When I am in a group or in conversation with another person and the topic shifts to one of the typically hot button issues of the day, my response is typically some combination of the following:

• keep quiet about what I think and believe because I don’t want to get into an argument
• feel tight in my stomach from the potential for conflict
• feel defensive if my beliefs or opinions are being challenged, especially if those beliefs and opinions are ones that in some way define me as a person.

In short, I don’t feel safe enough to express my beliefs and convictions. I fear being put down, or not able to think quickly and carefully enough so I can respond to challenges. I’m not a good debater, and I don’t like conflict.

I know this response stems in part from my personality, and not everyone responds the way I do. In fact some people seem to thrive under those circumstances; they love debate and they don’t mind conflict. In short, I don’t feel safe enough to express my beliefs and convictions. I fear being put down, or not able to think quickly and carefully enough so I can respond to challenges. I’m not a good debater, and I don’t like conflict.

I know this response stems in part from my personality, and not everyone responds the way I do. In fact some people seem to thrive under those circumstances; they love debate and they don’t mind conflict. However, I also believe that it is often very difficult to create an atmosphere where everyone, whether or not they like debate, feels free to say what they think without fear of being put down. Just imagine yourself in the middle of television or radio talk shows on controversial issues and feeling comfortable, not to mention believing that any real light was being shed or better understanding achieved.

In the church, safe space for genuine dialogue is often hard to come by as well.

In addition to disagreement on social issues like abortion, homosexuality or race (to name just a few), there are different opinions on building programs, worship styles, use of money, staffing, and so on. Plus, conversations in church contexts have an additional spiritual layer thrown in, so one’s basic faith commitment or understanding of biblical truth can be questioned as well as one’s opinion on the issue itself.

In our current environment where the world seems to be divided into liberal or conservative, left or right, us and them, either this or that, safe space for dialogue is sorely needed. While this safe space is needed at an international level to help bring about better understanding and peace among “warring” entities and perhaps prevent further conflict and violence, the concern addressed in this edition of Shalom! is creating safe space at the micro level—our communities, the workplace, the church, etc. The Brethren in Christ core value of pursuing peace calls us to promote understanding. When we are able to really talk to each other about subjects on which we disagree vehemently, we promote understanding—not to mention forgiveness and reconciliation.

Conflict and disagreement are inevitable, not just because we are human but because we are each unique, intelligent and thinking human beings. Conflict and disagreement, however, don’t need to result in shouting matches, hurt feelings, the silent treatment, or a resolve never to touch certain topics because they are so explosive. We don’t have to retreat into our respective corners and never talk with people with whom we disagree. Instead we can intentionally create settings where it is okay to explore difficult issues together, to talk about how and why we see things differently. There are resources and processes for creating space for dialogue on difficult issues. Some of them are described in various ways in this edition.

Recently, I have found myself in a couple of uncomfortable situations, where perspectives are different and perceptions of reality vary widely. As I have gone back and forth between the “sides,” I have been incredibly frustrated by how these differing perceptions of reality can cloud the real issues and prevent people from getting on with the business of doing the right thing. One can easily spend so much time defending one’s turf, or attempting to convince the other person, or proving that one is right, that nothing gets done that will actually change anything. At the very least, it seems like one outcome of creating safe space for dialogue, besides promoting understanding and respect, should be to advance good thinking that will lead to right action. Now if we could just get everyone to agree!!

A small editorial disclaimer: collecting articles for this edition didn’t go quite as I had hoped, so I apologize for an over-representation of material from my own congregation. This in no way is intended to suggest that we have the corner on figuring out how to talk about difficult issues, although we certainly have had plenty of practice!

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor
Confessions of an Opinionated Man

By Ken R. Abell

My dear brothers and sisters, be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry (James 1:19, NLT).

These words from James are so straightforward as to be impossible not to grasp, but for me they seem to be always just out of reach. I prayerfully strive to grab hold of them, but they creep away to mock and haunt me; like bones rattling around a locked closet they are always present to remind me of my futile determination to apply them. Conviction set in on me a long time ago and I earnestly decided to make this quick-to-listen mindset a personal goal, but more often than not I have experienced dismal failure.

I recently reached the fifty-year milestone which one might hope would generate a new level of patient maturity, but unfortunately, in all the gifts I received, forbearance with differing outlooks did not come wrapped up with pretty blue ribbons. Learning to be quick to listen can only be achieved in the old-fashioned way; it must be earned through hard work and perseverance. It is progressive, but unfortunately, in all the gifts I received, my pugnacious reputation precedes me. Plus, I routinely use sharp-edged words because the seasons of my life have cultivated a very hardboiled worldview that automatically clashes with softer, rose-colored perspectives—all of which likely makes me one of the most misunderstood persons on the planet. That of course may be some more exaggerated humor, but then again, it is an honest assessment of how I often feel.

In my observations, the obstacle to communication within the context of controversial or hot-button issues is our collective unwillingness to be quick to listen, which speaks directly to the grim reality of human nature. Ego can so easily rear up and demand attention; our carnality, which we endeavor to keep tethered, can slip off its leash to run free, marking its territory with gleeful abandon. Self, motivated and mobilized by its Siamese twin Pride, is truly elusive as it makes its way to center-stage to seize the microphone; we expect to be heard and understood before we seek to understand a differing view.

We are feckless and fallible, and we have a seemingly endless capacity to taint everything we come in contact with; in our hands, the ideals of Scripture can be fashioned to say whatever we need or want them to say. I suspect that we have all eye-witnessed the same passage cited by opposite sides of a debate and marveled at how the user determined to exegete the verses. There is much in God’s Word that is mysterious and complex, much that is difficult to apply, but have you noticed that when the common-sense meaning of Scripture hits too close to home we simply ignore it and emphasize those passages we think validate our perspective or our lifestyle choices.

