



BEFORE WE SPEAK

A Christian Guide to Entering
Difficult Conversations

PARTICIPANT GUIDE

“How we enter the conversation shapes what becomes
possible within it.”

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Before You Begin

You may have received this guide because your congregation or governing body is preparing for a difficult conversation.

The subject may be human sexuality, race, abortion, climate change, Christian nationalism, money, worship, staffing, or the relationship between faith and politics. It may be a local question about a building, a ministry, a policy, or the congregation's future.

Whatever the subject, you may already know what you believe. You may have studied it carefully or lived with its consequences. You may feel responsible for defending a biblical or moral conviction. You may fear that the church is about to make a serious mistake.

This guide will not tell your church what conclusion to reach. It will help you participate in the conversation in a way that reflects your Christian faith.

Christians often prepare what we will say without preparing ourselves. We gather facts, choose Scripture passages, anticipate objections, and rehearse responses. Those preparations may be necessary, but they are not enough.

Before asking what we should say, we should ask who we intend to be as we say it.

Christian dialogue does not require us to surrender our convictions. It asks us to surrender the illusion that we possess the whole truth by ourselves.

That is not relativism. Christians enter dialogue because truth matters, love matters, and our own sight is limited. Human beings are created good and bear God's image. We are also finite, vulnerable to sin, capable of self-deception, and dependent upon grace. Every person may contribute something worth receiving. No person is beyond learning something new.

You may leave a faithful conversation believing much of what you believed when it began. But you should understand more than you understood before.

Understanding is not agreement. Listening is not surrender. Humility is not the absence of conviction.

Dialogue is not appropriate in every circumstance. It must not replace required reporting, investigations, personnel procedures, accountability, or protection from abuse. No one should be coerced into defending their dignity, disclosing trauma, or staying in a threatening setting.

This guide cannot guarantee agreement or preserve every relationship. It offers a more modest hope: that we can seek truth, practice love, and share responsibility for our common life.

The conversation will be shaped by everyone who participates in it.

That includes you.

1. Prepare More Than Your Argument

The meeting has not begun, but the conversation may already be unfolding within you.

You imagine what someone will say. You prepare your response. You remember a previous conflict or promise that was not kept. You decide which point must not go unanswered. You scan the room for allies.

Difficult conversations touch things that matter: faith, identity, belonging, morality, safety, memory, and hope. Anxiety does not mean the conversation should be avoided. It means something important is at stake.

But what you carry into the room will shape what you are able to hear.

James urges believers to be “quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19). This is not a command to suppress conviction or emotion. It is an invitation to change our readiness and pace.

Be quick to listen. Do not make listening the activity that begins after you have said everything important.

Be slow to speak. Let understanding grow before deciding what another person means.

Be slow to anger. Notice what fear, loss, injustice, loyalty, or wounds may be giving anger strength.

Christian faithfulness concerns more than the position we defend. It also concerns the spirit in which we speak, the truthfulness of what we say about our neighbors, and the power we exercise.

What are you trying to protect?

You may be protecting a theological conviction, a vulnerable person, the congregation's unity, or its public witness. You may be protecting your place in the community or your confidence that you are a good and faithful person.

What we protect is not necessarily the problem. Protection becomes dangerous when it goes unexamined.

If you are protecting unity, you may silence necessary disagreement.

If you are protecting truth, you may become unable to recognize truth spoken from another location.

If you are protecting your moral identity, you may hear every challenge as an accusation.

The purpose of noticing is not shame. It is freedom—the freedom to participate rather than merely react.

Practice: The threshold pause

Before entering the room, place both feet on the floor and breathe slowly. Ask:

What am I afraid may happen?

What outcome am I trying to control?

Whom have I already dismissed?

What would faithful participation look like if I do not get the outcome I want?

You may wish to pray:

God of truth and grace, quiet what keeps me from listening. Give me courage to speak honestly, humility to receive what I do not yet see, and love for the people with whom I share this conversation. Amen.

Carry this commitment:

I will prepare not only what I want to say, but who I intend to be.

2. Remember Who Is in the Room

Two truths should guide every Christian conversation.

God is true. We are finite.

Every person bears the image of God.

We do not enter dialogue because nothing is true. We enter because every human being possesses and interprets truth within limits. We know truly, but not completely.

