

Can We Learn to Like Diversity?

How do you feel about people who are different from you? We usually believe, or at least we're told, that diversity is a Good Thing. We like to get to know new people, to experience new and fresh things, and to appreciate new perspectives. It's fashionable to agree that diversity is good, or at least that the comfortable kind of diversity that doesn't challenge our preferences or values is good.

We observe that genetic diversity is good for many kinds of populations, from plants to animals and human communities. We know that the church is called to welcome all people, those who are like us, those who are different in congenial ways, and those who make us outright uncomfortable.

Negative feelings about differences

Members of a community usually have some kind of sense of those who are different among them. People naturally feel more comfortable with those who are like themselves, those whose feelings and motivations they share. Those who have similar behavior patterns are predictable and feel safer to be around.

Conversely, those who are in some way different are less predictable, less reassuring, and in a sense seem less safe. When tensions get high in a crisis, relationships with those who are different develop a higher level of anxiety. Just as folk seem to know who to go to for advice, or comfort, or a good time, they also know who to step back from and avoid when things get tense.

The habit of suspicion and mistrust of strangers has served us well over the centuries, especially when encounters with those who were different were likely to include bad surprises, like robbery, war, or plague. A negative reaction to difference feeds on itself, since the negative interpretation of each other's desires is infectious, leading to further mistrust and separation.

Building positive appreciation for differences

To change the negative effect of differences in our communities, this negative spiral needs to be completely replaced with a positive one, where positive experiences of difference solidify and build on each other.

The challenge for us is to move our intellectual conviction of the value of diversity to the level of our feelings and automatic reactions. We need to believe, deep down, that living and cooperating with others leads to better results in our common efforts and to more fun along the way. If the various parties within a community expect this to be true and if it reflects their experience with each other, they will make it so going forward.

In order to reach this conviction, members of the community need to see and experience the value of differences in action. The goal is to change our reactions, our habits of mind, from our negative feelings—distrust, dislike, irritability, etc.—to positive ones like hope, energy, and enthusiasm.

Building a positive appreciation for differences is not a new challenge for the church. Paul spends a fair amount of time talking about the diversity of gifts that come from one Spirit and the way different parts of the body do their different work in support of the whole. We can begin to work on appreciation of differences with preaching and teaching that engages these parts of scripture. But more than teaching and listening is required.

Seeing ourselves from the outside

When we're in the middle of reacting to something or someone, it's hard to see the big picture. We're playing out a script, directed by our feelings and conditioned by patterns of behavior in our past. What we are saying and doing "feels" right, so we tend not to question our reactions.

It's very hard to picture both sides of an interaction, either to sympathize with the other side or to see the interaction from the point of view of outside observers. We need to be able to break out of our own patterns to evaluate them or to change them when we decide they need to be improved.

The first experience that can move a community in this direction is a dramatized attempt of two typical opposite personalities to work together. The goal in the drama is to show an interaction between two very different people in a kind of situation that could happen to anyone.

In the conflict, observers can easily identify with one or the other of the participants. It's a kind of conflict they can empathize with based on their own experience. Watching from outside, with sympathy for one of the participants allows the observers to see the reactions that usually lead to frustration. They can also begin to see ways to break the pattern.

The drama of differences in action

This simple skit is called "The Special Event Hospitality Committee." It uses two participants who are willing to sight-read the dialog and take the parts of the two members of the committee, Sally Spontaneous and Oliver Organized. If the readers are typecast to their characters, so much the better.

The skit is played twice, the first time with the characters simply reading the dialog provided. The effect is of a typically boring and frustrating committee meeting. At the end of the reading, the meeting leader asks some basic questions, "How do they feel after the meeting? Was it an effective meeting? What will the event be like?"

The first reading reflects the way differences in style get in the way of communication and cooperation. Observers usually identify with one of the participants, and they experience the frustration directly and personally.

The more they are drawn into sympathy and participation in the interaction processes, the more effective the second reading will be. Walking in the negative reactions of the participants makes it humanly difficult to sympathize with the opposing side.

For the second playing of the skit, the Sally and Ollie read their dialog, and then they share their thoughts directly with the audience.

The script

The text of the script itself is fairly simple:

	What They Say	What They Think
Ollie:	We are lucky to have Tom Traveler offer to talk about his visit to churches in Latin America. This should be a great chance to bring everyone together for fellowship. This could be the event of the year, so we need to plan carefully.	This is a big challenge. It is really important to have things under control.

