

# CHAPTER 1

# LISTENING

“Listen privately, silently to the voices that rise up From the pages of books and from your own heart. Be still and listen to the voices that belong To the streambanks and the trees and the open fields. There are songs and sayings that belong to this place, by which it speaks for itself and no other.”<sup>1</sup>

Our intentional community in San Diego recently had the opportunity to spend some extended time with a couple from the Bruderhof community. The Bruderhof has roots as far back as World War II, when they fled Germany due to persecution. They now have communities scattered throughout the world. Ascribing to values birthed out of the Radical Reformation and Anabaptist traditions, they seek to live out the life and teachings of Jesus in very tangible ways.<sup>2</sup>

We spent hours sitting on our patios with Daniel and Sarah as we shared stories of life, faith, and dreams. As they described the life to which they have willingly given themselves out of faithfulness to Jesus, we were inspired and enlivened by their devout commitment to God and to one another. While their commitment to life in intentional community calls them to seemingly radical practices (at least when viewed through the lens of an often nominalistic American Christianity) such as a common purse, daily-shared meals, and communal parenting, what most resonated with me was their posture of listening.

In a spirit of radiant humility, they shared with us that it is easy to think we know God’s will for our lives when we are trying to discern it from a purely individualistic perspective. They told us, “we [the Bruderhof community] believe that we must discern God’s will for our lives through the shared revelation and council of the community to which we have committed.”

I am in no way saying that God hasn't or doesn't speak directly to individuals, but I think the Bruderhof community offers an important corrective in our interpretation of discernment. After all, God created us as communal creatures who have historically interacted with God as a collective people rather than as single persons.

How easy is it to say we know God's will for our lives, when in reality we may simply be manifesting our personal agendas? When we seek to listen to God solely as individuals, we deny our communal DNA and deny the structures God has offered his people as they move forward on mission.

“Taken as a whole the Bible asserts that God’s program is directed to the bringing into being of community in the highest sense—a reconciled people, living within a renewed creation, and enjoying the presence of their Redeemer.”<sup>3</sup>

## LISTENING AS A WAY OF ALIGNMENT

It is for these reasons that we enter our first posture of listening in the context of covenant community. As we seek to listen to God, to self, and to our contexts, we do so through the lens of community. Community is the gift God has given each of his followers as we seek to be faithful to our individual vocations and the overall mission of God.

While listening seems like a basic skill that doesn't require much effort to develop, in many ways it has become a lost art. In a world swirling with noise, we can easily find ourselves sucked into endless outlets of communication. Now, more than ever, we need to listen to and yield to the words of scripture: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

The Carthusian monks would argue that when we finally do embrace a listening silence, we may encounter the loudest noise of all in our inner beings.<sup>4</sup> Living as a community of Jesus's apprentices who are being formed and seeking to form others, it is imperative for us to enter the path of formation by listening to God through our communities (both intentional and local contexts) and ourselves.

As a missional community seeking to engage our local contexts with the good news of Jesus, we choose to view our neighborhoods and our cities as our classrooms.<sup>5</sup> If we are to be good news, we need to listen to the needs and dreams of our surrounding contexts. For instance, even though we live in San Diego, we consider Tijuana, Mexico part of our city. When viewing our geographical region from a satellite, there is no clear distinction between San Diego and Tijuana. It is basically one big city whose inhabitants are separated by a haunting wall. Each day, thousands of people cross between San Diego and Tijuana to go to work, visit family, and receive basic health services. Without this dance of economic and social interdependence, both neighboring cities would likely collapse.

A significant number of us from NieuCommunities spend a lot of time in Tijuana supporting local leaders who have given their lives to the underserved of the city. Luis is a native Mexican who has become the father of about twenty-five boys who either don't have parents or whose parents don't have the financial means to give their children everything they need. One of the couples in our intentional community, Shaun and Maria, lived in Mexico for twenty-five years. As a native Mexican, Maria had lived her whole life in Mexico and has known Luis since he was a teenager.

Although Shaun and Maria now live in San Diego, they regularly cross the border to come alongside, encourage, and simply listen to our friend.

I recently tagged along with this couple to go see Luis, his family, and all the boys at the home he runs. As we sat in the run-down courtyard, the boys gathered around Luis, who they all inevitably end up calling “Dad,” and they gradually warmed up to our presence. I began to ask Luis some questions about his life and ministry, which led to him sharing his frustrations he has had with the North American church’s failure to listen well to the people of his city.

He began by reminding us that Tijuana is the most evangelized city in the world. This is largely due to its proximity to the United States and the wealthy churches just on the other side of the border. He continued by sharing that these churches come down to Tijuana on “mission trips” for a week, build a house or run a vacation Bible school, and leave. While he stressed these churches’ right motives, he said, “These mission trips have done terrible damage to the church of Tijuana. If they would simply set aside their agendas and listen to the actual needs of my people, they could come alongside us in transformative ways.”