Paul writes, “For we know only in part” (1 Corinthians 13:9). These words occur in a chapter about love. Love is necessary not because truth is unimportant, but because no member possesses its fullness alone.

You may understand Scripture carefully and remain unaware of how your experience shapes the questions you bring to it. You may know theology and not know what a policy requires from the people most affected. You may have suffered real harm and still misjudge the motives of someone who reminds you of the person who caused it.

“I may be wrong” does not mean “nothing is true.” It means I am accountable for how I seek, interpret, and apply truth.

Christian humility can say:

I believe this is true, and I will explain why.

It can also say:

I know that my interpretation is not identical with God.

Humility does not tell us that another person is right. It tells us that another person may know something we need.

The person, not the category

The person across from you may have become *a conservative, a progressive, a fundamentalist, an activist, a nationalist, or one of those people*.

Labels can describe patterns and communities. They become dangerous when they persuade us that we already know the person wearing them.

Every participant possesses a dignity you did not create and do not control. Respecting that dignity does not require approving everything they believe. It does mean that no disagreement authorizes contempt.

Contempt appears through ridicule, sarcasm, disgust, motive assignment, or speaking about present people as though they were absent. It creates distance: if the other person is foolish, hateful, brainwashed, or morally inferior, we do not risk being changed by encountering them.

Allow people to describe themselves.

Instead of:

You only believe that because of your politics.

ask:

What experiences or convictions have shaped how you see this?

Instead of:

People like you do not care about Scripture.

ask:

How does Scripture inform your understanding?

Letting people define themselves does not make their self-understanding complete. It prevents us from substituting accusation for attention.

Dignity does not require silence about harm

“Be respectful” can be used to mean “Do not make anyone uncomfortable.” “Unity” can be used to protect people with power. Dialogue must not treat every claim as equally true or every behavior as equally safe.

If a statement degrades a group, threatens someone, or denies another person's dignity, the faithful response is not passive politeness. The conversation may need to pause and the statement may need to be challenged.

Accountability is not the opposite of dignity. It takes a person's moral agency seriously.

Practice: Restore the person

Think of someone whose position you strongly resist. Complete:

Beyond this issue, this person is...

Something important may be at stake for them because...

A question I could ask without assuming their answer is...

What might this person say is difficult about talking with me?

Carry these commitments:

God is true. I will seek truth with conviction and humility.

No position a person holds can erase the image of God in the other.

3. Notice What You Bring

Our convictions do not arrive as abstract ideas above our lives. They take shape within families, churches, friendships, losses, loyalties, education, worship, media, and experience.

Beliefs have biographies.

We often experience our own conclusions as the natural result of Scripture, facts, or reason. We experience other people's conclusions differently: they were raised that way, influenced by politics, reacting from fear, or shaped by personal experience.

Other people have backgrounds. We have good reasons.

Yet all of us receive the world from somewhere. We trust some authorities more readily than others. We notice evidence that fits an existing understanding. We remember experiences that confirm what we fear or hope.

Recognizing this does not make every conclusion equally reliable. It makes honest examination possible.

Ask how, not only what

Debate asks:

What do you believe?

Dialogue also asks:

How did you come to believe it?

Consider two members discussing whether the church should make a public statement about a controversial issue.

One says, "The church has no business getting involved in politics." The other says, "Silence is political. Refusing to speak protects the status quo."

The first may remember a congregation nearly destroyed when a pastor used the pulpit to promote a candidate. The second may remember a church that refused to challenge segregation or abuse because leaders wanted to avoid controversy.

The stories do not settle the question. They reveal what a faithful decision must take seriously.

Ask:

What experience first made this important to you?

Who or what has shaped your understanding?

What Scripture or teaching carries weight for you?

What do you fear the church may overlook?

What hope are you trying to protect?

Your view has edges

Stand at one window of a church and describe what you see. Someone at a window on the other side will give a different description. Both may be accurate. Neither window reveals everything around the building.

Your perspective works similarly. What you see can be real, important, and incomplete.

A blind spot is something your present location makes difficult to notice. Looking harder from the same place may still not reveal it.

The church needs different members because no member is the body. Ask:

Whom have we treated as though we have no need of them?

