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Facing divisive issues in the Beloved Community

Our local conversations can help heal a fractured society
(page 20)

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Study guide

Facing divisive issues in the Beloved Community

By Robert C. Blezard

At no other time in recent memory have Americans been so polarized on almost every issue. The divisiveness is taking its toll on our personal relationships, our community spirit, our national unity—and even our churches! How can we as the “Beloved Community” of Jesus’ followers do better? How can we lead the way to harmony and strength? With determination, creativity, hard work and the help of the Spirit!

EXERCISE 1: TABOO SUBJECTS

To “preserve the peace,” some families, and even whole congregations, avoid talking about certain topics, or if they are discussed, participants “tiptoe” around the issues.

- Does this occur in your family or congregation? Why?
- How long has this been the case? Has it gotten worse in recent years?
- What topics are “off limits”? What issues are “tiptoed around”? Why?
- Which causes more harm in the long term—talking carefully but honestly about issues or avoiding them altogether? Why?

EXERCISE 2: CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

No church is free of conflict. From the dawn of Christianity, Jesus’ followers faced conflicts, as Acts of the Apostles and the epistles will verify.

- What has been your congregation’s experience with conflict?
- How can conflict be a force for positive change and better change?
- Is there such a thing as a good conflict and a bad conflict? Explain.
- For it to be positive in a church, how should conflict be handled by a congregation’s leaders?
- What are some guidelines that congregation leaders might use to ensure that conflict is handled as positively as possible?
- In any resolution of conflict, is it possible to make everybody happy all the time? What is the best way to handle people who are unhappy at the end of any conflict? Has your church had experience in this?
- When is “agreeing to disagree” a good option?
- Can a “parting of the ways” be a positive result?



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Study guide: **Facing divisive issues** *continued*

EXERCISE 3: NEGATIVE MEDIA

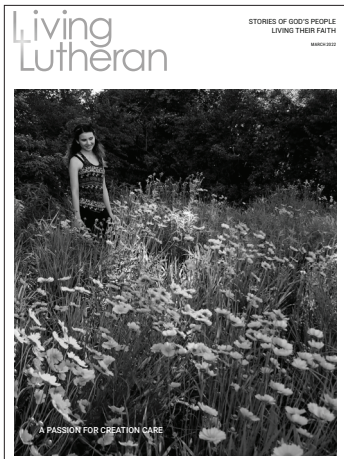
Many observers have noted with alarm that communication in social media and other outlets has become increasingly virulent in recent years. Animosity, intolerance and hatred expressed in the media and social media is trickling into our family, community and congregational relationships.

- What shifts have you noticed in the tone and content of conversations over the last few years nationally? How do you explain it?
- How have those shifts affected conversations in your circle of friends, family, community and congregation?
- How have the shifts in conversation affected your relationships with family, friends and congregation members?
- Have you lost friends or been distanced from your family and congregation as a result of differences of opinion on social issues?
- What coping strategies have you tried (or are you trying) to maintain connections? How successful were (or are) those strategies?
- As a beloved community, what can we do about this?

EXERCISE 4: SAFE DISCUSSION SPACE

One reason people and congregations avoid certain topics is a possibility that a discussion will devolve into a verbal donnybrook. It's sometimes easier not to talk about a subject than to risk harsh disagreements. But setting ground rules for discussion may help ensure that there will be safe space for all viewpoints to be spoken and heard.

- Do you or does your congregation avoid talking about topics for fear it will be too divisive? Explain.
- Have heated discussions been a problem in the past? Can you cite a specific instance?
- If your congregation were to hold structured discussions on a topic of the day, how might the following "ground rules" help keep it civil? Which might work for your context?
 - Ask all participants to agree in advance that the discussion is for exchanging viewpoints, not to "win" an argument or change anybody's mind. Talking, listening and understanding are the goals.
 - A moderator is appointed to manage the discussion by identifying speakers, perhaps alternating between those of differing viewpoints, and ensuring that the conversation flows smoothly and in the right direction. (The moderator does not participate in the discussion.)
 - Only the person identified by the moderator may talk.
 - No interrupting.
 - No laughing, cheering, clapping or comments from participants or listeners.



