

LEARNING TO DIALOGUE AND DISCERN:
CONVERSATIONS THAT MATTER IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

by

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*This thesis is dedicated to the local church,
the body of believers that lives out Christian ethics every day.*

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ABSTRACT

LIBBY MAE GRAMMER
LEARNING TO DIALOGUE AND DISCERN:
CONVERSATIONS THAT MATTER IN THE LOCAL CHURCH
Under the direction of DR. DAVID P. GUSHEE, PhD

“How now shall we live?” “What is right under these circumstances?” “What has character and morality to do with decision-making and ethical living for Christians?” These questions and many more feel harder and harder to address in a culture so politicized and polarized that the very consideration of ethical conversation bestows upon individuals and communities heaping amounts of anxiety. Learning how to navigate the dual enterprises of ethical exploration in a church community setting and fundamentally changing how a group dialogues requires deep examination of Christian morality and the ethical methodologies to assess it and make moral recommendations in group settings, as well as examination of group dynamics and dialogue / discernment models.

With the deep social and political divide in the United States today, politically diverse churches like River Road Church, Baptist in Richmond, Virginia have often become silent on issues of moral importance that have become politicized, or have even split along secular political party lines, instead of seeking to find a Christian response to contemporary political and social issues through productive dialogue. This project sought to create a covenantal ethical discerning dialogue that creates a way of having a productive dialogue within church

leadership that is theologically rich, intellectually serious, genuinely illuminating about moral issues, and that leaves the community intact. Ultimately, the project results seemed to indicate that such a model for discerning dialogue was necessary and helpful for church leaders, with some changes made to the dialogue process itself.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

River Road Church, Baptist is a unique congregation located in the suburban West End of Richmond, Virginia. With the tagline “A Thoughtful Faith,” the congregation lives out its calling as an intellectual, traditional, intentionally ecumenical, and deeply theologically reflective faith community. The church is largely progressive in theology, but has a wide range of political and social viewpoints, and often because of these differences, the church has chosen not to address some matters of moral importance corporately as they play out in our nation or our world in various ways (politics, social injustice, etc.). The church is an approximately 1000-member (500 active-member) congregation with an average weekly worship attendance of about 320, and its position as a “flagship” congregation in Virginia Baptist life gives its leadership and membership a platform to lead other congregations in its learning and growth patterns, including how its members dialogue about politicized issues of moral importance.

The Problem

With the deep social and political divide in the United States today, politically diverse churches like River Road have often become silent on issues of moral importance that have become politicized, or have even split along secular political party lines, instead of seeking to find a Christian response to contemporary political and social issues through productive dialogue. What does it look like for a small group of church lay leaders at River Road Church to begin a covenantal ethical discerning dialogue process to attempt to discover a paradigm for discerning dialogue about controversial social ethical

problems in such a way that it does not leave the congregation divided, even if they discover that their differences are intractable? What does it mean for a group of church leaders to learn to dialogue well about these issues, creating greater clarity and understanding, even without complete consensus?

Project Goals

The purpose of the project is to create a way of having a productive dialogue within church leadership that is theologically rich, intellectually serious, genuinely illuminating about moral issues, and that leaves the community intact. This process of discerning dialogue has sought to do the following:

1. Learn techniques and processes for successful dialogue and discernment.
2. Provide space for group members to feel comfortable and safe as they discuss tough, politicized ethical issues.
3. Reflect on a politicized ethical issue, as well as the process of discerning group dialogue.

The result of the process is to create a covenantal dialogue and discernment model for ethics that can be used by church leaders to engage congregations in better conversations about politicized ethical issues.

Limitations and Delimitations of Project

This project is limited to a sample size within River Road Church of 5-10 adult lay people (age 18+), with a representative sample of the congregation based on gender, age, and political viewpoints. Group participants have been regularly involved as lay leaders in the life of River Road Church for at least one year. In order to ensure the representative sample, I reached out to particular church members who hold varying

political opinions, are of varying ages, and are of different genders.¹ The group met five times over the course of two months.

Definition of Terms and Assumptions

Terms to Define:

1. *Christian Ethics*: Living in a way that reflects the mandates and teachings of Christ is a constantly-changing and adapting process for Christian communities: “Christian Ethics is not synonymous with biblical ethics. One obvious reason is that biblical communities did not confront some of the moral issues and historical forces which shape our lives today.”² Christian ethics is a community moral response to the actions of God in our lives and in the world... not simply a list of “dos” and “do nots,” but a way of living into what it means to be a follower of Jesus in a world confronted with questions of what is right and good, and what is sinful and harmful.
2. *Politicized Moral/Ethical Issues*: Politicized issues of moral importance are those that confront issues of justice – and simultaneously are matters of public interest and public policy debate. These topics could include war, racism, classism, sexuality, and many others.
3. *Community*: A culture and group of people with whom we associate. Community is “a synonym for social relatedness... We cannot and do not muster moral insight for ourselves by ourselves apart from communities, any more than we are or can be human beings apart from others. Everything we know about morality and the moral life, or anything else, for that matter, is finally a community enterprise and achievement.”³
4. *Christian Community*: “Christian community (or *koinōnia*, to recall the New Testament term)...[is] the community-creating human relatedness which is a consequence of the impact of Jesus.”⁴ Moral relations are always dimensions of social relations in which “personal” cannot be separated from “social,” nor “individual” from “community.”
5. *Dialogue*: A form of discussion that fosters safe space among group members. This open discussion creates better communication by analyzing group dynamics in real time, allowing group members to be honest without repercussion, and

¹ See Appendix A for contact email to participants.

² Bruce C. Birch & Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress), 11.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

collaborating in a way that considers carefully language used and norms adhered to, and challenges old ways of thinking and confronting others.⁵

6. *Christian Moral Discernment*: A way of doing dialogue that separates or distinguishes between two, or among various, options; a way to distinguish between good or evil choices; finding the authentic over against the counterfeit; to see as God sees, set apart from normal, human preoccupations; to locate the most immediate and particular among a broader landscape of choices; or to put forth insight.⁶ For purposes of this project, *Christian moral discernment* is a process by which a group of Christians in a given church community setting reaches both understanding and normative judgment about ethical issues.

7. *Detachment*: Though the popular definition of this word comes across as cold or indifferent, the principle of detachment in the process of Christian discernment means something very different. Detachment functions as a method to create *freedom to discern*. “The freer we become, the more we are able to go about life in a wise and discerning way. And the more we use wisdom and discernment, the freer we become to make choices and then get on with life. It’s difficult to say which comes first—discernment or freedom. One leads to the other.”⁷ The detached person says, “I don’t value anything as much as I value knowing and doing God’s will...I am indifferent to matters of ego, pride, favor, comfort, advantage, and so on.”⁸ As a first step in the process of discerning dialogue, each individual needs to spend time in prayer and preparation to enter into dialogue with others from a place of detachment, acknowledging their struggles and limitations as part of the process.

Assumptions made:

- Assume there exists in the United States a divisive political culture that creates strain within churches over politicized moral issues.

- Assume that this strain oftentimes leads to silence about ethical issues that have become politicized – specifically due to a fear of conflict arising and further dividing the church.

⁵ Annette Simmons, *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths: Using Dialogue to Overcome Fear and Distrust at Work* (New York: AMACOM), 18-25.

⁶ Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Nashville: Upper Room Books), 13.

⁷ Vinita Hampton Wright, “Freedom and Discernment,” Loyola Press, online: <https://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/ignatian-spirituality/discernment/freedom-and-discernment> (accessed 10 March 2018).

⁸ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together*, 70.

- Assume there is a methodology for teaching/leading dialogue that can curb divisiveness and have these conversations in meaningful and moral clarity-producing ways.
- Assume all project participants are believers, focused on how to live an ethical, Christian life.
- Assume all project participants are committed to the work of ethical discernment and dialogue in community, seeking the most effective approaches to help lead others in their own congregations in such discussions.

What is at stake?

Churches with differing political opinions among members often remain silent on major issues of moral importance due to our divisive political culture, which, as stated above, leaves no room for discerning a Christian response, or God's will, on a given issue. This same silence can lead to division within the church as well, as congregants avoid these hard topics, or if ever broached, rely on poor dialogue and end up in arguments or heated discussions, splintering the Body of Christ. Without learning to confront these issues in a way that builds community through careful discerning dialogue rather than dividing it through culture-based arguments, Christian communities like River Road Church will have little to no relevance in the wider discussion on these issues, and may leave the church divided and without a strong moral voice to lend to a world in need of religious moral guidance.

Potential Significance

This project seeks to end the communal silence on moral issues and move into discerning dialogue in a community-building setting.⁹ This group will act as a laboratory for ethical discerning dialogue, attempting to use the best dialogue and Christian

⁹ Which, paradoxically, may as part of the process involve periods of *useful silence* to better discern a Christian response!

discernment processes to better hear and speak to one another about tough moral issues. This first step of a group dialogue process together will be toward the longer-term and bigger-picture goal of creating a guide for how ethical conversations can be undertaken productively in church group settings (and how they might be made better if this kind of group is implemented).¹⁰

Project Methodology

The project consists of creating a small, covenantal group of adult lay leaders of the congregation, motivated by shared interest in ethical dialogue and discernment. In order to ensure the representative quality of the group, I reached out to particular church members who hold varying political opinions, are of varying ages, and are of different genders.¹¹ This group of 5-10 adult lay leaders covenanted together so that each member would fully be aware of and understand what we were doing (e.g., some information may be shared in the church community, but names may be used only with permission in writing; research may be quoted for purposes of reports, publications, etc.). The covenant was crafted together after the initial retreat meeting and signed by each member to confirm participation in the discerning dialogue sessions.

In the small group, members learned how to dialogue productively as Christians when confronted with politicized ethical issues. I led a discovery process for approaching these issues that attends to the individual and corporate ethical discerning dialogue we do together as a group. Using our shared covenant, we applied ethical processes to one particular politicized ethical issue together (income inequality), thinking through the

¹⁰ Ideally, this process could also be used to further conversations among Christians generally, fostering ecumenical growth in discernment by finding better ways to communicate about given issues.

¹¹ See Appendix A for contact email to participants.

implications of the scriptural, social, and ethical approaches to it. We spent three 90-minute discerning dialogue sessions together after an initial learning retreat.

At our preliminary meeting, I worked with the group members to explain the process. We went over the basic structure of the project and let the group members leave to pray about and confirm their participation (this also left space for group members to back out early on, if needed). Then, after the confirmed participation of each member, I provided the group with reading materials¹² about the subject matter to ensure they had sufficient reading time.

The first group meeting, a “retreat” spanning a half-day, introduced the discerning dialogue method and presented “models, facilitate experiences, and set the stage so that people expect a dramatically different communication experience.”¹³ At the end of the meeting, group members agreed on a covenant wording together, drafting language gleaned from the dialogue methodology and their own discernment about the process. Following the first retreat meeting, the next three meetings were 90 minutes long, spaced out over a few weeks’ time and required pre-reading of the two listed books in order to have background for a common vocabulary about the issue at hand.

For each 90-minute discerning dialogue meeting, we used the first ten minutes to recap the last group meeting. I then facilitated dialogue around the ethical issue. Each meeting was audio recorded for research purposes, and each meeting ended with a short

¹² Two books will be required reading on the topic, see Appendix C for books and explanations.

¹³ Annette Simmons, *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths*, 79. I will use the paradigm for dialogue presented in this volume, weaving in the processes of Christian discernment, as outlined in Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together*. See Appendix B.

survey for the group members.¹⁴ Each group member also wrote a reflection paper after our three dialogue sessions concluded, prompted by reflection questions.¹⁵ The group gathered one final time for a brief reflection on the process. The written and verbal reflections were used to help evaluate the effectiveness of the methods used.

Rationale for the Process

Dialogue is a way of creating useful and safe space for conversation in community. By identifying dialogue and discernment models that work in small groups of church leadership around the topics of politicized ethical issues, those leaders can gain a significant understanding of how best to lead discerning dialogue such as this in other settings – thus expanding the church’s communal response to politicized moral issues and other tough topics. This project serves as an ethnographic case study in small group discerning dialogue, examining how well a specific medium of covenantal discerning dialogue can guide a group of committed Christians in a given congregation toward honest and safe group dialogue about politicized issues of moral importance.

Plan for Evaluation and Analysis

In order to gather data, I employed various methods:

1. I provided an inventory before and after each session (choose on a scale of 1-6) measuring how each participant’s opinions or understandings have changed using specific questions to measure how well the group members have learned techniques and processes for successful dialogue and discernment, how well a comfortable and safe space has been provided, and how well the group has reflected on a politicized ethical issue. The scale gathered information about the group members’ certainty versus uncertainty on a given ethical issue; level of familiarity with an issue; comfort with the discerning dialogue process; level of detachment achieved before discerning dialogue begins on a given topic; level of unity achieved among group members (even in disagreement); theological

¹⁴ See Appendix E for survey questions.

¹⁵ See Appendix D for reflection paper guide.

approach, social approach, or ethical methodology; and how well a given dialogue period worked to increase or decrease the group's level of conversational tension. In providing a survey that reviewed people's familiarity and growth in learning about a specific topic alongside the dialogue process being used, the project provided insight into how covenantal communities can learn and grow well together while discussing these issues, pointing to the most effective discerning dialogue models for churches to use when addressing politicized ethical issues.

2. The group members provided a more robust response through a reflection paper with guided questions to answer (but with more freedom to explain their rationale) after the final dialogue meeting.¹⁶
3. I observed group dynamics in each dialogue session, taking notes about body language, tone, and the words used by group members to further supply background information for the study.
4. At the conclusion of the sessions, after reading reflection responses, I asked the group to share briefly together at a final gathering whether and how the discerning dialogue processes worked for this topic and in general. The information gleaned from the papers and the final meeting served to help me evaluate the effectiveness of the process.

In order to analyze this data, I watched for the development of common themes to emerge among group participants related to their comfort level with the process, their proficiency in discerning dialogue as taught, and their openness to discussing the topic at hand. Specifically, I spent time analyzing the quantitative data from the surveys to gather information related to the development of ideas from one discerning dialogue session to the next, as well as overall group comfort levels with any given session. I then compared this survey data against my own observations and pointed out both the tensions and the evidence of the observations in the survey data. Additionally, the reflection papers served to help me better understand the answers to survey questions from each participant. In reviewing the reflection papers, I used coding to pull out words and phrases used both in the reflections as well as the transcripts of the audio recordings of the discerning dialogue

¹⁶ See appendices 4 and 5 for copies of the reflection paper guide and survey.

sessions. Through this, I gleaned insights into the participants' overall understanding of the process as well as their development through the process – have they felt comfortable, have they learned the process and used it well, etc.

Sharing the Project

River Road Church, Baptist will receive a report on the covenantal dialogue process through a written article shared in the church's newsletter. The church will hear from me and from some of those involved in the process (if they wish to do so) as to what was gleaned from our time together. In sharing this information widely, the church will be invited in to these processes in their own small group settings, with the leadership of those lay leaders involved in the group. The discerning dialogue processes learned will provide lay leaders with ongoing tools for their ministry areas, leading to what hopefully will become a more open and safe space for dialogue about politicized issues in the future. With these new tools, I hope also to create a discerning dialogue process more generally for church communities.

CHAPTER TWO

COMMUNITY, CHARACTER, CULTURE WARS, AND CONVERSATION

“How now shall we live?” “What is right under these circumstances?” “What has character and morality to do with decision-making and ethical living for Christians?” These questions and many more feel harder and harder to address in a culture so politicized and polarized that the very consideration of ethical conversation bestows upon individuals and communities heaping amounts of anxiety. Learning how to navigate the dual enterprises of ethical exploration in a church community setting and fundamentally changing how a group dialogues requires deep examination of Christian morality and the ethical methodologies to assess it and make moral recommendations in group settings,¹⁷ as well as examination of group dynamics and dialogue / discernment models. To that end, we will explore the history of our collective struggle to dialogue in our given context, as well as examining concepts of Christian character formation, what moral decision making and action look like in faith communities, how the moral vision of a community can be formed and function, and how discerning dialogue can foster better communal conversation around issues of moral importance.

Christian Community and Character

To begin, one must understand a few concepts related to group moral / ethical discussion. First, “moral agency” as a concept is described by Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen in their book *Bible & Ethics in the Christian Life*, as the capacity humans

¹⁷ Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics in the Christian Life* (Augsburg: Minneapolis, 1989), 39.

have for perceiving various courses of action through analyzing and contemplating a given moral quandary. For Birch and Rasmussen, this means that moral agency “encompasses both character and conduct, both our moral ‘being’ and our moral ‘doing.’”¹⁸ Each individual in a group, as well as the group itself, must understand their own agency as part of the process of collective ethical discernment. All individual moral agents are part of the individual and group work of both being (virtue/character formation) and doing (ethical action): “Character informs actions, so acts form character. Being and doing shape one another.”¹⁹ So, as an individual in a group seeks to shape his or her character, he or she is also living into said character qualities. Exploring how all of this functions in group settings helps us to understand “that artful science which asks after the best kind of life to live and the excellences of character which foster and express that”: namely, ethics. For Christian ethics specifically, this moral formation is a transformation that happens to a community of people who share a faith identity based on belief in Jesus Christ. This group of “sinners and saints” (all living as both simultaneously) are moving together “from vice and virtue to *grace*.”²⁰

Moving from vice and virtue to grace in community, however, requires more than simply a change in character of individuals in the group: “Moral virtue pertains not only to the qualities of sound moral character but to the social arrangements which make for communities of sound moral character.”²¹ Group dialogue around issues of moral

¹⁸ Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics in the Christian Life*, 40.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

importance requires not only good character of the group as a whole, but a deep understanding of the issue at hand: what particular data are important, what factors weight most heavily on the decision, what moral norms and criteria should guide the group, what sources should the group consult, etc.²² The good character of each member is a decent starting point for good dialogue about ethical issues, but it cannot help create decision or discussion on its own. As Birch and Rasmussen point out: “Ethics as decisions only is too reductionist; ethics as character formation is too simplistic.”²³ Our intentions and dispositions as ethical humans do not give us enough information to make a decision about a given action (or inaction). Thus, when moral decisions must be made, an ethical actor must employ *practical moral reasoning*. Much of this moral reasoning is rather innate. We learn at a young age not to steal or murder and do not have to reasonably think through these actions very often. But there are plenty of non-internalized moral judgements we must make that do require moral deliberation. This process of examining a moral issue moves beyond the rudimentary judgements we make on a day-to-day basis and requires us to engage in a process to confront a more complex and perhaps ethically uncertain issue.²⁴ In the context of Christian community, this becomes even more important, as the group is seeking to not only form character but make right decisions based on that character, which has been formed by a communal ethic in Jesus Christ and the study of Scripture. Christians cannot fully embrace their faith without engaging their community story – and their real-life community in which

²² Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics in the Christian Life*, 101.

²³ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

they partner and grow in that faith story day-to-day. That dynamic faith story is rooted in a real-life relationship with an active, covenanting God and shares “a history of stories, symbols, interpretations, ritual forms, and other traditions which influence moral character and moral choice.”²⁵

In community, Christians are what Birch and Rasmussen call a “story-in-process,”²⁶ that is those who live into these faith claims are also living into the continuously-forming and unfolding story of God, Christ, and Spirit at work in their lives and the world. This living and developing story provides a framework for living out a communal story rooted in the forming identity Christians have through their faith. But, in order to fully live into this flexible, growing story in Christ, a community of Christians must create an open and tolerant environment – one that allows for doubt and amicable disagreement, while respecting the views of others as fellow image-bearers of God. This kind of fundamental dignity is at odds with an individualistic society that divides persons into camps of “left versus right” and “liberal” or “conservative,” demeaning the “other” as something less than fully human. In Christian community, all parties should be foundationally children of God, seeking first God’s will and desires for all. Communities must also have those within who call attention to the context for deliberation, reminding the community of its foundational identity. Similarly, there must also be a recounting of the experience of the community and other similar faith communities to analyze through memory and tradition (both modern memory as well as Scripture).²⁷ Lastly, there must

²⁵ Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics in the Christian Life*, 104.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

exist in community agents of clarity and direction – those who can help educate and put into practice those moral decisions made in community.²⁸

Moral decision making begins often with emotive responses to given issues (“I’m incensed this is happening in my city!” “That’s the worst way to respond to these people I’ve ever heard of!”). Certainly, these often deeply personal experiences of outrage or solidarity are healthy, functional ways to stir a community into ethical decision-making and action.²⁹ But, for communities that want to discern God’s will for them, ethical decision making often involves *challenges* to individual feelings, moral norms, or even presumed understandings of what data are important.³⁰ With these challenges to community moral decision-making, the work of dialogue and discernment becomes even more necessary as community members grapple with their own argument challenges, their shared moral history, and their ongoing formation of character together.³¹

Culture Wars and The Great American Divide

Often church members will ask: How did we get where we are as a faith community? Why is dialogue about politicized moral issues so difficult for us? This history is long and storied, and begins with one simple fact: the church as community is comprised of people influenced by their surrounding culture. Though our faith may be rooted in our “otherness” or heavenly citizenship, the fact remains that as an engaged citizen of a country, most of us are influenced by the media and political parties dominating our discourse throughout our week. When we enter the sanctuary, then, we

²⁸ Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics in the Christian Life*, 111.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

are often wearing along with our ties and dresses a common thread of divisive discourse. At home, church members are watching news sources with hard left- or hard-right focuses. They are trimming their social media feeds so much so that they become echo-chambers of their own political agendas. In Baptist churches, we are also fighting amongst ourselves on doctrinal and social issues – from slavery in the nineteenth century, to capitalism and socialism in the early twentieth century, to women in ministry in the later twentieth century, to homosexuality and gay marriage in the twenty-first century.

