Welcome to Fearless Dialogues. Are You Ready for Change?
by Faith and Leadership

Between the parking lot and the front door, those who attend Fearless Dialogues events will typically hear the following greetings several times, says Gregory C. Ellison II:

“It’s good to see you."

"Welcome to Fearless Dialogues."

"Are you ready for change?”

Launched by Ellison in 2013, Fearless Dialogues is a nonprofit organization that creates spaces for unlikely partners to engage in hard conversations about difficult subjects such as racism, classism and community violence. The nonprofit partners with organizations ranging from sports teams to schools and businesses to lead community conversations.

Three elements -- see, hear and change -- are woven throughout the organization’s curriculum, which employs various modules, or “experiments,” to encourage and stimulate conversation between people who don’t normally talk to each other, said Ellison, an associate professor of pastoral care and counseling at Candler School of Theology.

“All of our experiments in some way deal with the power of seeing yourself and the power of seeing others,” he said. “If you cannot see the people around you as individuals made in the image of God, there is no way that you can hear what they are saying as meaningful.”

Until that happens, any change that is created will not be sustainable, he said.

“The primary foundations of our work are creating spaces where we can see and hear, and then, with that foundation laid, we begin envisioning possibilities for change,” Ellison said.

Ellison’s research focuses on caring with marginalized populations, pastoral care as social activism, and 20th- and 21st-century mysticism. He is the author of “Cut Dead But Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men” and “Fearless Dialogues: A New Movement for Justice.” He has a B.A. from Emory University and an M.Div. and a Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary.

He spoke recently with Faith & Leadership about Fearless Dialogues. The following is an edited transcript.

Q: What is Fearless Dialogues?

Fearless Dialogues started as a grassroots movement, which has since turned into a nonprofit organization. We seek to create unique spaces for unlikely partners to engage in hard, heartfelt conversations about taboo subjects.

We started in 2013, and in just over five years, we've worked with nearly 50,000 people worldwide.

Q: How did all of this come about?

My first book, "Cut Dead But Still Alive," is about young African-American men who feel unseen and unheard, and how those feelings of muteness and invisibility affect how they interact with people, how they think about themselves, and how they envision their future.

The book came out just weeks before the George Zimmerman verdict in the Trayvon Martin case, which had provoked conversation and became a public issue.

As a professor at Emory, I was invited to do several local and national interviews, pitted against other scholars or activists, and I was told, "You have 20 seconds. Argue your point."

And I would say what I needed to say, and then somebody would shout at me. I thought to myself, "I don't converse like this even with people that I don't care for. There has to be another way." But there aren't many healthy models of conversation in the public media.

So I was on our local NPR station, and I put out a call. I said, "Several of you will be marching on the state Capitol in the coming days in memory of Trayvon Martin. For those who would like to try something different, please join us at Emory for a conversation about how we can improve the lives of young people, particularly African-American young men in our community."

Over 300 people showed up. It's a rainy Saturday, and there are parents and high school students and Emory students and faculty and administrators and political officials and drug dealers from the local community that a few friends and I were mentoring. It was a very eclectic group.

We greeted them in the parking lot, so before they got to the door, they received a unique greeting and then walked into the space curious about what they were about to experience. They were anticipating what they saw on TV, more of a debate, but we utilized some strategies that we still utilize today to encourage authentic exchange.

After an hour and a half of dialoguing, we finished, but nobody left. People wanted to continue talking, so for another hour and a half, people lingered.

Later, I was leaving, and one of the drug dealers said to me, "Greg, this is the first time I've been able to share my story and not feel judged. This felt like heaven."

At that point, we decided to figure out how we could re-create this.

That's how Fearless Dialogues began. A group of students and friends and I built a

curriculum that now has several “experiments,” or interactive modules, that encourage and stimulate conversation between people who don’t normally talk.

Q: Explain the name. What does dialogue have to do with fear?

In my second book, “Fearless Dialogues: A New Movement for Justice,” I explain how, in our work with this large sample of people, we’ve noticed five fears that inhibit authentic conversation between unlikely partners.

The first is fear of the unknown. In our daily lives, we go into spaces and we’re uncertain of who the people are, what they think, how they might think about us, and so fear of the unknown constricts. It constricts the muscles but also our speech.

