

## THE ART OF ACTIVE LISTENING

Listening is a learned skill. There is a significant difference between *hearing* and *listening*. Hearing is a biological function, and like breathing or blinking it happens whether you are consciously telling yourself to do it or not. Listening, on the other hand, is a mental process. It requires thought, effort, and practice.

Let's start by remembering a few listening times from God's word.

**James 1:19a** (NRSV) - "You must understand this, my beloved; let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak."

**Exodus** – The Israelites, groaning in their slavery, cried out and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard-remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and Jacob. Later in Exodus – after they were delivered God said to Moses "I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites." (Ex. 16:12)

**Psalms 66:19** – "God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer."

Jesus before Lazarus' tomb said – "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." **Jn. 11:41b**

**Isa. 65:24** – God said "Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear."

Listening is a skill you will use in any caring relationship you have – family, friends, neighbors as well as the men, women and children you have in your groups. You will always be honing this skill. We've all heard the saying – God gave us two ears and one mouth – so we should listen more than we talk but maybe it is because God knows listening is twice as hard as talking!

- Senior Leaders - conduct this test with your LD group. Have everyone in your group close their eyes and keep them closed until you say it is time to open them (after one minute). Instruct them to raise their hand and keep it raised when they *think* it has been a minute. Then tell them when a minute has transpired.
- Follow with these comments – A minute seems like a long time, doesn't it? A minute can be a productive time – a shy person can be gathering courage to speak, thinking deeply about a topic, or maybe coming up with new insights. In your core groups someone can be building on some new thought someone else has said. As you begin the year tell your core group that you are not afraid of silence – you can outwait them!
- Thoughts move about four times as fast as speech so you can also think about and process what you are hearing. This may be a reason our minds tend to wander. Keep focused on what is being said.

So what is active listening? It is listening to the whole person in order to genuinely show interest and understand as well as possible. Listen for what he/she is thinking, feeling,

wanting, attitudes, opinions or what the message means. It is a challenging mental task – your ears, eyes, brains and heart are involved!

*Some things to remember:*

- Intentionally focus on who you are listening to, whether in a group or one-on-one, in order to understand what is being said.
- Focus your attention on the person – eye contact – nodding – positive reinforcement.
- Listen across time – remember what was said before.
- Listen with a third ear – read between the lines.
- Think about your body language:
  - Sit slightly forward
  - Open relaxed posture – this encourages speaker and signals interest – no arms across your chest, don't fidget, play with pen (nervous habits)
  - Look into the person's eyes – nonverbal acknowledgment – nod your head, unhum
  - Pick up on non-verbal clues – shaky voice, nervous hands, eyes averted –looking down
  - Non-judgmental expression on your face
- Ask your LD group to share some irritating listening habits such as
  - Interrupting the speaker, rushing the speaker and making him/her feel that he/she is wasting the listener's time.
  - Getting ahead of the speaker and finishing his/her thoughts
  - Being so interested in what you have to say next that you listen mainly to find an opening to get the floor
  - Ignoring the speaker, or topping the speaker's story – “That's nothing, let me tell you about....)

Apply what we have talked about to listening to God. Our prayer life is not to be a one way street. We need to listen too. Show our love for God by paying attention – work to truly hear God's messages – think about them, pay attention to the thoughts, feelings, spiritual concerns God's communications bring up in us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: “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 brothers and sisters when we learn to listen to them. Christians....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.”