

Peace in Practice Project

Findings from a National Listening Project
of Christian Leaders Navigating Polarization

Introducing the Peace in Practice Project

The Peace in Practice Project is a national listening initiative of Fuller Theological Seminary's Center for Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation. It was created to better understand how Christian leaders are navigating conflict, division, and polarization within their communities, institutions, and fields of work.

The Project Began with a Guiding Question:

How are Christian leaders navigating conflict and polarization today, and what do they actually need to do so faithfully, sustainably, and effectively?

From 2025 to 2026, the Center listened to leaders across ministry, nonprofit, academic, and marketplace settings through a national survey, regional and virtual listening sessions, and a final leadership convening at Rose Castle. Across these stages, **leaders described polarization not simply as an occasional disruption or isolated conflict, but as an ongoing condition shaping their relationships, decisions, communication, and sense of leadership over time.**

What We Heard

Polarization is ongoing

It is not episodic, but a constant background pressure

Leaders are carrying strain

They are navigating significant emotional, relational, and spiritual costs.

What This Reveals

Leaders need more than one-time tools or trainings; they need sustained relationships, shared practices, and spaces for discernment.

The challenge is not primarily a skills gap.

It is a deeper challenge of formation, culture, and leadership practice.

As the project unfolded, a broader insight began to emerge.

What began as a study of how individual Christian leaders navigate conflict also revealed the importance of strengthening the relationships, institutions, and patterns of shared learning that sustain the Christian peacebuilding field itself.

While equipping leaders remains essential, **this project suggests that many of today's challenges cannot be addressed through isolated leaders or organizations alone.** Lasting peace also depends on cultivating the broader ecosystems of trust, collaboration, and shared learning that enable leaders and communities to navigate conflict faithfully over time.

About the Center for Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation

The Center for Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation (CPCT) at Fuller Theological Seminary exists to strengthen the field of Christian peacebuilding so the Church is better equipped to navigate conflict, cultivate peace, and bear faithful witness in a divided world.

CPCT was established at a moment when congregations, institutions, and Christian leaders are facing sustained division, eroding trust, and increasingly complex forms of conflict. Building on the work and relationships of Ideos Institute, which became part of Fuller Seminary, CPCT brings together theological reflection, leadership formation, research, and field-based practice within the interdisciplinary life of the seminary.

During its inaugural year, CPCT intentionally began with listening. Rather than immediately launching a broad portfolio of programs, CPCT sought to understand how Christian leaders were experiencing conflict and polarization, what forms of support they found most meaningful, and where the broader peacebuilding field might need greater connection and shared learning.

The Peace in Practice Project emerged from that commitment. As CPCT's inaugural research initiative, it was designed to document the experiences of Christian leaders and inform the Center's future research, formation, partnerships, and collaborative work.

Rooted in reconciliation and the Church's calling to be a community of peace, CPCT understands peacebuilding not simply as responding to moments of conflict, but as cultivating the long-term spiritual, relational, and institutional conditions that enable leaders and communities to remain faithfully engaged across deep difference.

Research Team



Christy Vines

CPCT Executive Director

A leader in peacebuilding, conflict transformation, and social cohesion, Christy's work equips Christian leaders and institutions to navigate conflict with wisdom, courage, and hope while cultivating the relational and organizational conditions necessary for lasting peace. She brings more than two decades of experience working across faith, nonprofit, philanthropic, and civic sectors to address division and strengthen communities.



Nicholas Scott Blakely, Ph.D.

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Nick leads curriculum development for the Center's Certificate for Peacebuilding. His work brings together Christian ethics, peacebuilding, and interreligious dialogue, with particular attention to how Christian communities repair broken relationships and cultivate more faithful forms of public and communal life.

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The Peace in Practice Project began with a simple aim: to listen carefully to how Christian leaders are experiencing disagreement, conflict, and polarization in their own contexts.



The Project

Through a national survey, listening sessions, and a leadership convening, each stage of the project built on the last to deepen our understanding of how Christian leaders are navigating polarization across different contexts.

