



The Latino Racial Justice Circle Guide for Faith Community Dialogues on Immigration

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BACKGROUND AND GOALS

In American society, racism and xenophobia have been deeply intertwined. Under the doctrine of white nationalism, the United States is understood in racial terms as a white nation of European descent. Many immigrants from Latin America and other parts of the world are discriminated not only because of their foreign nationality but also because of their skin color. The term “racialized nativism” has been used to describe this combined discrimination suffered by non-white immigrants. The struggle for immigrant rights – the rights that allow immigrants to thrive in our society alongside native citizens – is therefore connected to struggle for racial justice.

Religion is another social institution that interacts with immigration. For immigrants, religious institutions have been gateways into local communities, providers of social services and advocates for rights. Religion could, therefore, mitigate the exclusionary effects of racialized nativism. However, religion has also been used to discriminate immigrants, as in the case of Catholics and Jews in the past and Muslims in the present.



In response to this complex context, the Latino Racial Justice Circle (LRJC) was created in 2015 as a faith-based group of volunteers that supports immigrants in Baltimore, Maryland. The group helps Latino families obtain legal immigration counsel, offers scholarships for Latino youth and advocates for a federal immigration reform that benefits Latino communities.

The LRJC vision is to create opportunities throughout Maryland for meaningful, authentic dialogue about race relations with people of different cultures, forming cross-cultural, faith-based communities focused on spiritual growth and improving social relationships. With that purpose, the LRJC established a program of faith community dialogues on immigration. In these dialogues, volunteers of the LRJC and local faith communities gather to share perceptions on immigration, build mutual understanding around issues affecting immigrants and native citizens, and plan collaborative action to tackle those issues.

From summer 2018 to summer 2019, Dr. Felipe Filomeno – a volunteer of the LRJC and professor of Political Science at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) – led the design, implementation, assessment and analysis of pilot dialogues on immigration. The design of the dialogues was informed by a review of the academic literature about the intersection of religion, race and immigration and a review of existing models for intergroup dialogue.

The first LRJC dialogue happened as part of an ecumenical workshop on immigration held in Baltimore in October 2018. In spring 2019, two dialogue series happened under the project Honest Conversations: Faith Community Dialogues on Immigration and Race, which was funded with grants from UMBC and Maryland Humanities². The implementation of these pilot dialogues involved collaboration between the LRJC and the Archbishop Borders School, St. Ann Catholic Church, St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church, Church of the Annunciation Catholic Church, and St. Clement Catholic Church in Baltimore. After the pilot dialogues were conducted, Dr. Filomeno evaluated the program by analyzing observation notes, dialogue transcripts and exit questionnaires completed by participants.

Based on this year-long community-based research project, Dr. Filomeno – in deep and extensive collaboration with members of the LRJC – wrote the LRJC Guide for Faith Community Dialogues on Immigration. This guide describes, step by step, the LRJC dialogue model. The LRJC hopes it will enable faith communities everywhere to use dialogue for mutual understanding and collaboration between immigrants and native citizens. The guide includes organization procedures, recommendations for dialogue facilitators, ground rules and prayer, and questions for dialogue. Although the guide was based on the experience of dialogues among mostly Catholic participants, it is adaptable to other faith traditions and interfaith contexts.

1 For an evaluation of this workshop, see Filomeno, F. A. (2019). Changing Hearts and Minds? Evaluation of an Ecumenical Workshop on Immigration. *Journal of Applied Social Science*. doi.org/10.1177/1936724419846197.

2 This project was made possible by a grant from Maryland Humanities, through support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Maryland Historical Trust in the Maryland Department of Planning, and the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this guide do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Maryland Humanities, Maryland Historical Trust, Maryland Department of Planning, or the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation.

ORGANIZATION

At least two people should be in charge of organizing an LRJC dialogue. One should be the facilitator of the dialogue sessions; the other should be the logistics coordinator, who will lead the scheduling of dialogue sessions, the recruitment of participants, the communication with faith leaders and staff, the securing of a room for the dialogue sessions, the purchase supplies, the set up and clean up of the room. Two organizers, however, is the minimum. Ideally, a committee would be in charge of the organization. This committee should include leaders of the faith communities involved. This will facilitate the implementation of the dialogue and increase the trust of participants in the process.

