

# Shalom!

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## Making Peace When We Disagree

**MY HUSBAND AND I** are part of a group of friends who get together several times a year for the three Fs: food, fun, and fellowship. We've been friends for a long time and share many things in common. Yet we are not always of one mind when it comes to some theological beliefs, certain social issues, and politics. We've frequently had difficulty having constructive conversations when we disagree. It's not that we yell and scream at each other or call each other names. Rather, it's easy for us to avoid having the conversation at all, deciding by default that we aren't going to try to engage in dialogue. Sometimes we have trouble even understanding how one or more of these wonderful people who have been our friends for many years can believe or think what they do.

Some of us are better than others at having difficult conversations and being able to handle the inevitable conflict that comes when people disagree vehemently. We all believe that we should not avoid certain topics, but should have the conversation despite the discomfort, work harder to listen carefully to each other, and ask questions to gain greater understanding.

Some months ago when we were together for a weekend, we braved a political discussion. The conversation generally went well, and relationships were not broken. We all survived and learned that we can do it—which doesn't mean it will be easier the next time, just that we know we can survive.

I think about conversations like this often as I feel outraged by something in the

news. I wonder how my friends on the other side of the political spectrum can possibly feel okay about something I consider an outrage. I scroll my Facebook newsfeed and see meanness, dishonesty, and bad faith arguments coming from people at both ends of the spectrum. I sputter and fume and don't feel particularly "peaceful."

That's when I know I need to heed the counsel of the contributors to this edition of *Shalom!*. If you're at all like me, maybe you do too. I need to use my words carefully and responsibly, listen actively, try to understand other points of view, periodically opt out of television news and/or social media, nurture relationships, and take time out from the cacophony of voices to reflect on the quiet beauty that is all around me in nature.

I recently discovered an organization called Vote Common Good, which lists six values of good communication, known as the six commitments. They resonate with me and complement the principles articulated by *Shalom!* writers in this edition. The six commitments are: example, curiosity, clarity, decency, fairness, and persistence. If we could each take those commitments to heart, perhaps "making peace when we disagree" would be easier, and perhaps we could live up to Paul's admonition in Romans 12: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

**Harriet S. Bicksler, editor**

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# Beyond Sticks and Stones: The Power of Words

By David Flowers

**WE'RE LIVING IN** tumultuous times in America. From political campaigns to nightly news, from social media to the dinner table, we are experiencing great division, strife, and polarization in our culture. And unfortunately, the Church is often lured in to the fear mongering, name calling, and violent rhetoric that is typical of those who haven't heard the good news or who have yet to encounter the love and grace of Christ.

As those who claim to follow the Prince of Peace, I believe that we can do better. We can do better and we must, for Jesus calls his followers to be peacemakers and ministers of reconciliation. You might be thinking, is that even possible? I believe it is. Jesus showed us

that it's possible, and said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God" (Matt 5:9).

What does it look like for us, who want to be known as his children, to disarm and deescalate the hostile world around us by pursuing peace in our everyday lives? How can we follow Jesus and live peacefully in an age of outrage?

As a child, you may have heard or even said, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." This couldn't be further from the truth! Who hasn't been hurt by someone's words? Who among us hasn't hurt someone with our words? Plus, the Bible actually teaches us that our words have great power.

Our speech can make peace or lead to war. We can use our words to heal or to destroy. What we say can be a healing balm or a murderous hatchet to someone's soul. And in this age of outrage, when our whole society seems to be up in arms and on the brink of disaster, we in the Church need to reflect on the power of our words and whether we're helping or hurting the cause of Christ.

If we're going to be peacemakers (i.e., be the sort of people who proactively do the things that make for peace in this world), then the proper place to begin is with what comes out of our mouth. Of all God's creation, our ability to speak sets us apart in a most significant way. As human beings, we reflect God's image in that we can bless or curse with our words. When you consider that we speak somewhere between twenty to thirty thousand words a day (some of us with gusts up to fifty thousand or more), we are reminded that we have the potential to do a great deal of good or cause great harm with our words.

In Matthew 15:11, Jesus said, "It's not what goes into your mouth that defiles you; you are defiled by the words that come out of your mouth." "Defile" means to spoil, desecrate, violate. He goes on: "The words you speak come from the heart—that's what defiles you. For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual im-

morality, theft, lying, and slander. These are what defile you." Earlier in Matthew 12, Jesus says, "You must give an account on judgment day for every idle word you speak. The words you say will either acquit you or condemn you."

James says similar things in his letter. James is thought to be the half-brother of Jesus. The books of Acts and Galatians tell us that this James, who became a disciple after the resurrection of Jesus, was the leader of the Jerusalem church, the first congregation made up of Jesus's 11 disciples and other Jewish believers. In the book of James, there are many allusions to Jesus' words.

James is largely concerned about evidence (or works) to prove that our faith is genuine. He challenges his audience to put their faith into action—that we reflect a "pure religion" by caring for those who are poor, by not showing partiality for the rich, by being humble and showing mercy, by persevering through trials, and by the way we talk, by the words that come out of our mouth.

He says, "A bit in the mouth of a horse controls the whole horse. A small rudder on a huge ship in the hands of a skilled captain sets a course in the face of the strongest winds. A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything—or destroy it! It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell (James 3:3-7, MSG).

James says we can praise God one minute and then turn around and curse others made in his image the next. No matter how godly we are, no matter how much we love God, the Church, and serve his people, an uncontrolled tongue completely nullifies it all.

