BEFORE WE SPEAK

A Pastoral Guide to Preparing and Leading Difficult Congregational Conversations

FACILITATOR'S EDITION

"Tend the conditions in which people may speak truthfully, listen humbly, and seek a faithful way forward."



Rev. Dr. Lorne Bostwick
CHURCH AND CLERGY COACHING

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A Word to the Facilitator

You may be holding this guide because you are a pastor, priest, deacon, commissioned minister, chaplain, judicatory leader, or other trusted church leader preparing to guide a congregation or ministry body through something that matters deeply. The subject may concern identity, belonging, theology, public life, money, leadership, sexuality, race, climate, abortion, Christian nationalism, institutional change, or a decision whose effects will not be shared equally.

This guide assumes that the facilitator ordinarily belongs to the church body. You may preach to these people, visit them in the hospital, baptize their children, chair their meetings, supervise their staff, know their histories, and continue as their pastor after the conversation ends. That relationship is not merely an obstacle to facilitation. It provides knowledge, trust, theological responsibility, and pastoral connection that an outsider may not possess. It also means you cannot pretend to be detached from the community or untouched by the outcome.

At other times, the facilitator may represent a commission on ministry, diocese, presbytery, conference, synod, association, district, denomination, or another church body. Such a person may be outside the local congregation while still sharing its ecclesial life and accountability. A fully independent facilitator, mediator, or consultant is sometimes needed, but that is not the ordinary assumption of this resource.

The difficulty lies not only in disagreement. People may believe that something sacred is at stake. They may fear losing their church, their moral integrity, their voice, their safety, or their place in the community. They may carry memories of earlier meetings in which they were ignored, shamed, threatened, or overruled. They may arrive prepared to persuade, defend, withdraw, expose, protect, or win.

Pastoral facilitation cannot remove these realities. It can help the church face them without abandoning its life together.

This edition accompanies the *Before We Speak Participant Guide*. The participant guide prepares people to enter a difficult conversation differently. This guide prepares leaders to create and tend a process worthy of such preparation. It is part theological formation, part field manual, and part collection of practical tools.

Good pastoral facilitation is not neutrality about dignity, honesty, or harm. Neither is it pastoral authority disguised as control. The pastor-facilitator serves the purpose of the gathering, the covenant of the group, the vocation of the church, and the dignity of the people in the room. The facilitator helps participants do their own work rather than doing it for them.

The governing conviction of this guide is simple:

> **God is true. We are finite. Every person bears God's image. We need one another to see and act more faithfully.**

That conviction does not make every claim equally sound. It does mean that no participant possesses the whole truth, no position erases a person's dignity, and no group should confuse a successful vote with completed moral responsibility.

The work described here requires judgment about both role and process. Most conversations can be led by a pastor or another trusted church leader who prepares carefully, names their relationship to the matter, and receives support from others. Some are better led by a diocesan or denominational representative who knows the church's polity but does not carry the same local history. A smaller number need a skilled independent facilitator or mediator. Some require trauma-informed practice, legal advice, personnel procedures, safeguarding, or formal investigation rather than dialogue. Dialogue must never be used to postpone accountability, force disclosure, or make vulnerable people debate their own dignity.

Use this guide to discern the process needed, design the gathering honestly, intervene when the covenant is strained, and carry responsibility after the room empties.

How to Use This Edition

Before designing a significant gathering, read Parts One through Three. They address purpose, readiness, power, participation, and process. Keep Parts Four and Five nearby while facilitating; they contain scripts and responses for common moments. Use the Field Tools to plan, lead, and debrief.

For a conversation happening soon, begin with:

Should We Have This Conversation—and Who Should Facilitate?

Name the Work Honestly

Power, Safety, and Participation

A 90-Minute Conversation Plan

Intervention Language at a Glance

The participant guide should normally be distributed several days beforehand. Do not assume that distributing it is the same as preparing the group. Leaders must also explain the purpose, authority, boundaries, decision pathway, confidentiality limits, and what will happen afterward.

PART ONE

Discern Before You Design

CHAPTER ONE

The Facilitator's Vocation

Facilitation is often described as managing a meeting. In a church, pastoral facilitation is better understood as tending a common practice of truth, love, justice, and discernment. It belongs to the pastor's ministry of equipping the saints for a shared life, helping the body hear its members, and guiding the community toward responsible action.

The pastor or other facilitator is responsible for the process, not for manufacturing a preferred emotional atmosphere. A faithful conversation may include grief, anger, silence, sharp disagreement, or the recognition that the group cannot yet proceed. Calmness is not the same as faithfulness. Agreement is not the same as understanding. Politeness is not the same as dignity.

The pastor-facilitator helps the group remain in responsible relationship to the question, to one another, to God, and to the consequences of its choices. The pastor does not stop being a theologian, teacher, shepherd, or accountable leader while facilitating. The work is to exercise those roles transparently without using them to predetermine what participants are permitted to discover or say.

The pastor is already in the room

A pastor never enters the room as a neutral stranger. You have history with the congregation, formal authority, relationships of affection and conflict, knowledge received in confidence, and your own convictions about the matter. Participants may watch your face for approval, fear disagreeing with you, expect you to settle the question, or assume they already know your position.

Faithful facilitation begins by acknowledging this reality rather than performing detachment. Tell people which role you are exercising. If you will facilitate the conversation and later recommend or make a decision, say so. If you have taught or preached a position, do not ask participants to pretend they do not know it. If confidential pastoral knowledge shapes your concern but cannot be disclosed, recognize that limit without hinting at private information.

Pastoral presence can also strengthen the process. You know the congregation's language, losses, loyalties, and patterns of avoidance. You may recognize when an argument carries an older wound, when silence signals fear rather than agreement, or when someone needs care after speaking. Use that knowledge to tend participation, not to diagnose people publicly or reveal what was entrusted to you privately.

> **Pastoral facilitation does not require the absence of a position. It requires honesty about your role, discipline in the use of authority, and room for the congregation to do its work.**

Four loyalties

A facilitator holds four loyalties at once:

Loyalty to the stated purpose. Keep the gathering focused on the work people were invited to do.

Loyalty to the people. Protect dignity, participation, and the right not to be demeaned or coerced.

Loyalty to the process. Apply the covenant and agreed structure consistently, while adapting when the group needs a pause or repair.

Loyalty to truth and accountability. Do not use even-handedness to blur factual differences, conceal power, or excuse harm.

At times, these loyalties pull in different directions. A participant may want unrestricted speaking time, while the group needs equitable participation. A governing body may want a decision tonight, while the process reveals that essential voices or information are missing. A powerful member may request confidentiality that would hide misconduct. A pastor-facilitator needs enough freedom within the pastoral role to name such tensions and enough support to withstand the pressure that may follow.

Fair process is not pastoral indifference

Fair process means that the pastor does not manipulate the gathering to produce a predetermined conclusion. It does not require the pastor to act as though theology, ethics, polity, safety, and human dignity do not matter. A pastor may teach, clarify denominational requirements, correct misinformation, or name a moral boundary, but should distinguish those acts from facilitating the group's exchange.

