



Leading with Confident Pluralism: How to Thrive through Deep Difference

John Inazu, Sally D. Danforth Distinguished Professor of Law and Religion at Washington University in St. Louis

Session 1: An Introduction to Confident Pluralism

How do we live faithfully and witness effectively in a world of difference? In this session, Professor Inazu outlines a framework for what he calls “confident pluralism” and explains how we can hold steadfast convictions while making room for others to disagree.

We can be confident without sacrificing compassion, and compassionate without surrendering our confidence in the one who loves us.

Key Terms

Confident Pluralism: A framework for living together in a world of difference that takes our differences seriously and seeks common ground, even when we can’t agree about a common good.

Pluralism: Describes both the fact of difference in the world as well as the political response to that difference.

Main Points

- Confidence without pluralism misses the reality of politics, while pluralism without confidence misses the reality of people.
- Pluralism describes the fact that the differences in our world aren’t going away. It also suggests that we find ways to live together despite those differences, recognizing that we won’t resolve them in this lifetime.
- Confident pluralism recognizes three realities:
 - We are beyond interfaith.
 - We are beyond propositions.
 - We are beyond simple agreement.
- Confident pluralism proposes that the future of our democratic experiment requires finding a way to be steadfast in our personal convictions while also making room for others to disagree.



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Session 1: An Introduction to Confident Pluralism (cont.)

Content Questions

- What ideas or beliefs are difficult for you to imagine being wrong?
- What ideas or beliefs are difficult for you to imagine being right?
- Think of particular people that you find difficult to love or like: Can you think of ways to separate the people from the ideas they hold?
- Are there opportunities that come to mind from the ideas in this session that give you a new way to think about engaging with difference?
- How is leading with confident pluralism different from relativism?

Application Questions

- In what ways could you lead with confident pluralism in your local church community—whether your role involves leading a congregation, facilitating a small group, or relating to friends? Spend some time considering what this might mean in your particular community. What need do you see for this framework? What resistance might there be? What would it take to lead effectively using confident pluralism as a guiding principle?
- What does confident pluralism look like outside your immediate community? What do you see as your role in the larger conversations that divide our society? How do you participate in those conversations?
- There are many issues that divide today's church. They often are some of the same things that divide us politically: LGBT issues, immigration, race, abortion, etc. How do you see people missing the realities of politics and people on these issues? How might you be missing those realities? Do you think you could partake in communion alongside someone who disagreed with you in one of these areas? Why or why not?



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Session 2: Legal Commitments

What does it take to put confident pluralism into practice? In this session, Professor Inazu describes how the civil liberties contained in the First Amendment are necessary for confident pluralism to be possible.

We can hope that we will persuade people away from the errors and harms we see them embracing, but we have to guarantee and defend their right to believe and act differently from us, even as we ask them to do the same on our behalf.

Key Terms

Civil Liberties: Rights that protect individuals from oppressive government action. Civil liberties are for everyone, including (and perhaps especially) for those whose ideas we don't like or who lack political power.

Right of Association: The ability of people to form and gather in groups of their choosing.

Public Forum: A government-provided space for people to come together on their own terms and express their views to government officials, to one another, and to anyone who will listen.

Public Funding: Within the context of confident pluralism, public funding is generally available to fund a wide range of private groups to express their beliefs and values through benefits such as tax exemptions.

Main Points

- Confident pluralism depends on legal commitments.
- There must be a commitment to civil liberties for everyone, especially those on the losing end of political and social disagreements.
- The right of association (including the right not to associate) is essential to a healthy society.
- Public forums, opened and operated by the government, facilitate peaceful expression and help keep our differences from festering.
- Some forms of generally available public funding should be administered without regard to the viewpoints or beliefs of the beneficiaries of that funding.
- Civil liberties must be available to all the people. Christians should protect others' rights while hoping to persuade—rather than coerce—those who disagree.



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Session 2: Legal Commitments (cont.)

Content Questions

- When do you find it hardest to use the protections of the law in defense of others?
- When should the law restrict harmful ideas?
- When do some groups and some ideas go too far outside of the bounds of civil society?
- What are some of the groups that are most important to you in your own life, and when are those groups misunderstood?

