

Facilitating Group Conversations Using the Equally Sacred Checklist

NETWORK Advocates across the country care deeply about many issues and work to create a world where everyone thrives – no exceptions!

One powerful way you can get the word out about the many issues that matter to us this election season is by **hosting a group conversation about the Equally Sacred issues** – the many issues that Catholics are called to care about. You can help your friends, neighbors, fellow parishioners, and more discern their votes through deep listening and deep sharing, and educate them about the many policies and issues that are important to Catholics and people of faith – especially in this election year.

This toolkit will help you plan and host a conversation about the [Equally Sacred Checklist](#) and the many issues Catholics and all people of good will are called to consider this election year.

Goals

There are four primary ways hosting an **Equally Sacred Group Conversation** helps us achieve our larger goals of advocating for our Equally Sacred Issues:

- **Build relationships.** Hosting events creates space to invite new people into the conversation and strengthen relationships with those who are already connected.
- **Give people a space to grapple with the decisions facing them in the election.** By opening a space for conversation, you create spaces for thinking and discerning in community. This often leads to more thought-out and nuanced perspectives.
- **Share information.** Sometimes it's hard to get a clear picture of why policy matters and what policies have achieved in our society. NETWORK's resources help you to share this information with people.
- **Encourage people to think about a variety of issues when they vote.** By sharing the [Equally Sacred Checklist](#), you're able to share a framework for people to consider as they discern their decisions in this year's election.

Prepare for Your Event — A Checklist

___ Pick where you're going to host your event.

Is the location convenient and accessible for the people you're hoping will attend? Is there enough room for everyone to participate comfortably?

___ Identify your guest list/target audience.

Are you gathering a group of friends? Are you working with your parish to host a group there? What other groups might you be able to invite?

___ Pick your date and time.

Tailor this decision to your hoped-for audience. A group of retired people might want to meet during a workday. Younger folks who might still be active in the workforce might need to have an evening meeting.

___ Determine if you need to or can provide any accommodations.

Are you inviting parents of young children? Can you recruit a local teenager to offer childcare during the conversation? What other barriers might potential attendees face and how can you alleviate those concerns?

___ Promote your event.

Can you advertise in a parish publication? Can you invite friends by phone call, text message, or email? Should you create a social media event page or graphic?

___ Bring handouts and other information

- ___ [Equally Sacred Checklist](#)
- ___ [Freedoms one-pagers](#) (optional)
- ___ [Voting Plan Checklist](#) (optional)

Sample Agenda

Note: This agenda can be adjusted to fit the needs of your group and the timing available for your event. For example, if you're facilitating this conversation with a group of people who are connected through participating in regular service opportunities, you can invite them to reflect on the people they serve in their ministry and how policies impact the lives of those they serve.

- **5 minutes:** Welcome and expectation-setting (agenda overview, shared agreements)
- **10 minutes:** Buzz question: In small groups, invite people to share the issues that matter to them this election season
- **10 minutes:** Present the [Equally Sacred Checklist](#) and the six freedoms, and talk about why we're multi-issue voters
- **15 minutes:** Break open two of the freedoms by sharing about current reality, policy progress, and policy goals (using the policy one-pagers available [here](#).)
- **15 minutes:** Invite reflection/conversation (can be done in small or large group)
- **5 minutes:** Call to action, closing

Your Role: Facilitator

As the facilitator, you have an important role in stewarding the process. A few things to keep in mind:

- Most people just want to be heard. By helping people to feel heard, you can free them up to hear others.
- It's important to balance allowing conversation with keeping the conversation on track and making sure there's space for everyone to be heard. Starting with shared agreements can help create the framework to bring people back to something they already agreed to.
- Don't be afraid to invite a pause in the conversation. This can be a way to honor what someone has said, especially if it's a heavy topic, or to address tension that is coming up within the group.
- For more support in your role as a facilitator, check out the [5 Principles of Effective Conversations](#) NETWORK has identified.

Shared Agreements

Shared agreements are a set of principles established by a group of people in a specific space to ensure their discussion can be productive and healthy. Often, things can be misunderstood or miscommunicated during discussions around topics as sensitive as race and racial justice. To support conversations around racial justice at NETWORK, we established the following shared agreements that we review and agree to before starting the conversation. Use them, add your own, or create your own.

Resolution will not happen today: We are not going to solve our society's challenges or fully change peoples' minds in one conversation or in one day, and that's okay. Today's conversation is one piece of an ongoing conversation. We must be patient with the process.

