

*Just*Faith

*Purpose. From a
new perspective.*

JustFaith Dialogue and Active Listening Guidebook

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Dialogue and Compassionate Presence: The Essence of the Journey

Maintaining respectful dialogue and compassionate listening is essential to the JustFaith process. During all gatherings, the co-facilitator’s role is to model and nurture these Christ-like modes of practicing community. It is the co-facilitator’s prayerful judgment, intuitive sense, and Spirit-led discernment that help to create a safe space for dialogue.

Our culture places a high value on free and open discussion and urges us to get our ideas across, make a point, add our “two cents,” and endeavor to persuade. In our fast-paced marketplace of ideas and opinions, we are familiar with debate, but are not often shown examples of respectful dialogue. Often, we are comfortable with stating our opinions but are not accomplished listeners.

The power of sacred presence is a humbling force that aligns participants with one another and with all of God’s people. In this way, every act becomes a prayer, and silence speaks more profoundly than words. These steps create space within us to hold the needs of the world, to let them disturb our self-preoccupation, and, ultimately, to transform our lives as to usher in the Reign of God’s justice.

When deciding what to do in times of conflict or disagreement, the best intervention is one based on respect and care for the individual participant and the group. Model Jesus’ responses from the parables. Respond to a question by offering another question to reveal underlying assumptions. Pause to pray before intervening, asking for guidance from the Holy Spirit. Invite the group to make a suggestion; some participants will have had other group process experiences and may bring a wealth of knowledge to share.

Finally, if consultation is needed, do not hesitate to call the JustFaith Ministries program director. JustFaith staff members have extensive experience with leading JustFaith groups, as well as numerous years of related group process and leadership experiences.



Dialogue as an End in Itself

“Even if a unity of faith is not possible, a unity of love is.”

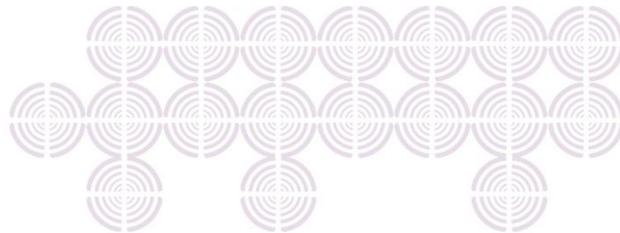
Hans Urs von Balthasar

Dialogue over Discussion

JustFaith is a contemplative process in which participants share personal insights and struggles in order to understand more clearly God’s presence in the world and God’s call in their lives. While participants may be accustomed to theoretical discussion or debate, they may have limited experience with dialogue. The following chart offers some distinctions between discussion and dialogue*:

Discussion	Dialogue
The individual’s goal is often to bring others to his or her way of thinking.	The group’s goal is to explore and expand understanding of a topic and incorporate varied perspectives.
Individuals present and defend different views.	The focus is on listening to one another, putting aside one’s own views in order to fully listen to others.
There is a search for the best view to support a decision or action.	There is a free-flowing exploration of the complexities of an issue.
There is a back-and-forth discussion of differing and often opposing views.	People are not primarily in opposition, but looking for deeper insight and clarity.
Controversial topics often become sources of tension.	Controversial topics become discussible because participants seek to increase their understanding and because they care about each other.
There is a constant flow of conversation with someone always speaking.	The pace of the conversation varies with times of silence for thinking and absorbing what has been said.

*Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 239–43.



Creating Space for Dialogue

Co-facilitators will find that a hospitable space and a prayerful tone will welcome respectful dialogue among participants. Follow these simple guidelines in preparation for each session:

- Be prepared for each session. Arrive 10-15 minutes ahead.
- Set up the space to create a prayerful environment conducive to dialogue.
- Welcome everyone warmly.
- Invoke the Holy Spirit. Avoid rushing the opening prayer.
- Keep the prayer space uncluttered.
- Model a listening presence for the group.
- Gently invite people to share; contributions should be voluntary and unpressured.
- If the dialogue devolves into debate and tension, call for a full minute of silence.
- Always be sure prayer is the concluding element of every gathering.

Active Listening

“As they conversed and debated, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him. He asked them, ‘What are you discussing as you walk along?’”

