



“Have you
ever had a
conversation
which changed
your life?”

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The logo for the International Baptist Theological Study Centre, featuring a stylized icon of an open book above the text "IBTSCENTRE" in a bold, sans-serif font.

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A GUIDE TO
Creative
CONVERSATIONS

ANNA RUDDICK · CATHY ROSS · MIKE PEARS



“Have you ever had a conversation which changed your life?”

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A GUIDE TO CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever had a conversation which changed your life?

One of those moments where you glimpsed a different way of seeing the world? In which you connected with someone else or a group of people at a profound level, even if just briefly, and where something new, even unexpected, came out of the connectedness between those people on that day in that place and at that time?

This is a CREATIVE CONVERSATION.

CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS ARE:

MUTUAL & EQUAL: They happen when people who have different views and experiences of the world build a relational bridge through a two-way flow of stories, questions and reflections. By sharing their experiences, wisdom and power they come to understand and see the world through one another’s eyes.

GENERATIVE: They may start with getting to know one another but they progress to a less self-conscious sharing and spontaneous “Ah-ha!” moments in which we see things in new ways together. The new shared insights emerging from within a conversation lead to changes in the participants and have the potential to impact their respective worlds as they live out their altered perspectives.

HOLY: In such creative encounters there is a sense of God being present within and throughout. In fact the shared ‘seeing’ that occurs is actually seeing the image of God in one another more clearly and responding to that revelation. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, who draws our attention to one another in a deeper way.

MISSION: We believe that creative conversations are a part of God’s mission. They are a creative act, echoing our Creator God, and they are also a reconciling act. As we forge relationships with people that we may have previously seen as ‘other’, we live out our ‘ministry of reconciliation’ in the world (2 Cor 5:17-19).





Creative conversations can happen in any setting, in churches or community centres, streets or parks. They might happen as part of a structured gathering or just in a serendipitous moment with a neighbour or acquaintance. Much, if not most, of our conversation is not like this; it is functional or practical, and that's fine. But because we believe that creative conversation is part of God's mission, and that it is much needed in our communities and society, we would like to have more creative conversations, and to encourage you to as well.

This guide has been developed before and during the Covid-19 pandemic and UK lockdown. The situation of physical distancing, online gatherings and heightened anxiety in public spaces or interactions with 'other people'

has impacted us all in ways we may not be able to name yet. Equally, the disproportionate impact of Coronavirus and lockdown on BAME communities and people experiencing poverty has shone an uncomfortable light on the prejudices and inequalities entrenched in the UK and other countries. This resource already named such inequalities, and our purpose in beginning the project was to invite all people to become aware of their own privileges and marginalities and to be braver in seeking to learn from people with different backgrounds and experiences. We are all on a journey in this, and will all have our blind spots, so this guide is not definitive, it will not be perfect or the final word. It is offered as a contribution to our collective growth in human solidarity and understanding, which we understand to be a part of the mission of God. In response to the rapid increase in online conversations in the time of lockdown we have added a more reflective chapter specifically on conversational dynamics online. Again, there will be more to say and learn but we offer some thoughts-in-progress from a time of physical, if not social, distancing.

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This guide is designed to help you reflect on and be equipped to be a part of more creative conversations.

We learn by trying things out and then taking a step back and thinking about how it went. This process of reflection helps us to pay closer attention to events in our lives and to see things that otherwise may go unnoticed.

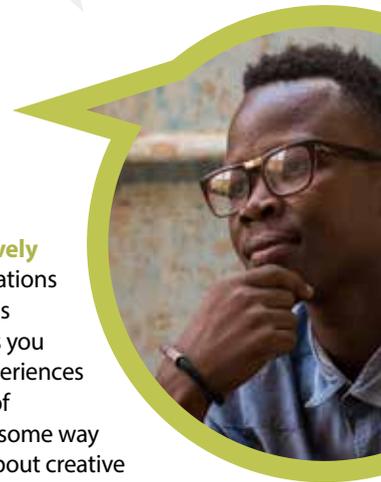
HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

We want to encourage you to actively seek to be a part of creative conversations in your communities, and to read this guide, either alone or with others, as you do so as a way to reflect on your experiences and grow in confidence and depth of relationship with people who are in some way different from you. While thinking about creative conversations in such detail might feel a little strange at first, remember that the aim is simply to develop new and deeper relationships with people, to see them as God sees them and to be changed yourself through those relationships.

There are five chapters which practically consider how to help enable and what might hinder creative conversation: the physical environment, shaping stories, personhood, the people involved and virtually a creative conversation. Each contains:

- A short chapter to read
- A guide for personal reflection
- A brief discussion guide to be used in a group setting
- Practical challenges to try out in your day to day life and mission
- Suggestions for further reading and resources

Whether you work your way through this guide on your own or with a group try to take your time. Perhaps read a section each month and give yourself/selves space to mull over the reflection questions, do any follow up research, and have a go at the challenges, to see what happens as you adventure into deeper relationships and encounter God along with your neighbours and friends in your communities. Our hope is that you will discover an exciting new focus for your missional living – looking out for and participating in creative conversations.



