

**INVESTIGATING THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFICIENT
LISTENING AND FEEDBACK IN THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA
FOR THE ONGOING SYNOD ON SYNODALITY:
A QUALITATIVE REVIEW**

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Abstract

Listening is one of the most difficult human actions, as such most of the problems found in the Church today are as a result of a deficiency in listening. Like talking and hearing, listening is a complex process best maintained by knowing the barriers that affect it. It is a vital tool for all kinds of communication for the successful execution of a common discourse. An important component of efficient listening is feedback. Feedback helps in learning to understand the match between behaviour and original intention. Efficient listening and feedback enhance the ability to learn and adopt new information, knowledge, and skills. Pope Francis in his call for the synod on synodality encourages people both within and outside the Church to listen to one another. However, there are some unanswered questions with regards to the best type of listening skill to be employed. To search for the best kind of listening skill for a synodal Church this study titled "Investigating the Importance of Efficient Listening and Feedback in the Church in Nigeria for The On-Going Synod on Synodality: A Qualitative Review" anchors on conceptualizing listening. It employs the narrative approach to explain efficient listening as best for a synodal Church in the Nigerian Pastoral Context. It explains the concept of feedback, categories of listening, and barriers to efficient listening as an option for the Church in Nigeria. It concludes that efficient listening is active listening, that is listening with the ear of the heart.

Keywords: Synod, Synodality, Church, Listening, Feedback

Introduction

The ever-present nature of new media and their uncountable platforms for easy connectivity, thanks to the growth of the internet, has tended many to perceive communication simply as talking much and hearing less even if it is at the expense of understanding what is being talked about or what is being heard. Such a phenomenon

is spawning new cultures of communication where possession of different forms of modern media gadgets is viewed by many as communication competence. As a result, the linear (no feedback) model of communication tends to inform the thinking and practice of many while the very essence of communication, which is the human person, is relegated to the background. The problem of taking communication as nothing more than talking and hearing is the eventual failure to realize that all human communication goals are linked to the thoughts and feelings of others.

Generally, human communication is not simply the exchange of information. It also involves complex processes of managing the information exchanged. This is why the ability to communicate effectively at different levels between the priest and parishioners is a distinctive quality of a healthy church community. Likewise, the act of listening which is an essential part of communication indicates the ability of a person to receive and interpret information in the communication process. The act is so vital that it is referred to as the key to any effective communication. Listening is at the foundation of every communication process and every good communication begins with active listening. This is why various studies stress the importance of listening in every aspect communication. This perhaps explains why the Holy Father Pope Francis invites us during this year's World Communication Sunday to reflect on the theme: "Listening with the ear of the heart".

Today, the society, including the Church, is getting distracted through misunderstandings and assumptions which have led to numerous broken relationships and unions. This has deteriorated trust, weakens social interaction and even communication. One of the common attitudes visible among Nigerians is the lack of paying attention to one another. People seem to engage in the dialogue of the deaf where one party is not paying attention to the other. The situation usually presents a good number of bad habits that hinder healthy relationship. Musa (2022), described the situation thus, 'we suffer from a common disease that may be described as 'Listening Deficiency.' It can be argued that majority of the crises in Christian homes, working places, institutions, and organizations which are associated with communication breakdown but good number are unconnected to deficiency in paying attention to each other.

The church is not excluded from the situation. There incidences between Pastors and parishioners where the priests are accused of not having time for their parishioners because they are busy with routine administration of funerals, baptism, weddings, catechism classes and other pastoral engagements. When you visit the parish house, the priests are often involved with construction and repair of church facilities. The problem is that a typical catholic priest in northern Nigeria is occupied with routine administration of the sacraments. Therefore, to listen to parishioners after a hectic

day is not a delightful experience to any priest. Nonetheless, with the many problems bedevilling the society today, listening to one another as Pope Francis said is a veritable tool for peace and co-existence in the world. Hence, the resolution of communication problems through efficient listening and feedback is one of the suggestions for everyday life challenges for the Church in the ongoing synod on synodality.

