

HOW TO HAVE A COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION

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INTRODUCTION

If you're like me, just the thought of having a difficult conversation can send your conflict avoidance radar into overdrive. Need to speak with a spouse about an unmet need? No thanks. Need to speak with a co-worker or boss about an unhealthy office dynamic that involves him? Hide! Need to challenge a friend about her recent behavior? Avoid her. Church having a "holy conversation" about immigration, human sexuality, or some other social issue? Skip.

We all have our healthy and unhealthy ways of relating to conflict. However, growing as a disciple of Jesus Christ will require difficult conversations. They happen in all our relationships and even in our church communities. Learning to manage our emotions, being able to respectfully engage those with whom we disagree or have an unsettled issue, and owning our perspectives are not innate skills. Beyond just learning new skills, engaging in difficult conversations are also key aspects to growing as disciples of Jesus Christ. Group experiences of "holy conversations" create room for dialogue and reflection to help us better understand ourselves and God.

Being able to exhibit self-control, compassion, and grace in highly anxious situations reveals our maturity in Christ. Instinctively, we might flee, freeze, or fight, but by learning to engage in these conversations as disciples of Jesus, we can experience healing and reconciliation. In a culture saturated with winning and losing, debate over dialogue, fear mongering, and an increasingly larger political divide, the church has an opportunity to nurture disciples who are willing to engage in difficult conversations and model for the world how to respectfully disagree in love.

This booklet and the resources connected with it serve as an invitation for you and your church to learn skills and trust in the transforming presence of God's grace that is available to us all as we engage in Courageous Conversations.

NATHANAEL'S WILLINGNESS

1Not many people naming Jesus' twelve disciples from memory would be likely to include Jesus' disciple Nathanael in the top five or six names. Yet Nathanael's question about Jesus is an example of the dynamics at work in the Courageous Conversations project. He asked Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46) Nathanael's question reveals much about him and us.

Looking back, it is easy to laugh at Nathanael's dismissal of Jesus the Nazarene. Yet Nathanael's doubt was legitimate. Nazareth was so unimportant, it probably would not have shown up on any maps. If GPS had been available, it would have had a hard time directing anyone to the tiny city. In Nathanael's perspective, it seemed implausible to consider that the long hoped-for Messiah would have come from such an insignificant town.

For Philip to suggest to Nathanael that they had found the One predicted by Old Testament prophets seemed laughable to Nathanael. Had Nathanael remained skeptical and dismissive of Philip's advice to "come and see," Nathanael would have missed it. He would have missed Jesus, the very One who would not only shape Nathanael's future, but the One who — for Christians — stands at the center of history.

While it might be easier to see ourselves in more prominent disciples like Peter, I contend that we also need to see ourselves in Nathanael. Skepticism and, in some cases, even cynicism, is ingrained in the American way. Recent polls show how little we trust our elected officials. Our political divisiveness has resulted in a lack of trust with those whom we disagree. This is also true theologically. Within The United Methodist Church alone, groups across the theological spectrum claim to be the "real" Wesleyan followers. Each group uses Scripture to authenticate its claims. The result is that we label and dismiss the perspectives of those we worship alongside and attempt to engage in mission to the world. Worse than merely disagreeing in love, we border on apathy, even toward those with whom we are called to love and serve. Instead of modeling for the world beliefs expressed in the axiom "unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, and in all things love," we dismiss, and worse even, we divide. We, too, ask, "Can any good thing come from a Democrat? a Republican? a liberal? a conservative? A southerner? A Yankee? A fan of the SEC?"

When Nathanael was startled by Philip's belief that this Nazarene was the Messiah, Nathanael had to become willing to lay down his assumptions. Giving up long-held assumptions and beliefs is hard work. It takes courage to enter a space of uncertainty. But we see many others in the Bible move from being startled to becoming uncertain and, in faith, grasping for God's guidance (Abram, Moses, Elijah, Saul/Paul, Hebrews 11). It is often when we are vulnerable enough to question our assumptions that we encounter God's grace, as Nathanael did.

