

# LEARN TO LISTEN

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## Aims

- to help us listen to the voices of children and young people in our churches and communities

## Summary

Within ten minutes of the first session beginning, it was clear that I was part of an elite task force gathered from across the Church of England given the mission of saving the church from extinction. Whilst that is a bit James Bond-esque, there is some truth in it. These 48 hours felt like a significant marker in our work with children and young people and this project is a potential game changer for the church.

There's nothing more frustrating than thinking that no one is listening to you. Tragically, it's a feeling children and young people often have. However, in the last few years there has been a growing paradigm shift from previously seeing children as vessels to be filled to increasingly recognising them as candles to burn brightly. Furthermore, as 'Going for Growth' states;

*...we must commit ourselves to listen to the voices of younger generations and the challenging messages they may bring to light.*

Going for Growth, 2010

Learn to Listen is another step in this sea-change. It is based on Biblical precedents such as the call of Jeremiah to rebuild and to plant, and upon British and International Laws relating to the rights of the children to have a say on the things they are involved in. It also stems from knowledge about early childhood brain development that shows how babies are born ready to develop through experiences of interaction with other people – as we listen, we grow.

Tony Cook both stated and showed us that listening to children is not rocket science, but it requires the adult church to change its culture, patterns and ways of thinking. We thought about the benefits of listening, the barriers to listening and worked on solutions.

Significantly, as someone who has been working in churches full-time with children for 16 years, and who takes pride in listening to the hearts of children and their views on scripture, God and faith, listening to children's views and opinions on what the church is like, on what they do in church, and on how they meet God has not been a big part of my ministry. I am challenged deeply by this.

Wednesday, 18 November 2015

Ali Langton and Ester Gregory shared their experiences of how youth councils and children's councils can work with great and profound impact and Sonia Mainstone-Cotton took us through the practical and ethical issues involved in working with children in their early years, showing that they have a deep sensitivity to other's needs as well as their own and that they have a powerful voice that needs to be heard as well.

The truth is that children and young people have much to give to the church and some, if not all, have a prophetic voice to the church, for today. Dare we risk missing that voice? I know the feeling of being listened to and being heard. It feels good. It builds me up, gives me confidence and inspires me to do more. We need our children to feel this, to feel valued and engaged, to feel like they own the church, are genuinely part of it and can actually make a difference. Without this, many will leave the church.

Below, and on the Learn to Listen website there are scores of thoughts, ideas, reasons, benefits and tools to back this up and enable every church, big and small to listen to the voices of children and young people. There are 300 questions to ask children, simple ideas for holding a consultation session, ideas for involving young people on PCC and creating a children's PCC and countless more.

It was a very encouraging and challenging time with excellent input, guidance and facilitation from people with a great heart for children young people and the church. So to sum up in short; ask questions, listen and act upon what children say.

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# THE JOURNEY TOWARDS PARTICIPATION

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Tony Cook

- Josiah king at 8... call of Jeremiah, who was about the same age, came 13 years later. Maybe Josiah needed a peer? Jer had tough words for Jo. Jeremiah 1.3-10 - his call. But then was called to *rebuild* the nation and to *plant*
    - who are going to be the next prophetic voices - who will rebuild and plant our churches, our faith?
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Mary Hawes

- history of church is not favourable re listening to children
- 1989 children act said we needed to listen to children for the first time. It's now law
- 1989 UN Convention on Rights of Child. UK signed 1991: International law
  - Article 12 ; children have a right to have their say on things that they are involved in
- The children's commissioner (began 2005) meets with groups of over and under 11's
- The National Children's Bureau has YP who meet with Lords and Parliament to give their views
- 'Mind' has Young Minds
- CRAE - Children's Rights Alliance
- >> children being taken very seriously

## **What about the church?**

- need to change the culture of our churches
  - change the language
  - change opportunities for YP to be confident to talk about an issue: how can they serve on PCC. What about children? How can they have their say?
    - impact of money and giving on what an individual or group will support. YP have no say with 'money' as they don't have any. Adults could withdraw funding from something they don't want to happen

- engagement in decision making = ownership
- we need a new readiness to take risks and share power by working with YP
- learning to listen and to act appropriately on what is heart

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Tony

## **What is participation?**

Wisdom from the room: (split into groups and write on large sheets)

- belonging / ownership / inclusive / citizenship /
- organising / organisation
- empowerment
- relationships
- immersive, being present
- journeying
- choice
- contribution, a voice, a right
  - rights = responsibility - adults need to help YP understand their responsibilities
- active
- creative
- different levels and boundaries
- valued / respected
- engaged
- permission to fail
- coaching
- involvement
- TB: 'participators in the divine nature...'

