

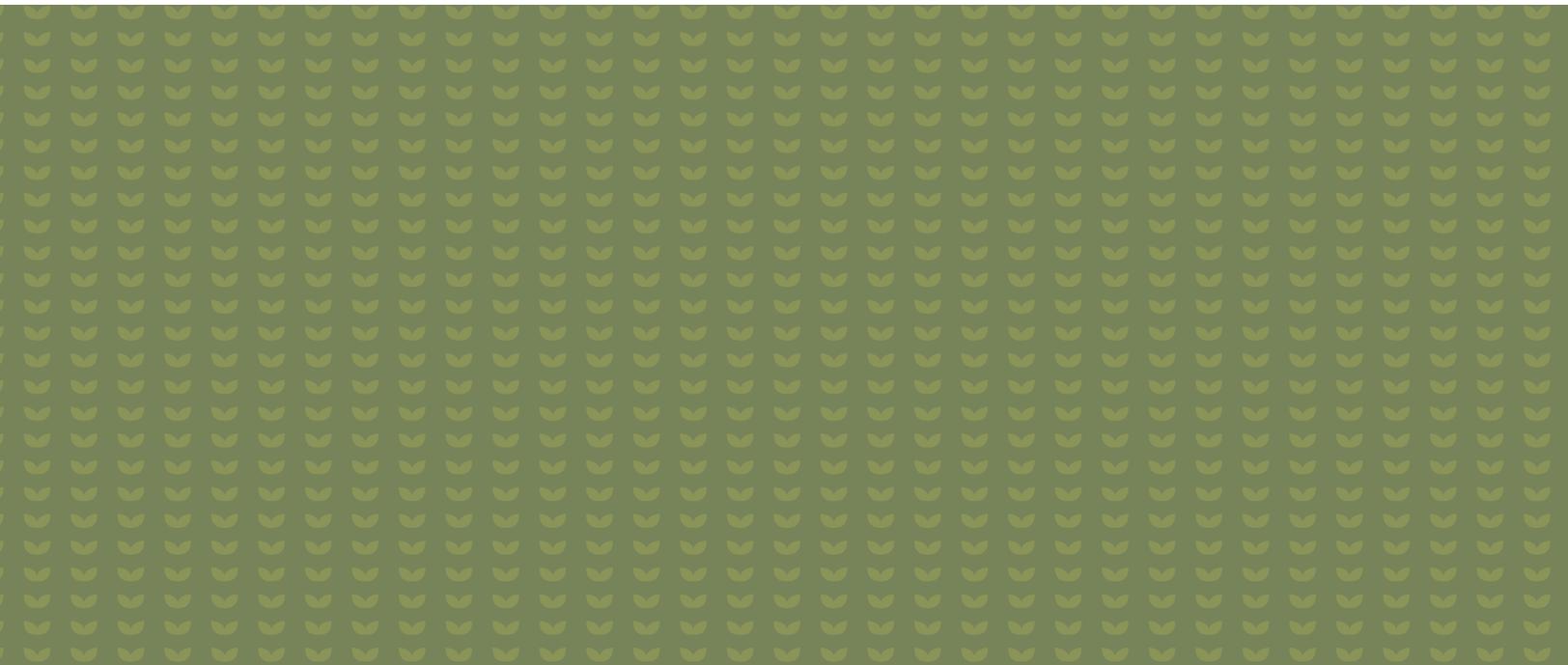


**Mennonite Central Committee**



# Peaceful Practices

A guide to healthy communication in conflict



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# Introduction

**The *Peaceful Practices* curriculum is a resource produced by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) U.S. It is designed for congregations and other groups to build basic skills of healthy conflict transformation and dialogue.**

MCC's stated values include just relationships. "MCC seeks to live and serve justly and peacefully in each relationship, incorporating listening and learning, accountability and mutuality, transparency and integrity."<sup>1</sup> Amid human brokenness and conflict along all kinds of divisions, MCC supports peacebuilding initiatives around the world that seek to improve relationships and address root causes of conflict in order to prevent, reduce or recover from violent conflict. The ministry of reconciliation as outlined in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 provides a foundation that guides this work of building toward a reconciled humanity through dialogue, conflict transformation and restorative practices.

This is not limited to the international realm, however. As faithful followers of Christ, we are called to build toward right relationships here in our own contexts, as well as around the world. In a church and a world increasingly polarized, skills of conflict transformation and healthy dialogue are fundamental tools for living out a theology of peace.

As Marshal Rosenberg, author of *Nonviolent Communication*, asserts, "We are dangerous when we are not conscious of our responsibility for how we behave, think and feel."<sup>2</sup>

The way we interact with one another in interpersonal conflicts matters. It creates habits in us that begin to influence the way we see people who think differently than we do. So often, when we find ourselves in situations of conflict and difference of opinion, we *want* to listen, but our frustration gets in the way.<sup>3</sup> After all, we believe that life and death are implicated in the theological, political and ideological ideals over which we argue. We forget to put into practice the kinds of basic skills that are helpful in communicating through a conflict, such as active listening and "I-statements."

We quickly become defensive, and after the conversation, we find ourselves regretful of the way it turned out.

The reflections, tools and activities in these sessions are simple yet foundational. They are meant to call us back to ways of engaging with conflict that offer dignity to the other, while effectively expressing our own thoughts and opinions. Each session has a focus word meant to be a key for remembering the lessons and tools of that session. Each session also has a "peaceful practice," a simple, short instruction for how to communicate in conversation. Together, the peaceful practices offer a list of guidelines for engaging well in dialogue together.

**We are dangerous when we are not conscious of our responsibility for how we behave, think and feel.**

<sup>1</sup> "Principles and Practices," Mennonite Central Committee, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Marshal B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: a language of life*, 3rd Ed., Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2015, pg. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Adrienne Maree Brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017, p. 219.

These practices are just that – practices.<sup>4</sup> They are skills we need to practice so that we do them naturally in conversations of conflict. What we do on a small scale sets patterns for the whole. It takes intentional work to make these patterns of communicating habitual, especially in conflict.

Yet peaceful practices are more than just mental tools. True dialogue requires a transformation of the heart. The goal is transformed relationships rather than changed opinions. In this sense, peaceful practices can also be approached and embodied as a spiritual discipline. Our responses to conflict reflect our theology and can open us to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our conflicts.

The curriculum is organized into nine sessions. Each session has a focus word, peaceful practice, biblical reflection, conflict transformation tool, at-home reflection questions, group activity, closing blessing and resources to go deeper. (Session One, more introductory in nature, has neither a focus word nor a peaceful practice.) There is a lot of material in each session. Depending on the amount of available time for collective study, groups may or may not get through it all. Our hope is that the various components provided here are helpful long beyond this study, as individuals and congregations engage in real conflicts. For this reason, the resources are extensive, anticipating that they can be helpful as references in the future.

For optimal learning, we recommend that each participant read the biblical reflection before arriving to class so that the group time can begin with discussion right away. We also advise that ample time be left for the activity each session. If there is limited time, we suggest you prioritize the activity and spend less time on the tool, which is meant to be introduced briefly in the group setting but studied in more depth individually (or with others) at home. The “At home” section of each session refers specifically to the tool and offers ways to study it at a later time.

This resource is designed for in-person study, although can easily be adapted for online study through platforms that provide the opportunity for group dialogue and breakout rooms.

For congregations interested in creating intentional spaces of dialogue after studying *Peaceful Practices*, conversation guides will be released in the future as further steps in your congregational path toward conflict transformation.

We pray that the peaceful practices outlined here will provide helpful guidance as we all work to engage with our conflicts in effective and faithful ways.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 53.

**Mennonite Central Committee, a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches, shares God’s love and compassion for all in the name of Christ by responding to basic human needs and working for peace and justice. MCC envisions communities worldwide in right relationship with God, one another and creation. See more at [mcc.org](http://mcc.org).**



# Session 1: Making peace a practice

## Biblical reflection: Finding God's face in the wrestling

Genesis 32:22-32, 33:1-10



*The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.*

*Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.*

*But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, "Who are these with you?" Jacob said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant." Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor with my lord." But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself." Jacob said, "No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor."*

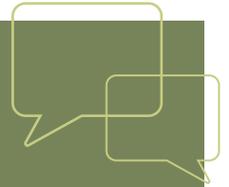
**You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.**

The story of Jacob and Esau is well known. Children grow up in church learning about the conflicted brotherhood in Sunday school. One of the most significant parts of this reconciliation story, sometimes skipped over, comes in Genesis 32:22-32, when Jacob wrestles with God. This happens as Jacob is returning to Esau. After bargaining for his birthright and stealing his blessing, Jacob had fled from Esau and lived many years with his uncle Laban. However, he had more conflict with Laban and eventually decided to return to his homeland and risk his brother's wrath.

At the point of Genesis 32:22, Jacob has sent messengers and gifts ahead of him to appease his brother's anger and is fearfully awaiting how Esau will receive him, due to the historic conflict between them. Night falls and Jacob must wait until dawn to arrive to his brother, whom he has heard is coming to meet him. From a storytelling perspective, this is arriving at the climax of the story: the confrontation between feuding brothers. Tensions are high in the midst of their division – and here enters the Divine. Overnight, Jacob wrestles with God, who takes an incarnate form to visit Jacob. One might ask, why does God come to Jacob on this night, of all nights in his life? What does God have to do with these quarreling brothers?

In fact, what does God *not* have to do with their quarreling? Conflict is part of the human experience and as such, how we deal with conflict is a theological question. As image-bearers of Christ, how we engage in conflict reflects a certain picture of Christ that either demonstrates the values of the kingdom, or perhaps doesn't, depending on our actions. Inviting God to wrestle with us as we work toward healing and reconciliation is a necessary step on the faith journey. Conflict is not to be separated from our spiritual life.

**As image-bearers of Christ, how we engage in conflict reflects a certain picture of Christ that either demonstrates the values of the kingdom, or perhaps doesn't, depending on our actions.**



Throughout history, Anabaptists<sup>1</sup> have been known for our peace theology. Specifically, this is true as the proclaimed pacifism pertained to warfare and a resistance to pick up arms. Without doubt, conscientious objection can be an important avenue for individuals to live out Jesus' call to peacemaking. In the U.S., this was especially true during years of military draft.<sup>2</sup> Anabaptists are known around the world for the ways in which we support peacemaking efforts in war-torn situations. This is central to the historic peace churches' witness.

At the same time, however, Anabaptists in the U.S. have a reputation for avoidance of interpersonal conflict. We have been content to let our peace witness reflect perspectives on foreign policy without addressing the conflicts at home. Yet how we engage in conversation with one another regarding things we disagree on is another important way to embody Jesus' call to peacemaking. This is especially true as the church has become more political and the culture more polarized in recent decades. Healthy dialogue is a critical tool for engaging in conflict in ways that reflect God in us.

The way we approach conflict could even be considered a spiritual practice or discipline.<sup>3</sup> If we intentionally invite God into our disputes and acknowledge God's presence in our conflicts, healthy dialogue becomes a spiritual practice – something that we do habitually, in our ordinary lives, to draw near to God. This curriculum is titled *Peaceful Practices* because it attempts to offer practical tools that can help us engage in healthy dialogue as a spiritual discipline.

Of course, it implies the *practice* part. Just like prayer, Scripture reading and other spiritual disciplines, engaging in

<sup>1</sup> The Anabaptist movement emerged in Switzerland, South Germany and Holland in the early part of the 16th century as part of the Protestant Reformation. The word "Anabaptist" means "re-baptizers" and was given to them by others because of their focus on adult baptism. Today, there are more than 2 million members in 86 countries around the world. For more information, visit [mwc-cmm.org/membership-map-and-statistics](http://mwc-cmm.org/membership-map-and-statistics).

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see [civilianpublicservice.org](http://civilianpublicservice.org).

<sup>3</sup> *Spiritual practice* and *spiritual discipline* are used interchangeably in this session.

healthy dialogue requires the discipline of *practicing* it. It can be easy to assume that we already know how to do this, but we are not taught well about healthy dialogue and we are not automatically good at it.

The world around us models extremely unhealthy ways of talking to (or yelling at) one another when it comes to conflictive issues. There is actually very little healthy dialogue to be found. In this current, extremely polarized culture, words are used to accuse much more often than to welcome. Defenses are up when it comes to divisive issues and we are quick to categorize people into “us” and “them.”

The church has tended to be no different. We say we believe in healthy dialogue, but when it comes to extended family gatherings and conversations on social media, it doesn't always look that way. When we don't see eye to eye, our churches divide. We spend most of our time with people who think and look like us. Our words, thoughts and actions are not Christ-like when we find ourselves in conversations with people we don't agree with, be it at work, online, in church or at a family gathering. We need to practice.

This will require some wrestling. The story of Jacob and Esau is a beautiful example of the spiritual nature of interpersonal conflict and its transformation. We cannot do it alone – we aren't supposed to do it alone. God is with us, tussling around in our mess with us.

However, God's presence does not automatically make it easy, or fast. Jacob spent the entire night wrestling with God. It takes time to wait for, listen to and welcome the Divine into our hearts, especially when we are at the climax of our own conflicts – when we feel anger, fear and grief. We believe God will transform us if we give ourselves to the wrestling, but it takes so much energy, time and work.

Besides that, it hurts. Conflict can be excruciatingly painful. It is heartbreaking to disagree with beloved family members and close friends from other walks of life. We feel the rupture in our bodies. Jacob was injured in the process of his wrestling with the Divine. Conflict can leave us wounded. In fact, most conflicts of consequence probably come with some degree of wounding. No wonder we are so quick to fight them off or flee from them.

The promise of Jacob's story, however, is that pain is not the only result. The wrestling comes with blessing also. After wrestling with God, Jacob's name is changed and he receives a blessing. And as if that weren't enough blessing, he arises from his night-long tussling match to realize that his brother has long forgiven him. A broken relationship is restored. Blessings abound when we allow God into our conflicts and view our engagement in them as central to faithful discipleship – in other words, when we practice engaging in our conflicts as a spiritual discipline. Jacob's conflict becomes one of his greatest blessings.

Jacob experiences both the wrestling and Esau's forgiveness as encounters with the Divine. His journey begins and ends by seeing the face of God, as written in verses 32:30 and 33:10. God is in the wrestling and God is in the reconciliation. What does it tell us about God's character that God is revealed to Jacob so obviously in this experience of conflict and reconciliation?

Conflict has the potential to help us receive the Divine in new ways. When we are most vulnerable, we are most able to see God. This conflict is perhaps one of the most intimate experiences Jacob has with the Divine, which is a large part of the blessing Jacob receives. Sometimes, an experience that is difficult and causes pain can become a great gift, with the possibility to offer lessons and blessings beyond our imagination. This is, of course, not *always* or *necessarily* true, but it is a good first step to welcoming God into our hard places. Jacob's wrestling wounded him, but it also left him with blessing beyond measure. This is the gift waiting for us if we approach conflict as a spiritual practice toward authentic discipleship. May we learn to welcome and wrestle with God in our conflicts so that we, too, may come face to face with Divine blessing.

### GOING DEEPER

For another tool to work through conflict geared toward congregations, read ***Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians*** by John Paul Lederach.

## Questions for discussion

1. How have you received blessing from a conflict you have experienced?
2. When do you consider conflict to be spiritual? Do you agree that dealing well with conflict could be a spiritual discipline? How have you practiced this, or not, in your own faith formation?
3. How do you, your family, or your church community deal with disagreements with others, particularly related to the sensitive issues that divide people?
4. What does healthy dialogue mean to you?
5. In what relationships might we be best positioned to see God's face well? How might we enter into struggles and conflicts looking to see God's face?

## Tool: Peaceful practices

The eight peaceful practices in this curriculum highlight components of healthy dialogue. They are not the only elements of healthy dialogue or conflict transformation. They can be guides, however, to orient and remind us how to engage constructively with others in the midst of conflict. The biblical reflection in each session connects these practices to our faith. With these practices come focus words, the session titles, quick reminders of the fuller practices. Peaceful practices are not only pragmatic; they are also faithful ways of engaging with conflict so that we draw near to God through our practice of them as a form of spiritual discipline.

Each session in the curriculum will go deeper into one of the peaceful practices. Together, these eight practices are themselves a tool – a set of guidelines – that can remind us how to wrestle well as we practice peace daily.

**Curiosity.** Be curious, inviting diversity of ideas and opinions.

**Discovery.** Focus on what matters.

**Engagement.** Invite the best in yourself and others.

**Dialogue.** Listen together for insights and deeper questions.

**Empathy.** Seek to understand rather than persuade.

**Authenticity.** Speak from the heart, contributing your own thinking and experience.

**Dignity.** Consider power dynamics.

**Transformation.** Welcome creativity.



**These peaceful practices are available as a complimentary bookmark, so that you may keep them in front of you as you go about your daily interactions. To request a bookmark, or to order with the printed curriculum, go to the *Peaceful Practices* website at [mcc.org/peaceful-practices](http://mcc.org/peaceful-practices).**

## Activity: Class agreements and expectations

Directions: As you begin this collective journey of wrestling with God in the midst of your conflicts, it is important to outline agreements and expectations.

In small groups or pairs, reflect on the following questions.

- What are your hopes for this class? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What do you fear on this journey? \_\_\_\_\_
- What do you need to create a healthy and safe learning environment? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What values will help us stay in a healthy, learning community together? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Together, as a class, create a list of guidelines you will abide by throughout the sessions. This list may include the eight peaceful practices or may be a different list. Keep these in a place where they can be present at each class for the remainder of this study.

**At home** Spend time reflecting on these peaceful practices. What jumps out at you? As you think about the divisive conversations or other conflicts present in your life, which of these practices come more easily to you; which do you embody well? Which are more difficult for you and need some work for you to embody them well?

## Blessing: Jacob's Blessing<sup>4</sup>

If this blessing were easy,  
anyone could claim it.  
As it is,  
I am here to tell you  
that it will take some work.

This is the blessing  
that visits you  
in the struggling,  
in the wrestling,  
in the striving.

This is the blessing  
that comes  
after you have left  
everything behind,  
after you have stepped out,  
after you have crossed  
into that realm  
beyond every landmark  
you have known.

This is the blessing  
that takes all night  
to find.

It's not that this blessing  
is so difficult,  
as if it were not filled  
with grace  
or with the love  
that lives  
in every line.

It's simply that  
it requires you  
to want it,  
to ask for it,  
to place yourself  
in its path.  
It demands that you  
stand to meet it  
when it arrives,  
that you stretch yourself  
in ways you didn't know  
you could move,  
that you agree  
to not give up.

So when this blessing comes,  
borne in the hands  
of the difficult angel  
who has chosen you,  
do not let go.  
Give yourself  
into its grip.

It will wound you,  
but I tell you  
there will come a day  
when what felt to you  
like limping

was something more  
like dancing  
as you moved into  
the cadence  
of your new  
and blessed name.

<sup>4</sup> "Jacob's Blessing" © Jan Richardson from *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*, Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2020, pp. 68-70. Used by permission. janrichardson.com.



# Session 2: Curiosity

Peaceful practice: Be curious, inviting diversity of ideas and opinions.

## Biblical reflection: Comfortable with conflict

Acts 2:1-13

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

*Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."*



**All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.**

Pentecost is known as the birth of the church. And quite an interesting birth it is – one that perhaps surprises and challenges us if we look closely. Shortly after Jesus had ascended, the disciples were gathered in Jerusalem, worshipping and waiting as they discerned what to do next. Jesus had told them that the Holy Spirit would come after him. He said, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever."<sup>1</sup>

One wonders what the disciples would have been expecting. What did they anticipate the Advocate would be or do? The Greek word used in the original text of John is *paracletos*. The word literally means "called to one's side." Referring to the Holy Spirit, English translations of the Bible have most commonly translated *paracletos* as advocate, helper or comforter.

<sup>1</sup>John 14:16.



It is an interesting contrast to think of the Holy Spirit as *comforter* in juxtaposition with the revelation of the Holy Spirit to the disciples on Pentecost as Luke describes in Acts 2. In the Anabaptist world, the word *comforter*, a filled and stitched blanket, often elicits feelings of warmth and tradition. Comforters are comfortable. Images of grandmothers sewing colorful, warm blankets meant to wrap people in love come to mind. Mennonite Central Committee sends out more than 50,000 comforters each year to people in need around the world.

**Far from comforting images of cozy embrace, the actual experience of receiving the Comforter through divided tongues was probably quite uncomfortable. Yet this is how the Holy Spirit was revealed – through difference.**

It seems doubtful that the disciples had in mind a violent wind and tongues of fire as they awaited the *Comforter* Christ had promised them. Far from comforting images of cozy embrace, the actual experience of receiving the Comforter through divided tongues was probably quite uncomfortable. Yet this is how the Holy Spirit was revealed – through difference. The Holy Spirit showed up and created chaos, unleashing tongues of fire so that the disciples were each speaking in a different language. It was so incredible that it brought in crowds. The author, Luke, takes the time to note the breadth of diversity in the language and culture present – “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs” (Acts 2:9-11a, printed above). The Holy Spirit was not revealed to a small group of homogeneous people who thought, looked and sounded alike. The Comforter came to create new and broader community in the midst of difference.

Imagine the scene for a minute. It is quite hectic. All kinds of people, speaking very different languages. One could say this is a common appearance in today’s world with different political perspectives, theological understandings, cultural practices, entire belief systems and more, running into each other. They are different groups of people saying different things. Most often, these differences never truly meet in any meaningful way. They talk past one another. We’ve all seen it happen.

Contrast those contemporary encounters to Pentecost. A major difference is that at Pentecost, each one understood the other. There was order in the chaos. The Holy Spirit’s presence allowed for understanding. It created the possibility to speak in ways that others could understand, as well as to understand what others were saying. Notably, this happened not through wiping away all difference and blankly making people the same, but rather through valuing each identity present and highlighting the differences.

The Scripture says that witnesses to this event were amazed and astonished – so much so, they thought that everyone was drunk. It looked crazy to those from the outside. Perhaps we have often interpreted these comments to be referring to the many different languages being spoken, to the chaos. However, as mentioned earlier, it is actually quite common to speak different languages – to speak past one another and have chaos when it comes to difference. Perhaps what seemed so remarkable to these bystanders wasn’t the chaos, but the order and understanding in the chaos. It was the fact that each of these many different tongues and people could understand one another, listen to one another.

