



## Leading Safe Conversations

January 15, 2021

In his book, *How the Body of Christ Talks*, author C. Christopher Smith draws a variety of parallels between how the various members of the human body communicate to sustain its own health, and how the Body of Christ must communicate to sustain our health. He states:



“Recognizing that we belong to one another in Christ’s body, our health and our future depend on our ability to learn to talk and work together as the members of our human bodies do.... If we understand ourselves as belonging to a body, we should be willing to have the conversations necessary for the health of that body – even if they prove to be painful. At the same time, conversation is crucial to the sort of discovery by which we discern the identity of the body to which we belong and thus become more confident in our sense of belonging to it.”

The upcoming series, “SHALOM: Following Jesus in an Anxious, Angry and Polarized World,” is an opportunity to deepen and refine our practice of conversation together. As usual, our sermon study guides express the basic “rules” of engagement for group interaction. In Christian tradition, developing a “rule of life” for a community is associated with the function of a trellis in a garden. A trellis provides structure for an otherwise unruly plant, so that it can be positioned for the greatest possible growth and fruitfulness. That’s really what these principles are about. As we proceed with the series, I want to offer a few reminders about this “trellis” for all of us who are acting as group facilitators over these next weeks.

In pursuing conversations that promote peace (*shalom*) even in the face of potential disagreement, an important principle is **alignment**.





Many of us know how painful it can be when a joint or muscle system is out of alignment, and have seen a doctor, chiropractor or physiotherapist to get realigned from the inside out. In the case of a broken bone, we need external splints, casts or slings to provide the alignment that ensures proper healing.

Smith writes, ““Alignment does not mean that we agree on everything but rather that we are committed to belonging to one another and to moving toward similar ends. Our alignment and the shape of our body, therefore, is found in Jesus Christ.” Our preoccupation should not only be with “like-mindedness,” he suggests, because in a complex world this is sometimes hard to attain. But because of our shared faith, we can find a “like-heartedness” by listening to how each member of the group understands his or her position in light of a desire to please Jesus. In our study guide, this is captured succinctly this way: **“Our purpose in Life Group is to grow in Christ-likeness, together learning to love God and others.”** I encourage you to remind your group weekly of this common purpose.



In writing about the potential disagreements that can arise in certain conversations, Smith invokes author Olli-Pekka Vainio’s concept of “virtuous disagreement.” Part of what guards a community from disagreements turning into conflicts are three important virtues: open-mindedness, humility, and courage. As we state, **“remember to arrive ready to listen and learn from others’ perspectives.”** Inherent in being an apprentice is admitting we still have lots to learn, that our views can still be altered and might even be wrong, and that Jesus often teaches us through contact with the different views of our fellow members of the Body of Christ. Let’s remind our groups to come with that humble posture, **“ready to surrender your ideas to the heart and mind of Christ.”**

We also encourage our group members to **“value your relationships above proving your point.”** Smith calls this being “mutually present.” From the very nature of the Triune God, in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit are mutually present to one another, from the great story of Scripture, which reveals how deeply God desires to be with humanity, and especially in the incarnation, we learn that love is always pressing deeper into relationship, even when there are differences. Scripture’s word for this is “abiding”: Smith states,

To abide does not mean that we cease to have convictions – even convictions that stand in stark contrast to those of others in our congregations – but rather than our personal convictions must take a back seat to the work of learning to be present. It is these encounters with God’s presence, and often God’s presence refracted through the people of our congregation, that powerfully transform us.”



Finally, we remind our groups to “**deal with conflict lovingly.**” There are times when we fail, by commission or omission, to do the things that lead to peace, and people end up hurt. Sometimes we bump into others’ baggage and trigger their hurt without even intending to do so. It’s so important in these cases that we help people return to conversation rather than pull away. As in all “crucial conversations,” help your group members continue seeing their mutual purpose and practicing mutual respect, so that you can keep journeying together.

The study guides that we are writing for you are similar to what you’ve seen before. But I want to explain a little bit of the logic that shapes what we’re preparing.

- **Connecting:** Even when our groups are meeting in Zoom, it’s obviously important to connect and catch up with one another’s lives. People are continuing to engage in community within the limitations of Zoom because they experience love there. The questions are designed to keep this time brief, but meaningful.
- **A Reminder:** It’s also important to remind ourselves to why we have gathered (as I’ve described above). Feel free to put this in your own words, but please don’t skip this part.
- **Prayer:** Smith describes the importance of prayerful preparation for important conversations. Assuming that not everyone has had the chance to slow down and prepare for prayerful conversation, we encourage you not to rush this moment of silence and consenting to God’s work among you. This is not a “perfunctory” prayer, but a pause to situate ourselves in God’s presence again.
- **Debrief:** Two key elements in adult formation are “relevance” and “immediacy.” These questions are designed to orient you as a facilitator to the ways that people have already been thinking about the topic, prompted by the sermon, and what they hope to gain by talking about it. You can ask these questions one at a time, or present all three and give people the option to answer the one they connect with.
- **The Big Idea:** We will be providing both a brief paragraph summary, and a video synopsis from Sunday’s teaching to help get your group members’ thoughts back on track with what was taught. We encourage the group to take a moment of silence to collect their thoughts after watching the video.
- **Scripture & Discussion:** Choose at least one of the Scriptures to read and discuss. The questions are provided as jumping off points. Your previous debrief may also provide some guidance about where to take the conversation. But remember to **ground your conversation in a reading of the Scripture.** The final question invites the group to **identify a principle to which the Life Group can agree to practice in its life together.** In subsequent weeks, you will be reminded to bring that back to your group’s attention.
- **Practice:** Finally, as always, apprenticeship is always most effective when it goes from “head knowledge” to “hands-on.” For some, a personal application will be obvious. The suggested practice can be viewed as an “experiment” of application – something to try that is drawn from ancient or contemporary spiritual disciplines that have proven life-changing. Encourage your group to do something with this.
  - NOTE: We will be posting a “participant guide” to Church Center for your group members’ reference as you gather together.