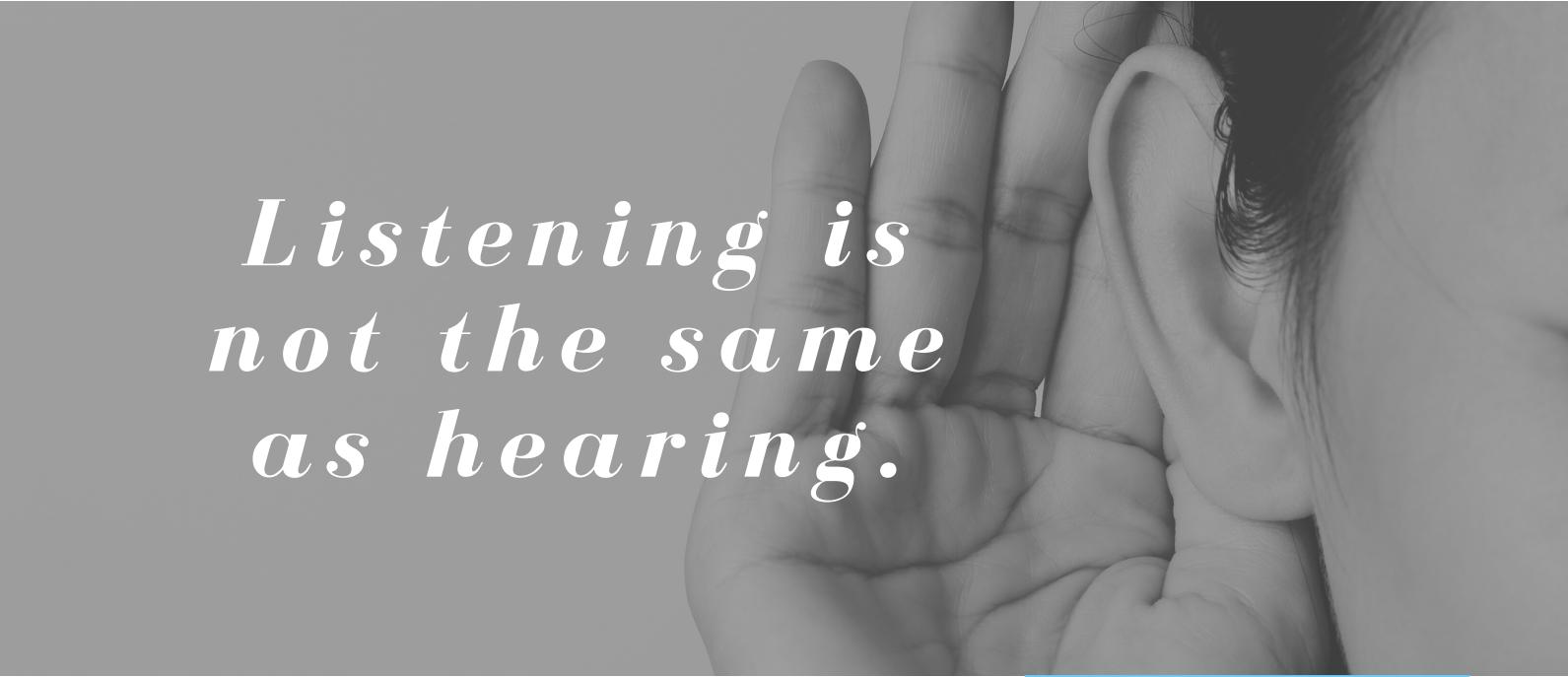


PRACTICE GUIDE

JOURNEYING IN THE WILDERNESS

TERRI MARTINSON ELTON

LISTENING



*Listening is
not the same
as hearing.*

Listening is not the same as hearing. Hearing is a physical ability; listening is a conscious process. Listening takes in stories, ideas, feelings, and frustrations using verbal, non-verbal, and contextual clues. Humans are wired to listen and also have a need to be heard. We teach children to listen, yet most adults stop developing this practice. Studies show most adults underutilized their listening capacity (on average, people only listen at about twenty-five percent efficiency) and feel no need to improve.

Listening requires focus, emotional attention, physical engagement, and reading the environment. The capacity to listen well builds understanding, connections, and self-worth, as well as cultivating clear communication, enhancing trust, and aiding in conflict resolution. Listening involves a range of experiences and is a practice woven into all areas of our daily life. Unfortunately, it seems to be disappearing in our digitally-mediated, 24/7 world. Our context is noisy, and we live connected to our devices, making it extremely difficult to listen with our full, undivided attention. As a practice exercised less and less in society, **what if listening was reframed as a spiritual practice?**

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*Journeying in the
Wilderness, 34*

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Listening as spiritual practice shifts our focus from ourselves to others.

Journeying in the Wilderness, 35



Listening as spiritual practice shifts our focus from ourselves to others. Listening to others honors them as a unique one-of-a-kind person created by God. Focusing on others creates the opportunity to go deeper into another's experience and understand what lies below the surface. Listening with an *empathetic ear* provides insight into others' feelings; we recognize another's humanity and have the opportunity to care for another. Listening with an *interpretive ear* seeks to reflect on life, clarifying experiences and accompanying others in meaning-making. Listening with a *theological ear* seeks to discern God's movement in another's life and allows God to work in and through us. In other words, listening connects people and cultivates relationships. It has a transforming capacity, not only within individuals, but also within communities.

What does transformational listening entail? Listening with a *transformative ear* allows current norms and prevailing assumptions to be challenged by opening space for another's point of view. This type of listening requires the listener to bracket their own understanding in order to fully hear another. Through dialog and questioning, the listener entertains another's perspective as valid, even if it differs from their own. When done well, both the listener and the speaker are changed. This practice is important in communities with a high degree of difference that is committed to honoring diverse perspectives. What drives individuals and communities to participate is something bigger than themselves—a shared mission and/or vision. While transformational listening is relational, it is more than pastoral care and effective communication; it changes people and communities.

Transformational listening has a ripple effect. As space is opened and relationships are deepened, new ways of thinking become possible. Learning from this type of listening has the potential to be transferred from one area of life to another. For example, developing transformational listening within a community with diverse theological understandings may allow participants to listen differently to family members or coworkers with diverse points of view. As congregations create the conditions for this type of listening, they foster environments where people feel safe and can expand their ability to be present with others in ways that stand out in society.

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Developing our capacity to listen...is a way faith can be integrated into everyday life.

Journeying in the Wilderness, 37



How might congregations do this? It takes practice.

TRY THIS.

Begin by drawing people into the present moment. Start with a minute of silence or having people take a few deep breaths. Invite people to put aside whatever is preoccupying their mind and be open to those in the room. Break-up into pairs and take 5 minutes each to share about a time you left loved. As you listen to the other person, become curious. Pay attention to verbal and nonverbal clues; focus on what the other person is trying to communicate.

THEN REFLECT.

Are you able to imagine their perspective? How can you deepen your understanding? How can you reflect back what you heard and invite their reflection? What conditions were important for you to focus on the speaker? What other practices can be incorporated to enhance your exchange? Would prayer be appropriate? Would having another person join the conversation be helpful? Would guidelines help create boundaries?

Listening to another's story is a sacred practice. Developing our capacity to listen, especially across diverse perspectives and in the midst of conflict, is a way faith can be integrated into everyday life. As congregations cultivate listening—empathetically, interpretively, or transformationally—they connect the times God's people gather despite being scattered in the world, creating space for the Holy Spirit to enter into the most fundamental parts of our lives—our relationships.