

# THE ONE-TO-ONE CONVERSATION

The Common Good happens when we cultivate relationships of mutual respect. A first step towards developing a covenantal culture in our area would involve us as congregations to focus our vocation toward building local relationships. This means getting to know our neighbours in one-to-one conversations. It means loving friendships of reciprocity, and being willing to stand in solidarity when it counts.

On a very practical level, a place to begin would involve taking on practices of commitment and love. It will involve our congregations discerning how we might covenant with our neighbours and other local institutions in our parish or locality in order to generate a renewed civic life.

## SOWING THE SEEDS

Any type of friendly conversation is valuable to start with. But an intentional one-to-one has the potential to lead to transformative relationships: it is different from a meeting with an agenda or a goal to get something. It might require us to hear different viewpoints from those we are used to, but relationships like this help to build bridges of trust and immunise us against tribalism.

Above all, the one-to-one is about listening, knowing that God is present in all things, allowing ourselves to be moved by being with another human being made in the image of God. When we have the honour of hearing each other's stories, we each receive a gift and find recognition. This is a simple and powerful way in which human beings find meaning.

So how do we get started and who will we meet? We can each think about our neighbourhood and where we work. We can ask 'who is missing?' and how many of the people we know are from a different background, class or viewpoint. We can think about who is part of a neighbouring local institution with whom we would like to build links, or perhaps someone from another part of the community who may know things that are in our blind spot.

We decide on who we would like to meet, then approach them suggesting meeting up for tea or coffee, we agree a place and time in an informal setting where we both feel comfortable. We agree to keep the conversation to under an hour and follow the tips below.

## WATCHING THINGS GROW

We may find that something emerges in the one-to-one conversation which we want to pursue. Or we can stay in touch and see what happens. Or we may find the seeds of our conversation bear fruit in subsequent weeks and months. Or we may straightaway see something we can do together now. We may arrange to meet again, or meet with others, or take steps to rebuild a local relationship that has become estranged. We will feel the sense of gratitude for the opportunity to connect and to learn from each other. We may pray together briefly, asking for God's blessing on each other.

### TIPS: a one-to-one conversation is...

- ✓ A focused conversation
- ✓ To hear each other's stories and understand each other's interests
- ✓ 70% Listening
- ✓ To find areas of mutual interest or concern
- ✓ To share your story, your vulnerability, to tell the truth
- ✓ To receive the gift of the other
- ✓ To share what you are involved with, saying how others can be involved, being open to new people and insights
- ✓ To give respect and foster potential for leadership
- ✓ "I love this place"
- ✓ To build your experience and learn about your community
- ✓ About patience, waiting to hear what someone wants to do that is meaningful for them. Trust that a way forward will come.
- ✓ About reciprocity and sharing
- ✓ A conversation that ends with gratitude and agreement to stay in touch and any steps for shared purpose

### it is not...

- ✗ An interview or a chat
- ✗ Prying
- ✗ You talking too much
- ✗ Selling a product or an idea
- ✗ To show off
- ✗ To make your points
- ✗ To recruit for your campaign or project
- ✗ To gather more followers
- ✗ "Let's plant these bulbs!"
- ✗ To impose your great idea
- ✗ To get them to do something or extract information
- ✗ Where one person dominates
- ✗ Driving towards a conclusion

## THE ONE-TO-ONE: A TRULY RADICAL ACT

An individual meeting is a face-to-face, one-to-one meeting, in someone's home or apartment or workplace or local coffee shop, that takes about 30 minutes. The purpose of the meeting is not chitchat, whining, selling, gossip, sports talk, data collection, or therapy. The aim of the meeting is to initiate a public relationship with another person. This may seem so basic and old-fashioned that many of you are wondering what we are talking about here. We are suggesting an approach to others that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Lutheran theologian, described in this way:

*"The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them... Those who cannot listen long and patiently will always be talking past others, and finally will no longer even notice it... The death of the spiritual life starts here... Brotherly pastoral care is distinguished from preaching... by the obligation of listening."*

If the death of the spiritual life starts in 'talking past others', so frequently that you 'finally will no longer even notice it,' then the birth of the spiritual life starts in the individual, one-on-one meeting - in listening to the other person.

Face-to-face meetings are the truly radical acts of effective organising. They are not a slogan or a demonstration; not an email blitz or power point presentation. The commitment to listening to others means that the leaders who initiate them operate on the basis of several important assumptions.

The first assumption is that the other person is worth listening to. The late Bernard Crick described this as having a belief in the affirmative individual - that most people, most of the time, will do the right thing, if given the opportunity.

So the very act of calling someone up and setting up an individual meeting with them, of going to their home or meeting them at a coffee shop and listening to them, of asking them what they think about the community or congregation or country, understanding how they see the future, hearing what hopes and dreams they have, learning where they've come from and how they see themselves five years in the future, is an act of recognition.



You are saying to the other person: you have values, ideas, dreams, plans, lessons, insights that are well worth listening to.

*Recognition is the pre-condition for any ongoing reciprocal working relationship with others. When my late father arrived in the United States, a teenager from the coast of Croatia, the local parish priest in the Croatian parish in Chicago went to his apartment and did an individual meeting with him. Then, every year, for 60 years, until my father died, that priest and his successors paid a yearly visit to our home to sit with my father for a while and then bless our house. This was a banner day in my father's year. The priest was recognising him, listening to him, and bringing the incense and holy water from the church to him. Those priests demonstrated that they believed that my father - bartender, plasterer, security guard, working man - was worth visiting and hearing out. In Christian language, this is how my father learned that others believed he was made in the image and likeness of God.*

The second assumption is that the person initiating the individual meeting - organiser, pastor, veteran leader - understands that the time devoted to individual meetings is more important than time spent in more conventional activities. 'All real living,' said theologian Martin Buber, 'is meeting.' The initiator knows that the new dynamic created by meeting and relating to another person is rich with opportunity and possibility.

*The above is an extract from Effective Organizing for Congregational Renewal by Mike Gecan. We have found this helpful and hope you do too.*

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