



Synod-Wide Conversations Inspire Hope and a Sense of Belonging in the BC Lutheran Church

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Facilitation: Charles Holmes, CE Holmes Consulting, Inc. and Pastor Kathy Martin, Assistant to the Bishop

In early 2019, the BC Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) took another step in the ongoing culture change process with the hope of imagining a renewed future to be co-created with their congregations. Building on five years of exploratory work, they wanted to continue their move away from a structure that no longer served them towards a collegial model, focused on relationship building, connection and enhanced communication. They brought in consultant and facilitator Charles Holmes to help them design and co-deliver a series of nine conversations to take place between February and May throughout BC.

In this story, we explore how building trust and belonging in group conversations inspired hope and positive action within congregations. Space was created for people to dream about the future together rather than lament the past. Individual voices were valued, heard and respected. As people sensed they had personal agency, they were empowered to share stories, inspire one another

and work together to find new possibilities. It all began with a mindful invitation.



Participants of all ages came together during the Conversations.

Designing Group Conversations – What’s the Invitation?

The Synod understood the importance of designing the conversations to create a space for people to feel comfortable sharing their ideas and stories. Bishop Greg Mohr and Assistant to the Bishop Kathy Martin worked closely with Charles Holmes to plan the discussion questions, the room set-up and movement within the space, the collection of ideas, and promotion. This attention to detail in the planning stage was crucial in creating the conditions for people to feel genuinely invited to the table. As Grace Beek, a youth participant in the conversations, shares, “The announcements made us aware of what the point of the conversations was,” and Karen Lee, who attended the Vernon conversation, agrees: “The Synod Council contacted every congregation ahead of time and encouraged them to participate.” This encouragement resulted in many people showing up on the day already feeling engaged and ready to participate.

“There was joy in recognizing ourselves in and amongst our peers.”
Diana Edis

Several other factors that were decided upon during the design phase stood out to participants as promoting engagement. Many people we talked to for this story said how much they appreciated the facilitators splitting people into small groups or circles, and inviting them to move around and meet new people. Aneeta Saroop, a Victoria-based Lutheran pastor, said that when she entered the space she was disappointed by the lack of diversity and the under-representation of often marginalized voices at the Victoria gathering. This resulted in an initial reluctance on her part to speak up. However, this changed when Charles Holmes shifted the group dynamics by moving people into smaller groups, and she found herself sitting at a table with all older men:

“They quickly recognized that I was a younger pastor and the only female at the table. Immediately they relinquished voice to me, they heard me, they engaged my opinion... They created space for the minoritized voice and gave it a legitimate power.”

“What model are we going to use? We can’t just take it off a bookshelf, we have to experiment to find out what that model is.”
Gene Blishen

After this pivotal moment, Aneeta felt able to fully speak up and contribute. The importance placed on listening as well as the personalities of the facilitators also built engagement in the nine conversations. Glenn Harvey recalls how Kathy Martin was able to break the ice very early in the Nanaimo conversation with her relaxed approach and her humour: “She chuckles a lot! You feel relaxed because [she’s] relaxed.”

For Nathan Fong, a pastor in Burnaby, the fact that the Synod brought in note-takers and commissioned a summary of the conversations contributed to people feeling truly heard and engaged: “The fact that somebody is taking notes, then somebody is summarizing those notes – even though it’s not directly attributed to me, I know I’ve contributed to it.”

The ability of the facilitators to stay nimble and responsive on the day was also crucial to ensuring that people felt their ideas and opinions were valued. As Glenn Harvey comments, “The process wasn’t very rigid, it flowed,” and Gene Blishen, who attended the Vancouver/Lower Mainland conversation, agrees: “The dialogue just flowed throughout the whole day, and all voices were heard.”

All these elements – whether carefully designed or more responsive – contributed to creating a space where people felt not only heard but connected. Why is this space important in a culture change process? How do words and voices inspire real action or help any organization move towards its intentions?

We Are Not Alone: Story-Telling and Story-Listening as a Tool for Connection

When people are given the space for their voices, and when they feel invited to step into that space, powerful things happen. First, siloes begin to dissolve as people see how connected they are to others, even if they’re geographically or socially distanced from them. Diana Edis, a pastor in Prince Rupert, points to the importance of feeling connected to the wider Church: “When we only hear our own stories, it’s like vertigo, you keep spinning and spinning and spinning, but when somebody says, yeah, me too, it makes it better – you’re not alone.” For her, knowing that the conversation is part of a larger process affirms the sense that her



Everyone's voice was valued and heard during the Conversations.

“We need to hear the expression of the Lutheran theology, know that we are loved unconditionally. The lens is quite beautiful and I do hope that expression gets communicated.”
Aneeta Saroop

and her congregation's voices and actions are important: “Something will come of this if we choose to step into it, we're part of the future.”

