

A VALUES CONVERSATION
AT FOREST HILL CHURCH, PRESBYTERIAN

Finding God's Values in Today's World

A Pilgrimage for Understanding

February 2007

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ABSTRACT

In December 2004, after the bitterly-contested presidential and congressional elections, Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian perceived a partisan divide within its congregation. To dig deeper and to understand why the divide existed in the first place and, more importantly, to see if it could be bridged at least within our church community, a small but diverse group of members was invited to meet and talk about their values. These discussions provided clues that helped the participants discover what shaped their own and others' belief systems and, in turn, not only shed light on why the divisions existed but also led to discovery of beliefs held in common. While the Values Conversation began with an initial focus on addressing the political divisiveness in the 2004 General Election, it became a transformative journey for the participants, and it resulted in agreement on an Affirmation of Faith that is the heart of this report.

SUMMARY

After the November 2004 election, a small group of members of Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian, met to engage in a conversation about the highly polarized 2004 Presidential election. We all were disturbed by the angry rhetoric about values that persisted throughout the campaign, statements issued by the religious right that linked one party's platform to narrowly-defined "Christian values," and the seeming inability or unwillingness of other parties to even recognize the role of faith values in the political sphere.

The original intent was to meet once or twice and make some sense out of what happened during this highly charged campaign, which resulted in such deep division in the country, and at the same time to explore how we understand Christian values. On the one hand, we are a group of

church members who consider ourselves Christian. Yet we feel very uncomfortable that the concept of “Christian values” has been so narrowly represented in the media and other public forums on the basis of the views of only a small segment of believers who identify themselves as Christian. We quickly discovered that we had difficulty articulating our faith values in our daily lives. After two meetings we realized that we had barely scratched the surface in our conversations and were not willing to put an end to our dialogue, and so we decided to continue meeting.

After a year and a half of monthly meetings and numerous other discussions, we have decided that it is time to document our shared experiences as pilgrims seeking together the reality of God’s kingdom here on earth and to articulate our mutual understanding of values that would help us discern and build that kingdom.

Our meetings took many directions. Our group was heterogeneous politically and was not in agreement as far as the hot-button issues of the day. We agreed that we needed to adhere to guidelines for respectful conversation in our meetings. One of our members happened to be a professional mediator, and she taught us active listening skills, skills that we put to use, and sometimes to the test, throughout our discussions.

Having decided to expand the scope of our endeavor beyond a couple of meetings, we began by discussing some of the polarizing issues of the day. In trying to understand how each of us arrived at our views, we shared our personal stories and our understanding of values as taught by Jesus. We read and discussed portions of Marcus Borg’s The Heart of Christianity and James Wallis’ God’s Politics. As a necessary part of our search for how our particular faith informs our values, we intentionally strove to place our values dialogue in a Biblical context. We firmly believed, and believe now, that for us this focus will guide us to values essential to living a kingdom life in today’s world.

We have sought to gain a better understanding of our faith in the context of today's world. In the process we all have grown as believers. Participation in this conversation has been transformative for each of us. Trusting in each other and in the deepening bonds that formed among us, we shared personal stories that shaped and reshaped how we look at the world and at God's grace. On this pilgrimage, we became a community. In community, we learned to appreciate the views of others, views that nurtured our growing understanding of our roles in God's purposes. We found that we also became better able to express our faith values in both our public and our political lives.

We deeply cherish the time we spent together and the deep friendships and community built in our time together. At the same time, we recognize that we possessed no more ability and had been given no more grace than others seeking answers to the same questions and help with the same dilemmas. The possibilities for discernment and growth we experienced are there for others to claim. The dialogue we started at Forest Hill Church can, and should, be shared. Our dialogue will only grow as we seek out and take in the gifts of others beyond our church family, our community, our denomination, and our faith. We have taken the first step, knowing there are many more to take on the kingdom road.

Our Affirmation of Faith (our values) follows. The process by which we arrived at them is described in the Addendum at the end of this report: "The Plan and Progress of the Work of the Values Conversation."

