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"We Need To Talk!" Restoring the Practice of Congregational Conversation

JAMES L. ALDRICH, MICHAEL J. BOWLING, M. JOE BOWLING, AND C. CHRISTOPHER SMITH

"[T]he kingdom of God is not in the wisdom of the world, nor in eloquence, but in the faith of the cross and in the virtue of dialogue."

– St. Cyprian (c. 200-258)

Most conversations start and develop casually, originating with low expectations and continuing with little fanfare. However, when someone says, "We need to talk!" the encounter suddenly burns with immediacy and intensity. Unfortunately, most congregational conversations are either of the casual variety or of the sleep-inducing quarterly business meeting variety. While many church members resist intimate and substantive conversations concerning the church, mission, and the Kingdom of God, many others long to discern God's movement in the present. They want to talk about their place in the church, and the church's place in the *Missio Dei*. Thus, because of the loss of the practice of congregational conversation, many congregants are left with the unfulfilled longing expressed by a wife who says to her husband, "We never talk anymore." Such was our situation at Englewood Christian Church ten years ago, as we began to explore congregational dialogue.

As we began this exploration, our congregation was weighed down by its own history and fractured from rapid congregational and neighborhood change. Our church—presently located in an inner-city area two miles east of downtown Indianapolis—was born in 1895 on what was then the city's outskirts. As Indianapolis grew, the church was well-positioned for numerical growth. By the early 1970s, Englewood had grown to over 1000 members and had become one of Indiana's largest churches and one of the nation's largest (Independent) Christian Churches. However, the prosperous working-class neighborhood was quickly becoming an older, urbanized one. Although the congregation committed to staying in the neighborhood, hundreds of church members, as well as sister churches, took flight to newer, suburban neighborhoods. This suburban migration—and a lack of one-mindedness on core convictions—shrank attendance to 250 within twenty years. By the mid-1990s, the majority of church members and leadership lived outside the neighborhood and drove in for Sunday worship. Although well-intentioned members stayed active in neighborhood outreach programs, it was evident that we no longer had a neighborhood witness or a discernable identity.

Throughout much of this history, Englewood was a typical Christian Church in her polity. Elders, along with the pastor, made key decisions that affected the direction and focus of the body. Every Sunday, the church gathered for Sunday school, and morning and evening worship, a structure that left little room for congregational conversation. Thus, our congregation developed deeply ingrained habits of not talking about the stuff of daily life (such as food, employment, and housing) and confronting together why our witness had gone dim. Our sphere of relevance had therefore come to be defined in very narrow, religious terms, and we found ourselves largely unequipped to talk openly together about the new challenges we faced. Like a married couple, years of not talking resulted in greater fragmentation and isolation.

By the 1990s, attendance at our Sunday evening service had grown increasingly sparse. However, those

who did come on Sunday evenings did not want to stop, as stopping would have been one more capitulation to the cultural forces, one more step away from the comfortable traditions of our body. After weighing our options, the decision was made to stop trying to provide Sunday evening programs that people would attend, and to start having conversations. Or more accurately, we had one conversation, at great length, in which anyone could participate. Our first topic was the Bible, which might seem to be a fairly innocuous topic and one about which we would have few conflicting thoughts. Not so! The Bible, as it turned out, was something few of us had ever thought about, but about which we all had strong opinions. Around fifty of us, from diverse backgrounds, came together and discussed questions like: "If scripture identifies Jesus as the 'word of God', then what is scripture?" We talked together and we yelled, questioned, disagreed, and generally were stunned by the disparity of thought and feeling among those who called themselves one. We did it one Sunday, then another, and another, until after six months it became apparent that we would not have oneness of mind concerning scripture. Having no process for reaching agreement, our conversation moved on to a variety of other important issues: the gospel, the church, the mission of God, the nature of man and even the meaning and practice of congregational conversation. Sometimes people would storm out; other times we would be denounced and encouraged to quit talking and get on with doing the church's business. The first four years of this conversation were extraordinarily tense. Some people left the church; many left the conversation. The dialogue was widely condemned by those who only heard about it and by many who found it too intense and intrusive. Attempts were made to stop the conversation, and yet the number of people involved in the dialogue stayed fairly constant and the conversation continues today. These discussions produced an energy in us that made the difficulties seem worthwhile and although we found, over time, that the list of issues upon which we cannot agree is lengthy, some of us have come to agreement about many issues. More importantly, we have gained the awareness that God has brought us together, and so our mutual submission and care take priority over agreement about verbal constructions.