The aim of this booklet and the Courageous Conversations project is to move people from skepticism to curiosity onto openness to encounter God's grace. Engaging in difficult conversations takes courage to move past our fear and skepticism to come to the table with those we'd rather just dismiss. Even during the simplest conversations, there are internal and external dynamics that keep us from hearing and learning from one another. These forces also keep us from valuing other members in our churches and can hinder us from recognizing the image of God in others. Being open to God's voice in others by taking a posture of listening and curiosity can help us to have the courage to come to and stay at the table of conversation as Christians. May we, like Nathanael, be willing to encounter the grace of God who is among us in unexpected places.

JESUS MODEL

Jesus certainly had his share of courageous conversations. He rebuked Peter and other disciples (repeatedly), challenged his family, constantly disputed the interpretation of Jewish leaders, and even stood face-to-face against Satan's temptations, just to name a few.

John's gospel records a time when Jesus was cornered into conflict. Jewish leaders brought a woman caught in adultery. Would Jesus side with the law that stated the woman must be stoned or side with lawless mercy and let her go? The leaders had manufactured the situation solely to bring charges against Jesus.

Perhaps you remember the story. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger in the sand. He paused. Perhaps we see Jesus' dependent relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit in stark relief as he searched for a solution. Backed into a corner with someone's life hanging in the balance, Jesus responds, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7. NRSV).

We learn much more from Jesus' response than merely to be amazed at his answer. The lesson continues as the conversation turns to Jesus' interaction with the woman. Jesus addresses her in his typical fashion, using questions, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" Having just had her life spared, now she has to face another question. Yet in this question, Jesus allows the victim the opportunity to speak. Jesus empowers her voice.

Jesus presents a creative alternative. Jesus holds grace and truth in tension as he dealt with the Jewish leaders and the woman in his response, "Neither do I condemn you. Go on your way, and from now on do not sin again."

What would we have done if we were in Jesus' predicament? Would we have affirmed the holiness of the law and allowed the woman to die? Would we have affirmed sloppy mercy by undermining the law? Too often, our society presents false "either/or" predicaments where there are only two choices without the middle way being a viable choice. In Jesus, fully God and fully human, we see that what appears contradictory is held in tension - grace and truth.

Engaging in courageous conversations invites us to keep these dynamics of grace and truth in tension while being open to the Spirit's guidance. We engage in conversation, believing that those we are in dialogue with are valued as people made in the image of God. Learning to hold these dynamics in tension during the anxiety of difficult conversations requires we learn or mature in our Christ-like qualities.

COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS AS SPACE FOR GROWING IN CHRIST

Growing or maturing in Christ requires learning (that's what being a disciple is - one who learns). As adults, we take an active role in determining what we will learn and accommodate into our lives. When we experience anxiety, as we do during a difficult conversation, our response is naturally a

posture of “fight, freeze, or flight.” Any of these three options compounds the problem and inhibits learning. Instead of being open to learning and growth, we assume a posture of self-protection, defensiveness, and attack.

Postures such as self-awareness, self-reflection, and willingness to learn are required for learning, discipleship, growth in Christ (however we say it) to take place. The largest obstacle the church has is in creating a safe environment for learning. This obstacle is real when people come to the table of conversation determined to be “right” or to “win” or are defensive about their opinions. They might also fear the dialogue will only result in more divisiveness.

Creating a safe environment for learning is essential, but it is also difficult. Settings that foster hospitality, grace, and truth honor each person’s unique gifts and perspectives by providing room to practice the ability to own our convictions with humility.