No matter how careful or spiritual we may be, we are always in danger of being influenced by the mindset of the surrounding culture. In our 24-7 media
Talking about Controversial Issues without Ruining Friendships

Eric A. Seibert

Conventional wisdom suggests there are two things you should never discuss: religion and politics. The unstated—but understood—reason for this “sage” advice is that people who do so get into heated arguments which cause division and ruin friendships. Surely that is not the only possible outcome. Besides, religion and politics are too important not to discuss! But how can we do so in a more constructive fashion? What guidelines are there for discussing emotionally charged issues like the war in Iraq, capital punishment, same-sex marriage, legalized abortion, and many, many others? In what place can we have safe dialogues where we can learn about perspectives which differ from our own, while mutual trust and respect increase. It is only then, when we honor one another about valuing one another, that we find safe places to explore even the most combustible issues that confront us in these interesting times in which we live.

That’s my opinion and I’m sticking to it.

Ken Abell sticks to his opinions in Morrison, IL, where he is senior pastor of the Morrison Brethren in Christ Church.

1. Seek to Understand the Other’s Position

Whenever we talk with people whose perspectives differ from our own, we should try to understand as fully as possible not only what they believe, but why. Unfortunately, most of us are more eager to speak than we are to listen, to present our own ideas than to learn about another’s. This does not bode well for a constructive conversation. We need to make a concerted effort to see things from their perspective by asking questions and listening carefully to their responses. What has led them to this position? What reasons do they give for their ideas?

We can also educate ourselves by reading about perspectives which differ from our own. John Michael Talbot refers to a Franciscan monk named Ramón Llull who rejected the violence of the Crusades and desired to see Muslims come to know Christ rather than die at the end of a sword. Talbot writes, “Instead of loading up on

2. Find Common Ground

Second, when discussing controversial issues we should seek to find common ground. I suspect many people are not quite as far apart on some issues as they might think. If they took time to really listen to each other, they might discover they share many common values and commitments. Yet more often than not, people become polarized on issues, giving the appearance that one is either “with us” or “against us.”


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or “with them.” Such divisions blind us to the possibility that despite our differences, we actually do share some common concerns. For example, there are people on both sides of the legalized abortion debate who have a deep and abiding concern for human life. Rather than hunkering down into opposing camps of “us” and “them,” such persons could actually join hands on various initiatives since both desire to minimize abortions and provide supportive environments for women who decide to carry their babies to term. Even if they still hold very different opinions about legalized abortion at the end of the day, finding common ground will help them work together in ways they might otherwise have thought impossible. The ability to identify common ground helps foster new levels of appreciation and understanding when discussing difficult topics.

3. Communicate Respect

Third, when talking to others about controversial issues, we should always communicate care and respect. In his helpful book Choosing Against War, John Roth addresses the manner in which pacifists ought to engage others in conversation. “For the pacifist . . . the lingering questions should always be: did I present my case in a way that consistently reflected Christ’s love and compassion, even in the midst of profound disagreements? Have I come to a deeper understanding of the worldview of my conversation partner? Can we leave the exchange with a sense of mutual trust and respect despite the differences?” Roth’s questions are excellent and their applicability to conversations about all types of controversial issues easily apparent. They encourage a Christian posture toward the other, an openness to learn, and a desire to communicate care and respect. If all of us dialogued with each another in this way, it would be a safe space indeed!

Obviously, we communicate respect (or lack thereof!) by the things we say and the way we say them. If we hope to engage in a constructive conversation, we need to be gracious with our words. As the writer of Colossians puts it, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.” Gracious speech is courteous, respectful, and humble. It does not ridicule, demean, or demonize those who think differently. It avoids the kind of inflammatory and incendiary rhetoric we so often hear on talk radio, in political campaigns, and even from certain well-known Christian leaders! Instead, gracious speech is grounded in love and characterized by hospitality. We recognize the other as someone created in God’s image and strive to treat him or her with reverence and respect.

4. Be open to new insights

Finally, when talking about controversial issues, we should do so with a genuine sense of humility and openness. Regardless of how informed our perspective may be, it is always limited. We never see the whole picture. We should always enter these kinds of conversations ready to learn and even to change our minds if necessary. Such modifications come easier if we view such conversations as opportunities to exchange ideas rather than arguments to be won or lost.

So go ahead. Throw conventional wisdom to the wind. Discuss religion, politics, and whatever else you like with family and friends. Just be sure to do so in a way that creates space for genuine dialogue, authentic disagreement, and mutual respect to develop.

Eric Seibert is assistant professor of Old Testament at Messiah College and director of the Sider Institute for Anabaptist, Pietist and Wesleyan Studies at the college. He and his wife are active members of the Grantham Brethren in Christ Church.

Shalom! sent out a list of questions to our bishops and church leaders to get their perspective on difficult issues in the church. Their responses are compiled below in a sort of check-list of their experience with churches and individuals that encounter difficult times and issues. Some recurrent themes were:

- Life is difficult, so we will encounter difficult situations,
- Difficult situations can be handled in healthy ways, and
- Difficulties can produce growth and valuable outcomes.

The bishops also shared about spiritual concerns, warning signs, basic principles, and biblical resources.

Understanding the Difficult Situation

On the difference between a merely difficult situation and an unhealthy or destructive situation, the prevailing idea was that difficult can be merely the result of:

- poor communication,
- different goals,
- different passions or gifts, and
- different personalities.

All of these can present problems to overcome but none of these constitute a sinful or unhealthy situation. When the situation does become destructive or unhealthy one bishop advised it is time to “own the unhealthy nature of the situation.” Others warned against avoiding the reality of destructive situations and pointed out that too many Christians think there should not be conflict or difficulties in church life. This idea in itself is unhealthy and can actually create an atmosphere where unhealthy situations can grow.

