

The Practice Of Dialogue - An Overview

What is dialogue and how is it different from everyday conversation ...

Broadly speaking, dialogue is a way of engaging in conversation, often in groups but also between individuals. A dialogue is not a normal conversation. Dialogues are conversations that have been carefully designed. They help people communicate in ways that feel fresh, constructive, and honest.

The goal of a dialogue is to listen as if for the first time. It's to share your lived experience. It's to find a new curiosity about your friends and neighbors. It's to connect as complicated, whole human beings. In places where peoples' lives and relationships are deeply intertwined— like church families—the ability to hold a dialogue can help folks live and serve better together by building mutual trust and understanding across their differences.

Dialogue creates new understandings, new relationships, a new level of trust, and new opportunities. The goal is not to change anybody's beliefs or arrive at a solution (though that happens sometimes). Dialogue helps people wrestle with their differences openly, honestly, and with dignity. It encourages a stronger sense of community, which is what makes real and lasting growth and relationships possible.

Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) - the model that will be our guide - leverages the power of personal reflection and structured conversations to create mutual understanding and new relationships, as well as a solid foundation for problem solving and collaboration.

Developed more than thirty years ago and used by communities around the globe, RSD lets people share their stories and beliefs while encouraging them to really hear perspectives and experiences that may be different from their own. RSD is designed to avoid the usual dynamics of polarized conversations.

For more information on the dialogue model and training that will guide the structure of your conversation series, check out Essential Partners (based out of Cambridge, MA): <https://whatisessential.org/our-method>.

What to expect from your community's dialogue series ...

We begin with clarifying and agreeing to a shared purpose for why we're gathering. The statement of purpose for a dialogue serves as its guiding star. A clear purpose lets participants set appropriate expectations and helps the-facilitator know how to best hold and maintain the "container" of the dialogue experience.

The stated purpose of your dialogue series is:

- **To practice understanding and developing trust among members of the church, and explore together what "unity even with differences" means.**

The first is that you are able to experience a different way of having conversations around sensitive issues. That you feel you had a chance to both better understand and be better understood.

We then shift to clarifying and agreeing to a shared way of being in our gatherings. These conversation commitments are a set of shared guidelines for the way people will engage and interact during the dialogue. They are a way we can experience unity and a shared way of being even amidst our differences, and they can also serve as guardrails to keep a tough conversation on track with its purpose.

We will then open with a connecting question, followed by 3 structured questions. Each of these questions will follow a "think, write, speak" flow where everyone will have 2 minutes to write out their thoughts before turning their attention to listening. The facilitator will provide each person with 2 minutes to share (sharing is not obligated and passing is absolutely okay). Timed sharing, while often initially new to many dialogue participants, assures equity amongst conversation participants.

Following the structured questions, where everyone responds to the same question prompts, there will be a longer time of less structured conversation—an intentional space for questions of genuine curiosity from the participants to one another that can lead to deeper understanding. This is the time for participants to learn more about what others have said and to make connections between what is on their minds and what they've heard. The facilitator will step in if needed to maintain the purpose and conversation commitments.

We close with a final structured question where everyone will have another timed opportunity to share. The final reflection and closing invites participants to reflect on and appreciate what has been shared.

Conversation commitments ...

We will:

- Honor time limits to ensure everyone has a chance to participate.
- Pause between each speaker to take a breath.
- “Pass” or “pass for now” if we’re not ready or don’t wish to respond.
- Speak for ourselves and from our own experience rather than on behalf of a group (as “I”, not “we”), and not assume that anyone else is speaking on behalf of a group. This includes speaking respectfully, being aware of our tone of voice, and avoiding generalizations.
- Take responsibility for our own participation by remaining fully present to each person, ourselves and the emotions we’re experiencing as best we’re able.
- Use the “go again” sentiment (if you feel you need to say something in a different way or tone, pause and go-again).
- Hold each other’s stories with special care. We will honor whatever confidentiality requests are made at the end.
- Remain muted unless speaking.
- Use the chat function to let the facilitator know if we need anything.