



**The Holy Spirit in the Room:**  
**A Follow-Up Conversation on Facilitation**

**June 10, 2026**

Jennifer Watley Maxell: Hello, friends. This is Jennifer Watley Maxell, and I am so excited to be here with my colleague Adam Borneman. We are actually continuing a conversation we were having earlier about the necessity for, and the benefit of, facilitation for clergy and pastors, and our ability to do it, and do it well. And one of the reasons why I think it's such a necessity, is because we have all been in the poorly-facilitated gathering: whether it is a business meeting that just is like drinking from a fire hose, or it's just the gathering that we go to where we don't have an opportunity to really feel connected, or engage with whatever is being presented.

And I do think that Mark made a good point when we were talking about this early: people don't have to show up. I think, sometimes, a lot of clergy still labor under the misnomer that just because people have a position or are on a board or have an office in the church, that they have to show up and they have to kind of slog through the work of ministry. And I just don't think that's the case. I think the more engaged and aligned we can make gatherings, the better it is for everyone. And so, Adam, the question I have is: what are some of the practical things you've seen in different ministry settings that have either been beneficial or not so beneficial when it comes to facilitation?

Adam Borneman: Well, I'll just start with myself. Over the years of this work with the Ministry Collaborative, I frequently look back at my time as a pastor in a parish context and saying, "I really wish I knew what I know now." My defaults of feeling like I needed to be the expert, that I needed to show up with a written-out plan, that I needed to tell people how we were going to fix problems, that I need to say the smartest thing in the room. I look back now, and I really wish I'd understood how to prioritize group process, how to make sure things were collaborative; because in the long run, it just increases the likelihood of health and success.

I think part of that also has to do with deconstructing our own training in these respects, and deconstructing what we've seen growing up; and not just in the life of the church, but just in institutional life in general. I think a lot of us have grown up and been trained in spaces where we are looking to the expert to give us the answers that we can then internalize ourselves and share with others. And I realized that prioritizing process, prioritizing formation over information, prioritizing people interacting with each other, not just with me – these are all things that have really changed the way I think about ministry.

And it's been really fun for me to share this type of learning with pastors. I can think of just last week, two different phone conversations with individual pastors who were going into possibly contentious meetings. And our conversations weren't around, how are you going to fix this or what are you going to say? It was, how do we reframe this so that it's something that everybody owns together? How do we have a couple of questions that pushes people towards a deeper process, and not just towards a reactive posture? These are all things I really wish I had known earlier in ministry, and it's fun to see those play out in healthy ways in some of the pastors we work with.

Jennifer: You know, I think you're hitting on a really important distinction. I heard somebody say this recently, I can't remember who it was, that "information is not transformative". Simply disseminating

information to people will not produce the transformative thing that we're trying to do in the meeting, or the gathering, or in community. However, experiences transform. And I think there's nowhere where that is more evident than in the Bible. When you look at the process of transformation that happens throughout Scripture, it is always through an experience: an experience with the Holy Spirit, an experience with Jesus, an experience with other members of the faithful. It is always through some type of experience. And so, what I think is wonderful about facilitation, it gives us the opportunity to not just have gatherings, but to help people to have some type of experience. Even if it's a business meeting or something like that, there can still be transformative moments.

What I see a lot of times happening in gatherings is one of two things. Either the facilitator shows up with 700 hours worth of material for a two-hour meeting, and then tries to squish all that information into the two hours; or they just show up with this thought, "Oh, I had this thought this morning. Let's talk about it for two hours." And I think either one of those approaches can lead to a meeting or a gathering that is very lacking. So, I think it is, yes, definitely having a plan. And I like what you said: if you know it's going to be contentious, how is it that we're going to enter into this space in a way that doesn't feed the contention and doesn't add to people's anxiety, but that recognizes, yes, this is a contentious situation, but we don't have to be contentious with one another as we navigate it? And I think facilitation definitely allows us to do that in a very powerful way.

Adam: Yeah. What you were describing is a key component of the facilitator training we do, one which I see playing out in congregations in some extremely practical ways, and that is: paying attention to the problems that need to be solved, paying attention to the support that's needed, and paying attention to the information that's needed, but never falling into any of those as a trap, never being lured so far into a conversation that you think, "Oh, more information will fix this", or "more care and support will solve this problem", or "if we just had more brainstorming, we could really fix all these issues in our church"; but rather, building a more comprehensive process that engages all of those things in different ways, but maybe not in the expected way. Pastors who do this well, you really start to build some long-term resilience in a congregation, because people begin to learn how to navigate complex issues in a deeper way, and not getting hung up on binary decision-making, or flattened out versions of how ministry's supposed to work, but actually can think more comprehensively and long-term, if you prioritize a process, and not just being the expert or solving problems.

Jennifer: And that's so helpful, because I think, in the world, the society that we live in right now, people are really encouraged to kind of stake a claim, pick a side and stick with it, and then just insulate yourself behind that, and just go after somebody. And really what we're talking about is facilitating how people can be human again, and can relate and connect with one another again across complexity. Adrienne Maree Brown has this saying, she says, "In every room, there is a conversation that is waiting to be had." Part of good facilitation, I think, is taking the time to figure out what that conversation is, and then helping that conversation to come to the fore.

And again, it requires, yes, a plan, but it also means leaving enough space for what I believe is the Holy Spirit in the room, to do what the Holy Spirit does in the moment; that it's not having this tight grip, like I said, on this agenda or this curriculum. But it is this kind of dance, and this interplay of having a framework, and then leaving space, and trusting that the people in the room who are there for a purpose have what is necessary for the group in that moment.

