

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Dialogue, discussion, debate, discernment—dos or don'ts for the church?

I'm still thinking about the kind of decision-making processes that John Wesley called "conference" and other Christians throughout our history have called "discernment." Christians have traditionally used such processes for analyzing issues and making faithful decisions about them. I'm still wondering how we might find such a process that would work in today's church meetings.



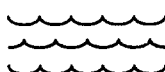
God may be trying to get the attention of church members about this subject. Maybe we need to start looking for God's will in ways that are more likely to find it than our present ways.

A flow of meaning that leads to insight



I often hear church leaders talk about "dialoguing," and urging us to "dialogue." That use of these words grates on me because "dialogue" is a noun, not a verb, and it usually means merely a conversation between two or more voices. However, we may not have a better word for what these church leaders are referring to, so we may have to keep calling it "dialogue." Whatever we call it, it's worth our consideration.

Many people have written about this kind of dialogue in recent years. Peter Senge, a specialist in organizational learning, describes it in *The Fifth Discipline* (Currency/ Doubleday, 1990). He points out that our word "dialogue" comes from two Greek words. One means "flow." The other means "word," or more broadly "meaning." To the Greeks, Senge says, dialogue meant a free flow of meaning through a group.



This kind of dialogue lets a group discover insights that individual members don't see. It lets the

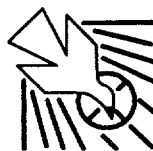
Finding God's yearning for us

In his book *Claiming All Things for God: Prayer, Discernment, and Ritual for Social Change* (Abingdon, 1998), George D. McClain contrasts two ways in which churches can approach group decision-making. One is to ask, "What shall we do?" This, he observes, is a commonsense approach that relies mostly on our own reasoning capacities.



A preferable way, McClain believes, is to ask, "What is God's yearning for us?" However, he rarely sees us asking this. He finds that even though many of us are familiar with traditional Christian ways of asking it—prayer, discernment, Bible reading, journaling, trusted conversation, and silence—we use mainly the planning and administrative methods of the business world instead.

Clearing the obstacles, becoming receptive



McClain, who for many years has been director of the Methodist Federation for Social Action, urges us to use a way "that helps clear our corporate receptivity so that God's yearning may be more keenly perceived and acted upon." Among McClain's suggestions is praying for meetings ahead of time, preferably in the meeting space. Ideally, pray-ers should move around the room, he suggests, praying at the places specific participants will occupy and picturing each one individually in God's light. McClain recommends praying that the space and those who gather in it will be cleared of all obstacles to the free moving of the Spirit.

McClain also urges us to take some time for silence when a particularly challenging issue comes up during the meeting. In this time we express our willingness to let God into the problem. We acknowledge that we are in God's presence. We pay attention to whatever arises within us (scriptures, images, memories, brainstorm?) and acknowledge that it may be coming from God. Then we share it and explore together its possible meaning.



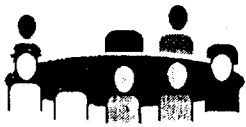
Interceding for our churches' souls

McClain's book includes many other good suggestions that our churches could benefit from. As religious change agents who are called by the Spirit, he observes, "We are called to nothing less than interceding for the souls of institutions." We need to start with our churches.

group explore complex, difficult issues from many points of view. In this kind of dialogue, group members observe their own thinking. They notice where it is faulty. Dialogue lets the group find common meaning that hangs together better than any one member's thinking.

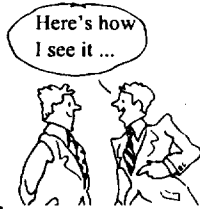


Another helpful description of dialogue comes from Tom Atlee. He founded and directs the Co-Intelligence Institute and has spent years exploring and writing about the dynamics of groups collaborating and communicating. (I'm quoting from his Web pages, <http://www.co-intelligence.org>.) Atlee learned about the kind of process that Christians call discernment, in the Quaker meeting in which he was raised. It was a silent meeting for worship, in which decisions were made by consensus in the presence of the Spirit.



Atlee gives these basic guidelines for dialogue.

- We talk about what is really important to us.
- We really listen to each other, trying to understand thoroughly each other's views and experience.
- We see what we can learn together by exploring things together.
- We say what is true for us without making each other wrong.
- We avoid monopolizing the conversation. We make sure that everyone gets to speak.



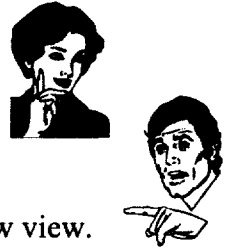
Dialogue is different from discussion

Both Senge and Atlee point out that most conversations are like ping-pong games, with the talkers hitting their solid ideas and well-defended positions back and forth. This kind of conversation is a discussion rather than a dialogue.

Based on the same root word as percussion and concussion, discussion connotes striking, shaking, and hitting. Just as a game's purpose is to win, discussion's usual purpose is to get one's views accepted by the group. Both discussion and dialogue are useful for a group's learning and decision-making, Senge observes.



However, they are different and they serve different purposes.



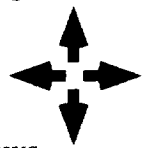
- In a discussion, different views are presented and defended. In dialogue, different views are presented as a means toward discovering a new view.
- When a group must reach agreement and decisions must be made, Senge finds, some discussion is needed. When discussion is productive, it converges on a conclusion or course of action. In a dialogue, by contrast, complex issues are explored. Dialogues diverge rather than converge. Rather than agreement, they seek a better grasp of complex issues.

