

The Episcopal Church Office of Government Relations

Civil Discourse Five Week Curriculum



**OFFICE OF
GOVERNMENT
RELATIONS**

Written and Compiled by members of The Presiding Bishop's Staff:

Alan Yarborough

Communications Coordinator and Office Manager, The Office of Government Relations

Wendy Johnson

Officer for Digital Formation and Events, Formation Department

The Rev. Shannon Kelly

Officer for Young Adult and Campus Ministries, Formation Department

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Civil Discourse
Five Week Curriculum**

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Introduction

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is discord, union;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

(Prayer attributed to St. Francis, BCP p. 833)

The Office of Government Relations, for purposes of this curriculum and our engagement on this topic, defines civil discourse as the following:

Civil discourse is engagement in conversation intended to enhance understanding.

Rabbi Steve Gutow, speaking at the Episcopal Church's event Civil Discourse in America¹, remarked that, "civility is simply demonstrating respect for the dignity of our fellow humans—even those humans with whom we have sharp disagreement. Civility is allowing others to speak, and having the humility to admit that we may have something to learn. Civility favors truth over cheap gain, and patience over knee-jerk judgment."

Notes for the leader:

- Italics signify notes and directions for the leader.
- Each session has a list of materials you will need.
- Make sure you make copies of the handouts for the participants and read them over so you know what instructions they have.
- Have nametags at each session, even if you think everyone knows each other's names.

¹ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/civil-discourse-event>

WEEK I: CIVIL DISCOURSE IN CONTEXT: AN INTRODUCTION

Materials: Copies of the handout for each participant, writing instruments, easel with paper and markers

Opening Prayer: *(Read in unison)*

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

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where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

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and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

(Prayer attributed to St. Francis, BCP p. 833)

Opening:

Leader:

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:21)

In this introduction, we seek to define what we mean by civil discourse in the context of this educational curriculum. The Office of Government Relations defines civil discourse as the following:

Civil discourse is engagement in conversation intended to enhance understanding. Rabbi Steve Gutow, speaking at the Episcopal Church's event Civil Discourse in America², remarked that, "civility is simply demonstrating respect for the dignity of our fellow humans—even those humans with whom we have sharp disagreement. Civility is allowing others to speak, and having the humility to admit that we may have something to learn. Civility favors truth over cheap gain, and patience over knee-jerk judgment."

Let's read that again and on your handout, mark the words or phrases that stand out to you.

Invite someone else to read the quote from Gutow slowly so the participants have time to mark the words or phrases that stood out for them.

Once done, invite participants to name the words or phrases that stood out for them.

² <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/civil-discourse-event>

Civil Discourse

Leader:

In this series, we will focus on civil discourse as a primary strategy for learning from each other and how to use it for effecting change in our government—a strategy that is integral to any successful civic engagement.

Why is civil discourse important for policy advocacy and civic engagement?

Individuals and institutions within our country contain a wealth of knowledge, experiences and perspectives that can help us create a better society and a better world. Civil discourse as a means of engagement, whether among politicians or individuals, is crucial for developing public policies. When applied to political debates, civil discourse helps us to see the merits and faults of particular positions including our own, and can open up new opportunities and ideologies previously unknown.

Through civil discourse, The Office of Government Relations of The Episcopal Church builds relationships by engaging with elected officials and career policy makers throughout the U.S. federal government. These relationships are formed through our advocacy for the policy positions of the Episcopal Church, as passed by General Convention and Executive Council with the aim of influencing federal policies. What this means in practice is engaging in conversations with decision makers about important issues of the church—from immigration policies, to care of the environment, to programs that aim to lift and keep people out of poverty. The policies of the Episcopal Church may not always align with the policy maker's position, but through civil discourse, they engage respectfully, seeking to understand and be understood.

Another primary task is bringing the voices, resources and expertise of Episcopalians and Anglicans into the decision-making processes of our government. The Office connects policy makers to knowledgeable people through the church whose daily lives are impacted by public policy and can help provide unique perspectives and expertise.

A third primary task of the Office of Government Relations is listening to government officials to learn their point of view on a given policy and the concerns of their constituents. Listening to one another not only builds our relationship, but grants us and opportunity to collaborate with them on the development of legislation and policy.

As individual Episcopalians, civil discourse is important as we seek to understand our increasingly complicated world and make the best decisions possible when participating in the democratic process through voting, petitioning, and advocating. We must maintain a thirst to talk with each other respectfully, even in disagreement and even in debate. That thirst will continue to challenge us, expose us to new ideas, and bring us closer together as we continue the pursuit of justice and peace.

If we are looking to persuade others, we cannot do so without dialogue, and we cannot enter into dialogue without first a basis of civility and respect. We also cannot persuade others if we are only interacting with people we mostly agree with.

In this curriculum, we will cover tenets for civil discourse, values-based conversations, the messiness of policymaking, and the importance of maintaining a sacred space for debate. We hope it will motivate you and your communities to enter confidently into constructive conversations on the important issues facing our local communities, our country, and the world.

Role Reflection:

Leader:

As we just heard, the Office of Government Relations has three main tasks at hand when building relationships with elected officials and career policy makers.

Office of Government Relations:

- Builds relationships with elected officials and represents the policy positions of the Episcopal Church as passed by General Convention and Executive Council with the goal of influencing federal policies.
- Brings experiences and expertise of Episcopalians and Anglicans into the decision-making processes in our government.
- Listens to government officials to learn their position and to collaborate on the development of legislation and policy.

