

The Episcopal Church Office of Government Relations

Civil Discourse Five Week Curriculum



**OFFICE OF
GOVERNMENT
RELATIONS**

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WEEK 5: SACRED SPACE FOR DEBATE

Materials: Copies of the participant handout, large paper, sticky notes, pens or pencils

Opening Prayer: (Read in unison)

Everliving God, whose will it is that all should come to you through your Son Jesus Christ: Inspire our witness to him, that all may know the power of his forgiveness and the hope of his resurrection; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen. (Prayer for the Mission of the Church, BCP p. 816)

Sacred Space for Debate

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. I Corinthians 12:4-7

Our country, and indeed the world, needs our participation in addressing the challenges before us today and the unknown challenges yet to come. Civil discourse, the pursuit of enhanced understanding, is a means of sharpening our minds, advancing our ideas, and selecting the best route forward.

For elected officials, civil discourse is the bedrock of bipartisan debate, helping them to work, often slowly and with great difficulty, toward the best option they can muster. For every individual, exposure to ideas and perspectives and motivations different from our own can help us to modify and improve our own understanding of the world and each other. When we apply our learning to civic engagement, particularly in the act of voting, we make more informed decisions when choosing among candidates for office.

This space for civil discourse and debate is a sacred space. It brings us together, opens up opportunities to discuss difficult topics, and helps us recognize the humanity in each other. We must be informed by ideas beyond our own, at least to be aware of other possible perspectives and learn what flaws we have in our own thinking.

With our engagement online through social media and selective sources, often curated for us without our awareness or input, we must be diligent even in passive participation in civil discourse. Taking time to read opinion writers and news sources different from what we typically read, may present opinions different from our own and can help us become more familiar with opposing ideas and learn more about our own.

The preparation for civil discourse takes discipline and work, especially given the growing divisions in our society along political and other lines. Repairing these divides and preserving this sacred space for debate takes effort, resolve, patience, and faith. It does not come without discouragement, frustration, or even anger on occasion.

Yet, if we recognize our shared values before entering into conversation, remembering the tenets of civil discourse and acknowledging that the solutions before us are not always so clearly right or wrong, we can better understand the significant role that civil discourse plays in promoting peace and justice in the world, and we can overcome that discomfort.

We must have courageous conversations, even with people who are strongly opposed to our views. We must also put ourselves out there, in face-to-face situations, not just hiding behind keyboards and cell phones, to engage with those with whom we disagree. While civil discourse sharpens our minds, builds trust, and expands our capacity for change, it also dulls the violence and potential for unrest in our world.

People see and experience the world differently; that diversity is an asset if explored, examined and exposed openly, or it can be a wedge to drive us apart, to drive us into a space of anger and contempt for one another.

So, when and where can you engage in civil discourse? You can engage in it now—begin by taking what you have learned here and studying it with a friend, family member, or with various groups of people. You can engage in civil discourse in your own community. Hold an event on a particular topic, even just discussing this series in order to build up understanding on civil discourse before entering into discussion on a particular issue.

As you pursue greater understanding through civil discourse, carry the following quote from Thomas Merton with you:

“Don’t be too quick to assume your enemy is a savage just because he is your enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy because he thinks you are a savage. Or perhaps he is afraid of you because he feels that you are afraid of him. And perhaps if he believed you were capable of loving him he would not be your enemy. Do not be too quick to assume that your enemy is an enemy of God just because he is your enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy precisely because he can find nothing in you that gives glory to God. Perhaps he fears you because he can find nothing in you of God’s love and God’s kindness and God’s patience and mercy and understanding of the weaknesses of men.”

- Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 177

Reflection

Invite the participants to write down the topics about which they would like to engage in Civil Discourse.

- What topics would you like to engage in using Civil Discourse?
- With whom would you like to have those conversations?
- What ideals from these sessions would you want to make sure and take with you into those conversations?

Creating a Civility Covenant

Explain to participants that we are now going to create a Civility Covenant that will serve as a guide for conversation and action in the future for themselves individually, for their family, and for the congregation.

Have participants write their ideas on post-it notes and stick them to the large paper you have posted around the room.

As examples, the covenant may include the following components:

- Commitment to pray for civility among themselves, others, faith community leaders, political leaders, and others they may name.
- Commitment to “lead by example” and practice civility, as you have defined it during your time together. Individuals may want to list particular aspects of civil discourse that they feel important to emphasize.
- Commitment to listening more carefully to those with whom they disagree.
- Commitment to make amends for past incivility.
- Commitment to respect the dignity of every human being.

Call the group back together and ask participants to brainstorm ideas on how they can broaden the impact of this curriculum. Ideas may include:

- Hosting educational programming using the sections from this curriculum and discussion questions above. Consider inviting the wider community.
- Holding a prayer breakfast focused on the importance of civil discourse.
- Preaching or sponsoring events or a season of events designed to foster a deeper understanding of civility.

Once everyone has finished their work, invite them (or small groups at a time) to organize the post-its into general themes or ideas.

Once this work is done, read the groups of post-its aloud. Ask for reflections, additions, changes.

As you complete the work, commit to writing the covenant into a final document and disseminating it throughout the congregation. Also, make a list of any next steps you have agreed to undertake.

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)