

**Shifting Ground: Religion & Civic Life in America**  
**A Conversation Series with State Legislators**  
**Convened by the New Hampshire Humanities Council**  
**with support from the Project on Civic Reflection**  
**Concord, NH**  
**2007**

In 2007 the New Hampshire Humanities Council convened a small group of members of both houses of the New Hampshire legislature for six weekly civic reflection conversations as part of a two-year initiative, “Shifting Ground: Religion & Civic Life in America.” The Shifting Ground initiative is a project that seeks to engage citizen groups around New Hampshire in conversation on the changing role of religion in the public arena and how it impacts our common civic life.

The purpose of this series was to establish a comfortable neutral space where legislators could discover new insights about the relationship between religion and politics, learn more about the implications of their beliefs and values, and engage in personal reflection and respectful discussion. Guided by co-facilitators who complemented each other politically and religiously, legislators from both parties discussed a diverse set of readings—from Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural to a short story by Richard Selzer and an essay by Reza Aslan—on the relationship between religion and civic life. Of special interest to program organizers was how the “willing suspension of disbelief” that people generally adopt in the reading of a piece of literature translates into “real life” understanding of and decisions about public policy issues.

Conversations in this series were co-facilitated by Donna Sytek, former Speaker of the New Hampshire House, and James Squires, M.D., former New Hampshire Senator. All members of the New Hampshire House and Senate were invited to participate. The series was attended by eighteen legislators—coincidentally, half Democrats and half Republicans. Participants were religiously diverse, ranging from self-described fundamentalists to agnostics.

The series was deemed a great success, with participants expressing gratitude for a “safe” venue where conflicting views could be discussed with respect and care. Below are a few representative participant responses:

- *It has been helpful to hear other legislators from both parties answer difficult questions candidly. We rarely have that opportunity in the State House.*
- *[T]his series has caused me to think about how my values and beliefs influence my perspective on public issues.*
- *I watched the group, and myself, slowly become more comfortable in discussing the “touchy” subjects as we moved further into the sessions.*
- *It all worked, and the conversations were inspiring, heartbreaking, enlightening.*

For more information on this innovative program, please contact the Project on Civic Reflection at (219) 464-6767 or at [civic.reflection@valpo.edu](mailto:civic.reflection@valpo.edu).