

Community Building through the Ministry of Convening:

An orientation for religious leaders to a challenging service in the public realm

By

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Introduction

An Undersecretary of Defense led the after dinner forum-discussion describing the alcohol and drug problem among military personnel. He outlined the treatment concepts of a new recovery program. The panel selected to respond included: a college chaplain, a former university athletic coach who had developed an innovative education and treatment referral service for students, an assistant editor from a major metropolitan newspaper, a woman in charge of an education program in Texas, a clergyman-executive of a Minnesota counseling center. The ensuing debate-dialogue was lively. Opinions and insights bounced back and forth.

Gathered for this assembly were seventy-six men and women, clergy and laypeople, politicians and bureaucrats, treatment professionals, educators, administrators and business executives. They represented industry, government education, the media, and the many religious communities. They came from all sections of the country.

During a break, I relaxed in my chair and looked around the lovely old living room with the large stone fireplace and high mantle, the deep set, small-paned windows, and elegant, dark oak woodwork. I began to wonder how these interesting people, from so many vocations, could be gathered together in June at this quaint, stone hotel in North Conway, New Hampshire. Why were these people here? All of them shared a common interest in addiction problems, but most of

them had no relation with one another until this meeting.

My mind returned to the opening night. The Reverend David Works, the founder and President of The North Conway Institute (NCI), had walked around the room introducing each of us with a little speech about our work and personal life. In these introductions David exhibited a primary convener skill, acquainting the participants with the background and the experience of the others. Through those introductions each person knew where the others were from and "coming from."

Every person had crossed paths with David at some time, in some place. Over the years, from these path-crossings, David had built a network of people concerned about addiction problems. On the basis of his personal and professional contacts, he was able to gather this diverse group. He has a knack for collecting people.

Annually, for over thirty years, NCI June Assemblies have brought professionals and laypeople together to address major themes such as:

- What Shall We Say To Young People?
- Social Drinking Patterns in the U.S.A.-The Implications for The Church
- The Ecumenical Church, Planned Social Change and Alcoholism
- The Role of Churches in the Prevention of Alcoholism

NCI has also convened leaders to work on issues concerning Native Americans, civil rights, the women's movement, as well as in other areas demanding policy clarification and improved programming.

That evening as I gazed around the room, I realized how much society needs leaders who have the power to gather people together to engage public issues and to solve community problems. I call this service "The Ministry of Convening."

This article sets forth a rationale for the "ministry of convening," the need for it and the qualities and skills required in the leadership of convening. Included are some practical suggestions on "how to do it."

The Reverend John E. Soleau

The Need for Convening in the Public Realm

Leafing through the Yellow Pages in the phone book reveals what's happening to us. The entries detail an increasing number of businesses, occupations, organizations, professional services, information centers, schools, training programs, cultural groups, recreational activities, products for sale, hobbies, diversions, health spas, eating places, treatment providers, funeral homes, religious organizations ... and on it goes. Specialization splits into specialization. There are more things to do, more places to be, and more lifestyles to try than ever before. We have built a complicated society, getting more complex each day.

Complexity creates people pressure; more people to see, hear from, talk to, think about, plan for, and worry over. Increasingly we know people only partially, usually through role functions and

exchanges of services. Our private "worlds" tend to move away from others into personal isolation. We live a contradiction: more people to know and knowing less about them.

Negative consequences appear. Institutions such as schools, churches, hospitals and social agencies are overburdened. Referral services, "hot lines," radio talk show are flooded with requests for help. In attempting escape, persons destroy their minds and bodies with alcohol and other drugs. At the same time, aggression and crime pour out upon others. Traditional values and associations which provided continuity and inner security from one generation to the next are disrupted.

In residential living, the unifying bonds of community are loosened. Knowing people on sight occurs less frequently. Life is no longer integrated around the natural events of the land, the seasons and the climate. Knowledge of the community as "my" community with its history of special traditions, rituals and symbols fades. Distance between neighbors increases; distrust and cynicism toward authority grows; adversarial attitudes invade relationships; and belonging disappears in the pursuit of self-interest.

We know all this — we're tired of hearing about it. However, romanticizing the past or complaining resignation solves nothing. Dwelling on our troubles drains energy away from the work before us. An old adage advises, "energy follows attention." Therefore, we turn our attention to the Ministry of Convening as a positive approach towards restoring community.