Listed below are some warning signs that a situation is becoming destructive with spiritual problems that add to the destructive nature of a situation.
**Warning Signs**

- When a conflict drags on and more and more people are brought into it
- When people begin to focus on the problem rather than the solution
- When there is a lack of respect for the other view/person
- When sides are beginning to form instead of working as a team
- When people see only one solution
- When communication becomes garbled or stops
- When people see themselves as their own authority
- When those in positions of legitimate authority grow weary or negligent

**Spiritual problems**

(listed in no particular order)

- Gossip
- Personal attacks
- Unwillingness to acknowledge another view
- Vindictiveness
- Intentionally hurtful comments
- Personal agenda over "kingdom-minded" agenda
- Pride or unwillingness to admit wrongs
- A defiant or stubborn spirit
- Spiritual disobedience to biblical principles
- Power mongering
- Lack of respect for spiritual leadership
- Lack of willingness to seek forgiveness
- Unwillingness to talk
- Dogmatic perspective

**Mediating the Difficult Situation**

When called to help mediate a difficult or unhealthy situation the bishops talked about both personal preparations and basic mediation principles. Personal preparations:

- Prayer and fasting
- A check on personal motives and agendas, attitudes and feelings
- Starting with an open mind, no assumptions
- Reviewing relevant biblical passages
- Studying the full dynamics of the particular situation

Some basic principles adhered to in the mediation process included:

- Making sure beforehand that individuals, pastors, and congregations do as much work on their own as possible – following Matthew 18
- Preparing several possible options in advance to be flexible as new information is given
- Laying the ground rules so everyone knows what to expect
- Defining the issues in Biblical terms (e.g., are we dealing with absolutes, matters of conscience, or personal preferences)
- Keeping the focus on issues, not personalities
- Helping the group to understand that conflict and differences of opinion are normal parts of human interaction, but “fight fair”
- Listening well (One bishop explained, “It is critical to know what is driving the difficulty, what is wanted. Often real issues are disguised beneath initial comments, and it takes careful listening to [discover] the real issues.”)
- Keeping the goal in focus – a mutually acceptable solution
- Taking another person as an observer/ note-taker (note taking is difficult when mediating a meeting)
- Remembering that long term health is more important than expediency.

**Emerging from the Difficult Situation**

A situation that starts out or turns bad does not have to end badly. Through the redemptive power of Christ the bad can have positive results. The bishops have seen:

- Congregations with major divisions become healthy, growing congregations,
- Individual healing,
- Reconciled relationships,
- Congregations shedding the “baggage” of past difficulties,
- Congregations learning how to handle future difficult issues,
- God using the hard times to teach numerous lessons,
- Difficulties worked through becoming a witness that attracts whose who saw it transpire, and
- Renewed vision.

None of the bishops suggested that difficult or destructive situations were fun or not fraught with temptations and failings, but each gave witness to the need to recognize them, to deal openly and honestly with them, and to turn to God for wisdom, right attitudes, and his redemptive work in everyone’s lives. Of difficult situations one bishop said, “I begin believing there is a way through the difficulty without dividing the body of Christ.” It seems fitting for us who follow Christ to begin a difficult journey by believing in the triumph of the final destination.

**Biblical Resources**

The bishops found wisdom and instruction in the following passages for dealing with conflict and human interaction.

- Proverbs 15:1, “A gentle answer…”
- Matthew 18:15-35, “If a brother or sister sins…”
- Acts 15:1–41, The council at Jerusalem; Paul & Barnabus disagree
- I Corinthians 10:12-13, “…So if you think you are standing firm…”
- I Corinthians 13:12 “Now we see but a poor reflection…”
- Galatians 2, Paul accepted by the apostles, Paul opposes Peter
- Ephesians 4, Unity in the body of Christ
- Ephesians 6:10-20, The armor of God
- Philippians 2, Imitating Christ’s Humility
- Philippians 4:2-3, “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree…”
- II Timothy 4:11, Mark’s worth is recognized by Paul
- Philemon, Paul’s plea for Onesimus
- James 1:5, “If any of you lack wisdom…”
- James 4:10, “Humble yourselves before the Lord…”
- I John 3, “Children of God, love one another”

**Educational Resources**

- Peacemaker Ministries, Billings, MT
- Alban Institute, Washington DC
- Mennonite Conciliation Services, Akron, PA
- Impact Course, Equipping for Ministry, BIC

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Thanks to Bishops John Byers, Perry Engle, Ken Letner, Craig Sider, and John Zuck for participating in this discussion. Solicited and compiled by Lois Saylor.
Facilitating Dialogue

By Kim Phipps

Editor’s Note: The following article is adapted from a closing address Kim gave at a Faith in the Academy conference at Messiah College in 2004.

To accomplish our goal of facilitating dialogue, I suggest we consider engaging in three practices.

Promoting Inclusive Conversation

My disciplinary expertise is communication. I elected to study that discipline because I am enough of an idealist to believe in the necessity and the wonder of community. Community is built through effective human communication— to “commune” or “to make common.” Like many of you, I have been disappointed by an Academy that often exemplifies the antithesis of community—a culture Parker Palmer described as “infamous fragmentation, isolation and competitive individualism.” I believe that the reclaiming of educational community will require the encouragement and facilitation of conversation on our campuses and in the broader Academy.

Why should academicians who are deeply connected to their faith commitments choose the vehicle of conversation as opposed to debate? Because conversation connects us at a more intimate level: as we share different human experiences and opposing ideas and paradigms, we rediscover a sense of unity. We are reminded that we are a part of the greater whole.