What does it take for different groups of people – different cultures, experiences, perspectives and beliefs – to create community together? What would it look like for the church to welcome and expect the Spirit’s presence in our differences rather than in our similarities? Might we be able to hear differently? Speak differently? Might we be able to understand a different language than our own?

This birth story of the church creates a beautiful and challenging vision for us today: global community that values each individual and makes space for their unique gifts. It is a community full of difference – or, one

could say, conflict – that places God at the center rather than being on one side or another.

We are not good at doing this. We tend to self-organize so that our communities, and our churches, are filled with people who look and think like us. Where there is difference, we highlight what we have in common rather than authentically recognizing and valuing our unique identities and gifts. Where there is tension, we find ways to avoid discussing the differences that create tension, with the aim of keeping harmony in our relationships. How harmonious is that, though, really? This pattern happens unconsciously and reaffirms all the things we already believe. We are so practiced at it.

Instead, we need to **be curious, inviting diversity of ideas and opinions**. We need the gift of curiosity to stir up some chaos. Curiosity helps us ask better questions – of ourselves and of others. It helps us study how we are building community, who we are including and who we aren't. In this sense, curiosity aids us in welcoming the Spirit. Independently, our own knowledge and experience are limited and incomplete. We need other perspectives to help us see beyond ourselves and glimpse a bigger picture of what the Spirit is doing.

Curiosity is, unfortunately, a lost art. We are born with so much of it – toddlers are proof. We watch them engage with the world around them and our hearts explode at their curious spirits and constant questions. Yet, as adults, we have trouble reviving that same curiosity we modeled as children. We must learn to cultivate curiosity about ideas and perspectives we don't agree with or perhaps don't understand. Rather than jumping to judgment, how would it change our relationships and interactions if, when confronted with a thought we disagree with, we would engage in a bit of toddler-like wonder? If we think we have all the answers and believe more in our own convictions than the possibility of revelation, we will miss the transformation that God offers us in healthy dialogue.

In bringing curiosity, we are willing to have something be “shook up” – to introduce some chaos – in how we see the world. To get there, we need exposure to other ways of being, doing, thinking and believing. This means searching out relationships with people who think, look and experience life differently than we do. It means engaging in our conflicts because they teach us to sit in the uncomfortable places of difference. Going deep into our conflicts and our differences, rather than running away from them, gives us a chance to do that. It is in the middle of conflict and chaos that transformation comes, because it is where the Spirit enters.

Our English word “conflict” comes from the Latin word *conflictus*, which joins the prefix *con*, meaning *with* or *together*, and the verb *fligere*, which means *to strike*. To be in conflict is to *strike together*. Culturally, we have learned to define conflict as something *against*, when in fact it is *with*. We need conflict to refine us. Many long-lasting friendships and partnerships say it is their differences that have most helped them each grow. It is in the stretching, the changing and the challenging that we are most effectively molded into the creation God wants us to be. While one of the most difficult parts of relationship, it is also one of the most beautiful.

The Pentecost story has mystery in it. We can't say we know exactly what went on when the Holy Spirit rained down in tongues of fire. Chaos can be disorienting. There is discomfort in saying that we don't understand everything, that we don't have all the answers. But we can assume that when we welcome and honor difference like at the birth of the church, we begin to emulate the community God intended for us. And we know that we are promised the Comforter to come to our side as we enter the fire, together.

## GOING DEEPER

For a stimulating proposal on building global community through empathy and expanded identity, watch “**The empathic civilization**” by Jeremy Rifkin on TED.

## Questions for discussion

1. What “Pentecost moments” have you had – times when you understood someone who believed or understood something very different from you? How did your shared understanding influence the relationship?
2. Where are you living with difference? Who are the people in your life who think very differently than you, have different economics, look different or have had different life experiences than you? How are you engaging with them to hear and see in new ways?
3. In what areas of your life could you seek out different perspectives from your own? What blessings do you think may come as a result? What fears do you have?
4. When have you minimized difference with the aim of creating harmony in a relationship? What would it look like to emphasize and appreciate those differences and what value might there be in doing so?

## Tool: The Johari window

### **DIRECTIONS**

The Johari window can provide valuable insight as we reflect on how we live with difference. Consider the following and reflect on the questions as a group.

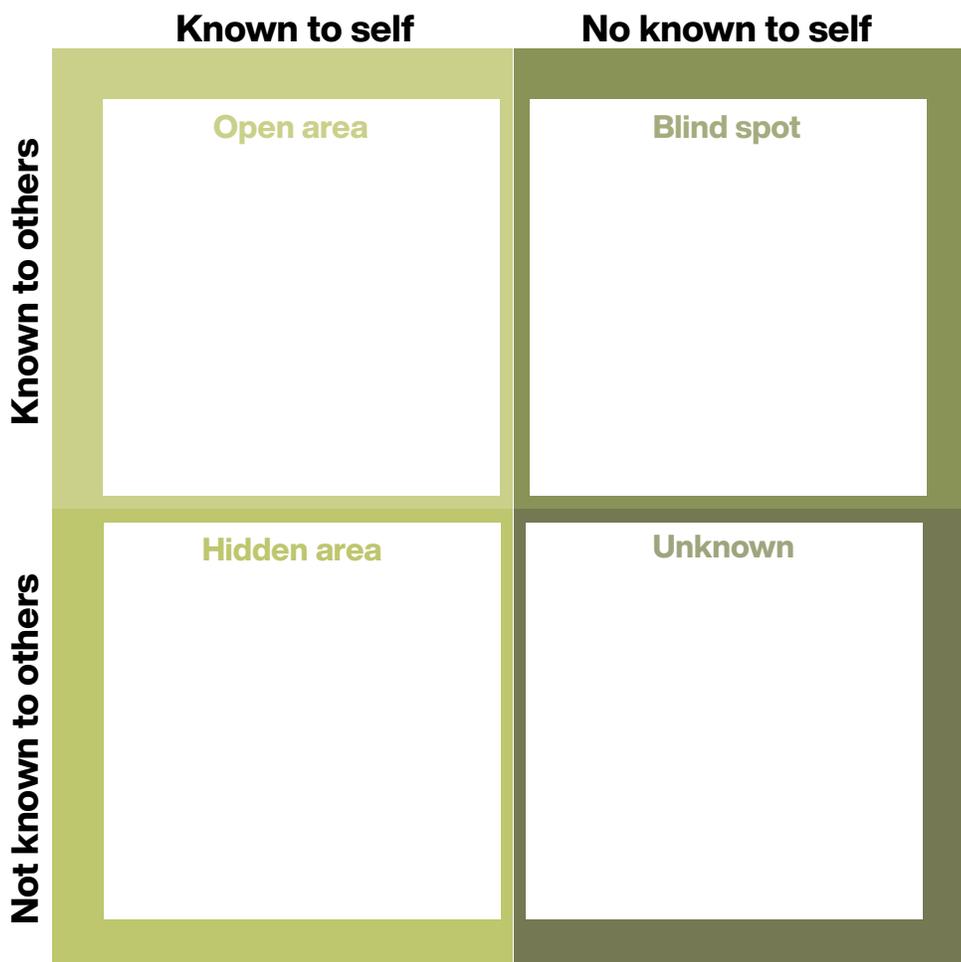
- What factors help you share more of yourself when you are in conflictive conversation? What encourages you to grow your Open area?
- What experiences do you have where engaging difference has helped grow the quadrants known to you (Open area or Hidden area)?
- What examples do you know where collective knowledge has been gained, and the Unknown quadrant has been minimized for everyone, through vulnerable conversation?

The Johari window is a model developed by American psychologists Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham in 1955. The name “Johari” came from combining their names. The Johari window is a helpful tool in analyzing relationships and growing trust within those relationships. Furthermore, it helps us to embody curiosity toward ourselves. Curiosity must be self-facing as well as outward facing. The model is divided into four quadrants, or windowpanes, cross-sectioned by what is known and unknown to one’s self, as well as what is known or unknown to others.

Although the four windowpanes appear to be the same size, different individuals will have altered sizes of windowpanes for each relationship or community in which they participate. The Open area pane is likely much larger with close family and friends, while the Hidden area pane might be larger in new relationships where trust has not developed. These quadrants grow as trust is built and as time is spent investing in relationships. What is known to oneself can be expanded through asking questions (curiosity!), and what is known to others can be expanded through telling. The Open area expands downward into the Hidden area by disclosing information about oneself and opening oneself to more vulnerability. The Open area also can expand sideways into the Blind spot by asking for feedback from others and opening oneself to receive the insights and perceptions other people have of us.

- The Johari window functions as a tool to help us evaluate the extent to which we engage and share across difference in our communities. As we think about different relationships, we can see how the Open area is larger or smaller depending on various factors. Reflecting on what encourages us to broaden the Open area is helpful in assessing how to expand our circles with those with whom we disagree.
- The Blind spot reminds us that our individual knowledge is limited. We need others to see ourselves, and the world, more fully. There are things we cannot see, but others can. When we learn to dialogue across difference and engage in deep inquiry, we can expand the Open area and grow our own understanding and knowledge.
- As the quadrants shift sizes based on vulnerable sharing and learning, the Unknown quadrant shrinks. The more we can grow our communities to include those who see differently, the more we know collectively.

## The Johari window<sup>2</sup>



**Open Area:** Information about you that is known by you as well as by other people. These are things that you share with others or that are visible and public about yourself.

**Blind Spot:** Information about you that you can't see – it is known by other people, but you are unaware of it. These are things that other people perceive about you that you do not know.

**Hidden Area:** Information that you know about yourself and others do not know. This could be parts of your history, feelings, perceptions, or much more – that you (intentionally or unintentionally) refrain from showing or sharing with others.

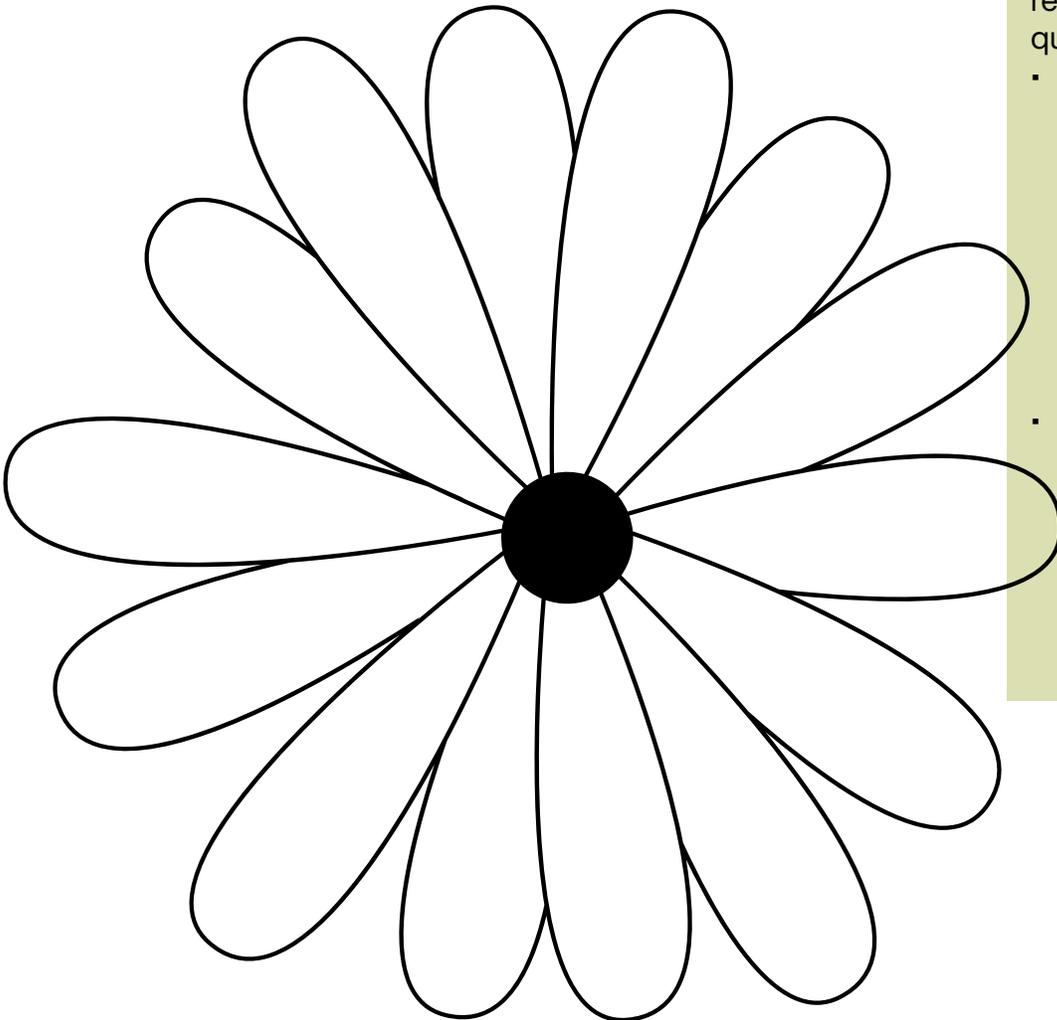
**Unknown:** Information that is unknown to yourself as well as to others. This could be due to traumatic events that hide things from conscious memory, or lack of knowledge and understanding about a person, individually and collectively.

<sup>2</sup> J. Luft and H. Ingham, "The Johari window, a graphic model of interpersonal awareness," Proceedings of the Western Training Laboratory in Group Development, Los Angeles: University of California Los Angeles, 1955. This model is in the public domain.



## Activity: Understanding the complexity of identity

In order to grow our communities (family, church, neighborhood, country and more) into strong, vibrant groups filled with healthy difference and conflict, it is essential to begin by noticing our own individual patterns of recognition and categorization. How do we limit the dignity of other people's identity (consciously or unconsciously) due to our experience and context, their perspective on an issue, their lived experience or something else that makes us different? Each person is a beautiful and intricate creation of God, filled with complexity. Any action, anecdote or assertion made by another person is just a small window into the entirety of who they are. What do we see when we look at "the other?" What do others see when they look at us? Beginning to lean into the complexities of ourselves and others is a first step toward embodying the community of difference to which God calls us.



### DIRECTIONS

On the Identity daisy, take time to write different aspects of your identity on each petal of the flower. Write one descriptive word or phrase about yourself on each petal. This could be related to your profession, faith identity, political leanings, familial role, race or ethnicity, cultural background, general attributes or much more.

In small groups or pairs, reflect on the following questions:

- Which aspects of your identities do you tend to bring to the front or foreground when in encounters with others, and which do you tend to hide? What benefit(s) do you gain and what is the cost(s) of doing this?
- What aspects of your identity do you find repeated in much of your community? What identities, different than yours, are missing in your community?

**At home** Take some time to fill out the Open area and the Hidden area in your Johari window. Write down some questions you have for the Unknown and Blind spot quadrants. Reflect on the following questions: In what contexts have you been able to grow the things known to you? What individuals have helped you see something (or yourself) in new ways?

## Blessing: This Grace that Scorches Us<sup>3</sup>

Here's one thing  
you must understand  
about this blessing:  
it is not  
for you alone.

It is stubborn  
about this.  
Do not even try  
to lay hold of it  
if you are by yourself,  
thinking you can carry it  
on your own.

To bear this blessing,  
you must first take yourself  
to a place where everyone  
does not look like you  
or think like you,  
a place where they do not  
believe precisely as you  
believe,  
where their thoughts  
and ideas and gestures  
are not exact echoes  
of your own.

Bring your sorrow.  
Bring your grief.  
Bring your fear.  
Bring your weariness,  
your pain,  
your disgust at how broken  
the world is,  
how fractured,  
how fragmented  
by its fighting,  
its wars,  
its hungers,  
its penchant for power,  
its ceaseless repetition  
of the history it refuses  
to rise above.

I will not tell you  
this blessing will fix all that.

But in the place  
where you have gathered,  
wait.  
Watch.  
Listen.  
Lay aside your inability  
to be surprised,  
your resistance to what you  
do not understand.

See then whether this blessing  
turns to flame on your  
tongue,  
sets you to speaking  
what you cannot fathom

or opens your ear  
to a language  
beyond your imagining  
that comes as a knowing  
in your bones,  
a clarity  
in your heart  
that tells you

this is the reason  
we were made:  
for this ache  
that finally opens us,

for this struggle,  
this grace  
that scorches us  
toward one another  
and into  
the blazing day.

<sup>3</sup> "This Grace that Scorches Us" © Jan Richardson from *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*, Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015, pp. 169-171. Used by permission. janrichardson.com.



# Session 3: Discovery

Peaceful practice: Focus on what matters.

## Biblical reflection: Fighting like children

Matthew 18:10-22

*“Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.*

*“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”*

*Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”*



**Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.**

The Bible is a story of humanity, which means that conflict can be found throughout its pages. Conflict starts with the very first verses of the Bible. God creates humanity full of diversity, with freedom of choice and the power to be co-creators. All three of these aspects of humanity lead to conflict. It is an inevitable, normal part of life for all people – even for God’s people! Old Testament leaders, the disciples, the apostles – each of these groups experienced significant conflict. When it comes to Jesus, the book of Matthew is commonly referenced for giving instruction regarding conflict. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus discusses being peacemakers (5:9), reconciliation when in arguments (5:21-26), retaliation (5:38-42), love for enemies (5:43-48), forgiveness (6:12-14) and judgment (7:1-6). One of the oft-referenced Scriptures of Jesus addressing conflict is Matthew 18:15-20, where he gives explicit instruction on how to engage the other.

It is not only these verses that can guide us in conflict scenarios, however. Chapter 18 begins with the disciples enmeshed in a conflict of their own. Jesus responds, then goes on to talk about sin, tells the parable of the lost sheep and then gives

explicit instructions on dealing with situations when someone sins. The chapter ends with instruction on forgiveness and a parable about forgiveness. If we read the entirety of Matthew 18 as an overarching lesson on conflict, rather than dividing it up into mini sermonettes on unrelated topics, we likely will find new insights into our understanding of conflict as well as a constructive posture with which we are called to engage conflict.

A working definition we will use moving forward for conflict is *a problem between two or more parties who perceive incompatible goals*. With this definition in mind, Matthew 18 starts with a conflict. It's a conflict that is recorded in all the synoptic gospels. The disciples are arguing over who is the greatest. They perceive incompatible goals – they cannot all be the greatest – and therefore find themselves in conflict.

Jesus' first response to this conflict is to direct their attention to children. In conflict, we must be like children. Too often when reading this Scripture, however, we skip over the child and go right to the lesson on humility: the last will be first and the first will be last.

Perhaps there is more to Jesus' focus on little people. Children embody curiosity. If we are open to their teaching, they offer us lessons on the centrality and importance of discovery. Their natural curiosity cannot be denied – a baby who finds their toes, a toddler squatting to look at a bug, the period of life when kids ask “why” to absolutely everything, a young child's fascination with how things work, how they break, and how they are fixed again.

Discovery is endless in a little person's world. When Jesus points toward humility, it should be heard in the context of his analogy of children – meaning, we should read the lesson on humility in the context of discovery. Discovery is a humble posture after all. Juxtaposed with belief, discovery demands that we ask questions rather than give answers. In conflict, this is essential. French philosopher Emile-Auguste Chartier said, “Nothing is more dangerous than an idea when it is the only one you have.”<sup>1</sup> Much like the root of the word “conflict” studied last session (to strike together), *constructive* conflict is oriented around a humility that looks to discover together rather than dictate to the other.

Jesus further alludes to the necessity of discovery in the approach he uses to respond to the disciples' argument. Beyond *what* he says, we can study how he says it. As usual, Jesus does not answer their question as they hoped, with the name of one greatest disciple. Rather, he outlines a framework that asks them to *discover* the answer themselves through a parable. By speaking in parables, Jesus is communicating that the “answer” requires going deeper.

And the parable he tells is that of the lost sheep. Reading this parable in the context of conflict, it also encourages the transformative practice of discovery. At a glance, it would be easy to miss one lost sheep among one hundred. Noticing the missing sheep requires careful attention. Shepherds must spend time with their flocks, must know them well and be watching very intentionally if they are to observe one gone of a hundred.

We need to do the same with conflict. Healthy conflict transformation requires a posture of discovery. This happens in multiple ways. As discussed in the previous session, discovering our own identities and the identities of those with whom we are in conflict is an essential first step. This means valuing our differences and being willing to listen, learn and embrace who the other is as unique to who we are.

Furthermore, discovery means we look below the surface to detect what is underneath the conflict at hand. Much like the shepherd who will not see one missing sheep in the flock without knowing the flock well, we will have difficulty solving conflicts that we do not spend time trying to understand. The surface level only shows a



<sup>1</sup> Emile Auguste Chartier under the pen name Alain, *Propos sur la religion*, Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1969, 4th edition (1938 first edition), p. 232.

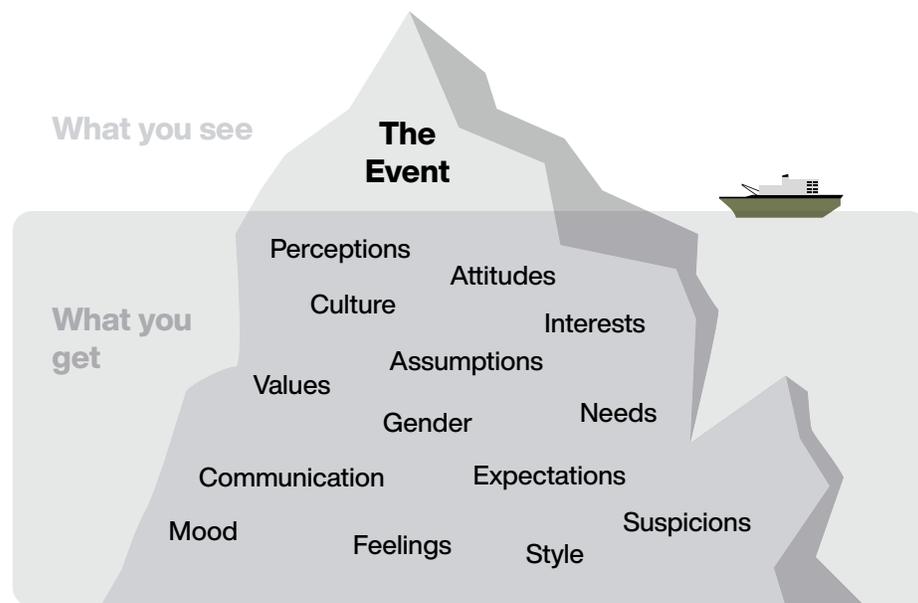


## GOING DEEPER

For more in-depth learning on the basics of conflict analysis, read ***The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*** by John Paul Lederach.

tiny piece of what is really going on in conflict.

