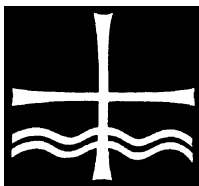
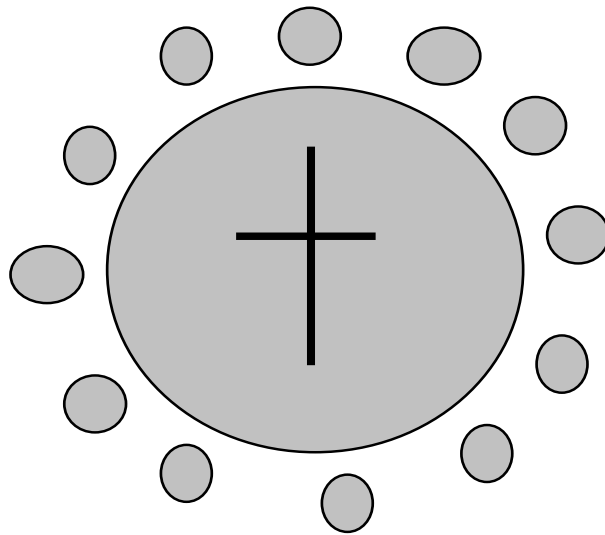


Dialogue

**A process for learning and renewal
within communities of faith.**



A collaborative effort between members and agencies of the
Archdiocese of Louisville

What is Dialogue?

What is a dialogue? The meaning we use comes from looking at its derivation. The root meaning of dialogue comes from the Greek word *dialogos*. *Logos* means “the word” or “meaning of the word” and *día* means “through”. So a dialogue is a stream of meaning flowing among and through and between us. Out of this will emerge some new understanding that wasn’t present at the beginning. Dialogue encourages deeper levels of listening and reflection. It leads to building community. It helps to contrast dialogue with the word discussion, which has the same root as percussion and concussion. It means to break things up – to analyze. Each person is presenting a different point of view and trying to get others to agree with it. Often there is a focus on results and a sense of competition with a win/lose outcome. There’s nothing wrong with discussion – it’s a valid way of communicating and producing results. However, in dialogue we are most interested in understanding others’ perspectives and in clarifying together what we are trying to accomplish.

Dialogue

Seeing the *whole* among the parts

Seeing the *connections* between the parts

Inquiring into assumptions

Learning through inquiry and openness

Creating *shared* meaning among many

Discussion / Debate

Breaking issues/problems into *parts*

Seeing *distinctions* between the parts

Justifying / defending assumptions

Persuading, selling, telling

Gaining agreement on *one* meaning

From: Ellinor, Linda and Glenna Gerard, *Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998

Why Dialogue?

Our ultimate goal for dialogue is to promote learning, growth, understanding, healing, and renewal of our faith communities, or the communities we serve. Rev. Msgr. Philip Murnion eloquently captured the role of dialogue in today’s church in the letter he wrote hours before his death:

If I were to sum up my final plea to you, it would be: “dialogue, dialogue, dialogue!” I do not mean this a facile or pious slogan, for I am only too aware of its cost and conditions. It is for this reason, I think, that the Pope places dialogue within the context of an entire theological and spiritual vision and practice. In his Letter [Novo Millenio Inuente] the Holy Father advocates and advances a “theology and spirituality of communion,” for they “encourage a fruitful dialogue between pastors and faithful” [NMI, #45]. Indeed, does not the living out of such a spirituality of communion require dialogue as its very life-breath: the dialogue of prayer with Jesus Christ, the dialogue of mutual building up on the part of the members of Christ?

