

The Episcopal Church Office of Government Relations

Voices from the Church Civil Discourse Curriculum Supplement

We invited a handful of Episcopal Leaders from across the country to share their thoughts on civil discourse based on the following prompt:

What are your values as an Episcopalian as they relate to issues of public policy? How are you living into your values when considering civil discourse and civic engagement?

We hope these messages serve as guiding inspiration and an example of the diversity of views held within our church, yet also a testament to what we share in common through our faith and values. The views they each share are their own.



The Rt. Rev. Jeffrey D. Lee
Bishop of Chicago

It's a bold thing to say about a church whose members make up less than 1% of the American population, but I believe that especially in these tumultuous and fractious times, we Episcopalians have a particular vocation and responsibility to bring people together across political divisions. Our tradition of the *via media*—the middle way of Anglicanism—offers this country a desperately needed model of what public discourse might become.

Perhaps the best champion of the Anglican middle way in public life is Senator John Danforth, who represented Missouri in the U.S. Senate for nearly 20 years and also served as ambassador to the United Nations and as a special envoy to Sudan. Before he took on the vocation of politics, he was ordained an Episcopal priest; the ethos of our faith has enlivened his entire political career. At a pivotal time in our church's own political turmoil, he visited the 2006 General Convention, where I was a deputy, to give an electrifying address. He charged us to remember what he said is our highest and noblest calling—to be agents of reconciliation in this fractious world.

Senator Danforth pointed at some of the thorniest problems facing us as a nation then—in many ways, they pale in comparison to what faces us today—and said, “These are very difficult issues in the best of times, but to even discuss them requires some common ground, and that common ground is provided by the center of American politics, not by the fringes, and it's the center of American politics that has eroded...and therefore we're at the situation of stalemate in addressing some of these issues.

“When Jesus prayed that we all may be one, didn't he mean it?” he said. “So that to me is particularly the message of the Episcopal Church. We have always, always seen ourselves as the middle way.”

I resonate deeply with Senator Danforth's call to hold the middle way. The Anglican *via media* is one important reason why, as a searching young adult, I chose to be an Episcopalian, and why I find the ethos at the heart of our way of being Christian so appealing as a model for civil discourse. The Anglican tradition was shaped in definitive ways by the rough-and-tumble politics of the English 16th century; we were born as a way to hold the middle ground in tough political times, and I believe it's what God still calls us to today.

Whenever we gather for common prayer across our differences and divisions, we show ourselves and the world what it might look like to reclaim common ground in our political life. Each time we renew our baptismal promise to respect the dignity of every human being, we remind ourselves and the world that this promise includes even our adversaries who may wield power and privilege and espouse views antithetical to our own. And each time we find in the *via media* a way to hold ourselves together despite our differences, we show ourselves and the world a vision of the kingdom of God in which we all can be one.

The Reverend Elizabeth Bonforte Gardner
Christ Church, Georgetown

1 Corinthians 13:4 Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; (RSV)

The Rev. Jay Sidebotham shared a story in his blog, Monday Matters, from Anglican Bishop Stephen Cottrell who preached at the National Cathedral. According to the post, Bishop Cottrell met a young woman while waiting in line for coffee. After learning his vocation she told him she sees two kinds of Christians: those who treat Christianity as a hobby, like gardening or bridge. It isn't wrong but it isn't transformational, either. The second are those who hold faith so tightly it scares everyone around them. As a priest I know describes it, it is Christianity as a hitching post instead of a guidepost. Whether we are talking about doctrine or ritual, being right sometimes becomes more important than being in relationship. The bishop told the woman of a third way: Jesus. Living like Jesus, he told her, would break down barriers, tear down walls, and encourage people to live through faith and love.

If civil discourse is “the engagement in conversation intended to enhance understanding,” then my wish would be for Episcopal leaders to lean in and listen more. Some are taking to social media with angry rants and hostile diatribes that would be offensive by any standards, but more so because they come from those who profess Christ as Lord. Others are shaming via tweets and posts in the name of furthering “progressive ideas” and “real American values.” Priests are preaching politics from the pulpit as if everyone held captive in their pews wants to hear their opinions on public policy.

On the other hand, I've found congregations of the Episcopal Church to be inviting and thoughtful. One woman who has seen many, many, many presidential administrations told her rector to welcome civil discourse because, as she put it, “if we can't have meaningful conversations at church, where can we?” Episcopalians in the pews are anxious to hear the gospel spoken in church and lived in the world. Should anyone need help exploring what it means to be the hands, feet, and heart of Christ in the world, church leadership (lay and ordained) is called to pray and explore that with them. Civil discourse, therefore, looks like listening and loving rather than pointing fingers and protesting.

