

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

A workshop by Ken Bechtel for Equipping Day, October 29, 2005

For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden...
(Acts 15:28 – *the conclusion of church leaders who brought to their meeting conflicting understandings of God's requirements for uncircumcised Gentiles.*)

We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check...No man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. James 3:2, 8

"The church that is unwilling to discuss controversial issues is one in which unity is only skin deep." *Katie Day, Difficult Conversations: taking risks, acting with integrity (Alban, 2001), pp.90-91*

Our Assignment

Difficult Conversations 101: Some Helps

Those drums! Should we pave the parking lot, or send the money to New Orleans? Sex! How can we have those necessary conversations in ways that build rather than destroy the body?

Does this feel familiar?

The Hillside Church adult class greeted each other warmly, asking about each other's families. Elbow jabbing and teasing included a joke to their one Native member about needing less sunscreen. She responded with her usual weary chuckle.

"We can talk about anything here. We're just one big happy family", they told their visitor. They listed their activities – Bible Study, potlucks, socials, the occasional musical.

As the visitor looked out the window, she noticed the nuclear cooling towers in the landscape. "Do you ever talk about nuclear energy? About urban sprawl? About racism?" "No, these topics never come up," someone replied.

After the class, the Native woman quietly thanked the visitor for daring to name "the issue."

Our Context

In an earlier era, Isaac Peebles' Politeness on Railroads was considered an essential resource for travellers. Now the horn, the finger, the radio dial and "road rage" may have replaced that guide.

Some historians (e.g. William Strauss and Neil Howe, Generations: the History of America's Future 1584-2069, Quill, 1991) describe behavioural patterns as moving in cycles. They would describe the current era, the "Culture Wars", as "an unravelling". Such eras share with the early church period the unmannerly harshness with which we engage our opponents.

Robert Putnam's Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (Simon & Schuster, 2000) describes the decline in what he calls "social capital", our connections with each other.

These American studies and many others point towards the task facing the church. Add to this the fact that careful decision making takes time and energy, an investment that Type A personalities, and quick-fix folk may be loathe to give.

Putnam challenges churches to "mine our resources," our "social capital", to help bring about interpersonal and social transformation. And we try to do so with the interpersonal values of Christian faith, rather than those of our culture.

Fortunately we have as a resource the New Testament, letters written during a similarly uncivil age.

Developing Conversational Muscle

No athlete would enter the Olympics without first undergoing strenuous training. In similar fashion, why would churches attempt to tackle the "biggies" without first honing their ability to tackle such conversations?

Conversation with our unchurched neighbours, the secular press or testimonials from the "emerging church" quickly identify the central issue(s) for contemporary seekers. As has been true ever since the early church, "how they love one another" remains the most powerful evidence of God's presence among us. Many a jaded ex attendee cites "avoidance" or "the fight" in their judgement of the church's hypocrisy or irrelevance.

Using the New Testament as a Model

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament illustrates the biblical way of working at developing conversational muscle.

Invite groups to skim the paragraph headings of the epistles, categorising their subject matter as "What we believe", "how we live together" or "other things." The results for the "believe" and "live together" sections tend to range from 40 to 60%. Up to half of each of these letters explicitly describe the preferred Christ like ways of treating one another, even when we disagree. Up to half of the apostle's writing is given over to helping these disciples live in this counter cultural way. Dare we, in our somewhat comparable setting, devote less attention to the ways we live and behave together?

Some Helps

The following tools have proven helpful for various circumstances. Two good sources for further details on several of these are Ron Kraybill's Facilitation Skills for Interpersonal Transformation at www.berghof-handbook.net and the Jossey-Bass website's Tools for Group Dialogue and Issue Formation at www.josseybass.com.

For Changing our Conversational Culture

Ground Rules for Specific Conversations

It is often appropriate to begin a more difficult conversation session by writing on a flip chart some "Ground Rules" to which we agree. Group members may wish to add further expectations, and these too are written there. These function somewhat as a covenant.

Our "Season of Discernment" Resource offered the following sample Ground Rules:

We will

1. Listen respectfully and carefully, without interrupting
2. Share time equitably so that each has opportunity to participate (you may instead suggest "Wait to speak a second time on an issue until all have had a chance to speak the first time."
3. Speak for ourselves, not for others. (e.g. "I think", "I feel")
4. Attack the problem, not the person.
5. Keep what is shared in this discussion here within this room.