Ways to Develop Dialogue

1. **Balance advocacy with inquiry.** State what you mean, asking others to explore it. *“This is what I think. Please ask me about it.”* Explore what another says before offering your own ideas. *“When you say that I think you mean such-and-such. Is that it, or can you help me see it more clearly?”*
2. **Be willing to suspend your assumptions.** Each of us has had different experiences in life and we bring them to our conversations - we look at life from a slightly different perspective. One clue to gaining awareness is to notice when one of your hot buttons is being pushed by something someone else has said. When you think to yourself: how can he or she say such a thing? That's the dumbest thing I ever heard? Sometimes your response comes out in emotions such as anger, fear or discomfort at what someone has said. Usually there's an assumption present - you assume the other person means something and that may not be so for them. That's the time to ask a clarifying question - with the intent to understand, not to challenge or fix. *“Am I correct in thinking . . . when you say . . . ?”*
3. **Make your reasoning explicit and public.** Say, as well as you can, how you got from the information you have to the conclusions you drew, asking others to look at the process with you. This not only helps us find holes in our understanding, but also ensures that others see what we intend. *“This is what I observed that makes me say that. Did others see the same thing?”* *“Here's how I got to where I am, the thoughts and feelings that led me here.”*
4. **Actively seek contradictions and alternative explanations.** Take a curious stance by seeking out opinions that differ from your own. This allows for a larger point of view to be developed. *“Is there anyone that feels/thinks differently about this?”*
5. **Suspend Judgment.** In a dialogue we are interested in coming to new understandings and perspectives. Suspending our judgments, at least for the moment, creates a space, a listening for other points of view. One clue to gaining awareness of our judgments is to notice our responses. When we find ourselves in disagreement, discomfort or even **100% agreement**, we have made a judgment. Listen for understanding, not to agree with or believe in. In a dialogue we don't have to agree with what is being said - the point is to come to a new understanding of another's perspective. When you find yourself making a judgment return to step 3 & 4 above.

Guidelines for Dialogue

- ∞ Acknowledge one another as equals
- ∞ Try to stay curious about each other
- ∞ Recognize we need each other's help to become better listeners
- ∞ Slow down so we have time to think and reflect
- ∞ Remember that conversation is the natural way humans think
- ∞ Expect it to be messy at times

How to Get Started

It is important to develop trust and ensure confidentiality. Create an environment where everyone feels safe enough to speak their minds and explore such questions as “Why are we all here?” The environment should allow people to say what they’re thinking and share important information without fear of reprisal.

For those groups who have already developed relationships, such as small faith sharing groups and Renew groups, there may already be a level of trust developed. However, if it is a new group, time should be given to allow members to get to know one another. You may want to consider asking each person to share the history of their name or do some other activity that helps the members get to know one another. All individuals should review the previous sections on What is Dialogue, Ways to Develop Dialogue and Guidelines for Dialogue to make sure everyone understands the process and all agree on the meaning of the guidelines.

Safety is the responsibility of everyone in the group. Be aware of the group dynamics. Is everyone sharing and being heard? Is the group being dominated by one or two people? Are people’s statements being acknowledged and affirmed or are they discounted by changing the topic? Be aware of how each person’s feelings and opinions are being heard and valued.

Format

The intent of dialogue is to support and encourage shared learning within a community. To begin, have your group identify a question or issue that is most relevant to them. Next, agree upon meeting dates and times as necessary. As questions and issues surface in the dialogue they can be used as the focus for your next meeting. Listed below is a suggested format for a three-week process. Feel free to add or adapt as necessary.

1. Past: Why am I a Catholic? Or What is the "history" of my Catholicism?
2. Present: How can we be Catholic at this time?
3. Future: What do we hope for the church in the next ten years?

-OR-

1. Where do I see God’s presence in the Church today?
2. Where is the Spirit calling me? Us?
3. How do I respond to this call?

From these dialogues, a collective sense of the “next step” may emerge and the group can decide how they would like to continue.

Special Note

Dialogue is also an effective method for engaging difficult situations or approaching difficult decisions; especially those that affect a number of people. Should you decide to use dialogue for this purpose, it is recommended that you use a trained facilitator who can help the group surface difficult feelings in a safe way.

For more information about dialogue, finding a facilitator, or further training, contact the Office of Ministry and Spirituality at 502-636-0296.