Reflect:

Following the lead of the Office of Government Relations, how can we adopt similar practices in our own settings? How do we:

- build relationships
- bring what we know to the conversation
- listen and learn

Take some notes as you reflect on this for yourself and your community.

Invite the participants to reflect on this first by themselves and take notes on their paper. Then invite them to get into groups of three and share what they came up with.

Create a Covenant (15 minutes)

Leader:

As a way to create space for us to have these conversations, we are going to create a covenant of behavior for our time together. We can revisit this each session to see if we need to add or change something based on what we have learned during our time together.

Hang 1-2 sheets of large paper at the front of the room and write the word Covenant at the top. Ask participants to raise their hands and contribute behavioral norms that should govern your time together. Examples include “raise hand and wait to be called upon” “use G-rated language” “one person talks at a time.”

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus, who traveled with the disciples on the road to Emmaus:

Be with us on the way,

that we may know you in the scriptures,

in the breaking of bread,

and in the hearts of all whom we meet. Amen.

[\(Saint Augustine's Prayer Book, Forward Movement\)](#)

WEEK I: CIVIL DISCOURSE IN CONTEXT: AN INTRODUCTION

PARTICIPANT HAND OUT

Opening Prayer:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is discord, union;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

(Prayer attributed to St. Francis, BCP p. 833)

Reflection:

Civil discourse is engagement in conversation intended to enhance understanding.

Rabbi Steve Gutow, speaking at the Episcopal Church's event [Civil Discourse in America](#), remarked that, "civility is simply demonstrating respect for the dignity of our fellow humans—even those humans with whom we have sharp disagreement. Civility is allowing others to speak, and having the humility to admit that we may have something to learn. Civility favors truth over cheap gain, and patience over knee-jerk judgment."

Role Reflection

Office of Government Relations:

- Builds relationships with elected officials and represents the policy positions of the Episcopal Church as passed by General Convention and Executive Council with the goal of influencing federal policies.
- Brings experiences and expertise of Episcopalians and Anglicans into the decision-making processes in our government.
- Listens to government officials to learn their position and to collaborate with them in the development of legislation and policy.

As individual Episcopalians, civil discourse is important as we seek to understand our increasingly complicated world and make the best decisions possible when participating in the democratic process through voting, petitioning, and advocating. We must maintain a thirst to talk with each other respectfully, even in disagreement and even in debate. That thirst will continue to challenge us, expose us to new ideas, and bring us closer together as we continue the pursuit of justice and peace.

Reflect:

Following the lead of the Office of Government Relations, how can we do similar things in our own settings? How do we:

- build relationships
- bring what we know to the conversations
- listen and learn

Take notes as you reflect on this for yourself and your community.

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus, who traveled with the disciples on the road to Emmaus:

Be with us on the way,

that we may know you in the scriptures,

in the breaking of bread,

and in the hearts of all whom we meet. Amen.

([Saint Augustine's Prayer Book](#), Forward Movement)

WEEK 2: TENETS FOR CIVIL DISCOURSE

Materials: Copies of the handout for each person, writing instruments, large pieces of paper, markers, and sticky notes (have tape handy if the notes don't stick)

Opening Prayer: (Read in Unison)

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart [and especially the hearts of the people of this land], that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Prayer for Social Justice, BCP p. 823)

Tenets for Civil Discourse

Leader:

“The Lord has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Micah 6:8

Below is a list of important ground rules for civil discourse—centered in the Golden Rule: *doing unto others as you would have them do unto you*. This list is adapted from material developed for the Episcopal Youth Event 2017 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Though we often teach these rules to children and youth, many of them are essential for civil discourse, particularly during emotionally charged conversations and debates where we may have great personal stake or passion.

The Baptismal Covenant calls you to be the best version of yourself that you can be—who God made you to be. Civil discourse requires that we treat people with respect as we seek and serve Christ in each other and strive for the respect and dignity of every human being. It means treating people how we want to be treated, even in disagreement and even if we do not have shared values.

Important tenets of civil discourse include: respect, listening deeply, mutuality, interactivity, openness, honesty, humility, and careful speech. As we live into our Baptismal Covenant and engage in civil discourse, please keep these important tenets in mind.

Invite the group to go around the room, having each person read one of these tenets. If someone does not want to read, they can simply say “skip.” If you have a small group, you may have them go around the room a couple of times until all are read.

As people are listening and reading, invite them to mark words or phrases that stand out to them. We will come back to these as we work together in the “Defining Civil Discourse” section.

- **Respect** – Respect each person you meet and take the time to truly consider what they are saying. Respond, don't react. No blaming, shaming or attacking another person. Doing this does not mean accepting or upholding their ideas as your own; rather, it can

help you understand their perspective, build your knowledge for future conversations, and open your mind to previously unfamiliar ideas—especially important even if you continue to disagree with them.

