup>*Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>293</sup>Hestorff, vii.

<sup>294</sup>*Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>295</sup>*Ibid.*, 41.

have their own morals, values, and dress code. In generations past, an “in-crowd” existed, and then all the other students, but this is no longer true.<sup>296</sup>

Students find it necessary to form these clusters, because they feel a sense of abandonment by their families and society. Patricia Hersch suggests this generation has spent more time on their own than any other.<sup>297</sup> The local newspaper carried a story about a student at Iowa State who said he had canceled his accounts on “My Space” and “Facebook.” These are popular “social-networking” Internet sites where students can meet others. This student said he has realized that the people he has met are not “true friends.” He writes, “It seems we have lost, to some degree, that special depth that true friendship entails.”<sup>298</sup>

Youth today are more “connected” than any generation, but still lonely. For adolescents, loneliness is at the top of the list of issues, which are problematic.<sup>299</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean says that adolescents want intimacy that comes from relationships, not sex.<sup>300</sup> The millennial generation is busy, and many parents have programmed them to fill every moment.<sup>301</sup> Youth often play sports, work at jobs after school, and do community service. Parents are at the games, at the schools--they “do”

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<sup>296</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>297</sup>Patricia Hersch, *A Tribe Apart* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), ix, as cited in Hestorff, 2.

<sup>298</sup>*Fort Worth Star Telegram*, Fort Worth, TX, Saturday, October 7, 2006, 3-C.

<sup>299</sup>Chap Clark, as quoted in Hestorff, 2.

<sup>300</sup>Dean, 134.

<sup>301</sup>Hestorff, 5, 12-14.

for their children, they just are not “present” for them.<sup>302</sup> Families do not spend time together; the family meal is a thing of the past.<sup>303</sup> The family meal used to be the time when families would talk about politics, religion, and ethics.

Rather than over-scheduling, some parents allow their teens to come home to empty houses after school. These children are often left alone with little guidance.

These are parents who usually work long hours and leave the teens to fend for themselves.<sup>304</sup> When the high school teachers met for the listening training, they were asked to outline a typical day for themselves when they were in high school. Most of them talked about family meal time--breakfast and dinner. Students of today are lonely and desire time with their families. In one survey, 21 percent of students said that “spending more time with family” was a major concern.<sup>305</sup>

Many parents believe that the last thing their teenager wants is time with them, but, in reality, that is exactly what teens want and need. Most parents never intend to abandon their children; they usually make choices based on what they think is best for them.<sup>306</sup> Parents often say that their student spends all of the time in the bedroom, never choosing to be with family. When more questions are asked, the parent reveals

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<sup>302</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>303</sup>Nichols, 7.

<sup>304</sup>David Elkind, *The Hurried Child*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), xvi, as cited in Hestorff, 3.

<sup>305</sup>Nichols, 212.

<sup>306</sup>Hestorff, 5.



that their child has a computer, telephone, and television of their own. Why would the child ever need to come out of her room?

I know of one woman who was director of a public agency while her children were in elementary school. When they became teens, she abruptly quit, citing her reason as being the mother of two teens. She said her children needed her more as teenagers than ever before. When teens are left alone for long periods of time, they find ways to occupy themselves. Plenty of available people will try to entice a teen into harmful activities. Predators use the Internet to find unsuspecting youth. Video games which promote violence are easy to come by. Many in the sixties thought nightly newscasts from Viet Nam desensitized a generation to killing, but it is nothing compared with the violence teens learn to perpetrate on video games.<sup>307</sup> One youth describes a particularly violent video game, “Diablo,” like this, “. . . [it] is not just another shoot-‘en-up orgy. It’s more like slice ‘em up.” The ad for a new game, Kingpin says, “Includes multiplayer gang bang death match for up to sixteen thugs! Target specific body parts and actually see the damage done including exit wounds.”<sup>308</sup>

Psychiatrist Ross Campbell says that most parents love their children, they just do not know how to express their love in a way that the child understands. Campbell goes on to say that the most important question for a teenager is, “Do you love

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<sup>307</sup>John Leland, “The Secret Life of Teens,” *Newsweek*, 10 May 1999, 44-54.

<sup>308</sup>*Ibid.*, 48.

me?”<sup>309</sup> It sounds paradoxical, but even though teens are working toward independence, one of the ways parents let them know of their love is by setting boundaries. Parents also show their love for their teens by helping them come to an understanding of faith. When parents are absent from the lives of their teens, young people are left to navigate their spiritual journeys alone.<sup>310</sup>

Some teens may feel that the school has failed them, because it is no longer the safe haven it once was. It seems as if we hear of new episodes of school violence each day.<sup>311</sup> Because of the emphasis on standardized tests, required in most states, teens may feel that the school is interested in their performance on the tests rather than in them as persons.<sup>312</sup> Large schools can also be depersonalizing.<sup>313</sup>

The home and school must not take all the blame, American society has done its part in devaluing American youth. The media offers a picture of youth out of control heading to “. . . hell in a handbasket.”<sup>314</sup> This has helped to foster an environment in which teens are feared and not trusted.<sup>315</sup> Society has also allowed the

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<sup>309</sup>Campbell, 10.

<sup>310</sup>Hestorff, 6.

<sup>311</sup>Sharon L. Nichols and Thomas L. Good, *America's Teenagers--Myth and Realities* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2004), 81.

<sup>312</sup>Hestorff, 7.

<sup>313</sup>Sharon Begley, “When Teens Fall Apart,” *Newsweek*, 10 May 2006, 43.

<sup>314</sup>Nichols, ix, 8.

<sup>315</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

media to aim sexually explicit content toward teens.<sup>316</sup> Adults in American society have not done their job of giving young people a chance to grow and mature without the stress of maturing more quickly than they ought.<sup>317</sup> Added to all of this is the feeling of youth that society expects them to be perfect.<sup>318</sup>

Lest the church feel left out, it has also failed teens. In defense of the church, some would have you believe that today's teens care nothing about the church. Two years ago I was asked by the youth minister at my church to lead a retreat for youth. We discussed what the retreat should be about and decided that it would focus on prayer. The students would experience different kinds of prayer, and the retreat would end with an opportunity for the students to walk a labyrinth at a local church. I was very worried that the youth would find the topic totally unrelated to their lives and not something they would want to talk about or experience for the weekend. The only "saving grace" was that I knew these youth and liked them very much.

The astounding moment came when I began to realize that they were taking this subject very seriously. They entered into every experience of prayer with the sense that it was indeed a sacred moment. When the students went to the labyrinth, a woman from the church explained it to them and then invited them to walk. They walked with reverence and awe, and I could tell that they sensed that it was "Holy" ground. When the hour-and-a half was over, the students did not want to leave. The

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<sup>316</sup>Ibid., 112.

<sup>317</sup>Elkin, as quoted in Hestorff, 15.

<sup>318</sup>Ibid., 29.

adults in charge of that retreat walked away believing that if these young people were an example of the youth of today, then they are interested in spiritual matters.

One way the church has failed youth is by not providing adults who will take an interest in them, accept them, and try to understand them, in their quest for faith. One author has said that, “The first Bible that many of us read is the Bible that is someone’s life. The first Jesus that many people meet is the Christ who emerges in a relationship with someone who has been transformed by his saving grace.”<sup>319</sup> Often the church has created a youth ministry which is just one more wholesome thing to do in an already busy week.<sup>320</sup> To some, the church is just another “club.”<sup>321</sup> The church must be the place where teens learn to be compassionate and caring. This can only happen when they see adults doing the same.<sup>322</sup>

The church must accept its responsibility to teach youth about the love and grace of Jesus, love which is unconditional and worth everything.<sup>323</sup> Youth need to know that Jesus accepts them as they are and will be there for them. Before they can believe in Jesus’ love, they must find a community of faith with adults who are “there” for them.<sup>324</sup> Young people of today have been forced to “grow up” quickly,

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<sup>319</sup>Ratliff, 104.

<sup>320</sup>Dean, 37-38.

<sup>321</sup>Hestorff, 81.

<sup>322</sup>Dean, 90.

<sup>323</sup>Ibid., 42.

