



ARE YOU LISTENING?

BY DAVID PING

Spiritual opportunities surround us every day when we take the time to engage with others and practice the fine art of listening.

Much to the chagrin of a few people at her church, Carol, a 25-year-old Christian college graduate, took a job as a waitress

in a trendy nightclub. A month later, she ran into the leader of her mother's Bible study group at the grocery store.

After greeting Carol, the older woman drew her close, and with a look of deep concern said, "I've been praying for you →

ever since your mother told me where you're working. How are you doing?" Carol smiled and answered truthfully: "I guess your prayers are being answered. My spiritual life is better than ever. In the four weeks I've been working there, I've led three people to Christ. How are you doing?"

Carol's outreach success is worth a closer look. According to denominational statistics, in one month she led to Christ more than three times the number of people half the churches in North

America reach in a whole year. Surprisingly, Carol explains, her outreach efforts didn't depend on the *location* where she worked as much as another frequently overlooked "L-word"—*listening*.

Recently, Vineyard Community Church in Cincinnati (cincyvineyard.com) sent a video crew out for a man-on-the-street report. They asked passersby what they thought of Christians. Here's a sampling of responses:

• "It seems like they don't care about me or my views. They're all about what they want to pull me into ... They try to open me up to their 'new views,' but it's kind of like it doesn't matter what I tell them."

• "They're too aggressive. They push their beliefs on you because they want you to believe what they believe."

• "I'd say 75% of these people don't really care who I am. They just want to build up their church or something. They don't even ask me what my name is ..."

Each response suggests that when most

Christians approached them, they didn't take the time to engage and hear their story and discover who they are. They didn't listen to them.

Is your congregation equipped to actively listen to their coworkers, family members, neighbors and those they see every day at their local Starbucks, drycleaners or gas station? Hopefully, these proven principles will give your worshippers the confidence, inspiration and empathy for others essential to listening to someone.



"BEING LISTENED TO IS SO CLOSE TO BEING LOVED THAT MOST PEOPLE CANNOT TELL THE DIFFERENCE."

-DAVID OXBERG

THE MISSING FACTOR

As Carol and increasing numbers of outreach-oriented leaders are now discovering, many angry and apathetic people who recoil at religious-sounding words are more than ready to open up when they meet someone who cares enough to genuinely listen.

That's not hard to believe. Look at Scripture and Christ's conversations with strangers. Countless times, Jesus met someone, asked a question, and then listened—without interruption—to his or her story. The people He healed, fed and talked with felt listened to and in turn walked away feeling important, their lives

changed for eternity. Moreover, James 1:19 encourages us: "Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

The 10% of evangelistic extroverts among us may confuse the concept of being quick to listen with passivity or silence. But evangelistic listening is one of the most vigorous and proactive activities you can engage in. It requires you to use all of your senses in new and insightful ways.

LISTEN WITH YOUR EYES

Ever notice the people around you—the looks on their faces, the way they're walking, their eyes? It's called the ministry of *noticing other people*—picking up on hundreds of tiny nuances and minor details that speak volumes about what's happening inside other people. By paying special attention to messages sent by a person's eyes, nonverbal gestures and overall posture, we can tune into a seeker's deep heart. Noticing other people requires you to look outside yourself, focusing on others,

to identify their needs.

It's a ministry Steve Bowen, evangelism pastor at The Vineyard Church in Dayton, Ohio (daytonvineyard.com), practices often. Recently, while eating a quick lunch at a local Chinese restaurant with his wife, Bowen noticed a woman a few tables down from them.

"Her eyes were sad, and her shoulders slumped as if she'd been carrying around the weight of the world," he recalls. "I said a quick prayer, asking God to help me encourage her."

A few moments later, Bowen flagged down a nearby waiter and asked him to put the woman's bill on his tab. On their

way out of the restaurant, the couple stopped by the woman's table.

"You looked like you could use some encouragement today, so we bought your lunch," Bowen said.

The woman responded through tears, "How in the world did you know?"

Quickly, the Bowens gave her a card with The Vineyard's address and a phone number to call if she needed someone to really listen to her.

"Opportunities like this surround us all the time," Steve says, "if we simply slow down and listen with our eyes."

Whenever Steve visits a new city to lead an outreach, he makes it a point to walk around the local shopping malls with a cup of coffee in his hand. He watches the people around him very carefully, looking intently into their eyes and asking himself, "What do I hear?"

"God spoke to me early on in my ministry and told me that if I looked into people's eyes—with His help—I could see where they're hurting. It's not mystical or magical; He made us all with this ability. If you watch closely enough, hidden pain, worry and hope are all there to see. This is how I get the 'feel' for what makes a person or a whole city tick so that I can discern the best ways to reach out."

SPEAK WITHOUT WORDS

As Willow Creek Community church's director of evangelism and author of several books, including *Seeker Small Groups: Engaging Spiritual Seekers in Life-Changing Discussions* (Zondervan), Garry Poole is a leader in the concept of seeker small groups—where unbelievers interested in exploring spiritual issues gather to discuss life's questions of death, truth and God. In his own seeker small groups and others he has observed in churches nationwide, Poole has seen that for seekers, evangelistic listening can often be infinitely more compelling than pre-packaged Gospel presentations.

"I usually spend the first four or five weeks of a group listening and encouraging participants to talk about their beliefs and questions," he explains. "The more I listen, the more they want to know

what I believe. Once, my whole group actually stopped me at the door and said, 'You're not going anywhere until you tell us your opinion about what it means to be a Christian.'"

