

EXPLORATIONS



Phone: 410-366-1851
 Fax: 410-243-7062
 www.listeninghearts.org
 http://blog.listeninghearts.org

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Emerging with the Spirit

Mike Croghan
Herndon, VA

In the years since I first encountered Listening Hearts as a new Christian in 2003, my spiritual journey has taken me to the frontiers of what has become known as the “emerging church” movement. In 2005, I first met a small group of denominationally diverse Christians who were reinventing church together in a coffee house/ rock concert venue in Vienna, Virginia. In 2007, I became a member of the leadership team of this community, which is known as the Common Table. Through my friends there, I’ve gotten to know folks engaged in similar (yet very different) experiments in being church and doing church together, all over North America and throughout the world.

Some of these explorers are from mainline denominations; others come from a nondenominational background or (like me) grew up unchurched. Often, as at the Common Table, folks from various backgrounds come together without much concern over historical divisions, yet with a reverent appreciation for the rich diversity of the Christian tradition. The communities they create may take many forms: a neo-monastic communal house and a network of house churches; a small group that worships in rented space and a larger community that owns a church building. These churches may be affiliated with one or more denominations, or they may have the “flavor” of a particular tradition (liturgical, perhaps, or charismatic) without any formal denominational connection.

But in my experience, these varied communities all have one thing in common: every single one of these emerging churches is practicing spiritual discernment on almost a daily basis.

The people in these communities are trying to figure out how to be the Church in their particular context, with their unique collection of backgrounds, gifts, needs, and passions. Every day, these folks are trying to work out which aspects of received tradition to bring to the forefront in their particular community and which ones they should deemphasize.

For example:

- How does a group containing Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, Mennonites, and agnostics approach Communion? How about baptism?
- Should we use creeds in worship? If so, how?
- How should we make decisions as a community? How do we define the roles of our group leaders?
- How are we called to love our neighbors incarnationally in our local context?
- How much beer should we bring to the backyard theology pub gathering? (All right, that last one is a different sort of spiritual discernment.)

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But here's the thing. It's true that we emerging church folks are practicing discernment every single day, just by doing what we do. However, the language and traditional wisdom of spiritual discernment practices – that is, the gifts that Listening Hearts has to offer – are no better known in these circles than they are in most other church settings. So, while we do discernment all the time, we don't always do it very well.

And that, in a nutshell, is why I'm so excited about the possibilities of connecting emerging church communities with the wisdom of Listening Hearts Ministries. The church as a whole needs these gifts, but the emerging church needs these gifts *desperately*.

Mike Croghan is a member of the Church of the Holy Comforter (Episcopal) in Vienna, VA, and a member of the leadership team of the Church of the Common Table, which also worships in Vienna. He recently accepted an invitation to join the board of trustees of Listening Hearts Ministries.

Écoute les Coeurs - Listening Hearts

**Pastor Russell J. Atkinson
Swarthmore, PA**

“The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments.”
The Sabbath, by Abraham Joshua Heschel

The outer life is screaming for attention, and in our contemporary context, we know just what to do – we feed it by accumulating information, amassing resources, linking it into vast, shallow, and irresponsible connectivity, and organizing it well beyond any practical necessity. If there is a sacred moment, it must fall on schedule, properly packaged. It must not be dynamic or paradoxical; neither can it be elusive.

Our inner life starves quietly, and in our contemporary context, we are lost as to what to do. So we manufacture purposefulness. We have spent far too long forcing spirituality to be a

commodity. It is not a commodity, of course, but we have little aptitude to receive it in any other way. As individuals and as communities we have simply lost elasticity in our spiritual muscles. I wonder if we have only recently become this way. Could it be that our forebears in the faith had a more open communion between the inner and the outer life?

Last summer, my wife, Barbara, and I were blessed to receive a clergy renewal grant from the Lilly Endowment. We lived in the midst of a medieval town, Bayeux, France, for four months and experienced something absent from our suburban, northeastern United States lives – daily, weekly, and annually structured “down-time.” In Bayeux, sometimes activities and commodities were simply unobtainable. We didn’t have to come up with a “Sabbath agreement” together – everyone was having a Sabbath: it was Sunday. On weekdays, no one was shopping at 7 PM. Essentially secular as France is, it nevertheless holds to closing times and retains a rich observance of church feasts and holy days. People have time off – everyone has time off at the same time.

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and personal responsibilities at home, church, and work.
Our life in faith cannot be more packing. It must be qualitatively different
and stand apart, in order to play its part in the whole.*

To be able to reflect on Sabbath, time, and the pace of life in the midst of a community 1200 or so years old is an extraordinarily rich blessing. Part of the wisdom of the Lilly clergy renewal program is its expectation that the clergy person’s congregation have a similar opportunity to reflect while the pastor is off being renewed. Listening Hearts Ministries was vital to our grant. It provided a series of three retreats to take our congregation through a similar contemplation. Listening Hearts holds a “vision of the church as a community of faith, eager for God’s guidance, alert to signs of the Spirit, and alive with the prayer of deep listening.” While I was away, my congregation was invited to contemplate this: “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?” Though Swarthmore is a well-known center of Quaker heritage, many of the Wesleyans living here were challenged by the discipline of centered silence, to “be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). Our thoughts are often packed with unfulfilled obligations and personal responsibilities at home, church, and work. Our life in faith cannot be more packing. It



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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.

...this much is certain: If we try our very best to follow the way of spiritual discernment, we will be staying close to God, and all that we do will be used constructively by the creator of all that is.
—Keeping in Tune with God, p.36

must be qualitatively different and stand apart, in order to play its part in the whole. Listening Hearts Ministries helped retreat participants to reach consensus and imagine a way forward. Listening to God's voice together is vital to the whole structure of the household of faith. This is what makes us ecclesial as well as theistic. This community is where we join together and grow into God's will.

For more than twenty years, Listening Hearts has provided guidance in spiritual discernment through prayerful listening in supportive communities. The quality of this is simply profound. Not just the addition of more valuable facts, studies, and data, Listening Hearts has helped us see within ourselves and within our community to face each sacred moment.

Russell J. Atkinson, pastor of Swarthmore United Methodist Church, has served as a pastor in the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church for twenty-three years.. He enjoys a broad range of hymns and providing short-term hands-on mission opportunities to the congregations he serves.