Convening — well done — puts people and groups in touch with each other and rebuilds community life. Convening clarifies relationships among groups and aids collective decision-making. Convening raises a community's level of consciousness. This restorative work needs doing.

What is Convening?

The word "convene" stems from the two Latin words *con* meaning "with" or "together" and *venire*, "to come." Its two major meanings are:

1. to come together, to assemble as in one body, *usually for some public purpose* (italics added)
2. to cause to assemble

the phrase "usually for some public purpose" points to the objective of the ministry of convening — improvement in the public realm.

The Historical and Biblical Basis for Convening

In the dictionary definition of convening the "one body" idea connects with the biblical tradition of a worshipping community. The word *synagogue* means "a bringing together, a meeting of worshippers." But what about "for a public purpose?"

When the first Christians were looking for a word to call the early church they chose the word

ecclesia. That Koine Greek word had a political meaning, referring to the assembly of persons gathered together to deliberate, debate and decide on the public issues confronting the Greek city-state.

The "public" meaning is further reinforced in the word for Christian worship, leitourgia. The root meaning of the word is the "work of the people." In ancient Athens "liturgy" was the word used for the various public offices which were delegated to the wealthy citizens who administered the services required to operate the city.

Thus the earliest words for "church" and "worship" point to the human experience which links the function of religion to the public work of the entire community. The message proclaims that the biblical God is concerned for all people and for the whole creation. There is no private individual salvation unless our public life and social life are redeemed as well.

The individual versus community tension emerges here. While individuals are often in conflict with community, they are always dependent upon the social structure. Strong communities raise up strong individuals. Good convening strengthens both, for it is based on the biblical concept of the "general" resurrection of the entire creation rather than the notion of individualized redemption.

Examples of the Ministry for Convening

The examples come from New England, where we have been involved in these convenings firsthand. Similar examples, however, can be drawn from every section of the country.

Beginning in 1953, the late Reverend W. Seavey Joyce, S.J., then Dean of the Business School at Boston College, convened the "Boston Citizen Seminars" on a regular basis on the neutral ground of the College. The seminars gathered the community leadership around social, fiscal, cultural, economic, and political issues of pressing importance in the metropolitan Boston area. These meetings became the central public forum for all interested parties. Discussions and debates on the controversial matters surrounding the development of the "New Boston" were informative, often passionate and emotional. This ongoing process permitted vigorous expression, issue clarification, "bargaining chip" testing, and development toward reaching solutions.

In another situation the convening leadership was exercised by the Methodist Bishop in Boston, Edward Carroll. In 1980 he realized that public interest in the civil rights movement had begun to wane. Yet in Boston, developments such as the heated controversy over school busing and the rapid influx of the Hispanic population forged the possibility of violent racial and ethnic conflict.

Bishop Carroll took action. First he talked to the religious leadership, Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Protestant. Then he talked to the leadership of all the ethnic and minority groups. He alerted the officials in business, finance, government, politics, education and the helping professions. Subsequently, he convened this leadership for continuing conversation.

This convening process led to the creation of the Boston Covenant of Racial Harmony, Equality

and Justice. In this compact, the leaders publicly pledged their support to "peaceful negotiations" as the method of working on human group conflicts which inevitably arise in a changing urban community. This Covenant provides a structure and a communications network for monitoring the city scene and spotting troubles before they breakout in destructive violence.

Another example comes from the Town of Concord, Massachusetts. During a Memorial Day celebration, a young man was permanently injured in a black powder misfire from one of the town's front-loading cannon. The community experienced shock and grief. The young man's suffering, the guilt over the lack of safety procedures, and the uncertain legal and economic responsibilities paralyzed the town's leadership. In the aftermath of the tragedy, the late Reverend Dana McLean Greely provided guidance.

In 1970 Mr. Greely had accepted the call to be the minister of The First Parish. He had just completed his statutory term as the first President of the Unitarian and Universalist Association. In the cannon firing tragedy he was able to call together the town's leadership to begin to face the human dimensions of the tragedy.

This is one of many situations where his role and skills as a convener served the community. Dana Greely was respected as the chief local convener; he was able to work outside and beyond the constraints of an elected office. He helped people talk to each other, but more importantly, he guided people in listening to each other.