Luis went on to make the point that our imperialistic posture of missions has disabled the church of Tijuana as local churches now simply wait for United States churches to come down for a week or two to do the work that the local churches should be equipping their people to do every day. As a result, Mexican leaders sometimes feel both used and debilitated by these forms of mission. Listening to Luis, I was convicted of my personal involvement in this destruction, having led many of these trips myself. More than

that, I realized that the United States church has failed to listen, to really hear and understand the people of Tijuana. Luis simply needs someone to sit with him and listen. The church of Tijuana simply needs us to take a few minutes to come alongside them and listen to their needs right where they are. In the same way, we must also be open to hearing from God through our brothers and sisters across the border.

Listening requires humility and trust in the Spirit, but it is also an act of honoring those we come alongside with the good news of Jesus. As people who seek to form apprentices of Jesus, we begin by listening to the voice of God, to the inner workings of our individual souls, and the complex dynamics of our contexts. In each area, we listen through the lens of covenant community. Listening forces us to set aside our own agendas and open ourselves to the work of the Spirit among the community of God.

When we are out of sync with the work of the Spirit, we compromise our participation in the mission of God. The *missio Dei* requires us to ask, *Where is God at work, and how can I be part of what he is already doing?* While failing to listen can have tragic consequences, being faithful in listening can create a birthplace for the dreams of God to be made manifest in the midst of humanity.



## LISTENING TO GOD THROUGH COMMUNITY

The life of faith and practice is a process that requires an open heart to God, which has direct implications for the way we live and participate in the *missio Dei*. Some describe our journey toward God as a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is less about the destination and more about the transformation that takes place along the

way. It challenges our assumptions, forces us to wade through adversity, and creates space for the divine breath of God to rest upon each of our lives. As followers of Jesus who are committed to live in daily *communion* with God, we choose to walk the path of spiritual pilgrimage. Our pilgrimage is centered in the way of Jesus: his *life, death, and resurrection*.



As I walked through the labyrinth alongside other people who had committed to the pilgrimage of God's mission and to a community of fellow pilgrims who had given their devotion to this mission, the moment suddenly became a sacred one. We had built the labyrinth in the backyard of a big Victorian home where we gather for our Sunday night community worship time. It was an odd-looking compilation of patio chairs, yarn, duct tape and computer paper, but it represented something much, much more. Something—when understood in this context—sacred.

Our labyrinth was a journey of worship that led to the heart of God and then back toward the realities of life. We assembled a three-fold path that led us in the way of Jesus's death (releasing), life (receiving), and resurrection (integrating). As we entered the first leg of our pilgrimage that night, we prayed through and released our insecurities, distractions, and failures in the same way that Jesus put to death our bondage to sin.

Seeking to fully offer ourselves to our creator as we navigated closer and closer to the heart he desired all of us to receive, we opened ourselves to receive the gift of life that Jesus embodied and invited others to experience. It is in receiving this life that we are filled with hope, peace, conviction, and transformation. Of

course, in receiving the life of Jesus, we also fully commit to being willing to give it away.

The final leg on the three-fold path is one that calls us to live fully into the truth of the resurrection. Jesus's resurrection brought life to all of humanity as he took on the vocation of kingship over the newly inaugurated kingdom. We have each been offered the opportunity to experience resurrection—to step into God's story and participate in his kingdom. As we immerse ourselves in this divine union, we commit to living into a new story—a renewed story whose plot is no longer death, but life.

As I examined and prayed during my time on this pilgrimage, I couldn't help but notice the feet of those in front, alongside, and behind me. I was not alone. I was surrounded by a community of pilgrims who had willingly entered into the same journey as I. Walking toward Christ is a beautiful and transformative endeavor, but walking toward Christ as a community of believers is stepping in the very path God has designed for each one of us. With each step, we were saying to God, "We are listening for your voice, and we invite you into our stories. In fact, we will faithfully step into your story as you step into ours."

It is in moments like these that we are listening and communing with God individually and as representatives of our community. But in this posture, we must be willing to listen to the voice of God. When we commune with the creator, we allow his Spirit to transform and move freely through the life of our community as we continually put to death the ways of old, step fully into the mystery and conviction of life in Jesus, and live lives that reflect the transformation of Jesus's resurrection. It is only with the Spirit's leading

that we can then set off on the holy pilgrimage of Jesus discipleship as participants in the mission of God.

## — LISTENING TO SELF THROUGH COMMUNITY: COACHING THAT TRANSFORMS

As a covenant community, NieuCommunities seeks to create space for the Spirit to move in the lives of each of our participants. One of the central ways we have seen this formation and discernment come to life is in the form of coaching. Through personal coaching, we are able to listen to and discern God's imagination and dreams for each of our lives within his advancing kingdom.