The answer may include staff afraid to speak before supervisors, people whose lives are being discussed, members with disabilities, younger adults who stopped participating, newcomers unfamiliar with church process, or conservatives who assume their questions will be treated as evidence of moral failure.

Making room for a voice does not give it veto power. It allows the body to receive information that may not be available elsewhere.

When defensiveness appears

Defensiveness is the impulse to protect ourselves from a perceived threat.

We may hear, “This practice harmed people,” and experience, “Everything you have done is corrupt.” We may hear, “Other voices need more room,” and experience, “There is no place for you anymore.”

The perceived message may differ from what was said. If we respond only to the threat we felt, the actual words disappear.

Defensiveness is a signal, not a moral failure. It tells us that identity, belonging, status, safety, or moral self-understanding feels endangered. The task is to keep that feeling from deciding what happens next.

Try:

I notice that I am becoming defensive. I may be hearing more than you intended. Could you say what you most want me to understand?

Practice: Map your conviction

Before the conversation, complete:

I believe...

The Scripture, relationships, experiences, and sources that shaped me include...

I am afraid that...

The good I hope to protect is...

Whose experience is least represented in my understanding?

What evidence might I dismiss too quickly?

Something I may not yet see is...

Carry these commitments:

My convictions have a story, and so do yours.

I need perspectives beyond my own, not because mine has no value, but because it has edges.

4. Listen Before You Answer

Most of us can remain quiet while another person speaks. Quiet, however, is not the same as listening.

We may be preparing our response, testing facts, or waiting for a pause long enough to enter. Dialogue asks us to listen for more than a weakness in another person's argument. It asks us to understand what the person is saying, what they mean, what matters to them, and what gives their words weight.

Listening does not require agreement. It requires attention before judgment.

Dialogue does not forbid persuasion. Congregational deliberation includes offering reasons and inviting others toward a judgment. Dialogue changes the order and ethics of that work. We first seek understanding, represent differences fairly, and remain willing to be persuaded as well as to persuade.

Listen for four things

Words: What did the person actually say?

Meaning: What do important terms mean to them? Words such as *biblical*, *justice*, *welcome*, *political*, *safety*, and *unity* may carry different meanings.

What is at stake: What value, fear, relationship, loss, or hope gives the position importance?

The invitation: What does the speaker want the community to understand, consider, protect, or do?

You may understand one layer and miss another. Good listening does not require accepting all four as justified. It asks you to distinguish them.

Hear, reflect, clarify, confirm

1. Hear. Give full attention. Notice your impulse to correct, interrupt, rescue, or complete the thought.

2. Reflect. Offer a fair account:

What I hear you saying is...

It sounds as though the concern beneath your position is...

Reflection is not agreement. Do not insert judgment into the summary.

Unfair:

So tradition matters more to you than actual people.

Fairer:

I hear you saying that the church would lose something essential if it changed this teaching. Is that accurate?

3. Clarify. Ask one question:

What do you most want us to understand?

What consequence are you concerned we may overlook?

4. **Confirm.** Return the understanding to the speaker:

Have I represented you fairly? What have I missed?

The speaker may say no. The process is still working. Try again.

Listen until you can tell the story fairly

Before arguing against another person's position, describe it in words they recognize as fair.

This requires distinguishing a person's actual claim from the most extreme version associated with their side.

Fair listening does not decide which position the church should adopt. It brings the real disagreement into view.

When facts or stories are contested

Listening does not require pretending an inaccurate claim is true. Clarify the claim and identify the source. Separate the underlying concern from the disputed fact:

I hear that safety matters to you. I share that concern. I believe the specific claim needs to be checked before we use it in our decision.

Leaders should identify reliable sources and distinguish factual questions from moral and theological judgments. Repeated, deliberate falsehood is different from honest error.

When someone shares a personal story, do not immediately turn it into evidence for or against the whole issue. Do not respond with a counterexample or ask for details they did not offer. Begin:

Thank you for trusting us with that. What would you most want the congregation to understand from your experience?

Carry this commitment:

I will not claim to disagree with you until I can describe your concern fairly.

5. Speak, Ask, and Disagree Faithfully

Dialogue requires honest speech. Humility does not ask you to become vague; it asks you to become accountable for your words.

Speak clearly about what you believe. Speak from the experience and knowledge you possess. Distinguish what you observed from what you inferred. Name your fear as your fear, not as another person's intention.