Behavioural Covenants

Behavioural covenants are simply a way of making explicit the values by which we choose to live together in the congregation. This short document is created by the congregation and names the behaviours we agree to practice. Having such a document in place, and in practice, before more difficult conversations helps the congregation navigate even turbulent waters.

Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A handbook for honoring differences by Gil Rendle (Alban, 1999) is the classic description of this resource. Rendle offers several workshop models, as well as examples. Our own MC Sask covenant contains a significant "behavioural covenant" section, "Our Commitments".

Behavioural covenants may be the single most important tool for helping congregations forge new ways of living healthfully together.

For Surfacing Issues

Samoan Circle

Three chairs (facing into the circle) are designated for those wishing to speak to an issue or topic. One chair is for the speaker; the other two are for the "on deck speakers" (i.e. those speakers next in line). Other people wishing

to speak line up behind one of these "on deck" chairs. The speaker selects a "Listener" whose job it is to listen and paraphrase what is being said. (Note that they are not to rebut, editorialise or dispute what is said; if they wish themselves to speak, they can later take one of the "on deck" chairs.) One person has the floor as long as it takes to feel fully understood.

Barry Lesser (Zoar Waidheim) presented a workshop on using this approach at our 2004 Difficult Conversations sessions.

Fishbowl

One group sits in a circle surrounded by a larger circle of listeners. Only inner circle members speak.

The inner circle members may reflect only one side of the debate (in which case the purpose is careful uninterrupted listening). The other side next takes the inner circle chairs.

The inner circle, fishbowl, may also be used to give a representative pair or small group of persons a chance to dialogue in the presence of others.

Conflict Spectrum

This tool is effective for opening conversation on a controversial issue. Note that in deeply polarised congregations where people quickly categorise others, this can be a dangerous exercise. It is a valuable tool where there is enough safety, and where this is coupled with further listening and exploration.

Identify the two poles, encouraging people at one end of the issue to go toward one end of the room, and the other extreme toward the other. Everyone finds his or her position on the continuum between these poles.

The important activity then begins. People explain to each other why they have chosen this particular spot. The groups can then be divided into two (or three, the two ends plus the middle group). These groups spend twenty minutes preparing a list of the strengths and weaknesses of their position and report these to the larger group. Or the group can be divided in the middle and the lines reformed so that each participant is paired with a person from a different perspective. One of the various structured listening exercises can then be used to help participants listen carefully to each other.

Small Group Discussions

Where the issues and factions are not yet well defined and we need further clarity about the conflict, mixed discussion groups may help. Randomly assign people to mixed groups. Their assignment is to create a list of the three to five most important issues facing the group. They are given 15 to 30 minutes to do so.

If the tension is high, either designated facilitators or special guidelines may help this process. One helpful practice is going around the circle, listening to each person's views (with no discussion) until each has

spoken. Other such groups use a simple questionnaire that they fill out and then share in the group.

Affinity Groups

Affinity groups are composed of people with similar views. These may be helpful when people are too timid to speak in front of those with whom they disagree, when anger is high or when people may feel a need to check things with similar minded friends before committing to proposals for resolution.

Affinity groups may be formed through a spectrum exercise, by assigning people (based on your knowledge of them) or through inviting them to form groups of four to eight people with whom they feel comfortable sharing their feelings.

The work of the affinity group is to prepare for helpful conversations with people outside their group. Such preparation may include listing our concerns, and preparing for further conversation about mutual perceptions (list adjectives to describe the other side, adjectives we think the other side uses for us, actions by your side that contribute to the way the other side views you). This may even include creative exercises such as drawing a vehicle (bus, car, steamroller) that reflects this situation.

Each affinity group then shares a summary of its deliberations in a carefully facilitated discussion.

For Going Deeper

Interviews

Interviewing people in the presence of their opponents can transform a conversation. The parties select two or three spokespersons. The interviewer, an attentive trusted facilitator, engages each in turn using a friendly, informal, conversational tone. He/she begins on a personal note (“Tell me a little about yourself”), moves to the issues at hand (“How do you personally view this issue?”) and then moves deeper (“Explain that a little further.”). When finished, the interviewer may wish to turn to the listening audience and inquire if there are any views not yet heard. If so, then that speaker must come forward and be interviewed.

A variant on this approach is **Role Reversal Interviews**. Several persons are selected representing the various views. This resembles the earlier interview, **except** that the persons being interviewed exchange roles and postures. Mr X attempts to speak as Mr Y. At the end of each round, the facilitator turns to Mr Y and asks for an evaluation.

