

NINA MOINI: This evening, a Twin Cities church is hosting a facilitated discussions about the surge of federal immigration agents to Minnesota this winter and the increased scrutiny, arrests, and detentions of refugees. The federal government named these Operations Metro Surge and Operation PARRIS, terms that didn't exist a year ago, and now carry specific memories, meanings, and emotions for people across the state.

The organizers of tonight's event at Faith United Methodist in Saint Anthony want to help people through what's happened across divides. It's part of the Minnesota Council of Churches Respectful Conversations Project. Pastor and MCC Director of Civic Dialogue Jerad Morey is on the line, to tell us more about it. Thanks very much for being here.

JERAD MOREY: My pleasure, Nina. Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: We're also happy to have Ade Salami, with the group Democracy 2076. She's based in Minnesota, and she's another partner in the event.

Ade, thank you very much.

ADE SALAMI: Thank you, Nina. Good afternoon.

NINA MOINI: Good afternoon.

Pastor, I'd love to start with you. So the name is really nice, Respectful Conversations. I understand, it started during the debate over same-sex marriage, about 14, 15 years ago now. And you've dealt with other topics from gun violence to policing. Tell me about what defines these conversations. Walk us through, if you would, what happens to keep it respectful, so to speak.

JERAD MOREY: Absolutely, yes. In the last 14 years, there were about 500 of these conversation event. We've helped around 9,000 people to reduce their polarization and increase their peacemaking skills. And the way that happens is when a community is facing a divisive, a toxically, polarizing debate or conflict, the kind that when you try to have a regular conversation about it, you walk away feeling kind of worse about the other person, or maybe even worse about yourself, so regular talking just hasn't worked, but you want to stay in community. You want to stay in relationship with the people that you disagree with about this. That's when we come in.

So you come to a Respectful Conversations event, and it begins with a meal, because without food, so little happens. And with food, so much happens. And part of the principle of it is that the food gives us the chance to talk at our tables about the small stuff. Pass the salt, pass the salad. Wow, what a great meal.

And that also gives us the fuel inside to follow some of the guidelines that we agree to practice, as we move from the meal into a space of table conversations, each of which is led by a table facilitator that we would have previously trained from that host community. The table facilitator leads us through a series of circles, and then has a time for questions of genuine interest, a more broad, conversational time focused on people being curious about each other, what each other said during those circles.

Then we close, after about 25, 30 minutes, with another circle, before reflecting on the experience that we all had, moving into the large group for some popcorn conversation, and concluding with an evaluation. And it's the evaluation piece, I think, that's one of the things that's really kept us doing this for 14 years.

Even earlier this year, we had a Roseville congregation. 87% of them said they had more confidence in their ability to talk about divisive topics because of the experience. 91% said they had a better understanding of other's points of view, and 80% said that they had improved relationships in their community because of the event.

NINA MOINI: Wow, you've helped 9,000 or so people. That is incredible.

Ade, your organization's stated mission is to come up with strategies to restore people's faith in democracy. And how do you see gatherings like this one happening this evening fitting into your goal?

ADE SALAMI: That is a great question, Nina. The way I see that fitting into our goal is we really want to help people understand how areas of political division are going to be things that we can discuss before they really turn it into what our current political binaries are. So before something becomes a left or right divide, it's just an issue that folks have got opinions about. And we can still talk to each other about them without anger or fear.

And I think the concept of this Shared and Shattered Truth Conversation that we're doing with MCC is new for a lot of people, and a lot of Minnesotans are actually open to hearing why someone might see their opinions differently than themselves. And it's not something that feels rooted in personal identity yet, which means that we can disagree.

NINA MOINI: And I understand, the event is titled Shared and Shattered Truths in Minnesota. Can you tell us about what that means and why it's useful for talking about the surge, Pastor?

JERAD MOREY: Absolutely. So the Shared and Shattered Truth lens is part of why we were so happy to partner with Democracy 2076, in putting these conversations together, because they've done such wonderful research on what are these topics that will be polarizing in the future, but may not be yet. And while some of the topics can be abstract, the experience that we've all had in Minnesota from Operations Metro Surge and PARRIS earlier this year, give us a lens through which to engage in that sort of anticipatory peacebuilding around that topic.

It's the relevant time for a conversation like this because we've faced so much trauma directly or vicariously over the first few months of this year, and having a community opportunity to reflect on what's happened, to share our own stories, and hear the stories of others, as Ade said, is a great step towards doing it. And D2076'S lens is so good for this, not just engaging in the present differences that we may feel, but also helping us to build those skills that will help us to engage in future challenging conversations without having them produce the same toxic divisions as have been the case in the past.

NINA MOINI: Speaking of toxic divisions, Ade, are you ever concerned that people who show up to events like this, maybe, they all kind of already have the same similar views, or are there instances where people really are on extreme opposite ends of the spectrum? Who shows up, and how do you make that work?

ADE SALAMI: The question of who shows up, I think, for Respectful Conversations, is one that Jerad is probably better equipped to answer. But from my experience and having conversations across Difference, we do have folks that have a variety of opinions. And I think our research has really helped us identify what those emerging wedge issues are.

And something that I have experienced in that conversation is these binaries that we often hold on our political beliefs are false in the sense that people aren't extreme in those beliefs. A lot of people do understand some facet of the other side's position, and maybe just has a couple of cases or a couple of reasonings for their personal disagreements, or where they may not exactly feel aligned on that particular issue.

NINA MOINI: Jerad, what would you add to that? Do you find that it's people of similar views who tend to show up?

JERAD MOREY: You know, that varies widely from topic to topic. And that's another reason why we were happy to partner with Ade. There can be groups where even within a group, it may feel as though everybody has the same conclusion, but through the conversation, you find out the myriad different ways that different members have come to that conclusion. And that alone helps open your eyes to how much diversity there is within your own perspective, within the folks that you agree with on the end, because you've all taken such different trails to get there. We found that to be the case.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, that's such a good point.

So lastly, I understand, Jerad, that tonight's event is full, but you're planning to have more conversations in the future. Who can reach out to maybe participate or how can people participate?

JERAD MOREY: Absolutely. The Minnesota Council of Churches offers these conversations on a fee-for-service basis to any community organization that wants to be a source of peace in our state and in our region. So people can reach out to me, Jerad Morey at Minnesota Council of Churches-- j.morey@mnchurches.org-- and I'm very happy to talk with them about what it would look like to put one of these on, whether it's the Shared and Shattered Truth topic, which is clearly a vital one, based on how many people are engaged so far, or some other toxically polarizing conflict in your membership community or in your broader neighborhood.

We work with faith communities, college campuses, community organizations, city councils, school boards. We've partnered with all sorts of different bodies, who feel in some way that they can make a difference for the better in their community.

NINA MOINI: Thank you both so much for your time. We really appreciate it and wish you the best with the event.

JERAD MOREY: Thank you very much, Nina.

ADE SALAMI: Thanks, Nina.

NINA MOINI: Thank you. Jerad Morey is the Minnesota Council of Churches Director of Civic Dialogue and Ade Salami is a Minnesota-based Program Director with the group Democracy 2076.