

## Genesis of Work with Deliberative Dialogue

Before I learned about the deliberative dialogue process or the wealth of resources available through the National Issues Forum Institute, I heard an interview with Rev. Dr. William Barber II. In this interview, he made the comment that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s main goal was to put love into the public sphere. I was particularly gripped by this comment and saw it as the primary function of the church of Jesus Christ. We have the story of a God who so loved us that God entered our human existence, suffered, and died to offer life to all. It is this level of love that I find myself, as a pastor, called to share, not just with the congregation I serve, but with the world.

When I think about the information widely promoted and shared in the public sphere, love is not the first word that comes to mind to describe it. Often, it seems fear and anger motivate our messages about, and toward, one another. Our best standard in the public sphere seems to be neutrality, objectivity, but not love. I wondered about how the church might inject love into such a public and what that might look like.

It was as I was pondering such questions that I came across the deliberative dialogue model and Rev. Dr. Leah Schade's work around how these dialogues might be used within the context of preaching and congregational life. In the deliberative dialogue model, I found a way to gather people together to talk about issues of public concern in respectful and loving ways. In these conversations, we seek not to be right, but to be in right relationship with those at the table. While the goal of the conversation is deliberation, to discern what next steps we might take around a given issue, it is not to come up with the one "right" answer that will solve the problem once and for all.

Through this process, we have to recognize that there are trade-offs of our decisions, consequences of what we would seek to do, and we must weigh those trade-offs against the benefits we perceive from those actions. When these conversations happen within the context of faith, I encourage participants to think about what actions the love of God would lead us toward, and how this love is for all present at the table.

In my experience with this process, people have responded very positively. I have found that people are craving for honest and open conversation that helps them better understand their neighbor, regardless of how they may concur or differ around issues of public concern. Through this process, the value of the people present is affirmed and the merits/tradeoffs of each option is discussed. In short, I have found the deliberative dialogue process to serve as a bridge between communities of faith and the public sphere. This process helps us think together (within congregations, between congregations, and among communities) about how we might lift up shared values, shared concerns, and ways that we can work on the given issue together.

Personally, I see the value of this process as one that brings people together and allows them to form relationships with one another. These relationships are what we need if we are going to meaningfully address the issues of our society. In my understanding, we can have the greatest idea, the greatest solution, but without love for one another, it will ultimately fail. We need to find ways to relate to one another, to care for one another, if we are going to find ways to work

together for peace and justice in all the earth. Deliberative dialogue is not in and of itself a cure-all, but I think it creates space, and a process, for people to begin to associate their values with the issues of our day, and do that alongside neighbors of varying backgrounds and ideas. It's not the final step, to be sure, but it has been a helpful first step in an ongoing process to put love in the public sphere.