

MINISTER'S PAGE

Ministry Through Listening

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I still keep the voicemail message on my office phone, though it is more than a year old. A lay-leader of our Pastoral Associates had called to tell me that, over dinner, another congregant had described her meeting with me and how “incredibly listened to” she felt afterwards. The unsolicited report touched me, but also reminded me that powerful ministry often occurs in the absence of words.

One of the simplest forms of ministry is attentive listening.

Our society places great value on verbal ability. We love great communicators and articulate leaders, but we place much less value on being good and effective listeners.

There is a difference between “hearing” and “listening.” An old cliché features one partner in a couple proclaiming with exasperation, “You haven’t heard a word that I said!” We can hear what others say without listening to them and we can listen to another person without understanding them.

Really listening to another person – opening not just our ears, but our hearts and minds to their story – is one of the greatest gifts that we can offer. Listening closely to another person, especially when they are sharing tender truths about their life, is an act of loving kindness. When we listen in love, fully attentive to another person, we are performing a powerful act of ministry.

Attentive listening requires focus and effort. We must focus on the speaker and not on what we would like to say in response. The minute we start thinking about our comments to their story, we have stopped listening closely. Similarly, attentive listening requires us to be silent. It is hard to hear what someone else is saying, and impossible to listen to them, while we are speaking. The “no cross talk” and “no discussion until after the circle” rules that many Small Group Ministry programs adopt are meant to hold the sacred silence and allow the ministry of listening to work its power.

Through giving by “listening” and receiving by “feeling listened to,” Small Group Ministry participants create an intimate experience of truly mutual ministry. In these covenanted circles of support, we minister to one another through our presence. We attend to each other by listening in silence, signaling our care with our eyes, our posture, and the gentle nod of a head. No words are needed, just open ears and hearts. That is a ministry that anyone can provide, and one that all of us need.

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