



Columbus Day: A Community Conversation

2019 Report

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Background

The Columbus Dialogues are a result of the request made to InterFaith Works by the Syracuse Mayor’s Office to begin a community conversation about Columbus Day, Indigenous People’s Day, and the Columbus Circle statue because of the tensions held in the Syracuse community about this issue. InterFaith Works wrote a dialogue guide which includes global and local history on this issue, and outlines four different viewpoints on the issue of what to do about Columbus Day in 21st Century America. This guide was used as the foundation to the dialogue. From September 2018 - July 2019, InterFaith Works held three Columbus Day Dialogue circles, consisting of 34 people in total.

The goals of the Columbus Dialogues, outlined by the mayor, were to:

- allow concerned individuals in our community to be heard by one another,
- engage key community partners to enter into respectful relationships while the community educated itself on the critical issues that have led to community tension,
- find common ground where most can stand together and preserve the dignity of all groups, and
- inform public officials who have responsibility for decision-making on this issue.

For the purpose of this report, the pilot dialogue circle, held in the fall of 2018, will be referred to as “Circle 1,” the spring 2019 dialogue circle held on Tuesdays will be “Circle 2,” and the spring 2019 dialogue circles held on Thursdays will be “Circle 3.”

Common Ground Solutions

Process of Finding Common Ground: The Columbus Dialogues began with research on the various beliefs and complicated ways people thought about whether and how to celebrate Columbus Day in Syracuse. These beliefs were encapsulated in four viewpoints:

Viewpoint 1: **Columbus Discovered America and Should Be Celebrated**

Viewpoint 2: **Italian-Americans have Contributed Greatly to this Country and Should Be Celebrated**

Viewpoint 3: **Consider the Impact of Columbus on Native American People**

Viewpoint 4: **Facing Our Past and Creating a New Future Means Saying No to Columbus Day**



Each dialogue circle created a framework of the pros and cons for each viewpoint and subsequent logical actions that participants perceived to come from each viewpoint (See Attachment 1, page 9, for a comprehensive, combined framework). The common ground solutions that are identified in points below reflect the voices of the participants across all three dialogue circles:

1. Understand that Righting the Wrongs of Oppression is at the Basis of All Viewpoints

All dialogue participants learned something new about the oppression toward Italian-Americans and/or toward Native Americans. Many found that the Columbus Dialogues provided new and profound insight into American history, a history that many did not learn about as young people.

One aspect of this unknown history is the conditions under which Italians left southern Europe in large numbers. Failed land reforms, poverty and repression forced many Italians to seek a better life in the U.S. But their arrival was not always well received, and Italians were segregated, kept out of certain trades, attacked, and even lynched in their new country. It was in this context that Columbus was lifted up as an American hero.

Another aspect of American history that was unknown to many dialogue participants was the US government's campaign of near genocide of Native Peoples, and especially the Clinton-Sullivan campaign in Upstate New York that was ordered by President George Washington. The ramifications of that attempted annihilation continue today through poverty, loss of land and culture, fracturing, and mental health issues for Native People.

People who hold all different viewpoints came to a common ground understanding that any past action by the Italian-American community and any future action around this issue is an attempt to right the wrongs of oppression toward certain communities. In this understanding we must be careful not to group the oppression together, but to acknowledge each as its separate story.

2. Recent Revelations About Columbus Require New Updates to Public Education

It is necessary to embark upon education about what happened to Native American people as a result of the arrival of Columbus. This is an "invisible issue," meaning that it is not obvious to participants that there are many public educational opportunities to reflect recent learnings about Columbus's history and thought. This education can and should happen throughout our community, schools, and institutions, and must be driven by the leadership of our community.

3. Uphold Respect and Dignity for All

The Columbus Day issue encompasses a variety of different groups of people who all have a stake in the issues, and who have been, or risk being, hurt in the process of any decision making. These groups of people include the Onondaga, Italian-Americans, and allies to either of these groups. A common ground understanding that was held by all is that we should find ways to respect all involved, especially our elders, and uphold or create dignity for all.