Study guide: **Facing divisive issues** *continued*

- No shouting or comments in anger.
- No insults or personal attacks.
- Stick to the issue under discussion. Sidetracks and rabbit holes are not permitted. (The moderator will rule on these.)
- The meeting may limit any commenter to a certain time, such as two minutes. (The moderator would keep time.)

Are there other rules that might be helpful?

EXERCISE 5: “THOU SHALL NOT LIE”

Truth and facts have become victims of our current state of discourse. Misinformation, much of it wantonly malicious, can confuse issues and prevent helpful conversation. Productive conversations cannot take place if there is disagreement on underlying facts. Yet we are commanded by our Lord not to lie.

- What is a lie?
- Why are lies and lying so harmful that it is on the “top 10” list of commandments? What problems do or can lies cause?
- What are the many ways we can lie? List as many of them as your study group can think up.
- Is telling a partial truth a lie? Why or why not?
- Can you lie by withholding information? How? Why or why not?
- Is it a lie to exaggerate or stretch the truth? Why or why not? How much exaggeration or stretching does it take to cross into the category of a lie?
- If someone says or writes something that I know to be a lie, and I don’t clarify it or challenge it, am I complicit in the lie?
- If I write or pass on information that I know to be untrue, isn’t that a lie? Explain. And if I do so, I’m breaking the commandment and sinning, right?
- Why is trafficking in misinformation sinful? What harm does it do? How can we stop it?
- How might the national discourse be affected if Christians insisted that followers of Jesus not participate in lies?

EXERCISE 6: “VERBAL MURDER”

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus calls God’s people to a higher standard of righteousness: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:21-22).

- How do you define murder? How does the law define murder? How does the Bible?

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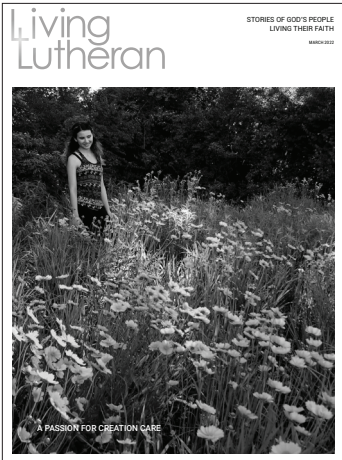
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- How does Jesus' teaching expand our understanding of murder?
- What does Jesus' teaching say about our current culture of name-calling, insulting and denigration?
- How can Jesus' teaching encourage Christians to search for new patterns of handling disagreements and conflict?
- What is Jesus calling us to do? How does this play out in your daily life? In that of your community and congregation?
- If every Christian took this teaching to heart, how would that change the tone of political discussions in our country?

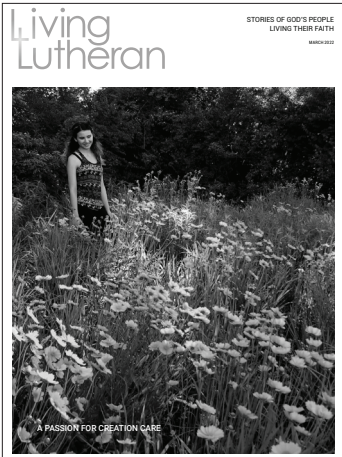
EXERCISE 7: HATE AND GOD

Today's polarized climate is characterized by a rising rate not only of hate speech but also hateful actions, according to the FBI's 2021 report on hate crime. Moreover, there is now a record number of hate groups in our country, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. While this is definitely an affront to neighbor, it also puts a wedge between us and God: "Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" (1 John 4:20).