<sup>324</sup>Ibid., 77.

and they grapple with the hard questions of life--the church has often failed them by trivializing their questions and making youth ministry “fun and games.”<sup>325</sup> The church must offer teachers who are grounded in their faith and who are able to articulate faith to teens.<sup>326</sup>

The church also needs to offer a prophetic word to teens and their parents about how to take control of their overly busy lives.<sup>327</sup> Rather than helping, the church has added to the stress by programming, programming, programming youth activities. Consequently, students do believe in a “higher power,” but they do not connect that belief with organized religion.<sup>328</sup>

One of the best ways for parents and teachers at church and school to show acceptance and love to children is by listening to them. Youth often say they are upset about mothers who are poor listeners. This says to them that “. . . their mothers do not care and are not ‘there’ for them” and that “their own opinions are not important.”<sup>329</sup> Empathetic, intentional listening is what teens desire and need.<sup>330</sup> All adults who relate to youth should endeavor to give them the gift of a listening presence.

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<sup>325</sup>Dean, 41.

<sup>326</sup>Hestorff, 69.

<sup>327</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>328</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>329</sup>Nichols, 222.

<sup>330</sup>Shafir, 119-20.

## APPENDIX I

### SERMON

#### “LISTENING TO EACH OTHER”

It is an old joke, you have probably heard it. A young psychologist, just beginning his counseling practice, is leaving his office one afternoon and encounters a much older counselor who has been in practice for some time. The young counselor says, “This is really hard work. I don’t know how you have done it all these years, day after day, listening as people pour out their troubles and concerns.” The older psychologist, stops, looks at him and replies, “Who listens?”

The joke is old, but the question is an important one. Who does listen? Who will listen? Listening is one of the first senses we use, even in “utero,” we become acquainted with the outside world through our ears. Expectant mothers are told to talk to their unborn babies so they will be familiar with the sound of their mother’s voice at birth. Listening is also the last way we connect with the world as we lie dying. Hospice workers tell families to talk with their loved one, because the sense of listening is “the last thing to go.” In between birth and death, listening is vital to all our relationships--spouse to spouse, parent and child, employer and employee, pastor and congregation, teacher and student, friend to friend, sister and brother--yet, most of us have little training in how to listen effectively to another.

Fred Craddock tells the story of a student who came to him in tears. She had walked into the student center and saw a friend of hers sitting reading something. She said, "I was busy getting some money out of my purse to get a pop out of the machine. I just said to my friend over there, 'Well, how are you doing?'" She continued, "I found out later her response was, 'I just got a letter from my mother. She has a malignancy, and I think I'm going to have to go home to help her.'" In tears, the student said to me, "I didn't hear. I just went on and got my drink, came back out, and said, 'Well, what have you got planned for the weekend?'" I did not hear a thing."

We live in a world full of talking, yet so much of the time, we feel as if no one is really listening. Computers have made conversations impersonal, and answering machines make it easy for us to avoid talking to a "real person." With so many ways to be connected these days, it seems that we are building more and more relationships, but the lack of depth in these relationships prevents us from feeling truly connected to each other. We often talk just so we will not have to listen.

Each day I become more and more aware of the fact that a basic yearning of the human heart is for someone to really listen. You probably hear it too. A person with mental illness says, "I don't feel that I really exist anymore. Do you understand that? Do you hear what I am saying?" A teenager says with resignation, "My parents just don't listen to me." A woman whose husband has dementia cries, "We used to talk about everything, and now I do not have anyone who really listens to me anymore." Winston Churchill said, "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen."

The gift of listening affects our whole being, and if our need to be heard is not met, all aspects of our health could be compromised. One study with patients about to undergo surgery had an anesthesiologist visit the first group giving only a quick explanation of the surgery and the projected recovery time. The second group was visited by an anesthesiologist who spoke warmly, listened to the patients' concerns, and answered questions in detail. The second group recovered sooner and was discharged from the hospital 2.7 days earlier than the first group. Other studies show that during listening, the blood flow increases to many parts of the brain, thus invigorating the brain.<sup>331</sup> When we lack a listening presence, we can become angry, alienated, frustrated, and lonely. E. H. Mayo says that "One friend, one person who is truly understanding, who takes the trouble to listen to us as we consider a problem can change our whole outlook on the world."<sup>332</sup>

In today's *Star Telegram*, reporter Karalee Miller writes a story about the day her father was stabbed. He is a car salesman in Michigan, and a man came in wanting to test drive a new car. That is not unusual, but the man not only wanted to drive, the car he wanted to steal it. After they drove away from the dealership, he stopped and began stabbing her father, telling him to get out of the car. Karalee is far away in Texas when her mother calls to say her father is in the hospital. As she waits for news, she thinks back over her life with her father. This is what she writes: "As I got older,

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<sup>331</sup>Shafir, 201, 246-47.

<sup>332</sup>Koile, 13.



he became the one I turned to with the big stuff. . . . Dad always listened. Never judged. Always comforted. He was always just there.”<sup>333</sup>

This is Father’s Day, and we celebrate and honor those men in our lives who were our fathers or acted like fathers to us. In describing a loving, caring father, you seldom hear people say--I love and appreciate my father, because he gave me a new car when I was sixteen, or gave me unlimited credit card privileges. What we usually hear is—he always listened, never judged, always comforted. He was always just there.

Most people feel cared for if they believe someone is really listening. One writer has said that, “Being listened to means that we are taken seriously, that our ideas and feelings are known and, ultimately, that what we have to say matters.”<sup>334</sup> Michael Nichols, in his book *The Lost Art of Listening*, says that “The power of empathic listening is the power to transform relationships.”<sup>335</sup> As Christians, we believe that our faith does transform lives, and that true listening is one way to live out our faith. If listening is loving and caring for one created in the image of God, then for the Christian, there is no other way than to listen to the deep longings of the heart of another.

The one place where we should feel cared for is the church, but unfortunately, one of the places where we often feel the least listened to is here. We talk about a God

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<sup>333</sup>*Fort Worth Star Telegram*, Fort Worth, TX, June 18, 2006, G-1.

<sup>334</sup>Nichols, 9.

<sup>335</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

who listens and Jesus who listens, but a disconnect exists between what we say we believe and how we relate to each other. Recently, a young woman told me she was changing churches, because she felt no one every really got to know her at her church, no one ever really listened to her. She was going to try another church to see if it would be different there. If we can intentionally learn to listen and to understand those with whom we fellowship, perhaps we can have that for which we yearn, that which will make us feel a part of a community of love and grace.

Jesus was the consummate listener, listening beyond and beneath the words. He listened, and people felt loved and cared for, they felt understood and appreciated. This kind of love and care did not mean that Jesus shied away from confronting or speaking the truth, when necessary. If Jesus is our example, then we are called to be more effective listeners. In the Gospel story today, Jesus encounters a woman who had probably been beaten down by life, and yet he offers her God's grace and love. When he asks her to go get her husband, she must have thought, "This is it, this is when he will tell me what an awful person I am, and this is when the conversation, the listening will stop." She did not lie to him, perhaps because he was taking her seriously, listening to her as not many people had in her life. We can imagine that she was surprised when Jesus said, "Thank you for telling me the truth. I know you don't have a husband, you have had five." He didn't condemn; he just continued to listen.

Jesus, on more than one occasion, is adamant about the need to listen and the seeming paradox he finds in so many people--you have ears, but you do not hear. In Jesus, God makes God's self known to us as a caring, compassionate friend who

listens intently to those in need. If we are to live like Jesus, we will offer this gift of listening to those we encounter. When we listen and listen well, we are the presence of Christ. Susan Hedahl says that we can paraphrase 1 John 4.19: “We love because God first loved us” as “We listen because God first listened to us.” She goes on to say that, “. . . true listening is an act of love--divine and human. Learning to listen is preparation for the astonishment of grace and love. . . .”<sup>336</sup>

To listen poorly is to refuse to listen, pretend to listen, or listen impatiently. The kind of listening Hedahl talks about is a true listening which creates a listening relationship with another where we do not have to feel the need to “fix” every problem, we do not need to give advice--as helpful as it might be--our call is to be the presence of Christ as we listen. Helpful listening can bring about healing and change. To really listen is to give each other our time so we can offer focused attention--looking into a person’s eyes, not distracted by other things--television or cell phones. When we listen, we show respect for the other by listening carefully to each word and reflecting back what we are hearing. If we can identify the feelings in the conversation, we can say to the other person, “It sounds as if you are sad--you can fill in the blank depending on the conversation--angry, hurt, overwhelmed.”