Despite the early tenseness and inflammability of our conversation (which still occasionally persist), we have found that if we are to mature into the unity of Christ-mindedness, it must be the Holy Spirit who speaks in our midst and guides our conversations.¹ If we speak (or listen) out of our sinful nature, passions will be ignited and division will ensue. Thus, we are finding that we experience the uniting power of the Spirit only to the extent that we have died to our selfish natures and are willing to let God speak and work through us.² The increase of civility in our conversation and the budding of some forms of agreement can only be attributed to the Spirit's work of maturation in our midst. Additionally, we are beginning to experience a sense of God's carrying out the divine plan for reconciling a fallen world through the gathering of a faithful community.³ In the wilderness, God led Israel in a cloud of fire; today, God leads the chosen people through dialogue in the church community that is grounded in the gifts of the Spirit. Having been given the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5.17-20) exercised through the practice of congregational conversation, as described here, we began to see our assembly, not as a form of selfish entertainment or vague religious duty, but as the place in which we imagine and discern the will of God and in which we are energized to undertake the fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes. Indeed, we are finding that our conversation is not an end in itself, but rather it shapes the way in which we actively bear witness together to the gospel of Christ. For instance, as our conversation unfolded, people began moving back into the neighborhood and

1. See Paul's assessments of human wisdom and divine wisdom in 1 Cor 1-2. Also bear in mind that, according to Paul, our conversation is flow forth from the gifts of the Spirit: cf. 1 Cor 14.26 and Eph 4.11-13.

2. For a more thorough treatment of this idea, see Marva Dawn's *Powers, Weakness and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

3. Gerhard Lohfink's works on ecclesiology, *Jesus and Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1984) and *Does God Need the Church?* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1999), do a wonderful job of developing a theology centered on God's calling of a people and God's work in the world carried out through the called community. A key facet of Lohfink's work is the continuity between God's building of Israel in the Old Testament and God's building of the church in the present age that had its dawn in Christ's calling of a community of disciples.

we launched a community development corporation to provide jobs and housing for our church community. Both of these fruits of our conversation, in turn, provided many more opportunities for us to converse and grow closer together.

As we waded deeper and deeper into our conversation, we began to reflect on the historical and theological meaning of church dialogue, finding that we had stumbled into a rich tradition of dialogue. The apostle Paul, for instance, prescribed the practice of congregational conversation to the Corinthian church (1 Cor 14.26-40) as a means of ordering their assemblies. In this passage, Paul instructs the Corinthians that when they gather, everyone should come prepared to share out of the gifts given to each member. Paul explains that such dialogue, guided by the gifts of the Spirit, serves to drive the congregation toward maturity and one-mindedness.⁴ Although Paul emphasizes the importance of those who speak the words of God, he is quick to note that the role of other members in weighing the speakers' message(s) is no less essential.

Similarly, Acts 15 can be read as a case-study in this manner of church dialogue.⁵ Although a detailed examination of this passage is outside our scope, one should note in this narrative the place of debate (v. 7), its silencing (v. 12), and the tension between the perspectives of the believing Pharisees and that of Paul and Barnabas. The heart of this story, however, is the apostle James' summary—grounded in the unity of the gathering (v. 12)—that is marked by the reiteration of the idea that "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (v. 25, 28).

Congregational dialogue was a practice retained by the churches, even after the apostolic era. Cyprian (c. 200-258), even goes so far as to say that "the kingdom of God is not in the wisdom of the world, nor in eloquence, but in the faith of the cross and in the virtue of dialogue."⁶ Throughout the first millennium of the church's history, the Council of Nicea and subsequent councils served to extend the practice of church dialogue beyond the local congregation, in hopes of uniting diverse churches across the broad span of the Roman Empire. Even during the turmoil of the Reformation, Luther and Zwingli both maintained a hope that their differences with the Roman Catholic Church could be resolved through convening a large-scale council of churches. Church communities, especially in the Anabaptist and Quaker traditions, continued to be formed by the practice of conversation well into the modern era.⁷

Although there is peace to be found in being rooted in such a long history of congregational conversation, Englewood—even after ten years—continues to struggle with many issues, but the ability to talk with one another has deepened our relationships together. Like a couple in a healthy marriage, we are imperfect people joined together, but as we learn to communicate better with each other, we mature in our commitment. Losing the fear of disagreeing with each other has resulted in a willingness to explore a variety of expressions of radical discipleship. Such explorations are only possible when sisters and brothers begin to trust one another and trust that God is present when they gather to talk with one another.

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4. The 1 Corinthians 14 passage also parallels Paul's description of the Holy Spirit's use of gifts to guide the Church toward maturity ("the fullness of Christ") in Ephesians 4, especially v. 11-13. One should also note the place of dialogue (i.e., "speaking the truth in love") in the Ephesians 4 passage: cf. v. 15, 25. On the central place of gifts in the life of the church, see J.H. Yoder's *The Fullness of Christ* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1987), and the chapter of the same name in his *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001).

5. This interpretation has been noted elsewhere, particularly in John Howard Yoder's chapter on congregational conversation (a.k.a. "The Rule of Paul") in *Body Politics*, p. 61-70.

6. Cyprian's *Third Book of Testimonies against the Jews*, as paraphrased in Christopher Smith, *Water, Faith and Wood: Stories of the Early Church's Witness for Today* (Indianapolis: Doulos Christou Press, 2003), 126.

7. This brief summary of the role of congregational conversation throughout church history is indebted to J. H. Yoder's chapter on this practice in *Body Politics*.