

# Respectful Conversations

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All of us can provide examples of where we have had significant conversations that have changed the way we behave, think or interact with others. We might also have experiences of conversations that have been less fruitful or have been extremely hurtful either to us or to others with whom we are trying to speak. In any church, it is necessary for us to understand the importance of having constructive and respectful conversations with others about difficult issues. This might include conversations about beliefs, character issues, concerns about child safety, supervising ministry leaders or providing feedback to leaders or people in your congregation.

It is important that we are all skilled in having these conversations in a respectful way that leads to personal development and faith growth rather than leading to hurt and withdrawal.

## Jesus models respectful conversations.

We see Jesus throughout his life having respectful conversations with people. The woman at the well (John 4: 7-30), the rich young ruler (Matt 19: 16-30), the chief priests and teachers (Matt 21: 12-17, 23-46) and the Pharisees (Matt 22: 15-22, 41-46) are all examples of conversations that Jesus had where he challenged those around Him but yet showed respect and love to them in the conversations.

Jesus' interactions with the disciples also show him inviting them into a deeper relationship with himself but also challenging behaviour or beliefs in order to help them grow in their maturity. Jesus was able to entrust the ongoing mission of His church with his disciples because they had grown to sufficient maturity to continue without Jesus' physical presence.

Jesus didn't avoid the difficult conversations or issues. He affirmed people's identity as daughters and sons of God but challenged behaviour to help people mature in their faith. *"For many churches, as they seek to create comfortable environments in the form of worship services or small groups, have lost their ability to challenge people in meaningful ways."* (Mike Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture*) Our ability to challenge people requires us to have these conversation in a respectful way that has love at the core.

We can all learn how to engage in respectful conversations that lead to growth and maturity.

## What are the dynamics in a respectful conversation?

Conversations can happen in two settings. The first is the informal conversations that happen over morning tea, before or after a church service, while we are catching up with someone or in the corridor. We may not plan to have these conversations but sometimes we find ourselves in a conversation about a significant issue before we realise it is happening.

The second type of conversation is a planned conversation. We notice that something has happened, or we have to raise an issue with someone and we organise to meet with them to raise the concern or discuss the issue.

The book *Crucial Conversations* (by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan and Switzler) suggests that a conversation becomes crucial when four things occur:

- Opinions vary
- The stakes are high
- Emotions run strong
- Results could have a big impact on your quality of life.

They suggest that conversations need to be safe to allow for people to hear the feedback that is being given and there are some important steps we can take to develop safe environments.

## How do we have these conversations?

There are some key steps we can take to make sure we bring our best approach to engaging in difficult conversations.

### 1. Stop and Reflect

#### Examine yourself

What are you feeling and why?

Take some time to reflect on the issue.

What is the relationship that you have with this person? Do you have supervisory responsibility for them and therefore you have a responsibility to raise concerns with them?

If you are feeling upset, are there personal issues that this has raised for you?

Why is this an issue?

#### Examine your church

As you consider your own reaction, consider the culture and personality of your church. Does your church have a blunt “tell it like it is” culture or a “sweep it under the rug” culture?

Are there areas of growth for your church community to equip and train people to have respectful conversations well?

#### Ask Questions

What else is happening for this person?

What do I want from this conversation?

What does the other person want from this conversation?

What roadblocks might be encountered in the conversation?

Asking ourselves good questions before we go into a conversation can help us to get perspective on the conversation and enables us to extend grace and truth into the reality. It can also help us identify the type of conversation we are taking part in.

### **Communicate Facts**

Often facts are less controversial and more persuasive. Share facts or ask people to clarify their understanding with facts. Often facts can calm stressful or emotional conversations.

## **2. Prepare for the conversation**

It is important that we let the person know that we need to have a conversation about an issue. Allow them time to prepare, emotionally and mentally. Let them know they can bring a support person if they wish to.

Make sure, if there is any conflict of interest for people involved, this is identified and a way forward is planned. Does someone else need to be present or lead the conversation?

What is the key issue?

Where is the best place for the conversation to happen?

What outcome do you want at the end of the conversation?

## **3. During the conversation**

Stay calm during the conversation. Be aware of your emotions and if you notice that things are becoming driven by emotions, suggest that people take a break.

Provide a balanced view in the conversation.

Listen carefully and be present in hearing the person.

Come to an agreement about next steps.

Use direct and open communication

## **4. Following the conversation**

If there are follow up actions, do them promptly.

Make sure that any notes that are taken during the conversation are provided to people in the conversation.

Debrief (don't gossip) with someone you trust if needed.

# **A Framework for a Formal Conversation**

When we know we need to have a formal conversation with someone, it is helpful to plan and prepare before the conversation. This makes sure that we can remain calm in the conversation.

The following structure can be helpful when we are have a formal conversation:

- State the issue
- Give a specific example
- Say why it matters
- Restate the issue
- Ask for their perspective
- Ask questions



- Summarise your understanding
- Move towards a resolution/plan

### Things to consider:

Don't have conversations when you are angry or under a lot of pressure.

If you are concerned about the conversation, practice the conversation with someone you trust before the actual meeting.

It is important that you provide the opportunity for the person to give their point of view and for you to listen carefully.

Remember we are seeking to encourage people (including ourselves) to live into their true identity (as a son or daughter of God) in very direct yet graceful ways.

Don't avoid the difficult issues. We are not helping people in our congregations grow in maturity if we avoid the challenging conversations.

### Seek Unity:

We will not always agree with people on theological positions but we can affirm and engage with people as children of God.

When we are unable to reach agreement, it is important to remind ourselves that we are brothers and sisters in Christ, we are family. A good question to ask when we cannot reach agreement is "How might we live as brothers and sisters moving forward?"

*"Biblical community is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of Jesus in the midst of conflict."*<sup>1</sup>

It is important that we remember that as family of God, we should seek to show grace and love to each other, even when we disagree.

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<sup>1</sup> J.R. Briggs, *"That Discussion that you dread"*