“Polarization” has become a common way of describing political division, social fragmentation, and the strain individuals and communities experience as they try to remain in relationship across deep difference. Yet the term often carries more weight than clarity, illuminating important dynamics while also obscuring what leaders are actually facing.

The situations leaders described were rarely contained within a single issue or moment. Politics, theology, identity, and culture often overlapped, and a particular disagreement could be connected to longer histories, strained relationships, institutional dynamics, or broader social pressures.

As the study progressed, our analysis suggested the need to distinguish disagreement, conflict, and polarization as related but distinct dynamics. Some tensions involved ordinary disagreement within communities while others reflected more sustained conflict around identity, trust, and belonging.

In many cases, leaders described polarization as something deeper still: a condition that gradually shapes relationships, institutions, and communal life over time.

What emerged suggests that polarization is best understood as a lingering, often sub-surface condition that shapes leaders quietly and cumulatively, even if it sometimes surfaces in acute moments. It is therefore less a discrete problem addressed through a targeted intervention than an ongoing condition within which leaders and communities are formed.

Several patterns emerged consistently throughout the project:

Polarization is ongoing

Leaders did not describe polarization as episodic or easily resolved. Instead, they described it as a constant background pressure that shapes what can be said, how decisions are made, and how communities remain in relationship across difference.



Leaders are carrying significant strain

Many leaders described the emotional, relational, and spiritual toll of navigating conflict within fragile communities. They are not necessarily disengaging, but they are often carrying this work with limited support.



Short-term responses are insufficient

While leaders value practical tools and training, they repeatedly pointed to the need for something deeper and more sustained: trusted relationships, shared practices, spiritual grounding, and spaces for discernment over time.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the challenge facing Christian leaders is not primarily a skills gap or a need for another one-time training. It is a deeper challenge of formation, culture, and leadership practice. The work of peacebuilding in polarized contexts requires more than isolated interventions. It requires communities, institutions, and networks capable of sustaining leaders in the slow, relational, and formative work of remaining present across deep difference.

The Process

The project unfolded in three phases, with each stage built on the one before it by testing and refining earlier insights.



Listening as a Starting Point

One of the defining features of this project was **a commitment to deep listening before diagnosing**. Rather than beginning with a predefined framework or set of solutions, the project sought to understand how leaders themselves were experiencing conflict and polarization within their own contexts.

This listening was not treated as a preliminary step before the “real work” began, but as an essential, integrated, ongoing part of the work itself. It surfaced patterns, tensions, and complexities that resisted easy categorization and challenged overly simplistic responses. The patterns that emerged also raised broader questions about how Christian leaders, organizations, and institutions might learn together in response to the ongoing realities of conflict and polarization.



Stage

1

A Broad Survey

We began with a national survey of 132 active Christian leaders across ministry, nonprofit, academic, and marketplace settings representing broad geographic, theological, and political diversity. The goal of the survey was to identify patterns and establish a baseline understanding focused on the following questions:

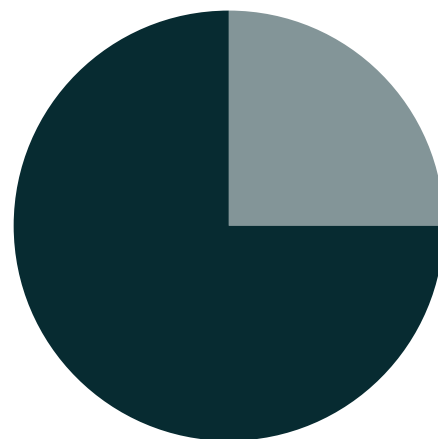
What are leaders experiencing as they navigate conflict and polarization?

How is polarization showing up in and impacting their work?

What kinds of support are they seeking?

The survey revealed a consistent picture: Polarization is not experienced as an occasional disruption. Rather, it functions as a background condition that leaders must continually account for in their decision-making, communication, and relationships with others.

