



Eight Principles of Holy Conferencing

A Study Guide for Churches and Groups

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The United Methodist Church



Before you start . . .

WE UNITED METHODISTS CONFERENCE TOGETHER—meaning that we confer with each other in order to find our way forward as disciples of Jesus in the world today. In all aspects of church life, we have to decide how to organize our ministries, how to apply our faith to complex and contemporary matters, how to spend money, and even what it means to be a follower of Jesus. When we all come together, there are many different perspectives and opinions about each one of those decisions and lots of emotion, because the decisions matter to us.

“Holy conferencing” is what we call the spirit and principles that guide us to be caring in our conversations—that is what makes them holy. Based on the premise that *how* we talk to and about each other is as important as the decisions we make together, holy conferencing calls forth deep spiritual maturity from each of us. That is what helps us to relate to and even love one another in spite of our differences.

Holy conferencing is not limited to a specific topic or a specific venue for decision-making. It is also not a strategy to shut down conversation or stifle impassioned speech. It is a means for staying connected to each other in spite of our differences. Holy conferencing requires that we be open to the possibility that we as individuals do not possess all perspectives or even all truth on any specific topic.

Holy conferencing doesn't allow us exemptions because others may have hurt us with their words or actions. We're still called to holy conversation. Nor are we exempt from it when others don't seem like they are following the guidelines for holy conversation. We're still called to holy conversation. Nor are any topics so important that in order to accomplish our ends, we can decline holy conferencing. We're still called to holy conversation. We can't change others' behavior but we are called to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit that is self-control.

When we follow the guidelines or principles of holy conferencing, we discover that it is more than just being nice to each other around divisive issues. We find ourselves reaching deep into our souls as we seek to follow the gospel message of loving our neighbors and our enemies, including those who disagree with us with as much passion and conviction in their viewpoint as we have in ours.

These guidelines or principles can be used anywhere, at any time. They can strengthen our relationships with others wherever we find ourselves gathered in conversation. Wherever two or three are gathered—whether in our homes or our church—there are bound to be two or three different viewpoints!

I invite you to use these eight reflections as discussion starters in various groups that are part of your church. They will prepare your church to follow the Wesleyan way of holy conferencing when addressing any important topic or decision.

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1. Every person is a child of God

WE GLIBLY SAY that we believe every person is a child of God and humanity is created in the image of God. Throughout the scriptures, we are reminded that to love God is to love our neighbor. The writer of the letters of John emphasizes how important it is to treat each other as brothers and sisters who love one another:

If anyone boasts “I love God” and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won’t love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can’t see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You’ve got to love both. (1 John 4:20-21, The Message)

Yet when the heat in a conversation rises or we get angry at someone for not seeing things our way, our perspective on the face of God seems to vanish and we begin to see the other as our enemy. Once we see another as our enemy and we begin to demonize that person, we start to justify our insensitive and harsh words and actions.

Building up relationships in the body of Christ is fundamental to holy conferencing. We may get angry with people we know and even love, but we less likely to demonize them. The more we strive to know and care for each other, the better able we are to see the other as a child of God, as a friend who may disagree with us, as a person whose opinion is borne of his or her own experience—and the more likely we are to treat that person with respect.

Sometimes our ability to see another as a child of God is tested most after a decision. Decisions often divide groups into winners and losers. No one likes to be the loser, especially over decisions that are important to us. When we see others as children of God, as brothers and sisters in Christ, as people we seek to know and love, we care that they are hurt by a decision that makes them feel like losers—even when the decision makes us feel like a winner.

That’s why it’s important not to applaud and cheer after a decision has been announced. That rubs salt in the wounds of those who are disappointed by a decision they took very seriously.

In many cases of intentional holy conversations, people have told how they worked to get to know someone with a different view. They’ve developed deep friendships over the years because they sought each other out, worked to build a relationship of understanding and respect, and cared for each other before, during, and after a decision was made.

Questions for reflection and discussion

- Have you ever experienced the sense that a person with a different opinion than yours no longer saw you as a child of God? How did you feel?
- Did your ability to see the face of God in your brother or sister in Christ vanish after you learned that you held different viewpoints? What did you do about it?
- Have you ever found yourself forging a relationship with someone who holds a different viewpoint? Describe that experience.
- How would you want to be treated when a decision goes against your viewpoint?

2. Listen before speaking

TO LISTEN BEFORE SPEAKING means that we suspend judgment about the other.

Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with—even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently. (Romans 14:1, The Message)

Holy conferencing isn't for convincing others that we are right. It is for listening to others in such a way that we understand better why they hold their beliefs.

The scripture's observation that someone might be "strong on opinions but weak in the faith department" could apply to any of us! It's the next line that holy conferencing seeks to draw out: what part of another's history brings them to their perspective? When we understand another person better because we have listened to them, we are less likely to demonize them and think the worst of them; we are better able to love them in spite of our differences.

Listening entails more than hearing someone's words. It means to hear the person's heart—not what we *think* is in that person's heart, but to hear their "story." Too often, while we are in conversation we are so preoccupied with planning our rebuttal that we don't really hear another's words, much less their heart.

We don't have to agree with another's perspective. A discipline of debate is that we accurately describe the other person's viewpoint and why that person holds it. We have not really listened to another until we can reflect back to that person her position and describe the emotional depth—even pain—that accompanies that position.

When people passionately disagree about the direction of the church, they usually do so from a deep love for Christ and the church. At least we should bring to such conversations that benefit of the doubt. People don't get worked up about things they don't care about.

We can't, therefore, assume we know what another person feels or thinks or intends until we listen to their words. One of the signs that we are not listening or engaging in holy conferencing is that we jump to conclusions about what another person thinks, feels, or intends. Combine this with a tendency to demonize the other, and we easily fall into the trap of presuming the motivation of everything that person does or says. From there it is not a far leap for our fitting all that another person does or says neatly into our presumptions about them. At that point, we no longer see that person as a child of God.

To listen before speaking requires that we take what another person says to be an accurate expression of their thoughts and intentions. Therefore, in order to better understand another, we need to listen and ask clarifying questions instead of making assumptions.

Questions for reflection and discussion

- Would others say that you are a good listener? Or that you are always thinking about the next thing that you want to say? Do you catch yourself doing that?

- Are there people about whom you are certain you can guess what they would say about a given topic? Have they ever surprised you by voicing an opinion you did not expect? Is there someone who assumes they know what *you* are going to say before you speak? How does that feel?
- What's the hardest part of truly listening? What makes that so difficult?

3. Strive to understand from another's point of view

YOU'VE HEARD THE OLD ADAGE about walking a mile in another person's shoes. It communicates the importance of imagining what it would be like to have had another's life experiences, feelings, and truths. Christian conferencing means to confer in order to discover the truth. If we are certain that we have the truth and there is no other truth but ours, then conferencing isn't necessary.

Bishop James S. Thomas—the bishop who ordained me—used to say that the truth was clear to him when he was thinking his own thoughts by himself. It was when he was in the presence of others that it all got confused! In other words, he had to confer with others to see more sides or angles or perspectives on whatever the matter was at hand. Humility is necessary in order to understand someone else's point of view; it requires that we concede that there are more perspectives than our own.

We are called to imitate Christ's humility. The beautiful liturgical poem that we find in Philippians 2 reminds us that Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:6-8, NRSV)

This liturgical poem calls upon the Christians in the church at Philippi to imitate Christ's humility. It is evoked in a context of conflict created by special interests.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 2:3-5, NRSV)

The writer is telling us that if we are one with Christ, our lives will be changed. We will have love, compassion, and sympathy—again, not just for our friends but also for those we disagree with around things that matter to us all. If we claim salvation in Christ then we will pattern our lives, shape our speech, and bow our pride . . . and it will show in our lives.

Questions for reflection and discussion

- Have you ever experienced a time when you were sure about something—until you conversed with people who held different perspectives? Did that upset you, or did it help you?
- How do you think pride and humility are factors in our disagreements and the way in which we converse with each other?
- What's the most difficult part about trying to see from another's point of view?

4. Strive to reflect accurately the views of others

IT TAKES GREAT SPIRITUAL MATURITY not to skew others' viewpoints. To strive to express accurately others' views is a matter of honesty, not to mention integrity. If we skew, or cast the worst light on another's viewpoint, and give it a spin that is not accurate, then we are being dishonest.

Matthew 12:36-37 reports Jesus as saying, "I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (NRSV). Here Jesus seems to think that even the things we say carelessly matter. If we care about our words, we will use them to reflect with honesty and integrity others' positions as well as our own.

John Wesley believed that we need to "order [our] conversations right." He wasn't a stranger to confrontational, emotionally charged conversations about deeply held beliefs. He emphasized the need to converse "always in grace." Again, this means to give the other person the benefit of the doubt, to assume the best instead of the worst, to listen deeply ("Preface to Sermons on Several Occasions," §§ 9-10, in *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. I, Sermons I*, ed. Albert C. Outler, Abingdon, 1984).

