

Pastoral Listening

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ABSTRACT

Listening is fundamental in human communication and attentive listening is more fundamental in pastoral care. The paper examines pastoral listening as a skill in pastoral care and ministry. It presents pastoral listening consisting of attitudes and therapeutic actions in the acronym ATTENTIVE LISTENING. Pastoral workers are called to cultivate this important pastoral skill while offering pastoral care.

Keywords: Listening, Attentive Listening, Pastoral Listening, Pastoral Care

INTRODUCTION

Listening is fundamental in human communication and attentive listening is more fundamental in pastoral care. Although listening and listening attentively are inevitable in pastoral ministry, not many pastoral workers are trained in this important pastoral skill. This work exposes the act of pastoral listening as an act as a skill.

PASTORAL LISTENING

Following the example of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, it may sound as if the shepherd only speaks and the sheep listens as reflected in John 10:27 NIV, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” Meaning that the pastor gives spiritual instruction and the flock follow. However, when “Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?’ He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ He said to him, “Tend My lambs.” To tend here could mean, according to Ritenbaugh (1992), “to pay attention to” or “to serve.” To tend according to Merriam Webster Dictionary also mean “to listen”. One of the most important things a pastor does is listening to the flock (Boyd, 2003). Jesus the Good Shepherd does more than just speaking to the flock, he also listens. Thus, he said, “If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.” (Jn 14:14 NASB) as Jeremiah 29:12 prophesied, “Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you.” (Jer 29:12). As the Lord listens, so are His ministers.

However, one thing is to listen, and another thing is to listen actively or attentively. As it is in tending, the pastor is to pay attention and be present to the member of the flock who is speaking. Active listening can be difficult, and it requires prominence in theological education (Schramm, 2009). Unfortunately, active listening is rarely taught to priests, pastors, catechists and other pastoral workers. Seminarians are taught to exegete and preach, but listening skills are simply assumed. Pastoral listening is inevitable.

Pastoral listening is the pastorally oriented attention given to the person seeking or needing pastoral care. This involves pastoral-minded attitudes and therapeutic actions. Through pastoral listening, the priest, pastor, or pastoral workers are consciously and intentionally present to the presence, emotional needs, and pastoral care of the members of the flock and anyone one who may seek healing or support.

The truth is that “Listening, a complex skill, seldom comes naturally” (Schramm, 2009). It is, for long,

“regarded as a passive skill, ... an ability that would develop without assistance” (Osada 2004, p.53). Listening is intentional. Developing listening skills requires a considerably long period of time, and it may involve experiences of a variety of emotions such as depression, frustration, exhilaration, and pride (Walker, 2014). Contemporary priests and pastors may feel they are good listeners because they may sit for long hours hearing people’s pastoral challenges but are likely limited in their listening skills unless they cultivate them intentionally (Schramm, 2009) and through training.

It is important to listen at the third level where one shows unconditional positive regard (Okpalaenwe, 2022). Listening is key in communication, listening is the heart of community living, listening builds trust and relationship, but listening is not just hearing. While hearing is a “process, function, or power of perceiving sound; specifically: the special sense by which noises and tones are received as stimuli.”(Merriam-Webster. (n.d.a), listening, is “to pay attention to sound; to hear something with thoughtful attention; and to give consideration.” (Merriam-Webster. (n.d.b). In other words, it is conscious. This is not for the pastors alone, but for everyone offering pastoral care or receiving pastoral care.

PASTORAL LISTENING SKILL

Listening is not the same as active or attentive listening. Listening can be a one-way communication where the receiver need not provide feedback to reflect the understanding of the message. Active or attentive listening, on the other hand, involves feedback or responses to demonstrate that the message is understood or to reflect the thought, feeling, and action being generated by the message. This distinction between listening and attentive listening is demonstrated in St. James’ letter, “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak” (1:19 NIV). This is about listening. Attentive listening is reflected when he said, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. (Jam 1:22 NIV). Of course, Proverb 19:20 also stated, “Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end you will be counted among the wise” (NIV).

According to Schramm (2009), skilled pastors don’t just listen but listen attentively by being empathetic. This means that they can set aside their personal thoughts, feelings, interest, and agendas in order to enter into another world of their flock members. Attentive listening, for Schramm, enables one to see members’ concerns from members’ perspectives. Attentive listening also requires being compassionate, suffering with their flock. A good pastor, minister to the flock, or any pastoral worker must be an attentive listener.

Egunjobi (2022) holds that attentive listening involves positive attitudes and professional acts (skills). For him, by being attentive one is showing an attitude, but by listening, one is performing a conscious act. He came up with the following acronyms which fully depict attentive listening.

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| 1. Awareness | Learning/Learning Forward |
| 2. Thoughtful | Internalizing/Immediacy |
| 3. Timing response | Summarizing/Silence |
| 4. Empathic presence | Throwing back (Reflection) |
| 5. Natural | Eye contact |
| 6. Tolerance | Node if agreed/understood |
| 7. Insightful | Interrogation |
| 8. Vigilance | Noticing |
| 9. Enthusiastic | Genuineness |

Awareness – This attitude involves being conscious of one’s thought, feeling, and behavior as well as respecting the thought, feeling, and behavior of the other.

Thoughtful – This attitude opens one to be considerate of other’s physical, psychological and spiritual

needs. It is an attitude of kindness.

Timing response – This involves the ability to respond appropriately to other’s need and at the right time. Using the appropriate choice of words at an appropriate time.