- **Listen Deeply** – Listen to what the person is saying, focus on the ideas presented, and discuss ideas and issues—not people. Don’t start side conversations as they distract from engagement and listening. Do not interrupt while others are speaking.
- **Speak for Yourself** – Use “I” statements when commenting or responding. Share your personal experience. Own it.
- **Try to Understand** – Try to understand the thoughts and ideas of others. Ask questions for clarification. Note: sometimes we may be discussing the same concept, yet use different words. Make sure to pay attention to such areas of misunderstanding, and seek clarification where there is any confusion.
- **Share Talk Time** – If you are having a discussion with more than two people, make sure everyone has the opportunity to speak before speaking again. Take notes if there are things you want to follow up on. Ask what others think.
- **Speak with Humility** – You may not know everything about the topic at hand, and your experience may not be that of the other person’s. Lean into your knowledge, personal experience, and expertise, but remain open to the truth others are sharing.
- **Gratitude** – If what someone has shared or asked helps with your own learning, say thank you.
- **Suspend Judgment** – We all have presumptions, biases, stereotypes, prejudices, and other pre-judgments. Try to suspend pre-judgments and seek first to understand.
- **Disagree and Love** – We seek to learn and listen. You can disagree with someone and still love them and listen to them. Civil discourse is about listening and learning together, seeking shared understanding and exposure to new ideas in the pursuit of improving our world and fulfilling our call as followers of Jesus.
- **Practice Forgiveness** – We learn from trying things out and sometimes we make mistakes. Seek to forgive and to be forgiven as we learn together.
- **Pay Attention to your Feelings and Thoughts** – If you do not feel safe asking a question or commenting on a topic, write it down and ask someone you’re more comfortable or familiar with to help you voice or talk it through with you. If someone hurts your feelings, acknowledge that the comment hurt your feelings and explain why. Be open to others sharing that with you as well.

In addition to these tenets, we want to offer three additional suggestions:

First, all issues do not have to be fully discussed in one sitting. Civil discourse can be tiring and emotional, and taking a break—stepping away from conversation for a period of time—is not abandoning the practice or cutting yourself short in sharing your perspective. Civil discourse is a method of discussion framed within a context of long-term relationship building, a habitual practice useful over one’s lifetime. Productivity of conversation can diminish if we become too tired or overwhelmed, weakening our emotional capacity to follow the tenets listed above. Be patient with yourself and others. Make sure breaks are a part of your practice of civil discourse.



Second, try to stay focused on one topic at a time. Yes, issues are very much interconnected and overlap, and it is often hard, if not impossible, to discuss one issue without relating it to another. Yet, not everyone is going to have the same knowledge about those relationships between issues. Our conversations are not as effective if we jump around from topic to topic, lumping things together in an unstable manner. In such a scenario, we may end up reverting to partisan talking points, talking past each other instead of honing in on important details and following the tenets of civil discourse. If we stay focused and on topic, we can dig into the nuance and messiness.

And finally, in the event these tenets are not upheld, and in particular, if the safety of those in conversation is questioned, then further pursuit of civil discourse in this moment is unproductive and the conversation should be terminated. Signs that these tenets are not being upheld include verbal intimidation, personal attacks, deception, demonization, generalized character attacks, recklessly false and negative or misleading statements, vulgarity, threats, and racial, sexual or religious stereotypes.³ Hopefully, under different conditions and in a different environment, civil conversation can continue with greater attention to these tenets.

Reflect

Invite participants to take 5 minutes to reflect on these questions:

- What inspires you about these tenets?
- What challenges you?

After 5 minutes, invite them to share with a person sitting near them.

Defining civil discourse (30 minutes)

Hang large sheets of paper around the room. On each, write some or all of the following questions:

- Given all that you've heard, write down a word or phrase that describes a key component of Civil Discourse.
- How do you know if a conversation is not civil?
- Where have you witnessed instances of incivility?
- What could you do if you ever witness incivility?

Distribute self-sticking notes and ask participants to take 15 minutes to write their responses on the notes and stick them to the large paper. When everyone has completed the process, read every page individually and facilitate a discussion on the responses.

Possible reflection questions include:

- How difficult was this exercise?
- What is the difference between discourse and fighting and how do you know when a conversation or debate crosses that line?
- How can you demonstrate respect during a conversation?
- Are strong emotions compatible with civil discourse? Why or why not?
- Did anything surprise you?

³ https://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/civil_discourse_facilitators_guide_1.pdf

Revisit Covenant (5 minutes)

Revisit the Covenant you originally created. Given your conversation on civil discourse, is there anything participants want to add to the Covenant?

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus, who traveled with the disciples on the road to Emmaus:

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that we may know you in the scriptures,

in the breaking of bread,

and in the hearts of all whom we meet. Amen.

([Saint Augustine's Prayer Book](#), Forward Movement)

WEEK 2: TENETS FOR CIVIL DISCOURSE PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

Opening Prayer:

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart [and especially the hearts of the people of this land], that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Prayer for Social Justice, BCP p. 823)

Tenets for Civil Discourse

- **Respect** – Respect each person you meet and take the time to truly consider what they are saying. Respond, don't react. No blaming, shaming or attacking another person. Doing this does not mean accepting or upholding their ideas as your own; rather, it can help you understand their perspective, build your knowledge for future conversations, and open your mind to previously unfamiliar ideas—especially important even if you continue to disagree with them.
- **Listen Deeply** – Listen to what the person is saying, focus on the ideas presented, and discuss ideas and issues—not people. Don't start side conversations as they distract from engagement and listening. Do not interrupt while others are speaking.
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- **Gratitude** – If what someone has shared or asked helps with your own learning, say thank you.
- **Suspend Judgment** – We all have presumptions, biases, stereotypes, prejudices, and other pre-judgments. Try to suspend pre-judgments and seek first to understand.
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- **Practice Forgiveness** – We learn from trying things out and sometimes we make mistakes. Seek to forgive and to be forgiven as we learn together.



- **Pay Attention to your Feelings and Thoughts** – If you do not feel safe asking a question or commenting on a topic, write it down and ask someone you're more comfortable or familiar with to help you voice or talk it through with you. If someone hurts your feelings, acknowledge that the comment hurt your feelings and explain why. Be open to others sharing that with you as well.

