

Bridging the Religious Divide Hope in Open Dialogue

For more than eight months, a unique citizens' project has sought, without preconceptions, to open a window on what is probably the best-known and least-addressed challenge of our community. The "religious divide" between Mormons and non-Mormons is pervasive. It is reflected not merely in our religious practices, but in our politics, employment and commercial practices, our architecture, our schools, our recreation, and often most troubling, in our emotional lives and ties with our families and friends. Recognizing its depth and breadth, citizens from both sides of this divide came together, without an agenda for "solutions," mutually believing in the healing power of honest dialogue. Following a background description is an Open Letter to the Community from the "Bridging the Religious Divide project," much of it in the voices of the participants.

From dissension to dialogue

Salt Lake City's Bridging the Religious Divide project is a community-building initiative designed to bring people from different faiths and cultural backgrounds together for honest, open dialogue. First conceived in response to the contention and division provoked by the Main Street Plaza dispute, the project is based on the simple concept that when people come together to talk, listen and get to know one another, they can find ways to respect differences and enjoy common ground.

The first phase involved three community forums in which citizens were invited to address the questions: "What would make Salt Lake City a more compassionate community?" and, "What is your role in this process?" Standing-room only crowds packed meeting rooms at the Main Library, the University of Utah and the Sorenson Center to respond to these questions and share their perspectives on the "religious divide." These meetings were later broadcast over community radio and television to wider audiences.

To create an opportunity for citizens to speak on a more personal, one-to-one basis, the second phase of the project provided for small group dialogues. Interested citizens were divided into thirteen groups with approximately ten members each. Each group included several members of the LDS Church as well as people from other religious and non-religious orientations. This included Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Wiccans, Buddhists, atheists, agnostics, people who identified with no particular religious path, and people who embraced multiple religious paths.

All groups agreed to meet at least four times between April 30 and October 1. Many met more often. Each group was facilitated by a trained facilitator. The stated purpose of the project was "dialogue" – an opportunity to have a conversation across religious differences and to explore whatever issues, feelings, and concerns emerged between group members.

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. They were meeting for what was ostensibly a very simple purpose – to have a conversation. But apprehension as well as anticipation permeated the room. Anticipation because this was the first gathering of the city’s “Bridging the Religious Divide” small group dialogue project. Apprehension because no one knew quite what to expect. The topic on the table – the “unspoken divide” between members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and those who are not members – has been called the 800 pound gorilla in Salt Lake City’s living room. In most settings, especially those involving people with different religious beliefs, that gorilla is usually relegated to silence. The citizens sitting around the tables, however, were about to invite the gorilla into the conversation.

This letter – which is being distributed to the Salt Lake community at large – is an effort to share with you some of what the participants said, felt, struggled with and took away during the six months of conversations that followed that Saturday

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morning. This is not a comprehensive accounting; nor does it represent a consensus report. The dialogues were much too far-ranging and diverse for that. Rather, this letter seeks to highlight some of the major insights, topics and themes that emerged from speaking together. Much of what is reported here was identified when participants gathered together in November to “harvest” the fruits of their discussions. Some is drawn from personal interviews with people who participated in the project.

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. It is not without its rough spots. There are no guarantees. And it is not a cure-all solution to any problem. But it offers an opportunity to speak and be heard, to listen and respond. Out of such simple acts, profound possibilities can emerge.

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The “bridges” dialogue project had its limits. Many voices from the community were absent, including people who do not feel there is a divide or who are too angry or apathetic to feel it is worth talking. A few groups were small and had less diversity of perspective than desirable. Some people felt the process was too short. Some groups found it

difficult to meet on a regular basis over the summer. Everyone who participated was learning how to approach the conversation.

But most people who participated in the “bridges” dialogues found the process deeply

worthwhile. As this letter shows, many came away with new insights and expanded perspectives. Some found the experience life-altering. Others discovered a new – and expanded – sense of community. “I felt an outsider,” commented one person at the end of the project. “Now I feel I can be myself in community.” “This process reminded me that we are in this community together,” said another. “It put a human face on the divide. I realized I can’t really retreat to my own side. I’ve realized we share this community.”

Perhaps most important, many came away with a renewed sense of possibility. One participant, reflecting the feelings of many, summed it up this way: “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.”

What the process was like

As one might imagine, many participants approached the process with trepidation. Some worried that the atmosphere would be contentious. Others feared being the target of “venting.” What the participants found, however, with very limited exceptions, was honest – yet respectful – conversation. As one person commented, “I came in prepared to meet people with an axe to grind who wanted to grind it on me. But I feel we have been able to dialogue freely and we’ve had real issues. I never felt attacked.” Another said, “There were earnest expressions of frustration at times, but I never felt ‘vented upon’ by others.”

