

RENEW! Small Group Reflections

Given our conversation today, what have we learned?

- The need for grace
- Agreement is not necessary to have a meaningful conversation
- Difficult conversations deal with emotions. We may not be equipped to deal with our emotions or the emotions of others.
- Communication is a 2-way street
- Do not avoid difficult conversations
- Respect from all views
- Correct another in a helpful/kindly manner
- Be kind
- Difficult conversations are important. They help us grow
- Listen!
- Process, how to get to a solution
- Goal
- Do not need to change how someone else thinks
- Not to look at it as a “win”
- Thoughtful steps to take, boundaries, hang in there
- Dialogue is an intentional process
- Ongoing commitment is important
- These conversations are worthwhile
- Fear often keeps us from talking
- We don’t all agree but we all have valuable ideas
- There are risks and rewards. In the long term, rewards outweigh the risks.
- We can talk even though we don’t know each other
- We can listen
- It is helpful to have discussions in doing this work. We are not alone.
- Gaining perspective is important
- Conversation is important. Need to know how to start it and how to listen
- Grow personal relationship in conversation – not facts but people.
- Ask “how can we get you comfortable enough to converse?”
- Fear is a huge factor
- Fear is not an option
- Ground rules of a conversation – they are currently missing
- A sense of intentionality
- Difficult conversations are valuable and important
- Wish for a public/political understanding of this value
- The church as a safe place to learn how to have these conversations
- We all have good intentions, accompanied by fears that we may hurt the church – assume positive intentions.
- Important to be respectful regardless. Set aside assumptions.
- Seek understanding not necessarily agreement.

- STOP and listen
- Be a respectful listener
- We can discuss difficult topics – and still smile!
- Not alone in struggles, congregation to congregation
- Importance of being honest, listening, agree to disagree, openness
- Important to listen and to understand
- We all have the same fears (rejection, being singled out)
- Leaders need to be “guardians of the process” even if it means putting aside personal feelings
- Face-to-face conversation is needed
- Inclusion
- We need the courage and faith of Bonhoeffer
- We are not alone in this struggle or joy
- Seek to understand first
- Respectful of all sides of an issue – seeing my opinion as a part of the whole
- Having a neutral facilitator is necessary for honest process
- Don’t assume that you know what’s challenging for other without asking
- Our interests are universal, but we’re in it together
- Many difficult areas, but we are the voice of God.
- Our voice wants to be heard
- We need to have more conversations
- Being kind, not nice
- Fear is a barrier
- Be a better listener – identify intention, listen to understand
- Listening
- Empathy
- Creating safe place
- Fun is possible
- Open mind
- Open in prayer
- Respect is essential
- Base interactions in love
- Silence doesn’t solve the problem
- Copies of shared commitments with leaders in church
- If difficult conversations arise, better prepared
- Learning to ask for opinions and listening vs. assuming
- Lots of difficult conversations; topics overlap outside church walls (eg: money a hard topic in and out of church)
- Creating a safe place to share
- We’re not always right, there are other sides
- Relationships take time to build
- To not take a stand is taking a stand
- Open to differences of opinion is important
- Doesn’t have to be winners or losers
- Reach consensus is a process

- To be in any type of conversation, we need to listen
- Everyone has unique perspectives and experiences that can enrich the group
- Thinking of Jesus – He would want this process – acceptance
- Some methodology and process
- Learning happens here and maybe I (or we) will change for the better
- Begins and ends with Christ
- The importance of listening
- Take the risk to be transparent and honest (vulnerable)
- We resist difficult conversation for different reasons – we want to “win,” we fear looking judgmental or being judged, we feel like we will fail (uncertainty)
- Difficult conversations take courage and time and prayer

What issues are important in your local context that you wish you could talk about in your congregation?

- Money – budget issues
- Racism
- Only vocal people are entering the conversation. Greater involvement in the conversation – not the same old people.
- Worship times
- Styles of worship
- Needs not being filled
- Change with new practices
- Honoring political differences
- Openness
- Diversity
- Reaching out
- Budget
- Worship forms, instruments, liturgy
- To feel valued and respected no matter age or politics
- Homelessness, immigration, racial tension, money
- Survival of rural congregations
- What does the church look like in the future?
- Engaging youth who are divided to many activities, especially sports
- Stewardship, time, money, buildings
- Responsibility in membership
- Respect for one another
- Getting people involved
- Responding instead of reacting to change
- Homosexuality, sexuality
- What does our future look like?
- Money/stewardship
- Racism, immigration
- Race
- Immigration