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

As beloved children of God and as followers of Jesus Christ, we seek to discover, discern and live out the Spirit's inspiration in our own lives and in our own time so that we may experience and help build God's kingdom here on earth. Our search is a pilgrimage into the heart of God's desires for us. We yearn to walk humbly in the way of Jesus, guided joyfully by the Spirit and mindful of the call of the Prophets whose words are as true today as they were when first spoken. Trusting in the power of our faith and eager to take on a new mind and a new heart through which we may discern God's values, we affirm:

1. That God's values should illuminate all of our aspirations and actions, whether personal, communal or global.
2. That God's values are for all of humanity, and that all people are beloved children of God. No one is beyond God's embrace. God's values are not reserved only for those who profess agreement with our particular beliefs, just as God's love is not reserved only for those who are like us.
3. That our search for God's values must be guided, first and foremost, by humility. Pride blinds us to grace. Only in humility are we vulnerable to truth, and only through our humility may God's mysteries move in our hearts.
4. That what we treasure possesses our heart and directs our lives. By choosing God's values over the world's values and in being led by God's love for us, we lay the groundwork for building God's kingdom here on earth.
5. That while we may differ in acts, beliefs, politics and faith, when we seek and share God's values our differences can lead to creative dialogue instead of confrontational disagreement.
6. That for Christians, Jesus is the lens through which we discern and claim our vocabulary to embrace God and God's Spirit. God's values are universal. They do not belong to Christians alone.

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In faith, humility, trust and confidence, we recognize that, through Jesus Christ, the Spirit and the Prophets, God teaches us these values grounded in faith, hope, love and justice, and we affirm our commitment to them as guiding principles for our lives:

1. All are made in God's image. What liberates the image of God in ourselves and in others is to be celebrated, and what subjugates God's Spirit as embodied in anyone is to be confronted. (Genesis 1:27)
2. God's Encompassing Love. God's love is for all people. What we do for and to the least among us is the yardstick against which we will be measured, individually and collectively. (Matthew 25:31-46)
3. Honor God's priorities. Jesus tells us that the poor and the poor in spirit; those who mourn; the meek; the pure of heart; those who hunger, thirst and are persecuted; the merciful; and the peacemakers are especially near to God. Those whom we marginalize are God's especially blessed. When we see the disenfranchised as God would have us see them, then we will embrace God's blessed as God does. When we embrace God's blessed, we embody God's love. When we scorn and ignore God's blessed, we depart from God. (Matthew 5:1-11; Luke 6:20-23)
4. Commit to justice. Justice has been called "finding out what belongs to whom and giving it back to them." Biblical justice moves beyond charity to the disenfranchised and marginalized and towards a restoration of basic human rights due to all people as beloved children of God. God's call for justice moves us as individuals and as communities, but also holds institutions and nations to account. God's justice calls into question all human boundaries and divisions. (Micah 6:8; Amos 5:24; Matthew 25:31-46; Luke 4:18-19)
5. Make peace, not fear. We are to actively seek and make peace, not merely long for it. Scripture calls us to be peacemakers. Jesus says "Fear not." The Prophets teach us that swords will be made into plowshares only when each is safe and unafraid in his or her own garden. Those whom we fear cannot teach us; those we make afraid cannot see God's love in us. (Matthew 5:9; Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3-4;

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Leviticus 26:6)

6. Share the Shalom. We are to be ambassadors of reconciliation. Jesus calls us to a kingdom society in which our individual well-being is not our chief end. Rather, our chief end is to love and enjoy God together forever. In God's kingdom on Earth we are to organize our work, our vocation and our economic system to bring the fruits of the world to all of God's children. (2 Corinthians 5:19; The Westminster Shorter Catechism question 1; Confession of 1967 – 9.07)

6. Account to God. The Earth and all of Creation belong to God. What we own we hold in trust. We are accountable to God and to God's children for our stewardship of that Creation. (Psalm 24:1)