He also invited his detractors to stay at the table with him, saying, "Are you persuaded you see more clearly than me? It is not unlikely that you may. Then treat me as you would desire to be treated yourself" ("Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others," *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 8, Addresses, Essays, Letters*, ed. Thomas Jackson [third ed.; Providence, 1995]; question 48). None of us likes to be misrepresented or misinterpreted in our viewpoints. Yet in this day of sound bites that report words out of context, we can easily misrepresent the viewpoints of others.

The 1904 Book of Discipline, the Methodist Church's rules of organization for ministry, emphasized the importance of unity and the practices that engender unity.

In order to form a closer union with each other: 1. Let us be deeply convinced of the absolute necessity of it, 2. Pray earnestly for, and speak freely to, each other, 3. When we meet, let us never part without prayer, 4. Take great care not to despise each other's gifts, 5. Never speak lightly of each other, 6. Let us defend each other's character in everything as far as it is consistent with truth, 7. Labor to honor each to prefer the other before himself (*The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* [Eaton and Mains, 1904], pp. 127-128).

We need to "take great care" in our conversations about others and their viewpoints; not to do so would be demeaning. It "despises each other's gifts" when we stomp on each other's intentions. To speak lightly of others is to minimize them and their viewpoints. If people hold strong convictions, then their viewpoints must not easily be dismissed just because they are different from our own.

What if we defended each other's character, even those with whom we disagree? If a friend says something derogatory about someone's viewpoint, it's up to us to defend their character, their integrity, and honesty in holding that viewpoint. To do so is to respect that the other is a child of God.

Perhaps the most challenging rule is to “labor to honor each to prefer the other before himself.” In other words, we’re not meant to protect our own self-interests alone but to pursue robust conversation that allows everyone the opportunity to speak and the chance to decide for themselves.

The 1904 statements mirror the principles of holy conversation that the General Conference 2012 is encouraging and which all of us would do well to follow in our conversations wherever and with whomever we are speaking to and about.

Questions for reflection and discussion

- What’s most difficult about accurately reflecting the views of others?
- Have you ever felt that your views weren’t accurately reported by others? How did that make you feel?
- Were you taught to “order your conversation” or were you taught to say whatever you felt like, no holds barred?
- Why do you think careful conversation is important in conversations about deeply held convictions? What happens when we’re not careful?

5. Disagree without being disagreeable

MEMBERS OF THE EARLY CHURCH found many opportunities for disagreement. They came together from different cultures and with different expectations of what it meant to be in community. The early church was a petri dish for disagreement. Yet the writers of the epistles allowed for no “evil talk,” or being disagreeable in their disagreements.

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. . . . Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. . . . Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us. (Eph. 4:25-27, 29; 5:1-2a, NRSV)

We often imitate our culture, not Christ—especially when it comes to the ways we express disagreement. Someone said to me that he wished General Conferences didn’t take place the same years as United States’ presidential elections because those are marked by negative campaigning and political divisiveness. We watch our elected leaders wrangling with each other with “bitterness and wrath and anger.” We imitate them in our families, communities, and churches—rather than imitating Christ.

The writer of Ephesians was dealing with an outside influence on the church at Ephesus—an invading spiritual species was threatening the unity of the body of Christ. He continually called them to be “one in Christ.”

When we gather at the Lord’s Table, we are called to be “one in Christ, one with each other and one in ministry to all the world.” Unity doesn’t mean uniformity. It is more like the way the different parts of the body, even the parts that seem to compete, come together like a jigsaw puzzle to complete the body. We can live that unity when, at the Lord’s table, we honor and respect each other as we kneel side by side, coming together as different parts of the body of Christ in the world.

It’s been said that in order to change the culture, we must change conversation. In order to change the culture of disharmony, we have to change the conversation so that we are not denigrating each other but respecting each other even in our disagreements. Wouldn’t the world around us be in astonishment if we could forge a different way of disagreeing!

Furthermore, even John Wesley believed that being disagreeable isn’t very effective if our goal is to change another person’s mind! He said:

Be not displeased if I entreat you not to beat me down in order to quicken my pace (in coming to your persuasion) . . . not to give me hard names in order to bring me into the right way. Suppose I was ever so much in the wrong, I doubt this would not set me right. Rather, it would make me run so much farther from you and so get more and more out of the way. . . . For God’s sake, if it be possible to avoid it, let us not provoke one another to wrath. Let us not kindle in each other this fire of hell, much less blow it into flame . . . if we die without love, what will knowledge avail?