Professor Margaret Wheatley, author of Leadership and the New Science, described the need for authentic conversation, “I need to learn to value your perspective, and I want you to value mine. I expect to be disturbed by what I hear from you. I know we don’t have to agree with each other to think well together. There is no need for us to be joined at the head. We are joined by human hearts.”

If we approach conversation with humility, if we truly believe that everyone has something to teach us (including our students), if we carefully listen and willingly follow the circuitous and crooked path that characterizes most conversations, if we are inclusive in our invitation to participate, we will learn much about each other’s academic disciplines, methodologies, faith traditions, personal narratives, and individual perspectives. As we suggested in the Scholarship and Christian Faith text, the grand conversation of scholarship and Christian faith is “not simply knowing things, but also being known. Not claiming the truth as if we owned it, but living in truth and toward truth as a style of life. Not holding on to our current views as if they defined knowledge for all time, but sharing our ideas and ideals with others in confidence that they will come back to us in improved form.”

We’re at different places in our collective and individual conversations.

- We need to make certain that we have voices of women and men and different cultures and ethnicities.
- We need the voices of administrators and educators.
- We need the voices of students inside and outside the classroom.
- We need the voices of other religious faiths – as we seek to prepare our students and ourselves to engage in a global 21st century culture.

We are also involved in different disciplines and we use different research methodologies. Conversation will enable us to truly learn from one another.

Practicing Intellectual Hospitality

In addition to promoting inclusive conversation we must seek to practice intellectual hospitality. As a child of German immigrants living in Brooklyn, I had the opportunity to learn about the common understanding of hospitality at a young age. My maternal grandmother (who lived with us) and my mother loved having people in our home. A small band of relatives frequently stopped by, Entenmann’s (“cakes in the box”) were in ample supply, friends were welcome for dinner, neighbors were always invited for holiday gatherings. We were always prepared to welcome guests.

But “hospitality is much more than a punch bowl or donuts at a meeting or even the sharing of a meal. Hospitality is the gracious welcoming of the other into one’s domain”; it is the “welcoming of the person in all of his or her uniqueness and fullness as a human being.” It extends beyond specific actions and involves a perspective, a particular way of looking at the world.

Intellectual hospitality involves communicating respect for others, inviting them to participate in the conversation, listening without judging and affirming the worth of others even when serious disagreement exists.

Intellectual hospitality is rooted in the virtue of epistemological humility—the belief that our own intellectual powers are finite and that we have much to learn from others. Epistemological humility is not a natural thread of the fabric of the Academy, the Church or contemporary society (polarizing political debate). To quote Margaret Wheatley again, “We weren’t trained to admit we don’t know. Most of us were taught to sound certain and confident, to state our opinion as if it were true. We haven’t been rewarded for being confused or for asking more questions rather than giving answers.”

But the 21st century is rife with complex problems—global, religious, ideological and cultural conflicts, terrorism, famine, poverty, technological advances that bring new ethical challenges. The acquisition of knowledge requires the mere click of a mouse but the quality and credibility of that information continues to deteriorate. Academicians and people of faith need to exhibit epistemological humility as they reflect on salient questions, and as they pursue their vocations as scholars.

In his wonderful book on Academic Life, our colleague John Bennett reminded us that the quest for knowledge and truth will never be completely satisfied, “no single position is exhaustive—all positions and arguments are subject to revision and correction and expansion. But this is not an argument for relativism or the abandonment of standards. It is an argument for rigor, but hospitably, rather than negatively construed.”

The perspective of intellectual hospitality possesses serious implications for our scholarship, our teaching, and our administration. Rather than espousing certitude, intellectually hospitable scholars willingly make themselves vulnerable to critique or even attack. The primary
goal of their scholarship is to achieve increased understanding, not persuasion. Intellectually hospitable scholars believe that they have something worthwhile to communicate across personal, disciplinary, cultural, religious, and ideological boundaries, but they know that communicating across those boundaries will likely alter, challenge, enrich, and animate their scholarship.

Henri Nouwen has argued that intellectual and spiritual hospitality is essential to Christian education. I think this idea can be extended to all religious education. Professors need to create a “fearless place where there is an articulated encouragement to enter discussions seriously and personally.” He further explained, “more important than the imposition of any doctrine or pre-coded idea is to offer the students the place where they can reveal their great human potential to love, to give and to create, and where they can find the affirmation that gives them the courage to continue their search without fear.” The fearless space will be affirming but it will also be confrontational. True education calls for the sharing of differences. True education changes and transforms both the teacher and the student.

It is important to make the distinction that hospitality is not tolerance born out of frustration or resignation.Intellectual hospitality acknowledges the interdependence and the importance of community formation. Scott Moore of Baylor University explained the difference between tolerance and hospitality. Tolerance means, “we are willing to put up with you.” Hospitality means, “we are willing to put you up”—to have you in our “homes”—discussing what we disagree about. Hospitality does not require the compromise of one’s beliefs or the lack of genuine appreciation for the beliefs of others; hospitality requires genuine, empathic understanding that goes beyond mere civility. We need to reflect on how to teach students to develop empathic skills just as we seek to develop their analytical and writing skills.

As we return to our homes let us reflect on how much of our teaching, scholarship, and service is characterized or influenced by the perspective of intellectual hospitality—a concept rooted in Christian teaching and a legitimate means of research and inquiry. We have an individual and corporate responsibility to serve as role models of intellectual hospitality to our campuses and organizations, to the Church, and to the Academy.

**Demonstrating Supportive Leadership**

Finally, promoting conversation and practicing hospitality cannot be facilitated without supportive leadership. The creation of organizational and campus cultures that nurture conversation and exhibit intellectual hospitality requires the vision and support of formal and informal organizational leaders. Policies and protocols need to be established and maintained that aid and encourage the development of scholarship and community. Reward systems and promotion and tenure policies need to reflect and honor individual differences, interests, and giftedness of faculty (or other colleagues) in addition to valuing all of the different scholarly disciplines and methodologies.

