

AN OVERVIEW OF ESSENTIAL PARTNERS' EARLY WORK ON ABORTION

Our Founding Focus: 1989–1990

The idea for the Public Conversations Project (now known as Essential Partners) occurred to Laura Chasin, the project's founder, while watching a televised debate on abortion.

The moderator's efforts to facilitate an orderly conversation among two pro-choice and two pro-life advocates had been totally ineffective. Speakers on each side had attacked and counter-attacked, and they had interrupted each other repeatedly to disparage their adversaries.

When the moderator lamented, "There's nothing going on here but a lot of noise," Laura agreed, and she mused that she and many of her family therapy colleagues knew how to facilitate constructive exchanges on "hot" conflicts, at least among related individuals.

She wondered whether their approaches could be used to help small groups of unrelated citizens engage in productive conversations on this and other divisive public issues. Laura invited a small group of colleagues at the Family Institute of Cambridge to join her in exploring this possibility.

Out of this small brainstorming group the Public Conversations Project was born.

We began our work by watching several videos of political debates and brainstorming ideas about how those conversations might have been more constructive.

We drew cautious optimism from our clinical experiences. We had seen couples and family members resist chronic patterns of attack and counter-attack. We had seen them open their minds and speak and listen from their hearts. We had seen stale and repetitive interchanges in families become fresh and creative in ways never imagined possible.

We knew that such changes could occur under the right conditions and we set out to discover what such conditions would be in the context of stalemated political issues.

Developing a Model for Introductory Dialogues on Abortion: 1990-1992

In the Spring of 1990, we began to convene small dialogue groups on abortion, inviting our early participants to collaborate with us in learning how to build contexts for constructive conversations on divisive public issues.

Eighteen months later, we had conducted eighteen one-session dialogues. Most of these dialogues took place on weekday evenings at the Family Institute of Cambridge and involved four to eight participants who did not know one another ahead of time.

Several participants were activists but, by design, only two were highly visible leaders. All groups were evenly balanced with people who described them-selves as "prochoice" or "prolife."

By the end of this series of dialogues we felt that we had developed and field-tested a fairly reliable model for opening new ways of communicating on this contentious issue.

In subsequent years we learned that our general approach adapted well to work on other divisive issues—work that resulted in shifts, not shifts in people's deeply held beliefs, but in the way they perceived those who held different views and the way they chose to interact with those who stood on the opposite side of political fault lines.

Media Attention and Diversification of PCP's Work: An Interlude

In the spring of 1992, in the midst of these dialogues, the Supreme Court's Casey decision refocused public attention on the abortion issue. We were discovered by the media.

An interview on National Public Radio and a nationally syndicated column by Ellen Goodman brought us attention from across the country, and we greeted this attention with mixed feelings.

On the one hand, we had reached a point where we had something substantial to offer: an effective model for an opening dialogue between people with radically different perspectives on abortion.

On the other hand, we knew we had only taken our first step. In the wake of media attention, most of our energy went into responding to the requests of those who approached us, few of which involved the abortion issue.

During the next two years our efforts in relation to abortion were confined to writing articles on our first round of abortion dialogues and Laura Chasin's participation on the Steering Committee of the Common Ground Network for Life and Choice.

Responding to Clinic Shootings: Five Streams of Activity: 1995-1998

On December 30, 1994, John Salvi, a pro-life activist entered two women's health clinics in nearby Brookline, Massachusetts and opened fire, killing two clinic workers. Almost immediately, Governor Weld and Cardinal Law issued joint calls for common ground talks between activists and an end to inflammatory rhetoric.

At that time, we were the only people we were aware of in Massachusetts who had any track record of promoting an alternative kind of conversation on this issue. In addition, we had maintained good relationships with the five dozen Massachusetts participants in our 1990-92 abortion dialogues, which gave us considerable access to, and credibility with, activist networks on both sides of the issue. Well positioned to build on the fruits of our prior efforts, we initiated five streams of activity in the following months:

- Introductory Dialogues: A Second Series
- A Training Program for Prochoice/Prolife Facilitation Teams
- The NewGround Network, an ongoing forum designed for "graduates" of the introductory dialogues interested in opportunities for sustained dialogue and collaboration
- A Confidential Dialogue involving pro-choice and pro-life activists
- The Abortion Dialogue Handbook (in preparation).

These five activities were strategically linked with the goal of depolarizing the climate surrounding the abortion controversy in the Greater Boston area. The introductory dialogues served as "feeders" for the development of the NewGround Network and the training of bipartisan facilitators expanded the circle of people who had the ability to facilitate these important dialogues. In addition, we began to write a Handbook which others could use to convene dialogues on abortion in their own communities.

Introductory Dialogues on Abortion

As indicated in the Overview, PCP's initial forays into developing formats for dialogue involved convening and facilitating a series of eighteen single-session dialogues on abortion. Over the course of this early work (1990-92), we developed a reliable model for facilitating constructive conversations among small groups of people who self-describe as "pro-life" or "pro-choice."

We decided to return to our work on the abortion controversy in the wake of the Brookline clinic shootings December of 1994 and in response to the subsequent call issued by Cardinal Law and Governor Weld for a reduction in inflammatory rhetoric and for "common ground" talks. From December, 1995 to April, 1998 we conducted a second

series of ten single-session dialogues on abortion, each with about 6 participants. This second series of introductory "citizen" dialogues on abortion comprised the grassroots component a multi-faceted initiative to improve the climate surrounding abortion in the Boston area. Each of the ten sessions that we convened was observed by or facilitated by one of three "bipartisan" facilitation teams whom we trained in 1995.

