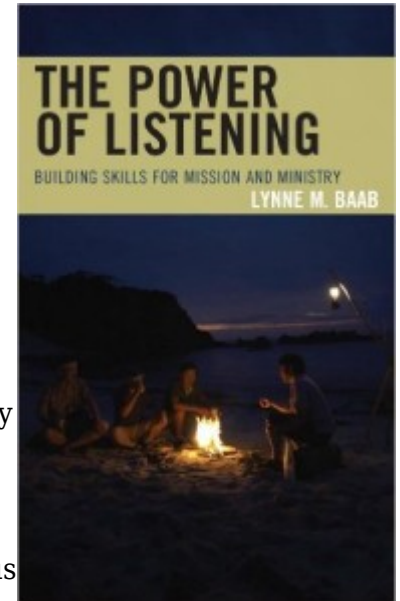




BOOK REVIEW: 'THE POWER OF LISTENING' BY LYNNE M BAAB

Review of Lynne M Baab, *The Power of Listening: Building Skills for Mission and Ministry* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014)

My local church, AuburnLife, has been discussing the missional practice of listening. We have been challenged to listen to one another and to our neighbourhood with acute attentiveness. One of our members quoted the wise words of the Dalai Lama: 'When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new'. Listening is not just part of a good friendship or a ministry skill for the counselling room. It is a mission skill for parish awareness. Nineteenth century French doctor Laenneec, who invented the stethoscope, used to say to his students 'Listen, listen to your patient! They are giving you the diagnosis.' Our neighbourhoods, if we listen, will help us understand how we can bring them healing and wholeness. Moreover, in a local church, we need processes for listening to one another to discern how God is leading us in mission.



This is why we were eager to learn from Lynne Baab's wisdom on congregational listening. Baab is a Presbyterian minister and teacher of pastoral theology based in New Zealand, but also a writer on congregational health and spiritual practices. A feature of her writing is that she combines biblical and personal reflection with stories from interviews of dozens of people from different contexts on her topic - in this case listening to God, obstacles to listening, listening in church, and listening to the wider community. Baab teaches listening skills to trainee chaplains, but her advocacy for listening is not just for pastoral counselling but as a broader framework for community engagement.

I appreciated Baab's reminder that Jesus was a champion listener, for example responding to Nicodemus (John 3:1-21) and the woman at the well (John 4). Jesus used what Einstein later called 'holy curiosity'; questioning and listening in ways that provoked life change. Jesus enabled the blind to see and the deaf to hear things they had not perceived before; and wants to help us see and hear new things.

The best chapter of the book was on 'Anxiety and listening'. Other parts of the book offer a toolbox of practices for fine-tuning our listening muscles: avoiding multitasking, switching technology off, and using empathy, non-judgment, body language and silence (a baseline for listening is to stop talking ourselves). But Baab's chapter on anxiety profoundly explores anxieties that cuts listening off. Sometimes people or churches are so busy with their own agendas, they have little time or energy for listening. If a congregation has minimal energy to meet needs beyond themselves, they are less likely to be interested in listening for those needs in the first place. When someone's cherished ideas are threatened by someone else, it's hard to listen to new ideas. When Christians think people do not want to talk about religion because they see it as merely a private matter, they will be less inclined to listen for opportunities to explore people's spiritual search. Baab urges adopting a theology of abundance (rather than scarcity), an attitude of learning (rather than close-mindedness), and an openness to

discuss spiritual matters with people curious about the meaning of life. She offers reassuring advice about not having to agree, not having to have all the answers, and not being responsible for all problems we hear.

Our church especially appreciated grappling with Baab's teaching in two areas: congregational discernment through listening to one another, and mission discernment through listening to our broader community.

Decision-making through congregational discernment and consensus begins with listening. Baab counsels giving everyone the space to say, 'This is what I feel or sense' and to aim for consensus of everyone affected on important decisions. This reminded us of the importance of listening to and counting not just 'voting members' but those on the margins of our worshipping community, and our children have not always been invited to contribute to decision-making. Baab says listen for voices that say, 'I'd love to do that'; more than burdensome thoughts of what people think we 'should' or 'ought' to do. She also discusses the value of listening through Scripture and engaging the text together. I appreciated reading of how one minister asks her people 'What bugs you? What shimmers? What confounds you? ... What else is tapping you on the shoulder?' (p.84) Baab advocates an interactive approach to engaging Scripture in preference over straight sermon-preaching.

Listening is also essential as a church opens their ears to their community. This is an area our church is growing in. Baab maintains that in a postmodern world of competing worldviews and diverse cultures, we cannot expect to operate from shared assumptions. We need to listen to know what brings pain and struggle to people. Karl Barth suggested preachers should prepare sermons with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. But listening for the pulse of our neighbourhood is not just for preachers. It's a skill for any of us who wants to understand what good news means for our neighbours. When we practice considering how everyday life beyond our church walls overlaps with our faith, we will be more ready to explain how our faith engages everyday life. Baab encourages us to open our newspapers, enjoy local art, take long wandering prayer walks around the neighbourhood, and exegete popular culture.

One of our local church artists, Tim Rhyder, painted a canvas of our neighbourhood with our children one Sunday. It hangs proudly on our church walls to remind us to be attentive to our closest local context where God has placed us. That is a symbol or icon for us to remind us to attentively listen to our neighbourhood.

Baab tells stories of churches who exercised community listening and the missional innovations this fostered. For example, Eileen served in India as a missionary and returned home to a dispirited congregation that had dwindled to 25 members (pp.1-4). Convinced by her global exposure that all churches should engage the world locally, nationally and globally, she encouraged the church to pray about global needs. They planned an overseas mission trip to Malawi. But they also surveyed local needs and Eileen encouraged people to ask questions of people whom they met in the community and pray for perception about concerns and unmet needs. They asked three questions of one another:

- What's your passion?
- What burns on your heart?
- Why are you here?

The resulting conversations helped them tap into God's nudges about where to place their energy. After months of listening, several members reported feeling a burden for mothers feeling isolated. They explored starting a preschool and involving the parents, and this led to Alpha and Marriage Alpha courses. They also started a foodbank, which expanded to have national connections - thus fulfilling the church's aspirations to have global, national and local mission influence. It all started with listening to God, to their own passions, to one another as a church, and to community and global needs.

The Power of Listening offers practical listening skills, models a posture of openness, and grapples honestly with some of the obstacles and anxieties of listening. It promises to be an invaluable resource for individuals and churches who want to listen empathetically to one another and to their neighbourhood.



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Darren Cronshaw is passionate about training and resourcing missional leaders through his work as Mission Catalyst - Researcher with the [Baptist Union of Victoria](#) and pastor of [AuburnLife Baptist Church](#). He serves as Head of Research and Professor of Missional Leadership at [Australian College of Ministries](#) (SCD), Honorary Research Fellow at [Whitley College](#) (University of Divinity). He is co-author with Kim Hammond of [Sentness: Six Postures of Missional Christians](#) (IVP 2014).