

HOW TO FOSTER DEEP LISTENING AMID POLITICAL DIFFERENCE

Honest conversation about all matters, even politics, must be part and parcel of a Christian response to daily life, say Sarah Stewart Holland and Beth Silvers. Holland and Silvers came to this view after extensive dialogue over their own differing political views. Holland, a liberal, and Silvers, a conservative, knew each other as sorority sisters at Transylvania University in Kentucky, and later began having Facebook discussions after the 2016 presidential election. They now co-host a podcast called “Pantsuit Politics” in which they hold “grace-filled” discussions about politics, democracy, and values they hold dear.¹

What Can Churches Do?

Yet churches in our time confront a dilemma not faced by many previous generations: the divided nature of American culture. It affects how congregations order their life in worship, fellowship, study, and community outreach. Though church and state remain separate in American society, what happens in our divided society spills over into church life. How can churches and church leaders navigate the tricky waters of political difference without harming relationships in the process?

Hold a deliberative forum to explore options for churches engaging a divided society. Deliberation is a style of conversation that considers issues in depth in a group setting, employing careful listening to others for better understanding. “The Church’s Role in a Divided Society,” a guide developed by church leaders and the Kettering Foundation, outlines three options for churches with regard to political differences: 1) “the church as refuge,” which asserts that churches should focus more on spirituality and faith than social issues, 2) “the church as mediator,” which asserts that the church should actively engage the differences that people bring in order to gain a better understanding, and 3) “the church as prophetic

voice,” which holds that the church only lives out its mission by becoming an agent of change to improve society. Convene a group of church members to carefully explore the benefits and drawbacks of each option. The goal is not to change minds but to explore the value commitments of congregants in a way that deepens understanding.²

What if it is not possible to convene in person? One model developed by Kettering is centered around texting and online polling to forge consensus around difficult public issues. In this model, called Common Ground for Action, a moderator with a computer convenes a group in widely dispersed locations to deliberate through texting. Participants, anonymous to each other, exchange opinions throughout the event, and the moderator conducts online surveys before, during, and after the meeting, displaying results in graphic form in real time. More recently, Kettering has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by



“AT THIS CHURCH, WE FOCUS ON SPIRITUALITY RATHER THAN SOCIAL ISSUES...SO, LET’S PRAY THAT GOD WOULD HEAL YOUR OBVIOUS CONFUSION ABOUT EQUAL RIGHTS, IMMIGRATION, AND GLOBAL WARMING.”

offering Zoom versions of the in-person deliberative forum, using texting and surveys for participants to state opinions about a topic and using Zoom to talk through the issues.³

Preach about a pressing social issue, invite small groups to explore the issue further, and then give a sermon in response to the dialogue. This “sermon-dialogue-sermon” model offers a “dialogical lens” for preaching and Scripture interpretation. The pastor begins by introducing an issue in the first sermon and, instead of taking a stand, explores the issue in its complexity, considering a wide range of voices. Later, small groups of diverse individuals engage the issue in more depth, brainstorming three approaches to the issue and then weighing the pros and cons of those approaches. The final sermon offers a “communal prophetic proclamation” that expresses the different perspectives that were explored in the group, the shared values that it revealed, and possible next steps the group could take to move forward on the issue.⁴ If it’s not possible to meet in person, hold discussions after the worship service via Zoom, using a feature called “Breakout Rooms” to break one large group into subgroups of three or four persons.

Offer the online course, *Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace: Guide to Civil Discourse for Groups*. This resource, released in 2020 by The Episcopal Church’s Office of Government Relations and its Department of Faith Formation, is available online for free. (The course is also available for individuals.) The five-part curriculum covers: civil discourse in context, tenets for civil discourse, values-based conversations, the complexities of policy, and sacred space for debate. The purpose of the course is to help anyone engage with others who hold a different view in a dialogue about the values that underlie these opinions. Each part utilizes three to six video lectures that are from five to seven minutes in length and are designed to support a fifty-minute class session.⁵

A Spiritual Imperative

The desire to assemble and debate are not only central to the American experience, they are integral to the Christian faith as well. As Holland and Silvers acknowledge, “love of the neighbor” implies not demonizing them, whether over tax policy or reproductive rights, and “turning the other cheek” implies

not using the community of likeminded individuals as a base to launch attacks on those who disagree. Likewise, being “the hands and feet of a loving creator” means not opting out of issues like roads and bridges, school curriculum, or war and peace. Agreement over how to structure community life cannot be had without conversation. In Holland and Silvers’ words, “Learning to have healthy conflict with each other over political challenges is of utmost importance; in fact, it is a spiritual imperative.”⁶

Other Resources

Judy Apps. 2019. *The Art of Conversation: Change Your Life with Confident Communication*. West Sussex, UK: Capstone.

The Listen First Project seeks to bridge social divisions “one conversation at a time” by partnering with a variety of businesses, schools, and other organizations to sponsor conversations that teach better listening. <http://www.listenfirstproject.org/>

Better Angels works to reduce polarization between conservative and liberal Americans and build alliances through Red/Blue workshops and ongoing partnerships between workshop graduates. <https://www.better-angels.org/>

Amanda Ripley, “The Least Politically Prejudiced Place in America,” *The Atlantic*, March 4, 2019, describes the upstate New York city of Watertown, centering on a longtime friendship between two Presbyterian women with differing political views. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/03/watertown-new-york-tops-scale-political-tolerance/582106/>

1. Sarah Stewart Holland and Beth Silvers, *I Think You’re Wrong (But I’m Listening): A Guide to Grace-Filled Political Conversations* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2019).

2. Resources available at Baylor University Public Deliberation Initiative, <https://www.baylor.edu/pdi/index.php?id=966987>.

3. “CGA and Zoom Technologies: Deliberation in the Era of COVID-19,” Maura Casey, June 6, 2020, Kettering Foundation, <https://www.kettering.org/blogs/cga-and-zoom>.

4. Leah D. Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).

5. <https://www.churchnext.tv/library/instruments-of-peace-a-guide-to-civil-discourse/109671/about/>.

6. Holland and Silvers, 2-6.