Like you said, Adam, not just the facilitator or the person who's "in charge", but that everyone in the room has something that is valuable, something that is needed, that is something generative, for what

that group is trying to do in that moment. And I do think that's counterintuitive to the ways that a lot of us have been taught. And, certainly, you know, I'm an AME, so our politics and our polity it's a thing. And so, it's very counterintuitive to what we have seen in terms of how we do meetings and gatherings denominationally. And so, I think for pastors to kind of have an open mind about what they can do and how they can gather people, I think, is really critical.

Adam: And by the way, I mean, everything you're saying, as you're saying it, I'm thinking of all these scenes in the gospels where Jesus does this. So, I think you can really lean into this theologically as well as a pastor and as a congregation, becoming more like Jesus by not just rushing towards answering a question, but maybe slightly reframing a question in a way that's deeper. You pointed out the Adrienne Maree Brown piece. That reminds me, too, of Jesus seeming to know that there's a deeper conversation to be had here, how might we unearth it? Jesus's ability to let silence linger – you know, as our colleague, Elizabeth Lynn says, “silence is the sound of people thinking”, not rushing to fill silence with noise and technical fixes. You know, so there really is a theological framework for thinking about this, not just in the gospels, but even more broadly, thinking about people are made in the image of God. They're resourceful and whole, they have depth, and there are ways for us to get at that.

I think another thing that happens a lot that's directly translatable from the Scriptures or our theological frameworks to facilitation work is learning to move towards tension together, and sit in it, and not rush away from it. That actually, when you can help a congregation or help your board or whoever it is sit in tension, you actually help them learn how to expand conversation, expand imagination, deepen resilience, grow their capacity. It may not seem like it in the moment, because our culture is addicted to finding quick answers, but over the long haul, you can really start to see how that manner of facilitation builds some depth. And I don't think it's a coincidence that Jesus does this really well.

Jennifer: What I love about this idea, and what you're naming, Adam, is that sometimes we as leaders don't go towards an issue, because it makes us anxious. And what I think is great about facilitation is, again, it takes the burden of being the expert, of having the fix, of having the answer off of us, but it also helps us to be able to establish the norms through which we will have this discussion. And so, we can establish a non-anxious presence in a very anxiety filled situation.

And I think that that's really important, particularly now, when people are so overburdened. And people are at their wit's end, and we expect them to just be able to shut that off, and now dive into whatever we want to talk about. To me, good facilitation recognizes that, yeah, when people come in this space, they may need a minute. So how can we facilitate giving them a minute? Sometimes it's as easy and practical as just saying, “Hey, everybody, let's do a 'what's on top'. Everybody take five seconds to just name, what's that thing that just... 'oh, I couldn't find a parking space.' Thanks. 'Oh, my sitter canceled at the last minute.'” So that now we now have space to be able to really engage this thing that we're getting after. So what I'm saying is: facilitation is a very practical tool. It's not something we have to go back and get another degree to be able to do, but I think it's something we do need to be thoughtful and continue to educate ourselves about in terms of how do we do this well and skillfully, to be able to have better experiences with those that we serve.

Adam: Yeah. You're reminding me of a conversation I had last week with a pastor, and this is one of many of these types of conversations I have. This is a pastor who is planning a retreat for his staff and lay leaders, volunteers. The congregation is healthy, but they're getting ready to make some shifts to kind of just build on some of the health that they have, and he's a little anxious about it. His intuition was to more or less say, “This retreat is an opportunity for me to tell them what my plan and strategy

is.” And he didn’t put it this way, but basically it was to do that, and then tell them to get on board or get off.

I pushed back really hard on this and said, “Okay” – Jennifer, this is to your point. It’s like, “how can you start this retreat by helping people feel valued in this space? How can you start this retreat by helping them build trust together so that you can have this bigger conversation?” And then we literally went back and forth over the next few days via email about a list of conversation prompts that you might use to do all the things we’re describing: questions and prompts that we’re not going to have people choose a side; that we’re not going to have people be reactive to an idea; that we’re not going to have people choose yes or no, but prompts that would help people to better own the complexity for themselves, and to look to one another to do that.

For this pastor, this is a pretty revolutionary type of shift in his way of doing ministry, and for him, kind of liberating, because he realized he didn’t have to be the expert, doesn’t have to have a perfect 10-page strategy, but can actually just be more thoughtful about, “how is this group of leaders going to own this with me, and be better listeners, build trust, build a longer process?”

The other part of that conversation that I think needs to be named for folks is: I think when you make that shift, some of your folks are going to be annoyed and disappointed, because some folks do want you to come in with the answer. Some folks do want you to come in with the plan and with the expertise. And so I think, at the front end, some of it’s just naming that, and saying, “If I’m going to facilitate a deeper space of trust building, conversation, and spiritual depth, I’m going to have to pay attention to the folks who are going to be annoyed by this, who want quick answers.” And naming that disappointment is just part of leadership and, in this case, specifically part of being a good facilitator and a good pastor.

Jennifer: Yeah. And I think helping people to grow beyond where they are. Some people, like you said, Adam, will be annoyed, because that’s all they know. And so, being able to hold space and say, “You know what? When I start doing this differently, some people may be upset, some people may be uncomfortable, they may not understand, but as we grow together, those people will grow as well.”

We’ve been having a conversation about a lot of elements of training, and what we’ve learned in terms of facilitation training over the last several years, and people may have questions, people may have things that they want to think through or talk through in terms of their context. So if you have questions, or you’re interested in perhaps attending one of our facilitation trainings, feel free to reach out to any member of our staff, and we’ll be happy to connect you and talk with you about it.