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The Promise and Perils of the Public Dialogue Movement: The Politics of Recognition, Redistribution, and Representation

Abstract

The struggle for mutual recognition and respect of difference is seen by many people as the paradigmatic form of public conflict in the U.S. and around the globe today, wherein cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious conflicts fuel violent enmity between diverse groups. In recent years, a movement and broad community of practice has emerged, using strategies that bring persons and groups together across sharp divides to engage in public dialogue aimed to reduce polarizing conflict, and foster mutual understanding. This paper introduces the public dialogue movement and the need for it, and draws on political theorist Nancy Fraser’s framework of justice-making, and selected concepts from liberation theology, to critically assess its promise and perils.

Introduction

In his older and widely acclaimed book Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation, Miroslav Volf writes, “It may not be too much to claim that the future of our world will depend on how we deal with identity and difference. The issue is urgent. The ghettos and battlefields throughout the world—in the living rooms, in inner cities, or on the mountain ranges—testify indisputably to its importance.” Though written two decades ago, the book’s concerns are ever more pressing today.

In this first section, I utilize empirical research to briefly depict the divides between persons and groups that appear to be most salient in the U.S. today, on the theological conviction that where the social groans and pain of people is most acute, we are assured to find the healing and reconciling presence of God at work, and are given a generous share in it.

To begin with, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reports that from 2011 to 2015, nearly half of all hate crimes in the U.S. were motivated not by religious prejudice (as widely assumed) but rather by racial prejudice—with crimes against Hispanics ahead of those against Blacks and Whites. Next in ranking, a third of hate crimes targeted victims because of their ethnicity, or their gender, followed by persons victimized on account of their sexual orientation. Approximately one in six hate crimes were motivated by bias against the victim’s religion, and one in six against disability. The Bureau evinces that more than half of all hate crimes against the aggregate of protected groups go unreported.

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3 Ibid.
Certain scholars contend that hate crimes, much like lynchings, do not merely victimize particular individuals. Rather, they also serve as an effective means to control entire identity groups through intimidation, fear, and violence. In this manner, such crimes serve both a symbolic and an instrumental function.

While scholarly research on hate crimes has increased, the focus is largely on incidents against racial, religious, and sexual minorities, with less attention given to incidents against Hispanics and other groups as immigrants—likely because immigrants as such are not a protected category in hate crime law. Yet, we know there has been an increase in incendiary “immigrant-as-threat” narratives, wherein immigrants “are portrayed as threatening national security (through their supposed links to terrorist organizations), economic security (by ‘taking’ jobs away from natural-born citizens), and cultural security (by bringing with them different languages, customs, and religions).”

Research shows that increased anti-immigrant sentiment strongly correlates with rises in immigration, and that prejudice and anxiety is often aroused by increased diversity in a given context, suggesting the need for communities not simply to become diverse, but also to use strategies that foster face-to-face friendship and sense of mutuality. This is urgent, inasmuch as the U.S. Census Bureau projects that by 2044 less than half of the U.S. population will be single-race non-Hispanic whites. Already, as of 2015, over half of U.S. babies younger than one year old are racial or ethnic minorities.

The End of White Christian America

Robert Jones, CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), contends—and various researchers corroborate—that the surprising outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election was not primarily about economic anxiety among working class whites, as some narratives suggest, but rather was an epic battle over identity and difference. Essentially, Jones argues, it was the “death rattle” of “white Christian America.” Whereas in 1976, 81 percent of Americans identified as white and Christian, today only 43 percent identify as such. In *The End of White Christian America*, Jones uses the classic iteration of stages of grief to depict the anger, anguish, and fear of cultural displacement being felt by a broad swathe of white Christians, especially conservative evangelicals, as their place of dominance declines in U.S. society.”

