

## What is a bilateral dialogue?

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One of the things I am often asked when I talk with people about ecumenical work is, "What is a bilateral dialogue and what is its purpose?"

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The simplest and most obvious answer is that a bilateral dialogue is a formal conversation between members of two communions (churches). Similarly, a multi-lateral dialogue is one involving three or more communions.

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According to one set of logic, the purpose of bilateral and multi-lateral dialogues is as adjuncts to conciliar ecumenism (that has, for a number of years now, been aimed at the ultimate goal of "full communion" among all council members). Specific discussions are initiated between two conciliar partners in order to facilitate their progress in the broader conciliar discussions, moving them past sticking points that are unique to them and holding up the progress of the larger conciliar enterprise.

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That's the theory. And, there is much virtue in this understanding of bilateral and multilateral ecumenism. It places the primary emphasis upon the big picture and the multitude of relationships among the Christian churches. Thus, Christian unity is seen as something undertaken as a commitment of the whole of the Body of Christ.

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In practice, there are a variety of approaches to bilateral and multilateral relationships although the ultimate goal in each of these is the same . . . attainment of full communion status between the various Christian communities of faith. Each bilateral also serves as an experiment that informs the wider ecumenical efforts; an experiment in which different approaches to discussions may be tried, different methods can be employed, etc. Indeed, bilaterals have been especially important grounds for discovery and development of ecumenism more generally since Vatican II (in the 1960s) when the Roman Catholic Church entered into discussion with various Protestant ecumenical partners. Since ecumenical efforts are works in progress, there is some lack of clarity about the status, purpose, and authority of bilateral and multilateral discussions in relation to the communions that have authorized them. As the ecumenical movement learns from experience, it may prove profitable to bring theory and practice more closely together in a way that unifies all of these relationships within an overarching philosophical frame.

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Generally speaking, a bilateral dialogue is undertaken in a series of "rounds" (usually lasting about four to five years each although some have gone on much longer). A dialogue committee is constituted for each round with members appointed from each communion. It is common for each round to be framed by a "mandate" or a "memorandum of understanding" that sets out the goals and a rough outline of the expected process (e.g., how often and where meetings will take place, whether or not a "statement" will be produced at the round's end, and so forth).

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Returning to the theoretical logic mentioned above, one of the basic principles of a bilateral is that the committee engages in discussions in order to speak to the communions that have given it the commission to meet rather than acting on behalf of the communions in dialogue. According to this understanding, dialogue committees raise points of insight, learning, and concern. They can also suggest ways forward to move the communions closer to the goals of full communion. In line with this strain of logic is the sense that a small, select committee cannot truly "represent" the communions involved. Rather, they are selected for expertise appropriate to the specific topics to be discussed in the round. The bigger picture is still the responsibility of the leaders of the communions involved.

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For instance, two communions in dialogue may have discussions concerning their particular understanding of the offices of ministry. Each communion might choose to appoint scholars or other sorts of experts who could speak to this topic and explore the similarity and differences of understanding between the two dialogue partners. At the end of the round, the committee might draft a statement that summarizes what was learned and further challenges they may have discovered.

The "statement" produced by a dialogue committee is not authoritative in itself. It is not necessarily representative of what either communion holds to be "official" doctrine or policy. Rather, it is a resource for the communions as they fashion their policy and/or doctrine by means of their particular processes and procedures. The communions themselves will decide what value is to be gleaned from the product of each bilateral round.

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Some of the most important things to be gained from dialogues are the establishment of important personal connections between members of the communions, and, a deepening sense of self that often comes when confronted with the task of having to articulate to another those things held dear by a religious community. The relationships formed help to infuse the ecumenical efforts with a heart-felt love for one's ecumenical partners (recalling that Jesus calls upon us to love one another as we love ourselves). This changes the emphasis upon the work of Christian unity from the abstract and institutional to the personal and familial. It makes the hearts of participants yearn for progress and for the success of the work. Likewise, it moves members of a communion out of their world of "insider assumptions and givens" into a relational space in which feelings, concepts, and ideas need to be explained to those to whom they may be unfamiliar. Often times in this process, members of a communion may discover things about themselves and the things they take for granted that they never knew before; or they may

see things in a different light (giving them new insight). One of the great blessings of a dialogue is that you not only learn more about your dialogue partner – you also learn more about yourself.

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Dialogues have been, and will continue to be, one of the most important tools in the efforts to actualize broad-based Christian unity.

Among the challenges they pose, however, is the need to keep these dialogues in harmony with the bigger goals of the ecumenical endeavor. If this harmony is not maintained, bilateral dialogues could end up causing the exact opposite of their purpose – breaking down conciliar ecumenism into a series of dis-integrated two-party relationships bounded by commitments that hinder goals of broad full communion relationships among all members of the conciliar ecumenical community. Here we return to the suggestion above that part of the forward progress of ecumenism probably lies in the development of a guiding philosophy that will shape the use of bilateral relationships in the future.

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