

Holy Conversations: Introduction

One of the ways in which the MCC Theologies Team seeks to “create opportunities and provide resources that will enable ‘holy conversations’ within our denomination about our various beliefs” is by providing resources that will help encourage and facilitate those discussions in local congregations. This resource is our first attempt to do so. This primer includes a suggested structure, some background material, and discussion questions on a number of theological topics. We are also working to expand the topical resources on an ongoing basis in order to supplement this initial material. We hope this resource will become a tool for local churches that want to create safe spaces for theological dialogue. We invite your feedback about the material, your experience of using it in your context, and your ideas for additional sessions.

Goals of Holy Conversations

It is probably most helpful to begin by stating what the goals of this study are NOT before moving on to a brief explanation of what we hope this resource will accomplish.

This study does NOT:

- aim to indoctrinate participants in a particular way of understanding the topics presented;
- define what is a “normative” understanding of any topic for the whole of MCC, a particular local church, or any church member;
- attempt to provide THE one right answer to any question posed.

This study DOES invite and encourage participants to:

- reflect on their own experiences of various issues, and especially their thoughts and/or feelings about what was “Holy” about that experience (e.g. how God was present or at work in it);
 - articulate and share their experiences with others, and to listen to and respect the experiences and reflections of others, whether or not they agree or disagree;
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- explore the connections between their various beliefs about a particular topic and the testimony offered in the experiences, opinions, and questions of others ... including the witness of Scripture and Church Tradition(s);
- make friends with any ambiguity or tension that might be present in the midst of conversations with diverse and divergent truths being claimed;
- notice and honor God (the “Holy”) *in* the conversation itself, rather than the materials that we hope will serve to meaningfully facilitate that discussion.

Contextualization

We are very aware that a number of things determine the “Context” of a particular local church at any given time (e.g. location, language, culture, identity, ideology, religious background, demographics of the group, or major events in the life of participants, the local church, and/or the world to name a few). What contributes to a very meaningful and transformative experience in one context might not work at all in another. It is also true that the specific format and structure of conversation and/or religious education and/or spiritual formation programming will differ from church to church (see note below on suggested structures). Therefore, we have attempted to compile some background material that will be useful at introducing the topic, as well as some questions for small and large group discussion. Each session begins with personal story(ies) to root these conversations in personal experience, and then moves on to a broader discussion “about” the topic, conversation we believe works best after participants have connected with and shared their own experiences. We have suggested a closing ritual or prayer for each section, hoping that participants can honor their time together and bless one another as they move forward on their spiritual journeys. We hope that you will be able to use most, if not all of this material, but we also know that context demands more than a “plug and play” resource.

You are the best authority on your community, and on the things that are most likely to encourage this type of “Holy Conversation.” You know the hopes and fears of your community, the flash points and the issues around which there may be pre-existing tension, uneasiness, or controversy. Please use these materials in the way you think will be most effective. Supplement them with additional material and resources, structure the conversations in whatever way works best for you, and use the questions that work best for you.



Guidelines for Dialogue

The following Guidelines for Dialogue are based on the work of Visions, Inc. (www.visions-inc.com). They establish basic ground rules for safe, healthy conversations that will honor the diverse viewpoints and experiences of those engaged in conversation. We recommend discussing these guidelines in the introductory/orientation session and having copies posted and/or available in each conversation. It may even be a helpful grounding exercise to briefly review these at the beginning of every conversation. In the Facilitator Suggestions section which follows, an expanded explanation of each guideline is included for the initial introduction of this material.

- **“Try On”**
Be willing to try on ideas, ways of thinking or being that you may never have considered before, even or perhaps especially if you have a gut instinct to reject it out of hand.
 - **“It’s OK to disagree”**
 - **“It’s Not OK to shame, blame, and attack self or others”**
Engaging our differences is something we want to do and that we benefit from, but shaming, blaming or attacking ourselves or others is not a helpful way of engaging difference. Agree not to shame, blame, or attack others or ourselves.
 - **“Self Focus” – “I” language.**
Focus on your own thoughts and feelings without universalizing them or assuming others/all people agree. Use “I” language to share your experiences, perspectives, and opinions. Be aware of how you are feeling and ask yourself what your feelings might be telling you. Share your feelings when appropriate.
 - **“Practice Both/And Thinking”**
Not every question has an either/or right answer. The opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth, not an opposing truth. “BUT” is a warning that Both/And thinking is not being practiced. BUT is generally diminutive, not additive. BUT shrinks back while AND expands.
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- **Be Aware of “Intent/Impact”.**
Someone may intend one thing with a comment, but the impact may be very different. Take responsibility for both parts of the equation. If something impacts you negatively, be willing to ask if that is what the person intended.
- **Confidentiality.**
What is shared in the group needs to stay in the group. Personal information is shared by the person who owns the information, feelings, and experiences; not by others, unless they have asked and received permission.

Guidelines for Listening

Listening well is an important part of dialogue and conversation. The following tips for enhancing listening skills are taken from *Guidelines for Healthy Theological Discussion* by David Rudolph.

- Ask questions rather than make statements.
 - Take a breath before speaking.
 - Allow for silence.
 - Ask yourself, “Whose perspective is left out in this discussion?”
 - ‘Follow your disturbance.’ Notice when you are feeling tense, defensive. Ask yourself, “Where is this coming from—my past training, a painful event?” Try to put yourself in the other person’s place with regard to their passion for their view.
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From time to time in almost every conversation involving a group or a topic matter that people feel passionately about, there can be a lack of balance between the amount of input that people give to the conversation. Some people are shy and need ample silence before they will enter a conversation; some require time to think and formulate what they are thinking before they are ready to share; others are so excited and comfortable speaking in groups that they jump in to fill any silence or have a tendency to talk over others. When you are aware of one or more people monopolizing a conversation, or others who don't seem to have contributed at all, it might be helpful to try one or more of the following.

- “Talking Stick” – identify some object (stick, ball, etc.) that one must be holding when they wish to share. This can be passed around and helps ensure that only one person at a time is talking.
It can also make it more evident when there is a lack of balance and equity between conversation partners.
- Specify an amount of time that must pass between comments.
- Keep track in some way of the number of contributions made by each person; make a point of noting when someone has under-contributed (e.g., “Is there anything you’d like to add to the conversation from your experience?”) or over-contributed (e.g., “You’ve made quite a few comments, can you hold that thought while we hear some of the folks who haven’t yet shared?”). It may be necessary in certain cases for you to talk with someone outside of the group about their amount or manner of contributing. Especially if you are having multiple sessions, it might be good to work one-on-one with anyone who might need some specific feedback and/or encouragement.
- Allow five-ten minutes of journaling or personal reflection on the questions for small and large group discussion to allow people to center their thoughts prior to having those discussions.