From this vantage point, **polarization is understood less as an external problem to solve and more as a condition leaders must continually navigate within.** Survey responses consistently suggested that while leaders value practical resources, one of the clearest needs expressed was not having to navigate these challenges alone.



Survey Respondents

- **75%** had some affiliation with Fuller Seminary
- **25%** had no institutional affiliation

Stage 2

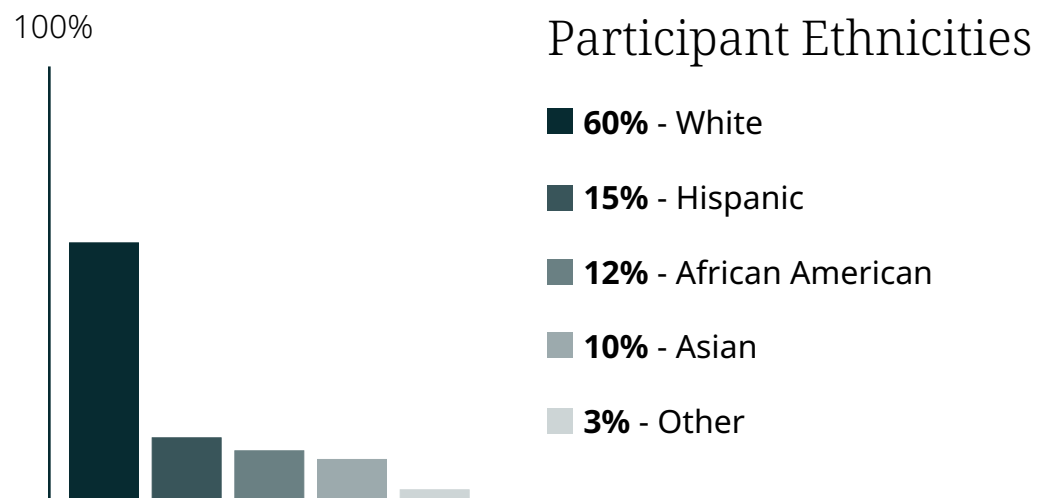
Listening Sessions

Stage Two leveraged the learnings from the survey to frame in-person and virtual listening sessions with 57 leaders across the U.S. to test and deepen the survey insights. Participants were invited to affirm what resonated with them in the data as well as name what felt incomplete, overstated, and missing.

This stage introduced important nuances. Leaders affirmed the overall picture presented by the data but clarified that **the experience of polarization can be uneven rather than uniform**. However, other leaders, especially women and leaders of color, experience it as a constant, embodied reality rather than a situational challenge.

These leaders named the reality of embodied polarization.

The shift from thinking about polarization as a separate, freestanding social problem to a formation challenge and opportunity became central to how we continue to interpret the findings.



Stage 3

Leadership Convening

The final stage convened a smaller group of leaders for shared discernment and collective interpretation.

The purpose of the gathering was to ask:

If this is what leaders are facing, what kind of response is actually required?

