Applying Restorative Dialogue

Two hours after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, a young, white, angry man called the local Islamic Cultural Center in a western state, saying that that all Muslims should be deported or killed. He then called a local mosque and expressed a similar hate-filled message. How could this situation be handled using restorative dialogue?

Write your imagined account of the entire process of a successful restorative dialogue, including:

- How to determine whether to use restorative dialogue
- What could be done to prepare the parties beforehand
- How the facilitators prepared themselves for the meeting
- How they opened the meeting
- What the facilitators did during the meeting
One Answer

Determining Whether to Use Restorative Dialogue
The local prosecutors invited the Imam and his wife to tell them the impact of this hate crime on their family and community. Then the prosecutors gave the Imam and his wife a choice: they could prosecute the case in the courts with a high likelihood of conviction and a harsh sentence, or they could refer the case to a local neighborhood accountability board, part of new restorative justice developments in the state. The Imam and his wife chose the path of restorative justice.

Preparation
The facilitators met with the Imam and his wife and the young man to identify issues, clarify expectations, build rapport, and reduce some of the anxiety about the face-to-face meeting. Through those meetings, they identified other parties to invite to the meeting. They discussed the following with each party: when the dialogue would occur; where it would be held; what opening ritual to use; who each party wanted to have as support people to witness the dialogue; where people would sit. All parties agreed to hold the dialogue at the county offices around a table in the conference room. They agreed to open by reading two verses, one from the Koran chosen by the Imam and one from the Bible chosen by the young man. These verses were read and approved by the other party prior to the meeting.

Prior to the Meeting
The facilitators took some time to center themselves. They noted that they felt somewhat tense and rushed, and did some breathwork to slow down, breathing in slowly and deeply to the count of eight and exhaling slowly to the count of eight. They reviewed their intention to work from a place of compassion for all present and reserve judgments.

The Meeting
After much preparation facilitators convened a talking circle that included the young man, people from the local Islamic community, and the larger local community. They began with the chosen verses, followed by a moment of silence. The facilitator then reviewed the guidelines for participation:

1. Listen from the heart
2. Speak from the heart
3. Speak concisely
4. Speak spontaneously
In the circle, the Imam and wife expressed how this hate crime impacted their community; the young man explained why he made the calls; and members of the community expressed their concerns. During this exchange, the facilitators worked with the energy of their body, mind, and spirit, centering themselves to create a safe place for all participants and promote connection. They consciously evoked a spirit of humility and compassion for all present and focused on listening, not fixing.

Together the participants in the meeting developed a plan to repair the harm. The young man received 100 hours of community service, prepared a letter of apology to the Muslim community that was published in the community’s leading newspaper, and agreed to attend three lectures on Islam at the Islamic Cultural Center, with the Imam and his wife.