

Safe and Respectful Listening

A Different Conversation

<http://diffcon.org>

Hospitality. ... the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.

HENRI NOUWEN, *Reaching Out*

Obviously, the two aims of this conference are in tension. On the one hand, this is a forum for Christians, especially ministers and leaders, to discuss the biblical, moral and practical questions raised by same sex issues. At the same time, this is an opportunity to listen to same sex attracted and transgendered people, be they Christian, non-Christian or ex-Christian, in order to understand their experience of life, faith and church. These aims ought to be complementary.

However, many in either or both groups will feel threatened or misrepresented by the other. Same sex attracted people have often had terrible experiences with Christian ministers, churches and politics – and especially with Christian scripture. Some who share will be extending us considerable trust in doing so. On the other hand, Christians and Christian ministers especially, may think of the LGBT¹ communities in terms of politics and confrontation. There are many more issues than these, and everybody will be wary of discussing very personal questions in this atmosphere.

Here's what we suggest –

1. *Relax.* When we feel tense and defensive, we speak in ways that communicate suspicion and mistrust, and others recognise that, and it escalates. We should have confidence that love and holiness do not conflict for God, and so be generous in spirit toward each other.
2. *Listen.* Since you can learn from everybody here, decide to listen even while expecting disagreement. Listening does not imply agreement, but rather empathy and respect, and a desire for understanding. In times when there is a flood of emotion in the room, please check-in with yourself and your colleagues that you are still listening.
3. *Empathise.* Put yourself in each other's situations and reflect on what their experience might have meant in your own life, or the lives of your friends and family. Start by saying, "I am curious about..."
4. *Love.* Assume that any person present may be feeling powerless or vulnerable because of their own sexual identity and faith history, regardless of appearances. Because this is a consciously Christian conversation, we want every person present to be respected and heard, and for it to be apparent that they are, above all else, a person that we *love*.
5. *Respond to the facilitators' directions.* They will have the best understanding of the range of people, experiences and perspectives present in the room.
6. *Maybe hold that question for later.* Reserve volatile questions for the sessions most appropriate to them – e.g. biblical morals on Fri afternoon, Christian politics on Saturday morning. Don't ignore those questions or forget them, but recognize that they can interfere with listening, and that listening comes before discussion. If in doubt, ask a facilitator or otherwise follow their guidance.
7. *And finally: respect confidentiality.* Don't record or quote any person without both their knowledge and permission. (And yes, all devices on silent.)

¹Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender