

CHRIST CHURCH COUNCIL

Principles for Discussions

In all conversations, and especially difficult conversation, it is helpful to examine one's own attitudes and reactions. As such, we commend these seven principles for having such discussions in the Christ Church Council.

1. **Good communication (within relationships) is essential.** From the beginning, and in every generation, God has communicated with his people. Jesus communicated throughout his ministry with both his disciples and strangers. The Holy Spirit still speaks today (Heb 3:7). But, communication is not always easy. Issues discussed in Council can be complex, requiring degrees of differentiation and nuance. They may require more words, not fewer. Or they may require thoughtful silence, rather than more words. It is helpful to ask questions of others rather than to rush to conclusions and also to be prepared to listen generously to answers, while taking into account people's own stories. What do they mean by the terms they employ? How is God working in this discussion already? Are we acknowledging that? Often, people remain silent out of apathy, embarrassment, fear, or even disease about timing. We must seek to listen and to understand in order to have useful communication. Regular dialogue is to be encouraged for mutual understanding and so that a good way forward is found. Commitment to such relationships, when possible, is a witness to God's persistent love.
2. **Good communication requires patience.** If communication takes time and requires both substantive discussion and active listening, then with forbearance must be the way we approach such communication. Particularly in a church with considerable theological, ethnic, economic, and other forms of cultural diversity, we must approach each other patiently. We must remember that the goal is not necessarily to be right or assert one's rights, but to build one another up in the faith (Eph 4:12).
3. **Good communication must happen in reference to a foundation of truth.** In the Holy Scriptures, we have a foundational document that is uniquely authoritative, abundantly useful, and no less than the very Word of God (2 Tim 3:16-17). We, likewise, have the wisdom of many centuries of Christian traditions that are unique and specific to our expression of the Christian faith. While giving full value to personal experience and its appropriate expression, these *sources of truth* (i.e., Scripture, tradition, reason) are to be prioritized in discussion. That is, we must primarily rely on the soundest exegesis of the Scripture available in continuity with historic Anglican and ecclesiastical traditions and the leading of the Holy Spirit. In our work on the Council, as in our personal and spiritual lives, we should be guided by prayer for ourselves and others.
4. **Remain open to insights from outside Christianity, but critical of those that fall short of Christian truth guided by Scripture, tradition, and reason, as shaped by diverse Anglican traditions.** While true objectivity is impossible to achieve, we must have regard for the knowledge and wisdom of others, especially those informed by experience, study, and reason—constantly filtering out ideologically driven interpretations and remaining humbly sceptical of anything short of verifiable fact and theological truth. In short, we must recognize the difference between objective truth on the one hand, and mere opinion without foundation or warrant on the other.
5. **Be aware of power dynamics and the potential for spiritual abuse.¹** While the countercultural nature of the gospel and the complexities of biblical discipleship will make it impossible to foster

¹ For more information about spiritual abuse, see Lee Gatiss, "What Is Spiritual Abuse?," *Church Society*, July 23, 2019. churchsociety.org/blog/entry/what_is_spiritual_abuse. For more on bullying, see the Church of



absolutely safe spaces (defined as contexts promoting uncritical acceptance), we must require of each other charitable and empathetic forms of dialogue. There is an important difference between the offense of the gospel (1 Cor 1:18-25, 1 Pet 2:7-8) and the offensiveness of Christians. While we seek to speak truth, we must avoid spiritual bullying and overly aggressive antagonism that can too easily accompany hard truth, instead “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15).

6. **Be aware of the conceptual lenses you are employing as you speak.** In other words, be self-aware and then be critical of such lenses. Additionally, try to put yourself in the place of those with whom you disagree, trying to understand the discussion from their perspective. The Church Council is to be a place of profound empathy (Luke 10:25-37).
7. **Speak kindly and listen generously.** Christians are, very simply, called to be kind to one another. And in no context is this truer than when we disagree (Luke 6:35, Col 3:12-13). The Lord’s servant, in 2 Tim 2:24 is called to not be quarrelsome, but kind (ἤπιος, *épios*). This is a unique word in the New Testament, but has a classical background in medicine—meaning that we are to be like a balm, like the balm of Gilead (Jer 46:11), soothing to one another rather than irritating. And part of this kindness is having a disposition for understanding and towards forgiveness: “*Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you*” (Eph 4:31-32).
8. **Assume a posture of humility.** In addition to being kind, Christians are called to be humble (Rom 12:3). We must recognize that we are all fallable and others may have knowledge and experience that is different than our own (Rom 12:16). As much as possible, we should adopt an attitude of humility and generosity, making sure we have understood what each other is saying, and recognizing that we may all misspeak in the heat of the moment. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:3-5).
9. **Strive for consensus, but be prepared to accept mixed outcomes.** In our conversation we must be seeking consensus. This will not always be possible, *yet it is always desirable*. While being committed to great care and pastoral sensitivity, fellow Christians will disagree. Even the first generation of Christians—led by the Apostles, the so-called Jerusalem Council—agreed to disagree on significant points of theology and practice in the context of discussion, prayer and critical listening (see Acts 15:1-15). But because we are a single body, the Body of Christ (Eph 4:4-6), we should be working for consensus with a readiness to accept a range of varying outcomes, if necessary.

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

—1 Corinthians 1:10

England’s *Parish Safeguarding Handbook*. churchofengland.org/safeguarding/reporting-abuse-and-finding-support. For more resources on principles for challenging discussions, see the Church of England’s *Pastoral Principles for Living Well Together*. churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/PAG-PP-website.pdf.



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