For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted”

LUKE 14:11

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CHAPTER 1 *THE PHYSICAL ENVIROMENT*

‘For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted’ Luke 14:11

It is easy to take for granted the physical elements in a meeting or encounter between people. The building or street, the busyness or quietness, the light or lack thereof, the choice and arrangement of furniture, food or drink.

All these things can make a difference to the way people relate to one another and can either promote and set the scene for creative conversations, or get in the way. For example, imagine you are going to a job interview and on entering the room in an office building you find three people in suits sat upright behind a desk with one chair facing them. The furniture, building, clothing, positioning and posture of the people all tell you that you are the visitor and they are in a position of power, you are the one who will be interviewed.

Now imagine you want to get to know someone in your community, you want to befriend them and show them you care about them and their situation. How would you instinctively go about it? If you are from a middle-class British background it might feel very natural to you to invite them to come to your church coffee shop or your favourite local café that serves the best coffee and cake and to pay for their order for them. While this scenario may be well-intentioned, it is also an expression of power which puts you and your guest in an unequal relationship. They are in a space that you are more familiar and comfortable with and are receiving your hospitality, are they now obligated to like you, hear your ideas or return the favour by paying for coffee next time? What if they interpret the exchange in a different





way? If you do not identify with British middle-class culture you might approach this completely differently, with power expressed in different ways. Becoming more aware of our habitual way of doing things, and questioning whether we can find alternatives that promote mutuality in our relationships, helps to avoid setting up physical barriers to creative conversations.

So, seeking to be a part of creative conversations means giving some thought to the physical arrangements of your encounters. How spaces, places, physical objects and bodies can either promote a generative exchange between people or can get in the way. Here are some practical examples of what might help, and then what might hinder a creative exchange.

WHAT HELPS TO ENABLE CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS?

1. THINK ABOUT THE SPACE

“And relaaaax.” Helping people feel at home in a space enables them to relax, breathe out, and feel at peace in their surroundings. Subtle factors make a difference here, and they will vary depending on the situation. Good but not too stark lighting, a comfortable temperature and gentle background noise from music or even a TV might help people feel at home.

“How are the kids doing this week? Has Mia finished her lego spaceship?” Spending time with people in their familiar surroundings can be an important part of getting to know a person. When you do this as equals, both sharing your spaces it builds trust and develops empathy.

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2. SHARING IN AN ACTIVITY

“Please can you pass the rice?” The need for food is something we all share, and so eating together can be a way to participate in an activity as equals. A brilliant way to do this is to prepare, cook and eat a meal together. This will help ensure that food is appropriate for everyone’s dietary requirements and that one or two people don’t become the ‘providers’, catering for everyone else.

“Wow these biscuits are great, would anyone else like one?” Having a shared focus in the room, for example a roaring log fire or a table of cakes and biscuits; or an activity that you participate in together such as craft, cooking or an exercise such as ‘Tree of Life’ (see resources list below), eases any awkwardness between people who don’t know each other well; it immediately gives you something in common and something to talk about.



3. BE AWARE OF BODY LANGUAGE

“He’s a good guy, there’s just something about him, we get each other, you know.” Familiarity is often subconsciously associated with safety. Therefore, we instinctively feel more at ease with people who look familiar or who look similar to us or people we know well. This might be in terms of gender or ethnicity, or it might be in relation to specific features or styles, for example having tattoos or wearing a uniform. We have an unconscious reaction that someone is ‘one of us’, and this helps us connect with them.

“You seem a little tearful, can I give you a hug?” Meeting in person has different benefits to meeting online or by phone. In face-to-face conversation the whole body communicates, with our body language often making sense of our words. Furthermore, genuine moments of human connection don’t always require words, in some situations silence and presence are the best gift we have to offer comfort to someone in pain. Connecting with someone through a glance, hug or smile, or simply through being alongside them for a while, could be equally, if not more significant than speaking.



4. DEVELOP YOUR CONVERSATION SKILLS

“They make me feel like they really care about what I have to say.” Listening skills such as orienting your body towards someone, leaning forward to show your interest, and responding to the emotion as well as the content of what they say can take a conversation into creativity as you notice and respond to a person’s stories. We all have different levels of skill and confidence in conversation and so learning about how to listen well and practicing with others can be of benefit to anyone.

“No one has ever asked me about that before!” Most of us go about our lives having largely functional conversations. Times to go deeper and really share about ourselves and our experiences can be rare. Furthermore, some people are listened to less than others; people experiencing poverty or marginalisation are often not invited to talk about their experiences. Equally, some experiences are not commonly talked about, they are taboos. Creative conversations are about inviting and making room for untold stories. By communicating someone’s value in the way we listen to them we can invite them to voice their experiences, perhaps for the first time.

