

the center letter

Cultivating Missional Communities

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CREATING READINESS: Preparing the Ground for Fruitful Conversation

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"Let all things be done for building up."

Getting ready for the transformation toward a missional community often involves cultivating a new way of talking together. Like a garden, the distinctive nature and manner of the church's conversation must first be desired and planned for. It doesn't just happen. Then it is sown into all occasions when the church gathers – for worship, learning, and decision-making. Then it is tended to and pruned so that it grows and flourishes. And as a result, the fruits of love, joy, and peace will be harvested in the life of the gathered people!

Frequently the church's conversation is more like a competition than cultivating and tending a garden. Named after the military commander who designed them, Robert's Rules of Order defines the way of conversation both formally and informally in church gatherings. Accordingly, groups achieve decision by means of debate until one side wins. This way of conversation does not form people into the Body of Christ but into competing groups who heave ideas against each other to see whose ideas will be the strongest and will win. Discussion is intended to produce a winner – and consequently also a loser. Each seeks to show who is right, who knows more, or who knows best for the church. The result of win/lose competition often shows only who is more articulate and persuasive. Because of such unproductive conversation, learning and teamwork are undermined. Ideas rarely get the consideration they deserve. Ideas are judged on the basis of who said them or how well they fit with "how we've always done things." The Latin root of the word "discussion" is *discutere*, which literally means "to smash to pieces." Too often people experience fragmentation in church groups or leadership teams and feel smashed to pieces rather than tasting the unique giftedness of all the members of the Body of Christ in ways that contribute to the unity of the Spirit.

This *Center Letter* offers perspectives and suggestions for fruitful conversation that will contribute to greater creativity, help penetrate more fully the issues and opportunities before you, and manifest the Body of Christ more faithfully. Church teams spend many hours exploring how to take care of the buildings, raise more money, improve programs, debate worship practices. But, they seldom create the space or the time they need to improve the quality of their collective thinking and decision-making processes – which in fact would leverage the quality of everything else they do. Creating readiness for missional transformation involves attending to and improving the quality of our conversation.

WHAT CULTURE SHAPES YOUR CONVERSATION? We live in a culture that promotes self-interest. This culture forms people 24/7/365. We learn to "think of our skills and abilities not in terms of what they can contribute to the common good of a community, but primarily in terms of the purchasing power they secure for us."² We tend to view other people in the marketplace not as unique and splendid people in their own right who warrant our attention, but as actors in *our* drama. So many of our daily interactions encourage us to be self-interested, to pay attention to others only to the extent that they can benefit us. It is hard to act differently when we come together as the church.

The image of church drawn from the New Testament shows a contrasting culture. Here the church is envisioned as a community that shows us a different way to think of ourselves – in community – and thus a different way to behave in relation to others. The church is community created by the Holy Spirit to manifest within the context of the world's cultures an alternative culture. It recognizes that humanity was created in and for community (Gen. 2:18). "What life have we if we have not life together? There is no life that is not in community, and no community not lived in praise of God."³ The church's mission then is not community in general, but a community that teaches people how to talk, how to act, how to disagree, how to love, how to see the world in a peculiar – namely a Christian – way. The role of the church is to cultivate a people who "can risk being peaceful in a violent world, risk being kind in a competitive society, risk being faithful in an age of cynicism, risk being gentle among those who admire the truth, risk love when it may not be returned, because we have the confidence that in Christ we have been reborn into a new reality."⁴

The nature and manner of the church's conversation is under consideration here. It is not a question of whether the church's

conversation will be formed after the pattern of the culture. It is a matter of which culture will have its way with us.

Q#1 What can you observe about your church's conversation – how it discusses its concerns and hopes, how it makes its decisions?

Q#2 How are these cultures having their way with your church:

Culture of self interest?

Community created by the Holy Spirit?

IMPROVING THE FRUITFULNESS OF OUR CONVERSATION.

Improving the quality of conversation is a primary way in which church leadership teams build the capabilities they need to become a missional community. Cultivating fruitful conversation first of all involves preparing the ground. Leaders attending to this concern can help diminish competition and lessen the triumph of self-interest. They can help create the climate that allows and encourages a more penetrating understanding of God's activity, the complexity of their world, and the dynamics of life together. All churches can improve the fruitfulness of their conversation, and most would benefit from learning and practicing a few basics.

1. Frame the time in the context of worship. If, as earlier quoted, human community finds its meaning as it praises God, then prayer, worship, and Bible study cannot remain a perfunctory act or afterthought when Christians meet together. It must become central to the purpose of gathering – every gathering. The identity of every "2 or 3" who gather is rooted in the biblical story of God's mighty and wonderful deeds. Through the church's study, reflection, prayer and conversation the church is learning the language of faith, sorting out the influence of its own heritage and history, and discovering how to proclaim and embody the Gospel within its daily changing context. In a

culture that places self-interest on a pedestal, the church seeks to focus single-heartedly on the one true God. We cannot secure either our personal or corporate lives, and thus we rest solely on God's grace and mercy. This is not something learned once upon a time, but is being learned and must be re-enforced at every juncture along the journey of life together in the church.

