

Lunch with Tim Tripp, pastor at Leelah Alcorn's church

Most of you here are familiar with the tragedy of Leelah Alcorn, the transgender teen who committed suicide in Cincinnati this winter by throwing herself in front of an oncoming tractor trailer. Because I live in Cincinnati, I was the first person to [report about it](#) here at Daily Kos.

It was an absolute tragedy.

2 months after the incident, I read an [editorial](#) in our local paper, the Cincinnati Enquirer, by Tim Tripp, the family minister at the Northeast Church of Christ, the church attended by Leelah Alcorn's family.

The article talked about the walls that separate us. Tim wrote:

These walls are strangling our society at every level, diluting us from a hardy melting pot of cultures and world views bound by a common vision and purpose to a thin fractured society too blinded by the structure of our own world view to see the beauty in that of others. From the halls of Congress to city hall we witness acrimony and asperity spread across the airwaves and the Internet. Whether the topic is taxes or pipelines, abortion or drugs, marriage or sexual identity, people are most comfortable speaking with those within their walls while taking shots at those on the other side. In so doing they hope to bring change by inflicting injury, a proposition that seems destined to ultimate failure. Meanwhile our communities pay the price.

My first reaction was anger.

Why?

I agreed with just about everything Tim wrote and have even wrote about this topic myself many times.

What I was having a hard time getting past was one thing: The church, or rather many churches, have played a huge role in building these walls. Religion, by definition, often means "We're right, you're wrong!"

I waited a day until I was less angry and responded in the comments section of the article:

I like what you say in this article, Mr. Tripp and hope you are preaching tolerance towards homosexuals in your church as well.

I haven't attended your church so I can't speak personally about it. I have, however, attended others where ministers have preached that homosexuality is evil and homosexuals are evil. When people preach that homosexuality is evil they are the ones creating the wall.

Tim wrote back:

David, thank you for your words. I am hoping we can all figure out how to love one another as God has loved us!

Ok. Well, that could mean anything. The Jesus I was taught about when I was young from The New Testament preached "Love each other as I have loved you." Or it could be the Old Testament God who preached punishment: "If a man lies with a male as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall surely be put to death. Their blood shall be upon them."

The Old Testament was harsh. It also prescribed the death penalty for cursing a parent or doing work on the Sabbath.

Which God was Tim talking about?

I was still mad. Rather than respond back in anger, however, I held off so I could think about it more. I've found most of the time that's it's not best to respond when you're angry.

A few days later I woke up with an idea. I liked most of what Tim wrote. What if I took him at his word and looked at his article as an honest attempt to reach out and make things better? What if I acknowledged the good rather than focused on what was making me angry?

What if I reached out to Tim to talk with him in person? What if, instead of being angry, I did something to try and make things better and assumed Tim was trying to do the same?

The idea scared me a little. What would he say? Would he try to convert me? I say this because I have an Uncle who became involved with the Church of Christ in Rochester, NY who tried to convert me at every possible opportunity. We used to play tennis. Eventually, I stopped going because I got tired of the conversion attempts.

The idea stuck though. I reached out to Tim and suggested lunch and he was open to it.

I decided that I would go in with no other agenda other than talking about our shared goal of, as Tim put it in his editorial, "tearing down the walls".

We met at a little place called Blue Ash Chili famous for their sandwiches.

We struck up a conversation about our backgrounds and what we liked to do and I found Tim shared a love of the Adirondacks. He talked about taking a youth group up there and finding a place where the fish were literally jumping onto the hooks. We talked about how cool this was for the kids.

I told him about how I enjoyed his article and shared a similar interest. I teach classes in how to break down walls and help people collaborate at work so it was easy to speak honestly.

Tim surprised me by saying: "It often comes down to relationships." He talked about his work counseling families and talked about how sometimes things reach a point where it turns into two sides, one against the other. Often over something that, in the broader scheme of things, isn't such a big deal. For example, the wife wanting to purchase a rug to make the house look nicer while her husband thinks it's too big a cost.