Dialogue is different from debate

Atlee gives some ways of recognizing dialogue by contrasting it to debate.



- In dialogue, two or more sides work together toward common understanding. In debate, they oppose each other and try to prove each other wrong.
- In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal. Participants listen in order to understand and find meaning and agreement. In debate, winning is the goal. Listening is for finding flaws and countering the other side's arguments.
- Dialogue enlarges participants' viewpoints. Debate affirms each one's own views.
- Dialogue reveals assumptions in order to reevaluate them. Debate defends assumptions as truth.
- Dialogue causes reflection on one's own position. Debate causes critique of the other's position.



- Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of those that were originally proposed. Debate defends one's own proposal as best and excludes all others.
- In dialogue, members are open to being wrong and changing. In debate, they are determined to be right.
- In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other participants' thinking will help to improve it. In debate, one submits one's best thinking

**As iron sharpens iron, one person sharpens the wits of another.
—Proverbs 27:17**



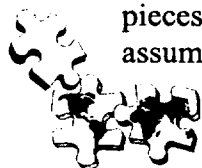
and defends it against challenge, to show that it is right.

- Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs. Debate calls for investing completely in one's beliefs.

- In dialogue one searches for agreements. In debate one searches for differences.

- In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other positions. In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in them.

- Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put those pieces into a workable solution. Debate assumes that one side has the right answer.



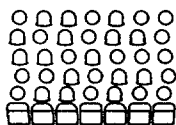
- Dialogue is open-ended. Debate implies a conclusion.

What usually happens at the church meetings you attend? Is it dialogue, discussion, or debate?

Dialogue could be helpful in the church

Dialogue as described here might not be useful for making the decisions our church groups often need to make, but it could help with exploring options to consider.

In considering some issues of belief, dialogue could work and it would be kinder and more productive than the debating and voting we now do. We could simply examine the issues and admit that our understandings differ.



Can we suspend our assumptions?

Among the conditions that advocates of dialogue see as essential, however, are two that I'm not sure we can achieve in the institutional church as it currently exists.

First, temporary suspension of assumptions may be too much to expect in our current systems. In contrast to the main assumptions that influence business organizations and other secular groups, many of the assumptions that influence church decision-making are considered by members to be truth that has come from God. Many church members believe that they can (and do!) know God's will com-



pletely and perfectly. It is spelled out in the Bible, they insist, so there's no reason for any uncertainty or disagreement about what it is. This view makes suspension of assumptions look like sinful denial of the truth.

This view also makes those who hold it sure that they can't learn anything worthwhile from the people who disagree with them. They may even feel that exposure to other views would expose them to dangerous temptation.



This viewpoint apparently rules out what I've been describing here as dialogue. To Christians with this view, debate evidently seems to be the only faithful method for considering issues and making decisions.

Can we really be colleagues?



Second, I doubt that our present systems will let participants regard each other as colleagues rather than opponents or competitors. Colleagues must feel they are working together toward a common goal, and that may be too much to expect in the church. Top church leaders often claim to be colleagues, but their actions often belie those claims.

In our hierarchical church organizations, typical meetings and conversations include powerful people and much less powerful ones. The conversations include bishops talking with pastors whose appointments they control. They include clergy talking with other clergy who are their peers today but can be their supervisors tomorrow, with power to say whether they're sent up or down the appointment ladder. The conversations include lay members talking with church officials who can keep the lay members out of decision-making roles.



I doubt that real dialogue is possible under such circumstances, because differences in power tend to keep participants from putting all their cards on

A church member phoned his pastor to express concern about something that was happening in their denomination. For 30 minutes the pastor stated his views. The member never got another word in.



That's not dialogue. It's a monologue. It's not helpful.



the table. The more powerful ones don't reveal all that they know, think, or feel, because they're guarding their jobs and confidential information. The less powerful ones don't, because past experience tells them that any weakness or doubt they reveal is likely to be used against them.

As Christians we often need to express our real thoughts, feelings, and insights even if we're likely to suffer for it. Few of us, however, will speak frankly unless we feel we can do it without our words being used against us. Unfortunately we can't always count on that in the church.

Too important to give up on

Where does all this leave us? I'm not sure. Surely we can have real dialogue occasionally in small local-church groups. Some regional gatherings evidently succeed in doing it occasionally in small groups. Maybe by making prayerful and deliberate efforts we could even shift from debate to dialogue occasionally in our largest decision-making meetings. We need to try. What's at stake is too important to give up on.

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Dialogue, discussion, debate, discernment— dos or don'ts for the church?

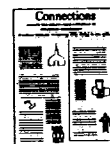
To help dialogue in a small group ...

- Put a chime or gong in the center. When anyone feels the group needs a pause for centering itself, she strikes the gong. All talking must stop til the sound fades.
- Give each person the same small number of pennies. Put a bowl in the center. Each person must put a penny into the bowl when he speaks. No one who has run out can speak again until all have run out.
- Put an object in the center. Whoever picks it up gets the next turn to speak. This can help less dominant, more reflective people who aren't inclined to compete for the floor in a fast-moving competitive conversation.
- Use an experienced facilitator sometimes, to ensure that everyone gets to speak and the talk stays on target.



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