Americans have become a tribal people, or “groupish,”³² and they have since the 1960s drawn a sharp line between “right” and “left” politics. These broader culture wars lead also to a divided church, both on its own doctrinal squabbles and its own members drifting so far apart politically that politicized issues of moral concern are rarely discussed and mostly end up driving wedges between members. One member may rely on Fox News, another on MSNBC, to gather their nightly news. Immediately, their biases are “clear” and they have been sorted into their categories “right” and “left.” The problems rise to the top of the government with bickering and underhanded behavior from both sides, leaving constituents falling in lock-step with the leadership, even while that very leadership makes “Americans feel that they’re on a ship that’s sinking, and the crew is too busy fighting with each other to bother plugging the leaks.”³³

The history of this hard split in U.S. politics in the twentieth century is complex, but in their book *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Robert Putnam and David Campbell give insight to the growth of the split in religious terms. They

³² Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books), 192.

³³ *Ibid.*, 275-76.

explain that because of “seismic societal shocks,” including the sexual revolution of the 1960s, which produced a prudish aftershock of conservative religion, the Republican party emerged as the party for the religious. Similarly, a second aftershock led to younger Americans disavowing religion due to its ties to the Republican party. This polarization is often seen in voting attitudes related to intimate matters such as sex and the family – now, often a religious coalition tends to vote in one way, while non-religious Americans vote another. This state of religious polarization leads to heated debates using hyperbolic language to demonize or criticize those of no faith (or sometimes of other faiths). And yet, American society still tolerates a wide range of religious traditions, and overall Americans are living among their neighbors of different faiths or no faith at all in numbers not seen in our history. This fluidity is a feature of our infrastructure, built in to the First Amendment, to not favor any religion over another. Yet somehow, this religious pluralism exists alongside religious polarization³⁴ – the same polarization found in voting practices and political ideology.

In his book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, James Davison Hunter describes this polarization as the “eclipse of the middle.”³⁵ This eclipse is rooted in sensationalism – a need reflecting the “human aversion to monotony and boredom.”³⁶ Most people are seeking in the media “the shrill pitch of harsh moral criticism and blunt commentary”³⁷ over against reasoned and more complex arguments for or against

³⁴ Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 3-4.

³⁵ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), 160.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

specific issues. And, once a person has been categorized into a political “side,” they are also more likely to categorize others. Suddenly all of those claiming conservatism or liberalism become inclined to be suspicious of any inkling of the other side’s arguments: “If they are not for us, then they must be against us.”³⁸ When voices arise that attempt to be distinct from either side, they are often seen as somehow less than loyal to whichever cause one supports: “Perspectives that are moderately progressive or moderately conservative or traditionalist tend to be portrayed as extremes.”³⁹ Specifically this has been happening more and more through the very medium most Americans receive political information: the media. Whether the 24/7 news cycle on the television, or the newsfeeds controlled by algorithms online, the polarization intensifies as the media moves further apart ideologically:

It is through these media that public discourse acquires a life of its own; not only do the categories of public rhetoric become detached from the intentions of the speaker, they also overpower the subtleties of perspective and opinion of the vast majority of citizens who position themselves “somewhere in the middle” of these debates...Middling positions and the nuances of moral commitment, then, get played into the grid of opposing rhetorical extremes.⁴⁰

Religious and Baptist Culture Wars

What does religion, specifically a Baptist faith in the Southern United States, have to offer this cultural polarization? Mostly more polarization, unfortunately. Born of a split over slavery in the late nineteenth century, the Southern Baptist Convention quickly moved into some of the same religious and political polarization found in the wider society in the United States in the twentieth century. The societal changes Putnam and

³⁸ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 160.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 160-161.

Campbell describe infused the convention with a conservatism that not only preached a social prudishness, but a fundamentalist theology of inerrancy that hard-lined the denomination as a whole into fundamentalist/conservative and moderate/liberal camps. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the denomination was fracturing. While the outcomes ranged from social to political to cultural, the initial differences were inherently theological. The divide over how to properly interpret Scripture was growing as the fields of theology and exegesis expanded in graduate programs throughout seminaries across the country. Struggling with perceived heresies put forth by seminary professors in the 1960s forward, the Southern Baptist Convention put forth a Statement of Faith that included the phrase “truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter” in relation to Scripture.⁴¹ Any move toward understanding Scripture as a human endeavor, or to insinuate that some parts of Scripture were more “true” than others created deep fears among those who held strongly to the doctrine of inerrancy, or believing the Bible was accurate in history, science, and social matters. Moderates, on the other hand, were weaving in newer theological discourse and scientific understanding about the world as they “saw biblical history and science as conditioned by the times in which it was written—only its religious truths were really without error.”⁴² Thus, to counter this diluted form of inerrancy, only strict inerrancy became orthodox in the Southern Baptist Convention, and though most Southern Baptist Christians in the pew were not true inerrancy-believing literalists, the growing leadership in the convention leaned further and further away from any mediated understanding of inerrancy, and toward biblical

⁴¹ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 74.

⁴² *Ibid.*

inerrancy that left little room for modern interpretation, and certainly little room for interpretations different from those in power. While the growing fundamentalist movement spent its time crying out for premillennial understandings of history, a literal Second Coming, a literal Genesis narrative, and other strong, literal interpretations of Scripture – moderates in the denomination were suddenly feeling like outcasts, as if they had quickly become liberals for even considering that the word inerrancy was an unhelpful designation and that historical-critical methods or literary study of Scripture were valid and helpful tools for understanding the Bible.

From these theological differences stemmed strong social opinion among fundamentalist leadership in the denomination. For the strictest fundamentalists, the Scriptures prescribed a strong hierarchy in church leadership. Pastors became ultimate authorities in ways the lay-led churches had not espoused, and women, though they were slowly encountering growth in church leadership through seminary training and being hired as Associate Ministers at churches and missionaries in the field, were quickly being ousted because they crossed the lines of submission to their husbands. Even as the Southern Baptist Women in Ministry was founded and women were being ordained by their local churches for ministry (a few to become senior pastors of congregations), the Southern Baptist Convention was condemning their very presence on boards and committees and actively dismissing them from convention meetings with harsh words, boos, and rancorous, angry chatter. Churches hiring women as senior pastors then began experiencing disfellowship from local associations, and eventually from the larger denomination as a whole. The divide over this particular issue was so strong it spilled

over not only into denominational life, but social and political life as well. Nancy

Ammerman says of this split:

In all likelihood, the members of Southern Baptist Women in Ministry and the men at the Pastors Conference across town were also separated by how they voted in the last national election. While fellow Southern Baptist Jimmy Carter got a large majority of Baptist votes in 1976, he lost many of them in 1980. By then, conservatives had become disillusioned with his version of religion and politics. One fundamentalist leader told us that Carter talked about being born again, but then “quotes Reinhold Niebuhr, so we knew he wasn’t reading the right things.” He was also a social drinker, and that was taboo. And his policies were too much like the New Deal and Great Society to please newly-awakening conservatives. By 1980, the gap between the Moral Majority and the progressivism of Carter was also present within Carter’s Southern Baptist Convention.⁴³

From the issue of biblical interpretation to the issue of ordaining women to ministry to social issues ranging from drinking and dancing to homosexuality and abortion, those churches affiliated with the convention that held differing ideologies pulled further away from one another,⁴⁴ leaving a schism that eventually would lead to a full split of the denomination and the creation of the more moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1991 (with which River Road Church, Baptist affiliates). The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the now-struggling “denomi-network”⁴⁵ currently finds itself in a similar situation as the Southern Baptist Convention 30 years earlier – this time over the hiring of homosexuals to ministry within the denomination. Unfolding even now, the handful of state Baptist associations that affiliate with churches across the ideological divide (including the Baptist General Association of Virginia, with which River Road

⁴³ Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 99.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 72-92.

⁴⁵ Carefully attempting to exclude language of denominationalism, this moniker was put forth in recent years to drive home the autonomy of the local church and the loose organizational structure that works more as a partnership, or network, than a “governing body,” as the Southern Baptist Convention has become in the last few decades.

Church, Baptist also affiliates), are beginning to make clear their separation with the Cooperative Baptists because of their perceived liberal social stances, even as the Cooperative Baptists make unclear statements about whether to fully include homosexuals in denominational leadership or not and further alienate the most progressive in their ranks. With so much polarization imbedded in our cultural narrative as a Baptist church in the South, it is no wonder that our church, and many like it, are struggling to have productive conversations about polarized ethical issues.

Creating Space for Discerning Dialogue in Christian Community

Creating a space for this kind of theological and ethical dialogue is an art and science. Because of this, learning some of the helpful research of group dialogue can be supportive as we endeavor to enhance our ability to dialogue well. To do this, we turn to the work of Annette Simmons in her book *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths: Using Dialogue to Overcome Fear and Distrust at Work*. While her specific aims are for workplace dialogue, her strategies for creating good space for dialogue to happen are applicable in many situations, including a church community group used to avoiding hard conversations. Simmons frames the work of dialogue not as a place for immediate decision-making, but as a place in which a group can begin to think honestly out loud together, whether or not a communal decision is ever made. Discussing ethical issues can be a hard conversation, bringing about hard truths for the people involved, and so having tools for enhancing dialogue forms the foundation for what this project hopes to accomplish.

Dialogue as a mapped process for groups has been studied in various settings and framed in many different ways, but Simmons specifically confronts some of the more

basic trust issues associated with deep divides that can occur in communities that regularly interact to accomplish tasks and work as a team. Her work uncovers some of the pitfalls of shallow community conversation that can breed a culture of fear that leads to divisive behavior and lack of progress.

Helping a group re-learn how to communicate requires some preparation work on the part of the group facilitator. Simmons points out that part of the trouble in a workplace environment (and I would posit probably most of our churches as well) is that we often do not tell each other the truth. In one survey, up to 93% of people admit to lying at work, and improving the flow of information in a given context will not help at all if the quality of the information is so poor.⁴⁶ If we are seeking to have productive group dialogue, it stands to reason that the flow of *truthful* information be a top priority. If our church members, like our coworkers, are always keeping quiet about “delicate issues” or avoid “touchy” subjects, soon enough, there remain more undiscussable issues than discussable ones, and our conversations stay shallow, and mostly meaningless to the growth and work of the church.⁴⁷

But what keeps us from having honest conversation? In general, it often has to do with a group’s ability to handle confronting the deeper, “real problem” facing their group.⁴⁸ It can happen in relationships of deep mistrust, but also in discussions involving issues that bring out mistrust or worry about outcomes – like politicized moral issues, which come with the baggage of society and denominational issues. When the “real

⁴⁶ Annette Simmons, *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths: Using Dialogue to Overcome Fear and Distrust at Work* (New York: AMACOM, 1999), 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

problem” cannot be addressed as a group, but perhaps only whispered in hallways between friends, our ability to function as a church – to grow in faith and action – becomes weakened or disappears entirely. Successful dialogue that opens groups to honest lines of communication, on the other hand, “has the power to change a group of strangers into friends and a collection of individuals into a team. Dialogue builds coherence around diversity and trust where suspicion and cynicism threaten to fragment an organization.”⁴⁹ We need to tap into skills, then, that open the door for safe space that allows all parties to speak of these “real problems” in meaningful ways “without escalating into arguments, declining into debilitated silence, or mindlessly deferring to a ‘leader’ the group can later subvert.”⁵⁰ Real communication, unlike the shallow, dishonest communication we fall into, can change people. It can change beliefs, change hearts, and can ultimately help to form us into better people who work together in better ways and thus accomplish more.⁵¹ Holding us back in group dialogue is often a low tolerance for frustration and uncertainty, as well as an unwillingness to take the time to fully address an issue – leading to a rush to judgement and a poor dialogue to arrive at that decision.⁵²

So, how does a group begin? Simmons says that groups must be willing to challenge their own assumptions, reflect on their decisions, and individually, all must be leaders in the conversation. Group members individually must be self-aware to have a

⁴⁹ Simmons, *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths*, 4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 10-11.

higher capacity to deal with unpleasant realities from others,⁵³ each while knowing his or her own strength and potential. Without each person seeing his or her weaknesses and strengths through a process of self-honesty, there is no way the group can arrive at honest dialogue. We will explore the concept of *spiritual* self-awareness in more detail below in learning about the stages of spiritual discernment.

The benefits of successful dialogue are not necessarily specific outcomes, but the act of participating in genuine dialogue that deepens relationships and leads to further creativity. According to Simmons, beginning with a day-long retreat, a group must first learn about dialogue models, setting the stage for later conversations about issues. In setting this precedent, Simmons suggests being up front with the agenda of the process – if a facilitator wants to create a safe space for dialogue, she must also work hard to constantly uncover fears and hidden agendas and deal with them up front. That means not acting like the expert in the room, but act as a facilitating group member only – someone of equal status genuinely seeking dialogue just as the other members of the group do as well. My work in this project was to inspire and facilitate dialogue, not directly move the group into answers or control the content (other than to keep to any given issue at hand insofar as it affects the outcome of the study).

Specifically, the group in this project spent a half day exploring some of the background of good dialogue, in addition to exploring their own wants and needs around dialogue (i.e., “I want people to be honest,” or perhaps, “I don’t want anyone to feel hurt or damaged by this process”).⁵⁴ The group learned about some of the stages of dialogue

⁵³ Simmons, *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths*, 12.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

(politeness and pretending, chaos, discarding and redefining, resolution and collective learning, and closure),⁵⁵ as well as escape strategies we often use (flight, fight, pairing, dependency, etc.).⁵⁶ These, and many more insights into dialogue laid a psychological and sociological foundation for a *spiritually discerning* dialogue session.

Steps to Christian Discerning Dialogue

In order to also un-learn our spiritual processes for approaching discussion about these polarizing issues, I posit that a process of *discerning* dialogue can be taught and implemented to assist groups of faithful Christians in seeking after a Christian response to a tough issue. Using many of the same kinds of physical and conversational methods as Simmons' dialogue model, the spiritual discipline of Christian group discernment weaves together this practice of good listening and speaking with the drive to know and understand the will of God as Christians seek to live out their faith in ways that lead to *consolation*, or toward the heart of God – to peace, rather than toward *desolation*, or away from the heart of God, to distress. This work of discernment begins with a deep humility and willingness to take time to pray, dialogue, and shed one's own ego while searching for the will of God in a given situation. John Cassian, a monk in the fourth century described discernment thusly: "From humility comes discernment, from discernment comes insight, and from insight comes foresight."⁵⁷ Only when Christians are taking seriously the spiritual work of discernment and the social-spiritual work of

⁵⁵ Simmons, *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths*, 209-211

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 221-223.

⁵⁷ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will*, 20.

dialogue can we fully address politicized issues of moral importance together in meaningful ways.

Discernment is a process of stages. While they do not always follow in this given order, it can be helpful to understand some of the ways our foremothers and forefathers studied and understood this process. The work of discernment moves like a dance between the individual to the communal, consistently re-focusing on the will of God:

- *Framing* identifies the focus for discernment of God’s will. The matters to be included are arranged into a unified whole. The focus of the exploration is briefly described.
- *Grounding* in a guiding principle jump-starts the process of discernment. The guiding principle is informed by the values, beliefs, and purpose of the discerning community. Boundaries are set.
- *Shedding* lays aside ego, preconceived notions, false assumptions, biases, and predetermined conclusions so that people involved in discernment can openly consider the matter.

This *Shedding* step creates individual “detachment” to better listen to other group members. Though the popular definition of the word “detachment” comes across as cold or indifferent, the principle of detachment in the process of Christian discernment means something very different. Detachment functions as a method to create *freedom to discern*. “The freer we become, the more we are able to go about life in a wise and discerning way. And the more we use wisdom and discernment, the freer we become to make choices and then get on with life. It’s difficult to say which comes first—discernment or freedom. One leads to the other.”⁵⁸ The detached person says, “I don’t value anything as much as I value knowing and doing God’s will...I am indifferent to matters of ego, pride,

⁵⁸ Vinita Hampton Wright, “Freedom and Discernment,” Loyola Press, online: <https://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/ignatian-spirituality/discernment/freedom-and-discernment> (accessed 10 March 2018).

favor, comfort, advantage, and so on.”⁵⁹ As a first step in the process of discerning dialogue, each individual spends time in prayer and preparation to enter into dialogue with others from a place of detachment, acknowledging their struggles and limitations as part of the process.

The Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits, sought to apply the discernment teachings of St. Ignatius to the process of gaining clarity and balance before seeking to discern, and part of this process still used in Jesuit spirituality asks for the soul’s freedom to decide openly. This freedom-inducing state is detachment. “In his *First Principle and Foundation*, Ignatius talked about ‘making use of those things that help bring us closer to God and leaving aside those things that don’t.’”⁶⁰ In the process of discerning that which leans toward consolation, Ignatius says we must let go of attachments that have the potential to lead away from God, toward desolation. Part of the process of detachment also entails examining one’s opinions in light of the question of whose kingdom we serve – our own, or ultimately God’s. And, if we are serving the Kingdom of God, are we able to adequately set aside those things we assume we are right about in order to discuss with others a matter of importance? However “right” we may feel, Ignatius understood that we often fall short, especially on our own, and part of discernment is learning to set aside and be open to both what we might be wrong about as much as what we may be getting right as we discern in a group of believers. Without this separation from one’s predetermined ideas in ways that allow for attention to God’s ways, group discernment is in peril and likely to fail.

⁵⁹ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will*, 70.

⁶⁰ Margaret Silf, *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyla Press, 1999), Kindle Edition, chap. 11, par. 7.

- *Rooting* in the tradition connects religious and biblical stories, themes, and images with the situation at hand. The tradition may confront, confirm, nudge, or even transform the direction of the discernment process.⁶¹

When discussing an issue of moral importance, Christians also should look to their traditions and symbols for guidance, but with modern understanding and interpretation at hand during the honest and open dialogue that seeks the will of God. While Christian ethical discernment draws from Scripture its framework, it is itself not a discipline *directly* from Scripture. To be sure, Christians seeking to live like Christ are exegeting Scripture, but they are doing so as they seek answers to problems that may or may not have been fully addressed in the pages of Scripture. Christian ethics is “that artful science which asks after the best kind of life to live and the excellences of character which foster and express that. The focus is on moral traits, together with the social arrangements which nurture moral qualities appropriate to people’s social roles.”⁶²

Specifically, Christian *character ethics* asks questions about the kind of person one should become based on norms developed from family and social values – in the case of this study, those values will be derived specifically from the teachings of Jesus and the rest of Scripture as interpreted through the lens of those teachings. “To belong to a people of God means the formation and transformation of personal moral identity with the faith identity of the community.”⁶³ Those seeking to understand an ethical issue normatively through Christian character ethics will seek to find the best way to be a good person (i.e., a person of good character and morality, always seeking the will of God in matters of

⁶¹ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will*, 60.

⁶² Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics in the Christian Life*, 44.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 45.

conscience) among the people of God in community, not necessarily come up with the exact right course of action to use in every instance. The Christian seeking to emulate Jesus, then, becomes virtuous, or has good character, and thus acts rightly because she or he is living as Christ lived. The work of character ethics helps to shape disciples in such a way as to “be ready” as people to face ethical issues that arise. “Basic Christian moral knowledge is acquired in intense engagement. It is rooted in the experience of caring and being cared for, of acting and being acted upon in close community...Thorough community moral deliberation insists that we scrutinize moral content and the grounds of moral authority.”⁶⁴

- *Listening* enables hearing the promptings of the Spirit of God, the voices of all in the discerning community, and the cries of others who may be affected by our discernment.⁶⁵

As part of the process of discerning dialogue, a group should prepare to discuss a given topic by learning about it from various viewpoints and broadening assumptions each person individually may have. The step of listening is based on the importance of understanding the subject at hand, along with the good ethical study process of seeking to read and understand more than one side of an issue. The group can only begin to discuss a politicized moral issue after every person takes time to study the issue and good dialogue practices and prepare spiritually to listen well to the other parties involved and to God’s voice in their midst. This step is also important as each person works to shed his or her ego as they seek to hear the voice of God while sharing and listening in group

⁶⁴ Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics in the Christian Life*, 117-118.

