

# CONNECTIONS online

## FREE TO DISTRIBUTE

Read online, or print to share and freely distribute in church, and among your neighbors and friends. Printed versions can be multiple pages on letter paper, or printed as a four-page booklet on 11x17 paper.

After printing, fold with this page on the outside, tab the open sides with bits of tape to keep it together, then place a mailing label and first-class stamp on the photo below (stamp at lower edge, mailing label as if the rest of the photo were an envelope).

**SOLA**  
www.solapublishing.com

P.O. Box 855  
Graham, NC 27253  
612-216-2055 or 888-887-9840



## *Listening is Loving* \_\_\_\_\_

Essay by Rev. Dona Johnson



In the new year it is common for many of us to make resolutions such as trying a new low-carb diet, new weight loss or fitness program, but have you ever thought of taking on a new spiritual practice? One practice that is sorely missing in today's culture is holy listening.


As a Christian spiritual practice, holy listening is a way we love one another and is one of the best gifts we can offer each other, and it is also a form of Christian hospitality. We all have a listening history. But our capacity to listen well and deeply to others is born out of our own experience of someone listening to us. Jesus was a perfect listener because he listened to what was transpiring in people's hearts. Jesus commanded us, "Consider carefully how you listen" (Luke 8:18). Listening is not a passive skill. It is not merely being quiet and letting the other person speak. It requires full attention, focused concentration, and careful thinking.

We live a wordy world — a world filled with lots of talking and a lack of deep listening. Today, we are surrounded by people talking over one another, whether it be on the floors of Congress, in town hall meetings, small group or family discussions, and in actual debates. In general, our current secular and religious communities all fall prey to not learning and teaching good, life-giving listening skills. This is exceptionally notable in Christian interactions, where holy listening should be paramount to Christlikeness.

When fear and anxiety arise in the human heart, our knee-jerk reaction is to speak without thinking. Rather than hold a neutral space of silence where deep listening occurs, our triggers produce anxiety and fear. In order to find relief, we then interrupt, cut people off in mid-sentence, and are quick to inject, talk over when others are trying to

speak. Proverbs 18:13 tells us: "To answer before listening—that is folly and shame," and James 1:19: "Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger."

For people of faith, listening is made holy when we practice holy restraint. What that means is that while listening, we let go, release ourselves from judging what is being said, and restrain ourselves from projecting our own fears and past experiences into the conversation. And this, without a doubt, takes a lot of prayerful self-awareness and inner work. A great example of not listening well in a conversation is when someone is talking to you, and your mind is hard at work thinking about what to say next or how you will counter or confront them. Holy restraint requires us to be less prideful and more compassionate with a humble spirit. This in turn creates a wide-open space where people feel safe and free to express themselves, able to disclose their deep longings, hurts and wounds that more often than not stay buried in their souls. Healing can occur when people feel listened to. The Psalmist recognized this need for open space: "He brought me out to wide-open space; I stood there saved" (Psalm 18:19 MSG).

So, in this new year, why not give holy listening a try. God speaks through the hearts of every person. You could be surprised at what happens when we listen empathetically to others. Imagine what might happen — deeper bonds, inner healing and growth in our relationships. 

[Rev. Dona Johnson](#) of Sedona, Arizona, is trained through Selah as a spiritual director in the Trinitarian tradition. She operates [StillPointe: Shepherding the Soul](#) and is a stewardship specialist and generosity coach for the North American Lutheran Church.

# Journey Through the Psalms

Mini Bible Study Installment



## PSALM 13

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?  
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?  
Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.  
But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.  
I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

**I** feel guilty when I pray." Many of the women in our group began to nod. "I start praying about what's troubling me, but then I start to think about how there are little children living in war zones, and how good I have it, and I just wonder what I'm doing bothering God."

"That's really interesting," I said. "Has God told you that you're bothering him?"

