

Grace and Dialogue

Shared Conversations on Difficult Issues

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.

James 1:19

These notes have been prepared by the Shared Conversations design team and are offered as a resource for the General Synod in July 2016.

1. Introduction

Since September 2014 the Church of England has been engaged in a small revolution. It may not seem so to all those who have been involved, but it has nevertheless marked a watershed in how things can be done.

The Regional Shared Conversations (RSC) process has enabled some of us to talk with each other in a way that we may never have before about the challenges posed by human sexuality.

The novelty of this lies not only in the RSCs themselves, nor even that they have tackled the many issues raised for Christians by human sexuality. The real revolution lies in the way we have talked – the fact that we have been talking *with* each other rather than *at* each other.

We have been learning about the difference between *dialogue* and *debate*. While debate certainly has its place, it also has its limitations. The purpose of these notes is to share with Members of the General Synod some of what has been learned because it suggests a way forward when the Church is divided on difficult issues.

All too often Christians do not get on as well with each other as we should and as Jesus taught us. We disagree about all sorts of things: not just same-sex marriage and whether women should be bishops, but what forms of service to use and whether to remove old pews and replace them with new chairs. There are times when it seems that everything one person does will be criticised and undermined by someone else.

In many ways disagreement is healthy. It shows that people really care about things, and perhaps disagreement is an inevitable corollary of all change: it's often about who has to change, the cost of change, and who has to pay it.

But disagreement can also be divisive, destructive and dangerous to our health, both individually and collectively. It can disguise the many things we do agree about; it can distort people's understanding of what being a Christian means; and it can dismay and divert those who would otherwise join us.

If disagreement is inevitable then we have to learn to do it better. This suggests finding ways that enable us to understand fully what we disagree about, and why.

These notes set out some ways to help us turn debate and confrontation into dialogue, empathy, shared understanding and the commitment to love each other even when – *perhaps especially when* – we are deeply opposed.

2. Degrees of disagreement

Disagreement comes in many forms. Some of them may seem relatively trivial; others are more fundamental. The first rule of finding a healthy way through disagreement, however, is to treat all disagreement as important, because what may seem minor or irrelevant to you may not be to someone else.

This is because disagreement always operates at more than one level. Let's take an issue such as removing the pews. Superficially this may just be about where and how people sit during worship, about conservation, or about the historic familiarity of the furniture, and if your focus is on the worship more than the sitting then you may not think it is very important whether people sit on pews or chairs. But how and where people sit during worship has several dimensions:

1. The physical and aesthetic: comfort, accessibility, audibility, lines of sight, whether the type of seating is perceived to complement or contradict the place of worship.
2. The relational and behavioural: where you sit may determine who you do – or don't – sit next to, the effect on relationships among the congregation and consequently how people behave towards each other.
3. The symbolic: the nature and placing of seating carries a range of meanings for some if not for others; and often differences over seating may really be about differences over more important things or over other changes that are happening.

Remember, these dimensions of difference arise just from questions about furniture and seating. When the differences stem from human sexuality, then to these dimensions you can add:

4. **Biblical hermeneutics** – how we interpret Scripture – because different people put different emphasis on the various ways Scripture can speak to us and be understood. This profoundly affects our beliefs and values.
5. **Finally, differences of interpretation and belief** tend to result in allegiances to different groupings within the Church. When these groupings fall out over anything people can then find it hard to see past them to important things on which they do agree.

Such allegiances can become such a part of people's sense of identity that they risk forgetting that they are, first and foremost, Christians.

3. Focusing on Unity

It is easy to forget, when we are constantly beset by differences, that as Christians we have much to agree on.

- We have a common faith and baptism – even if we may disagree exactly what this means for us.
- We have common values – even if some of us put more emphasis on some values and less on others.
- We have a common vision of a better world united in Christ – even if we sometimes disagree about how to achieve it.

How can we as Christians in the Church of England remember what unites us even when we are struggling with the important things that come between us? Some of this comes down to how we approach those with whom we disagree, and how we communicate with each other. Set out here is some of what has been learned in the recent Shared Conversations.

Whether or not you personally find these notes helpful, there are some valuable things that we can all do however much we may feel distant or even alienated from other Christians:

- We can focus more on those whom we are called to serve.

- We can invest more in building real relationships with each other as individuals, including with those with whom we disagree.
- We can view ourselves and others not as others tell us to, but as Christ calls us to.

It is worth us remembering always that the commands to love God and to love our neighbours supersede all other commands, and apply regardless of who those neighbours are, what they do, or however hard we may find it.

4. Debate and Dialogue: vital differences

First, let's explain what is meant here by dialogue:

- Dialogue refers to a form of conversation that systematically encourages people to understand each other, to respond to each other honestly and openly, and to value what others are saying even when we disagree with them.
- Dialogue as a process purposefully sets out to build relationships that enable people to work together in a shared search for truth, and for solutions, that embrace and address complexity and diversity.
- Dialogue is consciously developed in a way that helps us to respect each other, and to remember what we hold in common and what we share in community despite our differences.