⁶⁵ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will*, 60.

discerning dialogue: “Even one person can weaken or derail spiritual discernment if he or she holds on to motivations other than the ultimate ones of knowing God’s will.”⁶⁶

- *Exploring* frees our playful imaginations to identify possible options and paths that lie within the guiding principle.
- *Improving* works in consultation and prayer to improve each option under consideration until it becomes the best that we can imagine it to be within the yearning of God.
- *Weighing* sorts and tests the options of paths in response to the leading of God’s spirit.⁶⁷

Christian Discernment’s Tradition and Scriptural Roots

Christians must approach moral issues carefully in group settings, considering the implications of theology and Scripture as they seek to “do” ethics in community dialogue, which is best represented by the spiritual practice of Christian discernment. While discernment has roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition of the human awareness of the presence of God in the world, the concept of the spiritual practice was developed in the early church as the mothers and fathers of the new faith tradition sought ways to experience God by understanding and interpreting the spirits – good and evil spirits. The most well-known of these scholars, St. Ignatius, wrote in his *Spiritual Exercises* about the importance of imagination, reason, biblical connections, experience, and testing of the spirits and feelings. St. Ignatius wrote that there are spirits leading to *consolation*, or toward the heart of God and peace, and there are spirits that lead to *desolation*, or away from God in distress.⁶⁸ Ignatius and other foremothers and forefathers drew upon the

⁶⁶ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will*, 32.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 60. While there are two further steps in the discernment process to come to consensus, for purposes of this project, since no consensus is expected to be reached, I have omitted these last two steps.

⁶⁸ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will*, 22.

biblical narratives and commands to better understand and discern God's will both individually and communally as it relates to humanity's life and ministry on earth.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, Israel's kings sought wisdom and understanding to discern (decide or understand) whether a decision or issue or person was good or evil (1 Kings 3:9). Similarly, discernment as a means to experience God was also done in silence (1 Kings 19:12) to best hear the voice of God. When choosing Israel's next king, Samuel was reminded to discern not with outward appearances, but by examining the heart of others (1 Sam. 16:6-7). Discernment was a gift given by God to those who sought it, as Solomon did (1 Kings 3:9-12). In the New Testament, Jesus himself sought to discern the heart of God, and in spite of temptations toward evil, discerned the right and better path. Jesus' witness to the wisdom of his religious tradition, along with his deep commitment to prayer and awareness of God in the world, provided his followers a constant reminder of God's active presence, leading to their own discernment after the resurrection. Peter discerned a call to Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10), and Paul discerned God's call on his life after a revelation on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-22). Paul often reminded the early churches that they were to be transformed in order to discern the will of God (Romans 12:2), that God gives a gift of discernment of spirits (1 Corinthians 12:10), that all are called to test spirits to see whether or not they are from God (1 John 4:1), and that wisdom precedes the work of discernment and empowers it (Ephesians 1:17-18). When early Christians faced questions of morality, like whether Gentiles should be circumcised or follow Jewish law, the church leaders gathered to consider the question and discern the best path forward for the church (Acts 15). Discerning together took time in productive dialogue, but it eventually led in this particular matter to a clear and unanimous

consensus.⁶⁹ While this particular project will only address the processes of dialogue and discernment (with no requirement for clear consensus), the processes are well-rooted in the Scriptures and church traditions going back centuries. We are called to speak on matters of moral importance as Christians, and weigh our convictions against the community, the Scriptures, and the Spirit of God.

⁶⁹ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will*, 14-22.

CHAPTER THREE

CONTEXTUAL CONVERSATION AT RIVER ROAD CHURCH, BAPTIST

History and Heritage of River Road Church, Baptist

In a growing suburb of Richmond in 1946, a small group of people (largely professors from nearby University of Richmond) saw a need for a new congregation in the area. From the beginning, the church had an open policy for membership, welcoming those from many different denominations. The church chose Baptist polity to keep the congregation independent while still having avenues for missions giving through the Baptist General Association of Virginia and other national Baptist groups (including giving to the Southern Baptist Convention, but that giving in the last few decades shifted to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship).

Sponsored as a mission church early on by the First Baptist Church of Richmond, the small but dedicated group began worshiping in the university chapel at the University of Richmond, calling themselves “River Road Church” (the after-comma “Baptist” was only added later as other denominations on River Road planted churches and the church needed differentiation from these other churches, such as River Road United Methodist Church, or River Road Presbyterian Church). After clearing the property at the corner of River and Ridge Roads, the church built a brick fireplace around which they worshiped, a fireplace that remains on the church campus today. Slowly, over the course of a few decades, each building was built – beginning with the chapel, then the fellowship house, then the current sanctuary. The church building had been planned this way from the beginning, and in the 1990s, educational space was added as well to the back of the

church. This well-planned structure is a beautiful space for worship and learning, and one that is shared with the community – from a worshipping Ethiopian congregation, to the student awards ceremony of the Interfaith Council of Greater Richmond, to local civic groups such as the American Legion and the Gardening Club of Richmond.

From the beginning, the congregants of River Road chose to embrace a more formal style of worship, recognizing the blended families of both Baptist and other denominational backgrounds (Catholic, Episcopalian, Methodist, etc.) that made up their church needed space to worship liturgically. Those 66 charter members desired that the corner of River and Ridge Roads become a place of worship for people of many different walks of faith. The Baptist ideals of freedom of soul, freedom of biblical interpretation, freedom of religion, and freedom of church were (and are) embraced fully. The pulpit is open, and the preaching is challenging. The congregation regularly faces tough theological questions with deep introspection and consistently complex rigorous theological thought. The intentionality of the congregation is unparalleled in any prior church I have attended:

the church maintains the sanctity of the founders' belief in remaining ecumenical, embraces a worship style that is formal and inspiring to many across Christian denominations, offers an open communion, accepts any form of baptism for membership, and affirms women in ministry. These two very important ideals — Baptist and ecumenical — provide the fabric and thread with which River Road Church was created, supporting an ongoing open and welcoming environment for all who seek to further the Kingdom of God.⁷⁰

The church has been led by a total of six pastors, the most recent pastor, Daniel E. Glaze, being unanimously approved by the congregation in October 2016.

⁷⁰ “Congregational Profile,” River Road Church, Baptist, 2016, <http://www.rrcb.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/River-Road-Church-Baptist-Congregational-Profile.pdf> (accessed 7 July 2017).

Location and Demographics

The church's location in the West End of the Richmond metro area predisposes the congregation to some specific demographics. The church is located in the Tuckahoe area of western Henrico County, the county that sits atop the City of Richmond. This area makes up about 15% of the county's population and it has the highest median household income in the county. The median household income in the city of Richmond is a little over \$40,000, while in Henrico County, that number increases to almost \$62,000, and in Tuckahoe to over \$67,000. In the city of Richmond, there is a poverty rate of almost 25% while the suburbs of Henrico and Tuckahoe hover around just 10%. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the suburb of Tuckahoe is overwhelmingly white, with 82% of the population listing "white alone" as their race. In the city of Richmond, blacks make up 51% and whites only 41%, with Hispanic, multi-race, and other ethnicities making up the remainder.⁷¹

Something to keep in mind about the Tuckahoe area, though, is that there is a specific racial and cultural divide on a main thoroughfare called Patterson Avenue. Anything north of this street is where one finds more persons in poverty and more people of color. In fact, since the 2010 census, this area has grown even more to incorporate one of the largest refugee resettlement populations in Virginia. This corridor is host to persons from dozens of countries. South of Patterson Avenue, the story changes pretty drastically, and likely would have very different statistics.

⁷¹ U.S. Census Bureau American Fact Finder, Census 2010, <https://factfinder.census.gov/> (accessed 7 July 2017).

Like many suburban areas, the West End of Richmond (Tuckahoe) was created by families leaving downtown Richmond for larger homes and a more monolithic culture. As Richmond became more urban, the minority population increased, with African Americans making up just over half of the current residents of downtown. “White Flight” leaves suburban areas like the West End with substantial percentages of white residents and few minorities. River Road Church’s racial demographics largely reflect this same makeup, perhaps with an even higher percentage of white members than the percentage of white residents in the neighborhood at large. Much like income rates, the education of those in the city of Richmond and the county of Henrico and the locality of Tuckahoe move in an upward pattern. Virginia generally has pretty good high school graduation rates, with 83% in the city of Richmond, and over 90% in Henrico and Tuckahoe. However, when one looks at the prevalence of Bachelor’s degrees or higher earned, the locality of Tuckahoe has over half of adults age 25 and over holding bachelor’s degrees, while the city has only 36%.⁷²

River Road Church reflects the surrounding culture quite well as it relates to high school education. Easily more than 90% of our members graduated high school. Perhaps more like 99-100%. River Road Church definitely has a higher percentage of Bachelor’s degrees than the surrounding culture, well more than the 51% in Tuckahoe. Just looking at the number of doctorates and reverends in the congregation, there are 93 members with the title of doctor (MD, PhD, DMin, or otherwise) and there are another 16 ordained ministers in the congregation who hold at least a master’s degree. Education at River

⁷² U.S. Census Bureau American Fact Finder, Census 2010, <https://factfinder.census.gov/> (accessed 7 July 2017).

Road Church is of utmost importance. The church was founded by educators, nourished by doctorate-holding pastors, and consistently challenged to always continue to learn.

Because of its location, RRCB's members are largely stable family units – from married retirees to younger families with good jobs who live in the West End. Members overall have a great deal of financial resources to provide the church because most of them – educated, well-provided for people – have stable financial situations. They are homeowners with good jobs. They can afford some luxury (nice car, private schools, expensive suits). Members are often in the area for the long-haul. Save a few members who move for work, most are Richmond lifers (or those who will stay in Richmond until retirement). Some own multiple homes (one in the West End and one “at the Rivah,” for example) or are invested heavily in the metro area.

RRCB has a total resident membership of almost 1200 people, with 45.2% of the congregation age 60 or over, including around 40 members over age 90. Though we are overall an aging congregation, there are a healthy number of children, youth, and young adults who are members or regular attenders. One of the struggles with church rolls, though, is trying to communicate the numbers of people who are actively involved in any given age bracket. One way to explore church involvement overall, though, is to look at the average worship attendance. The church has in the last decade experienced some worship attendance decline, and in our retired pastor's last year in 2015, we were down to just under 300 in regular worship attendance (probably a mix of a rather tough staffing situation the former pastor faced, along with his waning ministry as he neared retirement). With a new pastor, the church is seeing an uptick in worship attendance, now averaging again over 320+ regularly, with lots of new faces.

Church members are socially and theologically very progressive on the whole. You will not hear even our most conservative members be extremely *socially* conservative. They are not overtly racist, sexist, or classist (with very few exceptions). They tend to be thoughtful about their stances on issues of the day overall. I am grateful to hear of RRCB members supporting and loving those society and churches often reject. However, church members are somewhat more politically and fiscally conservative than you might expect considering their more progressive social views. A finance committee meeting would likely look for ways to “put away” money for later before spending it on a new project – thus, the conservative bias emerges among the members – we are a wealthy people because we were not only wise, but cautious and careful with our funds. But in the end, if a mission project needs doing, they typically will invest (but oftentimes only after much conversation).

Though some investments take a great deal of time to get monies approved, the church is extremely involved in mission work and providing care to others. The church has a long-term ministry partnership for medical-dental care in Panama. The church has mission partnerships through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. The church supports mission projects closer to home, providing volunteers for mission trips all over the commonwealth and beyond. Closer to home, we support a free healthcare clinic called CrossOver Healthcare Ministries that provides free health services to anyone without health insurance who makes less than 200% of the federal poverty line. The only clinic of its kind, one of its offices is located in that northern part of Tuckahoe we discussed earlier, and that office now sounds a bit like the UN with dozens of languages spoken. The church’s Board of Missions, along with the ministerial staff, keeps the spirit of

mission work alive and urges the congregation to do the same. They also give out thousands each week through our fellowship fund (benevolence). The church also has a large endowment and is able to give financially to many organizations and causes. In fact, the church recently completed very successful endowment and stewardship campaigns to raise more funds for the church to ensure its current and future support.

There are some challenges, however. Families drive from all over Richmond, not just the West End, to attend this church. We are a commuter church. The members, however, are largely of the same or similar socioeconomic status. They are perhaps not “monocultural,” but there is a heavy majority living a specific kind of “lifestyle.” While poverty is not a big stressor for most anyone, there are other forces constantly pulling at our church members and their neighbors. For instance, RRCB Baby Boomers are at the top of their companies, and the younger generation is just now starting to climb that ladder, without as much success due to lagging retirements. These upper-class and upper-middle class parents are pulled in so many directions with their over-achieving children, and church goes to the back-burner to their college aspirations. Young people and young parents are often uninterested in church or simply too busy with work and obligations. Grandparents will often bring grandchildren to church activities.

While the church faces a number of challenges, RRCB is also filled with and surrounded by possibility, which I am hopeful for as they move into the future with renewed leadership and new eyes to see. One of the main challenges is that RRCB is a “wide tent” both theologically and politically. Conversely, though, one of the church’s main gifts is its openness to conversation, doubts, and differences of opinion. While some topics tend to remain taboo, especially those politicized issues discussed in this project, a

great many are still able to be discussed openly and often. Many churches are not so gifted to have such open, thoughtful minds in their midst.

My Relationship with and Ministry at River Road Church, Baptist

My husband and I joined River Road Church in August 2014 after moving to the West End of Richmond and visiting nearby churches. After only one other visit, we returned to River Road and joined the congregation and the chancel choir in quick succession. The church's theological rigor from the pulpit and thoughtful, traditional worship style, along with a pastor who took personal interest in our lives, had us enthusiastic about our future among this congregation. Within a few months, we had been welcomed wholeheartedly by the church, and while I commuted to complete my final semester of coursework at the University of Virginia Religious Studies Department, I became more and more aware of my desire to shift out of the academy and into ministry. While I had done ministry in many different capacities since graduating seminary and being ordained, I had not yet been employed on staff at a church. With a great relationship already built with the current pastor at the time (Michael J. Clingenpeel), I decided to see if River Road might be interested in helping me get some experience through an internship.

The church and Mike approved the internship, funded by the church's endowment, and I began work on staff in January 2015 (as I completed my Master's thesis and graduated from UVA in May 2015). My position was only fifteen hours per week, but each week was packed with learning experiences: from attending staff meeting every week, to visiting church members (young and old), to discussing church governance and oversight with the pastor, to attending youth trips as a chaperone, to

sitting in on children's Sunday School classes, to learning the church's history and background, to getting experience in church administration from our intentional interim church administrator, to writing reflections about the different experiences I was having. In every new experience, I began to see the inner workings of the congregation in new ways. I learned more about not only the building and history, but the legacy of those members who over many years have made River Road Church what it is. I got to meet long-time members in our retirement homes, learning stories of the "old days" and their part in River Road's history (many of whom, in blessed memory, have not made it to the end of my ministry at RRCB – I am so glad to have gotten to know their part of our collective story in person). The internship was an interesting chapter, not only for me, but for the church. It had been some years since the church had been host to an intern, and the internship for me was a little different, as someone who already had a seminary degree, was working on another academic theology degree, who had eight years of professional experience in a law firm, and who had been ordained and in ministry for over four years when she began her work as an intern. The internship was to last twelve months until December 2015, but the circumstances at River Road were soon to change, as were my plans and the church's plans for my ministry there.

In June 2015, our pastor Mike Clingenpeel announced his retirement, effective later that year, in November. Shortly thereafter, our Interim Minister of Christian Education & Spiritual Formation announced her resignation after nearly four years in her part-time position. The church, already in deep transition, wished to keep some semblance of normalcy, and rather than bringing in yet another new ministerial staff member, I was asked to move into the role of Interim Minister of Christian Education &

Spiritual Formation upon her resignation in September 2015. My work in this capacity was wide and varied in a somewhat confusing time of interim. When the pastor fully retired, our Minister of Pastoral Care, Dr. Daniel Bagby, became our interim head of staff, and we hired an interim preacher, Dr. Bert Browning, to fill our pulpit each Sunday. Meanwhile, our Minister to Children and Youth resigned at the end of summer 2016, and our staff was left with my part-time (20-25 hours per week, in theory) interim position (largely focused on adults), the interim head of staff, the interim preacher (Sundays only), the interim minister of visitation (and later interim minister to youth as well), and an interim minister to children, hired on in summer 2016. The reverse of our service bulletin each Sunday left the church wondering if anyone actually worked at River Road Church during this interim, but the leadership of the congregation wanted to keep the opportunities open for the new pastor and thus chose not to hire any full-time or permanent staff during this period.

My work in the position of Interim Minister of Christian Education & Spiritual Formation (the longest title on the church's website at the time), centered around mostly administrative work, but because of the interim period for the church, has incorporated much more than simply overseeing curriculum and budget for Christian Education. Because I have a gift for worship planning (and simply love to do it), I had, even as an intern, begun to oversee worship planning alongside our administrative staff, guiding the worship planning from a ministry perspective. For many years, the litanies and worship cohesiveness had been somewhat haphazardly planned (or simply used from previous years), so I became the worship planner on the ministerial staff, preparing litanies and other items for worship and describing liturgical seasons on our inserts for worship. I also

enhanced our spiritual formation from simply having a labyrinth available twice a year, to being available for labyrinth guided meditations, and providing the Stations of the Cross during Holy Week. I taught Lenten series, Sunday School classes, and Wednesday night adult programming. I led in worship, including preaching on occasion. I wrote numerous blog posts and articles for the church publications. I also wrote other articles and blogs for the Huffington Post Religion blog, and my own personal ministry blog. I attended conferences such as the Immigration 2020 conference in Washington, D.C., networking with advocacy and mission groups, along with getting to know other local pastors who care deeply about social justice. I was called on to be a part of baptismal and funeral services, providing communion and words of care. I participated in mission trips – domestic and international – with our missions groups. However part-time or interim this position may have been, it was fulfilling and amazing to join in partnership with this church and its people.

With all that being said, when a new pastor was finally hired and began work in late November 2016, the hard work of keeping the church running during the interim was wearing on the staff – myself included. The season of Advent kept everyone busy, including the new pastor and his learning curve regarding our worship style (extremely choreographed), our vision and plans, our staff interaction (not always the most healthy after a trying interim time), and our period of growth upcoming with new leadership. Nearly three months into this new pastorate, there were many unknowns, including the future of my position and my own vocation and employment, as well as the employment of other staff members with whom I had worked for some time. There were no easy answers, and our new pastor had a heavy burden of rebuilding an entire staff – even those

who stay were likely to have new and different titles and job descriptions. But none of this happened quickly.

In late 2017, my conversations with the pastor leaned toward the future, and after some discussion, my call to the pastorate was abundantly clear. Approved by the personnel committee in conversation with our pastor, I served as Pastoral Resident for seven months, beginning in January 2018. In this capacity, I had the opportunity to work full-time and facilitate this project with some of RRCB's lay leadership. Spending the time recruiting members of this group was meaningful, as this church has thoughtful people who consider carefully whether to participate. I even had some decline after an information session because they did not feel called to participate. I am grateful for an intentional group that invested in this process.

Challenges in this Context

The foremost challenge in this context as I prepared my project was the ability to function as a full member of the staff as pastoral resident while in a job search for a senior pastorate. Seeking to grow the small group lay leadership while simultaneously saying goodbye to the congregation posed a significant risk – I would not be there to watch this project's methods unfold in other areas of ministry or follow up with the lay leaders. However, by moving into the full-time role of Pastoral Resident, and one that prepared me for a more prominent leadership position, I had both more time and more training to oversee this small group.

River Road Church at the time of the project and for the better part of a year thereafter faced a number of challenges. They have more interim positions being filled by new staff members; they face mounting pressure to be a relevant voice in Virginia Baptist

faith communities; and they are in a growth period with a new pastor and a new vision. Having tough conversations will only be more important as the church works to be relevant in this world, and with a new vision, they will face the reality of the difficulties of remaining unified among differences of opinion.

