

LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

EXPLORATIONS

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Letter from the Executive Director

Ray Herman

By the powers invested in me as Executive Director, I am unofficially entitling this edition of *Explorations* the "Trustees Issue."

Throughout its history, Listening Hearts Ministries has been very fortunate to have very active and diversely talented board members. Their commitment to the organization and its mission has not stopped at the end of their semiannual meetings. For example, three current trustees have contributed their writing talents to this newsletter. They truly give their time, talent, and treasure to the ministry. I am grateful for their energy, advice, and support.

In the last issue of *Explorations*, I reflected on adapting to changing circumstances. One change in particular I am pleased to report is the relocation of our program office to The Mill Centre. Built in the 1800s to produce sailcloth, it was converted into office and studio space about twenty years ago. Here is our new address:

Listening Hearts Ministries
The Mill Centre, Suite 405A
3000 Chestnut Avenue
Baltimore, MD 21211

Please note that we have new telephone and fax numbers.

*Our calls are always evolving. If we are to
respond, we need to listen, not only today
but as today evolves into tomorrow.*

Listening Hearts, p. 15

A Living Word of the Spirit

The Rev. David W. Malone
Jamaica Plain, MA

In the summer of 1976, my brother died while serving in the Peace Corps. After the heavy sadness of his funeral on Cape Cod, we returned to Baltimore by way of Vermont, stopping overnight at the Benedictine Weston Priory. I don't recall why we chose this out-of-the-way route. Perhaps we had no desire to return to "normal" life; perhaps we wished to hear the music of then-Brother Gregory Norbert; perhaps it was our friend Fr. Barney Farnham's reports of his retreats there. Though I don't know why we chose this odd route, nonetheless the effect was a moment of stunning grace.

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Rich and Deeply Satisfying

Frances Sullinger
Vienna, VA

The first time I facilitated a *Listening Hearts* discussion series was in 1992 in Bogota, Colombia, where I was assigned to the United States Embassy. I introduced *Listening Hearts* to the adult Sunday school class at the English language interdenominational church when I was asked to lead the class while the minister was away for the summer. It provided a wonderful bonding experience for the Americans and Brits far from home. We were able to open ourselves to each other and to God in a way that amazed us all.

When I transferred to Costa Rica later that year, I took *Listening Hearts* with me and, in two discussion series there, found God speaking to me through the others in the circle. Without exception, the participants reported that sharing experiences with others in the group helped them to focus on what God had done and was doing in their lives. The experience also transformed our ongoing interactions as we moved together to a deeper place in our spiritual lives.

I have now retired from the State Department and am living in northern Virginia. One of the questions on the feedback form for the *Listening Hearts* book discussion series asks: “Do you feel that you have developed a stronger awareness of listening to God in yourself?” I would like to share with you a few of the responses to this question from discussions I have facilitated at Holy Comforter:

- “Definitely. Reading the book started to help me understand what it really means to pause and listen and to *discern* what God might be trying to teach me. The group meetings enhanced my understanding in a very hands-on, *real* way of discernment.”
- “My awareness is pretty significant already, but I gained a stronger awareness of the importance of discerning that call *in community*—carrying it out in community, of how we all form part of the picture God wants to develop.”
- “I am more aware of God’s interaction in me. I feel His guidance. I must make time to listen to God every day. The rewards are enormous!”
- “The book and discussion were good reminders that in our quiet, still times with God He speaks to our hearts. It is in those times I find peace in the direction my life is headed or peace as I wait.”
- “. . . Hearing from others about their experiences helps me to recognize times in my own life when God has been ‘calling’.”

In addition to developing a stronger awareness of listening to God in yourself, discussions around the book also serve to develop a stronger awareness of listening to God in others and to personal growth in relationship with God.

Each time I read the book, something new leaps out at me that enhances my understanding of what God may be calling me to do or to be. It is even more rewarding to be in a group where everyone is sharing their own insights and experiences and understanding how necessary community is to the process of spiritual discernment. The texture of the discussions is always rich and deeply satisfying.

“Lead a Book Discussion . . . Who me?” “Yes, you!”

