

THE PENUEL DIALOGUE PROJECT

An Effort in Peacemaking

What is it?

The Penuel Dialogue Project* was initiated by the Congregational Church of Topsfield in 2021 in response to the escalating polarization in civic discourse. The name Penuel represents the location of the Biblical story of Jacob 'wrestling with God,' struggling to do the right thing. While the overall purpose has been to promote peaceful relationships, the direct purpose of reflective structured dialogues has been to demonstrate and model how people with disparate perspectives can communicate in a civil manner and emerge from conversation having shared, having been heard and respected as well as discovering commonalities with others. The content of the dialogues focuses on questions of personal thoughts and experiences as well as questions of curiosity, neither debate nor advocacy.

Some key aspects of planning these dialogues include thoughtful question development, calculation for diversity among participants, preparatory invitations and questions as well as group conduct agreements. Controlled timing of participant responses allows for processing time to focus on what's said while the personal nature of the questions encourages authenticity. Incendiary terms are intentionally avoided, questions of curiosity are encouraged following the timed Q & A sequence, and hope for a satisfactory conversational experience is the primary desired outcome. Outreach hopes to reduce paralyzing polarization, enhance our communities' constructive conversations, and build a sense of belonging.

What's happened so far?

After a weekend training of facilitators by Essential Partners* in fall, 2021, a steering committee of facilitators formed to begin planning next steps. Starting in January 2022, the first dialogue was planned primarily to engage facilitators in their own dialogue experience with the topic of "News," in response to issues of "fake news." The second dialogue in June 2022 focused on voting-- "2022 Midterms: What's At Stake?" The third dialogue in August 2022 focused on the Massachusetts' issue of allowing (driving) "Licensing of Undocumented Immigrants." In November 2023, the fourth dialogue focused on the topic of "Belonging in Community" as a possible segue to further conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). More Tri-town community conversations are planned for 2024.

History*

Martin Riekert, CCOT pastor, initiated the Penuel Dialogue Project by securing a Lily grant to fund dialogue group facilitator training by Essential Partners, Inc. whose goal is to "give people the means to strengthen relationships, deepen belonging, and renew hope in their communities." Robert Stains (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/bob-stains>) trained approximately a dozen interested members of CCOT as well as the community. The current (2022-2023) steering committee has primarily included Jackie Cassiday of the CCOT; Meredith Shaw and Dawn Seymour of the Tri-town Council; Heidi Fox, Chair of the Topsfield Democratic Town Committee, and Ron Mastrogiovanni, Chair of the Topsfield Republican Town Committee. Dialogue participants have included members of these as well as other town/area organizations.