



Belonging Beyond Differences

Finding Common
Ground in Christ

**Workshop Materials for January 28, February 4
and 11**

Presented by: Susan Tamborini Czolgosz, WorkLife Consulting

Belonging Beyond Differences

Overall Purpose of the Series

The purpose of this workshop series is to strengthen the congregation's capacity to live more fully into its baptismal and communal calling: to be a place where people truly belong across differences, where conflict is engaged faithfully rather than avoided or weaponized, and where relationships are strengthened through honest, grace-filled conversation.

This series is not about "fixing" people or resolving disagreement, but an educational experience about forming a congregation that can hold difference, navigate tension, and remain connected to one another in Christ.

Core Goals of the Workshop Series

1. To Deepen a Shared Understanding of Belonging

Participants will:

- Explore what *belonging* means theologically, relationally, and practically within a Christian community.
- Distinguish between belonging, agreement, inclusion, and conformity.
- Reflect on how belonging is experienced differently depending on identity, role, power, and history within the congregation.

Outcome:

A more nuanced, compassionate understanding of how belonging is created, threatened, and restored in congregational life.

2. To Build Capacity for Engaging Differences Faithfully

Participants will:

- Name the differences present in the congregation (theological, political, generational, cultural, personality-based, and experiential).
- Learn skills for listening across difference without defensiveness or erasure.
- Practice curiosity, humility, and respect in conversations where disagreement exists.

Outcome:

A congregation better equipped to stay in relationship across difference rather than retreating into silence, polarization, or factions.

3. To Normalize Conflict as a Spiritual and Communal Reality

Participants will:

- Reframe conflict as a normal and potentially generative part of communal life rather than a sign of failure or unfaithfulness.
- Understand common congregational conflict dynamics (avoidance, triangulation, polarization, reactivity).
- Reflect on how faith, fear, and past experiences shape responses to conflict.

Outcome:

Reduced shame and anxiety around conflict, and increased willingness to address tensions directly and constructively.

4. To Develop Practical Skills for Conflict Transformation

Participants will:

- Learn concrete tools for engaging conflict with clarity, compassion, and accountability.
- Explore pathways from conflict toward learning, healing, and deeper trust.

Outcome:

Increased confidence and competence in navigating difficult conversations and repairing relationships when harm occurs.

5. To Strengthen Trust and Relational Resilience

Participants will:

- Explore how trust is built, broken, and rebuilt in congregational settings.
- Practice behaviors that foster psychological and spiritual safety.
- Discuss shared norms for communication, disagreement, and accountability.

Outcome:

A stronger relational fabric that can withstand stress, disagreement, and change without fracturing community.

6. To Align Congregational Life with Faith Commitments

Participants will:

- Reflect on how baptismal vows, covenantal language, and scriptural narratives call the community to reconciliation and mutual care.
- Discern how the congregation’s stated values are embodied—or undermined—in everyday interactions.
- Identify concrete practices that express the congregation’s commitment to belonging and reconciliation.

Outcome:

Greater alignment between the congregation’s theology and its lived communal practices.

7. To Create Shared Ownership for the Health of the Community

Participants will:

- Move from a model of conflict as “someone else’s problem” to shared responsibility for communal health.
- Identify personal and collective commitments for sustaining belonging across differences.
- Understand the role each member plays in shaping the congregation’s culture.

Outcome:

A congregation that sees relational health and conflict transformation as a shared spiritual practice, not just a leadership task.

Belonging Beyond Differences

Workshop Outlines

Workshop 1: Belonging as a Sacred Calling

Theme: Grounding belonging in baptism, not agreement

Goal: Establish theological and relational safety; reframe conflict as normal within Christian community

Learning Objectives

- Root “belonging” in **baptismal identity**, not sameness
- Normalize difference and conflict within Christian community
- Create shared covenants for courageous, respectful engagement

One-Hour Flow

0–10 min | Introduction, Ground Rules, Opening & Prayer

- Prayer invoking the Holy Spirit as “bond of love amid difference”
- Brief framing: *Belonging ≠ agreement; belonging = staying at the table*