We can tithe regularly, volunteer hours upon hours of our time, serve on commissions, even pastor a church, but if we're gos-



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sipping, lying, being critical of others (assuming the worst about people and voicing that out loud), if we use your words in any way as weapons against others, James wants us to know it is sin against God and others made in his likeness.

Human speech is a window into the heart of a person, so our reckless, unbridled tongue is evidence of a spiritual problem. For example, a person who goes around assuming the worst about people and their motives in any given situation is saying far more about themselves than the person they are judging. A person who uses their words to hurt people reveals their own woundedness and need for healing. A person who is violent with their words reveals that there is violence in their heart, regardless of their commitment to nonviolence.

According to Proverbs 18:21, “Words kill, words give life; they’re either poison or fruit—you choose” (MSG). Words have power! We can choose to participate in things like gossip, slander, and accuse others, or we can put love into practice. Love “believes the best, hopes the best, is slow to

anger, is quick to forgive, and doesn’t dishonor others” (1 Cor. 13:6-7). We can choose to love and build people up with our words, thereby channeling heavenly peace to earth, or we can use our words to poison the world around us. Disciples will choose words that give life and bear fruit.

James ends his discussion of the power of the tongue with this verse: “Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness” (3:18). What a great image! Our words are like seeds planted in others and the world around us, and then we watch and wait for the harvest that God will bring through people who are committed to being healthy and whole image-bearers, who believe Christ calls us to live out the gospel of peace. Peacemakers are those who have chosen to use their words solely for the purpose of bearing the fruit of God’s Kingdom and to plant seeds of peace in a world poised for resurrection.

If we want to get control of our words, and choose words that give life, we must let God have more control of our heart. The goal for every follower of Jesus is to become

more mature in our faith; how we use our words is an indicator of our growth. This applies to the words we speak, as well as those we type through texts, emails, and social media.

So how are you doing? Have you used your words to hurt, not to heal; to stir up dis-sension, not to seek understanding; to add to the angry noise of our culture, instead of using your voice to imagine and inspire a better way—the way that leads to more of God’s peaceable Kingdom being known on the earth? What is God saying to you, and what will you do about it? Whatever it is, don’t delay. The Lord is looking for disciples who are ready to use their words to bring peace, healing, and hope in an age of outrage.

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## Lay Your Political Weapons Down

By Christopher Ashley

**PEOPLE ARE ANGRY.** This might be the least controversial way to begin an article, but let us pause for a moment to consider if there is much of a difference between Christians and non-Christians. I don’t think there is. It seems like just about everyone is piping hot mad.

This is an unfortunate result of advertising-supported news networks devolving into highly partisan coverage that is moving everyone, Christians included, onto the margins of the political spectrum, where our echo chambers reinforce our perspectives and those who might challenge them can be easily dismissed as biased, irrational, or even as enemies. I think Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount are especially poignant, when he teaches that we murder one another with our thoughts, and commands us to “leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:21–24).

In our efforts to triumph in politics, it is clear that we are jeopardizing our ability to worship God properly. “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20).

Not only is our worship at stake, but so is our public witness. In Christ’s beautiful prayer in John 17, he makes clear the connection between the unity of Father and Son and the unity of believers:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me—so

that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:20–23).

It is clear to me that we have not shown the world the kind of love that God desires of us and have rendered our worship tainted and our witness tarnished. We have found every way imaginable to divide ourselves. This would be a very discouraging way to end an article, so let me propose instead a way forward that will rely on convictions more than on handy step-by-step instructions.

### Lament

Soong-Chan Rah, in his book *Prophetic Lament*, takes readers through an in-depth look at Lamentations. This collection of poems is Israel’s response to the ruins of Jerusalem after having been sacked by the Babylonians. The condition of the city of Jerusalem and the fall from grace causes the

people to look inward and to seek to understand how such a fall from grace could have occurred. They recognize that they did not keep covenant with the Lord, *and* they ignored his commands.

Rah's point is that the people of Judah could never move on to rebuild Jerusalem or even to hope for the return of the presence of the Lord until they had done the necessary work of lamenting. I agree with Rah that the Church needs to do the same. "Tear your hearts, not just your garments," reads Joel 2:13 (NET), and I appreciate its emphasis on both/and. I think the world needs to see the Church making public acts of lament and confession, and to see the Church demonstrating humility and accepting blame for the sorry state of our worship and witness.

### Lay your weapons down

M. R. Zigler once offered a modest proposal for peace: "Let the Christians of the world agree that they will not kill each other." In our vitriolic political climate, Christians aren't killing each other, at least not literally. But is that cause for celebration? Hardly, as the earlier passage from Matthew 5 demonstrates.

We are as weaponized as ever, but our weapons are our tongues and our typing. We

must find a way to lay our weapons down, and to no longer speak ill of one another but to choose instead to lift one another up.

We need to find ways to opt out.

First, let's opt out of the 24-hour news cycle. It is naïve to assume that only "those people" are being misinformed and that "our people" are merely reporting facts. This is not a suggestion to become ignorant of what is happening in the world. Rather, it is a call to remember that we are to be formed into the likeness of Christ, not a Fox News or CNN subscriber.

If we strongly desire to tune into current events, let's seek out a diversity of perspectives that resist hysterics. I did this by getting rid of my television and subscribing to the *Economist* (a center-right publication) and the *Atlantic* (a center-left publication). Reading causes me to slow down and think more critically. What are some other ways of opting out of divisive news cycles?

Second, let's opt out of partisan politics. Allegiance to party affiliations appears to run more deeply than our allegiance to Christ and the Church. In the United States, we essentially have two choices: Democrat and Republican. But Jesus Christ resisted every binary and always found a third way. Christians have taken the bait on the binary of De-

mocrat and Republican options. Can opting out demonstrate a Christ-like wisdom of choosing a third way?

