

•
•
•
•
•
•
•

Church Planter Network Resource

Dialogue

• • • • • • • • • •

The Lost Art of Dialogue in Church Life



Gerald Raynor

The art of dialogue has been lost in a modernistic world where getting to the bottom line as fast as possible is of premium value. The value in dialogue is taking the time for participants to come to a common understanding with one another. This may be the skill needed for the body of Christ to come together in unity.

As the New Testament church emerges in Acts, we see the local expression of church meeting house to house. What was the nature of churches meeting in houses? How does one meet in homes? Central to first century church meetings was an architecture where everyone was facing one-another. Jesus was always central to everything that happened.

The church, when meeting, would be characterized as open. Dialogue as a communication style where everyone was sharing their experiences with one-another from their daily activities. The first century Christians knew how to small talk. Sharing was common to the culture. Church meetings were an open forum where everyone had an opportunity to add to the common meaning or just ask questions. Paul was careful to remind the Corinthians to take their turn and meet with order. Obviously, everyone was so excited to contribute that they were competing for their turn. Today's church, by contrast, is a series of meetings where the people of God come to hear from one individual who has prepared a lesson for the day. Time is never allowed for a coming together of minds and hearts.

Dialogue is not something new. The ancient Greeks held dialogue in high esteem. This may well have been the setting Paul found himself in at the Areopagus on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17). Dialogue over new ideas would have been a common practice. Also, tribal peoples over the world, such as Native Americans, have long revered dialogue. Ellinor and Gerard say, "dialogue is artful

conversation crafted through focusing of attention, attitudes, and behaviors that support open authentic inquiry. The art of dialogue is a living, interactive process. It is shaped by, and shapes those who engage in it. The craft of dialogue is fluid.”ⁱ

Dialogue comes from the Greek “dialogos”. Dia means “through.” Logos means “word” or more broadly “meaning.” David Bohm suggests it means “a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us.”ⁱⁱ The spirit of dialogue wants to create shared meaning. It is inspired to create something new which would not have been possible with any other composition of participants. In dialogue, no one is trying to win. Dialogue is the coming together of different opinions without trying to defend one’s own opinion. Shared vision can only happen with dialogue. Without it, what is perceived as a shared vision is only a vision espoused with a lot of compliance surrounding it.

The other avenue one can take in conversation is discussion. By comparison, discussion is always aimed at winning. It has the same root meaning as “percussion” and “concussion.” There is a breaking apart of analyzing which happens in discussion. Discussion is essential for decision making. Dialogue, however, is the building block for productive discussions. A group which learns the difference between the two and when and where to use each will maximize their potential to reach unity and learn together. The object of discussion is win-lose. Someone’s point is taken at the sacrifice of another’s opinion. In dialogue, everybody wins because everyone is learning together.

There certainly isn’t anything more powerful in the life of a congregation than a truly shared vision. If there was a single purpose for dialogue, shared vision could be it. We must give up the traditional view that shared visions are announced from higher up the institutional ladder or that organizational planning produces them. Vision does not become shared until it touches an individual’s personal vision. Building shared vision is a never-ending process. The practice of

dialogue is necessary to achieve a sharing of a vision.

Shared vision grows out of the merging of personal visions. Dialogue helps individuals form teamship or partnership by bringing the best the Father has within them together. If people don't have their own visions then they merely "sign up" in compliance with little or no real commitment. Dialogue can afford people the opportunity to express their dreams and to listen to the dreams of others. A shared vision takes time to emerge and requires considerable conversation over time.

Why do we need dialogue in our lives, not only at church but all around us? Ellinor and Gerard, pages 166-171, show us some common conversational patterns and values at the work place. These are common even in church life. This chapter of their book is quoted here because it is important for us to visualize what we lack without dialogue.

"How we talk with one another is fundamental in our ability to think and learn together and make appropriate decisions. What follows is a collection of brief descriptions of some prevailing beliefs, values, and behaviors that shape conversations in organizations. They are intended to bring to mind real-life memories of conversations you have been part of and start you thinking about what is needed to create powerful conversations that support collaborative thinking and learning.

