

## **Bridging divides – speaking with others across difference and on issues of contention**

As members and leaders of churches, it can be difficult to know how to talk about contentious issues. We can worry about ‘getting it right’, about causing friction and entering disagreement, but we can also worry about the impacts of not speaking up and the division in communities caused by anonymity and misinformation if we don’t talk to others who are different and work to understand each other better.

Some of the issues that you might find difficult to have conversations about in your communities may be in relation to:

- Asylum seekers, refugees, and migration
- Poverty assistance and Universal Credit
- Addiction
- Race equality
- Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities
- LGBTQIA+ rights, or using Prayers of Love and Faith

If we’re not willing to talk about these issues, they remain unaddressed and can fester, and we risk issues rearing their heads in ugly ways. Some of which, we’ve seen over recent years, such as in riots outside hotels accommodating asylum seekers, the forcing of Traveller and Romany Gypsy children and young people on trains by police to prevent them from attending Manchester’s Christmas market, and rising physical violence and verbal harassment experienced by trans and non-binary people. We are also seeing the increasing polarisation and tensions in local communities, and concern over a growing far-right movement.

It’s been shown that just a single 10-minute conversation which encourages people to actively take the perspective of others can markedly reduce prejudice for a sustained period of time<sup>1</sup>.

### **Why is this important for us as Christians?**

- Every person is created in the image of God and is worthy of respect, and kindness. *‘So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them’ - Genesis 1:27*
- We’re a diverse humanity, and one day people from all different backgrounds, heritages, experiences, and languages will stand united before God. *‘From every*

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<sup>1</sup> Kalla, J. L., & Broockman, D. E. (2020). *Reducing exclusionary attitudes through interpersonal conversation: Evidence from three field experiments*. American Political Science Review, 114(2), 410–425. DOI: 10.1017/S0003055419000923

*nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.’ – Revelation 7:9*

- If we are to be the body of Christ, caring for each other and choosing to listen to different opinions; one part of the body can not say to another that it does not matter. *‘You are the body of Christ. Each one of you is a part of it.’ – 1 Corinthians 12:27*
- We’re called to stand up for justice and the rights of marginalised people. *‘Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy’ - Proverbs 31:8-9*

### **So where do we start if we want to encourage conversation on difficult topics?**

Here’s some resources you may find helpful in facilitating respectful conversations and fostering understanding:

#### Hope Not Hate

Hope Not Hate are a UK-based advocacy organisation that campaigns against racism, fascism, and far-right extremism. They are non-partisan and community-focused, aiming to promote tolerance and challenge hate through research, education, and grassroots activism.

Read their report [\*Fear and Hope 2024: the case for community resilience\*](#) identifying the drivers of fear and hope, and the triggers that push people from one another.

They also run [training](#) in organisations on having difficult conversations, and have a range of [resources](#) including:

- Community engagement as a preventative and reactive way of mitigating the effects of far-right agitation
- Staying safe amidst far-right violence
- A guide to planning a community event as an act of solidarity, and as a response to far-right activity, including event ideas and advice on publicity
- Practical advice on what to do when allegations of gender-based violence direct community attitudes towards asylum seekers

#### Joy For All

Free resources to support churches to respond to the co-option of Christmas by the far right. This resource has been compiled by the Revd Dr Al Barrett, Hodge Hill Church, in collaboration with Larger Us, the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence, the Joint Public Issues Team (Baptist Union, Methodist Church and United Reformed Church), and a number of other Christian leaders and organisations across the UK. While

specifically put together to support churches over Advent and Christmas, the themes and principles may also be helpful beyond Christmas. See resources [here](#).

### Pastoral Principles

Pastoral Principles is a resource offering principles for how the Church of England can live well together and with our communities. These principles were created for the Living in Love and Faith project conversations of marriage and relationships, but are useful in other conversations where people deeply hold convictions and may disagree with each other.

The Pastoral Principles addresses the 'six pervading evils' and helps churches consider how they might address them:

- Acknowledging prejudice
- Speak into silence
- Address ignorance
- Cast out fear
- Admit hypocrisy
- Pay attention to power

You can run the Pastoral Principles course in small groups or with your whole church congregation, to explore these principles, and give everyone a good basis for having conversations well. Pastoral Principle cards are also available to download or purchase. Find out more [here](#).