Useful role language includes:

> *I am going to step out of the facilitator role for a moment and clarify what our denomination requires. Then I will return to facilitating the conversation.*
>
> *I have a pastoral and theological conviction about this question. I will state it briefly and will then ask someone else to guide the next round so that my authority does not close the conversation.*
>
> *I cannot remain neutral about language that demeans a person. I can remain open about how this congregation faithfully addresses the question before it.*

Having a personal or pastoral stake does not automatically disqualify you. Hidden interests and unacknowledged power are the greater danger. Disclose what participants reasonably need to know, clarify how authority will be exercised, and arrange another person to facilitate portions in which you must advocate, provide testimony, or receive evaluation.

The temptation to rescue

Facilitators may overfunction when the room grows uncomfortable. They summarize too quickly, answer questions meant for participants, soften every disagreement, or propose a compromise before people understand the conflict. Such interventions may protect the facilitator from anxiety, but they deprive the group of its work.

Your role is not to prevent all discomfort. It is to distinguish productive discomfort from harm, keep the work within agreed boundaries, and help participants remain present without abandoning responsibility.

> **Do not ask, "How do I keep everyone calm?" Ask, "What does this group need to participate truthfully and responsibly?"**

Pastor-facilitator self-examination

Before deciding how you will facilitate, ask:

What outcome do I hope for?

Whom do I instinctively trust or distrust?

Which emotions in others make me hurry, withdraw, or become controlling?

Whose anger will I interpret as dangerous? Whose anger will I excuse?

Am I free to interrupt a powerful person?

Can I stop the process if continuing becomes unsafe or dishonest?

Can people disagree with me without fearing pastoral, employment, or institutional consequences?

What confidential knowledge must I keep from shaping the process in ways I cannot explain?

Which portions can I facilitate, and where must another person take the chair?

Who will support me in reflecting afterward?

CHAPTER TWO

Should We Have This Conversation—and Who Should Facilitate?

Not every conflict should begin with a congregational dialogue. Sometimes leaders convene a conversation because they do not know what else to do. Sometimes they hope that listening will make an institutional responsibility disappear. Sometimes a public meeting is proposed when private pastoral care, investigation, mediation, education, or a clear leadership decision is needed.

Begin by assessing readiness, not arranging logistics.

Dialogue is appropriate when

the group needs to understand differing experiences, convictions, fears, or hopes;

participants have real freedom to speak or decline to speak;

leaders are genuinely open to learning;

the purpose and authority of the gathering can be stated honestly;

adequate time, facilitation, and follow-up are available;

the group can establish boundaries against demeaning or threatening conduct; and

what participants contribute can influence understanding, relationships, options, or decisions.

Dialogue is not sufficient when

there are allegations of abuse, harassment, discrimination, financial misconduct, or other matters requiring formal response;

a personnel or confidential pastoral matter cannot be discussed responsibly in public;

people are being asked to debate whether another person's basic dignity should be recognized;

threats, stalking, intimidation, or a credible risk of violence are present;

the pastor or governing leaders have already determined the result but intend to advertise the meeting as discernment;

participation would require vulnerable people to disclose personal information to be believed;

a severe power imbalance makes refusal or honest speech unsafe; or

the conflict has repeatedly escalated beyond the leaders' capacity.

In these situations, dialogue may later support understanding or repair, but it cannot replace accountability, protection, or authorized decision-making.

Ask “Why now?”

The presenting issue is rarely the whole issue. A proposal about flags, facilities, worship language, public statements, or community partnerships may carry older conflict about authority, generational change, denominational identity, pastoral leadership, or who belongs.

Ask yourself and the governing body:

What happened that makes this conversation necessary now?

What has already been tried?

Who requested the conversation, and who may wish it were not happening?

Who will experience the consequences most directly?

What would happen if no conversation were held?

What responsibility belongs to leaders regardless of what participants say?

Readiness is not agreement

A group does not need to agree before it can meet. It does need enough shared willingness to honor boundaries, hear more than one voice, and refrain from coercion. If participants refuse in advance to recognize others as legitimate members of the conversation, preparatory work may be required before a whole-group gathering.

A readiness decision

Conclude the assessment by choosing one of four paths:

Proceed. The purpose is honest, risks are manageable, and the process can be supported.

Prepare first. Provide education, individual interviews, relationship-building, or small-group listening before convening the full group.

Use another process. Seek mediation, investigation, pastoral care, personnel procedures, legal guidance, or an authorized leadership decision.

Do not convene. The proposed gathering would be deceptive, coercive, unsafe, or unlikely to serve a responsible purpose.

The courage to convene—and the courage not to—belong to the same ministry of care.

Who should facilitate?

Choose the facilitator after assessing the purpose, relationships, authority, and risk. Begin with the person who ordinarily tends the congregation's common life, then add distance and specialized skill as the situation requires.

The pastor or another local church leader is usually appropriate when:

the congregation generally trusts the leader's fairness, even when members disagree with the leader;

the leader can state their role and convictions honestly;

participants can disagree without fear of retaliation or pastoral abandonment;

the leader is not the subject of the complaint or decision;

the conflict remains within the congregation's capacity; and

another person can assist with timekeeping, recording, pastoral care, or difficult portions of the process.

A diocesan, presbytery, conference, synod, association, district, or denominational representative may be preferable when:

polity, clergy oversight, congregational transition, or denominational accountability is central;

the pastor needs someone with ecclesial authority to clarify boundaries or options;

local leaders are divided about the process;

the congregation needs more distance than a local leader can provide but would benefit from someone who understands its tradition; or

the pastor needs to participate as a member, witness, or affected leader rather than guide the exchange.

An independent facilitator or mediator is usually preferable when:

the pastor, staff, or governing body is a principal party to the conflict;

participants reasonably fear that local or denominational authority will control the outcome;

employment, discipline, litigation, abuse, harassment, or serious allegations are involved;

repeated local attempts have intensified the conflict;

threats, severe intimidation, or major power disparities require specialized safeguards;

confidentiality boundaries are unusually complex; or

the process requires mediation, conflict assessment, restorative practice, or another skill beyond local capacity.

The choice need not be absolute. A pastor may convene and provide pastoral framing while another person facilitates. A denominational representative may advise the pastor, co-facilitate, or lead only the decision stage. An independent facilitator may design the process and coach local leaders without leading every gathering.

CHAPTER THREE

Name the Work Honestly

Many church meetings become needlessly painful because participants are doing different kinds of work without realizing it. Some arrive to learn. Others expect to decide. Some believe they are discerning God's call. Others assume a vote has already been scheduled. Some expect negotiation; others hear compromise as betrayal.

Before selecting a format, name the primary work.

Five kinds of work

Dialogue asks: What do we need to understand about one another, the issue, and what is at stake?

Education asks: What information, history, theology, policy, or lived experience do we need?

Deliberation asks: What options are available, and what benefits, burdens, risks, and consequences accompany them?