7. Our understanding of God is imperfect. It is an essential tenet of our faith tradition that God's love is inclusive. Being one of God's beloved is not the unique right or quality of any particular group of Christians, nor dependent upon any person's nationality, gender or adherence to a particular ideology or religious tradition. While we seek to reach a better understanding of the revelation of God through the life of Jesus, we also humbly acknowledge that we cannot know as God knows. We strive, therefore, to listen for new understandings from others with different perspectives of God. (Job 38:2-4; Micah 6:8; Romans 11:33-34)

As we embrace these values, we rejoice that current circumstance is not necessarily the right circumstance, and that God working through us can and will turn lives, systems and societies upside down. Loving but bold challenge to the current order can release the power of the Spirit if that challenge lifts up blessedness and nurtures the image of God in humanity. If our bold pilgrimage, guided by humble seeking and prayer, feeds on God's values, then we can trust in the Spirit for success, even when we do not know what that success may look like.

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ADDENDUM

THE PLAN AND PROGRESS OF THE WORK OF THE VALUES CONVERSATION

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In December 2004, after the bitterly contested presidential and congressional election, the clergy of Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian perceived a partisan divide within the congregation and wanted to gain a deeper understanding of why it existed. The pastoral staff sensed that the divisiveness across the country was also present within the congregation. In response, they invited a small, diverse group of members to come to the church at regular intervals to discuss our values. Understanding what we valued would provide clues as to our belief systems which, in turn, might shed light on why the division existed.

We recognize that our group is, to say the least, idiosyncratic. We come from diverse backgrounds with widely differing experiences. The recipe for our own progress was made up of a set of human, emotional, and spiritual ingredients. The path of our pilgrimage grew out of our own gifts and needs. There is no way of saying that any others taking a path like ours will ever get wherever “there” is by walking the same stones. But, as much as our search came from our own circumstances, we believe that what we found is there for all: God’s love and guidance discovered through community built among believers who trust, value and, in the end, love one another. More than two of us gathered in God’s name, and God’s presence among us built and builds bonds through which we can discover the shape of God’s kingdom on earth. This is how and why we did what we did.

At the first meeting in December 2004 we were asked to answer the following question: What do you like about Forest Hill Church? Responses were varied as each participant had the opportunity to answer the question and included such things as:

Openness and friendliness of the congregation

Our church building and its location

Music and Liturgy

Tradition of the service

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Pastoral staff

Sermons

Amount of activity taking place

Church school and youth programs

Adult education

As we articulated what we liked we realized that, despite our political and theoretical differences, there was much more that drew us together than what set us apart and, indeed, we all had chosen to be Presbyterians and members of Forest Hill Church. There was, then, a commonality despite our political differences.

That commonality led to our recognition that we shared an acceptance of the following beliefs:

We trust God whom we see in Jesus Christ.

We are born in the image and likeness of God; hence, all people are worthy of deepest respect.

We value community, as the spirit is inspired by it.

We value learning and inquiry.

We value seeking the truth with humility and in community.

At the outset of the Values Conversation, we talked about the election for two or three meetings, but after those initial sessions we realized that we would need much more time to understand why we felt the way we did. We began to understand that there was more to it than being a Republican, a Democrat, a Libertarian or a Green.

God's Politics

As we were still dealing with political divisiveness, at the next meeting we watched a DVD in which noted Christian author Jim Wallis moderated a conversation with four other leaders of the Christian faith who expressed different political views about what had happened in the 2004 election. Much of the dialogue was similar to that

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contained in his book, God's Politics, sections of which we were asked to read for the next meeting. We considered Wallis' question: *How does your faith shape your politics?* Wallis' book is based on the following:

Abraham Lincoln had it right. Our task should not be to invoke religion and the name of God by claiming God's blessing and endorsement for all our national policies and practices – saying, in effect, God is on our side. Rather, Lincoln said, we should pray and worry earnestly whether we are on God's side.