David does not seem to share her concern in Psalm 13. This brief prayer, one of the shortest the psalter and the shortest prayer of aid in the book, strikes me as the kind of prayer we may fire off when stuck in traffic — it's short and frustrated. Unlike other psalms of David, we don't know what his enemies are doing to cause him stress — just their potential success and his potential failure. All we know is that David is sad, worried, fearful, and turning to the Lord with it all. In fact, more than anything, David is making known that his deepest desire is the Lord's presence and reassurance. He wants God to look at him in his pain and reassure him with his presence. David understands God to be his God — his God who took interest in him when he was a shepherd boy and his God who is present in his kingship.

What David realizes, in calling for the presence of his God, in asking God to intrude upon his daily worries, and in giving thanks for the blessings God has already granted him, is that God takes notice of us. Our theology of suffering cannot grow so large that we come to believe God is only present in war

zones and hospital rooms because then our theology is shrinking God. Our God is not finite, but infinitely abundant, as unbothered by big prayers as he is by the small. Our God is as active in hospital rooms as he is in traffic jams. He is as active in war zones as he is in math tests. Our God — your God! — is a God present in vast devastation and small sorrows, of overwhelming celebration and unnoticed joys.

1. Do you ever feel guilty praying to God? Why? What messages in scripture assuage this guilt?
2. What does it mean to address God as "my God" or "my Lord"? What does it mean to belong to God and recognize him as "yours"?
3. Are even brief prayers "enough"?
4. This psalm ends with a proclamation of God's blessings. How can ending your prayers the same way offer you comfort and perspective?

## PRAYER

Holy Father, you have heard the cries and songs of your people. In big and small moments of grief, make your presence known to us. In big and small moments of joy, allow us to celebrate alongside you, and your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen. **N**

The author of this installment, **Rev. Taylor Rister-Stempniak** of Fresno, California, is pastor of [Immanuel Lutheran Church in the community of Easton](#).

**CLICK TO VISIT WORLDWIDE PARTNERS IN MINISTRY**

**AUGUSTANA DISTRICT**  
[augustanadistrict.org/events](http://augustanadistrict.org/events)

**I AM THE WAY**  
CROSS OR GLORY?  
Part 1

On Being a Theologian of the Cross  
**THEOLOGICAL CONVOCATION**  
February 1-3, 2026 | Bloomington, MN

**SAINT PAUL LUTHERAN SEMINARY**  
314-497-2400 • [semllc.org](http://semllc.org)

CLICK HERE FOR  
**SIMUL**  
The Journal of St. Paul Lutheran Seminary

**MI** The Master's Institute  
White Bear Lake, Minnesota  
651-765-9756  
[miseminary.com](http://miseminary.com)

**Ingham + Okoboji**  
Lutheran Bible Camps

Milford, IA 51351  
1-800-OKOBOJI  
[okoboji.org](http://okoboji.org)

**Ambassador PUBLICATIONS**  
Biblical Lutheran Educational & Devotional Resources  
Minneapolis, Minnesota  
763-412-2010  
[ambassadorpublications.org](http://ambassadorpublications.org)

**Naomi's Heart Mission**  
General Santos City, Philippines  
937-304-8110  
[naomisheartmission.org](http://naomisheartmission.org)

**SPIRITUAL ORPHANS NETWORK**  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
505-994-3278  
[sonetwork.org](http://sonetwork.org)

**LUTHERANS FOR LIFE**  
Lutherans For Life exists to equip Lutherans and their neighbors to be Gospel-motivated voices For Life.  
[lutheransforlife.org](http://lutheransforlife.org)



## Ministry Partner Focus

### CONTACT AND SUPPORT

Support for Naomi's Heart Mission, a registered 501(c)(3), comes from the generous donations of churches and individual believers worldwide.

Anyone can donate \$40 a month to feed, clothe, provide medical care, and educate one student. Visit [naomisheartmission.org](http://naomisheartmission.org) and click the Donate button to begin.

Individuals are invited to participate in a short-term mission visit. Visit the Contact Us page on the website and complete the contact form for more information.

Contact Kristie Ward at [kleward@yahoo.com](mailto:kleward@yahoo.com).

God has no requirements for his servants undertaking great works for him other than a willingness to take steps of faith.

