

Beyond “them” and “us” in the church: The power of dialogue

by Robert R. Stains, Jr, MEd

Righteousness feels so good. Especially now, in election season.

When people have a political view different from mine, I take comfort in the fact that they are at least misinformed, probably of limited intellect, and possibly just plain evil. They become a “them,” certainly not like me. And there’s the problem: I think I know. I don’t take the time to ask, to risk an encounter. It’s the same with my deeply-held beliefs in church. It might get uncomfortable. So I keep my opinions to myself and avoid the conversation as best I can. But this has consequences.

My unexamined assumptions drive what I see, hear, think and feel and form the screens that filter the data which shapes the stories I tell myself about “them.”

All communities—including communities of faith—struggle with welcoming difference. Martin Buber said that “all living is meeting,” yet meeting—true, deep, honest, mutual encounter—is often hard to come by, even in the house of God.

In religious communities “Different Others”—especially politically and theologically different others— can be seen as a threat to the integrity of the community, or to the faith. Clergy are sometimes caught between creating an inclusive environment on the one hand and standing up for what they believe and teach on the other. Among the laity, outliers can feel silenced. In recent years, the rightful place of LGBTQ persons and the sanctity of their relationships has been an issue which illustrates this dynamic.

The dynamics of division in the religious community often show the hallmarks of other types of conflicts involving identity, values, and worldviews.

Congregations, like families and other groups, often develop habitual, ritualized responses to perceived threats. People draw distinctions between “them” and “us,” gather support from their like-minded sisters and brothers, and talk less with those with whom they disagree.

As positions harden, conflicts may erupt or simmer under the surface, fostering a polarization or fractionalization of a previously more unified community. Some members

may avoid difficult topics altogether, and some may leave the church. The erosion of trust accelerates. The congregation's ability to move forward in shared mission is increasingly compromised.

Dialogue is one way to stand against the divisive forces of denial and diatribe.

Dialogue invites people to see and examine their assumptions and re-weave the threads of community. It runs counter to the "us/them" binary of dominant approaches to conflict.

Reflective, Structured Dialogue (RSD) is a model for conversation rooted in family systems ideas that was developed by Essential Partners (then known as the Public Conversations Project) in 1989. RSD has been used extensively in sacred and secular communities at local, national and international levels for conflicts ranging from human sexuality in the Church to Hutus and Tutsis living together in post-genocide Burundi.

RSD is a conversation that has mutual understanding as its primary goal. It enables people to tell the stories that underlie their beliefs in ways that enable them to be heard and understood by those who may disagree. We interrupt dysfunctional patterns of communication by listening deeply and helping people prepare for a fresh conversation. We open the possibility of speaking and listening in new ways by structuring initial encounters in dialogue and framing them in collaboratively created communication agreements. We offer dialogic questions which yield new information from the speaker and curiosity in the listener.

As a result, participants move from certainty and caution about "them" to caring, through the curiosity and understanding (not agreement!) that is cultivated by dialogue.

Robert R. Stains, Jr, MEd, is a Senior Associate at Essential Partners.