And the Curtain Rises on Yet Another Day at Work

It's all about being right! We come to meetings to advocate our answers, our agenda, or to determine whose agenda we should adopt in order to be in the favored camp. Learning from one another through the exchange of ideas is not the top priority. There is always one best answer; you win when it is yours and lose when it is not. Challenging questions demonstrate strength. Revealing a lack of knowledge is a sign of weakness.

In search of agreement, not input. Leaders often arrive for the meeting with a solution or destination already firmly rooted in mind. If opinions are invited, all those at odds with the leader's solution are met with counterpoints. Integrating new and different perspectives is too much work. Besides, the leader already knows the best way to go; isn't that what she is paid for?

Up the ladder in search of answers. It is safer to look to leadership for answers than to come up with one's own. Many of us will state our opinion only when we know where those in power stand. Leaders are validated for providing answers rather than listening and/or asking questions to help others find their own answers.

Escaping the gray zone. Ambiguity is confusing, uncomfortable, and to be avoided. When an answer is not obvious, there is a high degree of pressure for someone to "make the call" and whoever does becomes responsible. This means gray zones are risk zones. To escape them, we tend to see alternatives as black and white, right or wrong, winners or losers, when in actuality they are not. We may even find ourselves defending a course of action in

the face of all evidence to the contrary.

We are all actors in a play. Though people are much more than numbers, functions, or roles, we come to meetings cast as sales managers, production supervisors, accounts receivable, customer service, marketing, shipping, legal, etc. We contribute ideas and questions from our assigned perspective; we play *our* role and expect others to play theirs. Crossing boundaries into other territories is not often done and can be dangerous. What does a salesperson know about production or vice versa? Roles allow people to focus attention and develop depth of experience in a specific area. They also fragment and limit the scope of what people observe, how they think, even how they are allowed and willing to contribute. A team becomes quite literally the sum of its parts/roles rather than a gathering of multidimensional people. Some teams end up as a functioning whole, others don't. If roles are too restricting, most of us just check out of the conversation. Our bodies are sitting there, but our energy and creativity remain elsewhere. Sometimes you can feel the "Why bother?" attitude in the room.

People are not trusted to make appropriate decisions. Control often substitutes for shared understanding and a feeling of ownership. Without shared understanding, flexibility and decentralized decision making seem dangerous. As a leader you might find yourself challenging decisions you delegated and looking over people's shoulders. Your questions may take on the flavor of interrogation. The relationship between flexibility, responsiveness, alignment, and effective decision making becomes unclear. Willingness to take on and share responsibility diminishes among team members as they decide that it is more efficient "to just go to command central before it comes to them."

You are not like me. We say diversity is a resource, but we often think the opposite: It is a pain in the neck. Are you in or out? Being different is not safe. It can make getting along with others difficult and make authentic conversation seem risky.

Agreeing to disagree. Surely you jest! Sounds good, but in a culture where it's all about being right, and being right requires getting agreement, how realistic is this? Different styles and values tend to become either right or wrong. Most often, agreeing to disagree results in the separation of disagreeing parties or stalemated conflicts, both of which decrease open conversation and collaboration and minimize chances for aligned action. Suspension of judgment and listening are the exception. Questions are aimed at determining who is right rather than in revealing underlying interests to build shared understanding.

There is no time! Reorganization at multiple levels is the rule. Team membership changes day to day, yet you are expected to perform a non-stop stream of tasks, figure out how to integrate new people and create new structures and processes with no more time than you had before. Crisis management rules, and fire fighting is a 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week activity. There is no time to talk about what is important, create shared meaning, and do what it takes to make informed versus reactive decisions. Conversation is totally task focused. Shortcuts are frequently taken to reach decisions. We say we want alternative and innovative thinking, but questions and new ideas are often unwelcome because they require time for consideration. People are either burnt out or edgy and volatile. Conflicts erupt, getting by becomes the norm, and creativity becomes equated with more work.

Why are we solving this problem for the umpteenth time? We "go fast to go fast" and often find we have "gone fast to go very slow." We find ourselves talking about the same problems and challenges over and over because so many of our solutions are single loop in nature. They take into account a change of action but rarely address the beliefs,

assumptions, and motivating values involved. No one is amused when an old familiar enemy shows up yet again at the weekly production/marketing/customer service meeting. “If there is anything we learn from history, it is that we don’t learn from history” can be a disappointing and expensive reality. And still we hurry to the next fix.

