



Information Sheet

How to really listen

“Listening is one of the most common and important things that we do ...”

In an average day we spend almost half of our time listening. Listening is an essential part of communication. It is obviously a very important skill for people in ministry, yet one that is often underestimated. Understanding what stops us from listening in some situations and the idea of “active listening” is an important first step to becoming a good listener.

What stops us listening?

There are a number of things that can stop us from listening effectively. Consider the effect the following have on your ability to listen:

- not really caring about what you are being told
- being distracted by things in your own life
- not understanding what is being talked about
- being afraid of what you are being told
- having a strong opinion about a topic
- being tired when you are trying to listen
- being ill when someone is talking to you
- distracting noises
- an uncomfortable environment.

What is active listening?

Active listening is not a debate. It is not trying to work out your argument and get your point of view heard. Neither is it simply sitting and listening without interaction.

Active listening is more than just listening carefully; it is showing obvious interest in what is being said and concern for the person saying it. It involves careful interaction.

Active listening is something you can learn. Here are some ideas:

1. As you begin, think about what might stop you from listening; the surroundings, the situation, your state of mind, and try to remove as many distractions as possible.
2. Start by stopping. Stop talking. Learn to leave silences. Sometimes silence is all it takes to allow the other person time to think and talk.
3. Concentrate on your body language. Where are you sitting in relation to the other person? Are you making eye contact?
4. Be encouraging. Nodding your head, smiling and saying “I see” and “Uh-huh” as the other person talks encourages them to continue.
5. Think about your tone of voice before you say something.
6. Make sure that you understand what the person is saying, but more importantly what they want to happen as a result of the conversation.
7. If you need to ask questions to clarify something don't sound like you are interrogating the other person. Don't interrupt; wait for an appropriate gap in the conversation. Use open questions to encourage the person to talk more about an area. Use closed (yes/no) questions for clarification.

8. Using your own words, repeat to the person the main points of your discussion. Sometimes this is called reflecting or paraphrasing. It helps you to be sure that you have understood what you are being told and gives the person a chance to correct you if you have it wrong.
9. Don't be afraid to say how you are feeling and reflect how the other person may be feeling. If you are being told something that is clearly upsetting then it is OK to show sympathy. However, don't make assumptions about how they are feeling, for example, "you must be very angry" when in actual fact they have said that they are "scared." And don't fall into the "I know how you feel" trap either.
10. Sometimes it helps to take notes, but it is difficult to do it without distracting the other person. If you have to take notes just write down key words and fill in the details later.
11. Finish the discussion by confirming what will happen next and then ask a question; "Is that OK with you?"

And if someone talks to you about abuse?

It is possible for any person in a position of authority within the church to become aware of abuse, have an aggrieved person disclose abuse to them or have an offender confess to abuse. In these situations it is extremely important that you do not compromise the situation in any way. Here is an idea of what to say:

- Listen, listen, listen... and do not add anything.
- Offer the services of a contact person: "Would you like to talk to someone outside the church? Someone who understands these things?"
- As far as possible, only ascertain the gist of the allegation. Obtain appropriate details while being aware that at this early stage it is not appropriate to probe too deeply.
- Clarify exactly what the allegation is and who is involved.
- Do not minimise the allegation or convey disbelief by anything you do or say.
- Ask what the aggrieved person would like to see happen next, what can be done to ensure that the aggrieved person feels safe from further abuse.
- Preserve evidence.
- Provide details of the process.
- Provide details of who will be contacted.
- Keep notes.
- Maintain appropriate confidentiality.

Don't be afraid to show how you feel: saying "I think you have been very brave to tell me this" or "I can see you have suffered a lot" is OK. You need to say: "Abuse is a terrible thing" and "You are not alone."

PLEASE NOTE: This information does not form part of the policy or process for dealing with or preventing abuse within the church but is provided as general information.

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