

PARTICIPANT GUIDE

“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

—Proverbs 29:18

Dear Readers,

At a bookstore, I recall once coming across a book entitled, “Collaborate or Perish!” If we combine that admonition with the oft quoted proverb about lack of vision causing people to perish, then we get a sense of what needs to happen for our society to confront the urgent, intertwined challenges of energy use, economic wellbeing, public health, and climate change. In short, such significant challenges call for sparking the kind of dialogue that leads to cooperation and vision within our communities. This guide for small group dialogue does exactly that.

Through a partnership with the Sierra Club’s Ready for 100 program and Everyday Democracy, I was able to see collaboration and vision come to life as we piloted a dialogue at St. Paul’s Community Church in Cleveland. Participants came from all walks of life, and honestly, I did not know what to expect. None of us gathered were policy experts, but we were people who cared about our children, our neighbors, and the fate of our planet.

By the end of four weeks of meeting together, I was blown away by the ideas and excitement that were generated. One person would say, “We should promote what we are doing with a big public sign.” Another person would say, “I know a muralist.” And another person would say, “I know an organization that funds murals.” With the energy picking up, someone would say, “We could invite others in the community to come and give input about what the mural would look like.”

My hope is that conversations like this will soon be taking place in communities throughout the country, because this is the kind of dialogue that leads to transformative action. I invite you to gather a group of 10 to 12 persons to meet over the course of four weeks. Perhaps, those gathered will all be from one’s church. Perhaps, those gathered will come from the broader community through ecumenical or interfaith networks. Whatever the case may be, let us know how it goes. We want to hear from you.

With gratitude,

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Session 1: Making the Connections and Laying the Foundation

Before we can identify solutions on how to make our community even better, first we must understand some of the important issues and how they affect us individually. We need to make personal *connections*. We all have experiences that help shape our perspectives on what makes a community a good place to live. Sharing our personal stories is a good place to start this dialogue to help build a common understanding that lays the foundation for creating community solutions that work for everyone.

Objectives

- Get to know one another
- Set agreements for our work together
- Share personal connections with the issue
- Explore ideas about livable communities

Part 1: Meeting Each Other

Part 2: Developing Group Agreements

Let's agree on how we are going to work together during this dialogue. Group agreements help create an atmosphere of mutual respect by:

- Enabling better communication within the group.
- Strengthening the group's ability to determine what norms will guide the conversation collectively.
- Acting as a reference point when dealing with conflict.

Group Agreement (suggested examples)

- Make sure everyone can contribute
- More talkative people: talk less
- Quieter people: your contributions are welcome
- Only one person speaks at a time
- Respects each other's opinions even/especially if you don't agree with them
- Participate fully
- Confidentiality – what is discussed in the dialogue remains with the group unless everyone agrees otherwise
- Be conscious of time – help stick to agenda or negotiate for more time
- Listen for understanding, not to respond
- Speak about yourself and your personal experiences by using “I” statements
- It's OK to disagree with someone else – in fact, it can be helpful – but personal attacks are never appropriate.
- Others? (Ask the group if there are additional agreements they'd like to add.)

Part 3: Making Connections: Clean and Livable Communities

Reflection Questions

- Think back to where you grew up and what the people were like. Here are some questions to help stir your thinking: What kind of people lived in your community or neighborhood? What was its demographic makeup (for example, race, ethnicity, and class)? Did you readily connect with the people in your community/neighborhood?
- Think about what the environment was like when you grew up. Consider the environment in broad terms, so that you might ask yourself: What was the natural environment like in terms of trees, land, climate, weather, air, and water? Describe the physical environment in terms of buildings, parks, transportation systems, sidewalks, and housing. What type of transportation did your family use to commute to work or school?

Group Discussion

Background for Discussion—Defining Community Livability:

“Livability is the sum of the factors that add up to a community's quality of life—including the built and natural environments, economic prosperity, social stability and equity, educational opportunity, and cultural, entertainment and recreation possibilities.”