The visual of an iceberg is often used to describe the nature of conflict. Above the surface, we only see a small percentage of the entire iceberg, while most of its mass lies under the water. Similarly, in conflict, only actions and stated positions are above the surface, creating the perception of incompatible goals. Under the surface, however, are all the assumptions, interests, feelings, needs, values and more. We need to **focus on what matters** by discovering what is below the surface. When we don't see the whole conflict, it is easy to spiral into destructive ways of handling it. We jump to conclusions quickly before working to discover what the actual problem is.



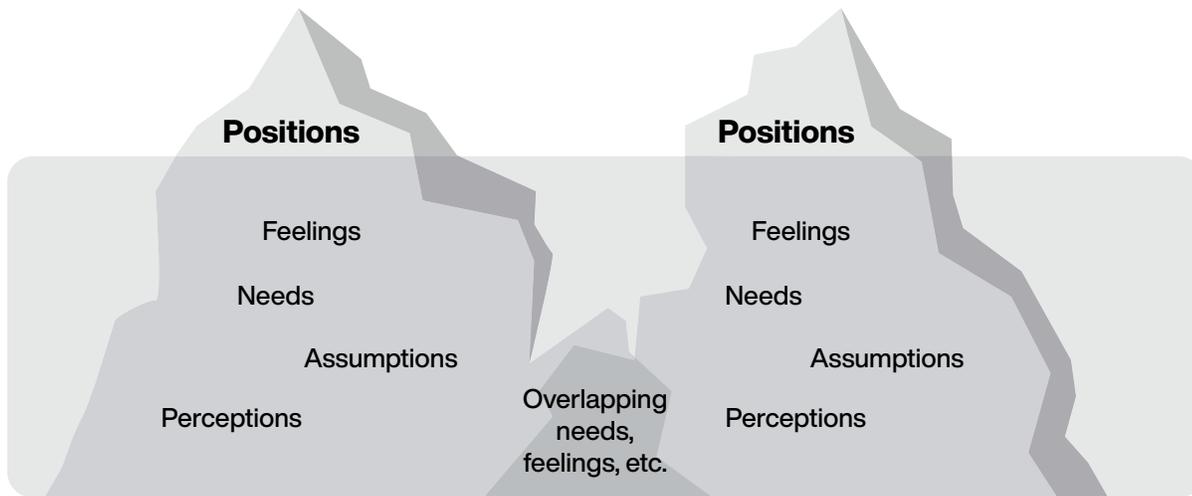
This is depicted well by the ancient Indian parable of a group of blind men who have never encountered an elephant before. They each feel a different part of the elephant's body and conclude what an elephant is based on that experience. Of course, their perceptions are influenced by their position. This happens all the time in conflict – two people hear the same thing and walk away understanding completely different ideas.

*"Some [Hindus] were exhibiting an elephant in a dark room, and many people collected to see it. But as the place was too dark to permit them to see the elephant, they all felt it with their hands, to gain an idea of what it was like. One felt its trunk, and declared that the beast resembled a water-pipe; another felt its ear, and said it must be a large fan; another its leg, and thought it must be a pillar; another felt its back, and declared the beast must be like a great throne. According to the part which each felt, he gave a different description of the animal. One, as it were, called it 'Dal' and another 'Alif.'"*<sup>2</sup>

Discovery allows us to go from destructive conflict to constructive conflict. A posture of discovery must be both internal and external. We must study our own perceptions, interests and assumptions, as well as those of the other. Whatever lies underneath the surface level creates the opinions we express above the surface level. It also affects how we receive the actions and positions above the surface from another person.

Interestingly, below the surface, icebergs touch one another. With our time and energy invested in humility and curiosity (the posture of discovery), it is possible to reveal needs and values that often overlap in a conflict where actions and positions clash.

<sup>2</sup> Maulana Jalalu-'D-DIN Muhammad Rumi, "The Elephant in a Dark Room," *Teachings of Rumi*, Book III, Story V, accessed Feb. 18, 2021, p. 180, [archive.org/details/MasnaviByRumiEnglishTranslation/page/n1/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/MasnaviByRumiEnglishTranslation/page/n1/mode/2up). This work is in the public domain.



The U.S. has grown significantly more polarized in recent years. Standing atop icebergs, political, religious and other positions seem further and further away from one another. There is a serious lack of attempt to go below the surface and find places where opposing perspectives might have commonalities and be able to hear one another or work together.

Significantly, we perceive our divides to be larger than they actually are. A report put out by Beyond Conflict in June 2020 showed the results of a 2018-2019 study called the Beyond Conflict Polarization Index, which analyzed the psychological processes of polarization and their causes. It found the following:

Americans incorrectly believe that members of the other [political] party dehumanize, dislike, and disagree with them about twice as much as they actually do. The divide between actual and perceived dehumanization, dislike, and disagreement is correlated with outcomes that are consequential for democracy and represent a new degree of toxic polarization in America. In short, Americans believe we're more polarized than we really are—and that misperception can drive us even further apart.<sup>3</sup>

This may sound contradictory to the testimony of the Holy Spirit embracing difference in Acts 2. The deep study of what exists below the surface level of a conflict is not an erasure of the difference, however. It is a fuller awareness of the complexity of the difference. Only when we are able to see and understand the full icebergs for all their complexities and differences can we authentically identify any ways they might touch below the surface.

Of course, standing atop an iceberg, it is impossible to see all the way to the bottom. When we are in conflict, it can be incredibly difficult to name and recognize our own assumptions, feelings, attitudes, needs and more, let alone those of the other. Studying all that lies beneath the surface is its own kind of wrestling. It takes significant and intentional struggle to uncover the ways we habitually hide what's underneath those surface positions. A posture of discovery means we must be willing to have something shaken up in how we see the world.

For this, we have community. Jesus continues in his lesson in Matthew 18 to outline the value of neutral

<sup>3</sup> "America's Divided Mind: Understanding the Psychology That Drives Us Apart," Beyond Conflict, June 2020, p. 16, accessed Dec 11, 2020, [beyond-conflictint.org/americas-divided-mind/](https://beyond-conflictint.org/americas-divided-mind/).

parties in conflict. This is where verses 15-20 come in, which we know well for their explicit instruction on conflict resolution practice. When we are unable to engage conflict with a healthy posture of discovery, the community helps us. Notice in these verses the attention to listening. The role of the community is to help create a space where listening – or discovery – is more possible.

Sometimes, that leads to reconciliation. Jesus rounds up his extensive lesson on conflict encouraging us to move toward forgiveness. The role of forgiveness in conflict is deeply complex and contextual – much more than what can be addressed here. While forgiveness is not a necessary ingredient in the resolution of conflict, when we engage conflicts from a posture of discovery, we are often more open to mercy and forgiveness. These added ingredients have the possibility of freeing us from conflicts that bind us, like children who quickly move past grudges to return to the joy of playing and discovering.

May our prayer be, then, that we learn to be a little more like little children as we humbly uncover our own conflicts and find our way toward one another as we go below the surface.

## Questions for discussion

1. What insights do you gain in considering the entirety of Matthew 18 as a lesson on conflict?
2. Can you think of examples where you have applied a posture of discovery to a conflict? What did that look like in practice and what was the outcome?
3. In what areas have you seen or experienced how underlying beliefs about polarizing issues in U.S. politics are actually more nuanced or similar than the popularly expressed positions? Share a story from your experience.

## Tool: Optical illusions

Our seeing is influenced by many things. When we look at a picture, our biological realities come into play – our vision and brain differences affect how we each see a picture. For example, people will see things differently depending on whether they function more out of their right brain or left brain. Some people will tend to see specific details and others will tend to see connections more broadly. These differences are part of who we are and how we approach the world.

Another very important influence on the way we see is our social reality – our personality, experience, identity and culture. This influences what we see and how we see it. Our brains are wired to recognize patterns and they do so more quickly than we realize. When a word is misspelled, sometimes we read right past it, not noticing the flaw. Even if letters are jumbled together, we can often still understand the message. You can probably read this easily despite the misspellings. When it comes to interacting with others and the world around us, our brains do the same thing – they look for patterns and categorize what we see accordingly.

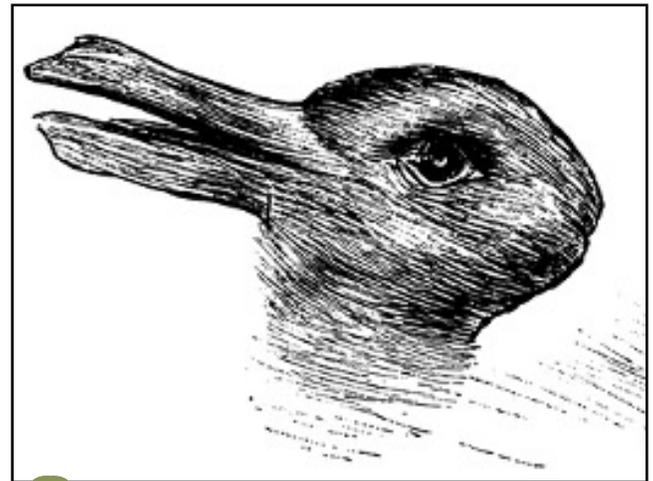
This is a gift to us much of the time. It helps us engage in the world around us easily and quickly. However, it is important to analyze the patterns engrained in our brains due to our experience and context. The same pattern recognition happens when engaging with people. We categorize individuals and relationships into recognizable patterns. Someone makes a comment that we perceive as political and our brains automatically begin to label that person, putting them in a box that is familiar to us, based on people who make *those kinds of comments*. This is often unconscious. Without intentional work, our observations quickly evolve into stereotypes. This can be limiting to our own understanding as well as limiting to the other person. In the end, this can restrict our interactions, depth of relationship and connection with those people we classify as “other.”

## DIRECTIONS

Look at the Optical illusions visuals on this page. As a group, discuss what you see. Help one another so that everyone is able to see the various images in each picture. Look at the next page for hints on what images exist. When everyone is able to “see” all the images, move on to the activity. Keep in mind as you do the activity together the ways different perspectives can see different sides of a conflict.



Forever and Always<sup>4</sup>



The mind's eye<sup>5</sup>

My Wife and My Mother-in-Law<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Octavio Ocampo, “Forever and Always,” copyright 1988, Visions Fine Arts. Reprinted with permission.

<sup>5</sup> J. Jastrow, “The mind’s eye,” 1899, via *Popular Science Monthly*, 54, 299-312, accessed Feb 8, 2021, [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Duck-Rabbit\\_illusion.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Duck-Rabbit_illusion.jpg).

<sup>6</sup> W. E. Hill, “My Wife and My Mother-in-Law,” via Wikimedia Commons, accessed Feb. 8, 2021, [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:My\\_Wife\\_and\\_My\\_Mother-in-Law.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:My_Wife_and_My_Mother-in-Law.jpg). This image is in the public domain.



Forever and Always: There are three images in this picture.

1. An older man and woman looking at one another. They are facing one another with their chins almost touching right in the middle of the picture. The woman is on the left with white hair, the man is on the right and he is bald.
2. A yellow vase. It is in the exact middle of the picture, filling up the space between the older man and woman.
3. A younger man and woman sitting near one another. Their heads are the eyes of the older man and woman. The man is playing a guitar and the woman is balancing ceramics on her head.

My Wife and My Mother-in-Law: two images.

1. A younger woman is looking away from the viewer. The small black horizontal line toward the bottom is her necklace. Just above that to the left is her chin. Her nose and eyelash are barely visible to the left of the profile as she looks away. Her ear (which is the eye of the older woman) is outlined under the black hair. The black area toward the middle-top of the picture is her hair, worn above her head with a white garment behind it.
2. An older woman with a large facial structure. The horizontal black line toward the bottom is her mouth and the white below that is her large chin. Her large nose is accentuated just above her mouth with a small black line outlining it. There is a pimple (which is the nose of the younger person) on the top of her nose. Her eye is outlined right in the middle of the picture, touching the black bunch of hair that comes over her forehead like bangs.

The mind's eye: two images.

1. A duck is facing left. Its beak opens slightly, pointing left and up.
2. A rabbit is facing right. Its ears come out of its head, pointing left and slightly up. Its mouth is closed on the far right of the image where there is a dent in the head's outline.

## Activity: Church conflict case study<sup>7</sup>

### DIRECTIONS

Role plays can be helpful ways to practice engaging in conflict transformation by going beneath the surface to address the underlying interests and needs. Choose which case study you would like to role-play. Case study 1 is about a conflict over the music in a congregation. Case study 2 is about a conflict over meeting in person or not during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Read through the chosen scenario together. Then divide into two groups, each group representing one of the two parties in the conflict. This can be done either by counting off or, if gathering virtually, the host can randomly send participants into two breakout rooms.

The two groups will have around ten minutes to meet and become clear on what their position is and why they hold that position. For case study 2, each party also will have a description to read. On the case study worksheet are two icebergs, representing the two positions present in the conflict. As groups outline their take on the conflict, they should fill out one of the icebergs on the worksheet. Above the surface, they should write their stated position and below the surface they should identify some of the feelings, needs, assumptions and perceptions of their given perspective. They should also choose two people for the role play who will represent the individuals assigned to their group.

The two groups will then come together. Two volunteers from each group will take on the roles of the characters in the case study. One volunteer will assume the role of pastor to facilitate the conversations. The pastor and both parties in each conflict should then engage in a role play to address the conflict. The purpose of the role play is not necessarily to resolve the conflict, but to discover what is underneath the surface of the conflict.

After a 10-minute discussion, participants should go back into their groups and complete the worksheet activity, filling out the positions and underlying components of the other group's perspective. They should write down the position (what the other said publicly that they want) of the other group in the above-water part of the iceberg. Then below the water line, they should write the interests (what the group would like) and the needs (what the group must have), beliefs, values, etc., of the other group. Participants should use their imagination based on the information given in the case study and what was heard in the discussion.

After 10 minutes, come back to the large group to discuss the following questions:

1. What interests and needs were included on the iceberg? What commonalities did you discover between the two conflicting groups?
2. What were the major differences between the groups in the interests and needs sections?
3. What kinds of questions helped you to see what was below the surface for the other party in the conflict during the role play?
4. What does this remind you of in your own church, family or community conflicts?
5. What is the main learning for you in this process?

<sup>7</sup> These case studies are fictional. These are not actual congregations and have not been created based on any specific congregation's experience.



## Case Study 1: Music at church

In a small city in the U.S., an Anabaptist church is experiencing a conflict. The young adults in the congregation would like a more contemporary service with a charismatic flavor and newer musical compositions and arrangements. There are budding musicians among them, and some are quite talented. The young adults made an official request to the church elders that they would like to have a contemporary service at 5 p.m. on Sundays. The youth minister is in support of the idea.

However, much of the congregation prefer hymns and written music, because of the theology. They find the music at their congregation refreshing amid a culture where Christian nationalism is sneaking into the theology of popular Christian music. Furthermore, many have been drawn to the church over the years because of the skill of the musical director, a talented pianist who has served the church for decades. The depth of harmonies and instrumentation make the music quality superb. The current song leaders choose music that coordinates with the Scripture in consultation with the musical director.

Several young people have brought forward suggestions of “praise and worship” music to the musical director in the past, but the suggestions were not always taken up by her. When the youth were given space to share a song that encourages confession, some congregational members afterward expressed their displeasure about the song with each other informally. The pastor also received a more formal complaint.

Some young people are starting to attend a nearby nondenominational church that has contemporary, charismatic worship. This follows a pattern within the denomination of young people leaving the church. This is disturbing for members of the church. Many are concerned that they will lose the young people. The future of the church is looking bleak as members age. At the same time, strong voices in the church are urging the elder team to not allow the proposed 5 p.m. contemporary service.



## Case Study 2: Worshiping during the COVID-19 pandemic

Circle of Grace Church is an Anabaptist congregation of about 200 people in a city with a warm climate year-round. When COVID-19 brought everything to a halt in March 2020, local schools went virtual, restaurants and other public facilities closed and much of the congregation began working remotely from home. The pandemic caused significant economic hardship for a small portion of the congregation, while the majority remained financially stable, even being able to save more than usual throughout the months of shutdown. Vaccines are still a long way off.

In this state, the governor has decided that churches are exempt from the shutdown. However, the pastor and elders of Circle of Grace decided to move to virtual worship in March 2020 when the pandemic was beginning. Many other churches in the area continued to meet in person.

Circle of Grace is politically diverse and the pandemic has exacerbated the differences present as individuals and families respond to COVID-19. Some have been limiting almost any exposure with individuals outside their household and are wearing masks at all times in public. Others are moving about town with a fairly strong sense of normalcy, eating in restaurants frequently and wearing masks only when absolutely required.

The pastor is aware of a growing dissatisfaction about online church from a significant sector of the congregation. With other churches in the area meeting in person, two families have already left the church and the pastor fears more will follow if they do not move to in-person worship soon. Considering the conflict at hand, the pastor has asked the elders to make a recommendation as to how they can best move forward. The pastor has done this fully aware that the elders are not of one mind.

Beginning on the next page are descriptions of the two sets of elders. Read only your group's description, rather than both.

### Michelle and Quinn

Michelle and Quinn are unrelated members of the elders team, both long-time members of the congregation. Both have served on the elders team for numerous years. Michelle is thought of highly by the entire congregation; she is known as one of the most godly women around. She provides a lot of informal (unpaid) congregational care, visiting individuals in difficult moments, checking in with congregants and praying with and for people throughout the church. Quinn has been a leader in the congregation for decades and his strong voice has often been significant in decisions throughout the years. He is known to be levelheaded and is respected for the ways he has helped the congregation process issues wisely and calmly over the years. Quinn and Michelle know that they feel very differently from the other two elders regarding the decision about worshiping in person, so they decided to get together before the pastor and the elders meet.

Michelle's cousin died of COVID-19 early in the pandemic and she has done a lot of spiritual searching to rest in God's control of the situation. Her grieving process has meant giving it up to God and relinquishing control to the Divine. After significant time spent in prayer and lament, she sees how this experience has enriched her relationship with God by teaching her the importance of her dependence on God.

Quinn is a guidance counselor at the local high school and has a unique glimpse into how youth are experiencing the pandemic. Furthermore, he has youth-aged children. Quinn can see the restrictions weighing on their mental health. He is deeply concerned for their well-being. He wants to give kids at Circle of Grace (including his own children) the best shot they have to be successful and faithful followers of Jesus. The congregation had a young person die by suicide two years ago and it was very difficult for the youth.

Quinn and Michelle believe that the spiritual life of the congregation is at stake and church should take precedence over all else. They see this as a test of their faith. Furthermore, they believe that, as elders, it is their job to care for the individuals in their congregation and they are acutely aware of the mental health component of this necessary care. They see significant risk to the spiritual, emotional and mental health for Circle of Grace members in the event that the congregation continues to be physically distant from one another during such a challenging time.



Michelle and Quinn also remember that Anabaptists have a rich history of commitment to faith, even in the face of death and danger. This scenario feels similar and they hope that the congregation will be able to stand strong and faithful in the midst of this new challenge. It is, after all, within their legal rights to meet. They believe the congregation should resume normal, in-person worship.

### **David and Mariana**

David and Mariana are unrelated members of the elders team. David has been at Circle of Grace since he was a child and Mariana is a newer member. Mariana felt very affirmed when she was invited to be an elder recently. She understood it as an intentional move for Circle of Grace to welcome the leadership and listen to the experiences and perspectives of the Latinx population, which is slowly but steadily growing in the church. As a lifetime member of the congregation, David has a very broad perception of the congregation; he knows its history and knows almost every member of the church fairly well. As such, he has a good understanding of the ideological diversity present within the congregation and, knowing the other elders' position on COVID-19, he reached out to Mariana to talk together prior to the meeting of the pastor and the elders team.

Mariana's job is in essential business, so she has not been working remotely at any point during the pandemic. People at her job site are supposed to wear masks, but the company does not have enough PPE to offer workers and many find it stifling to work long hours in a mask. Mariana does not feel safe from COVID-19 in her workplace and she believes the church should be a place of comfort, not fear. Mariana would be uncomfortable meeting in person for church and knows of many others who would feel the same way. She is sensitive to the growing Latinx population in the congregation. Recognizing the ways COVID-19 is affecting Latinxs more adversely across the country, she wonders how the families at Circle of Grace might interpret a move to go back to in-person worship.

David's father died of COVID-19 just two months ago. He was in a nursing home and David was not able to be with him in his last months, nor when he passed. This has been an extremely difficult reality for David to accept. He feels angry that so many people are dismissive about COVID-19 when real lives are being lost. He was raised with a strong Anabaptist belief to care for others and believes this is fundamental to the Christian life. David sees COVID-19 as a very tangible way to embody care for the other – by wearing masks, staying “hunkered down” and limiting exposure for everyone, so as to not expose others and make the sickness and death toll worse. Furthermore, David sees the history of Anabaptist tradition as being one where the church constantly had to mold to the situation around them. During the Reformation, Anabaptists had to worship in small groups, hidden away, so that they could do it safely.

David and Mariana believe science is important and should guide decisions the church makes regarding worship. They believe that as elders, it is their job to care for the individuals in their congregation and they are acutely aware of the risks to returning to church in person. They believe the congregation should remain online for the foreseeable future.



**At home** Reflect on the exercise of seeing different things in the optical illusion pictures. Journal on the following questions:

- What was it like to not be able to see what others were seeing? How did you feel when you were able to see both sides?
- What does this remind you of in your life? What examples can you remember from conflicts in your own life where individuals were seeing things differently? What might have been below the surface of that conflict that affected what was visible above the surface?

## Blessing: The Hardest Blessing<sup>8</sup>

If we cannot  
lay aside the wound,  
then let us say  
it will not always  
bind us.

Let us say  
the damage  
will not eternally  
determine our path.

Let us say  
the line of our life  
will not always travel  
along the places  
we are torn.

