

# LISTENING to the PEOPLE

*The Spaghetti  
Listening event*



**W**hen I first introduce people to the Listening Project, the normal reaction is less than enthusiastic. I can almost hear them thinking: "Big deal—you just go out and listen to people." "It's not radical enough." "It takes a lot of time and I don't want to go knocking on people's doors and impose myself on them." When people come back from doing a Listening Project the reaction is quite different:

"I've been involved in peacework a lot of years now and worked on all sorts of projects. This is definitely the most significant thing I've done so far. It feels great to be connecting on a heart to heart level with people who just aren't affected by all our petition tables and education programs and demonstrations and all the rest."

The above quote followed the Summer '87 Listening Project in St. Marys, Georgia. The Kings Bay nuclear submarine base, home port of the first

*Herb Walters is the founder and present coordinator of Rural Southern Voice for Peace. For information on organizing a Listening Project, contact him at RSVP, 1901 Hannah Branch Rd., Burnsville, NC 28714. (704) 675-5933.*

strike Trident II submarines, is in St. Marys. For five years, southern activists had been conducting a "Feast of the Holy Innocents" witness in St. Marys. The witness, including vigils, walks, and civil disobedience, was successful in mobilizing regional concern and action at St. Marys. Yet there was no local involvement with the witness. Activists were coming into St. Marys, conducting their witness and then leaving, having had virtually no contact with the people who lived there.

In December of 1986, Rural Southern Voice for Peace/FOR introduced the St. Marys Listening Project. Since then, two Listening Projects there have sent over sixty trained activists out into the St. Marys community with survey questions designed to open people up to talking about local and nuclear issues. St. Marys residents have been generally receptive to the listeners, although there have been instances of people being suspicious or reactive.

Our survey question asked people what the positive and negative effects of the naval base on their community were, and what local issues concerned them the most. We asked them how they felt about having their community

become a prime nuclear target, and if they saw nuclear weapons as being essential to our security or if they saw alternatives. We asked if they were troubled morally or religiously by the arms race and if they had fears for their family. The negative effects of the base on the community mentioned most often were an increase in crime, too rapid growth and loss of small community spirit, and the impact on commercial and private fishing. "They lied to us all along," said one fisherman. "They kept telling us that certain fishing spots wouldn't be affected and the next thing we knew those places would be closed."

As trained listeners, we offered a safe environment, so that people could go beyond their surface ideas and beliefs to the heart of how they truly felt about a frightening issue like nuclear weapons. The experience can be a profound one as listeners are allowed to enter deeply into the fears, hopes and ideals of people who minutes before were strangers. "I've had nightmares about nuclear war," said one woman I was listening to. She began pacing the floor and wringing her hands as she described her nightmare.

Tears came to her eyes. "I've never talked about this before because its so horrible. It's just not right. I think about my family sometimes and I'm so afraid for them. Something's got to change."

Some people we surveyed expressed genuine concern or anger over the arms race and the weapons at Kings Bay. One respondent said, "Russia and us, we're both in the same position. If there's a war it'll wipe us both out, so it seems crazy" At the same time, however, many people felt confused or powerless to change the situation: "What can one person do?" "If we say 'no' the government goes ahead anyway." "I don't want the weapons, but can we really trust the Russians?" Many of those who feel powerless choose to "leave it in God's hands."

Almost half of the people we've talked to during the past two surveys asked us to send them more information on the arms race and the weapons at Kings Bay. Some said they'd never even thought about the issue before. It's thrilling to look at what people listed as alternatives to the arms race:

- give more power to the people and less to the politicians
- stop making new weapons
- a bilateral freeze
- negotiations and arms control
- learn to love one another, even our enemies
- teach peace to our children
- have some of our kids live in Russia, some of their kids live here.

Most of the people we surveyed had never talked to a peace activist before.

Listener Jack Cumbee reports: "I sat down with one man and he said right away that he was solidly behind Reagan and didn't give a hoot for disarmament. So I just listened to him and asked questions and let him know that I wasn't there to judge him. I did that for about half an hour and by the time we were through he was being friendly to me and was saying that we needed to get more serious about arms control and start getting rid of all those weapons."

Door-to-door canvassing is only one of the Listening Project strategies used in St. Marys. Many of us felt the high point of this summers project was the spaghetti dinner and social event we shared with members of three black community churches. The event was accepted by these churches because we came as listeners, not as activists trying to convert people. We talked, shared food, laughed, sang and prayed together. We asked people about the local issues that concerned them. We watched the video of the Methodist bishops' statement on nuclear war. And we listened to the voices of the people, speaking from a gut level wisdom about their fear of nuclear weapons and their hopes for a better world.

The voices we heard said they were tired of not being told the truth, "never really knowing what is going on at that base (Kings Bay)" "I'm scared but I really don't know what to do because no one tells us anything," said one woman. "We need to find out what's happening 'cause something aint right," said

another. Towards the end of the evening, someone suggested that prayer was also needed to deal with the bomb; so we reached out to one another and hand in hand we prayed, led by Rev. Timothy Green. And then together, like a family, we sang what was in all our hearts: *We Shall Overcome*.

Our latest Listening Project gave us the chance to go back to our church friends and to people we'd previously interviewed, who had asked for further information. We returned to review with them the outcome of the first survey, to hear their reactions to the nuclear education material we'd sent them, and to ask them if they'd be interested in getting together with other concerned St. Marys residents. Unfortunately, many people weren't home, but of those who were, we got some positive response to the question, "Are you interested in meeting with others concerned about these issues." Our plan now is to facilitate a meeting of these people, providing them once again with safe space to talk, listen, learn and consider possible ways they can act on their concerns.

The Listening Project has shown some real positive results and it certainly has tremendous potential. It is both a spiritual and a practical process. It is practical because it allows us to successfully reach out to people who would probably never reach out to us, and to get a mostly positive response. It allows us to break through the barriers and the polarization that so often occurs between the peace movement and the public. As one Listener put it:

"The Listening Project was super! Such real communication with the community. I think it certainly wiped away any fears or apprehensions they might have had about us (peace activists). I'm not sure just how many people were aware of our presence, but they know us now! And in a positive way."

Listening Projects can also be related to other issues. A project focusing on poverty, racism and military spending proved very successful this past summer.

The Listening Project is a spiritual practice because it calls on us to fully open our hearts and to accept people whose ideas may be very different from our own. As we listen and speak, we open ourselves less to our own egos and more fully to the light and the truth in the person sitting across from us. True listening is love in action. This is good work for FOR members to be doing. □



*Listening: both a spiritual and a practical process*