Discernment asks: In light of Scripture, tradition, reason, experience, prayer, and our vocation, what may God be calling us to do or become?

Decision asks: What action is authorized, by whom, under what rule, and with what responsibilities afterward?

Negotiation may appear within deliberation or decision: How will we arrange a common life when interests, needs, and convictions differ? Negotiation is not automatically unfaithful. Congregational budgets, schedules, shared spaces, policies, and public witness all require communities to negotiate finite resources and competing goods.

Do not promise more than the gathering can deliver

State clearly:

what is open and what is not;

who holds final authority;

whether a decision will be made at this gathering;

how participant contributions will be recorded and used;

what rules or denominational policies govern the decision; and

when participants will hear what happens next.

If the meeting is consultative, call it consultation. If leaders will decide later, say so. If the purpose is learning, do not imply that every view will become policy. People can accept honest limits more readily than manipulation.

Write a purpose statement

A useful purpose statement contains the people, the work, and the intended result:

> *We are gathering members of the congregation to understand the convictions and experiences shaping our responses to the proposed welcome statement, identify the questions and consequences leaders must consider, and prepare the council for a transparent decision next month.*

Avoid vague purposes such as “to talk about the issue,” “to heal division,” or “to hear all sides.” Healing cannot be scheduled as an outcome, and “sides” may conceal the complexity of the room.

Frame a usable central question

The central question should be open enough to invite discovery and bounded enough to guide the gathering.

Weak: *What do you think about LGBTQ+ people?*

Stronger: *What do our faith, congregational commitments, and neighbors' experiences require us to consider as we decide how our welcome is expressed in membership, leadership, worship, and pastoral care?*

Weak: *Is Christian nationalism wrong?*

Stronger: *How do we distinguish faithful Christian public witness from claims that bind Christian identity to national power, and what practices should guide our congregation?*

The facilitator does not need to make the question comfortable. The question must make the work honest.

PART TWO

Prepare the People and the Container

CHAPTER FOUR

Power, Safety, and Participation

Power is present in every room. Titles, ordination, age, race, gender, wealth, education, family history, employment, theological fluency, disability, citizenship, social confidence, and access to leaders all affect whose speech is believed and whose discomfort changes the agenda.

Treating everyone identically does not erase these differences. Equal speaking time can be useful, but equity also asks who had to take greater risk to speak, who may face consequences afterward, and whose absence permits others to discuss them abstractly.

Map power before the gathering

Identify:

formal decision-makers;

staff who report to people in the room;

people directly affected by the issue;

participants with long-standing influence;

people who have previously been interrupted, disbelieved, or retaliated against;

absent groups whose lives are being discussed;

people whose language, hearing, mobility, cognition, or technology needs affect participation; and

relationships that make confidentiality or candor difficult.

Do not publish this map. Use it to design responsibly.

Safety is more than comfort

Do not promise a “safe space” as though a facilitator can guarantee how people will feel or what consequences may follow. Promise specific practices: no threats, no demeaning language, no forced disclosure, clear confidentiality limits, permission to pause or leave, and a stated response when boundaries are crossed.

Differentiate:

Discomfort: encountering disagreement, correction, uncertainty, grief, or a challenge to one's assumptions.

Harm: demeaning treatment, intimidation, exposure, retaliation, coercion, or conduct that attacks dignity or safety.

The distinction cannot be made solely by the speaker's intention or the listener's immediate feeling. Attend to words, context, power, pattern, and impact.

Do not require testimony

Personal stories can deepen understanding, but no one should have to disclose trauma, identity, medical history, family experience, immigration status, or other intimate information for the group to take an issue seriously. Invite testimony; do not extract it.

When a story is offered, remind the group that it is a gift, not raw material for cross-examination. Participants may ask clarifying questions with permission. They may not debate a person's account of what they experienced.

Design for more than the quickest voices

Use a sequence that gives everyone time to think:

silent reflection or writing;

pairs or groups of three;

a structured round in which each person may speak or pass;

open conversation after a foundation of broad participation; and

a final round for what remains important or unresolved.

This does not eliminate power, but it prevents the opening minutes from determining the entire meeting.

Confidentiality with honesty

Explain what can and cannot be promised. A useful distinction is:

participants may share what they learned and how their own thinking changed;

they should not attribute another person's story or statement without permission;

leaders may need to act on threats, abuse, safeguarding concerns, or legally reportable information; and

official decisions and reasons may need to be communicated to the congregation.

CHAPTER FIVE

Prepare Yourself and the Leadership Team

The pastor's nervous system enters the room as well. When you become anxious, you may speed up, overexplain, become rigid, avoid eye contact, rescue a distressed person, silence anger, or permit a powerful participant to dominate. Because you know these people and will continue in ministry with them, their disappointment or anger may feel personally consequential.

Preparation is therefore spiritual, emotional, and procedural.

Work with the governing body

Even when you initiated the gathering, do not design it alone. Work with the session, vestry, council, board, wardens, moderators, or other responsible leaders to establish:

the purpose and central question;

the sponsoring body's authority;

what is already decided;

the relevant history;

likely participants and affected communities;

known conflicts, safety concerns, and accessibility needs;

confidentiality and reporting limits;

who can authorize a pause, change, or conclusion;

how notes will be taken and used; and

the plan for follow-up.

Ask leaders what they hope the conversation will produce and what outcome they fear. Significant differences between the pastor and governing body should be addressed before inviting the congregation. If the governing body is itself divided, decide whether a denominational adviser, coach, or co-facilitator would help it prepare.

Establish roles

The pastor may hold more than one role, especially in a small church, but the roles should still be named. For a substantial gathering, distribute them when possible:

Pastor or convener: names the pastoral and institutional purpose, offers theological framing, and explains why the gathering is happening.

Facilitator: guides participation and protects the process. This will often be the pastor; it may also be a trained lay leader, denominational representative, or outside facilitator.

Recorder: captures themes, questions, agreements, differences, and commitments without creating a transcript.

Pastoral support person: attends to participants who need care outside the main room. When the pastor is facilitating, another clergy person, deacon, chaplain, elder, or trained caregiver should hold this role if possible.

Timekeeper or host: manages practical details so the facilitator can watch the group.

The pastor will often facilitate. Do not surrender that role merely because you have convictions or authority. Instead, ask what support and role clarity will make pastoral facilitation trustworthy. Appoint another person to watch participation, receive private concerns, and tell you when you are speaking as advocate rather than facilitator.

If you need to present a proposal, defend your conduct, be evaluated, disclose how the matter affects your employment, or advocate at length, do not also facilitate that portion. A co-facilitator can take the chair while you participate. If the conflict centers upon your leadership, the governing body or denominational authority should select someone else to guide the process.

Build a small facilitation team

Pastors should seldom carry a high-stakes gathering alone. A simple team may include the pastor-facilitator, a governing-body partner, a recorder, and a pastoral support person. Meet beforehand to review the agenda, signals for intervention, confidentiality, emergency procedures, and who has authority to change or stop the process.