- Sexuality
- The whole shebang – violence, trafficking
- Immigration
- GLBT
- Building accessibility
- Political themes
- So many surprising “golden calves!”
- Politics
- Refugee/immigration
- Diversity in communities
- Need to change in the council/church/congregation
- Same sex marriage policies
- Staff salaries, finances
- Homosexuality in clergy, gay marriage
- Culture of consumerism within the church
- Idea that we are called to justice as a church
- Becoming open to change
- Understanding differences – tolerance of differences – respect
- Racism
- Religious differences
- Former ministers not allowed to stay in congregation – per synod policy
- Accept members for what they are. Do not be judgmental
- Need open discussion on different races
- Keep working through the sexual issues
- A lot of positive things are going on in these congregations
- Communication instead of lack of it is necessary for understanding others
- Changing culture vs church traditions
- Stewardship – yearly pledge or “it will just happen”
- Gaining membership in rural areas
- Family leaving after Sunday school or confirmation
- White privilege
- Diversity
- Politics
- Sanctuary – can meet different things in different places
- Trump – and the issues he is presenting
- Where are we as a congregation going to be long term?
- How to have a discussion about interfaith relationships
- How to deal with a changing demographic and impacts on mission and budget
- How to talk about faith formation discipleship with next generation and get folks to commit
- How to talk about stewardship, time and resources, when there are so many other options
- Same-gender marriage and repercussions on the community
- Outreach – how can we help others even if they aren’t members of our congregation
- Diversity – are we welcoming them?
- Changing church

- Volunteerism, participation
- Finances
- Human sexuality
- Purpose of the church
- Expanding leadership/volunteers
- Understanding mission
- Interfaith
- Generational gaps
- Money-financial gaps
- Same sex marriage
- True meaning of Jesus – inviting the stranger
- The issues and topics relevant to politics right now
- Discussing the “why” of struggles in the world
- Money
- Cross-generational adult/youth opinion differences
- Getting/keeping youth involved – giving them a voice
- Civility is needed. “Healing the great divide” a topic shared
- How does the church need to change in a changing world?
- Inclusionism, pluralism, exclusionism, other “isms”
- Racism – is a turnoff – how to start?
- How do we get beyond thinking of “serving” as being outside of our walls, as well as in. That we are called to serve on an ongoing basis.
- Adult education is lacking in our church. Emphasis is on youth – there is a huge gap from ages 18-50
- Money
- Allowing/being willing to grow as a congregation
- Is growth or retention a goal/an important metric?
- What does “inclusion” mean as we fear of the “other?”
- Human sexuality – transgender – welcome?
- Including young people in this conversation
- Immigration
- Financial equity
- Take action and do things
- Prison re-entry – prisoners reentering society
- Politics
- How do we have a church that is open to diversity (race, gender) to everyone – those not like us
- How do we encourage outreach and acknowledge needs in our community within our churches?
- Commitment – do people want to commit to a project, etc...
- Tradition – across the board
- What does it mean to be community?
- Sanctuary/immigration
- Politics

What did you value about our conversation today?

- “We can only change ourselves”
- Acceptance
- Respect the person and their right to their opinion without necessarily agreeing
- Be aware of our own emotions in entering into difficult conversations
- Similar issues
- Smart group
- Openness
- Honesty
- Different churches
- New thought process, new way to look at things
- Group has come from different perspectives
- To learn the value of discussions instead of ignoring issues
- “in the moment of calm”
- Learn from conversation and trusting the process
- Place to share thoughts and opinions
- Respectful listening
- Facilitator – neutral, keeps us on track
- Many different perspectives in the group
- People spoke up and shared insights
- Open minds
- Hope
- The safe place for conversation
- Appreciation for the difference in the ages of those participating in conversation
- Others have same concerns, frustrations, getting conversation going
- Learning about some tools for conversing
- The intentionality – that all of us have a shared concern
- That there is a process for mutual conversation that will likely result in a better outcome
- We liked hearing from others in our group
- Nice size group
- Learning from one another
- Modeled the process
- Everyone was included
- Nice to feel so comfortable in a group of people you don’t even know
- Honesty
- Respectful of speaker
- Listening members
- This is an important topic to discuss
- Hearing other’s point of view, perspectives
- Balance of voices
- Framework to have a difficult conversation around
- Let go of need to convince others
- No one has authority to dominate anyone or lead or push something
- Good facilitator
- Strategy sharing