Common Themes

While each of the three dialogue circles were unique, there were many similar themes discussed in each group. Dialogue themes were identified from facilitator notes and debriefing. Themes are not the same as common ground solutions, as they might not lead to or guide action. Rather, they are important points that the groups wrestled with, and were the driving concerns of much of the conversations. The themes identified here are issues that were discussed in *at least two* of the dialogue circles.

1. Uniqueness of Syracuse/CNY Area

- Over 170 municipalities and jurisdictions (an increase of more than 40 since the Syracuse dialogues started) have officially done away with Columbus Day, many changing it to Indigenous People's Day. They have frequently done so without a community change process. Our group is conscious of a particular uniqueness of our area: the strength and location of the Sovereign Nation of the Onondagas, and the Haudenosaunee (made up of six tribes including the Onondaga who are the Fire Keepers), the sacred site on Onondaga Lake of the Great Tree of Peace, and the maintenance of the spiritual rituals and family life of their ancestors.
- The activism of Onondaga allies is strong here.
- A large and politically active Italian-American community continues to thrive in and around Syracuse.

The confluence of these three factors affords particular possibilities of finding common ground and hopeful community solutions that other cities and municipalities do not enjoy.

2. Leadership. Who gets to decide on this issue?

- The Mayor's actions in pushing for these dialogues is seen as a hopeful sign by all dialogue participants, regardless of their viewpoint. The Mayor must weigh the value of patience with the importance of progress. He must gauge when enough opportunity for education and community buy-in for a community solution has been found that will then lead to proper action. Leaders lead by pushing towards positive solutions, and this group wants the Mayor to lead, while also recognizing that solutions must come from the grassroots up and from the top down.
- The Syracuse City Mayor's office and the Syracuse City School Board were brought up as entities who have power to change the calendar and Columbus Circle. The others leaders on the issue involved are: Italian-American community leaders, NOON and other Onondaga Nation allies, and SCSD students. The Onondaga Nation may be consulted, and ask that Americans become educated about what happened to Native People. As a sovereign nation, they are interested in our government's decisions, but do not interfere in these decisions. The circle participants called for all leaders on the issue, including those with change-making power, to work together toward a solution.

3. Oppression is a thread that joins us

- The group came to a common ground understanding that the lifting up of Columbus as an American hero grew out of a time of severe oppression of Italian immigrants who sought a way to claim their right to life in America, and had - only one generation back - been forced to leave their homeland due to poverty, failed land reform, and fascism. This history fueled much discussion across the dialogue circles about how to proceed taking in account the oppression of Native People through brutal colonization tactics started by the encroachment of European explorers, which attempted to obliterate all native culture.
- There is a path to be taken here that recognizes the contributions of Italians to America while recognizing the Haudenosaunee's greatness and the painful history that ensued during/after colonization.

4. Importance of listening and learning

- The power of dialogue is its ability to build trust and relationships so that *empathy* can emerge. From empathy comes a desire to act as a community, to act in ways that assure that we work to have a common ground solution, not winners and losers.
- *"You gave me a voice that I didn't have before. To be heard is a powerful gift. To be heard is a healing."* Circle 1 participant.

5. Colonization at the core

- People in the United States need a much bigger awareness of what happened to Native People in our history as a result of the European expansion. Certain truths have been left out of our story, and therefore we develop our identities with holes in our truth.
- The Doctrine of Christian Discovery gave explorers the Church-sanctioned framework for claiming a land as sovereign if not inhabited by Christians. The role of the Doctrine of Discovery in this piece of history served to depict Native People as less than human in order to subjugate them and the resources of their land.
- Columbus was an exceptional explorer, master sailor, and excellent navigator who dared to explore parts of the world unknown to the Europeans. He was a product of the European Renaissance Period, seeking to discover new land to acquire wealth. Columbus was operating under the Doctrine of Discovery. For some, Columbus was not directly responsible for the genocide of the Native Americans in the US because he arrived hundreds of years before in the Caribbean Islands. For others, his brutality, as recorded in his own journals, began the genocide of Native Americans, starting with the people he encountered, and this oppression and genocide continued as other European countries colonized the Americas.

