

Dialogue: Searching for Common Ground

An approach to living in community in spite of our differences. . .



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Dialogue: Searching for Common Ground - 1

Fresh  Start

Talking Points

As the writer of James so eloquently declares, wisdom from on high is “peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy” (James 3:17). Yet when confronted by someone whose beliefs or opinions are diametrically opposed to ours, we often find ourselves on the defensive and engaged in less-than-peaceable interchanges, particularly when we perceive our deepest values are at stake.

Some of these ongoing differences may never be fully resolved, yet we may find we share common ground with our polar opposites if only we could but listen to each other. By finding a way to “walk a mile in another’s moccasins” we may be able to stay in community and share in common mission. Dialogue is a process which may allow us to do exactly that.

When Is Dialogue Important?

- Conversations reflect deep disagreement; people take sides.
- Issues are complex, long-term and involve strongly held values and/or beliefs.
- There is a desire or at least a need to remain in relationship.
- Differences may never be resolved, but there is often common ground on which relationships can be built and maintained.

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Fresh  Start.

Talking Points

When we have disagreements in the church (or in the workplace or at home) our first instinct is often to force a solution that usually entails trying to get others to see things our way, to convince people that one side is “right” and another “wrong”. That might be appropriate if there is a factual answer to a question or disagreement, but when deeply held values or beliefs are involved, trying to force a change of heart may not only be impossible; it may destroy the relationship.

When maintaining the relationship is important -- because, for example, we live in the same neighborhood, have to work together, are members of the same congregation, or have a long-standing friendship -- use of dialogic principles can help us gain a deeper understanding of each other. While our differences may never be resolved, we can focus on those areas where we agree, where our values are congruent, and live together more peaceably.

Stuck Conversations

- Broken record: The conversation is predictable and unvarying.
- Nothing new: Old ideas re-circulate.
- Emotional: Rational discussion is replaced by emotional reactions.
- Closed minds: Genuine questions are rarely asked. There is little attempt to really understand each other.
- Demonizing: The adversary is seen as the problem.
- Blame game: Each side blames and attacks the other while feeling victimized and disempowered themselves.
- “Right” vs. “wrong”: Each side is convinced of being right and wants their position to prevail no matter what the cost.

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

Stuck conversations are often a clue that dialogue is needed. Every time there is a discussion, the same arguments and ideas are heard. The tone may become emotional and lead to blaming, demonizing, or assigning labels of “right” (to my side) and “wrong” (to yours). Around what kinds of issues have you experienced stuck conversations?

Facilitate a brief discussion, capturing the issues on a flip chart.

It is important to note that some of these characteristics may also be seen in conversations about conflicts which are problems for which there is a single “best” or “right” solution or about polarities, issues which will always be in tension because together they form part of an indivisible whole.* So when stuck conversations occur, it is essential to step back and reflect on what the real issue is.

One test in identifying whether dialogue is called for might be to ask yourself whether the other person’s ideas are likely to change and if not, whether there are reasons to want to stay in relationship. If the answer to the first question is “no” and the last part is “yes,” it’s time to seek out the “heart of the matter.”

Let’s look at the examples of “stuck conversations” you mentioned. Which ones might meet the test of whether dialogue is an appropriate way to address them? ***Facilitate a discussion. Have some examples of good topics for dialogue (e.g., human sexuality, race, abortion) and task for additional suggestions from the group to be sure everyone understands when dialogue may be effective.***

****Note: if the group has not had the session on polarities, you may need to provide some examples (e.g., work/family-personal life; tradition/innovation).***



“Out beyond right-doing and wrong-doing there is a field. I’ll meet you there.”

Rumi

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

In dialogue your goal is to enable people to stay in relationship in spite of deeply held differences. You are not looking for decisions of any kind, rather you want to create a safe place where people can share their perspectives in ways that promote understanding.