- How do you understand John's teaching?
- What does John's teaching say to Christians who participate in hate speech or support hateful groups?
- What does John mean when he characterizes as "liars" those Christians who love God but hate people? To whom are they lying? God? Other people? Themselves? All of these?
- Do you agree with John's teaching? Why or why not?
- How should this teaching inform Christians in their relationships and discussions with people with whom they have disagreements?
- If every Christian took this teaching to heart, how would that change the tone of political discussions in our country?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Martin Luther King Jr. used the term "Beloved Community" to describe followers of Jesus. What does this mean? What characteristics are implied by "beloved"? What does "community" mean? How do the words together — "beloved community" — both challenge and empower followers of Jesus to behave and participate in God's mission? As it relates to the current age of divisiveness, how might thinking of the beloved community help?
- When deciding whether to engage someone of a differing viewpoint on a topic, Pamela Cooper-White has some good advice. In her book, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide* (Fortress, spring 2022), she suggests people take a cue from a traffic



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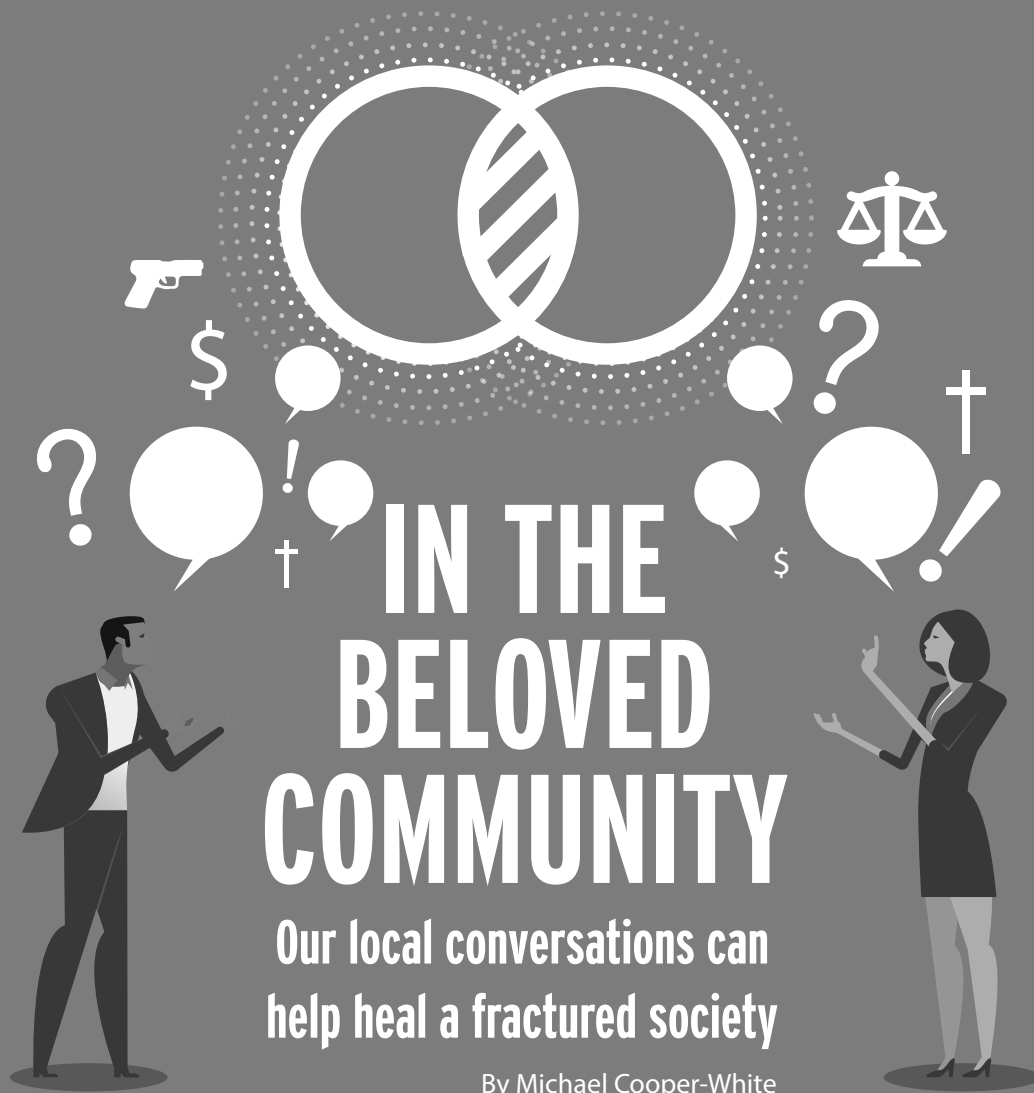
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Study guide: **Facing divisive issues** *continued*

