

CONVERSATION FORMAT

- 1.) Priest introduces the Process:
Open with Prayer & Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:1-6
Agenda and Schedule for the Session
- 2) Divide Participants into groups of 6-8 ; designate leaders and scribe/reporters for each group.
- 3) Discussion topics: Begin by going over the guidelines and modify as needed for group consent.
 - A. My Personal History With This Issue
(no notes or reports on this segment)
 1. Have you had encounters or relationships with homosexuals that have affected your feelings and beliefs about homosexuality?
 2. What books, movies, television programs have shaped you feelings and beliefs about homosexuality?
 3. Have you been in any Bible studies, theological reflections, or other church programs that dealt with sexuality? If so, how did they affect your feelings and beliefs about homosexuality?
 4. Do you regard your church as “welcoming to gays and lesbians?” If so, does that welcome extend to including gays and lesbians in leadership positions?
 - B. What are your main hopes and concerns around the issue of blessing same sex unions?
 - C. Given that Episcopalians differ over the issue of whether to bless same sex unions, what are the pros and cons of trying to hold the Church together?
 - D. If you are concerned to include homosexual people as fully accepted members of the Church, what do you see as the minimum pastoral response the Church should offer – what, short of sacramental marriage, would be an adequate pastoral response to same sex couples in committed relationships?
 - E. If you are opposed to the blessing of same sex unions, what pastoral responses do you believe the church can offer to same sex couples that would not be fatal to the unity of the Church – praying for them, blessing their homes, etc. Be creative.
 - F. If the Church did authorize blessing same sex unions, how could such blessings best be done to minimize the divisiveness and pain for those who are opposed to such blessings?
- 4) Reports From Small Groups To Large Group & Closing Prayer

INTRODUCTION OF CONVERSATION PROCESS FOR PRIESTS

The Conversation Process is intended to:

1. To move our congregations beyond venting the feelings and beliefs they already have.
2. To encourage an actual conversation between persons instead of a debate over ideas.
3. To open hearts and minds to new insights and creative proposals.
4. To practice the art of caring for each other despite differences of opinion.

To make this work, it is important to actually follow the format. We have found that groups tend to disregard the format and fall back into the old patterns of discourse. In order to make the process work, we believe it is advisable for you:

1. To become personally familiar with the format in advance. If you have questions about the intent of the format, please contact a member of the Same Sex Blessing Committee.
2. Arrange an occasion for the conversation. Allow at least two hours. (Our experience is that this is the absolute minimum time for the process. It may well take more.)
3. This process can be done by a Vestry, Sunday School Class, or an adult forum. The challenge is making sure people of differing opinions participate. The key to the process is talking across the lines of difference, not forming groups who already agree with each other and reinforce the opinions they brought to the table. It may be necessary to personally request some people to attend in order to insure diverse viewpoints.
4. Select group leaders in advance. Facilitating this small group discussion is a challenging job. No one can do it well flying by the seat of their pants. They need to spend time in advance praying and learning the process.
5. Give the group leaders copies of the Conversation Format, the Conversation Guidelines, and Introduction of the Conversation Process for Group Leaders in advance so they can study them.
6. Provide a space in which groups of 6-8 persons can sit in circles and talk without disturbing each other.
7. Clergy should be available to help group leaders should problems arise.

GUIDELINES FOR CHRISTIAN CONVERSATION

The goal of this process is for people to have genuine, personal conversation in which they come to understand each other and perhaps have new thoughts or feelings. It is not a debate. There is no way to “win” in this process – only to learn and grow. Your objective is not to convince someone else to agree with you. Nor have you lost anything if you come to agree with another person. The best sign that this process has been worthwhile is if you have a new thought about something or come to understand something or someone in a new way.

These guidelines are intended to help create a safe space for Christian conversation. They are not written in stone. Your group is free to modify them or supplement them in whatever way will best help you have a caring Christian conversation about difficult issues.

1. We will not express hatred or contempt for each other or for any group of people.
2. We will not interpret moral or theological convictions as hatred or contempt.
3. We will not interrupt each other, even to agree or offer support.
4. We will listen respectfully and carefully to others, trying to understand what they are saying and find points of agreement.
5. We will not attempt to dominate the group by monopolizing time, by raising our voices, or any other means.
6. If the Group Leader asks us to stop speaking to allow others to speak, we will do so graciously.
7. We will not be respectful of individual confidentiality, with the understanding that the comments of the group will be reported back to the larger group.
8. We will treat personal information as giving human context to people’s beliefs, not as reasons to dismiss or discredit them.
9. We will address all our comments to the whole group (meaning the small group) rather than having side bar conversations or talking in sub-groups. We will speak one at a time and listen respectfully to each other.

INTRODUCTION TO CONVERSATION FORMAT FOR GROUP LEADERS

The goal of this process is for people to have genuine, personal conversation in which they come to understand each other and perhaps have new thoughts or feelings. It is not a debate. There is no way to “win” in this process – only to learn and grow. The Group Leader is the key to making this process work.

1. It is important for you to maintain a primary role as facilitator of the group rather than dominator. To that end, please refrain from expressing your views on the discussion questions, at least until after everyone else has had an opportunity to speak about that question. This does not apply to the “My Personal History” section.
2. Have the group review the guidelines in advance and ask if these guidelines are acceptable or if they need to be modified or supplemented. Make sure the whole group has bought into whatever set of guidelines you can agree on.
3. Your most important job is insuring that each person has an opportunity to speak about each question. Try to prevent side-bar conversations or sub-grouping. All comments to be made to the whole group, with one person speaking at a time, and everyone listening respectfully to that person.
4. Do not skip or minimize the “My Personal History” section. Although some people may be reluctant to share very much, this section is crucial to personalizing the discourse so that it can be a conversation instead of a debate.
4. Limit the length of people’s answers as needed in order to insure that everyone gets a chance to speak. Some people tend to filibuster. It is essential to the process for everyone to have a chance to speak and to be heard. People are, of course, also free to refrain from speaking.
5. Appoint a scribe/reporter at the beginning to take notes and report back to the large group. You should not try to serve as scribe/reporter as well as group leader.
6. Feel free to use other group process techniques – power sticks, reflecting back, etc. – that may improve the exchange. We hope you will use this format, but not let it prevent you from using your own creativity and skill to facilitate authentic constructive interaction.
7. If someone arrives late, ask them to read the Guidelines first, and sit out the discussion of the question being considered when they arrived. Invite them to join in on the next question.