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After Sunday, based in the North East of England, is a charity which aims to strengthen the connection between faith, work and the world. It is particularly concerned to encourage everyone to explore their Christian vocations and sense of calling as disciples and think about how they live out their faith in their daily lives.

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Faith Life Conversation

How to have a helpful conversation
between our faith and daily life



Introduction

How is this going to help me?

As Christians, it is important for us to feel that our faith is relevant to, and underpins every aspect of our daily life. Our faith has to make sense and be worked out in our own particular context.

At its heart, the Gospel transforms us and our thinking, and the world around us, as we follow a Christ who is alive in the everyday. As human beings we face all sorts of issues and challenges at all stages of our life, and have to make decisions about how best we respond to particular issues. We want our faith to speak into these situations to give us fresh energy and perspectives, and that is where this conversational process should begin.

Prayerfulness is at the heart of our relationship with God, and helps us to ensure that the action we take is grounded within that relationship. The conversational process outlined in this booklet builds on that to help us explore, with others, fresh ways of understanding and responding to the challenges we encounter in life and the world around us, and so become more open to the possibilities of God's transforming power.

Through this process, we may find ourselves called to respond to ourselves and others, in ways that may seem new, or even risky. But we do so, having thought carefully about our faith in God and the way that it has been revealed, developed and interpreted throughout the ages.

We hope that as you engage in conversations with others, using the process, that you will find a new sense of freedom and hope and see new possibilities in everyday work and life.

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How to Structure a Conversation

- **Getting started**

A group decides to focus on a particular topic or issue of common interest or concern

- **Selecting an Issue**

Decide on the specific topic/issue for the conversation

- **Experience**

All group members share their relevant experience in relation to the topic/issue

- **Exploration**

Group members explore the topic in terms of a range of different perspectives and view points

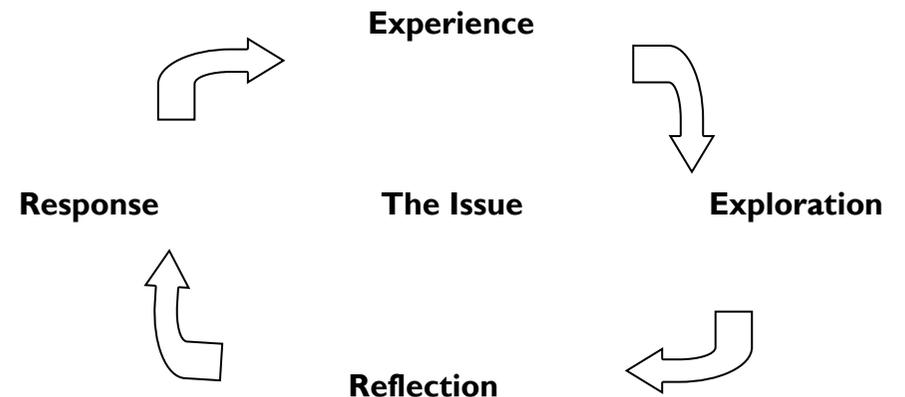
- **Reflection**

Group members bring the explored topic/issue into dialogue with Scripture and the traditions of faith

- **Response**

Group members discern and decide on appropriate collective and individual responses to the topic/issue based on a fresh understanding and insight.

Then the process could start again, in the light of a changed response to this issue, or to the emergence of a new challenge.



Getting Started

Ingredients :

- A group of people, between 3 and 8 members, who are interested in a common topic, and are open to new possibilities and willing to explore their faith with others
- Time and place—enough time to talk in a relaxed environment (minimum of 2 hours), and a comfortable, sociable place
- Someone prepared to lead the conversation , without feeling that they have to be an expert
- A table and a white paper table cloth (or large piece of paper), with marker pens, to structure and record the conversation and keep the group focussed and moving forward
- Access to, or a willingness to explore information to help with the exploration phase (news reports, newspapers, facts and figures)
- Access to suitable resources to help with the reflection phase—such as Bibles, hymn books, Bible concordance, other spiritual writings etc.

Ongoing Encouragement

The process of conversation that we have gone through is a cyclical process which always comes back to experience. We look at and engage with life in ways that are different. Working through the process faithfully with others does not necessarily guarantee any positive outcomes in the short term—it may take some time for changes to arise. Members of the group may need some ongoing encouragement to be patient for God to act in their ongoing realities. Prayers are not always answered in the way that we want, or hope. It may be best to re-visit the process, refreshing the issue in light of new experiences—we may wish to explore different aspects than those we explored last time—or reflect on different themes within the same situation. All of this might lead to fresh responses, as might bringing new members, with new experiences and insights, may also help.

