



Let's Talk

**How one congregation
addresses controversial issues
in Christian community**

ROBERT BATES

It was March of 2003 and the United States had just invaded Iraq. Emotions in the country—and in our congregation—were running high, both in support of the U.S. action and against it. Just a few years earlier our congregation had suffered through a divisive conflict around the Vermont legislature’s consideration of a civil union bill. That conflict had polarized the congregation and some had left the church as a result. Now emotions were fueled again, this time around the issue of the war. Was another split inevitable?

Thankfully a small group of members, including our pastor at the time, David Hawkinson, decided there had to be a better way to deal with controversy. The group invited interested folks to come together around coffee and breakfast to discuss the war within the confines of a loving Christian community—and the Let’s Talk program was born.

It is common to read Jesus’s words in Matthew 18 in the context of interpersonal conflict. “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector” (vv. 15-17).

We often turn to this text when we have been wounded or wronged by a brother or sister. But what happens when the body of Christ encounters division and disagreement about political or social or moral issues? How can we read such texts in the context of our collective life together? How can we find healing in the face of

divisions and dissension?

For the past eight years Let’s Talk has relied on Scripture and our commitment to each other in the midst of community to talk about difficult issues and conflicts.

It wasn’t obvious from the beginning that our approach would work. As one of the founding members of the group, I vehemently disagreed with some folks regarding the war. My tendency was either to avoid conversation with these individuals or to debate them in an attempt to prove that my view was correct. We didn’t know how to talk together about controversial subjects.

Another original member of the group, Doug Hall, shared his own thoughts about Let’s Talk before his death last November. “I have to admit, I was not really excited about the prospect of starting on this walk. First, I come from a family that talked a lot, but, unfortunately, talking often turned to shouting and ‘gaming,’ or taking up opposition for no other reason than winning. My mother was often caught on the sidelines wondering why we couldn’t just get along. Sadly, winning often trumped agreeing.” He added, “Second, at that time my career was in full swing and meetings already took up altogether too many hours in my week. The prospect of yet another meeting presented a real burden.”

At the same time Hall and others in the congregation were hopeful about the program. All of us saw the effort as evidence that our church wanted to learn from the challenges we were facing—and to grow from them.

That first meeting included seven or eight people, representing both sides of the issue, and we spent some time establishing some initial ground rules. We kept it simple and we worked

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to listen to and respect one another. We stuck it out through those initial, uncertain days, and over time we developed the following structure, which guided our discussions of the war, and continues to guide us as we address issues of the day.

In the first session participants write statements expressing their opinions, feelings, and concerns about the issue at hand on Post-it notes. The notes are posted on a large sheet of newsprint at the front of the room, and a facilitator attempts to group them by similarity.

As the facilitator reads each group of similar statements out loud, participants indicate whether they agree or disagree. If there is unanimity of agreement about a particular statement, or group of similar statements, they are posted under an “Agree” column on another sheet of newsprint. If any individual disagrees with a statement, it is posted under a “Disagree” column on the same sheet. Then participants reflect together on those areas of agreement and disagreement. We also use a “green card” technique, which requires anyone who wishes to speak to request the one green (or speaker) index card before talking. This helps ensure that no individual dominates the session and that only one person speaks at a time.

In the second session the group examines the areas of disagreement

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further. For each expressed position we attempt to peel back the onion skin a bit and identify some of the underlying needs and principles behind that position. We employ several techniques to accomplish this goal. We brainstorm. We engage in a “five whys” exercise in which participants are asked why they took a particular position. After answering, they are asked why again and again for each ensuing answer, until they have been asked why five times. This

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process helps to identify what informs and drives each individual’s original position.

The process works best in small groups of four to six people in order to encourage open sharing and discussion. Each small group appoints a recorder who then summarizes the discussion for the larger group. Frequently participants discover that when we get beneath the surface of disparate perspectives, we realize that many of our underlying needs and principles are not vastly different. Even when we do not share the same foundations, we develop a clearer view of where others in our congregation are coming from on a specific issue—and why. That can also make it easier to respectfully agree to disagree.

For session three we ask participants to bring examples of Scripture passages that speak to the topic at hand. The purpose is not to proof-text, but rather to share Scripture with regard to the issue being discussed. We have discovered that one session usually does not do justice to this important step of the process, so we compile a list of all the biblical passages participants bring and make it available

at the next session. This gives everyone the opportunity to explore the passages further—either individually or in corporate study if they choose.

