

Dialogue: Searching for Common Ground



Purpose

To introduce the concept of dialogue and how it can be used to help people with profound differences stay in relationship.

Theological Understanding

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 all too often we find ourselves engaged in less-than-peaceable interchanges with others, particularly when we have significant disagreements.

Gregory Jones, Dean of Duke University Divinity School, wrote, “...though we are created with the capacity for integrative thinking, one of the conditions of original sin is our tendency to define ourselves over against others, whether we think of enemies or simply of opposing ideas.”¹ Dialogue is an effective way to practice integrative thinking in order to *understand* ideas different from our own and to integrate them into our own thinking even if we do not agree with them.

Special Instructions

If you are not familiar with the concepts of dialogue and circle processes, read the three short books from the Mennonite *Little Books of Justice & Peacebuilding* series listed in the bibliography before leading this session. In addition read “Framing Questions for Dialogue” in this section, so you can help participants draft good questions and provide feedback. Prepare a poster for the dialogue Ground Rules (see Slide 8) or be prepared to leave the slide up during the last part of the session and have a “talking piece” for each circle that you will form. A small wooden cross, a beautiful smooth stone, a decorated stick or a feather would make an appropriate “talking piece.” If the topic of traditional vs. contemporary forms of the Lord’s Prayer is not a good choice, feel free to come up with your own topic as long as it is not too controversial. Be sure to modify the questions in Handout 2 if you change the topic. Have information on the Public Conversations Project ready to share with participants.

¹ Jones, Gregory. “Of Two Minds,” *Christian Century*, March 25, 2008; p. 35

The Boston Globe and Congregations magazine articles would make good handouts on dialogue if you would like to give participants additional information. Look under Fowler, Anne, and McCollum, Marlis in the bibliography to find out how to download.

Related Modules

Conflict Module I: Conflict Awareness
Conflict Module II: Conflict Management
Polarities: Differences to be Managed

Bibliography for This Module

Fowler, Anne; et. al. "Talking to the Enemy", Boston Globe. January 28, 2001: Focus: page F1 (available on-line from Public Conversations Project – www.publicconversations.org – go to Dialogue in Action, then Public Policy, Abortion to find link which is under "Boston Pro-life and Pro-choice Leaders Dialogue") – an article about a years-long dialogue involving a group of six women including Episcopal priest, Anne Fowler, this provides a good first-hand account of the impact of dialogue.

Gilliam, W. Craig. "Communications Strategies for Addressing Conflict in Congregations", Leading Ideas: A Resource for Church Leaders, Online. November 5, 2008. (www.churchleadership.com – click on Resources, then "Leading Ideas E-Newsletter" and search by author's name) – a brief essay on the importance of connection and silence in effective communication; a good overview of the steps for effective listening.

Isaacs, William. Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together. New York, NY, Currency Books/Doubleday, 1999 – by the MIT professor who has been at the forefront of thinking about and using dialogue, this provides an in-depth analysis of how dialogue differs from our normal style of communication; excellent for grounding in theory but not a "how to" book.

Jones, Gregory. "Of Two Minds", Christian Century, March 25, 2008, p. 35 – a short essay on the need for integrative thinking as a way to hold diverse convictions in harmony.

Kraybill, Ron and Wright, Evelyn. The Little Book of Cool Tools for Hot Topics: Group Tools to Facilitate Meetings When Things Are Hot. Intercourse, PA, Good Books, 2006 – part of the Mennonite *Little Books of Justice & Peacebuilding* series, provides an excellent overview of circle and other processes for engaging in conversation around difficult topics; an excellent facilitator resource.

McCollum, Marlis. "Respectfully Disagreeing: How Dialogue Works to Transform Conflict". Congregations, Summer 2006, Number 3 (download from www.Alban.org, click on Publishing, then on *Congregations*, and go to 2006 Summer to find) – A good overview of dialogue as fostered by the Public Conversations Project; includes some great questions for reflection.

Mead, Loren B. and Alban, Billie T. Creating the Future Together: Methods to Inspire Your Whole Faith Community. Herndon, VA, The Alban Institute, 2008 – contains a case study of use of dialogue to deal with issues around human sexuality (pp. 77 – 80).

Pranis, Kay. The Little Book of Circle Processes: A New/Old Approach to Peacemaking. Intercourse, PA, Good Books, 2005 – part of the Mennonite *Little Books of Justice & Peacebuilding* series, provides a more in-depth look at circle processes and contains practical tips on setting up such a process.

Schirch, Lisa and Campt, David. The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects: A Practical, Hands-On Guide. Intercourse, PA, Good Books, 2007 – part of the Mennonite *Little Books of Justice & Peacebuilding* series, an easy-to-read guide to the formal dialogue process.

Yankelovich, Daniel. The Magic of Dialogue, Simon & Schuster, N.Y., 1999 – excellent introduction to the concepts and value of dialogue in a broad-ranging philosophical context, with some discussion of practical models and methods of dialogue as well.

Web-based Resources

Everyday Democracy: www.everyday-democracy.org – a national organization that helps communities organize large-scale dialogues to support community change, their web site contains a number of resources and case studies on the use of dialogue in public life.

Mennonite Peace and Justice Support Network: <http://peace.mennolink.org> – this website provides a wide array of congregational conflict and peacemaking resources, including a statement on how to agree and disagree in love that is theologically based. From the home page, click on Resources, then Resources for Congregations, and finally “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love.” The statement is available in both English and Spanish. The Network offers training in conflict resolution and mediation.

