



# the BridgeDialogues

laity & clergy reimagining the church

A collaborative effort of Voice of the Faithful, FutureChurch, & Association of U.S. Catholic Priests

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***The BridgeDialogues model depends on a collaborative environment, one where facilitators maintain adherence to the session guidelines rather than serve as leaders who direct the discussion or provide “answers” to questions. Use the following Startup Guidelines to begin and then follow the Session Guidelines during the dialogues.***

## Starting Up

***Step 1: Obtain commitments from one cleric and one lay person as facilitators.***

This is not just the first step but also a **primary requirement** for holding BridgeDialogues. If we are to bridge the gaps between ordained and lay in addressing problems, we must model collaboration at all stages. Facilitators must share the work of producing any documents or materials needed, setting up the meeting space or making phone calls, and facilitating each session.

***Step 2: Select a resource and outline the questions to ask.***

Choose the paper, book, video, or other resource that will serve as the basis from which you launch the dialogue sessions. Alternatively, you may decide that questions on a selected topic could serve as the basis. *The current dialogues focus on Clericalism, and we provide both the resources and sessions models for you to use.* However, BridgeDialogues may be adapted to any set of issues that need your faith community’s combined efforts, lay and clergy, to address.

***Step 3: Invite participation. Choose the venue.***

Invite participation with a description of the dialogue model and purpose along with the topic for your session(s). Consider including a brief summary of expectations with the invitation. Also, be sure to obtain contact information so that you may call participants ahead of time to go over the guidelines and expectations. When you reserve the venue, look for spaces that feel comfortable for about a dozen people or ones where you can close off space so the attendees are not tiny dots in a cavernous hall.

**Limit participation to a maximum of 12 to 15 people.** Holding multiples sessions is better than one large session where no one can fully engage in the dialogue desired.

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#### **Step 4: Prepare the participants.**

Ensure that all participants know beforehand what you expect from them. Here's a short list of what each should know:

- A collaborative discussion does not use speakers and a standard Q and A format. Instead, it is similar to a book group where each person reads material prior to the discussion, then comes to express their own feelings and thoughts about the material.
- During sessions, no one seeks to "answer" another's thoughts or ideas, but rather to talk about what "I think" and "I feel" and "I had an experience"—the "I" statements must prevail. It matters less what a rule or fact or event is than what I think or feel about the rule or experience or event. Be sure participants understand this format AND are prepared to share your thoughts and feelings.
- What is shared in a session will remain confidential to that session unless the person who shared information gives their express permission to report their comments elsewhere.

After talking with a prospective participant, send them (or direct them to) the resource(s) you will be using for the planned session(s).

#### **Step 5: Set up the meeting space.**

Arrange chairs in a large circle so that each person can see the one speaking. Consider using a "talking stick" as an aid to remind people to speak one at a time—anything can serve as this "stick": a rock, a large medal, a three-minute timepiece, a hat, a baton, even an actual stick. The idea is that only the person holding the talisman may speak (except the facilitator, who may need to remind the speaker that it is another's turn). When one person finishes, they hand the talisman to the person on their right. This person may speak or may decline to speak at that particular time and hand the talisman to the next person. Those who decline should be invited after one cycle to speak before others speak a second time.

#### **Step 6: Run the session.**

Conduct the session, following the instructions in "Running a Session." Use one of the resources included in this package and its related questions for your session, or develop other questions for those resources, or specify your own topic and questions using our templates as design models.

## Running a Session

Remember, these sessions require co-leaders, so you both share the duties of the facilitator. Your goals are to involve as many attendees as possible in the discussion, to encourage respectful attention to different views, and to prevent one or two voices from dominating a session. This does not mean cutting off a persistent voice. In any such setting, some people will speak more than others. But you can encourage those who have not yet contributed by inviting them to speak before others have a second chance to speak.

Here is a format for the session that you may find useful.

- **Greeting and Introductions**

Introduce yourselves, ask each person to introduce themselves and, depending on the size of the group, perhaps say what they hope to learn or how they heard about the session. The goal is not necessarily to obtain answers to these questions but rather to "lubricate the voices" (get everyone

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talking from the start). [You may not need the introductions each time if you hold multiple sessions with the same group.]

- **Opening Prayer**

Use a multi-stanza prayer and go around the room having each person say a few lines of the prayer. Again, your goal is to lubricate the voices and let everyone participate from the beginning.

- **Ground Rules (remind attendees of this at each session)**

1. Everyone is invited to contribute. Make sure everyone has a chance by not taking more than three or four minutes each time you speak.
2. Try not to speak twice until everyone has had a chance to speak once—but don't feel compelled to speak until you are ready. (If you are using a talking stick, where each person hands the "stick" to the right, advise everyone that they may pass the stick if they are not yet ready to speak. Be sure to return to them later to ask if they are ready.)
3. Respect each other's opinions and contributions.
4. Anything said during this session remains confidential to this session.

- **Session**

1. Use questions or topics you have prepared for the discussion. Perhaps begin with your own initial thoughts (briefly) about the issue.
2. Hand the "talking stick" to the next person and proceed around the room. When you feel the first question/topic has been addressed, pose the next question/issue.
3. Continue until about 10 minutes prior to the end of the scheduled time. Then ask what "next steps" the group sees as useful in light of the session's exchanges. If it's a next meeting, try to get best days/times from the participants. If it's wider sharing, offer to set up ways for that to happen or designate someone from the group to do so.

- **Closing Prayer**

## Tips and Potential Problems

It is rare, but no matter how prepared you are, no matter how long you spent "vetting" and preparing everyone, someone may disrupt the session. Perhaps by speaking too long. Perhaps by veering wildly off-topic. Perhaps by directing personal comments at another participant. Plan beforehand for how you will handle any such issues. Because there are two of you running the session, one of you is always available to guide a disruptive person away from the circle. Do not worry though—disruption rarely happens; you just want to be prepared in case it does.

### ***Some possible ways to defuse a situation:***

- Take advantage of the slightest pause in the offending speaker's monologue to thank them and ask them to hand the talking piece to the person on the right. Be quick!
- If the offending speaker's monologue ends, remind everyone of the ground rules before the next

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person speaks. However, if the offender is making a personal attack on someone else, please interrupt immediately to remind them of the ground rules and that we are here to listen to each other's thoughts, not to critique them: "We want to hear what you yourself think."

- Even though you, as a facilitator, do not direct the conversation, you should speak up if someone jumps to an entirely different topic. Gently interrupt and thank them for their observations, but "for this evening, perhaps we can return to the topic of X" [clericalism or the selected topic].
- If a disruptive person will not cooperate, move to their side and ask if you can discuss his/her "very interesting idea" with them elsewhere while the others continue with their own discussion.