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YOUR PLACE TO EXCHANGE IDEAS AND EXPERIENCES



Welcome to the Listening Post

By Ruth McDonald

The Rev. Colin MacDonald and the Rev. Ruth McDonald offer pop-up listening in Barrie, Ont.

IN A QUIET ALCOVE AT THE BUSBY CENTRE in Barrie, Ont., volunteers arrive before their weekly shift to set out signs that say "Welcome to the Listening Post." They arrange flameless candles, colourful scarves, mandala colouring sheets, and pencil crayons. Their intent is to create a peaceful, nurturing space devoted to listening. When all is ready, they still themselves with a moment of silence that centres them in preparation for their listening role.

The Busby Centre serves as a lifeline for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. They come for emergency shelter, breakfast, community, help with housing, and many other kinds of support, but on Thursdays they also find the Listening Post, where people come to be heard one-on-one with compassion and respect, as well as in confidence.

The Listening Post is a concept that began in a storefront in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver about 18 years ago. It began through the leadership of trained spiritual directors and is rooted in a conviction of the importance of listening deeply with those who are vulnerable—people with painful realities such as childhood trauma, poverty, addictions, mental illness, or exclusion due to

disability. The Rev. Ruth McDonald, a spiritual director in Barrie, learned about another Listening Post in Anchorage, Alaska, and was moved to imagine ways she could offer the same kind of listening spaces in Barrie.

As a spiritual director, McDonald listens with individuals as they pay attention to the interior movements of their hearts on their spiritual journey, but before the Listening Post idea came along, she yearned for more. She wanted to respond to the deep pain she knew people were experiencing in her community. For her, the Listening Post is a way she and other volunteer listeners can be compassionately present to that pain, accepting and being present to people who are often ignored, turned away, shunned, or feared.

With the support of her home congregation of Burton Avenue United Church, McDonald applied for and received funding from her presbytery. She has since received funding from the Embracing the Spirit Growth Grant for ongoing work in 2020.

Since January 2019, the focus of the Listening Post has evolved to be twofold: to nurture listeners and to create spaces in Barrie where people can be heard one-on-one

respectfully, compassionately, and confidentially.

The nurturing of listeners happens through training sessions that are open to anyone of any faith, culture, or background who has a heart for listening and through monthly meetings that offer space for volunteers to reflect on their listening experiences and practise listening and being heard in a confidential community of other listeners.

Another way the group promotes the importance of listening is through pop-up listening in public spaces. Volunteers make homemade signs that say “Free Listening” and then show up in spots around the city for people to come to them to be heard.

One of our earliest volunteers, Selene Taylor, has found the listening experience moving. Speaking of her time with the visitors at the Listening Post, she says, “There are moments during our time together that feel like a sacred connection. By sharing their vulnerabilities and true selves with me, their exterior layers appear to fall away and genuine people with tender spaces are revealed. Their trust is a gift.”

Explaining what drew her to seek training to become a volunteer, Steph Carter says, “When I heard about the Listening Post, I thought, ‘People don’t realize how much that is needed.’ When I went through difficult times myself, having someone who would just listen made the difference.”

Like all the volunteers at the Listening Post Barrie, McDonald delights in listening too. Her vision is to create safe listening spaces in more and more places, such as libraries, other drop-in centres, and supportive housing units. She is delighted to have been asked to offer listening training to volunteers from other support agencies in Simcoe County.

“Our listening is in response to an experience of divine compassion that moves us to act in the world, seeing and holding all people as beloved. It moves us to ‘just’ listening,” she reflects. “At the Listening Post we understand that phrase in two ways. The first is that all we do is ‘just listen’ without an agenda. The second is ‘just’ listening in the sense of restorative justice, where people’s sense of worth expands because they have been accepted just as they are without someone else trying to fix them. As a result they live out their experience of self-worth in how they value themselves and make choices in their life.”

That yearning for justice sounds a lot like our New Creed: “We live in God’s world...We are called to...seek justice.” The Listening Post Barrie seeks to do that through “just” listening. 

The Rev. Ruth McDonald is the Director of the Listening Post in Barrie, Ont.

Sharing resources in a changing church

By George Bott

Many rural communities struggle in the absence of paid accountable ministry. When lay worship leaders step up to fill in the gaps, often they don’t have the time or resources they need to guide a faith community. St. John’s United Church in Marathon, Ont., is a small rural congregation on the north shore of Lake Superior that is setting out to change this situation. The Very Rev. Dr. David Giuliano, the 39th Moderator of The United Church of Canada, served his ministry here. Giuliano, and his predecessors, encouraged leadership to prepare this faith community to continue in the absence of paid accountable ministry.

Giuliano encouraged the development of a worship leadership team made up of himself and four licensed lay worship leaders (LLWLs). This team has served our faith community, offering support to neighbouring communities whose clergy are moving away or retiring. More recently, its formation has led to the Crossing Boundaries Cluster, a group of United Churches within a two-hour drive of Marathon. LLWLs from St. John’s United travel monthly to the cluster communities, leading worship and providing respite for untrained and tired laity. The cluster has allowed St. John’s United to live out our core ministry objective of offering “radical, intentional hospitality.”

The worship team has sought other ways to support neighbouring faith communities. These efforts have given rise to what is known as Online Licensed Lay Worship Leaders Training, now in its third year. A program of the Canadian Shield Region of The United Church of Canada delivered by United-in-Learning, it provides the opportunity to receive quality training while eliminating cost of travel, accommodation, and environmental impact, as well as reducing program costs. It boasts of being able to build trusting relationships and bonding in a virtual space that is as strong as face-to-face models and features keynote addresses by current and leading theologians. It prepares individuals for licensing within their own regional councils.