2. Make it safe for people to participate. When people come together for conversation to discover, explore, discern or decide, they must first expressly agree to treat each other as colleagues and fellow members of the Body of Christ. The practices and virtues of the marketplace nourish a kind of indifference to other people. Too often the freedom we claim in Christ is the freedom *from* others. The freedom for which Christ has set us free (Gal. 5:1, 13) is freedom *to serve* one another. Agree to pay attention to each other rather than indifference. Show curiosity instead of suspicion, respect rather than secret ridicule, support for one another's opinions and feelings rather than counteracting them.

3. Make openness and trust the rule rather than the exception. People must feel secure that they can speak freely without fear of being the target of criticism, ridicule or retribution. One helpful ground rule to establish is that people will not have their remarks attributed to them outside the room, unless they agree. Everyone who is part of the conversation must be assured of every other participant's promise in this regard. And of course, setting ground rules is only the beginning. Trust develops only when participants hold themselves accountable and continue to act in a trustworthy manner.

4. Encourage and reward the offering of new perspectives. Most work groups and church teams have barely touched upon the creativity, experience, knowledge, and ideas present in the room when they meet together. Most work groups give short shrift to new perspectives because they are busy about their day-to-day work when they meet together. When the expectation is to keep meetings short it's a hard sell to take time for innovative thinking. Encouraging and rewarding the offering of new perspectives must be introduced and cultivated in a disciplined manner in most churches. Inviting the exchange of perspectives and points of view will flourish where judgment of those ideas is withheld and where sharing – and not selling – is encouraged "At the heart of Christian faith and practice is the giving of gifts. God has abundantly given to us; we respond in gratitude by offering gifts to God, and we seek to continue to be avenues of God's grace by giving gifts to one another."⁵ Our ideas and perspectives are such gifts!

5. Plan the agenda, time, and context to allow for concentrated deliberation. Times of concentrated deliberation in the church are usually kept for times of crisis, when it is often too late for careful exploration and creativity. The best approach is to budget for times of deliberation. When you do so, assure that every participant expects to talk about the same subject and has carved out the time to do so in advance. Keep distractions, especially other business items, to a minimum. Fruitful conversation takes time. Don't expect a quick fix. Rather, seek to introduce and sustain a pattern of significant and meaningful conversation.

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¹ I Corinthians 14:26c.

² Phillip Kennison, *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community* (Intervarsity: 1999), p.45.

³ T.S. Eliot, "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*, p.101.

⁴ Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1992) p. 118.

⁵ Kennison, p.49.

⁶ Kennison, p.32.

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6. Establish helpful norms for listening. It is important for conversation to be fruitful that some ground-rules for listening be established. Start with these:

Stop talking.

Imagine the other person's point of view.

Look, act, and be interested.

Observe nonverbal behavior.

Don't interrupt.

Listen between the lines.

Speak only affirmatively while listening.

Rephrase what the other person has just told you at key points in the conversation.

Stop talking.

Q#3 In what ways has your church, work group, or leadership team already prepared the ground for fruitful conversation?

Q#4 To which of the above suggestions would you like to give more attention?

BIBLE STUDY: Galatians 5:22-23. The goal of the Christian life is to be conformed to the image of Christ. Yet God has not called us to such a purpose for our own sake. God has called out a people who through their very life together would bear witness to God's character and reconciling mission in the world. That character and mission have been uniquely embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, and it continues to be reflected, even if imperfectly, in the life of the community as the "fruit" of the Spirit. The fruit that the Spirit desires to produce when we meet together as Christians in community, therefore, is not a hodgepodge of desirable group dynamics or admirable personality traits. Rather, "God desires to produce this fruit through the Spirit – and the community of Jesus Christ desires to have this fruit produced in its life – because these dispositions reflect the very character and mission of God."⁶ If the church is to be the community God desires it to be, then it will seek to reflect the character and mission of the God it worships.

Read Galatians 5:22-23.

The "fruit" of fruitful conversation is best described as the fruit of the Spirit, evidenced when persons gather together in Christ's name. As you read this text, notice the extent to which the fruit of the Spirit is social or relational in nature.

1. How does the fruit of the Spirit as the goal of Christian mission shed light on the importance of Christian conversation?
2. Where is there evidence of the Spirit's fruit? In what circumstances in your church would you like to see greater evidence of the Spirit's fruit?

Next month's issue of *The Center Letter* will build on these perspectives and explore further how church leaders can cultivate fruitful conversation to create readiness for missional transformation.