

Bridging the Religious Divide Open Letter to the Community

On a Saturday morning in late April 2005, 120 people gathered in 13 small groups in a community center in Salt Lake City to begin a journey of conversations. Anticipation as well as apprehension permeated the room. Anticipation because this was the first gathering of the “Bridging the Religious Divide” small group dialogue project. Apprehension because the topic on the table was what has been called the 800 pound gorilla in the city’s living room – the “unspoken divide” between LDS and non-LDS citizens. In most settings, that gorilla is relegated to silence. These citizens were about to invite that gorilla into the conversation. This letter shares with you some of what was said, felt, struggled with and taken away during the next six months of conversations.

Hope lies behind this letter – hope that by sharing some of what took place in the Bridging the Religious Divide dialogues others will be moved to take up their own conversations. Dialogue can sometimes be difficult, but it offers an opportunity to speak and be heard, to listen and respond. Out of such simple acts, profound possibilities can emerge.

“It’s significant how transforming it can be to have someone listen to you in empathy across the divide.”

A palpable sense of relief – and appreciation – pervaded the process. For many participants, this was the first time and place where they could speak candidly about experiences or feelings that had long troubled them. Many shared stories from their own lives – one to one exchanges that were challenging at times but which most reported as rewarding and even transformative. Groups discussed core beliefs, shared their experiences of the divide, explored causes and contributions, and grappled with hard questions about how to negotiate difference in their own lives.

“I came in prepared to meet people with an axe to grind who wanted to grind it on me. But I found that even though we had real issues, I never felt attacked.”

The divide is more complex than many realize and affects many people.

A huge number of people in Salt Lake City struggle to negotiate the religious divide on a daily basis at work, at school, in social settings, and – perhaps most difficult – in their own families. Said one participant, “Salt Lake City is like the South was. This town is divided, except it is divided by religious affiliation rather than skin color. It controls who we hang out with. Who we date. Who we marry. But I would never say it out loud.”

Describing the tensions in her own family, one participant asked, “How do I negotiate this sense of division in my own family? My family is where I go for love.” Equally poignant were the stories of individuals who feel the divide runs right through them individually. Said one person, “I am tired of trying to be both in a place that wants me to be one or the other.”

Many told stories about simple incidents, but the feelings beneath ran deep. People on all

“sides” of the divide described feeling judged, isolated, marginalized, or even socially erased. “The hurt goes both ways. LDS to other, other to LDS,” noted one person. Participants described children coming home in tears because they felt rejected or excluded. And many worried that children are unintentionally being taught to perpetuate the divide.

Some pointed to fear, as well as the desire to protect what is held dear, as contributing factors. One LDS man said he felt the religious divide began in the 1800s when Mormons were the target of “ethnic cleansing.” “That kind of memory can take centuries to fade,” he observed. Others noted how the common desire to pass on one’s values to one’s children contributed to the divide from both sides.

Certain issues frequently emerged as points of tension: power, stereotyping, Mormon-bashing, “morals” legislation, proselytizing, and the claim that the LDS Church is the “one true church.” Often however, discussions of these issues led participants to grapple with questions that lie at the heart of any effort to bridge difference.

“Is there a place where you can hold your beliefs and I won’t be offended? Is there a way we can both be here?”

Respect – often suggested as the answer – merely open up more questions. “How do we practice respect?” asked one participant. “What does it look like?” Someone else said, “What does it mean to love someone as a child of God? To honor their path? To allow them to be different without judgment?”

“This process reminded me that we are in this community together. It put a human face on the divide.”

In November 2005, participants all gathered together to identify significant insights. Most often mentioned was greater awareness – awareness of unconscious assumptions, of how one’s words, beliefs and behaviors may affect others, or how another’s intent may be different than one’s interpretation. “I came to understand that what I experienced as exclusion was actually an effort to protect something,” said one person. “I was stunned to realize how perceptions differ,” said another.

Perhaps most important, many came away with a renewed sense of community, and of possibility. One participant reflected the consensus: “I feared meaningful dialogue was not possible. I’ve seen possibilities for dialogue turn into ‘you’re wrong, and now I’m going to tell you why.’ But this experience convinced me people are capable of honest open dialogue. It makes me hopeful.”

I felt an outsider. Now I feel I can be myself in community.”

Where do we go from here? An invitation to the community.

Participants rallied around four initiatives to expand efforts to bridge the divide and involve the community:

- **Fostering or participating in more dialogue opportunities in Salt Lake City.**
Contact: Salt Lake Center for Engaging Community, j_kesler@woodburycorp.com
- **Making a documentary on the “Bridging the Religious Divide” dialogue project.**
Contact: Joseph Price, pricefamilyforever@gmail.com
- **Promoting the wisdom and skills needed to bridge religious differences through our schools.**
Contact: Michelle Straube, mstraube@mindspring.com
- **Bridging the divide in your neighborhood.**
Contact: Christine Balderas, balderas6@yahoo.com

We encourage you to join these initiatives or launch an effort of your own. So we return to the hope stated at the beginning – that others will take up the conversation, exploring new directions, and experiencing the courage, connection, and sense of true community that emerge from speaking one’s truth, being heard, listening, and responding.

“We need to continue speaking the unspoken. To bridge the divide we must speak at a deeper level, to have the courage to discuss the ‘elephant in the room.’”