10 min | Theological Reflection

- Short teaching on:
 - Baptismal Covenant (“seek and serve Christ in all persons”)
 - Paul’s metaphor of the Body (1 Cor. 12)
 - Jesus’ table fellowship across difference
- Prompt: “*Where have we confused unity with uniformity?*”

25 min | Reflection/Discussion

- Guided questions:
 - When have you felt deep belonging in this parish?
 - When have you felt on the edge—or unseen?
- Emphasis on listening, not responding

15 min | Discussion

- Name shared longings for belonging
- Identify behaviors that **build** vs. **erode** belonging (no blame)

10 min | Beginning a Covenant Creation

- Draft 5–7 shared commitments (e.g., curiosity, confidentiality, staying in relationship)
- Closing prayer

Take-Home Practice

- Reflect: “*What helps me stay connected when I disagree?*”

Take-Home Assignment

- Read two-page article by Bishop Stephen Charleston, *What Witness Will We Make?* And prepare for discussion of article in Workshop #3
-

Workshop 2: *Listening Across Difference*

Theme: Curiosity as a spiritual discipline

Goal: Build skills for hearing one another without fixing, persuading, or withdrawing

Learning Objectives

- Distinguish **listening to understand** from **listening to respond**
- Practice curiosity across theological, political, generational, or cultural differences
- Reduce reactivity and defensiveness

One-Hour Flow

0–5 min | Grounding Prayer

- Silence and breath prayer

10 min | Teaching: Why We Stop Listening

- Brief input on:
 - Threat response in conflict
 - How assumptions block belonging
 - Jesus’ questions as models for engagement

30 min | Structured Listening Practice

- Triads with roles:
 - Speaker
 - Listener

- Observer
- Prompt: “*Describe a parish issue you care deeply about and why it matters to you.*”
- Listener may only ask clarifying questions

15 min | Debrief

- What helped you feel heard?
- What made listening hard?
- What surprised you?

20 min | Whole Group Reflection

- How might better listening change our parish culture?
- Identify one habit to practice communally

3 min | Closing Prayer

- Prayer for “ears to hear and hearts to receive”

Take-Home Practice

- Practice reflective listening once during the week (at church or home)

Take-Home Assignment

- Read Handouts: *Dialogue Instead of Debate* and *Listening and Healing*
-

Workshop 3: *Staying at the Table When It’s Hard*

Theme: Practicing belonging amid disagreement

Goal: Equip participants to remain in relationship when tensions arise

Learning Objectives

- Understand conflict as a **spiritual and relational opportunity**
- Learn practices for repair, accountability, and reconnection
- Strengthen communal resilience

One-Hour Flow

0–10 min | Opening Prayer and Word Association

- One word describing how conflict feels to you

20 min | Teaching: Conflict in Christian Community

- Normalize conflict
- Introduce key practices:
 - Naming impact vs. intent; emotional “wake”
 - Hard on issues; soft on people
 - Speaking for self, not others
 - Repair over winning

25 min | Understanding “Family Systems”

- Triangulation; drama triangle
- Self-differentiation
- Congregation as an “emotion system”
- Multi-generational transmission
- Homeostasis

25 min | Repair Practices – in small groups

- Introduce simple repair language:
 - “When you said/did..., I felt...”
 - “What I need to stay connected is...”

20 min Debrief and Blessing prayer

- Each participant names one way they will practice belonging
- Blessing for courage and patience

Take-Home Practice

- Use one repair practice within the next month

What Witness Will We Make? By The Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston.

Published with permission of Episcopal Divinity School, 2006.

As the Episcopal Church, the most important question before us is not about schism or sexuality. It is about witness. What witness will we make?

Christian witness is the public affirmation of faith. It is how we let the world see that we practice what we preach. Today those of us in the Episcopal Church are being called on to make our witness. We have the opportunity to be what we say we are. The world is watching. What will we do?

The answer is a matter of faith. We witness to what we believe.