Let us say  
that forgiveness  
can take some practice,  
can take some patience,  
can take a long  
and struggling time.

Let us say  
that to offer  
the hardest blessing,  
we will need  
the deepest grace;  
that to forgive  
the sharpest pain,  
we will need  
the fiercest love;  
that to release  
the ancient ache,  
we will need  
new strength  
for every day.

Let us say  
the wound  
will not be  
our final home—

that through it  
runs a road,  
a way we would not  
have chosen  
but on which  
we will finally see  
forgiveness,  
so long practiced,  
coming toward us,  
shining with the joy  
so well deserved.

<sup>8</sup> "The Hardest Blessing" © Jan Richardson from *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*, Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2020, pp. 157-158. Used by permission. janrichardson.com.



# Session 4: Engagement

Peaceful practice: Invite the best in yourself and others.

## Biblical reflection: One body, many conflict styles

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*

*Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.*

*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.*



**For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.**

The story is told of a Sunday school teacher who, to begin her lesson, held up a picture of a squirrel and asked the young kids in her class what it was. She was answered with silence, so she pushed them further to tell her what they saw in the picture. Finally, one brave child spoke up and said, “I think the answer is Jesus, but it looks an awful lot like a squirrel to me!”

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul is trying to help the church of Corinth see that there is more than one kind of right. There is more than one

way to be an authentic representation of Christ in the world. Yes, there is one Spirit, but we the people of God are many. We have different gifts, different styles, different tendencies and habits. Paul's discussion on the parts of the body can offer lessons for us that apply beyond a literal translation of gifts as vocational identifiers. As we consider dialogue, one of the ways this text can enlighten us is by recognizing the gifts of the various ways we engage with conflict. Some of us run away from conflict, some charge at it when we see it coming. Some of us tend to yield to the other in conflict, some hold tight to controlling the outcome, some prefer a give and take method. Each of us should be understood as valuable members of the body of Christ.

This is not how we have often understood conflict, however. Much like the story of the young child and the squirrel, we have been taught to believe certain ways of engaging conflict are better than others. Society tells us that winning is the only appropriate option. U.S. culture models force as the superior response to conflict. Sometimes, the church has said that a collaborative model of engaging conflict is the faithful response to conflict, proclaiming that getting everyone's voice at the table is necessary. Historically, the church has taught a dominant model of decision-making, in which leadership makes decisions on behalf of the community. Often, the church also has taught a much more passive-aggressive response, modeling unhealthy patterns of pulling in third parties to outweigh an opposing position, gossiping, shutting others down or avoiding conflict because of fear of difference.

Paul encourages us to not throw all our eggs in one basket. In his metaphor of a body with many parts, Paul is valuing the unique contributions of each gift. He explicitly outlines how each member of the body is needed. Only hands or only eyes would not make a complete body. In this sense, all conflict styles can be valued and offer gifts to the community. The key is understanding the gifts and weaknesses of each as well as knowing our own tendencies so that we engage effectively in conflict. We must know ourselves and be willing to critique our habits, weighing the benefits and costs of our attitudes, behaviors and personal styles.

This requires self-awareness and self-analysis. How do we respond to conflict? What are our tendencies? What are the strengths and weaknesses of our methods in dealing with conflict? Where are our growing edges?

Understanding different conflict styles and knowing their benefits and weaknesses is important so that we can analyze our own engagement of conflicts and work to **invite the best in (ourselves) and others** in conflict.

Some of us prefer to *avoid* conflict. We find it hard to believe that engaging conflict will help anything, so we withdraw from conflict. This can create problems when we let the conflict simmer too long – eventually it explodes and creates problems for all involved. This avoidance of conflict is sometimes seen as weak, yet Paul says that “the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.” In fact, these individuals hold strength in their model of protection. In situations of potential harm, a conflict style of avoidance can save lives.

Others of us prefer to attack conflict, bringing out a *competitive* edge. We believe there is a right way and we believe we have it. We are vicious in our response to conflict, demanding engagement and solutions. This style is often encouraged by society and modeled all around us. Yet, insisting on one's own way can come at significant cost and can even be harmful to others, excluding voices and limiting possibilities for conflict resolution. In the Anabaptist world, this conflict style is looked down upon. Paul challenges us, however – those who model competition in conflict can also be important members of the body. Paul says that “those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor.” In times of emergency, quick and vocal decision-makers are valuable.

Some of us prefer to *accommodate* others in our conflicts. We constantly make space for other people to make decisions. We give in easily to another's view, communicating that it is not a big deal or does not matter to us. This sometimes comes at great cost to ourselves, as it can be disrespecting our own valuable point of view and experience. Paul affirms that all members should be treated with great respect, however (1 Cor 12:23, printed above). This, too, is a conflict style that has merit at times. Culturally, there may be times when it is appropriate to cede to the opinion of someone who has more experience or a unique perspective. On issues of little importance, there can be value in preserving a relationship.

Still others prefer to *collaborate*, wanting to get everyone involved and spend immense amounts of time working on a viable solution together. We want to uncover everything there is to know about what is going on under the surface



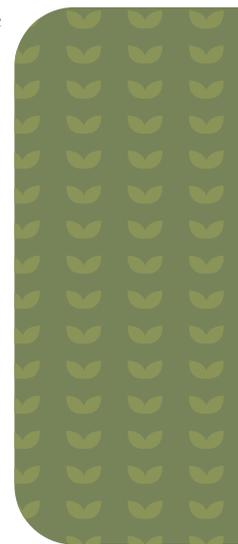
of the iceberg (as referred to in session 3). As mentioned earlier, this style is sometimes held high in the teaching of the church. It is helpful and constructive when a creative outcome is important and there is reasonable hope that everyone's needs might be met. The shadow side of this conflict style is that people can become overloaded with process. Sometimes time does not allow for such in-depth analysis of conflict and, in fact, sometimes conflicts are intractable and do not have solutions that work for everyone involved.

One last conflict style is those of us who like to strike a deal. We see conflict as mutual difference that requires everyone to compromise a little by meeting one another halfway. Each person gives a little and gains a little. This method can be time-efficient and is helpful in arriving at solutions, although sometimes people don't like the "glass half full" method of this conflict style. Wanting to move quickly toward solutions that everyone can agree with, those of us who tend toward this conflict style quickly take the role of facilitator in a conflict. In these situations, we need to be careful of the ways we may hold power and encourage a conflict process in certain directions.

This is perhaps an unusual way to think about conflict styles. We like to have clear-cut instructions on how to engage in the difficult problems we face. But there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to conflict. The beauty of God's creation is in its diversity. Each gift is valued as a part of the whole. Paul suggests that God arranges the body in this way so that "the members may have the same care for one another." This creates interdependence. We need one another and we need these varying gifts to be wise in our response to conflict. We need to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each approach so that we can respond in the best way possible in every situation. In recognizing the gifts of each person and style, we can lean on the wisdom of different individuals in different conflicts.

Our interdependence holds us together. Paul says, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it." Indeed, the way we respond to conflict ripples out from us and affects all those involved. Our avoidance of conflict influences others, as does our forcing of conflict or our compromising. Since conflict is *between two or more parties* (referencing the definition from session 3), someone else is always involved. Our actions matter beyond ourselves.

A healthy recognition of our need for one another's unique and diverse gifts is essential to a functional whole. We are one body, together. Paul begins by saying that it is the Spirit that unites us and ends the chapter by encouraging the church to "strive for the greater gifts," and follows with 1 Corinthians 13, a radical description of love. How we allow the Spirit to use us and work through us is what matters. Are we working together toward a whole picture of conflict transformation? Is the Spirit guiding how we respond? When we know ourselves well, we understand the gifts and weaknesses of our unique contributions. We know what we offer as well as what we lack and need to draw out from others. As we work together, recognizing, evaluating and valuing our different ways of engaging conflict, we can **invite the best in (ourselves) and others** so that our body may be Spirit-filled, transforming the world around us through conflict.



## Questions for discussion

1. In what conditions do you find it easiest to conform to unhealthy patterns of engaging with conflict? What are defining characteristics of these relationships or situations?
2. If a close friend or family member of yours were asked how you typically respond to conflict, what would they say? What are your tendencies? What would you like to change or transform in the way you engage conflict?
3. When you bring your best self to a conflict, what does that look like?
4. What relationships or experiences have taught you to value other ways than your dominant response of engaging with conflict?

## Tool: Conflict styles

### **DIRECTIONS**

Go through the Conflict styles matrix and take time to read, as a group, the introduction here and the explanation for each style.

There are numerous tools for assessing individual “styles” in conflict. Many of these models map different approaches to conflict on a graph developed by Robert R. Blake and Jane Mouton in 1964, called the Managerial Grid model, which organized leadership styles based on a concern for people and a concern for production. Moving this graph more specifically to conflict styles, social psychologists Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann developed the most widely used model in 1974, called the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, which outlines five different conflict styles on axes of cooperativeness to assertiveness. Other conflict style tools offer adaptations to this model but have many similarities. Most tools have questionnaires to accompany the model so that individuals may “test” their responses to conflict and map them out on the associated tool.

The Conflict styles matrix included in this packet provides a visualization of five basic conflict styles, also described briefly below. This model has been developed for this curriculum, adapted from the Thomas-Kilmann model, the Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory and Steve Thomas’ “Approaches to Conflict.” It outlines five responses or approaches to conflict based on the level of concern for relationship and the concern for goals in any given conflict. The matrix includes an animal associated with each style, as well as a traffic sign. These are meant to be helpful visual metaphors that enhance understanding for each style.

This model is meant to be used as a tool to give a broad overview of approaches to conflict, understand the benefits and costs of each approach, and provide context to begin the process of self-analysis and self-management in conflict. It is an entry point for conflict styles. For those interested in more in-depth study of conflict styles, see the Going deeper section that includes various resources and questionnaires available for purchase on the internet.

There are multiple factors that influence our tendencies in conflict. These include our personalities, as defined by biology, and the various cultural norms that are embedded in us based on the groups with which we identify. Furthermore, depending on the situation, our response is frequently different. The relationship and the issue play a large role in defining how we will respond in any given conflict scenario. Even with these situational differences, however, we each have a predominant style toward which we tend. Understanding our own styles, as well as the styles of oth-



## GOING DEEPER

If you are interested in a more in-depth analysis of your conflict style, the following resources are good options.

- Personal Conflict Style Inventory<sup>1</sup>
- Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode<sup>2</sup>
- The Friendly<sup>3</sup> Style Profile

ers, can help us manage conflict in constructive ways. Furthermore, each conflict style has pros and cons. Depending on the situation, different styles are more or less appropriate and constructive. Learning to understand and appreciate all the different styles is crucial for constructive conflict management.

**ACCOMMODATING** In this approach to conflict, the individual looks to keep the peace at any cost, putting relationships first and satisfying the goals of the other person while not asserting their own needs. The accommodator often sees conflict as disastrous and therefore yields to the other person by giving in, acknowledging their own error, disengaging or denying their own needs. This is often expressed as a desire for harmony: “It’s more important to me that we work together than do what I want.”

**AVOIDING** This style withdraws completely from conflict, making few or no attempts to respond, engage or cooperate to resolve the conflict. It is nonassertive and uncooperative. The avoider believes that dealing with conflict is unproductive and that avoiding it is the best solution. This could look like postponing, diverting attention, denying the presence of conflict or taking a step back to consult with others or reflect alone.

**COMPETING** This approach to conflict is assertive about satisfying the person’s own needs, even if that comes at a cost to the relationship. In this style, individuals will defend their position strongly, hoping to control the outcome of a given conflict. They see conflict as an obvious reality, usually with the understanding that there is a right and wrong answer to any given scenario. Competitors often have quick solutions to problems and do not hesitate to use power to advance their position.

**COLLABORATING** This energy-demanding style asserts the individual’s own goals while simultaneously working to satisfy the goals of the other parties involved. This approach welcomes differences and dives deep into the issue in an attempt to discover underlying needs. The collaborator sees conflict as natural and is interested in spending significant time and energy working toward a solution with all parties involved.

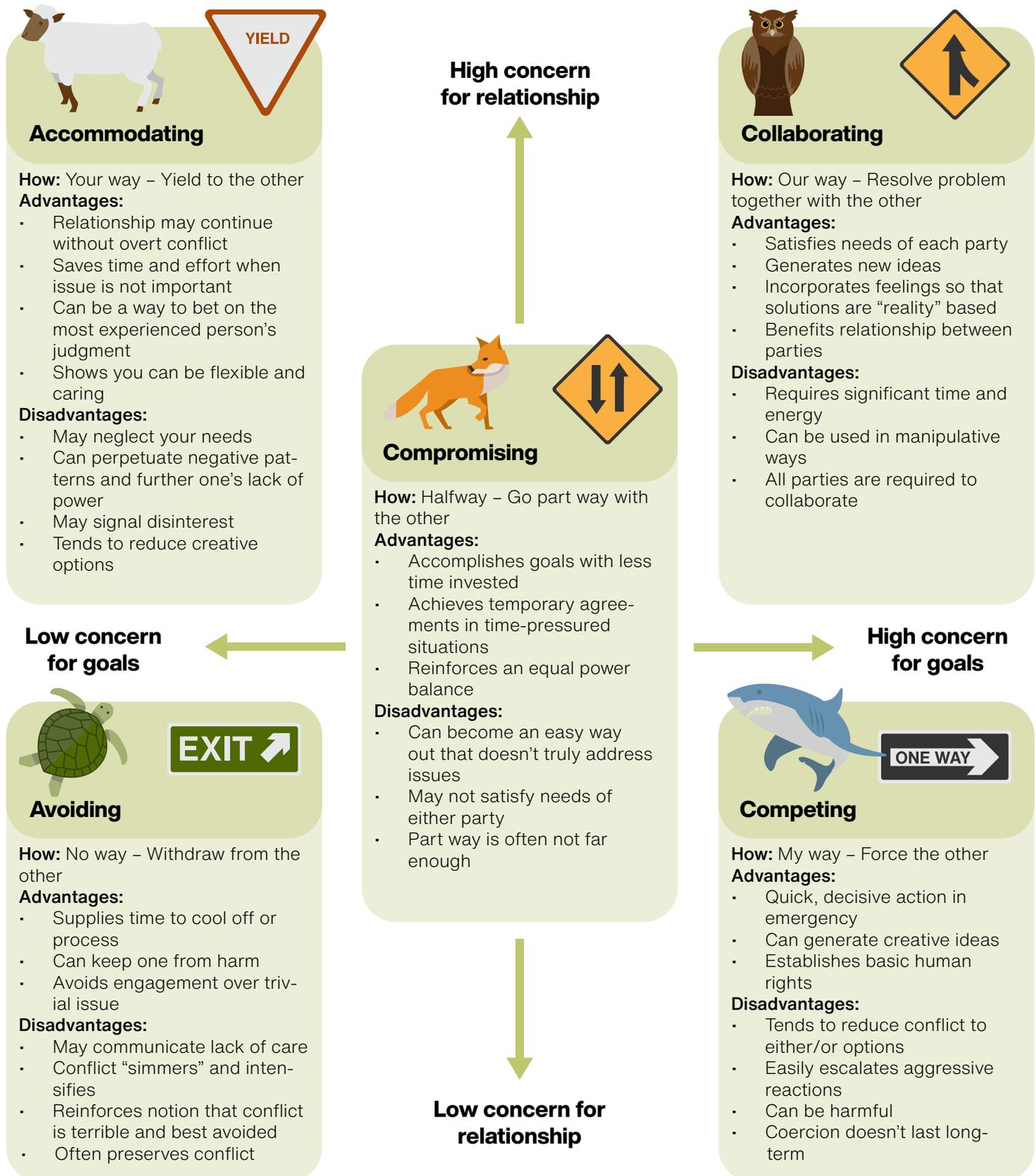
**COMPROMISING** An intermediate style, this approach is highly practical, looking for quick solutions while appealing to fairness by offering a give-and-take model. This style is moderate, looking for mutually acceptable solutions that result in some gains and some losses for each party. The compromiser believes that conflict is neutral difference that can be resolved through democratic process. No one embodies one conflict style at all times. However, different people do have different tendencies of how they respond to conflict. If these five conflict styles can all be practiced in different members in the body of Christ, what is your gift? What style most resonates with your natural response to conflict? Which animal are you? If it is helpful, think specifically of the way you respond to conflict in your family context.

<sup>1</sup> [www.riverhousepress.com/en/about/style-matters-inventory](http://www.riverhousepress.com/en/about/style-matters-inventory)

<sup>2</sup> [kilmanniagnostics.com/overview-thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument-tki/](http://kilmanniagnostics.com/overview-thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument-tki/)

<sup>3</sup> [friendlypress.com/the-friendly-style-profile-2](http://friendlypress.com/the-friendly-style-profile-2)

## Conflict styles matrix<sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> Adapted with permission from Ron Kraybill, "Approaches to Conflict," *Conflict Transformation and Restorative Justice Manual*, fifth edition, Michelle E. Armster and Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz, editors, Akron: PA, Office on Justice and Peacebuilding, a program of Mennonite Central Committee U.S., 2008, p. 39, and Steve Thomas, "Approaches to Conflict," *Peacemakers emPower Teacher Manual*, Creative Commons License, 2012, p. 145.

## Activity: Your conflict style

No one embodies one conflict style at all times. However, different people do have different tendencies of how they respond to conflict. If these five conflict styles can all be practiced in different members in the body of Christ, what is your gift? What style most resonates with your natural response to conflict? Which animal are you? If it is helpful, think specifically of the way you respond to conflict in your family context.

### DIRECTIONS

Divide into groups based on conflict styles and how people self-identify. Spend time in small groups reflecting on the following questions, then come back to the larger group and share.

- When has this style worked well for you in conflict? What situations are well suited to this style of conflict? \_\_\_\_\_
- What comments or questions do you have for the other animals/conflict styles? What would you like them to know about your approach to conflict? \_\_\_\_\_

- What were you taught that is healthy or unhealthy? \_\_\_\_\_

**At home** As you think about the conflict style you most identify with, reflect on the following questions.

- What conflict approaches in other people do you find difficult to work with or understand?
- What approaches would you like to improve on and what are ways you could practice them?
- How does your conflict style change depending on the person with whom you are in conflict (family member, friend, coworker, supervisor, pastor, child, etc.)? Or depending on the issue?



### Blessing: Poured Into Our Hearts<sup>5</sup>

Like a cup  
like a chalice  
like a basin  
like a bowl

when the Spirit comes  
let it find our heart  
like this

shaped like something  
that knows how to receive  
what is given

that knows how to hold  
what comes to fill

that knows how to gather  
itself  
around what arrives as  
unbidden  
unsought  
unmeasured  
love.

<sup>5</sup> "Poured Into Our Hearts" © Jan Richardson from The Painted Prayerbook. Used by permission. paintedprayerbook.com.



# Session 5: Dialogue

Peaceful practice: Listen together for insights and deeper questions.

## Biblical reflection: Bind us together

John 4:3-26

*[Jesus] left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.*

*A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."*

*Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."*



**How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?**



Throughout the gospels, Jesus does a lot of teaching. We have scores of parables where he teaches important lessons, applicable to us today. His responses to Pharisees who question and rebuke him also give us guidance for how we must live as God's people. Storytelling and direct instruction are only some of the ways Jesus taught, however. Christian discipleship is defined not only by obeying what Jesus instructed, but also emulating how he lived. The popular slogan, *What Would Jesus Do*, is meant to inspire our imaginations toward embodied modeling of Jesus' life.

One of the many ways we can look to emulate Jesus is in how he engaged with those different from him. As we reflect on the conflicts and divisive differences in our lives and relationships, what guidance does the Prince of Peace offer about how to engage? The story of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well provides surprising insight.

It is a well-known story, one of engaging with "the other." Jesus is traveling to Galilee, but he goes through Samaria to get there, and while in Samaria he stops to spend time with a woman. Jews and Samaritans were not friendly to one another. They didn't agree on things, they didn't hang out – and even less so Jewish men with Samaritan women. Culturally, men and women were supposed to keep their distance. So, the story's landscape sets a scene that can be very applicable to our own contexts of division.

Imagine the groups of people you disagree with so much that you avoid any sensitive topics when with them; or the people you avoid altogether; or even the extended family member(s) you see at holidays with whom you always get into heavy arguing. Those relationships are much like what Jesus and the Samaritan woman *should* have looked like, by normative cultural standards. However, per his normal pattern, Jesus breaks with tradition. He engages in healthy and transformative dialogue with someone very different from him. In studying the interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, we can glean insights on *how* we might engage in dialogue, even in contexts of conflict.

Jesus begins the conversation with vulnerability – he is thirsty and asks for a drink of water. He opens dialogue by naming where he is weak and what his need is, rather than offering what he is qualified to give her.<sup>1</sup> This is significant, especially since he is, in fact, exceptionally qualified: as *the Messiah*, he has a lot to offer! But in humility, he lowers himself and honors the Samaritan woman.

**Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change.**

This seems like a crazy notion when we disagree with someone on something about which we believe passionately. It seems backwards to diminish our own position. Yet self-analysis, being able to see and expose the weaknesses and flaws in our own understanding, is key to healthy dialogue. It demonstrates maturity and requires being vulnerable.

Our culture struggles with this. Vulnerability is hard and can feel scary, yet it is essential for connection. Brené Brown, a bestselling author and research professor at the University of Houston who has spent decades studying courage, vulnerability, shame and empathy, says that

"vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change."<sup>2</sup> It can be especially difficult to welcome vulnerability in our disagreements. Each person risks something in authentically coming to the table, by being known and being seen. These brave spaces of conversation, however, are what create transformative dialogue.

The woman at the well also has need – she needs the living water that only Jesus can give, and his vulnerability disarms her to eventually reciprocate his openness. This mutual vulnerability is a significant part of what

<sup>1</sup> Karoline Lewis, Holy Conversations, *Working Preacher*, March 12, 2017, accessed Feb. 29, 2021, [workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/holy-conversations](http://workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/holy-conversations).

<sup>2</sup> Brené Brown: The power of vulnerability, TEDxHouston, June 2010, accessed Feb. 3, 2021, [ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_vulnerability](http://ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability).

leads to the transformation in their conversation, and it is an important component of healthy dialogue.

