

LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

EXPLORATIONS

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Stop, Listen to God

The Rev. G. Holger Hanson
Swarthmore, PA

The four words of this title embrace the consensus statement of participants in the final of three Listening Hearts Ministries discernment retreats this past year. We had considered the question "God, how would you have us structure the life of Swarthmore United Methodist in a way that draws the congregation into an ever-richer experience of the Sabbath?" Each retreat also included times of silent reflection on the "hallmarks of ancient Sabbath."

As at our prior two retreats, on Saturdays in April and July, we withdrew from the daily routine of life to focus on God's presence and to share in a communal setting what we learned by listening to God, to each other, and to ourselves. We shared quiet listening, singing, small group discussion, Bible readings, and prayers, practicing the discipline of "discernment listening" and meditative creativity in art, music, and words. Our pastor, the Reverend Russell K. Atkinson, and his wife, Barbara Felton, joined us for the first and last retreats, as they prepared for and then reflected upon his sabbatical in Bayeux, France, funded by the National Clergy Renewal Program of Lilly Endowment, Inc., in cooperation with our congregation.

Many of us were challenged by the discipline of centered silence, to "be still and know that I am God" (Ps.46:10). Sometimes our thoughts were filled with obligations or personal responsibilities at home, church, and work. Yet, the experienced facilitators provided by Listening Hearts Ministries helped us reach consensus on a statement and action steps at each retreat.

"Stop, listen to God, and then structure the Sabbath life of Swarthmore United Methodist Church across generations." This consensus statement captures our desire to stop the usual routines of daily life in order to discern where God is leading us. As one member observed, we tend to "become too goal oriented too soon." We must stop "to make time in our individual and corporate lives to listen to God and each other before taking action." Also discerned

was a need to include persons of different age groups and those who are absent, inactive, or looking for a church home. We agreed to take the following actions:

- Reach out and listen.
- Invite others to join in serving God and neighbor.
- Offer a Sabbath experience of reflection and renewal during Sunday worship.
- Train our working committees in the use of the Listening Hearts Discernment Listening Guidelines in meetings and ministries.
- Establish a schedule for exploring all retreat action steps with the Swarthmore United Methodist Church community.
- Create a blog that summarizes the retreats and the proposed action steps.

We have reached out and are taking action. Church committees have begun using the Discernment Listening Guidelines. In mid-November we encouraged less active members of the congregation to join us in our outreach ministry on Harvest Home Sunday, the day we bring food to the worship service for City Team Ministries in nearby Chester, PA. A congregational blog has been created at <http://sabbatsumc.blogspot.com/>.

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and to share in a communal setting what we learned by listening to God,
to each other, and to ourselves.*

Each of us who participated in the retreats was enriched with new skills in discernment listening, small group sharing, personal meditation, and through a variety of learning methods employed by our facilitators. I valued most the periods of silence, as we listened for God's voice and reflected on texts from Scripture. The Apostle Paul reminds the faithful in Ephesus that they "are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God . . . with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God" (Eph. 2:19-22). We look forward to discerning where the Lord leads us next as we develop the Sabbath life of our congregation.

The Rev. G. Holger Hansen is a retired United Methodist pastor who held appointments in local churches and colleges. He and his wife Anne are active in the Swarthmore Church's choir and committees.

“Hear What the Spirit Is Saying to the Church”

**The Rev. Ned Morris
Spartanburg, SC**

Every month our vestry gathers around a large boardroom-style table to begin a two-hour meeting, having just come from the 5:30 p.m. Holy Communion and healing service. As the one presiding over the meeting, I call us to order and into two minutes of silence before reading aloud the Discernment Listening Guidelines (Appendix 1 of Grounded in God).

I feel that this period of silence is a welcome invitation to unwind a bit and to focus on the presence of the Holy Spirit. This silence serves as an important transition from receiving the Word and Sacrament to addressing the temporal matters of keeping a parish up and running. Perhaps it allows us to see that both of these are sacred exercises and that we are being called always to do what St. John of Patmos was told by the angel in Revelation: to “hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.”

*Sometimes we have to get through all of the strong blowing wind
and earthquakes and fires before we can truly hear the “sound of sheer silence”
and know that it is God’s own voice speaking to us.*

Anyone who practices contemplative prayer will tell you that two minutes is barely enough time to get settled into a prayerful frame of mind. Because people have various temperaments and personality types, silence is experienced differently by various individuals. For some, two minutes seems a long time, and the silence seems almost to increase tension. But, even with these differences, the gift of the two minutes of silence allows most people to open heart and mind and soul to hear the voice of God.

This reminds me of the prophet Elijah’s experience of silence in the story from I Kings 19. Elijah was running for his life. After traveling for forty days, he found a cave. While he was there “the word of the Lord came to him saying, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.’ Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him . . .” Sometimes we have to get through all of the strong blowing wind and earthquakes and fires before we can truly hear the “sound of sheer silence” and know that it is God’s own voice speaking to us. Many noises and voices vie for our attention. I’ll admit that getting past them usually takes a lot longer than two minutes, but we have to start somewhere.

The Rev. Ned Morris is rector of the Episcopal Church of the Advent in Spartanburg, SC. Ned and his wife Ellen have four young children with whom Ned enjoys reading and playing.

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Listening Hearts Ministries provides a range of programs, publications, and services that teach people the practice of spiritual discernment through prayerful listening in supportive communities.

. . . the people of God can both enact their faith and deepen their love and trust while working out community decisions that they face as the body of Christ.

—Grounded in God, p. 3

Scientists Study Silence

Suzanne Farnham
Founder

Through the centuries, contemplatives have known the value of centered silence. Now modern science, using twenty-first-century technology, is validating that knowledge. By hooking electrodes to the skull, neuroscientists can measure brainwaves and identify exactly which parts of the brain are manifesting activity. These researchers are demonstrating that when the conscious part of the mind is subdued, its activity suspended, the unconscious part of the mind, which involves possibly 90% of the brain and from which our spiritual energy flows, is activated. These studies attest to the effectiveness of contemplative prayer, which can be described as deep, prayerful listening. The research shows that the keenest thinking, the best decision-making, and the greatest creativity appear in people who have cultivated an inner stillness. In Listening Hearts gatherings, fresh insights often surge forth in moments of profound, centered silence. T.S. Eliot grasped this when he wrote that the still point is the center of the dance and that without the still point there would be no dance.