Concepts' clarification

Efficient listening: Efficient listening is the ability to actively absorb information in discussion; it involves that one is interested and providing feedback to information discussed or received.

Feedback: Feedback is a verbal and nonverbal response produced by a receiver and perceived by a sender that informs the sender of the receiver's reaction to the message. It stands for a response of an individual or audience to a message that gives the sender information or clue about how the message is being received and modified.

Synod: Synod is traditionally understood as the coming together of a group of Bishops from different regions of the world, representing the people of God of their Dioceses to discuss issues bothering the universal Church.

Synodality: Synodality is simply a methodology that involves mutual listening in which everyone has something to speak and learn. It involves the process of fraternal collaboration and empathic listening where people of God freely expressed themselves for all to learn.

Conceptualizing Listening

Burton (2006) defines listening as an active process of deliberately attaching meanings to sounds, and calls for high levels of attention and concentration to interpret what is being said by the other person. Hearing simply refers to the sounds that we usually pick while listening requires more than just hearing. It requires uninterrupted attention. It requires being focused and paying attention. It is possible to hear many sounds without listening or understanding anyone. While for Fisher (1972, p. 63) hearing is a physical act and listening is a mental act. "Hearing," he says "involves the process through which sound wave enters the ear" while listening is a comprehension of what is said which has to do with assigning meaning to the stimuli received by the brain. From this distinction, it is understood that one can hear a sound without listening to that sound. However, a person cannot understand a sound without listening to it. Emmanuel (2012) in trying to differentiate between hearing and listening argues that "the fact that we were given two ears but only one mouth

speaks volumes about the importance of listening" (p. 36) This means that there should be more of listening to talking.

Research indicates that listening style is defined as a series of attitudes ranging from critical, analytic, and focused; to holistic, intuitive, and free-floating. Examining people's listening styles, Watson, K., Barker, L., and Weaver (1995) classify people under four listening styles such as;

- i. **People-oriented** when the listener is concerned with the speaker's feelings as well as ideas.
- ii. **Action-oriented** the listener is concerned with the idea that is well organized, clear, and direct **action-oriented** listeners find it difficult to believe the issues they hear at face value, even though it can be an added advantage towards effective listening but have the tendency of making them doubtful.
- iii. **Content-oriented:** Content-oriented listeners prefer hearing complex and detailed information than other styles of listening.
- iv. And lastly, **Time oriented** when the listener is always in a hurry. Generally, a listening style is a manner in which a person attends to the messages of another individual.

The need to listen to others and be listened to with care, respect and attention without judging is profound and basic not only for a good relationship but also for our emotional and physical health and even spiritual health unfortunately, our society and its systems provide many external forces that tend to derail us from listening to each other efficiently. As the most important aspect of oral communication, listening is a conscious activity that actively engages the mind. To be a competent listener requires that a person becomes conscious of preferred listening style as you try to respond to the communication needs of the other partner. This can help to adapt a listening style that best suits the situation. The process of listening impacts both the person being listened to and the listener. Harvey Jackins in his book *personal Counsellors* (1982, p. 49) writes, "you will find that whenever people are together, they are making effort to be listened to, and are very seldom listened to because the person they are trying to get to them is waiting desperately and impatiently for a chance to listen to himself or herself".

Being listened to is the medium through which we discover ourselves as understandable and acceptable or not. In the presence of a receptive listener, one can clarify what he/she thinks and discover the feeling. Thus, in giving an account of our experience to someone who listens, we are better able to listen to ourselves.

In his message for the World Communication Day, the Holy Father, Pope Francis

explains listening as the ability to allow oneself to get things right and not simply to be passive onlookers, users, or consumers. The clarifies the concept as being able to share questions and doubts, “journey side by side, to banish all claims to absolute power and to put our abilities and gifts at the service of the common good”. Listening in this broader sense is generosity. Listening is consciousness. Listening is alive. Functionally, listening allows people to see a world they do not know, understand experiences they haven't had, and reframe or drop a belief long held. It creates distinctions, and it is from these distinctions that new possibilities are created.

