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Study guide

A collaboration of voices

By Robert C. Blezard

The late comedienne Joan Rivers was famous for her line “Can we talk?” It’s a great question, but it certainly begs another: “Can we listen?” In our nation’s often-polarized climate, we certainly need more honest conversation about race and other issues that divide us. Such conversation requires both skills—talking and listening. The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago has found a good model with its “We Talk. We Listen” blog.

Exercise 1: Jesus the listener

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus modeled what it meant to be a good listener. For one thing, he sought out and engaged people who were very different from him. Breaking his Jewish heritage’s social constraints, he associated with women, beggars, foreigners (Samaritans), outcasts (tax collectors and prostitutes), the unclean (lepers). By contrast, how did the lawyers and Pharisees respond to these groups? Discuss:

- When Jesus engaged people of these groups, how did he respond? Was there judgment, condemnation or disdain? Or was there compassion, understanding, love?
- Do you think Jesus understood the desires, the struggles, the hurts and the problems of the disadvantaged in all people?
- How does Jesus’ encounters with these groups inspire our engagement with people who are different from us?

Exercise 2: Communication silo

Sociologists tell us that some people may unintentionally (or even intentionally) isolate themselves from different ideas and opinions by selecting only the news and information outlets that they agree with. It’s a phenomenon that is made possible by today’s internet and media world.

- Make a list: Where do you get your news and information to keep abreast of what’s happening in the world? What channels do you watch? What newspapers do you read? What websites do you visit? What blogs do you read?
- Looking over your list, to what degree do you live in a communica-



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tion silo? Is there a flow of different voices and ideas to keep you well rounded?

- How might your choice of communication and information outlets be changed to give you a better variety of voices and opinions?
- As an experiment, endeavor for a period of time—a couple months, perhaps—to balance your news and information with sources that you might have been avoiding.

Exercise 3: Relational silo

Do you have friends, neighbors or family members who come from a different ethnic background? A different financial, professional or educational background? Who are living in a different socio-economic reality? Whose stories of life experiences are very different from yours?

Similar to the communication silo, some of us live in a relational silo, where we tend to surround ourselves with friends and associates who are very much like us in background, interests and outlook. Nothing wrong with that, but living in the relationship silo can sometimes lead people to see their views and experiences as “normal” for everyone.

- If most of the people in your relationship circle are very similar to you, how might that make it difficult to understand the problems and outlook of people of other races? Economic groups? Educational levels?
- When you hear people from other ethnicities, economic groups or sexual orientations talking on the radio or television, do you understand where they are coming from if their life experiences are different from yours? Or do you just tune them out?
- If the people in your close relationship circle are a lot like you, what could you learn if you reached out to someone who is different from you in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or economic background? Who are the people you could talk to?

Exercise 4: Talk, don't shout

Political and social discourse today often seems patterned after the Sunday TV talk shows, where partisan hacks verbally duke it out. Regrettably, the “winner” isn't the one who has made the best argument, marshaled the best information or spoken most eloquently, but rather it's the one who has been able to out-shout, talk over, interrupt or belittle his or her opponent.

- Have you ever witnessed this kind of rancorous pattern of discussion? Have you ever fallen into it?



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- How is this kind of discourse destructive and unhelpful? How can we avoid it?

Exercise 5: Listening skills

Hearing isn't the same as listening. Hearing is mechanical—our ears process the sounds around us and our brain translates that into messages that make sense to us. Listening is emotional and relational. In listening we take in what people are saying, but we endeavor to understand not only the words but also the feelings and depth behind it.

- Can you share a time when you wanted to communicate something important to you but felt that you were merely heard, not listened to? Can you think of a time when, in retrospect, you felt someone was trying to talk to you but you heard them rather than listened?
- What are the barriers that keep us from listening to others? To what degree do our biases, prejudices and life experiences hinder listening? Can we work to overcome them?
- If we get defensive or angry, judgmental or reactive, how does that hinder listening? How can we work on that?
- What does it mean to listen to someone, really listen? Describe communication that involves deep listening.
- Some of the “techniques” for listening can be practiced until they become second nature. They include:
 - Not interrupting. Let the person finish before you speak.
 - Don't challenge or disagree. Seek only to understand.
 - Ask for clarification, more information.
 - Summarize their thoughts in your own words.
 - Discern underlying emotions—hurt, distress, etc.
 - Imagine yourself in their position.

Practice these techniques with each other in your study group.