6. Healing is hard work

- Healing means facing uncomfortable truths, and feeling things we do not want to feel. Healing is necessary, and allows us to do something to repair past wounds, and to stop doing things in the present that make the past wounds worse.
- *“I appreciate how painful a change in Columbus Day or the statue would be for the elder Italian community. They worked hard to become accepted as Americans and their feelings should be considered in decisions. But if/when you do decide to take down the statue, we will know that real healing has taken place.”* Circle 3 participant
- Circle participants discussed pain, and the process of healing deeply rooted pain. The pain of native peoples, particularly the genocide of their people, the loss of their history, the lived trauma of children’s boarding schools, and generational trauma which continues to manifest today is not easily “fixable.” The pain of an older generation of Italian-Americans who feel a loss of identity and history won’t easily wash away. The pain of younger Americans, of Italian heritage and others, who have trouble reconciling the failure of their parents and of a system that haven’t taught them the whole truth about the colonization of America won’t be solved with one action. Pain will continue to exist, but that doesn’t mean we don’t take action which can have healing effects over time.
- Healing by way of acknowledging the pain is a part of this process. All groups agreed we need to attempt to heal the pain – we should never try to leap over or ignore it. Any action shouldn’t skip over this part of the process.
- *“We need to sit with the pain. We need to acknowledge it.”* Circle 2 participant

7. Acknowledge the contributions of Italians and other immigrants

- Italian-Americans must be given the opportunity to honor their elders and the work that it took to build the statue, and the service that they have given and currently give to this community. Any new action should not further the hurts of Italian elders who lived through the oppression, didn’t know about the genocide, and needed a hero.
- It will be important to engage the older and younger generations of Italian-Americans in any action moving forward.

8. Columbus as a single story and one-sided history

- Columbus was lifted up to represent the American dreams of discovery and adventure. The other values that are represented in the holiday, but are ignored or not taught, are values that support genocide and colonization. Columbus’ vision was as much about garnering resources as it was about discovery.
- Recent revelations about Columbus through the release of his journals have shone a light on the exceptional brutality of Columbus, even more so than fellow explorers of the time, all operating under the Doctrine of Discovery. New information about the person of Columbus should encourage us as a community to consider whether we still want him celebrated as an American hero.



- If we educate our society on the whole story, then we have a stronger understanding of our history that enriches us all.
 - Circle 3 participants went through an exercise of Naming the Problem, and came up with two statements, which reflect this theme:
 - *“We currently display a monument that represents a single story. We want the truth to be told in a public space that represents all of us”*
 - *“We want Italian-Americans to know that we aren’t against them. We also want truthful information in our public celebrations.”*
9. **Education as a common ground**

- Many group members were shocked to learn what Columbus had done, and surprised that their own educations had neglected to explain the devastating effects of European exploration on Native Peoples. To make change, there has to be education. But with knowledge comes responsibility. When we know better, then we can do better.
- On July 9, 2019, all members from the Dialogue circles to date were invited to take part in the Witness to Injustice Blanket Exercise, facilitated by NOON, held at Le Moyne College, and sponsored by InterFaith Works. Some participants came and joined IFW staff and community members in the exercise, which is designed as an experiential simulation of the history of Native peoples on the land we call America. This was offered by IFW as a direct response to the call from the dialogue groups for more community education.

Actions Discussed

All of these actions don’t necessarily agree with each other, but they were discussed as actions that emerged from the viewpoints. The actions should be read in light of the common ground understanding to uphold respect and dignity for all.

