Faith & Leadership

A learning resource for Christian leaders and their institutions from the Forum for Congregational Life

CHRISTIAN PRACTICES YOUTH & CHILDREN YOUTH MINISTRY

Formational listening tools help young people connect to their faith

Ministry practitioners of Sacred Listening share examples of how young people respond to being heard without judgment when they share their beliefs.



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By Josh Packard
Co-founder, Future of Faith

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Conversations about youth disengagement from faith tend to center on the same solutions: better programming, more relevant worship, stronger digital presence. These are not bad ideas. But they may be solving the wrong problem.

At Future of Faith, we spent the last several years building a different response. The result is tools for Sacred Listening and a process grounded in the conviction that every person carries inherent worth, every conversation is a sacred encounter, and listening itself forms faith. What we've developed helps ministry leaders embed it in their own contexts, and a growing community of practitioners is doing exactly that.

Three of those practitioners lead ministries in vastly different settings: a sanctuary church in Tulsa, a nondenominational ministry in Dallas-Fort Worth, and a Catholic high school in Ohio. Each has been working to embed Sacred Listening in how they lead. And each has seen the same thing happen.

Our nationally representative data point toward why. We found that 67% of teenagers say they grow spiritually when someone listens to them share their beliefs without judgment. Only 33% say the same about hearing a sermon. These are examples of what that finding looks like when it moves from a dataset into a room full of people:

In Tulsa, belonging before belief

House Church Tulsa gathers around 70 people each Sunday, many of them excluded from other faith communities for whom they love, for divorce, for struggles that make some churches uncomfortable. Youth and Community Pastor Kris Jordan grounds the ministry in Sacred Listening and a conviction they call "belonging before belief."

Every gathering begins with the same ritual: Before any lesson, each young person shares a worry, a wish, and a welcome. What are they carrying this week? What do they hope for? It is Sacred Listening's first move, a signal that what people are holding shapes what happens in this room.

A few months ago, a new family visited. Their son had struggled with bullies at school and never felt welcomed at a previous church. During the ritual, he spoke up. The group listened, unhurried, without moving to fix what he shared. His parents reached out later to say he had told them something he had never said before: "I feel like I belong for the first time."

That is not a programming outcome. That is a listening outcome.

In North Texas, starting with what we hear

Family pastors Keedren and Keturah Boston lead a diverse community of middle school and high school students in North Texas. This community includes longtime churchgoers to first-time seekers. They have built their entire approach around Circle, a practice deeply connected to a Sacred Listening approach.

The setup is a circle of chairs, close enough to see each other's faces. Each week, students move through three questions together, from light to personal to meaningful, all tied to the current teaching series. Everyone shares, and the room holds whatever comes without interruption or advice. Listening has transformed how the Bostons lead: "We don't start with 'What should we teach?' We start with 'What are we hearing?'"

One Sunday, during a series on identity, they asked: "What is something people assume about you that isn't actually true?"

Responses started light. Then one of the loudest students paused and said quietly: “People think I don’t care about anything, but really I just don’t think anyone cares about me.”

Another student followed: “I joke a lot so nobody knows when I’m actually struggling.”

The room held it. Students began responding to each other, listening, staying present. Afterward, one student told them, “I didn’t know church could feel like this. Like I can actually say what’s real.”

In Mentor, Ohio, encountering the sacred in each other

Cari Foster serves as director of mission and ministry at Lake Catholic High School in Mentor, Ohio. Her context is a classroom where faith formation is part of the curriculum.

For her senior Christian leadership class, she built a Sacred Listening unit around a passage from Pope Francis: “Listening corresponds to the humble style of God. Fundamentally, listening is a dimension of love.” Students read it together, then practiced Sacred Listening in pairs, guided by questions about what it means to truly hear and be heard.

The reflections that came back surprised Foster. Students were disarmingly honest about how hard listening actually is. Several admitted that phones and screens had damaged something in their ability to be present.

“At first, it was hard not to think about what I wanted to say next,” one wrote. “I had to remind myself to focus only on them. Once I did, it became easier and more meaningful.”





When they put down the distractions and listened, something shifted. “It felt like I was truly being seen,” another student wrote. “Not just heard, but understood.”

For students formed in a tradition where encounter with God is central, they were discovering that listening to one another might be exactly that.

What These Three Stories Tell Us

These three settings were not chosen to represent a cross-section of American Christianity. They were chosen because they represent the range of contexts in which listening is taking root, and the consistency of what happens when it does.

The findings from our study give that consistency weight. Eight in 10 people say that listening was central to the moments that shaped their faith the most. Among teenagers, 73% say that when they feel listened to in a faith-based conversation, they become more open to discussing spirituality in the future. Those numbers hold across demographics, traditions and geography. What they cannot show is what the practice actually looks like in a specific setting.

That is what these three practitioners offer. A student who had never felt safe finds belonging in Tulsa. A teenager in Texas says what is real for the first time. A high school senior in Ohio discovers that being truly heard is its own kind of sacred encounter. None of these moments were programmed. All of them were listened into existence.

Kris Jordan, Keedren Boston, Keturah Boston and Cari Foster contributed to this essay. For free Sacred Listening tools and resources, visit futureoffaith.org.