Research Methodology

This project used a qualitative research methodology, specifically a case study of a subset of lay leaders at River Road Church, Baptist who participated in a small group discerning dialogue retreat, three dialogue sessions, and group/individual reflection. The process of data collection included facilitator observation and note taking, recorded audio transcribed, a Likert survey after each dialogue session,⁷³ a reflection session as a group, and reflection papers from each participant with prompt questions to guide the participant's writing.⁷⁴ I recorded each gathering digitally and transcribed the recordings to assist with the accuracy of participant response recollection. Participants all accepted the use of audio recording in all sessions.⁷⁵

Research Participants

To select participants, I contacted a group of ten lay leaders from varying age groups, genders, and political orientations.⁷⁶ The group of those contacted initially met briefly after worship one Sunday to go over what the project would entail, and some eagerly accepted the invitation, while others took time to pray about and consider their

⁷³ See Appendix E for Likert Scale Survey.

⁷⁴ See Appendix D for Reflection Questions that guided these written responses.

⁷⁵ See Appendix H detailing this in the informed consent given to and signed by each participant prior to the study.

⁷⁶ See Appendix A for email to potential group participants.

participation. From this initial meeting, five participants were confirmed. Following this meeting, three other lay leaders were contacted to even out the demographics, with the end result of seven participants agreeing to participate. The participants included a retired school teacher, Rose, in her mid-60s; a retired substance abuse counselor, Carl, in his late 60s; a civil engineer, Tyler, in her early 30s; a retired engineer, Sam⁷⁷ in his late 60s; Bill, a retired attorney, in his late 60s; a retired education administrator, Ed, in his late 60s; and an elementary school teacher, Elizabeth, in her late 30s. While the span of ages does not reach the highest age brackets of the church (as those in that age group tend not to be able to travel for meetings), nor does it reach the lower adult age group in their 20s (which is a very small population at RRCB), the span reflects well the average ages of lay leaders, and with three women and four men, splits the genders relatively well. All participants have served on boards and committees or in other ministries in the church, have been members for more than one year (some for decades), and have committed themselves as long-term members of the congregation. The group members were all emailed a reading list ahead of the initial meeting, with two required books to guide discussion on a specific politicized topic (income inequality).⁷⁸ All group members were able to read the books before and during the dialogue process.

Research Process

The group members came together for a retreat for five hours (with a break for lunch, and two shorter breaks) on Saturday, June 2, 2018. I gave the group background information on the process of dialogue, based on Annette Simmons' *A Safe Place for*

⁷⁷ Sam's real name has been withheld as his request. This is an alias.

⁷⁸ See Appendix C for reading list. These books were chosen to give differing viewpoints on this issue.

Dangerous Truths, as well as the process of Christian discernment, based on Danny Morris' *Discerning God's Will Together*.⁷⁹ The group ended the retreat by creating together the covenant that would guide their discerning dialogue sessions, incorporating some of the insights gained through the retreat. This covenant was finalized via email and signed by each participant at the first dialogue session.⁸⁰

Following the retreat, the participants gathered for three sessions of discerning dialogue to use their newly-learned skills dialoguing about income inequality. Each 90-minute session was designed to discuss a different aspect of this ethical issue. The first dialogue session on Wednesday, June 6, 2018 focused on the scriptural basis of the opinions on the issue. The participants were encouraged to use discerning dialogue to explore the issue from a scriptural viewpoint, using the arguments of the authors of the books as well as their own biblical knowledge. In the second dialogue session on Monday, June 11, 2018, the participants discussed the issue from the point of view of the church's traditional responses to income inequality (historically and currently), using the two author backgrounds as well as their own history with church leadership related to poverty and wealth. Lastly, on Wednesday, June 20, 2018, the participants gathered to discuss the contemporary issues related to income inequality, attempting to think through the answers Christians might give to this issue today (though no consensus was required in this exercise). After each of the three dialogue sessions, the group members participated in a seven-question Likert Scale survey about the effectiveness of the dialogue process, scoring each question from 1 to 4. The questions covered how well the

⁷⁹ See Appendix B for teaching materials for the retreat, including a PowerPoint presentation and presenter's notes.

⁸⁰ See Appendix G for a copy of the group covenant.

participant individually dialogued well and used the tools taught as well as how the group dynamic unfolded in the given session.

After the three dialogue sessions, the group gathered one last time for reflections on Friday, June 22, 2018, and all group members except Tyler were present to discuss their reflections on this process. (Tyler was interviewed separately). The group was encouraged to go over the retreat's effectiveness on the dialogue sessions, as well as the sessions themselves – whether something like this could be used for other important topics among lay leaders. The group went on to each write individual reflection papers as well.

IRB Process and Data Collection Methods

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Mercer University approved this project on April 9, 2018 for a duration of one year. The IRB approved this case study using small group dialogues and retreat meetings to create a way to have productive dialogue within church leadership that is theologically rich, intellectually serious, genuinely illuminating about moral issues, and that leaves the community intact. The IRB also approved the use of recorded and transcribed group discussions with participant consent.

After project participants were identified, they each signed the Informed Consent⁸¹ and all participants consented to being identified in the study by their real names except one, who will be identified by a pseudonym throughout. Each meeting, from the retreat, to the dialogue sessions, to the group (and one individual) reflection sessions, were all audio-recorded. The audio from the reflections was transcribed and coded to find points of commonality (and difference) among group members' response to

⁸¹ See Appendix H for a copy of the IRB Informed Consent.

the success of the techniques and processes used for the discerning dialogue sessions. While many points of commonality were found in the reflections (both transcribed audio and written), the study is focused on responses concerning how well or poorly the processes and techniques worked to create an environment for successful dialogue.

After coding all the reflection transcription and written reflections, along with analyzing the survey responses, the results were analyzed to see how the group had used the tools provided in the retreat, how effective the tools were, and whether the discerning dialogue sessions had been productive as a means of exploring a politicized ethical issue well. By reviewing the responses to the retreat and the dialogue sessions, some conclusions could be drawn about the effectiveness of the processes and techniques to create the comfortable space needed for group members as they discussed tough, politicized ethical issues.

Approach to Data Analysis

To properly analyze the qualitative project data in this case study, I coded the relevant conversations and written reflections and compared survey responses to each other and to the written responses. All reflections had to be finalized and received before coding could begin. I gathered the survey for each dialogue session from each participant and analyzed the responses by person/dialogue session and among the participants over the course of the three dialogue sessions to see where there was a change in response. Then, I coded the transcribed group reflection gathering (and the separate conversation with Tyler, as she was unable to attend the group reflection), along with the written reflection papers from each participant, and then I drew out themes related to how well the discerning dialogue processes taught at the retreat worked or did not work in the

dialogue sessions. The words and phrases most discussed and that were coded most frequently had to do with the challenge of the topic discussed, the tools taught in the retreat, and the covenant used for small groups.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH EXAMINATION

Having surveyed the theological, biblical, and ethical bases of undertaking a discerning dialogue process as part of a successful Christian covenantal relationship in the community of believers at River Road Church, Baptist in Richmond, Virginia, we now turn our attention to the examination of the project that sought to 1) learn techniques and processes for successful dialogue and discernment, 2) provide space for group members to feel comfortable and safe as they discuss tough, politicized ethical issues, and 3) reflect on a politicized ethical issue, as well as the process of discerning group dialogue.

Case Subjects

In order to provide an adequate sampling of the congregation, I requested participants from varied forms of church involvement, from the church choir to Sunday School teachers to committee members. All participants are involved in church leadership in some way so that the sampling would include lay leaders who could use some of the skills they learned in the process in their own groups. While the sampling was somewhat representative, the church has many differing political opinions, and this group did not contain people of the furthest of either “left” or “right” politics. While all participants are very involved in church leadership, they also do not represent all facets of church ministry, and some are teachers while others lead by serving on committees, so some participants may have more opportunity to teach and use this facilitated dialogue in ways others likely will not, at least in their current roles. However, for purposes of a small

study, the group of participants does allow for some insight into whether these processes work in this small group leadership context.

Discerning Dialogue Retreat

For more than four hours on a Saturday, the small group of lay leaders met to learn techniques and processes for discerning dialogue, and to learn how to cultivate space for group members to feel comfortable and safe as they discuss tough, politicized moral issues. During this gathering, the group learned the reasoning behind the need for successful discerning dialogue about specific politicized moral issues, followed by specific background and tools with which to create an atmosphere of successful discerning dialogue.

The group began by learning the “lingo” of Christian ethics by going over definitions of terms like community, politicized moral/ethical issues, dialogue, and Christian moral discernment.⁸² Following this, the group began to learn about and respond to the idea that the United States has become polarized about politicized moral issues and a brief history of how that came about through looking at the historical and current politics of the country as well as of Baptist Christianity.

Rather than beginning the deeper study with practical tools for dialogue, the group focused first on what I call the “why” of Christian discerning dialogue: the process of Christian discernment. The group agreed during our gathering that oftentimes church groups avoid discussing politicized issues (though not always, as some have had good experiences). They also agreed that dialogue contains in church settings contains the same polarization as the wider political community. With that in mind, we discussed how

⁸² For full printout of discerning dialogue retreat presentation, see Appendix B.

Christian discernment might aid us in overcoming the typical ways we speak with one another about these kinds of issues. As a spiritual discipline, the group learned that to create the right atmosphere for Christian discerning dialogue, we must begin in a place of humility, with a willingness to take time to pray and shed one's own ego in the process of discerning dialogue. We covered the main stages of Christian discernment, as outlined in Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will*.⁸³ Specifically, we discussed how to frame an issue as a focus on seeking God's will, how to ground in a guiding principle (such as love of God and neighbor), and how to shed our egos and preconceived notions, false assumptions, biases, and predetermined conclusions. "Detachment" from one's own ego and a refocus on the importance of the task of listening for God's input, creates what Vinita Hampton Wright calls the freedom to discern.⁸⁴ Valuing God's will above our own politics or ego assists a group in coming together on a level playing field – all seeking the same end goal of moving toward God's will and away from our own ego-ridden goals. In doing so, the group can move toward rooting in tradition to connect their shared faith stories to confront issues, rather than their varied and even divergent political stances. They relearn how to listen to not only one another, but to the Spirit of God and the cries of any who are affected by group discernment decisions. The participants learned that once they embraced such steps, it could become easier to broaden group assumptions beyond any one person's preconceived notions and then explore with playful imaginations new ways to improve situations.

⁸³ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together*.

⁸⁴ Vinita Hampton Wright, "Freedom and Discernment," Loyola Press, online: <https://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/ignatian-spirituality/discernment/freedom-and-discernment> (accessed 10 March 2018).

With the background of history and Christian discernment, the group then explored the steps to the process of dialogue and learned how to create a “safe place for dangerous truths.”⁸⁵ Digging in to the issue of group dynamics regarding the deeper issues when dialoguing, the group then explored how to best seek success in dialogue. The group touched on the subject of each person’s own dialogue styles and strategies (such as personality traits like introversion and extroversion / internal or external processing, etc.). The section on learning to dialogue well explored the basic understanding of what dialogue is – “shared meaning.” Seeking shared meaning moves from fear and mistrust to productivity and hope. This process requires some specific, practical tools in order to be successful. These steps included learning the five stages of dialogue (politeness and pretending; chaos; discarding and redefining; resolution and collective learning, and closure).⁸⁶

The group explored the work of slowing down to look outside our typical boxes of political sides, to check our discussion for errors, and to seek God’s will. This work of slowing down is a process that if done correctly, should help groups tackle many different politicized moral issues. The steps to create this kind of process include:

1. Assuming positive intent: those who harm us verbally often did not intend to do so.
2. Finding our individual regular response to uncomfortable conversation (e.g., tenacity, factumptions – or “facts” that are really just opinions, reductionism, distancing).
3. Finding our group response to uncomfortable conversation (e.g., escape strategies such as flight, fight, pairing, dependency).
4. Identifying assumptions: looking beyond assumptions about others based on short-term occurrences (e.g., he was late, so he must be unreliable). Also,

⁸⁵ This section was based on Simmons, *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths*. See appendix B for more detail.

⁸⁶ Refer to Appendix B for more detail.

looking beyond assumptions about the topic at hand (e.g., We need to find a solution; truth: we need to understand the problem).⁸⁷

Finally, the group explored their “wants” and “don’t wants” concerning the process of discerning dialogue. Asking questions such as “What behaviors/attitudes/actions would you change about how dialogue is typically done in church? What bad habits do you have that you’d like to overcome as we work through a discerning dialogue process?” The group took the information gleaned at the retreat, along with their personal goals for better church dialogue and began to choose “rules” for their own process of discerning dialogue. Taking notes as they spoke, I compiled a list of their most important promises to make for the process and drafted a covenant for the group to follow as they began their group dialogue sessions.⁸⁸

Discerning Dialogue Sessions

After drafting and signing a shared covenant for dialogue, the group met on three separate occasions for dialogue sessions. Each session focused on a different part of a politicized ethical issue, which for purposes of this study, was income inequality. To prepare for the dialogue, each participant readied him- or herself to discuss the topic by learning about it from varied viewpoints. Doing this preparation allowed the participants to engage in the discernment step of *listening*, not only to the Spirit of God, but also to the voices of those affected by this discernment.⁸⁹ For this study, the participants read two books ahead of time (and some continued reading them throughout the dialogue

⁸⁷ This section was based on Simmons, *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths*. See appendix B for more detail.

⁸⁸ See Appendix G for a copy of the group discerning dialogue covenant.

⁸⁹ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will*, 32.

sessions): Sider, Ronald J. *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity* and Schneider, John R. *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth*.⁹⁰ The books, while not exhaustive on the topic at hand, each dealt with income inequality from differing theological and economic viewpoints, allowing for some diverse theological preparation work for the group members before each session.

In session one, the group's focus was on what Scripture has to say about the topic of income inequality. This beginning point was chosen as part of the larger ethical methodology in Christian ethics that parses out our reliance on Scripture as a basis of faith, and it was followed by a focus on church tradition in session two and current policies in session three. The initial focus on Scripture had the group members use their own knowledge of scripture as well as the two varying approaches taken by the authors of the books the participants read. Focusing on Scripture as an authority of faith helped participants to complete the discernment step of rooting in their faith tradition, connecting biblical stories, themes, and images with the issue they were discussing.⁹¹

In session two, the group focused on the Church/Christianity's historical responses to the issue of income inequality. This session required some knowledge of church history, which was provided in the readings, and which many of the participants had received through learning opportunities in a highly education-focused church. The dialogue was to expand on the themes presented in Scripture and how they have been interpreted by Christian communities over the centuries up until the present time. By examining past approaches with a critical eye, the group would be better prepared to

⁹⁰ See Appendix C for more detail.

⁹¹ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will*, 60.

discuss potential current ethical responses. Again, this work of hearing the Church's story of concern for this issue helped participants to engage in discerning listening, hearing those affected and those who are effecting change about this issue.

In session three, building on its knowledge of Scripture and church witness, the group had the opportunity to discuss the issue of income inequality as we face it today. By exploring the current issues of poverty and economic inequality and potential Christian responses, the group was explored how to come to consensus, even if they were not required to do so in this exercise. Applying principles discussed in their growing knowledge of the issue from the readings, as well as the background in Christian scripture and tradition, the group could discover potential approaches to the issue for their own context(s). This final session incorporated three steps of Christian discernment: *exploring*, to free playful imagination to identify creatively possible options within guiding principles; *improving*, or in prayer and dialogue improving on options available until the option becomes the best it can be; and *weighing*, or sorting and testing the options in response to the leading of God's spirit.⁹²

Analysis of Survey Data

Following each of the three discerning dialogue session, the participants were asked to take a seven-question Likert scale survey to gauge numerically whether the participants were 1) using the tools provided during the retreat; 2) creating a safe space for participants to feel comfortable as they discuss tough politicized issues; and 3) learning about a politicized ethical issue through group discerning dialogue.⁹³

⁹² Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will*, 60.

⁹³ See Appendix E for a copy of the Likert Scale Survey.

Statements 1-3 and 5-7 were considered “positive” statements; in other words, the expectation for these responses was a higher number (Agree or Strongly Agree) was preferable to a lower number (Strongly Disagree or Disagree). Statement 4 was a “negative” statement, where a lower number was preferable to a higher number. Each participant was asked to answer these immediately following the dialogue and to be as honest as possible about their responses.

Group Survey Statement Analysis

In the survey, certain statements are geared toward whether the group functioned as presented in the retreat, and the responses were overall that the group did well at the dialogue process. Statement one reads: “The group dialogued well about this particular issue.” Though the larger issue of income inequality did not change between dialogue sessions, the focus within that issue did, and of course, the ability of the group to dialogue well could change from session to session. This question received high marks, with responses of Agree or Strongly Agree from all participants in all three sessions, except for one participant in dialogue 2 (score was Disagree), and another participant in dialogue 3 (score was Disagree).

Statement three reads: “I could be honest in the group without repercussion.” Openness and honesty were foci of the retreat, demonstrating the ability for groups to “dig deeper” into the “real issue” because no politeness and pretending was present. This question also got high marks, with only Agree or Strongly Agree as responses. The group did not seem to feel fear about their ability to be honest.

Statements four and five read: “I felt put-down or belittled as the topic was discussed” and “I was considered an equal while discussing this topic.” For Statement

four, all participants listed Strongly Disagree for all three dialogue sessions, with one participant listing Disagree for all three sessions. For statement five, all participants listed Strongly Agree except for one, who chose Agree for all sessions. So while there was some minor pullback from two participants, all participants felt as if they were treated as equals and did not feel put down by their fellow participants during the dialogue. Based on the survey feedback, group dynamics overall seemed to work well in the sessions, at least based on this cursory data.

Individual Survey Statement Analysis

Statements two, six, and seven in the survey are geared toward the participant's personal interaction with the dialogue sessions, and thus are treated separately here. Statement two reads: "I became 'detached' in the discerning process before dialogue began, leading to more openness to others' opinions." The responses to this statement varied much more than the group questions, including one Strongly Disagree to five Disagree responses. Some of the negative responses were isolated to one dialogue for one person (e.g., one person felt more detached in Dialogues one and three than he did in Dialogue two). But for at least one participant, detachment was much more difficult and all three of her responses to the statement were Disagree. It would seem that the personal discernment work was the most varied response of all the statements, and something the reflections below will bear out.

Statement six reads: "I have learned more about this issue by dialoguing with others." Part of the process to prepare for discerning dialogue, and any ethical conversation, is to learn more about the subject at hand, or in the process of Christian discernment, to *listen* carefully to the voices of those affected by this issue. Similarly,

once in the discerning dialogue group, the hope is that in the process of discerning together the best Christian response(s) to a politicized ethical issue, all participants leave knowing more by learning from those with whom they dialogue. This statement largely bore positive responses of Agree or Strongly Agree, but at least one participant marked dialogues two and three as Disagree. Of course, some begin dialogue with more knowledge of the issue generally, and this question may not capture that reality well. But the hope is that overall, group discerning dialogue does produce better understanding, and excepting those two responses, the group seems to have learned more about income inequality by being a part of this group.

Statement seven reads: “I contributed to the group’s unity even if there were disagreements in theological approach, ethical decisions, or worldview.” This statement again asks the participants to look inward and ask: did I use the tools while dialoguing? This question received high marks of Agree or Strongly Agree from all participants. While it may have been difficult to spiritually and emotionally “detach” for the process of discerning dialogue, the participants felt like they had at least outwardly done their part to keep group comfort at the forefront while dialoguing.

Reflections

After all three dialogue sessions were complete, the group gathered again to reflect on the process – from the retreat to each of the dialogue sessions. This one-hour reflection discussion for the participants (except Tyler, with whom I had a separate 45-minute discussion) created space to “think out loud” about their written reflections, which would be due within a few weeks of the last dialogue session. Once all reflections were received, the reflection group meeting audio was transcribed and both it and the written

reflections were coded. The participants discussed their reflections on the initial retreat and tools, the process in action during the discerning dialogue retreats, and how well they thought they had dialogued about a politicized ethical issue.

