

# Recorded conversations help faithful differ with civility

July 22, 2019

DALLAS—Two people of faith—but not necessarily the same faith—who hold drastically different political opinions talked for 40 minutes in a Dallas Baptist University recording studio. In the process, they discovered more common ground than they expected.

And it didn't just occur once. It happened multiple times.

"We've heard things like: 'I thought I would be with somebody really different from me. We are so much more alike than we are different.' People see the connections more than they see the differences," said Chelsea Aguilera, outreach specialist for the One Small Step project of [StoryCorps](#).

## 'Listening is an act of love'

Since 2003, StoryCorps has facilitated and collected interviews involving about 500,000 people throughout the United States. Digital files of all the interviews are archived in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. Excerpts from a tiny percentage of the recorded interviews are aired during "Morning Edition" on [National Public Radio](#).

"It helps us remember we all have a story. We have something to share," Aguilera said. "Listening is an act of love."

Last year, StoryCorps launched its [One Small Step](#) initiative to facilitate civil dialogue by bringing together people who disagree politically for facilitated conversations.

Recently, One Small Step piloted an effort in North Texas focused specifically on the intersection of faith and politics. Aguilera worked with Theo Brown, director of outreach to faith-based organizations at the National Institute for Civil Discourse. Together, they enlisted people of faith in the Dallas-Fort Worth area who view political issues differently to record facilitated conversations with each other.

## **‘Disagree without demonizing’**

Brown contacted a variety of religious leaders in North Texas, including Jana Jackson at Dallas Baptist Association, to promote the initiative. In turn, Jackson spoke to Nick Pitts, executive director of the [Institute for Global Engagement](#) at DBU, to ask if the university might be able to partner with One Small Step.



Nick Pitts

After talking with Brown and Aguilera, Pitts soon determined the project fit well within his institute’s goal of fostering engagement in the public square from a biblical perspective and its values of thoughtful consideration and gracious civility.

“I have been alarmed by a statistic that one in six Americans has lost a friendship because of differences regarding the 2016 presidential election,” Pitts said.

“We should be able to disagree without demonizing those we see as being on the other side politically. The love we are to have as Christians is not contingent upon agreeing with others.

“We should recognize every person is made in the image of God, and is worthy of respect. We demonstrate respect when are willing to hear what the other person has to say.”

## **Faith-focused project piloted in Dallas**

So, DBU allowed One Small Step to use its on-campus recording studio. The faith-focused One Small Step pilot project recorded at DBU included about two-dozen conversations involving Anglo, African-American, Hispanic and Asian individuals from at least a half-dozen Protestant denominations, as well as Roman Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, Muslim and Hindu participants.

Individuals who wanted to participate completed an online screening questionnaire. Producers then matched them with someone from a different faith, a drastically different political perspective or both.

In each instance, a facilitator prompted discussion with a variety of questions, including:

- How does your faith shape the way you see the world?
- Have you had any experiences through your faith that have shaped how you think about a particular issue or problem in our country?
- Have your political beliefs ever been in conflict with your faith?
- Is there anything that troubles you about the way people who share your beliefs communicate them to others?
- Is there something about my beliefs that you just can't understand?

Near the end of the conversations, participants were asked what surprised

them and what they learned, as well as, “What is one thing you respect about the way I see the world?”

## **Baptists involved in conversations**

In most instances, the individuals who recorded conversations did not know each other prior to the recording sessions.



In a Dallas Baptist University recording studio, a One Small Step conversation facilitator talks with Dabney Dwyer (center) from the Episcopal Diocese of Dallas and Jana Jackson of Dallas Baptist Association. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Jackson from DBA was an exception. She recorded a conversation with Dabney Dwyer, community outreach liaison with the Episcopal Diocese of Dallas. The two already knew each other through their involvement on the faith community action team of the Dallas Coalition for Hunger Solutions.

Jackson is a member of Cliff Temple Baptist Church in the Oak Cliff section of Dallas, and Dwyer is a member of the Episcopal Church of the Ascension in Dallas' Lake Highlands neighborhood. Jackson affirmed both she and Dwyer are motivated by a shared faith in Christ.

While the two would tend to vote for candidates of different parties in most—but not all—cases, Jackson noted, “I don’t feel like I belong anywhere politically.”

She particularly expressed frustration when people assume they already know where she stands on every political issue because she identifies as an evangelical Christian.

After some One Small Step recording sessions, people who had never met before and who came from drastically different backgrounds enjoyed their conversations so much, they exchanged contact information with their dialogue partners and pledged to keep in touch, Aguilera noted.

Pitts understood that experience. He recorded a conversation with a North Texas attorney who is a Reform Jew.

“We plan to go get coffee and continue the conversation,” he said.