

Bridging Divides in an Era of Polarization

by Judy Lumb, John Lodenkamper, Ann Kjellberg, and Margaret Lew

The Quaker Institute for the Future (QIF) has a practice of forming “Circles of Discernment” (CoDs) on particular issues of concern. These groups meet, usually by phone or videoconference, in “Meetings for Worship for the Conduct of Research.” One such CoD is seeking to understand the root causes driving polarization in contemporary society and to determine ways we can address this issue of concern. This CoD on “Bridging Our Polarities” was formed in response to a request from Frank Granshaw of Multnomah Friends Meeting in Portland, Oregon.

Frank said that he had grown up in a conservative family. He made a list of progressive ideals he had learned from his family and suggested that it should be possible to bridge differences between progressives and conservatives. He asked QIF to form a CoD on “Bridging Our Polarities” in October of 2020, and that same month, five QIF members began meeting to consider this concern. Since that time, three more people have joined the CoD. We meet every couple of months.

From the beginning, our group decided we would not aim to summarize our findings in a “QIF Focus Book,” as other CoDs have done. Our initial focus would be simply to gather resources and information about organizations that are working to transform problems of polarization and division. You can study a list of resources that we have found useful at: <https://westernfriend.org/library/bridging-divides-resources/>

For example, one such resource is “Resetting the Table: Courageous Communication Across Divides,” which aims to foster communication across political differences. Another is “The Frameworks Institute,” whose mission is encapsulated in their pitch: “Want to change hearts and minds? It starts with knowing what mindsets are – and aren’t – and what it takes to shift them.” We even found an encouraging website entitled “We Are Not Divided, Reasons to Be Cheerful.” Within the Society of Friends, we discovered a 30-minute documentary on YouTube: “Can We All Be Friends?”

We have also studied a number of valuable books on this subject, including: *Strangers in Their Own Land* by Arlie Russell Hochschild and *Upstream: The Quest to Solve Problems Before They Happen*, by Dan Heath.

Based on these studies, members of the CoD have been exploring a couple of “next steps” – producing a pamphlet called “A Plea to the Rich” and participation in “Quaker Deep Canvassing.”

Our member John Lodenkamper has taken the lead on developing a short pamphlet that QIF members will be able to distribute among social justice and pro-democracy activists. Called “A Plea to the Rich: For the Future of All,” this pamphlet includes sample text that activists might use for reaching out toward the “hearts and minds” of “the 1%.” You can find a working draft of “A Plea to the Rich” here: <https://westernfriend.org/library/a-plea-to-the-rich/>

Our members Ann Kjellberg and Margaret Lew have begun engaging in a practice of “Quaker deep canvassing” with a group of New York City Friends. With a goal of creating loving conversation across divides, this practice is modeled on an approach developed in the 2010s by the Leadership Lab of the Los Angeles LGBTQ Center. Unlike typical political canvassing, instead of arguing about issues, “deep canvassing” draws folks out into meaningful conversation about their fears and dreams. The Leadership Lab found that such conversations had a much more powerful effect in advancing civility and tolerance than traditional political persuasion.

This group of Friends was struck by the practice’s resonance with Quaker experience. Approaching people around a difficult issue with love and respect reminded Friends of John Woolman’s one-on-one practice in spreading opposition to slavery in the eighteenth century.

A few from the group embarked on deep canvassing with a political group to learn the method, and then began to work with local and regional Friends groups to develop a Quaker approach. In anticipation of the 2022 midterm elections, amidst fears (after the events of January 6, 2021) that the elections might provoke conflict, the group of Friends began traveling to regional Friends meetings in Long Island and Upstate New York to introduce deep canvassing and invite local Friends to canvass with them in their communities. Their canvasses focused not on any upcoming election or ballot initiative, but on drawing out people’s concerns about political division itself, and how it might be overcome by sharing their stories.

We were surprised to find that strangers, when they found these Friends at their doors, turned out to welcome mutually respectful conversations. Friends learned that people's views are eclectic and unpredictable, and more open to evaluation, in a caring setting, than public discourse about political polarization suggests. They learned that folks generally have a positive view of Quakers and see Friends as honest actors in moral conversation.

These Friends continue to plan trainings and canvasses in the greater New York region, presentations and workshops on deep canvassing with Quaker meetings and organizations, and conversations drawing on the methods of deep canvassing within Quakerism where there are divisions among us. Anyone can try deep canvassing. Margaret and Ann are happy to offer support and guidance to interested Friends on how they can practice deep canvassing themselves.

Margaret and Ann found that canvassing face-to-face with strangers who disagree with you about profound issues is challenging. However, as activist George Lakey has said, courage is doing something that is scary for you, but doing it because it needs to be done, which builds courage. When Friends build courage together, it

becomes part of the culture of Quakerism. The Quaker deep canvassing group has found that their experience with deep canvassing has built up their lives and witnesses as Friends, has strengthened their connections to the larger community, and has offered a way forward, despite the tragic gulf between worldviews that currently divides our country. ❖

Please reach out to any of us if you'd like to learn more about the work that we are doing to bridge social divides in our nation:

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- John Lodenkamper – lodenkamper@gmail.com – A Plea to the Rich
- Ann Kjellberg – ann.kjellberg@zohomail.com – Quaker Deep Canvassing
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To learn more about Quaker Institute for the Future, visit: <https://quakerinstitute.org/>

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