

Called to Listen, Called to Live

A Five-Year Guide for Ministry in the New England Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America June 2007 – June 2012

*"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live."
Isaiah 55:3*

In witness to our life in Jesus Christ, and as a church that is rooted for life and transforming for mission, we will:

- Listen deeply
- Pray unceasingly
- Give extravagantly
- Insist on justice
- Trust in partnership

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An Introduction to the Listening Life

Listening to God and Listening to One Another

For the last year, I have been listening in a dozen ways and to lots of people so that I could discern a theme for the next five years of my term as bishop as we work together. Mid-way through this process it dawned on me that God had already gradually and gently suggested a theme: *listening*. So instead of imposing a tiring new set of measurable plans and goals on the people of the New England Synod, I simply invite you to join me in five years of a life of holy listening as a way to navigate our course faithfully into the relationships and work that God has called us to do.

It is not easy to listen deeply.

*The time is surely coming, says the Lord God,
when I will send a famine on the land;
not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the Lord. Amos 8:11*

People were starving in the time of Amos, and the famine has gone on and on because the noise in our hearts and our world never stops.

Why would God send this kind of famine? Maybe it is simply one of the mysteries of God's way with the world. But I have noticed in myself that I do my worst listening when I am happily satisfied and my best listening when I need something. So maybe hunger is a good starting place to begin to understand our need for God.

When Jesus came among us as God's Word, we were given a new opportunity for listening. As we listen to his words, we are nourished with a fuller taste of God. Our life as Christians is shaped and understood by a careful listening to what God has told us through the life, witness and teachings of Jesus.

And further: there is a deep connection between listening to God and listening to one another. When we listen in a careful and expectant way, we not only connect more deeply with God, but we learn how to connect more deeply with one another. Careful listening is the key to solving conflicts in the congregation, welcoming new members into the community of faith, and understanding the work that God calls us to do in the world.

As we embark on these five years of holy and intentional listening, I believe that we can listen our way into a deepening of faith and a fuller realization of God's abundant life as we know it as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in New England.

Listening Roots us in God

The phrase "Rooted for Life" has become familiar in this synod. A tree planted by living water is a wonderful biblical image that helps us to understand the importance of our connection to God. We know that when we are rooted in God's Word, we will not dry up or be blown away, and that we will be nourished to bear the fruit that God calls us to bear for the sake of the kingdom. We used this image of a tree from Psalm 1 for the Bishop's Appeal as a way to remind us that our strength and fruitfulness are drawn from the living water of God's Holy Spirit.

Our particular Lutheran rootedness connects us deeply to God through Word and Sacrament. The Word in scripture and preaching guides us, and the Word present in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist gives nourishment and strength. In the daily remembrance of our baptism we know the grace of forgiveness and the freedom from a need to save ourselves by our works. The rhythm of regular worship that connects us with these sacraments is the heartbeat of the life of faith for Lutherans. It is a uniquely powerful expression of Christianity: we are called to offer it to others.

How can we root ourselves even more deeply in God and God's vision for our work? Can we hear God's call to discipleship in a way that will enable it to shape us in new ways?

We are challenged to hear God's Word in a way that does not allow our rootedness to become "stuckness", but rather gives us the strength to grow in ways that we have

never grown before, and the faithful courage to go “out on a limb” for the sake of the gospel.

Listening Transforms Us for Mission

Though I squirmed and resisted, God did not let me off the hook: we are called to “transformation”. I resisted using that word because it is big, overused, and scary. It sounds too much like “change” – something that is tough for all of us. Those are the things that I do not like about it. What I do like is that it is biblical and it is the right word to explain the effect that listening to God’s Word should have on us. St. Paul says it this way:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12:2

When we listen carefully to God instead of letting the world’s voice coax us to conform to its ideals and values, we are transformed from the inside out in a gradual and joyful way that brings us to a different place in our lives of faith. Opening ourselves to transformation is the way to open ourselves to God’s will and to the ability to see the world as Jesus sees it – and then to respond to it in the ways that he would respond.