light's colors of green, yellow and red to gauge whether its safe to talk. Why is this good advice? What are the risks of engaging in conversation if conditions are "red"? "Yellow"? "Green"? How would this analogy aid conversation in your life and congregation?

- In the article, Pamela Cooper-White says: "Making a commitment to talk across the divide may be among the most challenging and arduous work of a lifetime—but it is holy work as well. And it is work for the long haul." Do you agree? Why or why not? How can you engage in this holy work?
- Why is it misleading to assert that all opinions are valid and acceptable to people of faith and to God? Would it be a valid and acceptable opinion that all left-handed people are evil and that God has extra special love for Lutherans? How can the Bible and doctrines of faith help us weed out unacceptable opinions?
- Angela Denker says: "Grace, for American Christians ... means knowing that we all have something to learn from each other." Do you agree? What can we learn from people who are different from us?
- What has been your congregation's experience with divisive issues and conversations? Are people gridlocked in conflict, or have people left as a result of disagreements over hot-button issues? If so, why? How can your congregation do better in the future? If not, what can your congregation do to keep things going well?

FACING DIVISIVE ISSUES



Illustrations: Todd Grady

From the desperation and darkness of a prison cell, Paul cast a laser beam of light that has shone for 20 centuries. “Make my joy complete,” the ebullient apostle encouraged the Philippians. “Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Philippians 2:2).

“Of one mind?” “Being in full accord?” “In my family, my church?” “Dream on, Paul!”

Those are likely responses as we encounter Paul’s exhortations in our deeply divided nation. Studies have shown that the ELCA reflects less racial and ethnic diversity than other churches, yet it spans a broad spectrum of an increasingly diverse and polarized society. As we ponder Paul’s words, a flood of questions follows:

How can we move beyond the divisiveness and polarization rampant in our society? At a time when surveys reveal that millions of Americans fear a second civil war in the next few years, what role can the church play in averting disaster? How can we talk about difficult issues without dividing our congregation? In a church body as large as the ELCA, how much common ground remains? How can I even begin to converse with neighbors, friends and family members who see things so differently from my convictions?

This article offers observations and suggestions gleaned from Scripture, theology, personal experience and the collective wisdom of members throughout our church. It’s only a beginning, but I hope it will persuade us to balance understanding against faithful mission, which inevitably generates some conflict.

“Of one mind” doesn’t mean “conflict-free”

If anyone understood that Christian community involves conflict, it was the apostle Paul.

He issued several letters addressing fierce conflicts in diverse Christian communities throughout the ancient world. As Paul reveals in his letter to the Galatians, he disagreed sharply with Peter over the extent to which Gentile Christians had to observe Jewish traditions. Paul and Barnabas went their separate ways after a conflict about who else should accompany them on their missionary journeys (Acts 15:36-41).

If Paul isn’t discouraging conflict, then what exactly does his exhortation to the Philippians mean?

The apostle goes on to encourage Jesus’ followers to be Christlike in their mutual respect and regard, especially when engaged in conflict over contentious issues. But being Christlike doesn’t mean avoiding conflict. Jesus frequently disagreed with the Pharisees and others whose words and actions were an impediment to embracing God’s love and grace.

Balancing church unity and faithful mission

Fostering deeper unity while taking on tough issues won’t happen without enormous effort. But in what other arena can it be done better than in a Christian community?

Both anecdotal and survey evidence indicate that many churches rarely, if ever, provide members with opportunities for serious conversation about challenging social issues.