Although we talked about the topics that most readily lend themselves to dialogue, the principles can be employed at any time when high emotions are evident or you sense that someone’s opposition comes from something deeper than a superficial disagreement. Thus dialogue can be used on an individual basis to inquire about the deeply held values of someone with whom you disagree or as a formal process for community sharing of values, a process that can extend over a number of sessions (or even years).

Dialogue

Creating a relationship of “I-Thou”
to:

- Deepen communication
- Deepen connection
- Strengthen community

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Fresh  Start

Talking Points

In his book *The Magic of Dialogue*, Daniel Yankelovich refers to philosopher Martin Buber’s classic work *I and Thou*, in which Buber suggests that in authentic dialogue something happens which is far deeper than ordinary conversation. The I-Thou interaction implies a genuine openness of each person to the concerns of the other. Each internalizes, or integrates, the other’s views to enhance mutual understanding. “In dialogue, we penetrate behind the polite superficialities and defenses in which we habitually armor ourselves. We listen and respond to one another with an authenticity which forges a bond between us.”¹ By responding empathetically to others and in turn being heard by them, we can transcend the confines of the self as we begin to understand the other.

Dialogue seeks to deepen communication and connection to create a communion of souls and strengthen community, whether between two people or among the members of a congregation or other group. It can be used not only in structured group sessions but also informally in everyday relationships. By creating a safe space in which we can ask carefully framed questions and listen deeply to the answers, we can begin to understand and find common ground with those with whom we disagree, without seeking to change their minds or reach agreement.

¹Yankelovich, Daniel. *The Magic of Dialogue*, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, 1999; p. 15.

Concepts of Dialogue

- Searches for common ground.
- Acknowledges our shared membership in community.
- Is conversation, not debate. No view is “right” or “wrong”.
- Seeks to reach understanding, not solutions.
- Invites sharing of personal experiences.
- Encourages connective thinking.
- Encourages a spirit of real inquiry.
- Is not for decision-making.

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Fresh  Start

Talking Points

Dialogue is a conversation involving a search for common ground. It allows us to stay connected while expressing our differences. By acknowledging our shared membership in community, dialogue helps us identify our common concerns and how they impact us so we can find ways to face these issues together.

Dialogue is different than debate; there is no “right” or “wrong”. And unlike problem-solving, dialogue does not seek solutions but rather understanding. The process works through a sharing of personal experiences, of speaking as “I” not as “we” or in some abstract way. By sharing personal experiences, we can begin to understand how people came to their opinions on the issue at hand. Connective thinking focused on people’s strengths and wisdom, rather than their weakness and biases, is encouraged in dialogue. Questions are genuine, asked with the intent of understanding the other rather than promoting one’s viewpoint.

Have any of you experienced being part of a formal dialogue process? What was the occasion or topic, and what was the experience like?

From *Knowing* to *Inquiring*

Questions in dialogue:

- Are open-ended and do not assume you understand what others think and feel.
- Encourage reflection.
- Invite collaboration.
- Focus on specific personal experiences, both tangible and intangible, and their meaning for and effects on the person sharing them.

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

Before this session, read the Resources Section which provides more detailed information on framing effective questions for dialogue, so you will be prepared to provide guidance and feedback to participants as they practice framing and asking questions of each other.

In dialogue the overarching purpose of questions is to help participants move from a *knowing* stance to an *inquiring* stance. Asking questions based on a genuine spirit of inquiry is much harder than we might suppose because it requires letting go of our often unacknowledged assumptions about what others think and feel. Asking such truly open-ended questions is an art, and as such requires intentionality and practice.

Think about the kinds of questions you might ask if you wanted to explore a potentially sensitive subject with someone without making assumptions or putting the other person on the defensive. For example a long-term member of the congregation has accosted you about the recent change to using Rite 2 at the early service. How might you engage that person in a conversation? Take a couple of minutes to jot down some opening questions, then I'll ask you to share what you wrote, and we can coach each other on the language.

Give people a few minutes to come up with some examples, then ask them to share. Facilitate a coaching conversation around the examples. Are they open-ended? Do they encourage reflection, invite collaboration?

