

# WHO IS IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

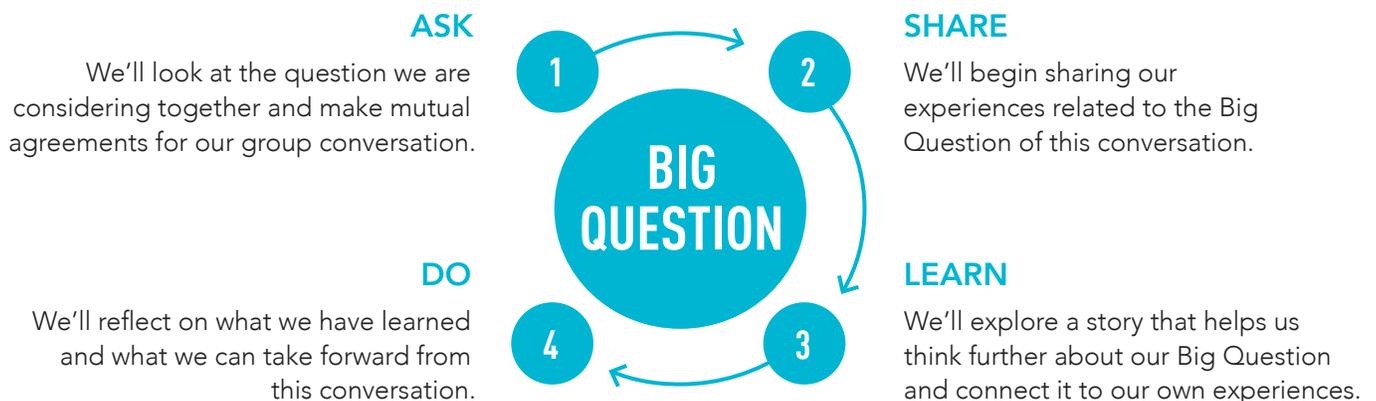


A GUIDED CONVERSATION

## WHAT KIND OF CONVERSATION IS THIS?

A Big Question conversation is one that helps us connect by discussing questions that matter to everyone, and everyone can answer. The questions we will talk about don't require expertise to answer. For our time together, we will share stories and explore questions instead of making arguments and debating issues. We'll focus on listening and reflecting together to understand and learn, instead of to convince or persuade others.

## CONVERSATION FLOW:



Our conversation today will follow these stages, and should last between 60 and 90 minutes. We'll use this written guide as a centering point, to help us have a shared discussion that stays focused and allows everyone to participate. Some parts of the conversation will include reading aloud by members of the group and at times we might break into pairs or small groups.\*

\*Conversation Leaders can find suggestions and support in our "Resources for Conversation Leaders" guide, available online.

## ASK

Before we ask each other to share our stories, we need to agree to some parameters to guide us. To create a more trustworthy space where we feel able to contribute openly, we will begin by asking each of us to agree that we have mutual responsibilities to each other and the group. We'll spend around 10 minutes in this section.

We will read our Agreement of Mutual Responsibility together, with volunteers taking turns reading items out loud. As we read, you can use the space provided before the items to mark them using the symbols shown below. You can put more than one symbol by an item if more than one applies.



Put a question mark by any items for which you need clarification



Put a check mark by items which feel easy or natural to you



Put an arrow pointing to items which will be challenging for you, where you will need to pay special attention



Put a star by items which are most important for you to receive from others in order to participate fully

After we read the Agreement items together, we'll review any that need clarification. Then, as we go through the conversation:

- be aware of those items you marked as challenging for yourself, and try to adjust when you find yourself not following an agreement;
- if you feel others are not observing agreements, especially those that you starred as most important to you, you can ask the conversation leader or the group as a whole to review an item and discuss what can help the group make adjustments;
- notice whether your assumptions about what would come easily or naturally to you were accurate, and whether in the future you might need to be more mindful about your tendencies in those areas than you anticipated.

