

Book Review: **The Power of Listening**. Lynne Baab (2014)

This review was first published as a blogpost.

“Listen carefully; speak gently”. These words of advice are Rev Dr Lynne Baab’s gift to her readers as she guides us through a comprehensive examination of the power of listening in human relationships and faith communities. Baab, who teaches pastoral theology at Otago University introduces her findings from over sixty in-depth interviews in a blend of academic insights and practical theology, and offers suggestions as to how we can more effectively listen to each other and to God.

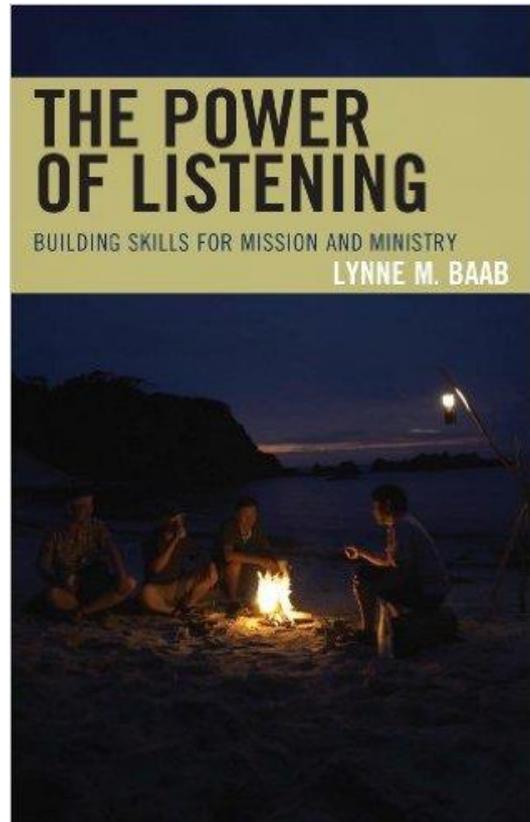
The usual applications of listening skills to effective pastoral care and thoughtful Bible study are covered well, but Baab takes us deeper by examining how listening contributes to effective mission and ministry. In a chapter on congregational decision-making, she writes about churches characterised by a culture of discernment, where:

“Listening to God is emphasised in sermons, practised at meetings, modelled by....leaders and encouraged for all members.” P 75.

Our own church is focussing on faith conversations this year, so this book arrived at a time of personal openness to new wisdom in matters of listening and communication. Like many congregations today, we are seeking to make authentic connections with people in church and neighbourhood through sensitive listening to, and respect for, individual stories. Baab makes a realistic assessment of the impact of culture and technology on efforts to communicate in today’s society, and offers thorough and practical explanation of ways listening enhances relationships with God and others. “Listening”, she says, “honours each person’s journey.” (p49)

Captivating notions such as “double listening”, “holy curiosity” and “listening as hospitality” are well-explained, and grounded in both theory and example. The familiar roadblocks to communication are helpfully reframed as ‘obstacles to empathy’. Baab’s illustrations of how anxiety and humility impact good listening are memorable; I often felt like I was looking in a mirror as she named my own experiences of listening and hearing. Chapter 8, “The Listening Toolbox” is a succinct and evocative guide that could well be published separately as a useful parish training resource.

I appreciated the way each chapter is linked with others in the book; this integration is explicit and helps the reader navigate the oceans of engaging information. Connections are made with relevant literature and research, as well as with Baab’s other books, such as her exploration of spiritual practices in congregations, *Joy Together* (2012). Her academic background in communication studies comes through clearly, but not in an intimidating way; the whole book is very inviting and readable. Writing about spiritual practices and authenticity, she says:



“(These practices) indicate our willingness to listen, to abide and to be available to whatever God is doing in our situation...fasting communally makes possible rich conversations about (addictive) habits, and powerful prayers about how to respond. Those conversations and prayers nurture authenticity. Praying using the body in various ways also nurtures authenticity because the body, soul and spirit are united and we approach God with our whole selves. Contemplative prayer encourages authenticity because we draw near to God with our inner being. When communities engage in spiritual practices together, members are able to talk with each other.. .. this feels real and honest, building trust that God does empower those who open themselves.” (p 104)

The questions at the end of each chapter are designed for individuals rather than groups; they range ‘deep and wide’ and offer valuable reflection points for a workshop or retreat. Adapting them for group study would be an excellent way to plumb further depths of this material.

A few minor criticisms – some typos early in the book were distracting and the absence of an index was surprising. The role of listening in relation to charismatic gifts might have widened the audience, and as a minister I would have liked even more specific coverage of how congregations have exercised discernment as part of their decision-making. That said, I enjoyed this book and would recommend it to a wide audience; certainly one for the church library (but leaders can buy it on Kindle!)

Baab, L. (2014). *The Power of Listening: Building Skills for Mission and Ministry*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield (around NZ \$20.00 plus postage from Amazon, \$12.00 on Kindle).

Vivian F Coleman, July 2014.