Alice Dorrance
Spartanburg, SC

My story began in 1995 in Baltimore, Maryland, when the rector of our church engaged Listening Hearts Ministries to lead a vestry retreat. For me personally, the book, *Listening Hearts*, provided clues to answers I had been seeking for a long time. What is call; what is ministry; and what does discernment *mean*?

By 1999 I was ready for more in-depth instruction. I attended a Listening Hearts Ministries discernment training week, which equipped me with the tools to lead others in offering discernment sessions to individuals. On a personal level, I felt both empowered and unnerved.

In 2001, after our family had moved to South Carolina, I was asked to join the Listening Hearts Ministries Board of Trustees. At my new church, I joined a recently formed group that was studying the Rule of St. Benedict. It was through this group that God called me to lead a *Listening Hearts* book discussion. But first I had to overcome a stumbling block.

Although I had received discernment training, somehow I did not feel prepared to lead a discussion group. Something was holding me back. At the fall Board of Trustees meeting I shared this concern with the members and asked them to pray for me. After the Trustees meeting, I went back to South Carolina and gave several people at church, including my Benedictine group, copies of *Listening Hearts*. I explained that I wanted to facilitate a book discussion but needed practice. The Benedictine group agreed to be my guinea pigs for a trial run.

Here are excerpts from three members' responses to the experience:

- “The book itself and the group discussions have reinforced for me the necessity of carving out quiet time in my day in order to give myself the space to listen and to hear what God has in store.”
- “There is something that happens in the process of the group that is substantive, that gets you out of your head and into your heart and into the depths of your being. God is there in the center of us.”
- “The book study and the discussion have made me very aware of others' need to be truly listened to – that there is a hunger among us to be truly attended to.”

“Ministry...requires support. Without support, we may become lost.” (*Listening Hearts*, p. 65). Together, our group formed a faith community to support God's call to one member. We have grown close in the Lord, and I have been truly blessed. As discussion of the book came to an end, a member said she wanted to continue to meet because she found the group “and the invitation to practice with a heart that is still, that listens and discerns ... very important and nourishing” for her. The unexpected blessing is that the group has now become a permanent one, and we are now reading and discussing *Grounded in God*, also published by Listening Hearts.

For me the experience gave me the practice and confidence to lead a *Listening Hearts* book discussion as part of a Lenten program at our church. I felt empowered and prepared for my new role as facilitator. God replaced my fears with a sense of peace and enthusiasm. What's next is perhaps God's secret!

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MISSION STATEMENT

Listening Hearts Ministries provides a range of programs, publications, and services that teach people the practice of spiritual discernment through prayerful listening in supportive communities.



Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

– Romans 12:2

A Living Word of the Spirit *(continued from page 1)*

That day I was introduced to the Rule of St. Benedict. “Listen,” a song by Brother Gregory, quotes the opening words of Benedict’s Rule: *“Listen, O my son, to the precepts of thy master and incline the ear of thy heart. ... Let us listen to the Lord answering and showing us the way to the tabernacle [of His kingdom].”* Fifteen hundred years ago, Benedict knew the renewal of the Church needed to begin in silence and reflective conversation, listening together to what the Lord will say to the people of God.

Benedict is known as the founder of monasticism in the Christian churches of the West. This movement is normally associated with men and women who are full-time, professed sisters, brothers, and priests. But the historians of his movement note that he intended his Rule as a guide for the Christian life of the laity, women and men engaged in the “ordinary” affairs of work, family, and community. To listen to the Lord was not an act of spiritual discovery reserved only for those in the professions of the religious life.

I am confident that influences of Benedict are in Listening Hearts Ministries’ bloodlines. We continue Benedict’s effort to call Christian individuals and Christian churches and organizations to the practice of discernment, of listening both carefully and caringly for the movement of God’s Holy Spirit in our deliberations and choices. Like us, he read Scripture and knew deep in his soul and mind that the Spirit speaks to the Church and to the faithful.

But during my introduction to Benedictine monasticism I saw none of this larger picture. I simply experienced, in the hospitality of the brothers at Weston, an opening to know that beyond our grief would be peace and, one day again, joy. It was a living word of the Spirit we still cherish.