- When you think of the different communities in which you have lived, what kinds of things made your community/neighborhood feel more livable or more challenged as a community? Tell a story or give an example.
- Do all parts of your community have the same level of livability? Offer an example to explain your answer.

Part 4: Wrapping up

- What new insights did you gain from the discussion?
- What common ideas kept occurring through this discussion?

Session 2: Going Deeper: Understanding the Complexity of the Issue

Not all communities have the same level of livability, and this is a matter of justice. A crucial component of what makes some communities more livable than others pertains to energy. Certain types of energy make a community more challenged due to pollution and lack of affordability. This session will help increase your understanding of clean and affordable energy, potential solutions, and how communities of low financial resources and communities of color are often negatively impacted by current energy practices.

Objectives:

- Share ideas about common language associated with the environment, energy, and equity.
- Consider the origins and potential solutions to climate change and energy issues.
- Consider how environmental issues impact some communities more negatively than others.

Part 1: Understanding of the Language

Discussion

- When you think of the words “environment,” “justice,” and “equity,” what ideas or images come to mind?
- What ideas or images come to mind when you see the words “clean,” “affordable,” and “energy”?

Reference: Glossary of Terms in Back

Part 2: Two Videos on Race, Poverty, and the Environment

First Video: What Do Racism and Poverty Have to Do with Pollution and Climate Change?

Second Video: Environmental Racism Explained

Discussion

- Does this video suggest to you that we need to add anything to our lists?
- How do you feel environmental justice might impact you, your family, friends, or someone you know?
- How do you feel clean and affordable energy might impact you, your family, friends, or someone you know?

Part 3: Understanding the Problem and Solution

Background on Video Clip

Katharine Hayhoe is a climate scientist at Texas Tech University who has been known for her work in making climate science accessible to a public audience through a series of PBS videos called *Global Weirding*. She has been described by a colleague as “perhaps the best communicator on climate change.” In articles and the documentary television series *Years of Living Dangerously*, Hayhoe’s work has also been noteworthy because she frequently speaks to evangelical Christian audiences as an evangelical Christian herself.

Video Clip on Fossil Fuels from the PBS series *Global Weirding*

Quotes from Video for Further Reflection

Extracting and burning fossil fuels creates an enormous amount of pollution: choking our lungs, dirtying our air, and contaminating our water and our soil. Coal is the worst. Considering only the health costs from air pollution, coal has not been economically viable for a long time, so why are we still using it? Because those who bear the costs are not those who reap the profits. Around the world, it is estimated that almost 4 million people die prematurely every year from outdoor air pollution. Two hundred thousand of those in the U.S. alone.

People who can afford to buy houses in nicer neighborhoods with better air quality. It is usually those who can’t afford a better place to live who bear the brunt of the impact.

The bottom line is this: fossil fuels got us to where we are today, but they take us further at our peril. Thankfully now we have better, cleaner, and cheaper ways to get the energy we need—ways that don’t pollute our air and our water and don’t change our climate.

Discussion

- What stood out for you after watching the video? What surprised you?
- Where does our community find itself in the current period of energy transition? How do you think clean, affordable forms of energy can contribute to our local economy and the strengthening of public health?
- What information was missing? What questions do you have?

Part 4: Wrapping up

- What new insights did you gain from the discussion?
- What common ideas did you notice from the discussion?
- What changes need to happen in your community to address the issues raised?

Session 3: Considering Options for Action

To make progress on creating more livable and equitable communities through clean and affordable energy, we need to identify the challenges we are facing and the factors that are contributing to the livability of our communities. This session will help you consider some of those problems and factors as we begin thinking about how to address them.

Objectives

- Talk about our vision for the future
- Identify priorities
- Talk about ways of addressing the priority issues our community is facing
- Generate action ideas

Part 1: Imagining Our Future

- Imagine ten years from now; this community is using clean and affordable energy and public health has improved. What do you see around you? How does your home look and feel? What does your surrounding community look like? Whether it is the air you breathe or the trees in your neighborhood, what are your natural surroundings like? What is life like for your neighbors? Do you see them outside in the streets, parks, and public spaces? What are they doing? What kinds of work do you see? How are people getting from place to place?