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS?

1. ONE PERSON/GROUP “OWNING” THE SPACE

“That’s my chair!” The choice of space for a conversation is very important. If one or more participants have a greater sense of familiarity or ‘ownership’ over the space than others this creates a subtle imbalance of power – it is their ‘turf’. Wherever possible enable the most marginalised person or people to feel the most ownership of the situation.

“What’s that noise?” Distractions such as intrusive noise, being cold or uncomfortable furniture can prevent people relaxing and focusing in a conversational setting. For some people certain settings might feel unsafe, for example entering a church, mosque or other sacred space might feel very vulnerable for someone who does not share that particular faith.

2. BEING DISTRACTED BY ACTIVITY

“Sorry, yes, I am listening, I just have to...” While gentle, rhythmic movement such as walking side by side or knitting can aid conversation, hurry or a frenetic lack of stillness communicates that you are not really present to the person who is speaking. They may get the impression that you don’t care about what they are trying to say.

3. DOMINATING THE SPACE WITH YOUR BODY

“Excuse me, can I just squeeze past?” Dominant personalities can express themselves in part by how they position themselves in a room. Choosing the ‘best’ seat, talking loudly and spreading themselves out confidently might lead to others feeling diminished. Equally someone may challenge a dominant participant by moving seats, changing their posture or tone of voice to insist that they are also allowed to be heard and recognised as a person in the situation.

4. A LACK OF CONVERSATION SKILLS

“He was looking over my shoulder for someone more interesting to talk to.” Not giving physical signals that we are listening to someone can lead to them feeling upset. Eye contact is a good indicator that we are listening, although not everyone feels comfortable giving people eye contact. Getting to know people over time and talking about our experiences of conversation can help us understand why we communicate in the way that we do, and to learn to connect with one another.

“I know exactly what you mean, it’s like when I...” Selective listening means to pick and choose elements of what a person says that fit what you expect them to say or what you want to say to them. In creative conversation we must be prepared to hear *all* that a person has to say, even when it is unexpected, challenges us or leaves us at a loss for words.



BIG QUESTIONS

HOW DO WE HANDLE POWER IN OUR PHYSICAL SPACES?

You will have noticed above the importance of power in conversation, and in many ways learning to share power is at the heart of having creative conversations. In relation to the physical environment and elements of the conversation, two important power questions to consider are, who initiates the conversation and who chooses the material elements of the encounter?

Giving thought to these issues can help prevent the creative potential of conversations being hampered by the setting and arrangements around it.

Space itself is rarely neutral; it becomes a 'place' when it holds meaning for people. In our society there is surprisingly little genuinely open space. Town centres and shopping precincts are privately owned and managed, parks likewise, even much of the countryside is privately owned or held in trust. The ownership of space means that an organisation or group has the power to decide who can go there or what kinds of things can happen in a space. For example, the recent policy, adopted by some city councils, of moving on rough sleepers from city centres is a clear example of authorities deciding who is accepted within their space. Inevitably we all feel most comfortable when we are in spaces and places which welcome us and in which we feel 'in place' rather than 'out of place'. But if you are a rough sleeper there may not be many places where you would feel this kind of acceptance. Feeling generally 'in place' in our lives and the communities we inhabit is, in itself, a form of privilege.

If we hope to engage in creative conversations which are a part of God's reconciling mission, being attentive to who is excluded or made to feel unwelcome in our places, is vital, both within church buildings and beyond. This is resonant of the biblical

theme of welcoming the stranger. Our cultural messages are often warnings of 'stranger danger' with the unknown person seen as frightening or threatening. But in scripture the stranger more often brings a gift, or is a manifestation of God come to us, for example the three travellers who visit Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18. To address power in our places and conversations we need to think about who 'owns' the place we meet in, and whether that leads any participants in the conversation to feel 'out of place'. Recognising the privilege that we each carry, as well as the ways in which we may feel excluded, can help us to be prepared to step outside our comfort zones and prioritise the inclusion of all.

THE PROBLEM OF "PEOPLE LIKE US"

We saw above how familiarity can be a help in having creative conversations as we feel more at ease and confident with people who look, sound or act in some way like us. However, there are two problems with this.

Firstly, it might be easy to be lulled by superficial familiarity into assuming that 'we are the same'. This can lead to not really listening to one another, and instead assuming that we think the same way. Much of the life-giving potential of creative conversations is found in exploring the ways in which we differ from one another, it is in these moments that new insight can emerge.

Secondly, and even more importantly, the security of familiarity can be a barrier to connecting with people who are different in some way. For example, a uniform could indicate hierarchy as much as familiarity meaning that people defer to or guard their words when one person is around. Or, while most white people are not deliberately racist, they may unconsciously 'not click with' Black or Asian people in part fuelled by a lack of familiarity. This is how insidious racism can be and shows that whatever our ethnicity it is vitally important to spend time with people who are different from ourselves in order to break down our unconscious biases. Creative conversations, if they are a part of God's mission in the world, have to involve breaking down the prejudice between people and overcoming the safety of sameness in order to learn from and celebrate the ways that our differences show us more of who God is.