An LRJC dialogue should have between 10 and 15 participants. Participants sit in a circle and are given name tags, pens, paper and refreshments. To recruit participants, organizers may circulate flyers and sign up sheets after worship events, in faith community bulletins or through other means. Dialogue presupposes a diversity of identities and perspectives among participants. If a faith community is already diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality or another form of social stratification, organizers can easily recruit a diverse sample of participants. If a faith community is nearly homogeneous, organizers might want to recruit members of a different faith community to the dialogue. The dialogue should have a balanced representation of members of different groups so that members of one group do not feel overpowered by others in the dialogue.



When diversity implies the inclusion of participants who are not fluent in English, organizers can translate the materials below to other languages and have facilitators fluent in those languages. In this guide, the essential materials are presented in English and Spanish (in italic, following the passages in English).

When more than 15 people are interested in the dialogue, participants can be split in small groups as long as each group is diverse and has a facilitator. The small groups can reconvene at the end of the activities and share their conclusions.

The LRJC dialogue happens in three meetings of one hour and thirty minutes, with one meeting per week over three consecutive weeks. It is divided in three parts: introduction, conversation and conclusion. In the introduction, the facilitator welcomes participants, states the goals of the dialogue and the role of the facilitator, leads participants' agreement on ground rules for dialogue and the prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi. Organizers may choose another prayer, depending on the faith traditions of participants. It is important that the prayer invokes the spirit of friendliness, orientation to the other, and unity.

The conversation is the core of the dialogue. It is divided in three sections: (1) personal stories, feelings and thoughts about immigration, (2) perceptions of differences and commonalities between immigrants and natives, (3) visions of how participants' communities should approach immigration and deliberation of actions that participants should take to achieve that vision. The LRJC dialogue is, therefore, a deliberative dialogue in which communication for mutual understanding (dialogue) is followed by communication for reasoned agreement on a consensual decision (deliberation). Moreover, it strives for a critical exploration of what unites people and what differentiates them, without assuming that participants should focus on either.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FACILITATORS

Read carefully the LRJC Guide for Faith Community Dialogues on Immigration, with special attention to the role assigned to facilitators.

- Your main task is to keep the discussion focused, stay neutral and enforce the ground rules. Do not act as a teacher or expert. You should not become the “go to” person to answer questions.
- Rehearse the dialogues with at least one other person before the actual dialogues using the LRJC guide.
- At the beginning of the first dialogue session, welcome and thank all participants. At the end of the last dialogue session, thank all participants.
- Value people and their ideas, promoting critical thinking on those ideas without being judgmental. Ask questions about the pros and cons of ideas or facts and about assumptions and concerns underlying ideas.
- If a participant says something that is likely to be controversial or upsetting for others, you may use one or more of the following tactics:
 - (a) Rephrase the controversial statement removing charged language but keeping the central idea. For instance, use “undocumented” instead of “illegal” immigrant.
 - (b) Ask the participant to clarify the controversial statement and explain how the participant reached that conclusion. This will allow other participants to “work through” the controversial statement. For instance, if the statement is based on an individual experience or anecdote, another participant might share a contrasting experience or anecdote, which will show the problems with overgeneralizing from specific situations.
 - (c) Invite the group to reflect on the controversial statement and share thoughts. As tactic (b), this usually helps the group move from simplistic ideas to more nuanced understandings of the issue at hand.
 - (d) Help participants identify common ground but do not force consensus (McCoy, Flavin & Reaven, 1999, p. 9). In times of political polarization, people tend to overlook common ground. For instance, those who support mass deportations and those who support giving amnesty to undocumented immigrants might think they are total opposites, but they agree that having millions of immigrants living in the shadows of the law is a problem. However, the first think the solution is strictly enforcing existing laws and the second think existing laws should be improved.
 - (e) Remind people that disagreement is normal and should not be personalized.