Mission/Vision: inspiration or demotivator? Imagine: one hundred top leaders, three days, a very fancy package with video clips, overheads, and multiple modules that you are supposed to present to everyone in the company. And it’s really worse than useless because it’s all based on the wrong questions and the people in the front lines know it. The mission statement tells us what we want to be but never stops to ask why we aren’t that, why we aren’t the best healthcare or manufacturing company around. The vision is too far removed from reality. People are disillusioned, even angry. Often those who are supposed to implement the vision are not even consulted.

Show me the money! The bottom line on the profit-loss statement is the driving force in most organizations. It drives downsizing, almost nonstop reorganization, rapid cycles of hiring and layoffs, mergers, and on and on. You might assume that a focus on the bottom line would provide a common goal for alignment, but it can just as easily create chaos. When the bottom line is the prize, individuals, teams, and even divisions will move into competition with one another at the drop of a hat. Competition for resources and a singular focus on competing goals can rapidly create a house divided and undermine the overall health of the organization.

Values and Conversational Patterns

There are common themes in the images we’ve just described. They are values, beliefs, and assumptions. Though not always spoken out loud, they are indelibly etched in us all by experience and determine the nature and quality of our conversations.

- ◆ Decisions and action create results. Reflection and soak time do not.
- ◆ Attention to relationships and quality are secondary to quick decisions and action.
- ◆ *Agreement = closure and getting on with it* is more important than shared understanding of what is agreed upon.
- ◆ Fast equals efficient equals good. Slow equals inefficient, equals bad.
- ◆ Being right and being certain are strengths. Not knowing is a weakness.
- ◆ Diversity creates problems and is not efficient. Similarity and agreement lead to fast, predictable results.
- ◆ It is better to act as if those in power know best even when they don’t.
- ◆ We all have specific roles and will be evaluated on that basis.
- ◆ Responsibility with power/control is undesirable.

The patterns of conversation that arise from the values and beliefs can be readily observed in our business cultures today.

- ◆ High levels of advocacy with the intention of convincing, persuading, selling.
- ◆ Low levels of inquiry, mostly directed at challenging or validating a position.
- ◆ Little willingness to risk addressing undiscussables or suggesting alternatives different from the majority position.
- ◆ High levels of debate, with occasional chaos and conflict, as people compete to be right.
- ◆ Cutting people off in mid-sentence.
- ◆ High levels of judgment of others’ ideas, styles, interests.

- ◆ Ignoring or denying others' views.
- ◆ Low tolerance for examining assumptions, except as evidence in support of a position.
- ◆ Low tolerance for silence, reflection, or any other activity that is not directed towards closure and action.
- ◆ Listening primarily from an adversarial stance.

None of the above is surprising, nor does it reflect a right way or wrong way to be in conversation. There are advantages and disadvantages to all these patterns, depending on your intention. Conversations are mirrors of the cultures they take place within. The above patterns are in complete alignment with the hierarchical, competition-based, individual-focused cultures that exist in most organizations, at least within the United States. The question that is important for our purpose is: *“What actions would help you create more powerful conversations and support collaborative thinking and learning?”* Rather than mounting a military campaign against current patterns, we suggest creating an environment for dialogue. This will naturally bring forth our inherent capacity for collaboration. Dialogue helps all of us see more of what is present so that we can make more conscious choices about how we talk together, think, create meaning, and take action.”

Christians say they value people. Yet, are not these the patterns and values we see every Sunday when we gather. Is there a problem or are we living in a paradox? Our patterns of thought have been patterned over a long time frame that pre-dates the present generation. These patterns collide with what we say we believe from the Word of God. When we say we believe one thing but act quite differently from it we are in a paradox. Out of a paradox problems can arise. Dialogue can help reveal the paradox in our individual and corporate lives, hence, preventing problems before they happen. Perhaps, this is where covenant forming takes place in the life of a congregation.

Dialogue creates and/or returns us to some new possibilities for congregations. The emerging teaching style for Bible study mimics the preaching style. From a podium an individual expounds on all she knows about a subject preselected by someone with little or no contact with the congregation. With dialogue a Bible study group could make the Holy Spirit their primary teacher and select scripture with addresses their current life situations. The basis for these dialogues could be the Discovery Questions as follows:

1. What did you like best in this passage?
2. What did you like least in this passage?

3. What did you not understand about this passage?
4. What did you learn about God?
5. What do you personally need to do with this passage?
6. Which thought would you take with you?

