

## FROM CONFRONTATION TOWARDS CONVIVIALITY

by Pia Rinne & Ulla Siirto

### Introduction

We live in a time where communication is fast and where both good and bad messages can be shared in a fraction of a second. The deliberate creation of polarization and confrontation is certainly present, but many people also firmly hold polarizing news to be true and share and disseminate them, thinking they are doing the right thing. Those who want to correct polarizing news can also do that in a provocative or rude way. In this way, the dividing lines deepen and confrontation increases.

Polarization always exists in groups of people. It is a thought construct that becomes stronger, as the lines we divide against are strengthened. How, then, can we work to break the confrontation and build a good common or convivial life?

In this edition of Talking Points, we offer a few perspectives. In recent years, the Kone Foundation has funded a Depolarization project led by Miriam Attias. Attias has years of experience in neighborhood mediation, especially with regard to issues of multicultural housing. Her work has crystallized last year into two publications (in Finnish): 'Us and Them: Tools in the age of polarization and Identity' and 'Conflict and Mediation'.

The book 'Us and Them...' is a compilation from different authors. In her articles, Attias highlights factors related to polarization, based on a model developed by the Dutch trainer Bart Brandsma.

From this point of view, it is important to direct the work of de-polarization to those who are not already locked into their position or who prefer to "remain silent" in the middle. It is already much more difficult to change the thoughts of those who are already locked into their positions.

### Constructive Dialogue in Polarizing Times

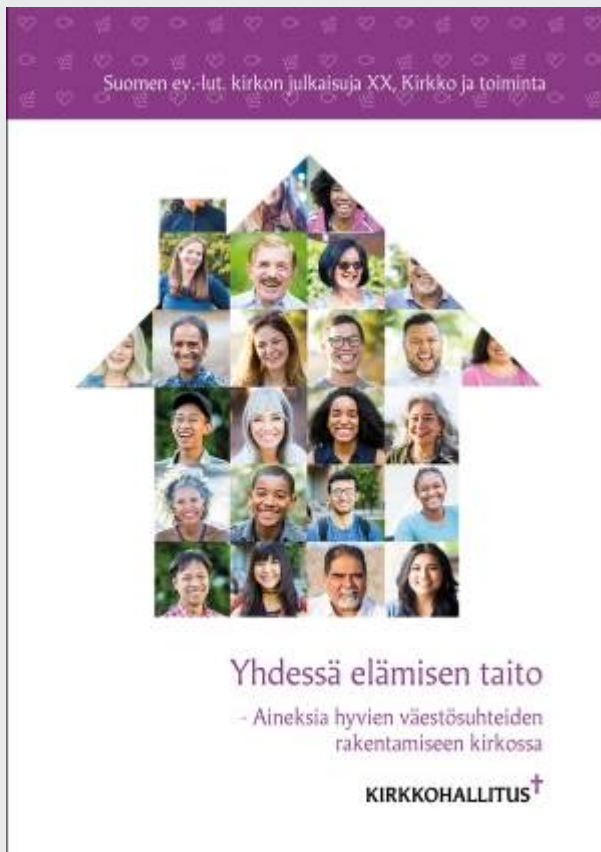
It is typical for parish workers to act as bridge-builders, between people who strongly disagree with each other (in Brandsma and Attias' terms 'pushers'). Attias notes that the bridge builder's attempt to develop a dialogue between 'instigators' or 'pushers' is often futile and supports and increases rather than dismantles the polarization. This is important to consider for those of us who like to build bridges!

Dialogue cannot be established with those who consciously or unconsciously seek to create polarization and add fuel to polarizing flames by producing identity speech. Opposite "poles" have an interest in getting more followers and subscribers to their side and to win the debate. Facts, dialogue, and positive counter-narratives do not dismantle polarization because thinking is guided by instinctive emotional dynamics, or a "gut feeling", as Brandsma puts it.

With whom, then, should a constructive dialogue be pursued? The answer can be found, according to the Brandsma model, in the middle. The strategy is to talk to the "silent" people in the middle about the themes that unite them. It is not about identities,

it's about the dilemma that connects people. Not moralizing, not adding facts, but focusing on questions and listening. It is also important to speak in a respectful and appreciative tone. There are good tools for this, for example, the 'Time Out Method' and 'Restorative Justice', more on which below.

Attias' book on identities, on the other hand, highlights the conflicts that can arise between people with different identities and on how these conflicts can be reconciled. Perspectives on mediation draw on restorative justice, which starts from people's experiences and how conflict has affected each person's life and goes on to consider what each person needs to rectify the situation and what each party could commit to. The perspectives and issues of mediation are also utilized in de-constructing polarization.



