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It's Time to Rewrite the Rules of Civility



I have a big problem with civil discourse and civility itself. I wonder if they are broken beyond repair. If not irreparably broken, then I think it is time for a major overhaul.

On June 29, 2018, *The New York Times* published a piece with the title, “White America’s Age-Old, Misguided

Obsession with Civility.” In it, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is quoted: “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice” (Sugrue).

The day before, on June 28, Vann Newkirk II wrote for *The Atlantic*, “As has so often been the case, the demands for civility function primarily to stifle the frustrations of those currently facing real harm.... Poor people, immigrants, black activists, and perhaps LGBT employees at a restaurant in Virginia¹ are bludgeoned into silence by the constant cry for civility, made to hold still as injustices are visited upon them.” Newkirk concludes, “Civility is the sleep-aid of a majority inclined to ignore the violence done in its name—because in the end, they will be alright” (Newkirk).

From Policing Civility to Neighboring and Accompaniment

The rules of civility regularly translate into the majority’s rules—play “nice” and behave (because I say so!)—so count me in among those who say it is time to set them aside and look elsewhere. The two pieces I mentioned resonate deeply with some of the most unsettling challenges from my own Christian faith journey. How often are the words *civility* and *Christianity*, and their related networks of ideas, used to shut up, to shut down, and to shut out? How frequently do people, in the names of both civility and Christianity, sustain the status quo of systems that scold and dismiss, that harm

“How frequently do people, in the names of both civility and Christianity, sustain the status quo of systems that scold and dismiss, that harm people and perpetuate injustice?”

people and perpetuate injustice? Thankfully, the parallel I see between civility and Christianity does not end here. I yearn for a Christianity that is durable and resilient enough to carry our greatest suffering and biggest problems as well as our deepest compassion. I have the same longings for civility and civil discourse.

Over the past few years, my longings for Christianity have brought me to focus less on beliefs and more on practice. It is not that I don’t find discussions of Christian

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theology important. I do. And it is not that I see myself and my actions as of ultimate concern. I don't. What I find important and urgent is my need for finding my way in this world day in and day out. So I am *practicing* Christianity. These days I am listening deeply and listening daily to the words of Jesus as he tells me to love God and love my neighbor as myself. I am practicing loving: loving God, neighbor, and self. I am practicing Christianity as neighboring and it seems to me that neighboring ought to be the beating heart of civility and civil discourse. Not the majority's rules. Not play nice. Not behave (because I say so!). Neighboring.

"Neighboring ought to be the beating heart of civility and civil discourse."

When I consider Christianity as neighboring, the most helpful guidance I know comes from the model of accompaniment used by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Originating in the ELCA's Global Mission Unit, accompaniment is journeying together in solidarity, living with the understanding that our lives are interwoven and interdependent.² Accompaniment is first, foremost, and always relational. Accompaniment puts flesh on the bones of neighboring. While nearly all of its ideas are appealing to me, it is the five values of accompaniment that I find concrete and specific enough to be practical, to be practice-able. This is why I aspire to practice them on a daily basis; this is why we've adopted the five values of accompaniment as the values of service for Campus Ministry at Concordia College; and this is why I propose we all carry these five values with us whenever we set out to practice civility and civil discourse. The five values of accompaniment are as follows:

- Mutuality
- Inclusivity
- Empowerment
- Sustainability
- Vulnerability

I propose that at each of our ELCA colleges and universities we rewrite civility as neighboring and use the five values of accompaniment as our guide.

Unpacking the Values of Accompaniment

I would now like to share some of the richness of how the ELCA specifically unpacks these universal values. At the same time, I will share some examples of the five values in action from within the Concordia community. These are my examples. They are from my perspective and they are not necessarily drawn from civil discourse, but I hope they can still serve to get our creative juices flowing as we consider rewriting civility as neighboring by using the five values of the model of accompaniment.

