

South Dorchester Community Conversation

Sponsored by Old Trinity Church



On a rainy Sunday afternoon, the South Dorchester Community Conversation transformed the gym of the South Dorchester into a warm and friendly café complete with small tables. The Community Conversation provided an opportunity for those who live, work, or serve in this part of Dorchester County to have meaningful conversations and discover ideas about how to better support and help community members in need. This “World Café” was an opportunity to use conversation to strengthen relationships, build trust, and identify common ground themes from which to work.

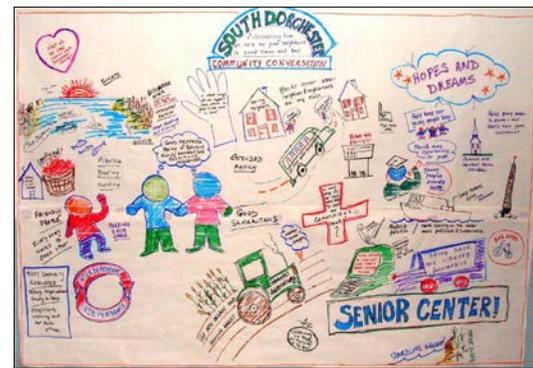
The World Café meeting design was created by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs as outlined in their book *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations That Matter*. It has been shown that bringing together the whole community allows for the “possibility of a future different than the past.” While it didn’t bring every community member literally together, the South Dorchester Community Conversation was developed through a planning committee who represented many parts of the community. They invited participants and developed the questions for the event.

Once participants were ready to begin, the group was provided the first question: “What do you love about South Dorchester County? What makes it a unique and special place?” Twenty minutes later the participants switched tables and the second question was asked: “In what ways do we support each other in good times and in bad? In what ways do we need more help to meet our community’s needs?” After round two finished the third question was posed: “What are your hopes and dreams for the future of South Dorchester County?”



After a break to enjoy dinner the group reconvened to hear reports from paired-up table hosts. Each pair of reporters provided a summary of the discussions that occurred at their tables including the three most prominent issues and underlying themes. Facilitators documented what was said in the reports.

Graphic documenter Tom Briggs created a meeting mural reflecting common themes heard from the conversations. The final discussion focused on next steps. Several participants provided ideas verbally and others submitted them in writing. The final report of the Conversation included next steps, major themes, notes from the tables during the three conversations, and a participant list.



The South Dorchester Community Conversation was a one-of-a kind event. However, it is part of a larger idea called the Good Neighbor Project through which the church seeks to discover, with others, how to more connections and be good neighbors to one another in good times and in bad. The Good Neighbor Project was initiated by Old Trinity Church in Church Creek, and funded by a grant. The Jesse Ball DuPont Fund awarded Old Trinity Church a Technical Grant to cover the majority of the costs of conducting the South Dorchester Community Conversation. Old Trinity provided their Parish Hall and dinner for the three planning meetings, as well as funds toward the promotion and dinner food for the community conversation event. The Dorchester County Public School opened the South Dorchester K-8 School and provided maintenance staff for the event. The grant allowed Old Trinity to contract with Jennifer Hicks to lead the process, which she has done elsewhere on Delmarva, including Chestertown where she lives. [See www.sustainabledelmarva.net]

Jennifer Hicks, the founder and manager of *Sustainable Delmarva*, a peninsula-wide project that uses dialogue and regional networking as a tool to increase community well-being, facilitated the process. Sustainable Delmarva is a project that brings together diverse stakeholders within communities of the Delmarva Peninsula to envision and plan for their future and the future of the region. The project emphasizes the important role of local communities as a catalyst for change for Delmarva by providing the tools to determine their desired direction and connecting them with other Delmarva communities to share ideas and resources and moving them closer toward sustainability.

South Dorchester County is endowed with churches, fire departments and post offices that help connect neighbors. In addition, the libraries, schools and sheriff's office in the region endeavor to reach out and support people in the community. However, many other regional services do not reach this rural area and while people in the community value self-sufficiency, there are services to which all are entitled. In addition, the community needs to be prepared for potential disasters, considering the area's vulnerability to devastating floods. The Good Neighbor Project seeks to bring together community and agency representatives using dialogue to brainstorm how all can be mutually supportive of community needs and continue to be in touch with one another.

For communities like South Dorchester who have tremendous opportunities but also face challenging issues a large-scale community conversation like a World Cafe offers relief to those whose job it is to "solve problems" as it provides a new way to approach old issues. A World Cafe event allows the group to focus on what can be created, rather than what problems can be solved.

(edited from a report by Jennifer Hicks, Sustainable Delmarva)