In American history, perhaps the most influential clergy-inspired convening was accomplished in 1633 by John Maverick, a minister in Dorchester, Massachusetts. In October 1633 the community faced a major problem: cows and goats were slipping through fences and grazing on the village green. At that time, there was no local government body to deal with such matters. Looking at the disturbance, John Maverick said, "We have a problem. We need to talk about it. Let's meet on Monday." From Maverick's calling people together about cows and goats on the green, grew a basic American political institution, the town meeting. Town meetings spread throughout New England. Their political power, based on grassroots citizen participation, shaped the structure of our constitutional system. To this day many town meetings in Massachusetts start on a Monday.

We are indebted for the above historical insight to David Mathews, President of the Kittering Foundation, who uses the illustration in an article entitled, "Our Shared Life In All Its Form" (Foundation News, July/August 1987). Mathews also describes the indispensable functions of the "Independent Sector" in creating the public realm:

"The public realm is pre-governmental, even pre-political; it is the environment out of which government grows. The public life is our shared life in all its forms. What is now called the Independent Sector is more accurately the Public Sector — a sector that performs the most basic functions for the body politic, which is older and larger than the structures of government." (p. 58)

Religious organizations belong to the "Independent Sector." From a sociological and historical

view, religious organizations bear responsibility for acting and creating in the public realm, "our shared life in all its forms." Again we see that positive relation between religion and society which flows from meanings of the earliest words for "church" and "worship:" ecclesia, synagogue, leitourgia.

Three Functions of Convening

David Mathews stresses the need to improve quality of "public talk." To round out the concept, we would emphasize improving the quality of "public listening." The union of speaking and listening was noted in the frustration of a seminary professor of public speaking. He observed, "I spend all my time trying to improve the skills of would-be preachers but nobody is improving the listening skills of the people in the pews."

Convening, well conducted, improves "public talk" and "public listening." In so doing it provides the following three functions:

1. Convening brings together people representing different interests and perspectives into a discussion over common concerns.

In the routine of daily life we talk mostly within our own circle of friends and associate with others who think like we do in various social, political or activity groups. Our conversations tend to reinforce our own ideas and opinions. Where few occasions take place for inter-group sharing, the society drifts apart as each group becomes caught up in its particular concerns. The examples of clan feuds of mountain folks or the rival youth gangs of the city show the extremes of social division. But the more subtle, ongoing separation of groups create less noticeable but still pervasive community disintegration. In our consulting work with people within the same organization, the most repeated complaint is "poor communication."

Good convening brings together people from different parts of the community. Convening fosters participation, shakes open closed opinions, seeks a common ground, and creates shared judgment. Convening guides self-interest toward a general interest; convening prevents a "hardening of the arteries" in the life-blood communication flow of a community.

2. Convening explores and develops constructive thinking and discovers new solutions.

Mathews, in describing "public talk," claims "Public talk is not a bull session or a gripe session. It is not talking about an issue but through an issue . . ." (p. 61). Good convening fosters talking through, listening through, and thinking through the problem. Convening opens up a situation and lets people inside to see the structure of an issue and to understand its interconnected parts.

From this in-depth exploration, alternatives appear and possible solutions emerge. Often convening receives an in-breaking of the "new," a new idea, a new arrangement, a new procedure. Such breakthroughs can bring about changes in customary social procedures.

3. Convening builds motivation and the will for common action.

After bringing people together to talk and listen, convening builds a common commitment for action. Individuals encouraged in expressive and reflective thought develop a desire to work and contribute toward a solution. As a result, convening provides an arena for individuals to demonstrate their skills and knowledge, new civic leaders emerge from the process.

Effective convening can benefit any community in solving problems and improving communication.

What does it take to be a Convener?

A convener is one who is able to call "to assembly" the leaders and the led, elected officials and voters, professionals and receivers of services, rival political and interest groups, and institutional executives in the public and private sectors. The ability to call others to come together may flow from an official capacity — such as that of a judge or a mayor — but we are considering conveners who are not in elected or appointed governmental positions. Because of the American doctrine of "the separation of church and state," religious leaders usually function without governmental authority (officiating in a marriage ceremony being one exception). Nevertheless, ministers work constantly in the "public realm."

Ministers who are conveners have power because of the respect and trust granted them by their fellow citizens. This esteem is earned day-by-day over time as one lives, works and serves in the community.

