

## **Healing Forum, Diocesan of Bath & Wells, February 2022**

### **Summary of Alison Perham's presentation on the power of Listening**

Understanding and being understood are very basic human needs, and we understand best through attentive listening. This is even more important at times of change and uncertainty. We can become more whole, healthier, through being listened to, and listening to others. It can help heal us as individuals and as communities too. In prayer we believe God listens to us, and we try to listen to God.

Listening without judgement or agenda can enable deep healing. Attentive curiosity acknowledges and accepts distress; whatever is expressed is valid. When we prepare to listen, it's important to have a clear mind and to provide a safe welcoming space without interruption, having agreed boundaries of confidentiality and time.

We must be aware of the potential power of the listener. Their role is to listen with gentle and respectful curiosity, and to be comfortable with silence. Occasionally they may reflect what has been said to check their understanding, trusting the process of listening, while resisting the temptation to 'fix' the problem by offering solutions.

People's individual expression of pain may not seem to relate directly to its cause: in the west physical symptoms are more acceptable and frequently represent deep levels of psychological or other pain for instance.

A safe place to tell their stories helps people to understand and reframe them, enabling personal growth. That safe place results in profound listening and the awareness that God may be present in the silence, as in the quiet time of our prayers. Silence becomes comfortable, and a gift when we know that God the Holy Spirit is present in it with us. The 13<sup>th</sup> Century poet, Rumi suggests 'silence is the language of God; everything else is mere translation.'

The distress of wider communities indicates that they do not feel listened to, and we become aware of it through protest movements (Black Lives Matter, teenage climate protest movements) and also the fragmentation of mainstream religious communities including churches, entrenched positions; shouting without listening or grace, tribalism (eg politics).

Respectful effective communication requires more listening than speaking, perhaps 80:20. Listening well is a life skill, and vital in leadership. We are then able to hear, understand interpret, evaluate and enable appropriate change. All change starts small, but perhaps mutual commitment to listening might start a revolution for change (Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa) and sometimes reduce the likelihood of war.

How do we listen effectively?

- With forethought: thinking ahead; periodically reviewing and summarising.
- Allowing stories to emerge, aware that each listener will hear these differently, due to gender, cultural and individual experience.
- Morally, evaluating; with the possibility of change and reconciliation (Archbishop Tutu).
- In context: relating what is heard to community, parish, church, diocese, country, world.

Our identities depend on connection to our stories, which can be lost for inpatients, nursing home residents, prisoners, people with memory loss. Listening well and acting collaboratively on what we hear can help reduce that dislocation. Often, we are awed, humbled by the stories we hear and thus more open to what we can learn. (Wonder and awe experienced through worshipping together before meetings (eg PCC) can be powerful.) Working together both altruistically and for mutual benefit is powerful too (as the mutual benefit to trees and fungi in Green Planet demonstrates).

Step by step, as we learn to listen to each other we will find ourselves more able to 'bear each other's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ', as Galatians enjoins us.