

Holy Listening: A Tool for Discerning Calling
Curriculum for Faith Formation Leaders
A Project for Vibrant Faith, C3 Initiative

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Learning Objectives:

1. To give participants a basic understanding of Holy Listening as a spiritual discipline.
2. To develop participants' capacity for Holy Listening through practice.
3. To deepen the experience of Holy Listening with the related practices of Testimony, and Asking Self Awakening Questions.
4. To show participants how Holy Listening is connected to the Christian concept of calling.
5. To teach participants how to use Holy Listening as tool to hear God's voice in their community and in their own discernment of calling.

Workshop Content:

This workshop introduces participants to Holy Listening through the following five components:

- Teaching segment
- Practice in pairs
- Debrief of experience
- Continued practice/debrief
- Individual and/or group reflection

Workshop Materials:

The following materials should be provided by the host church or faith formation leaders:

- Enough printed out handouts for all participants, including a few extras for last minute attendees.
- Writing utensils – pencils, pens, etc.
- Loose leaf paper – both lined and unlined is preferable to give participants options.
- Option for snacks or full meal, drinks, plastic plates, utensils, cups, and napkins.

**Please note that the host church or faith formation leaders should tell participants that they will be providing writing materials ahead of time while also having the option for participants to bring their own. People often forget or neglect to bring writing materials, which is why having them available at the workshop is important. Writing materials should be placed on tables where participants will be sitting to easily access them.

Recommended Readings:

Faith formation leaders may find these readings helpful in conceptualizing the teaching portion of the workshop, as well as in expanding their understanding of the Christian concept of calling. The themes in Kathleen Cahalan's book *Stories We Live* and Parker Palmer's book *Let Your Life Speak* are of particular relevance to Holy Listening.

The Stories We Live: Finding God's calling all around us, by Kathleen Cahalan

Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the voice of vocation, by Parker Palmer

Teaching Segment:

The teaching segment of the workshop will be focused largely on giving participants a basic understanding of Holy Listening (as distinguished from more typical ways of listening, including Active Listening), and what specifically makes Holy Listening a spiritual discipline. It is understood that most participants will already have a working definition and conceptualization of calling due to the efforts of the C3 Initiative. Thus, faith formation leaders will focus their teaching primarily on how the concept of calling is both informed and expanded by Holy Listening.

The following is an outline intended to assist faith formation leaders in structuring their teaching segment. Faith formation leaders can treat this as a script that they can say verbatim, which will be in this regular Times New Roman font. Words in *italics* indicate instructions that will not be said aloud. Words in **bold** indicate headings that help to structure the teaching and that will not be said aloud. Faith formation leaders can choose to fill in illustrative examples from their personal lives as they desire and see fit. This is not required; however personal examples can be helpful both in elucidating concepts and establishing a deeper and more personal connection with participants. Alternatively, the handouts are created in such a way that faith formation leaders can provide an introduction, then simply invite participants to read sections aloud as the core of the teaching session, with the faith formation leaders offering explanation and commentary as needed.

Teaching Segment Script:

I. Opening Prayer

II. Opening Exercise

A. Small group option (or if time permits):

- i. We will do two rounds of introduction: First, we will go around the circle and briefly introduce ourselves as we normally do. After that, I'll tell you how we will do the second round.
- ii. *Allow the group to introduce themselves.*
- iii. For this second round of introductions, I would like you to introduce yourself in a way that helps us understand what you feel called to—less about your roles and more about how you use the gifts God has given you in the world.
- iv. *Allow the group to introduce themselves a second time.*
- v. Debrief: What was different about the second round?

B. Large group option (or short on time):

- i. One of the ways we get a sense of God's call for us is by noticing what gives us joy. I'd like to invite you to introduce yourself by saying your name, and one thing that gives you joy.
- ii. *Allow the group to introduce themselves*

III. Overview of Calling

A. Main Idea

- i. Calling is not only work we do and roles we have – it is about identity.
- ii. Calling begins with listening for our truest identity in God.
- iii. We must know and experience our identity as God's beloved children in order to live out our callings in powerful ways.

- iv. Our stories give us clues for how God has already been at work, and can help us learn to listen for how God might be calling us now.
- v. The practice of Holy Listening can be a tool to help get us there.

