

# **The Episcopal Church Office of Government Relations**

## **Civil Discourse Five Week Curriculum**



**OFFICE OF  
GOVERNMENT  
RELATIONS**

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## WEEK I: CIVIL DISCOURSE IN CONTEXT: AN INTRODUCTION

**Materials:** Copies of the handout for each participant, writing instruments, easel with paper and markers

### **Opening Prayer:** *(Read in unison)*

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is discord, union;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

(Prayer attributed to St. Francis, BCP p. 833)

### **Opening:**

*Leader:*

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:21)

In this introduction, we seek to define what we mean by civil discourse in the context of this educational curriculum. The Office of Government Relations defines civil discourse as the following:

Civil discourse is engagement in conversation intended to enhance understanding. Rabbi Steve Gutow, speaking at the Episcopal Church's event Civil Discourse in America<sup>1</sup>, remarked that, "civility is simply demonstrating respect for the dignity of our fellow humans—even those humans with whom we have sharp disagreement. Civility is allowing others to speak, and having the humility to admit that we may have something to learn. Civility favors truth over cheap gain, and patience over knee-jerk judgment."

Let's read that again and on your handout, mark the words or phrases that stand out to you.

*Invite someone else to read the quote from Gutow slowly so the participants have time to mark the words or phrases that stood out for them.*

*Once done, invite participants to name the words or phrases that stood out for them.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/civil-discourse-event>

## Civil Discourse

*Leader:*

In this series, we will focus on civil discourse as a primary strategy for learning from each other and how to use it for effecting change in our government—a strategy that is integral to any successful civic engagement.

Why is civil discourse important for policy advocacy and civic engagement?

Individuals and institutions within our country contain a wealth of knowledge, experiences and perspectives that can help us create a better society and a better world. Civil discourse as a means of engagement, whether among politicians or individuals, is crucial for developing public policies. When applied to political debates, civil discourse helps us to see the merits and faults of particular positions including our own, and can open up new opportunities and ideologies previously unknown.

Through civil discourse, The Office of Government Relations of The Episcopal Church builds relationships by engaging with elected officials and career policy makers throughout the U.S. federal government. These relationships are formed through our advocacy for the policy positions of the Episcopal Church, as passed by General Convention and Executive Council with the aim of influencing federal policies. What this means in practice is engaging in conversations with decision makers about important issues of the church—from immigration policies, to care of the environment, to programs that aim to lift and keep people out of poverty. The policies of the Episcopal Church may not always align with the policy maker's position, but through civil discourse, they engage respectfully, seeking to understand and be understood.

Another primary task is bringing the voices, resources and expertise of Episcopalians and Anglicans into the decision-making processes of our government. The Office connects policy makers to knowledgeable people through the church whose daily lives are impacted by public policy and can help provide unique perspectives and expertise.

A third primary task of the Office of Government Relations is listening to government officials to learn their point of view on a given policy and the concerns of their constituents. Listening to one another not only builds our relationship, but grants us and opportunity to collaborate with them on the development of legislation and policy.

As individual Episcopalians, civil discourse is important as we seek to understand our increasingly complicated world and make the best decisions possible when participating in the democratic process through voting, petitioning, and advocating. We must maintain a thirst to talk with each other respectfully, even in disagreement and even in debate. That thirst will continue to challenge us, expose us to new ideas, and bring us closer together as we continue the pursuit of justice and peace.

If we are looking to persuade others, we cannot do so without dialogue, and we cannot enter into dialogue without first a basis of civility and respect. We also cannot persuade others if we are only interacting with people we mostly agree with.

In this curriculum, we will cover tenets for civil discourse, values-based conversations, the messiness of policymaking, and the importance of maintaining a sacred space for debate. We hope it will motivate you and your communities to enter confidently into constructive conversations on the important issues facing our local communities, our country, and the world.

## **Role Reflection:**

*Leader:*

As we just heard, the Office of Government Relations has three main tasks at hand when building relationships with elected officials and career policy makers.

Office of Government Relations:

- Builds relationships with elected officials and represents the policy positions of the Episcopal Church as passed by General Convention and Executive Council with the goal of influencing federal policies.
- Brings experiences and expertise of Episcopalians and Anglicans into the decision-making processes in our government.
- Listens to government officials to learn their position and to collaborate on the development of legislation and policy.

## **Reflect:**

Following the lead of the Office of Government Relations, how can we adopt similar practices in our own settings? How do we:

- build relationships
- bring what we know to the conversation
- listen and learn

Take some notes as you reflect on this for yourself and your community.

*Invite the participants to reflect on this first by themselves and take notes on their paper. Then invite them to get into groups of three and share what they came up with.*

## **Create a Covenant (15 minutes)**

*Leader:*

As a way to create space for us to have these conversations, we are going to create a covenant of behavior for our time together. We can revisit this each session to see if we need to add or change something based on what we have learned during our time together.

*Hang 1-2 sheets of large paper at the front of the room and write the word Covenant at the top. Ask participants to raise their hands and contribute behavioral norms that should govern your time together. Examples include “raise hand and wait to be called upon” “use G-rated language” “one person talks at a time.”*

**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.

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