Another element modeled in the conversation that Jesus has with the Samaritan woman is curiosity. We are already familiar with this important component of conflict transformation from session 2. Curiosity often comes through questions and this conversation is covered full of questions. The Samaritan woman asks question after question, and they are questions that don't have answers already embedded within them. They are candid, earnest questions that create space for Jesus to answer authentically. Healthy dialogue requires the kinds of questions that come from honest curiosity. These are known as open questions. They communicate interest in the other and a longing for understanding a different point of view rather than the kind of manipulative questions that are trying to make a point.

One of the questions the Samaritan woman asks in the dialogue with Jesus gets at the very heart of the division between Jews and Samaritans. For centuries, one of their central disagreements was about where the correct place of worship was. The humility and vulnerability demonstrated by Jesus created a scenario that opened the possibility for the Samaritan woman to approach a core issue of division. In this story, truth is not about having the correct answer, though. It's about asking authentic questions and getting at the core of our understandings.

These aspects of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman model healthy dialogue amid difference. They demonstrate what conversations can look like when we are vulnerable enough to engage with curiosity and discovery (sessions 2 and 3).

This way of engaging the "other" – through *dialogue* – is rarely practiced in our world today. Dialogue is fundamentally different than debate, a style of communication much more commonplace. As Philip Thomas, peace advocate and international mediator, said, "Dialogue requires the ability to navigate the narrow ridge between embracing and expressing your own perspective *while at the same time* remaining profoundly open to listen and understand the perspective of [the] Other."<sup>3</sup> Rather than victimize the other, dialogue demands respect, an open mind and heart and a spirit of curiosity. It asks that we **listen together for insights and deeper questions** as we talk with one another.

It is a challenging proposal and it takes practice. We are not automatically good at it. Dialogue is like a muscle. We need to use it, stretch it and strengthen it to keep it healthy and functioning.

Athletes train rigorously to keep their muscles prepared for competition. They practice the basics of their sport over and over to create consistent muscle memory that performs well in highly tense situations. A basketball player practices free-throws every day – hundreds, thousands, sometimes millions of shots go in the basket in preparation. With this practice, when the game is on the line, the player is confident that their mind and body knows what to do and responds successfully, putting the ball in the hoop with the pressure on. After an injury, individuals must rehab their muscles slowly and consistently. If they attempt to jump back into competition without the proper rehab, they will only do more damage. Similarly, we need a strong dialogue muscle to have healthy conversations amid conflict. If our muscle is not well practiced in our daily patterns, when we engage tense or conflictive conversations, it won't work correctly and will cause injury.

So, we must be deliberate in our practice, following Jesus' model. When we do, reward follows. Dialogue offers the possibility of transformation that is not found in the fighting matches, or the avoidance, that we often engage in when talking with people with whom we disagree. In our story, part of the miracle that comes from the healthy dialogue modeled by Jesus and the Samaritan woman is an incredible divine revelation. The woman at the well is the first person to whom Jesus reveals his identity during his ministry, verbally acknowledging and naming himself as the Messiah, the I AM. When we engage in dialogue together with the other, the possibilities are endless. It is not easy, but it is worth it.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Thomas, "Intro to Dialogue" workshop, Goshen, Indiana, Jan. 28, 2017. Reprinted with permission.

## Questions for discussion

1. What else do you notice about the way Jesus engages with the Samaritan woman? With others? What other clues can his modeling give us as we work to engage in healthy ways with those different from us?
2. How have you worked to strengthen your “dialogue muscle?” When are you most able to engage in healthy dialogue (embracing and expressing your own perspective while at the same time remaining profoundly open to listening to and understanding the other)? When is it most difficult?

## Tool: Dialogue and debate

### DIRECTIONS

The Dialogue and debate table outlines key differences between dialogue and debate. It breaks down important aspects of each conversation style and compares them. As a group, walk through this handout, reading left to right, by row, so that you can see and reflect on the comparative differences. Discuss as a group what you notice – what you are drawn to about dialogue or debate and what you disagree with or dislike.

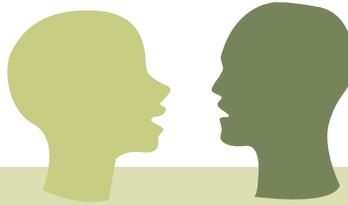
Dialogue is a challenging proposal. Most forces in our lives point us to debate rather than dialogue – but we are rarely conscious of the nuances between them as we talk with others. Recognizing the differences between these two very different styles of communication is important. It is easy to mix the concepts or replace one for the other when we don't have clear understandings of their characteristics. This leads to replicating one or the other (debate more often than dialogue!) unconsciously, based on habit and reaction. We must know and understand what each style is before we can intentionally put it into practice.

Boiled down to simple goals, debate is about defeating the other and dialogue is about listening to and understanding the other. Yet it is more complex than that. Dialogue is a cooperative conversation, leaning into relationship and learning. It values collective wisdom and collaborative action because it believes that individual vision and knowledge are always partial. Dialogue challenges our thinking and encourages us to be curious and inquire about other ways of seeing and thinking.

### GOING DEEPER

For more reading on the dialogue approach to conflict, check out *The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects* by Lisa Schirch and David Camp.

## Dialogue and debate<sup>4</sup>



Dialogue	Debate
is the understanding of myself and others.	is the successful argument of my position over that of my opponent.
I listen with the view of wanting to understand.	I listen in order to counter what I hear.
I listen for strengths, so I can affirm and learn.	I listen for weakness, so I can discount and devalue.
I speak for myself from my own understanding and experiences.	I speak based on my assumptions about others' positions and motives.
I ask questions to increase understanding.	I ask questions to trip up or confuse.
I allow others to complete their communication.	I interrupt or change the subject.
I concentrate on others' words and feelings.	I focus on the point I want to make next.
I accept others' experiences as valid for them.	I critique others' experiences as invalid.
I allow the expression of real feelings in myself and others.	I express my feelings to manipulate others and deny their feelings are real.
I honor silence.	I use silence to gain advantage.

### Questions to Ask Myself if I am Having Trouble Staying in Dialogue

- Am I honoring my own experience as valid?
- Can I trust others to respect my differences?
- Can I trust myself to be permeable, yet maintain my integrity?
- Am I willing to open myself to the pain of others and myself?
- Am I able to live with tension?
- Am I open to seeing God in others?
- Am I feeling defensive when others question me or have different opinions?
- Do I suspect others are forcing me to change?
- Do I fear that hearing other opinions will weaken my position?
- Am I denying pain I really have the strength to face?
- Am I viewing others as the “enemy” (especially those who disagree with me)?

<sup>4</sup> *Seeing the Face of God in Each Other: The Antiracism Training Manual of the Episcopal Church*, Mission Department of the Episcopal Church Center, 2011, pp. 97-99. Reprinted with permission.



## Activity: Conversation matrix role play

### **DIRECTIONS**

Turn to the Conversation matrix. As a group, read through each quadrant, beginning in the lower left (Talking nice) and moving counterclockwise. In each quadrant, name examples (out loud or to yourself) of what issues, scenarios or relationships generally fall into these categories of conversation in your life. Write them into the quadrants.

For example, if you have an extended family member with whom you know you disagree, but you both tend to glaze over your differences to make family gatherings enjoyable, put that person's name in the Talking nice quadrant. Or, if there is a specific issue that gets you so riled up that you explode in any conversation with anyone, put that in the Talking tough quadrant. An example of Reflexive dialogue could be a close friend with whom you strongly disagree but to whom you work hard to listen well, even if it means you don't express your own opinion much. Lastly, an experience where you may have spent hours over coffee, deep in conversation with someone with whom you disagree, both listening to their opinions and authentically expressing your own, would go in the Generative dialogue quadrant.

When the group has a good understanding of each quadrant, pick a few of the example issues that the group wrote down to role-play. You will need volunteers from the group willing to role-play and one person to loosely keep time for each example. Have two volunteers from the group choose which example issue they would like to engage in and pick "sides" of the issue. They will engage in conversation together while the rest observe.

The volunteers should begin the conversation by addressing the issue at hand in the style of the Talking nice quadrant. After a minute or two, the conversationalists should be notified so that they shift into the Talking tough quadrant. They continue to engage the topic, but now approach the issue in debate style. After another two to three minutes, they should again shift the style of conversation, this time to Reflective dialogue. Finally, after two to three minutes, they should finish by attempting to move the issue into the Generative dialogue quadrant. Given the limited time, it is expected that the conversations will not be able to go into immense depth. However, this can serve as a helpful exercise to note the differences between each kind of conversation. After each example, give time for feedback from the two people engaged in the conversation, as well as observations and learnings from the larger group.

This is very difficult and all attempts by volunteers should be applauded. Remember, it is something to be practiced over and over. It is often easier to do this with less intense topics. If the topics named by the group in each quadrant seem difficult to take on in role-play, the following are examples that can be used instead:

- Technology (makes our lives better vs. makes our lives worse)
- What is the best sport or which is the best team (pick two rival teams in any sports league)?
- Which is the best season of the year (spring, summer, winter, fall)?
- Pie vs. cake
- Best place to take a vacation
- Best music style

It can be tempting to see dialogue as a passive “giving in” to the other’s position. Especially in scenarios of power imbalance, it is important to recognize that dialogue is not just about listening and valuing the other’s perspective. While such actions are essential to dialogue, the ideal dialogue is a healthy balance of listening well and speaking from the heart – skills you will practice in later sessions! The Conversation matrix adds helpful complexity to what can be an overly simplistic dichotomy between dialogue and debate. It outlines four qualities of conversation.

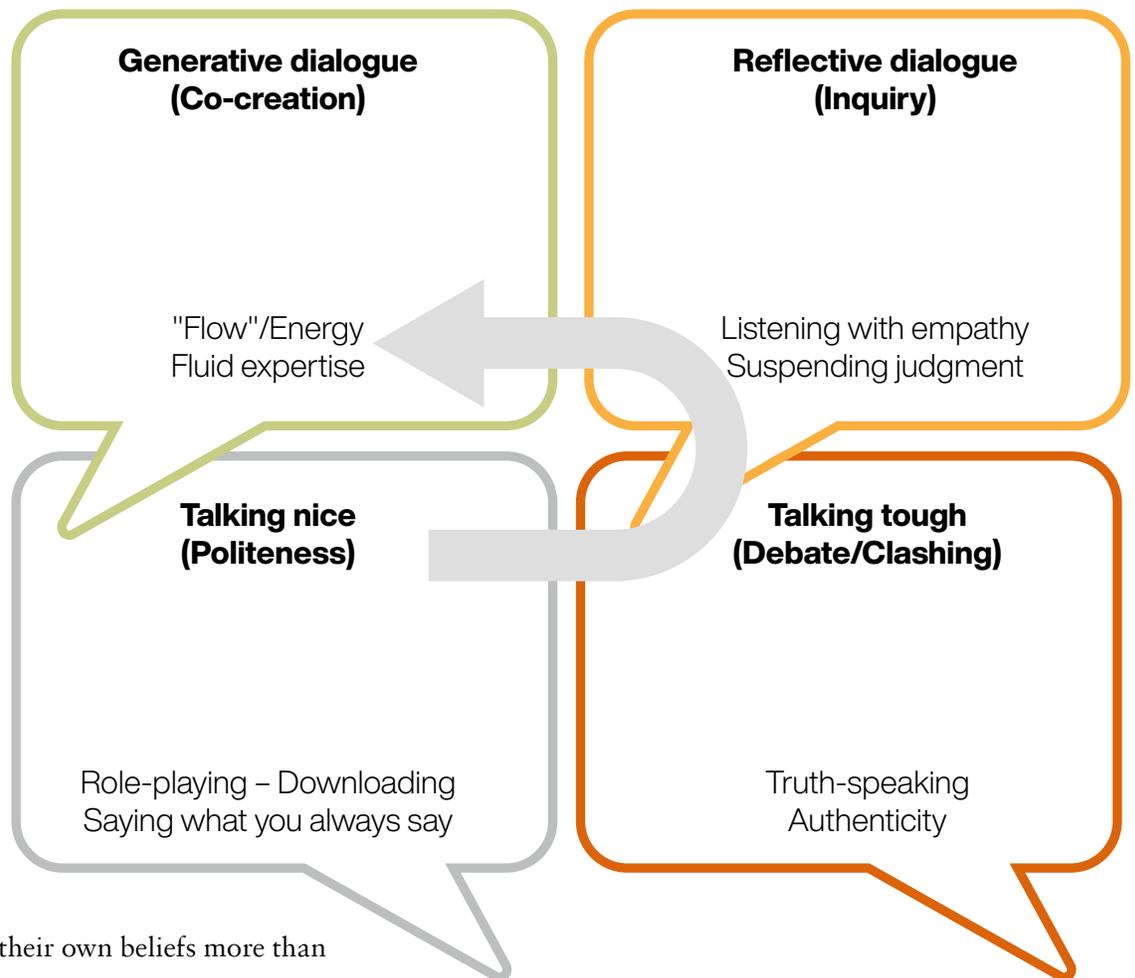
## Conversation matrix<sup>5</sup>

**Talking Nice:** This is a conversation that avoids confrontation or any real substance. Individuals respond politely to one another, playing a role more than authentically communicating their own beliefs. Outward emotion is removed from the conversation and the engagement is a false representation of the true beliefs and opinions present.

**Talking Tough:** This kind of conversation is direct and often aggressive. Individuals speak their opinions without concern for how they will be heard or interpreted. The focus of those involved is to verbalize their own beliefs more than anything else.

**Reflective Dialogue:** This conversation takes place when an individual in the dialogue is focused almost entirely on listening. Sometimes individuals engage in reflective dialogue as a way of avoiding potential conflict of differing opinions. The objective is to understand the other and convey care for them, but not to communicate their own perspective or idea.

**Generative Dialogue:** This is the kind of dialogue that offers potential for transformation. Both parties involved in the conversation are genuinely listening to one



another while responding with their authentic and complete self. In fully engaging with one another, there is energy present in the dialogue and new insights and growth can happen.

The arrow in this diagram represents a progression from least constructive dialogue to most constructive dialogue.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Thomas, “Intro to Dialogue” workshop, Goshen, Indiana, Jan. 28, 2017. Used with permission.

**At home** Look back at the Dialogue and debate table. Do your conversations more often model dialogue or debate?

Which characteristic of dialogue is most difficult for you to exemplify?

Consider the questions outlined under the Dialogue and debate table, as you reflect on the conversations you engage in on conflictive issues.



## Blessing: When We Breathe Together<sup>6</sup>

This is the blessing  
we cannot speak  
by ourselves.

This is the blessing  
we cannot summon  
by our own devices,  
cannot shape  
to our purpose,  
cannot bend  
to our will.

This is the blessing  
that comes  
when we leave behind  
our aloneness  
when we gather  
together  
when we turn  
toward one another.

This is the blessing  
that blazes among us  
when we speak  
the words  
strange to our ears

when we finally listen  
into the chaos

when we breathe together  
at last.

<sup>6</sup> "When We Breathe Together" © Jan Richardson from *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*, Orlando: FL: Wanton Gospeller Press: 2015, pp. 167-168. Used by permission. janrichardson.com.



# Session 6: Empathy

Peaceful practice: Seek to understand rather than persuade.

## Biblical reflection: Those who have ears

Luke 10:38-42, Matthew 13:10-15

*Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."*



*Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:*

*'You will indeed listen, but never understand,  
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.*

*For this people's heart has grown dull,*

*and their ears are hard of hearing,*

*and they have shut their eyes;*

*so that they might not look with their eyes,*

*and listen with their ears,*

*and understand with their heart and turn—*

*and I would heal them.'*"

**You will indeed listen, but never understand,  
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.  
For this people's heart has grown dull,  
and their ears are hard of hearing ...**



One of the many well-known stories of Jesus is his visit to Mary and Martha's home. The story is told only in the gospel of Luke and is just a few verses long, but it has a crucial message regarding the importance of listening. In the story, Jesus commends Mary for choosing "the better part" by sitting and listening to him, while Martha busied herself with the many tasks of the house.

What was Jesus saying is *the better part*? Jesus was not devaluing Martha's work, but he was affirming Mary's focus on relationship, evidenced by her listening. Jesus and Mary understood the importance of listening. As we study conflict transformation in this series, might we think of *the better part* as Mary's gift of listening, even in conflict situations?

Of all the components of healthy conversation and all the important lessons we should learn about dialogue, the art of listening well is given the most attention by Jesus. He addressed it over and over. Numerous times throughout his teaching, Jesus proclaimed, "Let anyone with ears listen!"<sup>1</sup> As usual with Jesus' teachings, it provides a challenge for us.

The crux of this challenge is understanding and practicing the *kind* of listening Jesus is affirming in this story. Not all listening is equal. It was once said in jest that conversation is a vocal competition in which the one who is catching their breath is called the listener. While humorous, this comment becomes reality all too often and could not be further from true listening. This is no simple task – it is definitely easier to listen poorly than to listen well. When Jesus demands that those with ears listen, he is implying that we do not always use our ears well. Jesus is drawing attention not to the fact that we have ears, but to how we use them – how well we listen.

Leading into the Matthew 13 text noted above, Jesus has just told the parable of the sower, ending with verse 9 where he, again, proclaims that anyone with ears must listen. When his disciples ask him why he speaks in parables, Jesus' response orients us to *how* we must learn to listen. He calls out the ways that humans hear things without paying attention to them. Like the common phrase "in one ear and out the other," Jesus highlights the tendency of humans to not give thoughtful consideration to what they are hearing. *You will listen but not understand.*

We are all culprits of this. While reading or looking at the phone, someone says something, and we reply with an "uh huh" to acknowledge their comment. But were we listening? Were we paying enough attention to repeat what they said or give a meaningful response? Children pick up on this quickly. By the time a child is 2 or 3, they know when they are being ignored. They want our full attention and will repeatedly call out to us, until they trust that they are being listened to well.

Jesus is referring to this half-hearted listening in Matthew 13 when he discusses why he speaks in parables. By quoting Isaiah, Jesus implies that listening engages more than just our ears. Good listening requires us to use all of our senses; it demands our full attention. In the world of conflict transformation, this is called active listening.

Active listening is focused, conscious listening that goes beyond hearing the words of another person and concentrates on comprehending the information and understanding the message as it was intended. It allows the listener to absorb and retain the full communication of another. Summed up, active listening can be defined simply by the peaceful practice for this session: **Seek to understand rather than persuade.** It requires that we place the highest value on the other person and their story, rather than being understood ourselves.

Active listening is an important skill to employ in all relationships, but it becomes especially important in conflict. Our ability to listen well drastically alters the path of a conflict. It is only with ample listening that conflict can be constructive. Yet we rarely think of *the better part* as listening when we disagree with someone. Naturally, we place more value on convincing them of our opinion – teaching them what we believe they do not know or understand. However, James 1:19 says we are to "be quick to listen [and] slow to speak." How

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 11:15, 13:9, 13:43; Mark 4:9; Luke 8:8, 14:35.

does it change an argument if we put the highest value on listening rather than convincing, or speaking?

It may seem counterintuitive, but active listening gets us much farther than arguing a point in a conflict. Listening is often perceived to be passive. However, active listening is just that – it is *active*. Active listening has consistently proven to be more effective and efficient than trying to persuade the other. It is a change agent, because people who feel heard are less defensive and more open to considering new ideas.

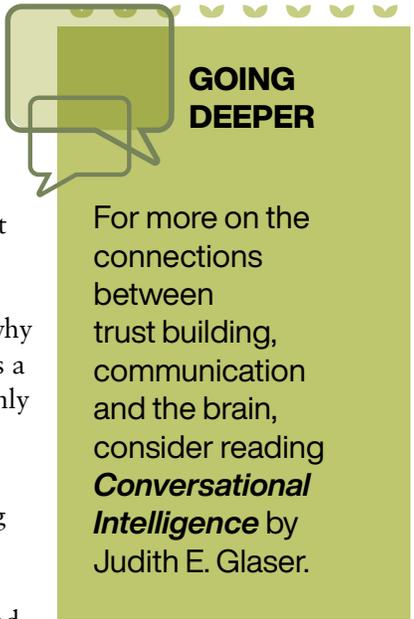
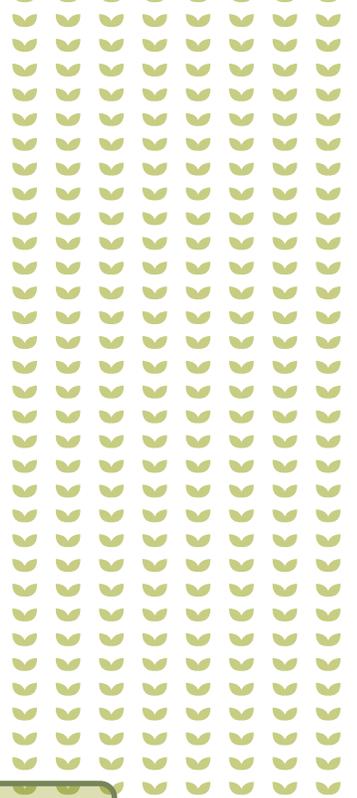
Brain science tells us that trust and distrust live in different parts of our brains. Distrust is signaled in the part of our brain that works out of instinct and holds memory, while trust is signaled in our rational brain.<sup>2</sup> When people perceive that they are not being listened to, they feel threatened and function out of the instinctive part of the brain that is geared for survival. Instead of being able to process what we are hearing, the brain is hijacked, and we respond with fight, flight or freeze. In essence, our brains shut down and are no longer open to influence. When we sense that we are being listened to well, however, trust signals go off. Our bodies and brains respond in the rational brain, which makes our heartbeat slow and sends signals to the brain to relax and open up.<sup>3</sup> In short, we humans are much more willing to listen to someone else's point of view when we are convinced that the other is also listening to ours.

We must be careful to be authentic in our listening, however. Active listening is not a tool we use *in order to eventually change someone's mind*. In the Matthew passage, Jesus tells the disciples to “listen with their ears, and understand with their heart.” Listening must come from a place of genuine curiosity and care. (This is why curiosity is the first peaceful practice established in our list of practices – it truly is a spiritual discipline to grow our curiosity.) As Jesus names, listening engages not only our ears, but also our heart.