Convening is not for Everyone

Some people should not attempt to be conveners. Convening requires a nosy but non-offensive attitude toward people and demands an attraction toward the fouled-up situations of life. You have to loosen your grip on your closely held ideas. It means working with people you disagree with and with folks you don't like. You discover that ministry is for everybody, not only for the denominationally-chosen few. You find that the "ministry of the laity" takes place in all activities and not just in "church work." To be a convener you need to stop demanding acceptance by others of your opinions. Maybe convening is not for you.

Ministers can be Conveners

Obviously religious leaders are expected to be conveners within their congregation and denominational organization. Although this function is assumed to be part of a minister's work, in seminary training little time is given to the conceptual understanding of convening and the development of convening skills.

The questions we are raising go beyond parochial or denominational leadership. What we call "the ministry of convening" deals with public leadership, with community leadership outside the local or regional church organization. This public "convening" leadership is based on the root meanings of the ancient words for "church" and "synagogue," and the relation of the "Independent," nongovernmental sector's role in creating the public realm. Ministers have been effective public conveners throughout history but their "public" effectiveness depends upon their theological convictions about the relation of God to history, and the relation of the church to society.

Writings abound on these theological questions, but this is not the place for a thorough exploration of those issues. Yet two theological interpretations assist an effective convener:

- The first holds that historical events reveal the "Word" of God.
- The second maintains that the love and mercy of the biblical God is universal; they include all people and all creation.

In Hebrew, the word for "word," *dabar*, means not only spoken language sounds and written words but primarily "word" means event, happening, historical occurrence. God's "Word" was "spoken" in and through historical events. The prophets of Yahweh paid close attention to those events which befell the people. In those happenings they discerned God's message. In this view, history was the arena where the saving of the whole creation was being worked out. Therefore, the developments of local history and the challenge of local issues are not minor matters but are precisely the events where the "Word" of God is spoken and we are addressed. We are called to attend those matters and use them as opportunities to move toward more justice and reconciliation. An effective public convener does just that.

A convener maintains an open attitude towards the array of beliefs, ideologies, and political opinions held by individuals and various groups. Differences do not disturb a convener; differences are understood as enriching a pluralistic society. The religious leader as convener stays close to the universal, non-exclusive character of God's outlook upon humanity. The biblical God of history cares for all people, all creatures — and the entire physical creation. In practice, a public convener is not effective when operating within a narrow, rigid religious ideology. He needs a knowledge of the ambiguity of all human life, most especially the ambiguity of religious activities. One's own views — or a particular group's interpretation of religion — should not be identified as being God's. Such pride frustrates the reconciliation hoped for in the ministry of convening.

Building a Network Through Pastoral Concern

The ability to be a public convener is based on a network of human relationships built over time: you take part in the celebrations of the community; high school graduations, the hospital fair, Memorial Day observances, the Fourth of July picnic. You show up on these occasions.

You know and are known by being curious about people, about organizations, and about the way things work. We have spoken of the importance of historical events in discerning the "Word" of God. The first meaning of the Greek word "history" is inquiry, seeking information. Only secondarily does it mean recording the passing events. In that spirit of pastoral inquiry, you ask questions and then more questions. You listen and listen deeply to the responses. You build your knowledge of the community, of its institutions, and the lives of the people through inquiry.

A knowledge of the community gained through talking with older folks and reading historical accounts is helpful. One of the most effective missionaries I know worked in Bluefields, Nicaragua some years ago. He spent the first four months of his tour there making a study of Bluefields. For his own learning, he wrote an historical survey of the region. This background gave him an ability to bridge the cultural gaps and effectively to serve the people. Understanding

history enables ministry. A good convener is part "history buff."

Important information always includes the operation of local government, the personalities of elected officials, their motivations for seeking public office, and who really makes the economic decisions. Know the work of the police chief, the fire chief, and department heads (public works, sanitation, recreation, social services). What's the legal system like? What is the quality of justice handed down by judges, probation officers, attorneys?

You'll need to know how businesses, agencies, institutions (private and public) conduct their affairs, including organizations such as schools, ice cream stores, mental health clinics, travel agencies and insurance companies. In these establishments find out who are the guiding influences, who sets policy, what are the working conditions and how things are going now.

Besides having knowledge of the religious organizations, get to know the voluntary, informal power structure of the community, such as the fraternal organizations, Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, clubs, social circles and neighborhood groups.

Not to be overlooked are people who work in communications: the editor and reporters of the local newspaper, the owner and the manager of the radio station, and writers of various organization newsletters. Media people have behind-the-scenes information; they can also assist in "spreading the word" about convening activities.

