

Opportunities for Collaboration

In August of 2017 I reached out to local pastors in Angola, IN, the community in which I serve as pastor, asking if they wanted to partner together to address, from a faith perspective, issues of justice in the world around us. I was not sure myself where this invitation might lead, but I knew I wanted to do something collaboratively with other churches to help engage people around issues they were seeing on the news and thinking about in their homes.

From that e-mail, I received four affirmative responses. The Catholic and Episcopal priests and Methodist and United Church of Christ pastors said that they were open to exploring what we might do together. When we gathered, I invited people to start by sharing what in the world broke their heart. I personally shared the disconnect I saw between people, the bitterness shared toward others in the public sphere, and the ways that we lacked ways of engaging one another in thoughtful and caring ways. Those present echoed this issue, but also shared other concerns that they had. One was concerned about the opioid crisis specifically and substance abuse in general. One was concerned about the issue of immigration (in the summer of 2017 the news had just covered the separation of families at the border). One was concerned about the environment and the health of the world. One was concerned about shootings in schools and the fear they saw teachers in their congregation expressing about going to work and the possibility (that was floated around at that time) about them carrying firearms.

Once we had a chance to share our various concerns, and affirm our support for one another in seeing this issues as important for us to work on and discuss together, we talked about what we might do to engage our respective communities around these issues. This is where the process of deliberative dialogue came into play. We benefitted greatly from having issue guides that the National Issues Forum Institute (NIFI) created around these issues (we used “Energy Choices” for the environmental concerns and the one on Mass Shootings to deal with the issue of shootings in schools, though that guide was broader than that specific issue. Of course the process of dialogue itself addressed my personal concern of having people connect and relate to each other). We found it incredibly helpful to not have to invent the wheel on the issues at stake and how to engage people in conversation around these issues. Since we used the NIFI issue guides as the basis for our discussion, a secular community group also participated in the discussions alongside the churches involved.

As a way to help people connect these conversations with their faith, we also had ecumenical prayer services, focused on the issue of each day, before the dialogue started (this way people could choose to come to just the dialogue or do both, which allowed the secular community group to be an official partner of the dialogues). These worship services are available to use, or modify, at <https://sites.baylor.edu/baylorpdi/faith-deliberation/deliberative-liturgies/>.

We had a dialogue once a week for the month of August. People consistently shared how meaningful they found the conversation to be and appreciated the opportunity to have a space to share both their thoughts/concerns around the issue and hear from their neighbor. As leaders, I think we found solace in saying this was an effort of multiple churches, and that each of the subjects came from one of the pastors. This both helped to create interest in the dialogues as a

way of supporting our collaborative work together and it helped us as leaders engage in hosting risky conversations because we were taking the risk together.

At the end of the four weeks, people kept asking when we would be doing something similar again. I had said throughout our meetings that our true goal was the development of relationship and seeking greater understanding of our neighbors. I shared that if we could have honest and forthright conversations about difficult issues, then we could learn to have honest and forthright conversations about any issue. I think those who came were pleasantly surprised to find that it was not a difficult or intimidating thing to join together for conversation, but was a true delight to get to know others in the community and better understand those around them. The process certainly helped our faith communities, and faith leaders, grow closer together!