

NINE HEALTHY WAYS TO HAVE A CONVERSATION

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Authentic conversations about race draw people into closer community. Authentic conversations about race encourage people to be present not partially, but wholly. Such conversations name the elephant in the room—the one that we have been taught it is not polite to notice or to mention. Such conversations about race build racial awareness.

These nine healthy ways to have a conversation come from an organization that trains people to talk about diversity. Part of our challenge is that many people feel uneasy about talking about racial inequities. Learning to have these conversations is an important step forward.

Please read these, pray over them, and then keep them handy as we move forward into having conversations about race.

1. Reflect back what someone has said using her words, not our own.

Many of us have been taught to do active listening, restating what the other person says in our own words as a way of showing that we understand.

But this way of reflecting back does not nurture a heart connection, which is what we hope to do. When someone rephrases what we have said, we are forced up into our head to re-interpret what we have said in those new words. That effectively breaks the heart connection.

With relational work and as God's people in shared mission, we really want to remain in our heart and soul as much as possible. We stay there when we reflect our conversation partner's own words.

2. Begin where our conversation partner is, not where we want her to be.

This can be difficult because we can sometimes judge others as harshly as we sometimes judge ourselves. The value of starting with people exactly where they are is that we show ourselves and all creation that we desire to accept each other – and ourselves – just as we are! This is a phenomenal spiritual aspiration.

We must respect the journey. When tempted to judge or measure another, let us remember that God meets each of us where we are. We have not all had the same experiences or training. We may share similar world views, but we are our own people.

Our narrative is the ongoing story that emerges as we interpret our world to ourselves and others. When we encounter new information, our narrative can change. Working for racial justice introduces many of us to new information; we get to hear and form new narratives.

New information can feel threatening simply because it is new or different from what we have believed. New information may lead to questions about why things are the way they are. Nevertheless, beginning with people where they are helps us know what to offer and allows others to remain engaged and hear what we have to offer.

3. Nurture curiosity about what people say. Curiosity builds bridges.

Be curious and open to what people say. Ask your conversation partner to say more to confirm that you understand her. Tell her you are curious about what she has said and wonder if she could tell you more. This is a wonderful way to get at what is real!

Being able to name what is real is a gift to community. We can nurture curiosity within one another when someone makes a statement that gets a group response! When this happens, we might say something like: “Did you feel the energy shift in the room when you said that?” or “Did anyone else feel the energy shift just now?” Then, follow up with something like: “Is anyone else curious to know what was behind that energy shift? I know I am!” If you raise your hand when you say this, it encourages others to raise their

hands with you. This kind of interaction always takes conversation deeper. We learn more about each other as we offer our interest.

4. Avoid making judgments by noticing what our conversation partner isn't saying.

It is easy to jump to the end of a story when we have heard similar stories or when we believe the story we are hearing is similar to our own. We have to fight this temptation and keep listening!

We can sometimes best hear what someone is saying by paying attention to what she is *not* saying. Listening on both frequencies (what is said and what is not said) nurtures deeper understanding of racial injustices and increases our capacity to make a difference.

5. Nurture the relationship by emotionally relating to how your conversation partner is feeling.

We want to make a healing connection with everyone we encounter along this journey toward racial justice.

Even when we are unsure of the "rightness" of any response shared, we can identify as another person of faith to things that frustrate, hurt, or confuse another. This is true even if we believe we would not be as frustrated, hurt or confused by the same experience.

This way of communicating reminds us and others that we are all human; we all know what it feels like to be invisible, disrespected, misunderstood or alienated.

There are times when using our emotional connection will preserve our human connection. This is not a new way of smoothing things over or of "handling" another person, but it may be a new way for us to make sure people know they are being heard.

6. Don't pretend to understand if we don't.

We must pay attention to our own feelings, and speak honestly and authentically.

This is also helpful when we believe we would not have responded to a particular situation the same way our conversation partner did. While it would not be okay to say, "Well, you were stupid there, weren't you?" it is perfectly appropriate and authentic to say something like, "I can't relate to what you are saying," adding, "but I can see you are still clearly troubled by the experience."

7. Take responsibility for our own part in any conflict or misunderstanding.

This is important in any relationship, but it is crucial for those in leadership roles. This practice can keep people in relationship and on mission.

Anyone can misspeak or misunderstand. Awareness of the impact of our language, both verbal and non-verbal, helps us connect more effectively. A quick acknowledgment of misspoken or misunderstood words is sufficient for people familiar with God's grace! This practice can keep us together along The Way.

8. Understand that someone's past affects who she is and that those experiences affect her relationship with us.

We cannot always understand the experiences or clearly see how these experiences have shaped the other person, but we can accept that those experiences were real and that they did shape her.

This can help us suspend judgment and listen with an open, curious mind.

We are all free to choose! How we responded in one situation does not dictate how we respond to all similar situations.

All of us are free to interpret our own life experiences in our own ways. God's grace can lead people, including ourselves, to develop healthier, more healing perspectives about our life experiences.

9. Staying with the process and the relationship means that it is okay to place a conversation "on hold" without reaching a solution.

We can agree to let things lie, agree to pray about things and commit to return to these things later. We need not be driven to find immediate solutions. Being solution-driven can silence the very voices we most need to hear or circumvent the healing possibilities of being in community.

Rushing to a solution requires certainty, and certainty is not faith. Besides, how can we be sure that our solution is the one God intends? In many of life's experiences, the process is as important as the outcome! It is easy enough to agree to return to the conversation at a later date.

In Conclusion

Communicating in healthy ways bolsters our best intentions. Read these ideas multiple times. Pray over them and pray with them. Commit to using them whenever we address difficult topics in community.