

# The Principles & Practice of Listening in Spiritual Direction

Prior to our time together, write out a first brief draft of your theology of listening. What do you believe about the nature /character of God in regards to the act of listening/hearing? Be prepared to add to this statement as we move through our day together and our reflections on listening in Spiritual Direction.

SESSION 1 – 9:00 to 10:30

9:00

\*Introduce myself

Introductions: Your name and where you are joining from is indicated on our Zoom screen. Would you please take a moment to share in the chat one thought that is on your heart today.

*Ashley or Chuck, do you notice any common themes?*

Today we're going to explore the art of listening. As Kay Lindahl reminds us, listening is at the heart of spiritual direction. And about listening she writes, "Each of us has our own unique perspective on the world, our own worldview. We listen from that view, mostly without recognizing we are doing so. Once we acknowledge that the way we hear something may not be what was actually said, we are on a journey to sacred listening. As with any new skill, learning takes effort, attention, and practice."<sup>1</sup>

"The first duty of love is to listen." —Paul Tillich

**Slide 1**

Listening is key to spiritual direction and the conviction at the foundation of what we do today is that love is at the center of listening - love for God, love for self and love for the other.

Take a breath, open yourself to God's presence, and hear this scripture reading.

I Samuel 3:1-10

One of my favorite passages of scripture is this narrative of the call of Samuel (I Samuel 3:1-10). In this story, Eli acted as a spiritual director. He helped Samuel recognize God's voice. Our first job as Spiritual Directors is to invite God's voice in our own lives, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." Let me say that again. We need to first listen to God in our own lives, to become familiar with God's voice in us so that we can discern when to speak and when to keep silence in our work of direction and then help our directees discern to God's voice in their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Lindahl, Kay, Practicing the Art of Listening (Woodstock, Vermont, Skylight Paths Publishing, 2003), 10

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## Slide 2

### WHAT IS LISTENING?

Kay Lindahl says that listening is:

**A Choice:** “Choosing to listen to someone is a decision...Listening is not a passive activity. It’s not about being quiet or even hearing the words. It is an action and it takes energy to listen.

**A Gift:** “...one of the greatest gifts we can give another is to listen to her or him with total attention...Thinking about listening as a gift that you either give or receive places a new emphasis on the value of listening. It makes it easier to slow down and savor the conversation, either by opening up to receive the gift or by extending the hospitality of giving the gift.

**An Art:** “...listening is more than technique. When two people are deeply listening to one another, we sense that not only are they present to each other, but they also are present to something beyond their individual selves – some call it spiritual, holy, or sacred”.<sup>2</sup>

#### Back to just the Zoom Screen

Further, Lindahl writes, “When two people are deeply listening to one another, we sense that not only are they present to each other, but they also are present to something beyond their individual selves... Musicians refer to it as aesthetic rapture, mystics describe it as ecstasy, athletes call it being in the zone, and jazz artists say they are in the groove. All of them speak about it as a moment when time stands still. They are simply being in the experience. It is the same with listening.”<sup>3</sup>

**Listening can literally save lives. (Share the story from from Zimbabwe from the article “Training faith leaders to work against suicide in the December 2025 *Christian Century*) see page 27**

## Reflection

### Slide 3

*As you look at what Lindahl says about the definition of listening, take a few moments to consider and perhaps write down what catches your attention, what resonates with you.*

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*Would one or two people like to share your reflection?*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Chapter 1

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. 6-7

## Slide 4

Suggested Practices for Holy Listening that you can use in your day to day life:

- The first practice is to become aware of opportunities for listening.
- Notice what happens when you choose to listen.
- Notice when you unconsciously choose not to listen. What happens when you come back to the conversation?
- Identify someone who has given you the gift of listening. Acknowledge him or her for doing so.
- Consciously choose to give someone the gift of your listening. What happened?
- Recall a time when you experienced listening as an art. What happened? How did you feel?
- Observe people in conversation. See whether you can identify those who practice listening as an art.<sup>4</sup>

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“Listening is a creative force that transforms relationships. Listening to yourself elicits full self-expression—it is speaking from your soul. Listening is being fully present—to Spirit, to self, to others. Listening is a sacred act.”<sup>5</sup> (SPIRITUAL DIRECTION PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES: ROBERT F. MORNEAU.)

In the time in which we live - a time of polarization and demonization of one another - listening, providing an example, and encouraging holy listening skills can make a great difference when directees are struggling with conflict in relationships and even on a broader scale. Amanda Ripley, in her book *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out*, struggles to find ways to help individuals and larger groups to get out of and stay out of what she calls High Conflict. She writes, “Listening and checking for understanding is probably the single best way to keep conflict healthy, all through life. That’s why it is practiced by everyone who navigates high conflict with grace.”<sup>6</sup>

## Practice

*In groups of two take turns being the speaker and the listener. The listener asks, “Tell me about someone who has given you the gift of listening. How did that feel?” The listener listens without comment. And When the speaker is finished the listener responds, “Thank you for sharing.” After two to three minutes, change places.*

**(Please place the students in diads)**

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 11

<sup>5</sup> Morneau, Robert F., *Spiritual Direction Principles and Practice*

<sup>6</sup>Ripley, Amanda, *High Conflict: Why We Ge Trapped and How We Get Out* (New York, Simon & Shuster, 2021), 245

## WHY IS LISTENING CRUCIAL TO SPIRITUAL DIRECTION?

\*It bears repeating that listening is key to spiritual direction and the conviction at the center of what we do today is that love is at the center of listening - love for God, love for self and love for the other.

Listening is important in the scriptures.

The word "listen" appears 412 times in the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible.