In Fearless Dialogues, we try to create a familiar environment that stimulates the senses. We’ll have music and food from a local caterer if possible, so there are familiar smells and sounds, and artwork.

The second is the fear of strangers. We all encounter strangers, public strangers that we see on the subway or at Starbucks or familiar strangers that we see at our workplace or our church, but we don’t know them. We just see them.

We negotiate around working with strangers by creating a space that is radically hospitable. We greet people in the parking lot. We invite people to choose a badge with the name of a particular gift they identify with, something that identifies them beyond a role. So when they enter into the space, there isn’t the hierarchy there would be if a judge were sitting across from a drug dealer if they share the same gifts, as an artist or a healer or an activist.

The third is the fear of “plopping” -- the moments when we muster the courage to share something that is meaningful to us and it just plops. It just hits the floor, and no one gives it merit. We try to create environments where people hold the truths of the people around them.

The fourth fear is the fear of appearing ignorant. We’ve found that people who fear appearing ignorant fill spaces with empty words. So we seek to invite people into an environment in which they will authentically share that which is most meaningful to them, and we work on listening.

And the final fear is the fear of oppressive systems, fear that the problems are too big for one person to solve. We seek to maneuver around that fear by inviting people to create small changes in the environment in which they live.

In naming these five fears, we recognize that it is not possible for people to enter into an environment without fear. But we believe it is possible, recognizing that fear is present, for us to move forward with less fear. So we encourage people to have the courage to share their authentic truth in the spirit of seeking to create some small change in the environment around them.

Q: How do you get these unlikely partners to come together?

Depending on the partner that is inviting us, we encourage them to think about the culture of their community and their organization. Who are all the stakeholders?

For instance, if we are working at a school and they're thinking about creating a culture shift, let's envision the kinds of people that would need to be in the room. Not only should there be teachers, students and administrators; we should also incorporate cafeteria workers and security personnel and parents and alumni, because all of them have touchpoints that influence the lives and education of the students.

If we're going to think about creating a shift in a culture, it's incumbent upon us to be mindful of who the people are that will bring that culture shift to be. We consult with those who invite us in to think about how and who are the people that need to be in the room.

Q: What kinds of groups do you typically work with?

It varies, but I will give you an example of my last several days. On Thursday, we worked with 300 executives from SunTrust Bank regarding their diversity inclusion efforts.

On Sunday, I was invited to participate in the launch for an organization called Hands On Atlanta, which brings together nonprofits and volunteers. This year, they want to have civic dinners in homes around our city, and I was invited to help them think about how they can approach these conversations.

And last night, I did a Fearless Dialogues for my daughter's Girl Scout troop.

We've also worked with professional sports teams and university groups. Last year, we worked with the archbishop of Canterbury's staff in London and the executive presbyters in the Presbyterian Church from all over the U.S., and we were also invited by the United Methodist Council of Bishops.

Q: So whether it's SunTrust or the Methodist bishops or your daughter's Girl Scout troop, once you get these people together, how does the process work?

It differs with the group. But in all of our work, we create what we call a "laboratory of discovery." By this I mean that it's not an ordinary conference room or a classroom. We want to stimulate the senses; we want people to learn through interactions with their body, with sight, with sound.

When people walk in, the first thing that we do is to say, "It's good to see you. Welcome to Fearless Dialogues. Are you ready for change?"

By the time they reach the door, they have received that invitation three times: "It's good to see you. Welcome to Fearless Dialogues. Are you ready for change?"

By the time they get that third invitation and welcome, they're like, "What is going on here? This is just supposed to be a conference that my boss said I had to attend."

Then they walk in and music is playing and someone is at a table with six different gift labels -- educator, artist, healer, activist, neighbor, connector -- and we invite them to choose which gift best describes them.

And after they choose their gift label, we invite them to sit in circles of five people who have chosen that same gift. So people who ordinarily would not sit together are now having conversations about why they chose that particular gift.

One example of how that took a very unique turn was in our first Fearless Dialogues session, when a judge and a drug dealer sat in the same circle. Both chose the label “healer.” If the drug dealer had known that he was sitting next to a judge and the judge had written, “My name is Judge Sarah Jones,” he would have gone to the other side of the room. But instead, they’re seated in the same circle and they’re talking about why they chose this particular gift.

Q: That’s the “unlikely partners” you talk about.