Research shows that in the face of rapid demographic shifts and social change, certain groups of people become vulnerable to the politics of fear and of nostalgia, and to nationalistic and authoritarian ideology. In *The Party of Fear*, David Bennett contends that the most persistent

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5 The Hate Crimes Statistics Act specifies that hate crimes are ones “that manifest evidence of prejudice based on race, gender or gender identity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or ethnicity.”


fear in U.S. society has been fear of outsiders. Steven Hahn, historian at New York University, suggests that what is striking today is not the number of organized hate groups (on the rise), but rather the number of ordinary citizens who, aroused by fear and anxiety, are allied with the sentiments of such groups, especially white nationalists. We must not allow attention given to direct acts of violence (i.e. hate crimes) to eclipse concern for forms of “slow violence” that permeate our society—inflicted, for example, by hateful and demeaning stereotypes and incendiary rhetoric, which make acts of direct violence thinkable in the first place.

**Partisan Divides**

A study conducted by Pew Research Center confirms empirically what many Americans observe and experience personally—namely that U.S. society is more intensely polarized along cultural, political, ideological, and generational lines than at any point in a quarter century, and public discourse is more acrimonious. Ideological differences across generations—on issues including immigration and border regulation, treatment of LGBT persons, the role of government, the social safety net, the environment, reproductive rights, and other concerns—have created deeper than ever divides between the political parties, and divides within the Republican party in particular. Paul Taylor of Pew contends that hyperpartisanship is “arguably the most powerful force in twenty-first century American politics.” It is, he notes, “a by-product of the many new ways Americans are sorting themselves—by ideology, age, race, ethnicity, wealth, gender, education, religion, immigrant status, neighborhood—into silos that align with their party affiliation.”

Surveys by Pew reveal that partisan antipathy is deeper and wider than ever, and that U.S. political parties see no common ground between them. The majority of both parties harbor fear and anger toward the other, and say its policies threaten the nation’s wellbeing. The antipathy spills over from the political realm into everyday life. Recently, a popular author in religion commented on Facebook that she had had an acrimonious exchange with her brother over his support for President Trump; her brief post ended with, “I no longer have a brother.”

As Reinhold Niebuhr once contended, “Whenever the followers of one political party persuade themselves that the future of the nation is not safe with the opposition in power, it becomes fairly certain that the nation’s future is not safe, no matter which party rules. For such public acrimony endangers the nation’s health more than any specific policies.”

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12 Ibid., 2.
“And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19)

I contend that in the face of all the toxic forms of social division, the wellbeing of our nation, and our global community, depends on the church committing itself to more robust public presence and public witness to our Creator’s dream and promise of peaceable, equitable, and interdependent creaturely flourishing, including our Earth Home. By the church I mean all faith traditions, including Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and others working collaboratively in the public square on endeavors of reconciliation and justice-making, bringing persons and groups into transformational relational encounters.

Over against the seeming triumph of incivility and mutual contempt, as James Davis asserts “we need counter-indicators, counter-movements that push our public culture in more virtuous, respectful, and constructive directions.” If Parker Palmer is correct, the impulse toward such a virtuous direction lies within us, ripe to be harvested for “healing the heart of democracy.” As Palmer asserts,

Within us is a yearning for something better than divisiveness, toxicity, passivity, powerlessness…Within us is the courage to pursue that yearning, to hold life’s tensions consciously, faithfully, and well, until they break us open. The broken-open heart is a source of power as well as compassion…We can access and deploy that power by doing what every great social movement has done: put time, skill, and energy into the education and mobilization of the powers of the heart.

I suggest that one counter-movement pushing our public culture in respectful directions and mobilizing “powers of the heart” is the public dialogue and deliberation movement. Over the past several decades, numerous streams of practice in public dialogue emerged at the grassroots level, often without practitioners being aware of what was similarly happening elsewhere. Slowly, a nascent and disjointed field of practice has coalesced into a coherent movement and field of inquiry, and vital community of practice. This is positioned in well over half a century of educational, religious, and social science efforts to generate and apply knowledge about promoting constructive interaction between groups with a history of conflict. Interreligious dialogue is part of this history.

Today, the practice of public dialogue draws guidance from, and generates research questions for, a family of interrelated fields of inquiry, including intergroup relations, intergroup conflict theory, intergroup contact theory, intergroup dialogue (IGD), social psychology, peace studies, and others. In 2013, the Journal of Dialogue Studies was launched (in the UK) as a multidisciplinary, blind peer-viewed academic journal, with the aim to contribute towards establishing “dialogue studies” as a distinct academic field. The Journal understands dialogue “to consist of meaningful interaction and exchange between people (often of different social, cultural, political, religious or professional groups) who come together through various kinds of conversations or activities with a view to increased understanding.”