Mutuality is grounded in the belief that we all have strengths, resources, challenges, fears, hopes, dreams, and shortcomings to share in every circumstance (Global Mission). When I design reflection on service, mutuality is almost always the starting point. Was this experience mutual? How do you know this? These short questions can go a long way while reflecting after a service engagement. They can reveal and contribute to rewiring the "white savior complex" and to disrupting feelings of, "Hey, good job! That's all done. Back to (my) life!" They focus attention on people and relationships as opposed to tasks and self-congratulation.

The value of *inclusivity* as upheld within the accompaniment model recognizes that someone is always excluded; accepting this as given, we "seek to build relationships across boundaries that exclude and divide" (Global Mission). Thanks to a Circle Keepers training organized by my colleague, Amena Chaudhry, I'm committed to "keeping circle" as a vital, equitable, and relational practice. An example from circle keeping is to pass a talking piece around a circle of conversation (Pranis 35). Everyone gets a turn to speak without interruption and a person's turn only ends when she/he chooses to end it by passing on that talking piece.

The ELCA translates the value of *empowerment* into the following intention: "We seek to identify and correct imbalances of power, which may mean recognizing and letting go of our own" (Global Mission). I find the explicit naming of this need to let go important, especially because I hold a lot of power and privilege and I am accustomed to this status. This past academic year I collaborated with four black male Concordia students, inviting them to explore the topic of black male anger as a Chapel during the week of MLK. I am grateful that they

answered with an enthusiastic and inspiring yes. My job was not to shape the message; my job was to create an environment, tend to relationships, and design a process whereby these four students could discover, draft, and refine what they wanted to say, including questions that they wanted to pose.

In the context of accompaniment, *sustainability* recognizes that tending to relationships and community leads to more durable shared efforts (Global Mission). Last spring, after listening to the insistence of compassionate students and in partnership with the disaster relief team of the Gulf Coast Synod of the ELCA, a group of 40 members of the college community travelled down to Pasadena, Texas to spend time with neighbors impacted by Hurricane Harvey. This fall, another group of students will head down to a nearby community, this time to learn about immigration, citizenship, and the mapping of community resources. Across campus, from week-long Justice Journeys to global learning partnerships, we're increasingly putting our energies into sustaining ongoing relationships rather than initiating one-off transactions.

The article by Sarah Ciavarrri in this issue of *Intersections* discusses *vulnerability*, the last value associated with accompaniment, and I am very thankful for her work. One of the ways I practice vulnerability is quite basic, but holds the potential to transform conversations, relationships, and me: when listening to another person, I practice presence instead of figuring out what I'm going to say next.

Clearly, I practice these five values a lot. Every day I practice not because I think practice makes perfect but because I think it's important to exercise these muscles.

Concluding Thoughts

If civility is the sleep-aid of the majority (Newkirk), it is time for those of us who are the majority to wake up. Together, all of us must redefine the rules of civility so that "the frustrations of those currently facing real harm" are not "regularly stifled" (Newkirk). Let us commit to a civility that has neighboring as its beating heart and not the majority's rules of playing "nice" and upholding the status quo. We need a civil discourse which can hold the biggest problems of our whole "glocal" neighborhood and the

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deepest compassion we have for each other as neighbors. Let us rewrite civility as neighboring using the five values of the ELCA's model of accompaniment: mutuality, inclusivity, empowerment, sustainability, and vulnerability. Let us get started and start practicing today. And today will be a beautiful day in the neighborhood.

Endnotes

1. Both of these pieces were published in the days after Sarah Huckabee Sanders was asked to leave The Red Hen by Virginia restaurant owner, Stephanie Wilkinson.
2. While I'd previously heard of the model of accompaniment, my more thorough introduction to the model was in the context of an ecumenical training prior to serving as Associate Country Coordinator for the ELCA's Young Adults in Global Mission Program in Southern Africa. Held in Toronto, this training also introduced me to the forced residential schooling of aboriginal peoples in Canada, a history we share in the United States. When I speak of the painful past of Christian (mission) history, such stories shape my perceptions and practices.

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