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**Guidelines**

**Overview/Framework**

1. At the base of many of our differences is serious mistrust of the “other” (those who are different from us or who don’t share our same values and beliefs), and much of it happens because we avoid serious engagement in face-to-face efforts to foster understanding of the “other.” In “Building Cultures of Trust,” religious scholar and historian Martin Marty offers the thesis that “development of cultures of trust will hold more promise and can draw on the energies of more citizens if there is concentration on the building blocks of a society. Those who build can then draw on both individual efforts and proposals for change on social and communal levels, including national levels, and even beyond.” He asserts that we live within cultures and sub-cultures—in terms of religion, race, ethnicity, political positions, work and other interests, etc.—and we may reside in several. There is general mistrust among these groups, and until we build not just understanding, but trust, among and across these cultures, we will continue to struggle mightily with our differences.
2. Intentional dialogue or conversations around our differences, aimed at understanding each other and our differences in a safe environment, is essential to building relationships—and thereby trust—which will make it possible to address differences more constructively.
3. Differences are seldom resolved completely. Perhaps a better way of speaking about how we approach dealing with differences might be conflict “transformation.” Often we look for a “quick fix” to a presenting problem, rather than getting to the core of what is causing it and addressing that. John Paul Lederach, in *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation: Clear Articulation of the Guiding Principles by a Pioneer in the Field*, suggests that transformation is a better way of looking at how we deal with conflict than “resolution,” which strives to get rid of conflict, sometimes by co-opting one or more of the parties in conflict. In resolution, we don’t necessarily resolve a conflict to everyone’s satisfaction, but with transformation we can determine ways to address our conflicts constructively and live with them.
4. Language matters a lot. Many, if not most of us, don’t realize how value-laden some of our communications seem to be. We often transfer motives onto others without even thinking, blame others, don’t truly listen or misinterpret what others say without seeking clarification—and that is just the beginning. We personally need to take more responsibility for honest communication that avoids blaming, labeling, making assumptions, etc., and that strives for clear expression of what we are feeling and why, and seeking clarification/understanding when we aren’t clear on what others are communicating.
5. The framework needed for discussions/conversations needs to vary depending on the situation or desired outcome. A very structured approach like Everyday Democracy/Study Circles or National Issues Forum, which presents different perspectives on a given issue (usually 3 or 4 perspective on an issue along a spectrum) in as unbiased a way as possible, with pros and cons related to each view, will probably be the best approach for difficult issue conversations in congregations or other settings where wide differences exist. This is helpful for the leader as well, as it helps to lessen what might be considered the leader’s bias on an issue. A more open-ended approach, like the World Café, may be most beneficial when the differences may not be as vast and a group is seeking paths to knowledge, action, etc.

**Planning for a Sacred Conversation**

1. Create a “safe space” for the conversation

NOTE: This goes beyond physical safety to include attention to ensuring emotional, physical, and psychological “comfort” and well-being.

