

LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

EXPLORATIONS

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Changing the Culture of the Church

The Rev. David W. Malone
Jamaica Plain, MA

Imagine the church alive with the practice of spiritual discernment. Envision your community of faith vibrant with people seeking God's guidance with open hearts and minds. We, as the body of Christ here in this world, can become a people learning, teaching, and living such a vision.

Words from an old Listening Hearts Ministries information folder capture the impact spiritual discernment could have upon the faith experience of contemporary Christians in a time of clashing alternatives: rampant secularism, theological reductionism, raging fundamentalism, institutional trivialities, and endemic conflicts within Christian churches.

For many Western Christians, the life of faith has become bound with traditions separated from feelings or convictions, and the lives of congregations have become predictable, boring, and increasingly of lesser importance in a world of increasing options for spending discretionary time. When youth soccer leagues trump Holy Eucharist in the practice of more and more families, the Christian experience is clearly diminished. When church life at every level is in constant danger from divisive conflict, something crucial has been lost. When Christians seek guidance more in common sense or psychotherapy or rational processes instead of prayer, one might begin to wonder, "Why bother with Christianity anyway?"

Listening to one another with reverence, waiting with patience for the Spirit to show the way, observing signs of God-at-work – all are simple and natural spiritual disciplines. Yet we need to recover them because our culture has led us away from them. Discernment training helps us to find the still point at the center of our being so that our actions as individuals and communities may spring forth in a right relationship with God and with one another.

Listening Hearts does not intend to add "one more idea" or "one more good technique" to the repertoire by which church leaders and communicants attempt to put a finger in the dike of frustrations, decline, and bewilderment. Spiritual discernment, a practice as old as humanity and as centered in Christian experience as Jesus'

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seeking a lonely moment with God on the Mount of Transfiguration or in the Garden of Gethsemane, intends to upset the culture of familiar church life, calling Christian people to a prayerful, informed, intentional effort to distinguish the voice of God from other voices that influence us.

Spiritual discernment brings into lived experience the awareness and appreciation of the Living God, moving, communicating, and reviving the Christian experiences of congregations and Christians. Spiritual discernment is a revolutionary movement that seeks nothing less than a change in the culture of the church by focusing Christian life on the movement of God's Spirit.

Spiritual discernment restores mysticism to the center of Christian life, inviting all to experience the healing, guiding, joyous, and righteous power of God's Presence.

Through the practice of spiritual discernment, the church can become a channel of God's guidance for people as they struggle with moral and ethical choices, wrestle with priorities, work through their relationships with others, or face vocational questions.

Led by the wisdom of our founder, Suzanne Farnham, and her early colleagues in Baltimore, Listening Hearts Ministries discovered within the historic Church a deep wisdom and a passionate conviction of the continuing presence of God through the Holy Spirit in human life. They knew that the special vocation of the Church was to explore and model how the loving care of God for human life can be found when individuals, congregations, and other groups seek God's will in careful, communal prayer.

Listening Hearts Ministries believes that, through practicing spiritual discernment, the churches not only enrich their own lives and the lives of their people but show the world just how God seeks to order human life in peace, justice, and hope.

The Rev. David W. Malone, a retired pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA), is a trustee of Listening Hearts Ministries.

Noon Prayers

Meg Kimble
Executive Director

"As we listen to God in prayer and through one another, we grow in Christian community and in our sense of God's path for us" (*Listening Hearts*, p. 61). In the Listening Hearts office it is our daily practice to stop at noon for prayers. We spend time in silence, centering ourselves. We sing a hymn from the *Listening Hearts Songbook* and then we pray for the staff and trustees, our contributors and volunteers, upcoming programs and projects, for the sick, and for the departed of the Listening Hearts community. This network of prayer extends far beyond the walls of our office in Baltimore. An array of people reaching across the country pray for the ministry on a regular basis. In an informed and focused way, a small band of intercessors hold each program in prayer as it approaches and while it is in session. As in the image on the cover of *Listening Hearts*, our noon prayers radiate outward with power and energy and flow back to us, sustaining the ministry of Listening Hearts. Carried forth by the steady flow of the Spirit, our entire ministry becomes prayer in action.

Abide with Me

**Brenda Dingwall
Snow Hill, MD**

*Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
the darkness deepens; Lord with me abide:
when other helpers fail and comforts flee,
help of the helpless, O abide with me.*

The image of the seven of us singing this hymn with tears streaming down our faces is permanently etched in my memory. We had met each other just five days before, but it was clear as we prayed together on April 16, 2007, the day of the terrible shootings at Virginia Tech, that we were forever linked in the Body of Christ.

We had gathered to attend the Listening Hearts Training Week. Six strangers and a leader, prepared to join together to listen for the Spirit to guide our lives and work. We each came with our own expectations and fears, but I don't think any of us anticipated the transformative nature of the week. Perhaps the awareness of our human fragility and need for community was brought into focus by the Virginia Tech tragedy. Perhaps it helped us to better understand our call to bring God's peace to the world. Perhaps our reminder of the presence of evil in our world helped us to more deeply listen for God's message in the stillness.

Few of us are lucky enough to be able to point to a moment in our lives that caused a radical transformation in our being, our faith, and our practice of sharing the message of the Risen Christ. Still fewer of us are able to say that that moment in time has continued to mold our lives, as a potter molds his clay.

I experienced such a moment at the Listening Hearts Training Week. It was a moment of transformation and clarity, when my past came into focus and my future became clear. It was not what I had expected or hoped for going into the week, nor was it something that I was consciously aware that I needed, but with God's help, my companions on the retreat were able to help me experience the abiding presence of the Spirit in a way that is too deep for words.

For many years, I have dedicated my life to serving God by working for peace and justice and striving to create a world, or at least a government, that consciously respects the dignity of every human being. I consciously chose to do this work in a secular setting so that I would never have to say that my work was done in the service of God. Surely anything that I could do would never be good enough that God would want it labeled as God's work.

As I sat with my companions in prayer, I saw my life as never before. All of my work, all of my service for God had been done to prove myself worthy of God's love. It was never enough, because somehow I had come to believe that God's unconditional love did not apply to me. One of my companions asked me, "Why do you believe you are unworthy to serve God?" My core began to shake.

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MISSION STATEMENT

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.

*Seeking God does not demand the unusual,
the spectacular, the heroic. It is in the here
and now, the ordinary situation of normal life,
that we find God.*

—*Listening Hearts, p. 39*

After our session, I was emotionally paralyzed. I couldn't move; I couldn't speak; I just sat there. Our leader and one of my companions sat with me. After a time, our leader took some water, and wordlessly placed a cross on my forehead. As he did, the words, "I claim you as Christ's own, forever" filled my being. Suddenly it hit me, God loved . . . me. I didn't have to earn this love, justify it, or even deserve it. By simply being made in the image and likeness of God, I was worthy.

I felt as though a jagged tear in my soul that I never knew was there had been miraculously stitched. Somehow, the despair that comes from believing oneself unworthy was plucked from my being.

I left the Listening Hearts Training Week wondering how or if this experience would change my life, and if so, what parts it would change. As the weeks and months have passed, I have found that the experience has had a profound effect on all of my life. My service has changed. I serve God because I am loved instead of so I will be loved. Because I am loved, I am able to see Christ in others, even when that Christ is crucified. I am able to love unconditionally, as God loves me.

*I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.*

Quoted hymn text by Henry Francis Lyte (1793–1846)