Narrowing the concept to pastoral context, it may not be possible for all members of the Church to give 100% active attention to all speakers particularly during the synod on synodality but is worth encouraging people to be active listeners. There is no exaggeration in saying that for a successful synod in 2023, efficient listening skill is the most important toolkit. Saint John Vianney teaches that listening can save lives. Regardless of how short conversation may last, to listen is to embrace another, to shine forth that spirit of community that builds the foundation for the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. God listens to His people always in everything they do; therefore, all that is needed for a synodal Church is to learn to embrace ourselves the way God embraces us when he listens to our stories.

The Concept of Feedback

Communication is a constantly changing, ongoing, and dynamic process, involving the exchange of meaning and interaction. Its various elements have certain components that are always present in the process despite its dynamic nature. The components of a communication process include the following: message, encoding, noise, decoding, channel, context, and feedback. This write-up deals with the feedback mechanism as a key component in process of listening. Listening is not a passive act; it is an active process. Wood (2005, p. 176) explains listening as feedback in dialogue. Greater feedback in communication is having the undivided, attentive listening ability, that is listening to the whole person, words, gestures, and feelings.

As defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, feedback is an evaluation of an action, event, or process and the act of feeding that evaluation back to the source. Feedback is a concept mostly used in the disciplines of management theory. In the field of communication, feedback can be defined as the receiver's verbal and nonverbal response to the source's messages. It is information produced by a receiver and perceived by a sender that informs the sender of the receiver's reaction to the message (Smith, 1973). After receiving a message, the receiver responds in some way and signals that response to the sender. The signal may take the form of a spoken

comment, a long sigh, a written message, a smile, or some other action. Even a lack of response, is in a sense, a form of feedback. Without feedback, communication is nothing but mere information.

Without feedback, the sender cannot confirm that the receiver has interpreted the message correctly as intended. Feedback ultimately provides an opportunity for the sender to take corrective action to clarify a misunderstood message. "Feedback plays an important role by indicating significant communication barriers: differences in background, different interpretations of words, and differing emotional reactions". The feedback mechanism allows the sender to evaluate the effectiveness of the message and sought better ways of doing it. Unlike in other forms of Communication where feedback is got directly as the communication process is ongoing, getting feedback in this digitalized society is not an easy process. This is so because devices and gadgets used for communication involved a source and a large number of unseen receivers. This justifies the call by Pope Francis, that the entire Church to deal with the weight of digital culture.

To this effect, different methods and techniques, as the case may be, should be employed to get feedback in a bid to attain effective communication. The Church may need to employ the use of modern media for the synod. It is important to note, that the media cannot communicate effectively without putting in place means of finding out whether the messages they are sending are reaching the target audiences and how they are interpreting them irrespective of the difficulties involved in it. A medium that does not think of its audience will not only close down but they lose its audience. Through the feedback mechanism intending media producers for a synodal Church can learn to serve its audience and maintain them. As there are different types of communication, there exist different ways in which the media producers used in verifying whether their messages are achieving their aim (Schilling, 2012).

Feedback has been identified as a key strategy in learning and teaching, little known research has focused on the pastoral importance of feedback to Church administration. The role of feedback not only enhances understanding but also facilitates a good relationship (Poulos, & Mahony, 2008.). In his homily, while declaring the process for the synod open, Pope Francis said, "let us ask in the Church, are we good at listening? How good is the hearing of our heart? Do we allow people to express themselves, to walk in faith even though they have had difficulties in life, and to be part of the life of the community without being hindered, rejected, or judged? Let us not soundproof our hearts." Efficient listening to the need of our brothers and sisters provides important feedback on how the journeying is going on particularly the synod on synodality.