Choose a partner who can respectfully interrupt you. Agree on a discreet signal meaning “slow down,” “you are advocating,” “someone needs attention,” or “we need a break.” This is not a sign of weak leadership. It is a discipline that protects both pastor and congregation.

When denominational support is available, use it before crisis. A commission on ministry representative, bishop's or superintendent's staff member, presbytery or synod leader, conference minister, association leader, or trained colleague may review the design, coach the pastor, attend as an observer, or co-facilitate without taking the gathering away from local leadership.

Prepare your intervention threshold

Decide beforehand what you will interrupt immediately. Examples include threats, slurs, demeaning generalizations, repeated interruption, disclosure of confidential information, or direct pressure on someone to reveal personal experience.

Also decide what you will usually allow: strong emotion, principled disagreement, a respectful challenge, silence, a participant declining to answer, and criticism of leaders or institutional decisions.

A facilitator's threshold pause

Before the gathering, ask:

What am I trying to make happen?

What person or emotion am I most likely to manage rather than understand?

What intervention am I reluctant to make?

What will tell me the group needs a pause?

Who can I consult if judgment becomes difficult?

When will I speak as pastor or teacher, and how will I mark the change of role?

Who has permission to tell me that my pastoral authority is narrowing the conversation?

Pray not for control, but for attention, courage, restraint, and the ability to recognize what the room is asking of you.

CHAPTER SIX

Invite People Honestly

Facilitation begins with the invitation. It tells people whether their time and vulnerability will be respected.

Include:

- why the gathering is being held;
- the central question;
- who is invited and why;
- what kind of work will occur;
- what is and is not open;
- who holds decision authority;
- what preparation is requested;
- the schedule and participation format;
- accessibility and pastoral-support contacts;
- confidentiality limits; and
- what will happen after the gathering.

Do not advertise a debate if the process is dialogue. Do not call the gathering a listening session if leaders will argue with every contribution. Do not call it discernment if the decision has already been made.

Distribute the participant guide

Send the *Before We Speak Participant Guide* several days in advance. Ask participants to read at least the opening, the covenant, and the personal preparation pages. Explain that the guide does not ask them to surrender conviction; it asks them to carry conviction with humility, clarity, and respect.

At the gathering, do not shame people who did not read. Briefly teach the core practices so preparation does not become a gatekeeping device.

Prepare affected participants without burdening them

Contact people who may be disproportionately affected. Tell them what the process will involve and what safeguards are available. Ask what would support meaningful participation. Do not make them responsible for educating the congregation, approving the design, or representing an entire group.

Consider preparatory interviews

Individual or small-group interviews are useful when history is complex or trust is low. Ask each person the same core questions:

- What do you most need the facilitator to understand?

What are you afraid may happen?

What would help you participate?

What conduct would make participation impossible?

What do you hope others might understand?

What responsibility are you willing to carry?

Summarize themes without attribution unless permission is explicit.

PART THREE

Design the Conversation

CHAPTER SEVEN

Build a Faithful Arc

A faithful agenda is more than a list of topics. It is an arc that moves people from arrival to shared work and then toward responsible closure.

The seven movements

Arrival: Help bodies and attention enter the room.

Orientation: State purpose, authority, boundaries, and schedule.

Covenant: Secure meaningful consent to how the group will work.

Opening participation: Give every person a low-risk opportunity to speak or pass.

Deepening inquiry: Explore stories, convictions, differences, and what is at stake.

Integration: Name themes, agreements, differences, questions, options, or responsibilities.

Closure: Explain what happens next and allow participants to name what they are carrying.

Do not spend most of the time on presentations and then rush the conversation. If information is essential, distribute it beforehand or keep presentations brief enough that participants still have time to do the work for which they gathered.

Sequence from lower to higher risk

Begin with questions that locate participants without demanding a position:

What brought you here?

What do you hope this congregation will embody as we address this question?

What value, experience, or concern do you want to keep visible?

Move toward difference after people have heard one another as persons. Do not ask for a public yes-or-no position before the room has developed any capacity to listen.

Use silence deliberately

Silent writing slows reaction, includes reflective participants, and gives people a chance to notice what they are about to say. A minute of silence may feel long to the facilitator yet brief to everyone else. Explain its purpose and keep it.

Small groups and the whole room

Pairs and trios increase participation but can also hide harmful speech from the facilitator. Use them when the covenant is credible and the prompts are clear. Tell participants how to seek help. Do not place a vulnerable participant alone with someone who has intimidated or targeted them.

When reporting back, ask for themes rather than requiring people to repeat another person's story.

Build in a break

Any gathering longer than ninety minutes needs a break. Emotionally demanding conversations may need one sooner. State that people may step out and return. Arrange pastoral support without making departure conspicuous.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Questions That Do the Work

A facilitated conversation is shaped by the quality of its questions. Questions can open inquiry, invite testimony, expose assumptions, or quietly corner participants.

A sequence of questions

Use four layers:

Experience: What have you seen, heard, or lived that shapes how you enter this question?

Meaning: What conviction, value, Scripture, fear, or hope gives that experience meaning for you?

Difference: Where do you hear a genuine difference in the room? What do you understand about it, and what remains unclear?

Responsibility: Given what we have heard, what must we consider, change, decide, or carry forward?

This sequence helps participants move beyond trading conclusions.

Questions to avoid

Avoid questions that:

contain the facilitator's preferred answer;

require a participant to defend their identity or disclose trauma;

ask one person to represent a group;

compress several accusations into one question;

frame only two possible positions;

invite speculation about absent people's motives; or

ask for reconciliation before truth or accountability has been addressed.

Follow the energy without losing the purpose

When the room becomes animated, ask what has suddenly become important. When it becomes silent, do not assume resistance. Participants may be thinking, grieving, afraid, or confused. Offer a minute to write, restate the question, or invite people to name what makes it difficult to answer.

Facilitator curiosity

Useful interventions include:

What do you most want the group to understand about that?

What experience or conviction is underneath your conclusion?

Where do others hear this differently?

What have we not yet asked?

Who will carry the consequences of this option?

What responsibility remains even if the decision goes the way you hope?

CHAPTER NINE

Establish a Covenant That Can Be Used

A covenant is not ceremonial language read before the meeting's real work begins. It is a shared basis for intervention, repair, and return.

Use the covenant in the participant guide or adapt it before distribution. Do not invite the group to rewrite every sentence at the beginning of a contested meeting. That consumes time and allows participants to weaken boundaries precisely when they are most needed.

Introduce the covenant

Say why it exists:

> *This covenant does not require agreement or perfect behavior. It names how we intend to share the conversation. It also gives any of us a way to pause when we move away from the practices we have promised.*

Read it aloud. Ask what needs clarification. Then ask whether participants are willing to try to work within it. Allow people to name a concern. Consent need not imply enthusiasm, but refusal to honor essential dignity or safety boundaries must be addressed before proceeding.

