

No small talk: A plea for civil discourse

From the Editors in the [August 23, 2005](#) issue

After last November's election, a frustrated member of a Mennonite congregation near South Bend, Indiana, wrote an article for his congregation's newsletter. In it, he articulated his own political convictions. Then, even as he acknowledged that others would disagree with his perspectives, he wondered whether members of his congregation could meet and begin a conversation about their political differences.

And so they did. Starting in Lent, the congregation held two series of sessions on "Faith and Politics." They set some ground rules: listen actively to each other, seek differing points of view, look for common ground and engage in dialogue without debating the issues. Their goal was to better understand each other, not to change minds or insist on unanimity.

They began by exploring their fears, including the fear of talking about politics within the faith community. They gave each person the opportunity to share his or her convictions and how he or she arrived at them. Hearing each other's stories helped them to understand each other even when the political positions reached were quite different. Some people admitted that they had changed their political persuasions at some point, but not all had changed in the same direction. After sharing their stories, they discussed two general questions, "What issues were most important to you in the last election?" and "How can biblical faith inform public policy?" and then three specific issues, abortion, international relations and economic justice.

Those who participated agreed that they had become more aware of the range of opinions among members. They had learned to articulate their own opinions in such a way as to respect those who differed with them, and to listen to people representing other points on the political spectrum. They realized that the faith convictions that unite them are deeper than their differences in translating principles into public policy.

Where two or three people are gathered together there will be conflict. Whether in the family, church, workplace or community, struggle is part of the human condition. Of course, the great conflicts of our own age are moral ones: how to respond appropriately to terrorism, how to define and support life, how best to help the poor and protect the environment. Reasonable people should be able to discuss and debate all of these issues, but at this point in the U.S., there is little civil discourse, and compromise is a scarce commodity.

That we have disagreements doesn't matter as much as how we deal with them. The fight-flight syndrome comes naturally: we either overheat in debate and struggle for power, thus losing the opportunity for productive dialogue, or we avoid conflict, sometimes even cutting ourselves off from our faith communities.

We humans cannot always be talking about our conflicts. We need small talk and other pleasantries. But if the unity in community matters to us, we'll create forums for respectfully talking about the things that divide us. We'll share our fears and visions and reaffirm together the faith that unites us.