Leaders must demonstrate their support for inclusive conversation by financially sponsoring opportunities for faculty and colleagues to talk together—to share their questions, research, and experiences. Leaders must act as role models. Leaders must collaborate with colleagues to create and sustain institutional rituals and celebrations that focus on the communal nature of learning and acknowledge that we are a community of learners.

Returning to John Bennett again: he described the role of the president in creating an inclusive, hospitable campus climate. I believe this description is applicable to all of us as we fulfill formal and informal leadership roles: “visions in universities are not manufactured, they are harvested. The president’s role is to take the lead in cultivating an institutional climate where openness, mutual respect, and the release of creative energies are valued as acts of leadership in themselves.”

What can we do to harvest that kind of vision on our campuses? Our leadership responsibilities extend beyond the borders of our campuses and organizations. We must meet the challenge of helping our broader constituency—the Church, the Academy, and society—understand that faith has a critical role in the Academy and that role is not one of limiting what issues can be discussed or who is able to address them. The role of faith in the Academy is one of learning and articulating how faith influences our understanding of theory and our practice in the context of a complex, chaotic, and often confused 21st century world. To fulfill that role, leaders will need to exhibit patience and courage; they will need to become “multilingual” as they seek to explain their institutional missions to different constituencies.

**Conclusion**

Former Louisiana State University Chancellor Grady Bogue penned these words about the Academy:

“[The Academy] . . . is a forum of fact and faith. It is the home of our hope, where scholars labor to solve those problems that rob men and women of their dignity, their promise . . . It is the theater of our artistic impulses...It is a forum where dissent over purpose and performance may be seen as evidence that higher education is meeting its responsibility for asking what is true, what is good, and what is beautiful. It is a place where all in the community—students, faculty, staff—are called to ask what brings meaning to their lives and makes them glad to be alive. It is, above all, a community in which we celebrate the humanizing force of our curiosity and wonder, a place for dreamers of the day.”

May we return to our classrooms and our offices inspired by our common conversation, renewed by our common commitments, energized by our common calling, and dedicated to facilitating a conversation that nurtures not only our own dreams for Christian scholarship but the dreams of our colleagues and students.

Kim Phipps was recently inaugurated as the eighth president of Messiah College. She also teaches the college Sunday school class at the Grantham Brethren in Christ Church, where she and her family are members.
Getting to Yes on a Building Plan

Three plans and 15 years later, the Grantham Brethren in Christ Church finally moved into a new facility in 1998. Soon after the first building plan was developed in the mid 1980s to expand the existing facility on the campus of Messiah College where the church had been located for many years, a new person joined the pastoral staff. This person looked at the plan and asked what in retrospect seems like an obvious question: “What is your vision for the church and how will the building addition help you achieve the vision?” Apparently no one was able to answer the question, and that plan was scrapped or put on hold.

Many discussions and board meetings later, a second building plan was developed and unveiled to the congregation and approved by a majority vote in a council meeting; a capital campaign began to raise the money needed for the building. At the same time, there was a fair amount of dissension about the plan. Some felt the church should have more seriously considered moving off campus and establishing more of a community identity; some did not like the plan because of the size of the sanctuary being proposed; some objected to the cost. And some felt the plan had been “railroaded” through by leadership without enough congregational input into decision-making. Sides were taken, and charges launched by one side against another. To their credit, church leadership recognized the unhealthy atmosphere, and sponsored a mediation process with an outside consultant. While this was helpful, the issues were not really resolved, and fundamental disagreement persisted. Finally, another congregational vote was taken, which stopped the process and sent church leaders back to the drawing board (literally and figuratively).

In the meantime, the college was doing its own planning, and projected a time when the parking area around the church building would for all practical purposes be inaccessible by car. This circumstance turned out to be the catalyst needed to crack the stalemate the church had been experiencing. The congregation was finally able to agree in a near-unanimous vote to move off campus. Graciously, the college offered the church a parcel of land immediately off campus. The next step was to develop a new building plan for a brand new building.

To do this, the church engaged an architect whose specialty is working with churches in a participatory design process. For a church where the culture demands inclusive processes for decision-making, this was just what we needed. Several “design” sessions were held, to which the whole church was invited. Small groups worked to design their ideal building, based on a vision of the possibilities for ministry in the community. The group as a whole then voted on the favorite design, which was then taken by the architect to be developed into an actual building proposal. Subsequent decisions about the plan were made with much greater unanimity than before. As the building went up, church members helped as appropriate to contain costs.

One Sunday in June 1998, the entire congregation started the morning worship service in the old church on campus and then walked en masse to the new building off campus to conclude the service. Due to the combination of individual contributions to the capital campaign, the building fund already accumulated during previous years and the earlier aborted capital campaign, and the college’s generosity, within three years the church was debt-free. (It should be noted that a significant part of the college’s generosity was their purchase of the old church, now known as Hostetter Chapel.)

The final result—a new building enthusiastically supported and completely debt-free—was truly something to celebrate, given how long it had taken to get to that point. While this successful outcome came about partly because of circumstances that forced the church to act decisively, as well as the college’s generosity, it is also a tribute to the way a congregation worked through an issue that could have split the church.

Just recently in a church board discussion, reference was made to the Grantham Church’s tendency to want to process everything endlessly, and how people want to feel like they have been involved in making decisions. We joked again about the downsides of “paralysis by analysis” and how it took 15 years and three plans to finally build a building. While sometimes we might wish it would be easier to make decisions more quickly, without all the time it takes to process ideas and opinions, we also recognize and celebrate the investment that people have in the way we do church and their desire to be actively involved. In the long run, the church has been well-served by its commitment to inclusive decision-making processes.