This can become especially complex when we believe that what we are hearing is harmful to someone. What does it mean to actively listen to someone who is being racist, for example? Where is the line between listening to the other and stopping oppression? These are questions we all must wrestle with, and we likely will come out at different places on them. Session 8 will focus on dignity, power dynamics and some of the challenges or risks that come with dialogue. As we consider listening, however, it is important to recognize and remember that listening does not mean agreement.<sup>4</sup> We can actively listen to someone and still respond with our own opinions, understandings and beliefs. Listening does not mean we approve of or agree with what is being said – it does not inherently affirm the positions and opinions of another. The act of listening does, however, speak to our character.

The curious truth is that we gain immensely by listening actively, even to things with which we staunchly disagree. Jesus says that to those who have, more will be given, and he says this while teaching his disciples about listening. So, could we interpret his words in this context to mean that we grow by listening because we understand more? To those who have (and offer) the gift of active listening, more will be given – more understanding, more transformation, more wisdom. Even if our opinion remains unchanged, it is nuanced by what we hear. Our understanding is amplified in listening, and we gain something.

Listening is a gift, and one that we can and should develop. When we engage a posture of listening, our observa-



## GOING DEEPER

For more on the connections between trust building, communication and the brain, consider reading ***Conversational Intelligence*** by Judith E. Glaser.

<sup>2</sup> Judith E Glaser, *Conversational Intelligence: How Great Leaders Build Trust and Get Extraordinary Results*, New York: Bibliomotion, 2014, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> This refers to agreement in the sense of stated positions. An individual does not imply an opinion or belief in the act of listening.

tions move us to questions for the other rather than to judgments of them. Transformation in relationship and in conflict happens only when listening becomes a sincere gift offered to the other. So, let's challenge ourselves to embrace the better part, learn the gift of active listening and practice it in all of our relationships – especially in our conflicts.

## Tool: Traditional Chinese character for “listen”

The Chinese writing system consists of thousands of characters. Often, multiple simple Chinese characters are combined to create complex words. The traditional Chinese character for “listen” combines several distinctive parts, each representing an important component of the act of listening. Although this character was simplified in the 1960s, the traditional ancient character, as presented below, is still used in a few places and much can be learned from it.<sup>5</sup> The Chinese character of 聽 [tīng] is made up of six Chinese characters: ear, king, ten, eyes, one and heart. These six words speak volumes about how we might understand what active listening looks like and what we must offer in the act of true listening.

## Questions for discussion

1. Think of a time when you were listened to in a caring and active way. How were you impacted by that experience? Or, share an experience of a relationship that was changed for the better through the gift of listening.
2. What do you find challenging about active listening – in your daily life and in conflicts?
3. What is your response to the complexity of engaging with someone who is speaking offensively? How far does listening go? What responses do you have to the idea that listening does not imply agreement?

<sup>5</sup> “Fun with Chinese Characters 007 – 聽 [tīng] (listen),” *Terracotta*, Aug. 31, 2017, accessed March 4, 2021, [eriksen.com/language/simplified-vs-traditional-chinese/](http://eriksen.com/language/simplified-vs-traditional-chinese/).

## Traditional Chinese character for “listen”



**耳** (ěr) means ear. Ears are obvious tools for listening as they are the body parts that perceive sound. Ears can give us clues when listening – voice inflection and volume level tell us something about the emotions behind what is being communicated. Human anatomy also says something significant about our ears: we have two of them, while only given one mouth. Many have said this is because we are to listen twice as much as we speak. At the same time, the ear is only one of six characters that create the word. Listening is more than just auditory perception.

**十** (shí) means ten. As part of the overall character, it is specifically connected to the eye character (below). Literally, these characters together communicate “ten eyes” which conveys a meaning of completeness, whole or 100% attention. A good listener is focused as if they had ten eyes and all were on the speaker. This kind of focus allows the wholeness and uniqueness of the other person to be understood and validated by the listener.

**目** (mù) means eyes. Eyes are another important part of listening. What we do with our eyes is crucial and must be intentional while listening. In many cultures, eye contact is a sign of respect.<sup>6</sup> The eyes, as part of overall body posture, can communicate sincerity or boredom, interest or distraction. Researchers Albert Mehrabian and Susan R. Ferris of the University of California found that 55% of communication is body language.<sup>7</sup> Active listening requires us to be in-

tentional, engaging our full bodies toward the speaker.

**一** (yī) means one. In this case, it is connected to the heart character (below) and refers to the idea of two hearts becoming one. There is a significance of being undivided, in a connection with the other.

**心** (xīn) means heart. The heart is part of listening, because it is a posture of empathy to deeply hear someone else’s story. Listening with our heart implies care for the other. It requires us to listen loosely to the individual words being spoken and tightly to the meaning behind the words. In a world where listening is frequently a tool to find fault in the other, engaging the heart in listening means we give the other the benefit of the doubt.

**王** (wáng) means king. An intriguing component to the concept of listening, the inclusion of “king” to the definition of listening implies that the listener must treat the speaker as royalty, or guest of honor, giving them their full, undivided attention. Listening means not interrupting, not offering advice or opinions, not preparing a rebuttal – it is focused on what the speaker is communicating. While seemingly obvious, this is a challenge. Too often, we assume good listening involves responding to someone by giving our opinion or sharing a story of our own experience similar to theirs. When solicited, these can be positive responses, but the ability to remain committed to the other person’s story is a key component of good listening.

<sup>6</sup> In some cultures, direct eye contact is a sign of disrespect. In any dialogue, cultural dynamics must be taken into account

<sup>7</sup> Albert Mehrabian and Susan R. Ferris, “Inference of attitudes from nonverbal communication in two channels,” *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, Vol 31, No. 3, 1967, p. 252.



## Activity: Concentric circles

It is important to practice this skill of active listening. It takes intentionality to be good, active listeners. Even for those who tend not to speak as much, focused practice is needed to become a good listener. Not speaking does not necessarily equal good listening.

### DIRECTIONS

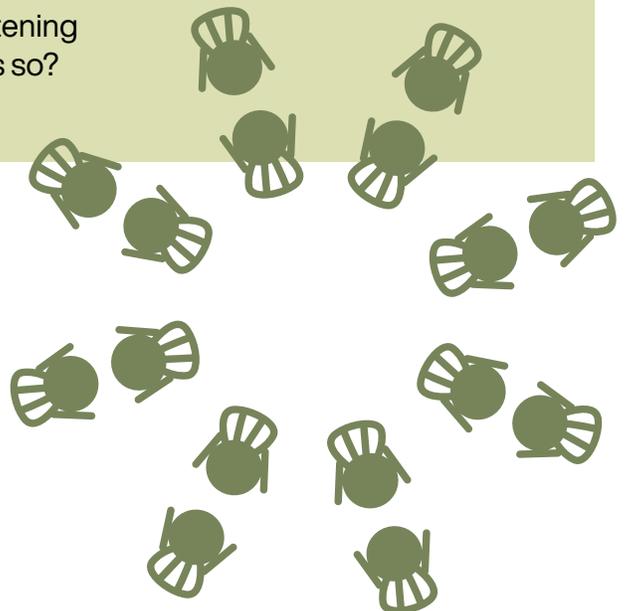
The goal of this exercise is to practice active listening with one another – an even number of people is required for this to work. Create two concentric circles in the group. Those on the outer circle should be facing in and those on the inner circle should be facing out. Participants should align themselves in front of someone in the opposite circle so that each person has a partner in front of them. Spread out the circles as far as possible so that there is distance between each pair, allowing for better hearing.

One person in each pair will be given two minutes to share a story or a reflection while the other person in the pair practices active listening. When practicing, participants should try to remember the various elements of active listening. The six components of listening as depicted in the Chinese symbol can be a helpful reminder.

A facilitator will need a timer and the list of prompts below. They should give a prompt for the entire group to respond to and will establish which circle (inner or outer) will respond first. The facilitator should give two minutes for one person in the pair to share while the other person listens. When finished, the pair should reverse roles so that the person previously listening now responds to the prompt while the person who previously shared now practices actively listening. After both circles have listened, one circle should rotate so that the pairs shift and they have a new partner for the next prompt. The number of rounds will depend on the time available to the group, but it is helpful to do at least three rounds. Feel free to choose from the prompts on the next page, or invent your own.

Finish by discussing the exercise as a group.

- What was it like to practice active listening? What was difficult? What did you enjoy?
- Did this feel different than how you engage in listening normally? If it is different, why do you think that is so?
- How was the experience of being listened to?



### Conversation prompts

- The history behind my name (first, middle, or last), or something I am proud about regarding the heritage of my name, is ...
- One of the persons who most impacted my life positively is ...
- A favorite childhood memory of mine is ...
- Something I am passionate about is ... (and why)
- One thing I have accomplished in life for which I feel great satisfaction is ...
- One of the things I most appreciate about my community is ...
- If I could sit with anyone (past or present) for an hour and talk, I would choose ...
- A time in my life when I felt marginalized or excluded is ...
- A time in my life when I marginalized or excluded others is ...
- An experience in my life where I became very aware of my own sense of privilege is ...
- A difficult situation I have experienced in my life is ...
- Something I am currently discerning is ...
- One way I think others often misunderstand me is ...
- In difficult conversations, others perceive me as ...
- One of my most embarrassing moments is ...

**At home** The six components of the Chinese character for listening also correspond with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 13. All of these pieces and their significance are implied in Jesus' definition of listening. Go back to the text and reflect on where you see these six components in Jesus' teaching.

### Blessing: Blessing to Open the Ear<sup>s</sup>

That as we wake  
we will listen.  
That as we rise  
we will listen.  
That before our first words  
of the day  
we will listen.  
That when we meet  
we will listen.

That at noontime  
we will listen.  
That at dusk  
we will listen.  
That at the gathering  
of night  
we will listen.  
That entering sleep  
we will listen still.



# Session 7: Authenticity

Peaceful practice: Speak from the heart, contributing your own thinking and experience.

## Biblical reflection: Acceptable words

Luke 6:37-45

*“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”*

*He also told them a parable: “Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Friend let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.*

*No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.”*



**The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.**

In the Christian tradition, humanity’s narrative begins with two individuals in full communion with God. The creation story is a beautifully poetic beginning to life. The book of Genesis paints an elaborate picture of what God determines to be *good*, describing the light and darkness, the waters, the planets, the soil, plants and animals, human beings and more. Each are intricately placed in an astounding community of interconnectedness. We can *almost* imagine it, even more wonderful than the images of BBC’s “Planet Earth.”

Unfortunately, it doesn’t last.

The perfection of the garden is based on a principle of humanity’s dependence on God as the judge of good and evil. In God’s intricate design, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is in the middle of the garden. It is off-limits to humans (Genesis 2:16-17). Judgment is reserved only for the Divine.

But as we know, our curious ancestors ate of the fruit. They could not resist the urge to judge between good and evil. They longed for the ability to determine right and wrong. As the Scripture tells us, judgment was unbearably enticing. Genesis 3:6 says, “The woman saw that the tree was good for food.” Might we understand the substance of this tree’s fruit as more than just sustenance? With all other trees available to them, it seems unlikely that the reason for taking the fruit of *this* tree is solely for its composition as food. If the tree holds the knowledge of good and evil, its fruit could be understood as judgment itself. Judgment is, indeed, a delicious way to feed our ego. She also admired its beauty, noting that it was “a delight to the eyes.” Placing the “correct” judgment can make us look very good in front of others. Lastly, she “desired to be wise” and thought that the fruit of judgment would give them such powers – a misconstrued perception even today.

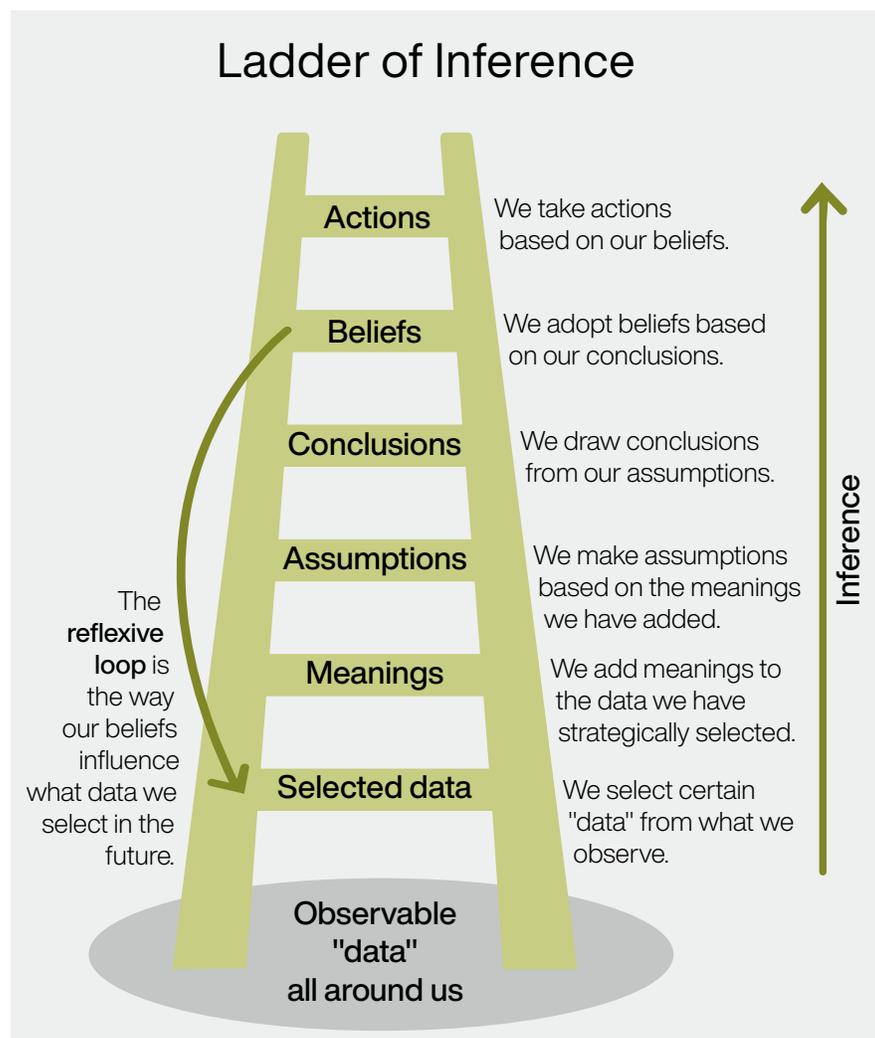
Might any of this sound familiar? Sin was introduced in the garden when humans attempted to take on the role of God, and humanity has been doing the same thing ever since. Just like Adam and Eve, we fall prey to the tempting nature of judgment. We constantly hear voices like that of the serpent, telling us that judgment brings wisdom, not death. We must be careful with these lies. When we “play God” in our judgments, we find ourselves, like Adam and Eve, no longer in the garden.

Jesus is commonly referred to as the second Adam. Through Jesus, we are offered a way to return to full communion with God, a way back to the garden. As Christians, we are called to embody Christ’s message and example of loving God and loving others (Matthew 22:37-40). It is therefore important, of course, that we follow his instruction. We see in Scripture that Jesus repeats the Creator’s direction to not judge (Luke 6:37-39, printed above). Going back to the garden and experiencing the fullness of God requires that we suspend our propensity to judge, and instead, speak authentically from our unique perspective.

Jesus also criticizes the church leaders of the day for their judgment, calling out the ways they are judging by human standards (John 8:15). When we read this text, we usually imagine ourselves in the role of disciple rather than Pharisee. We can point out all the ways others are wrong, and we identify our own theology as *the* correct interpretation of biblical truth. We believe our judgments are accurate, appropriate and even divinely established.

When we are honest, however, we may need to identify ourselves more with the Pharisees in this text than with anyone else. Often, our judgments serve to uphold the structures around us and only entrench us deeper into our own ideologies.

The Ladder of Inference (shown at right), first created by Chris Argyris and later developed further by Peter Senge, shows how this can happen quickly, without our realizing we are doing it.<sup>1</sup> First, we observe



<sup>1</sup> Chris Argyris, “Ladder of Inference,” via Peter M. Senge, et. al, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, New York: Doubleday, 1994, p. 243.



something in the world around us and (sometimes automatically) select certain data from those observations. We add meanings to the data we have strategically, if often unconsciously, selected, then we make assumptions based on the meanings we've added to the carefully selected data. We draw conclusions that inform our belief system and our beliefs, in turn, influence the data we select from our observations.

Meaning-making is so natural to us. It is impossible to intake all data at once, therefore we select. It happens quickly, often unconsciously. This process creates habits of defensiveness when it comes to our beliefs, forming a protective shell around our deepest assumptions.<sup>2</sup> This defensive judgment is the kind of thinking Jesus is referring to when cautioning his followers about noticing the speck in their neighbor's eye without first looking at the log in their own.

It is all too easy to repeat this reinforcing pattern and quickly fall into the exact kind of judgment that God (in the Garden) and Christ (in his rebuke) ask us to avoid.

Staying clear of judgment is extremely difficult, however, and perhaps a bit confusing. Is it even possible, let alone faithful, to suspend all judgment? Well, no. After all, discerning and proclaiming the way of Jesus is fundamental to our witness of the good news. That requires some judgment on our part. The question is how we do it. Judgment must be coupled with a recognition that we are not the sole owners of truth. When Jesus asks that we take the log out of our own eye, he is asking us to evaluate our opinions and beliefs. Effective and authentic speaking requires that we recognize the unhealthy, reinforcing patterns in our language and behavior. We have to slow our sprint up the Ladder of Inference by stopping at the first level of observation. Dialogue helps us to slow down.

Speaking authentically means learning to make observations without the kind of loaded evaluation of right and wrong our judgments usually hold. Instead of convoluting judgment with observation, we need to take responsibility for beliefs and understandings, which means going below the surface of the iceberg (remember session 3) to name our feelings and our needs. Faithful judgment means owning our beliefs and opinions without asserting them as truth. If we speak from the heart, contributing (our) own thinking and experience, we are able to communicate our beliefs and opinions without asserting them as the only possible truth. Using "I statements" is one way to put this into practice. Authentically sharing what we are feeling and naming what we need is received differently than if we add our evaluations to our observations, which assumes truth.

Dr. Marshall Rosenberg developed an approach to conversation called Nonviolent Communication (NVC)<sup>3</sup> that helps us do this. NVC is used around the world as a method of speaking peacefully and authentically. It is "a way of communicating that leads us to give from the heart."<sup>4</sup> NVC has four components:

1. Making observations without evaluating.
2. Communicating feelings in relation to the observation.
3. Defining and communicating the needs, values, desires and more that underlie the feelings.
4. Taking action by making requests that enrich life.<sup>5</sup>

This apparently simple process is actually very difficult. To begin, observation without evaluation is much harder than we estimate. Most of us think our evaluations are truth. Furthermore, we are not generally very good at naming our feelings and needs. By the time we get to naming what we desire, it sounds more like a demand than a request.

We need the Spirit's wisdom to guide us. In Luke, Jesus continues his sermon on judgment with an analysis of good fruit and bad fruit. Comparing people to trees, Jesus highlights the necessity of making inward change

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 231.

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see The Center for Nonviolent Communication, [www.cnvc.org/](http://www.cnvc.org/).

<sup>4</sup> Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, 3rd Ed, Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2015, p. 3, [nonviolentcommunication.com](http://nonviolentcommunication.com).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

for outward results. He establishes that we cannot just force the right words out of our mouths, because in the end it is our heart that determines how we speak (Luke 6:45, above). If we want our speaking to be effective and authentic, we have to spend significant time centering ourselves and preparing our hearts and minds for healthy conversation. If we have hatred and venom inside us, that is what will come out. But, if we are centered in love, we will produce an abundance of good (Luke 6:45, above). We will be better able to communicate in constructive ways. Removing unhealthy judgment from our communication is not the beginning; it is the result of having done the internal work. If we are to honestly engage in transformative dialogue, this is work we must do. Psalm 19:14 offers a prayer that can guide us along the way: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” May it be so.

## Questions for discussion

1. How do the wise people you know communicate? What are the speaking habits they practice that you would like to emulate?
2. In what circumstances are you most apt to judge? When and how do you get to a place of suspending judgment?
3. How does it change your understanding of faithfulness to consider the possibility that we are called to not make judgment on right and wrong? How does this change the witness of the church in the world?
4. What is lost and what is gained when we give up judgment?

## Activity: Observation without evaluation

Learning to make observations free of evaluation is a difficult but valuable skill to work at for effectiveness in difficult conversations. It’s important to recognize that the meaning in any conversation is embedded in the listener rather than the speaker. This may come as a surprise. It is easy to assume that meaning is communicated by the speaker. However, regardless of the intentions of the speaker, it is what the listener *hears* that matters.

Practically, what the listener hears is what defines the conversation. (This is why empathic listening is so important, as discussed last session!) So, if the listener hears judgment – even if that is not the intention of the speaker – it will alter the conversation, likely in unproductive ways. “When we combine observation with evaluation, we decrease the likelihood that others will hear our intended message. Instead, they are apt to hear criticism and thus resist what we are saying.”<sup>6</sup>

Observations free of judgment help move us (and the listener) out of the instinctive, reactive brain (remember session 6) and into the part of the brain where lie reason and analysis.

Observation can be defined as “noticing (and possibly describing) our sensory and mental experiences and distinguishing these experiences from the interpretations we ascribe to them.”<sup>7</sup>

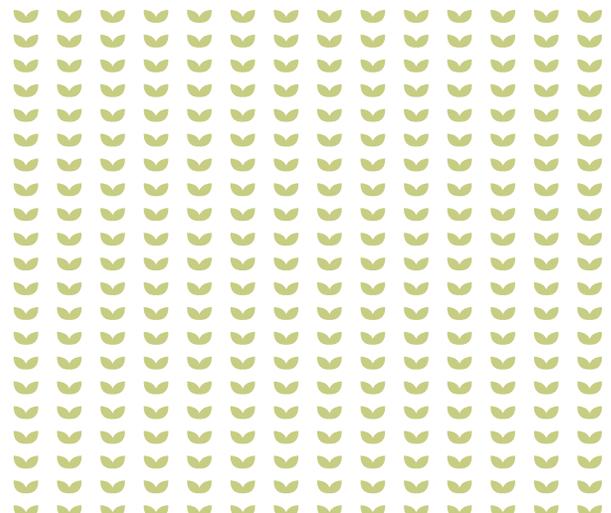
<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Jacob Gotwals, Jack Lehman, Jim Manske, and Jori Manske, “Pathways to Liberation Self-Assessment Matrix,” Version 1.2, [streetgiraffes.com/matrix/](http://streetgiraffes.com/matrix/).