Now, some may respond that this kind of opting out is forsaking the world to its own demise. I would respond that the world appears to be sinking anyway, that the tenor of our politics is only getting worse the more partisan we get. I would also respond that opting out is not for the purity of the Church to remain as a secluded enclave safe from the world. Rather, it is for the very sake of the world. When the first followers of Jesus refused to play by the rules of the Roman empire, the Church exploded in growth. When the Anabaptists refused to pledge their allegiance to the states in Europe, the movement grew rapidly. Opting out is both for the Church and the world, and for our worship and our witness.

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## Waging Peace by Listening

By Ryan Showalter

"**IF YOU'RE NOT** outraged, you're not paying attention. Few statements better describe outrage culture than this one. I love it! Why? Because it convicts me on a regular basis. It convicts me to pay attention to what is going on around me—to truly listen, not only to what is being said, but to what is going on that is creating the outrage. It is far easier to criticize someone's grief and outrage than it is to understand it. Anyone can be a critic, but only the emotionally mature have the internal anchoring needed to enter into the dialogue and truly listen, learn, and be a part of the solution. Jesus modeled this, but I'm already getting ahead of myself. Let's begin with the first step.

"Wage peace with your listening." Anabaptists have long been known for being

pacifists, but that doesn't mean we are the best listeners. In fact one of the most common critiques of evangelical Christianity is that we are more interested in dominating conversations with our opinions than we are in truly listening to those outside the church and on the margins. When our culture accuses us of being homophobic, racist, sexist, and tone deaf to a younger generation, this is when we need to adapt a posture of radical listening.

I remember a pastor who said that when someone shares something he doesn't agree with or understand, he makes it a habit to simply ask, "What makes you think that way?" The stories, he learned, told him far more than the simple disagreement on the topic at hand. In a divided world, it is impor-

tant to remember that each of us have unique stories, and these stories shape us.

Our country and world are increasingly becoming divided. Nowhere is this more evident than in politics. As is clear from the recent *Christianity Today* editorial on impeachment, the church is not exempt from this divide. Diverse opinions are not the problem. The problem is that the church has lost its ability to have civil discourse in a learning posture that unites us to a common goal. There are a variety of reasons for this, but what I observe most often is the echo chambers we find in our social networks and personal relationships. People naturally agree with people who have similar world views and assumptions. It takes work to understand someone who speaks a different lan-

guage and comes from a different culture, so we follow the path of least resistance. We expect this when we travel internationally, but are caught off guard here in the U. S. when we experience differences as a result of political views, economic status, education, generations, or rural vs. urban. Trying to explain culture is like trying to explain water to a fish; it is hard to see and explain if it is all you have ever known.

Brethren in Christ culture has been shaped by rural farmers on the banks of the Susquehanna River. It has deep communal and family aspects, which are gifts, but many unwritten assumptions about our worldviews mean that it can be hard for outsiders to integrate. Knowing and naming our history can be a gift, if we are also willing to let other people's stories be heard and appreciated as well.

Martin Marty once quipped, "It is a fact of public life that when it comes to religion and politics, 'the committed lack civility' and the 'civil often lack conviction.' What we need is convicted civility."

I was first introduced to the concept of convicted civility in seminary by then President Richard Mouw. Dr Mouw saw in Jesus

someone whose identity was so anchored in divinity that it enabled him to fully embrace humanity in love. Dr Mouw would often draw a cross on the board. He would remind us that the cross has both personal (vertical) and communal (horizontal) implications. He would then drive home his point by challenging us to deepen our convictions and connection to God. This would enable us to broaden our dialogue in civility with people who were vastly different from us. Radically listening to someone's ideas and stories that may challenge our assumptions and worldview takes energy and strength. Being anchored and knowing our own identity and stories allows us to gracefully and fully listen to someone completely different from us.

The last few weeks have brought lots of media coverage about the rising tensions between Iran and the United States. Those tensions peaked with the assassination of General Suleimani and the retaliation of Iran, including their tragic shooting down of a passenger plane. Last week as I came into our apartment complex, I was greeted with a warm hello by my Iranian neighbor. Immediately I asked the question that had been burning on my mind, "How is your family?"

I knew this was a loaded question, as I feared her brother could have been on the plane, and I worried about her family back home. We talked for a long time, but I spent most of my time listening. Rather than making assumptions, I listened to the deep concern of someone who felt real fear for their own family members trapped by a government that doesn't protect its own people. Despite having lived in the U.S. for many years and being a professor of engineering, she has found immigration difficult. I don't pretend that there will be easy solutions to any of this, but radical listening allowed me to be the loving presence of Jesus to my secular Muslim neighbor during her time of distress.

I wish listening was easier. I admit that it doesn't come naturally to me. The way of Jesus rarely does. Yet this is exactly what he calls us to do—to love our neighbors, including those who are radically different from us. As you do this, may you wage peace with your listening.

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## Listening to the Enemy

By Grace Spencer

**JOHN PAUL LEDERACH**, an author and international peace activist, suggests that everyday people can cultivate peace by committing to engage in a relationship with people with whom they disagree. This is much easier said than done. He considers listening to be a spiritual discipline—a discipline that seems challenging to practice in our current political climate. In his book *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Humans*, Lederach writes, "Our capacity to listen to God is only as great as our capacity to listen to each other when we are in conflict. We test our real capability to listen, not when it is easy, but when it is most difficult" (pp. 130-131).

