

## YOUR STORY - MY STORY - HIS STORY

In tune with the opening of the Meeting Place, with the Activity Space and the Story Room we in the church need to be comfortable listening to the stories of others and in sharing our story with reference to the Christian story.

This programme for Cell Groups is designed to help in this and will run alongside events for varying ages in the Meeting Place and the use of the Narrative Lectionary in Sunday worship.

Three elements are present in this programme:

- Exploring the art of listening
- Telling our story
- Sharing in God's story

Group sessions may be devoted to any combination of these, as seems appropriate, but in order to allow time for careful listening there should only be one personal story in a session.

It would be appropriate for any group session to be facilitated by someone who is not telling the story in that session.

### **Exploring the art of listening**

Below is an extract from a book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer with some 'lessons' on good listening. These might form a whole session on the matter of listening, but it may also be referred to in an ongoing way, by way of monitoring how we are doing!

### **Telling our story**

Group members are invited to share a story. This story:

- should be of personal significance.  
(an incident or occasion, something you have read or heard, a film watched, which has in some way touched you - shaping life, persuading a change in direction, affirming you etc.)
- may be fact or fiction.
- may be original, have been written or told by someone else, be Biblical or historical.
- be shared by telling, reading, showing (video), illustration, acting out.
- the story-teller should include something about the particular significance of the story to them, perhaps with some insight for their faith or belief.

Group members should listen/watch without interrupting. Avoiding the temptation to offer 'what I think' or a similar experience. At the end questions may be asked to gain a deeper understanding of the story, seeking not to undermine the significance of the story to the teller.

Discussion should continue to focus on the story and the significance for the teller, perhaps also identifying where others recognise a significance for themselves, their faith or belief.

### **Sharing in God's story**

This may consist:

- Hearing/watching a Biblical story presented by a group member and exploring the personal significance.
- Reading together a Biblical passage from the Narrative Lectionary - spending some time in silent reflection, allowing God to speak through the passage - listening to contributions made by group members, accepting each as significant. Group members should offer what is significant for them, without challenging the views of others.
- A time of worship/prayer would appropriately allow people to offer to God as well as receive.

### **Outside the Group Session:**

Each person is encouraged to give time to reflecting on how what they have heard touches them in any significant way.

This might be a focus for sharing at the following group session.

## **SOME NOTES ON LISTENING**

### ***Dietrich Bonhoeffer "Life Together" (regarding Christian community)***

*"The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear.*

*So it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking.*

*Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too.*

*This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arrayed in pious words. One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and be never really speaking to others, albeit he be not conscious of it. Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies."*

## Lessons in Good Listening

The charter text for Christian listening might be James 1:19: “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” It’s simple enough in principle, and nearly impossible to live. Too often we are slow to hear, quick to speak, and quick to anger. So learning to listen well won’t happen overnight. It requires discipline, effort, and intentionality. You get better with time, they say. Becoming a better listener hangs not on one big resolve to do better in a single conversation, but on developing a pattern of little resolves to focus in on particular people in specific moments.

Here are six lessons in good listening, taking cues from what may be the most important three paragraphs on listening outside the Bible, the section on “the ministry of listening” in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*, as well as Janet Dunn’s classic Discipleship Journal article, “*How to Become a Good Listener*.”

### 1. Good listening requires patience.

Here Bonhoeffer gives us something to avoid: “a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say.” This, he says, “is an impatient, inattentive listening, that . . . is only waiting for a chance to speak.” Perhaps we think we know where the speaker is going, and so already begin formulating our response. Or we were in the middle of something when someone started talking to us, or have another commitment approaching, and we wish they were done already.

Or maybe we’re half-eared because our attention is divided, by our external surroundings or our internal rebounding to self. As Dunn laments, “Unfortunately, many of us are too preoccupied with ourselves when we listen. Instead of concentrating on what is being said, we are busy either deciding what to say in response or mentally rejecting the other person’s point of view.”

**“Poor listening diminishes another person, while good listening invites them to exist and matter.”**

Positively, then, good listening requires concentration and means we’re in with both ears, and that we hear the other person out till they’re done speaking. Rarely will the speaker begin with what’s most important, and deepest. We need to hear the whole train of thought, all the way to the caboose, before starting across the tracks.

Good listening silences the smartphone and doesn’t stop the story, but is attentive and patient. Externally relaxed and internally active. It takes energy to block out the distractions that keep bombarding us, and the peripheral things that keep streaming into our consciousness, and the many good possibilities we can spin out for interrupting. When we are people quick to speak, it takes Spirit-powered patience to not only be quick to hear, but to keep on hearing.

### 2. Good listening is an act of love.

Half-eared listening, says Bonhoeffer, “despises the brother and is only waiting for a chance to speak and thus get rid of the other person.” Poor listening rejects, good listening embraces. Poor listening diminishes the other person, while good listening invites them to exist, and to matter. Bonhoeffer writes, “Just as love to God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them.”