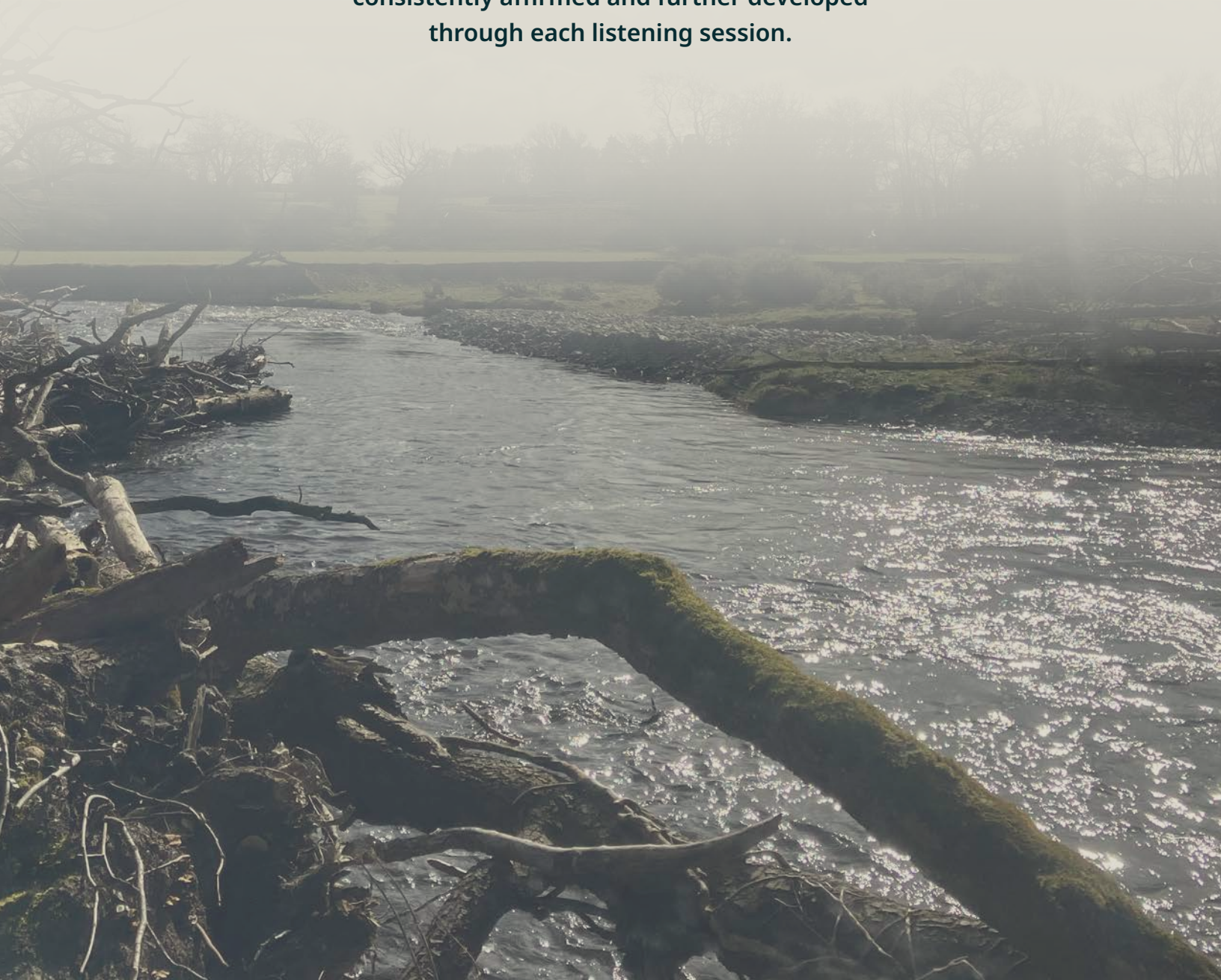
What kinds of relationships, institutions, and forms of collaboration would be necessary to sustain faithful peacebuilding over time?

What unique role can the Center for Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation hold?



What Leaders are Facing

The survey surfaced six core themes that were consistently affirmed and further developed through each listening session.



1

Political polarization is most visible, but rarely isolated from other issues.

Leaders described polarization as intertwined with:

- theological disagreement
- racial, gender, and cultural dynamics
- generational differences

Listening sessions clarified: Political polarization is often a surface expression of deeper questions around identity, belonging, and formation.

2

Polarization isn't episodic, but a constant background pressure.

Leaders did not describe polarization as something that happens and then resolves. Instead, they described these dynamics as sustained pressures that constrain and shape what can be said publicly, how decisions are made, and how relationships are maintained.

One listening session participant in Phoenix, Arizona, described the impact of this dynamic within ordinary ministry practice: "I am spending more time writing a sermon than before. I have to consider and measure the possible impact of every word and every phrase and how that will impact someone in my congregation."

In many cases, discord is not expressed directly. It shows up through:

- silence
- withdrawal
- guarded communication
- exhaustion
- eroding trust

Listening sessions added: Participants described this not just as pressure, but as a condition that quietly aggregates from many different sources.

