

The Episcopal Church Office of Government Relations

Civil Discourse Five Week Curriculum



**OFFICE OF
GOVERNMENT
RELATIONS**

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WEEK 4: THE COMPLEXITIES OF POLICY

Materials: Copies of the handout for each person, copies of “Voices from the Church” for each person, markers, writing instruments, large paper

Opening Prayer: (Read in unison)

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Prayer for the Human Family, BCP p. 815)

The Complexities of Policy

In the previous segment, we explored values-based conversations. For this next segment, we will discuss the messiness of policy and legislation development even among people who share the same values.

Policy is Messy Both in Development and Outcome

Given the complexities and nuances of the many issues our government addresses, it is not always clear what is right or wrong, what is ethical, or what the actual consequences of a policy will be compared to what is intended.

Development of Policy or Legislation: The process of developing and passing new policy or legislation can be long and arduous. Most bills intersect with many facets of our government and society, and as such, those developing the legislation must consider a broad array of factors and issues. Lawmakers draw information from many areas, both in the public and private sectors, to make the most informed decisions possible.

This is particularly true when trying to forecast policy impacts on different populations, either in the present or the future. Take for example an infrastructure project like a new hydroelectric dam that displaces a small population and impacts a small area of land (arguably ethically wrong), but that provides increased electrical capacity and greater efficiency in the long run, leading to net economic growth and better care for the environment (arguably ethically good).

As we the general public debate and aim to shape policy, we should keep in mind how messy the development of it actually is.

Outcome: Sometimes the intent of policy or legislation can be good, but the outcome harmful—making the process even messier. We cannot predict the future with any great accuracy. Though we may enact policy rooted in the right values and with the right intent, the ultimate outcome can be vastly different from what lawmakers intended.

Here is an example: The 1933 Congressionally-established Soil Erosion Service (now under a different name and part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture), promoted kudzu¹ as a means of soil erosion control across the Southeastern U.S. Though soil erosion is certainly an environmental protection issue, the focus at the time was an economic one, to protect the assets of Southern farmers. Today, as many in that part of the country know, kudzu is an incredibly harmful and invasive species that has killed off other plants and animal habitats as it spreads without any natural predator of disease or insect.

Of course, not all policy and legislation is as benign as a recommendation for kudzu. Consider weighing budget decisions among options to address present needs or reduce future risks—or decisions in national security and defense weighing options to act or not.

The morally correct path may not be clear here, as there can be morality and immorality in multiple solutions—and thus the importance of maintaining a focus on values and allowing for a creative space where a multitude of ideas may be presented, processed, understood and debated, in hopes of getting to the best solution.

Reflection:

Invite participants to reflect on what they just heard.

- How do you make decisions based on your knowledge, ethics and values?
- When those decisions are difficult, who or what do you turn to for help?

Practicing Civil Discourse (45 minutes)

Materials needed: “Voices from the Church,” large paper

On a large piece of paper, write the following points:

1. Facts are put on the table
2. People express an opinion
3. Engage in productive dialogue
4. Understand how to accomplish goals through compromise

Divide into small groups and ask each group to read through one of the “Voices from the Church” statements. Now ask participants to engage in a short 15-minute conversation that is modeled on the above outline on civil discourse. Have one person at each table act as the facilitator to get the conversation going and keep it flowing in a productive way, gently reminding participants about the Covenant. If your group begins going to a different topic, gently remind them about the topic at hand.

Most likely, participants will run out of time. When 15 minutes is up, call the group back together and facilitate a discussion with the larger group.

Possible questions include:

- How did you feel during your discussion?
- Did you become emotional or ever feel angry or frustrated?
- Alternatively, did you enjoy the engagement?

¹ <http://www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-2221/ANR-2221.pdf>

- Was it difficult or easy to maintain your emotional balance to ensure an ongoing, safe, and productive discussion?
- During your conversation, did you notice that your position was shifting or that you were gaining a better understanding of each other's opinions?
- Do you believe that our culture, media, and political system have created tendencies toward incivility in our society? Can you see that influence in your own thinking and dialogue? *(Keep in mind that civil discourse can be challenging and take practice, so be sure to reinforce that we are always in the process of learning how we can best participate in respectful, fruitful discussions.)*

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.

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

