

Pastors have the power to convene conversations

When it comes to addressing local problems, proclamation isn't enough.

by [Derek R. Nelson](#) in the [September 27, 2017](#) issue



Pastors have two kinds of public power: the power of proclaiming and the power of convening. The first of these is usually the default position for pastors wanting to influence political discussion: they preach a sermon taking a stance on a particular issue or express their view in the newspaper. In a similar way, a congregation or denomination may produce a document that states its view on an issue. Such efforts have their place, but they can also be spectacularly ineffective in changing minds or shaping a conversation in the congregation or the community. (After the stunning vote by the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, a Church of England

official was heard to say: “I don’t get it. I mean, we issued our statement last month, and everything!”)

The power of convening does not replace the power of proclamation, but it can complement it. Convening is a way to draw on the expertise of the wider community and help model civil discourse. By virtue of their position in the community, pastors and congregations have the power to host deliberative processes for the sake of the wider community. Few other entities or institutions have comparable power to convene such conversations. It’s hard for political leaders to do so without being or seeming partisan. Business interests don’t want to risk losing customers by raising controversial issues.

Pastors may instinctively think of themselves as accountable only to the congregation that called them, and given that it’s the congregation that pays their salaries, that makes some sense. However, pastors who attend only to the needs of their congregations will soon become isolated from the community of which they are a part, which is bad for both mission and congregational dynamics.

The power of convening is not used nearly as much as it could be to enhance civil society and reach out to non-Christians. This work is especially needed in our partisan, post-truth, post-fact political world, exacerbated by the echo chamber of social media, in which political deliberation is all but impossible.

The goal of convening is to bring together civic leaders of genuine expertise and insight on specific problems. It’s a way for pastors and community members to learn the facts from people who really know about the issues. When care is taken to keep the discussion about facts and social trends, without highlighting a particular solution, pastors will learn a lot. They will also have credibility with their congregations and communities when they raise issues. And civic leaders will come away from such encounters with a renewed sense of the church as a vital part of the community.

I have seen the power of convening because of my work with the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program. The program has focused on helping young pastors dig into the social issues important in their communities, such as education, economic development, health care, and immigration.

For example, a Baptist pastor in the program was concerned about unemployment in his area. He convened a meeting and asked a local expert on vocational-technical

education, a person from the county social service agency, and several human resource administrators at local companies to speak. And he invited the community to attend.

One finding that came out of the meeting was that high addiction rates were a major cause of high unemployment in the area. Employers were actually eager to hire, but they could not find enough workers who could pass the required drug test. Those with criminal records (almost always related in one way or another to substance abuse) also were not employable because their record disqualified them or the conditions of their parole or probation made employment impossible. The 300 or so people who gathered for the event learned that addressing the addiction problem was more important for addressing unemployment than rewriting the tax code or changing the high school curriculum.

In another congregation, a pastor decided to convene a discussion of human trafficking. This congregation had been torn apart recently by tense discussions of same-sex marriage, but members did not have strong feelings about what the church might do about sex trafficking. They were open to learning the facts and thinking of ways to become involved in the issue. The invited speakers included representatives of the Indianapolis police, an adoption and family services agency, a residential treatment facility, and a human trafficking awareness group.

Congregations are God's best idea for the healing of the cosmos.

Those who attended the meeting learned about how severe the problem of human trafficking was in the community and about ways they could help fight the sexual enslavement of their neighbors. As a result, when Indianapolis hosted the Final Four college basketball tournament that year, the congregation partnered with local organizations to try to stop the human trafficking that occurs in connection with the tournament.

Something else happened as a result of convening: people in the congregation who had espoused opposite views on same-sex marriage found they could stand side by side to fight sex trafficking. After a bruising battle over same-sex marriage, members found a way to work together in ministry, and this provided some healing for the congregation.

Another case of convening involved a Catholic priest who organized a community conversation the day after a tornado hit his small town. Through social media and

word of mouth, he gathered a group of people from a number of churches and community organizations to try to coordinate relief efforts. A leadership team was formed that ended up working especially with Catholic Charities Disaster Relief to coordinate volunteers and supplies. The local priest was surprised and proud to be able to report that he was not on that leadership team; his role as pastor was to convene the conversation and encourage people to work together.

Younger Christians seem particularly interested in participating in these kinds of conversations. Much research has been done on the religious viewpoints of millennials, and one theme that seems to run through all the findings is that millennials are quick to discern when a group is interested only in itself.

Nancy Ammerman, for example, discovered that many millennials choose “none” as a religious category despite the fact that they often have quite conventional and orthodox Christian beliefs. (See her 2014 book *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*.) They do so because, as they see it, to claim to be a member of a group is to claim all the group’s positions—and that runs counter to their own sense of integrity. As a corollary, millennials are very wary of participating in organizations that seek mainly to perpetuate themselves or are somehow opaque about their orienting values. Churches that want to reach young adults can appeal to their best instincts by hosting conversations about the issues that are important to them.

The power of convening is especially needed in our post-fact world.

But convening is not just another tool in the pastor’s toolbox or an item on a to-do list. It has theological significance. Local congregations constitute God’s best idea for the healing of the cosmos. Tears in the fabric of our shared life—shared by all, not just by Christians—reach across the globe. The purpose of ministry is to relate our local part of this brokenness and pain to the whole of God’s shalom. Ministries of mercy enter where the pain is, and they are integral to congregational witness. Ministries of mercy include disaster relief, spiritual care for the grieving and downtrodden, and service for those who need help. Ministries of justice are the necessary counterpart to ministries of mercy, working to realize a greater overlap between the “is” of our world and the “what can be” dream of God for creation.

The work of pastors and congregations is grounded in the nitty-gritty of what God’s dream of shalom looks like for *this* community, *this* state, *this* nation. To relate

shalom to contextual realities, pastors need to know what's going on and welcome voices that can speak the truth. Pastors who embrace the convening power of the office may be surprised at the renewal of community and congregation that results.

A version of this article appears in the September 27 print edition under the title "The ministry of convening."