Reported by Harriet Bicksler, Grantham Church board secretary through eight of the 15 years it took to get a building, and back again in that role for the past four years.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Not all problems are spiritual

I am always reluctant to write letters to the editor but after reading Melissa Rorabaugh Heise’s letter (Summer 2005), I wanted to commend her for both her honesty and her courage. I am not a health care professional, but I’ve lived long enough to be firmly convinced that not all our problems are spiritual. I’ve seen depression raise its ugly head too often to assume there are simple solutions. I just finished reading Dr. Paul Brand’s book, *In His Image*, and I’m absolutely amazed at how the body works/functions. Thankfully, great strides are being made in understanding that intricate balance. Thanks for your good work.

Marian Sisco, Palmyra, PA
Using Logic to Discuss Controversial Issues

Randy Basinger, new provost and former philosophy professor at Messiah College, has regularly taught an adult Sunday school class at the Grantham Church for 20 years. As a philosopher, he thinks carefully, and prefers logical lines of thought that lead to logical conclusions. He is interested in helping people understand the process of thought that leads them to believe as they do. He also has an uncanny ability to make the lofty topics of philosophy and logic accessible to ordinary people in the pew, and to lead discussions that value everyone’s opinions. He has often said that teaching the class gives him an opportunity to test ideas; in turn, class members are challenged to think carefully about many important contemporary issues.

This fall, Randy has been teaching a class about homosexuality, using logic as his approach. There could hardly be a more controversial issue than homosexuality in our society, even in a church that believes that “Human sexuality is affirmed within the chaste single life or a life-long marriage between a man and a woman” (Articles of Faith and Doctrine of the Brethren in Christ Church). As Christians, we need to understand why we believe as we do, and what assumptions and beliefs we bring to discussions of issues like homosexuality. It is also important to be able to develop arguments that are internally consistent, and don’t involve leaps of logic or faulty conclusions. Randy’s approach is helpful in that regard.

On the first Sunday, Randy presented the class with a true-false questionnaire soliciting beliefs about homosexuality. A sampling of the statements: “All homosexual activity is wrong.” “The best of scientific evidence seems to suggest that a person’s sexual orientation is biologically determined.” “People cannot be held responsible for their sexual orientation.” “Whatever the Bible teaches is true and should be obeyed.” “The current debate over homosexuality is similar to the past debate over the abolition of slavery and civil rights (or the debate over the ordination of women).” After class members wrote down their choice of whether these statements are true or false, Randy led the class through them one and one. Individuals were invited to explain their answers, identify the clarity or lack thereof of the statement, or express their ambivalence about the statement.

The next week, Randy taught a lesson in “Homosexuality and Logic.” His brief “Logic 101” lesson answered the following questions:

- What is an argument?
- What is a successful argument?
  - Valid: there is a logical connection between premises and the conclusion
  - Sound: the argument is valid and the premises are true
- What do we assume when we present an argument to another person?
- What can we hope to accomplish when we argue?
- Why don’t arguments we employ don’t always convince others?
- How is logical analysis useful for moral and theological debates?

He then led us through six different arguments related to homosexuality in which certain premises (the statements from the true-false questionnaire from the previous week) logically led to certain conclusions. Two examples:

1. The Bible clearly teaches that all homosexual activity is morally wrong. Whatever the Bible teaches is true and should be obeyed. Therefore, all homosexual activity is morally wrong.

2. There is good scientific evidence that a person’s sexual orientation is biologically determined. There is good scientific evidence that a person’s sexual orientation cannot be changed. What is there any good scientific evidence for ought to be believed. Therefore, sexual orientation is something that people do not freely choose. People can only be held morally responsible for what they can freely choose. Therefore, people cannot be held responsible for their sexual orientation.

In subsequent weeks, Randy led the class in thinking about various characteristics of people, like taste in clothing or music, speaking accent, alcoholism, personality style, right or left-handedness, schizophrenia, and hair color. The class was asked to think about whether these are chosen states, whether they are biologically and/or environmentally caused, whether the person is responsible for the characteristic, whether the resulting “dysfunction” is less than ideal, whether the person could choose to change the characteristic, and whether the person should try to change or correct the characteristic. Interesting discussion ensued, as you can imagine, especially as the class tried to push the analogies between lefthandedness and homosexuality, for example, to their logical conclusions. While the analogies often led in uncomfortable directions, they were helpful in naming some of the questions that need to be resolved relating to homosexuality. To what extent does environment influence sexual orientation? To what extent does biology influence sexual orientation? Can we act in opposition to our orientation? Can we change our sexual orientation?

For two different sets of answers to those questions, Randy relied on two books that approach the topic from differing perspectives, What God Has Joined Together: A Christian Case for Gay Marriage, by David Myers and Letha Dawson Scanzoni, and Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church’s Moral Debate, by Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse. He then asked, “So what? What are the moral implications of any scientific or empirical analysis?” Specifically, how do we answer these three questions:

- Why do most “conservatives” emphasize choice and the ability to change one’s orientation?
- Why do most “liberals” emphasize biological determinism and the inability to change one’s orientation?
- What logically follows from these scientific claims? How does the scientific debate inform the moral debate?

As this goes to press, the class continues. Since we are part of a church that clearly states its position on homosexual behavior, class members are inclined to place more weight on the side of the debate that concludes that “there is nothing persuasive in the scientific research that, properly understood, would compel biblical Christians to desert the historic and monolithic teaching of the church from scripture that homosexual conduct is immoral” (Jones and Yarhouse). But our thinking is also clarified as we examine the arguments on the other side. Class discussion has been civil and respectful; it is okay to ask questions, wonder out loud, or poke holes in arguments on either side that seem shaky. Because the approach to the issue is based on logic, some of the emotional impact is diffused, making it easier to discuss a difficult topic.