A 2019 Pew research study reveals that two-thirds of Americans believe churches should play no role in politics, and according to an earlier study, a majority of Christians agree. By the thousands, congregations avoid any issue likely to be deemed “political.”

But almost any subject that generates controversy—from immigration policy to global warming, racism to gun rights, abortion to mandatory vaccines—

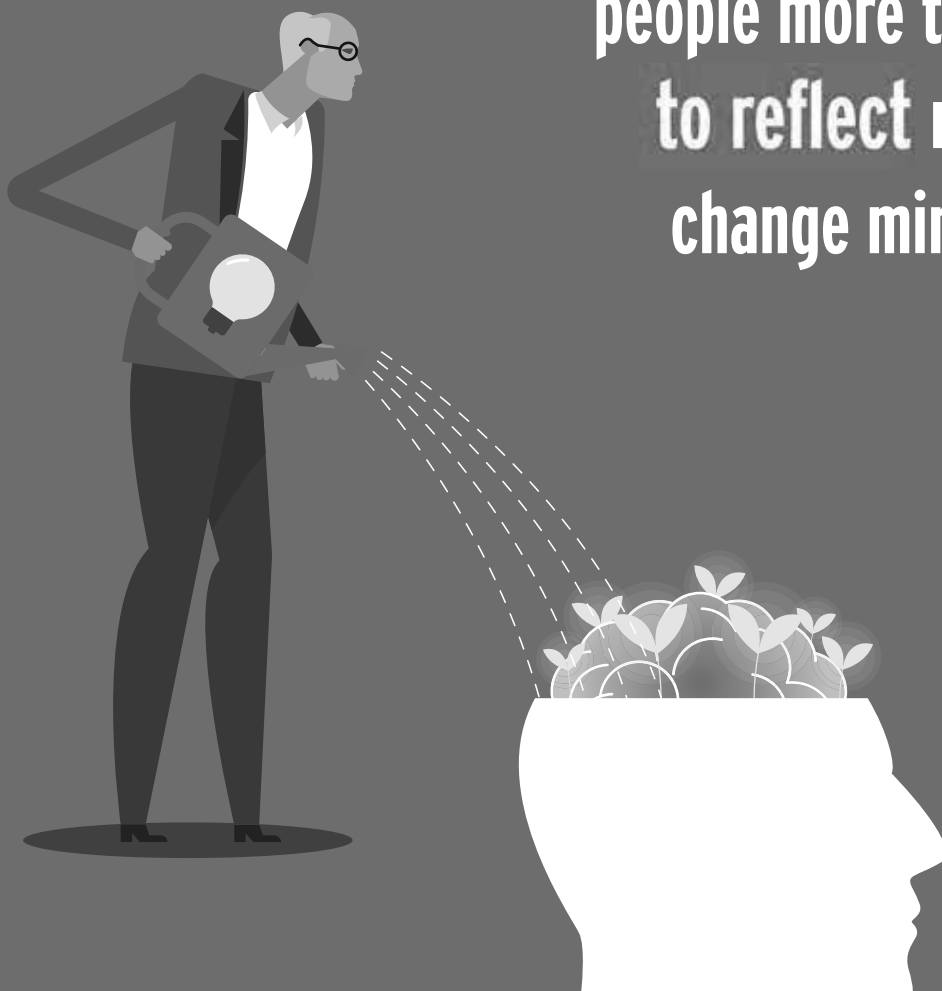
is a “political” issue in that communities, states and nations must make decisions about them through their political processes.

A congregation’s council wrote to ELCA leaders last year urging greater sensitivity in addressing divisive issues, particularly those related to homosexuality and rostered leadership. The parish leaders explained that, in general, they avoid taking up contentious issues in hope of promoting unity and strengthening their welcome to people of diverse perspectives.

“Authentic and respectful engagement with others is key, with discussion centered on genuine inquiry aimed not to convert but to understand.”

