

Deep listening: The pastor learns the congregation's story

by [Mary Clark Moschella](#) in the [July 26, 2011](#) issue



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Pastors often complain that their congregations are resistant to change. Hence the old joke about the seven last words of the church: "We've never done it that way before." The persistent thrum of the status quo keeps many congregations insulated from innovation or transformation. Pastors who answered the call to ministry with an echo of Isaiah's words, "Here am I, send me!" find themselves stymied by quotidian power struggles and ritualized repetitions of old scripts.

A leadership tool that can forge a path through the thicket of resistance and routine is something called "pastoral ethnography." Pastoral ethnography is simply a strategy for listening in a disciplined and attentive way to church members and leaders. It's a research process that can enliven theological conversation. It is not a top-down exercise of power, but rather a process of enlisting members as research partners.

By taking on the role of researcher, a pastor can better understand what is going on among church members, what is at stake for them and what they value. As a researcher, the pastor strives to adopt a neutral, curious and nonjudgmental attitude about the information gained through observations, interviews or surveys. This neutral attitude helps people speak honestly and freely. This in turn leads to greater understanding on the part of both parties. Attentive listening and deeper

understanding constitute the beginning of growth and change.

Pastoral ethnography often starts with a leader (or a group of leaders) posing a simple question. It may be a nagging question, something along the lines of "What's wrong with this church?" A question that is somewhat critical is OK because it is likely to be an honest question. Then the researcher tries to articulate the theology behind that question. "Why does this matter to me?" is a good question for prompting the pastoral researcher's theological reflection.

Consider the case of "Ken," a pastor whose congregation seemed not to want to grow. Ken would bring in some new church members every three months or so, but he noticed that as quickly as he would bring them in, leaders of his small congregation would find a way to drive them out. He dealt with this issue at first by preaching on the Great Commission passage in the Gospel of Matthew, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." When that didn't work, he preached on it again. But no matter how hard he preached that message, he saw leaders in the church acting so as to push new members away.

Ken's honest question was: Why? Why are these church members acting in a way that seems to contradict the faith? Ken understood his own theological reasoning. He wanted to probe the logic of what the people were doing. By becoming genuinely curious, Ken was already starting to change.

Ken designed some interview questions. He didn't want the questions to be biased or critical, because he figured that would shut people down. One of the questions he listed was, "Do you like a big church or a small church?" This simple question was really quite ingenious. While it had a casual and nonjudgmental tone, it got right to the issue that Ken found troubling.

Before starting the interviews, Ken expected that the people would all say that they would like a big church. After all, that seemed like the only faithful answer. But several people said they preferred a small or medium-sized church. Even more curious now, Ken asked why. Three members said that they liked knowing people and that if the church got too big they might not be able to know everyone or be known. Four people said they really liked the way Ken said their names when they received communion, and they worried that if the church had more members he wouldn't be able to remember all the names. Two members said that they would feel lost and that they wouldn't have a place in the congregation if it grew too much.

Ken was surprised and moved by these comments. Instead of judging the people as unfaithful, he started to appreciate how much the church meant to them. He did some historical research on the community and learned that it was a prominent farming community that had had a significant loss of land and status 25 years earlier when the government bought out numerous farms to build an electrical plant. He came to see that people were hanging on tightly to the church they knew because they had lost so much. Church was the one thing they had left.

After doing his research, Ken stopped being angry at people's resistance to change and started to feel compassion for them. He stopped pushing for numerical growth. Years later, the church did grow numerically—but that happened because Ken understood people's concerns and was able to lead them in a different way. Ken was transformed by his experience, and then the church changed. (This story is shared with permission.) To the extent that pastoral researchers are willing to learn from the people, they will become able to help the group move toward theological clarity and more intentional, faithful practice.

The results of a pastoral ethnography are not always encouraging. Sometimes pastoral research reveals disheartening information. When leaders start to look at the social interactions of a congregation, its sin, brokenness and failures can come into greater relief.

One pastor conducted research on a prominent congregation in a northeastern city and discovered an unsettling story of how church members had behaved during a period of citywide racial unrest. The legacy of racism could still be detected in the congregation's practice of turning away homeless people at the door on Sunday mornings. The encounter with the mundane and flawed side of faith communities can be painful and disturbing, but it is ultimately empowering for leaders and congregations to gain historical clarity.

When groups can get a better picture of their past and see their own patterns of faith and practice, they can think more clearly about the patterns they are weaving in the present. Some of those patterns may involve threads of hope as well as threads of sin and sadness. Mourning the loss of old identities may be part of this project of coming to terms with group history. When the past is given its due, honored through memory and story, it is a less mysterious and constricting force in the present life of the group.