Make intervention authority explicit

Tell participants:

anyone may request a pause;

the facilitator will decide how the process resumes;

naming a covenant concern is not an invitation for the group to prosecute the speaker;

vulnerable participants are not responsible for enforcing the covenant; and

repeated or severe violations may end a person's participation or the gathering.

When the covenant is broken

Use the lightest intervention proportionate to the moment:

Remind: Restate the relevant commitment.

Redirect: Ask the speaker to rephrase or return to the question.

Pause: Stop the exchange and create time to regulate or consult.

Repair: Invite acknowledgment, apology, correction, or another necessary action.

Limit: End a turn, speak privately, or establish a condition for continued participation.

Stop: End the gathering or seek appropriate assistance.

Do not demand an immediate public apology from a defensive person merely to restore appearances. A coerced apology may deepen harm. Name what must change now and arrange further repair afterward.

PART FOUR

Facilitate the Room

CHAPTER TEN

Open with Clarity and Calm

The opening minutes signal whether the process is trustworthy. Be warm, direct, and brief.

A sample opening

> *Welcome. As your pastor, I am facilitating tonight's conversation. I am part of this congregation and I have responsibilities and convictions of my own. My role during this gathering is to guide a fair process, protect our covenant, help us hear what is present in the room, and be clear when I need to speak in a different pastoral, theological, or leadership role. We are here to understand the convictions, experiences, and concerns shaping our congregation's response to [question]. Tonight is [dialogue/consultation/deliberation]. We will not make a final decision tonight. The [council/session/board] holds that authority and will use the themes and questions from this gathering when it meets on [date]. We will hear from one another through silent reflection, small groups, and whole-group conversation. You may pass on any invitation to speak. We will not require personal disclosure. Our recorder will capture themes without attaching names. We cannot promise confidentiality concerning threats, abuse, or matters that require formal reporting. Strong disagreement is welcome. Demeaning language, threats, motive assignment, and repeated interruption are not. Anyone may ask to pause and return to our covenant. I will guide what happens next.*

Then introduce the covenant and the first low-risk question.

If you are both pastor and facilitator

Name the role you are exercising whenever it changes. Participants should not have to guess whether a statement is a facilitation instruction, a pastoral boundary, a theological teaching, a personal conviction, or an institutional decision.

Keep opening theological framing brief enough that it does not predetermine the faithful answers. If substantial teaching is needed, provide it before the conversation, identify other responsible interpretations, or separate an educational session from the dialogue.

When you need to contribute as a participant, hand the process to a co-facilitator or governing-body partner:

> *I need to speak to this question as your pastor rather than as facilitator. Morgan will guide this portion and will make sure my contribution is received under the same covenant and time limits as everyone else's.*

When a denominational representative or outside facilitator is leading, the pastor or convener should explain institutional purpose and authority, then yield the process clearly. The pastor should remain available for pastoral care without privately undermining the facilitator's work.

Name visible realities

If a recent event, leadership conflict, protest, denominational action, or prior harmful meeting is plainly present, name it briefly. Silence can make the process feel evasive.

> *Many of us enter tonight carrying what happened at last month's meeting. We cannot resolve all of that history here, but we will not pretend it is absent. The covenant and the option to pause apply especially when that history enters our exchange.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Listen to the Whole Room

Facilitators listen on several levels at once:

Content: What is being said?

Meaning: What values, experiences, and interpretations shape it?

Emotion: What is the room feeling or avoiding?

Participation: Who speaks, who is interrupted, and who disappears?

Power: Whose words alter the room? Who bears risk?

Process: Is the group doing the work it was invited to do?

A pastor also listens through knowledge gathered across years of ministry. This can help you hear history and relationship beneath the words. It can also tempt you to assume you already know what a person means. Let present speech correct pastoral impressions. Never disclose or allude to confidential pastoral knowledge in order to strengthen a summary or win the group's confidence.

Track patterns, not only incidents

One interruption may be accidental. A pattern of interrupting the same person is process information. One generalization may be corrected easily. Repeated motive assignment after redirection signals resistance to the covenant.

Name patterns without diagnosing people:

> *I notice that we have heard from the same four voices during the last twenty minutes. I am going to pause open discussion and invite those who have not spoken to contribute if they wish.*
>
> *We have begun responding to positions we expected to hear rather than what people actually said. Before the next response, please reflect back the point you are addressing.*

Summarize without flattening

A facilitator summary should hold both connection and difference:

> *I hear broad agreement that the congregation should be truthful about its commitments. I also hear a significant difference about whether this proposal expresses faithfulness or exceeds the church's authority. Under that difference are concerns about belonging, biblical interpretation, public witness, and the effects on families. What have I missed or stated unfairly?*

Do not reduce deep disagreement to “we all want the same thing.”Shared values may lead to different conclusions. False harmony makes people feel unheard.

Attend to silence

Ask whether silence reflects reflection, exclusion, fatigue, fear, or completion. Offer options:

write before speaking;

speak in pairs;

submit a question anonymously;

pass without explanation;

take a break; or

continue the process through another channel afterward.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Intervene Without Taking Over

Intervention protects the group's capacity for shared work. Too little intervention allows domination or harm. Too much teaches participants that the facilitator will manage every difficult moment.

When someone speaks too long

> *I am going to pause you so we can make room for others. Please give us the one sentence you most want us to carry forward.*

If the pattern continues, speak privately during a break and establish a clear limit.

When someone interrupts

> **Please let Jordan finish. I will come to you next.**

For a pattern:

> *We have interrupted Jordan several times. Our covenant asks us to make room for voices that are easily cut off. Jordan, would you like to complete your thought?*

When motives are assigned

> *You have named why you believe other people hold their position. Please restate that as your own concern or ask them what has shaped their view.*

When Scripture is used to close inquiry

> *Scripture is central to this conversation. Our interpretations and applications still require us to listen and reason together. Could you say, "I understand this passage to mean…" and explain how you arrived there?*

When a statement demeans

> *I am stopping us. That description denies the dignity our covenant requires us to protect. It cannot remain unaddressed. Please restate the concern without characterizing those people as [term], or we will end this turn.*

Do not immediately ask the targeted person to respond. They may choose to speak, but they should not be assigned the work of correcting the harm.

When factual claims are disputed

> *We have reached a factual disagreement we cannot resolve from memory. The recorder will name the claim and the source needed. For now, let us distinguish what we know, what we infer, and what must be verified before a decision.*

Do not turn disputed facts into competing searches on participants' phones. Establish trusted sources or a later fact-checking process.

When emotion rises

> *This is carrying strong emotion. We do not need to remove it, but we do need enough space to choose our next words. Let us take one minute in silence.*

Tears do not automatically require stopping, and anger does not automatically require removal. Ask what the person needs and whether they wish to continue. Respond to conduct, not stereotypes about emotion.

When someone withdraws

> *I notice you have become quiet. There is no requirement to speak. Would it help to pause, write, or check in privately during the break?*

Do not force public explanation.