For deep learning to occur, everyone needs to believe his or her voice will be respected and heard. Part of our Methodist heritage from John Wesley is in displaying both humility and “provoking” one another toward love. In Wesley’s *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, he declared, “There is not love of God without patience, and no patience without humility and sweetness of spirit. Humility and patience are the surest proofs of the increase of love... True humility is a kind of self denial. This is the center of all virtues.”ⁱ

Balancing disorientation with a setting of nurture, humility, and openness can create an atmosphere for deep learning. Deep learning requires navigating complex issues by evaluating our assumptions, hearing diverse perspectives and experiences, and then assimilating these into our lives.

Philip’s invitation to Nathanael disoriented him enough to cause him to evaluate his assumption that the Messiah would hail from a noteworthy town. Nathanael was open and trusting enough to join the ministry of Jesus. While not always in a “safe” environment, being a follower of Jesus was safe enough in that it led Nathanael to revise his initial assumptions. This process (which often happens without us noticing) caused Nathanael to live differently by committing his life to learning to follow Jesus, the Messiah from Nazareth. This process may seem simple, yet the first parts can be the hardest: evaluating our assumptions and hearing the perspectives of others that do not align with ours.

The church, then, has an opportunity for holding courageous conversations. The church can serve as a learning organization since it can begin dialogue with a common starting place - God’s grace and truth. It is also in the church where we encounter the disorienting grace of God. We can all come to the table of dialogue, trusting that what has brought us here is a common experience with God’s grace from the Father, in the Son Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Spirit. Our experiences will have their unique nuances, to be sure. With each person being a vital part of the body of Christ, we have the opportunity to create an environment where deep learning and maturation happens. Such spaces for intentional learning (discipleship) help the church display to the world the unity that exists and our genuine love for one another (John 13- 14). These safe spaces in the presence of God are where real dialogue can occur with others with whom we differ.

DIALOGUE VS. DEBATE

Courageous Conversations is an invitation for interpersonal dialogue instead of debate. A debate has the goals of persuasion and to win the argument or be on the right side of the perspective. Debate differs from dialogue. In dialogue, the conversation's outcome is often unclear. The aim is more about attentiveness to differences and openness to new possibilities. Dialogue uncovers people's assumptions and their unique experiences that inform their perspectives in hopes of new insights or possibilities. In our pragmatic, sound-bite driven culture, dialogue appears too slow and indecisive. Thus, most of us are more familiar with debate.

Our title, Courageous Conversations, is accurate because it truly takes courage to enter into dialogue. It takes courage to admit we might be wrong. It takes courage to place the importance of relationship ahead of the need to be right. It takes courage to revise deeply held beliefs. It takes courage to hold our beliefs with humility and to provoke others toward love. It takes an equal amount, if not more, courage to stay in dialogue when someone is pushing our buttons or stating things we find demeaning, offensive, or hurtful. The natural road is "flight, freeze, or fight," to create false either/ors, or to be dismissive of those with whom we disagree.

As Christians who regularly gather around the Table of the Lord's Supper where our unity is expressed, whether we realize it or not, we share the presence of Christ. We are the body of Christ with diverse experiences, opinions, races, ages, and genders. The vows we take in baptism and the liturgy we express in Communion call us to commit to come to the Table and stay at the Table. It takes courage, as Nathanael had (and as Philip had in suggesting he had found the Messiah in nowheresville), to be willing to come to the table of dialogue; and it takes courage to stay at the table of dialogue.

FORCES THAT KEEP US DIVIDED

Seeing the opportunity that the church has for being a venue for courageous conversations is one thing; actually engaging in courageous conversations is another. There are many forces that keep us from listening to one another. Social dynamics and interior biological and neurological reactions come into play when we engage in difficult conversations. Making ourselves aware of these dynamics can go a long way in overcoming the forces that keep us locked in to assumptions and locked away from one another.

SOCIETAL DYNAMICS

It should not surprise us that we continue to have disagreements in the body of Christ. Disputes and divisions are not new. We see in the New Testament that Corinth had factions. Acts 15 recounts how

the early believers disputed and even debated the role of circumcision within the new covenant of Christ.