IV. Introduction to Holy Listening

A. Basic Overview

- i. One could argue that the primary Christian spiritual practice is listening.
- ii. We listen to scripture, to sermons, to hymns. We listen for the voice of God in prayer, in silence, in spiritual practices. We listen to other Christians' stories, confessions, struggles, joys, and testimonies.
- iii. Holy Listening as a practice is extremely simple, but also extremely powerful. It's a way to focus our attention and practice the art of listening well.
- iv. It's similar to active listening, but not the same. In active listening, we seek to fully understand and help the other person feel heard. In Holy Listening the goal is really to listen in a way that creates a holy space for someone's story to fully emerge so that they can be more in touch with how God is working in their life.
- v. Connected to Holy Listening are the practices of Testimony, which is simply speaking your truth out loud, and the asking of Self Awakening Questions, to invite deeper reflection.
- vi. Together, these ways of listening form the basis of many Christian discernment practices like the "Clearness" practice that comes from the Quaker tradition.
- vii. Like all spiritual practices, the only way to really learn them is to "practice."

B. Addressing Apprehensions

- i. This may feel awkward at first. We are taking a normal, daily activity (listening to someone) and putting it into unnatural constraints. Go with it, it gets easier with time.
- ii. It's important to say: not every spiritual practice works for everyone. You may hate this or you may love it, but its only in the doing of it that you'll learn if this is something that could benefit your spiritual life.

C. Introducing the Practice of Holy Listening (*this material is also on the handout*)

- i. Holy listening is very different from every day listening, where often we listen to what is being said only enough to form a response.
- ii. Holy listening invites us to slow down, take a look around, and create space between us to speak the truths of our lives out loud to one another.
- iii. We focus on the speaker, as the listener practices a disciplined posture of care, hospitality, relaxed awareness, and attentiveness.
- iv. We are invited to "listen to another person in the way we listen to scripture".
- v. Douglass Steere writes of the sacred nature of this practice: "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."
- vi. God is revealed to us in the stories of scripture, and in the stories of God's community. When we gain the ability to listen to one another deeply, we may begin to notice the presence of God in other people's stories—and more and more in our story as well.
- vii. Creating a space for those stories to live and move is part of creating a community where we all have room to discover our gifts and become who God is creating us to be.
- viii. *Reflection question (as a group or individual written with optional debrief):*
 1. When have you experienced this kind of listening?

D. Introducing the Practice of Testimony (*this material is also on the handout*)

- i. Clearly, listening is only one part of the equation. In order to listen, you also need someone to speak.
- ii. The corresponding practice to Holy Listening is Testimony.
- iii. Testimony is the practice of sharing with honesty the stories that give meaning to our lives.
- iv. In some churches, it means standing up to tell your conversion experience or personal salvation story.
- v. Testimony can include these stories but can also be seen more broadly.
- vi. In their book “Lives to Offer” authors Dori Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer encourage us in testimony not only to focus on “God’s already-finished action in the world” but also to testify of those moments that have “been tucked into the seams of everyday living” because “in the presence of an artful listener, we may better be able to discern a pattern of calling, claiming, and ongoing revelation woven through these life events.”
- vii. Testimony is simply telling the truth of our lives out loud to one another. As we share stories about our lives, we testify to our truths.
- viii. *Reflection question (as a group or individual written with optional debrief):*
 - 1. What images or connotations does the word “testimony” evoke in you? What memories of “testimony” do you have from your upbringing?

