

Improving communities through true dialogue

By Randy Lisk

Recently I was privileged to attend a conference with people from all over the world. I met people from South Africa, Israel, Palestine, Sri Lanka, India and Northern Ireland, to name a few. A group of about 20 of us met for three hours a day for six days to explore the topic of Leading Beyond Borders.

Many of these people are faced each day with hatred, killing, fear, repression and other horrors that we see on the nightly news. As they told their stories of seemingly hopeless conflicts, they also spoke of hope for the future.

Pain, conflict and desire for healing are not limited to the world's hot spots. They can be found everywhere. Although the issues we face in Kentucky may not be as dire as those being faced by others, there is still much work to be done to strengthen our communities.

What can we learn from these areas to improve our communities here at home?

The first lesson for me was that some of the most difficult borders to get beyond are within us. We must be clear about our intention. If we want stronger communities, the intention must be to create that stronger community – whether community means a marriage, a family, a small town or a country. The intention cannot be selfish or one-sided. Motivation has to be about something larger than self.

Several times during the week I heard stories of personal courage, where people faced a large risk for a cause. They all said it was something they felt compelled to do. In that moment, the choice to act was clear for them. As a man who had worked in Belfast for eight years said, “The killing begins to stop when one person stands up and says, ‘No more. Not in this place.’”

The next lesson for me was that, although we are all unique, we are also all much the same. When we begin to focus only on the differences, to see “us” as different from “them,” this is the first step that, if unchecked, can lead to annihilation of the “other.”

To turn this vicious cycle around, it is important to not participate in the creation of the other. Connection with the other person as a human always precedes any work on the content of the issue. Respecting the humanity of the other is the starting point for any type of meaningful conversation. As connection deepens, so does the trust and understanding between people.

How connected are we? How well do we know our neighbors, let alone those people who are “different” from us?

The third lesson for me was to realize that, in any relationship issue, there is enough blame for both sides. That is, relationships, both good and bad, are co-created. When violence erupts, each party blames the other. One side's terrorist is another side's freedom fighter. As we listened to a Palestinian and an Israeli tell the stories of their people, they both said, “We have tried to be reasonable, but violence is all they understand.”

Realizing that all sides play a part in the problem and all sides must play a part in the solution is a big step on the right road. Later in the week the Israeli said to the

Palestinian, “I am sorry for the pain you and your family have suffered as a result of this conflict.”

What does forgiveness look like at the local level?

Good intentions and a mutually respectful relationship lay the groundwork for a particular type of conversation. It is called dialogue. It is characterized by a curiosity to understand the other person’s point of view – what is significant to them, balanced by a willingness to authentically state your own point of view.

There is a quality of humility that goes with dialogue: the understanding that, as humans, none of us has all the answers. As partners in the conversation we can create a large pool of meaning by disclosing, inquiring and listening. We tell our stories to each other. Every voice has the chance to be heard. This is the type of conversation you have naturally with your best friend. It takes courage to have it with your enemy.

One of the people in our conference was a child of a holocaust survivor. She speaks of the continuing trauma, 50 years later, and how she found relief through dialogue with a man who was a member of the Hitler youth during the war. They have recently gone to Bosnia to tell their stories, with the hope of starting the healing process there.

Communities are webs of conversations. When people quit talking and listening with each other, the relationships and the community begin to die. Conversely, by talking and thinking together, a community can create new life and vitality.

I am hopeful that the practice of dialogue will find its way back into our communities. I think there would be a profound shift if a city council, for example, set aside time on a regular basis for dialogue. I am told there is no time for dialogue, because “we have to hurry and make decisions.” So, at best, we get a conversation style called discussion. It comes from the same root word as percussion or concussion. There is the banging together of ideas. This is not the way to innovation.

Of course, decision making is important, but the paradox is that taking time saves time. Dialogue provides the raw materials to build innovative solutions. It is incumbent upon those in the conversation to be willing to look for the common ground that unites the community and to build the solution on this common ground. This may mean giving up your solution to the problem to look for another idea that fulfills the needs of everyone involved. This step is sometimes called bridging, as in connecting several disparate positions.

The natural outcome of true dialogue is a solution better than what anyone in the group would have created on his or her own. For the hot spots in the world, these conversations hold the seeds of peace. In our communities, dialogue may be a way to reconnect us all in a way that brings new meaning to the word democracy.

Sidebar for article

What is dialogue? It is a form of conversation. 'Dia' means through (as in diameter) and 'logos' means the word or the meaning. In a dialogue, the meaning moves through the group. Participants state their thoughts and feelings (advocacy), inquire into the thoughts and feelings of others and listen to understand others. When dialogue is practiced in an atmosphere of respect, trust, and authenticity, the result is often a new idea, new solution to a problem, innovative resolution to conflict or some other form of innovation or creativity.

Dialogue is divergent in nature. The more members of a group talk together, the more meaning becomes available to all. When dialogue precedes decision-making, this increased meaning usually creates a better result.