



## **“Practicing Democracy: Seeking Common Ground”**

Maryland Humanities Council  
Case Statement

### ***Choose***

*“The single clenched fist lifted and ready,  
Or the Open hand held out and waiting. Choose: For we meet by one or the other.”—Carl Sandburg*

### **The Need**

Conventional wisdom holds that democracy rests on our ability to exchange differing points of view in order to come to a conclusion that serves the common good. A look at the landscape of civic discourse—in the media, at public forums, and on-line—suggests we may have forgotten how to exchange differing views without resorting to partisan slogans. What does it mean for democracy if we rarely connect with those with whom we disagree and if we disagree disrespectfully when we are in the same room? What is the difference between rambunctious and robust disagreement that has characterized our politics for centuries and exchanges that literally prevent us from communicating?

There is an urgent need to re-imagine ways to discuss issues across ideological camps, to model civil debate and dialogue between people who come down on different sides of an issue, and to share information in a way that strives to be unbiased, fact-based, and even-handed. We propose that engagement with the humanities—history, ethics, literature, philosophy—can foster productive debate and help us talk, listen, disagree, and find commonalities. The Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities Jim Leach urges that, “No one should underestimate the importance of the public humanities or the need to address the temper and the integrity of the political dialogue. America cannot revive its infectious leadership until it revives its sense of self and reaches out respectfully instead of shunning, or, worse yet, name calling those with whom we differ.”

Civic dialogue transforms communication and relationships in ways that make other kinds of change possible. For many issues, action cannot be taken without first improving mutual understanding, building relationships, and reducing stereotyping and demonization. Civic dialogue can lay the groundwork for making decisions or significant collaborative actions. Like Chairman Leach, we believe that “shared learning with open dialogue is more likely to lead to

acific relations between peoples of the world than any other circumstance. Knowledge is unifying.”

## **Program Description**

In 2010 the Maryland Humanities Council (MHC) will launch a new program, “Practicing Democracy: Seeking Common Ground,” that will gather people together with different opinions and ideological approaches for a series of public discussion forums that will strive to produce real and respectful debate. In 2010, discussion forums will focus on issues of the environment, sustainability, real estate development, historic preservation, and transportation. In 2011, MHC will choose a new cluster of relevant contemporary issues for the “Practicing Democracy” forums to address.

MHC will use a shared humanities experience—hearing from a scholar; reading a short story, essay, or poem; watching a film; or participating in or attending a performance, for example—to engage participants in these topics and make information sharing possible. Trained facilitators will encourage participants to share their personal experiences and express their different opinions, relating them to the ideas of the humanities work.

## **Program Formats**

The MHC will experiment with a variety of formats for producing effective civic dialogue through “Practicing Democracy: Seeking Common Ground.” The goal of the program is to determine processes that are effective methods of creating meaningful dialogue among fellow Marylanders.

In addition to the series of conversations on contemporary issues, MHC’s existing programs will also be a large part of the programming for “Practicing Democracy.”

- In September 2010, MHC will kick off a six-stop tour for “Between Fences,” a traveling Smithsonian exhibition that explores the literal and metaphorical meanings of borders and boundaries.
- MHC’s new One Maryland One Book selection will ask readers to think about what unites and divides us in our communities.
- A new RFP in our Grants Program will call for proposals from non-profits across the state who are gathering people together with conflicting ideas to connect with one another.
- A slate of new presenters will be added to MHC’s Speakers Bureau who can talk about the environment, planning, and land use issues.
- MHC’s 2010 Chautauqua characters—Thurgood Marshall, Sacagawea, and Frederick Law Olmsted—will address crossing boundaries, Native American concepts of land ownership, and planning public spaces.

## Partners

MHC is not alone in the search for methods that promote dialogue across ideological divides—a Google search shows over 600,000 entries for “civic dialogue.” Nationwide, organizations like The Transpartisan Alliance, Convergence, Public Agenda, and Everyday Democracy (formerly Study Circles Resource Center) are convening just such conversations. For “Practicing Democracy” MHC will partner with non-profit and for-profit organizations across Maryland—governmental, civic, religious, arts-oriented, environmental, educational, economic, business-orientated, and community-focused—and those that have a track record of bringing people with diverse points of view together. These partner organizations will help shape program content, build audiences, and host events. MHC will identify appropriate humanities materials, scholars, and trained facilitators; build audiences; and develop evaluations that assess both short-term and long-term outcomes and impacts.

## Audiences

Each year Maryland Humanities Council programs reach nearly 1.5 million Marylanders, with events taking place in all 24 jurisdictions throughout the state. Audiences include adults, families, and youth from a wide range of economic, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. Programs take place in community settings such as libraries, museums, schools, hospitals, town halls, churches and synagogues, shopping malls, and even outdoors under a tent. MHC programs reach additional audiences through radio and television broadcasts as well as through the Web on YouTube and Facebook. We expect that thousands of people will be served by “Practicing Democracy” programs between 2010 and 2012.

## Evaluation and Outcomes

MHC will develop, test, and evaluate a variety of formats and processes, noting procedures, assessing short term results, and evaluating changes in behavior of participants. As a result of this series of programming, MHC will develop a toolkit of processes and materials that other organizations can use to create their own dialogues.