

The Episcopal Church Office of Government Relations

Civil Discourse Five Week Curriculum



**OFFICE OF
GOVERNMENT
RELATIONS**

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WEEK 2: TENETS FOR CIVIL DISCOURSE PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

Opening Prayer:

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart [and especially the hearts of the people of this land], that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Prayer for Social Justice, BCP p. 823)

Tenets for Civil Discourse

- **Respect** – Respect each person you meet and take the time to truly consider what they are saying. Respond, don't react. No blaming, shaming or attacking another person. Doing this does not mean accepting or upholding their ideas as your own; rather, it can help you understand their perspective, build your knowledge for future conversations, and open your mind to previously unfamiliar ideas—especially important even if you continue to disagree with them.
- **Listen Deeply** – Listen to what the person is saying, focus on the ideas presented, and discuss ideas and issues—not people. Don't start side conversations as they distract from engagement and listening. Do not interrupt while others are speaking.
- **Speak for Yourself** – Use “I” statements when commenting or responding. Share your personal experience. Own it.
- **Try to Understand** – Try to understand the thoughts and ideas of others. Ask questions for clarification. Note: sometimes we may be discussing the same concept, yet use different words. Make sure to pay attention to such areas of misunderstanding, and seek clarification where there is any confusion.
- **Share Talk Time** – If you are having a discussion with more than two people, make sure everyone has the opportunity to speak before speaking again. Take notes if there are things you want to follow up on. Ask what others think.
- **Speak with Humility** – You may not know everything about the topic at hand, and your experience may not be that of the other person's. Lean into your knowledge, personal experience, and expertise, but remain open to the truth others are sharing.
- **Gratitude** – If what someone has shared or asked helps with your own learning, say thank you.
- **Suspend Judgment** – We all have presumptions, biases, stereotypes, prejudices, and other pre-judgments. Try to suspend pre-judgments and seek first to understand.
- **Disagree and Love** – We seek to learn and listen. You can disagree with someone and still love them and listen to them. Civil discourse is about listening and learning together, seeking shared understanding and exposure to new ideas in the pursuit of improving our world and fulfilling our call as followers of Jesus.
- **Practice Forgiveness** – We learn from trying things out and sometimes we make mistakes. Seek to forgive and to be forgiven as we learn together.



- **Pay Attention to your Feelings and Thoughts** – If you do not feel safe asking a question or commenting on a topic, write it down and ask someone you're more comfortable or familiar with to help you voice or talk it through with you. If someone hurts your feelings, acknowledge that the comment hurt your feelings and explain why. Be open to others sharing that with you as well.

Three further suggestions:

First, all issues do not have to be fully discussed in one sitting. Civil discourse can be tiring and emotional, and taking a break is not abandoning the practice or cutting yourself short in sharing your perspective. Be patient with yourself and others.

Second, try to stay focused on one topic at a time. If we stay focused and on topic, we can dig into the nuance and messiness.

Third, in the event these tenets are not upheld, and in particular if the safety of those in conversation is questioned, then the further pursuit of civil discourse in this moment is unproductive and the conversation should be terminated. Signs that these tenets are not being upheld include verbal intimidation, personal attacks, deception, demonization, globalized character attacks, recklessly false and negative or misleading statements, vulgarity, threats, and racial, sexual or religious stereotypes.¹ Hopefully, under different conditions and in a different environment, civil conversation can continue with greater attention to maintaining these tenets.

Reflect:

What inspires you about these tenets?

What challenges you?

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus, who traveled with the disciples on the road to Emmaus:

Be with us on the way,

that we may know you in the scriptures,

in the breaking of bread,

and in the hearts of all whom we meet. Amen.

([Saint Augustine's Prayer Book](#), Forward Movement)

¹ https://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/civil_discourse_facilitators_guide_1.pdf