("Preface to Sermons on Several Occasions," §§ 9-10, in *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. I, Sermons I*, ed. Albert C. Outler [Abingdon, 1976], p. 107)

In addition to being contrary to the gospel, provoking others to anger just doesn't work very well in changing hearts and minds. Rather, it can push people farther away from us and from our viewpoint. Yet we are still drawn to anger and malice as tools to influence or even intimidate others to see our viewpoint. Wesley points out that if in the end we win the argument but have not love, our victory is useless.

Questions for reflection and discussion

- How do you feel when you see politicians engage in negative campaigning? Does it draw you to agree with their policy proposals? Does it make you respect them more or less? Likewise, when we tear each other down instead of build each other up, how does that affect others' opinions about the church?
- Do you believe that a change in the conversation can change the dynamics or culture in which it occurs? Why or why not? What change would you work for?

6. Speak about issues; do not defame people

CALLING PEOPLE NAMES defames them and is inflammatory.

You're familiar with the command to the ancients, "Do not murder." I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother "Idiot!" and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell "stupid" at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill. (Matthew 5:21-22, The Message)

Words that defame kill both the spirit and the reputation of others. However, clearly giving your reasons for an opinion or belief, without disparaging someone else—no matter how painful it is to hear the other viewpoint—is not inflammatory.

For instance, if someone believes that the United States should defend its border with Mexico and supports that view with reasons that don't defame those others, that person is not using inflammatory language. However, if that person expresses general and derogatory assumptions about people who cross the border or explicitly call such people names, that person has crossed the border into inflammatory language. The conversation about immigration, for instance, can be painful because people tend to have strong opinions about it. Discussion about it requires us to be careful with our words; but to express disagreement through reasonable and well-thought-out points is not inflammatory.

Sometimes people think that holy conferencing excludes impassioned speech. Not so. It's not inflammatory when people clearly, reasonably, and carefully state their positions, even with the passion that comes when we hold deeply held beliefs. Emotion-laden speeches are permissible, even the emotions of deep concern, grief, and anger. (They may or may not be the most effective, however, depending upon the subject, time, and place.)

But speeches that defame or are derogatory or inflammatory do not qualify as holy conferencing. Among other things, inflammatory language includes calling people names, or "beating them down," as John Wesley described.

Recently a leader in the denomination told me that he was deeply hurt because someone said that he was disingenuous in his proposal of legislation and his support of it. He was offended because he understood the person to say that he was deceptive; a liar with ill-intent. I wouldn't have immediately identified inflammatory speech to include calling someone disingenuous, but I would have identified calling someone a liar as inflammatory. I had to think about whether the characterization of "disingenuous" was inflammatory, because arguably, it defamed the speaker's reputation.

I would say that casting aspersions on another's intentions without knowing what those intentions are is inflammatory. Was this church leader intending to lie or lead people astray? The best we can say is that we don't know another's intentions and therefore to suggest that we do, such as calling his actions disingenuous, is inflammatory.

We are reminded of Bishop Rueben Job's list of "the three simple rules," particularly the first: Do no harm—including when speaking to and about each other. Bishop Job says:

If . . . all who are involved can agree to do no harm, the climate in the which the conflict is going on is immediately changed. How is it changed? Well, if I am to do

no harm, I can no longer gossip about the conflict. I can no longer speak disparagingly about those involved in the conflict. I can no longer manipulate the facts of the conflict. I can no longer diminish those who do not agree with me and must honor each as a child of God. I will guard my lips, my mind and my hearts so that my language will not disparage, injure or wound another child of God. I must do no harm, even while I seek a common good. (*Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living* [Abingdon, 2007], p. 22)

In ordering our conversation, let us avoid doing harm caused by our defaming others or using inflammatory language.

Questions for reflection and discussion

- When was the last time that you felt you were defamed or subject to inflammatory language? How did it make you feel?
- Can you think of a time when you might have been inflammatory in your language toward another?
- Try taking a position that you disagree with (adamantly!) and stating it as clearly and rationally as you can without defaming someone or becoming inflammatory. Was it easy? Or difficult?
- Now take a position that you hold deeply and imagine yourself defending it in front of someone who disagrees with you. Can you state it clearly and rationally without defaming that person or becoming inflammatory?

