

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

Materials: Copies of the handout for each person, writing instruments, large pieces of paper, markers, and sticky notes (have tape handy if the notes don't stick)

Opening Prayer: (Read in Unison)

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

Leader:

“The Lord has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Micah 6:8

Below is a list of important ground rules for civil discourse—centered in the Golden Rule: *doing unto others as you would have them do unto you*. This list is adapted from material developed for the Episcopal Youth Event 2017 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Though we often teach these rules to children and youth, many of them are essential for civil discourse, particularly during emotionally charged conversations and debates where we may have great personal stake or passion.

The Baptismal Covenant calls you to be the best version of yourself that you can be—who God made you to be. Civil discourse requires that we treat people with respect as we seek and serve Christ in each other and strive for the respect and dignity of every human being. It means treating people how we want to be treated, even in disagreement and even if we do not have shared values.

Important tenets of civil discourse include: respect, listening deeply, mutuality, interactivity, openness, honesty, humility, and careful speech. As we live into our Baptismal Covenant and engage in civil discourse, please keep these important tenets in mind.

Invite the group to go around the room, having each person read one of these tenets. If someone does not want to read, they can simply say “skip.” If you have a small group, you may have them go around the room a couple of times until all are read.

As people are listening and reading, invite them to mark words or phrases that stand out to them. We will come back to these as we work together in the “Defining Civil Discourse” section.

- **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.

In addition to these tenets, we want to offer three additional 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—stepping away from conversation for a period of time—is not abandoning the practice or cutting yourself short in sharing your perspective. Civil discourse is a method of discussion framed within a context of long-term relationship building, a habitual practice useful over one’s lifetime. Productivity of conversation can diminish if we become too tired or overwhelmed, weakening our emotional capacity to follow the tenets listed above. Be patient with yourself and others. Make sure breaks are a part of your practice of civil discourse.



Second, try to stay focused on one topic at a time. Yes, issues are very much interconnected and overlap, and it is often hard, if not impossible, to discuss one issue without relating it to another. Yet, not everyone is going to have the same knowledge about those relationships between issues. Our conversations are not as effective if we jump around from topic to topic, lumping things together in an unstable manner. In such a scenario, we may end up reverting to partisan talking points, talking past each other instead of honing in on important details and following the tenets of civil discourse. If we stay focused and on topic, we can dig into the nuance and messiness.

And finally, in the event these tenets are not upheld, and in particular, if the safety of those in conversation is questioned, then 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, generalized 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 these tenets.

Reflect

Invite participants to take 5 minutes to reflect on these questions:

- What inspires you about these tenets?
- What challenges you?

After 5 minutes, invite them to share with a person sitting near them.

Defining civil discourse (30 minutes)

Hang large sheets of paper around the room. On each, write some or all of the following questions:

- Given all that you've heard, write down a word or phrase that describes a key component of Civil Discourse.
- How do you know if a conversation is not civil?
- Where have you witnessed instances of incivility?
- What could you do if you ever witness incivility?

Distribute self-sticking notes and ask participants to take 15 minutes to write their responses on the notes and stick them to the large paper. When everyone has completed the process, read every page individually and facilitate a discussion on the responses.

Possible reflection questions include:

- How difficult was this exercise?
- What is the difference between discourse and fighting and how do you know when a conversation or debate crosses that line?
- How can you demonstrate respect during a conversation?
- Are strong emotions compatible with civil discourse? Why or why not?
- Did anything surprise you?

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



Revisit Covenant (5 minutes)

Revisit the Covenant you originally created. Given your conversation on civil discourse, is there anything participants want to add to the Covenant?

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)