E. Practicing Holy Listening and Testimony (basic instructions are also on the handout)

- i. We will now practice Holy Listening and Testimony.
- ii. I invite you to find a partner, preferably someone you don’t know well.
- iii. Find a comfortable place where you can face each other (move chairs etc. as needed).
- iv. Decide who will share first, and who will share second.
- v. Once we begin, you will have 2 minutes in silence to think, and then 2 minutes each to share a story based on a prompt I’m going to give you in just a minute.
- vi. Listeners: Make eye contact. Give your full attention. Pretend that you have all the time in the world (even though you only have 2 minutes!).
- vii. This isn’t a time for the listeners to speak—simply listen. Normal body language and small natural noises (uh-huh, etc.) are ok. It doesn’t need to be more awkward than it already is. But you should not be responding or asking questions.
- viii. Storytellers: Speak from your heart. Don’t worry about having a beginning, middle and end. Add details to draw us in to the story, try to be specific and descriptive and focus on a particular moment in your life.
- ix. Are there any questions about the practice before I give you the prompt?
- x. The prompt is: Tell a story about a time when someone took you or your gifts seriously? (*repeat and clarify to ensure the prompt is understood by all.*)
- xi. Is everyone ready? Now you have two minutes in silence to reflect on this question. Two minutes, ready...go.
- xii. *Set a timer for 2 minutes, and alert the group when time is up.*
- xiii. Ok, now the first person has 2 minutes to tell their story about “a time when someone took you or your gifts seriously.” Two minutes, ready...go.
- xiv. *Set a timer for 2 minutes, and alert the group when time is nearly up that they need to wrap up their story. Call time, and be sure you have everyone’s attention again. You may need to fudge a bit based on the room, especially in the first round. But don’t extend beyond 20-30 more seconds.*

- xv. Ok, now the second person has 2 minutes to tell their story about “a time when someone took you or your gifts seriously.” Two minutes, ready...go.
- xvi. *Again, set a timer for 2 minutes, and alert the group when time is nearly up that they need to wrap up their story.*
- xvii. *Invite the partners to thank each other for their stories, then call everyone back into the group for debrief.*
- xviii. Questions for debrief (and/or journaling).
 - 1. How did that feel?
 - 2. What about it was hard?
 - 3. How did it feel to be the one listened to?
 - 4. How did it feel to speak without interruption?
 - 5. How did it feel to talk about your gifts? Was it hard? Easy?
Embarrassing? Exciting?
 - 6. Why don’t we normally listen like this?
 - 7. How do you think our relationships and communities might be different if people listened to each other in this way?
- xix. *Change partners and repeat the practice in as many rounds as you desire or time allows. If doing multiple rounds, consider spreading out and/or repeating some of the debrief questions between rounds. You can also ask questions such as: “Was it easier the second time around? Why?”*

F. Overview of Self Awakening Questions

- i. *If you are in an extended retreat setting, it is wise to take a break before beginning this section. If you are doing this as a subsequent session on a different day or with some who didn’t participate in the first session, take some time to summarize the Holy Listening/Testimony practice and do at least one round of practice pairs so that everyone has a recent experience of that part of the practice.*
- ii. The practices of Holy Listening and Testimony create the space for deeper reflection and connection help us get in touch with the important stories of our lives.
- iii. People who do this practice often report that they feel a strong connection to the person they are listening to (or who is listening to them). They both see connections to their own story, and also want to explore more with the person who they are listening to. The “no response” element of the Holy Listening practice doesn’t allow space for these kinds of interactions.
- iv. While much of those sorts of things are actually the fruits of this practice (and can happen naturally as we listen to each other outside of this kind of space), there is an additional practice that can be added to Holy Listening that can take it to another level.
- v. Like Holy Listening and Testimony, the practice of “Asking Self Awakening Questions” isn’t particularly complicated. But the intentional nature of this practice has a way of opening up a powerful, shared experience. All through the asking of a particular sort of question in a particular way.

G. Introducing the Practice of Asking Self Awakening Questions (*this material is also on the handout*)

- i. Jesus asked his friends and followers an important question: “What do you want me to do for you?” Sometimes he would do what they asked. But the question always invited them to interrogate their lives and their deepest desires.

- ii. Good questions, asked by a caring listener, can wake us up to our own lives, the life around us, and to the life of God.
- iii. Self-awakening questions are not always the questions we are in the habit of asking, but they become more habitual with practice.
- iv. They help us recognize gifts, listen more attentively for God's presence, and hear God's call. They are questions that emerge when our heads and hearts are open to the holy.
- v. We invite the storyteller to explore metaphors or images that help the explore who she is, what she loves, and what she cares passionately about.
- vi. Rather than satisfy our curiosity, these questions help the speaker walk around in his story long enough to remember risks, challenges, choices, and outcomes—and notice the presence of God.
- vii. *Reflection question (as a group or individual written with optional debrief):*
 1. Who in your life has asked you questions that led you to go deeper into your story, your passions, your values? What were the questions?