1. Choose a neutral space (i.e. not a space associated with a specific group representing a specific point of view related to the topic of conversation).
2. Choose an appropriate space for the size of the group (i.e. not too crowded if a large group, not cavernous if a small group).
3. Choose a welcoming space, or find ways to make the space feel welcoming.
4. Set an appropriate timeframe for the type of conversation to be conducted (so as not to feel either rushed or a need to speak longer than needed).
5. Configure the space properly for the type of conversation (individual tables for World Café conversations, etc.).
6. Provide for an appropriate facilitator for the specific conversation (e.g. neutral, skilled at keeping the conversation on track, etc.)
7. Ensure that the environment is comfortable for participants (e.g. temperature, lighting, seating, etc.)
8. Ensure easy access to other facilities/needs (restrooms, refreshment, etc.), as well as accessibility for physically disabled persons.
9. Provide and enforce appropriate ground rules (see below).
10. Carefully set the focus of the conversation—limit it to a manageable scope, and keep it neutral in tone. Be prepared to provide clarification when there are questions.
11. Have a notetaker(s) and provide appropriate materials based on the type of conversation being conducted. Potential needs include, but are not limited to:
12. Flip charts and/or white boards
13. Markers
14. Note paper and writing implements
15. Blank newsprint for covering World Café tables
16. Computer/projector
17. Overhead projector
18. Screen
19. Other
20. Prepare basic “ground rules” for conversations—the “Golden Rule” provides a good foundation. The following provide a foundation that can be modified/supplemented by the group:
21. One person speaks at a time.
22. All persons are encouraged to speak, but no one will be forced to speak.
23. Each person seeks to listen with intent to understand; questions seeking clarification to promote understanding are encouraged.
24. All that is said within the discussion is confidential unless otherwise determined by the group.
25. No side discussions or attempts to “win over” other participants or “win points” are permitted.
26. All discussion focuses on the issue and its merits from the perspectives of the person speaking—not on the character of a person expressing a different position or view.
27. Speakers should focus on using “I” comments that reflect their own understandings/ feelings about an issue.
28. “You” comments are appropriate when seeking clarification or understanding where others stand with regard to the issue (e.g. “Could you please help me to understand what you mean when you say…?); “you” comments should never be used in an accusatory way (e.g. “You’re making me angry,” “Why aren’t you listening to me?” or “You just don’t understand”).
29. Avoid use of “always” or “never”—both are seldom the case in any situation.
30. The group will determine specific rules/signals concerning the following:
31. Length of comments
32. Loss of focus on the issue at hand
33. Conversation domination by one or more participants
34. How to invite quieter participants into the conversation without coercion
35. How to ensure that clarifying questions are recognized and addressed at the appropriate time
36. How to deal with violations of other rules
37. Other issues as appropriate
38. Encourage and help participants to prepare for conversations in advance (where possible).
39. Provide appropriate materials on the topic to be discussed.
40. Develop a personal covenant that participants acknowledge, agree to, and use to guide behavior during conversation. Here are some components for a personal covenant:
41. I will enter into conversation with a positive attitude and an open mind and heart.
42. I will stay focused on the specific issue.
43. I will speak only when recognized/appropriate.
44. I will not interrupt others while they are speaking.
45. I will listen with intent to understand when others are speaking, and will ask for clarification if necessary.
46. I will speak based on my own understanding of and feelings about the issue.
47. I will not place blame on others for my feelings.
48. I will not attack others when they express differing views.
49. I will not dominate the conversation.
50. I will seek out input from those with differing views in an effort to understand.
51. I will seek out input from those who are quiet without being coercive.
52. I will honor the “sacred space” of the conversation by maintaining confidentiality unless otherwise determined by the group.
53. I will not “gossip” or speak about others in the group behind their backs.
54. I will not seek to “win points” or build factions within the group.
55. I will gently ask for accountability to the group’s “ground rules” when I feel they are being violated.
56. Urge participants to engage in a personal self-awareness inventory. Potential questions include:
57. What are my biases?
58. What behaviors in others trigger negative responses from me? How do I usually respond, and how can I respond more appropriately and/or constructively?
59. Where do I tend to fail or fall short in my own communications? How can I do better?
60. Suggest other appropriate preparation.
61. Dress comfortably/appropriately for the setting.
62. Get appropriate rest prior to difficult conversations.
63. Try to avoid stressful situations prior to difficult conversations.
64. Eat properly and avoid use of alcohol or medication that affects critical thinking (unless such medication is necessary for a medical condition).
65. Exercise, meditate, pray, or engage in activity that helps in mental/emotional/physical preparation for conversation.
66. Warn the facilitator of any personal issues (physical, emotional, etc.) that may have an effect on the conversation.

**Resources**

NOTE: These may be useful for planners, facilitators, and participants.

