

**Ethical Conversation in the Midst of Difference:  
Summary of Conversation Characteristics that Promote Dialogue**

In order to have discussion that will most likely contribute to “healthy and theologically robust ways of addressing difference in the life of the church” (*Ethical Conversation in the Midst of Difference*) the following characteristics must be present:

**Trust:** Trust grows from the realization that ALL participants are serious about their mission and ministry, share a sense of calling to mission and are trying to be faithful to that call. In order to establish the foundation of trust, it must be clear to all participants that the previously stated criteria are indeed present and, even more importantly, that each participant is committed “to finding ways to continue to move forward in communion with each other.” (*Ethical Conversation in the Midst of Difference*)

**Communication:** This section is short but not easy...For the hearers: People hear but don’t listen. If you’re thinking of a rebuttal while another person is speaking, then you are not truly listening. Silence is needed for processing and reflection. For the talkers: The stewardship of words is VERY important. Guidelines for appropriate language must be established at the beginning of the conversation. Leaders must politely but immediately cut off inappropriate speech. Good communication leads to trust, understanding, and the building of relationship.

**Attention to Context:** Differences have emerged across the Anglican Communion not only in different cultures but also within cultures. The Anglican Church reflects its character “as part of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church by the way it adapts itself appropriately to its missional context.” (*Ethical Conversation in the Midst of Difference*) Differences are normal and necessary. Article XXXIV says, “It is not necessary that the Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, or utterly like; for at all times they have been divers, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men’s manners, so that nothing be ordained against God’s Word.” Anglicans need to be reacquainted with the fact that Anglicanism has NEVER been a uniform set of beliefs. The strength of our unity is actually found in the embracing of our diversity. This is something increasingly being lost in a partisan world. Noticing differences within a safe environment fosters understanding and awareness. Many great Anglican scholars and theologians have addressed the plurality within Anglicanism as one of its greatest strengths. Louis Weil quotes the document of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission at length:

If the church, because it lives ‘in Christ’ by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, is a sign and agent of God’s Kingdom in and for the world, it is so – always and necessarily – in a radically ‘located’ fashion. The church exists in particular places and at particular times, and the truth which its life and action carry is conveyed only to the extent that it too is ‘located’. This means, as we have seen, that Christians in a given place and time both will and must share the cultural idiom of their geographical and social locale. It also means that their life and witness both will and must address the issues, moral and political, with which historical circumstance confronts them in that locale. The church belongs to all its

many places and times, and it is in this fact that its legitimate pluriformity is, in the end, rooted. (*For the Sake of the Kingdom*, para 94, p.58 in *Anglicanism* 80)

Weil goes on to say, “pluralism is not simply a situation to be endured, but is rather a stimulus to a deeper penetration into God’s purposes for the Church. It is an opportunity through which Christians may come to a fuller awareness of the scope of the Gospel.” (*Anglicanism* 80)

On the flip side, the differences serve to underscore that there are actually many more commonalities than differences. The differences “are a reflection of a common commitment to mission refracted through the different contexts within which that mission is carried out.” (*Ethical Conversation in the Midst of Difference*) A question to ask when confronted with uncomfortable differences is “How does the church express the unchanging love of God in the changing realities of our social, cultural, and historical contexts?” This leads to the realization that “the church needs to be always reforming and always being reformed (*reformata, semper reformanda*).” (*Ethical Conversation in the Midst of Difference*)

Encountering differences can be unnerving and it is almost always uncomfortable. For some people, difference equates with “wrong”. How can their way be right when my way is right? Yet, diversity is not something to be solved but understood – understood in “the light of our commonalities in terms of mission and tradition” (*Ethical Conversation in the Midst of Difference*) and the bonds of affection which hold together the worldwide Anglican Communion.

**Using Scripture:** This is a continuation of the above characteristic. Some dialogue leaders in specific instances have opted to ban the use of Scripture from the process. I would urge caution in allowing the use of Scripture (but Scripture *is* important so do use it). Establishing ground rules beforehand is a must. Perhaps you’d prefer using Scripture in a more structured way such as a “study”. Why the caution? People who see in terms of right and wrong often use Scripture to back up their position and this is dangerous. It maintains “sides” and almost never leads to productive conversation. In *Mere Christianity* C.S. Lewis remarks, “Most of us are not really approaching the subject in order to find out what Christianity says: we are approaching it in the hope of finding support from Christianity for the views of our own party. We are looking for an ally where we are offered either a Master or – a Judge.” (*Essential C.S. Lewis* 318) Anglican Divine Richard Hooker, several hundred years earlier, had cautioned against sole reliance on the authority of Scripture and noted, “It is no more a disgrace for the scriptures to have left a number of...things free to be ordered at the discretion of the church than it is for nature to have left it unto the wit of man to devise his own attire.” (*Anglicanism* 11) In conjunction with Scripture, Anglicans also look to Tradition and reason as the sources of authority – meant to be used together in making decisions. Hooker advised that there are ‘essentials’ necessary for salvation and other things that are ‘accessories’. We Anglicans, since the beginning of Anglicanism (actually, this goes back to Augustine), have held that Scripture contains all things necessary for salvation. Notice we don’t say, ‘All things contained in Scripture are necessary for salvation.’ Augustine said that Scripture, given by God for our illumination and therefore clear in essentials, nevertheless contained numerous obscurities and mysteries to exercise the thoughtful, and could have many justifiable interpretations. He believed interpretation must lie within the Rule of Faith transmitted within the worshipping community, of which

the bishops as proper pastors are the collective guardians. (*Anglicanism* 102-3) Scripture has been used to justify the institution of slavery, the slaughter of Muslims, and the oppression of women, among other black marks on our history. Perhaps the most important Scripture that could be held up during dialogue is Jesus' two commandments: [Jesus] said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40, NRSV)

