

Guidelines for Dialogue

The following Guidelines for Dialogue are based on the work of Visions, Inc. (www.visions-inc.com). They establish basic ground rules for safe, healthy conversations that will honor the diverse viewpoints and experiences of those engaged in conversation. We recommend discussing these guidelines in the introductory/orientation session and having copies posted and/or available in each conversation. It may even be a helpful grounding exercise to briefly review these at the beginning of every conversation. In the Facilitator Suggestions section which follows, an expanded explanation of each guideline is included for the initial introduction of this material.

- **“Try On”**
Be willing to try on ideas, ways of thinking or being that you may never have considered before, even or perhaps especially if you have a gut instinct to reject it out of hand.
- **“It’s OK to disagree”**
- **“It’s Not OK to shame, blame, and attack self or others”**
Engaging our differences is something we want to do and that we benefit from, but shaming, blaming or attacking ourselves or others is not a helpful way of engaging difference. Agree not to shame, blame, or attack others or ourselves.
- **“Self Focus” – “I” language.**
Focus on your own thoughts and feelings without universalizing them or assuming others/all people agree. Use “I” language to share your experiences, perspectives, and opinions. Be aware of how you are feeling and ask yourself what your feelings might be telling you. Share your feelings when appropriate.
- **“Practice Both/And Thinking”**
Not every question has an either/or right answer. The opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth, not an opposing truth. “BUT” is a warning that Both/And thinking is not being practiced. BUT is generally diminutive, not additive. BUT shrinks back while AND expands.

GROUND RULES

- **Be Aware of “Intent/Impact”.**
Someone may intend one thing with a comment, but the impact may be very different. Take responsibility for both parts of the equation. If something impacts you negatively, be willing to ask if that is what the person intended.
- **Confidentiality.**
What is shared in the group needs to stay in the group. Personal information is shared by the person who owns the information, feelings, and experiences; not by others, unless they have asked and received permission.

Guidelines for Listening

Listening well is an important part of dialogue and conversation. The following tips for enhancing listening skills are taken from *Guidelines for Healthy Theological Discussion* by David Rudolph.

- Ask questions rather than make statements.
- Take a breath before speaking.
- Allow for silence.
- Ask yourself, “Whose perspective is left out in this discussion?”
- ‘Follow your disturbance.’ Notice when you are feeling tense, defensive. Ask yourself, “Where is this coming from—my past training, a painful event?” Try to put yourself in the other person’s place with regard to their passion for their view.

Facilitator Suggestions

Make sure that the *Guidelines for Dialogue* and *Listening* are clearly explained, understood, and agreed to as you enter into intentional Holy Conversations. The Guidelines for Dialogue are reprinted below along with some additional information and/or examples, which you may like to include as you are initially introducing this material.

Introduction

Establishing shared guidelines or ground rules for dialogue is intended to enable people to deal with difficult or complex issues productively, without terrorizing and/or hurting one another.

▪ “Try On”

When you’re shopping for shoes, you don’t buy the first pair of shoes you see. You have to try on even the attractive ones to see if they fit. Sometimes even the shoes you know you’re going to love hurt your feet; and the ones that might not be your first pick end up being the best shoes you’ve ever had. In the same way, be willing to try on ideas, ways of thinking or being that you may never have considered before, even or perhaps especially if you have a gut instinct to reject it out of hand.

Sometimes stretching in this way helps us learn, grow, or develop sensitivities we would not otherwise have. Trying on a new behavior or idea does not necessarily judge old behavior or ideas as wrong. It indicates a willingness to see the benefits and disadvantages of different ways of thinking/being.

▪ “It’s OK to disagree”

This may be self explanatory, but it is a value that we need to name. It is not necessary that we all think alike or agree about every matter. That would be boring. It is OK for us to disagree with one another about an idea, an opinion, or a decision and still value and care for one another. Because we value diversity, this is all the more important to name. Differences aren’t something we need to be afraid of. The next guideline is closely related to this one:

▪ “It’s Not OK to shame, blame, and attack self or others”

Engaging our differences is something we want to do and that we benefit from, but shaming, blaming or attacking ourselves or others is not a helpful way of engaging difference. We agree not to shame, blame, or attack others or ourselves.