Upon arriving in the General Santos City area of the Philippines on a 2003 mission trip sponsored by their church, Kristie and Danny Ward found hungry, dirty children playing in the streets. Their parents, living hand-to-mouth, could hardly afford to feed their children, let alone send them to school. This means generations of poverty, because even getting a job at McDonald's in General Santos City requires a college degree.

Kristie couldn't sleep when she arrived home, and when she did sleep, she had dreams of children on the streets without proper clothing, food, or education. She felt called by God to do something, but how could God use her? She was a grandmother with only a high school education and no full-time ministry experience.

But she couldn't sleep. She had to try, even if it meant failure.

Kristie and Danny made return trips to General Santos City in 2004 and 2005, and in 2006, they sold their house, cashed in their retirement funds (along with any semblance of the American dream for their future), and moved to the Philippines. Living in a one-room cement-block house, they began feeding 100 children every week and built a bamboo hut where they educated 20 kindergarten students.

Twenty years later, they are educating more than 500 children and providing 1,600 meals per week. In the last few years, more than 150 children from Naomi's Heart Mission have graduated from college and are now working as teachers, nurses, lawyers, medical professionals, and pastors.

Naomi's Heart Mission is a miracle initiated by the faithfulness of Kristie and Danny Ward.

If you visit (and they hope you will), you will see more than 50 Filipino teachers and staff members serving children; hundreds of students, dressed in school uniforms, at a morning assembly before classes begin; a brand-new, modern classroom facility with construction of another to begin soon; and daily feeding programs for the poor. The mission extends to ministry in local prisons, and former students who are now pastors are now planting churches and leading in-home Bible studies.

God continues to expand this ministry through the development of a water-refilling station for the poor in the area and through livelihood projects, with hundreds of pigs and thousands of chickens raised by parents of children attending the school.

God has blessed this ministry, beginning with the steps of faith by Kristie and Danny Ward. Please consider taking a step of faith to help them. 

## CLICK TO VISIT WORLDWIDE PARTNERS IN MINISTRY



**NORTH AMERICAN LUTHERAN CHURCH**

Bedford, Texas  
888-551-7254  
[thenalc.org](http://thenalc.org)



**Luther House of Study**

\$300/MONTH ONLINE M.DIV.

FREE MINISTRY RESOURCES

[LHOS.ORG](http://LHOS.ORG)



**WORD ALONE**

SUBSTACK

NEW BLOG

Thinking biblically about religion, politics and culture with Pr. Chad Kyler. Brought to you by Sola Publishing.



**Beyond the River Academy**

715-296-0797  
[beyondtheriveracademy.org](http://beyondtheriveracademy.org)



**Still Pointe**


SOUL SHEPHERDING

[revdonajohnson@gmail.com](mailto:revdonajohnson@gmail.com)



**BLESSMAN INTERNATIONAL**

Join us on a life changing mission trip to South Africa!



SOLA SCRIPTURA  
SOLA FIDE  
SOLA GRATIA  
SOLA MENTE  
SOLA VERA

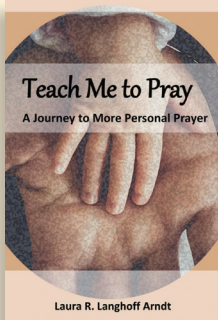
**STANDING FIRM**

ILT.edu (605) 692-9337



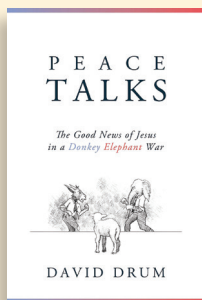
**THE HARVEST is WAITING**

WORLD MISSION PRAYER LEAGUE  
[wmpl.org](http://wmpl.org)



## PRAYER JOURNEY

**Teach Me to Pray: A Journey to More Personal Prayer** by Laura Langhoff Arndt is a prayer journey and prayer journal intended to guide the reader to intentionally praying more personal prayers for themselves, their family and community. Softcover, 131 pages. [Item Q-A150, \\$12.99, solapublishing.com](#)



