

Module 2: Generative Dialogues across Difference or What is healthy dialogue and why is it necessary?

(OPENING: Prophets or bridge-builders)

(use music To Everything Turn Turn Turn <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fHvf20Y6eoM>
Through the first stanza ... to reap)

FIRST TEACHER:

Voice: There are times we may be called to be prophets to admonish and predict doom

SECOND TEACHER

V. And then there are times we are called to be prophets who nurture and build bridges

THIRD TEACHER

V. We are often called to be both.

FOURTH TEACHER

V. Prophets who render judgment draw stark lines in the sand and make clear distinctions between those on different sides of that line. Sometimes, living our religious faith requires speaking truth to power, no matter the cost, no matter who is hurt or offended

[Image: words in black, foreboding, slowly emerge as speaking:

Thus says the Lord God: I will pronounce my judgments on my people because of their wickedness in forsaking me Jeremiah

FIRST TEACHER

V. When prophets are Bridge-builders, they avoid judgment in order to create connections and hope: They show how lines that may appear to be fixed can, in fact be changing and malleable. They show how many of us can find a place – can find at least some truth -- on both sides of the line. Sometimes, living up to our religious ideals requires seeing that ascertaining truth is a collaborative journey, a shared experience, and effort to reach out and embrace other rather than flying solo espousing an absolute, immutable truth..

(Text image warm, hopeful, slowly emerge as speaking:

I will betroth you to me forever;
I will betroth you inⁱⁿ righteousness and justice,
inⁱⁿ love and compassion.
I will betroth you inⁱⁿ faithfulness,
and thus you will know God Hosea

As prophets, we may be called to be both. In this module, though, we will focus on bridge-building. How can we learn from those with whom we passionately disagree? How can we create a collective process that helps us come closer to universal truths? How can we create a vibrant congregation able

to dig into difficult issues? Everything you learn in this session you will be able to bring back to your congregation, your community, your colleagues, to help them better engage as people of faith in civil dialogue and democratic values.

(VISUAL: A STAIRCASE OR DOORWAY OR OPENING LEADING TO BLINDING LIGHT)

SECOND TEACHER

V. We believe entrances to holiness are everywhere and we imagine difficult conversations in the community you lead that can provide holy moments and sacred spaces. To do this, we must be able to see each individual, each human being present, to be an image of God – and that God is more present when each person is worthy of infinite value, recognizes the infinite equality of all people.

(text on screen: **And God created the human being in God's image Genesis**)

V. An ancient Jewish parable speaks of a mortal king who stamps coins with his image and each one looks exactly the same. But God stamps humans in the divine image and each one is unique. The more uniqueness in the world, the more we honor and cherish human diversity, the more God will be present in the world.

V. This is a core principle that will need to be actualized for dialogue to work.

THIRD TEACHER

So let's begin imagining together healthy and vital conversations about issues that matter. As a leader in your congregation, you know that there are issues on which your congregation does not fully agree – in fact, there could be issues on which you are deeply divided. This module is about how to take those differences and turn them into generative possibilities. We begin with some material that will help you set-up the session. Then, we have created a step-by-step teaching session that you can follow as you lead a generative dialogue with your congregation.

FOURTH TEACHER

V. First, let's move to the building-blocks of the excellent conversations you will be able to lead. We need to think about the session and plan in advance. Consider the following:

(each bold face can then go on the screen as the words are described)

1. **Mission and Purpose –**

V. These conversations are not just for fun. There are real life and death issues out there beyond the walls of the congregation. You want to help people think about what they seek to do or change in the world, what is their mission and what this community's mission is all about.

2. **What do you need to foster conversation? and engagement to accomplish your goals. Think about who will be in the room, what burdens and pains they carry, how do you help those who cannot listen and how do you help those who are silent find their voices.**

3. **We bring all of ourselves into the conversation – and we expect those we have invited to join to do the same. It is crucial that I know who I am and that others can be known, even if they say something that makes me uncomfortable or even if they are someone who makes me uncomfortable.**

4. **What causes anxiety? about bringing people together to deal with difficult or controversial or even divisive issues? What makes you anxious and how can you prepare yourself for the**

conversation? Think of the religious language you could use to make everyone feel that they have a place in the room.