Some helpful characteristics of observation without evaluation mixed in are found in the following table.<sup>8</sup> When it comes to assessing how we communicate with others, a good place to start is studying the words we use, as reflected in the second column of the table below. How often do we communicate by making statements that have evaluation in them? By utilizing the characteristics outlined in the first column, we can rephrase our language to name observations without evaluation, as demonstrated in the third column.

<b>Observations without evaluation...</b>	<b>Example of observation with evaluation</b>	<b>Example of observation without evaluation</b>
... are specific to time and context.	Maria is a great basketball player.	Maria averaged 25 points in her last five games.
... clearly describe what happened, much like a video camera would reproduce a scenario.	No one was paying attention to the teacher.	Five of the six students were looking at phones while the teacher was speaking.
... make predictions but do not affirm certainties.	She'll never make it.	I think she will arrive late.
... do not use evaluative words.	Jayden helped the lazy guy on the street.	Jayden gave the man sleeping outside money.
... name when they are quoting/referencing someone's speech.	The best way to decrease homelessness in our community is by donating.	Alan, a friend of mine who works at the local homeless shelter, said the shelter is short of funding and their food bank is low.
... speak from a specified point of view rather than assuming generality.	Our educational system is a disaster.	Our educational system relies heavily on standardized testing for evaluation, which was very difficult for my son who did not get good enough scores to go to college.



<sup>8</sup> Adapted with permission from Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication*, pp. 30-31.

## DIRECTIONS

Think about a situation where you experience conflict that you are willing to share with someone else in the group. The situation you choose could be related to a specific person you are having conflict with or a general situation that produces conflict for you. Write freely about this situation in the space below, describing what it is about this person or situation that makes life harder for you.

Once you are finished, underline the places where you see judgments (observations with evaluation).

Divide into pairs and share with one another your situation by reading to each other what you have written. Together, work to rewrite the descriptions without evaluation.

When pairs are ready, join back as a large group to discuss learnings, insights and challenges.

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## Tool: Feelings and needs

As demonstrated above, stating our beliefs through observation presumes a closed truth which proves challenging for dialogue. Therefore, when it comes time to say what we think or believe, speaking from a posture of personal experience often is received better. Marshall Rosenberg, founder of Nonviolent Communication, said, “Often, our analyses of others are actually expressions of our own needs and values.”<sup>9</sup>

The peaceful practice of this session is **speak from the heart, contributing your own thinking and experience**. Using feelings and needs to describe our opinions and beliefs can be a very effective way to do that. We see one another’s humanity at the level of feelings and needs.

Like many other pieces of healthy dialogue, learning how to communicate our feelings and needs likely will require significant practice. It is vulnerable to express ourselves in this way and often we are not very good at it unless it becomes a habit.

Using “I-statements” is a good place to begin. “I-statements” literally begin with “I.” They are a form of communication that asserts an individual’s belief or feeling rather than expressing thoughts that imply characteristics of the other person. For example, a statement like, “You are late and now the food is ruined!” could be rephrased to, “I am frustrated that the food is cold because I waited for you to eat.” This changes the tone significantly. “I-statements” allow us to be assertive while remaining compassionate in our delivery. This helps us to focus comments on ourselves and “own” the affirmation.

There is a catch, though. Not all statements that start with “I feel ...” are followed by an emotion. Humans are quite good at turning perceptions into feelings. “I feel misunderstood,” for example, is not accurate. Misunderstanding is a description or perception of what someone else is doing (about which we likely have feelings), but in and of itself is not a feeling. Furthermore, we tend to narrow the possibilities of our feelings, describing ourselves as “angry,” “frustrated” or “happy,” when there may be more specific feelings that name our experience more accurately. It is important to have a vocabulary of feelings and needs. The Feelings and Needs pages that follow are helpful tools in broadening our vocabulary of feelings and needs.

<sup>9</sup> Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication*, p. 16.



## Feelings when our needs are satisfied<sup>10</sup>

### **Affectionate**

Compassionate  
Fondness  
Friendly  
Loving  
Open-hearted  
Sympathetic  
Tender  
Warm

### **Confident**

Empowered  
Proud  
Sage  
Secure

### **Engaged**

Absorbed  
Alert  
Curious  
Enchanted  
Engrossed  
Entranced  
Fascinated  
Interested  
Intrigued  
Involved  
Spellbound  
Stimulated

### **Exhilarated**

Blissful  
Ecstatic  
Elated  
Electrified  
Enthralled  
Euphoric  
Exuberant  
Overjoyed  
Radiant  
Rapturous  
Thrilled

### **Excited**

Amazed  
Animated  
Ardent  
Aroused  
Astonished  
Dazzled  
Eager  
Energetic  
Enlivened  
Enthusiastic  
Exuberant  
Giddy  
Invigorated  
Lively  
Passionate  
Surprised  
Vibrant

### **Grateful**

Appreciative  
Moved  
Thankful  
Touched

### **Happy**

Amused  
Blissful  
Cheerful  
Delighted  
Ecstatic  
Elated  
Giddy  
Glad  
Jolly  
Joyful  
Jubilant  
Merry  
Pleased  
Rapturous  
Tickled

### **Hopeful**

Confident  
Encouraged  
Expectant  
Jazzed  
Lighthearted  
Optimistic  
Sanguine  
Up  
Upbeat

### **Inspired**

Amazed  
Awed  
Eager  
Enthused  
Motivated  
Moved  
Psyched  
Stimulated  
Stirred  
Wonder

### **Peaceful**

Calm  
Centered  
Clearheaded  
Comfortable  
Content  
Equanimous  
Fulfilled  
Mellow  
Open  
Quiet  
Relaxed  
Relieved  
Satisfied  
Serene  
Still  
Tranquil  
Trusting

### **Refreshed**

Enlivened  
Recharged  
Rejuvenated  
Renewed  
Rested  
Restored  
Revived

**The following words are sometimes communicated as feelings when in fact they are perceptions or descriptions:**

Abandoned  
Attacked  
Betrayed  
Blamed  
Cheated  
Criticized  
Ignored  
Intimidated  
Manipulated  
Misunderstood  
Neglected  
Overworked  
Patronized  
Pressured  
Provoked  
Rejected  
Put down  
Threatened  
Tricked

<sup>10</sup> This list was adapted with permission from: Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, 3rd Ed, Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2015, p.44, [nonviolentcommunication.com](http://nonviolentcommunication.com).

## Feelings when our needs are not satisfied<sup>11</sup>

<b>Afraid</b>	Appalled	<b>Disquiet</b>	Wiped out	Fidgety
Apprehensive	Bothered	Agitated	Worn out	Frazzled
Dread	Contempt	Alarmed		Irritable
Fearful	Disgusted	Concerned	<b>Pain</b>	Jittery
Foreboding	Dislike	Discombobulated	Aching	Nervous
Frightened	Displeased	Disconcerted	Agony	Overwhelmed
Mistrustful	Enmity	Dismayed	Alienated	Restless
Panicky	Hate	Disturbed	Anguished	Stressed out
Petrified	Horried	Indecisive	Bereaved	
Scared	Hostile	Perturbed	Devastated	<b>Vulnerable</b>
Suspicious	Loathing	Rattled	Grief	Fragile
Terrified	Repulsed	Restless	Heartbroken	Guarded
Trepidation	Revulsion	Shocked	Hurt	Helpless
Wary		Startled	Lonely	In a stew
Worried	<b>Confused</b>	Surprised	Miserable	Insecure
	Ambivalent	Troubled	Regretful	Leery
<b>Annoyed</b>	Baffled	Turbulent	Remorseful	Reserved
Aggravated	Bewildered	Turmoil		Sensitive
Dismayed	Dazed	Uncomfortable	<b>Sad</b>	Shaky
Disgruntled	Disoriented	Uneasy	Depressed	
Displeased	Hesitant	Unnerved	Dejected	<b>Yearning</b>
Exasperated	Lost	Unsettled	Despair	Envious
Frustrated	Mixed	Upset	Despondent	Hungry
Impatient	Mystified		Disappointed	Jealous
Irked	Perplexed	<b>Embarrassed</b>	Discouraged	Longing
Irritated	Puzzled	Ashamed	Disheartened	Nostalgic
Miffed	Torn	Chagrined	Forlorn	Pining
Nettled		Discomfited	Gloomy	Wistful
Peeved	<b>Disconnected</b>	Flustered	Heavy-hearted	
	Alienated	Guilty	Hopeless	
<b>Angry</b>	Aloof	Mortified	Melancholy	
Enraged	Apathetic	Self-conscious	Miserable	
Furious	Bored		Unhappy	
Incensed	Closed	<b>Fatigue</b>		
Indignant	Cold	Beat	<b>Tense</b>	
Irate	Detached	Burnt out	Activated	
Livid	Distant	Depleted	Anxious	
Outraged	Distracted	Exhausted	Cautious	
Resentful	Indifferent	Lethargic	Conflicted	
	Numb	Listless	Cranky	
<b>Aversion</b>	Removed	Sleepy	Distraught	
Abhorrence	Uninterested	Tired	Distressed	
Animosity	Withdrawn	Weary	Edgy	

<sup>11</sup> This list was adapted with permission from: Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, 3rd Ed, Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2015, p. 45, nonviolentcommunication.com.



## Needs<sup>12</sup>

### **Autonomy**

Choice  
Dignity  
Fairness and justice  
Freedom  
Independence  
Interdependence  
Space  
Spontaneity

### **Connection**

Acceptance  
Acknowledgment  
Affection  
Agreement  
Appreciation  
Authenticity  
Belonging  
Care  
Closeness  
Communication  
Communion  
Community  
Companionship  
Compassion  
Consideration  
Consistency  
Cooperation  
Empathy  
Friendship  
Honoring  
Inclusion  
Intimacy  
Kindness  
Love  
Mutuality  
Nurture  
Partnership  
Power  
Presence  
Recognition  
Respect  
Security

Self-acceptance  
Self-connection  
Self-respect  
Shared reality  
Sharing  
Stability  
Support  
To know and be known  
To see and be seen  
To understand and be understood  
Transparency  
Trust  
Warmth

### **Honesty**

Authenticity  
Integrity  
Presence

### **Meaning**

Accomplishment  
Awareness  
Celebration  
Challenge  
Clarity  
Competence  
Consciousness  
Creativity  
Discovery  
Effectiveness  
Efficiency  
Expression  
Grieving  
Hope  
Integration  
Learning and growth  
Loss  
Mourning  
Participation  
Perspective  
Presence  
Purpose  
Self-expression

Sensory stimulation  
To contribute  
To matter  
Understanding

### **Peace**

Balance  
Beauty  
Ease  
Equality  
Equanimity  
Faith  
Harmony  
Inspiration  
Order  
Peace of mind  
Solitude  
Space  
Tranquility

### **Physical well-being**

Air, food, shelter, water  
Comfort  
Confidence  
Exercise  
Physical movement  
Pleasure  
Rejuvenation  
Rest and sleep  
Safety, security  
Self-care  
Sexual expression  
Touch

### **Play**

Adventure  
Excitement  
Fun  
Humor  
Joy  
Laughter  
Relaxation

<sup>12</sup> This list was adapted with permission from: Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, 3rd Ed, Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2015, pp. 54-55, [nonviolentcommunication.com](http://nonviolentcommunication.com).

**At home** Returning to the examples from the table in the activity section on page 56, use the Feelings and Needs pages and practice communicating beliefs or opinions through “I-statements” that identify feelings and needs.

Example of observation without evaluation...	Potential feelings	Potential needs	“I-statement” using feelings and needs
Maria averaged 25 points in her last five games.			
Five of the six students were looking at phones while the teacher was speaking.			
I think she will arrive late.			
Jayden gave the man sleeping outside money.			
Alan, a friend of mine who works at the local homeless shelter, said the shelter is short of funding and their food bank is low.			
Our educational system relies heavily on standardized testing for evaluation, which was very difficult for my son who did not get good enough scores to go to college.			



## Blessing: Blessing That Undoes Us<sup>13</sup>

On the day  
you are wearing  
your certainty  
like a cloak  
and your sureness  
goes before you  
like a shield  
or like a sword,

may the sound  
of God's name  
spill from your lips  
as you have never  
heard it before.

May your knowing  
be undone.  
May mystery  
confound your  
understanding.

May the Divine  
rain down  
in strange syllables  
yet with  
an ancient familiarity,  
a knowing borne  
in the blood,  
the ear,  
the tongue,  
bringing the clarity  
that comes  
not in stone  
or in steel  
but in fire,  
in flame.

May there come  
one searing word—  
enough to bare you  
to the bone,  
enough to set  
your heart ablaze,  
enough to make you  
whole again.

<sup>13</sup> "Blessing That Undoes Us" © Jan Richardson from *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*, Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015, pp. 172-173. Used by permission. janrichardson.com.



# Session 8: Dignity

Peaceful practice: Consider power dynamics.

## Biblical reflection: A time to talk and a time to act

Mark 11:15-19

*Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, “Is it not written,*

*‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’?  
But you have made it a den of robbers.”*

*And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.*



**Is it not written,  
‘My house shall be called a house of  
prayer for all the nations’?  
But you have made it a den of robbers.**

The peaceful practices offered throughout this curriculum are meant to provide useful support for engaging with one another across difference. We do this work because we believe it is a faithful embodiment of our call as Christians. The story of Jacob’s wrestling reminds us of the importance of inviting God into our conflicts (session 1) and the story of Pentecost teaches us that the Holy Spirit is found in difference (session 2). In part, we dialogue because it is faithful.

We also dialogue because it creates change. Conversations and vulnerable storytelling have the possibility of changing hearts and minds, a fundamental and constant ambition of the Christian life. We are working to build the kingdom of God on earth, following Christ’s example. In his life and ministry, Jesus did a lot of teaching (dialoguing) with others that led to transformation. Much of his ministry was communicated through parables. He was constantly found in conversation with the scribes and Pharisees, discussing interpretations of the law and teaching new ways of understanding.



He also engaged regularly with those on the outskirts of society. In other words, he hung out with the “out crowd.” His conversations, parables and teaching were calls to radically alter the ways the church offered healing to the world. Jesus’ ministry begins with a clear announcement that the kingdom of God has a preferential option for the poor. In Luke 4:18-19, he stands up in the synagogue and reads these words from Isaiah 61:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

This is not only an announcement of his Messianic identity, but also of the nature of the kingdom of God. It is an upside-down kingdom.

As we consider dialogue, then, we must also consider the context of any given conversation, so that our dialogue is an authentic representation of the kind of kingdom to which Jesus calls us. No dialogue happens in a vacuum; context matters. Issues of power and privilege cannot be separated from conversation. They are ever-present experiences woven into the contexts in which conversations takes place. What does it mean to dialogue while embodying the upside-down kingdom? What is the role of dialogue when someone’s speech is belittling the dignity of human beings made in the image of God? Is there a place for dialogue in the presence of oppression, persecution, hatred and injustice? Healthy dialogue requires that we **consider power dynamics**.

Engaging in dialogue looks different for everyone, especially because of the power dynamics at play. Having conversation with “the other” should never be forced, especially when individuals or communities are being discriminated against or otherwise denied social power. The reality is that dialogue is a bigger risk for some people than for others. It can harm some people more than others, because society harms some people more than others, specifically groups that have been historically marginalized.

### GOING DEEPER

Read *The Little Book of Biblical Justice* by Chris Marshall for more study on the stories and message of justice throughout the Biblical narrative.

When it came to questions of injustice, Jesus did not waiver from acting. The story of Jesus clearing the temple is perhaps one of the most striking stories of Jesus confronting systems of injustice. The picture we get is less of a dialogue-friendly teacher and much more of an action-oriented protester. This perhaps is because the scenario at the temple was especially oppressive to the marginalized. It was an issue of systemic injustice.

The temple was the primary center of political power in the city. When people journeyed to the temple during festivals and pilgrimages, they would have to pay a tax. As such, it would have been common to have money changers outside the temple, exchanging cash for animals from visitors. For those already oppressed by a system of heavy taxation, such as the poor people of Judah, the additional tax to enter the temple was debilitating. The money changers outside the temple took advantage of this. They likely offered loans or exchanges for various animals, but the doves, which are specifically named in all four gospel stories, “would have been the primary sacrifice brought by the poor, who were routinely exploited by the systems of the religious aristocracy at the temple.”<sup>1</sup>

In this sense, when Jesus turned over the tables and blocked people from carrying anything through the temple, he was engaging in an act of nonviolent resistance and protest. He disrupted the patterns of oppressive practices in which everyone was seemingly engaged. His actions did not hurt anyone, but

<sup>1</sup> Corey Farr, *Clearing the temple courts: What Jesus did about systemic injustice*, Corey Farr blog, May 30, 2020, accessed Feb. 8, 2021, [coreyfarr.com/post/clearing-the-temple-courts-what-jesus-did-about-systemic-injustice](https://coreyfarr.com/post/clearing-the-temple-courts-what-jesus-did-about-systemic-injustice).

they made a big statement, so much so that it upset the leaders enough to finalize a plot to kill him. Not exactly a dialogue.

So, how do we balance reconciliation-oriented dialogue with action-oriented justice-building? Following Christ's example, we do both. We neither engage in dialogue solely, nor do we avoid it completely. The key is understanding the systems of injustice present when we do practice the bridge-building approach of dialogue. This means recognizing some of the risks of dialogue. As with anything, if we do not consider the power dynamics at play in a dialogue context, there is risk of doing harm. Our story helps us highlight a few risks to recognize, as follows.<sup>2</sup>

- Dialogue as a substitute for action.** As demonstrated in sessions 3 (Jesus teaching on conflict), 5 (Jesus dialoguing with the Samaritan woman), 6 (Jesus teaching about listening) and 7 (Jesus teaching about judging), much of Jesus' ministry is filled with dialogue. But his dialogue is not without action. Luke tells a story of Jesus healing a crippled woman on the sabbath, even as he discussed it with the leader of the synagogue.<sup>3</sup> John tells of a blind man whom Jesus also heals on the sabbath, again while maintaining conversation with the Pharisees.<sup>4</sup> Christ's model of dialogue is not one that throws all the eggs in the dialogue basket. It is one of multiple ways he works to grow the upside-down kingdom of God on earth. Dialogue cannot replace action.
- Assuming false symmetry.** When there is a disequilibrium of power, assuming equal power increases inequalities. Power differences need to be named and addressed rather than swept under the carpet. In highlighting the exchange of doves, Jesus was calling attention to the inequalities present in the system. It was an exploitation of the poor to assume symmetry with those who could exchange larger animals, such as sheep and cattle, for the temple tax. In any dialogue we engage in, recognizing the inequalities present and addressing them rather than ignoring them is essential.
- Ignoring conflict issues.** It can be tempting to ignore the conflict at hand by trying to find places of agreement without acknowledging the deep differences and conflicts present. Jesus cuts to the chase in his temple clearing by using Scripture to call out a corrupt and exploitative system which he called a "den of robbers." Healthy dialogue *must* address the deep conflicts at hand if it is to be a successful movement toward transformation.
- Delegitimizing non-participation.** As stated earlier, not everyone has to engage in dialogue in the same way. Remembering back to the Conflict styles matrix in session 4, sharks and turtles can be appropriate ways to respond to conflict. They play essential roles, protecting themselves or others in situations of potential harm. As Jesus models in this story, action-oriented response is also appropriate. There are many ways to create change. When dialogue delegitimizes those who are not able or interested in engaging in the dialogue, it works against itself and creates more harm than good.

If we are going to engage in dialogue, we must be aware of the context, including the systems of oppression and injustice that are present in and around our conversation, as well as our location in them. Large social and structural dynamics are always present in interpersonal conversation. The ways we dialogue need to honor the dignity of all, especially of those most affected by systems of injustice. Much like the ministry of Jesus, there may be different moments for different ways of engaging. Dialogue is a valuable tool for embodying and growing the upside-down kingdom of God. But it is not an end-all. It is one significant component of the transformative work the Spirit can do through us in the world.

Psalms 85:10, translated directly from Spanish, says that "truth and mercy have met together; justice and peace have kissed." The kingdom of God brings all these pieces together – the action-oriented justice-building and the dialogue-oriented peacebuilding. Together, they change the world.

<sup>2</sup> This list draws from: Jonathan Kuttub and Edy Kaufman, "An Exchange on Dialogue," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol 17, No. 2 (Winter, 1988), University of California Press on behalf of the Institute for Palestine Studies, pp. 84-108, accessed Feb. 8, 2021, [jstor.org/stable/2536865](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2536865).

<sup>3</sup> Luke 13:10-17.

<sup>4</sup> John 9:1-34.

## Questions for discussion

1. Do you tend more toward dialogue or action? How do you decide when to dialogue and when to engage in justice-building action?
2. How have you witnessed power imbalances affecting dialogue? How have you seen dialogue equalizing or further distorting power imbalances?
3. What are other potential risks of dialogue causing harm and how might they be remedied?
4. Is there a place for dialogue in the presence of oppression, persecution, hatred and injustice? What are ways to address these realities in dialogue settings?

## Tool: The Dugan Nested Model<sup>5</sup>

In session 3, we discussed the necessity of going deep into what is underneath interpersonal conflict. Reflecting on the context in this session, we must also go broad into the systems in which our conflict takes place. It is important to realize the ways that our interpersonal dialogue is ideologically structural in nature.

