

Preparation for Listening

People come to church longing for, yearning for, hoping for ... a sense of roots, place, belonging, sharing and caring ... What we've learned is that Small Group Ministry is the single most effective way to provide people with a sense of roots, place, belonging, sharing, and caring. *Kennon Callahan, Effective Church Leadership*

In 2004 covenant groups began at our church. We wanted to create small groups where people were invited to share feelings and thoughts about various topics in a safe setting. We structured the groups in such a way that extroverts and introverts alike had an opportunity to share without being interrupted. Members told us that they had never been listened to in such a deep and thoughtful way. For many, the experience was a sacred, transcendent one.

In these times of "great divide" we may feel as if there is little listening going on in the world. In *Heart to Heart*, Christine Robinson and Alicia Hawkins state, "It's hard work to listen with an open heart rather than an analyzing mind. It requires putting aside judgment, categorization, and evaluation and instead just hearing the story that is told and the feelings behind it. Some people say they can feel a shift from their minds to hearts when they are listening in this way."

In covenant groups we practice this sort of deep listening. When listening at this deeper, "heart" level, the appropriate response may simply be silence, giving speakers a safe space to express themselves in a way that provides them with an opportunity to learn about themselves. Rachel Naomi Remen shares, "Listening is the oldest and perhaps the most powerful tool of healing ... Listening creates a holy silence. When you listen generously to people, they can hear the truth in themselves, often for the first time. And in the silence of listening, you can know yourself in everyone."

Listening happens in several ways. We learn to listen to one other with great respect, giving the gift of our presence, in silence. Secondly, when we share, we begin to listen to our own lives in a new way. And finally, we listen to our deepest selves, which some call connecting with our soul. Learning to listen in each of these ways is unique in our current world.

What happens when we are listened to in this way? Nelle Morton, theologian, explains it this way, "You heard me. You heard me all the way. I have a strange feeling you heard me before I started ... You went down all the way with me. Then you didn't smother me. You gave it space to shape itself. You gave it time to come full circle."

Parker J. Palmer adds, "When you speak to me about your deepest questions, you do not want to be fixed or saved: you want to be seen and heard, to have your truth acknowledged and honored. If your problem is soul-deep, your soul alone knows what you need to do about it, and my presumptuous advice will only drive your soul back into the woods. So the best service I can render when you speak to me about such a struggle is to hold you faithfully in a space where you can listen to your inner teacher."

Morton Kelsey says, "When we are secure in mature self-knowledge, what another person says is not likely to touch on sore spots that we have not dealt with in ourselves." If, when listening, you find yourself distracted and "hooked" by something the speaker shares, set it aside in your

mind to ponder at a later time, and then try to continue with your listening. You may have found an area to explore in yourself. Listening is not easy, but a skill to be cultivated.

Early in the life of a covenant group, people sometimes ask what they can *do* at the end of someone's sharing. The silence at the end of sharing seems to be not enough. Some use the hands in prayer mode and a bow of the head. Some say thank you quietly. Others nod and smile. These are all attempts to say, "Your sharing was deep, courageous and touching. Thank you." James Finley speaks about responding to deep sharing this way, "Sometimes silence is a way of honoring that which only a respectful, even reverential, silence can honor."

For none of us ever really walks in another's shoes or knows the innermost rooms of a person's heart. None of us truly knows the lonely places of another's journey or the causes of the lines around another's eyes. Therefore, let us be gentle with one another. Let us listen more than we speak and accept more than we judge. Let our open, outstretched hands reach and touch that we may walk along together for a little while in friendship and in trust. *Elizabeth Tarbox*

Questions to Ponder

Read the questions and ponder a few of them over several days to reflect on the role that listening has played in your life. At the Gathering, each person will have the opportunity to share reflections on their personal experience of listening. When you speak, other people will listen to you and not interrupt or question you.

1. Consider a situation in which you practiced deep listening or listening from the heart. How did that feel?
2. Think about one or more experiences when you were deeply listened to, when you felt you were really heard. What were your responses?
3. Recall a time when you were not listened to. How did you feel?
4. Who is the best listener in your life? What makes that person a great listener?
5. What distracts you when you are trying to listen deeply? How do you deal with that?
6. What can we do in this group to improve the quality of our listening?

This session is dedicated to Alicia Hawkins, who founded the covenant group program at First UU Albuquerque.