In the Episcopal Church, we believe in Jesus the Christ. We believe in the Bible. We believe in the Good News. In fact, we believe so strongly in all of these essential parts of our shared faith that we are not afraid to disagree with one another about what they mean to us.

We welcome difference as the active presence of God's Holy Spirit moving amongst us. Our witness is not to conformity but to community. As the Episcopal Church we are not concerned that everyone in the pews believes exactly the same thing, in the same way, at the same time. Instead, we are concerned that no one is left out of those pews because of what they believe, who they are, or where they come from.

Our witness is to the unconditional love of God through the grace of Christ Jesus. Therefore, we accept the risk of grace by not setting limits to love with our own judgment of others. There are no border guards at the doors of the Episcopal Church. We respect the dignity of every human being and are never ashamed of who sits next to us in worship. We are all the children of God just as we are all sinners in need of mercy.

There are no walls around the Episcopal Church. We believe that God is at work in the world. We are not concerned that this world sees us as perfect, pure, or powerful. Instead, we are concerned that people see us practicing justice,

doing mercy, and walking humbly with the God we believe loves us all equally.

Our witness is to hope, not fear. We believe that men and women, no matter how separated they may think they are by religious conviction, cultural value, or social location are never truly apart unless they choose to be. We have nothing to fear from one another unless we allow fear to be our witness. While the distance between us may seem great and the path to reconciliation impossibly long, we have the guidance and comfort of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we never despair of one another for to do so would be to despair and deny the power of that Spirit.

Our witness is to mission. While the Spirit leads us to truth, we carry on with the task God has given us. We do not place pride before discipleship. While we may have many disagreements between us, we have only one mission before us. We never question the faith of the person who seeks to do the work of God. We believe that it is not important to know if that person is "right" or politically correct. It is only important to know if she or he feels welcomed into the servant ministry of Christ. There are no loyalty oaths in the Episcopal Church, but there are many jobs for those who want to help heal a broken world.

Our witness is to the reconciliation of God in a time of fear. In the Episcopal Church, we stand together not even if we disagree, but precisely because we disagree. WE practice the radical hope of God. We embody a faith that says there are many rooms in the house of God, but one home for us all if we choose to live together.

It is time to make our witness. In a century already marked by the terror of war, with zealots of all traditions inciting us into the patriotism of fear, what witness will we make? What alternative will we offer? What fresh vision will we share? Will we retreat into yet smaller factions of "true believers," whether from the Right or the Left, smug in our self-righteous assurance that we

have the truth? Will we struggle over property and power as though these things had lasting importance for us? Will we vilify one another and become agents of suspicion among the very people we love? Will we worry more about what people think of us than what God expects of us?

It is time to make our witness. It is time to take off our halos, our mitres, and our martyr's crown to stand up and be counted. What witness will each of us choose to make?

I can not answer for anyone in this Church but myself. I do not ask that you agree with my theology. I do not demand that you read your Bible exactly as I read mine. I know that you and I may disagree on many subjects and find it hard to live together. But I also know that you are as much in need of God's forgiveness as I am.

You and I need one another now more than ever because there are so many others who need us both in this hurting world. That world, the poor and the hungry, the captives and the prisoners, are depending on us to do more than argue with one another. For them, our witness is not a matter of church politics. It is a matter of life and death. I am counting on the fact that you know that.

Now is the time to extend our hands to one another. We will not walk away from the Body of Christ.

Now is the time for us to use our hands. We will not place pride over mission.

Now is the time for us to raise our hands. We will not forget that to God alone goes the glory.

Are you a witness? Will you join me in this affirmation of faith?

In my life I have known many seasons in the Episcopal Church. This is the season for our witness. This is the time for us to do something totally unexpected and wonderful, to confound those who say we have lost our vision. This is our moment to show the world that we can practice what we preach and be who we say we are. Our finest hour will not be when we think we have won something from one another, but when we know we have nothing to lose by loving one another.

I am a witness. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe in God's gospel of justice, compassion, and reconciliation. I believe in the community of God and will work faithfully with every person to bring peace and healing to the world. I open my hands. I open my heart. I want the world to see that I am not afraid. I step gratefully into the unconditional love of God. I stand up to be counted not for what I think is right, but for what I believe to be possible. How about you? Will you stand with me?