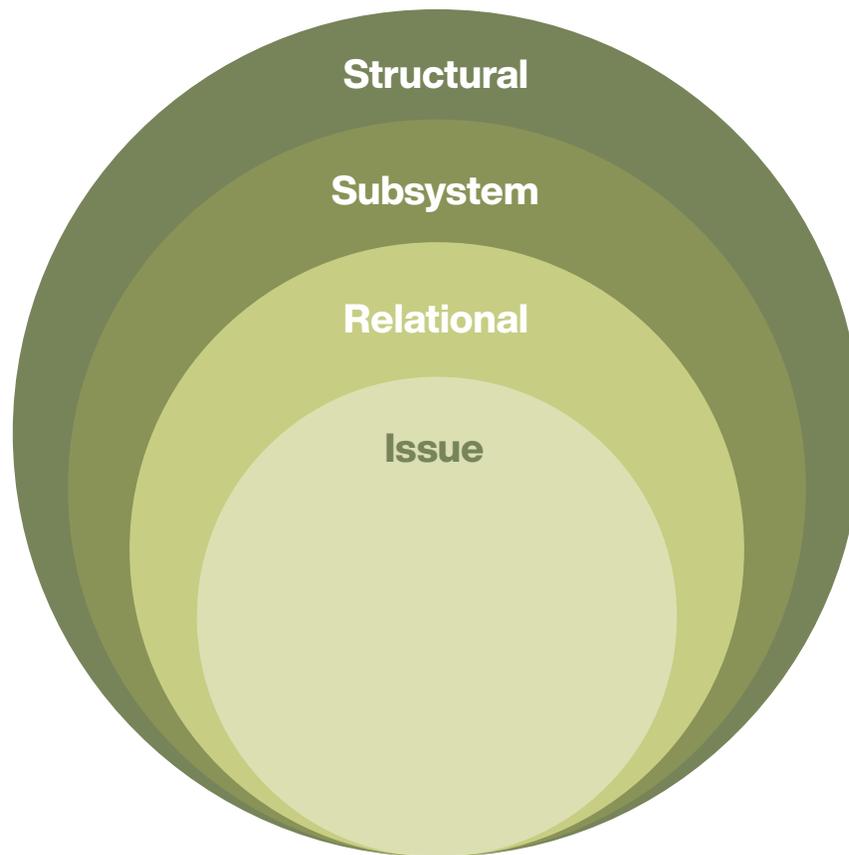
Máire Dugan created a model for analyzing the context in which a conflict takes place. The model provides four levels in which a conflict manifests itself. The first level is the issue at hand, the specific event or encounter that creates a visible and known conflict. The second level is the relational level, which takes into account the direct relationships that are impacted by the conflict. The third level is the subsystem, which refers to the small-scale systems in the communities surrounding the conflict. These subsystems have rules and practices that shape the experience of a conflict. Examples of the subsystem level include church denominations, educational structures and organizations.

Lastly, the final level is the structural level, which refers to the large-scale system that permeates every aspect of the context in which a conflict takes place. The structural level is often difficult to see in the specific event. It encompasses the cultural practices and norms that dominate behavior. Examples of the structural level include dynamics of gender, race and ethnicity, economics, age, religion and more.

### DIRECTIONS

After studying the model on page 67, ask for a few examples of conflicts that people have experienced in which they can identify the larger, structural issues at play.

<sup>5</sup> Máire A. Dugan, "A Nested Theory of Conflict," *A Leadership Journal: Women in Leadership – Sharing the Vision*, Vol 1, July 1996, accessed Feb. 8, 2021, [emu.edu/cjp/docs/Dugan\\_Maire\\_Nested-Model-Original.pdf](http://emu.edu/cjp/docs/Dugan_Maire_Nested-Model-Original.pdf). Used with permission.



## Activity: Peace or justice?<sup>6</sup>

It is common to see the words peace and justice together – and rightfully so. Following Jesus’ model, the work of peace and the work of justice are intertwined, and both are fundamental components of the upside-down kingdom of God. But which comes first? Although dialogue is not an exact and full definition of peacebuilding, it is an essential component. As you consider the ways you engage in dialogue (as modeled by Jesus) and/or in resistance (also as modeled by Jesus), it can be helpful to reflect on the relationship between peace and justice.

### **DIRECTIONS**

Divide into two groups, combining those who identify primarily with peace in one group and those who identify primarily with justice in the other group. As a group, discuss and answer the following questions as if you are the value your group identifies with (Peace or Justice).

When the groups are finished, select one volunteer from each group to embody the personas of Peace and Justice as if on a talk show. One nonbiased individual should play the role of Host and interview the two personas – Peace and Justice – based on the questions provided. Make this playful as Peace and Justice interact with one another.

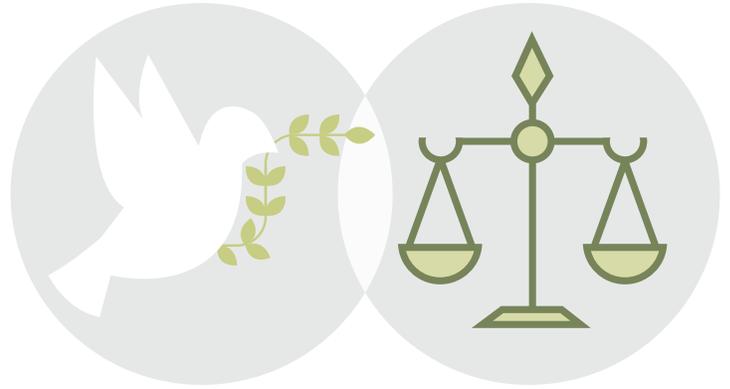
<sup>6</sup> Adapted with permission from John Paul Lederach, *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians*, Harrisonburg, Herald Press: 1999, pp. 167-172.



## Peace or justice?

### Questions

- When conflict arises, what do you want to see happen? If there are multiple steps, what comes first and what comes last?
- What are you most concerned about in the midst of conflict?
- In the middle of a conflict, what do you ask those involved to do? What do you require?
- What is your relationship to the other persona (Peace or Justice)? What is easy about working with them and what is difficult?
- Who comes first in order of importance – you or the other persona? Why?
- What do you most fear about the other persona?
- What is a song, quote, motto or Scripture that would help others to understand who you are and what you're about?
- Can you exist without the other persona? What other values are necessary for your existence?



**At home** Using Dugan's model, write down a specific experience of conflict in the "issue" circle you've had with another person. Spend time reflecting on that conflict and try to fill in the contextual levels surrounding the conflict – relational, subsystemic and structural (these terms are defined on page 66). Does this analysis of your conflict change the way you see the conflict? How might this conflict be addressed in ways that consider the context in which it is taking place?

## Blessing: A Prophet's Blessing<sup>7</sup>

This blessing  
finds its way  
behind the bars.  
This blessing  
works its way  
beneath the chains.  
This blessing  
knows its way  
through a broken heart.  
This blessing  
makes a way  
where there is none.

Where there is  
no light,  
this blessing.  
Where there is  
no hope,  
this blessing.  
Where there is  
no peace,  
this blessing.  
Where there is  
nothing left,  
this blessing.

In the presence  
of hate.  
In the absence  
of love.  
In the torment  
of pain.  
In the grip  
of fear.

To the one  
in need.  
To the one  
in the cell.  
To the one  
in the dark.  
To the one  
in despair.

Let this blessing come  
as bread.  
Let this blessing come  
as release.  
Let this blessing come  
as sight.  
Let this blessing come  
as freedom.

Let this blessing come.

<sup>7</sup> "A Prophet's Blessing" © Jan Richardson from The Painted Prayerbook. Used by permission. [paintedprayerbook.com](http://paintedprayerbook.com).



# Session 9: Transformation

Peaceful practice: Welcome creativity.

## Biblical reflection: Church process

Acts 15:1-12

*Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.”*

*The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”*

*The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.*



**And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.**

The peaceful practices outlined in this curriculum offer strategies for engaging difficult conversations. Such conversations arise in all kinds of settings – at the holiday dinner table with extended family, in the workplace with colleagues, in the daily disputes at home. Our churches are also filled with conflict. Whether we name the underlying tensions or not, there are bound to be differences of opinion, and even belief, in our sanctuaries.

Many times when we think of church conflict, we envision major division, church splits and outside mediators. External facilitators for severe conflict are, indeed,

an important option to consider in such conflicts. This session does not attempt to address severe conflict in a congregation. However, talking about issues that we disagree on, together as a congregational or church body, is something we can practice. Hopefully, by doing so, we can address small conflicts in constructive ways before they turn into large, destructive conflicts. *Peaceful Practices* can help congregations create a culture that affirms and invites dialogue amid difference, as individuals put into practice the skills outlined in these sessions.

It is helpful, then, to imagine potential structures and processes that are useful for group dialogue. Good process makes a big difference. Naming a purpose, establishing norms and providing a structure to guide tense conversations in group settings are essential to productive dialogue.

Acts 15 tells a story of how the early church worked through a significant conflict. As the church was expanding, it began reaching and including Gentiles – people who had been on the outside of the movement until then. Followers of Jesus no longer only included individuals from the same cultural fold. Significant differences of practice existed, which led to conflict. The conflict in Acts 15 specifically names the difference of belief and practice regarding circumcision. Although not a current point of dogmatic disagreement, at the time circumcision was a major source of controversy because salvation was implicated. (In the end, aren't many of our arguments about salvation?)

The conclusion the church comes to at the end of their dialogue process is significant. However, before we look at *what* they decided, we can learn a lot from examining *how* they decided. While not an exhaustive list, the dialogue process implemented by the early church in Acts 15 offers key aspects (outlined below) of good process that we should consider applying when approaching our own community conversations.

Consider power dynamics. One of the most significant aspects of this conversation is the way it shifts power. The process that takes place in Acts 15 establishes a new creed – Gentiles are welcomed into the fold of the church, formally.

The initial conflict was raised when “certain individuals” were teaching the necessity of circumcision for salvation, and Paul and Barnabas got into an argument with them. Paul and Barnabas were allies to the Gentiles, engaging with them in their own territory and making space for their experiences in the church. At some point in the conversation, they realized the necessity of getting more voices involved, so they set off for Jerusalem to discuss the question with the elders and the apostles. They went to the center of power to challenge the status quo of who is in and who is out in the institutional church.

Significantly, it was not only Paul and Barnabas who went, however. They took with them “some of the others.” Although the text is not clear on who “the others” were, some have suggested that they were Gentiles, those most impacted by this discussion. If true, Paul and Barnabas not only acted as allies to welcome the Gentiles, but they also widened the conversation to include the voices of those being excluded.

One of the most important and initial questions in thinking about designing a process for constructive group conversation is, “Who should be involved?” This question needs to be considered specifically in light of the power dynamics at hand. Who previously has been excluded from the conversation? Often, healthy process requires amplifying the conversation by putting more chairs at the table to better represent the breadth of diversity in a group. Welcoming difference (as discussed in session 2) by getting multiple perspectives involved from the beginning creates a space where individuals feel represented and want to engage. In this sense, addressing power means getting more voices involved both in the designing of a dialogue as well as in the dialogue and decision itself.

**Take the necessary time.** We can read the story of Acts 15 in a matter of minutes, which removes us from reality of how much time this process likely spanned. Lest we forget, Paul, Barnabas and the others traveled to Jerusalem on foot. They stopped at least in Phoenicia and Samaria, preaching and telling stories (15:3, printed above). This was far from a fast process. Healthy conversation takes time because conflict is complicated. Transformation doesn't happen overnight.

**Pick the right place.** The conflict in Acts 15 required Paul, Barnabas and the others to travel to Jerusalem. This was necessary because they wanted to consult with the apostles and the elders, and that dialogue could not happen just anywhere. The space in which a conversation takes place influences the conversation. The question of location



is important to consider. This, too, implies power dynamics. What does it mean that Paul and Barnabas had to travel to access the decision-makers? When is it appropriate to go to the centers of power for conversation, and when is it important to intentionally hold conversation in places on the margins? There is not a one-size-fits-all answer, but the question is applicable to all dialogue processes.

Even logistical considerations of lighting, snacks, orientation of chairs, size and location of tables, windows, decorations and more, all play into the “mood” of a conversation. Spaces can invite participants to engage and they can turn participants away. Consider the location and space when organizing a group dialogue.

**Manage polarities.** Good process works to bring people together. When Peter stood up in Jerusalem and spoke to the apostles and elders, he deconstructed the common “us and them” narrative. Peter exposed the ways that groups which were perceived to be opposite actually had commonality. Healthy conversations provide opportunities for participants to engage their whole selves (remember the daisy exercise from session 2) and find similarity with the other, much like the touching icebergs below the surface in session 3. This means creating a process that encourages participants to go beyond positioning and get below the surface to identify their values and needs, drawing them together rather than apart. It is important to consider how the structure of a conversation offers avenues for people to move toward one another.

**Center storytelling.** Key to the conversation in Acts 15 is the testimony of Paul and Barnabas, telling of the signs and wonders that happened in their ministry. They gave firsthand witness to how God was at work among the Gentiles, which helped provide a framework to the possibility that the Holy Spirit could move beyond the Jewish community. Frankly put, they were telling stories. Storytelling is a foundational piece to healthy dialogue in conflictual issues. Stories help us see the humanness of the other. Good process includes establishing ways for individuals to connect to one another’s personal experiences through sharing stories. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the same structure will not work for everyone. Providing various forms for participants to share their stories and perspectives will create more effective dialogue.

**Welcome creativity.** It seems obvious that Peter’s monologue was significant in the conversation of Acts 15. To truly credit Peter’s part in the overall dialogue, however, we must look back at what he is referencing. Peter reminds those in the synagogue that he had been chosen by God to deliver the good news to the Gentiles. This is a direct reference to the vision he received from God as outlined in Acts 10. Peter experienced a visit from the Holy Spirit in the form of a dream, an entirely different medium of discovery than the wordy arguing taking place among the synagogue leaders. By naming this, Peter is calling them to the creative catalyst of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is exceptionally creative, moving in different ways that we often only can imagine. The best group dialogues are those that generate space for creativity to flow, because they help open us to the transformative power of the Holy Spirit.

“  
The Holy Spirit is  
exceptionally creative, moving  
in different ways that we  
often only can imagine.”

Creativity is required for all of the steps mentioned above. Creativity enhances our ability to think outside the box and design conversation spaces that get more people involved and challenge “us vs. them” thinking. It helps us create the right kind of atmosphere where we approach time with patience. Storytelling is a form of creativity. Often, good group process will include elements of doodling, drawing, playing with playdough, music, poetry, prayer and more. This is not to distract the participants or simply to keep nervous hands busy. These are creative elements that help engage the right side of the brain, which enhances engagement and

opens possibilities. **Welcome creativity** in process design so that everyone is able to learn and have fun as you dialogue.

When group dialogue includes all of these aspects, we have the possibility of seeing and understanding new ideas. Through the process outlined in Acts, the early church moved into a radically new understanding of itself and its mission. The Holy Spirit's presence was understood in the midst of their conflict, and it transformed the church. This is the ultimate goal. Divisive conflicts and contradicting perspectives have the potential for transformation if we are intentional and creative in bringing people together to dialogue, guided by the Holy Spirit.

We can do this – in our families, workplaces, churches and beyond. The peaceful practices outlined in this curriculum are small steps, but they can help launch us into brave spaces of transformative conversations. At the very least, let's have fun trying.

## Questions for discussion

1. What are your experiences of “group dialogue” (this could be in your family, congregation, workplace or other)? What were the key components of that dialogue process?
2. What creative elements would you appreciate in group conversations? What practices could make dialogue “fun” for you?

## Tool: Possibilities for group dialogue<sup>1</sup>

The following is a small taste of methods for holding group conversations. These explanations are brief and do not give in-depth descriptions of each process. Any group conversation should additionally establish guidelines, as referenced in session 1. They are meant to serve as a catalyst for understanding the breadth of options that exists when considering organizing a group conversation.



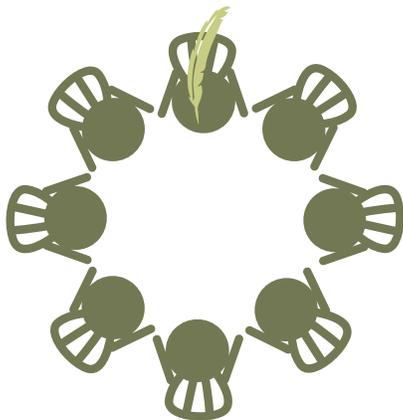
### GOING DEEPER

*The Little Book of Cool Tools for Hot Topics* by Ron Kraybill and Evelyn Wright is a wonderful tool for looking at these and other processes in more depth.



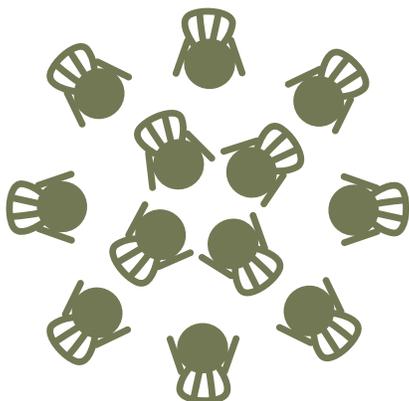
#### Circle of allies

- Everyone stands in a circle.
- A participant steps into the circle and makes a statement.
- For anyone with whom this statement resonates, they also step into the circle (acknowledging their agreement), but do not speak.
- Continue until everyone has had a chance to make a statement.



#### Circle process

- A process originating from ancient traditions of Native American people that combines with contemporary concepts of democracy and inclusivity.<sup>2</sup>
- The group sits in a circle.
- The leader or “circle keeper” begins with a focus statement or question.
- A talking piece (“an object passed from person to person in a group and which grants the holder sole permission to speak”<sup>3</sup>) is passed around the circle, giving everyone a chance to speak.
- Anyone may pass at any point if they wish.
- Participants may only speak when they have the talking piece.



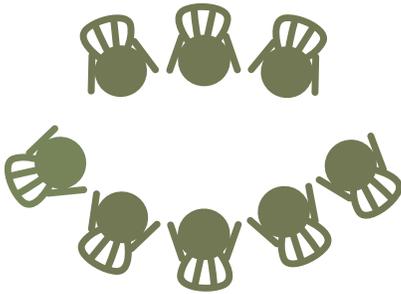
#### Fishbowl

- A group sits in a circle and has a conversation while the rest of the group sits around them listening.
- Only people in the inner circle may speak.
- Often multiple groups participate in the inner and outer circles. Groups can be divided in different ways, such as: sex, age, experience, etc.
- Conversation may happen naturally in the inner circle without much direction from a facilitator.

<sup>1</sup> Ron Kraybill and Evelyn Wright, *The Little Book of Cool Tools for Hot Topics*, New York, NY: Good Books, 2007, pp. 49-55, 61-67.

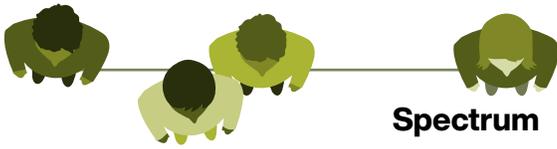
<sup>2</sup> Kay Pranis, *The Little Book of Circle Processes: A New/Old Approach to Peacemaking*, New York, NY: Good Books, 2005, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 3.



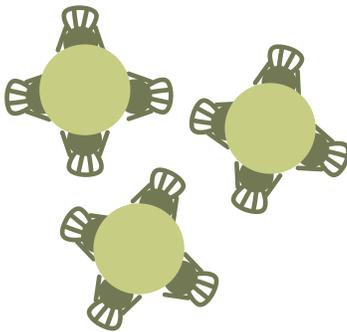
### Samoan Circle<sup>4</sup>

- A small group of people have an extended conversation in the presence of a larger group.
- The small group is seated in a semi-circle in the front. The larger group is seated in a semi-circle facing the small group.<sup>5</sup>
- One person is appointed to represent each of the views on the issue. They have a seat in the small semi-circle at the front and remain there the whole time.
- Additionally, two empty chairs are placed in the small semi-circle.



### Spectrum

- Name two polarized ideas and have participants physically stand where they place themselves on a spectrum between the two furthest points.
- Let participants reflect on why they stood where they stood by sharing their thoughts with the rest of the group.



### World Café

- Groups of four sit at small tables with snacks, drawing materials, drinks, etc.
- Each small group has a conversation around the same questions for 15 to 20 minutes, establishing one round of conversation.
- At the end of each round, three people get up and move to other tables.
- One participant stays at the table and begins the next conversation by giving an overview of what was discussed at that table previously.
- Focus questions often change with each round.
- A time for sharing back core ideas as a larger group, sometimes called a “harvest” or plenary, happens at the end.

<sup>4</sup> The source of the name is unclear. Some say it is a loose reference to the Pacific Island group called Samoa while others say it was derived by facilitators in Chicago wanting an interesting name for their process design. See “Samoan Circle,” *National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation*, Dec. 24, 2008, accessed March 2, 2021, [ncdd.org/rc/item/1439/](https://ncdd.org/rc/item/1439/).

<sup>5</sup> This can also be set up with a small, inner (full) circle and a large, outer (full) circle.



## Activity: Make a plan<sup>6</sup>

Groups do not need to be in major, overt conflict to have healthy dialogue across difference. The peaceful practices offered in this curriculum are not only individual – congregations can collectively strengthen their dialogue muscles by finding ways to practice together.

### DIRECTIONS

For this final activity, take time to imagine what a conversation could look like in your congregational or group context. Divide into small groups to outline a preliminary plan for a conversation. Consider the questions below as you plan. When the small groups have had enough time to outline a basic proposal, come back to the group and share with one another. Consider choosing a few of the proposals to implement with your congregation. Assign a small group to carry each proposal forward, organizing the preparation and implementation of the conversation. **If you would like support in this step, contact Jes Stoltzfus Buller, MCC U.S. peace education coordinator.**

- What topic might you discuss?
- How could you involve diverse voices in the planning and in the conversation?
- What are potential risks involved and how might you address them?
- Referring to the tools provided, which option calls your attention and how might you implement it?
- Brainstorm potential prompts or questions for the dialogue process.
- Where could this conversation happen?

<sup>6</sup> The eight peaceful practices are provided in the form of table tents as an additional tool for congregations wanting to use them as a set of guidelines for congregational conversations.

- How will you introduce creativity into the conversation?
- What is a rough timeline of how you could prepare, execute and evaluate this group conversation?

## Blessing: At the Edges of Our Borders<sup>7</sup>

At the edges of our borders  
you wait,  
and at our territorial lines  
you linger,  
because the place where  
we touch  
beyond our boundaries  
is where you take  
your delight.

And when we learn to read  
the landscape of our fears,  
and when we come to know  
the terrain of every sorrow,  
then will we turn  
our fences into bridges  
and our borders  
into paths of peace.

<sup>7</sup> "At the Edges of Our Borders" © Jan Richardson from *Night Visions: Searching the Shadows of Advent and Christmas*. Used by permission. janrichardson.com.











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