Sally:	Great program idea! Since we're looking at Latin America, we could have a Mexican theme. Atmosphere, music, maybe even special guests. Who do we know from that area? Maria and Carlos? Who else could we get involved?	Let's follow the ideas and see where they lead. There are some great opportunities here.
Ollie:	We need to make some lists. There's food, decorations, set up, clean up, program, publicity. What else is there we should cover?	Hold on. We have to put this together here and now.
Sally:	Let's be creative. It would be fun to have a piñata. We could cut a big poster picture into puzzle pieces, put them in the piñata, and have everybody put the picture back together.	I'm trying to get at least some good fun included to make it a lively time.
Ollie:	We need to stay on track here. The date is less than a month away.	Can't you keep your priorities straight and pay attention to the job at hand? We can't afford to waste time.
Sally:	But we don't even know what we're doing yet.	You don't even know what track we should be on yet.
Ollie:	Just my point. It's time we get down to details. Now who will do the meal and the decorations?	We have to get specific about what are we actually going to do, or we'll never get there.
Sally:	We can handle it. I can talk to some of the folks after bible study. I don't know who might have time, though.	I know somebody does enchiladas, but who? If no one has time to cook, we can cater, but who is good, Mexican and cheap? Decorating would be great fun.
Ollie:	We need to know exactly who is going to do what. Can we set some specifics and deadlines?	We are getting nowhere, and time is running out.
Sally:	Ok, tell me what to do.	I give up. This is going to be a dud.
Ollie:	You put up the pot luck sign up sheet, and I'll ask some of the guys to set up the room. I'll do the announcements and you make sure everyone knows the times. ... Now that we have it all down, I'm sure it will be great success. Just be sure you do your parts on time.	It is such a struggle to do something that should be easy. She doesn't have a clue how these things are done. I hope I am never on a committee with flaky amateurs again.
Sally:	Yes, sir.	If anyone comes. Doesn't he know how to have a life? I should find someplace with people who know how to live in the spirit.

At the end of the second reading, the leader points out that Sally and Ollie have all the talents between the two of them to make a superb event. Then the leader asks questions about what would have made that result possible.

What could have made things turn out differently? What would happen if Ollie admitted his need for structure? (giving Sally a chance to participate in process definition) What if Sally talked about her need for a clear vision of the goal? (reassuring Ollie and broadening his perspective) Could they have put together a better event? Could they have put together a better relationship? a better community?

Seeing Both Perspectives Together

Exposure to this simple exercise of hearing the thoughts behind the “normal” dialog can be extraordinarily effective in waking up participants to the possible perspectives behind the unsurprising words.

Spontaneous folks suddenly have a glimpse of how hard the more organized one was trying to make things work. People on the organized side suddenly have a picture of the unexpected richness and fun a spontaneous one could bring into the event. All were surprised to see how the best intentions of each side drove the other side further and further away.

All the right ingredients are present, but the mix went terribly wrong. The questions about how things could be done differently become practical and urgent, because the listeners can see how easily we all fall into the same kind of traps.

Practicing living with differences

The second experience brings home and internalizes the learning from the first. It happens over time, by intentionally building learning experiences into actually doing the work of the church. It involves creating teams to work together on specific activities which consist of two polar opposites—those with different talents, those with different personalities and styles, or even those who have been on opposite sides in conflict.

The activities are chosen to reflect an area that the two participants have in common, for example a concert event for those who love music, a building project for two craftsmen, a children’s program for two teachers, etc.

A third participant in each team acts as observer and facilitator, mostly listening, providing the safety of a neutral observer and keeping the others conscious of engaging their differences in a positive way. The third participant is the one who brings the perspective of the external observer into the work of the team, reminding those who are struggling to work together in spite of their differences to see themselves from the outside.

In practice, this kind of activity assignments can work out very well. The initial conversations between team members can be uncomfortable as participants are unsure of their welcome with each other. The presence of the third party sets a standard of courtesy, and things seem to smooth out once the work itself becomes the common focus of attention. With a third party present, both tend to try to live up to their own best behavior.

Watching a shared success grow out of the contributions of both makes the appreciation of the other’s value a reality. Each begins to build an inventory of positive memories from the shared experience that can be passed on to others. Occasionally, of course, a strong minded person may need to experience more than one of this kind of joint project to get the point, but, as

the local culture changes to “this is the way we do things around here,” there are additional models and even peer pressure to demonstrate the benefits of working together.

Conscious living with differences

How does it feel to live together when we appreciate our differences? We are still sinful people, and we will still step on each other’s toes from time to time. Because we are still different from each other, we will still compete for time, attention, and resources to do what we think is important. What changes is the way we approach each other, sympathize with each other, and work together.

Our interactions tend to become different—less emotionally charged, less subject to misunderstanding, and more trusting of our processes and of each other. When one church leader was asked how she could stand to work with a former opponent, she said, “He’s changed. He acts different now.”

When asked, he described his position slightly differently. He said, “I haven’t really changed. I still think the same things. They just don’t upset me so much anymore.” The reality is that neither had changed in character, convictions, or point of view, but both had changed in their tolerance for and willingness to work with each other.

As the community gets used to a new way of relating, the expectation in an interaction between people on opposing sides of an issue is that safety, trust, hope, and patience are possible. It is no mistake that the fruits of the Spirit are

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22–23)

In practice, brothers and sisters in Christ can expect to experience these traits from their opponents as well as from their supporters on any particular issue.

A confidence grows in members of the group, when they approach a controversial issue, that the outcome will probably be good, even if it’s not exactly what each had advocated at first. There’s an expectation that the process may take longer than it should, and that there will be weird moments and unexpected insights along the way.

There will often be an undercurrent of humor and laughter at our own and each other’s foibles as we go. There may also be occasional intense moments of surprising closeness and unexpected support as we share and respond to each other’s deepest values and concerns. There is a sense that, even if the resolution is not “my” solution, it is “our” best shot at a solution in an imperfect world, with fallible human beings, and within the limitations of our situation.