Christena Cleveland in her book *Disunity in Christ* names a number of these subtle group dynamics at work within the church. One dynamic is what Cleveland calls the “out group homogeneity effect,” the tendency to assume that people of a different group are all alike. “They” (whoever “they” are) are all alike, whereas the people in our group (the in-group) have diverse characteristics. While “they” all think alike, we notice nuances in our camp. So we might lump all liberals as thinking similarly, while we see the varieties of opinions within conservative positions (and vice versa). We can do this with males, females, children, older adults, and so on. Consequently, we end up with inaccurate assumptions about what others believe, or we box people into positions they may or may not hold.

Another subtle force that keeps us divided that Cleveland names is the “Gold Standard Effect.” This dynamic exaggerates differences among groups and allows one group to believe that its group is normative, right, or just better. Since our beliefs are what should be “normal,” we perceive all other groups as inferior. Not only is this attitude antithetical to listening and being open to diverse perspectives, but we may come to believe that we do not need the perspectives of another group. In the Apostle Paul’s language, we become an eye saying to a foot, we have no need of you! (I Corinthians 12:15)

Yet, listening better is not the cure-all. Even if we listened well, examined our assumptions, and gained an appreciation for a different perspective, unity is no guarantee. Thus the goal of engaging in courageous conversations is not unity that equates to uniformity or GroupThink. Courageous conversations aims for respectful listening, honoring the unique presence of Christ in others, and growth in Christ such that we model love that is compassionate and committed to others. (John 13-15). As Cleveland reminds us, “We need to adopt the belief that to be a follower of Christ means to care deeply about and pursue other followers of Christ, including the ones that we don’t instinctively value or like. We need to adopt the belief that to be a follower of Christ means to allow our identity as members of the body of Christ to trump all other identities.”ⁱⁱ

POLITICAL DYNAMICS

It is not news that the American church is situated in an increasingly polarized society. Pew Research and other groups have charted the increasing split between conservatives and liberals over the past forty years. As Michael Slaughter and Charles Gutenson highlight in their insightful book *Hijacked*,ⁱⁱⁱ this split has had an impact on the church when we have allowed our politics to inform our theology instead of the other way around.

Our cultural biases and assumptions influence how we read Scripture and serve to further divide “us” from “them.” Too quickly, we conclude “they” are not reading the Bible “faithfully,” “plainly,” or “as God intends.” Hearing other people’s interpretations of Scripture can seem so disorienting or

egregious that our impulse is to dismiss it. It is precisely at such moments that we can recognize our need to be like Nathanael. Perhaps this will serve as an opportunity for growth.

NEUROLOGICAL DYNAMICS

When we encounter opinions that startle us or cause us to question our deeply held beliefs, our natural reaction is usually not openness and curiosity. The more deeply we hold the belief, the setting in which we are called to question the belief (safe or unsafe), and the manner in which the challenging perspective is presented can cause us to take a posture of defensiveness or even hostility.

If we feel anxiety, our brain sends signals throughout the body to prepare for battle. Our brain begins operating from its survival parts (limbic systems) instead of the thinking part (pre-frontal cortex). In a heated discussion, we might wonder why we're saying what we are saying and/or why we are stating it with such conviction. It's often because the anxiety of the moment narrowed our ability to think. Instead of being in a posture of curiosity and able to see creative alternatives, we were in a posture of fighting. And we didn't even realize it! In order to adopt a posture of curiosity, we need to feel safe. The next time you find yourself in "the heat of the battle," recognize that for some reason you don't feel safe. Rather than engage with emotionalists, notice the tone and anxiety level of the conversation. Then, "Don't get mad, get curious."

TRUST

One of the biggest barriers to fruitful conversations is trust. Without trust, there is no room for safety. Without safety, we will not be open to engage on a meaningful level and move the conversation forward.

