



Missouri District

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH — MISSOURI SYNOD

Effective Listening Resource

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For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39*

*This includes present pandemics, future social distancing mandates, masks, and all the other COVID-19 hurdles we are overcoming.

When a soothing, empathetic ear is in high demand— like during a pandemic— our capacity to listen to the needs of others and respond with thoughtful engagement is severely diminished. Our God-given body senses the visceral suffering of other's. We feel their chaos & pain which propels our *fight, flight, or freeze* reaction.

But, I have good news for you. The best way to combat fight, flight, or freeze reaction— God's Word.

Into your overwhelm, fear, anger, sadness, and *anything else* you may be struggling with, God provides a savior: Jesus. *HIS* body and blood offered on the cross and at the altar soothes *YOUR* body and blood and *HIS* Word supports *YOUR* listening, caring, and reaching out to others.

Through Jesus we are comforted. In our affliction we are renewed to be able to reach out, listen, empathize, and comfort people in this pandemic.

The Problem

Overtaxed defense mechanisms push us to stop listening, to pull back from others and seek things to remedy our unease.



Real quotes from July, 2020:

- “I don’t listen to the (TV) news anymore” – Pastor
- “Dad, can you turn off the news” – Teenager
- “We just need guidance! Why can’t the elders meet with us!” – Staff Member
- “I’ve started to unfriend Facebook people who rant” – Friend
- “The school system released their plan for restructuring the day before more restrictions were issued! What do we now?” – Parent
- “We’re mandated to wear masks in public? This is unconstitutional!!! – Facebook Post

The Solution

God's Word renews us. And here's how to incorporate that comfort into a situation that you may experience.

Proposed Actions & Change Factors

1. Interrupt pain with Grace! **Bring Jesus into the moment.** Support from God’s Word through God’s people turns heads. Often people are just needing encouragement. Use scripture. Tell them you love them and God loves them.
2. Listen by remaining engaged. Abandon abandonment... Put on a mask, rub endows and be together. Be in-tune with people in pain, **AND YOU WILL CHANGE MOODS.**
3. Take it up a notch to a spiritual conversation about God’s Grace in Jesus, **AND YOU WILL BRING HOPE FOR ETERNITY.** Yes, it even works 6 feet away, by phone or video chat.

Remember that you are never alone, because God never leaves you alone. God’s mercy stays engaged.

“Blessed be... the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Faithful Adaptations: What increasing incidences of listening did for others:

- “We plan *regular* walks to get outside, where we can distance yet be together, *see* each other and *talk* about what we’re learning” – Retirement Community Resident
- “I made an *appointment* to talk to my pastor, he listened and then he *connected* me with another pastor who *specialized* in managing issues like mine” – College student
- “Our small group Bible study is sending Bible verses and prayer requests daily by text message to each other” – Mother at home during the stay-at-home order
- “Our family printed devotions from our church website and used them at the dinner table rotating who got to read and pray” – Dad working from home

Guiding Principle #1: Effective Christian Listening Uses the Gospel

It seems an *oxymoron* to simultaneously retreat *and* reach out, but retreating into God’s Word is critical to be able to effectively reach out during a pandemic! Fear of COVID-19 is confronted by God’s people



and alleviated by the presence of the resurrected Jesus' promises. When the Good News of Jesus is heard, peace and joy reduce and replace people's feelings of distress.

- Your hearing of God's good news cultivates your capacity to care for others. From our ears to theirs, the Holy Spirit comforts us in our suffering which then continues to flow out into the world. Practice telling someone else what God has done for you, for all.
- **Scripture Reference:** *"A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit... The light of the eyes rejoices the heart, and good news refreshes the bones."* Proverbs 15:4, 30
- **Discuss:**
 - When have you heard someone personally apply God's Good News to you?
 - If you were to apply those words of encouragement to someone you know, what would you say to them? See Resource from *Ambassadors of Reconciliation* at aorhope.org.