INTERVIEW CLIPS

FIRST TEACHER: Voice

How do you go about setting up a communal dialogue? Well, there are valuable technical steps as well to take to help create and nurture conversations that will lead to constructive civic engagement you hope to see. We want to offer them to you in this section:

1. **Clarify the purpose** – You need to think about this in advance, asking and listening to congregants, to your denomination and other leaders in your community, and to feel the pulse of what is happening in America and around the world. This will help people know what the parameters will be of the conversation. It cannot just be your own agenda.
2. **The invite** – you want to remind them of their religious as well as their citizen responsibilities, their civic engagement and that it is important to hear everyone’s voice, to know that each voice matters. This church or synagogue, mosque or temple, is large enough to embrace the issue or issues we are facing.
3. **Room set-up, thinking about the space, is very important.** If you can, avoid the pulpit, which for many represent authority and power.
4. **Think about the opening, the welcome** – what can you say to create a safe space in the language of your community, in the idiom of your faith? Language matters. Think hard about translating the public issues into the context of the religious lives of your community. Why not have a large poster in the front of the room that says
(VISUAL A POSTER WITH THE FOLLOWING WORDS)

BEFORE YOU – NEXT TO YOU – BEHIND YOU IS AN IMAGE OF GOD. ACT ACCORDINGLY

SECOND TEACHER

(Text on screen) THE KEYS TO DIALOGUE: MINDSETS AND BEHAVIORS

V. NOW, let’s think about the ways we have been taught to engage others. Perhaps you were on the debate team. Perhaps you learned that you must win all arguments and demolish the other. We feel that to connect better with others, we will be forced to change our behaviors.

V. For healthy dialogue to work, we need to rethink the ways we engage and help those we serve do the same.

V. One way to begin is to practice “active listening”. To listen deeply to others, to be unafraid of “walking in their shoes” for a moment and perhaps to paraphrase back to them what they are saying. Active listening is an important skill.

THIRD TEACHER

V. Active listening is a change in behavior. Before we can change our behaviors, we have to change our mindset or our thinking. It is very hard to deeply listen to someone else if you feel that that person is 100% wrong. Why would you put the energy into listening to someone from whom, you believe, you have nothing to learn?

V. That is why we suggest starting with your mindset, not your behavior. To create a generative dialogue, you have to at least consider the possibility that the other person knows something you don't know, has some piece of the puzzle that you do not and that you really need. And, with complex public policy issues, that is usually the case. It's hard --- or, more likely, impossible -- to have the full picture.

V. So, the most generative mindset for generative dialogue with someone with whom you passionately disagree is: There is a good chance that this person knows something I don't know. If that feels hard, try: There is a 5% chance that this person knows something that I don't know. (And if even that feels hard, go down to 1%).

(screen images 5%? 1%?)

V. Then put all your energy – for the moment – into exploring that possibility.

V. But mindset is just the first step. Behaviors are important as well. Deep listening is important. So is asking questions to draw people out. But just as important is your ability to articulate your own viewpoint, being able to advocate for your own perspective.

V. So to engage others in healthy dialogue, each of us must know who we are and what we bring with us to the conversation. My identity – actually, my many identities - matter; I carry them wherever I go, with everyone I encounter, sometimes one part of me is more apparent, other times, a different part of my identity emerges. I am the many identities that intersect within me.

FOURTH TEACHER

V. So let's try an activity:

V. Take out a way to make notes – pen and paper, tablet, etc. Now, write down 10 ways to answer the question Who Am I? in whatever ways feel right for you. You'll have three minutes for this. You won't have to share the full list with anyone else; that is for you.

V. Once you have finished your list, do a go-round in which everyone reads one item from their list. Do a second, third and maybe fourth go-round. Then move into the next exercise. Of course, you can pass if you wish.

(USE THE PAUSE SIGN)

V. HELPING PEOPLE KNOW WHO THEY ARE, WHAT THEY BRING to the conversation, is very important. It allows for self-reflection, greater self-awareness and perhaps even some modesty.

(Video clips)

FIRST TEACHER

V. There are some core principles that are the bedrock of creating and sustaining healthy conversation in any community setting. We begin with these principles, which could even be written on posters around the room:

(on the screen) CREATING A GENERATIVE DIALOGUE: CANDOR, CURIOSITY AND COMMITMENT

V. For generative dialogue, we think that participants have to bring three excellent qualities with them: candor, curiosity and commitment.