I worked as a restorative justice mediator at the Center for Peacemaking in Fresno, California for four years. In my role, I created space for juvenile offenders to meet with their victims to talk about their offense, ac-

knowledge the harm their offense caused, and make things as right as possible. As you can imagine, many of these meetings profoundly impacted my life, shaped my perspective of conflict, and even transformed my theology of the cross. I had the privilege of watching people expand their capacity to listen to their enemy as empathy and understanding unfolded. One mediation, in particular, continues to serve as a beacon of hope, reminding me that we can cultivate shalom, even in our increasingly polarized nation. (Disclaimer: some of the details didn't happen exactly as I've described them, as I'm writing from memory some years after the fact, but they convey the essential truth of what happened.)

"There is no way that the officer is going to say yes to the process," my supervisor said as he leaned back in his chair, lifted his chest to the ceiling, and placed his hands behind

his head. My coworker and I were working on a complicated case involving a conflict between an African American teenage female student and an on-campus male police officer. The conflict started when the teenager walked on campus when she wasn't supposed to—she had stayed home sick that day but decided to show up for practice. What began as a minor conflict quickly escalated when the officer interpreted the student's actions as resisting arrest. He tried to arrest her, and she pulled away. The officer then forced her to the ground. The force he used caused the student to have a panic attack, and a bystander called an ambulance. Because the incident between the student and officer was left unresolved, it caused more conflict to ensue, and the officer had the student expelled.

My supervisor's cynicism was warranted—the chances the officer would par-

ticipate were slim. Whenever victims are partially responsible for the conflict, they will more than likely refuse to participate because they'd rather not own their mistakes. My coworker contacted the officer anyway. We chose to believe that enemies are capable of love and compassion, that healing can happen, and even officers can find the courage to embrace vulnerability. To our supervisor's surprise, the officer agreed.

We met with the student, her grandmother, and the officer at our office. The vibrations of the old building's air conditioner filled the silence. The student paused, and the corners of her mouth caught her tears. I passed her a box of tissues. She covered her face for a moment. "I've had to go to therapy because I keep having panic attacks." She paused for a loud, deep breath. "And—I miss my school, my teachers, and my friends. I miss cheer."

The officer summarized what the student shared. Even though he was clearly listening, I could feel the disconnect between them; she did not feel heard or validated. He explained that he was doing his job. I started strategizing, trying to come up with questions to help the officer understand.

"Well, I have to go," the grandma of the student said and got up out of her chair.

"But, I have something to say before I go."

My eyes widened, and I turned towards my coworker.

"I don't think you get it." She continued: "She didn't have any problems before you pinned her down. Don't you understand that? When she sees you, it causes her distress. That's why she started acting out at school. She's afraid of you. Don't you see that?" Her grandma walked out, and my coworker followed her.

The air conditioner sounded even louder.

"So," I interrupted the awkward silence, turned towards the officer, and summarized the grandmother's feelings, "Do you understand this?"

"Yes," he responded. "I understand. And I hate that this happened. I am sorry for my response and what it has done to you. I really want you to do well. I didn't want to expel you." He inhaled deeply. "I've gone over the incident so many times in my head, wondering if I was too aggressive. I have a lot of pressure put on me. See this?" He pointed to a scar on his wrist. "A few months ago, I was almost forced into retirement because I was too soft during an arrest, and the guy broke my wrist."

The student adjusted in her seat. This is not what she was expecting to hear, what any

of us were expecting to hear. The officer chose to meet the student in a vulnerable space, space she courageously created.

Peacemaking is a delicate process. Advocating for peace at times can undermine the pain, trauma, and injustice victims have experienced. Rather than joining a group bound together by a common enemy, peacemaking invites us to stand in the space between us and them, and recognize the systems that perpetuate injustice, alienating us from our neighbors. As a mediator, I had to learn how to make space for multiple narratives, to listen to how everyone had been affected by conflict, while also acknowledging systematic injustice and significant power imbalances. When the story of this teenager and the police officer comes to mind, I am reminded that whatever love existed within them and allowed them to hear each other and vulnerably share their experience also exists within me. And when I choose to listen, to open myself up to the perspective and experience of someone else, I am no longer listening to an enemy. I am listening to my neighbor who also bears the image of the divine.

*Grace Spencer is on the pastoral staff at Reunion Oakville (ON), a Meetinghouse site.*

## Seeking to Understand

By Zach Spidel

**I DO NOT** recall the exact circumstances surrounding my first encounter with the following prayer of Saint Francis, but I do remember the immediate effect it had on me and the sense of revelation that shook me as I read it:

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is error, truth;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
And where there is sadness, joy.  
O Divine Master, Grant that I may not  
so much seek

To be consoled as to console;  
To be understood as to understand;  
To be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

The line that stood out to me in my first encounter with this prayer and which still challenges me the most today—the line that represents, I think, the wisdom of Christ in an age of division and animosity—is Francis's petition for help in seeking not to be understood, but to understand.

I see, or think I see, certain things clearly in the American political climate today. I am distressed, for instance, at the behavior of



many fellow Christians in their political engagements and affiliations. I worry about the Church and her witness. I am eager to defend, explain, and argue for a better form of Christian public engagement.

For all these reasons, when in discussion with others of a political nature, it is easy for me to feel flummoxed, get anxious, think that if I can only make one more point or bring in one more piece of logic or evidence, I can make the person I'm speaking with see the truth. Propelled by such feelings, I can

talk on and on. Perhaps I even end up talking over the other person, getting short with them and expressing not just dismay, but disdain when they, incomprehensibly-to-me, go on believing in and living by political commitments that seem out of line with Christ. In my worst moments, I have behaved and thought this way.