The values of politics are my primary concern in this book. Of course, God is not partisan; God is not a Republican or a Democrat. When either party tries to politicize God, or co-opt religious communities for their political agendas, they make a terrible mistake. The best contribution of religion is precisely not to be ideologically predictable nor loyally partisan. Both parties, and the nation, must let the prophetic voice of religion be heard. Faith must be free to challenge both right and left from a consistent moral ground.

God's politics is therefore never partisan or ideological. But, it challenges everything about our politics. God's politics reminds us of the people our politics always neglects – the poor, the vulnerable, the left behind (Wallis, 2005: xviii - xix).

We learned from reading this book that God's politics:

challenge narrow, national, ethnic, and cultural self-interest, reminding us of a much larger world and the creative human diversity of all those made in the image of the creator;

remind us of the creation itself, a rich environment in which we are to be good stewards, not mere users, consumers, and exploiters;

plead with us to resolve the inevitable conflicts among us, as much as possible, without the terrible cost and consequence of war; and

remind us of the ancient prophetic prescription to “choose life, so that you and your children may live,” and challenges all the selective moralities that would choose one set of lives and issues over another (Wallis, 2005: xix).

Viewing the DVD and reflecting on Wallis' teaching did three things. First, we had a philosophical and theological basis for our work. The words of Lincoln continued to resonate

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through the conversation. We reminded ourselves of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address in which the words that Wallis paraphrased were so evident. God is not on either side. Second, watching the video, we could see how other Christians had reacted to the 2004 election and the polarization that had taken place, which we could consider in light of the teaching from God's Politics. Third, it allowed us to see a good model for civil discourse. We saw the participants act responsibly in the conversation, treating each other with respect and dignity. We agreed that we needed to learn these active listening skills so that we would be able to express ourselves in a safe and open environment; without them, earnest conversation and trust would not develop. As our conversations progressed, this type of active listening became the model for our group dialogue.

Learning to Listen

To help in that regard, we participated in an educational session on active listening and peaceful talking in a role play situation, after which we were to describe behaviors that we saw in others (i.e., defensiveness and not paying attention to the other person) which hinder communication and understanding. We divided up into pairs in an exercise in which each participant took a different side of a serious issue such as capital punishment, abortion, the war in Iraq, patriotism, the economy, etc. In many of those one-on-one talks, there was some degree of discomfort: the conversation was somewhat guarded since we did not know the other person very well. As a result, we were reluctant to share what we really thought and the reasons that we thought that way. That led us to the following question: *How can we know where the other person is coming from unless we know the story behind the conviction?*

The exercise suggested that if we were going to get to the bottom of the divisiveness, we would have to become more trusting and to share the stories that shaped our individual belief systems. We encouraged each other to present our positions and also the reasons that we held them. We could tell our stories, which would help us understand the basis for our own values. Our

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listening to the stories of others would provide an appreciation for what the other members of the group believed and why they believed it.

That enabled the group to begin having conversations about larger issues, especially the war in Iraq. This was a difficult process, as we not only had to formulate our own positions but also to develop the philosophical and personal reasons for what we believed. We heard about the philosophical aversion to the war in terms of Biblical teaching, a position that the majority of the group supported. But we also heard from members who had served in our military or who had family members in the service, and why they felt strongly about supporting the military. They reminded us of the need for national defense, a need that is critical in these volatile times, not only in Iraq but in light of the threats from Iran and North Korea as well. We recognized that it took courage to tell these stories because they were advancing a position that was not shared by the majority. They were secure enough in what they believed that they lowered their defenses and, by sharing their stories, they were able to show us how deep their feelings were. As a result, we began to appreciate those who had the confidence and assurance to express their feelings, even if they did not hold popular positions. We also recognized that by sharing, there was a certain vulnerability that now existed which would have to be respected.

Biblical Foundation

We also wanted to make sure that our work was grounded in the Scriptures, and so we decided to study Amos and Micah and the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew. We read the books of Amos and Micah and the Beatitudes and reflected upon what we had read.