We are such verbal people, we find ourselves not listening at all, but trying to think of what we want to say when the other person quits talking. Caring listening puts aside our own words to give another person our undivided attention. Oftentimes, we do not have to say much at all. Have you had the experience of really listening to

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<sup>336</sup>Hedahl, 14, 95, 101.

someone without saying anything, and when the conversation is over, she tells how much you have helped? We just want to know that our thoughts and feelings are important to someone.

Teenage prostitutes, during interviews in a San Francisco study, were asked: “Is there anything you needed most and couldn’t get?” Their response, invariably preceded by sadness and tears, was unanimous: “What I needed most was someone to listen to me--someone who cared enough to listen to me.”

Robert Brizee offers this invitation: “Come, join me in offering the gift of listening to others. Yes, it sounds strange. Yes, it feels funny. Yes, it may be embarrassing. Yet, the possibilities are wondrous. The fields are ripe for harvest. So many hunger and yearn to be heard, especially those whom we love most. We can make such a difference with relatively little effort.”<sup>337</sup>

The important question is “Who listens?” Will you be part of the answer? Will you offer the gift of listening to others?

### **Benediction**

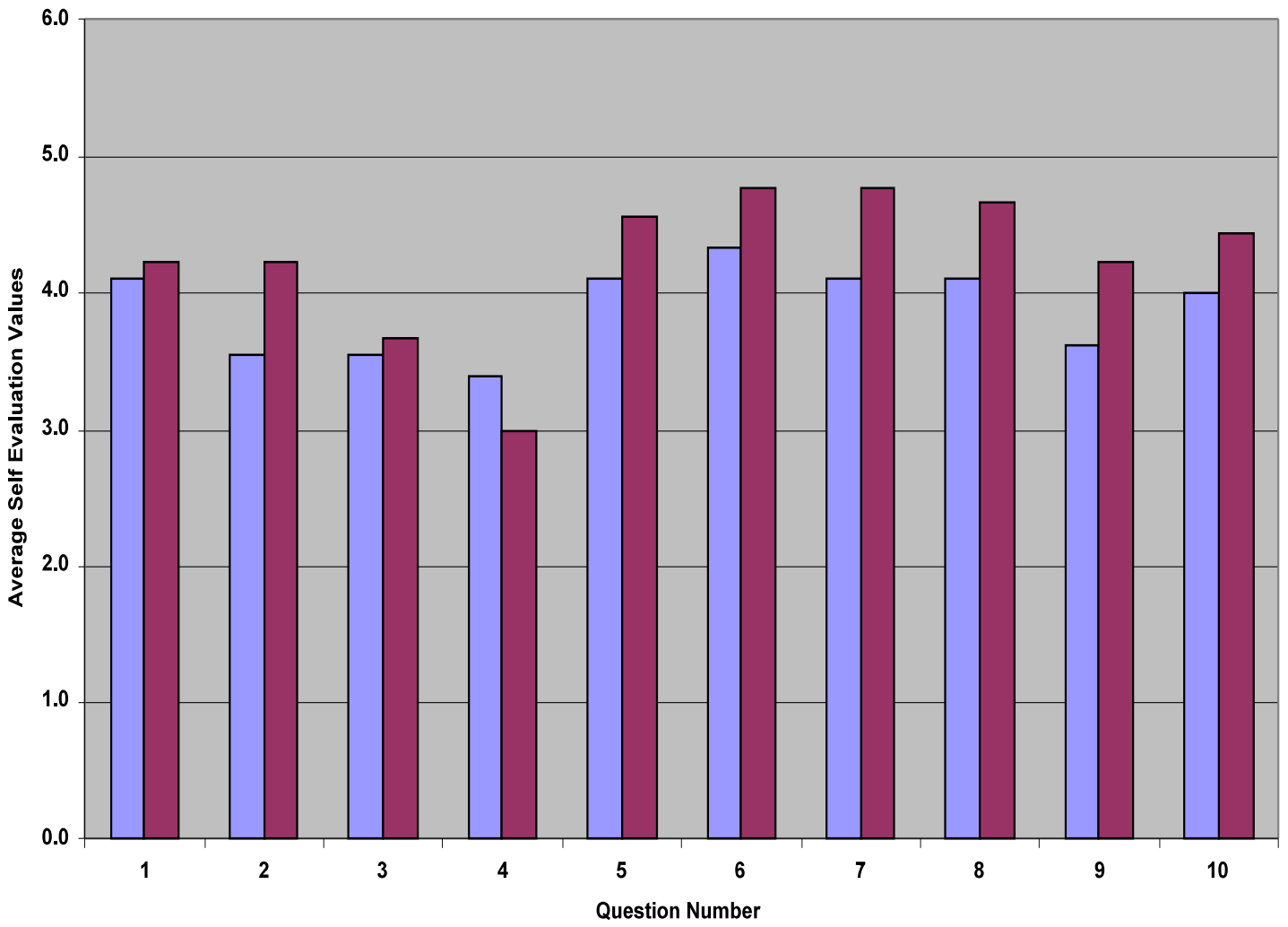
Friends, God has come to us in Jesus and is always there for us, loving us, listening to us—may you have eyes to see it, hearts to receive it, and the courage to give it away.

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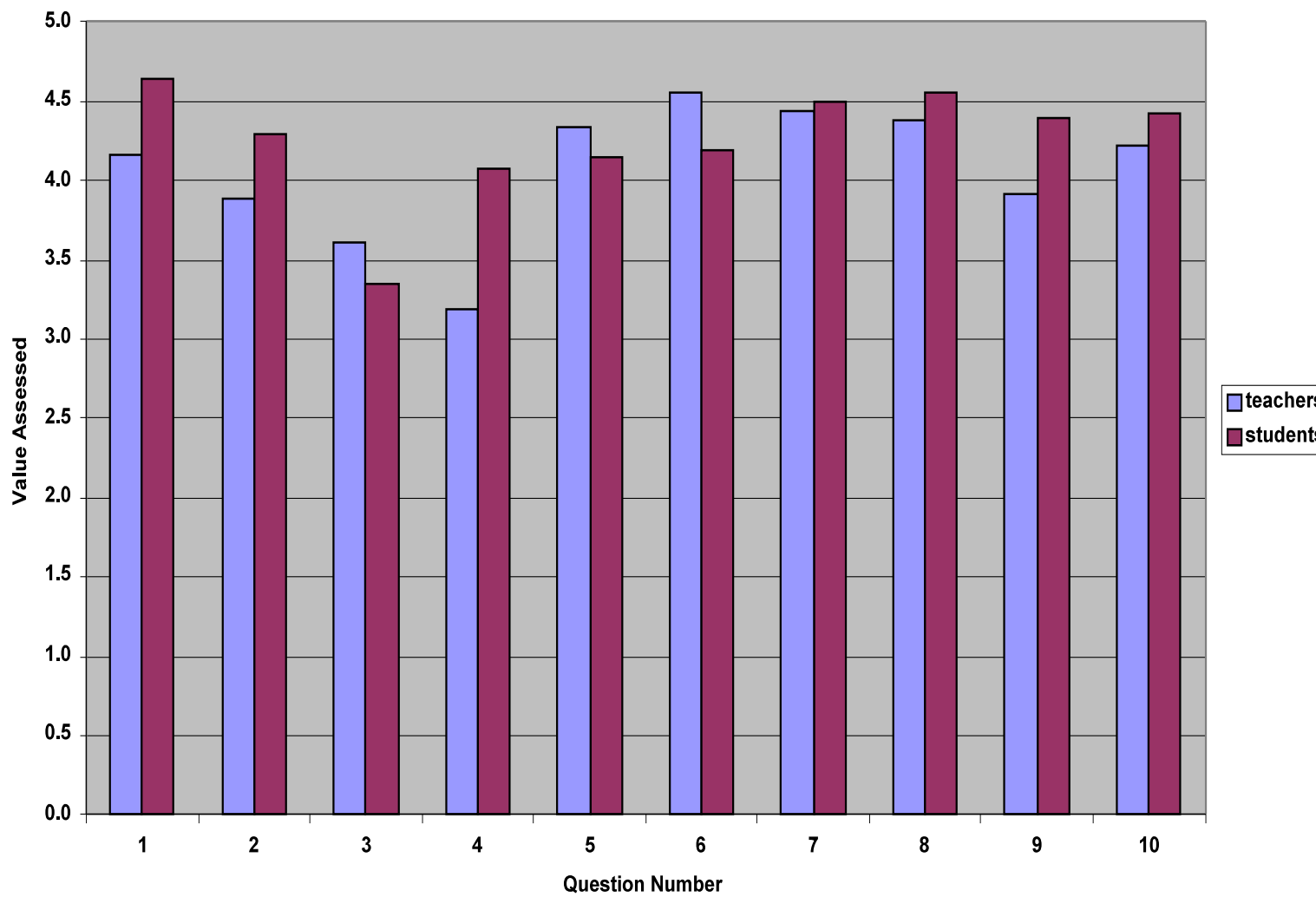
<sup>337</sup>Brizee, 42.