Most groups made agreements when they first met about how they wanted to talk to each other, typically calling for honest but respectful exchange, and agreeing to speak up if someone said something that was

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offensive or difficult for them to hear. To the surprise of some, the biggest challenge at times was reluctance to open up contentious issues for fear of offending each other.

As the dialogues progressed, a palpable sense of relief – and appreciation – pervaded the process. For many participants – Mormon and people with other backgrounds – this was the first time and place where they could speak candidly with people who wanted to listen about experiences or feelings that had long troubled them. As one person noted, these dialogue groups “gave people a place to talk about what was sometimes unspeakable in their own circles.” Another commented, “I was able to express feelings I hadn’t expressed publicly before.”

Sometimes conversations were analytical and outward looking. More often, the talk tended to be introspective, with participants speaking from personal experiences and sharing stories from their own lives. This kind of exchange was challenging at times. “I found that getting closer to the divide can be scary,” said one person. “It takes ‘hanging in there.’” “Sometimes it is hard not to mentalize and abstract,” noted another, “but to stay with personal experience.”

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Many participants reported, however, that

such one-to-one talk was the most rewarding. And for some, the opportunity to talk personally about experiences that had left them sad or hurt or angry was transformative. After sharing a painful story about how her children were shunned at school because of their religious affiliation, one woman said, “I felt like a huge burden had lifted from me.” Another participant observed, “It’s significant how transforming it can be to have someone listen to you in empathy across the divide.” One person noted that the process helped her “let go of my anger.” Yet another said, “The opportunity to express hurt was healing.” Someone else reflected, “This has helped me put some things to rest.”

What was talked about

Conversations were wide-ranging. 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. Some observations that were common to many groups include the following.

The divide touches many people.

Although many people in Salt Lake say they are untouched by the religious divide, it is very real – although largely unspoken – for many others. A huge number 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.” Said another, “I listen to radio shows and hear people trying to be polite. They are so worried that what they have to say could hurt someone that they decide they don’t have pain to express or axes to grind. But the divide is there in hundreds of engagements every day.”

Some themes emerging from the discussions:

- ~ *The divide touches many people.*
- ~ *The divide causes a lot of pain.*
- ~ *Children are especially affected by the divide.*
- ~ *The divide has many causes and contributions.*

Many participants talked poignantly about their struggle to negotiate the divide in their own families. This included both Mormon and other individuals with relatives who were “on the other side of the divide,” as well as individuals who had converted to the LDS Church and individuals who had chosen to leave the Church. 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.” One participant observed, “When family members choose to live on opposite sides of the divide, it can result in anger, losses and estrangement within families that span generations.” Reflecting a sentiment that was widely felt, another said, “All families need more help to keep their families closer when there is a religious divide within the family.”

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Equally poignant were the stories of individuals who feel the divide runs right through them individually. Said one

person, “I come from the outside and the inside.” Said another, “I am tired of trying to be both in a place that wants me to be one or the other. I am somewhere part of both sides and I just want to be free. Please, just let me be both without putting me in a box.”

The divide causes a lot of pain.

Painful stories abound on all sides of the divide. Some stories are about simple incidents, but the feelings beneath them run deep. For the story-tellers, hurt and sadness have often morphed to anger and anger has hardened into long simmering resentment, or into apathy. “My child was shunned because of her beliefs.” “My office mates don’t invite me to their parties.” “I hear remarks when my back is turned.” “My aunt quit speaking to me.” “I didn’t dare reveal my beliefs.” “No one waves in my neighborhood when they drive by.” “It was clear I wasn’t welcome.”

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The discussions revealed that many people on both “sides” of the divide in Salt Lake City feel judged or excluded because of their religious beliefs, or, lack of religious beliefs. And consequently, many feel isolated, marginalized, or even socially erased. “The hurt goes both ways. LDS to other, other to LDS,” noted one participant. “Many feel persecuted on both sides.” “There exist deep wounds in our community,” said another. “Lots of damage has been done. It will take a long time to repair.”

Many participants also described the painful and frustrating experience of feeling stereotyped – neatly boxed into a category and then dismissed. “There is a manager at my work,” noted one participant. “He said all LDS people are either brainwashed or stupid. I said, ‘Wait a minute.

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You don’t know me. I’m Judy (not her real name). Not LDS Judy.” Said another, “People look at me and because I have long hair they assume I’m either crazy or evil.”

Children are especially affected by the divide.

When people spoke of how they experienced the divide, they often spoke about the experiences of their children, or of their own childhood. They told stories of children coming home in tears because they were excluded by other children. They spoke of feeling judged and rejected. They described feeling isolated and alone.