Amos was the first prophet in the Bible whose message was recorded at length. Although he came from a town in Judah, he preached to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel, about the middle of the eighth century B.C. It was a time of great prosperity, notable religious piety, and apparent security. But Amos saw that prosperity was limited to the wealthy, and that

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it fed on injustice and oppression of the poor. Religious observance was insincere, and security more apparent than real. With passion and courage, he preached that God would punish the nation. He called for justice to “flow like a stream.” (*Good News Bible*, 1976: 990).

Amos offered the idea of the “plumb line” which affected our thinking after we read and talked about the prophecy: “I am using [the plumb line] to show my people are like a wall that is out of line. I will not change my mind about punishing them.” (*Good News Bible*, 1976: 997). We began to understand that, regardless of our political beliefs, there were Scripturally-based behaviors that we must all try to adopt. We also read from Micah:

The prophet Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, was from a country town in Judah, the southern kingdom. He was convinced that Judah was about to face the same kind of natural catastrophe that Amos had predicted for the northern kingdom, and for the same reason, God would punish the hateful injustice of the people. Micah’s message, however, contains more clear and notable signs of hope for the future.

Passages especially worth noting are the picture of universal peace under God (4.1-4); the prediction of a great king who would come from the family line of David and bring peace to the nation (5.2-5a); and, in a single verse (6.8), the summary of much that the prophets of Israel had to say: “What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God.” (*Good News Bible*, 1976: 1007).

Reading and talking about the vision of Amos and Micah gave the group the Biblical foundation that we wanted, which guided our thinking as our work progressed into the New Testament. Regardless of our political stance, there are some universal traits and qualities that the prophets offered for all of us, being just, showing love, and being humble.

The Gospel according to Matthew tells the good news that Jesus Christ is the promised Savior, the one through whom God fulfilled the promises he made to his people in the Old Testament. The good news is not only for the

Jewish people, but for the whole world.

Matthew is carefully arranged. It begins with the birth of Jesus, describes his baptism and temptation, and then takes up his ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing in Galilee.

The Gospel presents Jesus as the great Teacher, who has the authority to interpret the Law of God and who teaches about the Kingdom of God . . . the Sermon on the Mount, which concerns the character, duties, privileges, and destiny of the citizens of the Kingdom of heaven...(Good News Bible, 1976:1).

Studying the Beatitudes reinforced what we had learned in Amos and Micah, and the themes were repeated once again. The conversation about those themes was thoughtful and considerate and had a profound effect on the way in which we interacted with each other.

The Heart of Christianity

We then studied portions of Marcus Borg's book, *The Heart of Christianity*, which gave us new insight into what it means to be a Christian. Borg wrote that there are many ways to interpret Christianity and living the Christian life. In his mind, there is no right way or wrong way, just different ways of understanding Christianity, and no single right way of being Christian. "The task of Christian theology is to interpret a 'given,' a received tradition, in a present cultural context. It has always been so. . . . God may or may not be the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, but the cultural context in which we speak about God does change." (Borg, 2003: 19). Borg continued, saying that understanding the heart of Christianity requires an "unending conversation."

He referred to Kenneth Burke, *and this is crucial*: We arrive at some point in history, live our lives, learn and add to the conversations already underway and, when we depart, there still will be dialogue "vigorously in progress." (Burke, 1973: 110 - 111). In other words, we come to the conversation after others have started it, we add our own value to it, and leave it to those who will follow us to explore and expand it even more. Borg suggested that it is more than just talk, rather

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“the transformation of our lives.” Transformation requires discernment of the heart of Christianity which, in turn, requires the unending conversation of what it means to be a Christian. But it does mean changing the way we view and interact with the world and each other. The transformation of members of the group was subtle and not really recognized until we began thinking about the outcome of the entire Values Conversation process. It then became apparent that we had changed from the first session where conversation was guarded. Now, we could say what was on our minds, in consideration of the rest of the group.