In the fourth session we summarize what we have learned from each other and what new understandings or principles we have heard. We also formulate a statement that reflects areas of agreement. We have discovered that in virtually every series people are surprised by how many core things they actually agree on. Formulating

an “agreement statement” can be a useful, reflective, and insightful process. After our discussions on the Iraq war, that statement read something like, “War

is the result of the failure of humankind to resolve conflicts and injustice peaceably.”

We do not attempt to write position papers or take straw votes on positions. Our purpose in Let’s Talk is not to engage in a win-lose process, which can leave those who perceive themselves as being in the minority feeling hurt, angry, or both. At the end of the fourth session we invite participants to talk about what they have learned and where they would like to go from here. Sometimes individual members of the group choose to continue the discussion in informal sessions, or collectively to pursue a more in-depth Bible study on the topic. But in general we limit our discussions to four sessions as interest in a specific topic tends to wane after that.

Arnold Bolin was interim pastor at the church shortly after the state approved civil unions, and he describes that season, saying, “There was serious division. The mood was such that nobody seemed inclined to express opinions or to listen in a reasoned way to others’ views. Several had left the church.”

He returned five and a half years later for another interim period, and by then, the Let’s Talk group was meeting on Saturday mornings. Bolin noticed a marked difference in the climate. “Respect had replaced suspicion,” he says. “The term sister/brother in Christ had depth of meaning. Appreciation for one another had escalated. No, things were not perfect; there were different issues and problems, but a vehicle was in place for discussion for those who were willing to enter into dialogue.”

He adds, “When we differ on social, political, or religious beliefs in the church, we generally clam up. Often people leave a congregation to find one that is more agreeable to their point of view—and frequently that does not work to their satisfaction. We need to sit down with one another and talk, like mature and growing persons.”

Since those early days we have used Let’s Talk to address a number of other current social, political, and theological issues, including global warming and sexual identity. Today a small core group of people continues to meet informally for breakfast periodically for fellowship and to see if there are issues to consider for Let’s Talk. Through the years our basic premises and practices have remained fairly simple:

1) We open and close every session with prayer, asking God to help us listen respectfully to one another and to love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

2) We strive to ensure that every participant can express his or her feelings and opinions on the topic by employing both written and verbal communication opportunities.

3) We seek to articulate areas of agreement as well as disagreement throughout the course of our discussions.

4) We seek to explore the opinions

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individuals express in order to better understand the underlying needs and principles that inform these positions.

5) We ask, in the Covenant tradition, "Where is it written?" in order to understand how Scripture might inform us on the issue at hand.

6) We seek, after several sessions, to formulate a statement which reflects areas of common agreement.

Ron Lawrence, a longtime participant, says, "Our church motto is, 'Come as you are.' I think we're pretty good at welcoming people wherever they are in their Christian walk, but it means that we have differences from the get-go. 'Come as you are' can be difficult to live out. One of the things that may make our church a little different is that we've begun to think about these differences and to explore them. We've begun to look beyond our political and theological differences long enough to actually examine them together. What often results is the realization that no matter how great our differences seem to be, we have much more in common. We have found, time and again, that we tend to make assumptions about each other which are almost always wrong. Even if we haven't changed each other's minds, we have a better understanding of how others got to where they are. Looking carefully at our differences actually deepens our relationships."

Let's Talk has had a profound effect on building relationships in our community that might not have otherwise flourished. We've also come to realize that the only mind we can really change is our own, and in so doing have discovered, on several occasions, that previously disparate positions have changed to become more similar. When Let's Talk participants agree to disagree, we do so with a clearer understanding of the fundamental needs and values behind our divergent positions. Frequently folks come to realize that these core needs and principles are really not

so different after all, and that tends to strengthen, rather than fracture, relationships.

Let's Talk has reinforced in all of us the awareness that winning is far less important than helping each other understand the underlying needs and principles that govern our positions.

While this program is by no means a panacea when it comes to resolving intra-church conflict, it has provided our congregation a means to approach controversy as an opportunity for positive interaction, learning, and even creative change. We all know how easily churches can become divided during times of conflict. Perhaps models like Let's Talk can provide a better way for us to more genuinely act as Christians in our relationships with one another.

Let's Talk owes much of its success to the commitment and dedication of Doug Hall, one of our original participants, who died last fall. He was responsible for introducing us to the green card technique, and it is to his memory that I dedicate this article. ■