Among the views I hold related to the public sphere are these: I am convinced that Christians ought to avoid cooperation with or enmeshment in the violence of the nation-state. Even more fundamentally, I am committed to an alternative form of politics that avoids America's national electoral system in order to better invest in the monarchy of heaven through direct action here on earth. And finally, on that basis, I find partisan apologies for the behavior of specific politicians from fellow Christians troubling. These are no doubt important matters; yet, Francis's prayer reminds me that what's important for me in these important matters is not that I make sure my views are heard, but that I remain attentive and open to hearing the voice of God on the lips and in the lives of my neighbors—including those with whom I have serious, even disturbing disagreements. The peace of God is, I believe, arrayed against the violence of the state, the partisan posturing of elected officials, and the vitriolic shallowness of America's current political

culture. That same peace, in response, summons me not to incredulous and impatient explanations (how much less, denunciations!) aimed at those who do not see these things, but to a self-giving commitment to attend to what they can teach me. In fact, Christ would have me count those who disagree with me as better than myself (Phil. 2:3), and listen to them accordingly.

When I remember that Christ came into the world for sinners of whom I am the worst, then I will be eager not to lecture others until they see and accept the important truths I do; rather, I will be eager to listen to them in order to discover Christ in them. Rather than anxiously seeking to save the Church from error by trying to make others understand the truth I can see, I can trust in Christ to guide his church, I can slow myself down, and I can take the time to listen—to really listen—to the brothers and sisters, the neighbors, and even the enemies I have who seem to me to be so consequentially wrong.

This slowing down to listen and understand those with diametrically different convictions is, in the end, the true posture of peace. Christ did not demand to be heard, but was silent before his accusers. He did not try to make people follow him by force of argument, but invited people through parable and the power of his love manifest in miracle and in his way of life. The world around us

and, too often, the Church herself is too full of people demanding to be heard, convinced that it is utterly essential that we make ourselves understood. But the world doesn't need any more of that. The world could use a few people committed to truly and lovingly attending to those who disagree with them. Why do my brothers and sisters, my neighbors, and my enemies believe and act as they do? What value might I be surprised to find in their contrary positions even if I still disagree? What possibilities for change and renewal (first in myself and then, perhaps, in them) will come from my commitment to understanding before I make any attempts at being understood?

I suspect that the alternative, cruciform vision of politics which I believe loyalty to Jesus entails can only spread through a similarly cruciform style of engagement that dies to the need to make itself understood and concerns itself first and foremost with understanding others—including (perhaps especially) those who oppose that vision. If that's true, then the best thing I can do to promote the politics of peace is to stop talking and start listening.

*Zach Spidel is the pastor at Shepherd's Table, Dayton, OH.*

## Fostering Peace and Managing Conflict Without Sacrificing Your Position

By Ron Kramer

**HAVE YOU NOTICED** that nowadays it seems like almost everyone has an opinion, and they are more than ever willing to share it? While this openness can be beneficial in understanding where a person is coming from on an issue, responses contrary to the opinion being expressed can easily set up an open conflict. Even through conflict is unavoidable in this world, if managed correctly, it does not have to result in fractured peace between those with opposing opinions. Here are some diplomatic techniques that can be learned to help a person navigate a peaceful

relationship with someone with whom they disagree.

**Acknowledge the other person's point of view.** Acknowledgement is NOT agreement. Acknowledgment is simply communicating that you hear and understand the other person's point of view. While you sacrifice nothing of your own position on the issue, the power of acknowledgement of the other's position can convey a sense of personal acceptance and respect for the other person. This helps separate our love for that person from our opposition to their position. Love

is a key aspect for finding peace with others, and does not require that you change your position on an issue.

**Agree with everything you legitimately can, regardless of how small it may be.** Common ground is a powerful thing in a relationship. In even the most contentious issues, there are likely multiple points of mutual interest that you can agree with—if you are willing. Willingness is usually the problem, because many people feel that if they agree with even the smallest point, this will somehow weaken their own position. To the con-

trary, finding and acknowledging truthful common ground with an opponent can actually show them that you are a reasonable person and help build relational bonds, despite your opposite opinions.

**Try not to directly disagree with a person holding a different opinion.** When a person expresses a position contrary to your own, directly disagreeing with them invokes the very definition of a conflict, and often causes the other person to entrench and feel the need to defend their position. This is at odds with having peace with that person. If you see the disagreement as obvious, directly pointing this out is counterproductive to what you would like to accomplish. Our goal, in love, is to try and build a relationship of respect, so that contrary opinions can be expressed so that each person feels valued. Causing the other person to entrench in their already contrary opinion is exactly what you are trying to avoid if you hope to encourage them to think about changing any part of their position.

**It's okay to disagree with someone without telling them.** Just because someone expresses a position contrary to your own, you should not feel obligated to respond with your opposing opinion. No peace was ever broken by what someone didn't say. Engagement is not a requirement. You do not sacrifice your

position by leaving it unstated. The question to be asked many times in instances of unstated disagreement is this: "Which is more important—me stating my contrary position and fracturing the peace of the relationship, or keeping my contrary opinion to myself and fostering peace in the relationship? What is disclosing my contrary position going to gain? Is it really so important that it is worth introducing conflict into the relationship and sacrificing peace?" I believe it's more important to have peaceful relationships with those with whom you disagree than to have disagreeable relationships with them. If simply not disclosing your contradictory position allows this to occur, then it may be well worth it for the sake of having a peaceful relationship.