This section is for personal reflection.

Spend a little time thinking about the chapter you have just read and use these prompts and questions to help you.

TIME TO REFLECT

- What resonates with you in this chapter? Can you identify examples from your own experience where the physical elements of a situation have impacted your conversations?
- How diverse is your circle of friends and acquaintances? Do you have friendships with people who are different from you and, if so, what do you learn from them?
- How confident are you in your conversation skills? Do you show that you are listening with your body language? Can you ask someone who knows you well to give you some feedback. How can you grow in this area?

Spend some time in prayer asking God to speak to you about these things. Now take a look at the **GIVE IT A TRY** section below, what can you do in the coming weeks to act on what you have learnt?

This section is to use in a small group, perhaps a home group, a mission team or a group of volunteers at a community project.

It will help your discussion if you each read the whole chapter before you meet, then, when you come together, use the questions below.

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

- What struck you as new or particularly significant in this chapter?
- At the beginning of this section we quoted Luke 14. Read Luke 14:1-11 together and think about the connections to our theme. How does Jesus pay attention to the physical environment of social situations?
- Think about the conversations you already have with people who see the world differently from you. How do the space, activity and your bodies impact these encounters? Are there changes you could make that might enable a more creative conversation to happen between you?
- What do you want to make sure you remember about the physical aspects of enabling creative conversations?

After a time of discussion and reflection look at the **GIVE IT A TRY** section below and agree together what you will do in the coming weeks to put into practice what you have learnt. Then spend some time praying for one another and for those you know and love in your community.

THINK
OUTSIDE
THE BOX

Whether you are using this guide on your own or with a group, it is designed to help you TAKE ACTION.



GIVE IT A TRY

Set yourself/selves the challenge of intentionally seeking out more creative conversations in the coming weeks and trying out the insights you have gained from this chapter. Here are some suggestions to get you started:

- If you already participate in a community gathering try meeting in another place, changing the layout of your meeting space or inviting newer people to set up the room with you and observe the way that it impacts the dynamics of groups and the way that people use the space.
- When you are out and about in a familiar place such as a park or café, take a closer look at who else is there and ask yourself what kind of person may not feel welcome here?

FURTHER READING & RESOURCES

- **Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition** by Christine Pohl, 1999
- **The Other Face of God: When the Stranger calls us home** by Mary Jo Leddy, 2011
- **An Altar in the World: A geography of faith** by Barbara Brown-Taylor, 2017
- **Eating Heaven: Spirituality at the table** by Simon Carey Holt, 2013
- **Take this Bread** by Sara Miles, 2012
- **Ordinary Miracles: Mess, Meals and meeting Jesus in unexpected places** by Chris Lane, 2017
- **Facilitation Skills for Ministry** by Jo Whitehead, Sally Nash & Simon Sutcliffe. London: SPCK, 2013.
- **Tree of Life** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2OTzi3tgWs>
- <https://nathanbweller.com/tree-life-simple-exercise-reclaiming-identity-direction-life-story/>

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted”

LUKE 14:11

“Yes Lord”
she replied,
“but even the
dogs under
the table eat
the children’s
crumbs.”

MARK 7:28

“Yes Lord” she replied, “but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

All of our interactions are impacted by what we describe as shaping stories – our worldview.

These are the stories about ourselves, other people and the way the world works which we inherit and develop over our lifetimes.

For example, currently in British society there is a story about people who travel to live and work in the UK from other countries. A significant number of voices in the media and political life frequently describe all people coming to the UK as immigrants and stigmatise them as a ‘burden’ on British services such as housing and the NHS. If you have been born and raised in the UK, especially perhaps if you are aware of the pressures on housing and healthcare services at this time, you might find yourself absorbing this story over time, usually without really realising it. As a result you might find yourself feeling cautious or suspicious of someone coming from another country, even if they are coming as a refugee from somewhere which has been destroyed by war. The storyline that ‘there is not enough to go around’ and that ‘immigrants’ are ‘taking the jobs, homes and services that British people need’ is profoundly damaging to our society as it fosters resentment and division rather than reminding us of our shared humanity.

This is a big national story but there might be other more local perspectives that influence our conversations. For example, in churches there might be strong feelings about who has authority and therefore who can make decisions, or whose ideas about God carry the most weight. This might be the leader, but





equally it may not – it may be those long-standing church members whose presence is felt in the room even when they aren't there. The shaping stories we inhabit are often unconscious, or we may not immediately realise the impact they have on a situation. If we want to have more creative conversations it is vital to develop our awareness of our own worldview and what other stories and perspectives are possible in order to begin to see situations and people more clearly as they are.

WHAT HELPS TO ENABLE CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS?