Dialogue Retreat

Hearing the word “retreat” can put some people off, as the idea of retreat can come with it a number of different definitions. One participant said of the retreat, “I have dodged every retreat for 30 years that I’ve been invited to. This is my first retreat.”⁹⁴ To be sure, retreats as learning experiences can be formed in many different ways. Some are more spiritual and connective for the group, others more didactic and knowledge-based. The idea behind a retreat is to gather away from normal gathering times to accomplish a goal. In this project, the retreat was meant to introduce project participants to the idea of discerning dialogue and to teach its fundamentals for a few hours on a Saturday. The group had an opportunity to prepare to try out this new form of dialogue through learning about discernment and dialogue in useful steps. Additionally, and perhaps a stronger point for the retreat was the relationships that were built among the group members. Though most of the group members knew each other casually, because they were involved in different ministries in a larger church, they did not all know each other well. Thus, the retreat day was a good opportunity to get to know their fellow participants. One participant suggested in his reflection that these small groups is “where church works

⁹⁴ Project Participant, Group Reflection, 21 June 2018, audio recording (transcript, e-mail, etc.) River Road Church, Baptist, Richmond.

best...The worship service is fine, but where it really works is when you're connecting with people, and you can only do that in a small group."⁹⁵

The group's shared covenant that was created as a result of the discerning dialogue retreat proved both useful as a tool and meaningful as a way of creating safe spaces for dialogue and discernment generally. The participants, focusing on the retreat's principles, framed a covenant that took seriously the concerns of the group, from confidentiality, avoiding personal attacks, assuming positive intentions, sharing the floor and avoiding pairing, being honest, creating an atmosphere of mutual trust, cultivating humility, and working to practice detachment.⁹⁶ These ground rules provided promises in which the group could feel safe to speak. One participant said of the creation of the covenant: "we each had the opportunity to put on the table what we were passionate about. If it'd been just me, it'd be just two of them...I get a better feel for the lay of the group of what [all of you] care about."⁹⁷

Dialogue Sessions

During all three dialogue sessions, participants were asked not to come to consensus, but instead to actively engage in productive discerning dialogue, as modeled in the retreat. Facilitated largely through my opening statements and observation, the group was left to find its own direction without undue interference. This was done in part to let the dialogue not become dominated by the "expert" in the room, but in the end may

⁹⁵ Project Participant, Group Reflection, 21 June 2018, audio recording (transcript, e-mail, etc.) River Road Church, Baptist, Richmond.

⁹⁶ See Appendix G for full copy of Group Covenant.

⁹⁷ Project Participant, Group Reflection, 21 June 2018, audio recording (transcript, e-mail, etc.) River Road Church, Baptist, Richmond.

have led the group to a lack of focus on each week's portion of the topic. For example, One participant stated in his reflections that he was "very frustrated I think all the way through that we just didn't focus. To me, my training and everything is very structured. And you have to have a structure. You need to know where you're going."⁹⁸ Others concurred – having a decision as a goal would have structured the conversations differently. Consensus would have perhaps made the conversations more difficult, but likely more fruitful than the less-structured dialogue.

Similarly, group members thought that discerning dialogue happens better with more contentious topics and less contentious resources. In this study, the book resources were deeply polarized, but the group members' opinions on the topic were not – nearly everyone fell in between the two author's opinions. On the final night of dialogue, when the discussion took a turn from poverty to immigration status, the topic was much more of a "hot topic" with stronger opinions, and one where the tools were more useful, as there was more divergence in the group.

However, despite the regular review that the topic was not very contentious, as an observer, the group did struggle to delve deeply into the issue at times, as disagreement crept in, the group members would use various escape strategies or poor listening skills, including nonverbal frustrations that showed defensiveness and posturing. Of course, the highest emotional points happened in the final dialogue session when the focus of the conversation shifted to a new and harder topic for this group (immigration), and so it may be true that this particular topic of income inequality was not as contentious. Still, the

⁹⁸ Project Participant, Group Reflection, 21 June 2018, audio recording (transcript, e-mail, etc.) River Road Church, Baptist, Richmond.

process of dialogue with those of differing opinions was apparent in the three sessions. From scriptural interpretation to discussing economic realities, I observed some discomfort with disagreement, both from the internal processors who were shutting down to the external processors who were talking over one another. I think given more time, and if the stakes were higher, even this topic could have brought about profound disagreement and potentially even more profound discerning dialogue.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Project Methodology

The group had consensus in their reflections that learning discernment and dialogue techniques and sharing them with small groups could be a useful way to begin the process of discussing politicized issues. Having guidelines in a shared covenant – promises made to one another, based in good communication techniques and Christian discernment values – provides a means of both civility and openness required to properly interrogate these issues in light of shared Christian faith and tradition. One participant described the need for a retreat to reflect on one’s personality and dialogue responses like this:

I think that’s why a retreat is such a helpful thing to have ahead of time. Because it gave us an opportunity to spend a day together and really go through the process. You know I really came out of there going, “yes, I’m an internal processor.” And I observed that through the whole cycle.⁹⁹

The group also concurred that the tools are less useful if the group does not need to come to some sort of decision at the end of the process (e.g., what will our church/small group decide about this issue?). The stakes need to be higher for the discerning dialogue tools to be at their most useful. Thus, this project might have fared better by asking the group to

⁹⁹ Project Participant, Group Reflection, 21 June 2018, audio recording (transcript, e-mail, etc.) River Road Church, Baptist, Richmond.

come to consensus rather than simply dialogue for the sake of dialogue. The end result of examining the process itself would not have changed, but the discerning dialogue process might have been more productive and challenging for the group (and much more like real-world stakes if a church was needed to confront a highly polarized issue together).

If the participants had attempted the final steps in Christian discernment to conclude the discerning dialogue exercise, they would have had to make a decision through the closing step, which brings all the explorations to a conclusion, “moving toward the selection of an option that is given weight by the Spirit of God and the process in which the community is engaged.”¹⁰⁰ Following this step, the group would have rested, testing the decision “by allowing it to rest near the heart to determine whether it brings primarily feelings of consolation (a sense of peace and movement toward God) or desolation (distress and movement away from God).”¹⁰¹ Making final decisions, even in theory, would have likely caused the group to be more proactive in staying on topic. On the other hand, the group’s limited study meeting time likely would not have created enough time and space to come to any kind of final decision. For future use outside of a small contextual study, the process would benefit from a need for decision-making, even if some differences are still intractable between participants.

Facing tough issues head-on needs a willingness to “take time to fully address the issue”¹⁰² according to one participant. The group may not have stayed on topic in some of the dialogue sessions mainly to avoid the uneasiness that comes with harder questions

¹⁰⁰ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will*, 60.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

¹⁰² Project Participant, Written Reflection, 8 July 2018 (transcript, e-mail, etc.) River Road Church, Baptist, Richmond.

about contentious issues. This same participant described political topics as so delicate and touchy that churches are tempted to avoid them altogether, and teaching/using these tools in small groups could have far-reaching effects, not just in small groups of lay leaders, but in informal conversations as well. She says she continues to struggle with the efforts to be detached and listen to differing opinions, but she finds herself able, with some preparation, to combat her initial reactions with prayer, preparation, and targeted use of the discerning dialogue techniques learned in the retreat.

For others, the excitement of dialoguing about important issues was overshadowed by a lack of challenge. Without a topic that has clear divisions in the group and without a decisions to be made, the challenge was not fully present:

I find spirited, thoughtful discussion invigorating – not the kind of shouting and talking over others that we seem to see everywhere in the media. And if I’m not prepared to change my mind, then I’m not prepared to learn. And that’s not good. I do believe that a challenging dialogue can and should be pursued respectfully. So given these thoughts, I felt that we were generally too reserved with each other. We were getting better as we went along, but I didn’t feel pushed.¹⁰³

To fully understand an issue from many sides, and to be properly challenged, this participant suggests that groups be facilitated in such a way that the track is kept by both pre-ordered structure (like an end goal of a concrete and meaningful decision) and a facilitator more willing to step in when the dialogue goes off track, especially as personal anecdotes are shared instead of information:

I do think I am clearer now concerning the issue, but that is primarily from the reading rather than the discussion. I think there was too much relating of anecdotal stories; I don’t say that because anecdotes from my ancestry are never relevant, but because my recollection is that there was too much effort to identify with the poor and oppressed by telling about how poor or oppressed by ancestors

¹⁰³ Project Participant, Written Reflection, 7 July 2018 (transcript, e-mail, etc.) River Road Church, Baptist, Richmond.

were. Those things are certainly interesting to learn about friends, but I didn't see that they contributed to advancing the discussion. If such things are considered for the purpose of thinking about what would and would not work now, then they are helpful, but honestly, I don't remember that many of the anecdotes helped in that way.¹⁰⁴

Another participant agreed. To dialogue about an issue as complex as income inequality, more structure is needed, and perhaps less reading. To be sure, complexity of an issue requires research and reading, but for a structured dialogue, shorter reading and outlined discussion topics for the group is probably more realistic to keep the different topics on track for each session. This participant also agreed that without a need for consensus, the group dialogue was automatically less structured. Yet another participant concurred, saying: "I feel like we got distracted a lot and went on tangents, which were interesting... maybe it would have been helpful to have a little bit more structure with our discussion just to try to keep us on topic."¹⁰⁵

Carl suggested that the dialogue learning process would most definitely be helpful in future situations at the church, but he suggested that the shortness of the project format would not adequately prepare groups to dialogue. He suggested a six to eight week format involving both extensive learning and regular use of the tools in structured dialogue. The project may never have been completed if these were the parameters, but certainly, the future of the discerning dialogue model could be expanded as Carl recommended.

¹⁰⁴ Project Participant, Written Reflection, 7 July 2018 (transcript, e-mail, etc.) River Road Church, Baptist, Richmond.

¹⁰⁵ Project Participant, Written Reflection, 19 July 2018 (transcript, e-mail, etc.) River Road Church, Baptist, Richmond.

In another reflection, the best and most functional part of the project format noted was a change in mindset, not a change of mind about the issue discussed: “I became more intentional about listening for truth in the other person’s comment rather than reinforcement of my own opinion. I became a more careful and considerate listener being intentional about being open to a different view.”¹⁰⁶ A female participant agreed in her reflections, “I appreciated the chance to explore different learning techniques, stages of dialogue, and what my escape strategies might be.”¹⁰⁷

All participants mentioned in the group reflection or their personal reflections that foremost the relationships made and cultivated through the dialogue process were both meaningful and helpful to creating space for discerning dialogue to happen in a polarized world and even in polarized pews. Almost all participants also noted that in this particular dialogue process, very little changed regarding their viewpoint on the issue discussed. Perhaps this result was a weakness of the topic choice, a weakness of the dialogue facilitator, or a weakness of the structure. Certainly, a harsher topic with stronger polarization and with higher stakes would produce tougher conversations and more use for the tools learned.

¹⁰⁶ Project Participant, Written Reflection, 8 July 2018 (transcript, e-mail, etc.) River Road Church, Baptist, Richmond.

¹⁰⁷ Project Participant, Written Reflection, 7 July 2018 (transcript, e-mail, etc.) River Road Church, Baptist, Richmond.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS FROM RESEARCH

The need for churches to address the politicized moral issues that they encounter in the world around them is very apparent not just to me, but to every participant in this study, and to most Christians I have encountered who learned of my project's research. This project was one small attempt in one specific context to live out a way of creating the space needed to have these conversations by preparing participants for constructive dialogue through spiritual discernment and dialogue tools. In Baptist churches, and many denominations, small groups are the places where people are in closest relationship and primed for dialogue through those personal connections. Lay leaders in small groups, like the groups in which this project's participants were involved, are the leaders who will guide dialogue for others in their own contexts.

Impact of Discerning Dialogue

Implementing tools like those taught in the discerning dialogue retreat seem to have been widely successful in this short project format. From learning the basics of spiritual discernment and detachment, the conviction to have good dialogue from a Christian perspective was paramount for all the study participants. From learning the basics of good dialogue, stemming from psychology and sociology, each member had an opportunity to look inward and consider their own reactions and personality traits that affect their ability to dialogue well. Without learning the steps to dialogue well, and without centering that dialogue in our Christian identity, churches will continue to use the models found in old denominational spats, or worse, those models found in our wider

society that emphasize anger, ideological purity without compromise of any sort, political party platforms, or even violence against those with whom we disagree. Learning to talk to one another, as Christians, is sadly a skill churches still must learn in these troubling times of cultural polarization. Without confronting issues of moral importance first as Christians and secondarily as citizens of a country or members of a political party, Christianity will fail to have any bearing on molding the world in which they live into one that teaches as Jesus taught in the Greatest Commandment:

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matt 22: 37b-40)¹⁰⁸

Implications for Further Study

Covenanting as a group after learning tools of discernment and dialogue helps to create the requisite space for successful dialogue. Listening to the critique from study participants, however, the dialogue itself and the reflection on the issue at hand could be improved with better structure and facilitation. If a pastor or lay leader wanted to use the tools in this process, the most foundational part of the implementation would be the discerning dialogue retreat. Whether done in a few hours one day or a series of meetings, the learning process for how to discern and how to dialogue is necessary and helpful.

From there, preparation for dialoguing on a specific polarized issue would need to be concise and relevant, and group participants would need ample time to prepare before dialogue begins. Larger books could be useful in some settings, but as noted by some of the study participants, if there is shorter lead time, groups may benefit more from articles

¹⁰⁸ All Scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

or smaller, less dense reading material. With more structured dialogue, a facilitator might offer in each session of dialogue a bullet-point style guide of questions to try to answer.

Additionally, if each session had to come to consensus or decision, whether on “what we believe” from scripture or “what we should do” from tradition / current issues, the group might even start with potential ending points they can then use dialogue to expand on or change as needed. As noted in the analysis, discerning a way forward would take likely more time than was available in this limited study, but in contexts where a decision needs to be reached, Christian discernment calls for patience and prayerful time to consider options. Thus, any discerning dialogue on a contentious topic would likely take many more sessions than just three 90 minute gatherings. The retreat might also need to be lengthened, depending on the educational and spiritual background of participants. If participants are not as educated or may not have as much background in Christian studies (biblical, theological, ethical, historical, etc.), the group might want to have multiple retreat days, or even a seminar-type series on discerning dialogue before beginning the dialogue itself (expanding on each step, focusing on a given part of discernment or dialogue in weekly gatherings, going over theological reasoning behind discernment, going over more deeply how Christian ethical consideration might work concerning Scripture, church history, and current events, etc.).

While this project was obviously limited in scope, future iterations of a discerning dialogue process in churches could be expanded and adapted to fit the needs of different congregational structures. For example, at River Road Church, Baptist, the age groups vary widely, but at my current church, First Baptist Church of Martinsville, VA, excepting my family, the average age of a congregant is around 70 years old. How these

age groups approach politicized issues of moral importance will differ, how people of different socioeconomic status approach these issues will differ, and though neither of these churches is very racially diverse, certainly people of different races may experience these issues differently.

Additionally, this context is one in which the group participants were all highly educated and attending church learning opportunities led by experts in their fields, from theologians to church historians to psychologists. Interestingly, the group participants did not vary much in response based on political leanings, gender, or age. All participants seemed to approach the examination of the process in very logical and methodical ways – how to improve it, what was done well, etc. I think the church context of highly-educated individuals affects these results. Other church contexts with varied education levels of participants might see more variance in responses to the process than was found in this context.

Impact Upon My Ministry

While this small group of lay leaders gathered in June 2018, I was Pastoral Resident at River Road Church, Baptist, having just been called as Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church of Martinsville, Virginia. Creating a structure in which a group of community-sharing Christians can have productive discerning dialogue about the most politicized moral issues of our time has long been a goal of mine as a Christian Ethicist and a minister. The opportunity, then, to become the first Senior Pastor of a historic Baptist church in the South provides me a challenge to explore ways other churches can begin using a process like the one devised in this project (with requisite needed changes to some of the structure and of course based on the context and people/issues involved).

In my ministry at River Road, I served only in associate pastor roles, with limited impact on the visioning for a congregation. But as Senior Pastor of a church in need of change (in order to remain relevant – and open), the stakes for me are higher. I believe that finding constructive ways to engage the world with the faith we profess is what will make this church able to become relevant once again – speaking to issues that call us to faith in action. Without structured guides to this kind of conversation, though, the powers of the polarized political world will reign over the reign of the Kingdom of God in which we claim our first citizenship.

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Appendix A

Email to Potential Group Participants

Dear [Name of Potential Participant]:

Because you are a lay leader at River Road Church, Baptist, I would like to invite you to participate in a dialogue process in a small group of 5-10 participants as part of my Doctor of Ministry project. This process will provide the group skills for discernment and dialogue about politicized moral/ethical issues.

By participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to learn more about how best to approach tough ethical issues in your ministries at River Road Church and beyond. Hopefully, as we dialogue about one specific ethical issue together from differing viewpoints, you will also grow in knowledge about the particular ethical issue of income inequality and economic justice.

If you are interested in being a part of the study, the first gathering will be on **Sunday, May 6 at 5:00PM** in the Education Resource Room (UC 230) and will be a preliminary meeting to go over the project design and goals, as well as introduce our (short!) reading list so books can be ordered. This meeting will last no longer than one hour. At the end of this meeting, after asking questions and hearing the project design and plan, participants can choose to continue the study if interested or decline.

Thanks,
Libby

Appendix B

Teaching Materials for Retreat

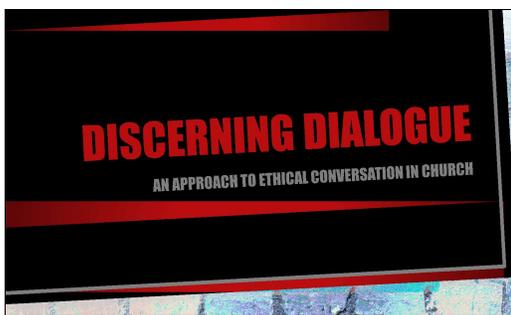
Slides and notes based on the following books' outlines and using the books' images:

Simmons, Annette. *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths: Using Dialogue to Overcome Fear and Distrust at Work*. New York: AMACOM, 1999.

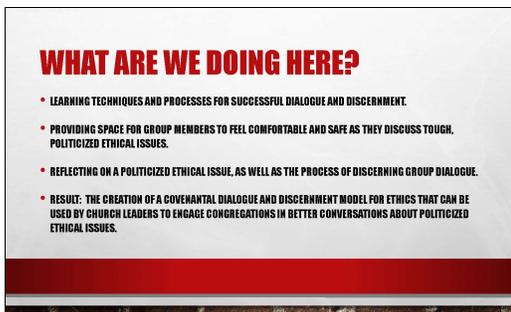
Morris, Danny E. *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997.

Part 1: PowerPoint Presentation

Slide 1



Slide 2



Slide 3

SOME TERMS:

- **CHRISTIAN ETHICS** LIVING IN A WAY THAT REFLECTS THE MANDATES AND TEACHINGS OF CHRIST IS A CONSTANTLY-CHANGING AND ADAPTING PROCESS FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES. A COMMUNITY MORAL RESPONSE TO THE ACTIONS OF GOD IN OUR LIVES AND IN THE WORLD... NOT SIMPLY A LIST OF "DOS" AND "DO NOTS," BUT A WAY OF LIVING INTO WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A FOLLOWER OF JESUS IN A WORLD CONFRONTED WITH QUESTIONS OF WHAT IS RIGHT AND GOOD, AND WHAT IS SINFUL AND HARMFUL.
- **POLITICIZED MORAL/ETHICAL ISSUES** POLITICIZED ISSUES OF MORAL IMPORTANCE ARE THOSE THAT CONFRONT ISSUES OF JUSTICE – AND SIMULTANEOUSLY ARE MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST AND PUBLIC POLICY DEBATE. THESE TOPICS COULD INCLUDE WAR, RACISM, CLASSISM, SEXUALITY, AND MANY OTHERS.

Slide 4

TERMS, CONT'D.

- **DIALOGUE** OPEN DISCUSSION THAT CREATES BETTER COMMUNICATION BY ANALYZING GROUP DYNAMICS IN REAL TIME, ALLOWING GROUP MEMBERS TO BE HONEST WITHOUT REPERCUSSION, AND COLLABORATING IN A WAY THAT CONSIDERS CAREFULLY LANGUAGE USED AND NORMS ADHERED TO, AND CHALLENGES OLD WAYS OF THINKING AND CONFRONTING OTHERS.
- **CHRISTIAN MORAL DISCERNMENT** A WAY OF DOING DIALOGUE THAT SEPARATES OR DISTINGUISHES BETWEEN TWO OR AMONG VARIOUS OPTIONS; A WAY TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN GOOD OR EVIL CHOICES; FINDING THE AUTHENTIC OVER AGAINST THE COUNTERFEIT; TO SEE AS GOD SEES, SET APART FROM NORMAL, HUMAN PREOCCUPATIONS; TO LOCATE THE MOST IMMEDIATE AND PARTICULAR AMONG A BROADER LANDSCAPE OF CHOICES; OR TO PUT FORTH INSIGHT, A PROCESS BY WHICH A GROUP OF CHRISTIANS IN A GIVEN CHURCH COMMUNITY SETTING REACHES BOTH UNDERSTANDING AND NORMATIVE JUDGMENT ABOUT CERTAIN ETHICAL ISSUES.

Slide 5

QUESTION TIME
WHAT IS DIALOGUE TO YOU?

Slide 6

DIALOGUE ABOUT ETHICAL ISSUES IS TOUGH. WHY?

