



“Defending the faith?”
- discerning core values and promoting
creative change in a faith community.¹

Ideas for leading a Conversation

*For general guidance in running these sessions see
'Planning a Conversation' also available at www.agoraspace.org*

*This is the first in a series of three conversations and aims to start us thinking about
power dynamics in a faith community.*

Although the conversation is specifically applied to Christian communities, the principles used are general and we would be very keen to work with other faith communities on similar conversations suitable to their own situation.

Background

This conversation takes a look at what we particularly value about our faith community and how we maintain those values. Strategies to defend what we hold to be good can also end up by excluding certain types of people, either deliberately or quite unconsciously. They can also easily slip into defending things that are actually very trivial. This conversation is designed to help you explore these areas and begin to see how faith plays a part in making all this happen. Altogether it is an attempt to explore the interaction between faith and power as it is expressed in community life. Power is often perceived as a 'bad' word and so faith communities rarely speak of it. This conversation reveals the positive purpose of power in defending what is good, but also looks at some of the common pitfalls in its use and abuse.

Starter questions for small group discussion

- 1. What aspect of the life of your faith community is most highly valued?**
- 2. How diverse is your faith community? Are you mainly from the same social type, age, gender or part of town? What happens to someone who disagrees with your core values?**
- 3. Why are faith communities generally resistant to change? Give some examples from your community where change was resisted.**
- 4. What does it mean to talk about change well in a faith community?**

¹ These materials are produced by Project Agora, a company limited by guarantee, which is dedicated to creating new spaces in society for the highest possible quality of public conversation, the building of realistic trust and the seeking of vision. Contact Agora at www.agoraspace.org or email info@agoraspace.org

One way through the conversation

Do not feel tied to this.

Begin the evening with Question One.

What aspect of the life of your faith community is most highly valued?

Discuss this in small groups and then gather together the views expressed.

The aim here is both to be practical and to try to discern the values of the faith community as a whole. So if people say that that 'mission' is their chief value, ask them to say what that means in practice. Similarly if people offer what are obviously personal opinions about what *should* be valued, encourage them to decide what actually is most valued by their faith community.

Explain that every group has some aspects of its life that it particularly values.

So for example in Anglicanism, some communities will particularly value the traditional rituals of their faith. Anglo-Catholic churches have a strong concern to uphold the traditions of the church and order their services with great care.

On the other hand some evangelicals will centre their life on the 'teaching' element of the faith community with particular reference to the Bible.

Others on the charismatic wing will be more interested in spontaneity, inspiration and exploration and the charisma of their leaders may be particularly important.

More 'liberal minded' churches may value a tolerant approach to faith matters. They may prize relations with the wider community and engage powerfully with issues of justice.

These examples are not to stereotype faith communities but simply to show that there are particular things that every community values. In power terms these are the aspects of their life that the community will most strongly defend and around which the community will find its identity. They will also tend to be strongly bolstered by belief. Ministers will be expected to underline the dominant values of the community interpreting to the people how this matter is genuinely the concern of God. (see resources section for examples of this in the Bible)

Go to Question Two. How diverse is your faith community? Are you mainly from the same social type, age, gender or part of town? What happens to someone who disagrees with your core values?

All communities tend to have a limited diversity of people within them and the extent of diversity is often a clue to their core values. This is because a community naturally excludes people who offend them and one of the most powerful offences is to subvert the core values of the group.

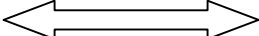
Invite the groups to compare the types of people in their communities with their core values. Is there some obvious correspondence? For example, do the values expressed appeal particular to an older generation, or to those with substantial education, or to the better off?

Sometimes this exercise may reveal hidden values that have not been expressed. So, for example, a community might pride itself on its biblical teaching ministry, but be located in a particularly comfortable area of town and actually foster a community of educated and well-off members with a hidden set of values about things like 'being in good company' among 'interesting people' and 'good education for our children'. There might be a whole set of structures and ways of behaving that exclude those who would offend against these norms.