Borg's work led us to the use of the word “dialogue” which comes from the Greek, a free flow of meaning between people; as opposed to “discussion,” the root for which also comes from the Greek and is the same as the root for “percussion,” or to beat upon. We realized that we did not have to “win” conversations with each other; rather, we could learn different points of view as we expressed our own, which was another part of the transformation. In that process, we learned that we could trust each other.

Meeting Agenda

Each of the meetings began with the moderator asking a question: “What have you been thinking about since we last met?” The answers were revealing. Sometimes they were quite global in nature, e.g., the war in Iraq and the victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. At other times they centered on the work of the group or personal situations. Anything was fair game.

We began and ended each meeting with prayer. In the first few months, typically one of the pastoral staff would lead us in prayer. In later months a member of the group would often lead us in prayer. At first, we did the study that has already been described, but eventually the conversation deepened as we explored the issues that were important to us. Even though some of these issues were personal and compelling, we had learned that we could express our beliefs on them. In the process, we had also learned to listen to each other and to ask about the stories that

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helped us shape our positions. While we may have debated issues early on the process, we began to have dialogue and transformed ourselves into a community that understood the importance of deeper relationships, and we wanted to develop these relationships further. We moved beyond simply agreeing to a compromise position, but went further as the truth drew us beyond ourselves. Some of the conversation became very emotional as members of the group expressed anger, sadness and frustration, but it seemed like we always felt more optimistic and hopeful as the sessions concluded.

As we prepared to write this document, we asked a simple question: How did this happen?

We:

Attempted to be less partisan

Learned to respect positions of others and the reasons for them

Learned how to listen to one another

Changed the way we talked to each other

Deepened our prayer life

Built relationships and formed community

We also understood that we had not articulated our “values.” In the spring of 2006, we brainstormed and agreed, at the time, that we had experienced:

Trust

Respect

Humility

Dialogue

Relationships

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Confidentiality

Safety

Sharing

Listening

As we looked at the list, we began to question whether these were “values” or the outcome of our values, but we did acknowledge that to achieve them in a diverse group of people who really did not know each other very well was a major accomplishment. What it meant was that each member of the group, to some degree or another, was transformed to be able to participate freely in the conversation and dialogue where a year before it would not have been possible.

Values

We found it difficult to pinpoint the method by which we were able to achieve these qualities. We agreed that the members of the group have felt free to disclose very personal views even as we were on different sides of issues, and that we can become more open to a diversity of opinions. Listening to each other's stories helped us in this learning process. The question became one of how that happened. What values did we hold that allowed this transformation to occur? As we thought this through, it became apparent that our values are grounded in:

Love

Hope

Faith

Acceptance

Interestingly, and without really knowing it, we had articulated Scriptural values which we agreed satisfied the need for Biblical values that had been the challenge at the beginning and as our

work progressed. We had become the “product” of our own work.

Specifically, the product of eighteen months of the Values Conversation was transformation of the participants, as suggested by Marcus Borg; that is, to one degree or another, each of us grew personally and collectively as Christians to be more understanding and tolerant, to listen and to really hear, and to be comfortable in taking our positions and offering our personal stories. Having reached this point, we were able to produce a more tangible product, a statement of values: a document that reflects our deeply-held faith values, the values that bridge our differences.

The Future

Will the Values Conversation continue? We trust that it will, but it may be in a different format, depending upon the group. Will the outcome be the same? That is a little harder to answer as new groups may come together to have conversations about issues that divide them. We will leave the answer to those groups as we continue to have our own conversations. But, we have one hope for all who may follow. In one of our more recent conversations, a couple of us said, “When I came here today, I wasn’t in a very good mood, but now, as we conclude, I have hope.” Another said, “I wish I felt as good after other meetings (even here at the church) as I do when the Values Group meeting ends.”

We value that and are not sure why it happened. But, it did. May it be so for those who join the conversation.