1. BECOME AWARE OF YOUR OWN WORLDVIEW

"Wow I've just never questioned my assumptions about that before!" We all have worldviews that influence us, we can't help that. The important thing is to be aware of them and be able to decide for ourselves whether they are helpful or not. So, a good first task in any conversation is to help each other explore and name the different perspectives that you bring and come to a shared acknowledgement that you are wanting to see beyond these together. This is not necessarily an easy process. Discomfort can be an indication that unconscious worldviews are at work. Ask yourself when have you been uncomfortable in a conversation? Have you been in a conversation which helped you to see something about yourself in a new way? What was it about the conversation that helped bring that to light?

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2. MAKE PEACE WITH DISAGREEMENT

"I think I see things a bit differently from you." Fundamental to learning from one another beyond our inherited worldview is to make peace with disagreement. This might mean grappling with our own feelings of offense when someone sees the world differently from us; but it may also mean coming together and challenging a dominant cultural narrative such as the negative stereotype of white working-class young people as 'chavs'. In this sense disagreement is an expression of freedom from inherited cultural stories.



3. USE FACILITATION & LISTENING TOOLS TO ENABLE MUTUAL SHARING

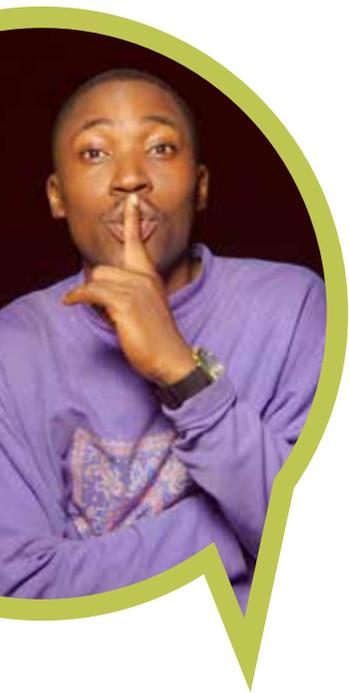
"How would you describe your experience of this community as a weather report? Is it sunny, rainy or stormy?" Using a conversational structure or exercise can provide a framework that is helpful for a group in conversation. Tools such as Pip Wilson's Blob Tree (see resource links below) offer a shared focus and some common language to help people articulate their experiences. They can help people stay in the moment and reflect on their experiences and enable everyone to contribute.

"I can see that you feel angry about this... how do you imagine the other person might feel?" Non-judgemental coaching or pastoral care models seek to enable people to work towards their own ways forward by affirming them and acknowledging their perceptions of situations. In creative conversations the gift of this approach is that it is about giving space for people to open up their ideas rather than closing them down as soon as they venture a thought. This can be difficult if we strongly believe someone to be wrong in their views or information, but we need to develop skills to hear one another and encourage one another to be open to the new.

4. GET COMFORTABLE WITH SILENCE AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

“Let’s just spend a few moments in silence to still ourselves.” Within the contemplative Christian tradition there is a strong emphasis on silence, listening and developing awareness of God’s presence in every moment. This can help us recognise God at work in our conversations. Times of silence in a conversation help people to reflect on what they have heard and can deepen our engagement with one another.

“I think I might have to learn to live with that question for a while.” Identifying the questions that arise from a conversation but deciding not to try to answer them is a good way to learn. So rather than hurrying to an answer, try just holding a question for a while, mulling it over together on a number of occasions without pressure to resolve it and see what comes to light as a result.



WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS?

1. A SUBTLE SENSE OF SUPERIORITY

“Well obviously any normal person would...” Our own worldview is familiar and therefore seems obvious: the ‘right’ way to see the world. This can lead to an unconscious (or even conscious when challenged!) belief in our superiority, based on our race, religion, class or other factor/s, over people who live and think differently. Feeling superior prevents us building equal relationships, we might see ourselves as doing things ‘for’ people rather than ‘with’ them as equals. In conversation this becomes ‘telling’ rather than sharing and listening.

2. MAINTAINING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN “US” AND “THEM”

“For some reason they just don’t seem to be able to manage their own lives.” One particular story which is dominant in British society is an understanding of poverty simply as ‘a lack of’ the basic necessities of life, meaning that the most common response to poverty is charity – providing people with money, food or resources to meet their needs. This is known as a ‘needs-based’ approach to poverty and unfortunately it can be unhelpful as it doesn’t recognise the complex structural causes of poverty, or the gifts, skills and resources that people who struggle against poverty have to offer in society. While providing for people has its place, creative conversations are about relating as equals and overcoming any sense of “us” and “them”. This means that when the differences between people relate to their relative wealth or resources, we have to take care not to slip into traditional patterns of the ‘haves and the have-nots’ and instead come together, each with gifts to bring.

3. MAKING ASSUMPTIONS

“It just is how it is isn’t it, if you can’t see the blindingly obvious you must be stupid!” Being dogmatic or fundamentalist means to insist on a very cut and dried understanding of the world. That things just are as we see them and everybody else is wrong. It is possible to be dogmatic or fundamentalist about almost any kind of belief, as it is the resistance to considering that others might have something of value to say.