- ❖ Make Columbus Circle a Heritage Site that includes the current statue, as well as plaques or interactive displays that explain Haudenosaunee life, current situation, and the genocide. One group came up with the idea to plant a “tree of life” in the small park adjacent to the circle. If this action is taken the leadership would need to focus on community engagement around the issue. (Circles 1, 2, 3 – Viewpoint 3)
- ❖ Embark on a Community Education Campaign which might include a the following: a festival/storytelling event, connecting Columbus Circle to the Skä•noñh Center by way of the Creek Walk, yearly educational events in the Circle, a city-wide day of dialogue on the holiday, events to promote healing and care for the environment honoring Native American spirituality and work. The campaign must be comprehensive: curriculum, news, community outreach, geographical. (Circles 1, 2, 3 –Viewpoint 3)

- ❖ Keep the Statue. The monument represents a part of our community's and our American history. We cannot erase our history. We can only learn from it. Just as the confederate monuments are being preserved so that we can learn from the past, this one should be preserved. The dialogue circle participants discussed keeping the statue, but moving it to private land, with input from the Italian-American community. They also discussed keeping the statue in its current location, but removing the four Native American heads at the base of the statue, which are offensive to many people despite the original intention of the artist. (Circles 1, 2, 3 – Viewpoint 3, 4)

Note: Two groups discussed that a powerful and healing way forward is if the younger generations of Italians could lead the charge in acknowledging mistakes that their elders and ancestors made while commissioning and putting up the statue currently at Columbus Circle in Syracuse.

“What if they led the decision making process and fundraised to make changes to it, or move it, and also fundraised for future projects on this issue which honor the Onondagas AND the Italians for their contributions?”

- Circle 3 Participant

- ❖ Change Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day. Include a ballot vote, city council vote, and/or community online surveys, and include voices from SCSD students. (Circles 2, 3 - Viewpoint 3, 4)
- ❖ Native American people were at the original Columbus Monument dedication, and should be invited to attend again so all voices are heard at the current Columbus Day ceremonies and luncheon creating a spirit of celebrating together. Honor Native American leaders on Columbus Day. (Circle 1- Viewpoint 3)
- ❖ Raise funds for a Stone Canoe as a symbol of the Peacemaker to proclaim the Skä•noñh Center on the Parkway. Make the Skä•noñh Center more accessible, well-known, and used. (Circle 1- Viewpoint 3)
- ❖ Keep Columbus Day the same, and add a celebration like Indigenous People's Day, either on Columbus Day or another day like the one the United Nations has declared. (Circle 1 – Viewpoint 1)

Conclusion

What Worked:

- Participants were able to dive deep into differing viewpoints.
- There was an overall greater understanding by participants into the complexity of the issue for Syracuse.
- When action steps were brought into the dialogue, the brainstorming process included thoughtful consideration of other viewpoints.
- The dialogue circles led to the development of a comprehensive framework for this issue that can be referred to and used in planning for future action.
- The three dialogues circles combined included people representing all demographics involved in this issue.
- InterFaith Works held a successful Witness to Injustice Blanket Exercise in July 2019 in collaboration with NOON, as a result of the call to more community action by dialogue participants. Invitees to this event included dialogue participants and the wider community.



Challenges:

- Scheduling dialogue circles in June-July was challenging due to work and vacation schedules.
- The complicated meaning and politics of Columbus in Syracuse and Onondaga County may have resulted in some perceived risk of participation.
- There was concern that Viewpoint 1 Voices were not in the room.
 - Though many Italian-Americans were invited, and almost half of our participants were of Italian heritage, no one in one dialogue circle had a staunch position that Columbus was a hero and needed to continue to be celebrated. This group struggled with this lack of voice, and frequently asked themselves, “What would Viewpoint 1 people say?”
 - Reflecting on why Viewpoint 1 people were not present, the concept of “White Fragility” was raised: reactions of white people who are uncomfortable facing racism, and who have been acculturated to ignore racism. No one wants to be blamed. No one wants to be held personally responsible for all the horrors of history. And because white people do not have experience with ongoing daily, systemic, structural racism, whites often find discussions of race uncomfortable. This discomfort is important to face in Columbus Day discussions. The purpose is not to scold or shame, but to recognize we cannot just “put this all this behind us” without healing it, or settle for the erasure of history. The stress of the discomfort triggers defensive reactions, but we have to find ways of helping people who want to address racism to see what might impede productive conversations.

Next Steps

Participant Forum

A Common Ground Forum will be held on Thursday, September 19th from 5:00-7:30pm at InterFaith Works, which invites all participants back together to review the common ground held between them, debrief their experience in the dialogue, and discuss next steps.

