

Transition and Alignment of Conversation Café with Community Action Dialogues



By Jacquelyn Pogue, Director of Community Action Dialogues

When Bob and Jacquelyn Pogue were offered the stewardship of Conversation Café by Vicki Robin and Susan Partnow at the end of 2009, they welcomed both the opportunity and challenge. They pledged their support of the Conversation Café initiative to promote community, democracy and wisdom through open, respectful public conversations. Jacquelyn's interest in dialogue began in 1984 in London through David Bohm. Bob began his training in 1998 with Harrison Owen of Open Space. In 2004 they were the founders of the Richmond Dialogue Group of Virginia, now Richmond Action Dialogues. Since then they have facilitated community dialogue groups utilizing slam poets, television series, lectures, sermons, university courses and documentary films. Jacquelyn continues to lead training programs and presentations for conferences. In 2009, Community Action Dialogues was formed to create an outreach organization for our national/international work and to serve as an umbrella for Conversation Café and Richmond Action Dialogues.

We at Community Action Dialogues view Conversation Café as a foundation for work in *Deepening the Dialogue* and *Action Dialogues*. Although our dialogue methods differ slightly, require more skilled facilitation training, and we invite participants to consider taking action on some dialogue topics, our basic principles are closely aligned with Conversation Café. We are committed to preserving the purity of the Conversation Café model through the website and training (online, in person, and via teleconference). We are grateful to Vicki Robin and Susan Partnow for holding the founding vision and delivering on the mission of Conversation Café.

With its simple but powerful structure, the Conversation Cafe model works. What underlies its success?

The Circle—Sitting equally in the circle together, there is a sense of community gathering around a center. In this center is a space for the group's thoughts, feelings, insights and threads of meaning to weave together in a new conversational tapestry of co-creation.

Introductions—When people introduce themselves very briefly with their name and why they are participating, it allows for an authenticity that is free of ego. There is no need for titles, labels, life roles, or other pseudo-identities to start the conversation in a heartfelt way.

Agreements—The agreements are read to provide guidelines, or boundaries, for a civil conversation and deeper listening. Everyone's agreement to follow them establishes a common ground for participation. The host's role is to support the group in following the agreements and create a safe space.

Process—Describing the process provides an overview of where the conversation is going, how it will be, and when it will be over. The actual dialogue is unknown but the ending time and structure are clear.

Talking Object—The talking object arouses curiosity and invites a kinesthetic experience. It can also stimulate deeper speaking and listening.

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continued

Rounds—The two rounds give opportunities for everyone to participate without the pressure of having to speak since one can pass when the talking object is given to them. People get a sense of how others are relating to the topic without having to reveal a great deal about themselves. A group field of energy connecting each other can form in this process of the two rounds, emphasizing why both rounds are important.

Open Dialogue—In the open dialogue there is no goal of solution, agreement or action to be taken, simply an experience of human sharing and connectedness. The focus is on relating and not on a task. As the conversation is co-created, new meanings, interpretations, implications, understanding, and possibilities emerge. The questions can become more important than the answers.

Final Round—The final round provides a time for reflection and an opportunity to express what was challenging, meaningful, or inspiring for each individual. It also evokes a genuine connection with the group as a whole.

We are grateful to Vicki Robin and Susan Partnow for holding the founding vision and delivering on the mission of Conversation Café. We will carry it forward as servers in this time of transformation. We look forward to working together in unity for the common good of all.