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“The divide is learned.”*

Said one person, “It was difficult for me growing up. I’m not black or gay but I definitely know what it’s like being on the outside looking in.” Said another, “In high school, I had seminary in the morning. People would say to me, ‘What is that? A crack house you are going to?’ I had friends who labeled me as ‘polygamist.’ They didn’t do me any physical harm. But why didn’t they just ask me what I believe?”

Many worried that children are unintentionally being taught to perpetuate the divide. “I worry about the messages we are sending to our children,” said one participant. Another noted, “Cycles of intolerance are generational. Intolerance is learned through cultural practices.” Said another, “The divide is learned.”

The divide has many causes and contributions and is more complex than many realize.

In sharing personal experiences of the religious divide, participants also explored what causes or contributes to the divide. Some observed that “religious divides occur anywhere one faith is dominant.” Others suggested that “the divide in Salt Lake City is more cultural than religious,” that is, arising from different social norms and practices rather than from religious beliefs.

Many pointed to fear, as well as the desire to protect what is held dear, as contributing factors. Participants observed that “We are afraid of one another across the divide” and “people act

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We pay a price for that.”*

hatefully out of fear.” Another noted, “People establish a safe distance. We pay a price for that.” 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 noted. Another reflected that “as I came to understand LDS history, I better understood the need for refuge and a fear of outsiders.”

Others discussed how the desire to pass on one’s values to one’s children contributed to the divide. “There are parallel concerns on both sides,” said one person. “People want their children to marry within their community to preserve their culture,” noted another.

Lack of contact between members of different communities was also noted. “People live in their own circles,” said one person. Another noted that people tend to “circle the wagons” and “keep a comfortable distance.” An LDS participant observed, “We have so many activities for kids. Church *is* their social life. If you are not a member, you could feel rejected socially.”

Throughout the conversations, certain issues frequently emerged as points of tension. Some of the most common were:

- *The claim that the LDS Church is the “one true church.”* A core belief and point of doctrine for most Mormons is that the LDS Church has restored Christianity to its original authenticity. One commonly used phrase to express this concept is that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the “one true Church.” This phrase denotes to many non-Mormons that Mormons consider all other beliefs to be inferior, which

many non-Mormons find to be an offensive notion.

- *Proselytizing.* Seeking to share their faith with others is an important aspect of practicing the LDS faith for most Mormons. Some non-Mormons are put off by proselytizing, however, especially if they feel expressions of friendship by Mormons are contingent upon an interest in converting them.
- *Stereotyping Mormons.* A stereotype of Mormons is that they are “obedient,” “followers” who are “all the same.” Members of the LDS faith are deeply offended by this stereotype and people’s unwillingness to recognize their individuality and intelligence.
- *“Mormon bashing.”* Many LDS feel they are the target of disparaging remarks (and at times actions) that deprecate LDS belief and culture. Moreover, they feel troubled that many people outside the faith do not speak out against such remarks and actions.

*“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?”*
- *Power.* With Mormons comprising approximately 65% of the state’s population, LDS culture is experienced by many as “the dominant culture” of the state of Utah. Many non-Mormons feel members of the LDS are not mindful of the “privilege” that being the majority affords Mormons and complain that it is difficult to for minority voices to be heard.
- *“Morals” legislation.* Laws governing issues such as same-sex marriage, gay adoption, benefits for unmarried partners, the consumption of liquor, or the teaching of “creationism” are defended by some as supported by the majority and thus an exercise in democracy. Others feel that such laws inappropriately impose the majority’s moral belief system on all individuals.

Dialogue about these points of contention was sometimes “edgy” or challenging. Often, however, they led participants to grapple with questions that lie at the heart of any effort to bridge divides involving difference. After one group struggled with how to bridge what seemed to be irreconcilable differences over some people’s religious beliefs and the social practices of others, one participant commented that perhaps they should be discussing how to *live with* the divide. Another participant asked, “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?” Someone else framed the question as “How can I be congruent with my own beliefs and not offend others.”

Respect was often suggested as the answer. One participant said “I don’t think we can bridge the divide unless each person shows respect without expecting something in return.” Another said,

“What does it mean to love someone as a child of God? To honor that path? To allow them to be different without judgment?”

“We have enough in common without insisting that we all need to be the same.

There is much to gain in reciprocity, by respecting the unique contribution that every human makes.”

For many, however, the notion of “respect” opened up more questions. “How do we practice respect?” asked one participant. “What does it look like?” Another asked, “How can we hold our own beliefs and be respectful at the same time, and how do we translate that into our cultural and social institutions?” Someone else said, “How can we get past judging or critiquing? And if we can not help judging, how do we respond to others after that?” Another wondered, “What does it mean to love someone as a child of God? To honor their path? To allow them to be different without judgment?”