Mayoral Deliberation

The Mayor will review the report and participate in the Common Ground Forum, giving some thought to the necessary public responses needed to address community tension, including the possibility of more dialogues.

Personal Action

Individual members of the circles may choose to work on some of the recommended people-led democratic actions like fundraising for the Stone Canoe or Community Education Campaigns.

More Dialogues

More dialogues circles would serve to expose larger numbers of people to the conversation and to each other across diverse points of view.



Attachment 1: Comprehensive Framework

Viewpoint Pros and Cons

**Viewpoint 1:
Columbus Discovered America and Should Be Celebrated**

PRO	CON
<p>Older Italians find the day and the statue a source of pride. The day and the statue were hard fought for by many Italians who still care and whose sons and daughters still care. Continuing to celebrate Columbus Day in the same way honors these people and their history.</p> <p>Many Syracuse residents are neutral on the topic of Columbus Day so making no change would make no difference to most citizens.</p> <p>Native Americans do not want to dishonor the statue or the American celebration of Columbus.</p> <p>Some people dispute the validity of the historical evidence of Columbus' atrocities, and we need to respect that all people don't agree.</p>	<p>This viewpoint is not a true history of our nation. People who do not know history will repeat history.</p> <p>It does not represent the majority viewpoint of dialogue participants.</p> <p>It discredits people seeking change.</p> <p>If we equate Columbus day with Italian Pride, remember that he doesn't ever represent me. Why would I want to be associated with him? (voice of Italian persons)</p> <p>This viewpoint doesn't move the Syracuse community forward toward celebrating diversity</p> <p>Keeps open the wound of the native peoples. If Columbus was the murderer the majority of historians and his own diaries suggest, we need to face this and repent.</p> <p>Continues the burden of education of Native American history on the Native Americans and allies</p> <p>Doing nothing would mean we lose an opportunity to learn from Native Americans who have much to teach about how to live on the earth. With Climate Change racing us towards an uncertain environmental future, we need to engage and honor Native thinking.</p> <p>Someone might topple the statue out of rage that nothing is being done to acknowledge the past. By doing nothing, we might hasten the day when something negative would happen.</p>



**Viewpoint 2:
Italian-Americans have contributed greatly to this country and should be celebrated**

PRO	CON
<p>Viewpoint 2 addresses the mistreatment of Italians that gave rise to creating Columbus as an American hero, and explains why Italians would be fierce in defending him and his day.</p> <p>It connects the pain of Italian oppression with the pain of oppression of other groups, including and especially the oppression of Native People.</p> <p>It calls for empathy towards the Italians. No one's culture should be lost, not Italian-Americans' or Native Americans'.</p> <p>It acknowledges and celebrates deserving Italian-American heroes.</p>	<p>If we change this to "Italian-American Day" then we would be celebrating one ethnic group (Italians-Americans) using a federal holiday. This does not seem fair to other ethnic groups who hold celebrations throughout the year. Italians are still uplifted higher than other groups.</p> <p>This is bigger than an Italian-American question. This is an American question about what values we celebrate during our holidays, especially those which are federally sanctioned. This viewpoint privileges Italian-Americans and not all Americans.</p> <p>If the statue needs to stay to honor the Italian-Americans who brought it here, the narrative cannot stay the same. The narrative about the statue must change to reflect American history. The statue and the Circle has to be a place for all citizens of Syracuse, not just some. Those citizens include the Italian-American community as well as those from other ethnic groups, and the new wave of immigrants and refugees.</p>



