

Editorial: What might we learn by listening to each other?

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Hearing is easy ... if your ears work. Listening is hard.

We've had a hard time with listening from the very beginning. We've listened to the wrong people and things, and we've heard what we want to hear, not necessarily what was said.

I'm convinced, however, the solution to our problems is in the listening. To respond well to our problems, we need to overcome obstacles to listening. One such obstacle is our willingness to listen to each other.

What is listening?

Listening means I have to turn down or turn off my own internal conversation, so I can pay attention to what someone else is saying. As tiring as that internal monologue can be—at least, I think it's a monologue—it always seems less work than turning it down or off.

That internal conversation? It's rarely just a monologue. It's more often the cacophony of a "great crowd of witnesses," and not the blessed biblical cloud. The commotion in our minds often is composed of suspicions, doubts, fears, anxieties, mistrust, prejudices, selfishness and self-centeredness, among other nasty denizens.

Our preconceived ideas about others and our preplanned desires for ourselves drown out God's good gifts to us expressed in and through the people around us. If we could just turn down or, better, turn off that noise, we are apt to find true reward. We can find it in listening to each other.

Learning to listen

I'm not an expert listener. I'm an average person who's often preoccupied—assuming I'm like the average person.

I have had some training in listening, however. Yes, there is such a thing, and it's well worth the time and effort. After hours of listening training, some things I've learned are:

- Listening is only hard because I get in the way.
- Listening requires me to slow down.
- Listening is active, very.
- Listening is received as a gift, always.

I get in the way of listening in a number of ways. One is when I'm unwilling to hear another's pain or perspective, especially if the other's pain implicates me or their perspective conflicts with my own. It is true, listening opens us to confrontation, not all of which is to our detriment. There is confrontation that builds us up.

Often, despite being willing to listen, I'm tired, stressed or distracted. In those times, busyness, social media, music, news or entertainment is the easier road. They don't require me to engage as fully. If my distractions become uncomfortable, I can just turn them off. Even if they try to confront me with truth, I can fuzz out.

Perhaps the worst thing to get in the way of listening is lack of trust. Some things we don't hear, because we aren't listening. Other things we don't hear, because the speaker doesn't trust us enough to say them. Lack of trust is one of our biggest problems; its solution is in the listening.

Things I've learned while listening

Once I began to understand this, I started to learn answers to “why” questions I had as a pastor—such as why certain people don't come to my church.

When I was ready to listen, I learned about families with medically fragile children who require specific bathroom accommodations. These families must scope out almost every place they go to make sure bathroom doors are wide enough for specialized chairs, and that there is adequate and appropriate space for addressing personal hygiene.

I learned about senior adult couples with similar concerns. A wife might need to accompany her husband into the restroom to assist him, or vice versa. Buildings without a family restroom often leave the opposite-sex spouse in an uncomfortable quandary.

I learned about individuals with sensory processing challenges, many of whom are on the autism spectrum or have post-traumatic stress disorder. A grandmother, who anguished over not being able to attend our worship services, explained to me her grandson simply could not process anything loud. I learned our church did not accommodate his needs.

We like to think our churches are suitable for anyone and everyone, but I learned through listening that they aren't.

Why listening matters

When we are aware of problems like those mentioned above—what we might prefer to call challenges or opportunities—we may default to rejecting what we hear or to repair mode—to fixing the problem. Some of us are so driven to fix the problem, we will forego instructions and help.

Going straight to the fix often obstructs us from listening to those most affected by our problems and supposed solutions. It reveals we are more concerned with what we want than what another needs. What we assume to be solutions often disregard the actual needs of those we claim to serve.

Nonetheless, we congratulate ourselves, unaware we've made matters worse by creating or building mistrust. We've done this in missions and race relations, and within our churches and families.

Going straight to the fix might work for technical situations when we can afford to make mistakes. But the problems staring us in the face—social, religious and political problems that raise our blood pressure, heighten our anxiety, keep us up at night—these aren't technical issues. They won't be resolved by going straight to the fix. They require listening.

To build or rebuild trust, to address seemingly insurmountable problems, to find a way forward through one morass or another, we must listen more. And we must listen to the right people for as long as it takes, beginning with God.

One thing I've learned and still am learning about listening is what a gift it is.

What might we learn by listening to each other? And what might we *give* by listening to each other?

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