This process of conversation can expand within a community, there is no limit to the amount of conversations that might go on. We would encourage anyone to initiate a conversation about a real issue—and use this process to helpfully structure the discussion. Conversation leaders are not experts—they are just hospitable, and willing to create a safe environment for the God of Life to speak to his people through the power of his Spirit.

Some questions to help the conversation :

1. What do you think God is calling you to do in this situation?
2. What practical steps can you take to make a small difference?
3. Who might you join up with?
4. Where might you make a start?
5. How might you know that progress is being made?
6. What would you hope to see happening practically, on the ground?
7. How might you change how you think?
8. What might you need to let go of?



Some Tips for the Conversation Leader :

- Help the group to be realistic, but yet still be prepared to take a risk
- Help the group to focus on something specific, rather than generalised ideas
- Help the group to identify what support they might need, and how they might sustain enthusiasm
- Help the group to anticipate possible challenges, disappointments or blockages—rehearse ways to overcome them
- Ensure the group celebrates and gives thanks for positive change and new life

Group Matters

Jesus said “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” (Matthew 18:20). Throughout his ministry, Jesus helps his followers to learn invariably in small groups in an open and discursive way, often using stories, parables and riddles, to encourage people to think for themselves.

Adults learn best when they can relate new insights to their own experiences, and help them to solve a particular problem or address a particular issue. Learning is itself a social activity where we gain a great deal from each other’s experiences and insights. Everybody has something to learn and something to teach. In this process, there is no barrier to entry, and everybody can make a valuable contribution by sharing their own experiences of life and God, and by listening to others. When group members share their experience together, invariably trust builds up. People will then be more willing to say what they feel or think, and challenge themselves and others. It is vitally important for this conversation that everybody feels involved, able to participate fully, and to know that their voice has been heard

Holding the Process in Prayer

It is helpful to hold the whole conversation process in prayer—particularly, to begin and end the session in prayer. It is also helpful if the group holds the issue in their individual prayer life between sessions. The prayers could focus on thanksgiving for God’s blessings, our particular desires and hopes for situations, things we may want to confess of say sorry for, things that we may regret and need to let go or forgive. We can pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and our openness to the mystery and wonder of God, and own willingness to respond to this process.

Selecting an Issue

The conversation process must have a focus, an issue that is meaningful to the group, and that they would like to explore in conversation with their faith. Ideally, the issue should be something that the group can have some influence on, even in a small way.

It helps if the issue relates in some way to the concerns, struggles and predicaments of the group as this will create a sense of ownership and commitment to the topic and potentially transforming discussion. It is worth spending some time to get the topic clear and specific.

Deciding on an issue

- Phrase it as a question, rather than a statement.
- The issue should also be framed in a 'positive sense', addressing a question such as 'how can we increase collaboration', rather than 'how can we reduce conflict'. The way the question is phrased should convey something of the vision for the situation—which will be a source of 'kindling' for new hope and possibilities.
- The topic should be open, without hinting at solutions or limiting the group's thinking.

Each issue will be unique, and the discussion will be different each time.



Some tips for Conversation Leaders :

- Make sure everyone is involved and happy with the topic
- Don't be tempted to rush into the discussion before the topic is clear
- Write the topic in the centre of the tablecloth
- Don't be reluctant to modify the topic in the light of the subsequent conversation

Response

“Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

The response stage becomes a channel for committed action that arises from the new awareness from exploration and reflection. This whole process has, as its essential aim, transformation of the present so that it may conform to the hopes and yearnings of the Kingdom to come. In the response stage, we are invited to participate with God's saving intentions in the transformation of ourselves and the wider society. So our response may be both personal as well as collective and focussed on wider structures and systems. Our Christian faith calls us to be involved in committed action, which may require some risk and new behaviour. Faithful action may require us to let go, and give up some old ways of responding in the light of our fresh perspectives, and to move through the confusion and uncertainty into adopting new approaches.

The most effective kind of response is to take small, practical steps which can be easily managed and which allow fresh energy to move forward in a positive way. It is important to be realistic and not to feel overwhelmed by the enormity of an issue or challenge. We should never underestimate the significance of one individual making some small, brave step in response to a call for justice.