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15 James Calvin Davis, “Civil Character and the Church’s Public Ministry,” Eerdword, August 30, 2017.

Though practitioners and theorists use different terminology, techniques, and conceptual frameworks, the endeavors bring persons and groups together in structured public settings to engage in truly civil dialogue, in efforts to help heal enmity, reduce prejudice, foster mutual understanding, and cultivate the common good. Practitioners seek to create inclusive, safe space so that everyone who shows up can tell their story and share their identity and convictions—and be heard and understood, even if not agreed with. Theologically seen, civil dialogue is a concrete way to affirm and honor the image of God even in persons and groups with whom we vehemently disagree. As Robert Stains notes, “…healing dialogue invites people to stand in a place of honor in the identities that matter most to them (race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc.) and that they feel have been maligned. Participating in a dialogue may be the first time someone has had a conversation with people of different identities that does not begin with making someone wrong because of who they are.”

Many of the models are based, in part, on the premises of intergroup contact, demonstrated to be an effective way to help groups resolve and reconcile conflict of all kinds, and achieve mutual understanding. The seeds of this approach, known as Intergroup Contact Theory, are rooted in Gordon Allport’s The Nature of Prejudice (1954). Though Allport theorized certain conditions for intergroup encounter to be beneficial, a massive meta-analysis conducted by T. F. Pettigrew and associates of well over 500 empirical studies found that all that is needed to promote mutual understanding between groups is social contact, period.”

Certain conditions may facilitate and optimize positive outcomes, but not be absolutely necessary.

It is important to note that mere proximity is not the same thing as direct intergroup contact, which refers to and involves actual face-to-face encounter between members of different groups. It is not enough that institutions, communities, and congregations become diverse; there needs to be face-to-face interaction among diverse members. Without this, increased diversity may have the unintended effect of arousing anxiety. The more we cultivate meaningful dialogue and relationships across groups, the more likely it is the contact will reduce prejudice and animosity.

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How and Why Does Intergroup Contact Work?

Empirical studies reveal three key mediators which show that social contact works by (1) reducing the role of perceived threat, and of anxiety about encountering the diverse other; (2) increasing empathy for the lived experience and concerns of the outgroup, and fostering perspective-taking; and (3) enhancing knowledge about the other. While Pettigrew’s meta-analysis indicates the mediational effects of all three mechanisms, the increase of cognitive knowledge about the outgroup appears to be less strong as a factor than empathy, perspective-taking, and threat reduction. Group-oriented perceived threat refers to perceptions and fears that the outgroup poses a threat to one’s values and belief system, or one’s culture, or one’s political and economic power. Quality of contact can reduce the sense of threat and anxiety. Empathy refers to the capacity to understand and share another person’s feelings and put oneself in another’s shoes. It is elicited through hearing the stories, sufferings, perspectives, and situations of people once regarded as threats. Empathy “makes group membership salient by reminding people of the experiences a person has as a member of an outgroup.”21 The increase in empathy and perspective-taking operates to diminish prejudice, fear, and anger toward outgroups. Stereotypes are replaced with empathic perceptions of fellow human beings who have legitimate concerns and fears.

Pettigrew further found that the positive effects of intergroup contact emerge not only for religious, racial, and ethnic groups for whom the original theory was developed, but also for other, often stigmatized groups, such as homosexuals, the disabled, and the mentally ill.”22 All in all, affective and relational factors—rather than cognitive ones—turn out to be the major mediators in reducing conflict, fear, and hostility between groups.

Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD)

While intergroup contact can happen in varied ways, the focus here is on intentional, face-to-face dialogue in structured settings, including group dialogue, as in the Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) and Circle of Trust approaches, and intergroup dialogue (IGD) as especially practiced on college and university campuses wherein, in many cases, the lens of critical theory or critical race relations is added.23 Inasmuch as Reflective Structured Dialogue is both a representative and widely influential approach to public dialogue, and one in which I’ve received training, in this section I will depict its basic precepts.”24

While the RSD approach draws on a range of disciplinary areas—including intergroup contact, conflict mediation, interpersonal communications, and neurobiology—it gives special prominence to tools and concepts drawn from the field of family therapy, to where it traces its

24 For an introduction to this model, see Maggie Herzig and Laura Chasin, Fostering Dialogue Across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide From Essential Partners (Cambridge, MA: Essential Partners, 2006). Available online.
original inspiration. The precepts also reflect the influence of regarded theorists of dialogue, such as David Bohm and William Isaacs, among others.

RSD takes at its starting point the power of face-to-face personal storytelling to break down stereotypes, and engender trust and relationships where fear and alienation previously existed. In the RSD approach, dialogue refers to a structured conversation intended to enhance mutual understanding between people who differ deeply about significant and treasured values, identities, convictions, and practices. The process is aimed to disrupt the chronic polarizing cycle of attack and counter-attack. It disallows debating, advice-giving, arguing, fixing, interrupting, criticizing, correcting, or generalizing (“people like you”).

“Reflective” refers to the aim to disrupt habitual knee-jerk reactivity and emotionally hijacked responses that breed acrimony and polarization. Processes are designed to encourage thoughtful speaking, deep listening, and open hearts. “Structured” refers to strategies used to shape interaction, especially carefully crafted questions, and timed go-rounds blended with free-flowing conversation. In a go-round, the facilitator poses a question and indicates how much time each person will have to respond, so they can prepare accordingly. Then the facilitator provides time for participants to pause in silence to collect their thoughts, and perhaps make notes. The facilitator repeats the question and then designates the first speaker who shares within the time parameter given (a cellphone timer can be set with a non-intrusive sound to signal that time is up); then, after a pause, the next person shares. After several timed go-rounds, the facilitator opens up free-flow conversation, inviting participants to contribute in one of several ways, such as noting a point of learning; picking up on a theme or idea and adding to it; noting things that were especially meaningful, surprising, or challenging; asking a particular speaker to clarify or elaborate on something she or he said.

In order to help create a safe space wherein persons can entrust their stories and deepest selves to the group, particular principles are used to guide dialogue sessions, including the following.

Contribute to safe space. At the outset of the dialogue session, facilitators ask participants to articulate what agreements would need to be in place that would help them feel safe enough to speak from the heart, as well as listen deeply to others whose convictions and values are sharply at odds with their own. This includes at least a confidentiality agreement, and a “pass” or “pass for now” agreement.

Reflect, don’t react. Participants are urged to allow what is in them to take shape before giving words to it, and then to speak their own truth, regardless. They are encouraged to slow down, practice mindfulness, and pause between speakers in the group, so that everyone can take in and reflect on what the last speaker said before the next speaker begins.

Speak from the heart; listen from the heart. Rather than speak in theoretical abstraction, or declare and defend a position on the issue at hand, participants are invited to share stories and concrete lived experiences that reflect how they came to hold convictions, values, views, and assumptions that bear on the matter at hand, and to speak from their heart about these things.
Move from “we” to “I.” Individuals are asked to use “I” statements, and speak only for themselves, rather than attempt to represent, explain, or defend members of a particular identity or professional group.

Engage to understand—not persuade or convince. Conversation is not to be used in efforts to debate, persuade, convince, or negotiate. Instead, RSD encourages listening to understand the speaker from within that speakers’s own point of view and life experience.

Narrow the gap between intention and impact. If a listener feels hurt, upset, or offended about something a speaker said, he or she is encouraged to say so openly, but not to make accusations, or impute motives, or leap to assumptions. Participants are told that when they get most frustrated, they need to get most curious. First, as to oneself: “why is this so difficult for me to hear?” And then about the speaker, asking questions such as: “How did you come to believe that; is there a story there?” “Why is that really important to you?” “Do you ever feel conflicted, or have uncertainties or questions?”

Listen with resilience. Deep listening is the heart of dialogue—listening to others, listening to self. Participants are invited to make a commitment to hang in and stay engaged even when it may be tough to listen.

Democratize speaking. Participants are asked to stay within the designated time frames for speaking during the go-grounds—and during free-flowing conversation to share airtime and help ensure equitable access to the “group ear,” and refrain from interrupting others.