If there is protesting to be done, then by all means priests should help parishioners find a way to protest in the name of the gospel. If there are conversations to be had, then priests should be having them. And the Episcopal Church is where the gospel is read with love and where that love is demonstrated each and every day - inside and outside of the sanctuary. The Episcopal Church is where we understand that forgiveness of our sins does not mean forgetting what comes next - restitution, reconciliation, and renewal. But the only way we can do that is by offering a safe and sacred place where engaging in conversation leads to deeper understanding.

Civil discourse is essential to a well-informed church and nation. My prayer is our beloved church can be a beacon for others as we live our lives with love in our hearts, love in our words, and love in our hands. We must trust that God is bigger than us. We must believe that everyone is a beloved child of God. We must live knowing Jesus is Lord.

The Rt. Rev. Carl Walter Wright
Bishop for the Armed Forces and Federal Ministries

“To Be More Like Jesus”

I find it a worthwhile goal to pray to be more and more like Jesus every day. Now, I know what you're thinking: that's an unattainable goal. But I have evidence to the contrary.

Exhibit One: Abraham Lincoln. Biographer Carl Sandburg memorably recounts that Lincoln in his young adult years frequented Tent Revival meetings, similar to the ones our present Presiding Bishop provides for our spiritual growth. At the conclusion of one such Service, probably at the time of the “altar call,” the great orator, Reverend Cartwright asked all who planned to go to Heaven to stand, and many did. Similarly, when he requested all who planned to go to Hell to stand, some actually did. But when he noticed Lincoln didn't stand at either request, he loudly asked, “Mr. Lincoln, where do you plan to go?” Whereupon Lincoln retorted with his characteristic wit, “I did not come here with the idea of being singled out, but since you ask, I reply with equal candor, that I intend to go to Congress”! Even at a young age the future President knew how to handle bullies. Lincoln would have made an excellent Episcopalian.

I am a bit embarrassed that my patron saint, Abraham Lincoln, was a rustic, depressive, unchurched, common man. But I am inspired by the fact that when he was put to the test, he trusted completely in God. He never pretended to have all the answers. When asked if he thought God was on the side of the Union, he wisely replied that the question is not whether God is on our side, but whether we are on God's side! In my opinion, Lincoln was ironically our most Christ-like President. The more I read of his actions and pronouncements, the more convinced I am that God was directing him. Every time I see those five Thomas Brady photographs of Lincoln's face, each of the years of the Civil War, the more I see God refining and sanctifying him to save our great republic.

The thought occurs that our present times are strikingly similar to Civil War time, especially with respect to the incessant political partisanship we're witnessing. It is as if, 50-something years later, American history is repeating itself: focusing on the few things that separate us rather than the many things that unite us. Even Christianity, which Christ intended as the Way that leads to eternal life, is being hijacked by those who, like the Reverend Cartwright of old, can see only black-and-white, no grey.

If I have a creed, apart from the historic creeds, it is not to be right all the time, but to “be on God's side,” to trust in the Lord with all my heart and to strive to be more like him every day. You know, we who follow Jesus in the Anglican way can be a gift to the partisans, not by judging them, or even opposing them; but by looking for the Christ in them and loving them as Christ does. If we can manage that, our hearts will be lighter and our footsteps will be easier.

O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, who devoted your life and death to our most plenteous redemption: Grant that what you have wrought for us may also be wrought in us: that, growing into your likeness, we may serve and share your redeeming work; who lives and reigns in the glory of the eternal Trinity now and for evermore. Amen.



Sarah Lawton
Member, St. John the Evangelist, San Francisco
Lay Deputy, Diocese of California

I would like to offer the following for framing of civil discourse:

Civil Discourse is engagement in conversation intended to enhance understanding. According to Civil Discourse in America panelist Rabbi Steve Gutow, “Civility is simply demonstrating respect for the dignity of our fellow humans – even those humans with whom we have sharp disagreement. Civility is allowing others to speak, and having the humility to admit that we may have something to learn. Civility favors truth over cheap gain, and patience over knee-jerk judgment.”

Every week in San Francisco a group of people of many faiths, including Christians, gathers at immigration court to witness to the humanity of those going through the slow court process. More often than not, the court runs out of time to hear all the cases, and they are pushed off to a later date. Sometimes the hearing results in some sort of status change—a work permit, or release from detention center pending final outcome. Sometimes final deportation orders are handed down. Our faith witnesses are there every week to push the court, by their silent presence in the courtroom, for legal outcomes that respect the dignity and humanity of those in the process, and their families.

For example, a woman, a mother, suffering from serious illness, was recently released by the court on her own recognizance from a detention center many miles from her family, pending outcome of her case. Now she can attend to her health and be a mother to her three young children. This was an outcome, however temporary, that took into account the needs of the family in the midst of a system that nearly everyone agrees is profoundly broken.