Variations of the word "hear" appear 1,700 times. Just a few examples include:

- **Deuteronomy 6:4** "Listen, O Israel"
- **Isaiah 55:2-3** "Listen, listen to me...Pay attention and come to Me; listen,so that you will live."
- **Jeremiah 7:23** "Listen to my voice. Then I shall be your God, and you shall be my people."
- **Mark 9:7** "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."
- **Mark 7:14** "Listen to me, all of you, and understand."
- **Revelation 22:17** "And let anyone who listens answer, "Come."
- **Hebrews 3: 7-8** "The Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."
- **Matthew 13: 9** "Let anyone with ears listen!"
- **I Samuel 3:10** "And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."
- **I Kings 3:9** "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern"
- **John 8:47** "The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God."
- **Matthew 7:26** "And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a fool."
- **John 9:7** "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again?"
- **Luke 21:38** "And all the people would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the temple."
- **Luke 10:39** She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying."
- **John 18:37** "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."
- **John 10:27** "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

### Slide 5

*Take a moment to look over these scripture passages and note if there is anything you want to add or highlight to your theology of listening.*

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### Back to Zoom Screen

Other thoughts on the importance of listening in Spiritual Direction:

(Margaret Guenther) “(A) debilitating effect of the drive and greed of a consumer society on the life of the spirit is the assumption that everything is, in principle, *fixable*. True spiritual direction is about the great unfixables in human life. It’s about the mystery of moving through time. It’s about mortality. It’s about love. It’s about things that can’t be fixed.”<sup>7</sup>

(Margaret Guenther) “*Listen* is such a little, ordinary word that it is easily passed over. Yet we all know the pain of not being listened to, of not being heard...In a way, not to be heard is not to exist. This can be the plight of the very young and the very old, the very sick, the very ‘confused,’ and all too frequently the dying – literally no one in their lives has time or patience to listen. Or perhaps we lack courage to hear them...By contrast, the holy listener is reluctant to dismiss another person; as an amateur who is open to surprises, he makes a willing gift to his attentiveness. At present, this gift is all too rare...Both the director and the directee are listening and hearing, attentive and respectful...We can listen and help (directees) to listen for the voice of God in Scripture, dreams, the words of friends and enemies, to hear ‘what they knew all along.’”<sup>8</sup>

Listening requires reverence and Mark Nepo explores reverence in relation to listening this way, “So at the deepest level, the most essential level, listening entails a constant effort to feel that moment where everything touches everything else; a constant effort to live below the sheer fact of things. This fundamental listening invokes a commitment to keep what is true before us, so we might be touched by the life-force in all things. Such listening opens us to the never-ending art of tuning our inner person to the mysteries that surround us. We do this through the work of honoring what we experience, through the work of keeping what is true visible. All this is the work of reverence.

“This sense of freshness and possibility in life is at the very core of reverence. The ability for cutting through the outer appearance and for perceiving and feeling intuitively the inner sacredness and dignity of life is the gift of the reverent person. What is closest to us, our woundedness, often makes us blind to the beauty both within ourselves and others. Reverence looks at what may be. Reverence is what makes us human.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Guenther, Margaret, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Cowley Publications, 1992), x

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 143-144

<sup>9</sup> Nepo, Mark, *Seven Thousand Ways to Listen: Staying Close to What is Sacred*, (Atria Books Kindle Edition), 20

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Henri Nouwen in *The Wounded Healer*, observes: “But for the man with a deep-rooted faith in the value and meaning of life, every experience holds a new promise, every encounter carries a new insight, and every event brings a new message. But these promises, insights, and messages have to be discovered and made visible....he is a leader because he faces the world with eyes full of expectation, with the expertise to take away the veil that covers its hidden potential. ... by one who knows that life is not a static given but a mystery which reveals itself in the ongoing encounter between man and his world”<sup>10</sup>

“...the basic principles of Christian leadership: first, personal concern, which asks one man to give his life for his fellow man; second a deep-rooted faith in the value and meaning of life, even when the days look dark; and third, an outgoing hope which always looks for tomorrow, even beyond the moment of death”<sup>11</sup>

Kay Lindahl in *The Way of Spiritual Direction* writes “The formation of a spiritual director-directee relationship is the result of twofold call: God calls a particular directee to a certain director, and visa versa. The spiritual director and the directee are sent to each other so that united in the same spirit they may together listen to God within the directee.”<sup>12</sup>

“From the outset the director-directee relationship has to be centered on God in such a way that each is listening for God in the other. The relationship must be God-centered because it is only in him that each encounters what God has in store for the other.”<sup>13</sup>

She quotes Douglas Steere saying, “To listen another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another.”<sup>14</sup>

In the article you read about Nell Morton she speaks of Listening or hearing. She calls it listening into speech. In other words, listening may allow someone to recognize and express something which they previously had no words for.

## Reflection

### Slide 6

*Sit with your experience of reverence in listening for a few moments in the quiet. Notice what stirs within you. Write a statement of your perspective on listening as sacred.*

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<sup>10</sup> Nouwen, Henri J. M., *The Wounded Healer* (Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972) pages 74-75

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 71

<sup>12</sup> Nemeck, Francis Kelly and Coombs, Marie Theresa, *The Way of Spiritual Direction* (Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 1993), 51

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 56

<sup>14</sup> Lindahl, Kay, *Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening* (Woodstock, Vermont, Skylight Paths Publishing, 2003), 64

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After time for reflection, back to zoom screen

Kay Lindahl affirms the thoughts of Nell Morton writing, “Once we learn how to make our minds still, like water in a pond, people are drawn to us. The stillness around us provides a mirror for them to see themselves in their essence, perhaps for the first time. This gift can transform a life.”<sup>15</sup>

Break: 10:30 – 10:45

## TYPES OF LISTENING

Session 2 – 10:45 to 12:00

Welcome back.

\*Again I want to repeat as we come back together that listening is key to spiritual direction and the conviction at the center of what we do today is that love is at the center of listening - love for God, love for self and love for the other.