Speak up/make space: In recognition that all voices around the table bring something of value, this principle challenges those of us who tend to be more quiet to share and challenges those of us who tend to be much more willing to speak up to listen more intentionally and make sure there's enough space at the table for everyone's voices to be heard.

Practice self-care: Examining the ways privilege and oppression show up in our world can be emotionally taxing. Having hard conversations with people who may not agree can be emotionally taxing. While we wish for everyone to lean into their discomfort in order to learn and grow, we recognize that for some individuals this can bring up trauma. No one can learn when they are traumatized. If you feel yourself triggered, see if you can use breathing exercises to bring yourself back into your body and into this moment. If necessary, take a break away from the activity to soothe and care for yourself.

We are each experts on our own experiences: We can only speak to our own lived experiences, and nobody can invalidate the things that we have seen, heard, smelled, or touched. Be sure that we are openly speaking as ourselves and not speaking for someone else and their intentions or experiences.

It's also important to listen deeply and respect others' experiences. During vulnerable conversations in particular, it is important to give your full attention to the person who is sharing so that they feel heard and honored.

Respect confidentiality and continue the conversation: Another way of saying this is "What's said here stays here. What's learned here leaves here." While we want the conversation to transform us and, ultimately, our world, it is also important that we respect the sacredness of each other's stories. We should not share another person's story without their permission. As we continue the conversation, we must do so in a way that respects those who have shared their experiences with us.

Whether or not it has been named, the personal manifestations of power are present: White supremacy, racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, and cisgenderism are embedded within every institution within the United States. Every person is living in that social context, which bestows an amount of privilege or disadvantage on each person in the room depending on their identities. It is important to recognize your identity and the identities of those you are interacting with and recognize the intersectionality of identities. Also remember that aspects of people's identities that may lead them to experience oppression may not be visible or immediately apparent (like invisible disabilities). Be especially conscious of the ways you hold power and how that may impact the conversation.

Embrace and express discomfort: We don't grow without experiencing, embracing, and expressing some degree of discomfort. Lean into the discomfort of talking about potentially contentious topics and interrogate your feelings internally and externally.

Make space for evaluating progress and tension: It's important in the slow work of transformation that we acknowledge the ways we are growing and the tensions that we experience. Evaluation fosters a culture of honesty, accountability, and community. We want to create a space where it is safe to express and evaluate those tensions together.

Discussion Questions

Choose some of these possible discussion questions or create your own.

- What stands out to you from what you heard?
- How do you see policy impacting the lives of people you interact with on a regular basis?
- From what was presented, what values do you resonate with?
- Did anything surprise you from what was presented? If so, what?
- What questions do you still have?

501(c)(3) Guidelines

NETWORK Advocates is a Section 501(c)(3) non-profit under the IRS Code and must assure that all of our activities are nonpartisan. This means that we must not “expressly advocate the election or defeat of a clearly identified candidate,” or even “signal support” for a candidate indirectly. This gathering model is part of our nonpartisan voter education and engagement work. As you prepare and host your own gathering, please keep in mind the following guidelines:

Acceptable non-partisan activities include voter registration drives, get out the vote drives, candidate debate watch parties, and other NETWORK-sponsored events. At these events, we all can:

- Inform potential voters and advocate for the issues that are part of NETWORK’s mission, especially the issues included in the [Equally Sacred Checklist](#).
- Distribute and discuss any materials provided by NETWORK (these have all already been approved as in compliance with the IRS rules).
- Discuss the actions taken by current or past officeholders (e.g., their votes in Congress, legislation that they have proposed) as incumbents on issues that are part of the Equally Sacred Checklist.
- Encourage participants to learn about the issues to become a multi-issue voter.
- Help participants take the actions that they need to be able to vote in the upcoming election.

To be sure that we stay within the IRS limits in our NETWORK activities, it is important that we all avoid talking about specific candidates, and being especially careful NOT to:

- Express support for or opposition to any candidate by name or other identifying characteristics.
- State whether a particular candidate’s position supports NETWORK priorities.
- Give advice to potential voters on whom they should support or oppose in the elections.
- Turn away anyone who wants to participate in voter registration or other NETWORK events because they appear to oppose NETWORK’s priorities or your own political opinions.

These restrictions apply only when you are representing NETWORK at an event.

- You are free in your personal life to express political preferences, make financial contributions, attend candidate events, and otherwise engage in political activities.

If you have any questions or concerns about these rules during or after a NETWORK event, please check in with your NETWORK contact for answers.