A minister's primary focus, however, is pastoral, understanding the inner lives of people. You pay attention to people whatever their status, be they janitor, president, supervisor or clerk, waitress or manager, judge or prisoner. When you move about the community, listen carefully to hear the pressures, rewards, joys, disappointments, hopes and the failures. By knowing the people, you can serve by providing counsel and in strengthening the human spirit. This pastoral orientation toward the community, a primary ministry in itself, also builds the network of relationships-the necessary foundation-for the ministry of public convening.

Types of Convening

Convening is a flexible way of dealing with issues and problems. The nature of the concern indicates who should be convened, the size and scope of the convening and the range of possible results.

Often convening is used as an action in response after something has happened. Such situations might be a neighborhood demand for a traffic light following serious accidents at a street intersection, or an entire community aroused by the news that toxic wastes are polluting the water supply.

However, convening can be used to get out in front of a problem. The citizens of one community convened to provide an emergency, on-call, ambulance service to transport patients to the regional hospital twenty-two miles away. In another town, citizens gathered to plan and explore practical, economic arrangements for preserving tracts of open land.

The size of the convening depends upon the scope of the issue. Some are neighborhood-size. In a southern city without adequate zoning laws, a developer moved quietly to obtain permits to put a large commercial building in a residential neighborhood. Construction would have destroyed an irreplaceable wetland drainage area. In the face of this threat, a ministerial student alerted the residents and called a series of meetings. The newly-formed neighborhood association not only stopped construction but won victories before the city council, which then passed protective zoning regulations.

Other situations involving multiple issues are city and regionwide, as in the example of The Boston Citizens Seminar. The crises surrounding the closing of major industrial plants in a city require convenings of large numbers of citizens and representatives of interested groups.

Convening can be tailored to fit any situation. The issues suggest who needs to be involved. There can be different objectives for example:

- gathering political pressure for change
- providing for health care service
- reducing conflict between groups
- giving voice to the poor and powerless
- planning future directions for the community

The process itself will determine what the goals should be and how to bring about positive results. A minister who has built a network of relationships will know whom to call to get things started.

Convening: The First Three Stages

As you live and work within a congregation and the wider community, the sense arises that a situation needs general public attention. The following is a brief description of the first three stages in launching a convening process:

1. testing with a "trial balloon"
2. the preliminary planning conference
3. the first public session

The "Trial Balloon"

Your network of relationships tells you who should be concerned about this issue. You also know the people who have the power to help in the situation — they are usually the leaders of social, professional or interest groups. Others may have special knowledge or skills which would be useful. In some way they are "key" people with a special standing and respect in the community to whom others listen. You contact these "key" people and arrange to see them individually.

The purpose of these conversations is to measure the interest in doing something about the problem. During this stage, you will be looking for people who could share in the planning and management of the process. In these discussions the type of issue will determine the nature of the

appeal to be made. The appeal may be one of fairness, safety, preservation, improving a service, or mounting political pressure for change.

In these talks it is important to allow the people the freedom to genuinely respond to the issue. They may back away from it or not see it as a vital concern. They may identify with the problem, think it's important and indicate a willingness to help. Whatever the response, assess it accurately; your own interest should not cloud your judgment. During these preliminary discussions you can mention the others you are seeing in this "trial balloon" stage. Then, as the individuals meet in the community, they will begin to talk about your suggestions. The "public talk" will have begun.

From these "trial balloon" conversations, you'll have a good idea if the action will "fly" or not. There are three possible responses: people think something should be done and are willing to work for it; people express opposition; or people are not sure where they stand on the issue.

If people are mostly opposed or uncertain, don't push ahead without the support of these "key" people. Perhaps now is not the right time to move forward; more groundwork may be needed to generate interest. If the decision is negative, let the "key" people know your reasoning. However, if there is enough positive support, move into stage two.

Preliminary Planning Conference

Gather together a preliminary planning conference of "key" people who are willing to work as a steering committee. This meeting will lay out the steps leading to the first public session. The group reviews the entire issue and addresses the critical question of sponsorship. What organizations, public or private, should issue the call for this convening? On general public matters it is preferable to have several sponsors.