In other churches there may be hidden values based on different age groups. Much work has been done on our emerging 'postmodern' generations, descriptions of stages of faith, generation X and the like (see resources) to illustrate how some of the ways of being a faith community will appeal to one generation more than another. These again are a means by which whole groups of people might be excluded.

This leads to a general idea that every community finds its identity around core values. For Christians the most obvious core value will be discipleship of Christ, but our conversation so far should have shown that other values are always expressed in tandem with this and it is important to be aware of them. It can be argued that faith groups of all sorts have to hold a tension between upholding their core values and allowing a proper diversity and the challenges that come from that.

In simple power terms every faith community, like every human group, has to hold a tension between upholding its order and allowing appropriate challenge and change.

Upholding order  Allowing Challenge

One of the most revealing features of any group is what types of change it resists.

Go to Question Three. Why are faith communities generally resistant to change? Give some examples from your community where change was resisted.

This question is likely to reveal strong tensions around core values as we would expect, but also a resistance to change that is more general and shows itself in all sorts of seemingly irrational behaviour. So there may be a great row about an idea to move the organ or change the seating, for example.

Attempt to tease out why these apparently minor changes evoke such passion.

These may include:

1. We find comfort in the familiar. A faith community can be a place of refuge in a changing world. It can be a place where we remember loved ones and the most important events of our lives. Changes in that place can then feel a threat to those memories and the sense of refuge. This love of place and memory is well presented in Psalm 84.
2. Our faith community is often the place where we originally found a sense of God. All sorts of aspects of its life may remind us of that and nurture that faith. For example people generally continue to enjoy the type of music that meant most to them when they came to faith. And changing that may provoke a serious feeling of loss.
3. It is normal for a faith community to seek to justify all of its life by reference to God. So reasons may be given in faith terms for almost every aspect of its behaviour. One difficulty with this is that once God is brought in on the side of

one particular activity or structure then it can become very hard to change. A minister who is perceived to know so much more than anyone else about the faith can easily hold sway.

It should become clear at this point that all sorts of common issues in faith communities have a distinctive power element including how the community protects its core values, who may be systematically excluded, and why we may be resistant to change.

This then points to the importance of conversations within the faith community and how belief positions are negotiated in that process.

Go to Question 4. What does it mean to talk about change well in a faith community?

List the conclusions that your groups come up with.

Conversation could end with this historical reflection:

Belief clearly makes an impact on the power relations within every faith community. Faith and power issues are particularly obvious when faith is at the heart of political government. The Protestant Reformation in Europe is a key example of where arguments about faith went hand in hand with political change. (see resources)

Resources

There are a great variety of ways that a conversation like this can actually be handled. Here are some resources that may inspire other approaches, offer different tacks to go on and incorporate different perspectives.

Justifying our values

Many people may view the value system of their particular faith community as self-evidently right and others as wrong.

So, for example, as there have been mainstreams within Anglicanism in terms of Anglo-Catholic, Evangelical, Charismatic and Liberal etc so there were similar, different concerns within the whole people of faith in Biblical times. Some might speak of these as different 'spiritualities' today.

There were the priestly writers, whose passion was for the *ordering of life and worship* (see much of Numbers esp Chaps 3-10, 17-19, 28-29)

There were those who wrote Deuteronomy and the historical books based on it. They were very concerned for *The Word of God* to be known and obeyed. (eg Deut 28)

There were charismatic leaders like many of those in Judges or like David.

And there were also prophets whose would hang lightly to the rituals and big stories of faith and insist on the importance of justice, kindness, mercy and the like. (see Amos' opening words about cruelty, his critique of the big exodus story in Chap 9 v 7 or Jeremiah (esp in Chap 7) denouncing the easy assurances of the temple sacrifices and insisting on a reform in terms of social justice.

The interesting thing was perhaps that these very different views of life and faith were held together within the overall biblical community and the knowledge of God grew through their interaction.

Use these references to study different core values within the Bible.

For thinking about excluding others unwittingly:

Are those outside simply worldly? Or lost? How do we describe those who do not share our faith position?

