

# Group Rules for Risky Conversations

**Trust that God is the primary agent in the life of your group.** The Holy Spirit is present and active in the conversation. Assume that those with whom you're conversing are just as committed to Christ as you are. Although you may find their conclusions and arguments to be wrong, presume their efforts to be conscientious and faithful.

**Listen with respect.** That means not rolling your eyes and sharing a "knowing glance" with a like-minded friend. Such non-verbal exchanges can be hurtful and silencing. Actively listen to or interview the person speaking. State in summary fashion what you have heard them say before responding to or challenging them. Speak in the first person: "I heard you say...I think I understand, but could you clarify...I'm feeling..."

**Be patient and wait your turn to speak.** Do not interrupt. Be inclusive of everyone in the audience. Invite input, but do not require everyone to say something.

**Avoid personal attacks.** Don't make character judgments or attack the personal motives or traits of those with whom you're talking. Avoid name calling.

**Avoid characterizing your own position as "indisputable" or "obviously" true,** reducing the other's stance to a ridiculous "slogan."

**Many moral issues are emotionally charged.** Listen and respond with care to their emotions, as well as their ideas.

**Try to reach an agreement about what constitutes the "heart of the matter" as soon as possible.** Cut to the chase.

**State what you believe is common ground,** or what you can affirm in the position you just heard before entering an area of disagreement.

**Argue for what YOU want, not just against what the other person is saying.** Present alternatives to their options.

**Avoid appeals to raw authority or isolated, rare experiences when giving your reasons.**

**Speak truthfully.** Report ideas of everyone with accuracy and respect. If necessary, request or offer one another the promise of confidentiality. Be courageous—it is often difficult to speak up and maintain a position in the midst of other competing and conflicting positions.

**Be careful not to let dissension destroy love.** Hate destroys the body of Christ. Bring to your conversations passion, not hate.

(Adapted with permission from Patricia Beattie Jung, Associate Professor of Theology, Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois)

# Risking Difficult Discussions

**Let's say you're on the verge of a difficult conversation a, conversation you'd rather not have. Try these on for size:**

Your group is in the middle of a discussion that turns controversial. Sides are drawn. Perhaps the topic is abortion, gay ordination or gun control. You're the leader—a peaceful, easy-going leader—and the anxiety level in the room is gradually going up.

A member of your group—perhaps even one of the adult advisors—is engaging in some at-risk behavior. Others in the group are talking about the behavior, and it's obvious that people will need to level with one another for the group to maintain and strengthen its healthy relationships.

**Do you let the first conversation continue? Do you have the honest conversation that's necessary in the second scenario?**

You know you should, but how? Are there techniques? Necessary conditions? Do you need training? And how do you have these conversations in such a way that they are grounded in your faith?

Frankly, to do this kind of conversation well, you do need four components:

### **Certain attitudes and beliefs**

### **A couple of skills**

### **Several behaviors**

### **Just enough knowledge base to encourage healthy conversation.**

Let's look at these four components as they show up in persons and groups who have healthy, faith-based conversation about the tough stuff and see what we can learn.

## **Attitudes and beliefs**

---

- First, your hope is not so much in your persuasive skills or your ability to make friends as it is in God's promises and God's love for you. Your belief in a trustworthy God helps you to look at tough issues as challenges that the Holy Spirit might use to bring you to new understandings.
- Second, you believe that differences are good, not bad. You enjoy having people around you who are not simply copies of yourself. You find that when you disagree with others honestly and faithfully, you learn more and you discover newness and surprise.
- Third, you have a preference for action. That is, almost no matter what the circumstance, you would rather be moving than standing still. You'd rather forge ahead than hide. This gives you an advantage in a tough discussion because you won't run away to avoid disagreement, but rather, come together deliberately to confront an issue.

## **Skills**

---

- First, you are good at adapting and inventing ways of interacting with people. You may enjoy word games or interactive play that allows people to share their ideas in low-risk ways. You may even play around with rules or rituals that allow everyone to participate in safe ways. You may even invent seating arrangements or room decor that make people feel at home and willing to speak freely. Your innovations allow people to speak about their faith, even in places and times when faith might otherwise be laughed at.
- Second, you know how to open up your Christian imagination and use it to encourage great conversation, even on tough issues. What is Christian imagination? It is the part of us that understands the life of faith, the part of us that the Holy Spirit sparks when we imagine Jesus' love or imagine something we might do to make a difference for someone else. It is the place at which God visits us and inspires us. People who have great conversations over even the tough stuff know how to open their Christian imagination in the face of a challenging decision.

## **Behaviors**

---

- First, you live and breathe hospitality. This means that you consistently provide everything folks need to feel at home and safe. This *everything* might include nametags, handouts, comfortable chairs, friendly reminders to people who are getting out of line, snacks, potty breaks or even time to think. You act as Abraham did to the stranger who arrived at his tents for lunch.
- Second, you are a living listener. Your body language, your vocal tone, your facial expressions all say, "Your ideas are important to me. Tell me what you're thinking or how you're feeling." You know how to put others at ease. You look directly at the one who's speaking, and you honor whatever is said. You spend time thinking about what has been said rather than launching into your own response. You do and say everything you can to create a space for others to be heard.

In that way, you encourage everyone in the conversation to be honest and to say even the

unpopular thing. This open behavior reminds others of the way Christ welcomed children and showed compassion to the ailing. When we behave in these ways, we are acting out our faith. You are the kind of listener who doesn't just manage conflict. You encourage honest disagreement so that new thinking can be heard and tested and used to make the best decisions.

## **Just enough knowledge base**

---

- First, to be really good at putting the "faith" in faith-based conversation over tough issues, it helps to know the tradition of the faith community that is having the conversation. That means you need a knowledge of the history of that place and the group that's trying to have the conversation, but it also means knowing what Christians through the ages have said and done about such matters.
- Second, you are helped by a working knowledge of the Bible, especially Bible stories that form the Christian imagination of those taking part in the conversation. Thinking of how persons in the Bible reacted to the situations that they faced can help you open up faith-based conversation about the situations you face. We know that God was up to something in the lives of Bible people. When we talk together about our tough stuff, we, too, can ask what God is up to in the issue for us.