(image) Candor:

V. Be honest about what you are thinking and feeling. Voice your perspective. At the same time, name it as your perspective, not as The Truth: “It seems to me...” “What is coming up for me is...” “I was taught....”

(Image) Curiosity:

V. Tap into your curiosity about what others believe. Inquire. “Could you tell me more about...?” “What has led you to feel this way?” “I have such a different perspective – would you be willing to explore with me how we each got to what we believe?”

(Image) Commitment:

V. Stick with the conversation despite strong emotions or feelings of discomfort. Stick with the conversation even if you know you will not resolve the debate or come to closure.

V. Keep the three C’s – Candor, Curiosity and Commitment - in mind and encourage everyone to make sure they understand – you may even post them around the room.

SECOND TEACHER

V. Here is another way to think about healthy and vital dialogue on critical and often contentious issues: Once the conversation begins, you will need to encourage everyone – yourself included to remember these five principles of active, generative engagement with each other:

(have visuals of these words grow)

1. Stay engaged.
2. Expect discomfort.
3. Speak your truth with modesty.
4. Hear others’ truths with openness, curiosity and generosity.
5. Expect non-closure, we cannot resolve it all

INTERVIEW CLIPS OF SUCCESSFUL DIALOGUE

THIRD TEACHER:

V. We would like to model a shortened version of a process of engagement, a way to structure healthy dialogue and honor what we share and the ways we disagree. As you watch this short vignette, think of the elements that make this work well – and also ways you may want to restructure

this specifically for your community. Please think about the elements that make the dialogue work, where perhaps you would do things differently. Then we will ask you to actively put this all together.

Dialogue Clips

FOURTH TEACHER

V. Okay, now it is your turn. Pick a topic that you know is controversial in your congregation or in the small group assembled here. Then have a go-round in which each person gives his or her opinion about that topic. Try this technique to keep anyone from dominating: give each person one minute and have a timer that goes off and signals the end of the time.

- 1) : As the group goes through this process, try to do your best to listen deeply to each person and ask others to do the same; especially those with whom you disagree.
- 2) : As each person speaks, try to identify one thing – a thought, a phrase, an image, an aspiration -- that you can connect with. Do your best to find some iota of common ground with each participant.
- 3) : Go around the room and identify at least the one thing with which you connected with each person. Make sure to say that if someone just can't do it, they can pass.
- 4) Now go around again; this time each person names one piece of common ground (however small) with at least one person with whom they strongly disagree.
- 5) Please stop the exercise after 20 minutes even if you are not finished with all the steps

PAUSE

FOURTH TEACHER (CON'T)

Now, debrief the experience: As a group, consider these questions:

- a. How did it feel to give your own perspective? What emotions came up for you?
- b. How did it feel to listen to others? To try to find common ground with others?
- c. What helped you listen? What got in the way?
- d. What helped you identify common ground? What got in the way?
- e. Could you remain true to your identity and still find common ground?
- f. And now, how much were you able to follow the principles taught here? Were you able to internalize the learning, use the tools?

V: Please take five minutes to do this debriefing

PAUSE

FIRST TEACHER:

V. Sometimes you feel that dialogue is worthless, that nothing will make a difference, that bridges cannot be built to overcome the polarization, that dialogue cannot change the world. We believe it can. As a religious leader and a champion of civic engagement, and it can start with you.

SECOND TEACHER

V. For those who had the toughest time with finding common ground: Is there a 5% chance that someone you disagree with knows something you don't know from which you could learn? How would it feel to explore that 5% possibility? How could seeing others this way enrich your community?

THIRD TEACHER

V. In America today, and in our democracy, we believe that we must create pathways to dialogue to overcome the deep polarization. As we see over and over again, when there is pain, when there is tragedy, and when there is joy and a sense of national purpose and accomplishment, many Americans turn to their churches and synagogues, mosques and temples.

FOURTH TEACHER

V. And that's why we believe it is of the highest purpose for you to be a bridge-building prophet, sometimes even building on the 1 or 5%, because the settings in which you serve are not only entrances to holiness. They are also entrances to bring images of God together, to do good, to help repair a broken world.