The distinct advantage of this would be a pattern for Bible study which is highly reproducible. A leader or teacher is not necessary. The most a group would need is a convener. Also, this pattern could more readily lead to shared meaning.

Valuing dialogue could lead to an open worship as compared to the closed style of today. The possibility that the message from the Father could come through several individuals any given gathering time increases with dialogue time. The “Body Life” service of Peninsula Bible Church in the 70’s is an example of openness in worship. Ray Stedman led his congregation to share needs, experiences, and questions openly in their Sunday evening times.

A trend in Baptist life today is toward an elder form of government. Dialogue could take us back to Baptist roots and congregational government. Taking the time to let people share--taking the time for conversation where every one and every thought is valued could lead to not only shared vision but also a new commitment to some old values. Elder-rule is slowly dissipating the business meeting. Many have seen the monthly business meeting as a point of conflict. Maybe this is because the business meeting replaced family meetings. People need time to talk out their frustrations, anxieties, and fears. If not in a structured open meeting they will avail themselves of the dreaded talking in closed small circles where they feel safe to express themselves.

Another new pattern from dialogue could be pastoral leadership, which becomes “dialogic leadership.” William N. Isaacs says, “Dialogic leadership is the term I have given to a way of leading that constantly uncovers, through conversation, the hidden creative potential in any situation. Four distinct qualities support this process: the abilities (1) to evoke people’s genuine voices, (2) to listen deeply, (3) to hold space for and respect as legitimate other people’s views, and (4) to broaden

awareness and perspective. Put differently, a dialogic leader is balanced, and evokes balance, because he can embody all four of these qualities and can activate them in others.”ⁱⁱⁱ

A pastor as a dialogic leader could stand to the side and allow people to take control of their church. People could see the potential Christ has in each and every person. The congregation may more easily depend on the Spirit within than the spirit outside. Dialogue has the potential to open up avenues of the Lord’s leadership that is found in stories of spiritual awakenings.

To practice dialogue in today’s church will require a re-tooling. New seed will have to be planted. New guides for conduct observed. Ellinor and Gerard (pages 65-127) suggest some new skills for us to learn. These skills include suspension of judgment, suspension and identification of assumptions, regarding others as colleagues, listening, inquiry and reflection will require a patient, intentional process on our part.

In dialogue we are trying to create an atmosphere of openness. Being able to suspend our judgments (not do away with) for the sake of listening and learning from one another. The skill to learn is observation of judgments, both our own judgment as well as the judgment of others. As we begin to observe our own judgments it is possible to slow them down so that we are not simply reacting, but can instead begin to think creatively. A new creative thought process would focus on whole pictures while seeing the inter-relatedness and interdependency of the parts that make up the whole. Also a new creative process will give rise to partnerships where both/and thinking can move past the competitive either/or thinking.

Assumptions become a complex form of judgment. It moves past right/wrong, either/or, and yes/no, into deeper realms of our rationale behind the decisions or evaluations we make. We will all be a more effective communicator when we can identify and then suspend our assumptions to enhance our listening and learning. Learning and a need to always be right are incompatible. To

learn requires a relearning of some of our need to be right, to allow new ideas and thought patterns to emerge. Identifying our assumptions requires recognition of the “lenses” we wear. Most of us will need the help of others to see our “glasses.” This can be a deeply personal experience. It challenges to the bone. The challenge, however, is not to give up our assumptions but to be able to suspend them, “hanging them out in front” to gain shared meaning without defending our views or confirm to others. Church gatherings of all kinds need dialogue for shared meaning (covenant) to emerge, which gives us insight into our relations with one another, and with our Lord.

Those who would participate in dialogue must see one another as colleagues with different views (not adversaries) on common quest. It takes a measure of grace to deal with those who have different views as colleagues. It is easy to respond to those who hold different views as a rival who needs to be won over, a contender who are to be fought or an adversary that needs to be attacked.

