

**Report on St. John's Cathedral Forum – *How Can We Talk Across Differences?***  
**Gregg Kaufman**  
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On Wednesday evening, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 43 folks gathered in Ingram Lounge for a Civil Discourse program entitled “How to talk across differences?” It was the first of five Let’s Talk forums that will use National Issues Forum Institute dialogue resources, including several faith-based issue guides. With strategic questions about values and positions from Conservatives, Liberals and Centrists, I facilitated a conversation among people who, as a Cathedral staff member mentioned, “would inherently disagree with one another, but in this environment of deliberative dialogue were offered the chance to have civil discourse.” We used some guidelines from the Better Angles organization. <https://www.better-angles.org/our-story/#our-approach>

After an opening prayer and some introductory remarks, we reviewed guidelines for establishing a respectful and safe space for conversation.

- Be open and respectful – Disagree out of curiosity.
- Listen to understand – Listen for what people value and the positive aspects in others’ thoughts.
- Speak for yourself – Be brief and use “I language.”
- Know that God’s Holy Spirit is among us – Please express your faith.

We agreed to organize our time by devoting 15 minutes to the following questions.

1. Media members, scholars, and some citizens assert that we are living in a polarized society and have experienced a decline of civil discourse and the ability to talk across differences. What do we think? Is there a problem?

The following concerns were shared.

- The Judge Kavanaugh Supreme Court nomination hearings revealed the contentious nature of discourse.
- We forget that we are Americans and share a common bond and a concern for the common good.
- Decline in prayer, respect, moral values – elimination of prayer in schools.
- Negative effects of “pop culture.” (The church youth group was present for the beginning of the forum and actively participate in addressing the first question.)
- Loss of civility in society.
- Civil disconnect in spite of incredible technology resources.
- Anonymity inherent in social media.
- Lack of consideration for fellow citizens.
- Social media does not always share accurate information.
- Lack of respect for life.
- Lack of understanding of the facts.

- One person said, “It would be helpful if we had reliable, trustworthy, factual information to use when in dialogue with others.”
2. Considering the broad context of American society’s tensions and the current political climate, what feelings and thoughts did we have when watching the funerals of Barbara Bush, Senator John McCain, and President George H.W. Bush? The Episcopal liturgy and language were prominent. Your thoughts?
- One person shared that incivility was exemplified. When President Trump was not invited to the Senator McCain and Barbara Bush funerals.
  - We lost some honorable people.
  - The group agreed with an observation that there seemed to be a pause in divisiveness.
  - The paused showed what we can and should be as a nation.
  - Several people mentioned that President Trump did not seem to participate in the worship service.
  - Humorous moments in the funeral services was refreshing and could be helpful in governance.
  - The funerals reflected the “better angels of our nature.”
  - Proud to be an Episcopalian.
  - Proud to be an American.

3. Our theme is *How Can We Talk Across Differences?* What are some of the challenges or difficulties you face? For example, some have mentioned that they were fearful of family arguments at Thanksgiving and during the Christmas holidays. Others say their relationships with friends are influenced by the political climate. What inhibits conversation about sensitive issues relative to public policies and politics?

a. Those of us who favor conservatism, what concerns do you have about how you and your ideas are received by people who think differently?

b. Same question for those who tend toward liberalism?

c. What about those of us who are centrists, moderates, or independents? How do we feel?

- Several people shared comments about purposely avoiding talking about politics in order to maintain friendships.
- One person said, “I am afraid my love for dear friends would be compromised by learning that we disagree or become at odds with one another over politics.”
- A family patriarch mentioned that his extended family had a history of discord over politics and that he instituted a “no politics” rule for the Christmas family gatherings. “We had the best Christmas ever!”
- Fear of disagreement and offending someone I care about.
- Language and semantics can be perceived as offensive.

- People take disagreement too personally.
  - Fear of being judgmental.
  - We can't have civil discourse without educated discourse.
  - Many are unwilling to look at the other side of issues.
  - When attempting to draw our comments from conservatives, liberals, and centrists, a conservative person mentioned her concern about immigration and a "deliberative forum broke out!" The session got slightly derailed. Several liberal-minded people said they took offense to being called "Godless" and insensitive to criminal justice and living by the laws of the land we ran out of time for the centrists but started with them for the next segment.
4. What values you connect to your political views? (The recorder will make a simple three-column chart and list what people share.)
- I experimented with this question based on my reading and use of Jonathan Haidt's argument that people of different political ideologies emphasize different values.
  - The Centrists listed the following values.
    - Compassion
    - Truth
    - Listening to both sides.
    - Justice
    - Morality
    - Patience
    - Humility
    - Tolerance
    - Golden Rule
    - Respect
    - Kindness
  - A conservative person said. "Well, we subscribe to all those values!" And a liberal person quickly followed with, "And so do we!"
  - When I pressed the group to state the values they emphasize, conservatives listed "personal responsibility" and liberals "equality," all people should be entitled to basic needs," and staying "educated and informed" in order to dialogue.
  - A good friend and deliberative dialogue colleague of mine raised a concern about the exercise. "If we differentiate our values will we be inhibiting dialogue?" A spirited and witty conversation ensued. Clearly, we did not have enough time to "unpack" Haidt's theory, but it was interesting to see the group struggle with the question.

5. What does the Cathedral do well to recognize and affirm diverse ideas? What could we do better?

- The parish focuses on relationship building.
- The church is extremely welcoming of newcomers.
- Adult education in small groups is excellent.
- We have a civil discourse program.
- Immigrant ministry led by Father Raj and Lily, a Cathedral staff priest from Jordan.
- We welcome diversity. It is part of the DNA of the parish.
- Maintain our Anglican heritage.
- Beautiful worship.
- Creating more small groups represented the one improvement comment.

6. What public or societal issues do we feel Christ's Church could speak to from a faith perspective? **Or, should the Church speak?** Are there particular issues you would like to discuss in our *Let's Talk* series?

- Homelessness
- Human rights
- Water
- Drugs
- Environmental issues – We are stewards of God's creation
- Homeless veterans
- Economic issues – the wealth gap in America
- Any issue that violates human dignity
- Civil Rights
- Guns
- Mental Health
- Criminal justice reform

### **Closing comments**

Before a closing prayer, we debriefed the evening. People appeared to overwhelmingly appreciate the opportunity to come together as people with a wide range of political perspectives. The group was, indeed diverse as illustrated by a former Republican State Attorney and a Democrat criminal defense lawyer. While many appeared to reflect the centrist or moderate ideas, both liberals and conservatives spoke up. Several people expressed particular appreciation for having the youth group present for a portion of the evening and expressed a desire for future multi-generational dialogue opportunities.

After the session formally ended, people tarried to talk and express thanks for the session.

