

Making Choices

Recommended for Common Lesson Four Year D

At the 1998 Lambeth Conference of Bishops, Rowan Williams, Bishop of Monmouth Wales, addressed the Anglican bishops from throughout the world at a plenary session on making moral decisions. He began:

What is it like to make a choice? The temptation we easily give way to is to think that it's always the same kind of thing or that there's one kind of decision making that's serious and authentic, and all other kinds ought to be like this. In our modern climate, the tendency is to imagine that choices are made by something called the individual will, faced with a series of clear alternatives, as if we were standing in front of the supermarket shelf. There may still be disagreement about what the 'right' choice would be, but we'd know what making the choice was all about.

Common Lesson Two, Year D, introduced the Issue Method of Reflection (pp. 2-4-1ff.). Our definition of an issue statement is: two positive statements of equal value which represent a tension in which we live. Each side of an issue is equally attractive and each side has benefits (promise) and deficits (costs). Using issues as a tool in this way is a useful way to clarify matters, especially when difficult decisions are necessary. Issues are like two equally matched teams which face each other in a contest to decide which way a particular moment of decision will go. To see the world through an issue may be thought of as a "two-valued orientation." Our society is full of examples of two-valued orientations. Countries dominated by two political parties, team sports, wars and election campaigns—all are good examples of two-valued

orientations. This comes naturally. After all, our bodies usually have two eyes, two ears, two hands, two feet, etc., and we tend to think in terms of left and right, good and bad, up and down, and other ways of subdividing our perceptions on the basis of two ways. In theology and philosophy this approach to understanding the world is often reflected under the title of "dualism." "Dualism" or two-valued orientations are useful tools, but they serve us poorly if we apply them as general principles. It appears that the universe is just not that simple.

This lesson introduces a multi-valued orientation and an opportunity to think theologically through multiple points of view in order to deepen one's theology.

The down-side of a multi-valued orientation is that decision making is complicated and it may appear as if there are no values which ultimately count. It may appear relativistic and lacking the direction a moral compass should provide.

Multi-valued orientations suggest that there are a great, perhaps nearly infinite, number of perspectives. This may be seen as a problem or as an opportunity. The benefit of a multi-valued orientation is that it provides a number of courses of action. This is very useful when we are asked to respond to complex situations. We hope that an opportunity to reflect using multi-valued orientations may provide an occasion to explore methods that may help us work our way through what may seem perplexing, confusing, or even impossible. Is this not, however, the reality in which we live?

Applying a multi-valued orientation to an issue statement

For many issues there may be at least four or more perspectives to examine. For instance, you may have a job offer. An obvious issue you may face at some time or another is:

I want to stay in my present job where I love the work
and
I want to take on the challenge of a new job.

But there are really more than two issues here:

I want to stay in my job
I want to do what I love doing
I want opportunities to try new challenges
I want opportunities to go to new places

When this larger range of perspective is examined, you may decide to seek new opportunities and a new place to live but continue doing the same kind of work. Or you may decide to stay in the same place, but seek to do different work. Thus by seeing the larger number of possibilities, one has the information to make a better decision.

The same kind of analysis can be used for public issues such as decisions involving taxation.

We want to provide the best schools for our children
and
we need to keep tax rates low to attract business

This kind of public issue also involves multiple perspectives:

Our children are our future
Children need good education
Those who are taxed, especially the elderly, suffer
When taxes are high, business may move away
Those who provide education deserve adequate pay
We need good salaries to attract teachers
A community with good schools attracts business

In this case, the multiple values are communal rather than personal. Nevertheless, they have personal implications since how we might vote on the issue will be influenced by our own needs. Looking at the multiple values to be considered may help us to reach an ethical decision.

Multi-Valued Reflection

1. SELECT A PLACE TO BEGIN

Start by selecting from one of these three areas of the four-source model and identify material in that area with which you desire to work.

a. Share an event from your personal life from which you would like to learn. After the group hears the story, work together to identify at least four different ways to interpret that event. Take your thoughts and feelings into account as you develop this.

or

b. Take an event from culture (politics, business, law, medicine, education, art, music) and identify at least four different ways or perspectives by which to interpret the event.

or

c. Take a passage or event from the Bible or church tradition and express the different points of view within the event (i.e., the parable of the prodigal son: What is the point of view of the prodigal son, the brother, the father, the servants?).