Avoiding divisive issues might seem like an act of Christian unity, yet faithfulness to the gospel requires us to leave our comfort zones and engage with people who hold different convictions. As the congregation’s letter urged, “thoughtful sensitivity in our interactions with

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others” will go a long way toward maintaining harmony.

The ELCA’s foundational social statement, “The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective,” was adopted 30 years ago, when our denomination was in its infancy (elca.org/socialstatements). Then and ever since, we have recognized that “Christians ... often disagree passionately on the kind of responses they make to social questions.” The teaching document invites congregations and other Christian gatherings to engage in prayer, Bible study and respectful discussion as they become “communities of moral deliberation.”

Such processes of moral deliberation, the statement urges, should “include people ... with different life experiences, perspectives, and interests.”

If avoidance isn’t the answer, then how can we engage in difficult conversations while building the deeper oneness of which Paul wrote?

Leaders point the way

Amsalu Tadesse Geleta is a pastor of Christ Lutheran in central Baltimore, a diverse and vibrant urban congregation. He points to principles that have guided his leadership in the parish and previously as a synod staff member. As hot-button issues are discussed, the pastor frequently reminds members, “We are talking about this as church.”

Geleta says authentic and respectful engagement with others is key, with discussion centered on “genuine inquiry aimed not to convert but to understand.” Such engagement discourages people from demonizing those with whom they may disagree.

Patience is also key when taking on tough issues. “It doesn’t have to be on my schedule,” Geleta said. Giving people more time to reflect, he pointed out, may change minds.

Geleta cited an instance when people on a mission trip to

El Salvador got into a sharp debate over U.S. immigration policy. “I have never seen such a heated discussion,” he said. In the throes of the debate, he reminded his fellow members, “We all love America. We all love Christ. How do we be faithful citizens of two kingdoms? Where can we discuss if not in the church?”

In the end, personal relationships were solidified rather than fractured, Geleta said.

Tamika Jancewicz is a pastor of First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Ellicott City, Md., near Baltimore. In the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder by a Minneapolis police officer, she was participating in a Bible study when the discussion turned to racial bias in policing. Her parishioners encouraged her to share her experiences as an African American woman. Also in the group was a retired police officer, a faithful Christian who had worn a badge for decades. “The thing that made it fruitful,” she said of the conversation, “was our willingness to just hear each other.”

Jancewicz describes the Bible study group as one in which “members have been building relationships with each other, [creating] ... a healthy space of vulnerability where people are open to just be who they are.” Some members, she reported, seem willing to move beyond conversation and discern action steps to dismantle structural racism in the local community and more broadly. “It’s hopeful when people are willing to dig deeper,” she said.

Bradley Skogen, who recently concluded his ministry at a parish in Battle Lake, Minn., and is now on the staff of the Eastern North Dakota Synod, said he has noticed that conflicts erupt more quickly now and have become more volatile. For example, his and other parishes experienced sharp disagreements over how to protect

members when the COVID-19 pandemic mushroomed.

Skogen likes to remind folks of Martin Luther’s explanation of the Eighth Commandment. Writing in the Small Catechism, Luther urges people to place the best construction on others’ words and actions. But, Skogen said, “when I quoted how Luther said Christians should act during a plague, it didn’t gain any traction.” (In “Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague,” Luther emphasizes the duty to care for the neighbor, the responsibility of government to protect and provide services to its citizens, a caution about recklessness, and the importance of science, medicine and common sense.)

What did get through to some members resistant to limits on personal freedom was a church newsletter article that Skogen wrote about those called the *anawim* in Hebrew, people most vulnerable in times of crisis. For the sake of neighbors, especially those unable to protect themselves, the pastor issued to parishioners an exhortation: “Join me, please, in exercising extra caution and practicing love for the neighbor and loving the *anawim* as we refrain from doing what we can in favor of doing what is good.”

The Beloved Community has boundaries

In his work as a parish pastor and civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke often of the “Beloved Community,” reminding people of God’s love for the whole of creation and all humanity.

