

# Introduction

"Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying."  
—Luke 10:39

During the autumn of 1997, a group of ministers met in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, for a presentation and discussion about ministry and listening. One participant asked plaintively, "Who will teach us to listen for God—and to each other?" The silence that followed accurately reflects the current vacuum of listening education for those in pastoral leadership ministry.

*Listening Ministry* examines the role listening plays in the lives of those professionally engaged in lay and ordained ministry and entertains several ambitious intentions. It intends to provide the first blueprint, sometimes experimental in nature, for a theology of listening. As such, it provides a theological rationale for the development of good listening skills emerging from the witness of scriptural, pastoral, and theological traditions. That this book developed out of the author's work and experiences as a homiletician and pastor might be considered ironic or in direct contradiction to the Protestant emphasis on word, speech, and proclamation. However, the activities of listening—its meanings, presuppositions, intentions, and effects—offer a needed reformation for both our ministry leadership and for the nature of our theological speech in a word-saturated world. Foreground and background are inseparable. *Listening Ministry* describes the critical role of listening—the most basic field of speech communications—in all aspects of pastoral leadership and ministry. By doing so, it challenges the assumption that traditional listening patterns and skills are only the purview of good pastoral counseling methods. In fact, the act of listening extends into all arenas of ministry, with corresponding shifts in listening patterns, attitudes, and behaviors dependent on context.

We all speak frequently and in many ways. But who, after all is said and done, really listens? In fact, we rarely stop to consider the dynamics of listening. Yet listening is the primary trajectory of all other communication acts. It is the first learned type of communication, the most predominant of all speech communication acts, and often the last ability exercised before death. Listening is a key component in the way individuals and organizations function with one another; it has a direct bearing on the ways power and authority are exercised. An inability or refusal to listen could result in death, both spiritual and physical. It is the life-giving connective link between God and humanity.

Yet listening is a communication skill often ignored and little understood.

The evolution of this book started in the homiletics classrooms of Gettysburg Lutheran Theological Seminary. Like homiletics instructors in most faith perspectives, I spent my classroom time mainly listening to and commenting on student preaching. After awhile, however, it seemed insufficient to me to limit my remarks to delivery and sermon construction alone. Necessary questions related to inclusive language and theology fell short of some needed further step—but what? What did classroom preaching and commentary leave untouched? I was uncertain as to what was missing.

Through the Speech Communication Association and its multiple interest groups, I came across the International Listening Association. Because of interaction with that group, I moved toward a pedagogical and personal approach that situates me primarily as a listener to proclamation, along with other listeners-in-community. That change in perspective radically changed my views of teaching, pastoral leadership, and ministry. The reader will see these ideas more fully explored in the coming pages.

In turn, the insights gained in the homiletics classrooms evolved into a course on listening for church leaders in the spring of 1997. I taught the classes with Norma Wood, a counselor by vocation and now dean of the seminary. We believe the course was the first of its kind in any venue of theological education. With no book available on listening ministry, we used the seminal work *Listening* by college professors Andrew Wolvin and Carolyn Gwynn Coakley. Their rich, in-depth research and the resultant taxonomy of listening levels are referred to frequently in these pages; they serve as the dialogue partner and theoretical spine of this volume. The reader is encouraged to pursue this primary source on listening.

Those pondering the thoughtful incorporation of better listening practices into their ministries will no doubt encounter what the class did in dialogue with listening theory. We were intrigued with what it meant to view ministry primarily as listener rather than as speaker and doer. We continually found ourselves caught off guard, our biases and methods of ministry challenged by what seemed obvious yet was often difficult to practice or even to understand. We found we actually knew very little about the processes involved in listening. We wondered constantly why our training had so completely ignored such a crucial human element of communication in the lives of faith communities. The almost offhanded nature of listening continually double backed on us with multiple surprises.

Early in the course it became apparent that the listening typology provided by the Wolvin-Coakley work demonstrated the total absence of any research or written materials specifically for pastoral leaders on listening. Of necessity, this book has become, in part, a "class act." It reflects and encompasses many of the issues, frustrations, and insights the students brought from their varied ministry sites. The pastoral listening venues identified in these pages reflect the participants' creativity and their plans to specify listening tactics as a consciously developed part of their ministries. They contributed to the three major, related definitions of pastoral listening introduced in chapter 1 and explored more fully throughout *Listening Ministry*. Based on these struggles, this volume is an unabashed effort to start the conversation about making the connections among these three components: pastoral ministry, leadership, and listening skills. This is an invitation to look at pastoral leadership in a completely different way. In these pages the reader will find a blend of theological thinking on listening, new and tested research, suggested forms of listening education and skills assessment, and a continuing effort to understand listening as the heart of effective and faithful ministry.

The book encompasses several dynamics related to ministry and listening. First, it situates the listening event among leaders and those to whom they minister. This book cannot be regarded as solo continuing theological education; listening always involves "the other" or "others," making it an intensely community-based and context-centered activity. Learning listening skills can happen only when the learner practices, and faith communities are often eager to participate with leadership in this mutual means of deepening their lives and work.

Second, pastoral leadership listening is set within the context of its adjacent and interactive influences. These involve nonverbal behaviors such as silence and the variety of "contact codes" related to the ordering of time, space, touch, and varieties of verbal expressiveness that form the act of listening. Complicating and enriching the listening process are also the multiple factors of age, gender, race, personality, power, and context. Finally, the types of listening referred to throughout address both individual and corporate forms of listening. The Wolvin-Coakley taxonomy, together with the pioneering work developed through the Gettysburg Seminary class discussions, will demonstrate the multilayered components of listening involved as the pastoral leader moves through a variety of listening venues—ranging from the individual to groups to the entire congregation, as well as to other communities outside the parish. Listening is contextual. A college instructor

intent on teaching listening competencies, or a pilot learning the life-and-death needs of listening well in the cockpit, enter the field with intentions and needs different from the professional pastoral leader. What follows in these pages will cover some of the basics involved in good listening regardless of the setting, but with a special eye to the needs of ministry.

Since the field of communications termed "listening" covers many areas, this work is primarily devoted to listening as a skill that intersects all areas of pastoral ministry. Specialized listening settings related to those who suffer hearing loss or impairment are exempted from this volume since the field of study in this area has its own rich and extensive literature. While acknowledging the contributions of other adjacent fields, this is not a book on listening based on pastoral counseling (with its attendant verbal frames and techniques), pastoral theology, psychology, the contemplative tradition, or parish management—helpful as those materials are. I refer to these contributory areas only with the intention of continuing the focus on listening skills as a bridge to all ministry settings. In chapter 1, basic definitions, understandings, and benefits of listening are introduced. They describe listening generally, within the possibilities and constraints of pastoral listening. Successive chapters explore the settings and enactments of listening communication in its different pastoral forms. The reader will note that each chapter introduces a number of new ideas, some of which are explored fully with others offered in outline form only, as further prompts for the reader's own thinking and research. Every chapter concludes with questions for discussion that are useful in ministry settings of many types. The intent of the extensive bibliography at the book's conclusion is to further whet the appetite of the reader in developing her or his own theology of ministry that includes good listening.

However, perhaps the most significant struggle the pastoral leader will have is simply to consider how to listen better. Trained as fixers of humanity, the minister will find that the best response to the pastoral question "What can I do" resides in the place of loving and gracious listening.