### Difference Course

The Difference Course is about helping us consider our faith in the context of a complex and divided world, from global conflict to local disagreements and our own relationships. The Difference Course equips people to cross divides, navigate disagreement, and pursue a just and flourishing world. The course sessions are on:

1. God's Call – God can, and equips us to, transform relationships in a conflicted world
2. Crossing Divides – explore where prejudice divides us from each other, and the invitation to see others as God does
3. Navigating Disagreement – how to navigate disagreement for stronger relationships, and how God is with us throughout
4. Practising Forgiveness – God is with us in the mess and complexity of trying to forgive others

5. Risking Hope – conducting relationships God’s way can be risky and resisted, but brings hopeful-filled transformation

The course can be run in churches and church small groups, prisons, secondary schools, and church youth groups. Find out more, and get the resources to run the course [here](#).

### Weaving Trust

Weaving Trust is a simple and fun organised activity that enables participants to have relational conversations, to celebrate difference, strengthen common identity, and solidarity even when we encounter polarisation.

Weaving Trust was launched by Citizens MK in 2015, following a firebomb attack on a mosque in Milton Keynes in 2013. The methodology brings together an intentionally diverse range of people over two hours, with attendees sitting in either an inner or outer circle for a series of six-minute conversations with other participants they haven’t met before. They each have a chance to talk about their own lives and experiences with the framework of three short questions.

After the conversations, they are given a short reflection period, and are then given the opportunity to share insights from their conversations. The framing for conversations is about sharing stories, listening, and growing understanding, rather than arguing or persuading. Attendees often report joy in learning about others, and the common ground they discover with those they might have never had the chance to meet otherwise.

Weaving Trust is about building deeper connections with others, in line with Citizens UK’s aims of Community Organising work across difference and on issues of common concern.

You can [enrol](#) in Citizens UK’s *Organising Together Across Difference* self-learning module online. Sections 1 and 2 are about Organising across difference, sameness and difference, and sections 3 and 4 are on the Weaving Trust methodology and running your own Weaving Trust event (including example agendas and questions). You can also view Essex Citizens’ slides on how to run a Weaving Trust event [here](#).

You can also read Citizens UK’s *Organising Together Across Difference* report [here](#).

### Living in Love and Faith: The Course

Living in Love and Faith: The Course aims to help Christians think more deeply about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. It provides a structured and accessible

way for local groups to engage in and reflect on this a major exploration of Christian teaching and learning. One of the key outcomes highlighted in the course's feedback was its role in cultivating understanding, creating space for authentic listening and dialogue across differences.

There are five sessions, each of which includes an opening reflection about learning together, followed by teaching, time for discussion and Bible study. The sessions end with an invitation to reflect on our learning, and pray together.

As well as providing notes for those leading groups, the course also signposts the relevant sections of the Living in Love and Faith book as well as recommending films, podcasts and other digital resources available.

All resources can be accessed [online](#) for free, and are also available for [purchase](#).

#### Resources for conversations on migration, refugees, and asylum seekers:

- [How to Have Well Informed Conversations About Asylum](#), City of Sanctuary: a resource to help with courageous conversations, including a recorded 1.5hr webinar and handbook, additional resources, and exercises on how to put your compassion into action. City of Sanctuary also have a [poster style guide](#) on having courageous conversations.
- [Guide to Navigating Tough Conversations on Migration](#), Safe Passage: a simple guide to help speak up with confidence, empathy, and facts, including quick comebacks to common myths, real stories that shift perspectives, and quick facts and tips to keep conversations constructive.
- [How to Speak to Friends and Family About Refugees](#), Freedom from Torture: a short blog guide on speaking well with friends and families about issues of migration.

#### Support services:

- [LGBTQIA+ Chaplaincy](#) – the Diocese of Oxford's chaplains are available for listening, support and prayerful affirmation for LGBTQIA+ people and their loved ones.
- [Authorised Listeners](#) – the Diocese of Oxford's pool of authorised listeners are available to hear any bullying and harassment concerns.
- [Diocesan Safeguarding Team](#) – find out more about the Diocese of Oxford's safeguarding Team and who to contact if you have a concern about the safeguarding of an adult or child.

If someone is in immediate danger, or requires immediate medical attention, call emergency services on 999.

If you have concerns of a crime (including a hate crime) and there is no risk of immediate harm call the police on 101. If it's a [safeguarding concern](#), speak to a safeguarding professional about your concern as soon as possible. If you have significant concerns, please report to children's social service or adult's social services without delay.