- AS AN ENGAGED CITIZEN OF A COUNTRY, MOST OF US ARE INFLUENCED BY THE MEDIA AND POLITICAL PARTIES DOMINATING OUR DISCOURSE THROUGHOUT OUR WEEK.
- AMERICANS HAVE BECOME A TRIBAL PEOPLE, OR "GROUPISH," AND THEY HAVE SINCE THE 1960S DRAWN A SHARP LINE BETWEEN "RIGHT" AND "LEFT" POLITICS.
- THERE'S AN "ECLIPSE OF THE MIDDLE," ROOTED IN SENSATIONALISM, A NEED REFLECTING THE "HUMAN AVERSION TO MONOTONY AND BOREDOM." MOST PEOPLE ARE SEEKING IN THE MEDIA "THE SHRILL PITCH OF HARSH MORAL CRITICISM AND BLUNT COMMENTARY" OVER AGAINST REASONED AND MORE COMPLEX ARGUMENTS FOR OR AGAINST SPECIFIC ISSUES.

Slide 7

- WHETHER THE 24/7 NEWS CYCLE ON THE TELEVISION, OR THE NEWSFEEDS CONTROLLED BY ALGORITHMS ONLINE, THE POLARIZATION INTENSIFIES AS THE MEDIA MOVES FURTHER APART IDEOLOGICALLY
- THIS MEDIA OVERPOWERS THE *SUBTLITIES OF PERSPECTIVE AND OPINION* OF THE VAST MAJORITY OF CITIZENS WHO POSITION THEMSELVES "SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE" OF THESE DEBATES.
- BAPTISTS HAVE A TOUGH HISTORY, TOO. SLAVERY, FUNDAMENTALISM, INERRANCY/LITERALISM. POLITICAL SPLINTERING DUE TO OUTSIDE FORCES.
- HOW DO WE CREATE SPACE FOR THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL DIALOGUE WHEN WE'RE SO ENMESHED IN A CULTURE OF DIVISION?

Slide 8

DIALOGUE: A "SAFE PLACE FOR DANGEROUS TRUTHS"

ANNETTE SIMMONS' *A SAFE PLACE FOR DANGEROUS TRUTHS*

Slide 9

DID YOU KNOW?

- UP TO 93% OF PEOPLE ADMIT TO LYING AT WORK, AND IMPROVING THE FLOW OF INFORMATION IN A GIVEN CONTEXT WILL NOT HELP AT ALL IF THE QUALITY OF THE INFORMATION IS SO POOR.
- IF WE ARE SEEKING TO HAVE PRODUCTIVE GROUP DIALOGUE, IT STANDS TO REASON THAT THE FLOW OF TRUTHFUL INFORMATION BE A TOP PRIORITY.
- IF WE KEEP QUIET ABOUT "DELICATE ISSUES" OR AVOID "TOUCHY" SUBJECTS, SOON ENOUGH, THERE REMAIN MORE UNDISCUSSABLE ISSUES THAN DISCUSSABLE ONES, AND OUR CONVERSATIONS STAY SHALLOW, AND MOSTLY MEANINGLESS TO THE GROWTH AND WORK OF THE CHURCH

Slide 10

WHAT KEEPS US FROM HAVING HONEST CONVERSATION?

- IN GENERAL, IT OFTEN HAS TO DO WITH A GROUP'S ABILITY TO HANDLE CONFRONTING THE DEEPER, "REAL PROBLEM" FACING THEIR GROUP.
- IT CAN HAPPEN IN RELATIONSHIPS OF DEEP MISTRUST.
- IT CAN ALSO HAPPEN IN DISCUSSIONS INVOLVING ISSUES THAT BRING OUT MISTRUST OR WORRY ABOUT OUTCOMES – LIKE POLITICIZED MORAL ISSUES, WHICH COME WITH THE BAGGAGE OF SOCIETY AND DENOMINATIONAL ISSUES.
- WE NEED TO TAP INTO SKILLS, THEN, THAT OPEN THE DOOR FOR SAFE SPACE THAT ALLOWS ALL PARTIES TO SPEAK OF THESE "REAL PROBLEMS" IN MEANINGFUL WAYS "WITHOUT ESCALATING INTO ARGUMENTS, DECLINING INTO DEBILITATED SILENCE, OR MINDLESSLY DEFERRING TO A LEADER" THE GROUP CAN LATER SUBVERT."

Slide 11

- REAL COMMUNICATION, UNLIKE THE SHALLOW, DISHONEST COMMUNICATION WE FALL INTO, CAN CHANGE PEOPLE.
- IT CAN CHANGE BELIEFS, CHANGE HEARTS, AND CAN ULTIMATELY HELP TO FORM US INTO BETTER PEOPLE WHO WORK TOGETHER IN BETTER WAYS AND THUS ACCOMPLISH MORE.
- HOLDING US BACK IN GROUP DIALOGUE IS OFTEN A LOW TOLERANCE FOR FRUSTRATION AND UNCERTAINTY, AS WELL AS AN UNWILLINGNESS TO TAKE THE TIME TO FULLY ADDRESS AN ISSUE – LEADING TO A RUSH TO JUDGEMENT AND A POOR DIALOGUE TO ARRIVE AT THAT DECISION.

Slide 12

QUESTION TIME

- WHAT'S YOUR IDEA OF SUCCESS IN DIALOGUE? (EVERYONE AGREES (CONSENSUS), EVERYONE AGREES WITH ME, WE AGREE TO DISAGREE, MAJORITY RULES, DISSOLUTION OF A DISAGREABLE GROUP, AVOIDANCE?)
- WHAT IS YOUR PERSONAL COMFORT LEVEL WITH CONFLICT?
- ARE YOU AN INTROVERT OR EXTROVERT? AN INTERNAL OR EXTERNAL PROCESSOR?
- WHAT'S YOUR STYLE OF DEALING WITH CONFLICT IN OTHER SETTINGS? HOME, WORK? ARE THEY LIKE OR DIFFERENT FROM YOUR STYLE IN YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY?

Slide 13

(BREAK)
GRAB A SNACK AND A DRINK!

Slide 14

WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

- **DISCERNING DIALOGUE** COMBINES THE WORK OF LEARNING TO DIALOGUE WITH THE CHRISTIAN DISCIPLINE OF DISCERNMENT.
- FIRST, WE'LL LEARN A LITTLE ABOUT DISCERNMENT. THEN, WE'LL FOCUS ON SOME IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF SUCCESSFUL DIALOGUE.

Slide 18

- **ROOTING** IN THE TRADITION CONNECTS RELIGIOUS AND BIBLICAL STORIES, THEMES, AND IMAGES WITH THE SITUATION AT HAND. THE TRADITION MAY CONFRONT, CONFIRM, NUDE, OR EVEN TRANSFORM THE DIRECTION OF THE DISCERNMENT PROCESS.
- **INTERPRETING** THE BIBLE WITH A CAREFUL LENS, KNOWING THAT NOT ALL CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS ARE DEALT WITH IN THE PAGES OF SCRIPTURE.
- **USING** THE ART OF CHRISTIAN CHARACTER ETHICS: LEARNING WHAT KIND OF PERSON ONE SHOULD BE IN LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND COMMUNITY-DISCERNED NORMS. THE WORK OF CHARACTER ETHICS HELPS TO SHAPE DISCIPLES IN SUCH A WAY AS TO "BE READY" AS PEOPLE TO FACE ETHICAL ISSUES THAT ARISE.

Slide 19

- **LISTENING** REQUIRES US TO SEE EACH OTHER AS EQUALS IN THE PROCESS. IT ASKS US TO LISTEN TO GOD AND TO ONE ANOTHER INTENTIONALLY WHEN OFTEN WE SPEND MOST OF OUR TIME IN OUR HEADS WORKING ON OUR OWN RESPONSE. SILENCE CAN BE HELPFUL IN THIS PROCESS.
- **EXPLORING** FREES OUR PLAYFUL IMAGINATIONS TO IDENTIFY POSSIBLE OPTIONS AND PATHS THAT LIE WITHIN THE GUIDING PRINCIPLE.
- **IMPROVING** WORKS IN CONSULTATION AND PRAYER TO IMPROVE EACH OPTION UNDER CONSIDERATION UNTIL IT BECOMES THE BEST THAT WE CAN IMAGINE IT TO BE WITHIN THE YEARNING OF GOD.
- **WEIGHING** SORTS AND TESTS THE OPTIONS OF PATHS IN RESPONSE TO THE LEADING OF GOD'S SPIRIT.

Slide 20

IBREAK!
GRAB A SNACK AND A DRINK!

Slide 21

LEARNING TO DIALOGUE WELL

- IN ADDITION TO LEARNING SPIRITUAL STEPS TOWARD HEALTHY DISCERNMENT FOR INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS, WE NEED SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR HOW TO DIALOGUE IN A GROUP SETTING.
- LEARNING SOME OF THE TOOLS TO HELP GROUPS SUCCEED EMOTIONALLY CAN HELP US HAVE CONVERSATIONS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE, RATHER THAN SHUT PEOPLE DOWN.
- WE'LL FOCUS ON SOME TOOLS FOR GROUP DIALOGUE FROM ANNETTE SIMMONS, AUTHOR OF *A SAFE PLACE FOR DANGEROUS TRUTHS: USING DIALOGUE TO OVERCOME FEAR AND DISTRUST AT WORK*

Slide 22

WHAT AM I IN THIS PROCESS?

- A FACILITATOR ONLY.
- AN OBSERVER.
- A REMINDER.

Slide 23

WHAT IS DIALOGUE?

- *DM* (SHARED) AND *LOGOS* (MEANING)
- A DIALOGUE STORY: MOVING FROM FEAR AND MISTRUST TO PRODUCTIVITY AND HOPE
- GOOD DIALOGUE CAN CHANGE A GROUP. DISCERNING DIALOGUE CAN CHANGE A CHRISTIAN GROUP. WE MOVE FROM SURFACE-LEVEL CONVERSATION TO SOMETHING DEEPER. WE FIND SHARED MEANING (EVEN IF WE DON'T REACH CONSENSUS).

Slide 24

FIVE STAGES OF DIALOGUE

POLITENESS AND PRETENDING

- IN THE BEGINNING, WHEN DISCUSSING A TOUGH TOPIC, NO ONE CAN ADMIT ANYTHING IS WRONG.
- THERE'S BLAME FOR OTHERS, OR THERE'S PRETENDING IT'S AN UNSOLVABLE PROBLEM.
- WE ALL HAVE THESE DIFFERENT BELIEF "SQUIGGLES" AND WE ARE WAITING TO SEE WHAT OTHERS BELIEVE.



Slide 25

CHAOS

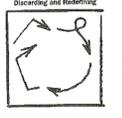
- SOMEONE FINALLY SPEAKS HIS OR HER MIND.
- SOMEONE ELSE BRISTLES, HOLDING AN OPPOSITE VIEWPOINT.
- THE GROUP BEGINS TO FACE THE FACTS AND ALLOWS HIDDEN CONFLICTS TO SURFACE.
- FEELS A LITTLE CHAOTIC.
- WE TYPICALLY DON'T LIKE CHAOS. SOME GROUPS GO BACK TO STAGE 1. SOME KEEP THE CONFLICT GOING, THRIVING ON THE CHAOS.
- GOOD DIALOGUE PROCESSES CAN MOVE A GROUP OUT OF THIS STAGE.



Slide 26

DISCARDING AND REDEFINING

- IF THE GROUP ADDRESSES ITS CONFLICT BY EACH GROUP MEMBER WILLINGLY RISKING THEIR OWN CERTAINTY ABOUT THE "FACTS," MEMBERS ARE FLEXIBLE ENOUGH TO GENERATE DIALOGUE.
- CHRISTIAN DISCERNMENT WOULD CALL THIS "SHEDDING" TO THE POINT OF "DETACHMENT"
- THIS IS AN UNCOMFORTABLE PLACE TO BE. CAN FOSTER SILENCE WHILE MEMBERS DECONSTRUCT WHAT THEY THOUGHT THEY KNEW FOR SURE.



Slide 27

RESOLUTION AND COLLECTIVE LEARNING

- IF PEOPLE KEEP TALKING, BELIEF SYSTEMS BEGIN TO CONNECT INTO A NEW BELIEF THAT IS A FUNCTION OF THE ORIGINAL ONES, PIECES OF THE OLD, BUT NEW.
- THE GROUP BEGINS TO THINK COLLECTIVELY RATHER THAN INDIVIDUALLY.
- A NEW VIEW EMERGES THAT IS BIG ENOUGH TO HOLD THE INHERENT CONFLICTS AND TO DELIVER A CONSENSUS (IF WARRANTED) THAT WORKS FOR EVERYONE.



The diagram is a square with a circle inside. The word "Resolution" is written at the top. Inside the circle, there are two arrows forming a loop, one pointing clockwise and one pointing counter-clockwise, suggesting a process of integration or synthesis.

Slide 28

CLOSURE

- WE CAN'T STAY IN THE FLEXIBILITY OF DIALOGUE ALL THE TIME. IT IS FOR A SEASON OF GROWTH AND COMMUNITY.
- MOST DAYS, WE NEED CERTAINTY AND STRONG BELIEFS – OTHERWISE WE QUESTION EVERYTHING ALL THE TIME.
- DIALOGUE ENDS A CONVERSATION ON A TOPIC IN A DIFFERENT PLACE THAN WHERE YOU STARTED, AND SO PEOPLE ARE CHANGED, BUT NO PERSON CAN STAY IN THE FLEXIBLE STAGE 24/7.



The diagram is a square with a jagged, irregular border, resembling a torn piece of paper or a rough-edged shape. The word "Closure" is written at the top.

Slide 29

GOING SLOW TO GO FAST

- DIALOGUE AND DISCERNMENT ARE TWINS IN THAT THEY BOTH ASK OF US THAT WE SLOW DOWN, LOOK OUTSIDE OUR BOXES, AND BEGIN TO THINK DIFFERENTLY IN A GROUP.
- WE CHECK FOR ERRORS. WE LOOK TO THE SCRIPTURE, TRADITION, COMMUNITY NORMS. WE ASK OF OUR CHARACTER – WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR A FOLLOWER OF JESUS? WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY NEIGHBOR – THE ONE WITH WHOM I AM SPEAKING AND THE ONES FOR WHOM THIS ISSUE IS A PERSONAL ONE?
- WE GENERALLY HAVE A BIAS TO ACTION – WE WANT TO GET ON WITH IT. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN FOR CHRISTIANS SEEKING GOD'S WILL? WHAT DOES THAT MEAN ABOUT OUR HURRIED BUSINESS MEETINGS? WHAT CAN WE DO AS A COMMUNITY TO SLOW DOWN? DOES SLOWING DOWN FRUSTRATE YOU? WHY/WHY NOT?

Slide 30

CONTENT AND PROCESS

- DO YOU EVER FIND YOURSELF IN MEETINGS WHERE THE "WHAT" IS CLEAR – THE CONTENT THAT'S IMPORTANT IS WELL STATED – BUT THE "HOW" – THE PROCESS TO ACCOMPLISH THE CONTENT - IS LEFT BY THE WAYSIDE?
- DIALOGUE IS A PROCESS, AND THE CONTENT 'SHOULD BE' IRRELEVANT. IF WE LEARN TO DIALOGUE WELL, ANY CONTENT CAN BE TACKLED.

Slide 31

POSITIVE INTENT

- ASSUMING POSITIVE INTENT IS A FIRST STEP IN RECOGNIZING THAT THOSE WHO HARM US VERBALLY LIKELY DID NOT INTEND TO DO SO.
- WE OFTEN JUMP TO CONCLUSIONS TOO OFTEN THAT FOLKS ARE TRYING TO CREATE TENSION OR HURT OUR FEELINGS. BY STEPPING BACK TO REFLECT, WE SHOULD REALIZE THAT EVEN WE CAN HURT FEELINGS WITHOUT INTENDING TO.
- WHEN HAVE YOU ASSUMED NEGATIVE INTENT AND COME TO FIND OUT YOU WERE WRONG?
- IT'S PROBABLY A 50/50 CHANCE OF KNOWING INTENT CORRECTLY – OFTEN WE ONLY KNOW THEIR BEHAVIOR AND OUR OWN REACTION TO IT.

Slide 32

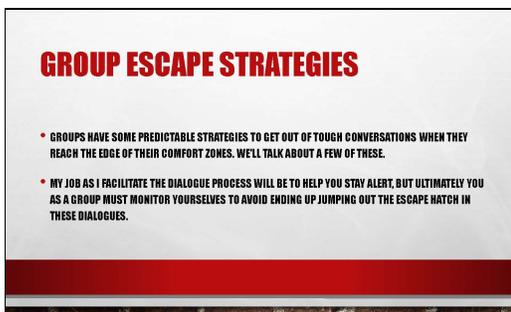
COMFORT ZONE MODEL

- WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF YOUR MIND?
- ✓ A SURVIVAL MACHINE (THINK: CAVERNMAN)
- ✓ WE GO BACK TO SAFE, COMFORTABLE THINGS NATURALLY
- WHAT'S OUR AUTOMATIC RESPONSE, THEN, TO DISCOMFORT – OR BEING REMOVED FROM THE COMFORT ZONE?
- ✓ FIGHT OR FLIGHT, RIGHT?
- ✓ SEVERAL THOUSAND YEARS AGO, THESE MIGHT HAVE BEEN MORE LITERAL MORE OF THE TIME. BUT NOW, WHAT ARE THE KINDS OF FIGHTING AND FLIGHTING WE DO? WHAT DEFENSIVE MECHANISMS DO WE HAVE? TAKE A MOMENT TO WRITE SOME DOWN, THEN WE'LL SHARE.

Slide 33



Slide 34



Slide 35



Slide 36

FIGHT

- WHAT DOES FIGHTING LOOK LIKE?
 - ✓ HEATED INQUIRY
 - ✓ UPROAR
 - ✓ SARCASM
 - ✓ ROLES OF WINNERS AND LOSERS



The diagram shows four stick figures arranged in a circle. Arrows point from each figure towards the center, and there are also arrows between adjacent figures, suggesting a state of conflict or tension.

Slide 37

PAIRING

- WHEN YOU HAVE A LARGER GROUP AND TWO PEOPLE LEAN OVER TOGETHER TO WHISPER, WHAT DOES THAT DO TO THE LARGER GROUP?
- ARE THERE NOW TWO GROUPS?
- ARE OTHERS ROLLING THEIR EYES OR SHOOTING A "LOOK" AT THE PAIR?
- DECREASING COMPLEXITY THROUGH PAIRING IS AN ESCAPE TACTIC.

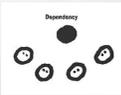


The diagram shows two stick figures leaning over each other as if to whisper. In the background, there are three more stick figures, representing a larger group.

Slide 38

DEPENDENCY

- WHAT DOES DEPENDENCY LOOK LIKE?
 - ✓ DIALOGUE IS HARD, AND THUS WE OFTEN TURN SOMEWHERE FOR HELP, BUT THAT CAN TURN INTO DEPENDENCY.
 - ✓ HOW DOES THE TONE OF A MEETING CHANGE IF THE PASTOR WALKS IN? DO WE LOOK TO HIM/HER FOR THE "RIGHT ANSWER"?
 - ✓ IF ONE PERSON DOMINATES A DISCUSSION AND EMERGES AS A LEADER SPEAKING FOR THE GROUP, THAT ISN'T DIALOGUE—EVERYONE IN THE GROUP MUST CONTRIBUTE EQUALLY.



The diagram shows a central black circle with the word "Dependency" written above it. Surrounding this central circle are five smaller white circles, each with a black dot in the center, representing a group of people dependent on the central figure.

Slide 39

INDIVIDUAL ESCAPE STRATEGIES

- LISTEN TO YOUR OWN DEFENSE MECHANISMS
- LEARN TO RECOGNIZE THESE ESCAPE STRATEGIES IN YOUR OWN HEAD.
- IDEALLY, YOU'LL ALL MONITOR YOURSELVES, BUT DON'T BE EMBARRASSED IF SOMEONE POINTS OUT THAT YOU ARE DOING ONE OF THESE. THIS IS PART OF THE GROUP MONITORING ITSELF. AND YES, IT'S NATURAL – DIALOGUING WELL IS NOT NATURAL. IT REQUIRES A LITTLE MORE WORK.

Slide 40

TENACITY

- WHAT'S THIS PICTURE REMIND YOU OF?
- WHAT DOES IT MEAN WHEN WE ARE "DIGGING IN OUR HEELS"?
- WE ARE ALL GUILTY OF TIGHTENING OUR GRIP ON OUR BELIEFS OR POSITIONS FOR NO OTHER REASON THAN SOMEONE IS TRYING TO CHANGE OUR MINDS.
- OR – JUST ADMITTING WE'RE WRONG CAN BRING THIS ON.
- WATCH OUT FOR THIS ONE – IF YOU FIND YOURSELF REPEATING THE SAME POINT MORE THAN THREE TIMES, EVEN PARAPHRASING, ASK YOURSELF IF YOU ARE ENGAGING IN TENACITY.