7. Pray, in silence or aloud, before decisions.

To those who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person. (Luke 6:27-28; The Message)

WHEN WE LOVE OUR ENEMIES BY PRAYING FOR THEM, Eugene Peterson says, we produce “energies of prayer.” “Energies of prayer” suggests to me that something happens that is palpable between and within us when we pray for those who disagree with us.

First of all, that’s hard to do! To pray for our “enemies,” those who disagree with us, is an intimate and therefore charged experience. We can’t pray for someone very long before we begin to see that person as a child of God, someone that we don’t want to defame. That’s why it’s so hard for us to pray for our enemies: it challenges our prejudices, anger, and malice.

Furthermore, Bishop Job’s second simple (but oh-so-difficult) rule reminds us to seek the good of another, not just do no harm. He says,

I must seek what is best for those whose position and condition may be far different from my vision for them. It will mean that I will seek to heal the wounds of my sisters and brothers, no matter if their social position, economic condition, educational achievement, or lifestyle is radically different from mine. It will mean that the words and acts that wound and divide will be changed to words and acts that heal and bring together. It will mean that movements that seek to divide and conquer will become movements that seek to unite and empower all. It will mean that the common good will be my first thought and what is good for me will become a secondary thought (*Three Simple Rules*, pp. 42-43).

Prayer isn’t meant just to make us feel better about ourselves but to lead to action: action that heals, brings together, unites, and empowers. Doing good in the midst of potentially divisive conversations requires us to “stay in love with God,” Bishop Job’s third simple rule. Prayer is the communication we have with God that keeps us in love not just with God but also with the other, the one with whom we differ. As Bishop Job says, “Practicing our faith in the world requires our deepest resolve, our greatest faith, our unwavering trust, and a very, very large measure of God’s grace” (*Three Simple Rules*, p. 24).

Questions for reflection and discussion

- Have you ever prayed for those who hold viewpoints different from your own? What happened and how did it affect your relationship with God and that person or persons?
- Do you believe that through prayer your “enemies” can actually bring out the best, not the worst, in you? Have you experienced that in your life or observed it in someone else’s life?

8. Let prayer interrupt your busy-ness

“PRAY WITHOUT CEASING.” In another denomination’s practice of holy conferencing around difficult decisions, a call to prayer was requested at certain intervals. In the midst of impassioned speeches, with long lines forming in front of microphones marked “for” and “against,” the presiding bishop called for a time of prayer and asked those in line for the “for” microphone to pray with the person opposite them in line for the “against” microphone. Joining hands, bowing heads together, praying to the same God through Christ Jesus, persons with deeply-held convictions let prayer interrupt not only their busy-ness, but their differences. Likewise those at tables reached out to pray with those who disagreed with them and were seated around them.

Prayer interrupted the busy-ness of making decisions by calling people to do no harm, to do good toward those who disagree with them, and to stay in love with God. We need all the help we can get when it comes to seeing others as a child of God, listening before speaking, striving to understand and reflecting the other’s viewpoint accurately, disagreeing without being disagreeable, speaking our truth with passion without defaming others or becoming inflammatory in our speech, and praying in the midst of it so that the disagreement might actually bring out the best in us and for the common good! That’s a lot to ask for—and yet that’s the task of the Christian discipleship.

This kind of prayer is not just that led by the presider or someone designated to lead prayer, but the prayers of those who are in the midst of the decision, who have impassioned feelings and strong convictions, and have the potential to demonstrate “a more excellent way” within the church and beyond. It’s always appropriate to call for prayer and also to be in an attitude of prayer in the midst of discussion about weighty, divisive, and important conversations.

Let our prayers begin with asking God to help us listen, love, and be open to the movement of God through us and others.

Questions for reflection and discussion

Write a prayer that you can use when the temperature of the conversation rises within and around you. What do you need for God to do in you and others? What do you need to focus on in order to keep these principles of holy conversation?

Closing thoughts

No wonder that John Wesley said that Christian conferencing is a means of grace, for it puts us in the position of growing in spiritual maturity. In order to confer with others who disagree with us, we need to practice our faith in ways that challenge us spiritually as well as relationally. To love God and our neighbor requires nothing less. After all, as Jesus said,

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same . . . but love your enemies, do good . . . expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for [God] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:32-33, 35-36, NRSV)

In Matthew it says that we are to be perfect as God is perfect. To be perfect means that we seek “a more excellent way,” the way of love. Through love we are made perfect in Christ.

Biblical sources

The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language, by Eugene H. Peterson

NRSV: The New Revised Standard Version (Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989)