APPENDIX J

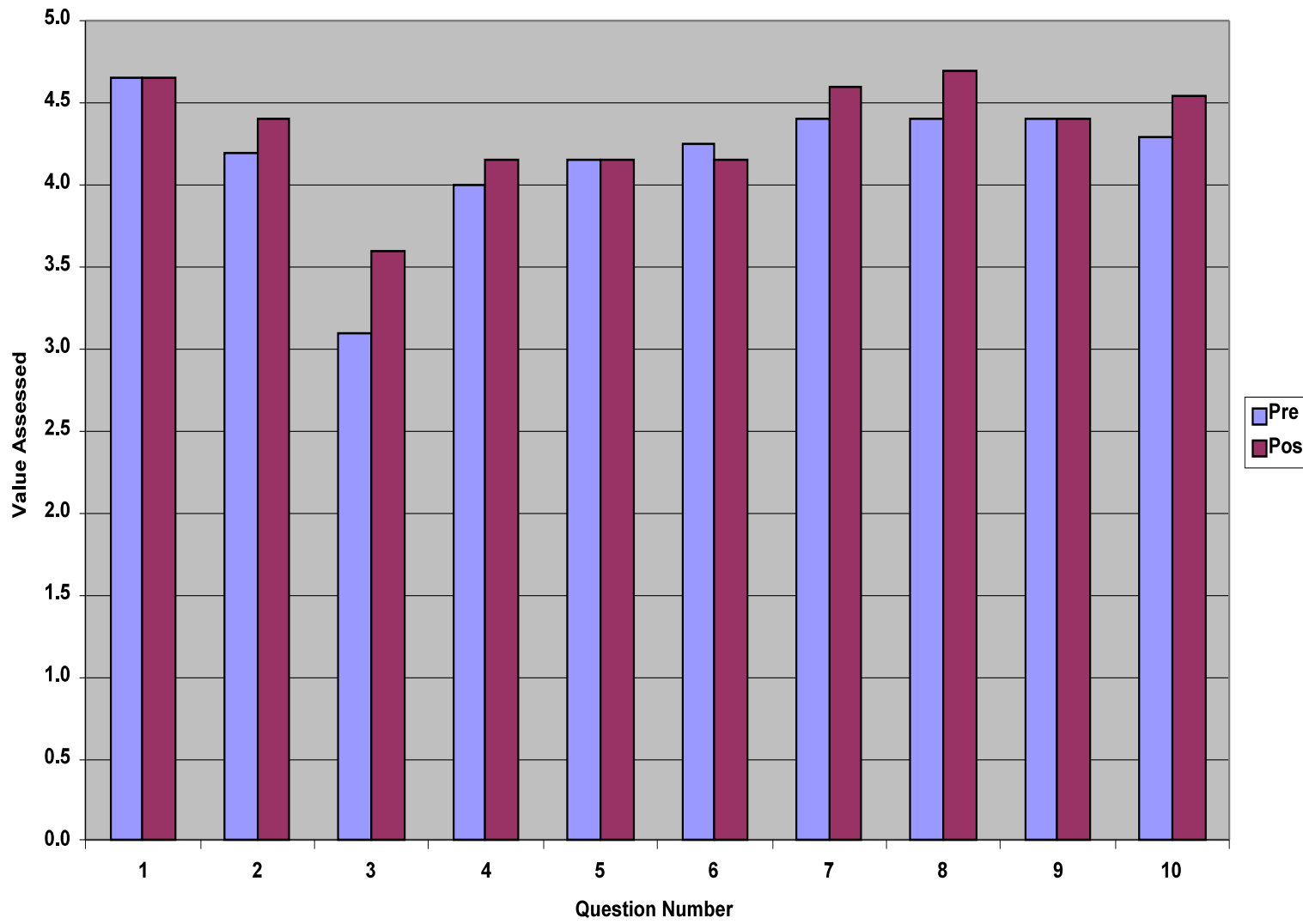
Listening Skills  
Teachers Self Evaluations



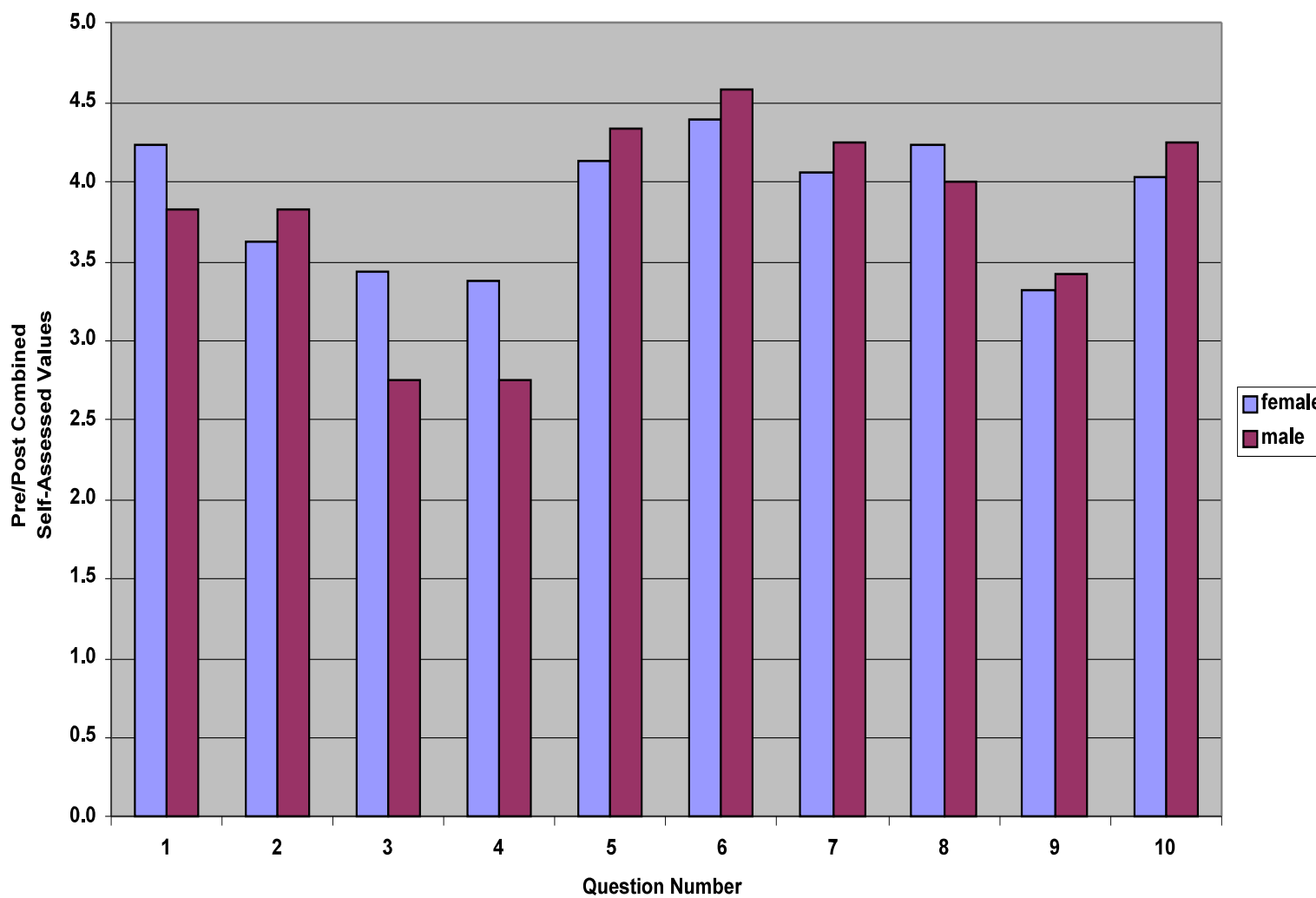
**Listening Skills**  
**Student Evaluation vs. Teacher Self Evaluation**



