

My UCC church's listening experiment with our evangelical neighbors

I hoped our shared faith would provide enough common ground. I was a bit naive.

by [Paul Hopkins](#) in the [August 2023](#) issue



(Illustration by Jing Jing Tsong)

As our last meeting of an inter-congregational experiment in dialogue was drawing to a close, I felt pleased. The atmosphere was warm and congenial. We'd talked about important subjects and about our most deeply held values in a way that seemed promising for further conversation. The experiment had been conceived as an exercise in listening between members of my very liberal congregation, First Congregational United Church of Christ in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and those of an evangelical congregation in the same town, and we had done just what we hoped.

Then came the written evaluations and several private follow-up conversations. The experiment was not as rosy as I had perceived it.

The idea for this experiment began when our pastor, Sue Joiner, asked after the turbulent 2020 election: "So where do we go from here?" Her question gave voice to my own long-standing concern about the tribalism in our country, which seemed to be tearing us apart. Maybe our congregation could start building some bridges toward people with different political views, but with whom we shared a common faith in Christ's message of love and community.

Finding dialogue partners wasn't easy. Putting out feelers yielded mostly crickets. We finally found a path forward when I invited my longtime friend, whom I will call Ted, to participate and to recruit people from his large suburban evangelical church. It turned out that having a relationship of trust already established was critical to building further rapport. That in itself was instructive: the gap had grown wide enough that it couldn't be breached with a simple invitation.

Eventually Ted and I, working together, recruited five people from each of our churches and set up four 90-minute meetings built around listening to one another. We also recruited Bill Miller, the author of a recently published book called *Listening Well*, to facilitate the meetings. Bill is a retired psychology professor and one of the founders of motivational interviewing, a technique used by substance abuse counselors and others to help people examine their own motivations and take action for bettering their lives.

My hope for these meetings was that we might not only gain a better understanding of each other's views but even foster more respectful relationships with each other. If we could do those two things, then perhaps we might be better equipped to continue to build more trusting and graceful relationships with others who held different views. I wondered if our shared faith might provide enough in common to bridge the gaps.

Sadly, my hopes proved a bit naive.

The 11 of us convened on a June evening: five evangelicals and five liberals, five women and five men, all White. We met at Bill's home church, St. Andrew Presbyterian, as neutral turf. As we gathered, we somewhat nervously drank lemonade and nibbled on nuts. It appeared people were chatting cautiously, almost as if we expected arguments to break out any moment. But everyone had their

church manners on.

In our first session, Bill set some ground rules and then had us practice listening, which eased the group's tension and fostered a more relaxed gathering. The next three meetings, though, were designed to take us into some deeper territory. We devoted a session each to talking about religious beliefs, deeply held values, and finally faith and politics.

Bill was convinced, from his experience, that developing better listening skills would serve the group well. He explained to the group that often—more often than we consciously realize—we are tempted in conversations to take control. This is especially true when our fears or anxieties rise to the surface. When another person is talking, we easily shift into thinking about what we are going to say next instead of attending to what the other person is saying. It takes discipline, he reminded us, to turn off that inner monologue and really pay attention. But it is worth it, because we can come to understand the perspective of the other person better and perhaps learn things that might surprise us. And we are more likely to find common ground.

At each session, he put us into pairs so we could practice listening. At certain points we would switch pairings so that we had the opportunity to talk to everyone from the other church. Even that first evening, I was surprised by my own guardedness and how I tried to avoid conflict by sticking to topics I considered safe. Other conversations I overheard were more relaxed and cheerful—or at least they seemed that way to me. As we returned to our places around the circle, I noticed how these simple exercises had broken through some of the initial tensions. People had made jokes and even shared something of themselves that felt a little vulnerable. The smiles looked warmer and more genuine. There had been genuine connection, and people expressed delight in being listened to.

At the next meeting we turned to the teachings of Jesus, and I found myself underscoring what I knew to be my own tribal identity: I focused on social justice concerns such as welcoming the stranger, healing the sick, and shunning wealth and power. Others followed a similar approach, taking the opportunity to offer their personal gospels. Only later did I wonder if I could have found a platform and a vocabulary with more commonality with my conversation partner.

She, on the other hand, talked of her concern for a family member who had not accepted Jesus as Savior and did not organize life around the evangelical beliefs and

values that she believed essential. I'm a counselor, and while I could feel the fear she felt for the eternal future of her loved one, I also found myself wondering whether there could be a way for us to talk about this fear and the beliefs that fostered it.

My son had died several years before, and indeed I was comforted by his explicit Christian faith. But my own confidence in God's grace has relieved me of the sort of fear she was feeling. Could we address both her fears and my reluctance to put so much focus on the centrality of proclaiming Jesus as Savior? And would it be possible for us, despite our differing beliefs, to find common ground for the implications our beliefs might have for our civil lives? It was difficult to picture how this complex conversation might take place.

At the outset of the experiment, we had all agreed that we did not intend to try to change one another's minds. Yet part of me wanted to broaden her understanding of God's love. Meanwhile, she seemed to want to convey to me the importance of evangelizing those who did not know Jesus in the way she did. Both of us, I think, may have longed to persuade the other to believe some things as we did, and I am sure that this same hidden agenda was present as we talked more specifically about values and politics.

