

The Ministry of Listening

"My Dad doesn't know how to listen. He doesn't ask what I think or feel, he just tells me what to do." Any of us who have ever worked with teens know how often this complaint is heard. That's not a problem just for teens, it's a problem at any age. No one likes to be told what to do.

A couple of weeks ago a resident at Wesley Village (where I am Director of Spiritual Life) was sharing her concerns about her relationship with her daughter. "I get so frustrated and angry with her. She is always telling me what to do!

Mother, you should have your hair done every week

Mother, you need to eat more greens!

Mother, you have to get involved in more of the activities that are offered!

Mother, this!

Mother, that!

I wish just once she would stop telling me what to do and simply sit and listen to me. Maybe then she would understand why I do what I do and what I feel what I feel!"

She got me to wondering how often, with good intentions, we presume to know what older adults want and need. How often we assume we know how they feel. We plan events for them in our churches and never include them in the planning. We offer advice freely, unconsciously perhaps, assuming they don't know what they want or need to do. We minister to them and for them, which assumes they are incapable of being in ministry with us.

A retired minister in our community, in his late nineties, carries on an active ministry and presence among us. Recently, I asked him if he wanted to be relieved of some of his "duties," only to be told he would let me know when and if that became the case. I needed to hear him and let him set the pace, rather than my own assumptions about what was good for him and what wasn't.

With all people, especially older adults, listening is the key ingredient of ministering. Unless cognitively impaired in a serious way, their thoughts, feelings and needs must inform us before we deign to offer advice, programs or any other form of ministry to them.

Wondering what to do about older adult ministry? Begin with a heavy dose of listening!

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