Reported by Harriet Bicksler, editor, who has enjoyed Randy’s Sunday school classes for all the years he has been teaching them!
Uncommon Decency: Where Conviction and Civility Coexist

By Lois Saylor

In a call to engage the world with Christian principles, morals, and belief, Richard J. Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, also calls Christians to do so with a studied and purposeful civility. In his opening chapter of his book, Uncommon Decency, he writes, “We need to find a way of combining a civil outlook with a ‘passionate intensity’ about our convictions. The real challenge is to come up with a convicted civility.” President Mouw is asking us to play nice, but not by letting the bullies on the playground silence us or by watering down our convictions to please them.

With this opening one might expect an outline of six or eight or even ten principles that the book would explore so that readers could walk away with a checklist of memorable and do-able guidelines when engaging the world. Not so. The book is not organized in such an overtly usable way. But whether you are about to enter a formal debate, a controversial Sunday school class, or just the world at large, like work or social gatherings or secular boards, there are some principles to be gleaned from the book.

The first principle might be titled “Respect.” Dr. Mouw insists we view those with other belief systems, “the other,” as God’s creation. All are made in the image of God and his Son died for them and wants them to experience salvation. We must never reduce another person to being empty and willing to be filled with whatever happens to come along. It is a thoughtful openness that weighs opinions and beliefs in light of scripture and revelation. “The other” may have some truth too, and since all truth is God’s, it is OK to learn truth from someone who is not promoting Christianity.

Openness as a principle also allows for valid relationships when we truly listen. Our openness could lead to reciprocal openness to the truth we proclaim. But, Mouw warns, openness is not a ruse or a technique just to get the other person to listen, a quid pro quo. It must be sincere or else we can not learn and that is the goal.

Another principle might be labeled “Freedom.” Mouw reminds us that God values human freedom. He created us with freedom for them to do so. We also give up the need to “win,” as God is a God who works SLOWLY. We can be civil because our human counterpoints are not demons that need to be exorcised and not enemies to triumph over. They are sinners like us that we are to love. If they “get the best of us” in some human forum—a political vote, a staged debate, a board meeting decision—our response is not hurt pride or retaliatory contingencies; we just keep running the race that is set before us and do it with a “convicted civility.”

Another principle might be called “Openness.” The book calls Christians to not be so arrogant in their convictions as to think they have nothing new to learn. We should be open to others, listening, and learning from what their lives and belief systems say to them. In this way we may find common ground, learn who “the other” is, what they believe, and we may even change some of our convictions.

This comes, of course, with the caution that being open is not the same as being empty and willing to be filled with whatever happens to come along. We worship a God that works in slow stages. We can be civil because we are living “in the time of God’s patience.” We too need to have patience as we engage our culture. God does not strike down the “bad guys” in what we would consider a timely fashion. In fact, he is being patient with them and so should we.

As we engage, we approach “the other” in our society with respect for them, feeling fully our own humility. We retain openness to understanding who they are and what they believe and grant a freedom for them to do so. We also give up the need to “win,” as God is a God who works SLOWLY. We can be civil because our human counterparts are not demons that need to be exorcised and not enemies to triumph over. They are sinners like us that we are to love. If they “get the best of us” in some human forum—a political vote, a staged debate, a board meeting decision—our response is not hurt pride or retaliatory contingencies; we just keep running the race that is set before us and do it with a “convicted civility.”

Antioch in Harrisburg

By Patrick Cicero

Creating space for dialogue on difficult issues? I have to confess that I am not very good at this sort of thing. It’s not that I do not like to discuss difficult issues. I am a poverty lawyer which means that I confront “difficult” everyday. To be honest, I love nothing more than talking until I am blue in the face about all things debatable. This trait, while useful in the courtroom, often frustrates my wife and family.

As a lawyer, I was trained to ask probing, rhetorical questions that seldom have answers but are designed more to frustrate a witness than to elicit useful information. It is difficult for me to turn this off when I leave work, especially when I find myself in an argument. Obviously, this style of questioning does not amount to genuine communication and does nothing to resolve a dispute in a marriage, a friendship or in the church. To be quite honest, it does very little to resolve disputes in court or during settlement negotiations either. This adversarial system often leaves the parties – the ones with the actual dispute – frustrated, drained and unsatisfied, while it leaves the attorneys energized, satisfied and a bit richer. It fosters an atmosphere where tearing the other side down, “telling your side of the story,” and “getting what you deserve” is more important than resolving disputes. Too often our legal system amounts to nothing more than a forum for a monologue on difficult issues. Thankfully, as Christian church we have another model: Antioch.

The Book of Acts is my favorite book of the Bible. This is partly because it reads like a good novel. There are scandals, miracles, martyrs and villains. Nothing intrigues me more, however, than the manner by which the early church settled its disputes, especially those involving delicate issues like racism and the distribution of resources within a community. As the church in Antioch grew, it became increasingly diverse. Acts 6 sets the stage for what could have been a dispute that tore the community in two. Greek-speaking Jews began complaining that the Hebrew-speaking Jews were unfairly discriminating against Greek-speaking widows in the daily distribution of grain.

In modern terms, this was tantamount to a charge of racism within the church. The Greek-speaking Jews claimed that their widows were being treated unfairly for no other reason than that they were Greek-speaking, rather than Hebrew. What did the apostles do? Well, they didn’t do what many of our churches do when confronted with similar issues. As far as we know from the text, they didn’t have an intervention where each side could air its grievances, exchange hugs, shed tears and promise to do better the next time. They did not use coercion or castigate the Hebrew-speaking Jews for their insensitivity and bias. They didn’t criticize the Greek-speaking Jews for being too sensitive and making what was a mere oversight into a “race issue.” I like to think that the apostles did not do any of these because they were so full of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2) that they were listening to the heart of God.