National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation: www.thataway.org – the web site of an organization whose mission is to bring people together in ways that expand the power of discussion to benefit society; contains an extensive collection of resources, news, events, and opportunities related to dialogue.

Public Conversations Project: www.publicconversations.org – a non-profit organization, PCP conducts dialogues between dissenting groups and dialogue training throughout the world. They also work with individual congregations in conflict. Its web site provides downloadable guides for fostering dialogue on difficult topics as well as a video-based virtual workshop on dialogue.

General Outline of Session

1. Opening prayer/meditation (suggested reading James 3)
2. Introducing the concept of dialogue (PowerPoint 1; Talking Points)
3. When dialogue is important (PowerPoint 2; Talking Points)
4. Stuck conversations as an indicator (PowerPoint 3; Talking Points)
5. Finding common ground (PowerPoint 4; Talking Points)
6. Concepts of dialogue (PowerPoint 5-6; Talking Points; sharing of previous experiences with the dialogue process)
7. Crafting questions to help dialogue participants move from a knowing to inquiring stance (PowerPoint 7; Talking Points; facilitated discussion; exercise to practice crafting, asking and critiquing questions)
8. Crafting dialogue questions to use in an individual discussion (PowerPoint 8; Talking Points; two rounds of exercises in pairs or congregational teams; facilitated debrief)
9. Ground rules for dialogue (PowerPoint 9; Talking Points; Handout 1)
10. The circle process (PowerPoint 10; Talking Points; practice round if there is time; Handout 2)
11. Final thoughts on facilitating a dialogue and wrap up questions (PowerPoint 11; Talking Points)
18. Closing quotation and prayer (PowerPoint 12; Talking Points; Handout 3)

Framing Questions for Dialogue: Resources for Facilitators in Providing Participant Feedback

Since dialogue, once entered into, is a spontaneous process, good questions have to be constructed on the spot, so it's hard to provide "generic" examples. There are some examples of effective questions in material available on the Public Conversations Project website at www.publicconversations.org. On the menu under Resources, select Guides. Under Guides, select *Constructive Conversations about Challenging Times: A Guide to Community Dialogue* which may be downloaded and is a step-by-step resource for dialogue. Questions for various topics are given toward the back of the Guide and generic questions are incorporated in the step-by-step description of the process itself. PCP's Copyright allows you to share those questions with your group.

If participants are having difficulty crafting appropriate and helpful questions (and they may – this takes practice), remind them to keep in mind that the primary purpose of questions is to help those engaged in dialogue move from a *knowing* stance to an *inquiring* stance. It may be useful to ask participants having difficulty to ask themselves one or more of the questions below, as applicable. Also, encourage participants to use any negative feedback about a question as a learning opportunity; i.e., ask themselves, "How I could re-frame this question next time so it is more effective?"

Questions to Ask Ourselves When Framing Questions

- Is this a genuine question to which I honestly don't know the answer?
- Am I trying to evoke a particular answer based on my assumptions?
- What do I want this question to accomplish; i.e., what kind of conversation, meanings and feelings do I imagine this question will invite?
- Is this question likely to be heard as confronting, or as an invitation to reflect?
- Is the intent of this question to elicit facts, or to stimulate interest in what is more subtle or unnoticed?
- Is this question familiar enough to connect – and, is it different enough from what the respondent expects to evoke a new response?
- How likely is this question to help people see themselves and others in their world in more complex ways than before?
- Is this question likely to be heard as one which comes from a collaborative stance, or from a stance which implies "I'm the expert"?
- When I ask this question, what tone or affect on my part is likely to develop a sense of fit, expansion, or violation in the person I am asking?

The Art of Dialogue

Guidelines for Dialogue Participants

Handout 1

- Take time to be in God's presence.
- Look for common ground (e.g., shared meaning, values, objectives or concerns) which exists in addition to expressed differences.
- Seek to understand rather than to be understood.
- Affirm individuals by respecting their differences of experience and opinion.
- Maintain a spirit of inquiry: Ask genuine questions.
- Suspend assumptions – refrain from blaming or assigning motives.
- Listen with openness.
- Acknowledge feelings, your own and others'.
- Speak only from your own experience (use "I" statements).
- Refrain from rebutting or challenging – no "yes, buts . . ."
- Share air time with others.
- Maintain confidentiality following the conversation.

The Art of Dialogue

Questions for Group Dialogue Exercise

Handout 2

(Note: Questions are based upon the issue of using the contemporary or traditional versions of the Lord's Prayer. Times indicated are per question, not per person.)

1. Tell us about a time when liturgy deeply affected you. (10 min.)
2. Do you prefer the traditional or contemporary version of the Lord's Prayer and what ***in your life experience*** has shaped your perspective on this issue? (10 min.)
3. What is your greatest fear/concern if the position opposite to your own wins out in your church? What is the worst that could happen? (5 min.)
4. Where do you experience ambiguity about your own perspective? What doubts do you have about it? What's your "gray" area? (5 min.)
5. What is at the heart of this matter for you? (5 min.)
6. What questions of ***curiosity*** do you have of someone else in your circle? (2 min. for each question/answer, not to exceed 10 min. total)

The Art of Dialogue

A Prayer Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi

Handout 3

Lord, make us instruments of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let us sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is discord, union;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy;

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen



Book of Common Prayer, New York, NY: The Church Publishing Company, Inc., 1979, page 833.