“Oh yes, I know about Sikhism, I went to a Gurdwara once.” Sometimes when we encounter people who are different we can find ourselves taking on a ‘tourist’ mindset, that of a passive observer, just hearing the facts of something rather than encountering the reality of it. Remember school trips where you trailed around museums staring at exhibits. Creative conversation is about hearing one another’s experiences not just the facts of our lives. It’s about active engagement not passive tourism; recognising our shared humanity in the midst of our different ways of living.



4. A LACK OF FREEDOM IN THE CONVERSATION

“Here we always say that...” ‘Group think’ can occur when conversation partners feel constrained to maintain the ‘correct’ position of a denomination or organisation, thereby inhibiting their personal expression. They speak as representatives of the organisation not as themselves. This can be adopted by a whole group, leading to a pressure to conform.

“Please be aware that I need to run all this by my line manager before we can move forward.” Clearly there is a time and place for professionalism. But ideas of professional distance can hinder creativity by keeping the conversation at the surface and preventing any true sharing person to person. It may even mean that injustice goes unchallenged as institutions often rely on the status quo for their survival. When professionalism is the framework for participants in a conversation they are there as their position not as a person. This de-humanises both conversation partners and can erode trust. Again, in some circumstances this is necessary, for example where there are safeguarding concerns, but it is not a helpful dynamic in enabling creative conversations.

BIG QUESTIONS

HOW DO WE DISCOVER AND COME TO TERMS WITH OUR OWN SENSE OF SUPERIORITY?

You might think that you don’t feel superior to others, in fact you might sometimes lack confidence, especially around people who you feel are different from you in some way.

It is helpful to recognise that we all have an inbuilt drive to protect our self-esteem. Being able to think of ourselves as basically good people is important for our wellbeing, and this is not a bad thing. However, we live in a time in which self-esteem is defined in relative terms: “I am better than you”. Rather than accepting our own fundamental goodness as people made in the image of God, we try to perform our way to acceptability through our

skills or personal attributes. This means that it is very uncomfortable for us to admit when we do things wrong or are simply not as good at something as someone else. Rather than simply being a part of being human, it feels like an attack on our self-esteem.

Depending on the circumstances of our birth, such as our family background, ethnicity, gender, the country we are born in or sexuality, we all experience different degrees of privilege or disadvantage. Coming to terms with our need to feel ‘better than’ others requires that we take a clear-eyed look at our society and our position within it. If you are a white, heterosexual, middle-class male you are among the dominant minority within British society. It may not feel like that some days, but the reality is





In the process our sense of worth becomes rooted in our fundamental personhood, rather than in a relative, and therefore competitive, self-esteem.

HOW CAN WE CHANGE OUR SHAPING STORY ABOUT POVERTY? SHIFTING THE FOCUS FROM NEEDS TO GIFTS.

that British society is set up for people like you. However, if you are a young, black, middle-class male your situation may be more complicated. Racial prejudice still exists, and you will likely have experienced it in education, in encounters with the police and perhaps in your workplace. But your middle-class background brings a degree of privilege with it - both marginalisation and privilege exist together in your experience of the world. These two examples are just a snapshot of how the complex dynamics of privilege and marginalisation work within twenty-first century British society.

Grappling with these realities, especially if you are part of the dominant group in society, can be painful. But God's mission to bring about justice and peace in the world starts with us, and so it is vital that we face our own position, and complicity, in a society in which some are unjustly privileged while others are unjustly marginalised.

Changing a shaping story which is so deeply embedded in our culture and therefore in our own thinking is not easy. However, over time, it can be done, arguably it requires a kind of conversion or repentance. Jesus' central message was "repent! For the kingdom of God is near". This call to repentance was a call to change our thinking, and particularly our thinking about the shaping stories we inhabit. In Jesus' time different groups of people had different ideas about what the kingdom of God might be. But most of them had clear rules and parameters to set out who might get to be a part of the kingdom of God and how good you had to be to get there. Jesus' words and his ministry were a confrontation to this exclusive and far off idea of the kingdom. He said, change your thinking, because the kingdom isn't far off and only available to the special few. It's here and its available to all, in fact it's within you.

For the tax collectors, prostitutes and lepers that Jesus spent most of his time with this really was good news. Previously the religious people had defined them by their sin and therefore had excluded them from 'polite' and holy, society. Jesus instead saw them as whole people, both broken and gifted with the kingdom of God. He became their friend, often receiving their hospitality. This upside-down kingdom shows us the shift from seeing people and communities primarily as 'needy' to recognising them as full people made in God's image and gifted by him. Seeing their skills, capacities and gifts as well as their needs and desires. Approaches to addressing issues of poverty that start from this more realistic and nuanced perception of people are much more likely to enable life change and community change.