We are going to turn now to 3 types of listening as noted by Kay Lindahl

Slide 7

### 1. Contemplative

“The (person) of prayer is a leader precisely because through his articulation of God’s work within himself he can lead others out of confusion to clarification; through his compassion he can guide them...”<sup>16</sup> (Nouwen)

“Contemplative listening...is about listening to the silence, listening beyond words...Silence is a key element of listening as a sacred art. Contemplative listening is about listening to God – exploring our relationship to Source. It’s about taking time to slow down and listen. There’s a wonderful story about Mother Teresa, who was asked what she did when she prayed to God. “Oh,” she said, “that’s easy. I listen.” And what does God do? “Oh,” she replied, “God listens.” This is contemplative listening.”...(It’s) the practice of stopping for a moment, being quiet, learning to listen to the silence....there is a richness and a grace to silence. We could all use more time for silence, for listening. It is out of silence that we can truly listen to someone else.”<sup>17</sup> (Lindahl)

There are many kinds of contemplative practices, each with opportunities to be silent and listen. Prayer is one form and is often thought about as a time to talk while God listens to us. However, most relationships are two-way streets—we need to listen as well as talk. According to the great Indian activist Mahatma Gandhi, “God speaks to us every day, only we don’t know how to listen.” Silent prayer leads us from conversation to communion.”<sup>18</sup>(Lindahl)

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 78

<sup>16</sup> Nouwen, Henri J.M., *The Wounded Healer* (Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972), 47

<sup>17</sup> Lindahl, Kay, *Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening* (Woodstock, Vermont, Skylight Paths Publishing, 2003), 13-14,16

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 17-18

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Lindahl suggests three practices to explore contemplative listening:

- Meditating with Music
- Walking Meditation
- Centering Prayer

Henri Nouwen suggests that “One of the best ways to cultivate silence is to begin a daily practice of silence. It doesn’t matter what form it takes...Find a minute or two each day to consciously be silent. Silence shifts from something empty, lonely, and to be avoided to something rich, filled with life, and yearned for. Mini-retreats are another way to connect to silence. These are brief time-outs in the midst of daily life. They are a conscious way to explore your inner life, to take the time to listen to God or Spirit, to slow down enough so you can hear and acknowledge or question what God is doing in your life. A few examples are:

- Go outside or look out the window at the sky for a few minutes, and allow your mind To rest.
- Slow down to a stroll instead of power walking, to take in what you see.
- Listen attentively to music; let it wash over you.
- Read a poem. Reflect on it.
- Focus on your breath; listen to yourself breathe in and out.
- Take a 3-minute stretch break.

These mini-retreats are a way for us to regain perspective and balance the calmness and peace of our inner lives with the fast pace and sometimes chaotic nature of our outer lives.

Many people find that setting up a sacred space in their homes supports the practice of silence. It can be as simple as choosing one of the chairs in your home as your special place for silence, prayer, and meditation. Or you can set aside a corner of a room, a windowsill, a cupboard, or the top of a dresser and add sacred objects to the space. A sacred space can also be outside in your garden or on a balcony or deck. It’s your space for silence, inspiration, and solace. This space becomes a reminder of the sacred and of your relationship to the Divine.”<sup>19</sup>

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## Discussion

*Has anyone tried any of these practices or are they already a part of your devotional practices? Are you willing to share your reflections on the experience or the possibility of any of these?*

These are practices you can place in your store of resources that may be helpful to suggest as you are doing spiritual direction.

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<sup>19</sup> Nouwen, Henri J.M., *The Wounded Healer* (Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Company, 1972), 38

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## 2. Reflective

“Listening is often thought of as something we do for someone else, outside ourselves, out in the world. Reflective listening is about listening inward, listening to our self – our True Self – getting to know the voice of our soul.”<sup>20</sup> (Lindahl)

Reflective listening is about listening for the questions...Rilke’s advice to the young poet was: ‘Live the questions. Perhaps then, someday far in the future you will gradually, without ever noticing it, live your way into the answer.’”<sup>21</sup> (Lindahl)

## Practices

“Take a few breaths before responding to a situation, question, or comment. Ask yourself what wants to be said next. Not ‘What do I want to say?’ (from the ego) but ‘What wants to be said?’ (from the soul). Wait for your inner voice to respond. Listen for your true wisdom to reveal itself.”<sup>22</sup>

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## Discussion

*Does anyone use this breath practice before responding? If so, how has it worked for you?*

Lindahl explores another practice that is critical in the work of spiritual direction at the end of chapter 3. It is called The Three Breaths. “It can be used in the moment as a brief process to get centered and listen to that still small voice that lives and abides within us.

1. First breath: Inhale and identify what is upsetting you, controlling you, causing you stress. Let go of it as you exhale.
2. Second breath: Inhale and touch the still point at the center of your being, the place you go to after your 20 to 30 seconds of Reflection ... See whether you can get there with a breath. Exhale.
3. Third breath: Inhale and ask yourself, “What is next?” It’s tapping into your inner wisdom. Exhale and notice what comes to your mind.”<sup>23</sup>

“Reflective listening helps us practice discerning the wisdom of our inner voices. Some people talk about it as discerning the voice of God in our lives.”<sup>24</sup> (Lindahl)

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<sup>20</sup> Lindahl, Kay, *Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening* (Woodstock, Vermont, Skylight Paths Publishing, 2003), 29

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 42

### 3. Heart

“Presence – listening from the heart, listening that connects us...Deep listening occurs at the heart level. It is present when we feel most connected to another person or to a group of people. Our hearts expand and our capacity to communicate with those of differing beliefs and customs increases.”<sup>25</sup>

Really listening is one of the best gifts one human can give another. It requires our full attention. It calls for a mind-set of appreciation, curiosity, and wonder for the other person. We can't be thinking about what we are going to say in response, or how we would handle the situation, or what's going on at work or at home. We must let go of our own agendas for the moment, which is not an easy thing to do.”<sup>26</sup>

(Heart Listening can involve dialogue or discussion.) ...a dialogue is a flow of meaning through words to which new understandings emerge that might not have been present before. It is done in a spirit of inquiry – wanting to know. We look for shared meaning beyond our individual understanding.