Three further suggestions:

First, all issues do not have to be fully discussed in one sitting. Civil discourse can be tiring and emotional, and taking a break is not abandoning the practice or cutting yourself short in sharing your perspective. Be patient with yourself and others.

Second, try to stay focused on one topic at a time. If we stay focused and on topic, we can dig into the nuance and messiness.

Third, in the event these tenets are not upheld, and in particular if the safety of those in conversation is questioned, then the further pursuit of civil discourse in this moment is unproductive and the conversation should be terminated. Signs that these tenets are not being upheld include verbal intimidation, personal attacks, deception, demonization, globalized character attacks, recklessly false and negative or misleading statements, vulgarity, threats, and racial, sexual or religious stereotypes.⁴ Hopefully, under different conditions and in a different environment, civil conversation can continue with greater attention to maintaining these tenets.

Reflect:

What inspires you about these tenets?

What challenges you?

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus, who traveled with the disciples on the road to Emmaus:

Be with us on the way,

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and in the hearts of all whom we meet. Amen.

([Saint Augustine's Prayer Book](#), Forward Movement)

⁴ https://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/civil_discourse_facilitators_guide_1.pdf

WEEK 3: VALUES-BASED CONVERSATIONS

Materials: Copies of the handout for each person, Baptismal Covenant or Books of Common Prayer, large paper, markers, pens (Optional: copies of “Voices from the Church” for participants to read in between Sessions 3 and 4.)

Opening Prayer: (Read in unison)

Eternal God, in whose perfect kingdom no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness, no strength known but the strength of love: So mightily spread abroad your Spirit, that all peoples may be gathered under the banner of the Prince of Peace, as children of one Father; to whom be dominion and glory, now and for ever. Amen. (Prayer for Peace, BCP p. 815)

Values-Based Conversations

Leader:

“You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.” Romans 2:1

In this segment, we will focus on civil discourse as it applies to policy advocacy, the development of legislation and new policies, and civic engagement.

Too often, we can find ourselves jumping into partisan debates over solutions without first acknowledging the values we hold individually, and the values we share with others. This division is fueled by national and public conversations, by the nature of social media, and by our own personal flaws to “be right” in debates. Our disagreements on solutions do not mean we are enemies in pursuit of different goals.

In this section, we will explore what it means to begin discourse with values.

We should always begin from a place of values. This means starting conversations on political issues by recognizing our values before jumping into solutions or partisan ideas. Values-driven conversation helps us see that we share more in common than the surface of differing political opinion may reveal. By recognizing shared values, we can often diffuse initial tensions in relationships knowing that we are pursuing the same goals—we just may disagree on how to get there.

In addition, values-based conversations help us to hold sacred the creative space for disagreement—which we will explore more in the final segment of this curriculum. Values-based conversations can help us find shared hopes for our country and produce outcomes in policy and legislation that have the most informed impact. As we seek solutions to the challenges of our time, we should aim to do so in a way that is always loving, liberating, and life-giving, even through disagreement.

Defining our Values

Invite the participants to underline the values they, as individuals, hold dear.

After a few minutes, invite them to go back over the list and circle what values they think the church holds dear. Finally, invite them to put a square around the values they think our country holds dear.

Abundance	Curiosity	Honesty	Perseverance	Spontaneity
Accessibility	Dependability	Hope	Personal fulfillment	Sportsmanship
Accountability	Dignity	Humility	Philanthropy	Stewardship
Accuracy	Discipleship	Humor	Piety	Stillness
Achievement	Discipline	Inclusion	Playfulness	Strategic
Adaptability	Diversity	Independence	Power	Strength
Adventure	Duty	Initiative	Practicality	Success
Altruism	Efficiency	Integrity	Pride	Support
Ambition	Empathy	Intellect	Professionalism	Teamwork
Appreciation	Environment	Introspection	Reason	Thankfulness
Authenticity	Equality	Intuition	Recognition	Thoroughness
Awareness	Ethics	Joy	Reliability	Thoughtfulness
Balance	Excellence	Justice	Resilience	Thrift
Beauty	Experience	Kindness	Resourcefulness	Time
Being the best	Expertise	Knowledge	Respect	Tolerance
Belonging	Fairness	Leadership	Responsibility	Tradition
Belonging	Faith	Learning	Rest	Travel
Boldness	Family	Legacy	Restraint	Trust
Bravery	Financial stability	Leisure	Reverence	Truth
Capability	Firmness	Love	Risk-taking	Understanding
Caring	Flexibility	Loyalty	Sacredness	Uniqueness
Challenge	Forgiveness	Making a difference	Sacrifice	Unity
Collaboration	Freedom	Meekness	Safety	Usefulness
Commitment	Friendship	Mindfulness	Security	Variety
Community	Fun	Nature	Self-discipline	Vision
Compassion	Generosity	Nonconformity	Self-expression	Vitality
Competence	Giving	Openness	Self-respect	Vulnerability
Confidence	Grace	Optimism	Serenity	Warm-heartedness
Conformity	Gratitude	Order	Service	Wealth
Connection	Growth	Passion	Silence	Well-being
Contentment	Happiness	Patience	Simplicity	Wisdom
Contribution	Harmony	Patriotism	Simplicity	Wonder
Cooperation	Health	Peace	Spirituality	Youthfulness
Courage	Holiness	Perfection	Spirituality	Other:
Creativity	Home			



The Values Around Us

The patriotic elements of our society are steeped in the values set before our country at its founding. Historically, we as a nation have fallen far short of fulfilling those values, yet that makes them no less worthy of pursuing.