Practically this change of mind is expressed in some simple changes in our habits. Firstly, becoming aware of how often we talk about people just in terms of their needs or problems in itself helps us stop ourselves in the act. Secondly, changing our strategy. Rather than starting with needs analysis instead start by listening, asking people about their lives, their passions and their gifts; the slogan used by Poverty Truth Commissions "nothing about us, without us, is for us" is a helpful litmus test for activity. Thirdly, refuse to create

projects which only meet people's needs, instead create opportunities for people to bring their gifts to share and contribute to building their community; this is the difference between a foodbank and a shared community meal.

This may seem one step removed from creative conversation, but if we are to be able to receive the insight and gifts of those experiencing poverty in our conversations we need to recognise that they are there to be discovered. Creative conversations are about recognising the gifts of every person, as a person, and anything which gets in the way of that recognition must be overcome.





Take some time now to still yourself before God.

TIME TO REFLECT

God is with you on this journey of seeking to have more creative conversations with people who are different from you. Reflect on the experiences you have had in the last few weeks alongside what you have read.

- Have I found myself in any creative conversations over the past few weeks? What happened and how did it feel?
- Reflecting on my own upbringing, what are the worldviews that shape me and my attitude towards others?
- Do I actually have opportunities to interact with people who are different from me in my life? If not why not? What could I do to change this?

Try journaling your thoughts either by writing them down or recording them using your phone. This can take you deeper in your reflection and helps your insights embed into your thinking, even if you never look at or listen to it again. Now take a look at the **GIVE IT A TRY** section below, what steps might you take next to move forward in creative conversations?

In your small group or mission team reflect together on your actions over the last few weeks and this chapter using the questions below.

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

- What, if any, changes did you make in your conversations after reading chapter 1? What happened as a result?
- Have you found yourself in any creative conversations over the last few weeks? What did you notice about the experience and what did you learn?
- What did you particularly like or dislike about this chapter?
- In Mark 7:24-30 Jesus meets a woman from Syrian Phoenicia who challenges his inherited worldview about who is worthy to receive from God. In Matthew's account (15:21-28) Jesus commends her faith. Read this passage together and discuss it in relation to this theme of shaping stories.
 - ➔ How does Jesus' experience mirror our own experiences in mission?
 - ➔ What can we learn from this?

After a time of discussion and reflection look at the **GIVE IT A TRY** section below and agree together your next steps in cultivating creative conversations. Spend some time praying for one another and particularly for those who experience prejudice in your community.



What will you do next to seek out more creative conversations in the coming weeks?

GIVE IT A TRY

If you're not sure, here are some suggestions to try:

- Becoming aware of the different worldviews at play in different situations takes practice. Over the next week or two try to be aware of the perspectives present in a couple of conversations in different settings e.g. a church homegroup or among colleagues at work.
 - ➔ What are the assumptions being made that everyone nods along with?
 - ➔ Who or what is 'in charge' in the conversation?
 - ➔ What does the conversation show about participants' beliefs in God, about themselves? About other people?
- In your group, mission project or conversation notice who is *not* there. Who is left out and why?
- The next time you find yourself having a conversation with someone who you see as different from you in some way (e.g. of a different faith or spirituality, from a different country or social background) try to name the worldviews which influence you and invite the other person/people to do the same. For example, if you are chatting at the school gate with other parents about buying end of term gifts for teachers you could say "I always feel I should... I think it's partly growing up in such a consumer-oriented British culture, how do you feel about it?"



FURTHER READING & RESOURCES

- **Contemplative Listening guide:** <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2012/01/contemplative-listening-a-simple-how-to-guide/>
- **Asset-based Community Development** is a strengths-based approach to community work and a good example of overcoming the needs-based response to poverty. You can read more about it and other strengths-based models in two papers written by Livability and Church Urban Fund: **Fullness of Life Together** and **Building Kingdom Communities**, follow the links below to download:
 - <https://livability.org.uk/fullness-of-life-together-report/>
 - <https://livability.org.uk/building-kingdom-communities-report/>
 - **Also check out** <https://www.nurturedevelopment.org/>
 - **Listen to the stories of refugee children in these BBC short animations: Seeking Refuge** <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01k7c4q/clips>
 - **Read the stories of people experiencing poverty in their own words through the Voices from the Margins project:** <https://voicesfromthemargins.org.uk/>
 - **When Helping Hurts** by Corbett, Fikkert, Perkins, and Platt, 2014.
 - **Why I'm no longer talking to White people about Race** by Reni Eddo-Lodge 2018.
 - **Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging** by Afua Hirsch, 2018.
 - **We Need To Talk About Race: Understanding the Black Experience in White Majority Churches Paperback** by Ben Lindsay, 2019.
 - <http://www.pipwilson.com/p/blob-tree.html>
 - <https://onbeing.org/civil-conversations-project/better-conversations-guide/>



CHAPTER 3 AFFIRMING PERSONHOOD

“Daughter,
your faith has
healed you. Go
in peace and be
freed from your
suffering.”