Empathic presence – This attitude requires one to be mindful and sensitive to other’s feelings, needs, perspectives, and spirituality.

Natural – This is a non-judgmental attitude of not taking side especially in the case of listening to two or more people in conflict. To be neutral is a way of staying objective or zeroing personal biases, stereotypical views, and prejudices.

Tolerance – This attitude involves the desire to bear, accept, or endure another person’s opinion or behavior even when one disagrees or dislikes the opinion or behavior. It requires being calm and patient.

Insightful – This involves demonstrating a deep understanding of what is being said or the deep meaning behind a particular verbal or nonverbal cue. An insightful person welcomes other people’s experiences and views and turns them into something motivational.

Vigilance – Vigilance skill involves the ability to sustain or maintain concentration for a long period of time in direct attention. It also involves attention to small details during an engagement.

Enthusiasm – With this attitude, one shows a keen interest in the person with whom one has an engagement, and in what is being discussed. This is expressed through open communication, positive contributions, and willingness to assist.

Learning/Learning Forward – The skill of leaning is used to know more about the person, the person’s world, or the subject matter from the person’s perspective. It involves what a particular concept, attitude, or behavior means from the person’s view. By **learning forward**, one shows interest in the role of engagement. It shows that one is willing to collaborate, show understanding, concern, or being present.

Internalizing/Immediacy – Internalization is a process of incorporating other people’s attitudes, values, standards, and ideas into one’s own identity or sense of self. It involves taking in and integrating a concept, viewpoint, conviction, towards making a deeper sense and meaning. **Immediacy** is the ability to use the immediate situation to invite someone to look at what is going on in the relationship between the speaker and the listener. Immediacy can be either or both verbal and nonverbal behaviors such as using compliments or a gentle non-suggestive touch, distance, body language etc.

Summarizing/Silence – Summarizing is a powerful skill to reflect to the other person that what is being said is understood. This may involve the combination of the person’s thoughts, feelings and/or behaviors into a basic idea. **Silence** is truly golden. It can be used to break a reluctant or resistant client. It usually feels uncomfortable, but it can unlock suppressed thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Throwing back (Reflection) – Throwing back is a powerful skill to reflect to a person that one understands what is going on. This can be in the forms of reflection, paraphrasing, reflection of meaning, and reflection of feeling. By **Reflection**, one is repeating the other’s words back to him or her exactly as they are said. In **paraphrasing**, one states what the other has just said in brief and using other words without changing the meaning. It reflects the essence of what the person has just said. **Reflection of meaning** is a way of giving the interpretation of what the other person said. It goes beyond paraphrasing by bringing out the value and the goals of what was said. **Reflection of feeling** is used to seek out and make the person aware of the feelings beneath what is being said. It is a way of responding to other’s feelings rather than verbal

communication. It shows that one can accurately sense the world of the other as s/he perceives it.

Eye contact – maintaining eye contact helps to connect to the other person and the other person to you. Good to note that this is cultural as some people may not be comfortable with eye contact. Eye contact is more than a look. It communicates compassion, empathy, concern, interest, care, and warmth.

Node if agreed/understood – Nodding is a non-verbal communication that indicates that one is listening. It encourages the speaker to keep talking or reflects to the speaker that one is understanding. It is also a sign of agreement with what is being communicated. Care is to be taken not to node to an irrational or negative projection from the speaker. Node is cultural because it can mean ‘yes’ or ‘no’ depending on the culture.

Interrogation – This skill or technique is used to explore a person’s world through questioning. There are two forms of questions namely open question and closed question. **Open question** is used to clarify one’s understanding of what the other person is saying or feeling. It does not have an absolute answer. That is, one cannot answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’, or give a monosyllabic answer. It requires explanations. **Closed question** on the other hand can be used to get a definite answer from someone to confirm or deny a proposition by simply saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

Noticing – This skill involves ardent attention to body language, appearance, orientation, and mood of the person with whom one is engaged in conversation. It requires attention to small details; what is new and what is different about a person.

Genuineness – This is a skill of authenticity. It is the process of creating congruence between what one thinks and what one does, including verbal and nonverbal cues. It is essential to build trust between two individuals.

Cultivating the pastoral skill of ATTENTIVE LISTENING will enhance the pastoral productivity of the pastoral workers as well as the biopsychosocio techno-spiritual outcomes of the flock. Attentive listening remains an important part of those ministering to others. Either listening attentively to the Holy Spirit for discernment or listening to the flock to discern the best appropriate strategies for pastoral care. When it comes to people’s physical, emotional, relational, or spiritual needs, listening is a vital life skill.

CONCLUSION

Pastoral listening consists of positive attitudes and therapeutic actions as expressed in the acronym ATTENTIVE LISTENING. It will be advantageous to priests, pastors, and all pastoral workers, who hear and attend to the needs of the members of the flock to be more intentional by cultivating attentive listening. In doing so, they will more authentically be present to these individuals and be able to offer consolation and spiritual healing. Attentive listening can reduce the likelihood of misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and misinterpretation or those whoa are entrusted to the care of the pastors and those who work closely with them in the healing and caring ministry.

If you can listen, you can **Learn**.

If you can listen, you can **Interact**.

If you can listen, you can **Socialize**.

If you can listen, you can **Teach**.

If you can listen, you can **Empathize**.

If you can listen, you can **N**egotiate.

If you can listen, you can **I**nspire.

If you can listen, you can **N**urture.

If you can listen, you will **G**row.

Be Blessed

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