

HOW TO HAVE HARD CONVERSATIONS: 10 PRACTICES

- 1. Recognize the opportunity of differences.** When we move toward people who are different from us, it doesn't compromise our faith; it reflects the very best of it. Instead of seeing conflict as a problem, shift your perspective to see it as an opportunity for transformation.
- 2. Listen longer than feels comfortable.** When your assumptions are being challenged, when you want to interrupt and correct... keep listening with a genuine desire to understand.
 - a. Later, journal about *what* made you uncomfortable and *why* was it difficult to hear? What is God trying to reveal through that discomfort?
- 3. Lead with curiosity rather than critique.** We need to learn how to ask better questions more often than make compelling arguments. What is a question that models genuine curiosity and a desire to understand? What is the insecurity in myself that requires I lead with critique rather than curiosity? How might we be more willing to rely on the Spirit to lead and guide rather than assume that is our job?
- 4. Embrace our shared identity.** We are the reconciled beloved of God... and so are those we disagree with. It is out of our identity as the reconciled and our experience of being God's beloved that our lives begin to reflect the costly, creative, restorative activity of God.
 - a. Reflect on this quote from Henri Nouwen: In the face of the oppressed I recognize my own face and in the hands of the oppressor I recognize my own hand.
- 5. Enter into the conversation as a student and not an expert.** What would it look like if you were actually willing to change your opinion? Practice modeling the curiosity you would like to receive from others. When we start getting defensive, it is important to listen, take some time to think, reflect and respond. Ask yourself the questions: "What is the source of my defensiveness? What might I have to learn from this person?" If we respond immediately during a challenging conversation, we are often listening to *respond* rather than *understand*.
- 6. Share stories rather than data points.** Data often leads to arguments; stories often lead toward conversation. Depending on "which side of an issue" one stands on, we often only hear data as talking points to either affirm or debunk those on the "other side." Data is important, but lead with stories that give life to the data. It's a waste of our precious energy to debate rhetoric when real people are being impacted by our paralysis. Verbal debate is a sign of privilege that needs to be leveraged for the flourishing of others, not used to prove our point.
- 7. Staying at the table does not mean you are not allowed to take a break.** With difficult conversations, especially those including unbalanced power dynamics, it can be better to step away from the conversation momentarily so you can remain at the table long term. If this is the case, state that early in the conversation so that the person is aware of your long term commitment even if you have to take a break for a moment.
- 8. Are you operating out of a place of grace or a place of shame?** We are often hardest on those we "used to be".
 - a. What parts of your story are you ashamed to see in those you disagree with? How can you stop yourself from projecting your shame on to them and instead give grace to them and yourself.
- 9. Share what you're learning rather than what you think "they" should know.** Insecurity is often the first thing that will cause a difficult conversation to turn into an argument. Share about your own formation instead of what you think they should be doing or thinking differently.
- 10. Don't forget that it is in the process of pursuing restoration that we find ourselves being restored.** Conflict is hard, but we must remember that it is in these difficult places that we meet ourselves and we meet God.