

the center letter

Cultivating Missional Communities

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CREATING READINESS: Cultivating Fruitful Conversation

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"...each one heard them speaking in the native language of each." Acts 2:6b

These words from the Day of Pentecost narrative in Acts indicate what profound communication occurred when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon those who gathered. In and through the speaking and hearing ancient differences were overcome and barriers were lowered. Profound meaning was shared as those gathered began to understand one another and what God in Jesus Christ had done for them together with all creation. The hearing and understanding of one another and hearing and understanding of the Good News of Jesus Christ are linked together in this Pentecost narrative. They are the foundation stones of the Christian community. And they are the work of the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the Bible, "Spirit" refers to what God does to indwell and empower not merely human persons but interpersonal relationships. "What the Spirit does is build, upbuild, and create community."¹ In an important sense, this "building" is a *process*: the activity of the Holy Spirit calling, summoning, assembling, and shaping. It is a process that becomes visible in the worship, witness and service of the community, but is particularly evident in the church's conversation. The fruitful conversation of the Christian community is a work and gift of the Holy Spirit. It is both evidence of the presence of the Spirit in the midst of the community as well as a key aspect in the formation of the missional community. As a movement of the Holy Spirit, fruitful conversation involves identifying and sharing gifts together. In fruitful conversation participants and the group as a whole are drawn to move outside of themselves. This manner of conversation contrasts with the culture's standard of competitive win/lose discussion, and with self-serving exchanges that look for what I will get as a result of what I give. It is not simply polite social conversation. Nor does it have problem-solving as its goal. Rather, it moves toward the formation of shared identity, vision, and purpose of life together as the people of God. It cultivates a communal experience in which thoughts, emotions, purpose, desire belong not to the individual alone but to all the participants together. It leads to coordinated action because participants see themselves in relation to one another contributing together as part of a whole.

Churches today are experiencing a situation that compels them to call upon the Holy Spirit for such conversation. The forces against which congregations and leaders are contending today are not simply local, minor, and manageable, but are global, major, systemic, complex, and often overwhelming and unmanageable. The "principalities and powers" of the present age manifest themselves in a complex web of issues, challenges, and opportunities – a situation in which no one individual "knows the answer." The only viable option exists among groups of people who gather together to think, inquire, probe, pray, and deliberate together to discern God's will for their life together as they seek to engage these realities.

"HOW" IS AS IMPORTANT AS "WHAT". Christian concern for fruitful conversation is evident in the witness of the New Testament letters to early congregations. Partners in the new community formed by the Holy Spirit recognized that "how" they engaged together around issues of concern to the church was as important as "what" the content of issues was. The apostle Paul and other leaders invited the community to take responsibility not only for "what" they offered in the way of gifts, but also "how" they participated with one another. This is evident in the frequent use of the reflexive pronoun, *allelon*, which is translated "one another" in these early letters. The manner in which Christians engage one another is key evidence that the new life in the Spirit is taking hold and growing among them.

Q#1 Why is it important to consider the church's "conversation" a key realm in which the Holy Spirit works?

Q#2 Why should a congregation be concerned with the "how" as well as the "what" of its conversation?

GUIDELINES FOR FRUITFUL CONVERSATION.² Helpful ways of talking together can be invited, encouraged, and learned wherever "2 or 3" gather in Jesus' name in congregations today. The following guidelines that describe conversation shaped by the Holy Spirit can increase the insight, clarity, and creativity of the entire group as they seek to discern God's mission and their role in it.

1. Be clear about your purpose. What is your purpose when you come together? This question frames the apostle Paul's pointed exhortation in his first letter to the church at Corinth (1 Cor.12-14). What is the objective of your coming together in conversation in your

church? To exchange ideas? To develop deeper insight into problems and challenges your church is facing? To deliberate and come to decision about a matter? To manage the church? To study the Bible? Often church gatherings – even ones described by these objectives – are distinguished more by the purpose to exert influence over each other or another group, to win the competition of ideas or solutions for the future direction for the church. A key rubric when gathering is embodied in Paul's words to the Corinthian congregation: "let all things be done for building up" (1 Cor.14:26c). These words not only suggest how we are to engage one another when we gather, it also points to the fundamental purpose of Christian conversation.

The Holy Spirit actively aims to build the church for its missional vocation. We participate in the Holy Spirit's purpose of "building" when we are willing to be influenced. Indeed, there is no point to the church's conversation unless participants are willing to be influenced by the Holy Spirit's movement among them – in, with, and through their hearing and speaking with one another. Fruitful conversation is not about primarily the sharing, sifting, probing, and sorting through our own ideas to create our own plans to shape our own future for the church. It is about thinking together in ways that lead to deeper discovery and further insight into God's purpose in the world and God's will for the church in the world. As participants come together for the purpose of "building up," their primary approach involves becoming open to and being influenced by the Holy Spirit who moves through their interchange, preparing them for their missional journey.

2. Balance "advocating" with "inquiring." Many of us have learned how to "advocate" – take positions and argue for them – in group discussions. We like to "challenge" each other, but too often end up

"in your face" with each other, one-upping each other with trivialities. This pattern creates stumbling blocks to fruitful conversation. It invites one another's judgment (Rom.14:13) and creates defensiveness in the group. As a result, what people really think comes out not in the group, but later – in the parking lot!