Tony's thoughts:

- 'About children and YP working together with adults on solutions to improve our world'

- Why is it hard to let children have their say? Because it's hard to give away power
- when evaluating events: ask children - this is hard because the answers are not what adults want to hear
- in the 80's the new & popular word 'participation' was about decision making. Roger Harts ladder of participation. But this must go hand in hand with active involvement
- Can we give the biscuits over to the children and yp?

## **Why is it important to listen to the voices of children and young people?**

- they are more in touch with their peers -
- they have a different perspective
- intergenerational
- Jesus put them at the centre of his kingdom / part of the body of Christ
- we might miss something amazing
- they will stop talking to us if we don't and leave the church and the church will... die
- they will be around for longer than adults
- why not? why wouldn't we?
- it's the law
- to discover what they like / how they worship /
- adults don't know everything
- They are the future of the church
- To hear what excites them
- To hear what they worry about
- Evidence of what they want/think
- We don't know everything
- They have a different perspective
- They have a right to be heard
- Culture has changed
- Jesus put them at the centre
- They are part of the body of Christ
- They will be around longer than us
- To learn from them
- They are part of the church family
- We might miss something amazing

- To gain a different view/way
- They are experts in their peer group/current culture
- They will stop bothering to say anything if we don't
- To value them
- How will you know what they think
- It just is!
- They have a lot of good things to say
- They are honest with no hidden agendas
- God speaks to them
- They've got something to say
- They are an important part of the church today and tomorrow
- They're leaving and we need to know why
- They're more in touch with culture inside and outside the church
- It establishes multi-generational relationships
- It gets them in the habit of expressing themselves
- They're more relaxed about boundaries
- It creates more networks and friends

## **What can we learn from listening to voices of children and young people in shaping the**

- How God communicates with them
- what their generation are passionate about
- how to develop programmes that work for them
- we don't know til we listen
- know what they want/need
- how they relate to God
- they have a superior view of inclusivity to older generations
- to learn differences and similarities, of style, worship, learning, relating
- what we are doing right/wrong/well/bad
- see handout 'The Benefits of listening'

## **What are the challenges of working with children and young people?**

- Fear of losing control
- Fear that new ideas won't work
- Fear of letting them fail – or the adults failing
- Thinking they know already what children want
- Fear of change/loss
- Reluctance to let go of the power
- Too much effort
- If it's not broke, don't fix it
- Truth hurts
- Physical problem – can't actually hear
- Adults think they know better
- They talk a lot (both adults & YP)
- Multiple ideas, sometimes not fully formed, sometimes unrealistic/impractical
- Opportunity – often in separate groups/services sometimes not in the building together
- Adults busy and seen as too busy
- Preconceptions on both sides – too cool, not cool enough

## **WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF US LISTENING TO / THE VOICES OF CHILDREN AND YP?**

### **What are some of the barriers?**

- Tradition and Canon law
- Clergy, micro management,
- fear of safeguarding issues



- professionalisation
- PCC / process and legality / mechanisms
- Gatekeepers
- feeling threatened by them
- what about our own needs
- no children in the church
- willingness / business / laziness / time
- mis-match of styles of worship e.g. 3 year old child / older person who like quiet
- (more will be written up by Mary)

## **Who are some of the people who create barriers?**

- vicars / PCC / Deanery / Synod
- peers
- us - being too enthusiastic with our ideas / not passing on ideas
- gatekeepers
- choir
- treasurer
- the vulnerable who feel safe in the place as it is
- those who feel ownership of the building

## **What are some of the solutions?**

- anonymity
- using social media
- junior PCC
- perseverance /
- being willing to have a go and starting small (remember the biscuit story)
- building relationships / creating an intergenerational culture
- going for walks together
- culling - remove those who are unhelpful
- listen to the past
- be good stewards of money
- communication