Each person who joins our community is committing to living in constant pursuit of God's call on his or her life. One of the central ways we see that call being unearthed is through a coaching relationship. Coaching is less about receiving instruction from another person and more about creating a space for the coach to ask questions that lead to realizing what the Spirit is already putting on our hearts.

This practice parallels the Quaker tradition of clearness committees, which assume God's image has been inscribed on the lives of each person and our job is simply to navigate the waters back to the true identity and destiny each has been given by the Creator. Through the insightful questions of our intentional community and coaching relationships, we begin to catch sight of what God has designed for us from the very beginning of time.

Ultimately, the voice that is often most difficult to identify and listen to is that of our own soul. In a world that is riddled with noise, fast-paced lifestyles, and expectations (both our own and others'), taking the time to listen to what God is saying through the

“I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I must live—but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.”<sup>6</sup>

unique design he has placed in each one of us is a forgotten value.

We trust that forming church leaders who have a missional DNA in the context of intentional community is more about creating a space to identify what God has already created them for than it is developing new skills and desires from scratch. So much of opening ourselves to the desires of God is simply listening to what he has done and being willing to step faithfully into the identity and passions he has created within us.

## LISTENING TO OUR CONTEXT THROUGH COMMUNITY

Listening to those in our contexts (neighborhoods, cities, and so on) requires patience, consistent presence, and eyes and ears that are open to the stories that are being told all around us. In the same way that the church of the United States must do better to listen to the church of Tijuana, the listening posture requires our community to simply be present—both physically and emotionally—to the people, places, and issues that are the realities of our context. Further, we must choose to listen *to* our community and to listen *as* a community.

San Diego is a world of polarizing opposites. One street is home to the rich and famous while the next street is home to the poor and forgotten. One street may be ruled by the ethnic majority while the next is governed by the ethnic minority. Depending on where they choose to explore, visitors to San Diego might be confronted with extreme violence and poverty or be ushered

through the secure gates of the isolated and wealthy. As is probably true in your own context, there are multiple stories being told here. As advocates of the kingdom of God, we must put ourselves in contexts that allow us to listen to the myriad stories that are being told.

## A BRIDGE THAT CONNECTS TWO WORLDS

The Coronado Bridge offers an incredibly symbolic and tangible picture of the polarizing realities of the multiple narratives that are alive in our city. The bridge is located right in the center of the picturesque San Diego harbor and connects the “island” of Coronado with the mainland coast. Stretching from one piece of land to another, it begins in a neighborhood that is the antithesis of the neighborhood in which it lands.

Known as “the barrio,” the mainland end of the bridge begins in the neighborhood of Barrio Logan. The vast majority of this neighborhood’s residents are from Mexico, and their rich culture is made clear throughout the streets. Most notably, the base of the Coronado Bridge begins in Chicano Park, which historically was both the heart of Mexican culture and later one of the most violent and volatile locations in San Diego. While there is still sporadic violence in this park, it is also home to some of the most brilliant and powerful graffiti art I have ever seen. The whole base of the bridge is covered in it, and it tells a story of our city that otherwise would never be seen, heard, or understood by the majority of San Diegans. A walk through the park will unveil both the history and modern story of the joy and the struggle of living in a home away from home due to oppressive circumstances.

While their story is told through the art on the bridge, the story of this neighborhood is not well understood by most. In fact, because of its reputation, most people would never drive through it, let alone offer economic support. Every day the wealthy and powerful drive right over this park and many do not even know it's there—let alone know its significance. It is a place of poverty and displacement for those who haven't been accepted or haven't been able to engage with the larger population.

As we live just a few streets from this neighborhood, its reputation spills into ours on a regular basis. In fact, one of our Nieu-Communities families recently woke up to the sound of dozens of gunshots in the alley behind their house. When the police came by to pick up the shell casings and secure the area, the police callously remarked, "That's what happens when you live in the ghetto."

Although Golden Hill used to be referred to as "Heroin Hill" and we live adjacent to a neighborhood that has a reputation for gang activity, we don't feel like we live in the "ghetto." This is our home, and we are constantly in awe of what God is doing to renew and restore areas that were once broken. We don't walk the streets in fear, but with hopeful conviction that this is exactly where Jesus is and where he wants us to be.

Much of this assurance has come as a result of our posture of listening, as a community, to our context. We know that there is more to the story of one gang shooting or piece of graffiti art that might not make sense the first time we drive by. There is a rich culture and are many beautiful people surrounding us, and until we listen to their historical stories and the stories they are telling with their lives, we will have no way of submerging deeper into our neighborhood with the good news of Jesus.