Discussion

- What insights do we have now that we've heard all these visions for our community's future that includes clean and affordable energy?

Part 2: Identifying our community's challenges

Group Discussion Questions:

- What would we need to work on to make this community healthier by using affordable energy? Why is this a challenge/issue worth attention? What is keeping our community from addressing these issues?
- If we think ahead 5 to 10 years, are there any challenges our community is likely to face if we continue the status quo that we haven't already discussed? If so, what are they?
- What might be other issues or challenges that community members not present in this dialogue might identify?

Part 3: Understanding our challenges

Questions

- Are there any connections? If so, what are they?
- What's at the core of these problems? In other words, what are the factors or root causes behind them?
- What makes organizing and leadership on these issues difficult?

Part 4: Approaches to Change

Six Approaches to Change

Approach #1: Get the whole community involved. Set common goals so that each person and group can see the path to action.

Make meaningful changes by getting the entire community involved. Create a vision for the community. Set clear goals and opportunities for everyone to actively participate. Everyone should be able to see how and where they can fit: individuals, families, government, community groups, hospitals, schools, faith communities, businesses, young people, unions, and so on.

Approach #2: Focus on underlying causes and prevention. Pay attention to what's "upstream" from the problems we usually focus on.

Instead of focusing on symptoms, look at underlying causes to prevent future problems. If there are problems with air quality, pollution, access to quality education, public health, or transportation, focus on root causes.

Approach #3: Influence decision makers. Advocate for policies and decisions that will benefit the whole community.

Influence the decisions of government agencies, businesses, and not-for-profit organizations. Demand that clean and affordable energy are a priority as well as access to basic health care for everyone. Seek environmentally sound practices. Encourage businesses to invest in community projects or insist that government cut the red tape. Work collaboratively with business and government to make changes. Hold government officials accountable in other ways, too, including petitions, education, publicity campaigns, and lawsuits.

Approach #4: Celebrate successes. Focus on good works and good people — it's more useful and fun than focusing on problems.

Let's look more at all the right things that have happened to improve our community— and the great people who have helped make those changes. Sometimes it appears all we do is talk about our problems and that's not helping us make progress. As someone once said, "We build the road as we travel." That means we should be having fun, learning from our experiences, and celebrating along the way!

Simply thanking each other for the good things we're doing will help us move forward.

Approach #5: Build working relationships. Improve our ability to work together as a community.

Learning to work together will help us get more done—and be more efficient. Instead of competing for limited resources, we can share information and focus on creative ways of working together. We can start by creating more community discussions like this one.

Approach #6: Pick one project and do it right. Build momentum by making a difference in one area.

Our efforts tend to get scattered because every problem and project seems to be at the top of our list. As a community, we are better off if we focus on one important project at time, or choose one problem to make a difference.

Approaches to Change Additional Guidance

- Focus on Institutions – Change the practices and policies of community institutions (such as schools, local government, nonprofit agencies, schools)
- Focus on Leadership – Develop leaders who reflect the racial, ethnic, and cultural makeup of the community.
- Focus on Law – Enforce environmental protection laws. Change unfair community policies.
- Focus on Relationship – Bring people together to build relationships to work for change.
- Focus on Community Impact – Before we start new projects, assess their impact on people of all racial, ethnic, cultural, and economic backgrounds.
- Focus on Economics – Help create economic success for people from all racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.
- Focus on Self-Reliance – Support efforts by people of color to be agents of change and build success.

Discussion

- Are there other approaches that you can think of?
- Have we already tried any of these approaches? If so, what happened?
- Which approaches will not work?
- Which approaches do you like best? Why?

Part 5: Wrapping up

- What new insights did you gain from the discussion?
- What themes kept occurring through this discussion?
- What went well today?
- What could've gone differently?

Session 4: Setting Priorities for Action and Change

This session will help you identify actions for change, whether you are part of a small group of concerned citizens or are part of a community-planning process.