Mistrust leads to hasty conclusions or even assigning ulterior motives. If we believe all people who support gun control have the ultimate goal of pacifism or socialism, whenever someone makes a comment in favor of gun control, we might jump to false conclusions. The reality might be that someone supports gun control but rejects both pacifism and socialism. Entering into courageous conversations requires that we suspend our judgments about someone else's motives so we can adequately hear his or her unique perspective. If we perceive that every time our teenager leaves her bed unmade as a subtle slap at our authority, we might overlook her need to slow down and reduce the number of activities she is participating in.

As Christians attempting to hold courageous conversations, our overriding perspective should be that we are all far from perfect and are continuing in the process of sanctification. This means we extend grace to one another by trying our best not to judge motives and to not assume that everyone has had the same life-shaping experiences. We also realize when we are creeping into **confirmation bias**; that is, trusting only that information that supports our previously held beliefs.

When we are tempted to get mad or when we feel our minds narrowing, we need to step back and get curious. We need to ask, “Why do they hold that position that seems so radically different from my own?” “How does their faith inform their perspective?” “What formative events that are different from my own have shaped their perspectives?” In *Turning to One Another*, Margaret Wheatley asserts, “Curiosity is a great help to good conversations. It’s easier for us to tell our story, to share our dreams and fears, when we feel others are genuinely curious about us.”iv

PRACTICAL ADVICE

Having explored the reasons for engaging in courageous conversations and some of the dynamics that keep us from one another, let’s explore some practical steps we can take to make sure our interpersonal and church dialogues are safe spaces for learning. Some are obvious and seemingly easy, such as prayer. Others might not occur to us as readily and require us to have the courage to be vulnerable.

PRAYER

My favorite definition of prayer is “intentionally being in the presence of God.” Prayer can simply be bringing ourselves before God in stillness and humility. Like the examples of Job (Job 40:1-5) or Elijah (1 Kings 19:11-13), discerning God’s will often happens when we do the hard work of intentionally quieting the noise, being still, and listening.

During such times of prayer, we make ourselves available to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Here, God can reveal to us where we are being self-centered or acting out of fear or insecurity. Prayer can be the place the Holy Spirit guides us into creative spaces that open us to possibilities we might not have considered.

While we normally think of prayer as a solitary activity, group time benefits from intentional times of silent prayer as well. Making time for silent and guided intercessory prayers in groups that are tackling complex issues can be the most meaningful use of time. These might serve as the most valuable times together in centering people’s emotions and perspectives on God’s ways instead of their own.

STARTING WITH OURSELVES

The best place to start any difficult conversation is by focusing on the one thing we can control - ourselves. This one piece of advice can be the most valuable. Without realizing it, our habits can be counterproductive to improving conversations because we are unaware of our internal dynamics.

It might be that we blame others for making us mad. The reality is that we alone are responsible for our emotions. No matter how much others “push our buttons” or say something that is our “pet-peeve,” we control how we react.

One hint for productive dialogue that helps each person own his or her opinion is by using “I” language. “You” language is often received as aggressive. So instead of, “Why don’t you ever tell me you love me anymore?” we would state, “I need to feel more appreciated.” Instead of, “Your mother-in-law is out to get me!” it becomes, “I need to hear why you think that is the case. I don’t understand.”

We might ask ourselves, “Why am I reacting this way?” It might be that you noticed during or after a conversation that you were more heated than you meant to be. Instead of stating your position clearly and calmly or asking for clarification, you retreated into silence or became aggressive in both tone and the words you used. Take time to reflect on conversations you have had in the past that did not go the way you hoped and ask yourself, “Why did I react that way?” “What am I afraid of?” Taking time to reflect on our reactions might reveal dynamics about how difficult conversations were handled in our family growing up, how we have built up stress, or even just having eaten bad meatballs. Either way, the best place to begin to start the conversation again is with confession. We are not perfect and are continuing the process of growing in Christ (Philippians 1:6).