## FIELD NOTES—NIEUCOMMUNITIES SOUTH AFRICA

*How do you begin to listen to a culture with eleven official languages present in a city that also serves as a place of refuge for countless other nations? Each language represents a people with its own unique cultural nuances that create a whirlpool of missional complexities and need. Within our small urban neighborhood, we experience extreme poverty living next door to extreme wealth. White Africans live next to black Africans. Exiles live next to CEOs, and we all share a central park as a place of intersection amid the chaotic rhythms of life. Here our community finds its home.*

*For nearly a decade, our community has listened intently to the different songs of the South African landscape. We began our journey in the Northern suburbs before a recent move into the heart of the urban center. We have worshiped alongside the refugee and the rich. We have held the hands of the dying and the arms of the champions. Within this mosaic, we have commonly heard one resounding reality: God's kingdom is like a great banquet. The host of the banquet is inviting every perspective from the various corners of the earth to linger together and feast on a new reality together. In this, there is a sense of necessity. Africans find their identity in the group, not in individualism. It's called ubuntu: I am because you are. We are hearing the voice of a new humanity in the heart of this African capital city, and we are hearing it because we listen hard for it.*

—Joe Reed

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I am one of the managers of our local Golden Hill farmers' market. Every week, this event creates a space and time for those

in our neighborhood to step out of our individual worlds and step into something that exists for the good of the whole. Further, it creates the call for local business owners and residents to interact and build relationships that lead to authentic sharing of community. However, the majority of our local business owners are Mexicans and are not represented well at our market or in our local council meetings. We are striving to better listen to their individual stories and better understand their cultural norms in an effort to develop a neighborhood identity that truly displays and embraces the diversity of its residents.

With that, I return to the Coronado Bridge. While it begins in Barrio Logan, it ends on the “island” of Coronado, which is home to some of the most expensive pieces of land in Southern California. It wouldn’t be a stretch to see the resident of Barrio Logan mowing the lawn of the Coronado resident. There is a polarization that—when given the eyes to see and ears to listen—is shocking. It’s not that the residents of Coronado are bad; it’s that they are living a different narrative. In fact, we must listen to their stories as much as we listen to those of Barrio Logan and Golden Hill. This bridge represents a bigger story that is being told in our city. A story of poverty and excess standing side by side. A story of races moving away from each other rather than growing closer. A story of complacency that has led to mutual misunderstanding.

Without actively immersing ourselves in these stories, we simply become part of the problem. As advocates of a kingdom that sees no distinction between rich and poor or white and brown, we must stand amid both narratives and humbly listen to stories that may be very different from our own.

## Our Integrating and Sustaining Practices

- Listening begins with "abiding with Christ" (see John 15, *NRSV*). So we abide with Christ by:
  - sitting in silence before God as a community.
  - imagining ourselves in the narratives of Scriptures through the ancient practice of *lectio divina*.
  - setting up a labyrinth in our backyard that acts as a communal pilgrimage through Jesus's life, death, and resurrection.
- We study the concept of spiritual pathways so members of the community are in tune with how they hear from God.
- Each person in our community is in a coaching relationship that creates a space to reflect on what they are learning and have it mirrored back to them.
- We intentionally listen to the stories that are being told in our neighborhood by studying its history and the significance of its places, spending time in those places, praying in and over those places, and sharing our observations with each other.
- We attempt to understand the culture of our neighborhood by looking at it through the grid of worldview, values, beliefs, and desires.
- We seek to know and understand the churches in our neighborhood by visiting them and getting to know their people.
- We get to know the other faiths in our neighborhood. For instance, in Vancouver we take a temple walk each year. We visit a Buddhist monastery and Sikh temple in hopes of bet-

ter understanding the history, beliefs, and practices of our neighbors.

### **Missional Possibilities**

1. Re-read this quote: “It is easy to think we know God’s will for our lives when we are trying to discern it from a purely individualistic perspective. We believe that we must discern God’s will for our lives through the shared revelation and council of the community to which we have committed.”

What feelings and questions does this quote evoke?

2. What places in your neighborhood (brainstorm them!) could serve as a “classroom” in which to listen and learn?
3. Respond to this idea: As a covenant community we choose to listen *to* our community and listen *as* a community.

What do you think it takes for a group of people to listen as a community?

### **Video Questions<sup>7</sup>**

1. On the video, Jon says we can only begin to discern what’s going on around us after we listen “to what God might be leading us into individually and as a community.” He believes that we can “only begin to discern our way forward” as we listen to God and our community. Do you agree or disagree with the statement that we must listen before we do anything else? Why?
2. On the video, Rob says that we must walk into places “gently” and “[unmask] some of the biases that maybe we came to the table with.” In doing so, we are able to put aside our agendas

and preconceived notions as we listen to and learn about those with whom we're engaging.

How can listening to God and our community prevent us from confusing "our own personal agendas" with God's will?