When the facilitator makes a mistake

> **I summarized your point unfairly. Thank you for correcting me. Let me try again.**

> *I allowed that exchange to continue too long. I am sorry. We are going to pause and decide what repair is needed before proceeding.*

Credibility does not require perfection; it requires accountability.

When criticism is directed at the pastor

Pastoral facilitation becomes especially difficult when a participant criticizes your preaching, leadership, theology, conduct, or handling of the process. Do not use the facilitator role to rebut the criticism immediately or label it a disruption.

If the criticism is relevant and can be heard safely, ask the co-facilitator to take the chair. Listen, clarify what is being raised, and respond later in the appropriate role. If it concerns misconduct, employment, discipline, or a formal grievance, stop trying to resolve it within the congregational dialogue and involve the governing body or appropriate denominational process.

> *That concern is about my leadership, so I should not decide how it is handled while I am facilitating. I am asking our co-facilitator to guide the next step, and we will clarify the appropriate process before continuing.*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Know When to Pause or Stop

A pause is an interruption with a purpose. It may last sixty seconds, a break, a private consultation, or several days. State why you are pausing and what question will determine whether the group resumes.

Pause when:

participants are reacting faster than they can listen;

the covenant has been strained and needs repair;

essential facts or authority are unclear;

someone needs pastoral or accessibility support;

the facilitator needs consultation;

the pastor needs to move from facilitator to participant, teacher, or accountable leader;

the agenda no longer fits what the group has uncovered; or

fatigue is producing preventable harm.

Use a simple sequence:

Stop the exchange.

Name what you observed without exaggeration.

Connect it to purpose or covenant.

State the pause and its length.

Explain what will happen during it.

Tell participants how a decision to resume will be made.

Stop the gathering when

there is a threat, credible risk of violence, or severe intimidation;

demeaning or harassing conduct continues after clear limits;

confidential or legally sensitive material makes public continuation irresponsible;

the sponsors misrepresented the purpose or authority;

essential participants or safeguards are absent;

the pastor's role in the conflict makes fair facilitation impossible and no co-facilitator can take over;

continuing would make the process complicit in harm.

Stopping need not mean failure. Sometimes it is the most truthful act available.

If pastoral facilitation reaches its limit, say so without blaming the congregation:

I am too directly involved in what has emerged to continue serving as the facilitator. That does not end our responsibility to address it. We will pause while the governing body consults with [the diocese/presbytery/conference/denomination] about appropriate leadership for the next stage.

We are ending tonight's gathering because the conditions required for responsible participation are no longer present. The leadership team will communicate the next steps by [time]. Please do not continue this conflict in the parking lot or online. Pastoral support is available through [contact].

PART FIVE

Move Toward Responsibility

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

From Dialogue to Deliberation and Decision

Dialogue may deepen understanding, but congregations must eventually make choices. Do not let a process remain indefinitely in conversation because leaders fear responsibility.

Mark the transition

Say when the work changes:

> *We have been listening for experiences, convictions, and what is at stake. We are now moving into deliberation. Our question becomes: What options respond most faithfully to what we have heard, and what consequences accompany each?*

Different rules may apply. A dialogue round invites testimony and inquiry. Deliberation requires options, criteria, information, and tradeoffs. Decision requires authority, procedure, and a recorded result.

Develop criteria before defending options

Ask what a faithful decision should honor. Criteria may include:

theological and biblical integrity;

the congregation's mission and stated commitments;

dignity and protection of affected people;

denominational polity or law;

pastoral consequences;

feasibility and resources;

public witness;

reversibility; and

responsibilities to those who disagree.

Criteria will not eliminate conflict, but they make reasoning visible.

Negotiate transparently

When arrangements are negotiable, identify interests beneath positions. A participant may oppose a proposal because of theology, fear of institutional fracture, concern about implementation, or lack of trust in leaders. These are not interchangeable.

Do not pressure disproportionately affected people to trade dignity or safety for harmony. Not everything is negotiable. State the boundaries and explain who has authority to set them.

What a vote does

A vote authorizes an action under an agreed rule. It does not prove that the majority is morally correct, heal relationships, erase minority conviction, or end responsibility for consequences.

Before voting, confirm:

- the exact motion;
- who may vote;
- the required threshold;
- conflicts of interest;
- what implementation follows;
- how minority reports or reservations may be recorded; and
- how the result will be communicated.

After the vote, resist triumphal language. Thank participants, state the decision plainly, acknowledge consequential disagreement, and name the next responsibilities.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

What We Owe People Afterward

The work is not finished when the chairs are stacked.

Communicate promptly

Tell participants:

what occurred;

what themes and differences were heard;

what was decided, if anything;

what remains open;

who is responsible for the next action; and

when another communication will come.

Do not publish attributed remarks without permission. Do not describe disagreement as misconduct merely because it inconvenienced leaders.

Follow up with vulnerability in mind

Contact people who disclosed harm, raised safety concerns, were targeted, left distressed, or faced unusual risk. Ask what support or repair is needed. The pastor may appropriately provide much of this care, but should not become the only person who can hear concerns about a process the pastor designed and led. Offeranother member of the clergy, denominational contact, governing-body representative, or qualified caregiverwhen participants need distance or when the concern involves the pastor.

Also follow up with participants whose conduct was limited. State what happened, the relevant boundary, and any conditions for future participation. Accountability should be clear without becoming public humiliation.

Debrief the leadership team

Within forty-eight hours, ask:

Did the gathering accomplish its stated purpose?

Who participated and who did not?

What did power look like in the room?

Where did the covenant hold or fail?

What surprised us?

What needs correction, verification, care, or repair?

What promises did we make?

What must be communicated, by whom, and when?

Review consequences over time

A process may feel successful to leaders while affected members experience its consequences quite differently. Schedule a review. Ask whether implementation matched what was promised, whether retaliation or exclusion occurred, and what the congregation is learning.

> **The measure of a faithful process is not that everyone felt satisfied. It is that the community told the truth about its work, protected dignity, exercised authority responsibly, and remained accountable for what followed.**

Issue-Specific Design Notes

The practices in this guide apply across subjects, but each subject carries distinct risks. These notes do not supply the congregation's conclusion. They help facilitators avoid predictable design failures.

LGBTQ+ Welcome and Inclusion

Avoid framing LGBTQ+ people as an abstract “issue” when they are members, relatives, neighbors, clergy, or staff whose lives will be affected. Clarify what the congregation is actually considering: public language, membership, baptism, marriage, leadership, employment, facilities, pastoral care, education, or denominational policy. A general conversation about “welcome” can conceal very different practices.

Do not require LGBTQ+ participants to disclose identity or personal history, defend their dignity, or answer every theological question. Arrange support and attend to the possibility that seemingly abstract statements may carry direct consequences for them. If policy is being considered, name who will experience its benefits and burdens.

Useful questions include:

What does our congregation presently promise, and what do people experience in practice?

Where do our interpretations of Scripture and tradition converge or differ?

What forms of participation, leadership, pastoral care, or public witness are actually under consideration?

Who bears the consequences of ambiguity, delay, or change?