**A relationship will only bear the weight of as much conflict as the strength of the relationship.** The stronger the bonds in a relationship are, the more conflict the relationship will be able to withstand before the bonds that hold the relationship together break. Two people who do not know each other very well and have weak relational bonds cannot withstand the weight of much conflict before the relational bonds break. When this occurs, the emotional peace the two had with each other is severed. On the other hand, two people with strong rela-

tional bonding can withstand quite a bit of conflict, including that brought on by opposing opinions. Strong bonds cause the two people to be more willing to give each other increased grace and forgiveness for holding different opinions. To foster peace with those who hold opposing positions, the best path is to forge stronger relationship bonds with them. Again, this does not require us to sacrifice or to change our own position in the least, but simply to adopt a different attitude toward those with whom we might oppose or disagree.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Jesus, Matt. 5:9).

"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Paul, Rom. 12:18).

"You catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar." (Ben Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack*).

*Ron Kramer is an associate pastor at CrossRoads Church of Salina, KS.*

## Public Service Peacemaking

By Rusty Bailey

**IN TODAY'S SOCIETY** where too many people publicly share angry rants and hateful comments and engage in personal attacks and public shaming over a difference of opinion, it is more difficult than ever to be in any type of leadership position. It is particularly difficult to be in a political leadership position. If not for my foundation in Christ and my commitment to be guided by Jesus's teachings, I'm not sure I could handle some of the challenges I face day after day. Jesus was a peacemaker. Following his example is the perfect solution to living peacefully in this age of angry, divisive chaos.

I was recently asked to explain how I negotiate situations of significant, polarizing disagreement. I make a concerted effort to

look to Jesus's example to guide me. Jesus approached everyone with openness. His goal was to build relationships through patience, love, and understanding. In John 4, Jesus interacts with a Samaritan woman and teaches her about "the gift of God," living water that leads to eternal life. The Samaritan woman says to Jesus, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" Whether or not we are of the same background or same opinion, I try to approach others with a measure of goodwill and respect as Jesus did with the Samaritan woman and with an open mind and willingness to compromise. The bottom line for me is making a decision to follow Christ, not a political party.

Holding political office exposes a person to the demands of partisanship. Even though I am engaged in local politics and have been elected to a non-partisan office, the questions "What are you?" and "Whose side are you on?" are often presented to me. Jesus taught that we should love our neighbor. Period. He did not teach us to love this type of neighbor more than that type of neighbor, just to love. Jesus calls us to love *everyone* because we are *all* God's children.

In addition to my spiritual approach, I have also taken a deliberate, practical approach to the partisan issue. As a voter, I am registered "Decline to State" because I do not want to be beholden to any group's agenda when I am faced with solving prob-



lems or developing visions for our city. Whose side am I on? I am on the side of the Riverside community. I try to always focus on bringing about the outcome that will be most beneficial to Riverside and its residents.

The best way I have found peace, when in the midst of turmoil, is to start the day on my knees in prayer. While I may not always receive the answered prayer that I want or expect, I know that God is with me through the crucible of leadership. Some of my most difficult moments come when confrontation is necessary, typically with another elected official.

When conflict is imminent, I always try to confront a person one-on-one. Explaining my side of the story or my position on a potential vote is much easier when I am sitting across a table from the opposition. Matthew 18 speaks to this way of handling conflict, and takes it steps further if you don't "win

them over." There have been times when I have asked others to call or speak to another elected official because he or she would not listen to me. I have even called upon the faith community to come to my rescue and speak at city council meetings to support me or my position on a matter at hand.

Still, the most significant way to negotiate disagreement in this age of polarization comes by being counter-cultural, just like Jesus. While humility and meekness may not be respected by the majority, the minority of one (i.e., God) is who we are to please. So we must spend more time with God than we do with others. We must continue to carve out time in our day to listen to that "still small voice." The Holy Spirit lives inside of us, and until we tap into that "Force," it won't be with us. Sorry for the Star Wars reference, but there is great wisdom in how the Jedi lived their lives. Don't be afraid to take a

knee, re-center yourselves and your priorities, stand up and put on the "full armor of God," and fight for what the Lord inspires you to fight for. I can't and shouldn't tell you what to fight for—that inspiration comes from God.

I choose leadership over politics, and peacemaking over conflict, and Jesus over this world. I hope you will too.

*Rusty Bailey taught high school government and economics for 11 years before he served as a councilman for the city of Riverside, CA. For the past eight years, he has been mayor of Riverside. He and his family attend the Madison Street Church in Riverside.*

## Assuming the Possibility of Peace

By Harriet S. Bicksler

**"IF IT IS** possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Rom. 12:18). This verse, one of my favorites, challenges me to pursue peace even when it is difficult and seems impossible. I have often reflected on the three parts of the verse as I try to live out my commitment to peacemaking, reconciliation, and nonviolence. During these days of extreme division, polarization, violence, and hateful speech and actions, the challenge to live at peace with everyone feels greater than ever.

**"If it is possible. . ."** These words remind me that peacemaking is not easy; achieving lasting peace might not happen any time soon. I often feel like there's not much I can personally do to make peace. Despite my best efforts, reconciliation might not happen. But I still wonder: do I really value all human life, as our pursuing peace core value says? Is it possible to value (and to love) terrorists, or other people who seem unlovable, who do unspeakably cruel and evil things, who don't value life themselves? Will valuing their lives make any difference? Maybe not, but shouldn't I try? What difference might it make if I

think of them as human beings who somebody loves, and who the God who created them in his image also loves?

