

REAL LISTENING THE OVERLOOKED ESSENTIAL

By Ellen Livingood

We missions people perceive our calling to be prophets, and we fulfill that role with passion. We are eager to proclaim. We've got answers to give and vision to communicate. Particularly when we relate to local churches in our homeland, we almost always go to talk not listen. Or we listen only long enough to find an open door to talk.

There are other reasons we don't listen well. For one thing, we think we already understand churches' needs, questions, and context. After all, most of us grew up in church and these are "our people."

Given all we have to say and accomplish, we just don't have time to stop and listen first, or we think we don't. This rationale often leads to a shotgun approach: Without spending much time listening, we develop programs and offer them to hundreds or thousands of churches and assume that we will hit the target with some—the perfect recipe for mediocrity.

Actually many of us don't know how to listen effectively. We may have worked our way through homiletics classes, but few of us have been trained in how to listen.

Yet the fact that listening is essential to missions mobilization is confirmed from two sources: Church leaders identify the lack of listening as one of their greatest frustrations with mission agencies (when someone takes the time to ask and listen to their answers!). And effective mobilizers consistently emphasize the importance of listening.

"If you aren't listening, you've got it all wrong," Tim McElhaney, an area director for Trans World Radio, states emphatically. "My most important skill is listening."

Listening to churches involves personal interface and also mass survey tools. Both are vital to understanding church partners.



LISTENING IS PIVOTAL

Listening communicates a servant heart. If we claim to serve the church yet are reluctant to listen, we convey an

arrogance that belies our words. Jesus repeatedly demonstrated how much He valued people by asking them questions that engaged them in dialog.

Good questions and careful listening are essential to understanding the increasing complexity of a church context that is changing at a dizzying speed. The person who assumes she understands the church never will.

Listening wins an audience. No matter how limited our appointment time nor how much we want to say, listening first will help us begin where our audience is and avoid answering a question no one is asking. If we ask for input with a genuine desire to learn, we often will be invited to speak to the issue, too—in an atmosphere far more receptive than if we began by selling our own agenda.

Carefully crafted questions will lead to self-discovery. Our best questions are sometimes those the person asked can't answer. Did you ever notice how often a question you can't answer keeps nagging in your mind for a response? Good questions often launch whole new lines of thinking.



HOW DO WE HEIGHTEN THE VALUE OUR AGENCY PLACES ON LISTENING TO CHURCHES?

Model it from the top down. Why not ask your CEO to call two church leaders each month to thank them for their support **and** ask for their input. Suggest some questions related to issues currently under review. This small commitment will pay high dividends in multiple ways.

Train staff in listening skills. Why do we assume only counselors need to be trained to listen? Time and money spent training personnel in active listening skills are well invested. But rather than hiring someone, why not contact churches to see if they could provide a professional sales trainer or counselor from their congregation qualified to develop your mobilizers' listening skills?

Make information gathering a significant part of the job description for church connections personnel. Clearly define listening goals for each of your staff, and include a

critique of their listening and information gathering in your regular evaluation. Push yourself to grow in this area, too.

Mentor mobilizers in listening skills. Staff will learn both the priority and skill of asking good questions and absorbing critical information as they see it modeled. As you interact with your personnel, describe the questions you ask churches and the information you glean as a result.

Recruit home office staff to ask a pre-selected question of every church contact they talk to. For example, finance staff might ask church callers their opinions on how missionaries' pension contribution should be determined. Field coordinators might query churches about their expectations for missionary accountability. Questions could be changed every six months or so to reflect new church/agency issues you are grappling with. Collect and use the feedback so it's not just an exercise.



WHOM ARE WE LISTENING TO?

Listen to multiple gatekeepers and influencers in the local church. Some mobilizers focus almost exclusively on the pastor and thereby miss strategic information. Contact with the missions chairperson or the entire global outreach team is also very fruitful. The lay perspective often differs significantly from that of the pastoral staff. Learn from both.

Work hardest to listen to those most different from yourself. Human nature leads us to enjoy dialog with people who share our perspective and reinforce our convictions, but engaging other opinions is more productive. Do you make it a priority to learn from those who lead youth and young adult programs in order to understand how to influence the church of the future? Do you purposely engage with church leaders who are not excited about missions to understand why?

Meet with church leaders just to learn from them. This may seem obvious, but in fact, many agency mobilizers seem to value interaction only if they can have a role as preacher/teacher/consultant/salesperson.



WHERE AND HOW SHOULD WE LISTEN?