**Back to zoom screen**

*Small Group Discussion: We will now move into breakout groups of 4. In your breakout group look at the three kinds of listening – CONTEMPLATIVE, REFLECTIVE, AND HEART. Share in turn If you have tried any of these practices, any you would like to try, or perhaps any you use regularly. What are your reflections on the experience? Be prepared to share one thought from your group when we come back together. Please come back to the main group in 10 minutes.*

**At end of breakout, back to zoom screen**

**Sharing**

**(If there is time, consider the following.** If no time, skip to Closing Thought.

Discussion...is an analysis, a search for an answer. It is done in the spirit of looking for results. Each person states his or her analysis of the situation with the hope of influencing the other's position on the issue.”<sup>27</sup>

“What are the outcomes of dialogue? It creates a safe space, so it builds relationships and trust. We can unlearn misinformation about each other. We begin to discern our common

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 43

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 44

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 48

values: what God wants us to do, what we are being called to do. We explore new areas of reality and beliefs that we hadn't thought about before. We tap into our collective wisdom."<sup>28</sup>  
 "These principles or guidelines remind us to stay in the present moment, to listen to others with our hearts. They are meant as a guide, not as a set of rules or commandments...

*Guideline 1: When you are listening, suspend assumptions.*

*Guideline 2: When you are speaking, express your personal response, informed by your tradition, beliefs, and practices. Use 'I' language. Take ownership of what you say. Speak from your heart.*

*Guideline 3: Listen and speak without judgement.* The purpose of dialogue is to come to an understanding of the other, not to determine whether he or she is good, bad, right, or wrong.

*Guideline 4: Suspend status. Everyone is an equal partner in the inquiry...*All are colleagues with a mutual quest for insight and clarity.

*Guideline 5: Honor confidentiality.*

*Guideline 6: Listen for understanding, not agreement or belief.*

*Guideline 7: Ask clarifying or open-ended questions to assist your understanding and to explore assumptions.* Watch out for questions with your own agenda embedded in them.

*Guideline 8: Honor silence and time for reflection.* Notice what wants to be said rather than what you want to say. Allow time to take in what has been said.

*Guideline 9: One person speaks at time*<sup>29</sup>

One of the practices in this process is allowing each person to finish completely what he or she has to say before the next person speaks. **[Spiritual direction is not the time to offer advice or solutions for any problems raised.]** It is a time simply to hear what is being said, receiving the voice of another's soul, and to notice how the conversation is flowing.

At the close of the dialogue, each participant shares one idea or insight that he or she gained by participating in the dialogue. Ask the question: 'What is one thought, idea, or insight that you will take away from this meeting?'<sup>30</sup>

*Reflect on what thought from the material on discussion is helpful for spiritual direction?*

Closing Thought:

Heart listening is a form of hospitality. Nouwen links the connection of contemplative practices to forming the ability to provide presence to another: Henri Nouwen writes, "Hospitality is the ability to pay attention to the guest...Paradoxically, by withdrawing into ourselves not out of self-pity but out of humility, we create the space for another to be himself and to come to us on his own terms...When we have found the anchor places for our lives in our own center, we can

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 50-51

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 64-67

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 52-58

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be free to let others enter into the space created for them and allow them to dance their own dance, sing their own song, and speak their own language without fear.”<sup>31</sup>

Lunch Break – Noon to 1:00

Session 3 – 1:00 to 2:30

**Begin with Zoom screen**

## Role Play

*We are going to begin the afternoon with a 10 minute role play. You will do this in groups of 2. Here are the instructions. Write them down if you need to. I will repeat them twice.*

Break into duets. (10 Minutes)

2 roles which will rotate

- Spiritual Director
- Spiritual Directee:

1. **Spiritual Director says to the Directee:** Welcome, I am glad you are here. Would you be willing to share a longing of your soul today? You can sit in the quiet for a moment to discern what that longing is. When you are ready, I would be grateful to hear what stirs in your spirit. How does that sound to you?
2. **Spiritual Directee:** Listens in the quiet and then shares what rises in his/her consciousness for a few minutes.
3. **The Spiritual Director listens without commenting.** Try to intentionally focus on the directee. Notice your internal reactions and anything that might draw your focus away.
4. **When the Directee has finished, the Spiritual Director asks,** “what are you becoming aware of as you speak these words?”
5. **And again, the Directee responds with the Director listening.**
6. **The Director asks the Directee,** would you like to offer a prayer to close? It can be out loud or silent. If silent, will you say “amen” when you are done?
7. **After the Directee prays,** reverse roles and walk through the process again.

*Any questions or thoughts coming out of that exercise?*

**After 10 minutes come back together on Zoom.**

Any thoughts or comments?

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<sup>31</sup> Nouwen, Henri J.M. *The Wounded Healer* (Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Company, 1972), 70-71

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## PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF LISTENING

(From Nemeck and Coombs, *The Way of Spiritual Direction*)

### Slide 8

“On a psychological level, the quality of personal interaction in the director-directee relationship is dependent on at least three factors: (a) the ability of each to arrive at self-intimacy, (b) the recognition that each person is different, (c) the capacity to listen to each other.”<sup>32</sup>

“**Self-intimacy** is the ability to listen to ourselves in all the diverse facets of our being. It is to experience the mystery of ourselves as we really are...Self-intimacy facilitates the discovery and the development of our creative potential: our talents, gifts, strengths. Yet self-intimacy confronts us also with the unavoidable truth of our sinfulness and weakness despite our best efforts and intentions...it is a communion with self that thrusts us into communion with others and especially with God...Our capacity to love others is profoundly related to our ability to love ourselves.