Take, for example, the Preamble of our Constitution: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” This defines the democratic nature of our country, the pursuit of improvement, justice as a central element of our society, peace at home, protection from external threats, caring for our fellow citizens and environment, and caring for future generations.

These values should not be taken for granted, overlooked, ignored, nor discarded as unattainable. Instead, these values should be defended and not forgotten, starting in our daily conversations. We may disagree on policies and laws on how to ensure these values are upheld and followed, but ultimately, they should guide our pursuit to address the challenges before us.

Like those in the Preamble, the values Jesus challenges us to uphold include love and caring for our fellow citizens (as each is made in the image of God), the pursuit of peace and avoidance of violence, care and protection of the environment, and honesty and fairness in seeking justice.

We are connected to one another through these values—we’re connected as Christians, we’re connected as Americans, and we’re connected as citizens of the world. To have more successful civil discourse, we must keep these values in mind when engaging our fellow brother or sister.

We do acknowledge we may face situations where our values differ from those we are speaking with. What to do when faced with someone whose values are different from ours? Do we sit and talk with those whose values we do not share? Yes—if possible.

That does not mean that discussion with someone who holds negative or harmful values is always appropriate, nor does it mean that civil discourse is the only or proper form of engagement. It also does not mean, for the sake of civil discourse, that we should place ourselves in a physically or emotionally unsafe space.

Civil discourse is about enhanced understanding—it is not about giving credibility or merit, or accepting differing viewpoints as our own, or suppressing conviction or passion. Though some may disagree on this point, it is important to understand what alternative values may guide others’ views of the world, where those values come from, and how they guide someone’s opinions and actions.

Just like when we have shared values, enhancing our understanding through civil discourse with those who have values different than our own leads to an improved ability to describe the world around us with greater accuracy, deeper truth, and more potential. Differences in values

are often deeper and harder to overcome than disagreements in opinions or perspectives that are rooted in the same values.

As a final point for reflection, civil discourse across disagreement but with shared values is typically easier than civil discourse with someone who has different values. The vast majority of conversations around policy and legislation involve disagreement in the *how* of fulfilling values not in *what* the values are.

In the next segment, we will explore the messiness of policy and legislation development, which will enhance our understanding of the importance of values-based conversations. Legislative and policy related solutions to the problems in our local communities, our country and indeed the world are not always clear or easily solved.

Reflection:

Invite the participants to take a couple of minutes to look over their Values list and make notes to themselves.

- Where did you find that you marked similar things?
- Where do you not see crossover?
- What do you do when your values are different than those around you?

Civil Discourse and Faith (30 minutes)

Invite participants to break into small groups and read the Baptismal Covenant at their table. Keeping in mind the characteristics of civil discourse, ask participants to spend 15 minutes in small groups responding to the Baptismal Covenant and identifying shared values embedded in the Covenant. Invite groups to share their responses.

Facilitate a discussion based on the responses. Possible questions include:

- Has this exercise caused you to consider the promises in the Baptismal Covenant in a new way?
- How has it made you consider how our values bind us together?
- We respond with “I will, with God’s help.” How can you individually or as a community call on “God’s help” to create a civil society? Share specific ideas.

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus, who traveled with the disciples on the road to Emmaus:

Be with us on the way,

that we may know you in the scriptures,

in the breaking of bread,

and in the hearts of all whom we meet. Amen.

([Saint Augustine's Prayer Book](#), Forward Movement)

WEEK 3: VALUES-BASED CONVERSATIONS PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

Opening Prayer:

Eternal God, in whose perfect kingdom no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness, no strength known but the strength of love: So mightily spread abroad your Spirit, that all peoples may be gathered under the banner of the Prince of Peace, as children of one Father; to whom be dominion and glory, now and for ever. Amen. (Prayer for Peace, BCP p. 815)

Defining our Values

Abundance	Connection	Friendship	Legacy	Recognition	Strength
Accessibility	Contentment	Fun	Leisure	Reliability	Success
Accountability	Contribution	Generosity	Love	Resilience	Support
Accuracy	Cooperation	Giving	Loyalty	Resourcefulness	Teamwork
Achievement	Courage	Grace	Making a difference	Respect	Thankfulness
Adaptability	Creativity	Gratitude	Meekness	Responsibility	Thoroughness
Adventure	Curiosity	Growth	Mindfulness	Rest	Thoughtfulness
Altruism	Dependability	Happiness	Nature	Restraint	Thrift
Ambition	Dignity	Harmony	Nonconformity	Reverence	Time
Appreciation	Discipleship	Health	Openness	Risk-taking	Tolerance
Authenticity	Discipline	Holiness	Optimism	Sacredness	Tradition
Awareness	Diversity	Home	Order	Sacrifice	Travel
Balance	Duty	Honesty	Passion	Safety	Trust
Beauty	Efficiency	Hope	Patience	Security	Truth
Being the best	Empathy	Humility	Patriotism	Self-discipline	Understanding
Belonging	Environment	Humor	Peace	Self-expression	Uniqueness
Belonging	Equality	Inclusion	Perfection	Self-respect	Unity
Boldness	Ethics	Independence	Perseverance	Serenity	Usefulness
Bravery	Excellence	Initiative	Personal fulfillment	Service	Variety
Capability	Experience	Integrity	Philanthropy	Silence	Vision
Caring	Expertise	Intellect	Piety	Simplicity	Vitality
Challenge	Fairness	Introspection	Playfulness	Simplicity	Vulnerability
Collaboration	Faith	Intuition	Power	Spirituality	Warm-heartedness
Commitment	Family	Joy	Practicality	Spirituality	Wealth
Community	Financial stability	Justice	Pride	Spontaneity	Well-being
Compassion	Firmness	Kindness	Professionalism	Sportsmanship	Wisdom
Competence	Flexibility	Knowledge	Reason	Stewardship	Wonder
Confidence	Forgiveness	Leadership		Stillness	Youthfulness
Conformity	Freedom	Learning		Strategic	Other:

Reflection:

Invite the participants to take a couple of minutes to look over their Values list and make notes to themselves.