**". . . as far as it depends on you. . ."** The second clause puts the responsibility on me to do whatever is possible and within my power. There are some things I can control. I can choose to see the human being first and not the terrorist or criminal or unkind colleague. I can choose to try to understand where the person is coming from, to put myself in his or her shoes, to see things from another perspective. I can choose to forgive when someone hurts me or someone I love. I can choose to do my best to reconcile with someone who has wronged me. I can choose not to respond with either the violence of words or the violence of a weapon.

**". . . live at peace with everyone."** Here's the imperative, after the two qualifiers. It's direct ("live at peace" rather than "try to live at peace") and all-encompassing ("with everyone," not "with the people you like or who agree with you"). "Everyone" includes the neighbor who flies the Confederate flag, perhaps in support of his underlying racism

which I abhor; the person who doesn't want to welcome refugees, however innocent they are or horrific the circumstances from which they come, because they might be terrorists; the friend who supports politicians from whom I instinctively recoil; and the person who says that my actions in a situation of conflict directly contradict my commitment to peacemaking.

I have been part of two intense situations of conflict that tested my commitment to the demands of this verse. My natural inclination is to avoid conflict, to run as fast as I can in the other direction, but I couldn't do that in either of these situations. I admit that during the height of the conflicts, I thought about simply leaving (running away) to escape what were very painful experiences. My commitment to peacemaking wouldn't let me do that, however. Even though reconciliation often seemed impossible ("if it is possible"), I felt responsible to do what I could ("as far as it depends on you") to "live at peace with everyone," or more accurately, to help to create an environment where reconciliation could happen.

In both situations, there was the claim of a strong commitment to peacemaking, but misunderstandings based on different perspectives of the same events still happened, and there was much ugliness in the way people talked about each other. Many words that felt violent—and actions that perpetuated conflict and misunderstanding—threatened to tear the organizations apart. It was very difficult for me to observe how Christians claiming to follow Jesus, the Prince of Peace, could treat each other so badly.

As someone involved in both situations, I did my best to help create opportunities for people on all sides of the conflict to talk and

listen to each other, and we enlisted the help of experts in conflict management. I often felt like we were all failing miserably, while things got worse instead of better. There was much criticism of our efforts, along with a lot of support.

In the years since, the conflicts have been resolved, necessary changes were made, and people have moved forward successfully and with integrity. Despite my frequent desire to run away during the conflicts, I'm glad I didn't. These experiences reinforced my conviction that if it is possible, and even when it doesn't feel like it is, I have to do whatever I can to make peace. To do less is to contradict

everything I have believed about the biblical call to Christians to be peacemakers and ministers of reconciliation.

*Harriet Bicksler has been editor of Shalom! since 1981, and also serves as editor for the Brethren in Christ Historical Society. She attends the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church. A shorter version of this article previously appeared in the Spring/Summer 2016 edition of In Part magazine, then the official periodical of the Brethren in Christ Church U.S.*

## If You Are Very Quiet You Can Hear the Leaves Fall

By Ann Bodling

If you are very quiet you can hear the leaves fall,  
following their twirling, swirling dance with your ears as well as your eyes,  
until they come to rest gently at your feet.

Even in the noisy tumult of the gales that loosen their grip,  
Even amidst the strident tumult that rages in your mind,  
If you stop, and if you will yourself to listen,  
you will hear their falling-gently-to-earth whispers,  
rustling through their companions  
on their once-in-a-lifetime descent.

Background noise so fills our minds right now...  
Outer noise of destruction, of greed, of power wielded wrongly.  
Inner voices of fear, of sadness, of outrage, of powerlessness.  
Noise that will surely drown us entirely if we let it and render us deaf,  
even to the Good.  
We desperately need times of stillness.  
We need to turn our attention to that which is beyond ourselves  
and all our thoughts.  
Our heart and soul's very functioning depend upon them.

Grace breaks through as I gaze at reddening and yellowing trees,  
standing and swaying in the autumn winds that strip their leaves.  
I am renewed.

If you are very quiet, you can hear the leaves fall.  
Listen. . . .

*Ann Bodling, a spiritual director, recently moved from Maryland to central Pennsylvania and attends the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church. This poem is reprinted by permission from her blog at [earthlyblessings.blogspot.com](http://earthlyblessings.blogspot.com).*

# “Hope Is the Thing With Feathers”

By Ann Bodling

*“Hope is the thing with feathers,  
That perches in the soul-  
And sings the tune without the words  
And never stops - at all-”*

-Emily Dickinson

**I THOUGHT OF** Dickinson’s verse as I stepped outside this morning. Like so many, I have felt weighed down lately . . . discouraged by national foolishness, by seemingly intentional hardheartedness, by frozen ground and icy puddles in the potholes, by thinking human thoughts and, naturally enough, carrying all-too-human concerns.

But when I stepped outside my door this morning, and stopped, and listened . . . why, there were songs of hope all around me, just like in the poem. It has only been in the last day or two that the red-winged blackbirds have begun to sing in the stand of bamboo where they shelter from the winds, and I’ve been hearing the tufted titmice’s high, clear, spring whistles for a week or more. I think I more than imagined the faint whisper of a cardinal’s spring song yesterday morning and the bluebirds and barred owls tuning up their voices for another season.

In the front yard, catkins have emerged on the hazelnut bushes and buds are enlarging on the star magnolia and the dogwood, as they do every year at this time. And as happens every year and is about to happen this week, they will be challenged by a bout of unseasonably severe winter cold, almost as an assault on their natural rhythms and intentions. And yet, though they must endure the upcoming frigid blast, it will not defeat them. Miraculous though it may seem and mostly invisible to us, those buds and catkins will continue on in their slow, methodical development and preparation for their spring display. They will take in their stride what this week and the rest of winter offers.