“The recognition and the responsible satisfaction of our personal needs – whether physical, mental, emotional or spiritual – awaken an awareness of the need of those around us...The self-acceptance that grows through self-intimacy leads to acceptance of others. Self-acceptance makes us more aware of their strengths as well as more patient and tolerant with their weaknesses.”<sup>33</sup>

Through self-intimacy we begin seeing others as another self because it confronts us with our own aloneness. Before we can actually stand being alone before God we have to be at home being alone with ourselves. This is the place within us where we can make those prudent judgments, decisions and moral choices for enabling us to gain some insights and for interpreting events more correctly. In short, the discovery of solitude can open us up to a deeper intimacy with self, others, and even to God. At the center of self-love, self-intimacy, self acceptance, is the ability to listen attentively—listening to self, to others and to God in any given situation.

“At the core of self-love, self-intimacy, self acceptance is the ability to listen attentively – listen to self, to others, to God in any situation.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Nemeck, Francis Kelly and Coombs, Marie Theresa, *The Way of Spiritual Direction* (Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 1993) 56

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 58

### **The recognition of basic differences and uniqueness**

“Every person possesses a unique personality and is called to personal fulfillment in a singular way...Any interpersonal encounter, if it is to be authentic, must be based on the recognition that we are each essentially different and distinct persons. A meaningful relationship begins with the recognition that we cannot exactly understand one another...When we encounter another person, a confrontation of two inner worlds occurs. We are faced with a dynamic, personal, and particular world that stands out against our own. It does so not in direct opposition to our world, but simply by the fact that we are not the other person and his/her world is not ours.

Since we are so fundamentally different, how can we possibly commune? How are we to penetrate each other’s world of experience? Only by listening to each other!”<sup>35</sup>,

### **The Capacity to Listen to Another**

“Listening is the basis of all personnel interaction. No communication can occur until at least one person becomes a listener...Should one person listen s/he can share in the life of the other. Yet human interaction transpires most effectively when both persons are listeners. Speaking then arises from listening. It invites deeper listening...To be at the disposal of another by listening, we have to let go our world of experience: our struggles, our joys, our concerns, our cares. We must even let go of any tendency to judge the other by our principles, our convictions, our moral code.

Listening then is the attentiveness of our being to another’s becoming in all his/her beauty and sinfulness, struggle and mystery.”<sup>36</sup>

**Intentionality** - To these three I would add intentionality.

The art of listening requires more effort than does speaking; it’s like trying to get into another’s shoes while they are still wearing them.

Silence gives space. Sometimes the best response is no response. · Listening is an active, engaging process in which one disengages from one’s personal concerns and viewpoints and opens themselves to the personal worldview of another and responds empathetically to what is said. (Reaching Out, Henri Nouwen) ·

How you say it is as important as what you say. Hospitality is an attitude! As a Spiritual Director you are the one who creates the space for extending hospitality in which the Directee feels comfortable, in which a relationship of trust can then begin to build between you the Director and the Directee.

A Spiritual Director sends an implicit and unspoken message that says:

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 58-59

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 59-60

[Type here]

- You are important: As the Spiritual Director who is willing to give of your time and your listening attitude you convey to the Directee that they are valued and cared for.
- The Director can send the message: I respect you, and I am not going to impose my “stuff” on you as I listen.
- The Director can strive toward understanding what the Directee thinks and feels, and it proves that you, as the Director, are determined, endeavoring to reach that point of understanding because you want to understand.
- You have within you the resources and wisdom for finding your own solutions:
- Listening communicates that you are not attempting to treat the Directee as if they were helpless, dependent, or ill.
- You can create an atmosphere that helps the Directee for growing, finding, and developing the God within.

St Francis de Sales invites the Directee to “Open your heart” to your Director “with all the sincerity and fidelity, manifesting clearly and explicitly the state of your conscience without fiction or pretense.”<sup>37</sup>

*Now take 5 minutes to reflect on the Psychological aspects of listening and see if there is anything you want to add to your personal notes on the theology of Holy Listening.*

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 68

## THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF LISTENING

### Slide 9

1. "While the relationship between the director and the directee encompasses the psychological dimensions (of listening), there is an aspect to spiritual direction which transcends completely the psychological as such...It is a **listening together by the director and the directee to God within the directee**...God implores people to listen to him."<sup>38</sup>

Deut. 6:4

Isaiah 55:2-3

Jeremiah 7:23

Mark 9:7

Mark 7:14

Rev. 22:17

Hebrews 3:7

Matthew 13:9

Jesus calls to us to listen

John 8:47

Matthew 7:26

John 9:27

There are those who do in fact listen to Jesus

Luke 21:38

Luke 10:39

John 18:37

John 10:27

"Listening is that attitude of heart whereby that which is deepest in most mysterious in us remains in loving attentiveness to that which is deepest and most mysterious in God. By listening, we abide in the simplicity of being in love with our God. We remain loving our Beloved with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength (Mt. 22:37), irrespective of words, thoughts and specific actions.

**"2. Listening is unconditional surrender to *Abba*.** Listening is a giving of our deepest to him whose depth has no end...Listening is waiting upon God in watchful expectancy. Not that we wait for or expect some-*thing*. Rather we wait for some-*One*. God himself...