Effective response often involves building collaborative relationships with others, and the Spirit calls us to work together for the greater good.

Bishop Laurie Green offers the following, as criteria for responding :

- Viable
- Beneficial
- Address the cause, not symptom
- Personal Involvement
- Witness to the Gospel

Some questions to help the conversation :

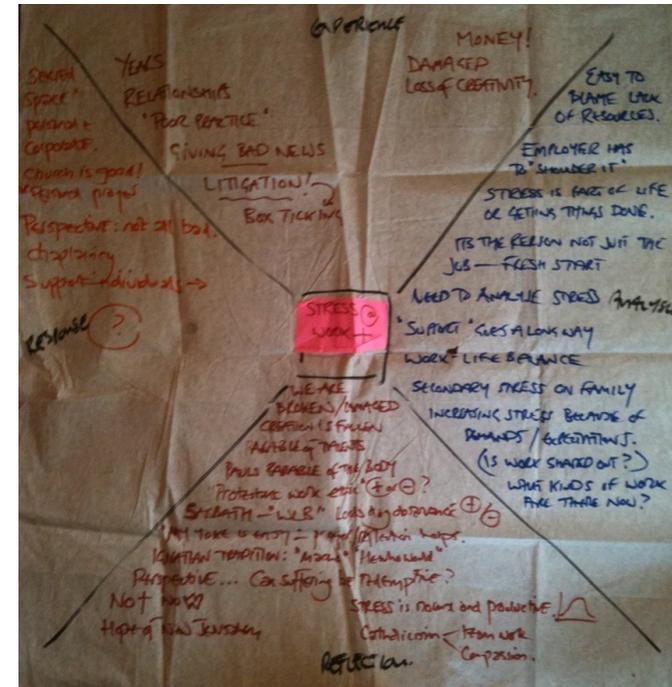
1. Are there any characters, stories or characters (etc.) that you are reminded of when you think about this issue, which could help us to look at the issue through God's eyes?
2. If God's Kingdom was to break into this issue, what might it look like?
3. Where do you already see new signs of life and hope, where God might already be at work?
4. Are there any hymns, prayers or spiritual writings that say something about this issue?
5. What do you long for and hope for in this situation?
6. What could human flourishing look like in this situation?
7. What does your own heart and mind tell you is 'good'?

Some Tips for the Conversation Leader :



- Reassure the group that prior theological and scriptural knowledge is not essential for effective reflection
- Everyone has a voice, and everyone has something to contribute, but we can use this as an encouragement to learn from each other
- Appreciate the wide range of experiences and interpretations that people will bring
- Offer a wide range of resources to the group for open exploration and discovery
- Leave time for the Spirit to be heard—follow promptings
- Where there are moments of struggle, go with the frustration
- Try and look for moments of connection, inspiration and transformation

About the Tablecloth



The tablecloth serves as a helpful way to keep the conversation focused and structured. It will also help everyone to feel that their thoughts and ideas are being listened to. If the conversation goes on over several sessions, then the tablecloth acts as a record of the previous discussion and the start point of the next conversation. Anyone can write on the tablecloth—the group needs to agree on how this should be done (take turns, each take a different section). It is important that there is only one conversation going on at any one time, and one person writing on it at any one time.

The paper tablecloth should be divided into 4, to represent the 4 stages ; experience, exploration, reflection and response, with the topic written clearly in the centre

Experience

“The only source of knowledge is experience”

Albert Einstein

Once the topic has been agreed, the first stage is to allow people time to share their experiences of the issue.

You may like to begin with broad outlines of people’s experiences – keep these short and simple, without going into too much detail.

As your group begins to become aware of the breadth of experience within the group, each member should be given an opportunity to ‘tell their story’. Personal experience of the issue is important – whether it is first hand experience, or sharing in experiences of others. Try to keep it personal. People may have ways of illustrating their story through artefacts or photographs, which help bring their experience to life and make it real for others.

It is important to acknowledge feelings. Some people’s account of their experiences may be painful, - people should not feel under any pressure to share their experiences. People should also be encouraged to think about in what ways they imagined that God was present or active in the situation.