*The cover of book. Available in Finnish*

However, the biggest difference between polarization and conflict is that conflict is located in a particular space and person, while with polarization, it is more difficult to see the tension beneath the surface.

Polarization is dismantled by reducing identity talk and talking to those "in the middle" about a common dilemma. Mediation, however, focuses on the parties to the conflict, with the aim of

identifying and acknowledging their experiences and needs and on correcting the relationship between them.

Miriam Attias' ideas have been utilized in various parts, for example in the Eastern Helsinki Youth Services Mellunkylä neighborhood project. Utilizing Miriam's expertise, multisectoral collaboration is modelled to address and prevent confrontations and conflicts. There has been more polarization and conflict among young people, especially during the Covid19 crisis, which may require cooperation between schools, youth work, the police, mediation actors, social work, and other actors in order for them to work effectively. Joint training on polarization and so called 'Time Out Dialogue' have been organized for employees and resident activists of the city, organizations, and the parish. New forms of cooperation and new common understanding has been found among the actors to address the challenges in the area.

### The Art of Living Together

Attias' ideas have also been used in the recent publication of the Board of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church, 'The Art of Living Together - Ingredients for Building Good Population Relationships in the Church'. The publication is intended to serve the concrete activities of the congregations. A further background factor is the Finnish Government Ministry of Justice' model of good population relations.

The publication is based on a workshop of the Church's multicultural working group, where good population relations were discussed based on an exploration of trust work led by Eveliina Lyytinen (Migration Institute of Finland). This discussion developed the ideas which were the start for producing the publication. In addition, the publication contains background materials for devotions and discussions, which at the same time bring out the theological basis of good population relations. In addition, the publication provides concrete tools to increase the skill of living together and resolve conflicts. Finally, it also highlights good practices that are already in use in congregations.

One of the authors has been involved in the Lutheran World Federation's multi-year conviviality process, in which the keys to good coexistence have been explored in various workshops from many angles: living together, economics, immigration, and theology. The term

conviviality is much easier to describe as “art and practice of living together in solidarity,” i.e., the skill of living together.

A good ability to live together requires the ability to empathize and thereby understand and respect the other and their situation. However, these alone are not enough, because reciprocity is also needed: even those with the weakest resources must be able to make their own contribution to life together, whatever that contribution may be. And a well-resourced person cannot share their own resources ‘from above’. The emergence of inclusion is important for a good life together.

Naturally, conflicts also arise in common life because people are different and have different interests. However, conflicts are not dangerous, they are a challenge to conflict resolution, that is, resolving the conflict.

Conflict resolution, in turn, teaches skills that can be applied later in similar situations. Therefore, avoiding conflict is a disservice to the people, even if it produces immediate relief. On a longer time span, unresolved issues can erode the trust between people.

In recent years, the ‘Time Out’ method has gained momentum as an effective, dialogical way to engage in discussion. A ‘Time Out’ discussion is based on a dialogical method of discussion where everyone is allowed to speak, and everyone is heard. Learning a dialogical way of speaking means that whilst we are eager to bring our own message forward, we are also learning to listen to others. Of course, it is important that everyone has the floor, including enthusiastic speakers, but it is particularly important that everyone's voice is heard.

All in all, means exist for resolving confrontations.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle is ourselves: we may not give time to listen to others because we are so caught up in our own message; our own interest is more important to us than the interest of others, or we just want to continue polarizing debates because those messages move forward effectively. However, change has to start from within each of us.

## About the Authors

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## Download here:

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NOTE: *This is the Finnish text of the book; ‘The Art and practice of Living Together’ mentioned in the text. An English translation of the book may be available later.*

## Web Links

Time Out <https://www.timeoutdialogue.fi/>

Tools for Depolarization:

[www.depolarize.fi/tyokalupakki/](http://www.depolarize.fi/tyokalupakki/) and  
<https://insidepolarisation.nl/fi/>

Link to the text of the Finnish blog on which this edition of Talking Points is based:

[https://www.diakoniaplus.fi/vastakkainasettelustahyvaan-yhteiseen-elamaan/?fbclid=IwAR0rEdX0-4j2P9NZCtEYuvvv6CzNXf-MgbFQcg1jdO\\_BSI-f1NGiyWxf-bY](https://www.diakoniaplus.fi/vastakkainasettelustahyvaan-yhteiseen-elamaan/?fbclid=IwAR0rEdX0-4j2P9NZCtEYuvvv6CzNXf-MgbFQcg1jdO_BSI-f1NGiyWxf-bY)

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