

DON'T DISAGREE, DELIBERATE

HOW TO LEAD COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR CHURCH

The church is no stranger to controversy. Chapter 15 of the Book of Acts describes a heated debate among the apostles at a gathering in Jerusalem. Should Gentiles be welcomed as Jesus' followers or only Jews who kept Moses' law by getting circumcised? When they resolved the matter, the letter they sent out to the churches acknowledged God's work in the midst of disagreement: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," they wrote, that even non-Jews should be welcomed (Acts 15:28). Yet if disagreement about church matters can be holy, what about community matters? Should church leaders ever discuss issues of public concern and ask community members to join them? If so, how?

Creating Space for Conversation

During an election season, some churches offer forums in which candidates for public office speak to the community about public issues. According to one research study, 16% of mainline Protestants, 12% of other Protestants, and 8% of Roman Catholics are members of congregations that hosted such forums.¹ In addition to candidate forums, a newer model has emerged for discussing issues of public concern that emphasizes fairness and respect among participants. Sometimes called a "deliberative forum," this highly structured meeting is designed so that everyone gets a chance to speak and provide their perspective, others listen respectfully, and all in attendance discuss the options so that the best solutions emerge.² While deliberative forums go by many names and take a variety of forms, they all share a structured process, one that requires advance preparation from the participants and aims to include a diverse group of people.³

A Deliberate Process for Deliberative Work

The Reverend R. Gregg Kaufman, an Evangelical Lutheran pastor in Jacksonville, Florida, began experimenting with deliberative forums as a way to introduce churches to dialogue about public issues. The inspiration

for Reverend Kaufman's work came from the Kettering Foundation (www.kettering.org), a nonprofit foundation that gathers community leaders to find ways to make democracy work better. With advice from a group of pastors hosted by Kettering, Reverend Kaufman began to use deliberative forums in several churches in the Jacksonville area. A few months before the presidential election in 2016, Kaufman held one at St. John's Episcopal Cathedral on the topic of political dysfunction.

Using a guide designed by the National Issues Forum Institute, *Political Fix: How Can We Get American Politics Back On Track?* Kaufman laid out the process for the group: First, he invited everyone to speak about a personal stake they have in the issue. Next, he presented ground rules that emphasized listening and respect. Then he added a twist: no talk about the Trump/Pence or Clinton/Kaine presidential tickets. The goal was to find ways to talk about political dysfunction and solutions to the problem in a way that



"JUST RELAX, BUDDY...
THEY SAID EVERYONE WOULD GET A CHANCE TO SPEAK."

encouraged respectful speaking and listening. The issue guide presents three options for consideration:

1. Break the grip of special interests: The key to addressing gridlock and dysfunction in government is to rein in special interests and curb the influence of big money.
2. Increase responsibility: Our best hope of fixing American politics is to restore individual responsibility in communities and at every level of government.
3. Fix the mechanisms of politics: The mechanisms of government are no longer responsive to the will of the people. We need major structural changes to make the system work as it was intended to.

Discussing politics with strangers can be intimidating, even with topics that might appear easy to reach consensus about. Some participants arrived at the meeting tense, expecting heated arguments. Before the discussion got very far along, however, the tenor of the group began to shift. “Speech that was like shaky steps on thin ice began to take on the feel of a driveway basketball game,” according to an observer who later wrote about the evening. Kaufman has held over a dozen such forums in the Jacksonville area, with most of them using churches as sponsors or to provide the venue.⁴

Deliberative work tends to be exploratory and open to revision. Meetings are designed so that everyone gets a chance to speak and listen respectfully. The goal is to move toward understanding, find some common ground, and identify possible solutions. For this reason, the National Issues Forum Institute (www.nifi.org) provides four-page printed guides that present three different and sharply defined policy options. The guide asks participants to examine the options together, keeping in mind the trade-offs or disadvantages implicit in each one.

Creating a Process for Your Church: An Example

When rhetoric becomes heated around a specific community issue, church-based forums give participants the chance to cool their tempers. In 2015, for example, in the midst of public concern over police violence and community safety, two Tennessee pastors joined forces to encourage dialogue. Oak Ridge, Tennessee is also known as the “Secret City” because it was established in the 1940s as a community for workers in the federally sponsored Manhattan Project, which built the first atomic bomb. Over time, this city of 29,000 has become increas-

ingly diverse. In the summer of 2015, the largely white Oak Ridge Unitarian Universalist Church responded to outrage over police violence nationwide by posting a message on its electronic sign: Black Lives Matter. When the pastor, the Reverend Jake Morrill, began receiving death threats, he called a meeting with his colleague, the Reverend Derrick Hammond, pastor of Oak Valley Baptist Church, a largely African American congregation in the city. At that meeting, also attended by a Roman Catholic priest and the city’s chief of police, the group decided to take the sign down and host a series of three public forums called “Community Matters.”

After considerable discussion, the group designed a process for discussing the community’s issues fairly and in depth. The process aimed to: identify the issues of most concern to the community, do research using quantitative data that would offer an objective basis for understanding the concern, identify resources that might improve the situation, and resolve the issue by taking collective action. The ground rules were simple. Participants were to 1) speak as an individual, not as a representative of a group, 2) speak to concerns without laying blame or personal attacks, and 3) “Remember there is no room for disrespect.”⁵

If Not Us, Then Who?

“One who spares words is knowledgeable; one who is cool in spirit has understanding” (Proverbs 17:27). Group discussion does not have to be twisted by anger or marred by disrespect. Deliberation is possible, even concerning controversial matters such as immigration, gun violence, or the opioid epidemic. By hosting forums, church leaders can offer a space where difficult issues get raised, and though perhaps not resolved, at least considered respectfully and fairly. Along the way, churches might help their members as well as community residents learn how to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39).

1. Mark Chaves, “Religious Variations in Public Presence,” in Robert Wuthnow and John Evans, eds., *The Quiet Hand of God*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 118.

2. Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger, *Public Participation for the 21st Century* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2015), 276.

3. *Ibid.*, 276.

4. Linell Ajello, “Out of the Shadows of Polarization,” *Kettering Review* 34, no. 1 (Fall 2017), 23-29.

5. Derrick Hammond, “Employing Democratic Practices to Address Community Forum Concerns” presented to the Kettering Foundation, October 20-21, 2016.