# OUR AGREEMENT OF MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY

? need clarification

✓ feels easy or natural

➔ will be challenging

\* need from others in order to participate fully

## WE AGREE TO:

- \_\_\_\_\_ **1. Share the Air:** We will strive to share this time, space, and learning process equitably, so that all can participate and share in the benefit. We will not expect other individuals or groups to bear the responsibility of educating us.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **2. Uphold Confidentiality:** We will not share others' stories or identities outside this conversation, although we may share what we have learned from this experience.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **3. Maintain Respect:** We will treat others with respect. We will not shame, blame, demean, or attack others.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **4. Allow for Silence:** We won't rush to fill silences, recognizing that we may need time to gather our thoughts or find our courage to speak.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **5. Listen to Understand:** We will acknowledge the limits of our own knowledge and open ourselves to what we can learn from the experiences and circumstances of others. We will listen to understand and to learn, not to debate.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **6. Speak Only for Ourselves:** We will each speak from our own experience, not for others, not for entire groups. We will not expect others to speak for entire groups.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **7. Consider the Bigger Picture:** We will strive to recognize how our own and others' experiences and perspectives are influenced by heritage, cultural environments, social groups, our diverse identities, and social systems.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **8. Explore Disagreement:** We will strive to be open and curious about our disagreements, and to engage with disagreement even when it feels uncomfortable.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **9. Lean in to Discomfort:** We will be willing to grapple with challenging ideas and feelings, and examine our own reactions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **10. Practice Generosity:** We will recognize that we are all people in process and are more than we express in any one moment. We will give ourselves and each other permission to not know. We will respect each other's right to be fully human, including experiencing strong emotions, not knowing, and making mistakes.

*Please sign here as a symbol of your commitment to upholding our Agreement.*

## SHARE

We want to enter into conversation by introducing ourselves and inviting everyone to reflect on our own experience, connecting our Big Question to our individual lives. We'll have up to 20 minutes for this activity.

Choose one of these questions to answer:

- Take a moment and think of the word "community."  
What comes to mind for you?
- When was a time that you felt part of a community?

## WHAT COMES TO MIND?

Take a moment to organize your thoughts; you can use this space to make some notes to yourself. Then we'll each introduce ourselves and share a brief answer.

## LEARN

This is the heart of our conversation; we'll spend up to 30 minutes in this portion. We are going to watch a video together, to help us think about our Big Question from a shared reference point.

### SETTING THE CONTEXT:

What makes a community? The dictionary reminds us that community is rooted in something we have in common: living in a common place, undergoing common experiences, sharing common language, values, or goals. Community implies communing—sharing life together. In a world increasingly defined by individualized, customized experiences—from the ads Facebook sends us based on our unique interests, to our ability to choose where we get our news or when and where we watch our favorite movies and shows—community is something we know we need, but also can seem hard to achieve.

Let's watch a story of what happened in one community when a Muslim center opened up across the street from a Christian church. (Link to Video: <https://youtu.be/tOWPd76HiVI>)

A transcript of the video is included below to refer back to after we view the video.

## VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

"I'll never forget the morning that I saw an article about a group of Muslims who had bought 30 acres and were planning to build a complex. When I saw that, my stomach kind of tightened up. They were gonna be right across the street from us. I felt that, that ignorance and that fear so I prayed, said well what are we supposed to do?" (Pastor Steve Stone, Heartsong Church)

"The idea of Memphis Islamic Center started because we felt we needed a family life center, a place for people to pray and play, to socialize and have a sense of community. It is a difficult time for Muslims in America. We did not expect to be welcome, we thought we'd have to work hard. One day we were driving by and we see a banner and that banner says:" (Dr. Bashar A. Shala, Memphis Islamic Center)

"Heartsong Church welcomes the Memphis Islamic Center to the neighborhood." (Pastor Steve Stone, Heartsong Church)

"Me and my wife both were thinking about leaving the church because I just did not accept what was going on. I went to Pastor Steve and asked him, I said what are we doing? He told me to read the Gospels. When I read through those Gospels and I figured out I was the problem. What was going on with the world today, I was the problem." (Mark Sharpe, Heartsong Church)

"And then we started building. In the month of fasting, the month of Ramadan was supposed to be our grand opening day where we start praying here and it was clear that we were not gonna have our hall

ready." (Dr. Bashar A. Shala, Memphis Islamic Center)

"We got a call and Bashar said we just wondered if we could use your building for our prayers." (Pastor Steve Stone, Heartsong Church)

"In case we don't get our permit in time. Instead of using the room for a few nights, we ended up spending the entire month of Ramadan at Heartsong Church. Ramadan brought us much closer. People started knowing each other on a personal level." (Dr. Bashar A. Shala, Memphis Islamic Center)

"We had done coat drives and food drives and close to 9/11 we do a blood drive together. I would've never thought that I would be friends with Muslims and I love it. It's kind of like my world got bigger." (Mark Sharpe, Heartsong Church)

"We are a better congregation now. We are better people because of this friendship with Heartsong." (Dr. Bashar A. Shala, Memphis Islamic Center)

"It's an amazing friendship that I can't imagine having missed out on." (Pastor Steve Stone, Heartsong Church)

"How's everybody doing today? Cheer louder if you're having fun." (Dr. Bashar A. Shala, Memphis Islamic Center) (crowd cheers)

*Published September 9, 2016. (Link to Video: <https://youtu.be/tOWPd76HiVI>)*

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

We won't necessarily discuss every question here, but we will discuss at least 1 or 2 from each section. As we discuss, you can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

**Clarifying:** What's happening in the video?

- Is there anything in the video that isn't clear to you?