Good listening goes hand in hand with the mindset of Christ (Philippians 2:5). It flows from a humble heart that counts others more significant than ourselves (Philippians 2:3). It looks not only to its own interests, but also the interests of others (Philippians 2:4). It is patient and kind (1 Corinthians 13:4).

### 3. Good listening asks perceptive questions.

This counsel is writ large in the Proverbs. It is the fool who “takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in exercising his opinions” (Proverbs 18:2), and thus “gives an answer before he hears” (Proverbs 18:13). “The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water,” says Proverbs 20:5, “but a man of understanding will draw it out.”

Good listening asks perceptive, open-ended questions, that don't tee up yes-no answers, but gently peel the onion and probe beneath the surface. It watches carefully for non-verbal communication, but doesn't interrogate and pry into details the speaker doesn't want to share, but meekly draws them out and helps point the speaker to fresh perspectives through careful, but genuine, questions.

#### 4. Good listening is ministry.

According to Bonhoeffer, there are many times when "listening can be a greater service than speaking." God wants more of the Christian than just our good listening, but not less. There will be days when the most important ministry we do is square our shoulders to some hurting person, uncross our arms, lean forward, make eye contact, and hear their pain all the way to the bottom. Says Dunn,

good listening often defuses the emotions that are a part of the problem being discussed. Sometimes releasing these emotions is all that is needed to solve the problem. The speaker may neither want nor expect us to say anything in response.

One of Dunn's counsels for cultivating good listening is: "put more emphasis on affirmation than on answers. . . . [M]any times God simply wants to use me as a channel of his affirming love as I listen with compassion and understanding." Echoes Bonhoeffer, "Often a person can be helped merely by having someone who will listen to him seriously." At times what our neighbour needs most is for someone else to know.

#### 5. Good listening prepares us to speak well.

Sometimes good listening only listens, and ministers best by keeping quiet, but typically good listening readies us to minister words of grace to precisely the place where the other is in need. As Bonhoeffer writes, "We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God."

While the fool "gives an answer before he hears" (Proverbs 18:13), the wise person tries to resist defensiveness, and to listen from a non-judgmental stance, training himself not to formulate opinions or responses until the full update is on the table and the whole story has been heard.

#### 6. Good listening reflects our relationship with God.

Our inability to listen well to others may be symptomatic of a chatty spirit that is droning out the voice of God. Bonhoeffer warns,

He who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life . . . . Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies.

**"The best ministry you might do today is to listen to someone's pain all the way to the bottom."**

Good listening is a great means of grace in the dynamic of true Christian fellowship. Not only is it a channel through which God continues to pour his grace into our lives, but it's also his way of using us as his means of grace in the lives of others. It may be one of the hardest things we learn to do, but we will find it worth every ounce of effort.

**NARRATIVE LECTIONARY READINGS**

**April 17**

**Church at Thessalonica**

**Acts 17:1-9 Founding church at Thessalonica**

**1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 Paul's message of thanks to the church at Thessalonica.**

**April 24**

**Church at Corinth**

**Acts 18:1-4 Founding the church at Corinth.**

**1 Corinthians 1:10-18 Factions in the church and the word of the cross.**

**May 1**

**Faith, Hope, and Love**

**1 Corinthians 13:1-13 "Faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love."**

**May 8**

**Death Swallowed in Life**

**1 Corinthians 15:1-26, 51-57 Jesus' resurrection and the future resurrection; death as the last enemy.**

**May 15**

**Pentecost - Gifts of the Spirit Acts 2:1-4**

**1 Corinthians 12:1-13 Faith as principal work of the Spirit; other gifts of the Spirit for the common good.**

**2 Corinthians (6 weeks):**

**5/22/2016: 2 Cor 1:1-11 – Consolation**

**5/29/2016: 2 Cor 2:1-10 – Forgiveness**

**6/5/2016: 2 Cor 4:1-15 – Treasure in Clay Jars**

**6/12/2016: 2 Cor 4:16—5:10 Walk by Faith not Sight**

**6/19/2016: 2 Cor 5:11-21 Reconciliation**

**6/26/2016: 2 Cor 8:1-15 Generosity**

**Job (6 weeks):**

**7/3/2016: Job 1:1-22**

**7/10/2016: Job 3:1-10; 4:1-9; 7:11-21**

**7/17/2016: Job 14:7-15; 19:23-27**

**7/24/2016: Job 31:35-37; 38:1-11**

**7/31/2016: Job 38:25-27; 41:1-8; 42:1-6**

**8/7/2016: Job 42:7-17**

**Lord's Prayer (4 weeks):**

**8/14/2016: Luke 11:2-4**

**8/21/2016: Luke 11:2-4**

**8/28/2016: Luke 11:2-4**

**9/4/2016: Luke 11:2-4**