Guidelines for Honoring and Talking across Differences

Do not judge, and you will not be judged: do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.


[There are] two sorts of truth: trivialities, where opposites are obviously absurd, and profound truths, recognized by the fact that the opposite is also a profound truth.

Niels Bohr

Guidelines are often presented as “rules for the road” or compared to a traffic officer directing cars through a rotary or traffic circle. They are much more than that. They are the framework and the building blocks (content) as well as the mortar (relational glue) that hold together a community as it moves on a journey from being a collection of disparate individuals to being a community living into the fullness of what it means to be Christ’s body—embracing the wonder and beauty of all the parts. Living the guidelines can be transformative!

We are all in different places on the journey of being transformed into the fullness of Christ. Wherever we are, it is helpful to begin with some behavioral guidelines recognizing, understanding at deeper levels, and celebrating our differences. At times when our differences seem overwhelming, guidelines ensure that we can speak and act in ways that will honor who we are in all our uniqueness. These guidelines are both simple and profound: simple in that they seem obvious to nearly everyone who hears them, and profound, in that if we ever truly lived them out in all their implications, little other regulation would be necessary. Every conflict, however small or large, can be traced to the violation of one of these guidelines. Most often the violation includes denying that significant differences exist or seeing differences as greater than or less than.

When adopted and practiced, these guidelines offer a common language that allows differences within a group to surface in a manner that serves ongoing growth for individuals and for groups as they discover new insights for themselves. It is a language that allows some safety in encountering differences so that the disagreements that arise can lead us to be more fully present to one another with all our differences.

Try on

To try on a new idea or belief does not mean that I judge my former idea or belief as wrong. It means that I do not judge the new behavior as wrong. I am willing to see the benefits and disadvantages of different ways of behaving. Trying on a new perspective is often a cumulative process. Some ideas or ways of acting are “acquired tastes.” Similar to getting used to a new pair of shoes, one may need time to try out the benefits of a new idea or a new way of relating to others. Two things are important to remember about acquiring new options. First, if you don’t try on anything new, you are stuck with the same old ideas and methods, and your learning will stagnate. Second, whenever you try on something new, you always have the option of going back to what you knew and believed beforehand, or to the ways of interacting that have previously worked.
When I think of this guideline theologically, I am aware that a primary way to image God is as creator. Insofar as we are made in the image and likeness of God, we are meant to be co-creators with God, the creator of all the diversity in the universe. What then does it mean, on an individual level, to be creating new life? We live more in God's image and likeness when we are open to trying on new ideas and behaviors, especially when this means listening to the different experiences of other children of God? The Try On guideline also helps me to understand the work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that reveals new insights to the faith community, the Spirit that blows where she will.

An attitude of superiority or internalized inferiority often underlies the violation of each of the guidelines. With regard to this first guideline, when I am in a position of dominance and I refuse to try on a new idea or way of behaving, at some level I am saying I know that my old way is better than this other way you are inviting me to consider. When I am a position of less power, I may be saying I do not have the internal resources to try on this new way, because I am not capable enough to do it. Thus attitudes of superiority and inferiority hinder the exercise of trying on new ideas, feelings, and behaviors. When I see myself as superior or inferior to others, I am also contradicting the belief that all people are of equal worth in God's eyes as Paul discusses in his analogy of the body (1 Cor.12:12-26).

It's Okay to Disagree. It's Not Okay to Shame, Blame, or Attack Oneself or Others

When disagreement is not allowed, people don’t show up as fully themselves. If I am afraid that what I will say cannot be heard in a particular group or community, I may be hesitant to speak and if I do speak, I will be always on guard. I may even develop a type of split personality—bringing only the “acceptable” part of me to the group, and sharing the part of myself that is not acceptable in other places. Such behavior will mean that I will not likely ever consider myself a truly committed member of that community.

Believing that it is okay to disagree both honors individuals and their differences and is an act of faith that the community is mature enough to understand and embrace significant differences. The embrace of differences has a scriptural precedent in the differing stories of creation in Genesis and in the four different gospel accounts of the life of Jesus, which cannot be reconciled into one smooth chronology or a completely homogenous theological picture.

Whatever the cause, when people attack, blame, or shame one another, there is an immediate need to re-norm the community by reiterating the guidelines.

Phrases such as: “How could you possibly think that?” and “No one who really loves God would . . .” are examples of shaming another person. Sometimes we shame or blame others through non-verbal body language, such as when we sigh deeply after someone says something we disagree with or find boring, or when we roll our eyes, or drop our head to avoid looking at the speaker.