The role of efficient listening in the ongoing synod on synodality

Efficient listening is often the foundation of strong relationships with others, anywhere including the Church. The quality of listening is so important that Pope Francis said, “it is decisive in the grammar of communication and is a condition for genuine dialogue” (Francis, 2022). Understanding the two types of listening will help the Church to be open to hearing and listening to one another. Hence, the two types of listening skills is examined:

- i. Discriminative listening is first developed at a very early stage even before birth, while in the womb. It is the foundation of listening and does not necessarily involve the understanding of the meaning of words or phrases, but differentiating between sounds that are produced. In early childhood, for example, there is a difference between the sounds of the voices of the parents, the voice of the father, mother, and siblings. Discriminative listening develops through childhood into adulthood. As person grows older, he/she develops and gain more experience and ability to distinguish between different sounds.
- ii. Comprehensive listening is a situation whereby a person understands the messages that are being communicated. It is fundamental to all listening genres. It involves understanding both verbal and non-verbal communication, such as the tone of voice, gestures, and another body language. Discriminative and comprehensive kinds of listening skills can be defined by the goal of listening. The three main types (Information listening, Critical listening, and Empathic listening) are common in interpersonal relationships and suitable for the synod on synodality to adopt. They are namely.
 - a. Information listening (listening to learn): This is a situation whereby one listens to learn something or to seek information. This takes place in an educational environment such as a classroom, lecture hall, seminars, workshop, etc. It could also be when person listens to the news, watch a documentary, and so on.
 - b. Critical Listening: People engage in critical listening when the goal is to evaluate or scrutinize what is being said. This is a much more active behaviour than informational listening and usually involves some sort of problem-solving and decision-making.
 - c. Empathic listening: According to Maurus (2001, p. 12), empathy "is a natural ability of a person to sense the feelings of another". When you feel with another, you identify yourself with the person. Empathic listening attempts to understand the feelings and emotions of the speaker; to put yourself into the speaker's shoes and to try to understand his/her thought. Empathic listening is a structured questioning and listening technique that allows you to develop and

improve relationships with a better understanding of what is being communicated, both intellectually and emotionally. McGrath & Nicole explain empathic listening as "listening with the heart and not only your physical ears" (1997, p. 131). This is so, because the listener listens attentively to every word of the speaker, his/her feeling, and expression of both verbal and nonverbal cues. Gamble & Gamble (2005, p. 220), discoursed that empathic listening was popularized by psychotherapist Carl Rogers, who believed that listening can be used to help individuals understand their situations and problems. When you listen actively or empathically, you do more than passively absorb the words that are spoken to you and try to make the other person's feelings yours and see life through his or her eyes.

Pope Francis calls it "listening with the ear of the heart". Sullivan (2007, p. 13) sees empathic listening as authentic listening. She defines it as a process of "turning aside for the moment, from my perceptions to be present in the world of another: to see what the other person sees and to feel what the other person feels". Explaining this in pastoral counselling McGrath & Nicole (1997) put it this way:

One basic and the important thing is to be interested in people, to feel at home with them, to be able to go outside yourself to reach others wherever they are, in their actual situation-of happiness, sadness, of success, of failure, satisfaction, disappointment, etc. To see things and people as they do and feel as they feel (, p. 103).

Rehling (2008, pp.3-38) compares emphatic listening to compassionate listening, he describes compassionate listening as being open, non-judgmental, and non-defensive. This type of listening is employed to tackle isolation, separation, and loneliness. Agreeing with this Beebe et al (2014. P.137) posit that listening with passion or acceptance takes emphatic listening one step further since the listener is not meant to impress others but to accept honour and compassionately confirm the worth of the other person engaged in conversation. This implies that an emphatic listener is a compassionate individual. It means that listeners not only want to hear your message but also want to know you as a fellow human being. They want to tune into your values, your feelings, and your mood. A synodal Church should be interested and able to see and feel life from point of view of their people. Through emphatic listening, people should realize that every person has his/her values, feelings, and experiences. Listening attentively to people around helps to understand their values, and encourages them to express themselves, particularly in this digitalized society.