Careful thought is given to the best way to present the issue. What is the historical background? What are the points of view and opinions which need to be presented for a well-rounded picture of the problem? Who are the individuals, because of their special knowledge or their leadership positions, most able to make the initial presentations? What should be the order of the presentations? A design for the public session is outlined with the list of suggested presenters.

The expenses of the convening should be estimated and a tentative budget drawn up. People or groups who might fund the effort should be identified.

Following the preliminary conference, the plan is shared with the leadership of the different groups, the presenters, and others in the community. As knowledge of the convening effort gets around, you'll be testing the response to it from a larger number of citizens. If no major stumbling blocks appear, proceed with the public session.

The First Public Session

The sponsors and presenters are now committed to the event. Cooperation is underway for the first public session. Now it is time to oversee the final details.

A place to meet is chosen large enough to accommodate the expected size of the gathering. A weekday evening is usually best for the initial general meeting. Newspaper, radio announcements and posters will attract the community at large and raise public consciousness. The presenters are responsible for preparing the needed graphics, handouts, charts, or slides.

A basic design for a first session would include:

- a welcome
- a recounting of the events which led to this assembly
- an introduction of the presenters
- description of the purpose of the session
- an historical review of the situation
- the presentations
- a time for questions and discussion
- a summing-up time to gain a sense of the meeting and to suggest ways to proceed

The convener of the session should be a person held in respect in the community. Good qualities for this moderator include a sense of humor, firmness, and the ability to listen and to allow people to express clearly what they are trying to say.

The summing-up time is critical. You listen, trusting in the "process of convening," believing that a direction will emerge which will guide you and the other leaders toward the appropriate next steps.

Now we look more specifically at the skills and abilities required in a convener.

Skills and Abilities for Convening

ACTIVE LISTENING: Active listening is a primary skill for pastoral counselling. It is an essential ability in all human relationships but in convening it is important in networking, in organizing activities, and especially during the convening sessions.

Skillful active listening is sensitive and intense. It involves focused concentration on a person or a group. It pays attention to more than spoken words; it is receptive to a wide range of communication, such as body language, eye movement, and emotional tone. Active listening closely follows thought patterns, the logic of step-by-step linear thought and the less rational reasoning of unspoken self-interest, habitual ideology, and unexamined prejudices. Active listening notes the intuitive production of novel ideas, desired hopes, and guiding visions. This listening deciphers code words of the current jargon ("replicated," "revenue enhancement") and hears behind the fad phrases of the day ("I'm straight out."). Active listening hears the silences between the sounds, marks the hesitation in the flow of words while following the rhythms and cadence of speech. It hears the quality of voice; flat, excited, despondent, or pressured. It knows that words both reveal and hide what is going on underneath. Active listening is attuned to the deeper experience of another person.

Active listening is always useful in the next skill: networking.

NETWORKING: The activities of networking were described earlier. The following is a brief outline of the abilities needed.

- developing rapport with a variety of types of people
- gaining information and knowledge through pastoral concern and curiosity
- discerning how the entire community functions as a social system; knowing how groups and institutions relate to each other
- staying in communication with people in the network on an ongoing basis

As you move toward the first convening session, skill in procedure planning is needed.

PROCEDURE PLANNING: Procedure planning begins by envisioning the physical setting — the room, hall, or auditorium — where the assembly will be held. Imagine the setting:

- the people as they gather
- the physical placement of the people in the room when the session gets underway
- the speaker's location in the hall
- where the slide projectors will be located
- where newsprint, charts, or maps can be most effectively displayed

After choosing the best physical arrangements, the agenda is laid out step by step. This planning includes deciding what information is needed, who should make presentations, as well as what printed material and visual aids will clarify the issues and lead to productive discussion.

As the time for the convening session draws closer, make sure there is a skillful moderator in place prepared to lead the assembly.

MODERATING: Being a moderator requires "traffic cop" skills in guiding the flow of public talk during the convening. Guiding means:

- making sure that people are understood
- helping to show where an opinion or idea fits into the entire picture
- making connections between the various contributions
- helping people stick to the issue
- keeping track of important ideas
- keeping the discussion focused by brief summaries and transitions which help people keep their bearings
- restating main points and summing up the conclusions
- helping to clarify recommendations for policy direction, decisions, and proposed action

A good moderator discerns the direction of the talk, spots things which need more investigation, and identifies the next steps.