"In the context of spiritual direction then, listening is the basic stance of the director and the directee towards God. It is not enough that a director and a directee listen to each other. Together they must listen to God himself giving the directee spiritual direction...Listening is an act of faith in which the director and the directee surrender their deepest selves in mystery to ineffable love...Listening to God, like loving, has within itself its own reason for being. The director and the directee do not listen *in order* to receive some particular message, feeling or communication...there is a higher kind of listening, which is not an attentiveness to some

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 61

special wave length, a receptivity to a certain kind of message, but a general emptiness that waits to realize the fullness of the message of God within its own apparent void.”<sup>39</sup>

**3. “Whether or not anything tangible emerges in listening to God is entirely the Father’s business (Luke 2:4).** It depends wholly on what God wills at a given moment. Nor is it better in spiritual direction to receive something observable or to receive nothing at all. What is best is that the director and the directee always listen to God the way he desires: hearing todo or hearing nada.”<sup>40</sup>

**4. “Spiritual direction then is concerned with discerning the spiritualizing influence of God within the directee as manifested in and through his/her thoughts, feelings, desires, aspirations, activities and relationships. ‘Let me know myself, Oh Lord, that I may know you.’ (St. Augustine) The director and the directee listening together to God to discern his influence within the directee as well as the spiritualizing direction he indicates...A spiritual director gives direction as a consequence of having listened to God within and through the directee.”<sup>41</sup>**

**5. “Spiritual Direction is, in reality, nothing more than a way of leading us to see and obey the real Director – The Holy Spirit hidden in the depths of our soul.” Thomas Merton**

*Now again take 5 minutes to reflect on the Spiritual Dimensions of Holy Listening and add any notes you would like to your personal reflection on a theology of listening.*

**Back to Zoom after 5 minutes**

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 63-64

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 64

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 66

## BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR LISTENING

I'm just going to mention these basic principles for listening from *The Way of Spiritual Direction*. You can read over them and study them more carefully on your own.

- A. The Spiritual Director is an Instrument of God  
 "As spiritual directors we operate first, foremost and always from the premise that God is the only director of any person. We are consequently no more than God's instruments, albeit free instruments, in the process of spiritual direction."  
 The chapter quotes St. John of the Cross, "As instruments of the Spirit, we are concerned principally with fostering in directees maximum receptivity to God's transforming and purifying love. Under the guidance of the spirit, we assist directees to discern the obstacles which block or slow down the growth of Christ within them. We afford them appropriate advice or encouragement as well."
- B. The Director is Abandoned to God in Faith  
 "We can be effective instruments of the Spirit only if we are completely surrendered to God in faith...We are truly servants of the mystery of Christ who came not to do his own will, but the will of the One who sent him (Jn. 4:34).
- C. A Spiritual Direction Exists Already Within the Directee  
 "...the direction which a directee is seeking to discern is already within him/herself. 'My word is very near to you. Indeed, it is in your mouth and within your heart. Therefore obey it.' (Deut. 30:14). The director and the directee have only to discern the direction as it emerges from within the directee."  
 "The director does not give spiritual direction. S/he discerns it. Moreover, spiritual direction in this sense is oriented towards neither the client nor ethical behavior as such. It is God-oriented pure and simple."
- D. The Director Imparts Guidance Only When Moved Interiorly by the Spirit to Do So.  
 "Since we are instruments of the Spirit, any word spoken to the directee must emerge out of our own silent listening to God. Only in this way can God communicate through us as Jesus promised: 'It is not you who will be speaking. The Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you' (Mt. 10:20). 'Whoever listens to you listens to me' (Lk. 10:16)...Speak only when prompted interiorly to do so."
- E. The Director Relies on Divine Wisdom  
 "How do we recognize the interior movement to guide a directee in a particular Way? Certainly as thorough a knowledge as possible of ascetical-mystical theology and competency with the principles of discernment cannot be overstressed. Yet, as actual spiritual direction directors rely principally and immediately on divine wisdom... In listening to God within ourselves and within the directee we receive the wisdom to know the appropriate direction as well as the proper time and manner to express it.

The experience of love's relentless searching for God brings the listening person quickly to the grace of discernment."

F. The Director Never Makes Decisions for the Directee

"This principle goes without saying: The director never assumes personal responsibility for the directee's life. We advise, instruct, correct; confirm, encourage, affirm, even give specific directives at times. However, the directee always retains full personal responsibility for his/her decisions and choices...Spiritual direction should leave the directee an emancipated pilgrim."<sup>42</sup>

*Any questions or thoughts on these basic principles?*

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 83-94

[Type here]

## PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

### Slide 10

Lindahl mentions one very practical consideration for the Spiritual Director:

“One aspect of listening that is often neglected is the **physical environment**. What is it that supports deep conversation? How can we set up the space around us to nurture the sacred art of listening? I have found that paying attention to the physical environment and using rituals are two ways to respond to these questions...

Simplicity is the name of the game. Get rid of everything that isn't necessary. Make sure the room is neat...What is the lighting like?...What is the temperature like?...What are the chairs like?...When people come into a room, their first impression sets a tone for how they respond the rest of the time...

Ritual is a way to create a special opening...(It) can transform the ordinary into something special – acknowledging the presence of Spirit in daily life and in our work together.”<sup>43</sup>

Then she goes on to mention more skill-based considerations:

Lindahl writes that “anyone who wants to be good at something practices...We need to exercise our listening muscles, and we do that by practicing. We want to create the equivalent of muscle memory, a state when our response is automatic and we no longer have to think about it because we have practiced regularly. As we practice we begin to notice how these concepts relate to all areas of our lives. They are about being, not doing. We become a listening presence.