Yelling, name-calling, stomping out of meetings, or refusing to talk to one another might be examples of this type of behavior, which we do not want to engage in. Other examples of shaming others might be to say to someone before hearing them out, “We’ve tried that before and it didn’t work.” Or “How could you possibly think that [e.g. something so stupid].” Shaming ourselves might be to belittle our own thoughts, such as saying, “This may be a silly idea, but ...” or “Probably no one will agree with me ...” Examples of blaming might be, “It’s all X’s fault that ...” or “If you hadn’t X, then Y wouldn’t have happened.”

GROUND RULES

- **“Self Focus” – “I” language.**

There are two ways in which “self focus” can be helpful. The first is to focus on your own thoughts and feelings without universalizing them or assuming others/all people agree. Use “I” language to share your experiences, perspectives, and opinions. Phrases such as “everyone thinks,” “we all know,” or “you know” may indicate that we are not focusing on self and that assumptions are being made of how others think.

The second part of self-focus is to focus on yourself and be aware of how you are feeling in a given conversation. Be aware of how you are feeling and ask yourself what your feelings might be telling you. Share your feelings when appropriate. Especially in difficult conversation or during times of disagreement, our feelings may be telling us something. We may need to learn to externalize the feelings when appropriate, simply to name them (i.e. “I’m feeling frustrated, afraid, or angry ...”) rather than acting them out hoping others will guess and respond to them.

- **“Practice Both/And Thinking”**

Not every question has an either/or right answer. This can be especially determined by context. This may be true in X context, but in Y culture or context, the other thing is true. We can be especially mindful of this in terms of how we do or don’t bring the assumptions of “mainstream” church into queer contexts. The opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth, not an opposing truth. “BUT” is a warning that Both/And thinking is not being practiced. BUT is generally diminutive, not additive. BUT shrinks back while AND expands.

- **Be Aware of “Intent/Impact”.**

Someone may intend one thing with a comment, but the impact may be very different. Take responsibility for both parts of the equation.

- **Confidentiality.**

What is shared in the group needs to stay in the group. Personal information is shared by the person who owns the information, feelings, and experiences; not by others, unless they have asked and received permission. If you aren’t sure if something is confidential or not, ask. Err on the side of NOT sharing information that concerns what someone else thinks, feels, or has experienced.

GROUND RULES

From time to time in almost every conversation involving a group or a topic matter that people feel passionately about, there can be a lack of balance between the amount of input that people give to the conversation. Some people are shy and need ample silence before they will enter a conversation; some require time to think and formulate what they are thinking before they are ready to share; others are so excited and comfortable speaking in groups that they jump in to fill any silence or have a tendency to talk over others. When you are aware of one or more people monopolizing a conversation, or others who don't seem to have contributed at all, it might be helpful to try one or more of the following.

- “Talking Stick” – identify some object (stick, ball, etc.) that one must be holding when they wish to share. This can be passed around and helps ensure that only one person at a time is talking. It can also make it more evident when there is a lack of balance and equity between conversation partners.
- Specify an amount of time that must pass between comments.
- Keep track in some way of the number of contributions made by each person; make a point of noting when someone has under-contributed (e.g., “Is there anything you’d like to add to the conversation from your experience?”) or over-contributed (e.g., “You’ve made quite a few comments, can you hold that thought while we hear some of the folks who haven’t yet shared?”). It may be necessary in certain cases for you to talk with someone outside of the group about their amount or manner of contributing. Especially if you are having multiple sessions, it might be good to work one-on-one with anyone who might need some specific feedback and/or encouragement.
- Allow five-ten minutes of journaling or personal reflection on the questions for small and large group discussion to allow people to center their thoughts prior to having those discussions.