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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Oral Communication: How to Strengthen Our Effectiveness

A congregation's clergy and members will find that the best way to improve communication is by perfecting their responsive listening skills. Briefly defined, this conversational method enables us to listen to and understand another person—even though we may disagree with some of his or her opinions or behaviors. Sometimes referred to as *caring* or *active listening*, responsive listening creates a conversational environment in which people with whom you converse often move toward positive changes in their feelings, attitudes, or behaviors. A few people are born with this responsive listening ability, but most of us need tips on how to do it.

What Responsive Listening is NOT

A pattern often seen in poor listeners: finishing sentences for people when they pause too long, doing all the talking, stepping on sentences by starting to talk before people have finished expressing their thoughts, not maintaining eye contact while others are talking, and giving more feedback than necessary by going too far beyond a simple “uh huh.” When our conversational patterns include any of those five traits, people enjoy talking with us about as much as they enjoy hearing chalk screech on a blackboard. Still, there are also actions that *appear* to represent responsive listening and a caring relationship, but they are simply disguises:

Runaway sympathy. Becoming emotionally entangled with someone's feelings can produce negative results. Runaway sympathy is dangerous for you because it may cause you to miss key issues that would normally have been obvious; it is dangerous for the person to whom you listen because she or he fails to increase the kind of self-understanding that leads to positive changes.

Taking responsibility for others. The temptation to drift from *caring* to *taking responsibility* is present in every kind of caring relationship. Yet none of us

can successfully take responsibility for another person's behavior, thinking, and feelings. If we begin feeling responsible for someone, then we begin feeling guilty because we have not accomplished what we had hoped for them, and then we start feeling either depressed (because we are too sympathetic) or angry (because we are too low in sympathy).

What Responsive Listeners Do

The most effective responsive listeners operate from two basic principles: (1) responsive listeners allow the other person to hear his or her own information clearly enough to find insights and self-direction; (2) responsive listeners understand what people are saying without a response that gives either approval or disapproval.

Several positives usually result when we practice the art of responsive listening with someone: we feel greater self-worth from the experience; we feel more positive toward the person to whom we listen; the person to whom we listen feels closer to us; the person to whom we listen gains wholeness



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because self-expression has clarified confused feelings and produced a more certain sense of self-direction; and, by getting it off his or her chest, the person to whom we listen can gain more positive feelings and take more constructive actions.

Responsive Listening Techniques

You feel like . . .” As one of the more basic techniques, this phrase is a great way to begin practicing your responsive listening skills. For example, after someone has finished unfolding a long criticism of another person, begin your response with “You feel like . . .,” and then finish your sentence by rephrasing the *feelings* that seem to lie behind their words. Using that response, you can talk about a hot issue without taking sides. Plus, the person feels that you are listening sympathetically to what they say. Those three words —*you feel like*—signal people that you have carefully listened to what they have said. Because of that, they want to say more. As they say more and you continue to listen responsively, their inhibitions and fear of “saying too much” declines.

Paraphrasing. Using this technique, you state back to the person the meaning of what she or he just said. Good paraphrasing sentences begin with words such as:

- “You are saying that you feel . . .”
- “I hear you saying that you feel . . .”
- “You feel that because . . .”
- “You seem to be feeling . . .”
- “You are saying that . . .”
- “Are you saying that . . .?”
- “It seems to me that you are saying . . .”

When you respond in one of these ways, the other person quickly tells you whether your understanding is on track or has accidentally derailed. Paraphrasing also tells the other person that you care enough to pay close attention; it is like becoming a human mirror. You reflect back the facts and feelings that the person told you without making a judgment about whether those facts and feelings are rational or irrational, right or wrong. Like a mirror, your words do not change anything; they merely reflect the reality before them. A mirror does not argue or add new information; it lets people see themselves more objectively. Test this with friends and people you meet for the first time. They will think of you as a sparkling conversationalist.

Repeat their words. When a person seems finished talking, repeat the last three words of his or her last sentence. Almost always, that prompts the person to add additional details to what he or she had been saying.

Perception checking. With this tool we ensure that, as the listener, we understand the facts, feelings, information, and viewpoints that the other person is conveying. Here are some examples of using perception checking in conversation:

- “You feel like _____ (*express his or her feeling*) because _____ (*repeat the content*).”
- “You feel hurt. Is that right?”
- “It sounds as though you’re very angry about that. Would you agree?”
- “It sounds as if you’re frustrated. Am I reading that correctly?”
- “Correct me if I’m wrong, but it sounds like . . .”
- “I’m not sure whether I’m with you; do you mean . . .”
- “I’m not certain I understand; you’re saying that . . .”

Creative questioning. Good listeners use this tool to flush out missing information by giving the other person permission to share in greater detail. A genuinely creative question cannot be answered with a simple yes or no or a one-word fact. “How old are you?” is *not* a creative question. “How did you feel about that?” is a creative question that elicits not just facts but also feelings. Creative questions should avoid being phrased as judgments; for example: Why do you feel that way? Judgment questions will induce withdrawal into silence instead of additional information.

Three Questions

Responsive listening is a skill that must be honed over time. It takes patience (and learning from a few mistakes) to get better. It’s best to learn in low-risk situations by practicing on friends and family when the conversation is not so serious. Then you can work on your skills when the situation is more difficult. To begin, ask yourself these three barometer questions: How high is the quality of my listening skill? Do I feel motivated to increase that quality? How often do I (or will I) intentionally practice?