## Student Evaluations

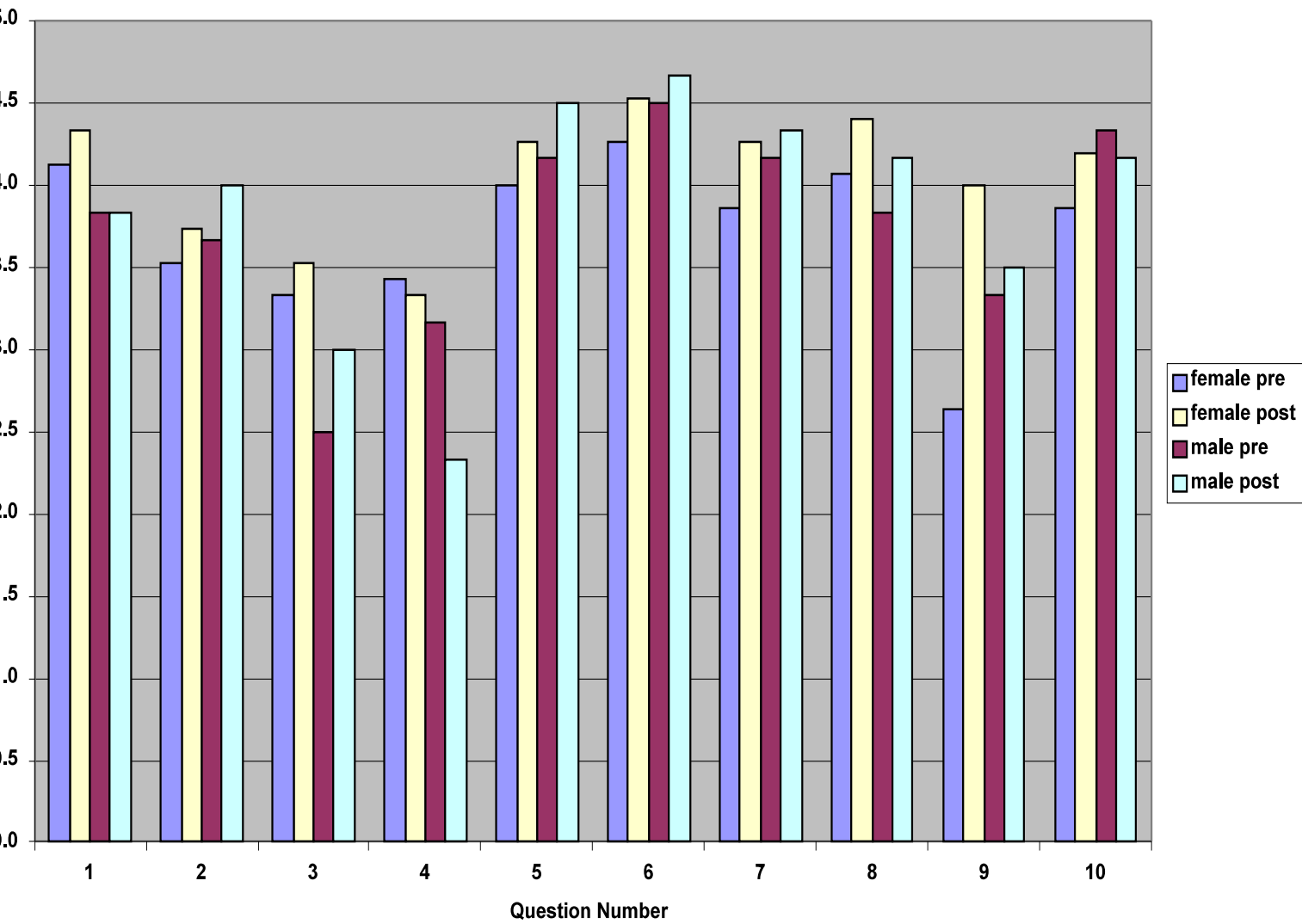


Listening Skills  
Female/Male Comparison

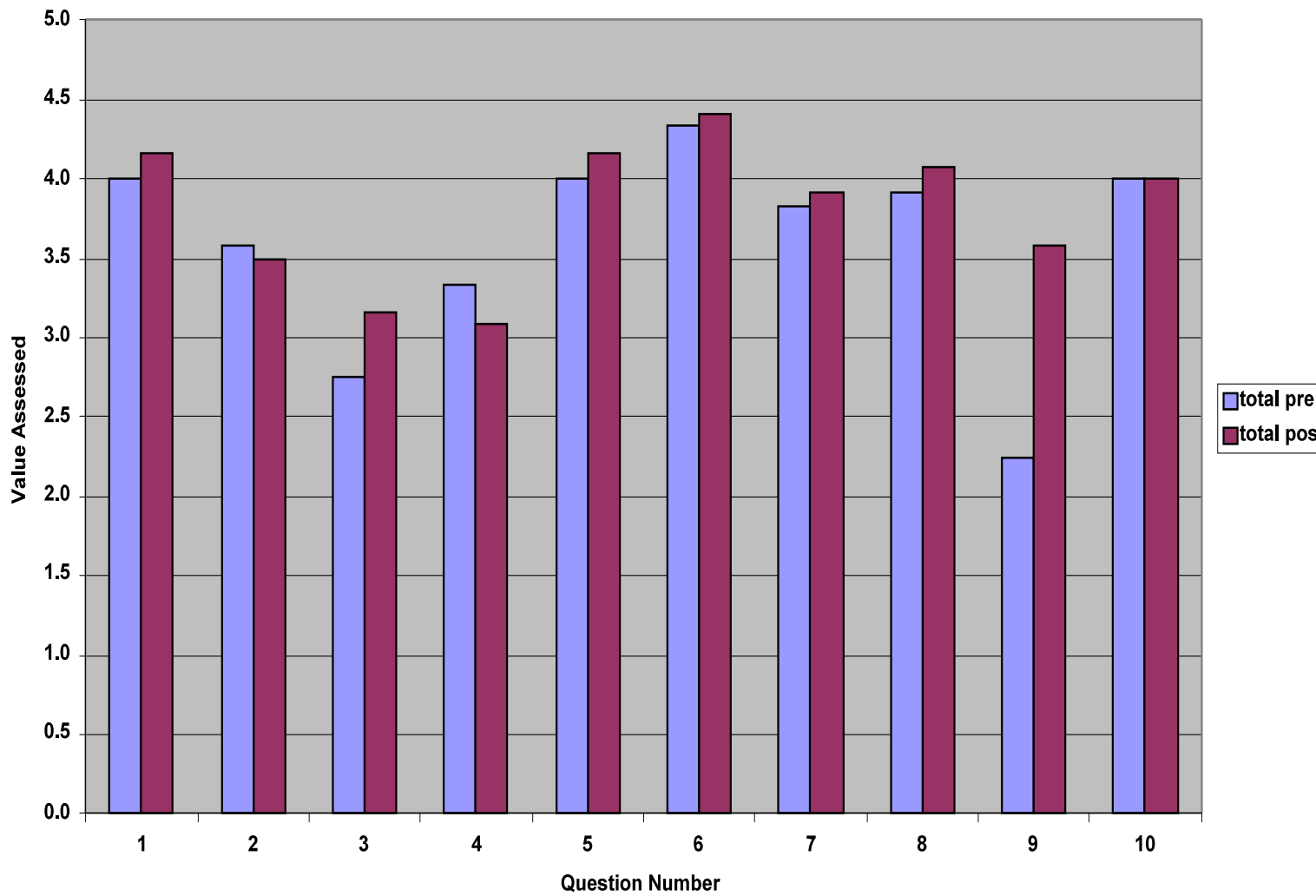




Listening Skills Male/Female Comparison



Listening Skills - General Participants  
Pre and Post Self Evaluations



## APPENDIX K

### LISTENING SKILLS TRAINING MODULE

**I. Welcome and Introduction (If the listening skills module is used by itself, all references to section one would be deleted. Since the project did address the issues of the teens with whom the teachers work, that part of the module has been included. It was modified for the training session conducted with general participants.)**