We were pleased to learn that the dialogue format that we developed in 1991-1992 had stood the test of time. The introductory dialogues in both the first and second series were notable for the heartfelt manner in which participants shared their stories and perspectives, the way they listened to each other and expressed curiosity about each other, and the extent to which they reported having been invited into deeper reflection on their own beliefs. The dialogues were also notable for the minimal need for intervention by facilitators. We attributed this to: 1) our careful preparation of participants (through a phone call and a letter); 2) the sturdy structure we offer (through the proposed ground rules and the format) and 3) the carefully worded questions we pose which are specifically designed to discourage the old debate and foster a new conversation.

In follow up calls, almost all participants expressed satisfaction with the experience and indicated that stereotypes they had brought to the dialogue—in some cases unconsciously - had been softened. Many participants told us about ways in which the dialogue experience had - or would in the future - alter the way they interacted with people of different perspectives. Quantitative evaluation of the dialogues indicated that participants came away giving less credibility to the media's portrayal of people who hold opposing views on abortion.

The model we developed for the introductory dialogues is described in several of the articles posted on this site. A Handbook is in preparation for those who want detailed written materials and step-by-step guidance in convening and facilitating dialogues on this issue.

Training Facilitation Teams

In the flurry of activity that followed the Brookline shootings, we decided to develop a small pool of trained facilitators to increase our capacity to convene citizen dialogues and to assess the potential of a facilitator training program as a vehicle for building community among those who hold different views on the issue.

Trainees began by participating in an introductory dialogue on abortion which was facilitated by the instructors. In subsequent meetings, trainees were introduced to the premises that inform our work and the practices that express it, as exemplified by all of the dialogue's stages. Participants also explored their pre-existing facilitation strategies

as well as the role changes that would be demanded of them as they made the transition from performing their accustomed professional tasks (leading a therapy group or mediating a dispute, for instance), to facilitating a dialogue on abortion.

Finally, each bipartisan team 1) conducted pre-dialogue interviews; 2) facilitated dialogues while being observed by the rest of the class; 3) observed dialogues from behind a one-way mirror; and 4) conducted follow-up interviews.

Videotapes of the dialogues were used as a basis for discussion in the group supervision sessions that followed each dialogue. After these sessions, we explored with participants their further training needs and planned subsequent sessions accordingly.

The six trainees rated the training program highly. Among the elements they cited as having particular value were: 1) the "hands-on" approach; 2) the class review of the videotaped sessions; 3) the evolution of the trainee group into a cohesive and collaborative group that offered its members valuable support and feedback; 4) the instructors' attention to detail; and 5) the instructor's respectful style of interaction as exemplified by their openness to feedback and their modeling of curiosity about and respect for different perspectives. The participants in the sessions they facilitated found them to be effective in setting a safe environment, helpful during the session, and unbiased.

The extended training described here is no longer being offered at PCP; however, elements of it can be incorporated into customized training for groups that wish to convene dialogues on abortion. Training programs on PCP's general approach and practices are offered regularly in locations around the country.

The NewGround Network

Like the introductory dialogues and the facilitator training program, the NewGround Network (NGN) was initiated in response to the Brookline clinic shootings. The NGN was envisioned as a continuing forum for "graduates" of the introductory dialogues who were interested in opportunities for sustained dialogue and collaboration. It was comprised of a group of ten members who generally met monthly. Meetings lasted about three hours. Initially, meetings were facilitated by Public Conversations Project staff; later, the group essentially functioned autonomously. In the Winter of 1999, the group disbanded, primarily because of competing commitments.

Dialogue was the consistent frame of the NGN. This frame was maintained by adherence to the ground rules which members had committed to during their first abortion dialogue

and which were re-introduced at the inauguration of the group and re-affirmed during the first several sessions.

NGN members explored several issues that they saw as crucial to the abortion conflict. One of their projects was to jointly examine media representations of the abortion controversy. An unexpected development in the NGN last year was that they began to consider other issues related to human life and social/political policy, e.g. the death penalty.

We know from extensive feedback that members of the NGN developed greater understanding of the roots of others' viewpoints, and a profound respect for the integrity and humanity of members on both sides of the issue. We have also seen and heard evidence that these new understandings influenced the way they interact on the abortion controversy outside of the Network meetings. Of the ten members of the NewGround Network, at least six have been motivated by their dialogue experience to engage in related outside action.

Confidential Dialogues

Immediately after the December, 1994 shootings at two clinics in Brookline, and the call for "common ground talks" issued by Cardinal Bernard Law and Governor William Weld, we began to assess the desirability of convening dialogues with a small group of visible pro-life and pro-choice activists in the Boston area.

Through interviews with key players, we found strong support for a dialogue initiative that had as its primary goal the de-escalation of the volatile and polarizing climate surrounding public debate about abortion.

Working in partnership with a mediator, Susan Podziba of Susan Podziba and Associates, we convened, designed and facilitated a series of off-the-record meetings. After meeting at intervals for five years, the participants co-authored an account of their experience that was published as "Talking with the Enemy" in the January 29, 2001 Boston Sunday Globe.