



Listening Project Training and Resource Center

Fall 2009 News and Donor Letter

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www.listeningproject.info

If you're an old friend, we thank you for making our work possible. If you're a newcomer, welcome to some new and exciting possibilities. Your support is crucial in making it all happen. We thank you.

Herb, Florence, Marilyn, Mari, Wanda, Colin, Jim, Marnie, Silvia, Catherine, Brian

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Tired of all the social and political polarization?

Overcoming polarization by increasing understanding and **building cooperative community action** is at the heart of a Listening Project. Conducted by a local organization or coalition, Listening Projects begin with learning how to *listen effectively* – not just with your ears, but also with your heart and with skills that enable you to build trust, understanding and new grassroots solutions – especially with people who have different or opposing positions.

For over twenty years we have been helping community based organizations do this kind of listening that leads to more effective organizing and action. The result has been change from the bottom up – a living democracy that engages a deeper and wider spectrum of your community in creating cooperative, community based change.

Below are brief summaries of **successful Listening Projects** that have shown such results:

- Residents struggling with poverty, crime, and drugs develop their own leadership and home-grown solutions
- Conventional Southern farmers transition to sustainable farming
- Victims and perpetrators of ethnic hatred and killing in the Balkans create a path to reconciliation and community renewal
- A district-wide health department develops business and community support for nursing mothers and finds new ways to serve and empower Hispanics
- A West Virginia statewide coalition successfully brings more compassion to state welfare reform

Conservative Churches Lead the Way on Environmental Stewardship

The Christian Stewardship of Creation Project

Community development planning is a proven means of protecting long-term community and environmental health and well being. But planning is still opposed by many in rural southern communities, including Yancey County, NC. This is why a Sept. 17, 2009 Sustainable Yancey meeting was truly a historical event.

Local leaders from Yancey County, its county seat, the Chamber of Commerce, the Economic Development Commission, the regional community college and local churches, all agreed at their meeting to initiate sustainable development planning in Yancey County. Their goal was *“development that is healthy for our citizens, their long-term economic security and the mountain lands and waters that sustain us.”*

Sustainable Yancey is one of many new developments in Yancey and nearby Madison County made possible since the **Christian Stewardship Listening Project (CSLP)** was completed. The CSLP interviewed 54 church leaders, a majority of whom were pastors in conservative Baptist denominations. The interviews revealed a local, Biblically based approach to stewardship of the earth as God’s creation.

The **Listening Project** interviews were followed by congregational dialogue sessions that enabled church members to share their feelings, ideas and priorities on stewardship of “our mountain lands and waters.” A gathering at High Pastures Christian Retreat Center provided the same opportunity for area youth.

In a recent newspaper article, a local church leader noted the role of CSLP in **Sustainable Yancey** - the commitment of so many community members to initiate a Sustainable Yancey planning process was possible because CSLP listened to the priorities of churches that were not previously engaged in environmental matters. He went on to say:

“It is clear to all who have participated that, as Christians, we need to protect and nurture both our people and our environment, which is God’s creation. That’s sustainable development.”

Other current or planned CSCP activities:

▪ **Alternative Energy** projects are being planned for farm families, churches, and community centers in Madison County. They will be offered through a partnership of CSLP, local churches, NC Interfaith Power and Light (NCIPL), and the Mountain Valleys Resource Conservation and Development Council.

▪ **Adopt-A-Stream** is a regional watershed program that enables churches to take responsibility for water quality in sections of streams they adopt.

▪ **Energy Audits** for churches and **Home Weatherization** for low-income families are provided through a partnership of local churches, CSLP, NCIPL, and local community action agencies.

▪ A **Creation Stewardship Information Booklet** is being developed to provide pastors with Biblical references on Creation Stewardship.

CSLP, is also expanding into other counties as a statewide and eventually a national organization named Christian Stewardship of Creation Project (CSCP). Communities in other states may also consider CSCP’s proven model for outreach to faith communities that have previously been disengaged or negative about environmentalism. This is an effective process because it empowers previously disengaged or disaffected faith communities to define their own beliefs and priorities for environmental stewardship.

Note: Church dialogue sessions conducted by CSCP were modeled after our Facilitated Dialogue program. More information on this can be found on our web site: www.listeningproject.org

~ Listening to our Teens ~

“Last year nobody cared about the Bloods and the Crips and now everyone wants to be one.”

“So you think the adults can help...”

“Yeah, because adults are the ones that started it.” -- Teen

The Asheville, NC Middle School was ready to tackle serious problems facing their students during and after school. A widening achievement gap and an increase in violence by young teens were two key problems needing attention.

The Asheville City Schools Foundation (ACSF), a non-profit local education fund that provides a wide range of services to the school system, again took the lead in finding those solutions. Because ACSF's co-directors, Kate Pett and Leah Ferguson believed it was important to involve the kids themselves, they chose to conduct a Listening Project with Asheville's young teenagers.