As difficult issues are discussed in Christian community, we mislead people when we signal that “all views are equally valid and acceptable.” God loves all people, but God doesn’t approve of all opinions. There are core credal and

“People are doing surprising things that don’t fit into our prescribed boxes that we use to categorize people. Grace, for American Christians ... means knowing that we all have something to learn from each other.”



ethical convictions that can't be compromised. The church can't be all things to all people and still remain faithful to the gospel.

To deny equality in God's eyes and in human community on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, economic status or immigration status is to abandon the gospel as Jesus taught it. To claim, as do a rising number of Christian nationalists, that God favors the United States and cares less about people of other nations is heresy.

As communities of moral deliberation, congregations and other Christian gatherings forge common convictions that may not be held by all individuals. Loud voices may be given a hearing, but they shouldn't be allowed to dominate or determine communal values. Creating safe space for fruitful conversation requires us to establish and maintain boundaries, set limits on angry outbursts and offer protection, especially for the *anawim* among us.

Valuable guidance for holding respectful conversations is offered in "Talking Together as Christians About Tough Social Issues" (Karen L. Bloomquist and Ronald W. Duty, 1999; search for the title at elca.org), which urges us to develop ground rules for challenging conversations. A key requirement is to "exercise care for group members who become upset over what is said during the conversation."

In search of our common humanity

On the day after Christmas 2021, one of our living saints moved into eternity. Among the memorable words of South African Bishop Desmond Tutu are "My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together."

Tutu only summarizes what these leaders in diverse locales have experienced. When people

with sharply differing perspectives encounter each other in what Jewish scholar Martin Buber described as "I-thou" relationships, they may find some common ground. But even if they can't agree on any aspects of complex issues, they avoid demonizing or regarding someone as the other, who must be disregarded or even cast out.

In *Red State Christians: Understanding the Voters Who Elected Donald Trump* (Fortress Press, 2019), ELCA pastor Angela Denker recounts her nationwide travels and talks with people who hold conservative and ultraright views. In her conclusion, she urges us to remain open to being surprised by those with whom we expect to find nothing in common.

"All across America," Denker writes, "people are doing surprising things that don't fit into our prescribed boxes that we use to categorize people." She concludes that "grace, for American Christians ... means knowing that we all have something to learn from each other."

In *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People Are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide* (Fortress, spring 2022), Pamela Cooper-White—an Episcopal priest and dean at New York's Union Theological Seminary (and, in full disclosure, my spouse)—also underscores the importance of supportive relationships to productive dialogue.

She uses the red, yellow and green lights of a traffic signal as an analogy for whether the timing is right for difficult conversations. If you feel unsafe talking with a belligerent bully or narrow-minded individual, heed the red light and back away. If things get heated or your own integrity is compromised, proceed cautiously and tentatively, as at a yellow light, and be ready to halt the conversation. If a relationship has deepened to the degree described

by the pastors cited above, a green light signals the possibility of true dialogue and mutual understanding if not agreement.

"Making a commitment to talk across the divide may be among the most challenging and arduous work of a lifetime—but it is holy work as well," she concludes. "And it is work for the long haul."

For the healing of the nations

The final chapter of Revelation, and of the entire Bible, ends on a note of hope and promise. Held before us is a vision of the tree of life, whose leaves are "for the healing of the nations."

Few observers of national and global realities dispute that this third decade of the 21st century has become one of the most divisive periods in recent memory. Amid the ongoing necessity for racial reckoning and reconsidering our national history narratives, and with the continual spewing of conspiracy theories, many despair and seem resigned to society disintegrating. Some even foresee the imminent demise of the American democratic experiment and a descent into national and global chaos.

Restoring greater unity in families, neighborhoods, congregations, communities and broader circles will require courageous efforts on the part of millions. Every facet of society must engage in this effort, but isn't the church, the Beloved Community, the body of Christ, best positioned to lead "the healing of the nations"?

Let's commit ourselves to this single-minded endeavor, which will make Paul's (and God's) joy complete. †

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