H. Framing Self Awakening Questions (*this material is also on the handout*)

- i. The best questions are simple, brief and to the point.
- ii. They are not questions to which you could anticipate the answers, or with right or wrong answers.
- iii. Invite the storyteller deeper self-reflection on his or her faith, gifts and sense of call or meaning.
- iv. Ask "how," "what" or "why" questions.
- v. Invite images or metaphors because they can open things up in ways that more direct questions don't.
- vi. Ask questions to clarify feelings, images, passions, concerns, hopes and values as well as patterns and themes in his or her story.
- vii. Ask questions aimed at helping the storyteller to walk around in his or her story—in order to remember the risks or challenges, choices and outcomes—rather than satisfying your own curiosity.
- viii. Watch the pacing of the questions, allowing some silence. Trust your intuition in asking questions.
- ix. As you listen deeply to the storyteller allow your questions to emerge from a place where your head and heart are opened to the presence of the holy.
- x. *Reflection question (as a group or individual written with optional debrief):*
 1. What are some questions you might ask that could help someone "go deeper" with their story?

I. Practicing Asking Self Awakening Questions (*basic instructions are also on the handout*)

- i. *Review the instructions for Holy Listening/Testimony as needed.*
- ii. Find a partner (same partner if you have just done a round of Holy Listening)
- iii. Decide who will share first, and who will share second. You will have 2 minutes in silence to think, and then 2 minutes to share your story.
- iv. The listener will then have 2 minutes to form and then ask a Self-Awakening Question (and listen to the response).
- v. Take your time to formulate and ask the question, don't rush. You don't need to ask a lot of questions—just one. See if you can find the right one.
- vi. Remember, this question isn't to satisfy your curiosity, but rather a question to open the storyteller up to their own story and invite them to go deeper.

- vii. A really good question will cause the storyteller to have to think—or maybe isn’t one they will be able to respond to right now. Silent reflection after a question is asked can often be the most powerful response.
- viii. This practice is really about forming a good question—later we will give more time for a more natural interaction and response.
- ix. *Check for understanding, when everyone is ready, move on:*
- x. The prompt is the same as before: Tell a story about a time when someone took you or your gifts seriously.
- xi. 2 min silence, 2 min person A tell story, 2 min for person B to ask a question (and response). Then 2 min person B story, 2 min ask a question (and response).
- xii. *Again, set a timer for 2 minutes, and alert the group when time is nearly up that they need to wrap up their story.*
- xiii. *At the end, invite the partners to thank each other for their stories and their questions, then call everyone back into the group for debrief.*
 1. What was it like to have someone ask you a “self-awakening question”? What was freeing about it? What was scary?
 2. What makes for a good self-awakening question? What were some of the really good questions some of you were asked?
 3. How can you tell if someone asking you a question is really interested in you, or is asking the question for other reasons?
 4. How does each sort of question make you feel?
 5. What did the questions open up for you in this exercise?
 6. Were you surprised by your answers? Did any of the questions stump you? How might you let those questions continue to work on you?
 7. Why do you think Jesus asked so many questions? What was he trying to do when he did that?
 8. What are the next steps for you in discovering your gifts and discerning your vocation?
- xiv. *Change partners and repeat the practice in as many rounds as you desire or time allows. If doing multiple rounds, consider spreading out and/or repeating some of the debrief questions between rounds. After a couple of rounds, you can increase the time for forming and asking questions to 5 minutes or more so that more than one question can be asked. However, remind participants know that silence in this process can be helpful—don’t feel like you need to fill the time with words. Some of the reflection questions above may be most suited for a closing debrief—as a group or with time allowed for individual journaling.*

J. Conclusion

- i. Recall the quote from Douglass Steere: “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.”
- ii. Just the act of listening, deeply listening, to the proclaimed truth of another can be a powerful act—and can open us up to our own stories, to the presence of God, and to the ways in which God is calling us.

K. Closing Prayer

- i. Personal prayer, and/or poem below: “Ask Me” by William Stafford

Some time when the river is ice ask me
 mistakes I have made. Ask me whether
 what I have done is my life. Others

have come in their slow way into
my thought, and some have tried to help
or to hurt: ask me what difference
their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say.
You and I can turn and look
at the silent river and wait. We know
the current is there, hidden; and there
are comings and goings from miles away
that hold the stillness exactly before us.
What the river says, that is what I say.

- ii. Thank you for spending time with us in Holy Listening and holding the stillness exactly before us.