

RESTORATIVE CONVERSATIONS

a resource for community repair and nurture

Restorative conversations create a *“space for all participants to speak their truth respectfully to one another on an equal basis and to seek a deeper understanding of themselves and others”* (from *Heart of Hope* by Carolyn Boyse-Watson and Kay Pranis). While they are particularly helpful for congregations that have recently experienced conflict, trauma, or disruption, they can also be useful for congregations that want to celebrate where they have been, where they are now, and where they might go in the future. The information below was gleaned from a Lombard Mennonite Peace Center workshop on restorative conversations. It is shared in order to introduce the practice to those who might find it helpful in their ministry settings.

Restorative conversations are a practical application of insights arising from...

- ...biblical witness including the Hebrew notion of “Shalom” and the Christian image of the “Body of Christ.”
- ...indigenous wisdom such as the use of “circles” in Navajo justice practices.
- ...peacemaking traditions that focus on nonviolent solutions to conflict.
- ...restorative justice concepts that highlight respect, responsibility, and relationship.
- ...relational psychology that seeks to balance autonomy and belonging.
- ...the power of storytelling to create a sense of agency, open doors for understanding, and provide a path for agreement (e.g. Acts 11:1-18).

A key scriptural foundation for restorative conversations is Colossians 3:12-17, which provides the prerequisites for faithful action including...

- ...remember your identity and calling
- ...clothe yourselves with patience and compassion
- ...bear with one another
- ...forgive one another
- ...let God’s peace rule and guide
- ...remember you are one body
- ...focus on gratitude
- ...let the Word dwell in you
- ...admonish one another
- ...work together to the glory of God

Restorative conversations are intended to provide a setting...

- ...in which people have agency to speak their own story and hear the stories of others.
- ...to repair relationships that have become frayed/broken due to loss, harm, conflict, or disruption.
- ...where community is built and supported through the development of collective consciousness.

...from which to move in new directions.

Restorative conversations can be “responsive” following an occasion of harm, conflict, or disruption. They can also be “proactive” affirming the present and providing opportunity for new growth.

The key elements of a restorative “circle” conversation include...

...the space – seating in a circle without tables.

...the centerpiece – a shared focal point that breaks intense eye contact.

...the keeper – a participant attentive to maintain the process. In cases of high intensity, the keeper might be from outside the community.

...the talking piece – an object that is passed among participants ensuring opportunity to speak.

...time – sufficient time (2 – 3 hours) to complete the process

...the circle process

- *opening

- *guidelines and confidentiality

- *explaining the centerpiece and talking piece

- *conversation rounds (3 – 4)

- *agreements

- *closing

A brief introductory video featuring Kay Pranis can be found at...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIvxzx1wHtU>

A closer look at process:

- *Opening – The intent of the opening is to set a “sacred space.” It can include a devotional, a reading, poetry, physical movement (e.g. spectrum exercise), and/or silence.

- *Conversation Rounds – Provide opportunity to introduce oneself, celebrate, share impact/harm (for “responsive” conversations), accept responsibility, express hopes. Guiding questions for each round are important.

- *Closing – Similar to the “opening,” the closing ceremony affirms and celebrates the community as it moves forward in its life together.

Types of restorative conversations (depending on situation and number of participants)

- *The Peace/Restorative Circle – to build collective consciousness, deepen understanding, build consensus regarding past experience, bring closure (25 or less persons)

- *The Fishbowl – to build collective consciousness, deepen understanding, clarify misunderstanding, deepen insight (40 or more persons)

- *The World Café – to explore new ideas, understand different perspectives, discuss future, broaden understanding (tables of 4 persons, unlimited)

*Small Group Listening – to understand issues in detail, focus on/document issues and interests, learn from the past while moving forward, provide agency and voice (12 persons)

*Sacred Stories Group – to deepen acquaintance, focus on one’s life journey, affirm personal stories, usually one person’s story per group gathering (10-15 persons meeting regularly)

Each of the Restorative Conversations mentioned above will employ different setting and process details.

Some Observations:

*Restorative conversations provide an opportunity to “restart” congregational process that has become “stuck” because of a negative event or disruption.

*Restorative conversations are generally not intended to conduct “business,” but rather to restore and nurture community health, which is a prerequisite for effective functioning.

*In the case of an experience of harm or conflict, restorative conversations provide opportunity to openly acknowledge what happened and move past it.

*In the case of a generally healthy congregational system, regular restorative conversations can be occasions for celebrating the past and present while staying open to the future.

*The “opening” and “guiding questions” can set the tone and direction of particular conversations.

For more information regarding the use of restorative conversations contact the Congregational Issues Commission or visit the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center website...

<https://www.lmpeacecenter.org/> .