- Not all disagreements are bad and not all agreements are good. Share counterpoints as needed to help remove false consensus (Sustained Dialogue Campus Network, 2017, p. 2) or to promote critical thinking. If necessary, you may share factual information as long as it comes from widely accepted sources. However, as much as possible, participants should be the ones offering counterpoints, not you.
- Prevent outspoken participants from monopolizing the dialogue. You may say “Rob, could you please wrap up your thoughts in one sentence?”. Don’t single out individuals who are not participating (“Jen, what do you think?”) but instead ask for new voices or perspectives (“I’d like to hear from someone who feels differently” or “I’d like to hear from those who haven’t spoken yet”) (Sustained Dialogue Campus Network, 2017, p. 2).
- Encourage dialogue (mutual understanding) and prevent debate (win/lose). Dialogue requires honest speaking and active listening; it cannot be a serial monologue in which participants do not ask each other’s questions and do not follow up on each other’s points. You may ask a participant “And how would you relate what you just said to John’s idea about...?”.
- Don’t be afraid to directly re-focus the group. You may close tangents or set them aside in a “parking lot” for consideration later (Sustained Dialogue Campus Network, 2017, p. 2). If someone starts digressing, you may say “I’m having trouble connecting what you’re saying to this question about... Can you make the connection?” (Herzig, 2011, p. 23).
- Do not fear silence. Participants will need time to reflect before addressing a question. If silence follows a question on a “touchy” subject, remind participants that this is a safe space to share opinions without fear of judgment and that we are not required to agree. The dialogue should not be confined to easy topics and superficial conversation.
- Do not be shy in intervening to enforce ground rules, especially in the beginning of the dialogue, to set the tone for the process.

References

- Herzig, M. (2011). *Fostering Welcoming Communities Through Dialogue*. Welcoming America.
- McCoy, M., C. Flavin and M. Reaven. (1999). *Toward a More Perfect Union in an Age of Diversity*. Pomfret (CT): Study Circles Resource Center.
- Sustained Dialogue Campus Network. (2017). *How to Use Sustained Dialogue Issue Sheets*. Washington D.C.: Sustained Dialogue Campus Network.

FIRST SESSION

Introduction

Facilitator: Welcome everyone! My name is _____. I am a member of _____ and will work as the facilitator of this faith community dialogue on immigration. The goals of this conversation are to promote mutual understanding and collaboration between immigrants and native citizens. We will meet today for an hour and a half and in the next two weeks as well. My role is to keep our conversation focused and to enforce the ground rules we will agree on. I will not share my own opinions or judge who is right or wrong.

Now, let's go around the circle with introductions. My name is _____ and I come from _____. Please say your name and the country where you or your ancestors came from.

Our next step is to establish ground rules for the dialogue. You have in front of you a list of suggested rules [distribute hand out], which we can edit as we wish. Let's start by reading each of the rules together out loud and stop to reflect on each of them for a minute.

Facilitator and participants: We agree to dialogue in good faith. We will listen to others carefully, speak honestly and be open to changing our minds and working together. We will avoid defensive behavior. *Estamos de acuerdo en dialogar de buena fe. Escucharemos a los demás con atención, hablaremos con sinceridad y estaremos abiertos a cambiar de opinión y a trabajar juntos. Evitaremos el comportamiento defensivo.*

Facilitator: Why is this rule important? *¿Por qué es importante esta regla?*

Facilitator and participants: We will raise our hands to the facilitator every time we want to speak. We will talk one person at a time and keep our comments brief. *Levantaremos nuestras manos al facilitador cada vez que queramos hablar. Hablaremos una persona a la vez y mantendremos nuestros comentarios breves.*

Facilitator: Why is this rule important? *¿Por qué es importante esta regla?*

Facilitator and participants: We will face and work through disagreements respectfully. Disagreements will be about ideas and not personalized. *Abordaremos los desacuerdos con respeto. Los desacuerdos serán sobre ideas y no personalizados.*

Facilitator: Why is this rule important? *¿Por qué es importante esta regla?*

Facilitator and participants: We understand that conversations on immigration and race can be difficult and unlikely to have closure within a single meeting. We will stay open to talking about these issues in the same spirit as today. *Entendemos que conversaciones sobre inmigración y raza pueden ser difíciles y es poco probable que se concluyan en una sola reunión. Estaremos abiertos a hablar sobre estos temas con el mismo espíritu que hoy.*

Facilitator: Why is this rule important? *¿Por qué es importante esta regla?*

Facilitator and participants: We allow the facilitator to remind us of these rules during the conversation.
Permitimos que el facilitador nos recuerde estas reglas durante la conversación.