Another skill Ellinor and Gerard point us to is listening. Communication is not just talking with one another. Listening has to take place. We need to hear what others are saying and not assume we heard because we heard them speak. Dialogue should have listening without resistance. Listening with a willingness to be influenced. To dialogue and reach shared meaning we listen on three levels. First, we must hear what others are saying. This may need some inquiry to go beyond the words spoken. Second, we must hear our self. We can listen in order to build collaborative partnerships. Thirdly, we should listen for a collective theme, pattern, or streams. If there were one voice speaking what would it be saying? The one voice has not always been the voice of God. In the Old Testament it was many times the minority one voice that spoke from the Father. Dialogue among followers of Christ need to take their time together with prayer so that a unified voice could be the voice of the Lord.

Inquiry asks the right questions, while reflection keeps the door open long enough to answers

to come. These skills will help to discover new innovating and perhaps perform interventions. Innovations are discovered by observation leading to inquiry, leading to reflection. This is how Einstein discovered relativity and Newton discovered gravity. Interventions into issues or problems require asking right questions and taking the time for the bottom line to emerge. Church planting is all about inquiry, that is, being willing to go where we have not gone before and seeing the world with new eyes. However, because we are always in a hurry, church planting, or any other activity, can seem like your circling and going no where. Dialogue can create a spiraling upward effect when proper reflection time is allowed. We need to stop occasionally and take note as to where we have come from, where we are going, and not importantly, where we are.

As we move toward dialogue as an integral part of church life, there are some guides that Ellinor and Gerard suggest. These are:

1. Focus on shared meaning and learning.
2. Release the need for specific outcomes.
3. Listen without resistance.
4. Respect differences.
5. Suspend role and status.
6. Share responsibility and leadership.
7. Speak to the group.
8. Speak when the spirit/Spirit moves you.
9. Go live.
10. Balance inquiry and advocacy.

These should not be seen as commands, for that would take us into a rigid, even defensive mode. These are merely some help toward achieving true dialogue.

As we begin to venture into meaningful group conversations we will need someone to help us--guide us, a facilitator. Where will they come from? Most people today in North America don't practice dialogue at work, school, or home. Our future facilitators will most likely come from individuals who see the potential for church life to emerge as a result of Godly dialogue taking place and venture out to train themselves, and lead others to take the time to connect.

The facilitator will have to move deliberately into this new mode. She will have to embrace all we have talked about in this paper. She will have to model what she has come to believe. He will have to find a place where people feel safe to speak out. He has to promote openness. She will try to have all the answers, but will instead spread the responsibility for the group to the group. He will pull together groups realizing that diversity is a resource toward seeing a whole, which is greater than it's parts. She will see disagreement as an opportunity for greater learning and shared meaning.

Who should do this? Pastors could engage with other pastors, deacons, staff, and/or laymen. Sunday School teachers could change from standing up to teach to sitting down to facilitate. Deacons could bring together men's groups and their wives could convene women's groups. Ministry leaders could engage their fellow servants in dialogue about what they are engaged in. Denominational servants could dialogue with one another in preparation to planning. The possibilities are endless. Christians getting together to learn in new ways can create new exciting futures in ministry.

Dialogue is about communicating with others in a way we can learn, grow, and be empowered to move into the future together. It is about partnership. It fosters openness, which leads to trust. Out of trust can come real teamship, yes, and even a sense of family. People need dialogue if for no other reason than to connect in a meaningful way with others. Perhaps James A. Michener said it best in *Chesapeake* when he wrote:

The ultimate source of the Susquehanna River was a kind of meadow in which nothing happened: no cattle, no mysteriously gushing water, merely the slow accumulation of moisture from many unseen and unimportant sources, the gathering of dew, so to speak, the beginning, the unspectacular congregation of nothingness, the origin of purpose. And where the moisture stood, sharp rays of bright sunlight were reflected back until the whole area seemed golden, and hallowed, as if here life itself were beginning. This is how every thing begins – the mountains, the oceans, life itself. A slow accumulation – the gathering together of meaning.”

Notes

-
- ⁱ Linda Ellinor and Glenna Gerard, *Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.), 1998, pg 61.
- ⁱⁱ David Bohm, *On Dialogue* (London: Rutledge), 1996, pg 6
- ⁱⁱⁱ William N. Isaacs, “Dialogic Leadership,” *The Systems Thinker*, February 1999, pgs 1-5