

## Ears to hear: tutor notes for an introduction to listening skills

### Introduction

Some material in this workshop is drawn from the book *Swift to Hear* by Michael Jacobs (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) SPCK, 2000. If you want to run a longer course in your parish or deanery, then that book is written more as a training resource than a “read-at-one-sitting” book. It is full of exercises you can use and adapt for the group you are working with. This workshop is a standalone introduction you can use in your ministry context and includes other sources.

This workshop is intended as a whole morning workshop. Some similar material is covered in the ALM Pastoral Worker module but even if some people have already done that training, this will still be of value, as listening always benefits from practice. This workshop could be split over two shorter evening sessions. It is not an introduction to counselling, but simply about skills that will enrich our ability to listen to the people we are talking to, which can be useful in any situation, but particularly in the context of pastoral ministry.

It really helps to have two tutors, and if possible, try to identify a second chair who has some good experience as a listener, and themselves had some training in listening skills. This is not only useful for reading the dialogues, but it means that one tutor can be focused on the group while the other is providing input. It is also healthy for mutual support and modelling collaborative ministry.

You will know the people in your workshop. The material here can be usefully covered in a full morning with a decent coffee break, but consider your own timings in the light of who is attending, and how thoroughly you want to explore the material on the two handouts.

### Getting going

#### Welcome and introductions

After welcoming everyone, emphasise the practical nature of what we’ll be doing together. Then invite people to talk in pairs, and say a little about themselves, and one reason why they’ve come to the workshop. Suggest that each person should talk for about two minutes, then swap over. Call out after 2½ minutes that people should swap over if they haven’t yet done so.

After five minutes, ask people, going round the group, to introduce the person they’ve been talking to, say one fact about them, and one reason why they’ve come to the workshop. E.g. “This is Mary. She has four children who’ve all left home now. She’s come to this workshop because she wants to join the parish visiting group.”

#### Being listened to

Invite people to think for a few minutes on their own about a time when someone really listened to them. Then ask them to discuss in pairs some of the things that made them think they were being well listened to. After about five minutes, invite people to report back what they found, and write these up on a flipchart. It’s a list we shall build on later.

#### Good and bad listening

Here are two dialogues for the tutors to read in front of the group. It helps to have rehearsed them together beforehand. Before you begin to read them, ask the group to listen carefully, and take notes of points that strike them as either helpful or unhelpful responses. These dialogues and a second set can be found in Jacobs pp4-7.

## Dialogue 1

Paula Hello?

Visitor I'm the street warden from the church. I'm just calling because I notice you recently moved into the road. I wanted to introduce myself to you and see if there's anything you need – you know, information about the area – that sort of thing.

Paula Thank you. I'm not sure there's anything ... but come in a moment ...

Visitor Are you sure? I needn't keep you long unless there's anything I can do to help.

Paula I'm not sure there is ... Though I must say people aren't that friendly around here, not compared to where we came from.

Visitor I'm sorry to hear that. Have you moved far?

Paula Quite a way. My partner went for this new job and so I had to come ...

Visitor That's hard ... You didn't have much say in that?

Paula Well, you don't do you? It was a good opening for him, more money, but ...  
[falls silent]

Visitor But as far as you were concerned ...?

Paula Yes – for me it wasn't so good. I had to leave my little job; it was in such a friendly firm.

Visitor And round here it doesn't feel friendly ...

Paula No, it doesn't, you're right there.

Visitor I imagine it's difficult to feel very good about people when you're not sure you want to be here.

Paula I suppose that's it. It's not like me to feel down, but I've been feeling ever so low since we moved in.

Visitor It sounds as if you've had to leave behind friends, a nice job, your own life, for the sake of your partner ...

Paula I don't blame him ... I mean, it was a good move for him.

Visitor But for the moment I guess it doesn't feel such a good one for you.

Paula Well ...  
[falls silent]

Visitor Do you want to tell me a bit more about what you miss from your old home? I mean, I don't want to intrude, but ...

Paula No, it would be nice to tell you a bit about it. I miss my friends I used to chat to ... well I think if I was more myself I might feel a bit more like getting to know people here. Do you know, one of the differences I've noticed about this area is that ...

[And that's where we'll end the first dialogue]

## Pause

Give people a few minutes to note down anything they want about the first dialogue, before reading the second.

## Dialogue 2

Paula Hello?

Visitor I'm the street warden from the church. I'm just calling because I notice you recently moved into the road. I wanted to introduce myself to you and see if there's anything we can do for you. There's lots of things going on at the local church ...

Paula Thank you. I'm not sure there's anything. You see I'm not religious ...

Visitor That doesn't matter. Can I come in? It won't take long. There's just a few things to tell you.

Paula I'm not sure ... but if you want to.

Visitor Thank you. Oh, this is nice, isn't it? You *have* settled in well. It's pleasant round here, isn't it?

Paula I suppose so. Actually I didn't want to move here, but my partner went for this new job, so I had to.

Visitor You do have to go where your husband goes, don't you? One of the drawbacks of being a woman, isn't it, really?