Slide 41

FACTUMPTIONS

- JUST THE FACTS, RIGHT? WHAT IS A FACT? GIVE ME SOME EXAMPLES.
- SOMETIMES WE ARE BASING OPINIONS ON WHAT WE THINK ARE "FACTS" WHEN ACTUALLY THEY ARE ALSO OPINIONS.
- DIALOGUE ASKS US TO QUESTION THESE FACT ASSUMPTIONS.
- REAL CREATIVITY MEANS CHALLENGING "COMMON KNOWLEDGE" LIKE "YOU CAN'T DO X" OR "EVERYONE KNOWS THAT X WON'T WORK OR ISN'T POSSIBLE."



Slide 48

WANTS / DON'T WANTS

- WHAT DO YOU HOPE DISCERNING DIALOGUE MIGHT ACCOMPLISH?
- WHAT BEHAVIORS/ATTITUDES/ACTIONS WOULD YOU CHANGE ABOUT HOW DIALOGUE IS TYPICALLY DONE IN CHURCH?
- WHAT BAD HABITS DO YOU HAVE THAT YOU'D LIKE TO OVERCOME AS WE WORK THROUGH A DISCERNING DIALOGUE PROCESS?

Slide 49

CHOOSING THE "RULES" FOR DISCERNING DIALOGUE

- TO COVENANT TOGETHER IS TO COME UP WITH PROMISES TO ONE ANOTHER IN THIS PROCESS.
- WE CHOOSE "RULES" AS A PROMISE TO ONE ANOTHER THAT WE ARE GOING TO DO OUR VERY BEST TO RESPECT EACH OTHER AND THE PROCESS.
- ALSO, IT'S JUST HELPFUL TO HAVE A LIST OF THESE RULES (OR PROMISES) HANDY AS WE TRY TO ENGAGE IN DIALOGUE -- WE OTHERWISE MIGHT HAVE A HARD TIME REMEMBERING ALL THIS STUFF.
- TAKE A FEW MINUTES TO YOURSELF AND WRITE DOWN SOME PROMISES AND/OR RULES YOU WOULD INCLUDE IN A COVENANT WITH THOSE HERE. YOU KNOW YOURSELF, AND YOU KNOW MANY IN THIS GROUP (AND CHURCH FOLK GENERALLY). WHAT NEEDS TO BE PROMISED?

Slide 50

COVENANTAL DISCERNING DIALOGUE GROUP

- NOTE TAKER: WHO'S MY WRITER? CAN YOU WRITE THESE FOR US SO WE CAN MAKE THIS INTO A WRITTEN COVENANT FOR US ALL TO SIGN AT OUR NEXT MEETING?
- GIVE ME YOUR TOP PICKS FOR DIALOGUE RULES -- AND SOME BACKGROUND AS TO WHY, IF YOU'D LIKE.
- HOW WILL KEEPING ANY GIVEN RULE CHANGE GROUP INTERACTION?
- WHAT PROMISES TO GOD ARE WE MAKING IN THIS COVENANT?

Part 2: Presenter Notes

What are we doing?

1. Learn techniques and processes for successful dialogue and discernment.
2. Provide space for group members to feel comfortable and safe as they discuss tough, politicized ethical issues.
3. Reflect on a politicized ethical issue, as well as the process of discerning group dialogue.

The result of the process will be the creation of a covenantal dialogue and discernment model for ethics that can be used by church leaders to engage congregations in better conversations about politicized ethical issues.

Some Terms:

1. *Christian Ethics*: Living in a way that reflects the mandates and teachings of Christ is a constantly-changing and adapting process for Christian communities: “Christian Ethics is not synonymous with biblical ethics. One obvious reason is that biblical communities did not confront some of the moral issues and historical forces which shape our lives today.”¹⁰⁹ Christian ethics is a community moral response to the actions of God in our lives and in the world.... not simply a list of “dos” and “do nots,” but a way of living into what it means to be a follower of Jesus in a world confronted with questions of what is right and good, and what is sinful and harmful.
2. *Politicized Moral/Ethical Issues*: Politicized issues of moral importance are those that confront issues of justice – and simultaneously are matters of public interest and public policy debate. These topics could include war, racism, classism, sexuality, and many others.
3. *Community*: A culture and group of people with whom we associate. Community is “a synonym for social relatedness... We cannot and do not muster moral insight for ourselves by ourselves apart from communities, any more than we are or can be human beings apart from others. Everything we know about morality and the moral life, or anything else, for that matter, is finally a community enterprise and achievement.”¹¹⁰
4. *Christian Community*: “Christian community (or *koinōnia*, to recall the New Testament term)...[is] the community-creating human relatedness which is a

¹⁰⁹ Bruce C. Birch & Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress), 11.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

consequence of the impact of Jesus.”¹¹¹ Moral relations are always dimensions of social relations in which “personal” cannot be separated from “social,” nor “individual” from “community.”

5. *Dialogue*: A form of discussion that fosters safe space among group members. This open discussion creates better communication by analyzing group dynamics in real time, allowing group members to be honest without repercussion, and collaborating in a way that considers carefully language used and norms adhered to, and challenges old ways of thinking and confronting others.¹¹²
6. *Christian Moral Discernment*: A way of doing dialogue that separates or distinguishes between two or among various options; a way to distinguish between good or evil choices; finding the authentic over against the counterfeit; to see as God sees, set apart from normal, human preoccupations; to locate the most immediate and particular among a broader landscape of choices; or to put forth insight.¹¹³ For purposes of this project, *Christian moral discernment* is a process by which a group of Christians in a given church community setting reaches both understanding and normative judgment about certain ethical issues.
7. *Detachment*: Though the popular definition of this word comes across as cold or indifferent, the principle of detachment in the process of Christian discernment means something very different. Detachment functions as a method to create *freedom to discern*. “The freer we become, the more we are able to go about life in a wise and discerning way. And the more we use wisdom and discernment, the freer we become to make choices and then get on with life. It’s difficult to say which comes first—discernment or freedom. One leads to the other.”¹¹⁴ The detached person says, “I don’t value anything as much as I value knowing and doing God’s will...I am indifferent to matters of ego, pride, favor, comfort, advantage, and so on.”¹¹⁵ As a first step in the process of discerning dialogue, each individual will spend time in prayer and preparation to enter into dialogue with others from a place of detachment, acknowledging their struggles and limitations as part of the process.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 67.

¹¹² Annette Simmons, *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths: Using Dialogue to Overcome Fear and Distrust at Work* (New York: AMACOM), 18-25.

¹¹³ Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Nashville: Upper Room Books), 13.

¹¹⁴ Vinita Hampton Wright, “Freedom and Discernment,” Loyola Press, online: <https://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/ignatian-spirituality/discernment/freedom-and-discernment> (accessed 10 March 2018).

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 70.

Dialogue about politicized moral issues is tough. Why is that?

- As an engaged citizen of a country, most of us are influenced by the media and political parties dominating our discourse throughout our week
- Americans have become a tribal people, or “groupish,” and they have since the 1960s drawn a sharp line between “right” and “left” politics.
- There’s an “eclipse of the middle,” rooted in sensationalism, a need reflecting the “human aversion to monotony and boredom.” Most people are seeking in the media “the shrill pitch of harsh moral criticism and blunt commentary” over against reasoned and more complex arguments for or against specific issues.
- Whether the 24/7 news cycle on the television, or the newsfeeds controlled by algorithms online, the polarization intensifies as the media moves further apart ideologically:
 - It is through these media that public discourse acquires a life of its own; not only do the categories of public rhetoric become detached from the intentions of the speaker, they also overpower the subtleties of perspective and opinion of the vast majority of citizens who position themselves “somewhere in the middle” of these debates... Middling positions and the nuances of moral commitment, then, get played into the grid of opposing rhetorical extremes.
- Baptists have a tough history, too. Born of a split over slavery in the late nineteenth century, the Southern Baptist Convention quickly moved into some of the same religious and political polarization found in the wider society in the United States in the twentieth century – from theological quibbles over inerrancy/literalness of scripture to fundamentalist interpretations of certain passages (but oddly, not others). Eventually, the denomination was torn apart and became multiple denominations by a mass exodus of churches.

How do we create space for theological and ethical dialogue when we’re so enmeshed in a culture of division?

Dialogue: A Safe Place for Dangerous Truths

Did you know? Up to 93% of people admit to lying at work, and improving the flow of information in a given context will not help at all if the quality of the information is so poor.

If we are seeking to have productive group dialogue, it stands to reason that the flow of truthful information be a top priority.

If we keep quiet about “delicate issues” or avoid “touchy” subjects, soon enough, there remain more undiscussable issues than discussable ones, and our conversations stay shallow, and mostly meaningless to the growth and work of the church

What keeps us from having honest conversation?

- In general, it often has to do with a group's ability to handle confronting the deeper, "real problem" facing their group.
- It can happen in relationships of deep mistrust.
- It can also happen in discussions involving issues that bring out mistrust or worry about outcomes – like politicized moral issues, which come with the baggage of society and denominational issues.
- We need to tap into skills, then, that open the door for safe space that allows all parties to speak of these "real problems" in meaningful ways "without escalating into arguments, declining into debilitated silence, or mindlessly deferring to a 'leader' the group can later subvert." (Annette Simmons)

Question Time:

What's your idea of success in dialogue? [Everyone agrees (consensus), Everyone agrees with ME, We agree to disagree, majority Rules, Dissolution of a disagreeable group, avoidance?]

What is your personal comfort level with conflict?

Are you an introvert or extrovert? An internal or external processor?

What's your style of dealing with conflict in other settings? Home, work? Are they like or different from your style in your faith community?

Where to begin?

- Discerning dialogue combines the work of learning to dialogue with the Christian discipline of discernment.
- First, we'll learn a little about discernment. Then, we'll focus on some important aspects of successful dialogue.

Christian Discernment

In order to also un-learn our spiritual processes for approaching discussion about these polarizing issues, I posit that a process of discerning dialogue can be taught and implemented to assist groups of faithful Christians in seeking after a Christian response to a tough issue.

The spiritual discipline of Christian group discernment weaves together this practice of good listening and speaking with the drive to know and understand the will of God as Christians seek to live out their faith in ways that lead to consolation, or toward the heart of God – to peace, rather than toward desolation, or away from the heart of God, to distress.

This work of discernment begins with a deep humility and willingness to take time to pray, dialogue, and shed one's own ego while searching for the will of God in a given situation.

Only when Christians are taking seriously the spiritual work of discernment and the social-spiritual work of dialogue can we fully address politicized issues of moral importance together in meaningful ways.

Discernment is a process of stages. While they do not always follow in this given order, it can be helpful to understand some of the ways our foremothers and forefathers studied and understood this process.

- *Framing* identifies the focus for discernment of God's will. The matters to be included are arranged into a unified whole. The focus of the exploration is briefly described.
- *Grounding* in a guiding principle jump-starts the process of discernment. The guiding principle is informed by the values, beliefs, and purpose of the discerning community. Boundaries are set.
- *Shedding* lays aside ego, preconceived notions, false assumptions, biases, and predetermined conclusions so that people involved in discernment can openly consider the matter.

This step creates individual "detachment" to better listen to other group members. Though the popular definition of the word "detachment" comes across as cold or indifferent, the principle of detachment in the process of Christian discernment means something very different. Detachment functions as a method to create *freedom to discern*. "The freer we become, the more we are able to go about life in a wise and discerning way. And the more we use wisdom and discernment, the freer we become to make choices and then get on with life. It's difficult to say which comes first—discernment or freedom. One leads to the other."¹¹⁶ The detached person says, "I don't value anything as much as I value knowing and doing God's will... I am indifferent to matters of ego, pride, favor, comfort, advantage, and so on."¹¹⁷ As a first step in the process of discerning dialogue, each individual will spend time in prayer and preparation to enter into dialogue with others from a place of detachment, acknowledging their struggles and limitations as part of the process.

The Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits, sought to apply the discernment teachings of St. Ignatius to the process of gaining clarity and balance before seeking to discern, and part of this process still used in Jesuit spirituality asks for the soul's freedom to decide openly. This freedom-inducing state is *detachment*. "In his *First Principle and Foundation*, Ignatius talked about 'making use of those things that help bring us closer to

¹¹⁶ Vinita Hampton Wright, "Freedom and Discernment," Loyola Press, online: <https://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/ignatian-spirituality/discernment/freedom-and-discernment> (accessed 10 March 2018).

¹¹⁷ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will*, 70.

God and leaving aside those things that don't.”¹¹⁸ In the process of discerning that which leans toward consolation, Ignatius says we must let go of attachments that have the potential to lead away from God, toward desolation. Part of the process of detachment also entails examining one's opinions in light of the question of whose kingdom we serve – our own, or ultimately God's. And, if we are serving the Kingdom of God, are we able to adequately set aside those things we assume we are right about in order to discuss with others a matter of importance? However “right” we may feel, Ignatius understood that we often fall short, especially on our own, and part of discernment is learning to set aside and be open to both what we might be wrong about as much as what we may be getting right as we discern in a group of believers. Without this separation from one's predetermined ideas in ways that allow for attention to God's ways, group discernment is in peril and likely to fail.

- *Rooting* in the tradition connects religious and biblical stories, themes, and images with the situation at hand. The tradition may confront, confirm, nudge, or even transform the direction of the discernment process.

When discussing an issue of moral importance, Christians also should look to their traditions and symbols for guidance, but with modern understanding and interpretation at hand during the honest and open dialogue that seeks the will of God. While Christian ethical discernment draws from Scripture its framework, it is itself not a discipline *directly* from Scripture. To be sure, Christians seeking to live like Christ are exegeting Scripture, but they are doing so as they seek answers to problems that may or may not have been fully addressed in the pages of Scripture. Christian ethics is “that artful science which asks after the best kind of life to live and the excellences of character which foster and express that. The focus is on moral traits, together with the social arrangements which nurture moral qualities appropriate to people's social roles.”¹¹⁹

Specifically, Christian *character ethics* asks questions about how the kind of person one should become based on norms developed from family and social values – in the case of this study, those values will be derived specifically from the teachings of Jesus and the rest of Scripture as interpreted through the lens of those teachings. “To belong to a people of God means the formation and transformation of personal moral identity with the faith identity of the community.”¹²⁰ Those seeking to understand an ethical issue normatively through Christian character ethics will seek to find the best way to be a good person (i.e., a person of good character and morality, always seeking the will of God in matters of conscience) among the people of God in community, not necessarily come up with the exact right course of action to use in every instance. The Christian seeking to emulate Jesus, then, becomes virtuous, or has good character, and thus acts rightly because she or he is living as Christ lived. The work of character ethics helps to

¹¹⁸ Margaret Silf, *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1999), Kindle Edition, chap. 11, par. 7.

¹¹⁹ Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics in the Christian Life*, 44.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

shape disciples in such a way as to “be ready” as people to face ethical issues that arise. “Basic Christian moral knowledge is acquired in intense engagement. It is rooted in the experience of caring and being cared for, of acting and being acted upon in close community... Thorough community moral deliberation insists that we scrutinize moral content and the grounds of moral authority.”¹²¹

- *Listening* enables hearing the promptings of the Spirit of God, the voices of all in the discerning community, and the cries of others who may be affected by our discernment.

As part of the process of discerning dialogue, a group should prepare to discuss a given topic by learning about it from various viewpoints and broadening assumptions each person individually may have. The step of listening is based on the importance of understanding the subject at hand, along with the good ethical study process of seeking to read and understand more than one side of an issue. The group can only begin to discuss a politicized moral issue after every person takes time to study the issue and good dialogue practices and prepare spiritually to listen well to the other parties involved and to God’s voice in their midst. This step is also important as each person works to shed his or her ego as they seek to hear the voice of God while sharing and listening in group discerning dialogue: “Even one person can weaken or derail spiritual discernment if he or she holds on to motivations other than the ultimate ones of knowing God’s will.”¹²²

- *Exploring* frees our playful imaginations to identify possible options and paths that lie within the guiding principle.
- *Improving* works in consultation and prayer to improve each option under consideration until it becomes the best that we can imagine it to be within the yearning of God.
- *Weighing* sorts and tests the options of paths in response to the leading of God’s spirit.¹²³

[BREAK]

Learning to Dialogue Well

- In addition to learning spiritual steps toward healthy discernment for individuals and groups, we need some practical advice for how to dialogue in a group setting.
- Learning some of the tools to help groups succeed emotionally can help us have conversations that make a difference, rather than shut people down.

¹²¹ Ibid., 117-118.

¹²² Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will*, 32.

¹²³ Ibid., 60. While there are two further steps in the discernment process to come to consensus, for purposes of this project, since no consensus is expected to be reached, I have omitted these last two steps.

- We'll focus on some tools for group dialogue from Annette Simmons, author of *a Safe Place for Dangerous Truths: Using Dialogue to Overcome Fear and Distrust at Work*

What Am I in this process?

To be a good facilitator, after today's retreat, I will back out of the conversation and be present only to moderate or get you back on track. My work will be one of observation at each meeting. I want to become completely unnecessary if at all possible. I give tools, not rules, and you impose your own group guidelines with me as a reminder only.

Dialogue does not allow for argument, and thus I will not enter into conversations to take a side or argue a point.

I won't take responsibility for the progress of the dialogue other than to serve as a reminder of the time allotted and/or a reminder about the topic at hand. I also won't ask for an outcome on these dialogue sessions – this is a process for the sake of being a process.

What is Dialogue?

- Dia- (shared) and -Logos (meaning)
- A dialogue story: moving from fear and mistrust to productivity and hope
- Good dialogue can change a group. Discerning dialogue can change a Christian Group. We move from surface-level conversation to something deeper. We find shared meaning (even if we don't reach consensus).

The Five Stages of Dialogue

Politeness and Pretending

- In the beginning, When discussing a tough topic, no one can admit anything is wrong.
- There's blame for others, or there's pretending it's an unsolvable problem.
- We all have these different belief "squiggles" and we are waiting to see what others believe.

Chaos

- Someone finally speaks his or her mind.
- Someone else bristles, holding an opposite viewpoint.
- The Group begins to face the facts and allows hidden conflicts to surface.
- Feels a little chaotic.

- We typically don't like chaos. Some groups go back to stage 1. Some keep the conflict going, thriving on the chaos.
- Good Dialogue processes can move a group out of this stage.

Discarding and redefining

- If the group addresses its conflict by each group member willingly risking their own certainty about the "facts," members are flexible enough to generate dialogue.
- Christian discernment would call this "Shedding" to the point of "Detachment"
- This is an uncomfortable place to be. Can foster silence while members deconstruct what they thought they knew for sure.

Resolution and Collective Learning

- If people keep talking, belief systems begin to connect into a new belief that is a function of the original ones, pieces of the old, but new.
- The group begins to think collectively rather than individually.
- A new view emerges that is big enough to hold the inherent conflicts and to deliver a consensus (if warranted) that works for everyone.

Closure

- We can't stay in the flexibility of dialogue all the time. It is for a season of growth and community.
- Most days, we need certainty and strong beliefs – otherwise we question everything all the time.
- Dialogue ends a conversation on a topic in a different place than where you started, and so people are changed, but no person can stay in the flexible stage 24/7.

Going Slow to Go Fast

- Dialogue and Discernment are twins in that they both ask of us that we slow down, look outside our boxes, and begin to think differently in a group.
- We check for errors. We look to the scripture, tradition, community norms. We ask of our character – what does this mean for a follower of Jesus? What does this mean for my neighbor – the one with whom I am speaking and the ones for whom this issue is a personal one?
- We generally have a bias to action – we want to get on with it. What does that mean for Christians seeking God's will? What does that mean about our hurried

business meetings? What can we do as a community to slow down? Does slowing down frustrate you? Why/why not?

Content and Process

- Do you ever find yourself in meetings where the “what” is clear – the content that’s important is well stated – but the “how” – the process to accomplish the content - is left by the wayside?
- Dialogue is a process, and the content *should be* irrelevant. If we learn to dialogue well, any content can be tackled.

Positive Intent

- Assuming positive intent is a first step in recognizing that those who harm us verbally likely did not intend to do so.
- We often jump to conclusions too often that folks are trying to create tension or hurt our feelings. By stepping back to reflect, we should realize that even we can hurt feelings without intending to.
- When have you assumed negative intent and come to find out you were wrong?
- It’s probably a 50/50 chance of knowing intent correctly – often we only know their behavior and our own reaction to it.