3

Effectively navigating polarization is not only practical, but formative.

Navigating polarization is shaping leaders themselves; not just their decisions, but their sense of calling, identity, and capacity over time.

Survey respondent: *“Navigating these challenges has clarified my calling more than it has changed it. It has reinforced that I’m called to pastor people, not perform for an audience or chase every controversy...Overall, it has deepened my dependence on Jesus, refined my priorities, and forced me to lead from spiritual health rather than urgency.”*

At the same time, many leaders described the emotional and relational toll this work carries.

Survey respondent: *“I am exhausted from being the ‘crucial conversation/mediator’ for our congregation.”*

Survey respondent: *“The mere willingness to engage around ethnic, political, or cultural tensions labels me as an outsider...and can impact my credibility and reputation.”*

One listening session participant described the cumulative effect this way: “I often feel like I have more developed thoughts, feelings, and opinions than I feel I can share. This creates an internal conflict around my integrity.”

Listening sessions clarified: Many leaders are navigating tension between conviction and credibility, as well as calling and sustainability. Leadership, in these contexts, can become shaped as much by anticipated reaction and risk management as by clarity of conviction.

4

Leaders are navigating ongoing tensions rather than disengaging.

Despite these pressures, many leaders participating in this project did not describe themselves as disengaging from these divisive dynamics altogether. Rather, they described navigating it carefully and selectively through ongoing discernment.

Leaders are also investing significant time navigating these dynamics. Across the different forms of communal tension identified in the survey, the most common response was spending 1-4 hours per week on each type of disunity identified through conversations, preparation, and relational repair. A notable number of leaders also reported spending 5 or more hours weekly on particular areas of conflict.

These leaders are actively trying to discern when to speak, how to engage, and what their communities can sustain. Yet this discernment is often costly and rarely supported.

This does not diminish the very real exhaustion many leaders are experiencing. Other national studies have documented rising burnout, conflict fatigue, and consideration of leaving ministry altogether in response to political and relational strain. At the same time, many leaders in this project described themselves not as withdrawing from these tensions entirely, but as trying to navigate it carefully within increasingly fragile relational environments.

Leaders described operating under real and significant pressures:

57%
reported burnout or fatigue
around divisive topics

45%
cited lack of time
or capacity

38%
described the work as too
costly or exhausting

38%
reported fear of
backlash or criticism

In many cases, leaders are not disengaging so much as trying to determine what faithful engagement can realistically be sustained within their contexts.

Listening sessions clarified: That this discernment is often shaped by:

- fear of backlash
- donor and board pressure
- fragile trust within communities

5

The help leaders need is both relational and sustained.

Few leaders pointed to programs or tools as decisive. Instead, what was consistently referenced were trusted relationships, shared practices, and repeated engagement over time.

Examples include:

- facilitated dialogue
- intentional listening practices

- shared spiritual rhythms (prayer, worship, scripture)
- selective engagement and boundary-setting

Survey respondent: *“Polarization is reduced through disciplined habits, not one-off interventions.”*

These forms of support are not easily scalable, but leaders recognized them as necessary. The importance of this relational work became especially clear as one listening session participant reflected on the cumulative effects of polarization over time:

Listening session participant in Grand Rapids, Michigan: “80% of our congregation from 2016 left by 2020. In 2021, as part of my counseling, I did an exercise where I recalled over 300 broken relationships that I experienced in the preceding 4 years.”

6

Leaders want more connection and companionship.

Survey respondent: *“It often feels like we are having to figure this out alone.”*

One of the clearest through-lines across this project was that leaders are not primarily asking for more information or more things to do. They are asking for relationships with others who understand the complexity of what they are navigating.

One listening session participant in Seattle, Washington, summarized this need succinctly: “It is constant pressure. I don’t need more tools, I need empathetic community. Relationship preservation is essential.”

Listening sessions clarified: What leaders are seeking is not isolated support, but forms of accompaniment that integrate practical skill, spiritual grounding, discernment, and sustained relationship over time.