- \* Give them a process
- \* Get a children's worker/Advocate
- \* Go to their groups
- \* More intergenerational stuff
- \* Food is always good
- \* Encourage discussions of how we can listen
- \* Educating everyone from the pulpit
- \* Not tokenism
- \* Creating opportunities
- \* Standing up to gatekeepers
- \* Creating an intergenerational culture
- \* Make it a priority
- \* Share the vision
- \* Actually giving people a chance
- \* Different ways to feedback
- \* External/internal process
- \* Safety nets for things that might not work
- \* Volunteers
- \* Mass culling – sometimes people need to leave
- \* Build relationships of trust and care
- \* Respect their values
- \* Listen to the past and 'wisdom
- \* Explore financial implications – best value for money
- \* Get them more used to hearing children/young people's voices
- \* Help young people know what's happening/own it for themselves

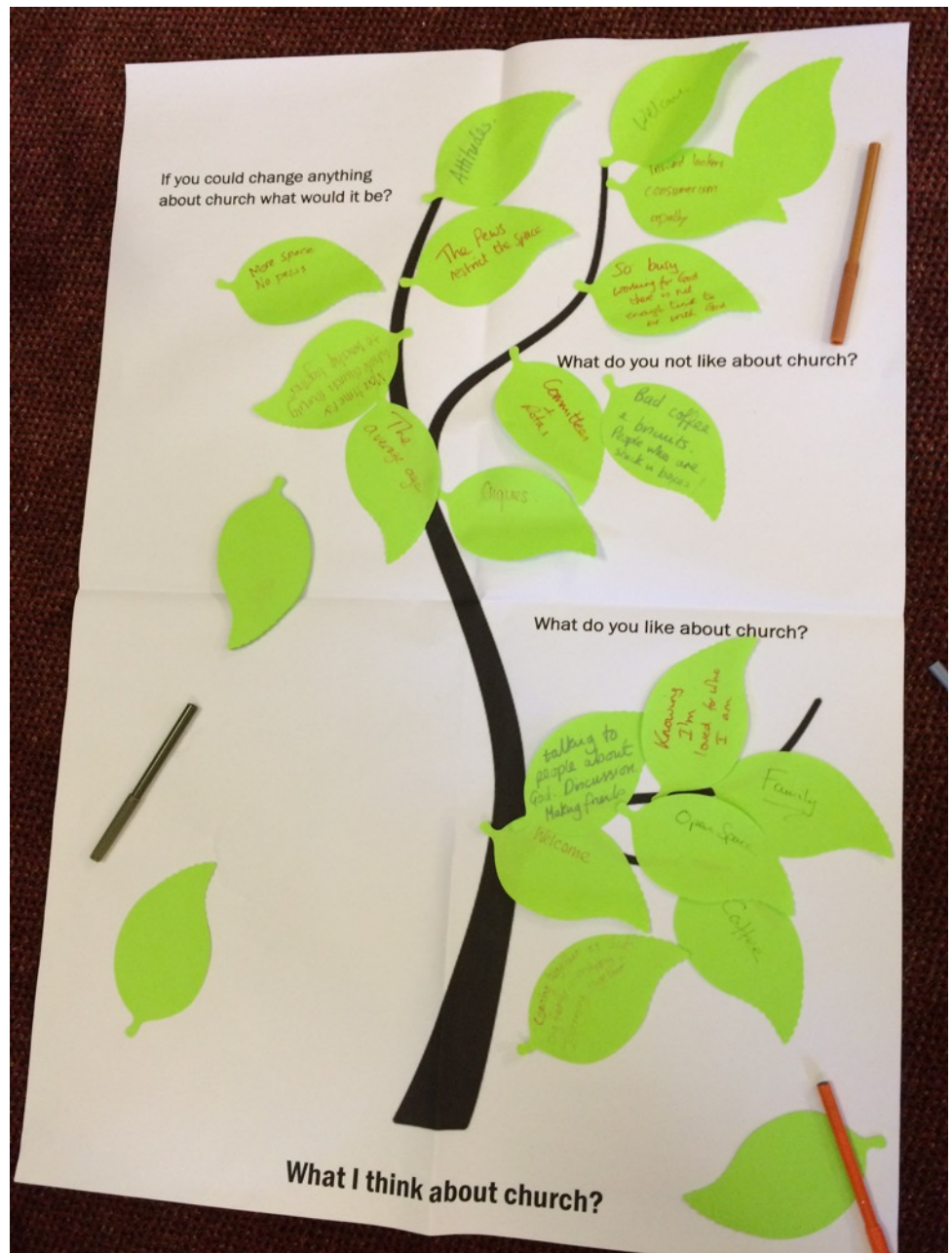
Story from New Wine when the caravan went up. 2 year old left with no clothes. 'The adults knew what was wanted, the child knew what was needed'