Application Questions

- It can often be hard to stand up for the rights of those with whom we disagree. What opportunities might your Christian community have to do this? How could you and your community lead others to allow for an open exchange of ideas, trusting that God's truth will win out in the end?
- Think back to your answers about divisive issues in the last session. How do you think about people who think differently from you on these issues? Are you willing to stand up for their right to believe what they believe? Why or why not? What can be hard about that?



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Session 3: Civic Aspirations

What are the civic aspirations necessary to the flourishing of confident pluralism in modern life? How can Christians seek to treat others in a way that is consistent with scripture and that helps maintain a free and fair society? Professor Inazu outlines three aspirations for civic life and provides insight on how to keep our relationships across difference open and constructive.

Christians are called to treat everyone with respect and dignity, because we are all created in the image of God.

Key Terms

Humility: A reminder of the limits of translation, and the difficulty of proving our deeply held values to one another.

Patience: Restraint not to project harmful assumptions on others and persistence and endurance when there are differences that seem like they cannot be overcome.

Tolerance: The recognition that people are for the most part free to pursue their own beliefs and practices, even those beliefs and practices we find morally objectionable.

Conversation Stoppers: Speech that breeds social intolerance by stigmatizing people instead of challenging ideas.

Main Points

- We can have humility while also maintaining our convictions.
- We can be patient with others while not remaining passive.
- Tolerance enables us to engage with different ideas while avoiding stigmatizing other people.
- Hurtful insults and conversation stoppers run contrary to these civic aspirations.
- Institutions set limits on speech, but must be generous across differences.



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Session 3: Civic Aspirations (cont.)

Content Questions

- When have words wounded you in your own life?
- What are the words that you've said to others that have harmed them, perhaps unknowingly?
- Thinking about the institutions that you belong to, how do they embody a kind of living speech true to their purpose and norms while also facilitating and allowing disagreement within their purposes?
- What are the labels that you are quick to put on other people, and what are the ways that you don't want people to label you?

Application Questions

- How have you seen insults and conversation stoppers get in the way of a healthy public dialogue? Online? At home? In church? How can you help your Christian community to cultivate living institutional speech that recognizes its limitations while being generous across difference?
- With regards to today's divisive issues, what conversation stoppers have you observed your side using in that debate? How might those points be better framed?



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Session 4: Christians and Confident Pluralism

How might Christians in particular embrace the challenge of confident pluralism? In the final session, Professor Inazu models how the civic aspirations of humility, patience, and tolerance map onto the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love.

In all of this, we have the promise of the gospel, the presence of the spirit, and the people of God around us.

Main Points

- The civic aspirations of humility, patience, and tolerance mirror the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love.
- Christians can exercise humility because our faith is in ultimate things.
- Christians can be patient because our sense of time is informed by the eternalness of God.
- Christians should see tolerance as merely the starting point, because we are called to love as Jesus loves us.

Content Questions

- Which of the civic aspirations of humility, patience, and tolerance is hardest for you to embrace?
- What about faith, hope, and love? Do you tend to struggle with the corresponding virtue?
- How can the members of your Christian community encourage each other to stay rooted in the Christian virtues that undergird the civic aspirations of confident pluralism?



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Session 4: Christians and Confident Pluralism (cont.)

Application Questions

- What's next for your Christian community? How can you lead through exercising humility, patience, and tolerance in the issues your community struggles with. How can you apply the civic aspirations of confident pluralism to these issues? How might that affect the way those conversations go? Brainstorm some practical next steps within the cross section of the needs you see and the spaces in which you have influence.
- What's next for the Church's role in society? How can Christians lead through faith, hope, and love in the public square? How can you constructively participate in contentious public conversations as a Christian practicing confident pluralism?
- If you haven't already, consider having an intentional discussion with someone from your community who disagrees with you on one of the divisive issues you have been considering (LGBT issues, immigration, race, abortion, etc.). Try to exercise the civic aspirations of confident pluralism as well as the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love in that conversation.