What responsibilities remain toward those who disagree with the eventual decision?

Christian Nationalism and Public Witness

Define terms before inviting positions. Participants may use “Christian nationalism” to mean anything from patriotic worship practices to a specific ideology joining Christian identity, national belonging, and political power. Distinguish love of country, civic participation, partisan loyalty, public theology, and claims of divine national privilege.

Use reliable historical and theological sources. Do not let the meeting becomea contest of social media examples. Be prepared for concerns about identity, military service, religious freedom, racism, immigration, national memory, and the church's relationship to state power.

Useful questions include:

What do we mean by faithful Christian public witness?

When does love of country become a claim that the nation possesses divine status or privilege?

How should worship relate to national symbols and civic observances?

Whose belonging is strengthened or weakened by our present practices?

What practices could help Christians participate politically without confusing party, nation, and gospel?

Politics and Religion

The goal is not to create a church without politics. Decisions about power, resources, law, bodies, families, and the common good already have political dimensions. The task is to distinguish theological and moral formation from partisan capture.

Do not ask only whether the church should be "political." Ask what kind of public witness belongs to its mission, how claims will be tested, and how leaders will avoid using pastoral authority to control partisan allegiance. Clarify legal or denominational constraints through appropriate counsel rather than speculation.

Useful questions include:

Which parts of this concern arise from the gospel, moral reasoning, public policy, or partisan identity?

Are we applying the same moral standards to leaders and parties we favor and oppose?

What belongs in preaching, teaching, advocacy, pastoral care, or individual conscience?

How can members challenge public injustice without treating political opponents as enemies beyond grace?

Abortion

Expect personal grief, pregnancy loss, infertility, adoption, disability, sexual violence, medical complexity, moral conviction, and experiences of care or abandonment to be present even when no one discloses them. Do not invite public testimony in a way that pressures participants to reveal intimate history.

Clarify whether the group is exploring moral theology, pastoral care, public policy, denominational teaching, congregational support for families, or a proposed public statement. These are related but different conversations. Avoid reducing complex convictions to labels such as "pro-life" and "pro-choice" without asking what participants mean and what responsibilities they include.

Useful questions include:

What moral goods and human vulnerabilities are participants trying to protect?

How do Scripture, tradition, medical knowledge, law, and lived experience shape the views present?

What pastoral care should the congregation offer regardless of political position?

What material responsibilities accompany our convictions toward pregnant people, children, families, and communities?

Where do legal conclusions and moral conclusions differ?

Climate Change and Creation Care

Separate factual claims, policy judgments, economic effects, theological convictions, and trust in institutions. Establish credible sources for scientific questions before the gathering. Do not expect a dialogue process to adjudicate technical evidence through competing anecdotes.

Participants may carry concerns about stewardship, jobs, farming, energy costs, government authority, global inequality, future generations, and the scale of congregational responsibility. Make these interests visible rather than assuming that resistance reflects ignorance or that concern reflects partisan loyalty.

Useful questions include:

- What responsibilities does Christian stewardship place upon this congregation?
- Which factual claims require verification from qualified sources?
- Who bears the costs of action and inaction?
- What can the congregation influence directly, and where might public advocacy be appropriate?
- Which actions are faithful and feasible even without complete agreement about policy?

When Several Issues Are Entangled

A single remark may activate theology, identity, party loyalty, institutional trust, and personal history at once. Slow the conversation and separate the strands.

> *I hear at least three questions in what has been said: how we interpret Scripture, what public policy should do, and whether members trust the institutions providing information. Which question do we need to address first, and which requires a different kind of process?*

Facilitators serve the group when they refuse false simplicity. Not every strand must be resolved in one gathering.

FIELD TOOLS

TOOL ONE

Conversation Readiness Assessment

Complete this with the pastor and governing body before issuing an invitation. If the pastor is facilitating, use the assessment to identify where support, co-facilitation, or greater distance is needed.

The question or conflict is:

Why is this conversation needed now?

The primary work is:

☐ Dialogue or mutual understanding

☐ Education

☐ Deliberation

☐ Discernment

☐ Negotiation

☐ Consultation

☐ Decision

☐ Repair or reconciliation

Who holds final authority?

What is already decided or not open?

How will participant contributions matter?

Who is most affected? Who may be absent?

Known power, safety, confidentiality, accessibility, or reporting concerns:

Another process may be required because:

☐ Abuse, harassment, misconduct, or formal reporting is involved.

☐ Personnel or confidential pastoral information is involved.

☐ Threats, intimidation, or risk of violence are present.

☐ Leaders have already determined the result.

☐ Vulnerable people would bear unreasonable risk.

☐ The conflict exceeds local skill or authority.

Who should facilitate?

☐ The pastor or another local church leader.

☐ The pastor with a co-facilitator or denominational adviser.

☐ A denominational or diocesan representative.

☐ An independent facilitator or mediator.

Why is this level of distance and support appropriate?

Readiness decision:

☐ Proceed.

☐ Prepare first.

☐ Use another process.

☐ Do not convene.

TOOL TWO

Facilitator Planning Canvas

Purpose statement:

Central question:

Desired result of this gathering:

Participants and affected communities:

Roles:

Role	Name	Responsibility
Pastor/convener		State pastoral purpose, authority, and role
Facilitator		Guide process and participation; often the pastor
Co-facilitator/adviser		Take the chair when the pastor participates; monitor process
Recorder		Capture themes and commitments
Pastoral support		Support participants outside the main process; receive concerns
Host/timekeeper		Manage room, time, and practical needs

When will the pastor speak as facilitator, pastor/teacher, participant, or decision-maker?

What words or signals will mark a change of role?

Immediate-intervention boundaries:

Pause or stop conditions:

Accessibility and participation supports:

Follow-up owner and deadline:

TOOL THREE

A 90-Minute Conversation Plan

Time	Movement	Facilitator action
0-10	Arrival	Welcome, purpose, authority, boundaries, and schedule
10-20	Covenant	Read commitments, clarify, secure willingness to proceed
20-30	Personal reflection	Silent writing: What value, experience, or concern do I want visible?
30-45	Pairs or trios	Share; listener reflects and confirms before responding
45-65	Whole group	Gather themes, differences, and what remains unclear
65-78	Deepening	Ask: What must this community consider or take responsibility for?
78-85	Integration	Summarize agreements, differences, questions, and next work
85-90	Closure	Final sentence from each participant; explain next steps

For a decision meeting, do not simply add a vote to the final five minutes. Schedule separate time for options, criteria, consequences, procedural clarity, and the decision itself.