Carmen Laing, a Vancouver/Lower Mainland attendee, reminds us that “Loneliness is an epidemic, we have a lot of lonely people in our world,” which is why it's so important to focus on connection and feeling part of a larger group. Sharing stories provides a valuable tool for combatting loneliness, building relationships and nourishing this sense of connection. During the conversations space was also given for people to just be with one another and chat in an informal way. Erik Bjorgan, a pastor in Salmon Arm, fondly recalls how Kelowna residents whom he'd never met before shared stories about his grandparents with him during the conversation. One person told him the story of how his grandparents had co-signed the papers on their mortgage: “It was random but also profound – sometimes the profound things need to be given space.”

Bishop Greg Mohr believes that “We are more creative and stronger together,” and during the conversations this collective strength enabled people to talk about, and find solutions to, some big challenges facing the BC Synod.

From Connection to Action

Grace Beek was worried that the conversations might be uncomfortable, especially when discussing the LGBTQ+ community, but found that her opinions were respected and she was able to engage in meaningful discussions about acceptance in the Church with other participants. Many issues that profoundly affect the Church and how congregations express their values and the Lutheran theology were openly discussed during the conversations. This discussion and sharing of stories provoked action in very concrete ways. First, it enabled participants to see how others were responding to similar issues in their congregations. They could then borrow and adapt ideas, or work together to create new possibilities moving forward. It also showed the congregations that they can take action even when they feel they don't have all the necessary resources. Erik Bjorgan recounts how his congregation recently raised \$8,000 in donations to settle

“We can hear what people are thinking down to the grassroots – instead of the top people saying, ‘This is how you should be thinking.’ We get actual data – this is what people are thinking.”

Nathan Fong

“It’s our Church – we all have a role, we’re all important, valued.”

Karen Lee

a refugee family: “This was the first time we’d done this. We could never have done it on our own, but why did we never try it before? We’ve learned [through the conversations and culture change process] that the best resource is the ability to convene people to talk about what we can do together.”

Actions don't have to be large or expensive to be meaningful. Glenn Harvey tells us that he now sits out in his front yard to chat with his neighbours, and the congregation he belongs to opened its doors over the summer to invite a local Neighbourhood Watch committee to use their building. In turn, the committee invited the Church to their annual picnic. These kinds of actions put into practice a sense of connection to the community, which is an important part of the Lutheran theology. As congregations now feel more hopeful and inspired to take positive action moving forwards, the Synod knows it is especially important that they stay mindful of what comes next.

Importance of Follow-Up

The conversations are part of an exploratory process, and were extremely well received by participants. However, as both Bishop Greg Mohr and Assistant to the Bishop Kathy Martin know, there is still work to be done. The timing of the conversations, for example, worked for many but not for all those invited. Considerations such as childcare, or choosing more family-friendly times, might help boost attendance and create more inclusivity for similar gatherings in the future. Some participants also commented on feeling tired by the end of the very full day, while others pointed out the logistic difficulties associated with gathering when you’re based in remote areas. Suggestions such as using technology or having shorter sessions split over two days, or on different days, were given as ways to enhance diversity of voices.

Ensuring that all voices are given equal space, especially lay voices and those who have historically been marginalized, is also a concern. Aneeta Saroop felt that “The voices of the margins – the poor, spiritually deflated, disenfranchised, LGBTQ+, Indigenous, people of colour – were not present [at the Victoria gathering]: I had a strong sense that their voices were not represented in this conversation.” At the same time, Nathan Fong was happy to see

“Human beings know this is a human space where we can do beautiful things – we have this intuitive understanding of when space is being held for us.”

Erik Bjorgan



that in these conversations equal weight was given to lay and clergy voices, whereas historically, “There [was] a distinct line drawn between the clergy and the lay – the clergy are the ones with all the answers and the lay are there for the ride.” He noted that since the conversation, he has been involved with smaller meetings and the same sense of empowerment has prevailed: “The lay people were rising up too – I’m here, I have ideas... that feeling of equality was there, being heard, being allowed to speak.”

It is clear that both lay and clergy members of the Church are ready for this renewal process, and want the work to continue. As Gene Blisshen notes, “The time was ripe... everybody knows that something needs to be changed, but nobody knows what to change it to.”

The Synod members are now taking what they’ve learned from the conversations as they explore a new model of being and working together based on communication, connection and collaboration. By being mindful of facilitation design and follow-up, they have sent a powerful invitation to congregations to co-create the future of the BC Synod together. They have put into practice their intention of communicating that all voices and all gifts are valued; each congregation member has something to contribute to this process; and everyone belongs. It seems fitting that, in many ways, this culture change process mirrors the Lutheran expression of God’s love: Unconditional, inclusive, welcoming and truly heart-felt.