

# LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

# EXPLORATIONS

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## New Dimensions of Faith

**The Rev. Mark Frazier  
DeWitt, NY**

I have had several “mountaintop experiences” that have strengthened my faith and given me glimpses of how God communicates with an average person like me. In places of surpassing natural beauty, in quiet contemplation, in art, in the birth of my children, and at least a few times as someone has died, I’m certain God has been especially present. In the course of becoming a more dedicated Christian as a young adult, I enjoyed learning of similar experiences that others had had and I found a wide range of ways that God touches us humans.

It seems that these experiences usually come as surprises. I recently was surprised by the distinct experience of God’s Spirit as I participated in a Diocesan Discernment Team Mentor training event. The group gathered for training was made up of members of our diocesan Commission on Ministry; we are hopeful of implementing the Listening Hearts process into many aspects of discernment for ministry. What I have been learning since participating in this very intentional experience is changing the way I understand vocation and Christian community.

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First, I relearned in a dramatic way the importance of team-building and of developing a spirit of trust and collaboration. The most dramatic way we experienced coming together as a group was through prayer and silence. Immersing ourselves in substantial periods of contemplative listening and intentional intercession connected us to each other, to the discernment seeker we would work with, and to our task of discernment. Most importantly, our prayer connected us to God, who is the source of what we seek together.

There were some other key elements to our formation as a team, as well. Creatively encountering Scripture and expressing ourselves in words and images also helped us understand each other and gain insight about how the group would work together. The extended time together at meals, in worship, in song, and just being together, enhanced our ability to function as one body.

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## Focusing on Deep, Prayerful Listening

**Meg Kimble**  
**Executive Director**

I am privileged to serve on the vestry of my church, St. Anne's Parish in Annapolis, Maryland. It took a bit of courage on my part to agree to run for the vestry. I grew up in a clergy household and remember late evenings when my father would come home frustrated and needing to let off steam after yet another contentious vestry meeting. A fellow parishioner hoping to persuade me to serve suggested that if I were elected it would mean "one less nut" on the vestry. Not a very lofty platform for a candidate for any office.

In the Episcopal Church, the vestry is the legal representative of the parish; its responsibilities include managing resources and finances as well as helping to define and articulate the mission of the congregation. Our vestry meets once a month, endeavoring in that meeting to address all these responsibilities and the many other concerns of our congregational life. We are a diverse and opinionated group, and sometimes in the past, despite our best intentions, voices were raised, tempers flared, and we sometimes adjourned at a very late hour in an uncharitable frame of mind, heart, and soul. In an effort to change this culture, our vestry and clergy participated in a remarkable weekend retreat last summer. In preparation for the retreat we read both *Listening Hearts* and *Grounded in God*.

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*When two or three or more come together in that room, more and more they are intentionally listening for God.*

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At one point during this vestry retreat we took turns reading aloud each of the Discernment Listening Guidelines found on page 57 of *Grounded in God*. Every member of our vestry received a laminated card with the guidelines printed on it. Now when we arrive at our monthly meeting we find one of these cards at each place at the table. We find it helpful to refer to these simple guidelines as we continue to learn how to seek God's guidance during our deliberations.

One member of our vestry took the guidelines, created a poster-size print, and framed it. It now hangs in our meeting room as another visual reminder of our purpose and intention to practice prayerful listening. This simple act has had an unintended and amazing consequence. Most meetings in our parish take place in this room: the weekly staff meeting, the Monday morning Bible study, and various 12-Step groups. These various groups are reading the guidelines, sometimes aloud, sometimes referring to only one or two of them. Some of the participants borrow copies of *Listening Hearts* and *Grounded in God* that are left on the bookshelves. A few have called or e-mailed the Listening Hearts office seeking more information. When two or three or more come together in that room, more and more they are intentionally listening for God. "So it is when we come together as God's people with the doors of our hearts and minds open—our eyes as windows raised to see what God will show us, our ears open to hear what God may say. It is then that the wind of the Spirit can sweep into our midst to make Pentecost a reality in our life together" (*Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations*, p 5).

