MCC Election Resource Companion Guide

Having Better Conversations on Divisive Issues — MCC’s tips for respectful dialogue

An election offers an occasion to consider the political implications of our values – an opportunity for our faith convictions and hopes for the world to be reflected in the public good. But if we consider that EVERY action can be seen as a vote for the kind of society we want to live in, this can offer us a renewed perspective about how we show up in the world everyday – especially when it comes to divisive topics.
When we care about an issue it is easy to silence contradictory sides of the story. However, having meaningful conversations about tense issues is a necessary characteristic of committed relationships, resilient communities, healthy churches, and strong democracies. Jesus’s call to love our neighbours is reflected in the conversations we engage in with one another.

Jesus call to love, however, isn’t a call to avoid or hide from disagreement. In the Sermon on the Mount, and in many of his parables, Jesus publicly engaged with tough and divisive subjects that made those around him uncomfortable. Conflict isn’t good or bad, it’s what we do with it that matters. Do we respond in violence or seek to use the space created by disagreement to fuel growth and deepen understanding? If we enter a dialogue with the intention of winning an argument, we may be off base before we start.

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Canada believes that healthy dialogue is a path to promote nonviolence. Although it can be challenging to try to understand those we disagree with, it is both possible and worth our time. When we commit to listening to others, we allow the teachings of Jesus to transform our opinions and can then hear the invitation to love and reconcile across difference and disagreements (Ephesians 2:14)

In this guide we offer a few tips for having positive conversations around significant issues in hopes that we can create spaces for better disagreement with respect and authenticity.

"From our experience of faith, peacebuilding demands healing wounds, restoring lives, and making a diverse participatory nation, founded on the respect for human dignity possible."

— JUSTAPAZ, THE MENNONITE CENTRE FOR JUSTICE, PEACE AND NONVIOLENCE, MCC PARTNER IN COLOMBIA

1. Be aware of groupthink

Often, a desire for harmony or conformity in a group can result in irrational decisions. Sometimes our desire not to ‘rock the boat’ can outweigh our moral convictions to speak out against an injustice or misrepresentation. But voicing a dissenting opinion does not always have to ruin the party. Try using some of these tips next time you’re hesitating to say your part:

- A quick response we can use to disagree without aggression is, “I see where you’re coming from but that has not been my experience...” or “I think that we actually have something in common here. We both feel... but where I differ is...”.
- Consider the 3 zones people may be in when learning new information (comfort | learning | panic) and try to avoid sending someone into their panic zone by offering too much information at once.
- Use the language of values - “Something I value is... and so that informs how I see this situation...”
- Be the person in your group who gently reminds everyone that democracies require engagement and that divisive issues can still be safe to discuss because
we all have something to learn, and because we are all committed to following a path of reconciliation

- Don’t give away your vote by allowing someone else to tell you who you will vote for. Be curious, ask questions, and cast your vote based on the platforms YOU care most about.

“We have to follow the footsteps of Christ. We have to love our enemies. We have refused to be enemies. We are depending on three basic things: on faith, on hope, and on love.”

—AMAL NASSAR OF TENT OF NATIONS, PALESTINE

2. Do the prep work

It is hard to have difficult conversations! There are many layered dynamics at play between the relational undercurrents and the easily accessible well of conflicting information. Add in our deep care for the people involved in the issue and the conversation is ripe for an argument. Although it is common to be rooted in our own worldviews, examining the various viewpoints at play within an issue can help tremendously in our ability to understand different ways of thinking. Consider the long view as well: the biblical call to reconciliation is one that we engage with over a lifetime of relationship and doesn’t happen in just one conversation. Some ways to do this are:

- **Follow alternate news sources.** Resist the urge to confirm your opinion by only looking for facts to strengthen your viewpoint. Try to notice when your inputs are one-sided and ask, “what is another way to look at this?”.

- **Seek out and listen to first voices.** Put effort into hearing the stories and opinions of the people directly affected by an issue or proposed policy, instead of only through the lens of corporations or media outlets whose objective may not be to get the truth out. Genuine human connections will complicate the narrative and offer a more nuanced understanding to an issue. When people feel connected to their neighbours, their communities tend to be less violent and have a greater capacity to move from feuding to inquiry.

- **Get informed.** You do not have to become an expert on a topic to enter into a discussion but try not to over represent your information either. Take time to read about topics you care about and commit to following a story, region, or issue regularly.

- **Be generous with yourself.** Giving ourselves permission to have internal contradictions will help us resonate when we see them in others. There are certain things in life that cause us to be on both sides of an issue.

- **Talk about destinations not detours.** Recognize that when it comes to shifting opinions it is easier to move towards something good rather than away from something bad. Take time to understand and articulate what good would come from a desired change in policy or practice. Then use that understanding to ask generous questions that invite others to do the same.