A synodal Church is a community where empathic listening is cultivated and practiced by the people. It helps each member of the community to relax and grow in confidence and understanding. Conversely, listening empathically does not mean you agree with the speakers nor does it mean you disagree with the speakers. Robert White (2014, p. 25), argues it thus: the most solid relationship entails a sense of openness to listen to others' problems of sickness, how they will get into a school, how they will get life partners, handling any of the many other life crises; vocation crises, workplace, and any others. He adds that sometimes what members of the Christian Community do and want is to listen to others. You may not give the person anything, but your emotional support matters a lot.

The ongoing synod on synodality in Nigeria: Adopting efficient listening and feedback mechanisms.

On October 10th, 2021, the Holy Father, Pope Francis, officially inaugurated a two-year synod process which will culminate with the 16th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October 2023 on the theme: "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission". The Holy Father is inviting all of us to actively participate in this Synod Process which has taken a new format for the first time since the Synod of Bishops was introduced by Pope Paul VI in 1965. The objective of the process according to Cardinal Grech: "Is to consult the People of God, so that the Synodal process is carried out through listening to all of the baptized, who are the subject of the census fidei – infallible – in credendo" (Synodus Episcoporum, 2021).

Traditionally, a synod signifies the coming together of a group of Bishops from different regions of the world, representing the people of God of their Dioceses to discuss issues bothering the universal Church. However, Pope Francis has a deeper understanding of what this means. In 2015, on the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, he explained vividly what he meant by "Synod" and "Synodality". According to the Holy Father, the word synod means:

Journeying together — laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome...A synodal Church is a Church that listens and realizes that listening is more than simply hearing. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn....: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth (Jn 14:17), to know what "he says to the Churches (Rev 2:7). (Pope Francis, 2015).

Continuing, he stipulates: "The Synod of Bishops is the point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church's life" This implies a human and spiritual methodology of discernment that involves everyone in the Church.

The concept of synodality is an ancient term. Synodality is simply a methodology that “involves mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn.” It is “the very essence of the Church, her constitutive reality, and is thus oriented towards evangelization. It is an ecclesial way of being and a prophetic example for today's world” (Synodus Episcoporum. Vatican, 21 May 2021). The call for listening and dialogue may not be the innovation of Pope Francis. It is not a new way of doing things in the Church. According to Kaithavana, G (2021) the first Christians of the Early Church already practiced it. He says, Listening was the practice of the Early Church. Whenever there was a problem, the leaders of the Early Church convoked the entire community together and they listened to the entire faithful. This can be seen in the case of the election of Matthias (Acts 1:15-26), the election of the seven deacons (Acts 6:1-7), and the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-35).

Therefore, synodality is walking together. In that way, we listen to what the Holy Spirit says and humbly accept the need for change. Synodality, without any doubt, insists on the need for listening and engaging in dialogue to create necessary relationships which build the Church, considering them as the people of God. Pope Francis envisions the synodal process to be “an exercise of mutual listening, conducted at all levels of the Church involving the entire People of God.” This consultation is possible through communion, participation, and mission.

Adopting empathic listening will serve several purposes for the synod on synodality. Pope Francis kept emphasizing that in the Church no human person is useless or less important to be listened to. In listening, the Holy Father calls for the respect and dignity of the human person. Nevertheless, empathic listening does not mean absence of evaluation. It rather means holding to remarks until one understands the nature and essence of the spoken messages. This is the connecting point between empathic listening and critical listening and why it must be practiced simultaneously in the synodal Church.

One of the major signs of a communication gap in a church is listening deficiency. People spend much of their communication time listening, many do not listen as they should or many are always absent-minded or have a nonchalant attitude to one another. Jesus is a model for a synodal church. The public life of Jesus is that of a good listener. According to Pope Francis, the public ministry of Jesus, it's far very clear that he's a person of listening and dialogue. He requested many times "what do you need from me" after which he listens. Instead of defining his divinity, he listens to the question, "who do you say I am?" and "do you love me?" Jesus cautiously listens to the affliction of the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21–28) and his dialogue ends with an appreciation of her faith. Jesus becomes a model of listening and dialogue in

the story of the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1–42). He bravely walks with the sinners and the tax collectors. Thus, the gospels reveal that the existence and ministry of Jesus is a whole of listening to others and having a dialogue with them. Pope Francis desires to offer this picture of Jesus as the idea of Synodality.