Thank you for your willingness to help me with my listening project. When I invited you to participate, I told you a bit about how I picked this topic. As a Minister of Congregational Care, how we care for one another is something I often think about. When we began training our Stephen Ministers a few years ago, we had a lesson on listening skills. Almost every new Stephen Minister said, “I thought I was a good listener, but I am embarrassed to admit that I am not as good as I thought.”

I knew I wanted my project to involve some aspect of our caring ministry, and the question which began forming in my mind was, “Would our church be a more caring congregation if our members learned to use basic listening skills? Others have written about teaching laypersons how to offer care by being more effective listeners, but these training programs, which are created by pastoral counselors or psychologists, last five to six weeks or more.<sup>338</sup> The difference in my training module

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<sup>338</sup>See chapter two, “Listening as a Paradigm for Caring in the Discipline of Pastoral Care.”

is that it is one session, lasting four hours. The hope is that more members will participate, because they are only required to commit to one session. This training will present basic listening skills. The purpose of the project is to empower members of our church to care more effectively by learning how to use intentional listening skills. My contention is that when members really begin listening to each other, both speaker and listener will become more effective leaders, teachers, and lay ministers. The church should be the one place where you are assured of a listening ear. Thomas Banville, in his book *How to Listen--How to Be Heard*, says “. . . listening isn't a passive thing; it's work. I don't know of any harder mental labor than listening to the words uttered by another for the feeling they reveal--or conceal. But if you care, it's a labor of love.”<sup>339</sup>

Knowing that it would be impossible for the purposes of my project to teach these skills to the whole congregation, I had to pick a target group. High school leaders were selected, because teens often complain that no one ever listens to them. A part of the training includes a discussion about the group with whom you work--high school students. It is important to know what issues they deal with and their stages of development so as to better listen to them. When we understand some of what they are going through, we can be more empathetic.

Jesus, on more than one occasion, is adamant about the need to listen and the seeming paradox he finds in so many people--you have ears, but you do not hear. In

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<sup>339</sup>Banville, 155.

Jesus, God makes God's self known to us as a caring, compassionate friend who listens intently to those in need. If we are to live like Jesus, we will offer this gift of listening to those we encounter. When we listen and listen well, we are the presence of Christ. Susan Hedahl says that, ". . . true listening is an act of love--divine and human. Learning to listen is preparation for the astonishment of grace and love," and reflects our personal and communal relationship with a listening God.<sup>340</sup> Here on the wall you see James 1:19a (RSV), "Be quick to listen, slow to speak." If only we could take it to heart.

This training module will consist of a discussion about the teens with whom you minister and instructions in using basic listening skills. If you find this training helpful, one of the side benefits is that you will be a more effective listener in all areas of your lives. You may see a difference at home, work, and church. On the other hand, you might discover that you are already a good listener; if so, this will be a refresher course for you. In front of you is the schedule for our time together. Do you have any questions about our purpose here or the schedule?

Let's pray together. God, you have promised to faithfully listen to us and you sent Jesus who listened with his whole heart. Please give us the courage to offer this gift of listening back to you and to each person who comes our way. Amen.

We will begin our discussion about adolescents by taking a short, ten-question pre-evaluation which will help you think about your own experiences as a listener.

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<sup>340</sup>Hedahl, 14, 101.

When you finish, feel free to get more food or drinks while waiting for the others to finish. During our time together, please feel free to ask questions at any time.

## **II. What you need to know about adolescents but were afraid to ask.**

One of my favorite stories about adolescents happened a number of years ago to a friend of mine. Her son was a teenager about to enter high school. One evening, the family was sitting in the den watching television when the phone rang; it was for her son. He answered the phone, and when he returned she asked, “Who was on the phone?” He became quite upset and said, “You always want to know my business. You are always asking questions.” His mother, my friend, was taken aback and really did not know how to respond. In about fifteen minutes, the phone rang again, and it was another call for her son. He talked for awhile and then returned to the den. She thought to herself, “Well, I won’t make that mistake again. I will keep quiet.” She didn’t say a word, and in a few minutes, her son, once again in an upset tone, said, “You don’t care anything about me, do you? You don’t care who calls or what happens to me.”

This story characterizes the teenage years. Teenagers have a lot of work to do in a relatively short period of time. One book on child development says, “In adolescence there is one overwhelming psychological demand: to become independent and in so doing to develop a sense of identity.”<sup>341</sup> Erik Erikson wrote that, “The adolescent mind is essentially a mind of the moratorium, a psychosocial

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<sup>341</sup>Richard Lansdown and Marjorie Walker, *Your Child’s Development* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 431.

stage between childhood and adulthood, and between the morality learned by the child, and the ethics to be developed by the adult.”<sup>342</sup> Erikson believed that adolescence is a time between childhood and adulthood when teens have a chance to work out their identity. It is a time to come to understand who they really are.

More recent studies have suggested that adolescence, as a time of moratorium, a break from the demands of the “real world,” is no longer a reality. Today’s young people are thrust into adult roles at a very early age, because of exposure to all life has to offer.<sup>343</sup> Pressure is placed to pick the right college, decide on a vocation, and make good grades. Teens do not sense that life is a break between childhood and the stresses of adult life. Many teens are overwhelmed by all that is required of them.

James Fowler proposed that stages of faith development exist, and he suggests that most adolescents are in his stage 3, “Synthetic-Conventional” faith. He writes, “In Stage 3 Synthetic-Conventional faith, a person’s experience of the world now extends beyond the family. A number of spheres demand attention: family, school or work, peers, street society and media, and perhaps religion. Faith must synthesize values and information; it must provide a basis for identity and outlook.”<sup>344</sup> Students in high school are trying to make sense of all they have been taught. Their minds are full of questions like: “How does what the church say fit with what I am learning in

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<sup>342</sup>Erikson, 263.

<sup>343</sup>Dean, 12-13.

<sup>344</sup>James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981), 151-73.

school? How do I make sense of the values from my home and the values of my friends? What do I believe?"

The high school years are very important in our identity formation. It can be “the worst of times and the best of times.” Most of us are a bit removed from our high school days, but we probably still remember particular pressures which plagued us during those days.

### Exercise 1

**Turn to the person on your right. Decide who is A and who is B. A will begin by sharing his/her most embarrassing experience from his/her high school days. You will have five minutes to share, and when I call time, B will have five minutes to share his or her experience.**

Is it not interesting that no matter how old we get, we can still immediately recall such experiences from our high school days? Is there anything you would like to share with the group about your remembrances?

The youth with whom you work, the millennial generation, were born between 1982 and 2000.<sup>345</sup> If you went out on the street and invited twenty teenagers into our meeting, you would most likely find twenty very unique people. Some would have tattoos, and some would be clean-cut and conservative. Some with tattoos might be politically conservative, and some clean-cut teens are politically liberal.<sup>346</sup> Even with their differences, some similarities exist, and in the next few minutes we are going to talk about some of these similarities.

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<sup>345</sup>Hestorff, vii.

<sup>346</sup>Ibid.