Theologically speaking, attacking, shaming, and blaming others with whom we disagree may stem from not valuing the vast diversity of goodness and beauty that God created. Some people feel a very strong need to defend what they believe to be true, to control and manage the truth as if the world would whirl into chaos if this truth were challenged or amended. Or they may believe that they have been chosen by God to direct and manage others during a cataclysmic collapse of morals. Could this desire to control others represent a lack of faith that God is in control or at least a doubt that God is okay with the way creation is evolving? Pastorally speaking, those who blame and shame others or themselves need support in their fear, even as one works to ensure that others in the group or community can disagree without being abused.
Practice Self-focus

Practicing self-focus has two parts. The first part has to do with using “I” statements—that is, making a commitment to speak in the first person singular about what one thinks, believes, or feels. Here the point is to avoid unsupported generalizations, such as: “People think . . .” or “Everyone believes . . .” When I speak in generalities from a place of power or privilege, without acknowledging my status, I foster monoculturalism by speaking as if what I am saying is true for everyone, rather than simply my opinion or my privileged group’s way of thinking.

As a group facilitator, it is more effective to say “Can you tell me more about . . . ?” than to ask “Why do you believe . . . ?” Inviting a person to tell me more is open-ended and shows my interest in the person as well as the statement. Asking a person why they said something strikes many people as questioning their motives or intelligence, and frequently triggers defensiveness. I am reminded of the times I angrily asked one of my daughters, in a demanding voice, “Why did you do that?” They were quick to learn that I was not asking for information but saying, “You should not have done that!” The problem is that questions that start with “why” often trigger memories of shame and defensiveness.

Self-focus has a second dimension. Here, self-focus means really listening to myself and the information from within that I often overlook. When I am truly self-focused, I am paying attention to the feelings that I am experiencing while someone else is speaking. As I am hearing his words and meanings, I am monitoring my own inner responses. I am aware that what is being said and what is not being said (what is left out of the conversation) are having an impact on me emotionally. Even if I do not know why I am having a particular feeling, I allow myself to become aware of my feeling state in the moment, and I take responsibility for it. Self-focus is being aware that these are my feelings. Something the other person said or did may have been a stimulus, and these feelings are mine. This sort of self-focus requires practiced discipline. When I am not exercising self-focus, I often “listen with my answer running.” I confuse my response with universal right and good. I am also in danger of responding to the statement without paying attention to the speaker.

Sometimes people make the distinction between reacting and responding. Reacting generally means replying hastily to someone without fully taking in what they have said and or replying to the statement and not the person. Responding usually connotes listening to the person as well as hearing the statement and in some way valuing the person.

In many cultures, people are reluctant to speak in the first-person singular. Their “we” statements are not generalizations as a way to avoid taking responsibility. For them, the use of “we” represents a deeply held belief in the primacy of community. For them, all actions of an individual, all thoughts, perhaps even feelings, exist because a person is grounded in a community. The notion here is “because we are, I am.”

Practice “Both/And” Thinking

Some of us grew up with an “either/or” worldview; some with “both/and” worldview. Underlying either/or thinking is an attitude, unusually unconscious and unarticulated, that I am superior to the person with a differing position, or that the other person is inferior to me. We may not even notice how deeply either/or thinking is ingrained in our way of living because it is part of our worldview. We are like fish swimming in the water and not noticing the water around us.
The practice of both/and thinking often means substituting the word “and” for the words “but” or “however” in a sentence. This substitution is even more important when stating your opinion after someone has said something with which you disagree. Your “and” will let the other person know that they have been heard and respected, and that what you are saying does not cancel out what they have said. Stating strong differences with both/and language can help prevent people with strongly differing views from slipping into defensive postures or predetermined solutions. It acknowledges the complexity of a situation and invites both parties to investigate why it is that they see the situation differently. It is a path toward mutuality. “Both/and” thinking is grounded in the Incarnation and the belief that Jesus is human and divine, and that God sees us as we are in all our sinfulness and calls us to live in God’s own image.

Be Aware of Intent and Impact

*Intent* is my intention or motive in doing or saying something. *Impact* is the effect or consequence my speech or action has on another person or persons. Sometimes I make comments that I do not intend to be racist, sexist, elitist, or oppressive, and nevertheless another person is deeply impacted by my comment. The person who feels hurt or offended may then accuse me of inappropriate behavior and may even say that they think the remark was racist, sexist, and so forth. The conversation quickly escalates, and both of us become defensive.

Not only do I need to become aware of the impact I am having on others, I also need to inquire of myself what attitudes of superiority or privilege may underlie my comments and behaviors that others experience as oppressive. In a similar way, it is important for people with less privilege or power to reflect about the ways they have unwittingly learned to internalize or buy into their own oppression and thus also make an unconscious and unintended impact on others.

Paul writes: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” (Romans 7:19). Ethically, we are accountable not only for what we intend but also for the impact we have on others that we may not have intended.

Take 100 Percent Responsibility for One’s Own Learning

When learning about and celebrating differences, it is very important to take responsibility for one’s own learning. Most importantly, this means that I do not expect the people who are the most vulnerable or underrepresented in a group to teach me what I need to know if I am in a position of privilege.

The gospels encourage us to learn the truth about God, ourselves, our neighbors, and all of creation. “And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). Complete openness to the truth is impossible on our own, Jesus promises us to send the Spirit of Truth. “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (John 16:13).

