

Enriched by our differences

Is disagreeing the opposite of unity, or does unity allow room for disagreement?

By Amy Uelmen



To see the tension between unity and disagreement, one need only look to St. Paul as he pleaded with a community amid quarrels. “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Cor 1:10).

I confess that at first glance, this exhortation makes me a little nervous. Looking not only to the current state of our polarized world, but also some of my most recent conversations, the idea of being “perfectly united in mind” seems to be an unreachable dream. In my own life, disagreements are common, and often I am the one to provoke them. And I have just enough of an anti-authoritarian streak in me to ask to get off the bus when “unity of mind” is interpreted as a kind of power dynamic in which the seemingly weaker simply cede to the stronger.

Is there another way to imagine “unity of mind” that acknowledges these difficulties, and avoids these pitfalls? Might a spirit of unity allow for disagreement? How?

Recently I was part of a decision-making discussion. The stakes were not high, but nevertheless some strong differences of opinion emerged. At the beginning of our conversation it seemed almost impossible to come to a shared perspective. By the end, my initial position had not won the day; in fact, the result was the opposite of what I had proposed.

And yet I left that meeting deeply convinced that we were headed in the right direction. What happened? Why did I not feel that I had simply “ceded” to a majority, or to more “powerful” voices? Why did I feel that I fully owned our group’s decision and could support it?

The preparation made a big difference. First, our group started with an explicit agreement to put love among us first, and to try to express this love concretely in how we shared our ideas, how we listened to each other, and in a readiness to let go, especially if the conversation brought us to

a different direction. There was also a pretty deep sense of trust in each other and in our shared commitment to the good of our project.

Against this backdrop, what happened as seemingly opposite opinions were zipping around the room? I realized my deepest investment was not so much in driving toward a particular result. What was most important for me was to feel that my ideas were being received into the mix, because I sensed that they could be of service for our broader work. At the same time, especially as I listened to other perspectives, I realized that some of my proposals may have been a little premature or better suited for a different context.

The option to take a different path did not necessarily entail a rejection of my position, and it was certainly not a rejection of my person. In fact, within this creative space, the value of the principles and concerns I was articulating could be simultaneously affirmed — not only as a contribution to the decision-making process, but as goods that everyone could share.

I do not believe that our deep disagreements can be instantly healed. Tripping points can emerge at several points in the journey — for example, when the stakes are higher; or when we don't see eye to eye on how principles might be appropriately applied in varying circumstances. In our polity today, there are also important areas where we simply disagree on what is good for human life and flourishing.

But I do believe that in our daily conversations, certain ways of being and of communicating can help us build the kind of trust that lets us broach even these difficult areas of disagreement.

One simple but powerful idea is to ask the other person a thoughtful question. Sincere questions can help to acknowledge the other person and the distinctiveness of their ideas. They can also help to communicate my own humble awareness that I may not yet fully understand their position, but that I am open to learning. Finally, they can help build that foundation of trust that helps me to convey that I care about the person with whom I am in conversation, and that I care more about building a lasting relationship than about winning an argument.

Disagreement need not be the opposite of unity, and need not lead to the kind of division that concerned St. Paul. When listening and communication are informed by a genuine desire to learn, to understand and to love our conversation partners, some disagreements can even open out toward the kind of trust in which even strong differences of opinion can enrich our relationships and the depth of the unity that we experience.