

LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

EXPLORATIONS

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God Calls Us to Reconcile

Suzanne Farnham
Founder and Program Director

Through baptism, we have been grafted into the body of Christ, irretrievably joined together as one in Christ. But now, in our imperfections, we battle one another over issues to which we attach supreme importance and grow hostile toward those who disagree with us. In lashing out at each other, we sorely wound this sacred body.

It is not our opposing views that fracture the church; it is that we give our differences central importance. But as Christians, it is God whom we are called to keep at the center of our consciousness, so that we see Christ in every person we encounter. Jesus commanded us to love one another. He even told us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Through Christ, God gave us a ministry of reconciliation (2Cor.5:18).

Spiritual discernment in community creates an environment in which this reconciliation can occur. In Listening Hearts discernment, three fundamentals combine to fashion a safe, caring atmosphere with ample space for the healing Spirit of love and truth. Those gathered begin by becoming still and immersing themselves in God's presence so that they can recognize themselves as unified in God's love. Next, they loosen their grip on their own opinions and agendas to prepare themselves to listen deeply and hear what others have to say, seeking to be nonjudgmental so that people can explore their thoughts and feelings honestly until God's truth emerges. Finally, they imaginatively engage with Scripture to let God speak to them in new ways and show them a broader perspective.

When a group surrenders itself to God in discernment, the Spirit may bring it together in a way that simply dissolves the dispute, uniting the members in heart and mind. At the very least, when people assemble to listen to each other prayerfully, seeking to unite with Christ at the center of each person, they develop compassion for one another. While convictions and points of view may continue to differ, the relationships among the people are shaped by love and understanding, thus sanctifying the community.

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.2:21, 22

Strangely Warmed by Prayer

**Jenny Montgomery
Clinton, New York**

Today it is very cold in upstate New York. The outside temperature has remained in the single digits all day and tonight the mercury is to drop down well below zero. It's the kind of cold that makes you hurt. The frigid air makes it hard to breathe. In addition to the cold, snow blankets the ground in a thick cover just outside my study window. Everything is frozen. Everything is cold. And this makes it all the more compelling to stay inside.

With the door to my study closed it is warm and quiet in here. The ticking of the clock calls me to slow down, listen, and it reminds me to breathe easy. It invites me to enter a quiet place within. This interior space is familiar to me. My prayer life often takes me into this place of stillness and contemplation. Yoga practice also guides me into these interior spaces of peace and quiet. But recently something inside has shifted. My heart has been strangely warmed. Let me explain.

Believing that discernment is foundational to the work and ministry of our Commission on Ministry, our Episcopal Diocese of Central New York is participating in the Listening Hearts training with Suzanne Farnham. Six persons from our commission are taking the training, and I am the "extra" person who observes and will coordinate some of our diocesan training. So, on the third day of our training session, when a seeker is invited to come and work with the group of six discerners, my part is to pray. Suzanne and I move our chairs close to the circle but just outside it. We can see and hear but we do not verbally enter into the conversation. Instead we surround the group with prayers, praying silently for the three hours of this discernment session.

With a listening heart I could feel the gentleness of the Spirit guiding the discernment group to ask questions and helping the seeker as she responded to them.

As I mentioned, prayer is something I do regularly but I had never prayed for this long in one sitting and with such intention. It was an amazing experience. It was as though I was drawn into a very deep place of listening. The listening was soft and warm. Words spoken by the group resonated within but did not attach themselves to any part of my mind and if the words did linger it was not for long. It was as though the words, both questions and responses, floated in and out like the tide. Through my heart I was hearing them, receiving them, and then they were being bathed in prayer. It was listening at a level to which I am not accustomed. Clearly the Spirit of God was present, known and unknown, in a powerful way. I was being transformed through listening and my heart was being strangely warmed.

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Strangely Warmed by... *(continued from page 2)*

Once in a while, however, a question would be asked by someone in the group that seemed to jolt me out of a Spirit-filled place. I would even say it hurt. Not that it was a hurtful question and was intended to startle anyone but it seemed to be out of sync with the Spirit. Either the timing was off or the silence shattered much too abruptly. (Let me quickly say that this was our group's first practice session with the seeker. We were just beginning to learn this approach of discernment and with practice our group became comfortable and proficient with the whole process.) But what was surprising was that by praying I could feel the difference in the kinds of questions that were being asked. With a listening heart I could feel the gentleness of the Spirit guiding the discernment group to ask questions and helping the seeker as she responded to them. I could feel the presence of God moving among the group and it was filled with healing and hope and love. And afterwards it was affirming to hear others in the group say they could feel our prayers and knew they were surrounded by God's presence during that discernment session.

Listening Hearts is more than a discernment training program. It is a means by which we as participants are invited into a deeper place of prayer and, with it, a deeper way of listening. Several days after that first training class, I realized I was hearing other people in a new way. I was more apt to linger in conversations at coffee hour and listen more deeply to my family at mealtimes. I felt less impatient with superficial talk and curious about what more needed to be said that wasn't being said. After spending those three hours in silent prayer and listening, my heart feels bigger and more open to others—perhaps even more loving.

Living in upstate New York I am quite aware that I cannot stay inside this warm quiet place of my study forever. Church and family responsibilities beckon me to bundle up and brave the cold. And in the same way, I cannot stay in that warm interior space of prayerful listening at all times. But it is very reassuring to know that, deep within, God is there and I am strangely warmed through listening with my heart.

The Rev. Jenny Montgomery, rector of St. James Episcopal Church in Clinton, New York, also chairs the Commission on Ministry for the Diocese of Central New York.

Comments following the Training Program in Central New York

“...the sacred nature of this work is inspirational; it is really taking in the Holy Spirit and letting the Spirit work in and through the entire group, seekers and discerners alike.”

“I have come to a deeper appreciation of how God directs us through community in prayer...”

“Embracing all of the program can be life changing to all involved. I'm excited to see how the diocese and our parishes will be changed in the years to come.”

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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.

To serve God we must constantly be alert to the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

—Grounded in God, p. 7

A Quiet and Extravagant Devotion

Excerpts from a homily

Shelly Banner
Oswego, New York

One of the most profound and most disregarded directives of Christian lifestyle is that one day of every seven we are commanded to cease, rest, and worship. But it is difficult for us to stop, to still ourselves and let God be God, and we his servants. It's a lesson I revisited over the past few weeks, while participating in a diocesan training workshop at St. Margaret House, given by Listening Hearts Ministries.

...The alternative to miles of busyness is deep stillness, to listen for the voice of the Savior, giving full devotion to the Savior. In the face of so much to be done, we equate that work with our busyness. But, as Isaiah reminds us, we are to do "a new thing," (Isa.43:19) not sacrifices of burnt offerings but devotedly listening for God in all we do. This is devotion given as we center ourselves in God as we worship, or rest, and even when we recreate, and feast. It's a devotion in which we celebrate our belovedness in God; we get quiet, and we relinquish control, we listen for Emmanuel, God with us. This quiet devotion proclaims a difference between us and God, a devotion that helps us surrender our strivings to the invisible grace of God at work. Extravagant devotion with listening silence is radical; it's a discipline, a test of obedience, a death to self. And it carries transformational power.

Shelly Banner is an ordained deacon at the Church of the Resurrection in Oswego, New York, and also serves on both the Local Formation Team and the Vision Grants Commission for the Diocese of Central New York.