Maintain Confidentiality

Confidentiality is important in one-to-one interactions, in learning groups, and in Bible studies. It has to do with boundaries and safety. On a personal level, I may choose to take certain risks or to try on new ideas and behaviors. I might even be willing to expose my assumptions or discuss my personal theology if I have a sense that what I am saying will not be made public
outside of the context in which I am speaking. Most simply put, this guideline means that everyone agrees not to tell one another’s personal stories.

In agreeing to each of the guidelines, people should be asked to make a commitment to each other and not just to the leader. This is most important with regard to confidentiality because people are agreeing not to tell each other’s stories. To emphasize this, I always ask group members to look at each person in the group as they verbally assent to the guideline of confidentiality.

We note that while Jesus talks with the Samaritan woman at the well about her many previous marriages, he leaves it up to the woman to tell her own story. She is the one who goes back into the village and says that Jesus has told her everything she has ever done (John 4:4-42). The story of the woman caught in adultery inspires a similar caution. Here it is clear that those who have called for the woman to be stoned have not kept confidential what they have found out. Rather than publicly attacking the woman or her accusers, Jesus writes in the sand and says, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7).

**It’s Okay to Be Messy**

One of the primary assumptions of learning about and celebrating differences in order to be in community is that no one is perfect. We are all on a journey. Because we are human, we will make mistakes. Being messy is part of trying on. Because we are human we will sometimes have a negative impact on another person. It’s forgivable. The point is to learn from what others tell us about the impact on them. Others in the groups will also learn. If you are constantly on guard about making mistakes or afraid of the impact you might have, it will be hard to try on new ideas and behaviors. Making mistakes is not, however, an excuse of shaming or blaming others or for failing to account for one’s impact on others.

**Say Ouch**

It is important to interrupt shame, blame, or attack as quickly as possible, even if one does not know what to do next. When we are practicing self-focus and noticing a feeling of fear, anger, or loss, we might want to literally say “ouch” to alert the group to the impact that some words or actions are having on us. The facilitator may then interrupt what is taking place to focus on what the impact has been on the person who said “ouch.” When the group agrees to this as a guideline, people are agreeing that it is okay to slow down the content to allow for the processing of feelings that impact an individual, even if the intention was not to inflict hurt.

**Invite Additional Guidelines**

Even when the suggested addition seems redundant, the addition itself or the possibility of adding a guideline means that the whole group feels less dominated by the leader. Members feel a greater ownership of the guidelines, even if they have been largely presented by the leader. This way of establishing guidelines underlines the fact that guidelines for a group's interactions affect both our relationships and what we can accomplish (products or goals). They create more mutual relationships by guaranteeing, as far as possible, that all group members are valued and celebrated through their participation and that the distribution of power is fairly equal.

**Guidelines and Safety**

Guidelines should be explicit and discussable and agreed to by everyone in the group. When they are not explicit and discussable, someone is likely benefiting and using power to his
or her advantage. Others may be holding back from taking responsibility, either out of habit or out of fear.

Safety is a complicated concept. People who have more power and privilege in society, in a culture, or within a particular group often like to talk about creating safety for everyone. While this goal is noble, these same people sometimes fail to acknowledge that they have more power or privileged status, more access to goods or resources, than others in the group. They sometimes fail to realize that when tension rises, people who have historically had less power, less privilege, less voice in a group are more likely to be adversely impacted by any conflict that arises. They may be unaware that the feeling of safety they experience is not equally distributed.

On the other hand, people with historically less status and power in society or in a group are deeply aware that the impact of decisions and the fallout from any conflict will redound upon them more than upon those who generally have more power. These people may not feel as safe as the people who have more power. Therefore, in a diverse group, people have different understandings and expectations for safety, depending upon their previous experience and their particular location in society or the group. Some people feel very little safety in a mixed group when they are in the minority, no matter how safe other people want them to feel. The range of feelings people have about their own safety in a group is worth paying attention to and naming in some situations.

Practicing the guidelines will change how people understand themselves in relationship to others—challenging attitudes of superiority and inferiority alike. It is often these attitudes that precipitate, maintain, and deepen the conflict as much as the ideas and behaviors about which people disagree.

Finally, the guidelines are interactive. They speak to and reinforce one another. "Trying on" a new idea or way of proceeding usually includes not shaming and blaming oneself or others for past ideas or ways of behaving. Self-focus (using I-language and noticing one's internal feelings) requires that one also bear in mind "both/and" thinking if one is to avoid exercising some form of dominance.

Guidelines for the Vestry

A new rector invited the vestry to spend 45 minutes on three sequential vestry meetings talking about these guidelines. Vestry members reported that years of previous unproductive bickering and fighting could have been avoided had they known and practiced these guidelines. They now interrupt destructive and negative behaviors before they gain momentum with a gentle reference to the guidelines. Their meetings are shorter, more productive, and people look forward to their next gathering.

Questions for Reflection

1. Which one of the guidelines comes most naturally to you? Which one are you really good at?
2. Which guideline is most difficult for you in a cross-cultural situation, in a situation where you are noticing your differences from another person or persons?
3. Are there any guidelines you would add?

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