

Ground Rules for Conversation

To fulfill the hopes people have for conversation in their congregation, and to lessen their anxieties and fears about it, certain ground rules for conversation are helpful. These will help to build trust among participants and create a safe space in which good conversation is possible.

- Follow the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" even when you disagree with them.
- Listen respectfully and carefully to others. This is your best way to begin to understand them. This also helps keep the "public space" of this conversation safe for candid conversation. By listening carefully to others, you help to build relationships of trust. You also move beyond our private feelings and thoughts to public space where it feels safe to share your differences, and where you can probe for values and positions that you hold in common.
- Speak honestly about your thoughts and feelings. Honesty about your thoughts and feelings expresses respect for others. Personal thoughts, feelings, values, and experiences are as legitimate a part of the conversation as factual information. Conversation can be quite passionate and still be respectful, civil, and constructive.
- Speak for yourself, rather than as a member of a group. You do not necessarily know what everyone else in the group is thinking or feeling--even if you've known someone for a long time and think you know them well. Use "I-statements" rather than "You-statements." Likewise, it is not fair to expect other conversation partners to represent a whole group. Remember that they are only speaking for themselves.
- Realize that the Holy Spirit is present and active in the conversation and has given each participant a part of the truth you are seeking to discern. But you won't hear that if you judge too quickly what is being said!
- A true conversation needs give and take. Give others plenty of opportunity to speak and respond. Help keep the discussion focused by sticking to the subject at hand.
- Maintain confidentiality about matters people share with the group when it is asked or obviously appropriate. This helps to build and maintain trust.
- Keep an open mind and heart. Try to understand others as much as possible from their point of view as they express it. Even those who disagree with you are not necessarily your enemies. Christ has broken down dividing walls of differences and hostilities (Ephesians 2).

- Exercise care for group members who become upset over what is said during the conversation. The outcome, quality and safety of the conversation is everyone's responsibility.
- **In a conversation of this kind, listening is as important or more important as talking. Genuine listening is not a passive activity, but an active, demanding one. Listen not only for the content of what is said, but for the way it is said--such as the language used, the tone of voice, the kind and level of feeling expressed, the body language and facial expression of the person speaking, whether they make eye contact, and so on. Also be attentive for what is not said. Being more conscious about this kind of deep listening will help us to hear and understand better what other people are saying.**

The purpose of this honest sharing is to open up discussion of things that need attention, rather than to close off discussion.