## TAKE A STRETCH BREAK

**Exercise 2**

**On the paper in your notebook, write what you believe are the three most pressing issues for the teens you teach. Who would share what you wrote with the group? (Write the issues shared by the group on paper and put it on the wall.)**

Sam Hestorff, a youth minister in Tampa, Florida, who happens to be the son-in-law of our own Bob and Lynda Poston-Smith, has written a book, *YM2K*, about this generation. He says that alienation and abandonment are the two issues which cause these teens the most distress.<sup>347</sup> In a world filled with noise and ways to communicate, who would think that the millennial generation would characterize themselves as lonely? They are busy, but in the midst of their busyness, they are lonely. Parents are so busy themselves, that they “do” for their children, but are not “present” for them.<sup>348</sup> Kantrowitz and Wingert suggest that “teenagers may claim they want privacy, but they also crave and need attention and they’re not getting it.”<sup>349</sup>

Kendra Creasy Dean tells this story about Eugene Rivers, a Boston pastor, who reclaimed a Boston neighborhood tyrannized by drug dealers. She describes how Rivers and his colleagues were “evangelized” by crack cocaine dealers who “reached out to Christians,” inviting them to crack houses and introducing them to drug dealers, guns, and the drug game. One young heroin dealer told Rivers, “I’m going to

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<sup>347</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>348</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>349</sup>Kantrowitz and Wingert, 38.

explain to you Christians, who are such good preachers, why you are losing an entire generation. Listen. This is really all about being there.” “What do you mean?” Rivers demanded. The heroin dealer coolly replied, “When Johnny goes to school; in the morning, I’m there, you’re not. When Johnny goes for a loaf of bread for Grandma for dinner, I’m there, you’re not. I win, you lose.”<sup>350</sup>

Adolescents spend about twelve hours a day and nearly seventy hours a week in school and extracurricular activities. With homework and jobs, many of our youth add another ten to twenty hours per week.<sup>351</sup> Because of all the demands on their time, youth today must be good at “multi-tasking.” They work on the computer, text message their friends, and eat dinner all at the same time. Trying to do so many things in such a little time brings great stress to their lives.<sup>352</sup>

### Exercise 3

**On your paper, outline a typical day when you were in high school. Then turn to the person on your left and share what you have written. When you have finished, let the other person share. (The group will then share together: What did you remember? What stood out for you when you talked about your life as a teen? What were your three most pressing issues as a teenager?)**

Today’s teens feel abandoned by the adults in their lives. They want adult attention--adult friends provide stability in the lives of students.<sup>353</sup> Their parents go to their activities, watch their ballgames, and work in the snack bar, but they are not

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<sup>350</sup>Eugene Rivers, as quoted in Hestorff, 9.

<sup>351</sup>Hestorff, 15.

<sup>352</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>353</sup>Ratliff, 41.

really “there” for them. Ross Campbell says that, as children enter adolescence, adults often think their children need less time with their families. Actually, the opposite is true--they need more time with family.<sup>354</sup>

Because so many teens feel lonely and alienated from their families, they are trying to create their own family where they can feel they belong. Hestorff says they are forming “friendship clusters” as a way to “. . . salve their feelings of loneliness.” Donald Postersky defines friendship clusters like this: “A friendship cluster is more than just a circle of relationships. It is heart and soul of being young today. It is a place to belong. There is no formal membership. You are either in or you are not. Being in means you share many things: interests, experiences, intimate thoughts, problems, and triumphs of the day. Being in means you tune into the same music, wear each other’s sweaters, and generally enjoy each other.”<sup>355</sup> Do you see these friendship clusters in the lives of the teens here at Broadway?

William Coleman, from the University of North Carolina, says that the loneliness adolescents feel drives them to find a group to fill the emotional vacuum in their lives.<sup>356</sup> Many experts believe that high schools no longer have the “in crowd,” and then everybody else. A diversity of groups now form around particular interests. These groups are often co-ed.<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>354</sup>Ross Campbell, *How to Really Love Your Teenager* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1984), 35.

<sup>355</sup>Donald Postersky, as quoted in Hestorff, 39.

<sup>356</sup>J. Adler, 56.

<sup>357</sup>*Ibid.*, 57.

Youth are looking for a place to belong, and the cluster provides this feeling of family for which they yearn.<sup>358</sup> Students need to feel acceptance and to have that inner feeling that he or she is loved.<sup>359</sup> To feel accepted is to feel loved.<sup>360</sup> Youth are not alone in this desire. No matter how old we get, most of us want to know that we are a part of a family, either one into which we are born or one we pick for ourselves. Like youth, we want to know that we are loved and accepted. One author has written that “choosing to listen or to engage personally in an adolescent’s world communicates, “who you are matters to me. I care about what you think, how you feel and why you make the choices you do.”<sup>361</sup>

Hestorff really gets personal when he says that the church has also abandoned today’s youth by being more concerned with numbers than persons and by hiring youth ministers who are short-tenured.<sup>362</sup> Students often find that the church seems to just add more busyness to their lives, rather than offering them opportunities for unstructured play and creativity.<sup>363</sup> You, as teachers, cannot solve the problems of the students you teach, but you can help them cope with their feelings of hopelessness and despair that stem from adolescent stress.<sup>364</sup> You can help them cope by listening

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<sup>358</sup>Hestorff, 39.

<sup>359</sup>Gordon, 33.

<sup>360</sup>Ibid.

<sup>361</sup>R. R. Dunn, as quoted in Lambert, 57.

<sup>362</sup>Hestorff, 8.

<sup>363</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>364</sup>Ibid., 31.

to them, and allowing them to share their stories with you. Knowing that you are a person who will take time for them is important.

You are important to students as they try to sort out what faith is going to mean in their lives. Some say today's youth are more spiritual than generations gone by, but not necessarily more religious. Dean says that students are asking the question, "Does faith really matter, is it something worthy of dying for? Is it worthy of giving one's life to it?"<sup>365</sup> Youth of today take these questions very seriously.

#### **Exercise 4**

**What implications does the busyness of teens have for us as a congregation? What can the church do to lessen the stress in the lives of our youth? How do we balance our need for quality teaching time at church and the need of youth for free time? What is unique about what the church has to offer teens?**

I will make sure that Fran (Broadway's Minister to Youth) gets a list of your suggestions. The youth you meet each week in your classes are complex people, but they are yearning for adults to take an interest in their lives. They need to know of Jesus who loves them unconditionally and has promised to be with them through all of life. Your willingness to listen to them could be a life-saving experience.

**TAKE A TEN MINUTE BREAK HERE BEFORE BEGINNING THE SECTION ON LISTENING SKILLS.**

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<sup>365</sup>Ibid.

## II. Listening Skills 101

Robert Shippey recently wrote a book titled, *Listening in a Loud World*, in which he tells this story:

One of the more humorous moments in writing this book on holy listening occurred late in the process when I was up against the publisher's deadline for receipt of the manuscript. I was in a moment of creativity and was busily writing when my wife called. I could not be present because I was too addicted to my task. I kept writing ever so gently touching the keys on my keyboard and somehow thinking, "If I type quietly enough, she will not know what I'm doing." But Cheryl is perceptive. Finally, after a few minutes of conversation, she quietly said, "When you are through writing about listening and are ready to listen, call me." Wow! I got the message and was reminded that for all of my thoughts about listening, I still have a long way to go.<sup>366</sup>

Learning to listen and listen well is a life-long process. Unfortunately, it is like many things we want to do in life; it takes practice. For the next few hours, we are going to work at learning to listen to each other. To do that, I am going to ask you to participate in some role-playing, and that may make some of us a bit uncomfortable. I have tried to think of different ways to learn to be an effective listener, and I keep coming back to the importance of experiencing what you are being asked to do. I hope we can leave our inhibitions at the door and give our best effort to the important work of learning to listen to each other.

**(If the group is not familiar or feels uncomfortable with role-play, modeling such an experience for the group might be helpful. Ask a member of the group to help you.)**

The Chinese symbol you see before you is made up of the characters of the verb, "to listen" (see Appendix L). This symbol links the characters for ear, eyes, and

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<sup>366</sup>Shippey, 10.

undivided attention, and heart.<sup>367</sup> One writer likened it to the call of Jesus in Mark to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, strength and soul.<sup>368</sup> The God who loves and cares for us calls us into relationship, an intimate relationship in which God talks and we listen, and we talk and God listens.<sup>369</sup> Unfortunately, we are more accustomed to doing all the talking and expecting God to listen.

