



Diocese of Monmouth · Esgobaeth Mynwy

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Pastoral Assistant

Lay Ministry Training Courses - Solo

*Material adapted from 'Living and Learning: Pastoral Visiting'
published by St Padarn's Institute.*

Session 2: Being a good listener

Introductory Reading

Key to pastoral visiting is the ability to be a good listener.

In the gospel of John (John 4:7ff) we read of Jesus meeting with a woman of Samaria and the conversation that unfolds with her at the well. In this encounter we discover the essence of listening as Jesus enables and encourages her to bring out into the open her personal thoughts and to reflect on her life and her faith. He brings to her, not only the gift of the water of life, but the gift of being listened to.

In a different context, in Luke's gospel (Luke 24:13ff) we read of Jesus walking with the two disciples along the Road to Emmaus. He meets them where they are, and from that place carefully answers the questions they puzzle over. We also read that Jesus spends time alone. He needs time away from the crowds to seek personal and inner refreshment and renewal before going back to give of himself, likewise, so do we – and more on this in a later session.

If we truly listen to a person, we offer them a sense of freedom and a sense of trust that grows out of that listening relationship. There is freedom in being able to say anything, and to be heard and accepted without being judged. It is the freedom to cry and to laugh. It is the freedom to share with another time and space in conversation.

To listen to someone is to give that person time and space in which to think, to speak, to ponder, to express the concerns and hopes they have and to chat. Most conversations that will take place in visiting will probably be simple conversations about day to day life. However, it is important to be ready and attentive in order to hear the unexpected and to discover something important that may only come to light as you are about to leave.

In all our listening, we need to enable the person we are visiting to trust us and to accept our ministry.



Therefore it is critical that we learn how to listen sensitively and effectively to what they tell us. In fact,

- we need to learn how to listen attentively and to know that we have 'heard' them correctly;
- we need to learn to listen with our eyes in order to recognise the emotion that is being shown;
- we need to learn to listen beneath the conversation so that we can hear what is not being said;
- we need to listen to the silences and to be aware that they might be comfortable, awkward, embarrassed or peaceful.

When we visit it is important to put our own concerns and worries to one side. We go to listen to the person that we visit and to make conversation which is focused on them. It is important to recognise that we go to listen and not to offload our own problems and issues. Indeed, it is important that we know ourselves well enough to know when we can and when we can't go visiting, and who we can and can't visit without raising real issues for ourselves.

To pay attention to others with the desire to make them the centre and to make their interests our own is a real form of self-emptying, since to be able to receive others into our intimate inner space we must be empty. That is why listening is so difficult. It means our moving away from the centre of attention and inviting others into that space. When our own life is stressed, it can be very difficult to become empty for another.

Simple, practical issues should not be overlooked. If you are going to put the person that you are visiting at ease then how you look, what you do and how you sit will all be important. Therefore it is important to dress appropriately, shake hands to introduce yourself at the door and be ready to show them your credentials. When inside, don't 'stand over' someone, or walk around. Where you sit will of course depend on where the chairs are, but never move a chair without asking, or sit before being invited, or first saying, "is it ok for me to sit here?". The best position is at right angles, and close enough to reach to touch an arm in comfort, but not close enough for knees to touch. If offered a drink, accept the offer, even if you don't really want one!

Body language is important. Sitting with arms and legs crossed can be seen as unwelcoming and defensive. Sprawling and leaning back can be seen as too casual, while leaning forward and staring can create tension. Be aware that some



people don't like others getting too close, or invading their 'personal space', though sitting too far away makes conversation difficult.

Eye-contact is important to help a conversation to flow as it shows that you are interested, and listening. It may help you to relax if you are able to focus your gaze on the person's nose or forehead rather than the eyes. Clues to how comfortable a person is can be gained from the way they look or avoid looking at you.

Moving hands, playing with hair, sniffing or wriggling around in the chair can be off-putting. Think about your own gestures and habits, or ask someone what they may be, and consider whether they might be irritating to someone on a visit.

Some people like to be hugged and some don't! There are times, if someone is upset, that you may wish to hug them, hold their hand or put an arm around the shoulders, to comfort them. If you know someone well, you will know what is appropriate and what isn't. If in doubt ask if it's ok, and if you don't feel comfortable to 'touch' then don't. They will sense your tension. The areas generally considered 'safe' to touch are the upper arm and the hands. To place a hand on their arm, to hold a hand can show that you share their pain.

Much of the above is common sense, and, although body language is important, it is essential that you are as natural as possible.

In order to build a relationship of trust with the person being visited it is important to be clear that you will treat the things they share with you in confidence. There are two exceptions to this; the first is if they specifically give you permission to share something they have said with another person or persons. This could be the vicar or minister, the prayer group, or the person who organises the intercessions in church so that prayers could be said for that person on Sunday. Second, if the person says something that leads you to think they or another person are at risk you have a duty of care to pass that on to the appropriate person or agency. This raises issues of safeguarding children and vulnerable adults that will be dealt with in more detail in Session 5.



Solo Reflection Questions

1. Beginning

Spend a few minutes in silence, offering any worries or concerns from everyday life to God, and acknowledging God's presence alongside you and within you as you prepare to reflect more deeply.

**Heavenly Father,
you know both our needs and our ignorance:
have mercy on our weakness,
not as we ask in our blindness
nor as we deserve in our sinfulness,
but as you know and love us
in your Son Jesus Christ our Lord
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and always.
Amen.**

2. Reflecting

Think of someone you know who is a good listener. What is it about speaking with them that helps you feel affirmed and encouraged? Is there anything particular they do or don't do, say or don't say? How does it feel when you have a conversation with them?



3. Exploring

What are the most important practical factors that aid in good listening?

What do you find most difficult in listening well?

Why is confidentiality important, and what are the limits of confidentiality in pastoral care? How, why and with whom is pastoral information shared in your Ministry Team?



4. Responding and Concluding

Describe one particular thing you have learned from this lesson, either from the reading or your own reflections.