- Where did you find that you marked similar things?
- Where do you not see crossover?
- What values do you think Jesus teaches us?

Civil Discourse and Faith (30 minutes)

Invite participants to break into small groups and read the Baptismal Covenant at their table. Keeping in mind the characteristics of civil discourse, ask participants to spend 15 minutes in small groups responding to the Baptismal Covenant and identifying shared values embedded in the Covenant.

Invite groups to share their responses.

Facilitate a discussion based on the responses. Possible questions include:

- Has this exercise caused you to consider the promises in the Baptismal Covenant in a new way?
- How has it made you consider how our values bind us together?
- We respond with “I will, with God’s help.” How can you individually or as a community call on “God’s help” to create a civil society? Share specific ideas.

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus, who traveled with the disciples on the road to Emmaus:

Be with us on the way,

that we may know you in the scriptures,

in the breaking of bread,

and in the hearts of all whom we meet. Amen.

([Saint Augustine's Prayer Book](#), Forward Movement)

WEEK 4: THE COMPLEXITIES OF POLICY

Materials: Copies of the handout for each person, copies of “Voices from the Church” for each person, markers, writing instruments, large paper

Opening Prayer: (Read in unison)

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Prayer for the Human Family, BCP p. 815)

The Complexities of Policy

In the previous segment, we explored values-based conversations. For this next segment, we will discuss the messiness of policy and legislation development even among people who share the same values.

Policy is Messy Both in Development and Outcome

Given the complexities and nuances of the many issues our government addresses, it is not always clear what is right or wrong, what is ethical, or what the actual consequences of a policy will be compared to what is intended.

Development of Policy or Legislation: The process of developing and passing new policy or legislation can be long and arduous. Most bills intersect with many facets of our government and society, and as such, those developing the legislation must consider a broad array of factors and issues. Lawmakers draw information from many areas, both in the public and private sectors, to make the most informed decisions possible.

This is particularly true when trying to forecast policy impacts on different populations, either in the present or the future. Take for example an infrastructure project like a new hydroelectric dam that displaces a small population and impacts a small area of land (arguably ethically wrong), but that provides increased electrical capacity and greater efficiency in the long run, leading to net economic growth and better care for the environment (arguably ethically good).

As we the general public debate and aim to shape policy, we should keep in mind how messy the development of it actually is.

Outcome: Sometimes the intent of policy or legislation can be good, but the outcome harmful—making the process even messier. We cannot predict the future with any great accuracy. Though we may enact policy rooted in the right values and with the right intent, the ultimate outcome can be vastly different from what lawmakers intended.

Here is an example: The 1933 Congressionally-established Soil Erosion Service (now under a different name and part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture), promoted kudzu⁵ as a means of soil erosion control across the Southeastern U.S. Though soil erosion is certainly an environmental protection issue, the focus at the time was an economic one, to protect the assets of Southern farmers. Today, as many in that part of the country know, kudzu is an incredibly harmful and invasive species that has killed off other plants and animal habitats as it spreads without any natural predator of disease or insect.

Of course, not all policy and legislation is as benign as a recommendation for kudzu. Consider weighing budget decisions among options to address present needs or reduce future risks—or decisions in national security and defense weighing options to act or not.

The morally correct path may not be clear here, as there can be morality and immorality in multiple solutions—and thus the importance of maintaining a focus on values and allowing for a creative space where a multitude of ideas may be presented, processed, understood and debated, in hopes of getting to the best solution.

Reflection:

Invite participants to reflect on what they just heard.

- How do you make decisions based on your knowledge, ethics and values?
- When those decisions are difficult, who or what do you turn to for help?

Practicing Civil Discourse (45 minutes)

Materials needed: “Voices from the Church,” large paper

On a large piece of paper, write the following points:

1. Facts are put on the table
2. People express an opinion
3. Engage in productive dialogue
4. Understand how to accomplish goals through compromise

Divide into small groups and ask each group to read through one of the “Voices from the Church” statements. Now ask participants to engage in a short 15-minute conversation that is modeled on the above outline on civil discourse. Have one person at each table act as the facilitator to get the conversation going and keep it flowing in a productive way, gently reminding participants about the Covenant. If your group begins going to a different topic, gently remind them about the topic at hand.

Most likely, participants will run out of time. When 15 minutes is up, call the group back together and facilitate a discussion with the larger group.

Possible questions include:

- How did you feel during your discussion?
- Did you become emotional or ever feel angry or frustrated?
- Alternatively, did you enjoy the engagement?

⁵ <http://www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-2221/ANR-2221.pdf>

- Was it difficult or easy to maintain your emotional balance to ensure an ongoing, safe, and productive discussion?
- During your conversation, did you notice that your position was shifting or that you were gaining a better understanding of each other's opinions?
- Do you believe that our culture, media, and political system have created tendencies toward incivility in our society? Can you see that influence in your own thinking and dialogue? *(Keep in mind that civil discourse can be challenging and take practice, so be sure to reinforce that we are always in the process of learning how we can best participate in respectful, fruitful discussions.)*

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus, who traveled with the disciples on the road to Emmaus:

Be with us on the way,

that we may know you in the scriptures,

in the breaking of bread,

and in the hearts of all whom we meet. Amen.