ACCOMMODATING: This word has multiple meanings. One is "making room for others." "In my Father's house are many rooms. . ." (John 14:2a) This bible passage often used in burying the

dead, expresses our hope for the deceased, but it applies equally to our life on earth. There is a place for everybody, and if there isn't, there should be.

Accommodating is the ability to relate to diverse people, giving them voice, assisting them to "find a place in the sun." As there are "many dwelling places in my Father's house..." accommodating works at learning to dwell together with less conflict, with increased respect and appreciation for one another. An accommodating person interprets opposing opinions, clarifies differences, explains the reasons behind the differences, and helps people whose views differ to engage in constructive dialogue.

Convening includes conflict resolution. Thus, skills in conflict management are a part of accommodating: helping groups negotiate, test new ways of relating, trying new methods of doing things. Accommodating helps people open up to new ideas, attitudes and values.

A convening effort benefits from all these abilities. By practice and evaluation you can increase your skills. But you don't have to have all these capabilities; rarely do they reside in one person. You may be strong in one or two of these areas yet all these skills should be available. Therefore, enlist people who have the other needed skills to be on the leadership team.

Conclusion

Religious organizations operate in the public realm. That public role cannot be avoided. For good or for ill, faith communities influence and are influenced by the body politic. The first words chosen for "church," "synagogue," and "liturgy" reveal the interconnection of religion and society. The universal elements in the major religions include all peoples and races and intend the healing and salvation of the whole world and the creation of a humane society. This religious impulse flows out beyond the local congregation, beyond denominational boundaries.

Therefore, this ancient mission can be carried on through the ministry of convening. Its three functions, which assist in building community are: bringing cohesion from differences; creating new opportunities; and strengthening motivation for common action. Convening provides for accommodation of new people, the dialogue between generations, and construction of solutions to old problems. These efforts are necessary to meet the changing demands of ongoing history.

By developing a community-oriented ministry and by learning the skills of convening, you can share in the work of "Kingdom" building through this challenging service — The Ministry of Convening.

The North Conway Institute (NCI) is an interfaith, ecumenical, interdisciplinary nonprofit organization that works with religious and secular groups in addressing problems of alcohol and drug abuse. An outgrowth of the Yale University School of Alcohol Studies, NCI was founded in 1951 in North Conway, New Hampshire, by The Reverend David A. Works and a group of concerned clergy and lay persons. The major goals of NCI are to promote education for the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse; to improve care and rehabilitation of alcoholics; to further personal, responsible decision making about the use/non-use of alcohol beverages; and

to develop a better climate for discussion, research, and action on all aspects of alcohol problems.

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Other Publications Available From The North Conway Institute

Alcohol, Alcoholism, and Social Drinking. A report by the Joint Commission on Alcoholism of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Greenwich, Conn: The Seabury Press, 1958.

A pioneer statement of a theological understanding of the place of beverage alcohol in the society.

Alcohol and the American Churches. Boston: North Conway Institute, 1967.

A comprehensive document including: a historical survey, summaries of papers on a united approach to alcohol problems, statements of national study groups, a series of the consensus statements from 13 annual NCI conferences, a community resource check list, and an extensive bibliography.

Coleman, John J. **Steps Toward a Drug-Free America.** NCI Occasional Paper #1. Boston: North Conway Institute, 1989.

A senior officer in the Drug Enforcement Administration examines the economic and foreign policy aspects of the drug trade, demonstrates the impracticality of legalization, and calls for moral leadership to rebuild standards of social behavior.

Kleber, Herbert D. **The Faith Community and the War Against Drugs.** NCI Occasional Paper #3. Boston: North Conway Institute, 1989.

The Deputy Director for Demand Reduction, Office of National Drug Control Policy emphasizes that the national strategy is a comprehensive approach involving all segments of the country. The faith community's role includes spiritual guidance, moral teaching and practical pastoral actions.

Musto, David F. **What Can We Learn From The First Opiate-Cocaine Epidemic?** NCI Occasional Paper #2. Boston: North Conway Institute, 1989.

A professor of psychiatry at Yale University shows the lessons to be learned from a previous drug epidemic and discerns the long-term social forces working for and against drug use. Persistence in anti-drug efforts is essential.

Works, David A. **Pastoral Care of Families: Including Alcoholics and Problem Drinkers.** Boston: North Conway Institute, 1987.

The founder of the North Conway Institute presents a lively and challenging approach to pastoral care to assist families in dealing with the damage resulting from alcohol problems.