Listening looks easy, but it's not simple. Every head is a world. —CUBAN PROVERB

- **Each of us has our own unique perspective of the world**, our own worldview. We listen from that view, mostly without recognizing that we are doing so. Once we acknowledge that the way we hear something may not be what was actually said, we are on the journey to sacred listening. As with any new skill, learning to listen takes effort, attention, and practice.”<sup>44</sup>
- **Listening in the Silence** – “It helps to begin with silence...the silence helps define the borders and makes it clear what we are about. During these initial moments of silence, I try not to pay attention to the directee, but rather to get my own house in order...Although we are not clinicians (the silence) can tell us a great deal. With our eyes closed and our hearts centered in prayer, we can pick up fear, anxiety, fatigue, rage, hope, and yearning – the whole spectrum of human feeling. I ask the directee to end the silence when she is ready...I phrase this request in general terms, ‘Lets be quiet for a few minutes, and then you begin whenever you are ready.’ ... For those who are uneasy or fearful of not saying ‘the right thing’ responsibility for beginning the conversation can be a burden. Then I end the silence with a prayer.

<sup>43</sup> Lindahl, Kay, *Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening* (Woodstock, Vermont, Skylight Paths Publishing, 2003), 65-66

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10

Perhaps... a simple ‘Come, Lord Jesus.’ An invocation of the Holy Spirit, of just ‘Amen.’”<sup>45</sup>

- **Story-telling needs to be unhurried and unharried**, so the listener must be willing to let the narrative unfold, to be sensitive to seeming repetitions – are they plodding in a circle, or do they spiral? Are there gems hidden in the trash? Is the storyteller testing the reliability of the listener, or denying herself the protagonist’ role and centering everywhere but on herself?...I cannot let her go on avoiding her own inner exploration, but neither can I become impatient.”<sup>46</sup>

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*Thoughts or questions?*

## TECHNIQUES FOR LISTENING

Again, I’m just going to mention these techniques. You can read over them and consider them on your own.

### Slide 11

#### Acknowledgment

Short words and phrases, which communicate your presence and attention.

They invite the person to continue talking.

“uh-uh” “mm-m” “I see” “yeah” or “yes” nodding of the head MIRRORING

#### Repetition

Repetition of the SAME WORDS spoken by the other person. This signifies that you have heard the other person and are willing to hear more.

#### Paraphrasing

Re-statement and summarizing the CONTENT of what’s been said and adding no new thoughts. This tests the accuracy of what’s been said and allows the person to clarify.

\*\*\*The above techniques deal only with the CONTENT of the message and are LIMITED in their usefulness. They do not focus on the MEANING behind the words and so they tend to have a repetitious, “treading water” effect in the conversation. They are designed to be used SHORT TERM to aid in developing trust and to prove you are attempting to understand and are willing to stay with the person.

“If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, and sharing in the

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<sup>45</sup> Guenther, Margaret, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Cowley Publications, 1992) 17-18

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23

[Type here]

Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that is in Christ Jesus.”  
Philippians 2:1-4

#### Reflective Listening Responses

You feel... You think... You believe... What I hear you saying... I’m picking up that...  
What I believe I hear you saying is that... I’m sensing... It sounds like... Is it possible that... I’m wondering if... You’re...(happy, sad, angry, etc).

Note: Perception Checks should always be done in a neutral or caring tone of voice.

Each person’s mental dictionary is unique. Each of us is a product of our own histories and we carry our own interpretations of meaning with us. You need to develop the skill of decoding a person’s statements.

Using perception checks might look something like the following: *(Would two of you read the example on pages 18 of your pre class material, one being the Director and one being the Directee)*

#### Slide 12

*Directee:* “I’m not sure that having a Calling Program in our church will be helpful. We have had programs like that before and they have never worked.”

*Director:* “It sounds as if your past experience makes you feel a bit leery about the value of this program. Am I right?”

*Directee:* “Yes, you’re right. We have tried so many different programs and they seem to go nowhere. We have a new pastor but that probably will not make a difference.”

*Director:* “I’m wondering if you are feeling discouraged?”

#### Slide 13

##### Listen for Continuity & Contrast

In Spiritual Direction, it is helpful to listen for the threads of continuity in the “short stories” or vignettes brought to a session. As you hear these collect them in your soul and when the time is appropriate, ask the Directee about the thread.

For example, “In all that you have told me, I hear a thread of fear in each story. Does that resonate in your spirit?”

It is also helpful to listen for contrast. For example, “You described God as love and mercy when we began today. But when you tell me of your journey, I hear a fear of judgment and rejection. This seems to be a tension within you. Can you explore that a bit?”

Let There Be Quiet

[Type here]

Extended times of silence can be very helpful for the Directee to discern and listen. Be open to more quiet than you might be comfortable with and trust that the Spirit is at work in the empty space.

#### Open Ended Questions

These may be used effectively when the listener is unclear about the meaning:

“I’m not sure what you mean, would you explain further?”

“Can you tell me more?”

“Can you give me an example of what you mean by...”

Or if you are unclear about something, ask permission to ask a question: “I’m unsure about this. May I ask you a question?”

#### Reflection

People are strange and sensitive creatures and sometimes can be influenced by very small things. The ideal Reflection is a statement rather than a question. It accomplishes the same purpose as a question but it takes the form of a statement rather than an inquiry. Reflections posed, as questions are more threatening and more likely to throw the person off track, may lead them to deny a feeling rather than discover it.

Whether a listener turns a Reflection up or down at the end of a sentence can make a difference in how willing the person is to go on. When you turn your voice up at the end of a statement it becomes a question. The subtle difference is one of inflection.

Not Effective: You’re really angry with your parents? (Voice turns up at the end.)

Effective: You seem really angry with your parents. (Voice turns down at the end.)

An effective reflective statement usually begins with the word “you.” It says something about what the speaker is thinking or feeling (which is usually a guess on our part.)