[\(Saint Augustine's Prayer Book](#), Forward Movement)

WEEK 4: THE COMPLEXITIES OF POLICY PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

Opening Prayer:

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Prayer for the Human Family, BCP p. 815)

Reflection:

- How do you make decisions based on your knowledge, ethics and values?
- When those decisions are difficult, who or what do you turn to for help?

Practicing Civil Discourse

In small groups, read through “Voices from the Church” and then engage in a short 15-minute conversation about this issue that is modeled on the outline below on civil discourse.

Have one person at each table act as the facilitator to get the conversation going and keep it flowing in a productive way, gently reminding participants about the Covenant. If your group begins going to a different topic, gently remind them about the topic at hand.

1. Facts are put on the table
2. People express an opinion
3. Engage in productive dialogue
4. Understand how to accomplish goals through compromise

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus, who traveled with the disciples on the road to Emmaus:

Be with us on the way,
that we may know you in the scriptures,
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([Saint Augustine's Prayer Book](#), Forward Movement)

WEEK 5: SACRED SPACE FOR DEBATE

Materials: Copies of the participant handout, large paper, sticky notes, pens or pencils

Opening Prayer: (Read in unison)

Everliving God, whose will it is that all should come to you through your Son Jesus Christ: Inspire our witness to him, that all may know the power of his forgiveness and the hope of his resurrection; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen. (Prayer for the Mission of the Church, BCP p. 816)

Sacred Space for Debate

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. I Corinthians 12:4-7

Our country, and indeed the world, needs our participation in addressing the challenges before us today and the unknown challenges yet to come. Civil discourse, the pursuit of enhanced understanding, is a means of sharpening our minds, advancing our ideas, and selecting the best route forward.

For elected officials, civil discourse is the bedrock of bipartisan debate, helping them to work, often slowly and with great difficulty, toward the best option they can muster. For every individual, exposure to ideas and perspectives and motivations different from our own can help us to modify and improve our own understanding of the world and each other. When we apply our learning to civic engagement, particularly in the act of voting, we make more informed decisions when choosing among candidates for office.

This space for civil discourse and debate is a sacred space. It brings us together, opens up opportunities to discuss difficult topics, and helps us recognize the humanity in each other. We must be informed by ideas beyond our own, at least to be aware of other possible perspectives and learn what flaws we have in our own thinking.

With our engagement online through social media and selective sources, often curated for us without our awareness or input, we must be diligent even in passive participation in civil discourse. Taking time to read opinion writers and news sources different from what we typically read, may present opinions different from our own and can help us become more familiar with opposing ideas and learn more about our own.

The preparation for civil discourse takes discipline and work, especially given the growing divisions in our society along political and other lines. Repairing these divides and preserving this sacred space for debate takes effort, resolve, patience, and faith. It does not come without discouragement, frustration, or even anger on occasion.

Yet, if we recognize our shared values before entering into conversation, remembering the tenets of civil discourse and acknowledging that the solutions before us are not always so clearly right or wrong, we can better understand the significant role that civil discourse plays in promoting peace and justice in the world, and we can overcome that discomfort.

We must have courageous conversations, even with people who are strongly opposed to our views. We must also put ourselves out there, in face-to-face situations, not just hiding behind keyboards and cell phones, to engage with those with whom we disagree. While civil discourse sharpens our minds, builds trust, and expands our capacity for change, it also dulls the violence and potential for unrest in our world.

People see and experience the world differently; that diversity is an asset if explored, examined and exposed openly, or it can be a wedge to drive us apart, to drive us into a space of anger and contempt for one another.

So, when and where can you engage in civil discourse? You can engage in it now—begin by taking what you have learned here and studying it with a friend, family member, or with various groups of people. You can engage in civil discourse in your own community. Hold an event on a particular topic, even just discussing this series in order to build up understanding on civil discourse before entering into discussion on a particular issue.

As you pursue greater understanding through civil discourse, carry the following quote from Thomas Merton with you:

“Don’t be too quick to assume your enemy is a savage just because he is your enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy because he thinks you are a savage. Or perhaps he is afraid of you because he feels that you are afraid of him. And perhaps if he believed you were capable of loving him he would not be your enemy. Do not be too quick to assume that your enemy is an enemy of God just because he is your enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy precisely because he can find nothing in you that gives glory to God. Perhaps he fears you because he can find nothing in you of God’s love and God’s kindness and God’s patience and mercy and understanding of the weaknesses of men.”

- Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 177

Reflection

Invite the participants to write down the topics about which they would like to engage in Civil Discourse.

- What topics would you like to engage in using Civil Discourse?
- With whom would you like to have those conversations?
- What ideals from these sessions would you want to make sure and take with you into those conversations?

Creating a Civility Covenant

Explain to participants that we are now going to create a Civility Covenant that will serve as a guide for conversation and action in the future for themselves individually, for their family, and for the congregation.

Have participants write their ideas on post-it notes and stick them to the large paper you have posted around the room.

As examples, the covenant may include the following components:

- Commitment to pray for civility among themselves, others, faith community leaders, political leaders, and others they may name.
- Commitment to “lead by example” and practice civility, as you have defined it during your time together. Individuals may want to list particular aspects of civil discourse that they feel important to emphasize.
- Commitment to listening more carefully to those with whom they disagree.
- Commitment to make amends for past incivility.
- Commitment to respect the dignity of every human being.