When you reach out to someone, who does most of the talking? Surprising people by genuinely listening to them, Poole says, allows you to model the same brand of openhearted listening that you want them to use when considering the Gospel.

SEE WITH YOUR EARS

Instead of using canned, prepackaged points to tell someone about Christ, let others be your guide to their unique emotional and spiritual world. Use your ears carefully, and words sparingly, to identify and meet their felt needs.

Watch for feelings. What is he happy, sad, afraid or angry about? Strangely, these simple emotions offer a direct line to a person's soul. And feelings are →

inextricably attached to beliefs. People *feel* depressed because at some level they *believe* there is no hope. They *feel* worried because they have a nagging *belief* something bad is about to happen.

Getting to the deep heart issues requires a combination of peace, self control and reflective listening that encourages someone to explore the threatening areas of pain or mystery.

And listening to someone enhances his or her sense of self-worth. The people who listen to us are the ones we move toward; when we are listened to, it makes us unfold and expand.

A recent Gallup organization survey reports that 72% of respondents said they view spirituality as a highly personal and individual affair rather than a matter of religion or church doctrine.

And there is nothing more individual and attractive than telling your story to someone who cares enough to genuinely listen.

One pastor tells his congregation



**"ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO
PERSUADE OTHERS IS WITH YOUR
EARS—BY LISTENING TO THEM."**

**—DEAN RUSK,
FORMER SECRETARY OF STATE**

that if they want to connect with the unchurched in their community, they should know the answers to three questions: What do you worry about? What do you wonder about? And what do you wish for?

Showing someone that you're listening lets you connect with him or her on a feeling level. Demonstrate with your body language (nods, gestures, uncrossed

arms, eye contact) and verbal expressions (groans, exclamations) that you genuinely care. And take time to put the thoughts and feelings they share with you into different words, mirroring their emotions and perspectives back to them.

Recently, Jan, an Athletes in Action leader, and one of her fellow staffers experienced the power of listening and mirroring. After a long day at a conference, the two women were

unwinding in a hotel whirlpool when a couple of teenage girls joined them. One of the teens, Brittany, began to tell her friend about an upcoming Wiccan gathering she planned to attend.

"Normally we would have tried to counter the girl's ideas, but we decided to listen instead," says Jan who recently completed a listening for outreach course. "I said something simple

like, 'Wow, you really sound excited about this!'

Jan's response was all the encouragement Brittany needed to launch into a five-minute explanation of why she was so attracted to neo-pagan rituals. She'd had a really traumatic time in high school, and the Wiccans accepted her, she said.

"I've gone through so much just trying to make it through high school that I'll probably be in therapy for the rest of my life," she said.

Jan mirrored back Brittany's comments back to her, saying, "It's hard for you to even imagine a future where you'd be free from all the pain you've gone through, huh?"

With tears starting to form in her eyes and complete sincerity in her voice, the teen responded, "Sometimes I wish I could be born all over again. I'd really like to start over from scratch." After a long pause, Jan's friend asked if she would really like to be born again.

"Yes, I really would," she answered.

It seems the Holy Spirit works through

us so much better when we slow down and listen. Often, putting aside our personal agendas, schedules and self-consciousness to tune in to God's heart for another person is a sacrifice. But gradually those efforts begin to open hearts and awaken an irresistible hunger to find and know God.

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Romans 15:1-3 in *The Message* puts it this way: "Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter and not just do what is convenient for us. Strength is for service, not status. Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us asking ourselves, 'How can I help?' That's exactly what Jesus did. He didn't make it easy for himself by avoiding people's troubles, but waded right in and helped out."

SHARE YOUR STORY

When you've listened patiently and well to people, almost invariably they'll want to know your story. You may be so "slow to speak," as Scripture says, that →

LISTENING EQUIPMENT

Below is a list of resources for cultivating your evangelistic listening skills.

Quick to Listen Leaders: Where Real Ministry Begins (Group)

Seeker Small Groups: Engaging Spiritual Seekers in Life-Changing Discussions (Zondervan)

Irresistible Evangelism: Natural Ways to Open Others to Jesus (Group)

Listening for Heaven's Sake Workshop: April 1-2, July 15-16
equipmin.org



"LISTENING IS A PRIMITIVE ACT OF LOVE IN WHICH A PERSON GIVES HIMSELF TO ANOTHER'S WORD, MAKING HIMSELF ACCESSIBLE AND VULNERABLE TO THAT WORD."

—UNKNOWN

you never get around to talking about what's really important. The risk of being rejected or labeled "annoying" looms large. Instead of retreating into silence or a "safe," prepackaged formula, relax and be real. Share yourself.

Briefly tell your story—warts and all. Simple, honest sharing is attractive. Don't worry if you don't have answers for every question, or if someone doesn't agree with everything you say. When you've engaged with someone and listened well, you'll likely be surprised by the level of attention and interest in what makes you who you are.

Our culture is crying out for the life essentials of understanding, hope and acceptance. Active listening—taking the time to listen with your eyes, see with your ears and speak without words—forges that life-giving pathway to others. ✕

David Ping is executive director of Equipping Ministries International, an organization that has equipped more than 120,000 leaders and lay people in 45-plus countries worldwide to effectively reach out to their communities in practical ways. He is the co-author of Listening for Heaven's Sake (Teleios) and Irresistible Evangelism (Group).