With excellent leadership from Pett and Jillian Buckley from Americorps / VISTA, the *Listening to Our Teens Project* was initiated in late 2008. More than 20 school and community organizations worked together. After months of planning and a day of interviewer training, more than 40 community volunteers began listening to a highly representative group of 85 teens and 40 family members.

On July 2009, a final report from the LTOT interviews made it clear that a primary need was for quality after-school and summer activities for students. In the words of one student:

“If you don't have something to do, you'll find something to do, and it will be the wrong thing...”

Barriers to after school program participation were identified by both students and families, with families noting problems with transportation, cost, lack of information and difficult scheduling. For each barrier, implications were clarified by the LTOT leaders, and possible solutions were identified. For example one of the solutions for transportation was to have programs available at the school.

However, based on student input, in-school programs would not be well attended unless a “cafeteria approach to programming is provided.” This allows students to opt-in to a variety of activities rather than to choose just one.

“After school programs that I went to before, they treated us like we were three-year-olds and needed a lot of help with everything... It would be nice if they treated us like the age that we are. Like young adults. Yeah!” (Middle School teen).



Asheville Mayor, Terry Bellamy, Interviews Student

At a Listening to Our Teens summit in June 2009, 85 service providers and community representatives came together to learn about and discuss the results of the Listening Project, which interviewed teens about their experiences, wants and needs inside and outside of school. Out of this discussion, community collaboration led to the **Listening to Our Teens Network**, which will work towards meeting the out-of-school needs of all of Asheville's young teens. The network includes a range of Asheville agencies concerned with teenagers, interested individuals, parents, and the teenagers themselves. Asheville middle schools are also instrumental in the network.

“Listening to our kids has dramatically changed the way that we will now plan programs.” Kate Pett, Asheville City Schools Foundation

The LTOT Network is now working toward delivery of a coordinated menu of highly experiential and relevant after-school and

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summer programs designed and evaluated with student/young teen input. These programs will be made possible by a collaboration of individuals, community organizations, businesses, and government agencies pooling their resources so that all middle school youth are empowered by opportunities to find their voice and realize their potential.

A full report on LTOT interview results is at www.acsf.org. The LTOT Network has adopted a program model called the Providence (Rhode Island) After School Alliance, or PASA. Learn more about PASA at: www.mypasa.org. The Network is currently seeking funding that would allow them to launch their project.

The Most Important Listening Skill

Listening Project training includes preparing ourselves to be good listeners. We discuss and practice a number of skills in a training session. Perhaps the most important is EMPATHY.

Empathy is both a skill and a profound spiritual practice. It happens when we are able to let go of our own concerns and really open our hearts and minds to the totality of the other person. It is learning to go beyond just hearing a person's words, to where we can get a sense of their underlying fears, hopes, needs, and ideas. In other words, we "walk a mile in their shoes."

What happens through empathy is that our minds open and we begin to experience compassion for the other person. This doesn't necessarily mean we agree with them – though it is helpful to focus on areas of agreement. We can disagree with someone's ideas or actions, yet with the help of empathy, hold them in our hearts so that our feelings are tempered with understanding, care and respect.

We don't need a Listening Project to do this. We can practice this at home which is truly the place where peace begins.

WE ARE COLLECTING STORIES OF LISTENING IN EVERYDAY LIFE – SEND US YOURS FOR POSSIBLE PUBLICATION IN A BOOK: *Transforming Self and Society Through Deep Listening and Community Organizing*

Even in projects on racial, ethnic or political conflict, where interviewers are concerned about hostile responses -- the reality is, people don't want us to end the listening interview!

People are hungry to be truly listened to, so we listen not only with our ears -- but also with full attention, compassion, and an open mind.

When this happens, trust is built, and doors are opened to new possibilities, ideas, and solutions.

To participate in a Listening Project is an opportunity to learn, to grow and to find that which is true and good in each and every human being.

Thanks for caring about our work. We'd love to have your involvement and support in any way you feel moved to offer it. Here are possibilities:

- Donate to support our work. Grassroots support is essential.
- Read our web site. It's inspiring to see examples of what others have accomplished in the past 20+ years. (www.listeningproject.org)
- Tell others about the Listening Project
- Volunteer. Help with our web site or with other electronic outreach tools.
- Participate. Occasionally we have projects that invite outside participants.
- Send us your love. We send you ours.

♥ ♥ ♥ ♥

San Jose Neighborhood Listening Projects

For the last twenty years neighborhood children had to walk through mud, trash, broken glass, discarded tires and other debris to get to school.