Call the group back together and ask participants to brainstorm ideas on how they can broaden the impact of this curriculum. Ideas may include:

- Hosting educational programming using the sections from this curriculum and discussion questions above. Consider inviting the wider community.
- Holding a prayer breakfast focused on the importance of civil discourse.
- Preaching or sponsoring events or a season of events designed to foster a deeper understanding of civility.

Once everyone has finished their work, invite them (or small groups at a time) to organize the post-its into general themes or ideas.

Once this work is done, read the groups of post-its aloud. Ask for reflections, additions, changes.

As you complete the work, commit to writing the covenant into a final document and disseminating it throughout the congregation. Also, make a list of any next steps you have agreed to undertake.

Closing Prayer:

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that we may know you in the scriptures,
in the breaking of bread,
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([Saint Augustine's Prayer Book](#), Forward Movement)

WEEK 5: SACRED SPACE FOR DEBATE PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

Opening Prayer:

Everliving God, whose will it is that all should come to you through your Son Jesus Christ: Inspire our witness to him, that all may know the power of his forgiveness and the hope of his resurrection; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen. (Prayer for the Mission of the Church, BCP p. 816)

Sacred Space for Debate

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Reflection

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Closing Prayer:

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([Saint Augustine's Prayer Book](#), Forward Movement)

Appendix:

Tenets for Civil Discourse

- **Respect** – Respect each person you meet and take the time to truly consider what they are saying. Respond, don't react. No blaming, shaming or attacking another person. Doing this does not mean accepting or upholding their ideas as your own; rather, it can help you understand their perspective, build your knowledge for future conversations, and open your mind to previously unfamiliar ideas—especially important even if you continue to disagree with them.
- **Listen Deeply** – Listen to what the person is saying, focus on the ideas presented, and discuss ideas and issues—not people. Don't start side conversations as they distract from engagement and listening. Do not interrupt while others are speaking.
- **Speak for Yourself** – Use “I” statements when commenting or responding. Share your personal experience. Own it.
- **Try to Understand** – Try to understand the thoughts and ideas of others. Ask questions for clarification. Note: sometimes we may be discussing the same concept, yet use different words. Make sure to pay attention to such areas of misunderstanding, and seek clarification where there is any confusion.
- **Share Talk Time** – If you are having a discussion with more than two people, make sure everyone has the opportunity to speak before speaking again. Take notes if there are things you want to follow up on. Ask what others think.
- **Speak with Humility** – You may not know everything about the topic at hand, and your experience may not be that of the other person's. Lean into your knowledge, personal experience, and expertise, but remain open to the truth others are sharing.
- **Gratitude** – If what someone has shared or asked helps with your own learning, say thank you.
- **Suspend Judgment** – We all have presumptions, biases, stereotypes, prejudices, and other pre-judgments. Try to suspend pre-judgments and seek first to understand.
- **Disagree and Love** – We seek to learn and listen. You can disagree with someone and still love them and listen to them. Civil discourse is about listening and learning together, seeking shared understanding and exposure to new ideas in the pursuit of improving our world and fulfilling our call as followers of Jesus.
- **Practice Forgiveness** – We learn from trying things out and sometimes we make mistakes. Seek to forgive and to be forgiven as we learn together.
- **Pay Attention to your Feelings and Thoughts** – If you do not feel safe asking a question or commenting on a topic, write it down and ask someone you're more comfortable or familiar with to help you voice or talk it through with you. If someone hurts your feelings, acknowledge that the comment hurt your feelings and explain why. Be open to others sharing that with you as well.

In addition to these tenets, we want to offer three additional suggestions:

First, all issues do not have to be fully discussed in one sitting. Civil discourse can be tiring and emotional, and taking a break—stepping away from conversation for a period of time—is not abandoning the practice or cutting yourself short in sharing your perspective. Civil discourse is a method of discussion framed within a context of long-term relationship building, a habitual practice useful over one’s lifetime. Productivity of conversation can diminish if we become too tired or overwhelmed, weakening our emotional capacity to follow the tenets listed above. Be patient with yourself and others. Make sure breaks are a part of your practice of civil discourse.

Second, try to stay focused on one topic at a time. Yes, issues are very much interconnected and overlap, and it is often hard, if not impossible, to discuss one issue without relating it to another. Yet, not everyone is going to have the same knowledge about those relationships between issues. Our conversations are not as effective if we jump around from topic to topic, lumping things together in an unstable manner. In such a scenario, we may end up reverting to partisan talking points, talking past each other instead of honing in on important details and following the tenets of civil discourse. If we stay focused and on topic, we can dig into the nuance and messiness.

And finally, in the event these tenets are not upheld, and in particular, if the safety of those in conversation is questioned, then further pursuit of civil discourse in this moment is unproductive and the conversation should be terminated. Signs that these tenets are not being upheld include verbal intimidation, personal attacks, deception, demonization, generalized character attacks, recklessly false and negative or misleading statements, vulgarity, threats, and racial, sexual or religious stereotypes.⁶ Hopefully, under different conditions and in a different environment, civil conversation can continue with greater attention to these tenets.

Additional Resources:

- Video:
https://www.ted.com/talks/theo_e_j_wilson_a_black_man_goes_undercover_in_the_alt_right?utm_campaign=tedsbread--a&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare#t-851266
- Video:
<http://rap.wustl.edu/video/healing-a-house-divided-public-lecture-by-the-most-rev-michael-curry/>
- Organization:
<http://nicd.arizona.edu/>

⁶ https://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/civil_discourse_facilitators_guide_1.pdf