We talked about how if the two sides could stop trying to push their position for a minute and listen to each other it could go a long way. For example, if the husband could see that his wife wanted the house to look good so she could invite people over and the wife could see that her husband was worried about funds. If they listened and talked through it, maybe they could find a way to make both happy such as setting aside a little for a rug each month or finding a less expensive rug. Some alternative.

The key is to acknowledge both sides, figure out what the goals are, and then figure out a way to mutually try to get there. Both people then are fighting on the same side instead of against each other.

I talked about how I did something very similar for a living, teaching communication and negotiation, and how I often wrote about the subject as well.

This wasn't at all like the conversation I thought we would have. Here was someone who does what I do, just in different situations.

I talked about my belief that we have 95% in common yet seem to spend 95% of our time fighting about the 5% we see differently. For example, I said, I think most people believe in both personal responsibility – taking responsibility for yourself – as well as helping others. Tim agreed. Helping others was not just something he talked about, he lived this belief.

We talked about Cincinnati and our families and where we both came from. I told him that I had recently moved to the West side, a very, very Catholic part of town, and joked about having to deal with all of the guilt. To my surprise, he laughed. Not in a mean spirited way, but in the way that people laugh about things we do as humans. This was very much how the joke was intended. Not as a joke about how bad Catholics are but as a joke a Catholic person might tell about himself. A joke that was funny because we all have our foibles and beliefs.

I didn't bring up Leelah Alcorn, Tim did. He said he contacted Chris Seelbach, one of our local city councilmen about his post about Leelah. Chris is a prominent member of the local LGBT community. I initially learned about Leelah's death from Chris' post.

Their online conversation was pretty heated, Tim said. Both sides seemed to be responding out of anger. So he had done something similar and had lunch with Chris. At the meeting, Tim said, he proposed a community service project between members of Northeast Church of Christ and the LGBT community.

The idea was simply to get to know each other. Because, Tim believed, the best way to get to know each other was to do something "in the trenches" together.

I thought this was a wonderful idea. It is very hard to hate someone, anyone, when you know that person. You may not always agree, but it's very difficult to hate people when you've worked towards a common goal together. I offered to help in any way I could.

I also suggested writing an article about our lunch where we each wrote about what we thought going in and after meeting each other. The idea was simply to show that good things can happen when you take a risk and reach out to people who you might normally think of as being on the other side of some wall.

Some of you out there might be saying, "But this doesn't solve the issue. The only thing that will solve the issue is *<insert your solution here>*."

Here's one thing I know about people: we're not computers. As Tim said, people are much more likely to come to different understandings about you if you have a relationship with them. If it is perceived that you are on one side telling someone on the other side what to do, this will often not be well received. By anyone. It will be perceived the same way I perceived my Uncle as preaching at me. If you, however, reach out with honest intentions, knowing that none of us are perfect and we're all just trying to figure things out as best we can and you can find a way to stand beside someone, rather than against them, there's a much better chance that not only may the other person see you a bit differently, but that you might also see a little differently.

You likely won't agree on everything and you have to accept that. You might have to agree to disagree and you might realize that your time might be better spent elsewhere but your chances of not being

seen as an enemy and not seeing others as enemies is much higher if you can find some areas of common ground and start with some kind of relationship.

With Tim, I found, we shared much more in common than I ever would have guessed. We both have a passion for trying to tear down walls and we both have strong beliefs in growing personally and individually and helping others. We both love the outdoors and our families and Cincinnati and the people we know.

When I've written about this topic before, I've been accused of being 'nice' or of trying to win flies with honey or of somehow weakening my position by talking with the 'enemy'. It's not about being nice. It's not about pandering. I don't believe anyone should lie. I don't think Tim does either. No, this is much harder. Neither of us asked the other to agree with him about any specific views. We simply sat down and started talking about what we have in common which turned out to be a great deal, much more than I initially would have guessed.

We may not agree on everything, but I walked away from lunch thinking of Tim as an ally rather than as an enemy and I sincerely hope Tim felt the same way. If this is the only thing that comes out of our lunch, it's already a win. If we can take it further, even better.