The winter weeds, those brazen and opportunistic chickweed and hairy bittercress youngsters that germinate and take hold

during the dark of the year, and will mount an all-out barrage on our gardens in a couple of months, will wither in the coming freeze and look altogether vanquished by the low temperatures. But once the air and ground warm a bit, they will shake off the cold, laugh at our wishes for their demise, push out new growth and go on to bloom when we are paying them no attention. Such is their resilience and their place in the botanical scheme of things.

And so, once again, even as I tire of the frigid temperatures, the many-hues-of-brown landscape, the lack of obviously growing things, the tumult of our times, I am reminded of the presence of hope, the Presence that lives in all things and bids us comfort and the ability to look beyond the immediate. In the coming weeks, I will need reminders. I will watch and listen carefully for signs of the unfolding spring, subtle as they might be. I am grateful for these tangible invitations to hope and their encouragement to believe that what is today is not what will necessarily be tomorrow. Newness and freshness beckon, right now just out of reach, but just as we experience every year, are all the more joyous for the wait.

*Ann Bodling, a spiritual director, recently moved from Maryland to central Pennsylvania and attends the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church. This piece was originally published on Ann’s blog (earthlyblessings.blogspot.com) in February 2019, and is reprinted by permission.*

## Editor’s Notes

### Subscription renewals and contributions:

You probably recently received the 2020 subscription renewal letter, and if you have already renewed, thank you very much. We depend on your subscription renewals and extra contributions to be able to continue to publish *Shalom!* four times a year. The basic subscription rate remains the same at \$20 per year. If you are reading this issue because it’s in the library or on a periodical rack at your church and you would like to subscribe to receive your own copy, you can send a check payable to Brethren in Christ Church U.S. to the editor at the address on page 2. You can also subscribe, renew, or contribute online at [bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom](http://bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom).

**Topics for 2020:** The Spring 2020 edition of *Shalom!* will be on “understanding the generations” (i.e., silent, baby boomer, Gen-X, Millennials, Gen-Z), featuring articles representing each generation and how these generational worldviews affect our faith and the Church. In the mix of possible topics for the rest of the year are creation care, economic justice, and criminal justice reform (including mass incarceration). If you or someone you know would like to write on any of these topics, contact the editor (page 2). Your comments and ideas are always welcome.

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lot like reconciliation, something to which we are all called. Can we be agents of reconnection and depolarization? I hope so. And I applaud *Shalom!* as a place to speak, avoiding both silencing and shouting.

*Lois Saylor serves on the editorial committee for Shalom! and attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.*

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## Reconnecting: An Antidote to Polarization

By Lois Saylor

**RECENTLY, AN ARTICLE** was being posted and passed around on Facebook. The headline was provocative, and I wanted to know what was behind it. But the article did not substantiate the message of the headline. In fact, the headline was totally false, but done cleverly by using an approximation to the facts in the story. I wanted to respond and note the disparity between the headline and the article, but I remained silent. Why? Because the dishonest headline was pointed at the president, and to stand up for honest reporting would have been misread as a defense of the president and by association alliance with his policies and behaviors. To critique the headline, to point out the actual facts of the article, to ask people to read articles before posting, would not have been seen as a desire for truth, but rather perceived as an endorsement of everything the president says or does. I would have been shouted down. Such responses have happened before to me, and others. They happen a lot and not just on social media.

This is one example of our polarization that is very disturbing. Many feel silenced, and many others feel emboldened to shout. Those who are silenced fill the political spectrum, as do the shouters. Regardless of the direction, left or right, dialogue is suffocated.

Debate becomes volume. Sound bites turn into dogma.

In *When the Center Does Not Hold* (Fortress Press, 2019), David Brubaker and his fellow writers take on the issue of leadership in an age of polarization. They look at causes and look for cures. We are treated to a study of polarization, leadership during polarization, effective communication, the effect of trauma, the hope of resilience, and ways to transform polarization. As the book addresses the issue of leadership, it is good for individual leaders such as pastors, but would also make a good study for church boards and leadership teams, including denominational leadership.

In the seven chapters, the details of the story of polarization and its effects and remedies are developed in their entirety. Here is a quick glimpse at some of the book's themes. Overall, polarization shuts us down and hems us in. To fight it we must open ourselves up. We need to:

1. **Keep listening.** We could be wrong about parts of what we believe or think, and be wrong about what "the other" believes or thinks. By listening, we learn and engage, instead of shutting down and closing the door.
2. **Keep humanizing "the other."** We must

not work out of fear or hate as it dehumanizes others and allows us to dismiss them.

We need to refuse to hold anyone in contempt and "refuse to be enemies" (p. 104).

3. **Keep seeking meaning.** Work to define what is happening and allow that something new may be emerging. If we define the current situation only in negative terms, we increase the polarization. Seeking meaning is an act of hope and resilience.

If we desire to transform our polarized society or a polarized congregation, it can seem overwhelming. But the book shows how fighting polarization begins internally with each one of us. We can start with "me," and then in positions of leadership, we can begin to use the understandings and methods explored in the book to bridge our differences. With the right tools and attitudes, leaders can also prevent polarization, another worthy goal.

In the first chapter summary, Brubaker writes: "Polarization is not a new phenomenon, nor is it limited to U.S. society. . . . I will argue that leaders at every level (family, community, organization) are well placed to be agents of reconnection in an age of polarization" (p. 26). Reconnection sounds an awful

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