Would anyone like to suggest changes to the ground rules?
 [Participants might suggest changes and have to agree on them.]

Facilitator: Now, would you like to say the prayer of Saint Francis? [Show and distribute hand out with prayer.]

Facilitator and participants:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace
 Where there is hatred let me sow love
 Where there is injury, pardon
 Where there is doubt, faith
 Where there is despair, hope
 Where there is darkness, light
 And where there is sadness, joy
 O divine master, grant that I may
 not so much seek to be consoled as to console
 to be understood as to understand
 to be loved as to love
 For it is in giving that we receive
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned
 And it's in dying that we are born to eternal life
 Amen

*Oh, Señor, hazme un instrumento de Tu paz .
 Donde hay odio, que lleve yo el amor.
 Donde haya ofensa, que lleve yo el perdón.
 Donde haya discordia, que lleve yo la unión.
 Donde haya duda, que lleve yo la fe.
 Donde haya error, que lleve yo la verdad.
 Donde haya desesperación, que lleve yo la alegría.
 Donde haya tinieblas, que lleve yo la luz.*

*Oh, Maestro, haced que yo no busque tanto ser consolado, sino consolar;
 ser comprendido, sino comprender;
 ser amado, como amar.
 Porque es:
 Dando, que se recibe;
 Perdonando, que se es perdonado;
 Muriendo, que se resucita a la
 vida eterna.
 Amen*

Facilitator: We will say this prayer at the beginning of each dialogue session. Do you have any questions?

Part I: Personal stories, feelings and thoughts about religion, race and immigration

Facilitator: How do you decide who your “own people” are? *¿Como decide quien es su pueblo?*

Facilitator: Have you ever been a minority, an outsider or invisible in a social context? *¿Alguna vez ha sido una minoría, un extraño o invisible en un contexto social?*

Facilitator: What made it difficult for you to be more included? *¿Qué te hizo más difícil ser incluido?*

Facilitator: What helped you or could have helped you be more included? *¿Qué te ayudó o podría haberte ayudado a ser más incluido?*

Facilitator: Have you seen or experienced tensions between immigrants and native citizens in your community around cultural issues such as language, religion or ways of life? *¿Ha visto o vivido tensiones entre inmigrantes y ciudadanos nativos en su comunidad en temas culturales como el idioma, la religión o los estilos de vida?*

Facilitator: Have you seen or experienced tensions between immigrants and native citizens in your community around economic issues such as jobs, taxes or social services? *¿Ha visto o vivido tensiones entre inmigrantes y ciudadanos nativos en su comunidad en torno a problemas económicos como empleos, impuestos o servicios sociales?*

Facilitator: Have you seen or experienced tensions in your community around unauthorized immigration? *¿Ha visto o experimentado tensiones en su comunidad en torno a la inmigración no autorizada?*

Facilitator: Instead of tensions between immigrants and native citizens, have you seen or experienced positive interactions between immigrants and native citizens? *En lugar de tensiones entre inmigrantes y ciudadanos nativos, ¿ha visto o vivido interacciones positivas entre inmigrantes y ciudadanos nativos?*

Facilitator: What does your faith tradition say about immigrants? *¿Qué dice tu tradición de fe sobre los inmigrantes?*

SECOND SESSION

Part II: Perceptions of differences and commonalities between immigrants and native citizens

Facilitator: Welcome everyone to our second dialogue meeting. Today we will talk about differences and commonalities between immigrants and native citizens. Let's start by saying again the prayer of Saint Francis, which is in the handout.