James Fowler was a psychologist that worked on faith and its development. He attempted to describe six stages of faith, not that we all necessarily work through, but which are commonly found in faith communities. For a brief description go to <http://www.pastornet.net.au/jmm/abfr/abfr0160.htm>

It has been suggested that many of those who are members of today's churches may be in the 'loyalist' stage three of faith development and are unable to countenance certain sorts of questioning. On the other hand many of those outside the church have imbibed the questioning, exploring feel of postmodern culture, value the personal integrity of this process and are suspicious of conformist behaviour and inherited patterns of authority. They are much more likely to respond to approaches based on Fowler's stages of faith numbers four and five, which resonate with this sort of thinking.

(I am grateful to Linsi Simmons for this idea – also reviewed in Alan Jamieson *A Churchless Faith pp110-123*)

If this is right how would we need to change our ideas and our practice?

How does your community view the young people of today?

Douglas Coupland in *Generation X*, written in 1991, described a generation of young people that had grown up in the US during the baby boom years and had little respect for established conventions or authority. (see

<http://www.jour.unr.edu/outpost/specials/genx.overvw1.html>)

Many have used his work to think about how young people today may find church structures alienating.

How does your community describe those who leave it? Are they perceived as backsliders? Or wrong? Or sinners? Or what? How we think about those who leave says a lot about us.

Alan Jamieson in his book *A Churchless Faith* has studied a number of adults who have left evangelical and charismatic churches. One of his findings is that many of these adults continued to believe in some way but expressed the need to 'explore' their faith and were no longer comfortable with the rigid definitions found in most faith communities.

Maintaining diversity

The prayer of Jesus that we should all be one has motivated churches to work to include as diverse a range of people as possible.

What is your church's strategy for maintaining diversity?

Anglican churches have maintained a degree of diversity by defining their identity around a geographical community (i.e. a parish) and insisting that worship was conducted according to a set pattern. This took the focus off doctrinal differences within the church. Of course it is an approach that also has its own problems. Today the focus on 'parish' can lead to a wholesale avoidance of concerns for those who go 'out' to work and a ministry focused solely on young people and retired people.

A historical example of faith and power – the Protestant Reformation in Europe.

The tension between upholding the social order and allowing challenge was played out dramatically during the Reformation. Without casting judgement on today's RC and Protestant dialogues, the events of the Reformation have much to teach about faith and power.

We recall a time when the Church held enormous sway over people's lives. There was clearly a considerable degree of corruption in the leadership and all sorts of means were used to maintain the Church's influence.

In 1455 Pope Nicholas V summoned the cardinals to his deathbed and told them that the loyalty of the 'uncultured masses' of believers was best obtained through giving them 'something that appeals to the eye'. Ideas of theology were too difficult for most people, but the Holy See should be 'displayed in majestic buildings', and 'imperishable memorials' then the church would be 'accepted and revered by all the world'. So the later Pope Julius 11 gave us the Basilica of St Peter's in Rome, Michelangelo was commissioned to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, there were works commissioned by Raphael and others etc.

But even as the established church of the time worked to uphold the social order that it had created, so others sought to challenge it.

The Printing Press was a powerful new tool. For years Lollards had been copying out the scriptures by hand. But now they could be mass-produced. Folk like William Tyndale spotted the opportunity. Every person could judge the truth about faith for themselves when they had a copy of the scriptures in their own language. The publication of the Bible undermined the authority of the ordained priesthood in dramatic fashion. It allowed a spectacularly powerful new form of challenge that went to the heart of the authority of the Church.

How we view that struggle may depend on our present viewpoint. There was clearly enormous political and theological controversy and not a little suffering. Yet perhaps there was also much learning taking place, hard lessons being learnt for the future, about governance, about constructive challenge, about how faith can be properly weighed and judged. At the same time visitors to Rome and Florence continue to enjoy the extraordinary artistic and architectural works of the time and believers likewise cherish their ability to read the scriptures and the light that it sheds on the faith. The Reformation remains an object lesson for us about how faith and power are locked in an uneasy embrace in every religious community.

(for above quotes and a lively account of the struggles of William Tyndale from a Protestant perspective see *William Tyndale - If God spare my life* by Brian Moynahan. Abacus 2002)