Let's take another example. You and a colleague disagree on whether affirmative action promotes or alleviates discrimination. Again, what questions might you ask to learn about another's experience with discrimination and affirmative action? Craft an example of a question and be prepared to share it.

Again, ask for some examples, leading a coaching conversation as before.

Using the Art of Dialogue

Remember that questions for dialogue:

- Are open-ended and do not assume you understand what others think and feel.
- Encourage reflection.
- Invite collaboration.
- Focus on specific personal experiences, both tangible and intangible, and their meaning for and effects on the person sharing them.

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Talking Points

Think about a specific topic which can trigger a strong emotional response in you, one which is based on some of your core values. Then choose a partner and practice crafting questions you might ask someone who felt the opposite of you. Give each other feedback on the questions you ask. To what extent do they meet the criteria on the slide? You will have 5 minutes to draft your questions; at the end of that time, I will ask you to present your draft questions to your partner and get some coaching on them.

Allow plenty of time for the coaching to take place – 10 to 20 minutes.

Note: if you have a mixed clergy/lay group you may want them to work as congregational teams to draft questions around a disagreement facing their congregation instead of having them work with partners.

Regroup and facilitate a brief description of what that exercise was like. Ask them to share some of their draft questions with the whole group.

How easy was it to frame the questions? Would any of you be willing to share the topics you identified and the questions you wrote?

OK – think of another example and pick a different partner. Once again, take 5 minutes to craft your questions, then share them with your partner and get some coaching.

Facilitate a general debrief as before.

Note: if time is short, you may wish to skip the second round of question-drafting and go straight to setting up the practice of dialogue (see next slide).

Ground Rules for Dialogue

- Take time to be in God's presence
- Look for common ground
- Seek to understand rather than be understood
- Be respectful both in speaking and listening
- Listen with openness
- Acknowledge feelings, your own and others'
- Speak ONLY from your experience
- Refrain from rebutting or challenging
- Share air time
- Maintain confidentiality after the conversation

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Fresh Start 

Talking Points

A formal dialogue process uses ground rules, which are also good guidelines to remember in informal dialogues between only two or three people. With these in mind we are going to practice the art of dialogue.


Distribute Handout 1 and review with group to see if there are any questions or suggestions. Leave the ground rules posted in the room or up on the screen during the dialogue exercise.

This group dialogue exercise works best if participants are seated in circles of five or six with no tables separating them. After stating the issue (use of traditional vs. contemporary version of the Lord's Prayer), you may want to ask participants to quickly indicate their preferences or "leanings" on this issue then seat them in groups which include a balanced mix of people having different preferences. If there is not enough difference of opinion, ask some participants to volunteer to role-play the under-represented preference.

The purpose of dialogue is to hold a conversation which brings out as many perspectives as possible about the issue addressed, in order to develop mutual understanding, not to develop a solution, get agreement or resolution, or make a decision. The process uses a series of structured questions that elicit people's experiences, values and concerns, as well as their area of curiosity and ambiguity.

The Circle Process

- Everyone speaks in turn.
- “Talking piece” passes from speaker to next person – talk only when you have the piece.
- You may “pass” if you wish.
- Leader poses the question for each round.



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Talking Points

If you do not have time to engage in a full circle process, just describe how it works and ask participants to think of how they might be able to use this within their congregations.

You will need a “talking piece” for each dialogue group. Ask one person in each group to be the leader – posing the question for each round and seeing that the basic process is followed. The leader (unlike a facilitator in a formal dialogue) participates fully, modeling the way in which answers are given. Be sure and have the ground rules posted where they can be seen. Then introduce the exercise.