Objectives

- Review action ideas that came up in the previous sessions.
- Talk about the assets we have in our community.
- Choose a small number of action ideas to make progress.

Part 1: Action Ideas

Listing and Assessing Ideas

- What ideas would you like to add to our list from our last session?
- Do we have a sufficient variety of ideas (things we can do on our own, in groups, or with the government)?
- Are there some ideas that only local government can do?

ACTION IDEAS FOR CLEAN & AFFORDABLE ENERGY		
<i>***Do these ideas get us to equitable solutions for clean and affordable energy? ***</i>		
On Our Own	In Groups	Institutions or Organizations

GUIDANCE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT		
<i>***Do these ideas get us to equitable solutions for clean and affordable energy? ***</i>		
For Local Elected Officials	Local Government	For Other Agencies

Part 2: Our Community Strengths and Assets

Questions for talking about our assets:

- What are some things you know a lot about?
- What are some of the talents or skills we have in this group? How about in the community?
- What groups do you belong to? How can they help?
- What are groups in the community currently working on environmental issues or social justice? How can they help?
- What assets do we have—like meeting places, experts, educators, trusted organizations, or even money?

Community Assets			
People	Places	Institutions/Organizations	Other

Part 3: Connecting Our Action Ideas with Our Assets

Questions for Discussion

- Which assets could we use to support our ideas for action?
- Are we sure that we can draw on these assets?

Part 4: Choosing Ideas for the Action Forum

Discernment Questions

- Which ideas address the issues we care about?
- Which ideas might have a long-term impact?
- Do these ideas get us to equitable solutions for clean and affordable energy in our community?
- What would it take to make this happen?
- Do the assets exist in our community to make this action idea happen?

Part 5: Wrapping Up

Final wrap-up questions for discussion:

- What surprised you?
- Have you gained a better understanding of the issues?
- How will you stay involved to make things better in the community?
- Will you do anything differently because you took part in this dialogue?

Glossary of Terms

Affordable Energy: Low cost access to reliable and sustainable energy services for all, which includes electricity, heating, cooling, and gas. Typically, affordable energy is defined as having an energy bill that does not amount to more than 10% of total household income.

Carbon Dioxide: Gas that exists in the earth's atmosphere and that is used by plants during photosynthesis and produced during respiration by animals and humans. Also, it's a colorless, odorless, non-poisonous gas that is a normal part of Earth's atmosphere. Carbon dioxide is a product of fossil-fuel combustion as well as other processes. It is considered a greenhouse gas as it traps heat radiated into the atmosphere and thereby contributes to the potential for global warming.

Climate Change: Today, climate change typically refers to an abrupt change in the earth's temperatures and weather patterns. Temperatures are sharply rising and this leads to more severe weather events such as droughts, floods, and stronger hurricanes.

Clean Energy: Energy produced with little pollution. This can include anaerobic digestion, geothermal power, wind power, small-scale hydropower, solar energy, biomass power, tidal power, and wave power.

Electric Grid: Network of shared electric power—generators feed power into a regional grid and energy is drawn on an as-needed basis.

Energy Efficiency: Using less energy (electricity and/or natural gas) to perform the same function at the same level of quality.

Environmental Justice: The fair and equal treatment of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income level in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. No environmental action, whether intentional or unintentional, should disproportionately impact or disadvantage individuals, groups, or communities based on race, ethnicity, or income.

Environmental Racism: This phrase was coined by the Rev. Benjamin Chavis of the United Church of Christ as the Environmental Justice Movement launched in the 1980s. Scholar Robert Bullard describes the environmental racism as "any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color."

Renewable Energy: Energy resources that are naturally replenished. They are virtually inexhaustible in duration. Renewable energy resources include biomass, hydro, geothermal, solar, and wind.

Solar Energy: Energy resources that are collected from sunlight used to generate electricity also refers to radiant light and heat from the sun, that has been harnessed by humans since ancient times using a range of ever-evolving technologies.