Move from certainty to openness. Facilitators design “bivalent” questions aimed to disrupt binary either/or frameworks of thinking that lead to polarized and acrimonious debate. Good dialogue questions encourage people to complexify their thinking about contested issues, and to express both their hopes and their fears, both what they appreciate about a matter and what troubles them about it. This helps participants see people on the other side of an issue as more than one-dimensional, and helps break down caricatures and demeaning stereotypes. Helpful questions to inwardly ask one’s own self include: “Why are you so certain?” “What is leading you to hold on to that perspective?” “What do you fear about letting go?”

An iconic example of the healing, reconciling power of this form of public dialogue was reported in a Boston Globe article on January 28, 2001. In response to the murder of two people by a pro-life and serious injury of several others in women’s health care clinics in Boston, outspoken pro-life and pro-choice advocates began engaging in structured dialogues, meeting eighteen times over the course of six years. They discovered it is possible and liberating to shift one’s own attitude toward opponents instead of trying to shift the opponents’ values and beliefs. On both sides, participants began to see one another not simply as one-dimensional activists for a “cause,” or irrational and malicious agents, but rather as complex fellow human beings who have religious and moral convictions and legitimate concerns that deserve consideration, even if no agreement or common ground ensues.

As another example, in 2012 the Minneapolis Council of Churches convened RSD sessions across the state in response to divisive reactions to a proposed Amendment to Define Marriage. Called the “Respectful Conversations Project,” the purpose was neither to support nor

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oppose the amendment, but rather to bring people together who disagreed in order to reduce public vitriol and foster mutual respect. Since then, 80 public dialogues have been convened on a variety of divisive topics, including racial implications of public statues and public art (as in Charlottesville); Muslims and Christians on border security; Jews and Protestants on Israel/Palestine relations; gun control policy in Minnesota; and other hotly contested issues. Participants reported that attitudes, values, and skills they acquired transfer to other situations, including relations in their workplace and family.

The Paradox and Peril of Public Dialogue

For all its powerful and positive effects, public dialogue may have an ironic downside. There is research evidence that positive intergroup contact, in certain circumstances, leads to the unintended consequence of reducing the motivation of minoritized group members to engage in collective action aimed to reduce institutionalized injustice and intergroup inequalities. Certain studies show that outgroup and minoritized group members with the most positive contact with majorities often indicate the least willingness to work for social change--possibly due to a false sense of conflict resolution and of equality.\(^26\) In this case, the net effect is mere tension-reduction system maintenance. Also, too many people have been taught that in the name of Christian love, one should avoid the messiness of politics, where endeavors may become confrontational and conflictual.

In the public sphere, dialogue across divides is engaged in order to promote civility and understanding as goals, while in religious spheres, dialogue across differences is seen theologically as a means of practicing hospitality and reconciliation. The latter are indeed profound and indispensable ecclesial practices. Yet no matter how theologically robust, they cannot carry the full freight of Christian ethical response to entwined forms of violence and injustice—direct, structural, and cultural—being inflicted on minoritized groups and outgroups in the U.S. today. Neither hospitality nor reconciliation as such, for example, was what ended institutionalized slavery in the U.S. Rather, it was another ancient biblical practice—justice-making. I venture there is biblical warrant to claim that justice-making is a practice so decisive to authentic worship of God that when this practice is absent, other ecclesial practices become domesticated, colonized, self-serving --and hospitality and reconciliation become hollowed out affairs which keep structural arrangements of white and ingroup privilege and power intact. In Hebrew scripture, justice-making has to do with securing a rightly ordered, collective way of life that conforms to God’s own character as the Utterly Just One, and with enacting God’s promised Shalom in all societal spheres—social, cultural, economic, political, and religious.