Paula It was a good opening for him, more money, but ...  
[falls silent]

Visitor That'll be nice, won't it? Bit more to spend ... Nice house too.

Paula I suppose so. I had to leave my little job; It was in such a friendly firm.

Visitor I expect you'll soon get another one. There are quite a lot of part-time openings round here, you know.

Paula Maybe ... though I don't feel like applying for anything at present.

Visitor Oh, you will in time, when you're a bit more settled. It takes time, you know. I found that when I moved here. But I must say our little church is a very friendly place. You'd like it.

Paula [switches off] Mm ...

Visitor There's a nice family service, just right for the children.

Paula We haven't got any children.

Visitor Oh, what a shame. It's so much easier settling in with children, isn't it? You know you meet other mothers at the school, and ...

Paula Well ...  
[falls silent]

Visitor Let me tell you a bit more about what we have at the church. You'll be able to meet people there very easily ...

Paula Well, I don't want to be rude, but perhaps another time. I must get on. There's still lots of things to get straight. I'm sure you understand.

## Reflection

What points have people noticed where the visitor's response seems helpful or unhelpful? Add the helpful ones to the list people made in the opening exercise (or tick existing items that are repeated this time). Make a separate list of the things that people identify as unhelpful. Make sure the lists are displayed so that people can see them.

*Handout 1* summarises the table Jacobs gives of the sorts of things that people identify during this exercise. Give the handout to members of the group. As you go down the lists, invite group members to tick the ones that are on the group's flipchart list, while you may find it helpful to underline or asterisk the ones on your list that come up in Jacobs' lists. Start with the helpful.

Be alert for any instances where there are mismatches between Jacobs' lists and the group's lists and make those a point for further reflection. Likewise, has the group identified anything that is not on Jacobs' lists. Is that something they want to re-evaluate, or have they found something worth adding?

Not all of Jacobs' list relates to this dialogue, some of it is found in a second set of dialogues in his book, so make sure the group knows not to expect everything to relate to the exercise that they've just done. But they may or may not miss some that are there, and it will be helpful to stimulate discussion about this, for example, does the observation that "You have to go where your husband does" fall into the category of sexism?

What strikes the group as some of the most important things on Jacobs' lists which weren't on the one the group compiled? (Some of these may relate to the second dialogue they haven't heard.)

## Guidelines: Handout 2

Jacobs offers some guidelines for both listening, and the kind of responses that help people feel listened to, and which keep the conversation going. These are on Handout 2. Give these out, and talk people through each one, inviting the group to think of, and share examples of each one.

## Break

This is a good time to take a coffee break before moving on to the next exercise. However, before you do, it will be worth flagging the next exercise. Say that after the break everyone will have to talk for five minutes in a small group about a recent or current issue, at work, at home, or in the community. If everyone is from different churches, then people could also choose an issue in their church, but this should be avoided if everyone is from the same church.

## Listening in triplets

In this exercise people work in threes. There are three roles in each group: Speaker, Listener and Observer. Everyone takes a turn at each. (Depending on numbers a tutor may need to take a role in a triplet. Decide who is to take which role. Then follow this pattern (with a tutor acting as timekeeper)

- The Speaker will talk for five minutes about a recent or current issue as described above, the role of the people involved (avoiding identifying individuals) and how it was, or might be, developed or resolved.
- The Listener pays close attention and may respond by nodding, smiling, frowning, etc. in empathy and by making short, appropriate comments.
- The Observer also pays close attention to the exchange, but without interacting with what the Speaker is saying.
- After five minutes, the Listener summarises the story they have heard. (Up to three minutes.)

- When they have finished their summary, the Observer offers their feedback on how from their viewpoint, the Listener has understood the story and really heard the Speaker. (About two minutes.)
- Finally, the Speaker offers some feedback on how it felt being listened to. (About two minutes.)

Then people change roles and repeat the exercise twice until all have taken each role.

### Group reflection

Draw people back together, acknowledging that some people might have found the exercise difficult. Note that if their conversations have raised any particular issues for them, in case they picked a bigger issue than they'd intended to do, that you as tutors will stay around afterwards if they want to talk.

Offer a chance to reflect on each of the roles with the whole group

**Speakers** – what did it feel like to be listened to? Did anything – a feeling, a thought, an idea – change for you as a result of being able to talk about the issue you chose?

**Listeners** – how hard was it to listen for five minutes? What felt most difficult? Were you aware of any particular technique among those we've discussed which you found you were using, or finding helpful?

**Observers** – what was it like to listen to a conversation in which you were not allowed to speak? Did the role of observer feel harder or easier than that of listener? What made it so?

### Conclusion

Invite people into the closing meditation.

#### Before beginning

Explain that you will begin with a short, written meditation, then one of you will lead people in a simple breathing exercise to encourage listening, then between you, you will read some selected verses of scripture into the pool of silence, and allow a gap between each for people to reflect on the verse, before reading the next. (The verse references are given to help you: don't include them in what you read out loud.) Finally, one of you will offer a closing prayer.

After the meditation is finished, you will give them the reflection as Handout 3.