Are you a witness?

The Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston was president and dean of Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Bishop Charleston is a member of the Choctaw Nation, has served as the Episcopal Bishop of Alaska, and as the executive director of the National Committee on Indian Work at the Episcopal Church Center. Over his career, Bishop Charleston has been deeply involved in exploring different models of theological training to meet the needs of a changing church. He is an advocate for theological education that is culturally sensitive and meets needs and concerns of local faith communities.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

In times like ours, what kind of witness to love and hope, not fear, are we individually called to make?

What kind of witness as a congregation community of faith?

What do you think and feel about Bishop Charleston's claim about NOW being the time for giving our witness?

Dialogue Instead of Debate

DIALOGUE

The goal of dialogue is increased understanding of myself and others

I listen with a view toward understanding

I listen for strengths so as to affirm and learn

I speak for myself from my own experience and understanding

I ask questions to increase understanding

I allow others to complete their communications

I concentrate on others' words and feelings

I accept others' experiences as real and valid for them

I allow the expression of real feelings (in myself and others) for understanding and catharsis

I honor silence

DEBATE

The goal of debate is the successful argument of my position over that of my opponent

I listen with a view of countering what I hear

I listen for weaknesses so as to discount and devalue

I speak based on assumptions made about others' experience or their motivations

I ask questions to trip up the other or to confuse them or the issue

I interrupt the other speaker or change the subject

I am not concerned about the other person but focus on my own next point, my own self-interest

I critique others' experiences as distorted or invalid

I express my feelings to manipulate others; I deny their feelings as legitimate

I use silence to gain advantage

IMPORTANCE OF CONFIDENTIALITY: No one, in talking about this gathering after the fact, attribute any names to what was shared in the meeting.

Some questions to ask myself if I am having trouble staying with dialogue:

Am I honoring my own experience as valid...

...or am I feeling defensive about it?

Can I trust others to respect our differences...

...or do I suspect others are trying to force me to change?

Can I trust myself to be permeable and still maintain integrity...

...or do I fear that really hearing a different perspective will weaken my position?

Am I willing to open myself to the pain of others (and myself)

...or am I resisting pain that I don't have the courage to face?

LISTENING AND HEALING

You are NOT LISTENING to me when...

- *You do not care about me*
- *You say you understand before you know me well enough*
- *You have an answer for my problem before I've finished telling you what my problem is*
- *You cut me off before I finish speaking*
- *You finish my sentence for me*
- *You feel critical of my vocabulary, grammar, accent*
- *You are "dying to tell me something"*
- *You tell me about your experience in a way that makes mine seem unimportant*
- *You are communicating with someone else in the room*
- *You refuse my thanks by saying you really haven't done anything*
- *You do not help create a safe space for our conversation*
- *You start giving advice – then you haven't done what I have asked*
- *You tell me I shouldn't feel that way*

You are LISTENING to me when...

- You come respectfully into my "world" and let me be me
- You really try to understand my experience even when my experience goes against your convictions
- You feel a bit tired and drained in your efforts to hear me
- You allow me dignity of making my own decisions even when you think they may be wrong
- You do not take my problem from me, but allow me to deal with it
- You hold back on your desire to give me your good advice
- You do not offer me religious solace
- You give me room to discover for myself what is really going on
- You help me look within me
- You accept my gift of gratitude
- You ask clarifying questions
- You allow for hospitable and safe space to talk/listen
- You do not assume motives for my behaviors
- You offer feedback without judgment
- You express yourself honestly and with empathy
- You are able to restate what I have said without parroting

Preparation...