- Participation
- Conversations are not always easy
- There are a variety of methodologies that are needed to even initiate these conversations
- Intentionally having the discussion about critical conversations
- To see commonality across contexts
- These challenges are real, and present in both large and small congregations
- A process that can be used right away
- An opportunity to share out loud what we're thinking
- Hearing what everyone has said
- Everyone has different experiences
- Strength of people, not giving up
- Openness
- Friendly
- Similar
- Loosening up – become less inhibited
- Hearing others experiences
- Safe space
- Having/building confidence to take back to congregation
- Honesty
- Gracious group
- Wide variety of situations and experiences
- Safe and comfortable to share
- Openness of how people are feeling
- Lack of bias but with kindness
- Learning together about having conversations
- I was heard and listened to
- Conversation in and of itself has value
- Insights into conversations
- Value all group members and their perspectives
- Care around the group
- We all have work to do
- Equal sharing – diversity of ages, clergy and lay
- Great facilitator!
- Hearing other people's points of view
- Being invited to express our thoughts
- Openness of the group
- The group hug
- Laughter and good humor
- Sharing
- Listening
- Wonderful to know we all have issues. We need the Lord
- My faith has been reinforced
- It's not an "easy walk" – we need God
- Trust

- Frankness
- Openness
- Sincerity
- Hearing different perspectives and views
- Opportunity to better oneself
- The group – listening, etc
- It's great to have a facilitator to keep us on track

What are the main points/insights we want to share with the whole group?

- "I respect your opinion. I don't share it. I'm glad you are here."
- How do we celebrate what we do well.
- Be willing to listen and wear someone else's shoes to understand perspectives
- This is a helpful tool
- Do the conversations! Follow the process!
- Leaders set the tone
- Goal is understanding, not consensus
- We were able to share and speak candidly even though we didn't know exactly what to expect
- Kindness, respect and growth
- To listen to each other!
- Listening!
- Encouragement to try to facilitate conversation even around safe topics as a starting point
- We look forward to the wisdom of others
- Do not be afraid!
- Difficult conversations will not go away
- We can expect conflict
- That having conversation and making a decision do not have to be the same thing
- This is good practice for congregations
- We have many similarities
- Need to be taught to have deep conversations
- Active listening – not thinking of next comment
- Want to have face-to-face conversations; not all media driven
- Emphasize kindness
- Acceptance of all cultures and races.
- Be intentional in your conversation
- Listen, listen, listen
- Leaders have a very important role when discussing topics of conflict – they need to be a positive, non-anxious presence
- The facilitator needs to be the "medium"
- Respect of the group
- Feeling valued
- Common ground to build on
- Encouraging and hopeful of learning, listening
- Don't give up!
- Surroundings of silence for circle group settings is essential

- We are NOT ALONE in this. It is the community of the Holy Spirit that keeps us together
- You don't have to agree... separate the behavior/opinion from the person and work to understand
- Different less threatening ways to have conversations (theology on tap)
- How to use this at a council meeting
- Whether big or small context, conversations and challenges are real
- We didn't try and fix anything – what does fix even mean?
- Common struggles across contexts – there are tools available
- It is helpful to have a smaller group. It feels more intimate
- Mixed experiences (church size, age, etc)
- Hunger for real conversation exists, especially among younger. Not preached to or mentored.
- Have to be brave
- Recognize the conversation as holy
- Conversation and learning how to is important and necessary
- Practice!
- Take the love we experience outside of the church building and into the community
- Our opinion might not be the opinion of others
- Timing of conversations is critical
- Don't block out others' opinions
- We need to be honest and willing to share our opinions with others – be brave!
- Conversation gets the issues and opinions out in the open for all to hear
- Key is to find and work toward the point of unity
- Importance of structure – trust the process
- Openness encouraged
- In a chaotic world, a non-anxious presence and approach can be invaluable
- Hug a lot as groups
- Let's keep trying out of love
- Patrick Patterson was a great leader/facilitator!
- Process is very worthwhile
- Learn the training – where to go next
- The process worked for our group.
- Relationships take work, but it's worth it
- Commit to the whole (God's purpose in whatever endeavor), not just your piece
- Difficult conversations take courage, time, and prayer

(Sidenote: there were too many groups in the same space. It was hard to hear)

How will we receive a script to use within our congregation?