A Path for Tense Conversations

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A conversation can turn tense in a heartbeat. A council meeting. Coffee hour. A family table. The air gets thick, and we can't see the next step.

This page offers four practices to help us navigate tense conversations. They draw on a recent Dialogue Circle webinar with Dr. Jacob Alan Cook, a Christian ethicist at Eastern Mennonite University, along with insights from Dialog Works. The webinar focused on Christian nationalism, but these practices apply wherever deep convictions meet.

1. Prepare yourself: Tune your own instrument

The work starts with us. A musician tunes before joining the orchestra. We check our own pitch before we try to help a room find harmony.

1. What am I seeing and how am I interpreting it?
2. What convictions, experiences, or fears shape my response?
3. What might others be seeing differently?
4. How does my faith call me to respond?

In our conversation about Christian nationalism, Dr. Cook raised a particularly challenging question: *Which rules from my own tradition would I require others to follow, even if they don't share my faith?*

2. Get curious: Listen for the fire

Sometimes the most helpful thing a leader can do is slow the conversation down. We can pause, ask a question, or suggest returning to the subject when people can listen better. If someone says something that frightens or offends us, our first instinct is to argue the facts. A strong position works like a smoke alarm. It tells us something is burning underneath.

So we ask about the fire:

- Where does this come from for you?
- What do you feel is at stake?
- What makes this particularly important to you?
- Can you tell me more about that?

Donna Hicks, a scholar of dignity, points to one quiet question under most heated conflicts: *Do I matter?* When we listen for that question, the person across the table looks different.

We can be curious and still disagree. We can seek to understand what lies beneath a statement while remaining clear about our own convictions. Sometimes we also need to interrupt a comment that harms someone else in the room.

3. Honor the person. Stay honest about the view.

Our political convictions can become deeply connected to our sense of identity. When those convictions are challenged, we may take the challenge personally. Knowing that we belong at the table can help us lower our guard and listen.

One sentence can hold both:

"I want to be in this conversation with you. I'm also troubled by what you just said."

We honor their presence. We remain clear about our own conscience. For faith leaders, this is part of our calling: to remain in relationship across differences while bearing witness to the convictions that shape our lives.

4. Build capacity: Practice before the flood

In disaster relief work, I have watched people of every political and religious stripe stand shoulder to shoulder filling sandbags. When the water rises, we need the person beside us to hold the bag open. The capacity to work across our differences is already in us. Our task is to practice it while the sun is shining.

A few ways to start:

- **Start with something manageable.** Invite a council or small group to discuss a question on which members disagree but where the stakes are relatively low. Practice listening, asking questions, and reflecting back what you heard before offering your own view.
- **Put a statement on the table.** Rather than asking people to defend their own positions, invite them to explore a statement from a public survey. This creates some distance and makes curiosity easier. For example, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) has surveyed Americans about the statement, "The U.S. government should declare America a Christian nation." We might ask the group: Why might people hold this view? What hopes or fears might sit beneath it?
- **Build relationships across differences.** Invite people from different congregations, traditions, or communities to share a meal and tell their stories. Begin with experiences and relationships before moving into contested questions.

When the next difficult conversation comes

Difficult conversations will come. We cannot always prepare for what someone will say, but we can prepare ourselves for how we will respond. We can practice curiosity when we are tempted to judge, remain connected when we disagree, and speak honestly without abandoning the relationship. We develop these habits over time, one conversation at a time.

When a conversation gets tense, remember:

Practice	Question to ask yourself
Prepare yourself	What is happening in me right now?
Get curious	What matters so much to this person?
Honor and be honest	How can I remain connected while speaking truthfully?
Build capacity	Where can we practice these skills before the stakes are high?

Continue the Conversation

Dialog Works helps faith leaders navigate conflict and change with clarity, courage, and care. Through the Dialogue Circle, courses, webinars, and the Sacred Dialogue Partner, we provide opportunities to learn, practice, and support one another.

Want to practice these skills? The Sacred Dialogue Partner offers a private space to rehearse difficult conversations, experiment with different responses, and reflect on what you are learning.

Sources and acknowledgments

This resource draws on a 2026 Dialogue Circle webinar with Dr. Jacob Alan Cook on Christian nationalism, Donna Hicks's work on dignity, and Dialog Works's experience in conflict transformation. We created an audio summary of the webinar using Google's NotebookLM.

- Dr. Jacob Alan Cook, Dialogue Circle webinar on Christian nationalism, 2026.
- PRRI, Mapping Christian Nationalism Across the 50 States, 2025 American Values Atlas
- Donna Hicks, *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict* (Yale University Press, 2011)
- Listen to the audio summary: How to Disarm High-Stakes Political Disagreements
- Practice with the Sacred Dialogue Partner: sdp.dialogworks.org
- Join Dialogue Circle: dialoguecircle.org
- Learn more about Dialog Works: dialogworks.org