The list of venues in which we can get input from churches is long: denominational or other multi-church conferences, pastors summits or other events your agency holds, in-church missions conferences and other programs, face-to-face appointments, phone calls (agency or church initiated), written surveys, emails, online responses, blogs, feedback via missionaries, etc. Which of these sources have been most helpful for your agency? Which are most cost effective? Which produce benefits in multiple directions? You may want to add a new information conduit during the coming year and proactively increase the feedback from others.

The Evangelical Free Church of Canada has introduced an annual conference for local church missions chairs that is specifically designed for, and limited to, lay leaders. "They talk about what they are doing in their churches and how they are cooperating with other agencies," Craig McClun shares. "They have reacted very enthusiastically to these sessions, and the interaction both during and afterward is great."

An opportunity for extended listening is presented when agency personnel travel overseas with church leaders on survey or ministry trips. While the agency person may officially be the leader, he is likely to fail unless he makes listening a priority. One agency field director took several church leaders on a survey trip to his region, returning happy with the way he had showcased his agency's ministries. Privately, the church leaders told me that the trip convinced them they did not want to collaborate with this agency. Sadly, this leader lost partners because he had not listened to them and surfaced their concerns.

McElhane explains his approach: "I simply ask the straight-up question—what is it that God is calling you to do? Sometimes they haven't the foggiest idea. Then I start drilling down to see if they have a vision."

Doug Hazen, NW Regional Church Connections Director for WorldVenture, begins by looking for commonality. "I just start asking questions about family, ministry in the world, countries they are interested in—things that reveal who they are and where they have been. Sometimes I find commonality in suffering, in the tough stuff we have both been through. You start comparing notes and it opens up relationships."



WHAT DO WE WANT TO ASK?

You will need to capture basic information about the church, its leaders, focus, priorities, size, missions program, etc. But consider some of these questions to draw out information at deeper levels:

- What one thing created the most excitement for missions in your church in the past three years?
- What is the #1 passion of your pastor? (asked directly of him or others) How might God want to engage that passion for greater global impact?
- What do you think are the two biggest hindrances in your church to unleashing passion for global outreach? If you could employ any means to eliminate these barriers, what would you do?
- What engages with the younger generations in your church? How could we assist you to help them catch a bigger vision for the world?
- Is there a local ministry or opportunity that you could use as a training ground for future missionaries?
- In what area(s) is your global outreach team most proficient? Where do you think you are least effective? (You might want to list options such as: creating strategy,

identifying and mobilizing future missionaries, developing congregational vision, engaging individuals' gifts and expertise, caring for missionaries, etc.)

- What would it look like if you were to take your church to the next level in missions? What kind of assistance would you need to do that?
- What would the ideal church/agency collaboration look like for your church? What could I do to move our relationship in that direction?



HOW DO WE BENEFIT FROM WHAT WE HEAR?

While good listening will produce gems of individual insights, much additional profit comes when feedback is compared and analyzed. Of course this takes time, effort, and some expertise. Despite the effort expended to collect data, it is often inadequately analyzed and benefits are lost.

Establish and use a church information database. Too many agencies fail to compile helpful data because they are waiting until they can develop a state-of-the-art database. It is more important to get going with a simple system into which multiple people can easily dump data than to wait for a complex system with finely tuned categories for every piece of information. But do make sure your system accommodates free-form comments. It doesn't matter that they can't be tabulated; they are invaluable.

Identify strategic thinkers and return often for their insights. Good listening surfaces individuals who have God-given ability to analyze their congregation and speak to relevant issues. They are gold! Build these people into an informal advisory network or a more formal advisory council on church relationships.

Let people know you heard and value their input. Reflecting back what was said helps you confirm you heard correctly and communicates that you are working to accurately understand the other's perspective. If your questions uncovered real or perceived failures on the part of your organization, do what you can to address them and report the outcome to the person who offered the criticism.

Fixing a failure promptly will often give you more credibility than all the other things you did right the first time.

Take the time to study the information you have already collected. Complete or sketchy, rambling or hard to decipher, the church feedback you already possess probably offers you additional insights into your church audiences. At a minimum, your church records will reveal what additional key data you must begin collecting. But more likely, you will glean crucial information about churches' perspectives, needs, and potential.



I'll stop here and listen for your response!

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- **Feedback on this article** and additional listening suggestions. We want to hear what you have to say!

Share with me at ellen@catalystservices.org:

- Would your organization be interested in discussing the possibility of a **multi-agency, cooperative survey project** to solicit broad church feedback on current church/agency issues?
- Can you recommend **resources for training staff** in listening skills?
- Do you have a **church survey form** you would be willing to share with other organizations?



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