

Listening between the lines

By [Diane Roth](#)

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My first congregation was a three-point parish in rural South Dakota. Three points meant that there were three churches. Two of them were in tiny towns, and one of them was out in the country.

I lived in one of those tiny towns, in a large parsonage across from the church. According to the sign on the way into town, the population was 90, but a few of us counted one day (on election day, I think) and we came up with 63. There was a main street, which held the remains of a bank, the post office, and Gizzy's bar. There were also several open spaces where buildings used to be. A little farther up there used to be a school. There was no gas station, and there was no longer a grocery store. There was still a park and a town hall. We held vacation Bible school there.

The town used to be bigger. I heard stories, and I read some. I saw old pictures of the glory days. Four railroads used to intersect in this town. There were once four churches, too. The community was settled by Bohemians and by Norwegian farmers. It was a lively place.

I used to go and visit people who were members of my congregation, but didn't live in town anymore. Some of them lived in nursing homes, or had moved to a slightly larger town nearby. They often asked me how the town was doing.

"I guess there's not much use for the small towns anymore," they would say.

I heard this sentence, almost exactly the same, so many times, until it finally occurred to me that perhaps they were not just talking about the small towns.

Perhaps what they really feared was that there was not much use for them anymore, that the things they valued, that the work they did, that the life they lived would slip away, and mean nothing, in the end.

"I guess there's not much use for the small towns anymore."

What do you say? It seems to be true that there is not much use for the small towns anymore. But I am listening between the lines, now, and I want to tell them that there is still a use for your life, that there is use and a value for your life that goes beyond this life, that lasts forever. I want to hold that old man's hand and tell him that all is not lost, that what he did and who he was had meaning, that his name is written in the book of life. I want to tell that old woman that her life has borne fruit, even though the town she loved is mostly gone.

In ministry now, in the midst of change, I am wondering about what it would mean to begin listening between the lines more often. I wonder what it would mean to listen to what people tell me, and wonder what their real fears and hopes are, what they are really saying. Perhaps it would mean to listen with less judgment and more grace. Perhaps it would mean to acknowledge the fear and walk right into the darkness, carrying a light.

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