



## ARE YOU LISTENING?

Diana Bennett

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One of the many human weaknesses is the ability to listen to one another. Think about the times when you were aware that the person to whom you were speaking had one ear tuned to the conversation on his or her left. “No, her name was Susan!” they might have contributed to the near-by conversation. Or perhaps you were discussing something important and your listener glanced down at her watch, or shuffled papers, or walked around the room! What kind of message is she sending? The ability to actively listen and care for one another is rare. In a small group setting, the inability to listen to one another inhibits the development of a trusting environment. Who is inclined to share personal concerns and difficulties knowing that the listening ear is unavailable?

“Careful, active, sensitive, evocative listening is the foundation skill needed. This kind of listening tunes into the other person at the deepest possible level, listening not just to words and ideas, but to nuances, shades of expressions, to feelings as well as non-verbal cues.” (Roberta Hestenes). Active listening requires full attention to the speaker as it demonstrates acceptance and is a basic way of showing love. Eye contact is essential because it sends a strong message of being present with the person and an interest in hearing the words, ideas, or concerns the speaker may have. There are times, however, when the listening person’s eyes may be on the speaker and their minds somewhere else! So how does one learn to listen well?

Active listening can be developed using the covenant the group has designed. If part of your group’s purpose is to build trust, share deeply, refrain from giving advice, and encourage one another, the need to listen becomes a tool that allows the trust level to rise. It is important that the art of listening be addressed. The process begins with the leader who must understand and model the skill of listening. Body language is important. If the leader asks a question and the person who offers an answer sees the leader look around the room, fiddle with the guidebook, look at her watch, or lean back and cross her arms, the speaker has been sent a very clear message that the leader is not interested in what the person has to say. More often than not, that person will not contribute again for fear of being rejected purely by body language!

If the leader allows the dominate person to interject an opinion or a disagreement before the speaker has finished, the speaker will become discouraged and disinterested in sharing in the future; so will others in the group. Many times group members cannot wait to speak into stories by telling one of their own that “tops” the experience of the speaker or one where he or she was far more hurt,

discouraged, or fearful. The dominate person may be one who constantly feels the need to share the newest or the on-going drama in his or her life. Most often others in the group start to stare at the floor and allow the intrusion to continue. Leaders may not be able to teach themselves or their group members the art of listening, but they can create an environment that will enhance this necessary element of small group life.

### Where to start

Every small group needs to design a covenant for the quality of group life. The covenant states the goals and purposes of the group during their time together. The covenant becomes a statement of “what is in and what is out.” A wise leader will lead the group through the covenant design that will preserve the value of the time together. Some of the covenant particulars will help with the development of listening well to one another:

Each group member participates and no one dominates

One person speaks at a time

No one will be called upon; going around the circle for answers is “out!”

Everyone’s contribution is valuable

Advice or criticism is not acceptable

The leader will most likely need to remind the group of the covenant agreement from time to time. When a group member starts to interject his or her own thoughts at inappropriate times, ask the person to hold off...don’t let the pattern continue. The word “briefly” is an important word to repeat during group discussion as it sets the pace for the length of discussion. When the leader allows a member to extend his or her thoughts too long, most people lose interest in listening. Be the example; Set the pace, and facilitate the discussion wisely.

### Reflective listening

Using a guidebook and answering questions in a didactic pattern reflects the more impersonal preparation for the Bible study. The personal implications or applications for the study becomes an important part of the group time. The members need to listen to one another for the continued encouragement and challenge for spiritual growth. Group discussion often never gets to the important questions like “so what?” or “what will I do differently because I

reflected on this Scripture?” It is here that the art of listening is most important if the group yearns to grow and travel a spiritual journey together.

I lead a spiritual friendship group (some would call it a spiritual direction group) where five younger women of my church and I gather once a month. We started meeting twice a month for three months. Once we got to know one another better, we then transitioned to once a month as an accountability group. We do not do a Bible study. We started by telling and drawing our spiritual autobiographies. We have explored various spiritual disciplines such as contemplative reading, reflective listening, journaling, silence, and solitude. Each week I give a few options for Scripture reflection. When we meet again, we share what we hear God saying to us through the Scripture and our present circumstances. We actively listen to one another. In a group like this, when listening to and reflecting on someone’s story, prayer request, or experiences, train your mind to ask these types of questions as you listen:

Silent prayer: Ask the Holy Spirit for discernment.

What did you hear?

What did you feel while you were listening?

What might God be showing you through this person?

What might you want to say to this person concerning God’s leading?

Is there something you want to speak back to this person for encouragement or for admonishment (when the time is right)?

The group understands that one person talks at a time; the others listen reflectively. No one interjects personal thoughts until the appropriate time. We are learning to listen well to one another and we are learning to listen to God!

Whether you are leading a Bible study or an accountability group, create the environment for listening well to one another. It usually does not happen by itself, therefore the leader is critical to the process. Give undivided attention to the speaker and encourage your group to do likewise. Encourage members to listen actively by shutting their mouths firmly, quit thinking about what they want to say, and listen with intense concentrated attentiveness to one another. The art of listening will develop over time and the group will grow spiritually together as they care and share the truth framed in love.

“...love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life...” (Deut. 30:20 NIV)