Luke 24:15–17

Moving from Hearing to Listening

How often have you said to someone, “I hear what you are saying?” Usually, we say this when we want to convey that information has been received. The JustFaith program, however, invites participants and co-facilitators to move from *hearing* what people are saying to truly *listening* with deeper understanding. The practice of active listening will be introduced to the group during the Opening Retreat; this model is a way to be fully present to a person and to hear the inspiration – the Spirit speaking in each voice – whispering between their words. The grace of deep listening is a mutually life-giving practice for all JustFaith participants to embrace and embody.

The receptive presence of JustFaith co-facilitators will set the tone for open and heartfelt dialogue. A posture of listening generates deeper and broader understanding and is always more fruitful than debate. Committing as a group to pre-established dialogue tenets gives co-facilitators a point of reference if misunderstandings arise. The following axioms—universally accepted principles— may help to focus the group on dialogue and sacred listening:

- Listening to others is a form of prayer.
- Share your truth with kindness.
- Silence speaks volumes!
- Speak to build up rather than to tear down.
- Leave room for other voices.
- Try to understand rather than be understood.
- Dialogue is an end in itself.

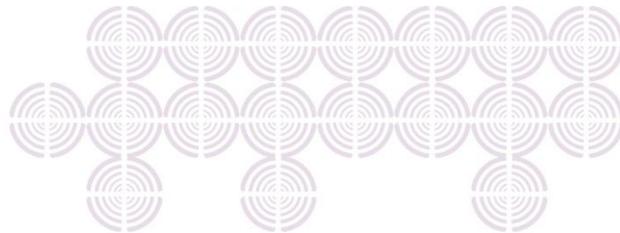


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- Whatever is shared from the heart deserves to be received with reverence.
 - We are each entrusted with some piece of truth.
 - There is nothing holy about blaming or shaming.
 - We are all responsible for our own feelings and what we do with them.
 - Everyone has something to teach us, especially those we are tempted to dismiss.
 - Ridicule and sarcasm are indications of a hard heart.
 - The harsher the truth, the more closely we must listen.
 - What we hear and see depends largely on what we are listening and looking for.

Commonly Used Facilitator Methods

A common concern for co-facilitators is involving all participants in dialogue. The diversity of group members usually means that some participants will be talkative and some participants will be quiet. The following suggestions are commonly-used methods that can help co-facilitators manage the dialogue. As a co-facilitation team, choose different methods to try throughout the process.

- Establish full participation as a group guideline; mention this as discussions are introduced each week, and repeat frequently, if necessary.
- Ask participants to respond to a question or issue by going around the circle, allowing each person to take a turn.
- Make a general observation to the group that only a few people are speaking and that you would like to make sure everyone will have a chance to share their thoughts.
- Invite someone specific to share his or her thoughts and opinion.
- Ask if everyone who desires has had an opportunity to participate in the discussion.
- Watch carefully for body language that might indicate someone would like to speak, then ask: “[Participant name], you look like you want to add something. Do you?”
- Use a "talking stick:" only the person holding the stick (or any designated item) may talk until they pass the stick to another participant. Participants are not allowed to pick up the “stick” a second time until everyone has had an opportunity to speak. If participants’ intentional listening needs encouragement, ask each person who takes talking stick to repeat what the previous speaker said; then, they are welcome to share. This can encourage people to focus more on actively listening than on the content of their perspective.
- Allow for a pause in the discussion for those who need to think through their thoughts before speaking.
- Ask each participant to take some time to write down their thoughts on an issue or question; then, invite each person share their notes.
- Ask group members what they need to more fully participate in the discussion.
- Affirm and acknowledge participants when feelings are expressed.



Additional In-Session Tools

Deepening Dialogue

Co-facilitators will receive dialogue questions for sessions within the facilitator documents. Often, more questions than can be answered are provided. Sometimes, it is more important for nourishing dialogue to continue than it is to accomplish everything planned for that session; at other times, it is necessary to focus the group on a particular question to build community or reach deeper revelation. Stay attentive to the group's needs; do not interrupt or cut short meaningful conversations.

