Why Dialogue?

What Is Dialogue?
- ‘Dialogue’ comes from the Greek word *dialogos*.
- *Logos* means ‘the word’. *Dia* means ‘through’.
- ‘Dialogue’ therefore suggests a stream of meaning flowing among, through and between us, out of which may emerge some new understanding.

Why Dialogue?
We have a saying in Northern Ireland: “Whatever you say, say nothing.”
- This attitude motivates an avoidance of conflict at all levels of society. We routinely practice denial, avoid responsibility and maintain an artificial appearance of normality. As a consequence, whilst we exist side by side, we don’t understand one another.
- When people do engage with each other on divisive issues they normally become embroiled in heated shouting matches where positions are stated and restated in a series of circular arguments. They leave with their views reinforced and their positions unchallenged.

At its simplest dialogue is a process that facilitates better understanding of each other’s, and our own, positions and enhances our ability to make informed decisions. This process may:
- Lead to trust, respect and the building of a shared future in which we all “belong”, or
- Clarify our disagreement and the need to follow separate paths to separate futures.

Either way dialogue enhances our ability to make informed decisions and we think that is good.

What Is Involved In A Dialogue?

We ask:
- What do you want?
- What do you really need and why do you need it?
- What could you live with, given the needs and hopes of others may differ from yours?

These questions help people to
- Question their own positions and look at the needs underlying them
- Question the position of others and look at the needs underlying them
- Explore how to meet those sometimes shared and sometimes conflicting needs

We encourage a re-examination of stated positions, based on the assumption that we all want something different and we are unlikely to get all that we want.

Where Do Our Dialogues Take Place?
We organise residentials, one day seminars, evening gatherings and morning workshops, sessions in the workplace, churches, community centres and schools. These events take place throughout Northern Ireland.

Who Is Involved?
People from all walks of life. We particularly encourage people who have never engaged in dialogue before and people who may be suspicious of dialogue.

Is It Always Cross Community?
No, we organise both cross community and single identity events.
Some Misconceptions About Dialogue…..

- “It erodes beliefs and identity” No. It should clarify beliefs and enhance identity.
- “It will make you think like them” No. It should improve understanding of “them”.
- “It is a negotiation”. No. It is a process of sharing and developing understanding.
- “There is a hidden agenda”. No. The agenda is to promote dialogue leading to greater understanding of each other’s positions.

Yes, It Can Be Difficult

- It needs genuine commitment from the participants to make the process work and it is vulnerable to wrecking.
- It can involve dealing with people whose views you may not be able to respect.
- It demands acceptance of the right of others to hold views you may not agree with.
- It can mean becoming vulnerable by revealing personal information.
- It is not negotiation, mediation or problem solving. It is an unfolding process of understanding and the outcomes may be unclear.

But There Are Many Benefits:

- You may understand more clearly where someone else is coming from.
- You may clarify your own position.
- You may develop a new insight into an issue.
- You feel empowered because you have been heard and taken seriously.
- You may find the basis for new relationships and new solutions to old problems.

Do The Benefits Out-Weigh The Difficulties – What Do You Think?

Some Quotes From Participants At Our Events

- “Any chance to communicate must be better than not communicating at all. It was sometimes difficult to listen to what others were saying”.
- “We emerged with new perceptions of the problem”.
- “I felt encouraged that other communities have been in the same position and come through”.
- “Community Dialogue gives ordinary people the opportunity to express their feelings on the effects the ‘Troubles’ had on them personally”.
- “Some people may have been dismayed at comments people were making, but I thought there was a real honesty.”
- “Political debate sometimes doesn’t tackle the real issues and I think the acknowledgement of the fact that we live in a society in conflict is a good point to move from. Maybe we can agree that we live in conflict, this doesn’t have to mean that we live in violence”

About Community Dialogue

In summer 1997 multi-party talks began, leading to the Belfast Agreement. This was a time of tension as our future was negotiated behind closed doors, many feared the outcome. In this context some people of diverse political and cultural backgrounds met to consider what to do.

We agreed on the need to develop a broad process of dialogue on the important issues affecting our future because they are too important to leave solely in the hands of political leaders. We believe that without inclusive dialogue at all levels of society there can be no lasting settlement that we can all buy into. Community Dialogue was formed as a result.

What We Do

We promote dialogue about our future so as to develop understanding of our diverse positions because without this an agreed future is impossible. We have produced over twenty discussion documents which address contentious issues (including What Price Peace?, Patten: What Do You Think?, Symbols Marches – Your Consent?, Decommissioning: What Do You Think?). Over 100,000 copies have been circulated. We base each leaflet on our own internal dialogue. Because our membership is drawn from across the spectrum of cultural, religious and political persuasions, it is representative of different views and often painful.
Each document:
• Presents the stated positions of our main traditions
• Articulates the needs and experience underlying them
• Encourages critical reflection and questioning

We have organised residential, workshops, seminars, - over 150 events and approx. 4,500 people have participated.

What We Don’t Do

We don’t pursue a party political agenda and we don’t tell you what to think.

If you want to get involved or would like help in organising a dialogue get in touch

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