Session 02.02 - Polarisation

Lab: Society and Nation - POLARISATION
Date: 7/10/26
Room: Apolonia
Facilitator: Jim Memory
Note-taker: Jim Memory
Approximate number of participants: 20

1. Key insights

Q1 Where do you experience the most polarisation in your own cultural setting?

Participants described recurring tensions around political allegiance, religion, migration, sexuality, abortion, and national belonging. Their examples showed why local history matters when interpreting another country's divisions.

Kosovo: A participant described how religious inheritance and identification with wartime leaders shape public debate. They connected protests over proceedings against former leaders with fears about Kosovo's national identity. As a Protestant involved in a predominantly Catholic Christian Democratic party, they also described suspicion that evangelism, like political campaigning, is an attempt to recruit followers.

Germany and Sweden: German contributions described a changing reception of migrants and considerable regional variation. Participants urged people to distinguish concerns about Islam from hostility towards foreigners. Swedish reflections described previously less-visible disagreement becoming more public, particularly on migration and LGBTQ issues; greater visibility of opposing views was not automatically regarded as unhealthy polarisation.

USA and UK: American participants expressed concern about rigid party loyalties, social media simplification, and the equation of evangelical faith with Republican identity. A British participant used Brexit to illustrate how a binary choice can leave lasting divisions, with competing groups continuing to argue over what the outcome should mean.

Q2 What similarities and differences do you see between polarisation on theological and political issues?

Participants warned that political positions can acquire spiritual authority. Once party loyalty is treated as evidence of Christian faithfulness, disagreement becomes harder to discuss and can threaten a person's sense of belonging.

Matt Paschall drew on ten years in Hungary to describe the dangers of merging national identity with Christian identity. He also questioned the influence of cable news and

social media on Christians' understanding of the world. Critiquing both political sides can be isolating when neither adequately represents one's moral and spiritual convictions.

The Brexit discussion offered another example. A participant recalled presenting several considerations for voters and explaining a qualified personal preference. They contrasted this approach with arguments portraying the European Union through biblical images of Babylon or Babel. Their concern was that people may choose a political position first and then look for theological justification.

Another contribution used Jonathan Haidt's moral foundations framework to explain how people weigh individual freedom and collective responsibility differently. These priorities can affect both political choices and theological conclusions, including understandings of marriage.

Questions that challenged the presentation

Can identity support constructive politics? A participant drawing on Spain argued that identity need not be inherently divisive. Loyalty itself involves belonging to a group. The challenge is to combine identity with respect, curiosity, and solidarity, rather than allowing it to become superiority or exclusion. Olof responded that shared identity should leave room for those outside the majority tradition.

How can pastors speak with courage and care? One question highlighted the risks of both speaking and remaining silent. Addressing controversial issues can appear partisan, while silence can lead younger people to doubt a church's moral courage. Olof recommended representing opposing views fairly and speaking in a way that allows the pastor to look affected people in the eye while communicating genuine respect.

Where are the limits of dialogue? A participant asked how peaceful rhetoric applies to corrupt leaders, violence, and the confrontational language found in Scripture. Olof distinguished ordinary moral disagreement among people acting in goodwill from threats to life and genocidal intentions. The exchange left an important question open: how can Christians uphold dignity while opposing serious wrongdoing?

Q3 What does it mean to be a person of peace in polarised times?

Recovering the ability to disagree well

One reporting group observed that conversations often become contests to win rather than opportunities to listen. Positions become personal identities, and complex issues are reduced to black and white. Another group suggested that church history, including Catholic–Protestant conflict and accusations of heresy, may have contributed to habits of treating disagreement as hostility.

Participants also recognised that Christian convictions include genuine moral boundaries. They did not equate peace with agreement on every issue. Their concern was how to express those boundaries without quick judgments, labels, or contempt.

The Ukrainian contribution

The Ukrainian group brought the discussion into the realities of bereavement, destroyed homes, displacement, and ongoing war. They described how language and regional identities have been exploited by Russian propaganda, and how churches differ over whether believers should serve in armed defence or refrain from fighting on biblical grounds.

Their question was how to remain a person of peace when suffering can erode inner peace and encourage hatred. They placed dependence on Christ at the centre of their response: "You can only be a person of peace if you have the Prince of Peace in your heart."

The group appealed for prayer and support for Ukrainian Christians across denominational boundaries. Their contribution challenged participants to consider peace amid unresolved danger and grief. Olof acknowledged that his general presentation had not attempted to address the full moral complexity of war.

2. Ideas and possible solutions

- Listen before judging. Ask what experiences, fears, and values lie behind another person's position. Avoid reducing people to labels.
- Practise constructive disagreement. Make room for dialogue, careful questions, and complexity instead of treating every conversation as a contest.
- Examine political loyalties. Consider whether Scripture is shaping political convictions or being used to defend a position already adopted.
- Participate responsibly in public life. Several participants warned that complete withdrawal can leave the debate to its most extreme voices. Christians entering politics should retain care and curiosity towards others.
- Keep clear moral boundaries. Know where compromise would violate conviction, and recognise when a conversation is unlikely to be constructive.
- Build understanding through personal encounters. A Kosovo participant described visiting East Jerusalem with a desire to understand people whose culture had previously provoked discomfort. They urged Christians to resist using Christ as a weapon against other cultures.
- Support believers facing war. Pray across denominational lines and help those experiencing suffering remain rooted in Christ rather than hatred.

3. Examples, projects and useful resources

- Haidt, Jonathan (2013), *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided By Politics And Religion*, London: Penguin