



The POWER OF DIALOGUE

By Dale Higginbotham

Dale Higginbotham, VP Fossil Engineering and Support, recently completed the first year of Servant Leadership Development, which includes extensive training in dialogue. Each leader was encouraged to practice these skills at home, at work, and in the community. The following story is a powerful example of how one person by shifting into dialogue can change the collective intelligence and spirit of collaboration of the whole group.

About 4 years ago an ill thought out and poorly communicated initiative to develop a church master plan was started at my local church. Unfortunately, the intention of the plan was perceived to be a secretive plot by some members to relocate the longstanding historic church to a different part of town. Church members became polarized, feelings were hurt and trust was destroyed. It is from this foundation that the following illustration is born.

Following a two year journey of developing and publishing a vision document for the church which spelled out our primary mission and our ministry focus, we took a controversial action as a church to try again to study how our physical structures could support our present and future needs—a master plan. The Trustees Committee is responsible for these types of activities, so they took

the lead in searching for an architect. A subcommittee was formed with the specific intent to involve a broad spectrum of church members, but most importantly to get people who were on both sides of the previously polarized issue. As expected, in the architectural selection process, the subcommittee members remained somewhat polarized with the final selection meeting approaching.

REPLACING ADVOCACY WITH INQUIRY

As a member of the selection subcommittee and having spent time working on dialogue skills I worked with the chair of the subcommittee for us to use these skills during the final selection meeting. The two of us agreed to not take a position during the meeting, but i

instead to simply ask questions of the group.

When all the architectural presentations were complete, one member stated his choice was a very small local firm with little experience in master planning or in church work. He then crossed his arms and leaned back from the table as if to suggest he was through discussing the matter. Almost as quickly another member stated a preference of one of the larger firms experienced with church

master planning. Then a third recommendation was made for another firm. It too was a larger firm with church master planning experience. It appeared that we were headed for our worst case scenario. Then, we began to ask questions.

ASKING QUESTIONS TO GO DEEPER

No one had spoken about the last firm. Would anyone like to offer them up as their recommendation? After some discussion we all agreed that fourth firm was not a fit for our church. Alas, agreement! We asked about the issues that made this group a bad fit for our church. Did any of the remaining recommendations share any of those traits? One person offered up that the first recommended firm was very small and the third recommended firm did not have a process for engaging the congregation into the dialogue as they developed their plan. The value of engaging the congregation had been a previously considered criterion for selection but had not been discussed up to this point. After more dialogue around this important criteria and the value of member involvement given our church history, the person who made the third recommendation withdrew it. The stated reason for withdrawing: they had not considered the value of including church members in the master planning process.

Was there agreement to remove this firm? Two down! Unfortunately, the two remaining had the most support and the committee was fairly evenly divided among these two.

We went back to the first recommendation. What advantages did their sponsor see in the firm being small? The main advantage he saw was the ability to work with the principle architect in the business and not some underling. A younger member of the committee offered up questions regarding the master planning process being the start of a potentially long relationship with this firm. Was it our desire, following the master planning process, to move forward with a multi-year, multi-phase building program? Will our program be limited by his health, his work load on other projects or even his death? The chair of the committee spoke up to state that of the four firms he had had regular contact, the only firm that he had consistently spoken to a principle architect was the large firm which had been recommended second.

EXPLORING BLOCKING ASSUMPTIONS

The discussion moved to advantages of a local firm over one with more church experience but from a larger city. There were a number of points being made in a respectful manner, when the individual that had recommended the local firm spoke up and said he had reconsidered and would like to rescind his recommendation. The reason: he had not thought about or considered the long term nature of the agreement we may be entering. He had focused on a short-



term deliverable and on the personal relationships we would have with the principle architect. It was not until someone asked the long-term question that he saw the situation differently. After another ten minutes of dialogue we unanimously agreed on one firm. The whole process was about 30 minutes. Everyone spoke and most importantly everyone genuinely felt positive about the selection and the process going forward. The first gentleman to make a recommendation turned to the group and said, "I don't know what happened here, but we all saw something different than when we arrived. I never believed we would leave here with a unanimous vote. Incredible!"

This experience showed me the power of dialogue. To my knowledge, the only person in the room of approximately a

dozen people that had had any dialogue exposure was me. With the help of one other willing participant (the chairman of the committee), we were able to keep the focus off of "taking positions" and more on learning. The collective intelligence of the group was tapped revealing a positive outcome with strong support from the team within the congregation.

Since this meeting, the news has been distributed to the church, the Administrative Board unanimously approved the contract and work has begun. It is my hope that this is the beginning of mended relationships and a positive start to productive work for which this church has long been known.