Guiding Principle #2: Assess and Steward for the Long-Haul

How ministers "survive & thrive" through it all depends on 5 interdependent resilient factors found by researchers Burns, Chapman & Guthrie (2013). The following items cannot be separated without diminishing their resilience. Losing one component ruins the quality of all the others. They include:

- - Spiritual Formation
 - Self-Care
 - Emotional & Cultural Intelligence
 - Marriage & Family
 - Leadership & Management
- **Listen Effectively with Support**
 - Gather regularly with people who listen well... to God and to others.
 - Our "listening" capacity can be quite big, but in order to keep hearing each other, we need God's miraculous Gospel assurance at every point of hearing, seeing, or feeling.
- **Scripture Reference:**
 - "...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ..." Ephesians 4:12
- **Discuss:**
 - Who do you meet with on a regular basis to hold private conversations where confession and absolution can be shared for mutual care and consolation?
 - What are the barriers of gathering to share personal and professional growth, discussions, and prayer?

Guiding Principle #3: Assess & Steward Your Emotions

We are swimming in an environment of conflicts, which send us in circles. And, although you've not likely added "manage my emotions" to your schedule, regularly maintaining your own emotions prepares and frees you from handling them in a tight moment or tense discussion. Remember that despite all things going on, God still desires to bring the joy of His salvation to you.

- **Listen to your current emotions:** Can you name what you are feeling? Become self-aware of how you are feeling. You should feel and respectfully manage and steward your emotions



within the context of that situation. Putting off analysis of our experience assumes that we can handle the burdens without reconciling problems nor thanking God for providing earthly & spiritual blessings.

- **Listen to your past emotions:** Do you need to release some grudges or do you suffer from long lasting guilt? Guilt has very little power to foster positive change compared to actual support. Most of the time people don't look close enough to the heart of a situation to forgive the innumerable negative influences that contribute to a particular failure. Forgiveness is applicable to *every part* of a damaging offense. Since personal failures—by definition—involve our own feelings, it is helpful to have someone help give a deeper analysis of the situation. Ask a trusted person or loved one if they are willing to help.
- **Listen to your future emotions:** Do you sense a threat, danger, or unease? How about an unavoidable conflict, disagreement of values, loss, or fear of loss? The whole Christian church on earth is called upon to serve—not just you, not alone, and not without calling upon God for appropriate resources. As the COVID-19 pandemic lengthens, adjusting is a group task for God's people.
- **Scripture:** *"Blessed be... the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."* 2 Corinthians 1:3-4
- **Discuss:**
 - Add "listening to my emotions" to your calendar. And see what might it look like, sound like, or feel like to assess and attend to your emotions regularly.
 - Try naming the emotions you are currently feeling or look up some feeling words to pick from and what you might say to your significant others about them.

References and Resources

- *Resilient Ministry-What Pastors told us about Surviving and Thriving* by Bob Burns, Tasha D. Chapman & Donald C. Guthrie, 2013.
- *Built on The Rock-The Healthy Congregation*, 2017, by Ted Kober
- Free booklet on God's grace through Confession & Absolution
- *Created for Connection-Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love* by Dr. Sue Johnson with Kenneth Sanderfer, 2016.
- *The Spiritually Vibrant Home-The Power of Messy Prayers, Loud Tables and Open Doors* by Don Everets, 2020;
- "Listen, Listen God is calling, through the word inviting, offering forgiveness, comfort and joy" (LSB #833, words by H. S. Olson, tune by A. C. Lovelace)

Next Steps

As a simple Good News next step, take a look at the virtual conference offered by Ambassadors of Reconciliation across August and September 2020. It's offered for free and the first ones are coming up in just a couple of weeks. You can take a look at the dozens of speakers and workshop titles starting now and register for any of the Gospel centered sessions. You can find it at

<https://www.aorhope.org/conf2020>. It's an easy first start, but it will also give you a taste of hearing someone speaking the Good News of our Lord Jesus to you while remaining COVID-19 safe.

Concluding Thought



YOU ARE NOT LISTENING *ALONE*. Effective care, effective listening, effective ministry is possible BECAUSE GOD LISTENED FIRST! From the first moment of human sin God promised the Savior. “[Jesus said] I am with you always, *to the end of the age*” Matthew 28:20

This paper is limited to a brief presentation of much more extensive researched subjects. This material is presented in order to encourage further discussion and resourcing of church workers and congregations of the Missouri District-LCMS. The author encourages further self-study & group Bible study in the context and relationship of a local LCMS congregation and/or pastor.

For further dialog or inquiry about this paper or to find other resources on this topic, contact:

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