What the Themes Reveal

Taken together, these themes provide a clearer account of how polarization affects Christian leaders and the communities they serve.

- Polarization is not only something leaders encounter. It is something that shapes them.
- It influences how they interpret situations, how they relate to others, and what they believe is possible within their communities.

In Christian terms, this is a question of *formation*. The practices, pressures, and relationships that surround a community inevitably shape how that community learns to see the world, to name what is good, and to recognize one another.

Two implications became especially important in interpreting these findings that we unpack below. First, the project clarified the distinctions between disagreement, conflict, and polarization. Second, the sustained nature of polarization pointed beyond isolated interventions toward forms of formation that help leaders and communities remain faithfully engaged over time.

Distinguishing Difference, Conflict, and Polarization

One pattern that emerged repeatedly throughout this project was **the need for greater clarity about the kinds of tension leaders are attempting to navigate**. Participants often described situations where disagreement, conflict, and polarization were treated as interchangeable, even though they function differently.

In response, we utilized the following definitions for purposes of this study:

- ***Difference*** is a normal and necessary part of communal life.
- ***Conflict*** emerges when those differences become charged.
- ***Polarization*** develops when conflict hardens into fixed positions, mutual suspicion, and opposing identities.

This distinction is vital because many efforts are designed to address conflict, but far less effectively address polarization as a persistent reality that shapes relationships and communal formation.

For communities shaped by the Christian story, the call is not to eliminate difference, but to become the kind of people who can remain in relationship across difference without collapsing into hostility or withdrawal.

From Intervention to Formation

Another theme that emerged throughout this project was the **growing recognition that many leaders are facing conditions that could not be addressed through isolated interventions alone**, in particular those designed to solve specific problems. Formation, by contrast, shapes how individuals and communities learn to live within ongoing realities over time.

Participants consistently described polarization not simply as a series of episodic conflicts, but as something shaping patterns of trust, communication, leadership, and communal life more broadly. In Christian communities, these patterns are formed through shared practices such as worship, listening, decision-making, and public engagement.

As a result, many leaders emphasized that responses focused only on short-term solutions, which, while still important, were insufficient on their own.

A Practical Orientation for Leaders

This report offers a practical orientation to the ongoing work of leading within polarized and conflict-shaped environments that aligns with what leaders are actually facing.



Begin with listening.

Resist the pressure to diagnose too quickly.

Listening well requires more than gathering information. It involves attending carefully to how people are experiencing issues in their specific context, what language they use to describe it, and what they may be hesitant to say.

Clarify what you are facing.

Not all tension is the same. Ask:

- Am I faced with disagreement, conflict, or polarization?
- What deeper dynamics of identity, belonging, trust, theology, politics, or culture might be shaping or informing the situation?

Adjust expectations.

Quick resolution is unlikely. Progress may look less like agreement and more like preserving relationships, rebuilding trust, reducing guardedness, and increasing a community's capacity to remain present across difference.

Focus on formation.

Pay attention to:

- shared practices
- patterns of communication
- habits within your community

These patterns shape how communities navigate conflict within polarized environments.

Invest in relationships.

Trust is not a byproduct of the work, but the substance of it. Leaders frequently reported a lack of trust as the context within which their own exhaustion and difficulties arose.

Where trust is thin, even small tensions become difficult to navigate. Where trust is sustained over time, communities are better able to absorb disagreement without fracturing.

Do not carry this alone.

This work is difficult to sustain in isolation. Many leaders described carrying the weight of these dynamics largely on their own, with few people who understood the complexity of what they were navigating.

Helpful forms of support may include:

- relationships with other leaders in similar roles
- a small group of trusted peers
- colleagues also engaging conflict and polarization within their own contexts

What matters is the presence of relationships capable of sustaining honest reflection, mutual understanding, and ongoing conversation over time. Without this kind of support, the work becomes harder to sustain and easier to abandon.

The Work Ahead

This report offers a practical orientation to the ongoing work of leading within polarized and conflict-shaped environments that aligns with what leaders are actually facing.