- **Do I consciously quiet myself to listen?**
- **Am I aware of my mental/spiritual state and "clutter" that inhibit my capacity to listen?**

- **Am I aware of my feelings? (anxious, enraged, hopeful, miserable, arrogant, hurt, regretful, bored, indifferent, relieved, curious, guilty, sad, joyous, tired, etc.)**

Typical Listening Responses that are NOT Helpful

Advising Response

- **How about you try...**
- **Maybe you should try...**
- **If I were you, I would just not take things so seriously...**

Judging Response

- **You are really uptight about this...**
- **You don't have a very good attitude on this...**
- **Now you're beginning to make sense...**

Analyzing Response

- **What's really got you worked up is...**
- **You are really overreacting...**
- **You see her just like your mother... no wonder you are made at her...**

Questioning Response

- **What's that about...**
- **Are you really doing all you can...**
- **Have you ever thought about just giving in...**

Supporting Response

- **Don't work about it. You'll do just fine...**
- **You did all you could do. Just let it go...**
- **Look at the bright side. Things will get better...**

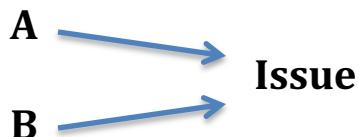
TOWARD HEALING AND RECONCILIATION

When _____ happened,
I saw _____, I heard _____,
I thought _____, I felt _____,
I did _____, I regret I _____
_____. And in prayer, I now commit to _____

Issues and People

We recognize that there are both issues and people involved in every situation.

The work is to separate the issues from the people; to be hard on the issues and soft of the people.



Belonging Beyond Differences

Family Systems Theory

Core Lens for Congregations

A congregation functions as an **emotional system**, not simply a collection of individuals. When anxiety rises, predictable patterns emerge that shape behavior, decision-making, conflict, and leadership dynamics.

Key Tenets (Congregational Application)

1. The Congregation Is an Emotional System

- Members are **emotionally interconnected**; what affects one part affects the whole.
- Symptoms (conflict, decline, burnout) usually reflect **systemic anxiety**, not isolated problems.
- Focusing only on “who is at fault” misses the deeper dynamics at work.

In practice: Conflict around worship, leadership, or change often signals anxiety about identity or loss.

2. Anxiety Drives Behavior More Than Theology or Policy

- Under stress, congregations act **emotionally rather than rationally**.
- High anxiety leads to reactivity, polarization, rigidity, or paralysis.
- Even faithful, well-intentioned people can behave poorly when anxiety is high.

In practice: Decisions stall, rules are weaponized, or minor issues become symbolic battlegrounds.

3. Differentiation of Self Is Central to Leadership

- Healthy leaders remain **connected without being reactive**.
- Differentiation allows leaders to stay clear about their values while tolerating disagreement.
- Low differentiation in leaders increases congregational anxiety.

In practice: A differentiated rector/pastor can say, “I hear your concern, and here is what I believe we are called to do,” without withdrawing or appeasing.

4. Triangles Are the Building Blocks of Congregational Conflict

- When anxiety rises between two people or groups, a **third party is pulled in**.
- Triangles stabilize anxiety but **prevent direct engagement**.
- Clergy are often triangulated into conflicts they did not create.

In practice: “Can you talk to them for me?” or complaints sent to the bishop, Session, or vestry instead of addressed directly.

5. The Identified Problem Rarely Is the Real Problem

- Congregations often project anxiety onto a **scapegoat** (pastor, staff member, vestry, subgroup).
- Removing or blaming the identified person rarely resolves the underlying anxiety.
- The system often produces a **new identified problem**.

In practice: Firing a pastor without addressing congregational patterns leads to repeating conflict with the next pastor.

6. Emotional Cutoff Is a Common Coping Strategy

- Members manage anxiety by **withdrawing emotionally or physically**.
- Cutoff may look polite but is deeply destabilizing.
- Leaving does not eliminate anxiety; it redistributes it.

In practice: Long-time members quietly disengage, stop giving, or attend elsewhere without conversation.

7. Congregational History Matters

- Unresolved grief, conflict, or trauma from the past continues to shape the present.
- Congregations transmit emotional patterns across generations of members and clergy.
- “We’ve always done it this way” often masks unresolved anxiety.

In practice: Past pastoral endings or building conflicts resurface during new transitions.

