

Preparation for Listening

People come to church longing 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*

At our church, covenant groups are one way that people develop a sense of belonging. The core practice in covenant groups is deep listening as people share thoughts and feelings. Many people find that this practice of listening and being heard can be a meaningful, transcendent experience.

It is surprisingly difficult to listen well. Even when we think we are listening to others, it's common to be distracted or preoccupied with details of our own lives. When we think we are focusing on what someone else is saying, sometimes we are preparing ourselves to speak. Even when we think we are relating to another by sharing a similar experience, doing so too quickly or vigorously can change the focus in such a way that the original speaker can feel shut down.

In covenant groups, we learn to listen to each other without judgment. In *Heart to Heart*, Christine Robinson says, "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 themselves shift from their minds to hearts when they are listening. Some describe deep listening as a sacred experience."

Deep listening is compassion. Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says, "We hear with one aim only; we don't listen in order to criticize, to blame, to correct the person who is speaking or to condemn the person. We only listen with one aim, and that is to relieve the suffering of the one we are listening to."

When we listen in covenant groups, we don't immediately respond to each other or offer support. Instead, we gift the speaker with our presence and attention. Parker J. Palmer says this presence is enough: "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."

We listen to others in covenant groups, but we also listen to ourselves. When we tell our stories in the presence of others who accept us, we may hear those stories anew, with new meaning. As theologian Howard Thurman says, "There is something in you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have."

In covenant groups, we practice this sort of deep listening. We learn to listen to one another with great respect, giving the gift of our presence. We see and hear one another in a new way. And we may begin to listen to our own lives in a new way as well, hearing our deepest selves, which some call connecting with our soul.

Consider these quotes as you reflect on listening in your life.

It is by speaking and listening to each other that out of the darkness of our separate mysteries is brought to light the truth of who we are. *Frederick Buechner*

When you are in psychological distress and someone really hears you without passing judgement on you, without trying to take responsibility for you, without trying to mold you, it feels damn good!
Carl R. Rogers

Listening is about being present, not just about being quiet. *Krista Tippett*

We can change the world if we start listening to one another again ... Simple, truthful conversation where we each have a chance to speak, we each feel heard, and we each listen well.

Margaret Wheatley

At the end of the day, stories connect us ... It's just a matter of who's out there listening.

Jose Antonio Vargas

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.

Rachel Naomi Remen

Our entire future may depend on learning to listen, listen without assumptions or defenses.

adrienne maree brown

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

Reflect on some of these questions over several days. You don't have to "answer" each one. 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 for you? Do think your listening was beneficial for the speaker?
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. When you're reflecting on being listened to, it's natural for feelings to come up about *not* being listened to as well. Consider one or two of those times. How did you feel? *These questions are for your reflection. You may not want to consider all the questions or talk about painful memories.*
4. What gets in the way and distracts you when you are trying to listen deeply?
5. Reflect on times when you have listened to people whose life stories were very different from yours, a different social group or different culture. What was that like?
6. Who in your life would you like to listen to more? How might you do that?
7. What can you do to listen to yourself?