Ways into Reflecting

Scripture

- Look at characters, stories and themes in the Old and New Testament
For example ;
Characters—Elijah (‘The Challenger’), Moses (‘The Leader’),
Stories—Parables
- Look at the ‘Wisdom’ literature in the Bible (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes etc.)
- Look at the Psalms - struggles and responses to God
- Look at the Epistles—contextual struggle with different issues
- Look at different translations of key biblical passages
- Look at commentaries
- Look at supporting literature for bible study

Tradition

- Look at the writings of Saints
- Look at Hymns and Liturgy
- Look at Poetry and other art forms

Reason

- Look at other theological writing and expertise (Dictionary of Theology etc.)
- Look through our own sense of logic and reason

Reflection

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure buried in a field.....”

Matthew 13:44

Looking at the issue through the lens of our faith enables the group to see through their own experience and how it connects to what we can learn from scripture and how our faith tradition has imagined God to be at work.

It might be helpful to start the reflection phase by picking up the key words, insights or phrases from the ‘exploration’ phase, and use them as the focus for making connections with the great wealth of Christian history, teaching and faith traditions.

‘God’s unexpected’ is a phrase used by Bishop Laurie Green, to describe how, by looking at the world and seeing what goes on under the surface, we can be surprised, shocked or confused by a world we thought we understood. Through reflecting on an issue with the eyes of our faith, we can see new-found relevance in the Bible, in worship, and in life.

Connecting our scriptural traditions with the current issue can be challenging – but we can gain a deeper appreciation of God’s presence and activity in the world, and draw on the Christian community’s past experience of seeing God in situations. Such traditions hold up pointers to where God has been experienced in the past and how God may continue to be experienced today. Such reflection helps us to view our perspective on life from the alternative perspective of the divine view and challenges us to respond in fresh ways.

Throughout this whole conversation process, we are mindful of the guiding of the Holy Spirit, leading us into fresh understanding of truth, seeing fresh possibilities and ways forward. The reflection phase encourages us to bring together our imaginations and our reasoning in a holistic way.

On the following page are some ‘ways in’ to the reflection phase—starting points for bringing God’s perspective to bear on this issue.

Some questions to help the conversation :

1. Tell us about your experiences in relation to this topic.....
2. How did you feel at the time?
3. How do you feel now about it?
4. Did you have any sense of God being involved in this? At the time? Or looking back?
5. What were the most challenging parts of the experience?
6. Were there any surprises?



Some Tips for the Conversation Leader :

- Note any key ideas, words or themes from people’s experiences, which you may want to come back to
- Establish a time limit for each person’s contribution, to ensure everyone is heard
- Keep the conversation flowing
- Avoid challenging or questioning people’s experiences
- Thank each person for their contribution

Exploration

“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view - until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

From ‘To Kill A Mockingbird’ by Harper Lee

The aim of this stage is to paint a broad picture of the situation which allows different viewpoints to be explored and come together in a helpful way.

The exploration phase encourages us to understand the situation realistically, specifically and factually, without being too critical or emotional. It is important still to acknowledge feelings, but to keep facts and feelings in a healthy exchange. It might be helpful to bring other people or sources of information into the discussion, to help the group to broaden their perspectives on the topic. Most issues are complex and have a number of different factors that inter-relate so focussing on just one solution or cause can limit fresh thinking.

It is helpful to identify all the different individuals, stakeholders or groups who may have a perspective to bring to bear on this issue. Look at each in turn and encourage the group to put themselves in the other’s position, and imagine how they see this issue.

At the heart of so many human issues is the question of power and money, and this needs to be addressed objectively. There may be something to learn from the historical perspective to an issue—how have things changed over time. Exploring how issues have been viewed by different religions and cultures can be also be instructive.

During the exploration phase, there might be key words, insights or phrases which emerge which become the focus for the next phase of reflection. It is helpful to listen out for these recurring themes and ensure they are written down. They may become the focus for the next stage of the process.

Some questions to help the conversation :

1. Which other people or groups might have something to say about this issue? What would be their viewpoint?
2. What is the historical context to this issue?
3. What other information might help us to understand this issue better, and where might we get that information?
4. How have attitudes to this issue changed over time?
5. How has this issues been viewed by the Church over time?
6. What are the economical / financial factors within this issue?
7. What are the key themes that are at the heart of this issue?



Some Tips for the Conversation Leader :

- Encourage the group to step outside their own experiences and realistically assess what other people think about this issue.
- Encourage the group to be analytical, not just emotional—look for facts, get in touch with the realities of the situation
- Encourage the group to get behind the ‘presenting’ issues, to identify the underlying themes
- Remember to write the different points of view down on the tablecloth
- Ensure that each member of the group contributes
- Keep the group focussed on the issue