8. Leadership Is About Presence, Not Control

- Systems change when leaders **change how they show up**, not when they force compliance.
- Non-anxious presence creates space for the congregation to self-regulate.
- Authority rooted in calm clarity is more effective than authority rooted in position.

In practice: Naming anxiety and slowing the process lowers reactivity more than quick fixes.

9. Larger Social Anxiety Affects Congregational Life

- Congregations absorb anxiety from the wider culture (politics, pandemic, racial tension).
- Societal polarization decreases differentiation within the church.
- Churches often reenact cultural conflicts internally.

In practice: National issues become flashpoints for worship, symbols, or mission decisions.

Summary Statement

When applied to congregations, Family Systems Theory teaches that conflict, resistance, and dysfunction are best understood not as failures of faith or character, but as predictable responses of an anxious emotional system—and that healthy leadership begins with self-regulation rather than fixing others.

Core Lens for Congregations

A congregation functions as an **emotional system**, not simply a voluntary organization. Behavior—especially in times of stress—is shaped more by **anxiety and relational patterns** than by theology, policies, or personalities.

Key Tenets in Congregational Life

1. The Congregation Is an Emotional System

- Members are emotionally interconnected; what affects one part affects the whole.
- Issues rarely belong to one person alone—**symptoms point to system stress**.

- Congregational conflict often reflects **unmanaged anxiety**, not bad intent.

In practice: Firing a staff member or blaming a rector rarely resolves the underlying issue.

2. Differentiation of Self in Leadership

- Healthy leadership requires the ability to **stay grounded and principled** while remaining relationally connected.
- Poorly differentiated leaders become reactive, defensive, or overly accommodating.
- Highly differentiated leaders provide a **non-anxious presence**.

In practice: Clergy and lay leaders lead best when they resist taking sides or needing approval.

3. Anxiety Is Contagious

- Anxiety spreads quickly through congregations, especially during transitions, decline, or conflict.
- Increased anxiety leads to:
 - Reactivity
 - Polarization
 - Simplistic thinking
 - Loss of curiosity

In practice: Meetings become tense, rumors increase, and “urgent” decisions multiply.

4. Triangles Are Inevitable

- When tension rises between two people or groups, a third is drawn in to stabilize anxiety.
- Clergy are frequently triangulated between:
 - Members and vestry/session
 - Staff and lay leaders
 - Past and future visions of the church

In practice: Healthy leaders refuse to carry messages and encourage direct conversation.

5. The Identified Patient / Scapegoating

- Congregations often project anxiety onto one person or group:

- “The rector is the problem”
- “That family is toxic”
- “The vestry is dysfunctional”

In practice: Removing the “problem person” often leads to a new one emerging.

6. Emotional Cutoff

- Members manage anxiety by withdrawing:
 - Leaving quietly
 - Stopping pledges
 - Sitting in the back
 - Avoiding meetings

In practice: Cutoff may look peaceful but signals unresolved tension.

7. Multigenerational Patterns in Congregations

- Churches carry **long memories**—past conflicts, clergy departures, mergers, or splits.
- These experiences shape current reactions, often unconsciously.

In practice: “We’ve tried that before” reflects inherited anxiety, not just resistance.

8. Homeostasis (Resistance to Change)

- Congregations seek emotional equilibrium, even when patterns are unhealthy.
- Any change in leadership, worship style, or mission increases anxiety.

In practice: Vision work without systems awareness triggers pushback.

9. Focus on Self, Not Control

- Systems change when leaders change how **they function**, not when they fix others.
- Clarity, calm, and consistency are more effective than persuasion or force.

In practice: Leaders state direction clearly and stay connected to dissenters.

10. The Church Mirrors the Wider Emotional Field

- Broader societal anxiety (political polarization, cultural change, decline in religion) intensifies congregational stress.
- Congregations absorb and amplify these pressures.

In practice: Church conflict often reflects broader cultural divides.

Bottom-Line Wisdom for Churches

Congregational health is less about eliminating conflict and more about increasing the capacity to stay connected, thoughtful, and faithful under stress.

Stop the Drama!