Because we know the system is broken, my congregation also provides specific accompaniment—a kind of sanctuary—to three young people whose human rights asylum claims are wending their way through the courts. They currently have legal status to be in the United States, although that may change; in the meantime, we helped the older one, who fled a vicious gay-bashing in his home country, find a job; while two younger ones are attending high school, working, and playing sports, but in the absence of family have needed our support in finding and paying for housing, food, and transport, as well as adult mentorship and accompaniment at court. My congregation also “gets on the bus” with other congregations to go to our state capital, Sacramento, to push for humane enforcement of immigration laws, and we respond to Episcopal Public Policy Network alerts to push our federal government to restore legal status to our Dreamer kids and not to revoke necessary temporary fixes to the system such as Temporary Protected Status for Haitians, Hondurans, and Salvadorans.

Our baptismal vows call us to seek and serve Christ in every person—regardless of immigration status, race, sex, nationality, gender identity, social class, sexual orientation, or physical or cognitive ability. Our baptismal vows very simply call us to respect the dignity of every human being. This is a deep commitment in a world that does not make dignity a top priority, or often any kind of priority at all. Scripture calls us to care for the widowed and the orphan, to feed the hungry, visit those in prison, provide shelter and clothing for those who are without, and to welcome the stranger; and to rebalance our community with forgiveness of debt. These vows certainly apply to our daily piety and life, and also to the systems within which we live.

In our gentrifying neighborhood that is a bedroom community for Silicon Valley, we look around and easily see extremes of wealth and poverty—shiny new condos that are marketed for millions of dollars, and on our church doorstep, new tent cities of the displaced and the homeless; thus we open our church doors every weekday for a respite of “sacred sleep” through the Gubbio Project, so that 70-100



neighbors who are sleeping rough on the streets may have a quiet place to rest for a time. We see a proliferation of Michelin-star restaurants, yet the numbers who attend our weekly food pantry are growing. We see neighbors who work in our neighborhood's fancy restaurants, cooking and cleaning, whose children, most of them US citizens, attend the neighborhood tutoring program we founded and continue to support—but those same neighbors are living in dread of deportation and family separation.

We know there are different ideas about how to address our society's problems. We may not even agree on what the problems are. If we take those same baptismal vows seriously, and I do, then those with whom we disagree are also bearers of Christ with whom we are called to reconcile. We are always glad to engage in civil conversation about the best way forward. We start with an assumption of the dignity of every person—but not everyone does, nor does our system function as if everyone does. Thus as Christians we have a particular obligation to witness with our neighbors who are materially poor, or do not have the power of citizenship or the stability of a home, or who, by the color of their skin, may be subject to personal and also systemic discrimination and violence: a preferential option for the poor and the oppressed.

Because my congregation is deeply engaged in serving our neighborhood, as well as partnered with several international projects in Central America, we have the relationships that give us power to help lift up voices that may not otherwise be heard in our broken world. It is exactly our work of service providing food, shelter, and accompaniment that also gives us the power to witness to systemic injustice. It's not about holding knee-jerk positions but about loving and serving our neighbors.

The Reverend Canon Bernie Schroeder
Episcopal Diocese of Virginia

“Religious Values in a Secular World”

Desire without knowledge is not good, and one who moves too hurriedly misses the way.
- Proverbs 19:2

Being an Episcopalian and advocating for or against public issues go hand-in-hand. Since the US Revolution, Episcopalians have been at the forefront of civil discourse. Many of our early Presidents were Episcopalian, having left the Church of England in 1789. And the church has been involved in public debate ever since. In my lifetime, the Episcopal Church led the way on Civil Rights (1950's), the anti-war movement (1960's), environmental consciousness (the 1970's), and the move to welcome all persons (LGBTQ, immigrants and refugees) into the House of God (1980's till now).

From where did the Episcopal Church derive this social activism and learn to put into practice? From Jesus Christ, Himself. Jesus was an advocate for justice. He was a friend to the poor, the downtrodden, the forgotten and those of different ethnic origins. He was a rabble-rouser and he paid an enormous price for it. But he showed us the way.

Before I became a priest, I was a public advocate (lobbyist) for 20 years in Washington, DC. The quote above from Proverbs set the tone: Always know your subject, be steady in your advocacy and avoid with pitfalls of lobbying your desire (noise) and lobbying for what you know (value). Public social activism is a forever kind of enterprise. Yes, the big marches are fun, the press conferences heady, and confrontation stirs the soul. But the day-to-day of everyday advocacy, though tedious at times, is much more effective and much more crucial.

This is why I am a big fan of the Government Relations Office of The Episcopal Church. Though most of our parishioners do not know such an entity exists, I know the office and the staff well and I am very proud to collaborate with them from time-to-time. The Episcopal Washington Office is our everyday advocacy group on issues of immigration, budget and all of the values that Episcopalians hold dear. Our values need to be constant, consistent and insistent on this daily basis so that our politicians know that we are there and that we are watching.