Now I would like to turn to the use of dialogue in a more formal sense. A circle process is a special kind of dialogue and can easily be replicated and used in your congregations without a trained facilitator as long as the issue is not highly conflicted or traumatic. People with differing opinions, in roughly equal proportions, should make up each circle. People should sit in a circle without a table separating them. A “talking piece” – anything that seems appropriate and can be passed from one person to another – is used to assure that all are given time to speak. Typically there are several rounds, each with a different question which the leader poses. The leader is a full participant, speaking when the “talking piece” passes to him/her and modeling the use of the ground rules. The “talking piece” goes in a clockwise fashion around the circle – feel free to “pass” if you do not wish to say something. You may request the “talking piece” later if you want to add something. Remember the ground rules, which are posted on the wall.

This dialogue is being held because you and members of your congregation have different opinions about use of the traditional form of the Lord’s Prayer in worship. Some people want to continue using it on a regular basis; others would prefer to drop it altogether and use only the contemporary version. Are there any questions before we get started?

Distribute Handout 2 to the leaders in each group.

You will have 45 minutes to complete the dialogue, so be mindful of the time so all can participate. I will let you know when you should go on to the next question.

When time is up, ask the full group to share highlights of this experience. Common learnings? Questions? Frustrations? (One frustration may be lack of time, since such a dialogue might normally be allotted an hour or more.)

Some Final Thoughts on Facilitating a Dialogue

- Not for decision-making
- Importance of ground rules
- Need for balance of opinion
- If conflict is high: more formal process, outside neutral facilitator

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

The kind of dialogue process we just experienced can be used with congregations or more broadly. In setting up a dialogue, it is important to keep in mind that NO DECISION is to be made at the end – and that reassurance needs to be given up front. That is not to say that some action might not emerge from the process – when people find common ground they often pursue some common objective even while continuing to hold their basic disagreements. Although circle processes can be designed to lead to a consensus decision and more formal dialogues may be followed by another process that would lead to action, for both finding common ground is the expectation -- action and decision-making are not.

Dialogue in highly conflicted or traumatic situations requires the use of a trained, neutral facilitator, who does NOT act as a participant in the dialogue and does not voice his/her own thoughts on the topic issue. In high conflict situations where there are well-known opposing groups, the process should be designed and facilitated by representatives from both sides. All facilitators, however, *must* have the ability to keep their personal views from affecting their interaction with either side.

The importance of ground rules and the ability of the facilitator to intervene when they are broken cannot be stressed enough. In high conflict situations, having a facilitator for each group rather than conducting the dialogue as we did today may be necessary. The Public Conversations Project and similar organizations can help you find, as well as train, people to serve as facilitators.

Any dialogue group should be as equally balanced between the two opposite opinions as possible – you don't want one "side" to feel overwhelmed by the other. That does not create the safe container needed for true inquiry and mutual understanding to occur. And do not expect people to change their minds as a result of dialogue. People are often firmer in their convictions following a dialogue, but they are less likely to demonize the other side and more likely to continue the relationship across differences.

(Note: Anne Fowler's article in the Boston Globe which is referenced in the bibliography illustrates this last point well.)

This has been a brief introduction to the art of dialogue and the kinds of situations in which its techniques might be useful. What questions or concerns about dialogue do you still have?

If people are interested in further information, call attention to the Public Conversations Project and the Mennonite Peace Network, listed under Website Resources in the Bibliography for this Module. PCP materials and training are an excellent next step for those interested in exploring dialogue concepts and methods more deeply, while the Mennonite Lombard Peace Center deals more broadly in conflict resolution training.

“Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of hope – not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges (people cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through); nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of ‘Everything is Gonna Be All Right.’ But a different, sometimes lonely place, of truth-telling about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle but joy in the struggle. And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we’re seeing, asking them what they see.”

The Rev. Victoria Safford



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Fresh Start

Talking Points

Victoria Safford is the minister of White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church in Mahtomdi, Minnesota. In a piece for The Nation in 2004 (www.thenation.com/doc/20040920/safford), she had this to say. It seems a fitting summation of our call within our congregation and our world – to plant hope and create a space where we can live together with our differences.

You may wish to end with the Prayer Attributed to St. Francis, found on page 833 of the Book of Common Prayer and included on Handout 3.