Their uncommon wisdom produced what I believe is a divine dispute resolution model. They listened to the concerns addressed by the aggrieved group, gathered the believers together to pray, and selected a different group to distribute the food. What is remarkable is that the group selected – seven men who were “full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” – were all Greek-speaking Jews. To me this demonstrates the fact that they not only listened to concerns of the minority, but they also heard these concerns. This is essential for creating a safe place for dialogue on difficult issues. We too often create spaces for people to simply listen to each other’s grievances, when what we need to do is create spaces so we can hear each others’ stories, concerns and fears. We are trying to do this at the Harrisburg Brethren in Christ Church as we attempt to further our church’s vision of being a racially reconciled community.

Ours is an urban congregation that is becoming increasingly multi-ethnic. If you look around our sanctuary on Sundays, you will see peoples of all hues and ethnicities worshipping together. We are not satisfied, however, merely being multi-ethnic in appearance; rather we want to get to a place where we can genuinely claim to be racially reconciled with one another. This requires that those of us who are white to acknowledge the harsh reality of continued discrimination and racism within the structures of our society, including our churches. It also requires us to acknowledge the invisible knapsack of white privilege that each carries and that confers subtle and intangible benefits such as not being followed around a store when browsing for a CD. It requires the people of color within our congregation to acknowledge their own prejudices about so called “white people.” Dialogue on these issues requires a commitment to something that this bigger than each individual’s concerns or hurts.

To foster this sort of dialogue many of us in the congregation have read Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice’s book, More than Equals, and participated in small groups. These groups tended not to focus on the issue of race per se, but rather as it affected each of the members of the group, both black and white. We spend time hearing each others’ stories, concerns and fears. We spend time trying to envision what a racially reconciled church would look like. We know that we don’t want to be a white church, a black church, a Hispanic church or a Guyanese church. We want to find a different way. We want to be a body that is reconciled with God and each other. Thus far, this process has not been divisive, not because we are not dealing with difficult issues, but because we have been committed to spending time and resources hearing each other. While the process has not been perfect and we have a long way to go, we have tried to use the model of the church in Antioch as our guide.

Patrick Cicero lives in Harrisburg, Pa with his wife Helena and their son Jack. Among other things, he is a member of Harrisburg BIC and a staff attorney at MidPenn Legal Services, a nonprofit agency providing civil legal assistance to low income persons throughout Central Pennsylvania.
Preaching Peace in a World at War: A Case Study

By Eric A. Seibert

This past Spring, Woody Dalton and I had the privilege of leading a series of one day Impact Seminars titled “Preaching Peace in a World at War.” They were offered in several locations corresponding to the various regional conferences of the BIC Church in North America. The seminar was specifically designed for pastors, to encourage them to preach on peace regularly and to equip them to do so more effectively, but it was also open to others. As the brochure stated, “Others interested in peace issues will also find the seminar helpful in knowing how to approach these topics in a way that . . . speaks peace in love and respect for others with varying points of view.” In other words, the seminar was designed to help people talk about a controversial issue without alienating friends or creating enemies!

Based on the verbal and written feedback given to Woody and me, we sensed the seminar was very well received. I think there are several reasons which can account for this. For starters, the seminar was intentionally designed to allow significant time for questions and discussion. After the sermons and each teaching segment, participants were invited to respond. Creating time and space for questions and comments is absolutely crucial when dealing with controversial issues, especially when these are being discussed in a group setting. People need to have the opportunity to raise questions, seek clarification, and offer alternate points of view.

Another important factor in the “success” of the seminar was the simple fact that Woody and I tried to practice what we preached. While both Woody and I have strong convictions about the importance of peace and its centrality to the gospel, we tried not to beat peace into people! Instead, we attempted to deal sensitively with this issue and encouraged participants to be sensitive when dealing with this issue in their congregation. At one point during the day, we discussed some practical “do’s and don’ts” of preaching peace such as “Don’t condemn those who disagree with your position” and “Don’t preach peace violently.” When preaching about peace, it is very important that the means are consistent with the ends.

“One of the highlights of each seminar was a sermon Woody preached on the sixth commandment, “You shall not kill.” Before beginning the sermon, Woody told us this was a sermon he previously preached at the Harrisburg BIC Church and shared with us how he framed the sermon in that setting. Before beginning the sermon, Woody told the congregation that he realized what he was about to say would be new for some people, and he invited them to talk with him if anything they heard was confusing or upsetting. At the end of the sermon, he made the same offer. That kind of invitational approach is very disarming and creates space for people to consider ideas they might find threatening or unsettling. At the end of the sermon, he made the same offer. That kind of invitational approach is very disarming and creates space for people to consider ideas they might find threatening or unsettling.

For all those readers who participated in one of these seminars, I offer my thanks. It was a privilege to participate in this series of peaceful conversations about peace! May many more follow.

Eric Seibert is a member of the Grantham Brethren in Christ Church, and Woody Dalton is senior pastor of the Harrisburg Brethren in Christ Church.

EDITOR’S NOTES

2006 subscription campaign

Early in 2006, you should receive a letter inviting you to renew your subscription to Shalom! Because we are self-funding, we rely on your subscription renewals and extra contributions to continue publishing Shalom! The balance from 2004, added to your contributions in 2005 total $7,231 in income, and the current balance in our account is $2,926 (which does not include expenses for this edition). We very much appreciate your support and generosity, and hope you will continue in the new year.

Proposed topics for 2006:

- Winter 2006, Gender Issues
- Spring 2006, Displaced Persons Around the World
- Summer 2006, The Church, Globalization and Technology
- Fall 2006, Advocating for Peace