

Establishing New Habits as a Community

Image



Group in Salmon Arm, B.C. introducing cycle of community conversations

Salmon Arm, B.C. is showing what's possible through moving away from the “great optimism” of the last century — the idea that if we could draw the most brilliant, rational people around us, we would arrive at some kind of utopia — to establishing what resident Erik Bjorgan is calling “new habits as a community.”

At the heart of these habits is a belief in the importance of a different kind of community conversation, not necessarily related to enabling any kind of legislative capacity, but understanding that a lot of insight can be gained from having conversations among citizens that aren't organized around a specific contentious issue.

“People don’t realize that it changes the world every time they have a conversation with someone they didn’t know previously,” Erik says. “It brings them into a different space where they have a different angle on truth now, and when we’re all operating under the same truth, I think that’s when we’re operating under the best place culturally.

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“But that truth is very very big and it’s very complicated, far more complicated than any one person can perceive or understand and I think that’s why we need to have these other perspectives that keep coming back to us and keep us in check too; otherwise, we won’t get the outcomes we want.”

The community conversations in Salmon Arm, a town of 17,000, began with a gathering of about 60 residents in spring 2014. The gathering was funded primarily through the Thompson Okanagan Respect Network, with a broad goal of generating respect for and between residents of all walks of life.

The framework for the event followed author Peter Block’s Six Conversations which are intended to build community and confront the issues of accountability and commitment. The conversations flow between small-group dialogues in which participants answer questions among themselves and then whole-circle sharing of what people hear from others.

The larger event was followed by a five-month series of monthly small-group gatherings having the same sort of intention. Another large event took place this past spring, and there are plans to continue the conversations in some form.

A related program featuring the individual stories of immigrants in the community is intended as another way to meet the larger goal of deepening understanding and respect among Salmon Arm residents.

The Deo Lutheran Church, which Erik pastors, has been the site of some of the gatherings.

“When (we were) asked if our church facility could be used for the process, I was thrilled because I think that this is at the centre of what a church needs to invest in in terms of being involved and participating in a community,” says Erik.

He himself joined all of the conversations and also participated as facilitator.

“(The conversations) really do create a sense of new possibilities and opportunities as you get to know people and their different passions and their gifts and also as you see how committed people are, it makes you want to be more committed,” Erik says.

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“Some of the people that I invited, they were really wondering, ‘What could I possibly contribute to something like this, I’m just an ordinary person,’ and they were reluctant to take part because they thought it would be something technical, that it would require them to have a particular skill or interest,” he adds.

“But every one of those people that participated was very grateful that they had been invited, that they had a chance to participate, that their voice had been heard... . A few of them have now said that they wanted to get more involved.”

Bernie Desrosiers, president of Shuswap Settlement Services Society and a central energy force in this effort has been encouraged by a growing confidence in the importance of the conversations as people experience them.

“I think we’re more committed to the idea of conversation as a way of changing community and building community,” he says.

“There are some people who say we need less talk and more action but we’re starting to realize that action without conversation is more likely to be not directed in a very meaningful and purposeful way.”

Perhaps the most significant impact of these gatherings to date has been the

broadening and deepening of relationship between Salmon Arm residents.

In one case, a small group of residents that did not know one another beforehand has bonded so much they've decided to continue meeting outside of the regular gatherings.

People who typically only work with church groups are broadening their circles, and those who tend to avoid faith groups are now welcoming them, Erik says.

He himself was invited to facilitate the spring event, which he describes as a precious and rare opportunity — for a member of the clergy to be invited to host a non-religious gathering of this kind.

Even some local government leaders responded positively to an invitation to engage in the spring event.

For Bernie, the new and deepened connections between residents is exactly what this work was intended to enable.

“I believe familiarity breeds respect, not contempt,” Bernie says. “By holding these conversations we become more familiar with each other and the diversity of our community and in doing so we manage to change some of the misconceptions people have and prejudices that they might have.”

But while the new sense of connection is a positive and welcome outcome, Erik is fascinated by the potential ramifications of these conversations for even more – for instance, what might they make possible with respect to changing the kind of engagement that happens between local government and citizens, or within institutions such as churches. Imagine listening circles that have government officials participating as equal members, for example. Or church activities that, rather than a lecture, feature some very intentional processes around listening and an action reflection cycle.

Erik has already seen some signs of this kind of change emerging in different places, including within his own denomination, which has recently decided to introduce some experiments around creating circles of authority.

“If we want to approach everything from strictly a strategic perspective, without being conscious of how culture influences our ability to arrive at those outcomes, then we won’t get to where we need to be,” Erik says.

“What we need is to reshape the culture itself and the only way I know to do that is to be changing the conversations that people are having and change the people that they’re having those conversations with.”

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