What Emerged at the Rose Castle Convening

The third phase of this project culminated in a convening at Rose Castle in Cumbria, England, chosen intentionally as a setting shaped by practices of reconciliation, hospitality, and encounter across difference. Removed from many of the normal pressures of institutional life and public performance, participants were able to slow down, listen deeply, and reflect together in ways that are increasingly rare.

By this stage of the project, the goal was no longer simply to identify patterns, but to consider what those patterns might require of leaders, institutions, and the broader field of peacebuilding.

Participants consistently described polarization as something more than political disagreement. It was understood as a deeply formative and cultural reality shaping people, communities, and institutions over time. **This reinforced the sense that peacebuilding**

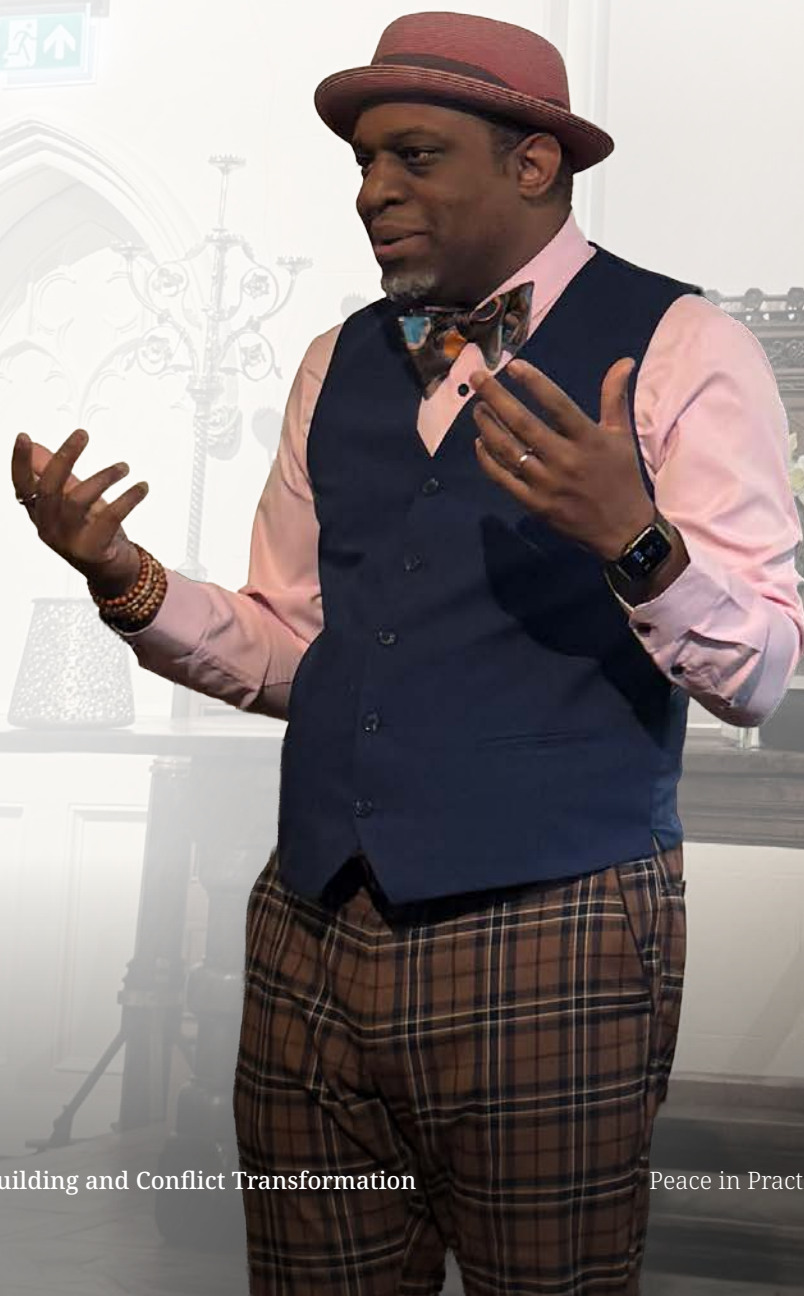
cannot be reduced to interventions or techniques alone. While skills, training, and practical resources remain essential, participants emphasized that this work must also involve the formation of communities capable of sustaining relationships across deep difference.

