

# Turning the tide takes time: Presence in a troubled community

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“When are you going to leave? Everyone I love leaves.”

Elise Kaufman’s heart broke when she heard a young boy ask her when she was going to move away. In his world, nothing good lasted long.

Griffin, another boy in Kaufman’s community, invited her to his high school choir concert. She went and cheered his name loudly as he sang. When the concert was over, she found him alone. Asking about his family, her heart broke again when Griffin told her, “They never come to anything I do.”

Kaufman and other presenters at the No Need Among You Conference, held at First Baptist in Waco from Oct. 3-5, challenged attendees to turn the tide of poverty and abandonment by calling them to make long-term commitments to troubled communities.

## Real presence takes time & intent

Kaufman, director of [Friends of North Richmond](#) west of Houston, said studies show it takes 15 years for a cultural shift to occur in a community. Challenging participants not to be part of the transience, she asked, “Can you invest 15 years?”

Kaufman and co-presenter, Jason Hall, explained that being present means a person is willing to move into and live in a troubled community. Kaufman quoted John 1:14 from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”

Beyond moving into the neighborhood, those wanting to overcome the effects of poverty need to become part of the community through shared experiences. Rather than being insulated from the difficulties associated with poverty, a community-minded person needs to do things like rely on public transportation or endure the lack of basic services.

Not everyone who wants to make a positive difference can stay in the same community 15 years. Good alternatives for those who move periodically due to work—such as military or oil and gas personnel—are to consider joining someone already working in the community and to enlist someone to carry on the work after they leave.

## **Some problems need more than presence**

Once a person becomes part of a community, he or she may recognize not every problem in that community can be addressed in the same way. Some problems are “tame problems” calling for a simple solution—like building a new school to meet the demands of a growing population.

“Adaptive problems,” on the other hand, require deliberation. A community may agree a new school is needed, but the community may not agree on where to build the school or how to fund its construction.

Adaptive problems can polarize a community by surfacing what seem to be competing values. Public deliberation seeks to avoid polarization by engaging a community in slow and deliberate conversation toward productive solutions.

The focus of public deliberation is not consensus but is instead the appreciation of values. Too often, groups seeking consensus end up with a false consensus caused by participants wanting a meeting to be over or

being too intimidated to voice their real wishes. As a result, the will of the power brokers or most vocal members of the group is adopted. Initially, all seems well, but grumbling and complaining soon take the place of temporary peace.

Interestingly, people who engage in public deliberation are more willing to forego consensus as long as their voices have been heard. Participants often note that though their thinking on an issue may not have changed, their approach to and attitude about issues is different because the other side is no longer caricatured and stereotyped but is now humanized with a face, a name and a voice.

Public deliberation benefits communities by encouraging greater creativity in problem-solving and increasing the number of options for addressing challenges.

For public deliberation to be effective, participants need to commit to a set of ground rules.

- Deliberation is not a debate. Participants don't need to defend their point of view. Instead, they should suspend judgment and listen.
- The conversation is about values, not facts or figures. Facts matter, but this process is for surfacing and clarifying values. Why are these facts important? This is a question that moves toward values.
- Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere.
- Be fully engaged and present. Pay attention to your voice and posture.
- Make sure everyone has the opportunity to speak.
- Make sure all options are discussed, including all the pros and cons of each choice.

As a further caution, power brokers such as pastors, department heads, employers, mayors or other persons of authority should listen to the

deliberation without speaking.

Leading the session on public deliberation were Erin Payseur Oeth, associate director of Baylor's [Civic Learning Initiatives](#), and Josh Ritter, co-founder of Baylor's [Public Deliberation Initiative](#) and assistant director for Spirituality and Public Life at Baylor. They are available to introduce groups to public deliberation. For more information about public deliberation, they pointed participants to [The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation](#) and the National Issues Forum.

*Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard and a former pastor. He can be reached at [eric.black@baptiststandard.com](mailto:eric.black@baptiststandard.com) or on Twitter at [@EricBlackBSP](#).*