Being attentive to one another with an inquiring mind while others speak and withholding judgment contribute to harmony that Paul envisioned to be so important to the church's witness in a non-Christian environment. "Inquiring" invites the expansion of our minds, deepening our exploration into God's interests and concerns. It involves offering our ideas and insights even in their incompleteness for the other's consideration. It includes listening together for further wisdom. "Inquiring" changes the way participants engage with one another. While inquiring, persons are more likely to step aside from their own positions and submit them to others for consideration with questions such as, "here is what I am thinking, how does it sound to you? What makes sense to you and what doesn't? What can you add? How do you see it differently?" Church conversations share in the Holy Spirit's work of building up the church when there is a balance between "advocating" and "inquiring".

3. Wait for one another. In the New Testament congregation at Corinth a major disjointedness existed. It often became visible at church suppers (I Cor.11). Those with a great deal of food to share went ahead of those with less and started eating without them! The same often occurs when Christians come together to deliberate. Those with a great deal of knowledge on a subject often move on ahead of those who don't. Paul's advice: "When you come together... wait for one another. (I Cor.11:33).

Miscommunication occurs when we assume we understand what others mean without taking the time to check it out. In most groups and work teams the discussion moves so quickly, and words get used so loosely, that it becomes very hard to build shared understandings. People walk away wondering, "what did she mean by that?" As a result, there is a feeling of fragmentation rather than cohesion and a sense of community. We participate in the Holy Spirit's purpose of building up the church when in our conversation we slow down and wait for one another. When you meet, assume that everyone is not using the same terms to mean the same things. Pause the conversation long enough to ask questions about meaning. For example, "When we say ----, what do we really mean?" Or, "Can the language of faith help us to better understand what we're doing here?" When shared meaning is developed, frustration decreases, and motivation, interest, and participation increase.

4. Bear with one another. In every group, there are times when participants become confused and frustrated. These feelings are often interpreted to mean that they don't fit in the group. Instead of making this interpretation, participants are invited actively to "bear with one another in love." (Eph.4:2). Bearing with one another is love in action. It is being open and honest with each other, sharing and dealing with the issues that touch and shape people's lives most deeply. "It is the fellowship of the Cross to experience the burden of the other. If one does not experience it, the fellowship one belongs to is not Christian."³

Members bearing with one another – key to the Spirit's work of building the church – is central to what the church does when it meets

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¹ Inagrace Dietterich, *The People Called by God*, a Bible study for missional transformation (Center for Parish Development, 1995) p.60.

² Adapted from Rick Ross, "Skillful Discussion: Protocols for Reaching a Decision – Mindfully," in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, Senge, Ross, Smith, Roberts, and Kliner (Doubleday 1994) p.385-391.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper & Row, 1954) p.101

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together. Bearing with one another is a more fundamental understanding of "fellowship," an overused word in the church today. Actively bearing may begin with the group agreeing together that it is OK to ask yourself (or another) "What am I (are you) thinking right now?" "What am I (are you) feeling right now?" "What do I (you) want at this moment?" "What do I (you) believe God wants us for at this moment?" We participate in the Holy Spirit's ongoing work of building up the church when we bear with one another in love.

5. Be subject to one another. There are times when a group seeks agreement but just can't seem to get there. An obstacle or disagreement stands in the way that resists resolution. When conversation involves moments of impasse, believers are reminded to recognize Christ in one another, and "out of reverence for Christ, become subject to one another." (Eph.5:21). This involves the hard work of listening to one another as though for the first time, looking at an issue from the other person's perspective, and being open to new ideas. What if each person's frame of reference was considered to be one part of a larger mosaic that included everyone's, enabling us better to discover God's mission for us?

In a practical sense, at moments of impasse it is helpful to pause and ask: "What do we agree on?" And, "on what are we not yet agreed?" Explore the disagreement. Is it a disagreement on the facts (we don't agree on exactly what happened). Or is it a disagreement on methods (we don't agree on how to do what we need to do). Perhaps it is disagreement on goals (we do not agree on our main objective). Or it may be a disagreement on beliefs and values (we disagree on why this matter is important). Exploring the impasses involves participants in giving themselves to one another, and thus participating in the Spirit's building up of the church.

Q#3 What can you observe would be an obstacle to cultivating fruitful conversation as described in these guidelines?

BIBLE STUDY: Acts 2:1-8, 37-42. The launching of the church on the day of Pentecost means hope for a world that is in bondage to division, suffering, anger and warfare. Evident on the day of Pentecost in the overcoming of culture and language barriers, the Holy Spirit acts to overcome the ancient divisions among peoples. The church is a manifestation of God's present and future act of reconciling all things in heaven and on earth in the body of Jesus Christ (Col.1:20). The church – God's New Creation community – is being formed by the Holy Spirit as a contrast to the world's divisions. It is coming into being as a community where God's reconciliation can already be seen and experienced.

Read Acts 2:1-8, 37-42.

1. What is distinctive about Christian community? What is its source? How are members of the community to relate to one another?
2. What significance does the quality of the church's communal life have beyond the boundaries of the church community?
3. What insights have you gained about cultivating fruitful conversation in your church?