What participants took away from the process

Perhaps the most significant outcome of the Bridging the Religious Divide dialogue initiative was personal awareness. Awareness that we all tend to operate within our own cultural assumptions and that those assumptions are often blind to the complexity and uniqueness of others experiences, feelings and values. Awareness that the intent behind others’ words or conduct may be different than the interpretations we presume. Awareness of how our words, beliefs and behaviors may affect others in ways we may not intend.

When participants were asked at the end of the process “What were the most meaningful insights you gained?”, many spoke about becoming more aware of their unconscious assumptions. “I was stunned

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to realize how perceptions differ and how important it is to not assume everyone sees an event in the same way,” said one person. “The process helped me to break away from cultural biases I didn’t even know I had,” said another. “For example, I knew nothing about the Wiccan faith. But although I know nothing, I had stereotypes. If I even thought about it, I thought it was wicked in some way.” Another reflected, “I remember the first day when we sat around the table. I think we all came in with stereotypes. Now that I know everyone I see that everyone is unique. I knew that in my head. That it’s not fair to make assumptions about someone until you hear their whole story, because until you do, you don’t really know them. But now I know it in my heart.” Someone else put it this way: “It’s very easy to demonize a person who is not like you. It is very easy to make *things* black and white. These discussions made me see how stereotypes drive out any possibility of getting to know someone.”

In reflecting on insights gained, some spoke of how learning about others’ beliefs and experiences helped them better understand – and trust – their intent. “Other’s intentions are often not what we assume,” noted one participant. “I came to understand that what I experienced as exclusion was actually an effort to protect something,” said another. Another summed up her experience by saying: “How do you effect change? First by being willing to speak up. But also by being aware of how I see things, how I interpret what I hear and experience. This group helped me remember I am in charge of my own response.”

Some participants described a newfound awareness about how their actions affect others, as well as a resolve to take personal action to bridge the divide. “It made me step back and look at the

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consequences of my actions,” said one participant. “I became more aware of how what I say may be heard,” noted another. One person reflected, “It’s easy to point a finger and blame someone else. But the only person you can really affect is

yourself. This process brought me back around to that.” Another concluded, “I am only one person, but this process made me think hard about what I can do to reach out. It’s easy to sit in the corner. It is harder to reach across.” Added another, “We don’t have to be the same to be friends, neighbors, co-workers. Organizations make lines for us. We need to reach across them.”

For many, these insights brought about a profound shift in how they perceive, experience and relate to the religious divide. “It made me think in a different way.” said one participant. “My views are less polarized, more textured and open,” noted another. One individual summed up her experience this way, “This process put a human face on the divide. It reminded me that we are in this community together. I realized I can’t really retreat to my own side. I realized we share this community.”

Looking to the future – where do we go from here?

In November 2005, participants in the Bridging the Religious Divide dialogue project gathered to “harvest” the insights gained and to look to the future. Although many individuals had entered the project with some trepidation, most people came away amazed at the transformative power of dialogue. As one person said, “I learned how seriously you have to take the importance of just listening.” Another noted, “I found out that there is healing through dialogue.” Yet another reflected, “The process of sharing stories and personal experiences *is the bridge.*”

There was widespread recognition that the success of any “next steps” depended, in part, on the continuation of dialogue, and there was a collective call to create more opportunities for conversation. As one participant said, “People need to be heard in a genuine and in-depth manner before solutions can be found. We must not skip this stage.” “We need to continue speaking the unspoken,” said another. “To bridge the divide we must speak at a deeper level, to have the courage to discuss the ‘elephant in the room.’”

In gathering together at the end of the dialogue project, participants also rallied around four initiatives to help continue and expand their efforts to bridge the divide. These initiatives, as well as the Bridging the Religious Divide website, are listed below. This letter encourages its readers to consider joining these initiatives or launching an effort of their own. Thus in closing, this letter returns to the hope stated at its 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.

Next Steps: Expanding the Dialogue

Seeing their conversations as the beginning of a creative process, participants in the initial “Bridging” project invite and urge members of the community to join with them in further steps to expand healing dialogue.

You are invited to join in one or more of the following:

- * **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 the religious divide through our schools.** Contact: Michelle Straube, mstraube@mindspring.com
- * **Working on the divide in your neighborhood.** Contact: Christine Balderas, balderas6@yahoo.com

To learn more about other groups working on bridging religious difference, go to www.slcbridges.com.

To post information on the SLC “Bridges” website, email: mark.alvarez@slc.com