

Model for an Introductory Dialogue on Abortion

A Note to the Reader

The model described below was developed for the single session introductory dialogues on abortion that Essential Partners (then known as the Public Conversations Project) conducted in 1990-1992 (eighteen sessions) and 1995-1998 (ten sessions).

Most of these dialogues took place on weekday evenings between 6:00 and 9:30 and involved four to eight participants who did not know one another ahead of time. Several participants were activists, but few were highly visible leaders. All groups were evenly balanced with people who described themselves as “prochoice” or “prolife.”

Before the Dialogue

Telephone Invitations. We gathered names from activist organizations and through informal networking. And telephoned potential participants. During each call, we outlined the goals of the event, described the group agreements (ground rules) that would be proposed, and addressed any questions and concerns that came up during the call. If the potential participant was interested and available, we promised to send a letter of invitation and encouraged him or her to call us if new questions or concerns came up after receiving the letter.

Written Invitations and Additional Information. All who agreed to participate received an identical letter of invitation which stated the goal of the dialogue. To foster clarity about what the event was — and what it was not — we enclosed a table: Distinguishing Debate from Dialogue. The letter also included the group agreements that would be proposed, some questions for participants to think about ahead of time, and logistical information.

The Pre-Dialogue Dinner. When participants arrived, they were offered a light buffet dinner during which they and the facilitators became acquainted. Participants and facilitators were each asked to say something about themselves unrelated to having particular views on the abortion issue or to being facilitators of the dialogue. Before moving to the dialogue room, participants were asked to turn in their video release

forms. (For research purposes, we videotaped sessions with the understanding that if we wished to use the tape for broader educational purposes, e.g., in a training or presentation, we would contact the participant with a specific additional request.)

The Dialogue

Seating and Orientation to Roles and Schedule. In the dialogue room, each participant was seated next to someone on the other side of the issue. Then one of the two facilitators made opening remarks about the structure of the evening.

Building Agreements. The facilitators reviewed the proposed agreements. These agreements, which were generally adopted with little or no discussion, pertained to:

- maintaining confidentiality
- voluntary participation (i.e., accepting “pass” or “pass for now” as a response)
- using respectful language (in this case we asked that “pro” terms rather than “anti” terms be used to describe positions on the abortion issue)
- avoiding negative attribution, stereotyping, and other forms of communication likely to raise the listener's defenses
- listening attentively, refraining from interrupting, and sharing “airtime.”

Opening Questions. The following three questions were asked and answered in this way: The question was read. Participants were given a minute to think. Then each person responded. The first and second questions were answered in “go-rounds” and the third was answered “popcorn” style, i.e., as people felt ready. Participants were asked to take up to 3 minutes for questions #1 and #3 and up to 2 minutes for question #2.

- Question 1: What events or other personal life experiences may have shaped your current views and feelings about abortion? Could you tell us something about one or two of these events or experiences?
- Question 2: What is at the heart of the matter for you, as an individual?
- Question 3: Many people who have participated in dialogues like this have said that within their general approach to this issue they have some dilemmas about their own beliefs, for example, some value conflicts or ambivalent feelings. Do you experience any mixed feelings, value conflicts, uncertainties, or other dilemmas within your overall perspective on this issue?

Questions of Genuine Curiosity. We invited participants to ask questions of each other, asking them to avoid rhetorical questions, and instead, to ask each other questions

arising from their genuine curiosity about the feelings, beliefs, and experiences of the people in the room.

Closing Questions. About twenty minutes before the end of the session, we posed two closing questions, each answered in a go-round format.

- Question 1: What do you think you have done or restrained yourself from doing that may have contributed to this conversation going the way it has?
- Question 2: Do you have any parting words you would like to say, to bring this conversation to a satisfying close?

Following the Dialogue

Team Assessment. After the participants left the facilitators reviewed the session, discussed how they worked together and individually, and considered whether any difficult moments suggested a need to change the model in the future. They also considered whether there were any new questions they wanted ask in the follow-up call.

Follow-Up Telephone Calls. About two weeks after the session, we called participants to elicit feedback, ask about their further reflections, and learn what they might have taken from the experience into their lives.