TOOL FOUR

A Two-Hour Deliberation Plan

Time	Movement	Facilitator action
0-15	Orientation	Purpose, authority, decision pathway, and covenant
15-30	Shared information	Present verified facts and name unresolved factual questions
30-50	Listening round	What is most important to consider, and why?
50-65	Criteria	Identify what a faithful decision should honor
65-75	Break	Private check-ins and facilitator consultation
75-95	Options	Clarify realistic options and who bears consequences
95-110	Deliberation	Test options against criteria; name tradeoffs and safeguards
110-117	Direction	Name convergence, unresolved differences, or procedural next step
117-120	Closure	Responsibilities, communication, pastoral support, and review date

TOOL FIVE

Intervention Language at a Glance

Moment	Language
A participant speaks too long	“I am going to pause you so we can make room. What is the one point you most want us to carry?”
Interruption	“Please let them finish. I will come to you next.”
Motive assignment	“Please state your own concern or ask what shaped their view.”
Misrepresentation	“Before responding, reflect the point and ask whether you have represented it fairly.”
Demeaning language	“I am stopping us. That description violates our covenant. Restate the concern without denying anyone's dignity.”
Scripture used to close inquiry	“Please tell us how you understand and apply the passage, while allowing that our interpretations must be tested together.”
Disputed fact	“Let us record what must be verified and distinguish fact, interpretation, and inference.”
Escalation	“We need enough space to choose our next words. We will pause for one minute.”
Silence	“There is no requirement to speak. Would writing or a pair conversation help?”
Covenant concern	“Thank you for naming it. I will guide what happens next; no one needs to prosecute the speaker.”
Facilitator error	“I handled that unfairly. I am sorry. Let me correct it.”

TOOL SIX

The Covenant for Faithful Conversation

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.

When we fail, we will pause, acknowledge what happened, repair what we can, and begin again.

TOOL SEVEN

Facilitator Debrief

Complete within forty-eight hours.

Did the gathering accomplish its stated purpose?

Whose voices shaped the conversation? Whose were missing or constrained?

What patterns of power appeared?

Where did the covenant hold? Where did it fail?

What did I do well as facilitator?

Where did I avoid, rescue, overcontrol, or intervene too late?

How did my pastoral authority, relationships, convictions, or vulnerabilities shape the room?

Where should a co-facilitator, denominational representative, or outside professional lead the next stage?

What requires verification, communication, care, accountability, or repair?

Who owns each next action, and by when?

TOOL EIGHT

Follow-Up Communication Template

Thank participants. Name the time, courage, and preparation they offered without claiming that the gathering was successful for everyone.

Restate the purpose. Remind readers what the gathering was and was not intended to accomplish.

Report themes. Name areas of shared concern, consequential differences, questions requiring verification, and perspectives that need further attention.

State decisions honestly. Identify what was decided, who decided it, under what authority, and what remains open.

Name responsibilities. Give owners and dates for promised actions, care, repair, research, implementation, or review.

Explain the next communication. State when and how the congregation will hear more.

Facilitator Checklists

Seven Days Before

☐ Purpose, central question, and authority are stated in writing.

☐ The readiness assessment is complete.

☐ The participant guide and invitation have been distributed.

☐ Affected participants and accessibility needs have been considered.

☐ Roles, intervention thresholds, and stop conditions are clear.

☐ The pastor's changes of role are planned and will be named aloud.

☐ A co-facilitator, adviser, or support person can interrupt or relieve the pastor.

☐ The agenda gives participants more time than presentations.

☐ Pastoral support and follow-up responsibilities are assigned.

One Hour Before

☐ Seating supports visibility and participation.

☐ Entry, restrooms, microphones, lighting, and printed material are accessible.

☐ The central question and covenant are visible.

☐ The recorder knows what to capture and what not to attribute.

☐ The pastor and leadership team have reviewed roles, handoffs, and emergency procedures.

☐ Water, tissues, breaks, and a private support space are available.

☐ The pastor-facilitator has paused, breathed, and released the need to control the outcome.

Before People Leave

☐ The group has heard an accurate summary.

☐ Agreements and differences have not been flattened.

☐ Decisions and authority are stated plainly.

☐ Promises, owners, and dates are recorded.

☐ Participants know how to raise a concern afterward.

☐ Pastoral support is available.

☐ The next communication date is clear.

A Prayer Before Facilitating

God of truth and mercy,

free me from the need to control this room.

Give me attention for what is spoken and what remains difficult to say. Give me courage to interrupt what wounds, restraint when the group must do its own work, and humility to recognize the edges of my judgment.

Guard the dignity of every person. Strengthen those whose voices are easily dismissed. Keep conviction from becoming contempt, listening from becoming performance, and peace from becoming avoidance.

When a faithful way opens, help us recognize it. When we cannot proceed, give us honesty to pause. When harm occurs, lead us toward accountability and repair.

May our manner of speaking bear witness to the One whose truth exceeds our possession and whose love calls us into responsible life together.

Amen.

Sources and Further Reading

This guide is an original Christian formation and facilitation resource shaped by pastoral experience and the wider work of dialogue, conflict transformation, discernment, and congregational practice.

Essential Partners, dialogue resources: https://whatisessential.org/

Living Room Conversations, conversation guides: 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

World Café Community Foundation: https://theworldcafe.com/

World Council of Churches, "Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies": https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/guidelines-on-dialogue-with-people-of-living-faiths-and-ideologies

Gary B. Agee, *That We May Be One: Practicing Unity in a Divided Church* (Eerdmans, 2022).

Robert S. Heaney and John Y. H. Yieh, *Building Dialogue* (Church Publishing, 2022).

Tim Muehlhoff and Richard Langer, *Winsome Conviction* (InterVarsity Press, 2020).

Presbyterian Resources**:**

Seeking to Be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians in Times of Disagreement. The 204th General Assembly adopted it in 1992 for its own life and commended it to congregations and other PC(USA) bodies. https://pcusa.org/resource/seeking-be-faithful-together-guidelines-presbyterians-times-disagreement

The Book of Order

The current *Book of Order* provides the deeper Presbyterian theological and constitutional foundation:

- **F-3.0101 — God Is Lord of the Conscience:** Presbyterians recognize the right of faithful individual judgment while placing conscience under God.
- **F-3.0102 — Corporate Judgment:** The church must make collective judgments, while acknowledging that it can err.
- **F-3.0104 — Truth and Goodness:** Presbyterians affirm that truth and goodness are found wherever people are enabled to receive them.
- **F-3.0105 — Mutual Forbearance:** Christians may differ over matters that are not essential to faith and should exercise mutual forbearance.

Together, these provide an unusually strong theological case for humility: individuals can be wrong, governing bodies can be wrong, and faithful Christians can reach different conclusions. See the 2025–2027 Book of Order.

Other useful PC(USA) resources

- **The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church:** This longer General Assembly report grew out of intense denominational conflict. Its account of how members with profound theological disagreements learned to pray, listen, worship, and discern together could help shape the Facilitator's Edition. PC(USA) resource page
- **Regarding Ruling Elders—Relationships and Conflict:** This material applies the disagreement guidelines to congregational leadership and stresses listening for understanding, empathy, direct communication, and attention to a congregation's unwritten rules. Read the collected resource
- **Trouble the Water: Conversations to Disrupt Racism and Dominance:** This is more issue-specific, but it demonstrates how the denomination frames difficult, honest conversation about race and power. View the resource