

SUBSTANTIVE DIALOGUE:

A TOOL FOR CONGREGATIONS TO DEAL WITH POTENTIALLY DIVISIVE ISSUES WITHOUT BECOMING DIVIDED

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INTRODUCTION:

Sometimes a congregation or a group of congregations reaches an impasse generated by diverse understandings concerning how the Bible informs faithful response to a particular situation or issue. At such a time, the tendency is to listen to the others simply to seek points to refer to in reinforcement of one's own views, in other words, not to undertake genuine listening, and to see the other as a position rather than as a person. Active listening is a learned skill which results in clarity on the generally vast amount of shared perspective, as well as the points of disagreement. Active listening opens the way to substantive dialogue when participants willingly engage one another for the sake of vital, renewed congregations, and enter into a Common Ground process.

What is the Common Ground Process:

Common Ground is like two interlocking circles. Each circle represents a point of view on the issue. A common ground process honors each perspective (complete set of concerns, beliefs and values around this issue). A common ground process first searches for concerns, beliefs and values that are shared. This common ground provides a platform of understanding. Participants also look together at their differences. **Common ground is not compromise.** It is not about compromising to reach some middle space; but rather it is focusing on our genuine areas of agreement.

A common ground process honors each one's piece of the truth. Realizing that only God knows it all, common grounders also acknowledge that each of us knows something that is of value to the rest of us. We look together for these gems of wisdom. **Common ground is about shedding light, not creating heat.** It is "all of us in a shared struggle to be faithful"--not "part of us against the rest of us."

Common ground recognizes a continuum of perspectives. When we label people (which isn't necessarily a good idea), this only sets them somewhere on one side of a line's center. One side is not a "good" side and the other side a "bad" side. Common ground explores the richness of diversity behind the labels.

Connective Thinking: There are two ways to do critical thinking. One way is to listen to a speaker, and hone in on the weaknesses, refuting them with one's own perspective. Connective thinking focuses attention on the strengths of the speaker. It is a search for the gems of wisdom among what might be considered an incomplete text.

The Process Design:

The heart of a common ground discussion takes place in facilitated small groups, using ground rules

for communication.

Preparation for discussion:

A study committee (2 or 3 people committed to guiding the study, plus the small group facilitators) publishes an open letter of invitation to join the study, together with registration information. Small group facilitators receive two to three hours of training.

The first meeting:

After an opening prayer the lead facilitator explains ground rules and the principles of common ground to the large group. Then diverse small groups are formed. Each small group will remain stable during the entire study. Within the small group participants learn the skill of active listening then respond to the following question: **"What are the personal experiences that have brought you to the place where you are now around (the topic to be studied)?"** Assignment for Next Time: Each person is asked to bring to the small group Scripture passages and other good resources that have guided their formation around this topic.

Second Meeting Questions for Small Groups:

1. "How has your call to be faithful to the teaching of the Bible influenced your perspective on this issue?" Have there been times when the circumstances of life have seemed to contradict the teaching of the Bible regarding this issue? What was that struggle like? Have you resolved this struggle?"
2. What resources have helped inform you on this issue -- both Scripture passages and other readings? Why have these been helpful? What insights did you gain from them?

After the Second Meeting: The study committee selects both required and recommended readings for subsequent meetings.

Third and Subsequent Meetings: Each major viewpoint has one study session devoted to it. Questions guiding each weekly discussion:

1. What are the insights and strengths you found in what you read?
2. What points did you disagree with, or find weak?
3. Where are this small group's points of agreement and disagreement on this perspective?
These responses are all recorded.

After all readings have been studied: The study committee compiles all small group responses, then sends them out to each participant.

At the final study session: Each small group composes a reflection statement synthesizing their best wisdom about this issue. These statements are then synthesized by the study committee into one reflection piece, which is distributed as the fruit of this local church's study of the issue.