Jesus lived a life of listening care--he listened and people felt cared for. When we try to live like Jesus, we are called into relationship with God and with those around us. Intentional, careful listening should be a part of each and every relationship. When we learn to listen to God and to others, it may be the most significant way in which we show God's grace to each other.<sup>370</sup>

### Exercise 1

**Find a partner and decide who is A and who is B. A will begin by sharing a happy experience from the last week. B will have written instructions for this exercise. A has three minutes to share. After A has shared, he/she has two minutes to reflect on how she/he felt while speaking. (B is given written instructions to act distracted, look away, check the clock, anything which will give the impression that he/she is not listening.)**

This exercise graphically helps us understand how it feels when the other is not listening when we are sharing. Would some of you share with the whole group how it felt when your partner was not listening as you talked?

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<sup>367</sup>Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>368</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>369</sup>Brizee, 11.

<sup>370</sup>Shippey, 35.

Listening is the most often used communication skill, and yet, we have very little training in how to be good listeners. It is one of the first senses used--we were listening when we were in the wombs of our mothers waiting to be born, and when we are in our last moments on this earth, even if we cannot speak, we will most likely, be able to listen.

### **Have any of you had prior training in listening skills?**

Even though it is vitally important, most of us have had little training in how to be good listeners. Listening is not the same as hearing. "Hearing is the process wherein sound waves strike the eardrum and cause vibrations that are transmitted to the brain. Listening occurs when the brain reconstructs these electrochemical impulses into a representation of the original sound, and then gives them meaning."<sup>371</sup>

Listening with understanding; "intentional" listening<sup>372</sup> is not a skill with which we are born.<sup>373</sup> We must train ourselves to be good listeners. Morton Kelsey writes, "Listening is an art for which some people have a gift. It is also a skill that can be learned, and it is a discipline which needs to be taught and practiced."<sup>374</sup> The way we teach our children to listen is to listen to them. We model what it means to be a good listener.

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<sup>371</sup>J. Adler, 129-30.

<sup>372</sup>Shippey uses this term for listening with understanding.

<sup>373</sup>Ibid., 131.

<sup>374</sup>Kelsey, 78.



Many persons have suggested ways to help us remember how to be better listeners. I wanted to find words which would immediately make you think of the skills needed for intentional listening. I have chosen to use words you learned as a child and will never forget: Stop, Look, and Listen.

**STOP**—Take time to give the other your undivided attention. It is hard work, do not even begin if you do not have the time to offer.

**LOOK**--Look into the face of the other. By using facial expressions, show your interest. Use as few words as possible, “Oh,” “Yes,” “I see.” Silence is perfectly acceptable, as well. When we look into the face of another, we can offer the gift of acceptance. We do not have to take their problems as our own to feel deeply and to walk with them as they grapple with the issues of life.<sup>375</sup> We need to walk a mile in his or her shoes as the Native American proverb says.

**LISTEN**--Carefully listen to what is shared. Repeat what you hear in your own words, along with the feelings you heard expressed. Don’t offer advice, hollow reassurances, or try to fix every problem, just listen.<sup>376</sup>

## Exercise 2

**Because we often think more about talking than listening, the next exercise will help us begin to get used to listening without feeling the need to talk so much. With your partner, continue you’re a and B designations. B will begin by sharing an experience from the last week when something good happened. You will have five minutes to talk. A is to give his or her undivided attention, using only one-word responses, “yes,” “oh”--primarily listen in silence. I will tell you**

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<sup>375</sup>Gordon, 58.

<sup>376</sup>The information about intentional listening comes from many different sources: Clinebell, Gordon, Stone, the Stephen Ministry, the Search Institute, Rogers, and Gorsuch.

**when the five minutes is up, switch and let A share while B listens. The group will share together about the experience.**

This exercise is a way to help us get used to listening rather than talking. To repeat back, in your own words, what you have heard is very important, because when the speakers send a message, they know exactly what is intended. The listeners hear based on their experience, so they may not interpret the meaning according to what the speakers intended. By saying back in your own words, you can check out the accuracy of what you heard. If the speaker says you heard incorrectly, do not feel bad, because now you can change your misconception of what was said.

Thomas Gordon uses the example of a child who says to his mother, “When is dinner?” The mother hears this and thinks the child just wants to hurry up with dinner so he can go play. So, the mother replies, “You want a chance to play before bedtime?” The child says, “No, I didn’t mean that. I am really hungry tonight.” Now the mother can respond to what the child actually intended.<sup>377</sup>

### **Exercise 3**

**In front of you are four paraphrasing prompts (see Appendix E). Each person will read two prompts, one at a time. The listener will paraphrase what was heard. The speaker will respond and indicate if the listener has heard correctly. Each person will have five minutes. How did you do?**

Let the words--STOP, LOOK, and LISTEN--remind you of what you can do to offer another the gift of intentional listening.

**TAKE A STRETCH BREAK**

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<sup>377</sup>Gordon, 50-53.

If we are not used to listening carefully, it is difficult to begin and surprising to us that sitting and listening is so hard. Interrupting or jumping in to share our own story is a way of trying to take control of the conversation.<sup>378</sup> Gordon uses the image of playing catch with a ball. When using intentional listening, the object is to keep the ball in the other person's hands. If you take it back into yours, you are taking over the conversation, and it now becomes a conversation about you.

When using intentional listening, it is important not to give advice, try to "fix it," offer platitudes, or hollow reassurance. Resist the urge to try to top the speaker's story by sharing one of your own.<sup>379</sup> I have always felt that finding commonalities was a way to get to know someone and put them at ease, but I realize that when I jump in to make "connections," I may just stop the other person's sharing.

Nancy Gorsuch writes in her book, *Pastoral Visitation*, . . . the listener reflects, as much as possible, an understanding of what was heard. . . .<sup>380</sup> As you begin to use intentional listening skills, you will find that paying attention, paraphrasing, and reflecting feelings will help the other to feel that you are offering them acceptance. When we feel understood, we feel accepted. This acceptance helps the speaker to be more open about sharing problems and feelings.<sup>381</sup> Acceptance of another person does not necessarily mean agreement. We sometimes are reluctant to

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<sup>378</sup>Shafir, 151.

<sup>379</sup>Nichols, 70.

<sup>380</sup>Nancy J. Gorsuch, *Pastoral Visitation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 48.

<sup>381</sup>Gordon, 32.

offer acceptance, because we feel that it in some way compromises our own beliefs.

Our last listening exercise will give you an opportunity to experience intentional listening.

#### **Exercise 4**

**Get into groups of three. Decide who is A, B, and C. First, A shares, and B is the listener, while C is the observer. The second time, B shares, C is the listener, and A is the observer. The third time, C shares, B is the observer, and A is the listener. Each speaker will have five minutes, with three for reflection. The observer is to listen, do not talk. When the five minutes is up, the observer will have three minutes to share his/her observations about how well the listener did. Here is the situation for each person who shares.**

**A--You just found out you lost your job, you have no insurance, and your spouse is sick.**

**B--You have an offer for the job of a lifetime, but it will mean uprooting your family and you have children in high school.**

**C--Your elderly parent just died, and you have been left to handle all the business, and it is a mess.**

**Do you have any questions?**

**When finished, we will share reactions to this exercise with the whole group. (If you forget what A, B, and C are to do, refer to your listening exercises sheet.)**

**Take time to have the group reflect on the previous exercise. Let the group reflect on the whole evening and the information which has been presented.**

#### **IV. Wrap-up**

I would encourage you to practice. It is going to feel strange at first, if you have never tried to use intentional listening. As you begin to feel more comfortable, practice more and more. My e-mail is on the board, please send me a message and let me know how it goes.

As we prepare to leave, hear these words from Psalm 121. I am reading from *The Message*, listen for God's Word to you.

Let us pray together. God, we need your help to become better listeners. We are much better at talking than listening. Give us patience and courage for the work you have called us to do. In the bold name of Jesus, who listened, and listened, and listened, we pray. Amen.

APPENDIX L

CHINESE SYMBOL FOR LISTENING



The Chinese symbol that is the verb, “to listen,” combines the characters for ear, eyes, undivided attention, and heart.

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