2. GENERATE AN IMAGE(S) OR METAPHOR THAT EXPRESSES THE VARIOUS POINTS OF VIEW YOU HAVE SELECTED

An image can be very rich and can encompass many aspects of an experience. Draw an image that encompasses all the different desires, values, or interpretations.

3. EXPLORE THE WORLD OF THE IMAGE OR METAPHOR

- a. What kind of world does this image describe?
- b. Where do you find evil and destruction in this image?
- c. Where do you find faith in this image?
- d. Where do you find grace in this image?
- e. What kind of God(s) dwell in this image?

Note: The metaphor or image that encompasses multiple perspectives provides a modicum of distance from the event under study. The metaphor (the word means bear or carry across) allows bridging between various points to occur.

4. EXPLORE A PORTION OF TRADITION (Skip this step if you began with a passage from tradition)

- a. Identify passages or events in our Christian tradition that speak to the image you have been exploring.
- b. Select one passage or event and ask questions 3a-3e.

5. EXPLORE WHAT OUR CULTURE SAYS (Skip this step if you began with an event that emerges from our culture)

- a. Identify a particular event from culture with which you wish to work. It needs to be something everyone knows about, although there may exist very different perspectives about it in the group.
- b. Ask questions 3a-e.

6. COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Where are there clashes?
 Where are there agreements?
 What do you think about this?
 How does this impact the beliefs you hold?

7. BRING IN THE POSITION SOURCE

- a. What is your personal belief about this issue?
- b. What are you willing to uphold as your fundamental point of view?

Note: We are using a four-source model. If the reflection begins with a particular source, then that source is not used later in the reflection.

Note: This is a time to enter into a discussion. A helpful way to proceed is to identify points of agreement, commonly held values, and to press disagreements for the common concerns that may be behind them.

8. IDENTIFY INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS

What new thoughts or ideas cross your mind as a result of this reflection?

What (must) (should) you do as a result of what you have learned? (Deciding to do nothing is a decision which is just as valid as a decision to act.)

What do you wish to do? Is there a dilemma for you?

What feelings does this reflection evoke for you?

9. DECIDE ON THE IMPLICATIONS

What resources do you need to act on your decision?

What steps can you take to support this decision?

In what way might your action affect others around you, in your community, in the larger world?

Multi-Valued Reflection Summary Sheet

Identifying

1. PRESENT AN EVENT FOR REFLECTION FROM YOUR LIFE OR SELECT ONE FROM TRADITION OR CULTURE AND LIST POINTS OF VIEW

Connecting

4. EXPLORE A PORTION OF TRADITION

5. HEAR FROM THE CULTURE SOURCE

6. COMPARE AND CONTRAST

7. BRING IN THE POSITION SOURCE

Exploring

2. GENERATE A METAPHOR THAT ENCOMPASSES THE DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW

3. EXPLORE THE WORLD OF THE METAPHOR USING THE PEERSPECTIVE QUESTIONS FROM THEOLOGY

Applying

8. IDENTIFY INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS

9. SEEK SUPPORT, LOOK AT POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES, AND ACT ON IMPLICATIONS

Work Sheet

Culture

Refers to:

Philosophies
Mores & Popular Culture
Artifacts
Literature & the Media
Politics and Economics
Non-Christian symbols
Our socio-cultural environment

Tradition

Refers to:

Holy Scriptures
Doctrine
Church Saints and Heroes
Church History
Church Doctrine and Pronouncements

Positions

Refers to:

Attitudes
Beliefs
Opinions
Convictions

Image

Metaphor

Action

Refers to:

Lived experience
Specific actions taken
Thoughts and feelings associated with an act
Fears, hopes, past experiences, concerns

Note: Insights and **implications** may occur at any time during a reflection. If they go unnoticed, they may well be lost. Place a sheet or note pad to the side and write these down as they emerge.