The gathering also surfaced a clearer map of the broader landscape of this work. Many meaningful initiatives already exist, but often in relative isolation from one another. Participants noted that fragmentation limits shared learning, coordination, and long-term support for leaders over time.

As a result, there was growing consensus around **the importance of relational infrastructure** itself: networks of trust, long-term partnerships, and shared spaces of learning and discernment capable of sustaining leaders beyond isolated moments of crisis.

What emerged was a broader realization: supporting individual leaders, while essential, is not enough. The challenges facing congregations and communities are too complex for any one leader or organization to address alone. **Strengthening leaders also requires strengthening the relationships, partnerships, and patterns of shared learning that sustain the Christian peacebuilding field itself.**

Rather than producing a single solution, the convening generated greater clarity, shared language, and a deeper sense of alignment regarding what this moment requires and how this work might move forward together.



Implications for the Field of Christian Peacebuilding

The patterns described throughout this project extend beyond the experiences of individual leaders to the broader Christian peacebuilding field.

Participants consistently described a landscape rich with gifted leaders, innovative organizations, and meaningful initiatives. Yet they also observed that much of this work occurs in parallel rather than in sustained relationship with one another, limiting opportunities for shared learning, coordination, and long-term support.

These findings suggest that strengthening individual leaders, while essential, is not enough. The challenges facing congregations and communities are too complex for any one leader or organization to address alone. As polarization continues to shape communities over time, leaders need

stronger networks of trust, spaces for shared discernment, and relationships that enable organizations to learn from one another and respond more faithfully together.

Rather than pointing to a single solution, **this project highlights the importance of strengthening the conditions that allow the broader field to flourish.** That includes cultivating enduring partnerships, expanding opportunities for collaborative learning, and investing in the relationships that sustain leaders beyond isolated moments of crisis.

Ultimately, responding to polarization will require not only stronger individual efforts, but a stronger, more interconnected Christian peacebuilding field.

How These Findings Are Shaping the Center's Work

The Peace in Practice Project does not conclude with a single program or recommendation. Instead, it has clarified where further research, investment, and learning is needed.

Throughout this project, leaders consistently pointed toward needs that extend beyond individual training or isolated interventions. They described the importance of sustained relationships, collaborative learning, trusted partnerships, and stronger connections across the Christian peacebuilding field.

Building on the insights of this project, CPCT seeks to strengthen the Church's capacity for faithful peacebuilding through research, leadership formation, public engagement, and field-building initiatives that cultivate trusted relationships, shared learning, and collaboration across the Christian peacebuilding field. One expression of this work is the emerging Christian Peacebuilding Collaborative, which will bring organizations and leaders into sustained relationship to learn together and strengthen their collective capacity.

At the heart of this work is a simple conviction: the challenges facing congregations and communities are too complex for any one leader or organization to address alone. Cultivating lasting peace therefore requires not only equipping leaders, but also strengthening the relationships, shared learning, and collaborative capacity that enable the broader field to flourish.

What began as a national listening project has become an ongoing invitation to deepen relationships, strengthen shared learning, and cultivate the conditions under which Christian leaders and communities can pursue lasting peace together.

Acknowledgements

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The following organizations provided indispensable support in disseminating the survey, hosting listening sessions, and convening leaders throughout the project:





Center for Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation

at Fuller Seminary

The Center for Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation (CPCT) at Fuller Theological Seminary exists to strengthen the field of Christian peacebuilding so the Church is better equipped to navigate conflict, cultivate peace, and bear faithful witness in a divided world.

Learn more about the Center for Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation, including future expansions of the Peace in Practice Project at:

peacebuilding.fuller.edu