Jennifer Harvey argues that rather that setting our sights on others who are racially or otherwise different from us and from whom we are alienated—seeing reconciliation of that relationship as primary—we need to set our sights on the sources of alienation, “seeing transformation of unjust structures and disruption of our complicity in those structures as primary in our justice work.”\(^27\) Similarly, Robert Bellah worries that Parker Palmer’s Circle of Trust approach—and by extension, RSD and related models—comes perilously close to the idea


that changing society happens by changing one heart at a time, and that concentrating on individuals and face-to-face groups can inadvertently compound, not challenge, the individualistic approach prevalent in the U.S., in efforts toward structural transformation.\textsuperscript{28}

In the RSD and other models, there is a subtle subtext of stigmatizing public expression of anger and outrage, thereby robbing its epistemological and moral potential. Research evidence suggests that anger and outrage against injustice and inequality is an important source of impetus and energy to sustain the long, slow work of justice-making. In a classic essay, feminist theological ethicist Beverly Harrison insisted that anger is not the opposite of love, but rather a vivid form of caring and connection. We must not, she writes, “lose sight of the fact that all serious human moral activity, especially action for social change, takes its bearings from the rising power of human anger.”\textsuperscript{29} Jeffrey Stout likewise insists, “A democratic republic cannot do without expression of passions such as grief at catastrophic loss and anger at particular instances of domination, injustice, and indifference.”\textsuperscript{30}

With these caveats in mind, I argue that seeking change in social agents and change in social structures are not mutually exclusive endeavors, but rather are dialectically (not linearly) related—and contra Miroslav Volf, both concerns are proper to Christian theology. We need a comprehensive paradigm of social transformation—one that maintains the agency-structure dialectic, and that incorporates but goes beyond the work of respecting and reconciling differences, as sought through public dialogue.

The three-dimensional framework for justice-making iterated by feminist political theorist Nancy Fraser addresses this concern.\textsuperscript{31} Fraser contends that certain groups in the U.S. may suffer three distinct yet interrelated types of injustice: cultural-symbolic, socio-economic, and political exclusion. These dimensions reciprocally influence and reinforce each other; none is reducible to the other. The remediation of these entwined forms of injustice requires a triadic model for the concrete practice of justice-making, with interrelated public endeavors—namely, engagement in what Fraser calls the politics of recognition, of redistribution, and of representation. The politics of recognition has to with addressing cultural matters of identity, difference, diversity, otherness, status, and so on. This is the contribution of the praxis of public dialogue. The politics of redistribution has to do with addressing economic matters—reducing class exploitation, and ensuring equitable access to resources and conditions needed for interdependent flourishing. The politics of representation has to do with addressing political parity—with ensuring that minoritized groups have a seat and collective voice at tables of public decision-making.

For Christians, the practice of justice-making presupposes that believers have all along been engaging together in an ecology of ecclesial practices and means of grace that nurture in them phronesis, i.e. practical wisdom and discernment, and that form them as “social agents

capable of envisioning and creating just, truthful, and peaceful societies.”32 Our identity as agents and beings created in the image and likeness of God means that God’s own Spirit is breathed into us and the whole created order, and is the source of our spiritual-ethical power and agency to engage in justice-making neighbor love—the heart of our baptismal vocation as Christians. The Spirit is the Divine choreographer in justice-making, blowing where it will, even outside the church walls. As Jurgen Moltmann holds, “The hidden presence in world history of the divine justice in God’s Spirit ‘destabilizes’, so to speak, human systems of injustice, and sees to it that they cannot last.”33 This is our hope and our promise.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have wanted to make the case that as religious educators and leaders, we should see ourselves as called upon today—by the “signs of the times”—to widen the bandwidth of our concern for dialogue across divides, and extend the praxis beyond our historic and robust leadership in the field of interreligious dialogue, though of course not forsaking that. After all, one favored account of the etymology of the word religion traces it back to the Latin word *religare* -- re- (again) + ligare (connect, tie), thus to reconnect, to bind fast. Through our tie to God, by God’s own embrace of us, we are tied to all that God creates and loves, and are called to be restorers and repairers and reconcilers when ties get severed, and when dominant groups exclude others, on any basis, from the sphere of equal regard and just relations. Our agenda needs to include not only helping orchestrate public praxis of dialogue across divides—as a dimension of larger justice-making endeavors—but also efforts to theologically ground and reflect upon such praxis, so that we better understand it as an ecclesial practice and theological means of grace wherein God is seen as the initiator and major actor, in whose work in the world we have been given a generous share.

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