

Conversations that Matter: General Guidelines for the Process

(Adapted from *The World Café* by Juanita Brown (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2005)

Though possible outcomes are often identified, conversations are not focused, at least initially, on finding solutions. The more important outcome, and one that happens best in conversation, is to discover the right questions to ask in relation to an issue.

In general, the flow of conversation is as follows:

- The first round of conversations sets the stage and explores the issue by exploring one another's perspectives. For the second round participants change tables (leaving behind a host at each table to orient newcomers). In the second round, patterns, themes, and deeper questions are identified. In the third round, participants return to their original tables and share with each other how their conversations have evolved. At this time the table groups prepare 2-3 questions that they believe are important. They may write the questions on the paper on each table and post it on the wall. Participants may want to take down a question that is of particular interest and take it their table for exploration.
- After three rounds of conversation, participants come together for a plenary session to share findings, key insights, and to share what the conversations meant to them. Each group identifies the most essential findings from their conversations. Anyone in the room may speak briefly to the issue, or share a question, insight, or idea that has meaning for him or her.
- At the end of the plenary session determine if there is, in fact, one overarching question that can take the group to a deeper level. Also, following the plenary invite participants to imagine an agenda and focus for their organization's activities this coming year.

Possible Focusing Questions for the Table Conversations

To initiate conversation and to determine one another's interests ask:

- What's important to you about this situation and why do you care?
- What draws you/us to this inquiry?
- What's our intention here? What's the deeper purpose that is worthy of our best effort?

When framing questions for further discussion ask:

- Is the question we are considering relevant to the real life or real work of people in church and society?
- Is this a genuine question—a question to which I/we really don't know the answer?
- What assumptions or beliefs are embedded in the way we are asking the question?
- To what extent will this question generate hope, imagination, engagement, new thinking, and creative action? To what extent will it increase a focus on past problems and obstacles?

To move the conversation to the next level ask:

- What's missing from the picture so far? What is it we're not seeing? What do we need more clarity about?
- If there was one thing that hasn't yet been explored but is necessary in order to reach a deeper level of understanding/clarity, what would that be?
- What's the next level of thinking we need to address?
- What question(s) if explored thoroughly, could provide the breakthrough possibilities we are seeking?
- What would it take to create change on this issue?
- What needs our immediate attention going forward?
- How can we support each other in taking the next steps? What unique contribution can we each make?

If a conversation gets stuck ask:

- What opportunities can we see in this situation?
- What do we know so far or what do we still need to learn about this situation?
- What are the dilemmas or opportunities in this situation?
- What assumptions need to be challenged in our thinking about this situation?
- What would someone who had a very different set of beliefs than we do say about this situation?

If a conversation gets conflicted ask:

- What I heard you say that I appreciated is . . .
- What I heard that challenged my thinking is . . .
- To better understand your perspective I'd like to ask you . . .

To connect ideas ask:

- What's taking shape here? What are we hearing underneath the variety of opinions being expressed?
- What's emerging that is new for you? What new connections are you making?
- What have you heard that had real meaning for you? What surprised you? What puzzled or challenged you? What questions would you like to ask now?
- What has been your major learning or insight so far?