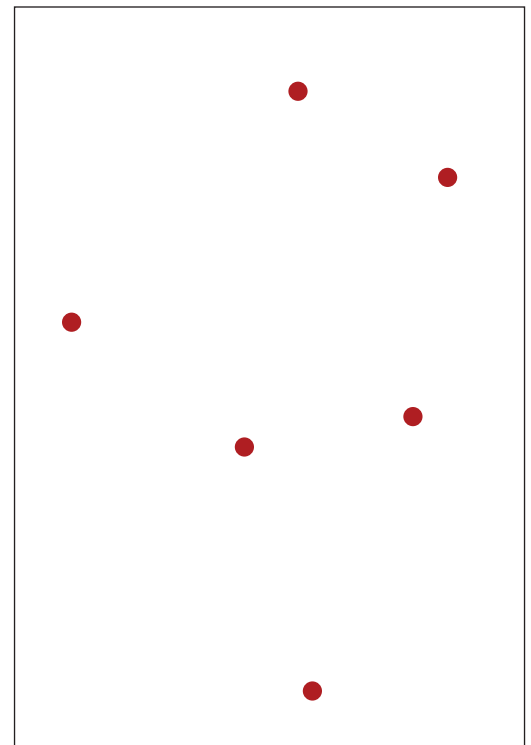
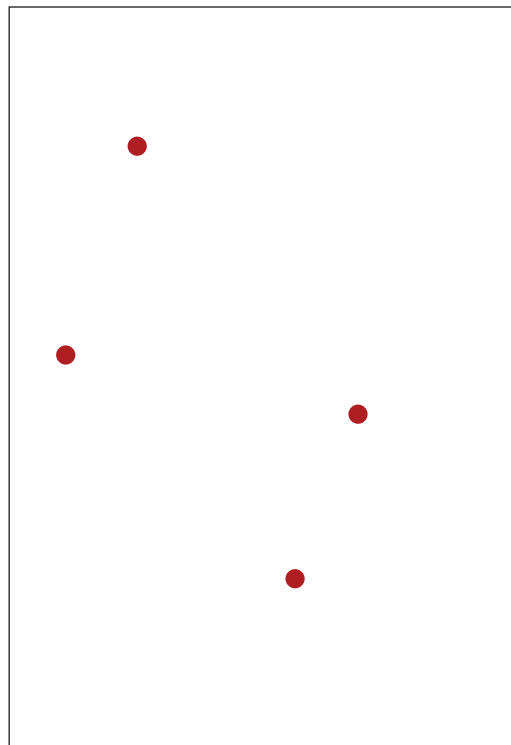
## POLITICS

**Peace Talks: The Good News of Jesus in a Donkey Elephant War** examines the divisive mess of the present-day U.S. and ways to handle interactions. By Rev. David Drum. Softcover, 245 pages. [Item B-H400, \\$15, solapublishing.com](#)

## ... AND A GAME

Try Sprouts, a paper-and-pencil game for two players. Players take turns drawing a line between two dots (or from a dot to itself) and adding a new dot somewhere along the line. The line may be straight or curved, but must not touch or cross itself or any other line, and the new dot cannot be placed on top of one of the endpoints of the new line. No dot may be the end point of more than three lines. When all dots have three lines, the game is over. The player who makes the last move wins. Here are two games of dots to start with, but it's (obviously) a very easy game to make for yourself. Fun fact for math people: If  $n$  is the number of dots, the minimum number of plays is  $2n$ , and the maximum is  $3n-1$ .

Reading this issue of Connections Online in your browser? Try [this jigsaw puzzle](#) from Rev. Mark Ryman.



## CLICK TO VISIT WORLDWIDE PARTNERS IN MINISTRY

**Lutheran Church of South Sudan**

[lcss.church](http://lcss.church)

**TRICKY QUESTIONS**

**THE STUFF THAT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE**

Augustana District Confirmation Retreat  
2/27 - 3/1 | [augustanadistrict.org/events](http://augustanadistrict.org/events)

**Make LCBI Your Lutheran Discipleship Boarding School**

**Gr 9-12 Canada**