I am asking each person and each congregation to ask the question: How does God want us to be transformed? Then listen for the answer. Only in that way will God be able to renew our minds so that we can discern the will of God for our ministry and mission.

Listening Equips us for Hospitality

A Quaker writer, George Steere wrote:

To “listen” another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another. From Gleanings: A Random Harvest

Too often when we welcome visitors to our congregations we have an agenda. Maybe we long for new members, maybe we need new pledges, maybe we are afraid that our congregation will not survive unless it grows, and maybe we truly want others to be part of our happy church family. Those reasons are not all bad, but they fall short of an authentic and winsome welcome that happens when we listen well to newcomers.

People long to be heard and discovered and valued for who they are and for what they have to offer a community. When that happens through loving and holy listening, people feel that they have been given a gift, and that makes them want to be part of that

community so that they can offer their own gifts to it in return. The result will be a renewed and transformed congregation that finds new health and strength.

If we practice listening as the heart of our hospitality, then we will be a church where authentic welcome is common and noticeable growth and enrichment is inevitable.

Listening Opens us to Abundant Life

It is also true that the vision of a life of holy abundance becomes more clear when we listen well to God and to one another. For seven years we have shared a vision of abundance that has reminded us of the central importance of these four ways of life:

Praying unceasingly
 Giving extravagantly
 Insisting on Justice
 Trusting in Partnership

During these next five years, as we answer the biblical call “to listen so that we may live”, we will continue to use these challenges as ways to understand how to use listening as a powerful tool in our ministry. After a first year of learning how to listen more carefully, we will use these four areas as annual themes for our listening.

Each person, each congregation, each conference, each unit of the synod, and the staff of the Office of the Bishop will be challenged to listen and to develop activities and programs that unite us in a wide community of listening and response.

Our mission is God’s mission, and our vision is God’s vision. We will learn what to do as partners in this mission and vision as we listen to God and to one another, share prayers and ideas, evoke new gifts from one another, and offer hospitality to the new brothers and sisters that God is sending our way to help us to learn about transformation.

I look forward to the journey with you throughout these five years, and I pray that the ideas in this guide will become the path into a future of ministry that is pleasing to God.

Here are the themes and questions that will guide our ministry for these next five years:

- Year I.** **On the Way and listening.** (Isaiah 55:3)
- Year II.** **Listen: What is the Spirit saying to our church?** (Revelation 2:29)
- Year III.** **Listen: What is Jesus asking of us?** (Mark 9:7)
- Year IV.** **Listen: What does the Bible say about justice?** (Isaiah 59:15, 16)
- Year V.** **Listen: What is God’s plan for our work together?** (John 15:4, 5)

Year I. On the Way and listening

*Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live. Isaiah 55:3*

In this first year, we begin to think of ourselves less as members of an institution and more deeply as disciples who follow Jesus. The earliest Christians were known as “The People of the Way” before they were known as Christians. That naming identified them as those who followed the one who is God’s Way before there was a church that bore his name. What would it mean for us to revisit that basic identity? This year we will be on a journey to understand ourselves as faithful followers of Jesus who are trying to shape a new way of life. On this journey, we will commit to listen carefully as a way to hear Jesus’ words more clearly ... listening as new Christians.

During this year, as we practice our listening, we will listen especially to the words of scripture and our Lutheran understanding of the meaning of Jesus for the world. We will listen for the difference between a theology of glory and a theology of the cross, and understand the importance of our emphasis on God’s grace in Jesus Christ. But we will also seek to listen more deeply to those who think and believe differently than we do, both within our own congregations, in other faiths and in other parts of the world.

What are the things that we can do to learn how to listen better, to listen in places where we have not listened before, and to grow into people who are truly “On the Way” – with Jesus? How might holy listening change our hearts and our communities of faith?

Year II. Listen: What is the Spirit saying to our church?