How does this approach to dialogue compare with the usual approach in Synod? In Synod we usually talk about debate rather than dialogue. In the table below you can see the detailed differences, but the most obvious one is that in a debate issues and answers tend to be framed adversarially – because a debate is by definition about winning or losing.

The consequence is that we tend to state our arguments in ways that make them more likely to be unacceptable to those with whom we disagree. There is little incentive to remember our common humanity when we are trying to 'win'.

The process of debate encourages people to do all they can to win by demonstrating that they are 'right'. This can result in personal attacks on others, belittling their arguments, and sometimes using facts, evidence and the interpretation of scripture selectively.

This is not to say that debate cannot be constructive. It can be a useful way to tease out the facts of a situation in a court of law or to hammer out arguments in parliamentary debate. In such contexts debate may be an effective way to determine the way forward.

In the Christian context, however, we are not just concerned about winning arguments. We also have to build the Church, the body of Christ, and we cannot do this by using methods that are liable to damage the relationships that define us. It is for these reasons that these notes advocate the use of dialogue rather than debate to discuss important issues about which we disagree.

What follows is a summary of the differences between debate and dialogue.

Debate:

Is adversarial: the main purpose is to 'win'

Encourages people to listen in order to find flaws and refute arguments

Affirms people's own points of view

Questions assumptions in order to defend them against criticism

Tends to discourage reflection and discernment

Makes it easier for people to defend their own positions and denigrate others'

Can close minds and harden hearts

Can solidify and entrench beliefs

Tends to focus on disagreements, mistakes, difficulties

Tends to highlight the flaws and weaknesses in others' positions

Tends to sideline others' feelings, ignore relationships, and deprecate others

Dialogue:

Is more collaborative: the main purpose is to develop mutual understanding

Enables people to listen in order to learn more and understand better

Enlarges every point of view

Questions and evaluates assumptions to check that they are valid

Actively encourages reflection and discernment

Encourages people to explore the needs, interests and values that motivate everybody's positions

Opens minds and hearts

Enables beliefs to be explored, examined, understood and fine-tuned

Makes it easier to explore opportunities and potential synergies

Highlights commonalities with others' positions and builds on shared strengths

Builds genuine concern for others, acknowledges feelings and relationships, empathises with and supports others

5. How to participate in a dialogue process

If you are more used to debate than a dialogue process may feel unfamiliar. One of the reasons for using experienced facilitators is to help people to participate effectively in the process.

You may also find the following 10 suggestions helpful.

1. Think of the other people in your group as allies and colleagues in the experience even if you know you disagree with them about some things. Treat the dialogue process as something you are all learning to do together.
2. Assume that others are sincere in what they say even if you think they are wrong, and listen carefully at all times, especially for the reasons behind what people are saying.
3. Ask questions before you reach conclusions. Give people sufficient time to think and reply. Rather than jumping on answers you don't like, ask further questions to tease out a person's reasoning and feeling.
4. Slow the conversation down and ensure that it is based on what people really mean, rather than on assumptions, stereotypes or past experience. Take time, be patient, invest in clarity and communication.

5. If you feel wounded or offended by something someone says, explain why – but use language that explains how you feel without attacking them (so say “I feel hurt” rather than “You hurt me”). Otherwise you may both become too defensive to hear each other properly.
6. Explain your experiences and how they have affected you - but don't take out your anger, anxiety or guilt on other people. Equally, support others when they are trying to say something they find difficult – even if you disagree with them.
7. Allow people to express themselves badly. They may say things you find offensive, and you may say things they find offensive. When this happens, use neutral language to point out when something seems inappropriate, and ask the speaker to have another go. Refuse to give up on anyone, no matter how unpleasant, opinionated or difficult you find them.
8. When it's your turn to speak, try to find language that expresses your views while still respecting those of others. Don't dominate a conversation: it just frustrates others and makes it harder for them to hear you.
9. Remember your body language. Watch that it doesn't say, “I'm bored,” “I'm right – you're wrong” or “I don't care what you say.”
10. Open conversations with a prayer for honesty, mutual respect and for listening with love. Finish conversations with thanks for people's participation, for new insights and for mutual care despite disagreement.

6. What do we do when we cannot reach agreement?

All the dialogue in the world cannot disguise the fact that sometimes we do just disagree about something and no amount of effort can help us to find an answer we can all accept or even a solution we can all live with.

What do we do if we find ourselves in dialogue with someone with whom we profoundly disagree?

First, we all need the humility to admit that we might be wrong even when we feel sure we are right.

Secondly, we can remember that in the eyes of God people are always more than their opinions. As Christians we are called to love and respect all, and perhaps especially those with whom we find it hardest to agree.

Thirdly, and most importantly, we can remember that reconciliation is not an optional add-on to the Gospel: it is the heart of the Gospel. We are always called to go the extra mile, and this means trying to be reconciled with others for as long as it takes and despite all provocations and setbacks.

Our experience to date through the RSCs suggests that when we all aspire to these Christian standards this opens up the possibility that, even when we profoundly disagree, the manner of our encounter with each other will uphold the Gospel.