The clergy should journey along with the old members of the Church. Overloading old people with many messages should be avoided. Information overload has long been a phenomenon that causes problem at all levels (Ragdsdell, 2015). When there is too much information coming to someone, it can be difficult to focus on one thing. This often happens in Church council meetings when Church leaders present new or complex information. It can also happen during conversations when your spiritual director gives you too much information at once. In either case, the listener does not focus on what is being said and risks missing important details. It is hard to understand a speaker carefully when you have many things to achieve at the same time. A person cannot be on their mobile phone while a sermon is going concentration will be lost, therefore, a barrier to effective listening.

The Holy Father also encourages the people to avoid an upcoming culture of "elitism" among the clergy than distance themselves from the people. The old people are one of the groups that the clergy tend to be far away from them. The distance can be a barrier to efficient listening in the Church. Schilling (2012) says it is important to always treat distance in listening in the same manner face-to-face conversation is cared for. The farther away people are when they speak, the harder it can be to understand them clearly. The Holy Father wants the Church to listen passionately not only to those that agree with the Church or allies of the clergy but also to those that disagree and are outside the Church. Listening is the other half of talking that is very essential for a synodal Church.

Conclusion

There is the common assumption among people that listening is passive and that talking has more advantages than listening. It is also assumed that the people who do the talking are the ones who capture everyone's attention and so talking is understood as a pathway to success. Listening is perceived like a sponge, quietly absorbing the speaker's messages and thoughts. Pope Francis has corrected these assumptions and explains the term "listen" to imply going beyond hearing and saying it is indispensable in communication. Listening refers to the sphere of communication and requires closeness. In reality, efficient listening is active, and this is hard to achieve. Likewise, feedback is equally hard to come find yet it is important for people journeying together.

Traditionally, in a synod, Rome speaks and the world listens, but, the synod on synodality has a different approach. The Holy Father insists that synodality is the joy of journeying together, listening, and engaging in dialogue. There is joy in journeying with a synodal Church but the objective of the joy can be complete through the process of listening which always starts with those ignored, outside the Church, rejected, or refused to be listened to. Jesus himself asks us to pay attention to how we listen (Lk 8:18).

In Nigeria today, the situation is that of where people are introduced as eloquent speakers, and orators, but no one cares to acknowledge an effective listener. We are sure that an orator cannot talk to inanimate objects—he/she must have an audience to listen to before he/she is called an orator. That is why Prabal (2010) scores listening highest among the techniques required to become a good speaker when he says "one of the rules of becoming a good talker is to learn to listen. And until you learn to listen to others, you will never know yourself." This work calls for the need to imbibe the culture of listening and feedback for a synodal Church.

Recommendations

- i. Responsible expression of self: There is the tendency for most people to label and define others and claim to be right without owning and sharing their feelings. It is recommended that people during the synod on synodality to learn how to share and express feelings.
- ii. Consistency is the art of listening: There is the need to learn to listen to people today particularly where there are so many things seeking human attention. It is said that the first step in learning how to efficiently listen is to realize that you do listen.
- iii. Be mindful of putting on false identity: The first thing to do if you want to be a good communicator is to step back to become your true self. It constitutes the fundamental basis for becoming “other-oriented” which is the core component for efficient listening. Self-awareness starts with the honest revelation of thoughts, views, feelings, beliefs, attitudes, values, fears, and hopes.
- iv. Avoid ambiguity: Everyone has a responsibility to be clear, concise, accurate, and appropriate in context when providing information. Most often we talk to ourselves and write to ourselves thinking we are talking to others without minding if we are clear and accurate enough for others to understand us as we so desired.
- v. Moderation in the use of digital communication gadgets: We need technology to live as we need food to live but if we eat too much food or eat food that has no nutritional value, or eat food that is infested

with germs, we turn a means of survival into a life-threatening. The same thing might be said to consumption information in digital age.

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