

Deep Listening:

Pastoral care with Incarcerated communities



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-SA](#)

Matthew 25:36 "I was in prison and you visited me..."

What does the phrase “deep listening” mean to you?

Why does deep listening / “active” listening matter in corrections?

The reality of persons incarcerated:

- Experiences of deep trauma
- Isolation and depersonalization
- Deep and profound grief and loss
- Dehumanizing reality of incarceration
- “I just appreciate you being here – and listening – I just need someone to listen to me for a while – It feels like it is so long since anyone listened to me.”

Contemplative presence

Empathic attention

Ethical boundaries and spiritual respect

Core practices of deep listening: Critical- The Gift of Your Presence

- Presence over problem-solving
- Honoring silence and pace of the person you are visiting
- Listening for the person behind the offense
- Trauma-informed attention
- Cultural and spiritual humility



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY SA](#)

1. Be Fully Present in the Moment

- Set aside assumptions, agendas, and the need to "fix" (we are not there to fix)
- Practice contemplative presence— simply being *with* rather than doing *for*
- Your undivided attention is itself a form of ministry in an environment where people are rarely truly seen



2. Create Space for quiet / silence as best as possible

(this will vary based on facility, cell blocks etc.)



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-SA](#)

- Don't rush to fill pauses—silence allows processing and deeper truth to emerge
- In the noise and chaos of prison life, offering quiet presence is countercultural and healing
- Trust the work happening in silence
- Not every pause needs to be filled

3. Listen Beyond the Words

- Attend to emotion, body language, what's *not* being said
- Recognize that pain, anger, or bravado often masks deeper wounds
- Listen for the person's inherent dignity beneath their offense or institutional label



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND](#)

4. Acknowledge Trauma Without Requiring Disclosure

- Understand that incarcerated persons carry complex trauma (often pre-incarceration and institutional)
- Don't probe or push for details
- Create safety through calm, non-reactive responses
- Do not talk about yourself or any similar experiences – this is their time to be listened to and honored.



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY](#)

5. Honor Their Spiritual Authority



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-SA](#)

- Recognize incarcerated persons as spiritual beings with their own wisdom and relationship with the sacred
- Ask rather than assume; follow their lead on faith and meaning-making
- **You're there to accompany, not convert—proselytizing has no place in pastoral care**
- Resist the expert/recipient dynamic—practice mutual reverence

Miscellaneous closing thoughts...

- Know the rules of confidentiality and also for your safety and privacy of self disclosure of both the facility and of the ministry in which you serve.
- Know the safety rules and protocol of the prison or jail you seek to minister.
- Be conscious of your own posture and body language to maintain warmth, and non judgement.
- Always prepare yourself before going in to this space – with intentional prayer from your own spiritual practice. You can not give what you don't have...
- Always remain connected to the leaders and fellow ministers of your ministry to talk, share, debrief and process.
- In any situation – any questions – ask!