#### Questions—Right Kind—Right Time

Questions are effective when they are the right kind at the right time. Margaret Guenther writes, “An effective teacher (spiritual director) does ask questions, but they must be the right kind of questions—ones that open doors, invite the directee to stretch and grow. Obviously one never asks questions out of curiosity, nor to fill a silence that threatens to be uncomfortable, but at times questions are needed.” (From: *Psychology Today*, November 1975. *Holy Listening* 1992 and *Practical Psychology For Pastors* 1994)

#### Closing the Time Together

At the close of the dialogue, each participant shares one idea or insight that he or she gained by participating in the dialogue. Ask the question: ‘What is one thought, idea, or insight that you will take away from this meeting?’ *Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening* 52-58

[Type here]

## ROADBLOCKS TO LISTENING

### Slide 14

*Take a look at the list of roadblocks to listening Note the roadblocks that are most likely to impact your listening.*

#### Filters

“The way we listen to others has a clear impact on the quality and depth of the conversation. Many times we think we already know what the other person is going to say, so we stop paying close attention. Or we listen to others with a voice going in our heads...In addition, we have certain ways of listening to others based on some preconceived idea of what they are like...When we are truly listening to someone else, we detach from these filters...Once we get to know what we usually listen for, our own personal checklist of filters, it is easier to acknowledge the way we listen and then let it go so that we can be present with the person speaking.”<sup>47</sup>

#### Other Common Roadblocks to Listening.

- Ordering, Directing or Commanding;
- Warning or Threatening;
- Giving Advice, Making Suggestions, Providing Solutions;
- Persuading With Logic, Arguing, Lecturing;
- Moralizing;
- Judging, Criticizing, Blaming, Disagreeing;
- Agreeing, Approving, Praising;
- Shaming, Ridiculing; Name-Calling;
- Interpreting, Analyzing;
- Reassuring, Sympathizing, Consoling;
- Questioning, Probing;
- Withdrawing, Distracting, Humoring. Changing the Subject

*Are there any questions or clarifications you need on the roadblocks?*

*Can you begin to become aware of when you are more likely to respond in these ways? Spend a few moments in the quiet. What are some things that inhibit your ability to listen deeply? What do you notice as you sit with this question? You might want to make a note of these so you can monitor them.*

**Back to Zoom**

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<sup>47</sup> Lindahl, Kay, Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening (Woodstock, Vermont, Skylight Paths Publishing) 61-62

[Type here]

## CLOSING OUR TIME TOGETHER

*If there is time ask each person to take a moment and write down one thought or idea they will take away from our day together. Then have each one share.*

### Closing Words

#### When I Ask You To Listen

When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving me advice, you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way, you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do something to solve my problem, you have failed me, strange as that may seem.

Listen! All I ask is that you listen. Don't talk or do- just hear me.

Advice is cheap; 0.20 cents will get you both Dear Abby and Billy Graham in the same newspaper.<sup>48</sup>

And I can do for myself; I am not helpless.

May be discouraged and faltering, but not helpless.

When you do something for me that I can do and need to do for myself, you contribute to my fear and inadequacy.

But when you accept as a simple fact that I feel what I feel, no matter how irrational, then I can stop trying to convince you and get about this business of understanding what's behind this irrational feeling.

And when that's clear, and the answers are obvious and I don't need advice, irrational feelings make sense when we understand what's behind them.

Perhaps that's why prayer works, sometimes for some people- because a higher power just listens and lets you work it out for yourself.

A higher power is mute and he or she does not give advice or try to fix things.

So please listen, and just hear me.

And if you want to talk, wait a minute for your turn – and I will listen to you.

-Anonymous

#### Nun's Prayer (17th Century)

Lord, Thou knowest better than I know myself that I am growing older and will someday be old. Keep me from the fatal habit of thinking I must say something on every subject and on every occasion. Release me from craving to straighten out everybody's affairs. Make me thoughtful but not moody: helpful but not bossy. With my vast store of wisdom it seems a pity not to use it all but Thou knowest, Lord, that I want a few friends at the end.

Keep my mind free of the recital of endless details; give me wings to get to the point. Seal my lips on my aches and pains. They are increasing and rehearsing them is becoming sweeter as the years go by. I dare not ask for grace enough to enjoy the tales of other's pains but help me to endure them with patience.

I dare not ask for improved memory, but a growing humility and a lessening cocksureness when my memory seems to clash with the memories of others. Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be mistaken.

Keep me reasonably sweet: I do not want to be a saint—some of them are so hard to live with—but a sour old person is one of the crowning works of the devil. Give me the ability to see

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[Type here]

good things in unexpected places and talents in unexpected people. And give me, Lord, the grace to tell them so. Amen.

[Type here]

## Referenced on page 2

In an article in the December 2025 issue of *Christian Century*, in an article titled “Training faith leaders to work against suicide” John Mathieu interviews Michelle Snyder, executive director of Soul Shop an educational organization seeking to help faith leaders be play a role in suicide prevention. She shares that the choice to take one’s life most often results from loss of hope and loss of social connection so the desire to take one’s life can happen to anyone. So a directee may at some time share with you that he or she is having suicidal thoughts. You may need to refer the person to a counselor, but the simple act of listening can make a profound difference. In this article Michelle Snyder shares a story from a TED talk. It is told by “a psychiatrist – one of 14 in Zimbabwe, a country of 12 million. He lost a patient to suicide because she couldn’t get to him: she needed \$15 for the bus fare and she didn’t have it...Because the pathways for care were not working, the doctor set out to figure out (another way). He did an analysis and concluded that every village in Zimbabwe had an abundance of grandmothers. These women were stable, well-trusted, and they weren’t leaving. So he implemented a program where he trained grandmothers in basic listening skills and some cognitive behavioral interventions. The program built a bench in the center of each town, and grandmothers would take a shift sitting on the bench. Providers would refer patients to the grandmothers. They conducted clinical trials and found that the grandmothers had better outcomes than any other health-care providers in Zimbabwe.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Jon Mathieu, “*Training faith leaders to work against suicide,*” *The Christian Century*, December 2025, 52.

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