1. General
2. Everyday Democracy (<http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/index.aspx>); also includes specific issue study guides
3. National Issues Forum (<http://www.nifi.org/>); also includes specific study guides
4. Conflict Resolution Network: <http://www.crnhq.org/>
5. Creating a safe space
6. Creating Safe Space: <http://www.ncdinet.org/media/docs/0782_CreatingaSafeSpace.pdf>; while the focus is on creating safe space for race, class, gender and sexual identity, the concepts apply in any conversation.
7. Creating Safe Space in Our Churches: <http://www.progressivebrethren.org/dl/wc/ss/CreatingSafeSpace.pdf>
8. Active listening
9. Cooperative learning series: Active Listening: <http://www.studygs.net/listening.htm>
10. Building Friendships: Listening Skills (study module): <http://www.togetherwecan.fcs.msue.msu.edu/Portals/0/Module3/Part3/TWC_Module3_pt3.pdf>
11. Devereaux Study Guide: Listening: <http://learn.devereux.org/nd/guides/qs-Listening.html>
12. Effective Listening Skills - An essential for good communication: <http://www.managementstudyguide.com/effective-listening-skills.htm>
13. Summary of active listening concepts: <http://istudy.psu.edu/FirstYearModules/Listening/Summary.html>
14. Model Ground Rules (attached)
15. Model Personal Covenant (attached)

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**Ground Rules for Group Conversations**

Conversations take place on many levels and in many settings. Ground rules are essential when the conversation involves many persons and issues over which persons of good will may differ. Ground rules help to foster order and respect, reminding participants of their responsibilities as valuable contributors to a productive conversation that results in better understanding among the persons involved.

Individual groups may wish to supplement this list and are encouraged to do so as they see fit.

1. Only one person shall speak at a time.
2. All persons are encouraged to speak, but no one will be forced to speak.
3. Each person will seek to listen with intent to understand; questions seeking clarification to promote understanding are encouraged.
4. All discussion within the group context is confidential unless otherwise determined by the group.
5. No side discussions or attempts to “win over” other participants or “win points” are permitted.
6. All discussion will focus on the issue and its merits from the perspectives of the person speaking—remarks shall not focus on the character of a person expressing a different position or view or make assumptions as to what others are saying.
7. Speakers should focus on using “I” comments that reflect their own understandings/feelings about an issue.
8. “You” comments are appropriate when seeking clarification or understanding where others stand with regard to the issue (e.g. “Could you please help me to understand what you mean when you say…?); “you” comments should never be used in an accusatory way (e.g. “You’re making me angry,” “Why aren’t you listening to me?” or “You just don’t understand”).
9. Participants should avoid use of the words “always” or “never”—both are seldom the case in any situation.
10. The group may wish to determine additional rules/signals to enhance its work. Some other rules may concern the following:
11. Length of comments
12. Loss of focus on the issue at hand
13. Conversation domination by one or more participants
14. How to invite quieter participants into the conversation without coercion
15. How to ensure that clarifying questions are recognized and addressed at the appropriate time
16. How to deal with violations of other rules
17. Other

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**Personal Covenant for Group Conversations**

Conversations take place on many levels and in many settings. Ground rules for groups help to foster order and respect, reminding participants of their responsibilities as valuable contributors to a productive conversation that results in better understanding among the persons involved.

A personal covenant that each participant acknowledges and agrees to will guide personal behavior in keeping with the ground rules and maintaining respectful and productive conversations.

I acknowledge and will strive to abide by this covenant during my participation in the following conversation:

Signature Date

1. I will enter into this conversation with a positive attitude, an open mind, and an open heart.
2. I will stay focused on the issue.
3. I will speak only when recognized/appropriate.
4. I will not interrupt others while they are speaking.
5. I will listen with intent to understand when others are speaking, and will ask for clarification if necessary.
6. I will speak based on my own understanding of and feelings about the issue.
7. I will not place blame on others for my feelings.
8. I will not attack others when they express differing views.
9. I will not dominate the conversation.
10. I will seek out input from those with differing views in an effort to understand.
11. I will seek out input from those who are quiet without being coercive.
12. I will honor the “sacred space” of the conversation by maintaining confidentiality unless otherwise determined by the group.
13. I will not “gossip” or speak about others in the group behind their backs.
14. I will not seek to “win points” or build factions within the group.
15. I will examine by personal biases and communication weaknesses so that I am aware of them and will work to avoid having them interfere in the conversation.
16. I will gently ask for accountability to the group’s “ground rules” when I feel they are being violated.