



Redefining the Sacredness of Touch

Touch is sacred for the church. We touch in order to meet the felt needs of the world, to physically be the hands of Christ. We hold hands to lift our voices up together in prayer. We pass the peace through the shaking of hands in order to welcome one another into fellowship. We hug in celebration and we offer a shoulder to cry on in the midst of pain and grief.

As COVID-19 spreads across our nation, our churches and ministers find themselves at odds with the new rules of social distancing: don't touch, don't shake hands, stay at least six feet away.

How can ministers care for their congregants, when so much of what we do to show care is wrapped up in the sacredness of physical touch, of actually feeling the hands we pray for and with?

Co-pastor at CBFNC church, Nobles Chapel Baptist Church, Rev. Brittany Caldwell, RN, BSN, MDiv, shares some practical tips she's learned from experience as a Hospice nurse.

1. Eyes are the windows to the soul.

- a. Be on eye level with the person to whom you're speaking. This means if the person is sitting, sit near them. If they are standing, then you should stand.
- b. Maintain eye contact. Don't be looking around at the room, looking at your watch or phone, or watching whatever is on TV. Let the person in front of you be your main focus.
- c. It is ok to minimize distractions such as asking if you could turn the TV off or if you move to a less distracting area. That will let them know that you are fully engaged.

2. Ears are the doorway to the brain.

- a. Listen intently to what is being said.
- b. Again, if you are having trouble hearing the person, let them know and ask to remove the loud distraction.
- c. Listen for the holy in the ordinary. In most cases, people seeking pastoral care do not offer obvious or explicit theological or spiritual questions.
- d. Turn off or silence your cell phone before the conversation begins.

3. The mouth is the overflow of the heart.

- a. As someone talks, it is important to give small verbalizations that you are listening, such as, "yes," "I understand," or "please continue."
- b. Restating a statement made by the person in your own words shows them that you were listening.
- c. If you don't understand a statement, always ask for clarification. This is not an interruption. This shows that you care and you want to understand.
- d. Using empathetic statements such as, "That must be so difficult for you" are more helpful than sympathetic statements, such as "I'm sorry." Empathetic comments can propel the conversation forward, rather than stall it in self-pity.
- e. Statements such as, "Don't worry! God's got it!" make a person feel shame, like their faith isn't strong enough. Statements such as, "God goes before you and is with you," give them hope.
- f. Try not to interrupt. Instead, wait for them to give you an opportunity to talk, and even then, it is better to ask questions and help them make observations rather than tell them what to do.
- g. Don't conclude a conversation without helping them to create a plan of action. This will help them walk away feeling empowered.

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4. Body Language is 55% of communication.

- Adopt an open posture by leaning forward, uncrossing arms or legs, and opening hands.
- Sit or stand up straight.
- Nod your head to let them know you're engaged.
- Don't fidget with your watch or phone or any other object.
- If you are eating something, put it down. Don't continue to try to eat as the person speaks.
- Appear relaxed, don't hurry the conversation. Even if you're in a hurry, don't let them see that. Let them see that they are the most important thing right now.
- I have found that praying with your hands open and head up, instead of the typical head bowed and hands clasped, communicates care well when hand holding is not an option.

In her book, *Cultivating Wholeness*, Margaret Kornfield states that holy listening is an act of prayer. When we listen to others well, it is an act of worship and an act of revelation, in which we have an opportunity to speak the truth of Christ into a person's particular situation, or even better, help to them find the revelation themselves. My prayer for you is that during this time of quarantine and social distancing, you will discover holy listening as a sacred practice, and that you will learn to care with both your hands and your heart.

Resources

Special thanks to Rev. Brittany Caldwell for writing this content.

- Cultivating Wholeness: A Guide to Care and Counseling in Faith Communities* by Margaret Kornfield
- Listening to the Soul: Pastoral Care and Spiritual Direction* by Jean Stairs
- Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing & Growth* by Howard Clinebell and Sister Bridget Clare McKeever
- Swift to Hear - Facilitating Skills in Listening and Responding* by Michael Jacobs



IMPROVE YOUR LISTENING WITH NON-VERBAL SKILLS



Pay close attention to what the person says.



Maintain comfortable eye contact. Don't avoid eye contact, but do avoid staring.



Maintain an open body position. Don't cross your arms over your body, as this may appear defensive.



Sit down, even if the person is standing, as this seems less threatening.



It's best to sit alongside and angled toward the person rather than directly opposite him or her.



Do not fidget.



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Nonverbal communication and body language express a great deal. Good nonverbal skills show you are listening, while poor nonverbal skills can damage the rapport and negate what you say. Keep these nonverbal cues in mind next time you have a conversation with someone who may need help.