**Understanding Motives:** In the heat of argument or in the midst of profound disagreement, motives are often wrongly attributed to the words and actions of others. Engaging in constructive dialogue provides the opportunity to re-evaluate the assigned motives. The assigned motives are generally very simple... "You said 'such and such' because you think 'X'." In reality, our motives are complex and, often, not easily explained even by ourselves. What we say and do comes about in response to multiple pressures and stems from layers of thinking. "The complexity of our moral commitments as individuals and as communities is only really disclosed in relationship." (*Ethical Conversation in the Midst of Difference*)

**Commitment to Relationship:** Encounter with the "other" is transformational. It undermines the mistrust and stereotypes built up prior to the encounter. One bishop noted, "We need to be at table together, not just the Eucharist." Formal and informal opportunities for encounter work together to build understanding and trust and reduce tension and conflict. It is important that there be a commitment to the relationship in the long term in order for people to truly enter into a transformational relationship.

**Focus on Understanding not Action:** Type 'A' personalities may have a hard time with this one. Actions taken or decisions made too soon can destroy all of the progress made in the relationship. Actions taken/decisions made solely because you feel you should go that route only result in increased tension. Actions taken/decisions made when a consensus is emerging are the successful ones. Please remember, not every issue can or should be resolved. Sometimes we need to simply understand and accept the diversity of God's work in creation and redemption.

**Debate vs. Dialogue:** This one is huge. All of the other characteristics mentioned above, hinge on this one. Here are the points outlined by Rev. Canon Eric Beresford:

- Debate emphasizes content. It is about distinguishing correct assertion from incorrect and excluding the latter. Dialogue emphasizes relationship. It is open to the possibility that apparent differences of content are really differences of language and perspective. It is open to the possibility that different approaches can co-exist if justified by the different missional contexts within which the gospel is proclaimed and lived. This is not to deny the importance of content. Content without context is abstract, but context without content lacks integrity.
- Debate focuses on correctness. It is linked to an understanding of truth that sees truth as the correspondence between assertion and some external standard to which it must conform. Dialogue focuses on Insight and recognizes that there is an interpretive element to truth claims. It recognizes that the way we see the truth is shaped by our context. This is not some form of relativism. It is a recognition that there is no view from nowhere and that perspectives are an

ineradicable element in the way we understand and interpret the cultural and social expression of the gospel.

- Debate focuses attention on points of difference. This is why the history of ethics is a history of what Alasdair MacIntyre calls an interminable debate between positions that are essentially irresolvable in their own terms. Dialogue focuses on points of connection. It recognizes that any real disagreement requires some underlying agreements and also that some apparent disagreements are only that and can be resolved once we understand the commonalities that lie behind our apparently different positions.
- The purpose of dialogue is to understand and appreciate the positions of others not to change or correct them, which is the implied end of debate.
- Debate focuses on facts. Dialogue focuses on meanings. In the area of theological and moral conversation both are important but the bishops' discoveries in dialogue suggest that the latter are more often the source of difference and that dialogue is therefore more likely to be more fruitful.
- The purpose of debate is to reach closure, to bring an end to difference and to choose resolution that will be agreed by all rational parties. Dialogue does not presume that this outcome is always possible but seeks to hold the space of conversation open as long as is necessary and possible. (*Ethical Conversation in the Midst of Difference*)

Western society tends to gravitate toward debate. In a debate, there are winners and losers. This impulse to debate – to punch and counterpunch – must be resisted in order to engage in conversation that will build relationship.

Debate certainly has its place. Debate provides the clarity important to policy formation processes. In situations in which debate is necessary, please consider a two-pronged approach. Before decisions are made, complex issues might be better served by utilizing dialogue “to deepen mutual understanding and uncover unexpected common ground prior to moving to parliamentary process and debate.” (*Ethical Conversation in the Midst of Difference*)

**In Conclusion:** Disciplined dialogue is not for the faint-hearted. It takes work and commitment to see it through successfully but it *is* worth it. “It demands that we not only understand the other better but also that we are willing to learn to understand ourselves better. It also demands a capacity to live in the midst of complexity and diversity that not all find comfortable.” (*Ethical Conversation in the Midst of Difference*).

## References

<https://www.anglican.ca/gr/bishopsconsultation/videointerviews2012/beresfordreflection/> is the website for the following resource:

Beresford, The Rev. Canon Eric. *Ethical Conversation in the Midst of Difference: Learnings from the Consultation of Bishops Dialogue*. For the Ethics Task Group of the Faith, Worship, and Ministry Committee, February 2013.

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Sykes, Stephen, Booty, John, & Knight, Jonathan. *The Study of Anglicanism Revised Edition*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN: 1998.