



INTERFAITH COMMUNITIES FOR DIALOGUE (ICD)

LIVING RESPONSIBLY

[Digging Deep: How Our Moral Foundations Shape Our Views](#)

*My neighbor and I don't see eye to eye. We passionately disagree on the biggest issues of the day.
How can we possibly have a civil conversation?*

In its first face-to-face dialogue since the pandemic, ICD tackled this question by exploring a framework for discovering shared values and understanding the factors that drive conflicting views. The session opened with a presentation on moral foundations theory by David Tassell, an adjunct faculty member in religious studies at George Mason University. Mr. Tassell, who is currently pursuing a degree in social work, has a Master of Theological Studies degree and a special interest in the connections between religion, culture, and society.

As Mr. Tassell told the audience, moral foundations theory was proposed by a team of social and cultural psychologists. It posits that there are a number of basic moral values that undergird our social institutions and cultural narratives, and thus our opinions. These include:

- Care – empathy, gentleness, kindness
- Fairness – justice, equality, proportionality
- Loyalty – group identity, patriotism, sacrifice for the common good
- Authority – respect for tradition, leaders/followers
- Purity – notion of the body as a temple, stress on “naturalness”
- Liberty – opposition to oppression, often in conflict with authority

Mr. Tassell's lecture laid the groundwork for about sixty people to engage in small group discussions on three contentious topics: gun control, the Israel-Gaza war, and reproductive rights. Before participants broke into small groups, he urged them to steer their discussions toward the underlying values that shaped their opinions, rather than focus on the issues alone. Attendees were given ground rules for these group dialogues, urging them to listen actively and attentively, while embracing risk by sharing their feelings and personal experiences.

During the discussion period, groups of six were split into pairs. Each member of the pair was asked to state his/her position and relate a personal story that inspired their passion on the issue. Small group facilitators then had each member of the pair report back to the whole group by telling the other person's story, speaking as their partner in the first person. From there, the group explored a number of questions, such as: What did it feel like to have your story told by another? What did it feel like to tell someone else's story?

Small group participants delved deeper into dialogue by exploring the moral foundations that drove them – and their partners – to their stated positions. They were also prompted to discuss: What can you do when you encounter someone whose position differs starkly, but whose moral foundations are compatible? What can you do if you encounter someone whose moral foundations are incompatible?

In the end, participants learned that we cannot “dig deep” in a dialogue by bombarding our conversation partners with facts in order to convince them that our opinion is “right”. Rather, we should listen attentively to the emotions, stories and values of others. A good faith discussion is predicated on deep listening and can change one's own perspective. As David Tassell said, there is always something to be learned from another person's story – especially someone with whom we strongly disagree.