Another variant on the interview is to add a **Listening Chair**. The interviewee selects someone to be their listener, preferably someone from an opposing perspective. This role resembles the listener in the Samoan Circle. This can make a major contribution toward transforming the quality of interaction between parties.

Yet another variant is **Role Reversal** presentations. Someone from each side is assigned to interview people from the other side, and then to

present a summary of the things they have heard. That side is then given a chance to respond to the summary, to expand on certain parts or to add clarification.

Deliberative Dialogue

Deliberative Dialogue is a structured dialogue whereby people of diverse perspectives (e.g. deeper concerns, values, experience, expertise) seek a shared understanding of a problem and search for common ground for action. Trained leaders use a discussion guide that frames the issue (the overall problem followed by three or four broad approaches to it).

Participants then work through the issue, considering each approach (its appeal and concerns, costs, consequences and trade offs).

Several websites describe this approach (e.g. Canadian Policy Research Network www.cprn.com; New England Center for Public Life www.fpc.edu.) At earlier Difficult Conversations workshops, Bruno Baerg of MCC Saskatchewan led our presentations of this method.

Designing a Process

Many of the techniques described above are useful for surfacing issues in group settings. Bringing resolution to these issues may require careful process. In addition to structured conversation techniques such as Deliberative Dialogue, there are other processes which can be helpful. A block of time at the end of an issue surfacing meeting can also be used to establish the kind of process for follow up.

A five person “process planning committee” representing all key groups could be appointed. This group is mandated to prepare a “process proposal” to bring back to the group. Their proposal should identify the issue (or issues) to be resolved, the proposed avenue for addressing each issue (e.g. mediation, study), a timeline for the proposed activities and a decision rule (who will make the decision and how).

Hearing from Everyone

Muzzling Big Talkers

We need to hear from those of many words, and from those who speak more reluctantly. The latter group may often have much needed insights as yet unheard. In order to give space for their voices, we may need some controls on the “big talkers.” Some of the following techniques may be presented as part of “wanting to hear from everyone.”

One Turn Only

No one speaks a second time until everyone has a chance to speak the first time (or to pass).

Matchstick

Everyone gets 3 matchsticks, pebbles or other small object. Each time someone speaks, they must throw a matchstick into a wastebasket. When the matchsticks are gone, no more talking is allowed. Candies that must be eaten can also be used.

The Talking Stick

The person holding the “Talking Stick” has the right to speak while the others listen. In order to ensure that quieter people get to speak, this method needs some further rule or expectation – e.g. that all will get the chance to hold the stick etc.

High Talk, Low Talk

People self select as “high talkers” (likely to talk a great deal) and “low talkers”. The “high talkers form the outer circle and the “low talkers” the inner circle. The inner circle “low talkers” are given first chance to speak while the outer circle “high talkers” listen.

Some Further Models

In her book, Difficult Conversations, Katie Day offers the following further models for cultivating conversational muscle in our congregations. The common features of these approaches are:

1. understanding and acceptance are valued, rather than only a demand for consensus
2. providing a safe environment so that participants need not fear ostracism, ridicule, disrespect or breach of confidentiality.

A Controversial Issues Committee

The congregation established this committee to receive suggestions of topics they could deal with. The committee’s task was to design and facilitate constructive conversations on these matters. The genius of this proposal was that, by its very title, it acknowledged that those issues are out there and provided an entry point for addressing them.

Congregational Forums

Though forums on controversial issues tend to become input oriented (however well balanced), they can also be made deliberately dialogical.

Small Groups

Day describes a parish where small groups became the instrument for dealing with their racial divisions and healing. Key to this were trained convenors and ground rules including confidentiality. One effective practice

was encouraging participants to discipline themselves to repeat the previous speaker’s arguments before making their own response.

Clearness Groups

From the Quakers comes this practice of gathering a group of fellow believers to wrestle with an important personal issue. These provide a safe trusting environment in which important questions can be asked. These are usually constituted for a concentrated and limited period of time.

Last Word

“When we grapple with complex issues honestly and openly, when we can act in trust and take some risks, when we enter into conversations that we know will be difficult, we will not emerge unchanged... We recognise at some deep level that transformation is a result of difficult conversations, and that is one reason we would rather not go down that road.”

Katie Day, Difficult Conversations (Alban, 2001) p.61