## Practicing What We Teach

Alice Dorrance

**Spartanburg, SC**

Extraordinary! That is how I experience the meetings of the Listening Hearts Board of Trustees. This meeting is one of spiritual discernment to set the direction and focus of the organization for the coming year. We consistently turn to God for wisdom and direction. We begin praying long before the meeting date. Prayer continues throughout the meeting and in the night and extends long after the meeting. We invite the Spirit of God to be present in every aspect of our work: reports, discussion, silent meditation, and the singing of hymns. We implore the Spirit to dwell in our midst, to be in our thoughts and words, to guide us in leading the ministry. Hearing God requires that we listen. We must open our hearts and be ready to embrace the Truth as it is revealed.

Each meeting begins with the minutes from the last meeting and a number of reports. Then the group turns to God to set the direction for the rest of the meeting. Through prayerful consideration of the information in the reports, the dominant issue facing the ministry rises to the surface. A discernment question forms, in which we ask God to show us how we are to proceed as we address that issue.

The next segment is a particular favorite of mine. We turn to the Holy Scriptures for inspiration. Grouped with chairs in a circle and Bibles in our laps, we silently pore over the Scriptures, searching for verses and images that speak to us concerning the discernment question. We share our choices and reflect on their relevance. It is indeed a holy time, to hear God's Word impart wisdom, support, direction, and redirection.

We then move into a two-hour silent meditation exercise that integrates the discernment question and the selected Scripture passages. Each of us finds a quiet space in which to be still in God's presence holding the question until it becomes firmly embedded in our consciousness, then repeating a chosen Scripture verse until it is fully absorbed. When we are ready, there are materials available to creatively express a sense or feeling that has emerged from our quiet.

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*It requires a constant listening ear, never assuming that God is finished speaking  
or we are finished hearing.*

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As the silence ends we gather to offer reflections and insights from our meditation. The sharing is deep and holy. In our listening we look for signs of the Spirit: a sense of joy and energy, convergence, persistence, and most especially, a shared sense of peace. As we are drawn together by the experience of these signs, we take note of the messages that seem to have come through most strongly. From this we develop a consensus statement. Our final work is to sketch out a plan of action for the coming months. The next morning our gathering culminates with a joyous agapé breakfast and a liturgy of thanksgiving and praise.

A ministry of spiritual discernment offers people of faith a way to pray to God that cultivates intentional listening with an openness that says yes to God's will, rather than ours. It requires a constant listening ear, never assuming that God is finished speaking or we are finished hearing. We move forward ever open, ever listening. And the Holy One blesses our path.

Extraordinary? I believe so.

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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.

*The goal of our discernment efforts is to find the mind of Christ.*  
—*Grounded in God, p. 7*

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## **New Dimensions of Faith...** *continued from page 1*

By far the greatest share of learning took place by actually being with our seeker. We didn't function at all perfectly at first, but at some point, in God's time, we "got it." What we "got" was the guidance and wisdom that only God's Spirit can grant. We mysteriously were able to meet the seeker where God was speaking to her, beginning to see together where God was leading her. We didn't solve every question or fix all her problems, but we did open some channels of communication between the seeker and us, and between the seeker and God. The listening in which we all participated was a very holy time.

What struck me most was the realization that we, gathered for that time in common purpose, were the Body of Christ. We each brought our own insights, intellects, and most importantly, our spiritual gifts to the gathering. God was truly present among us, guiding us and working through us. None of us in the end was acting alone, we were truly ministering together. This training program, which was part of our work with the Commission on Ministry, turned out to be a real "mountaintop experience," and a wonderful gift from God.

*The Rev. Mark Frazier, a former cancer research scientist, serves as rector of St David's Episcopal Church in DeWitt, NY. He lives with his wife, Amy, their four daughters, and a chocolate Labrador retriever.*