Asking questions that extend or expand the discussion is also helpful. Stretch the margins of the conversation and compel participants to delve deeper into the heart of the human experience encountered in the materials. A handout included at the end of this document lists questions to deepen and enrich dialogue; you can bring these to every session to help guide the group process.

Inclusivity

Making space for all participants to share with ease requires attention to personal inclinations. Some participants will naturally feel comfortable sharing; others may need gentle encouragement. The following suggestions can help maintain a balance.

To encourage quiet voices, try these prompts:

- Invite participants to pause prayerfully, allowing quiet time for participants who need to think through their thoughts before dialogue begins.
- End dialogues with questions such as, "Is there anyone who has not spoken yet who would like to share?"
- Observe body language and notice when someone is ready to contribute; ask, "[Name], you look like you are ready to share."
- Gently invite quieter voices to share.
- Speak privately with a quiet individual before a session. Share that you value his or her contributions, and that the group would benefit from hearing more of his or her perspective.

If someone begins or tends to dominate the dialogue, try these responses:

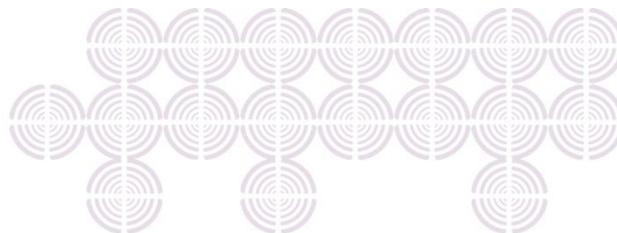
- "Thank you. Now we need to hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet."
- "Excuse me, [name]. Let's see if anyone wants to comment on your point."
- Say, "Our time is limited; we need to hear from everyone who wants to share."
- If someone is talking nonstop, gently interrupt with a comment like, "Let's remember our ground rule about making space for everyone to talk."
- Talk privately with the participant before a session. Ask questions about what he or she values in the program. Remind the participant that these sessions are an opportunity for everyone to share and he or she needs to leave more time for others to share so that they, too, may grow in new ways.



Interventions

Given differences in perspectives within a group, disagreements and conflicting views will inevitably occur. Held in the posture of active listening, the tension of opposing viewpoints can be holy ground. This sacred space involves some risk; engaged appropriately, conversation centers on positive disagreement rather than negative confrontation. Generally, there is no need to rush to ease the tension of the moment; however, if the conversation becomes heated and tension is sustained, an intervention is needed. Here are some suggestions:

- Remind participants that the goal of dialogue is not to create consensus, nor to win people over to a point of view, but to broaden the understanding of a topic.
- Ask participants who have opposing views to spend a few minutes stating *the other* person's perspective.
- Acknowledge that the views expressed seem very different; then ask the group what these views have in common.
- Broaden the discussion by asking for other views and perspectives on the topic.
- Go around the room and ask those who have been quiet to add other comments and perspectives.
- Take a break for ten minutes. When the group gathers again, ask a question that will help participants either refocus or move on.
- Allow quiet time for participants to think through the topic and issues.
- Ask participants to write out their thoughts. Then go around the room and ask participants to share their written comments.
- Observe that the group seems stuck, and ask the group for ways to move forward.
- Interject *appropriate* humor to break the tension.
- Table the issue for another time and move on to a different topic.



In-Session Questions to Enrich Dialogue

This page has been designed for co-facilitators to bring to every session. The following questions can be used at any point during a session to deepen dialogue and enhance sacred listening.

- Tell us more about . . .
- How would other groups, especially those who are poor, oppressed, or marginalized, respond to this issue or perspective?
- How did you develop your perspective on this topic?
- What beliefs and values shape your views on this topic?
- Has anyone had direct experience with this issue or topic?
- How does this affect you personally?
- How do you feel about that?
- How does God speak to you in this type of situation?
- Are there aspects of this issue that we are missing in our discussion?
- What positives/negatives would others see in this issue?
- What are the assumptions behind this perspective?
- What is the author trying to convey about the care of the poor?
- How does this author's opinion relate to the teaching of our faith tradition(s)?
- Does the author use Scripture to support his or her views?
- What other positions might be justified based upon gospel values?
- What perspectives did the author not discuss? How do these other perspectives relate to care of the poor?