Facebook group; 'Learn to Listen'

## Consultation exercise

TONY

see hand out



## YOUTH COUNCILS AND THE CHURCH:

ALI LANGTON, ESTHER GREGORY

see handout sheet

- CEYouthCouncil Mantra: Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity 1 Timothy 4: 12
- 16-25 year olds
- 2 conferences: Nov formal, April relaxed and anyone is invited to be at that to enable a wider discussion

- investigate children's councils. Visit school council.
- Children's PCC
- Children's council: Start small. One has 3. Emma Pettifer - Worcester Children's Council
- start with the Deanery?
- YP on PCC

## WAYS TO LISTEN

TONY COOK

- Choose and move, then ask questions about why
- T-shirt talk - everyone has a pen to write on re a about subject e.g. God, prayer. Everyone has a say. T-shirt is the canvas - it could be anything
- Order: set of cards to put in order - facilitates discussion and listening
- 100 ideas on website / handout
- simply about being creative in how we ask questions
  - hits different learning styles

# LISTENING IN THE EARLY YEARS: PRACTICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS:

**SONIA MAINSTONE COTTON**

(freelance so can get her to the Diocese)

Background in participation - believes that very young children can be involved in decision making, their own assessment at playgroup / nursery etc / consultations

- Ethical conversations:
  - Think carefully about questions we ask them: open or leading?
  - Are we truly open to their ideas? Do we really believe that they can have a say?
  - 3 year olds understand what a family needs
- Questions to ask
  - Why are we consulting with children? why not? (choose carefully what we do ask them about)
  - are we using stage/age appropriate methods that children enjoy
  - Do we *really* want to know their thoughts? How will we **feedback** to them
- Good practice guidelines
  - fun / quick / presented beautifully / lay things out beautifully / use quality materials & medium
  - adults playing with children
  - follow children's ideas
- simple idea: (for < 6's) on a plate write/draw ask what makes you happy (and sad) or what might Mr Happy / Mr Grumpy say about this?
- Mosaic Approach-book children take photos of what makes them happy/sad / ?
  - outdoor play was popular and people
  - to play is to worship
- follow children's interests - car engine in a nursery for children to take apart and play with!

Wednesday, 18 November 2015

- What is really needed in our church for children? make it from plasticine!
- Building a city of peace: from all manner of scrap and craft materials

## LISTENING ON THE EDGE: DISABILITIES AND LEARNING DIFFICULTIES:

**SONIA MAINSTONE COTTON**

- Communication exercise: child has lost a pet, adult has to find out what has happened. child can't communicate with words. Sonia can e-mail a copy
- it takes longer to communicate
- apologise when you get it wrong - children like that

## LISTENING IN THE PARISH AND DIOCESE

**TONY**

- ask the children whether would like to help in our groups etc
- Consultation feedback - give chocolate to the group who feeds back first
- YP and children on PCC (see handout with guidelines for YP)
- Involving children and YP in appointing the vicar (document)
- The BIG Listen - something accessible for every child to get involved in and have the opportunity to have their say: 3 simple questions (see document) to gather a national picture of what children are saying. At Pentecost (fits with theology). 2 sets of questions: one for those inside church and one for those who aren't so
  - could ask schools to join in this
- Going beyond listening
  - 5 steps to risk assessment...5 steps to monitoring results of consultation (document)

# WHAT HAVE WE HEARD?

## MARY

- need to take this back to the Diocese
- write to Bishop with a short report and offer to speak to him
- how do we spread the message? plan a workshop/seminar/event I could deliver:
  - what? why? hopes/outcomes?
    - Why? to share the vision, to inspire and to begin to enable others to make changes
    - What? essentially follow this programme in short.
      - Coffee & cake
      - Choices exercise: Maltersers & Raisins - we all have and make choices from day 1. Choices become voices
      - Biblical background: Jeremiah / Samuel
      - Legal aspect - rights of the child
      - Consultation exercise: Ideas tree about state of your church re voices of YP. 3 Qu or ordering exercise
      - examples of where it has worked
  - Hopes/outcomes: The BIG Listen, Ideas tree, working with the PCC (documents) a change in culture to listening to and valuing the voices of children and YP, changes to structures and practices to include and enable YP & children to participate. There has to be feedback and action – we will feed back what the children say
    - and so what? over to you
- think about what is already happening that I could get involved in and piggy back