Pastoral ethnography can give pastors and congregations the resources to write a corporate faith story in which strands of the history, theology, habits, stories and symbols of the people are woven together. Pastoral ethnographers look for threads of connection between group memories, scriptural stories and current practices, bringing together disparate threads that reveal the complexity of the community.

This narrative can then be shared with members of the congregation to help enliven their theological reflection on mission and identity. Out of this reflection, the local theology of the community emerges. Preaching that is in touch with local theology tends to be experienced as vibrant, because it is connected to the story of the people. (For more on these themes, see Robert Schreiter's *Constructing Local Theologies* [1985] and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale's *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* [1997].)

What matters in the creation of a corporate faith story is that people come to recognize themselves, their theology and their aspirations in the local theology being proclaimed. This recognition is analogous to what happens with "reflective listening" in the context of individual pastoral care and counseling. A reflective listener tries to mirror or reflect back what the speaker says. For example, if a parishioner comes in to talk to a pastoral counselor and begins by saying, "I'm feeling a little blue today," a reflective listening response might be: "A little down in the dumps?" The response reflects or mirrors back the gist of what the church member has said. It is a way for the pastoral counselor to find out whether he or she does understand the person's comments accurately. And because reflective listening helps people feel heard and understood, it often enables them to go a little deeper into their story. When heard and understood, people tend to feel more grounded spiritually and possibilities for growth open up.

An analogous dynamic takes place in the creation of a corporate faith story. When a carefully worded corporate narrative is offered to a group as a kind of mirror of what has been shared through the research, it is as if the pastoral leader is saying to the group, "This is what I've heard and seen here. Did I get that right?" It's important that the people get a chance to respond, challenge, correct or confirm the leader's findings. There might be disagreement, negotiation and even possibly some "Aha" moments when the group encounters its story as seen through a leader's eyes. The responses have to be handled gently, with humility, just as in pastoral counseling. Once this kind of honest reflection is offered, new energy is likely to stir and possibilities for growth will emerge.

The power of this process can be glimpsed in the case of a secular oral history project in Manchester, New Hampshire. The researchers' intention was to interview 300 former mill workers at Amoskeag Mills, once the world's largest textile company. At first the researchers had a hard time getting any former mill workers to agree to be interviewed. Many of the workers felt that their lives were unremarkable. They knew that textile work is not exactly a high-status profession, and many of them felt like failures when they recalled the painful and traumatic closing of the mill in 1936.

Nevertheless, some former workers did agree to be interviewed, and eventually their stories were presented, along with photos and documents, in an exhibit. No one expected this exhibit to be a popular success—it was meant primarily for architects and experts in historical preservation.

But a funny thing happened as word spread about the exhibit. Some of the former mill workers went to see the exhibit, and that experience rekindled their memories. They spread the word about the exhibit. Social historian Tamara Hareven, one of the researchers, observed at the exhibit "striking scenes where old former workers searched for their relatives in the huge historic group portraits of the workers that were on display. Grandparents led their grandchildren through the exhibit and described their work process of 30 to 40 years earlier." In the five weeks that the exhibit ran, 12,000 people came to see it. As former co-workers recognized each other, they began to see themselves and their stories as part of a larger story, one that had historical significance.

After the exhibit, the oral history interviews continued, but they took on a completely new character. Former mill workers started volunteering to be interviewed, recalling their work experiences with pride. The research process, together with the exhibit, became a catalyst for a dramatically new sense of shared self-worth among the former mill workers. Hareven describes what happened among the people as a "collective identification" that became "a common community event" (*Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City* [1978]).

This example demonstrates the kind of growth that can emerge, even unintentionally, from a research process that is shared with the community. The process generates energy that can be harnessed and directed to help a congregation move forward into new self-understandings and into a process of collaborative and intentional change.

In pastoral ethnography, we discover that change is a two-way street. Pastoral researchers must reflect not only on the stories of the members but also on their own stories and on their part in the larger faith story that the group is telling. Deep questions emerge: What have we been doing here together in this sacred place and space? How does this practice match up with our rhetoric or our mission statement? What do we need to change in order to be more responsive to the call of God and to the needs of the world?

This process requires that pastoral researchers pay attention both to their own longing and sense of call and to the people they are serving. While this kind of disciplined attention is difficult, it is not boring. It enables religious leaders to get to know people in all of their diversity, complexity, particularity and wonder. By staying open and curious, the pastoral researcher helps generate honest conversation and deeper, more reverent relationships. The practice of pastoral ethnography enables leaders and groups to move forward, coauthoring with God and each other the next chapters of their faith stories.