One way to focus on our response before and during a courageous conversation is to be clear what we are hoping to achieve by the conversation. Are we aiming to clarify our parenting styles? to win the debate? to be right? to mask an insecurity? to learn more about another person’s perspective and/or a particular topic? Often, we find that we have a mix of motivations. Clarifying the goal helps us stay on track and gives us more control over our emotions.

To focus the goal for particular conversations, the authors of *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* suggest three helpful questions: (1) “What do I really want for myself? (2) What do I really want for others? (3) What do I really want for the relationship?”^v We could add one more: “As best as I can discern it, what does God want in this situation?”

CHURCH-WIDE COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION

The element that will have the most impact in having meaningful courageous conversations as a local church will be the ability to create an environment of trust and hospitality. If people feel that they are being heard and respected, they are more likely to voice their opinions. The opposite is also true, however.

There are a number of ways to achieve this (please see the resources at the end of this booklet and the *Courageous Conversations* website). If possible, the church should create a task force to design the logistics for the conversations. Factors such as the physical environment of the room (large circle or small tables), guidelines for the dialogue, and candles and other religious symbols are great reminders of God’s presence during the conversations. Clarifying and displaying expectations or guidelines for the conversations can serve as reminders during the conversations, but also set the expectations from the beginning about how the conversations will take place.

Another key factor is the role of the facilitator. If the facilitator is not trusted by all parties and/or does not have the skills needed to facilitate a good conversation (i.e. always feels he or she has to impart opinions, etc.), this person will shut down the conversation. Make sure all parties see the seriousness and thoughtfulness that has gone on in designing the conversations so that they will also be able to see the gentleness (fruit of the Spirit) of the conversation.

INTERPERSONAL COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

Much of the skills that work at a group level are also true for courageous conversations in our interpersonal relationships. We've already mentioned the focusing question, "What is it I really want?" Another strategy when you notice the anxiety level going up is to focus more on trying to understand the other person's perspective more than proving your point.

To slow the conversation down, see the conversation as the beginning of an ongoing dialogue instead of as the only time you will be able to address the issue. Rehearsing with a friend to clarify your thoughts can also hone your conversational skills.

Sometimes the mere thought of the conversation can be paralyzing because you are unsure of how the other person will react or where you need to begin. Trusting that you are better off attempting the conversation than not and that God's presence will be available as you listen and speak from your needs should lend a spark of courage.

When we view courageous conversations from the vantage point of growing as disciples of Jesus Christ, we realize that these skills and practices help us as individuals and as a community of believers to model the love of Christ we are called to embody (John 15:12, 17)

AND FINALLY...

What might happen if we decide to engage in courageous conversations? We might have to swallow our pride. We might name some of our deepest fears. We might engage in some painful and scary conversations with those closest to us. We also might learn to express our deepest desires more clearly for others to meet. We might learn to hear someone's perspective that challenges us to new heights in our relationship with God and others. A scarier question might be, "What if we fail to engage in courageous conversations?"

Growing as a disciple often requires hard work on our part. It takes the courage of posturing ourselves with openness and curiosity like Nathanael and like Jesus did in offering grace and truth. We end with Margaret Wheatley's advice, "I hope you'll begin a conversation, listening for what's new. Listen as best you can for what's different, for what surprises you. See if this practice helps you learn something new."vi

- I Steve W. Manskar and Diana L. Hynson, *A Perfect Love: Understanding John Wesley's A Plain Account Of Christian Perfection* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2003), (Q. 38 [2], 78).
- Ii Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ* (Downers Grove, Intervarsity Press, 2013), 97.
- Iii Charles E. Gutenson and Mike Slaughter, *Hijacked: Responding to the Partisan Church Divide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012).
- Iv Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning to One Another*, (San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002), 30.
- V Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron Mcmillian, Al Switzler, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* (New York: Lagrawhill, 2002), 34.
- Vi Wheatley, 36.