- **Practice.** Spend time engaging with people you trust before embarking on a more public conversation.
“Listen to the invitation of the prophet Isaiah: Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

— BASED ON ISAIAH 2:3-4

3. Identify partiality

Our brains function with inherent biases in perception which causes us to take notice of information that validates what we already believe and reject information that disconfirms what we believe. This is confirmation bias and we all do it. It is how our opinions and beliefs are formed. Building familiarity with our biases can boost our capacity to hold our views a little more objectively and to listen for the values underlying another person’s message. When we listen with curiosity, we may hear values which actually harmonize with our own. Values like family unity, human dignity, honesty, self-determination, or loyalty. We can learn to identify a person’s underlying convictions underneath the aggressive tones, nitty-gritty policy jargon, or heated emotions that are often present in debates. This can be especially challenging when our social media news feeds are curated to conform to our biases. The good news is that we are capable of taking in new information and can challenge our minds to identify our biases as they come up. We need to seek to see the image of God present in the other person. Questions to ask yourself:

- Where do you see confirmation bias playing out around you?
- What are the values that motivate others? How do they affect their behavior? Where do you see God’s image reflected in the other person?
- Can you identify examples of when you’ve been swayed by your own bias into discrediting a voice simply because they’re saying something you don’t like?
- Who are your influencers and sources of information? How/where could you diversify?

“Many people misunderstand what conflict is. They assume that it is the same thing as violence, and therefore see it as a bad and destructive thing. However, conflict is not the same as violence, and it not a bad thing if we work to resolve it in a nonviolent and constructive way… conflict is a normal part of life. Conflict exists in society because people are different, with different perspectives and understandings of what they see around them… This is the idea behind nonviolent conflict resolution and transformation: through nonviolent conflict resolution, we can transform conflict into peace.”

— PEACE CLUB CURRICULUM, MCC PROJECT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

4. Listen well

To be effective communicators, our listening skills need to be just as practiced as our speaking skills. Listening is more than remaining quiet while someone is speaking. It is about being present, offering connection, letting go of assumptions,
and seeking mutual understanding. Real listening involves curiosity to understand what people are saying between the words they use. Listening well builds trust between conversation partners and is perhaps the most fundamental skill for having respectful dialogue on divisive issues. Part of our role as a community of faith is to develop relationships with people who are not like us; our ability to listen well plays a large part in relationship building across difference.

Some tips to approach conversations with active listening:

- **Check to see if you understand.** When we paraphrase what we hear and ask if we understand correctly, we allow others to feel heard. People need to feel heard before they can listen openly. Listen to understand, not to respond.

- **Listen to what's happening beneath the surface.** When our emotions hinder our ability to participate respectfully in conversation things can escalate quickly and we lose our capacity to communicate clearly. Although expressing our emotions has a time and place, holding them objectively for the purpose of making space for dialogue may be a good strategy.
  - Try naming what you feel when you are in a conversation that offends you or feels divisive. Be accurate.
  - What value(s) is this feeling stemming from?
  - How would you choose to respond? Which emotion would you like to cultivate when in difficult conversations?
  - Consider how you would like your conversation partner to feel.

- **Listen for propaganda and power.** When one narrative consistently dominates the conversation that viewpoint becomes normalized, easiest to believe, and the only perspective many people will consider valid. However, it is up to each of us to think critically about what we hear and to hold our sources accountable. The next time you hear a sensationalized story here are two ideas on how to do some investigative reporting yourself:
  - Widen the lens to engage a bigger conversation by returning to the broader context of an issue. Ask out loud…
    - Where/how did this story originate? What does the other side want?
    - Whose story is not being told? Who is most affected?
    - Who has the most/least power? The most/least to gain?
  - Amplify the nuance or complexity of the story. When a situation is oversimplified it is easier to find polarized sides. Destabilize the debate by injecting narratives that highlight the people involved as humane, relatable neighbours created in the image of God.

“Holy God, you have bound us together in a common life. Help us, in the heart of our battles for justice and truth, not to confront each other in hatred and bitterness, but on the contrary, to work together in tolerance and respect. Yes, Lord, imprint on us your love for those who are different from us.”

— SIAKA TRAORÉ, BURKINA FASO, MWC PEACE SUNDAY PACKET
5. Resources for continued learning...

There are many excellent organizations and resources available to keep sharpening our skills as respectful dialoguers. Check out some of our favorites:

- Civil Conversations Project and the Better Conversations Starter Guide by On Being
- Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians by John Paul Lederach
- The Little Book of Restorative Justice by Howard Zehr
- How the Body of Christ Talks: Recovering the Practice of Conversation in the Church by C. Christopher Smith
- Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism by Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill
- The Center for Nonviolent Communication – training for communicators

“Questions are powerful things. Questions elicit answers in their likeness. It’s hard to respond to a simplistic question with anything but a simplistic answer; it’s hard to rise above a combative question. But it’s hard to resist a generous question. We can ask questions that inspire dignity and honesty, and revelation."

— KRISTA TIPETT

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