This hazardous stretch of walkway -- over a mile long -- is in the Seven Trees Community of San Jose, CA. After the community conducted a Neighborhood Listening Project, they brought their ideas and plans to the City Council and now **the problem is getting fixed.**

On Saturday, June 13, 2009, members of the Seven Trees neighborhood in San Jose, CA broke ground on a \$1 million sidewalk project with trees and crosswalks. They were joined by City Council member, Madison Nguyen, and leaders from the **Seven Trees Coalition** which includes two elementary schools, a neighborhood group, a union local, an immigrants' rights network, Cry Out Christian Fellowship, and the City of San Jose.

The construction of this safe walking zone is one of **many positive changes** that came after completion of 200 neighborhood Listening Project interviews in 2007. The Listening Project, organized by the Seven Trees Coalition with guidance and training from Listening Project trainer, Erik Larsen, galvanized community action.

A month after the completion of the interviews, the principal of Seven Trees Elementary School hosted a meeting of neighborhood leaders who discussed the interview results and then created a formal **Listening Project report**. This report was made public during a September 2007 community meeting, in which 150 residents met in the Seven Trees school cafeteria to ask City Council member, Madison Nguyen, to make a commitment to their neighborhood. She responded with a strong yes!

The very next day Nguyen put the plan on the agenda of the City Council and on Nov. 6 nearly **100 neighbors marched to City Hall. The Council voted unanimously in favor of the plan.**

After the council meeting, staff from several city departments, in partnership with the Seven



Seven Trees Ground Breaking Ceremony

Trees Coalition. began work on the top **priorities listed in the Listening Project report**. City workers met with neighborhood residents to listen even more intently to clarify citizen concerns and to implement a plan.

Implementation of the plan included:

- The Police Department detailed a new problem oriented policing plan to reduce after school gang activity.
- The Department of Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services offered gang prevention trainings to residents.
- The Department of Transportation completed the resurfacing of every street in the Seven Trees neighborhood.
- Code Enforcement officers took action to create a proactive quarterly inspection plan for the Seven Trees area.
- The Office of Economic Development began responding to the needs of a blighted shopping area.

Now, two years later, residents continue to feel special pride about their cooperative community action and the response of their city.

Construction of the new pedestrian zone, their latest success, started in September 2009!

The Seven Trees Project is one of three Building Strong Neighborhoods (BSN) Pilot Projects in San Jose. These projects, modeled after the City's successful Strong Neighborhoods Initiative (SNI), build strong neighborhoods by developing community leadership and working collaboratively with residents. Listening Project trainer, Erik Larsen, is an SNI city employee.

Kudos to San Jose for adopting Listening Projects as a primary tool for community development.

The PICA Listening Project

An update from Jon Falk

“We believe that immigration, trade, and job loss are connected, and the best way to understand the connections is through the eyes of the people who are affected.”

PICA’s *kNOw US AND THEM* programs make important connections here in Maine among immigrants, small farmers, displaced workers, and other Mainers affected by international trade. We believe that the more we know about each other, the less we will have an *us* and *them* mentality about people whose basic concerns and experiences may not be very different from our own. That is why the **Listening Project** is one of the most important parts of the *kNOw US and THEM* program.

So far we have conducted 20+ interviews of Maine farmers, displaced workers, and immigrants. We also interviewed residents of Carasque, El Salvador and people from Carasque now living in the Washington, DC area. The interviews in Carasque have enabled us to examine both the causes and the effects of emigration to the US. These interviews have produced a rich body of material that has helped focus and direct our work. We took photographs and made audio recording of the interviews.



Jessie Newcomb interviews Maria Isabel in Carasque. El Salvador

We are using the **Listening Project** interviews extensively in workshops we are doing around the state of Maine. More importantly, the Listening Project has helped direct our

ongoing work by narrowing our focus to the relationships among free trade policies, economic immigration, and displacement of Maine workers.

The outreach we are doing and the relationships we have built through the **Listening Project** have already contributed to new connections and alliances among groups in Maine. For instance, for the first time an immigrant organization, **Centro Latino Maine**, has joined the **Maine Fair Trade Campaign**, which is a coalition of labor and community groups that is the voice of fair trade advocacy in Maine. We are also doing outreach and education with other labor and immigrant groups and allies, including faith and community organizations.

Moving forward, we are now doing outreach and education with labor and immigrant groups and allies, including faith and community organizations. We plan to bring members of these different constituencies together in **Facilitated Dialogues** next spring. This will enable us to have honest conversations about common interests and areas of conflict, and we will begin identifying concrete ways we can work together on local and national issues. We have also created a **Global Literacy** program in a group of eastern Maine high schools. The program will use experiential learning to engage students with the world, with people of different races, and with the fundamental issues of trade, migration, and community sustainability that are shaping their lives.

Two videos of our interview excerpts can be viewed on our web site at: www.pica.ws/Programs/KnowUsAndThem/tools/

There is an 8 minute presentation of displaced Maine workers, small farmers, and immigrants to Maine, and a longer (29 minute) video of interviews in Carasque, El Salvador.