Facilitator: Why do people come to the United States? *¿Por qué la gente viene a los Estados Unidos?*

Facilitator: Is there any similarity between those reasons and the reasons you or your family came to settle in Maryland? *¿Existe alguna similitud entre esas razones y las razones por las que usted o su familia llegaron a Maryland?*

Facilitator: Is there any difference between those reasons and the reasons you or your family came to settle in Maryland? *¿Existe alguna diferencia entre esas razones y las razones por las que usted o su familia llegaron a Maryland?*

Facilitator: What problems do immigrants face in the United States? *¿Qué problemas enfrentan los inmigrantes en los Estados Unidos?*

Facilitator: Is there any similarity between those problems and the ones you face? *¿Hay alguna similitud entre esos problemas y los que usted enfrenta?*

Facilitator: Is there any difference between those problems and the ones you face? *¿Hay alguna diferencia entre esos problemas y los que usted enfrenta?*

Facilitator: What does it mean to be an American? *¿Qué significa ser americano?*

Facilitator: Based on today's conversation, what might be some points of agreement, common interests and values that immigrants and native citizens in our communities could unite around? *Según la conversación de hoy, ¿cuáles podrían ser algunos puntos de acuerdo, intereses y valores comunes en torno de que inmigrantes y ciudadanos nativos de nuestras comunidades podrían unirse?*

THIRD SESSION

Part III: Visions of how participants' communities should deal with immigration and actions that participants should take to achieve that vision.

Facilitator: Welcome everyone to our third dialogue meeting. Today we will talk about how our communities should deal with immigration in the future and actions that we could take to achieve this vision. Let's start by saying again the prayer of Saint Francis, which is in the handout.

Facilitator: If we had excellent relations between immigrants and native citizens in our communities, what kinds of things would we see, hear or feel in the communities? *Si tuviéramos excelentes relaciones entre los inmigrantes y los ciudadanos nativos en nuestras comunidades, ¿qué tipo de cosas veríamos, escucharíamos o sentiríamos en las comunidades?*

Facilitator: If there are tensions or divisions in our communities that relate to immigrants, what efforts are underway to address those tensions? *Si hay tensiones o divisiones en nuestras comunidades que involucran inmigrantes, ¿qué esfuerzos se están realizando para solucionar esas tensiones?*

Facilitator: How can we build upon those efforts? Think about specific actions that we could take as individuals and as faith communities. *¿Cómo podemos aprovechar estos esfuerzos? Piense en acciones específicas que podríamos tomar como individuos y como comunidades de fe.*

Facilitator: Now let's choose one area or problem of interest to both immigrants and native citizens and discuss one concrete, specific action that we could take as a group for that area or problem. In our last session, we arrived at a list of common interests of immigrants and native citizens. [Show list to participants.] *Ahora escogamos un área o problema de interés tanto para los inmigrantes como para los ciudadanos nativos y discutamos una acción concreta y específica que podríamos tomar como grupo para esa área o problema. En nuestra última sesión, llegamos a una lista de intereses comunes de inmigrantes y ciudadanos nativos.*

Facilitator: Which one should we focus on? *¿En cuál debemos centrarnos?*

[Participants agree on area/problem, discuss possible actions, and make decision on what to do as a group, including activities following the dialogue.]



Conclusion

If the LRJC dialogue was conducted in small groups, the organizers reconvene the groups and ask each group to share the collaborative action each will pursue. If the dialogue has been conducted in a single group, jump to next paragraph.

Facilitator: As we approach the end of our conversation, I'd like to thank you for your participation. I am also giving you a handout with sources of information on immigration. Remember to stick to your action commitment and please share what you have learned today with your family and friends. Thank you! [Distribute handout - see next page].

This guide is based on a community-based research project that assessed the efficacy of the pilot LRJC dialogues in promoting mutual understanding and collaboration between immigrants and native citizens. For this reason, we are not including here an evaluation questionnaire for dialogue participants. However, organizers might want to create and apply their own questionnaires to receive feedback from participants.

INFORMATION ON IMMIGRATION AND IMMIGRATION POLICY

If you would like to know more about immigration and immigration policy, here is a list of non-partisan resources available on the internet:

United States Citizenship and Immigration Services

<https://www.uscis.gov>

Mayor's Office of Immigrant and Multicultural Affairs (Baltimore City)

<https://mayor.baltimorecity.gov/mima/>

American Immigration Council

<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org>

Center for Migration Studies (New York)

<http://cmsny.org/>

Welcoming America

<https://www.welcomingamerica.org/>