It is very unlikely. But now they’re talking, and the judge says, “Before I give a ruling, I turn my back and I say a prayer for the family.”

And the drug dealer says, “My mother and father aren’t present in the home, so I’m the one who cooks dinner for my younger siblings. I help them with their homework. I’m the healer in my family.”

If they had been, as Parker Palmer said, identified by their roles, there’s no way that conversation would have unfolded. But they were connecting based upon the gifts of their souls, which provide an entryway into conversation.

We also utilize artwork, with hundreds of provocative images placed upon the wall. We invite people in groups of two or three to move around the room and engage in small conversations with strangers about three questions:

Who do you see when you look into this image?

Who don’t you hear? Some stories aren’t easily heard and articulated, so who don’t you hear?

Then finally, Where is hope?

This experiment, which happens in the first 15 minutes of what could be a three-day retreat, helps leaders train their eyes and ears to see the invisible and to hear their voices. As a pastoral care professor, I believe that the primary role of the caregiver, the primary role of a leader, is to see and hear that which others overlook and ignore.

What we’re seeking to do in those first 15 minutes is to begin to retrain the eye and the ear to recognize those who are unacknowledged.

Notice the symmetry. The first thing we do is we shake hands and say, “It’s good to see you.” The second thing is, “Welcome to Fearless Dialogues.” And the third is, “Are you ready for change?”

Those three pillars -- “see,” “hear” and “change” -- move throughout our entire curriculum. All of our experiments in some way deal with the power of seeing yourself and the power of seeing others. If you cannot see the people around you as individuals made in the image of God, there is no way that you can hear what they are saying as meaningful.

If you can’t see them or hear them, any change that we create will not be sustainable. The primary foundations of our work are creating spaces where we can see and hear, and then, with that foundation laid, we begin envisioning possibilities for change.

Q: Where does the book “Fearless Dialogues” fit in? I gather you draw some on the work of Parker Palmer, who wrote the foreword to the book.

The book is not necessarily a how-to guide. However, it does share the theoretical and philosophical and theological influences that have framed our work.

One of the greatest accomplishments in my professional career was being able to place the wisdom of my grandmother and her people, who were in many ways unlettered, in the same sentences as people who have written 20 to 30 books, and to not privilege one voice over the other.

Both were equally influential in helping me learn how to see and to hear and shaping the vision of Fearless Dialogues. The book is a collection of theories and anecdotes that have been formative in shaping how this work has been framed.

Parker Palmer is one of those theorists/family members. It’s ironic that I’m a 41-year-old African-American man and Parker is nearly 80 and a white male and we have a family connection. I call him Cousin Parker, and he calls me Cousin Greg. We are much more than friends or mentor/mentee. We feel like family.

Parker invited me to his home several years ago so that we could get to know each other. We were sitting on his back porch and we began to talk about our families, and I told him that my grandparents were born in Mississippi but migrated to Iowa and that my grandfather worked in a meat packing plant.

And he said, “Really? Was it Rath?”

And I said, “Yes, it was Rath.”

And he said, “Where did your grandfather live?”

I said, “Waterloo, Iowa.”

He said, “My grandfather lived in Waterloo, Iowa.”

So I got on the phone and I called my aunt and I said, “Did grandpa know some guy named Palmer?” And she said, “Yes, your granddaddy called him ‘the good white man.’”

I was like, what? She said, “Your grandfather, when he moved from Mississippi to Iowa, met this man they called Old Man Palmer.” And Old Man Palmer taught my grandfather how to read the charts so that he could get hired at Rath.

Is that fortuitous or divine? Some things you can’t make up. Parker and I have established a long-standing friendship and relationship that continues to blossom.

Q: Given the current partisan divide, what lessons does Fearless Dialogues offer for our country?

One of the major learnings is that people really do want to engage in authentic conversation, but there has to be intentionality and space for it.

The vast majority of people want to think through how they can create a better environment for their children. The great challenge, however, is that far too many

individuals are torn by not knowing how it will be received if they say something. “Will I be lambasted?”

In our work, we seek to help people move beyond the polarities of ideological conversation and wrestle with what we consider “eulogy” types of questions -- not just questions that build résumés and populate one’s political viewpoint but, “When it’s all said and done, what do you want to be remembered for?”

A few people will say, “I want to be remembered for my political views.” But not everybody.

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