Comfort Zone Model

- ✓ What is the purpose of your mind?
- ✓ A survival machine [Think: Caveman]
- ✓ We go back to safe, comfortable things naturally
- ✓ What’s our automatic response, then, to discomfort – or being removed from the comfort zone?
- ✓ Fight or Flight, right?
- ✓ Several thousand years ago, these might have been more literal more of the time. But now, what are the kinds of fighting and flighting we do? What defensive mechanisms do we have? Take a moment to write some down, then we’ll share.

[Write on board: Fight / Flight and list]

How do we know when we’re in danger? Fight or flight is an auto-response. We usually don’t realize it’s happening till it’s over. Let’s do an exercise. In a minute, starting with Elizabeth, we’ll have each of you individually stand up to sing the first verse of the Star-Spangled Banner. This will help you reach outside the comfort zone and share with others your ability to move past comfort and do something different.

OK – you don't really have to sing. I just wanted you to think a minute about how that made you feel – physically and mentally – to be put on the spot like that. Did you feel nervous, have sweaty palms, flushed face?

You will feel that same response when someone challenges a near and dear belief. Pay attention to how your own body reacts – this is your physical cue. If you watch for it, you can learn to feel the discomfort without reacting the way you usually do—and see if through this you might learn something new. Learning always requires us to step outside our comfort zone.

If we're successful in dialogue we will emerge different, at least somewhat changed by the experience. You'll inevitably be moved to the edge of your comfort zone. If you aren't uncomfortable, at least some of the time, you are not digging deeply enough.

[Break]

Group Escape Strategies

- Groups have some predictable strategies to get out of tough conversations when they reach the edge of their comfort zones. We'll talk about a few of these.
- My job as I facilitate the dialogue process will be to help you stay alert, but ultimately you as a group must monitor yourselves to avoid ending up jumping out the escape hatch in these dialogues.

Flight

- What does flight look like in a meeting?
- ✓ Ignoring
- ✓ Looking out a window
- ✓ Zoning out

Fight

- What does fighting look like?
- ✓ Heated inquiry
- ✓ Uproar
- ✓ Sarcasm
- ✓ Roles of winners and losers

Pairing

- When you have a larger group and two people lean over together to whisper, what does that do to the larger group?

- Are there now two groups?
- Are others rolling their eyes or shooting a “look” at the pair?
- Decreasing complexity through pairing is an escape tactic.

Dependency

- What does dependency look like?
- ✓ Dialogue is hard, and thus we often turn somewhere for help, but that can turn into dependency.
- ✓ How does the tone of a meeting change if the pastor walks in? Do we look to him/her for the “right answer”?
- ✓ IF one person dominates a discussion and emerges as a leader speaking for the group, that isn’t dialogue – everyone in the group must contribute equally.

Individual Escape Strategies

- Listen to your own defense mechanisms
- Learn to recognize these escape strategies in your own head.
- Ideally, you’ll all monitor yourselves, but don’t be embarrassed if someone points out that you are doing one of these. This is part of the group monitoring itself. And yes, it’s natural – dialoguing well is not natural. It requires a little more work.

Tenacity

- What’s this picture remind you of?
- What does it mean when we are “Digging in our heels”?
- We are all guilty of tightening our grip on our beliefs or positions for no other reason than someone is trying to change our minds.
- Or – just admitting we’re wrong can bring this on.
- Watch out for this one – if you find yourself repeating the same point more than three times, even paraphrased, ask yourself if you are engaging in tenacity.

Factumptions

- Just the facts, right? What is a fact? Give me some examples.
- Sometimes we are basing opinions on what we think are “facts” when actually they are also opinions.
- Dialogue asks us to question these fact assumptions.

- Real creativity means challenging “common knowledge” like “you can’t do x” or “everyone knows that x won’t work or isn’t possible.”

Reductionism

- We use imaginary lines and categories to simplify our world into manageable chunks.
- What are some categories with arbitrary lines in our world? (Think national borders, etc.)
- For the duration of dialogue, we must recognize the blurriness of these lines so that we can see what we miss when we pretend these lines are distinct.

Distancing

- A special form of reductionism is one that draws a line between me and “the problem,” which is with you – over there.
- We gripe about things like “the government” all the time. But aren’t we part of it?
- Whenever we see problems that seem too big to solve alone, we distance ourselves from it. To admit our complicity in the system that caused the problem requires action on our part, which can be uncomfortable.
- What things have you thought “aren’t your problem” and then came to realize truly are?

Identifying Assumptions

- What is the primary cause of miscommunication?
- Assuming you understand when you don’t.
- Dialogue is the art of finding assumptions that are deeply embedded in our thinking.
- Assumptions are often hidden – what are some ways they manifest?
- ✓ Tone and manner
- ✓ We don’t regularly say what we mean
- It’s a wonderful investment of your time to think about your assumptions. Many issues begin with faulty assumptions.

Inference about others

- We operate with a set of beliefs that helps us choose how to interpret what we see and hear and what actions we should take. BUT oftentimes our beliefs are based on insufficient data.

- We take a sample of someone’s behavior and make long-term judgements about how that person thinks. This becomes a “fact” in our head.
- Example: you find yourself waiting for someone to show up for a meeting at a scheduled time. They come in leisurely and plop down 15 minutes late. What thoughts go through your head?
- What are some other things we assume about others?
- ✓ Corrected my grammar – must think I’m stupid
- ✓ Missed a deadline; he is unreliable
- ✓ Did not give me the information; she is withholding from me

Common Assumptions

- “I understand the problem.” [Truth: “I only understand a piece of the problem.”]
- “We need to find the solution.” [Truth: “WE need to understand the problem.”]
- “They can’t take or don’t want the truth. [Truth: Everyone (including me) usually believes they already know the truth.”]

[Break]

Wants / Don’t Wants

- What do you hope discerning dialogue might accomplish?
- What behaviors/attitudes/actions would you change about how dialogue is typically done in church?
- What bad habits do you have that you’d like to overcome as we work through a discerning dialogue process?

Choosing the “Rules” for Discerning Dialogue

- To covenant together is to come up with promises to one another in this process.
- We choose “rules” as a promise to one another that we are going to do our very best to respect each other and the process.
- Also, it’s just helpful to have a list of these rules (or promises) handy as we try to engage in dialogue – we otherwise might have a hard time remembering all this stuff.
- Take a few minutes to yourself and write down some promises and/or rules you would include in a covenant with those here. You know yourself, and you know many in this group (and church folk generally). What needs to be promised?

Covenantal Discerning Dialogue Group

- Note taker: who's my writer? Can you write these for us so we can make this into a written covenant for us all to sign at our next meeting?
- Give me your top picks for dialogue rules – and some background as to why, if you'd like.
- How will keeping any given rule change group interaction?
- What promises to God are we making in this covenant?

Appendix C

Reading List*Required*

Sider, Ronald J. *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 2010. ISBN: 978-084994530-4

Ronald Sider, an evangelical writer and professor of theology at Eastern University, founded and served as the president of Evangelicals for Social Action. This book, originally published in 1978, and updated for the twenty-first century, aims to convince a First World believer that the way in which they live their lives has a deep impact on the livelihood of others. “Every day, 30,000 children die of starvation and preventable diseases, and 1.2 billion people live in relentless, unrelieved poverty worldwide. Why is there still so much poverty? Conservatives blame sinful individual choices and laziness. Liberals condemn economic and social structures. Who is right? Who is wrong? Both, according to Sider, who explains poverty’s complex causes in this new edition and offers concrete, practical proposals for change.”¹²⁴

Schneider, John R. *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007. ISBN: 978-080283363-1

John Schneider is a professor of religion and theology at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Believing that one’s healthy desire to enjoy affluence can be a benefit to everyone, Schneider asks how Christians can live faithfully in a material world, eschewing guilt and debating the proper Christian attitude toward money. Schneider posits that Scripture provides support for the responsible possession of wealth. “By comparing classic Christian teaching on wealth with the realities of our modern economic world, Schneider challenges the common presumption that material affluence is inherently bad. Through insightful engagement with the biblical text Schneider overturns some of the most cherished and unquestioned assumptions of influential Christian writers (particularly Ronald Sider) on modern capitalist affluence.”¹²⁵

Suggested for Further Study

Bloomberg, Craig L. *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*. Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999.

Clawson, Julie. *Everyday Justice: The Global Impact of our Daily Choices*. Dowers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-8308-3628-4

¹²⁴ Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, back cover.

¹²⁵ John Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, back cover.

Groody, Daniel G. *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008. ISBN: 978-1-57075-696-2

Appendix D

Reflection Questions for Reflection Paper

Write a 1-3 page reflection paper about the dialogue and discernment process, reflecting on the process itself as well as the content of the ethical issue. Below are questions that may help guide your writing. Feel free to use these, or expand beyond them, to explain how you felt, how well the process worked, and whether you would continue to use some or all of these tools in future conversations.

1. Which of my points of view changed and how did changing my point of view help me to be a better dialogue participant?
2. What are you clearer about now concerning the issue than you were when you walked through the door?
3. What dialogue or discernment process(es) worked best for you in these sessions?
4. How did you find the process(es) helpful enough to consider using them in future dialogues concerning tough issues?

Appendix E

Likert Scale Survey for Each Dialogue Session

For each of the statements below, circle the response that best characterizes how you feel about the question, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. The group dialogued well about this particular issue.	1	2	3	4
2. I became “indifferent” in the discerning process before dialogue began, leading to more openness to others’ opinions.	1	2	3	4
3. I could be honest in the group without repercussion.	1	2	3	4
4. I felt put-down or belittled as the topic was discussed.	1	2	3	4
5. I was considered an equal while discussing the topic.	1	2	3	4
6. I have learned more about this issue by dialoguing with others.	1	2	3	4
7. I contributed to the group’s unity even if there were disagreements in theological approach, ethical decisions, or worldview.	1	2	3	4

Appendix F

Group Handout for Dialogue Retreat***Learning to Dialogue and Discern: Conversations that Matter in the Local Church*****Doctor of Ministry Project****Libby Grammer**

Thank you for your interest in joining this discerning dialogue group for purposes of research in my Doctor of Ministry project!

Project Requirements:

- Be Lay Leader and regular attender at River Road Church, Baptist
- Be willing to open yourself to tough conversations and learn some new skills in discernment and dialogue
- Be available to meet 4 times:
 - o One Saturday learning retreat, for about 4-5 hours, food provided;
 - o 3 dialogue meetings of 90 minutes each; and
 - o One final reflection conversation (no more than one hour)
- Be willing to read to prepare to dialogue on a topic (two books required)
 - o Sider, Ronald J. *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 2010. ISBN: 978-084994530-4
 - o Schneider, John R. *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007. ISBN: 978-080283363-1
- Be willing to reflect through survey answers and a reflection paper
 - o Brief survey provided after each dialogue session
 - o One final reflection paper and conversation (after the 3 dialogue meetings)
- Be willing to be in a study
 - o Sign the informed consent to be a part of this research project
 - o Approve audio recording of our gatherings
 - o Choose whether to be quoted anonymously (pseudonym) or by first name
- Be willing to share what you've learned
 - o As part of the process of learning some new dialogue and discernment skills, we want to find ways to share these new skills with the congregation – at least once I will need to report (with you, if you so desire) to the church, and each of you can take and use these skills in the ministries where you serve – from board meetings to Sunday School to mission work and beyond.

Timing:

I will need a commitment from the requisite ranges of groups of at least 5-10 participants before we can officially begin, so there may be some wait time if I need to find further participants.

Appendix G

Group Covenant

I covenant to join this small group of lay leaders at River Road Church, Baptist to learn new processes of dialogue and Christian discernment, and to put those skills to use through discerning dialogue with those in this group, as we seek to stay open to God's will through a willingness to experience change and growth. I make the following promises to my fellow group members:

1. I will keep our dialogue process confidential, understanding that each one of us is in a new process of seeking to discuss tough issues and may struggle and be vulnerable. I will not share outside of this group any personal information shared by another member of the group. Though I hope to use these new skills if the process proves useful, I will not break confidences to do so.
2. I will not, in the process of challenge or disagreement, personally attack any member of this group. I will respect those in this group as equals, and I will do my best to build up and not tear down as we seek to engage in productive and meaningful dialogue. I will not engage in name-calling or stereotyping.
3. I will assume positive intentions of the members of this discerning dialogue group and be willing to ask for clarification when my feelings are hurt or offer an apology when I hurt others' feelings.
4. I will share the floor and not dominate the conversation. I will listen as much as, or more than, I talk.
5. I will not engage in side-bar conversations (no pairing).
6. I will seek to have honest conversation – genuine and authentic – with a willingness to both give and receive feedback as we attempt this new and different process of dialogue.
7. I will strive to create an atmosphere of mutual trust (trustworthiness and a willingness to trust others).
8. I will cultivate humility by noting that I might be wrong, but that my thoughts are still worthwhile to be shared.
9. I will practice the spiritual discipline of “detachment,” seeking to lay aside my ego, my preconceived notions, my false assumptions, my biases, and my predetermined conclusions so that we can openly consider the matter. I will be honest when I am having trouble with detachment.
10. I will strive to have discussion that will reflect the love of God and love of neighbor.

Lastly, I promise to my fellow members that our time here will be considered an experiment in dialogue and a learning process – about an issue and about the discerning dialogue process, and I will not allow this work to adversely interfere with our ongoing

work together as lay leaders of this church. Instead, I will seek to enhance relationships through this experience, rather than cut them off.

Signed,

Signature

Date

Printed Name

Appendix H



JAMES AND CAROLYN MCAFEE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Informed Consent

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

Investigators

Principal Investigator:

Libby M. Grammer
2012 Ridge Stone Ct.
Richmond, VA 23238
(423) 240-4096

Faculty Advisor:

Dr. David P. Gushee
Mercer University
McAfee School of Theology
3001 Mercer University Drive
Atlanta, Georgia 30341
(678) 547-6457

Purpose of the Research

This research study is designed to create a safe space for dialogue about a politically polarized ethical/moral issue for a group of lay leaders at River Road Church, Baptist. The data from this research will be used for the creation of a covenantal dialogue and discernment model for ethics that can be used by church leaders to engage congregations in better conversations about politicized ethical issues.

This research study is being conducted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Ministry degree by the principal investigator.

Procedures

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to spend a half day at a retreat learning the process of discerning dialogue. You will then be asked to read two relevant books to prepare to dialogue about a politicized moral issue. Finally, you will be

asked to participate in three dialogue sessions about this issue, each session lasting 90 minutes. After these sessions, you will answer simple survey questions, and at the end of all three sessions, you will be asked to write a reflection paper about the process and the issue at hand. Your participation will take approximately ten to twelve hours (plus individual reading time) over a four- to six-week period.

During this process, the dialogue sessions will be audio recorded. The principal investigator will be facilitating dialogue, but not directly participating in it. Observations will be written down by the principal investigator and will be recorded for study.

Potential Risks or Discomforts

There are no foreseeable risks associated with this process. Conversations about controversial topics can come with strong feelings, though, and while we will work to mitigate these with tools from the discerning dialogue process, we cannot guarantee that the dialogue process will be a comfortable experience every time. As with any study relating to one's personal feelings about tough topics, you might possibly experience occasional discomfort through vulnerability, challenges to your viewpoints, or even a change of heart about an issue. While you are encouraged to be open and honest with your opinions and feelings, as part of the dialogue process, there is always room to simply listen and wait to share these at another time. You may also discontinue participation, either temporarily or permanently, at any time.

Potential Benefits of the Research

As a result of participating in this study, you can expect to:

1. Learn techniques and processes for successful dialogue and discernment about tough, politicized issues in a congregational setting.
2. Learn how to provide space for small group members to feel comfortable and safe as they discuss tough, politicized ethical issues.
3. Reflect on a tough, politicized ethical issue deeply, as well as the process of group discernment.

Churches with differing political opinions among members are often remaining silent on major issues of moral importance due to our divisive political culture, which leaves no room for discerning a Christian response, or God's will, in a given issue. This same silence can lead to division within the church as well, as congregants avoid these hard topics, or if ever broached, rely on poor dialogue and end up in arguments or heated discussions, splintering the Body of Christ. Without learning to dialogue about these issues in way that builds community through careful discerning dialogue rather than dividing it through culture-based arguments, Christian communities like River Road Church will have no relevance in the wider discussion on these issues, and may leave the church divided and without a strong moral voice to lend to a world in need of religious moral guidance. This project seeks to end the communal silence on moral issues and move into discerning dialogue in a community-building setting.

This group will act as a laboratory in ethical dialogue, attempting to use the best dialogue and Christian discernment processes to better hear and speak to one another about tough moral issues. This first step of group dialogue process together will be toward the longer-term and bigger-picture goal of writing a book (or series of articles, or both) on how ethical conversations can be had productively in church group settings (and how they might be made better if this kind of group is implemented).

Confidentiality and Data Storage

Because of the nature of this project as a community conversation, anonymity and confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed; it is hoped that at least your participation in this project will be well-known so that the congregation can look to you for ongoing support in dialogue and discernment in your area a leadership. However, you will be offered the opportunity to have me use your full name, your first name only, or a pseudonym in the published research. Should you change your mind on a public connection to the study, you are free to do so by contacting me any time before the research is published.

The dialogue sessions will be audio recorded. By signing this document, you give the principal investigator permission to audio record these dialogue sessions. Audio recordings may be transcribed by either the principal investigator or a paid transcriber. All transcribed materials will be stored in a password-protected computer in the principal investigator's office. All digital audio files will be saved in a password-protected computer in the principal investigator's office, with the principal investigator having sole access to these files. Aside from a possible paid transcriber (from outside the church community), the principal investigator will have sole access to this information.

All surveys and written reflection papers will be scanned in to the principal investigator's computer (or saved, if sent digitally) and saved to the password-protected machine. Any paper originals will be shredded.

Per university requirements, all materials discussed above will be stored at Mercer University for three years after completion of the study. Following the fulfillment of this time period, all audio and written materials will be destroyed and/or permanently deleted.

Participation and Withdrawal

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. As a participant, you may refuse to participate at any time. To withdraw from the study please contact Libby Grammer at (423) 240-4096.

Questions about the Research

If you have any questions about the research, please speak with Libby Grammer at (423) 240-4096 or Dr. David Gushee at (678) 547-6457.

Audio Recording

By participating in this study, you are permitting the principal investigator to audio record any and all sessions in which you are involved.

This project has been reviewed and approved by Mercer University's IRB. If you believe there is any infringement upon your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Chair, at (478) 301-4101.

You have been given the opportunity to ask questions and these have been answered to your satisfaction. Your signature below indicates your voluntary agreement to participate in this research study.

Research Participant Name (Print)

Libby M. Grammer, Principal Investigator**Name of Person Obtaining Consent (Print)**

Research Participant Signature

Person Obtaining Consent Signature

Date

Date

Appendix I

Mercer University IRB Approval



*Institutional Review Board
For Research Involving Human Subjects*

Monday, April 9, 2018

Ms. Libby Mae Grammer
3001 Mercer University Drive,
James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology
Atlanta, GA 30341

RE: Learning to Dialogue and Discern: Conversation the Matter in the Local Church (H1804091)

Dear Ms. Grammer:

On behalf of Mercer University's Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research, your application submitted on 02-Apr-2018 for the above referenced protocol was reviewed in accordance with Federal Regulations [21 CFR 56.110\(b\)](#) and [45 CFR 46.110\(b\)](#) (for expedited review) and was approved under category(ies) 06, 07 per 63 FR 60364.

Your application was approved for one year of study on 09-Apr-2018. The protocol expires on 08-Apr-2019. If the study continues beyond one year, it must be re-evaluated by the IRB Committee.

Item(s) Approved:

New student application for a case study using small group dialogues and retreat meetings to create a way of having a productive dialogue within church leadership that is theologically rich, intellectually serious, genuinely illuminating about moral issues, and that leaves the community intact.

NOTE: You **MUST** report to the committee when the protocol is initiated. Report to the Committee immediately any changes in the protocol or consent form and **ALL** accidents, injuries, and serious or unexpected adverse events that occur to your subjects as a result of this study.

We at the IRB and the Office of Research Compliance are dedicated to providing the best service to our research community. As one of our investigators, we value your feedback and ask that you please take a moment to complete our [Satisfaction Survey](#) and help us to improve the quality of our service.

It has been a pleasure working with you and we wish you much success with your project! If you need any further assistance, please feel free to contact our office.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Ava Chambliss-Richardson".

Ava Chambliss-Richardson, Ph.D., CIP, CIM.
Associate Director of Human Research Protection Programs (HRPP)
Member
Institutional Review Board

"Mercer University has adopted and agrees to conduct its clinical research studies in accordance with the International Conference on Harmonization's (ICH) Guidelines for Good Clinical Practice."

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