**Viewpoint 3:
Consider the Impact of Columbus on Native American People**

PRO	CON
<p>This view gives a good start in understanding and correcting our history.</p> <p>This view is a path to learning through discussion and dialogue opportunities, and calls for greater education within the community.</p> <p>Viewpoint 3 encourages the grappling of history.</p> <p>It engages more people with Native American history.</p> <p>It acknowledges and celebrates indigenous people and their contribution to all of us.</p> <p>This view is in alignment with new education programs in our schools. SCSD has contracted NOON to run the “Witness to Injustice” Blanket exercise, which is a simulation of the genocide of Native Peoples, to all 7th graders in the district.</p> <p>It would spur on TV programming and news articles.</p> <p>The conversation would be redirected to describe systematic racism and how it impacted Italians and other immigrants.</p> <p>Columbus could be removed as a figurehead and the day could be refocused on celebrating Italian-American History, or a history that is common for us all.</p> <p>This viewpoint teaches us the following values of Native American: sharing, what is enough, community, peace-making, harmony with nature, and good mind and wisdom.”</p> <p>It makes us aware of need for acknowledging hurt and creating healing.</p> <p>Viewpoint 3 reverses whitewash, a covering up of Native American history through a colonization lens of American history.</p> <p>This viewpoint honors the Two Row Treaty by “Polishing the Chain” – this is a concept meaning that friendship and peace are not things that endure without regular attention. We need to pay attention to one another, work through our differences in a respectful way, and come to new understandings.</p> <p>It gives us the freedom and courage to tell the story of the Doctrine of Discovery – the statue’s location between a Catholic Church and the County Courthouse is a perfect symbol of the collusion between church and state in the 15th century that gave ‘permission’ of European Christian explorers to act as Columbus did. Show this clash of cultures and its result.</p>	<p>For some, it does not go far enough if we as a city want to take action which will acknowledge the history of Native Americans, and create a future which can right the wrongs of the past actions taken against Native Americans resulting in devastating impact by the American government.</p>

Attachment 1: Comprehensive Frame Work Page 3 of 4

**Viewpoint 4:
Facing Our Past and Creating a New Future Means Saying No to Columbus Day**

PRO	CON
<p>Facing our past brings enlightenment.</p> <p>This view gives us the space to acknowledge our shared pain.</p> <p>The actions that result from this viewpoint would not only acknowledge the history of Native Americans, but they would lead to a healing of the deep pain felt by the Native American community.</p> <p>Columbus' atrocities need to be acknowledged in order for our country to heal from a great wound. The genocide continues through poverty, loss of culture, fracturing, and mental health issues for Native People, so work together, nation-to-nation, to make redress for broken treaties and the suffering. Only then can we be made whole as a nation.</p> <p>The message "We listened" would be sent loud and clear to our Indigenous Neighbors.</p> <p>This view would lead to actions which would stop using Columbus to celebrate values that include "winner"/oppression/genocide.</p> <p>This viewpoint would start conversations about reparations for Native Americans</p> <p>As a city we would be acting out of a more honest understanding of history.</p>	<p>We must care for the Italian elders who would be hurt by this decision, and walk gently with them. The monument was purchased and erected by private donors and this should be respected.</p> <p>We have to acknowledge our SHARED humanity</p> <p>If we take the statue down, it would tear the Syracuse community apart. Too many Italians locally are vested in Columbus Day and the monument for this to change. To remove either would pour gasoline on hurt and pain.</p> <p>Many dialogue participants raised the questions of cost of any action. How do we pay for it?</p> <p>The actions that would result from this viewpoint could inspire racist backlash; for example, if the day were used to call attention to the genocide of Indigenous Peoples, people might dress up as "Indians" and parody the holiday and the history. This would not be healing to anyone in the community. A con to adapting a viewpoint that seems harsh, even if we agree with it, is that we don't want to create further division.</p> <p>Columbus was not responsible for the Clinton-Sullivan campaign, the establishment of reservations and boarding schools, and all the rest. Activists go too far in making the leap from Columbus' bad behavior to blaming him for everything.</p>

One other viewpoint was offered from Circle 3. Its pros and cons are similar to those in Viewpoint 3 and 4.

Viewpoint 5: Columbus Day promotes oppression and racist effects of colonization; it should be acknowledged as such, and utilized differently.

The Circle 3 participants were in agreement that this viewpoint is a bit different than the ones stated above, because it is a viewpoint that says "yes" instead of "no." It also clearly articulates why people are against the status quo holiday. Because Circle 3 participants offered it as a viewpoint and created a framework using it, it should be noted. The pros and cons were assimilated into Viewpoints 3 and 4, because of the similarities with other pros and cons developed by Circle 1 and 2 within the existing framework.