

Being a Civil Voice in Uncivil Times

“Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ...As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ ... If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” [1 Corinthians 12: 14-26]

“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of your redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as Christ has forgiven you. [Ephesians 4: 29-32]

While public discussion of political issues has the potential to bring out the best in us ó by surfacing creative new ideas or developing effective problem-solving strategies ó more often than not in our public dialogue about the issues of the day, the opposite seems to be happening. From the national dialogue about health care to the passionate discussion of immigration reform this year, it is all too easy for anger and frustration to get the best of us. Whether around the office water cooler or the extended family dinner table, reasoned conversation is taking a back seat to personal attacks and replayed sound bites. Because we avoid these conversations, we miss out on deeper understanding.

As people of faith participating in the public square, we are called to a higher standard of engagement and interaction with our neighbors ó even and perhaps especially those with whom we may disagree on an issue. **Our faith provides us with spiritual resources to take the conversation to a different level.** We can choose respect and hope over animosity and bitterness. We can choose to listen and learn rather than attack and insult. We can choose to have civic discussions in civil tones.

We do not have to avoid the hard issues. We can prepare ourselves for a better conversation by thinking about some of the following ideas to shape your conversation on difficult and emotion-filled issues of the day.

Show Respect: Rather than trying to ówinö a debate with your arguments, judge your success by how well you demonstrate respect for other people and for what insights or interesting challenges arise for you. Stay away from insults and personal attacks, and keep trying to return to the substance of the issue. The more respect you show for someone else’s opinions, the more reason they have to respect yours.

Listen: One of the best ways to show respect is to listen. Focus on what the other person is saying, rather than focusing on what you are going to say next. Ask yourself, “What are they trying to express?” “What is important to them?” “Where do we agree?”

Seek Understanding: Try to understand the context from which other people are speaking ó ask yourself why they see things the way they do. Ask open-ended questions that invite others to say more about why they believe what they believe.

Share Your Own Views Well: Put thought and energy into articulating your own views clearly and concisely. What do you believe and why? Statistics can be helpful, but often sharing your personal stories is most effective. Claim your own opinions by using “I” statements, such as “I believe” and “In my experience” Try to avoid exaggeration or the use of sound bites or slogans ó use your own words.

Keep Your Head: Talking about public policy issues often taps into strong emotions and passions in all of us. Remember to pause, take a deep breath from time to time, and give yourself time to respond. Few people benefit or learn anything from a shouting match. You can help set the tone of the conversation by continuing to act with civility even when others are not. If someone is not showing respect ó for instance, by interrupting or not listening to your comments ó calmly ask that they do so. “You just shared your opinion and I listened without interrupting, could you please listen to mine?”

Our Faith Our Vote Civility Pledge

I believe our communities, our country and our world are stronger and safer and when we treat each other with respect. I believe that my voice is important, and I believe that listening to the voices of others is important for a healthy, vibrant democratic process. I believe that insulting, attacking or demonizing people with whom we disagree is unproductive and unacceptable. As individuals and as community, we can and should do better.

As a person of faith, I pledge to participate responsibly and faithfully in the electoral process. I recognize my responsibility for supporting a free, fair and respectful democratic process, and I pledge to do my part. I commit to honoring my own voice and the voice of others. I commit to educating myself and others about the issues at stake in these elections. I commit to expressing myself responsibly, to seek to learn from different perspectives, to always offer respect to others, and to challenge hurtful, disrespectful behavior when I can.

SIGN THE PLEDGE Visit <http://www.ucc.org/ourfaithourvote/civility.html>

Tips for Faithful and Respectful Discussion on the Issues

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.

Follow the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” ó even when you disagree with them.

Listen respectfully and carefully to others.

State what you think you heard someone say and ask for clarification before responding, in an effort to make sure to understand each other.

Speak honestly about your thoughts and feelings. Share personal experiences to help others more fully understand your concerns and perspectives on the issues. Conversations can be passionate and still be respectful, civil and constructive.

Speak for yourself, rather than as a member of a group. Use *I* statements rather than *You* statements.

Focus on ideas and suggestions instead of questioning people's motives, intelligence or integrity.

Look for and lift up points of agreement as well as disagreement.

Create space for everyone's concerns to be spoken, even when they disagree.

Seek to stay in community with each other even though the discussion may be vigorous and perhaps tense.

Keep an open mind and heart. You may not hear if you judge too quickly.

Pray for God's grace to listen attentively, to speak clearly and to remain open to the vision God holds for all of us.

[Adapted from "Ground Rules for Conversation" (Evangelical Lutheran Church Department for Communication) and "Seeking to be Faithful Together" (adopted by the 204th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, USA)]

Links to Additional Resources on Civility

Reclaiming Civility in the Public Square: Ten Rules That Work, www.instituteforcivility.org

Radio interview with Diana Butler Bass: On Civility and Graciousness,

<http://godcomplexradio.com/2010/05/season-2-episode-1-diana-butler-bass-on-civility-graciousness>

Dialogue vs. Debate: A Guide, <http://www.nald.ca/clr/study/scdvd.htm>

UCC General Synod Resource: <http://www.ucc.org/synod/resolutions/A-CALL-FOR-TRUTH-TELLING-AND-STANDARDS-OF-ETHICS-IN-PUBLIC-LIFE.pdf>

Witness for Justice Article - An Air of Hostility <http://tiny.cc/WFJ443>

Witness for Justice Article - Making the Connections - <http://tiny.cc/WFJ456>