I realized something I would never have admitted previously: that I am as drawn to evangelizing others as my evangelical siblings are. And in my own self-satisfied way, I'm convinced to my core of the truth of my message. But how do we expand our understanding of truth or become aware of our errors if we who have ears do not listen? I think a little humility and a healthy dose of doubt might serve us all well.

I was not surprised that, during debriefing, the evangelicals emphasized a religion of the heart while the other liberals and I emphasized a faith put into action. Despite our different emphases, there were lots of positive comments about the listening experience and about the personal connection we felt. Harmony seemed to be prevailing, and at the next meeting, when we discussed deeply held values, one man from the evangelical church noted that he was "bumfuzzled by the lack of disagreement." If our political disagreements weren't about fundamental values, we later wondered, what were they about?

Others, however, pointed to our ground rules and what we'd learned about listening as making the difference. "If we had just thrown ten people together in a room

without preparation,” a man from the liberal church said, “it would have been a nightmare.”

In the last meeting, we finally addressed political issues. We all knew that real disagreements were likely to emerge in these listening sessions, and Bill warned us to avoid questions that weren't open and honest: instead of questions that begin with “How can you possibly” or “Don't you see” or “Don't you even care about,” an open and honest question might be, “How did you come to believe that?” or “What is the most important part of that issue for you?” Speakers were encouraged to describe their beliefs rather than defend them. Bill especially encouraged us to pause often in our speaking and listening to absorb what we were hearing and to help us go deeper if we could.

As I listened to my conversation partner talk about her commitment to saving unborn life, I found my judgment bubbling up. I stayed in a listening position, but I wonder if I could have done a better job asking her questions without conveying judgment. One member of the evangelical congregation mentioned later that he found his partner's views of economics quite naive.

Still, we ended the four sessions in a positive, even joyful spirit. Our experiment seemed to be a success.

Bill and I were both experienced with group dynamics, and we should have known that it is hard, sometimes impossible, for people to express their feelings of hurt, frustration, and disappointment in groups when the prevailing attitude is positive. I wish we had noticed the small signs that all was not entirely well—signs that began to appear as early as the second meeting.

In the written feedback, some women in the group reported feeling condescended to. Others shared that they felt judged, even as our ground rules forbade partners from expressing judgment. On one of the feedback forms, one person had written, “There are many people and congregations who consider themselves to be Christians and yet hold beliefs and engage in practices that are contrary to God's word and Jesus' teachings.” I suspect we each had this opinion about the other: my Christianity is the real Christianity, and theirs is less legitimate.

In a later interview with one of the participants, the picture became even clearer. A woman from the liberal church said that she had felt “put on the spot” by the pointed questions her partner asked. Some wondered if maybe we would have made

more progress if we had spent more time with just a few issues instead of trying to cover all of religion, politics, and values in just four sessions. Bill and I discussed whether there might have been a way to monitor the pairings more closely, so that we could have seen where things were going awry. We would have liked to make the large group sessions more open to the expression of disappointed or frustrated reactions. I wondered whether I may even have shied away from that to avoid conflict. I was clear from the beginning that we would not all end up believing the same things, and changing people's minds was not the goal.

As we reflected on our seeming intractability, however, one of the participants from my church said she realized that "we are not getting out of this anytime soon." Maybe we had laid a foundation, and four meetings was just not enough to build the trust that would lead to mutual understanding.

One man from the liberal church said, "Silence has become the default position for too many of us." One of my goals in this endeavor had been to attempt to push beyond the silence that pervades the divide. I am still determined to find a way both to listen well and to "speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15), as Paul puts it. People must find ways to move past avoidance.

Respectful and honest conversation is one fundamental way we love one another. How can we have a healthy democracy without careful listening? How can we be a healthy body of Christ without acknowledging our differences? And even more immediately, how might we engage with one another—when we seem to live in different realities—without trying to represent our tribe instead of just being ourselves, questions and ambivalence included?

Since our time together, members of the two churches have maintained some connections. One member of the other church reached out to me to ask about something he saw posted on our church's website, noting that he was continuing to practice listening well. He and I met for coffee and talked about that, as well as wondering together how we might have, or might still, go farther in our conversations about differences. One participant helped a person from the other church get a new job. Several said that they were now noticing how well they listened to others in their lives. Another sent an email to the group recommending a new book about "coexisting with people who drive you nuts." One of the participants said he knows he still talks too much, but he is practicing listening more.

When our pastor raised the question that launched these conversations—“Where do we go from here?”—I don’t know whether she was harking back to Martin Luther King Jr.’s book by that name, written near the end of his life. It was a time of similar divisions 50 years ago, and King brought to the question a stark recognition of the brokenness of the world as well as a profound sense of hope. He answers his own question by embracing the necessity of redemptive relationships.

Perhaps, rooted in a better understanding of others, fragile conversations could begin to grow. Might our small band take the conversations beyond listening and into actually disagreeing agreeably, or even occasionally disagreeably but with forgiveness? Might we learn something new from each other that deepens our communion while exercising grace? Maybe we could even agree that some things that tear us apart are indeed sin. Even more, might we find a way to affirm our common values, recognizing that there are many different but still faithful ways of living out those values in community?