Speak from five places

1. **What I understand:** “The question before us is...”
2. **What I believe:** “My present conviction is...”
3. **What has shaped me:** “I reached that conviction because...”
4. **What I may not know:** “One limit to my perspective is...”
5. **What I hope:** “Whatever we decide, I hope we can...”

First-person language need not weaken conviction. Compare:

The Bible clearly says...

with:

I understand this passage to mean..., and I connect it to our decision in this way...

The second statement is more accountable. It identifies an interpretation that can be explained and examined.

Do not assign motives:

You only support this because you want approval from the culture.

Speak about the concern you can identify:

I worry that our desire for acceptance may be influencing how quickly we are moving. How are we testing that?

Intent matters, but it is not the only thing that matters. If your words cause harm, try:

That is not what I intended, but I hear that my words had that effect. I want to understand and restate it more carefully.

Ask genuine questions

Not every sentence that ends with a question mark is a genuine question.

How can you call yourself a Christian and believe that?

is an accusation wearing a disguise.

A genuine question makes room for an answer you have not already written.

Ask:

What is most important to you in this conversation?

What experience or conviction has shaped how you see this?

What do you wish people with my perspective understood?

What concern do you fear the church may overlook?

What would a faithful way forward need to protect or make possible?

Ask one question at a time. Do not require people affected by an issue to educate the room or disclose private experience before their concern is taken seriously.

Before asking, consider:

Do I want to know the answer?

Does my wording contain an accusation?

Am I asking this person to defend their dignity or prove their faithfulness?

Could I state my concern directly instead of disguising it as a question?

Disagree without dismissing

Some church conversations fail because people are cruel. Others fail because people fear conflict so deeply that they never name the disagreement.

Dialogue does not ask us to pretend consequential differences are small. It asks us to disagree without making one another disposable.

Mutual respect does not mean treating every claim as equally true. It means evaluating claims without denying the dignity of the people who make them.

Use this pattern:

What I understand: “I believe I understand that you are saying...”

Where I differ: “The point where I reach a different judgment is...”

Why it matters: “This matters to me because...”

What remains open: “What I still want to understand is...”

What I will continue to do: “Even with this difference, I will...”

Name the point of difference precisely. Do not turn one disagreement into a judgment of the person's faith, character, or belonging.

Challenge demeaning speech

Some statements should not pass without response. A claim may stereotype a group, deny documented reality, or imply that another participant is less worthy of safety or belonging.

You can pause:

*I want to stop for a moment. That statement describes a group in a way that could deny their dignity.
Could you state your concern from your own experience or belief without characterizing the whole group?*

If the speaker refuses, repeats the statement, or attacks those affected, a leader may need to end the turn or stop the conversation.

Correction is not persecution. A covenant without intervention is only a wish.

Carry these commitments:

I will speak clearly about what I believe without pretending to know everything about the issue or about you.

I will ask in order to discover, not to expose or defeat.

I can name a serious difference without making you disposable.

6. Seek a Faithful Way Forward

Dialogue cannot answer every question on its own. A congregation may understand its differences and still need to adopt a policy, approve a budget, or choose a course of action.

The pressure to decide creates two distinct dangers.

One is using dialogue to delay action while people affected by the present arrangement carry its cost.

The other is using dialogue as a ceremony before leaders proceed with a decision they have already made.

Faithful participation requires honesty about what kind of conversation is happening, what remains open, who holds authority, and when a decision will be made.

Know what work you are doing

Dialogue: What do we need to understand?

Deliberation: What could we do, and what would follow?

Negotiation: How will we arrange a common life amid different needs and convictions?

Discernment: What may God be calling us to do or become?

Decision: What action is authorized?

A meeting may include several movements. Ask:

What are we doing now?

What will this conversation influence?

What has already been decided or established by policy?

Who makes the final decision?

How and when will it be made?

If nothing participants say can affect the outcome, leaders should not call the gathering dialogue or discernment. They should communicate the decision honestly and provide space for response.

False openness causes more damage than clear authority.

Negotiation and compromise

The church does not negotiate whether God is God or whether love, justice, and truth matter. The church continually negotiates how finite people will share worship, authority, resources, responsibility, and communal life.

