

HEALTHY CONVERSATIONS

A Resource Guide for Youth Leaders

This document is a guide, not curriculum. It is meant to give a foundation for how to have healthy conversations on difficult topics such as human sexuality, gun violence, politics, substance use, and racial justice in a way that can be adapted to multiple contexts and cultures to align with the life and ministry of Jesus. In order for us to be authentic and growing in our faith, we need to have healthy conversations across differences on polarizing topics. This resource is primarily created for youth leaders as a framework for themselves as they minister to youth and their parents. It is our hope that the Holy Spirit will be present with you as you have these large group and small group conversations. We pray a blessing over you and your ministry.

PREPARATION

As you prepare for healthy conversations, consider these points:



1

AUDIENCE

What is the context of your group?
(Ex: teens, young adults, parents, etc)
What cultures or generations are present?

2

ACKNOWLEDGE

Honor the story, experience, and emotions of the people who are present for the conversation.

3

POSTURE

Come to the conversation with an openness to listen and learn. Try not to be defensive. Use "I" statements and don't speak for others. Don't assume that everyone holds the same view or opinion as you do. Value relationships and trust over getting it right.

4

PROCESS

Conversations are not always linear, and you may not arrive to a conclusion. That's ok; allow the conversation to go where it needs to. You may end up having multiple conversations. If this is a planned conversation, consider if the person or group is emotionally and spiritually ready. Set any necessary ground rules (time limits, speaking, stopping negative comments, etc).



A Note on Child Safety:

Remember, as clergy you are a mandatory reporter. Review your requirements and be aware of your church and state child safety policies as you have these conversations. If you have not created a policy, contact your Youth Formation leader.

Dwelling in Scripture,

LECTIO DIVINA: EPHESIANS 4

As pastors and leaders tend to your soul so that you may be "good soil" (Mt 13). One way to tend to your soul is through a regularly practicing spiritual disciplines. One spiritual practice of dwelling in the Word is called **Lectio Divina**. You read over a passage and notice a word or phrase that God is speaking to you, sit with this word, and then read again. Through this practice you allow the Holy Spirit to guide you. Take time to tend and prepare and center your own soul in scripture now through this guided Lectio Divina on Ephesians 4.

It is tempting to skip this section and jump to the content below. We urge you to stay here, dwell with scripture and the Holy Spirit. Grounding your spirit's roots deep into the life giving scripture and the Holy Spirit is an essential foundational part of healthy conversation as a pastor and youth leader.



Before you start...

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Conversations build upon one another. Facilitating healthy relationships and conversations means spending genuine time communicating at each level of conversation and not just jumping to the deepest level. As a youth worker, you're likely already having level 1 and 2 conversations and looking for guidance for how to address specific conversations at level 3 and 4. Below are a few ideas. Keep in mind that youth leaders should be open to talk with their youth individually or as a group. Before entering these conversations, remind everyone about healthy communication, allowing the space to be safe and open.

1 Prepare to actively sit with the passage: gather a pen, highlighter, and/or multiple colored pens/pencils. If you are tempted to rush, or concerned you will stay too long set a timer. Silence your devices for this time to stay present. Take a deep breath to center yourself here.

2 Read Ephesians 4 highlight or write down words that stand out. Hold these in prayer

3 Read Ephesians 4 again (same or different translation). In the context of healthy conversations write down the words that you notice. Hold these in prayer.

4 Read Ephesians 4 a third time (same or different translation). As we mature in our faith how does this passage instruct us to have healthy conversation? Write down the words you notice. Hold these in prayer.

5 Look over all the words you have highlighted or written down. Hold them all together in prayer and meditation. What might the Spirit be saying to you today?

LEVEL ONE:

CONNECTING

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Think about of level 1 as ground level conversations. Start by asking open-ended questions about hobbies, family, school, or hopes. These types of questions build relationships and trust. Controversial topics are not likely to surface in small talk conversation.

Sample Sentence Starter: "When I have time I enjoy....because..."

Sample Activity: Have everyone share a high, low, and random fact from their last week.

"As a girl, I prefer when my female youth leader talks to me about sex or stuff like that. I feel more comfortable opening up."
-Maria, 14

LEVEL TWO:

CONTEXT

NAMING OUR REALITIES

Think about level 2 as conversations that began at the ground level and are moving towards the soil underneath, the crust of the earth just out of view. They will often start as ground level conversations that lead to specifics within your context, such as follow up questions or conversation on school, work, a local event, family relationships, sport teams/events, or an event attended.

Sample Sentence Starters: "Last week you shared that you were overwhelmed by a science project. How did the project go?"

"You shared that your aunt was getting a biopsy. I've been praying; any word yet? How are you coping?"

"I want my youth leader to talk to me like I'm an adult. I can handle hard conversations. I don't like when adults talk down to me."
-Solomon, 17

LEVEL THREE:

COMMON GROUND

SHARED VALUES

Think about level 3 as the mantle level of the earth. Over time, with ongoing conversations at level 1 and 2, trust has been developed and conversation becomes less superficial and more specific into certain subjects. Conversations may move to more personal spaces that demonstrate self-understanding or particular perspectives.

Sample Sentence Starter: "If I could change a phrase in a worship song we sing to better reflect my experience, it would be..."
"When I hear about school shootings I..."

Example of this in church structure is when folks come together to create "**Church Together Statement**" and "**Grace and Truth Statement**".

CONVICTION

SHARING OUR PERSONAL STORIES

Think about level 4 as the core of the earth, the inner make-up that impacts everything else above. When we relate at this level, we have a glimpse of the core of a person. Conversation goes beyond the basic personal space like, "I am really hit hard by my parents separation and am experiencing [depression, substance use, loss of appetite, or rage]", or "I am concerned that my [family, church, or friends] might reject me if I say this out loud ...". Sharing closely held experiences is a holy moment. Receive these stories without interjection or personal bias. Dismissing or rejecting a personal story will end conversation and harm trust. Choose to be open to meaningful conversation, honor the vulnerability while constructively listening.

Conversation Tips: This core level is not a place where we as outsiders get to initiate the conversation; we must be invited in. Once we are invited, we must model healthy, relational formation. Remember we are acting as spiritual leaders. Practice active listening by asking clarifying questions because you are curious, confused, or challenged. Bring a spirit of curiosity as you engage in the conversation: if you are confused, ask clarifying questions; if something challenges your understanding, consider how you may share your perspective in an open way that builds trust rather than damages the relationship. As spiritual leaders, you may not always agree with the core values and convictions of the other person. That's normal. It's ok to state your own convictions or values to the other person and say you disagree. Disagreement does not mean you can't be in relationship. Other times, you may need to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) as you offer God's wisdom or speak from your own experience. The overall goal of the conversation is to build the relationship and understand the other person, not win an argument. However, if a youth or anyone is a danger to themselves or others, there is action you must take. Similarly, if a minor has shared about physical / sexual / emotional / other harm to themselves or others that has been done, you are a mandated reporter and must file a report immediately. If you do not know how, contact your conference youth formation leader for the correct website/phone number in your state.

"If I'm not ready to talk about it, don't force me. Try another time. You might be catching me on a bad day."
-Ruth, 13

A word from the Mosaic Youth Formation Team

Formation is a lifelong commitment to learning and living the Way of Jesus. Led by God's Spirit, we seek to provide opportunities for leaders of all ages to know and to grow in Christ. To continue the conversation or talk through how to apply this in your context contact the Mosaic Youth Formation Team.

<https://mosaicmennonites.org/youth/>



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