*Let anyone who has an ear listen
to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Revelation 2:29*

When we think of what it might mean to **Pray Unceasingly**, the words seems to imply endless hours of petition, confession, praise.....and not too much time to attend to the matters of our lives: work, study, play and relationships. But unceasing prayer is better understood as a thankful and attentive way of life that transforms us from self-centered consumers into people who always have an ear ready to hear God’s voice in every part of their lives.

In the second year, we will listen hard through prayer, worship and meditation and seek to discern through our listening what God is saying to our church in our country in this time of history. Prayer is the deepest form of listening to God and prayer will be the primary practice that we emphasize during this year of listening.

What can we do to grow in all the spiritual practices that will enable us to listen more deeply to God for our own lives and for the life of the church? How might worship and prayer infuse every other part of our lives? What is God’s Spirit saying to our congregation? What is the new vision being whispered to our church?

Year III. Listen: What is Jesus asking of us?

*Then a cloud overshadowed them,
and from the cloud there came a voice,
“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him. Mark 9:7*

It is worth noting that Mark’s gospel makes a point of telling the disciples that God said to listen to Jesus. It does not say ‘obey’, it says: ‘listen’. What is so important about listening that would make it the command that God gives to the disciples during the experience of the Transfiguration? In this third year, we will listen to the many things that Jesus said about the importance of giving as the central activity of the life of faith.

When we think about the call to **Give Extravagantly**, most people agree that there is a holiness about giving, but a rather uncomfortable excess in the idea of giving extravagantly. Yet, wasn’t Christ’s giving of his life an extravagant gift to all of us? How do we respond to that extravagance? How do we move from the modest expectations of membership to the more radical and joyful experience of discipleship?

More than one third of all of Jesus’ sayings and parables were related our need to change our relationship with money and material possessions, and most of the rest of them described God’s kingdom – the place where our giving of justice is transformative.. How do we move beyond measured and unnoticeable giving into Jesus’ kind of extravagance? How can we be more extravagant in our hospitality? How can we be more extravagant in the way that we listen to youth, and young adults, and people who are different from us?

Year IV. Listen: What does the Bible say about justice?

*The Lord saw it, and it displeased him,
that there was no justice.
He saw that there was no one,
and was appalled that there was no one to intervene. Isaiah 59:15, 16*

There are countless verses in the bible that call us to the work of justice. Perhaps the most famous is from Micah – the call “to do justice and to love kindness”. Yet I agree with a preacher I once heard who commented to her congregation that it seemed to her that more often people “love justice and do kindness”. It is easy to love the idea of justice, but it is demanding and complicated and sometimes costly to actually do it.

Yet, our vision in New England calls us to **Insist on Justice** and that includes the doing of it as well as the loving of it. The verse from Isaiah reminds us that God looks for the doing of justice on earth, and is “appalled” when no one is willing to intervene for the sake of those who are suffering from the lack of justice. In this fourth year we will emphasize our confirmation promise “to strive for justice and peace in all the earth” and to listen anew to the pleas for justice that surround us and respond to them.

Can we tune in to hear the voices of those who crying for justice? Can we hear Christ's voice in their voices? Can we listen and hear the pain of immigrants, of those unfairly imprisoned, and of those who are suffering from hunger and violence and disease? Can we learn to understand deeply that we are "rich Christians in a hungry world"?

Year V. Listen: What is God's plan for our work together?

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:4, 5

We are all branches of the vine that is Jesus Christ. Our shared life is not a human invention, but a way to live that was given to us by God for our benefit and our fruitfulness. When we honor the call to **Trust in Partnership**, we are being faithful to Jesus' call to seek unity in love, and partnership in mission for his sake.

In this last year of our call to deep and holy listening, we will listen carefully to the voices and hopes and plans of our partners. How can we connect to our partners in this church so that the entire fabric of our New England and ELCA witness is strengthened? Can we listen in new ways that draw us out of congregational and personal isolation into an even stronger partnership? Who are new partners whose voices we might hear for the sake of God's kingdom in this pluralistic world? Where else might our listening take us?