Some matters should not be negotiated. Human dignity is not a bargaining chip. Safety, legal obligations, and protection from abuse should not depend on how much influence a vulnerable person possesses.

Other matters invite faithful negotiation:

What must be protected?

What can be adapted?

Who carries the burden under each option?

Can an option be tested before becoming permanent?

Can the decision include a review date?

Compromise is not automatically faithful or unfaithful. Ask what is being exchanged, who has power to exchange it, and who bears the cost.

What a vote does—and does not do

When unanimity is not possible, a vote can authorize action.

It does not prove that the majority is morally, theologically, or factually correct. It does not erase what the minority said or release leaders from attending to consequences.

Nor does losing a vote automatically mean a person was not heard. Being heard means that a contribution was received, understood, and considered. It does not guarantee persuasion.

Before deciding, ask:

What have we learned that should change our options?

Whose experience is still missing?

Who will carry the greatest cost?

What is not available for compromise?

How will dissenting members continue to participate with integrity?

When will we review the decision and its effects?

Then ask:

Are we ready to decide, or are we merely tired of the conversation?

What we owe one another afterward

The chair announces the result, and the meeting ends. Yet the transition created by the decision may only be beginning.

Afterward:

Tell the truth. Communicate what was decided, who held authority, what concerns were heard, and what remains unresolved.

Protect dignity. Do not turn a vote into a judgment about character or belonging.

Attend to consequences. Notice who benefits, who carries an unexpected burden, and whether the decision produces its intended fruit.

Keep promises. Follow through on communication, support, confidentiality, repair, and review.

Do not demand immediate reconciliation or reassurance from people who are hurt. Allow grief as well as relief. Protect participants from retaliation, gossip, disclosure of private stories, or exclusion from unrelated ministry.

A decision ends a question for now. It does not end our responsibility to one another.

Carry these commitments:

We remain responsible for what our decision does and for how we live together afterward.

When agreement is not possible, responsibility remains.

A Covenant for Faithful Conversation

A covenant names how we intend to conduct the conversation. It does not guarantee perfect behavior. It gives the group a shared basis for pausing, correcting, repairing, and beginning again.

As we enter this conversation, we will try to:

- Remember that every person here bears the image of God.
- Speak for ourselves rather than assigning motives or beliefs to others.
- Listen to understand before preparing a response.
- Describe another person's position fairly, especially when we disagree.
- Hold our convictions with integrity and our interpretations with humility.
- Remain open to discovering something we have not previously seen.
- Ask honest questions rather than questions designed to embarrass, expose, or defeat.
- Distinguish discomfort from harm and disagreement from disrespect.
- Refuse language that demeans, threatens, or denies another person's dignity.
- Make room for people whose voices are often interrupted, overlooked, or dismissed.
- Accept that understanding may grow even when agreement does not.
- Seek decisions and ways of living together that reflect truth, love, justice, and the good of the whole community.

We will not do these things perfectly. When we fail, we will pause, acknowledge what happened, repair what we can, and begin again.

Returning to the covenant

Any participant should be able to say:

I would like to pause and return to our covenant.

Name the commitment involved without attacking the speaker:

I heard a motive assigned to people who support the proposal. Could the concern be restated without claiming to know why they believe it?

or:

Several people have been interrupted. Could we hear from those who have not spoken?

or:

That statement used language our covenant identifies as demeaning. We need to address it before continuing.

The chair or facilitator should decide whether the group needs a restatement, an apology, a break, a private conversation, an end to someone's turn, or additional support before continuing.

The measure of the covenant is not whether the group avoids every failure. It is whether participants recognize the failure, take responsibility, repair what they can, and return to the work.

Our covenant gives us a way to return when the conversation becomes difficult.

Participant Tools

Personal preparation

Complete privately before the gathering.

The question or decision I understand to be before us is:

My present conviction is:

The Scripture, relationships, experiences, and sources that shaped me include:

What I am trying to protect is:

I am afraid that:

The outcome I feel responsible for controlling is:

Whose experience is least represented in my understanding?

Something I may not yet see is:

When I become defensive, I tend to:

- ☐ interrupt;
- ☐ speak faster or longer;
- ☐ repeat my argument;
- ☐ become sarcastic;

- ☐ appeal to authority to end the discussion;
- ☐ withdraw or agree outwardly;
- ☐ look for allies;
- ☐ something else: _____

One genuine question I want to ask is:

Even if I do not get the outcome I want, faithful participation will require me to:

The listening card

HEAR — Give full attention. What was actually said?

