

## Courageous Conversations about Sensitive Issues

*A courageous conversation occurs when participants have the courage to make themselves vulnerable about a sensitive issue. This is usually done by sharing one's personal feelings and experiences about the issue with others, and by listening to and seeking to understand the feelings and experiences of others.*

*It is important that the conversation be conducted in a manner intended to foster trust, honesty, dignity, and respect; and by which all parties can feel honored. It is best not to approach it with a predetermined outcome in mind; instead, be open to common ground that might arise from a deeper understanding of each other.*

*Be aware that issues of power, position, and privilege related to gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, gender identification, or perspective can influence such a conversation. In other words, such factors may contribute to greater emotional risks or personal pain for some people than others in a courageous conversation. Acknowledgement of this can provide a powerful place to start.*

### Some Guidelines for a Courageous Conversation

**We all “see” an issue through our own “filters.”** Our filters include our personal assumptions, beliefs, values, experiences, and upbringing. What we “see” through our filters becomes our perception of reality.

**Our filters can limit our ability to understand an issue.** Understanding each other's perceptions of an issue can help us more fully understand each other and the issue at hand. Perceptions shared honestly have value, though they can also contribute to someone else's pain or unsafe environment.

**Encourage dialogue rather than debate.**

**Dialogue** involves taking ownership of our own perceptions and feelings. It also involves seeking to understand other's perceptions, rather than judging them -- e.g., “What experiences or beliefs have influenced your perception and feelings about this issue?” The underlying goal of a dialogue is to reach mutual understanding, and if possible, common ground.

**Debate** involves trying to persuade or change the other person's perception, often through argument. The underlying goal is to “win,” often at another person's expense.

**Words matter.** Encourage participants to try to avoid generalizations or labels or stereotypes about entire groups of people. References to “we” or “us” when everyone involved in the conversation may not be or feel part of “us” can contribute to a sense of isolation and exclusion, especially if the speaker is part of a majority or insider group with power or privilege. References to “them” can also reinforce this sense of being an outsider. If you find yourself about to use one of these group references, remember that one of the purposes of the courageous conversation is to begin to remove the sense of separateness that these words reinforce.

## Courageous Conversations about Marriage Equality

### Possible Discussion Prompts: [See also the attached “Ice-Breakers” document.]

- How might permitting same-gender marriages affect or impact different-gender marriages? How might same-gender marriages be seen as undermining different-gender marriages?
- For what reasons do different-gender couples wish to get married? How are these similar to, or different from, the reasons offered by same-gender couples? What concerns, interests, or issues might they have in common?
- Massachusetts and Connecticut are the only two states presently that permit same-gender marriages with all the rights and responsibilities of different-gender marriages. Several other states provide domestic partnerships or civil unions to same-gender couples, while others provide them to different-gender couples as well. Still other states have adopted policies that prohibit recognition in their state of same-gender relationships entered into in other states. How does this decentralization and lack of uniformity at the state level affect the lives of citizens in same-gender relationships? How does this relate to equal protection under the law?
- How do domestic partnerships and civil unions differ from state-sanctioned marriages in terms of the legal rights and responsibilities conferred upon the couples involved?
- What kind of hardships and legal uncertainties might be created presently for same-gender couples in the United States, especially those with children?
- How might legalization of same-gender marriages affect the moral fabric of the country? How might it affect the stability and security of same-gender couples with children?
- Until the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* decision by the US Supreme Court, many states prohibited interracial marriages. How are the legal, moral, religious, and practical aspects of same-gender marriage today similar to or different from those of interracial marriage yesterday?
- Marriage involves legal rights and responsibilities, and may also represent personal, emotional, spiritual, and religious connections and commitments. What are the appropriate roles for the government and for faith communities and institutions in these areas?

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### Resources:

- Many of our state and local affiliates have members or staff trained to facilitate conversations such as those we are considering here. Community-based dispute resolution centers may also be a useful source of trained facilitators.
- The First Amendment Center’s website has a number of valuable resources linked at this site, <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/about.aspx?id=16611>, including the next two.
  - + *Public Schools and Sexual Orientation: A First Amendment framework for finding common ground* is a 5-page booklet describing a dialogue process endorsed by the American Association of School Administrators, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Bridgebuilders, Christian Educators Association International, First Amendment Center, and the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). Access it at: <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/PDF/sexual.orientation.guidelines.PDF>
  - + The news release announcing the 5-page booklet contains a good summary of the booklet, and background on the endorsing organizations. Access it directly at: <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/news.aspx?id=16612>.