Exercise 6: Francis of Assisi

For centuries the prayer attributed to Francis of Assisi has offered Christians a wonderful framework for relating to others, especially those from whom we are different. Read the prayer and discuss:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.*



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*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

- How does this prayer resonate with Jesus' Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-11)? How do they express a Christian way of being and relating?
- What elements of this prayer ring true for you? Which come naturally to you? Which do you have to work on?
- In what ways does this prayer invite us to give up our judgment, defensiveness and preconceptions? Why is this so hard?
- How might Francis' prayer guide you into better understanding and communication with others?

A collaboration of voices

By Jill Dierberg Clark

We talk. We listen. The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) took these words from ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton to heart. Following the 2015 shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., that killed nine people, Eaton urged members of the ELCA and the entire Christian church to talk, listen—and act.

“Each of us and all of us need to examine ourselves, our church and our communities,” Eaton said. “We need to be honest about the reality of racism within us and around us. We need to talk and we need to listen, but we also need to act. No stereotype or racial slur is justified. Speak out against inequity. Look with newly opened eyes at the many subtle and overt ways that we and our communities see people of color as being of less worth. Above all, pray—for insight, for forgiveness, for courage.”

In response to that call for dialogue and justice, LSTC started “We Talk. We Listen.” (wetalkwelisten.wordpress.com). This blog was launched under the recommendation of public theologian Joan Harrell, with Linda Thomas, a professor of theology and anthropology at LSTC, at the helm as editor.

With a focus on racial issues, as well as topics concerning women, people who identify as LGBTQ, the poor, people who live with disabilities and others who are systemically marginalized, “We Talk. We Listen.” is a compilation of diverse voices, experiences and reflections. It’s a collaborative dialogue between students, faculty and members of the wider ecumenical community.

“[The blog] is living out Dr. [Martin Luther] King’s commitment,” said Thomas, who also serves as chair of LSTC’s diversity committee. “We are trying to give voice to people whose transcripts are hidden. It privileges those who can articulate their story, or people who work in theological education or religion who raise important questions.”

Having recently celebrated its first anniversary, the blog has quickly become a popular outlet and resource for LSTC students, ELCA clergy





and members of the entire Christian church as they navigate the waters of racial and societal tension and injustice, both in their own contexts and beyond. Francisco Herrera, a doctoral student at LSTC and the blog's manager, said "We Talk. We Listen." receives 4,000 visits per month on average, with its peak at 14,000 in April.

"Now people see us as a resource," he said. "They look to us to begin the process of interpreting and addressing these issues. We are a place for reliable reflection."

Diversity = Christianity

Herrera's passion for diversity concerns emerged out of his experience as he struggled with his Latino identity in the 80s and came out as queer in the 90s when homosexual inclusion was highly stigmatized. It wasn't until 2001 that he joined a church in Geneva, Switzerland, where he was studying music at the time. He said his experience of true inclusion at that particular church finally moved him to become a Christian.

"There were 47 different nationalities and 39 different languages represented among the congregation. We said the Lord's Prayer in our own language," Herrera said. "This was the first community I truly belonged to, and they were crucial to my understanding of what it means to be a Christian in the world."

Now Herrera is an integral partner in dialogue around diversity at LSTC. In addition to his work with "We Talk. We

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Listen,” he is also a member of the diversity committee alongside Thomas.

“We talk about race, but also ability and disability and sexual orientation,” he said. “Professor Thomas makes sure every person on campus is included despite what the conditions are that make their experience difficult.”


The need for dialogue

“We Talk. We Listen.” is just one of the ways LSTC is answering the call to join in dialogue around topics such as race, gender, sexual orientation and poverty. While the United States and the world continue to experience deep-seated tension and unrest around these issues, faculty like Thomas believe these conversations are of utmost importance at seminaries that train future church leaders. And in the ELCA, an overwhelmingly racially homogenous denomination, they say this work is especially paramount.

“Students, even in a predominantly white setting, need to have conversations and do so in a

formative way,” Thomas said. “LSTC has made a commitment to cultural development, and we have a public church curriculum. If faith is public, then diversity is central because of the diversity God created, not only humanity but all life.”

Thomas said LSTC will also provide anti-racism workshops starting this year, and she hopes her and her colleagues’ work will continue to play a vital role in the life of LSTC, the church and the world.

“We must do this because of our call to committing our lives to Jesus Christ, the triune God,” she said. 

Download a study guide by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab at LivingLutheran.org.



Dierberg Clark is a freelance writer living with her husband and twins in the St. Louis area.

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