## WHAT COMES TO MIND?

**Interpreting:** How do people in the story feel and respond?

With these questions, we want to stay as close as possible to the actual content/action of the story, examining what is there and what we think it means.

- What are some of the feelings you heard people talk about in the video?
- What do you think Dr. Shala meant when he said, "We did not expect to be welcome, we thought we'd have to work hard."
- What do you think Mark Sharpe meant when he said, "What was going on with the world today, I was the problem."
- What do you think changed for people?
- How do you think the people in this story were able to move through their fear or discomfort?

**Reflecting:** How does this story resonate with us?

- What, if anything, from the video feels familiar to you or similar to something from your own life?
- Have you ever had an experience like the one in the video, where you found yourself feeling a sense of community that you hadn't imagined possible?
- Have you ever felt like Dr. Shala, that you would "have to work hard" to be welcome somewhere?
- Have you ever had a moment like Mark Sharpe, where you thought to yourself something like, "I am the problem"?
- What helps you face or move through fear or discomfort?
- Mark Sharpe said his experience was "kind of like my world got bigger." What lessons can we take from this story that might help us make our worlds bigger?

## WHAT COMES TO MIND?

## DO

To conclude our time together, we'll think and talk about some of the things that really struck us during the course of our conversation and what we can take forward from this experience.\*\*

\*\*Conversation Leaders can find suggested variations of the "Do" section in our "Resources for Conversation Leaders" guide, available online.



### WHAT DID WE LEARN?

First take a moment to reflect and respond briefly, in a phrase or sentence, to at least one of these questions:

- What insights did you have about our Big Question?
- What insights did you have about yourself, your own values, or how you view the world?
- What insights did you have about others -- whether other participants, someone whose story we discussed in the Learn section, or people in general?

You can use the space to make some notes to yourself. After you've had a moment, we'll share some of our thoughts.

### WHAT COMES TO MIND?

## WHAT WILL WE DO?

Now take a moment to reflect and respond to the questions below and choose one response you would like to share with the group. We'll finish with a final round of sharing.

1. Think again about our Agreement of Mutual Responsibility. What are some things you noticed in this conversation that you and others did – or didn't do – that created the space for a meaningful, respectful conversation? What is one thing you want to work on maintaining in other conversations you have?
2. We all know maintaining commitments can be hard. In anticipation of the times when maintaining your goal is a struggle, what is a strategy that you can use to help yourself in those moments?

## WHAT COMES TO MIND?

## CLOSING

Thank you for participating in this conversation. Educator John Westerhoff has said that "We are at our best when we make our lives and our search for meaning available as a resource for another's learning."

### SHARE YOUR FEEDBACK:

We'd like to hear about your conversation experience! Take our brief survey at [bit.ly/AskBigQs](http://bit.ly/AskBigQs).

### SHARE YOUR STORY:

Join the Ask Big Questions community online – connect with us and share your conversation story. Tag @AskBigQs (Twitter) and @AskBigQuestions (Facebook and Instagram)



## ABOUT ASK BIG QUESTIONS

Ask Big Questions is a project that seeks to deepen understanding and strengthen community through reflective conversations about questions that matter to everyone. No matter our background or perspective, we need opportunities to see and hear each other more deeply – not as labels but as human beings. Conversations that help us connect are essential building blocks for strong and inclusive communities. Big Question conversations support and strengthen civic habits of listening, civility, and engaging diverse perspectives, which are important steps toward better problem solving. Ask Big Questions is an initiative of Hillel International.

## JOIN THE BIG QUESTIONS COMMUNITY!

Join our movement to build connection, trust, and community through better conversation! A good conversation changes us, and as those effects ripple outward, it can change the world. Visit [askbigquestions.org](http://askbigquestions.org) to find more Big Question conversation guides and resources to help you use our guides for better civic dialogue.

## USING ASK BIG QUESTIONS MATERIALS

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