REFLECT — “What I hear you saying is...”

CLARIFY — “What do you most want us to understand?”

CONFIRM — “Have I represented you fairly? What have I missed?”

Before responding, ask:

Am I answering what was said or what I expected to hear?

Can I name what matters to this person without sarcasm?

Is there a question I should ask before making my point?

Can I state precisely where I see it differently?

Language that closes and opens

Language that closes	Language that opens
“Everyone knows...”	“My present understanding is..., based on...”
“The Bible clearly says...”	“I understand this passage to mean..., and I apply it this way...”
“You only believe that because...”	“What has most shaped your view?”
“So you don’t care about...”	“How does your position address the concern about...?”
“How can you call yourself a Christian and...?”	“How does your Christian faith inform this conclusion?”
“That is ridiculous.”	“I do not understand how that conclusion follows. Would you explain?”
“Calm down.”	“This is carrying strong emotion. Do we need to pause?”
“I am sorry you were offended.”	“I spoke unfairly when I [name the behavior]. I am sorry.”

Language that closes	Language that opens
"We voted. Get over it."	"The decision is made. We remain responsible for its effects."

The pause practice

When defensiveness or escalation rises:

Stop speaking.

Feel the floor and breathe slowly.

Name what feels threatened: position, identity, belonging, authority, safety, or moral self-understanding.

Separate words from inference: What was said? What did you add?

Choose the next faithful action: reflect, clarify, request a break, or own what happened.

Try:

I notice that I am becoming defensive. I want a moment so I can listen more carefully.

I may be interpreting more than you intended. Could you say that another way?

We have moved away from our covenant. Could we pause and return to it?

I assigned a motive to you. That was unfair. Let me try again.

Stop and seek appropriate assistance when there are threats, intimidation, harassment, risk of violence, coerced disclosure, or matters requiring formal reporting or investigation.

A Brief Note for Leaders

Distribute this guide several days before the gathering. Tell participants:

- the purpose and question before the group;
- what is and is not open;
- who holds final authority;
- how contributions will affect the decision;
- what level of confidentiality can and cannot be promised;
- how safety or process concerns may be raised; and
- what happens afterward.

Do not invite discernment if the outcome has already been determined.

Read the covenant aloud before discussing the contested subject. Explain who may request a pause and how leaders will respond. Do not ask vulnerable participants to enforce the covenant by themselves.

Attend to accessibility, speaking time, staff-supervisor relationships, confidential ways to raise concerns, and how absent or less-connected members will be heard. Equal speaking time does not automatically produce equitable participation.

Seek trained facilitation, mediation, legal advice, denominational guidance, or another appropriate process when:

- threats, violence, abuse, serious harassment, or required reporting are involved;
- personnel or confidential pastoral matters are involved;
- leaders are parties to the conflict and cannot facilitate impartially;
- power differences make honest participation unsafe;
- the congregation has experienced repeated failed conversations; or
- consequences exceed local leaders' authority or skill.

Dialogue can support accountability, but it must not replace it.

After the gathering, communicate what occurred, what was learned, what was decided, what remains open, and what happens next. Follow up with people who raised safety concerns or carried unusual vulnerability.

A Closing Prayer

God of truth,

free us from the need to win, the fear of being changed, and the temptation to make enemies of those who see differently.

Give us courage to speak what we believe, humility to recognize the edges of our sight, and patience to listen for what we have not understood.

Guard the dignity of every person. Strengthen those whose voices are easily dismissed. Restrain speech that wounds or deceives. Give wisdom to those who must lead and decide.

When agreement is possible, help us receive it with gratitude.

When disagreement remains, teach us to live truthfully and responsibly together.

When repair is needed, grant us grace to begin again.

Amen.

Sources and Further Reading

This guide is an original Christian formation resource shaped by pastoral experience and the wider work of dialogue and church discernment practitioners.

Essential Partners: <https://whatisessential.org/>

Living Room Conversations: <https://livingroomconversations.org/>

School for Synodality, “Conversations in the Spirit”: <https://www.schoolforsynodality.org.uk/our-resources/conversations-in-the-spirit-a-how-to-guide>

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