MARK 5:34

“Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”

As we have sought to understand what enables a conversation to become creative one idea has come up again and again – the importance of affirming people as ‘persons’ - their personhood.

By ‘personhood’ we mean *the wonder and worth of just the fact of their existence and humanity*. Being a ‘person’ is not about what we do or the skills we have or don’t have. It is our worth just for existing.

We can also take this further and say our personhood results in ‘agency’: the difference we make in the world by our existence. Whether we are able to take action in a situation or not, we still have an impact, however small. As Anthony Reddie writes “God’s freedom to act and to be an infinite, transcendent being is bestowed upon humanity, who also possess these very same qualities of self-definition, transcendence, and agency” (2018, p. 8).

This is at the heart of many of the more practical elements such as the physical space or the roles other people play. For people to connect and learn from each other in what we describe as a creative conversation, they must be recognised and respected as a ‘person’. Furthermore, they need to have space to exercise their agency in the situation. In fact, recognising one another’s personhood is the very essence of a creative conversation.



WHAT HELPS TO ENABLE CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS?

1. NAMING THE PERSONHOOD OF OTHERS

“What do you feel about it? You matter in this situation too”

Recognising, respecting and giving space for the personhood and agency of other people in conversations is the foundation for true connection and for the conversation to become creative.

“I feel like I’ve really seen something of who you are today, thank you for sharing yourself” The inequalities in our society along lines of race, class, position, gender, income etc. lead to some people finding it more difficult to acknowledge their own personhood (if they have been systematically marginalised by society) and other people finding it more difficult to respect the personhood of others (if they experience privilege and make assumptions about others, seeing them as ‘less than’ in some way). Meeting as persons across these divides is at the heart of creative conversations.

2. PARTICIPATING AS A LEARNER

“Tell me more about...” Simply, coming into a conversation with an openness and expectation that we will learn from our conversation partner/s is an important starting point.

“I know I’m on a journey but this is where I’m at right now.” Confidently expressing our personhood rather than being self-protective is vital to enabling creative conversations. It does involve being willing to be vulnerable and having self-awareness about any unhealed wounds we may bring to the conversation. Expressing our own personhood goes alongside giving space for others to express theirs. It is not dominating or insisting that we are right, it is simply bringing ourselves as we are.

3. BUILDING SOLIDARITY

“Yes, that’s what I dream of for our young people too!” Discovering a shared hope, longing or desire can be a profoundly connecting experience. It forges bonds and can help build our empathy for people who may seem very different from us in other respects. Gently building trust over time by respecting and giving space for the personhood of conversation participants can lead to people recognising their *oneness*. That even though they are not *the same*, in their common humanity they are, in some way united.

“The way you describe that really reminds me of my own journey...”

Discovering experiences in common and identifying with someone else’s story can be powerful in helping us see people as ‘persons’. Recognising shared experiences in the past builds a foundation for the conversation to become creative, for participants to join in mutual discovery together for their future lives.

“Wow! We are getting somewhere.” Articulating out loud what we notice in a conversation can consolidate a new insight which has arisen within the group, and also helps individuals grow in self-awareness. When we are looking for a creative conversation it is easy to focus on those who are eloquent, who are recognised, or who have a lot to say. But new insight often comes from hearing people who are not usually listened to, people who are invisible in public conversation. Prioritise listening to marginalised voices and allowing yourself to learn from them.



WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS?

1. UNQUESTIONED WORLDVIEWS

“I don’t think that’s up for debate here!” As we saw above, every conversation is impacted by the worldviews that participants bring to it. When these are imposed or assumed and are not open to questioning there is no space for people to exercise their agency. This could lead to participants shutting down, saying only what they think the other person wants to hear. Alternatively, it could lead to anger and an assertion of personhood through strong disagreement. Either reaction is a sign that people are not feeling respected as persons with the agency to impact the situation. If participants feel quashed in this way you might notice times of restraint as they submit to the status quo, followed by release as they forcefully assert their personhood in the face of dominance.

2. RUSHING TO SAMENESS RATHER THAN BUILDING SHARED ONENESS

“Well we’re all the same here, aren’t we.” Asserting that participants all think the same or even are all ‘one’ without taking the time to build empathy and trust together can feel like dominance – not giving space for people to express their own personhood as different. This closes down conversation and erodes trust. Moving too quickly to ideas of sameness can deny differences which exist, and which are important in order to spark creativity in the conversation.

3. WITHOLDING OURSELVES

“Statistically speaking...” Focusing only on fact-sharing without including something of our own experiences or perspectives side-lines personhood and keeps the conversation on the surface. At worst it becomes an exchange between an ‘expert’ and ‘others’; mutuality is lost.

“Well, I know that there are people round here that always...” Telling stories about other people rather than sharing our own also inhibits expressions of personhood. It can be a way for the storyteller to avoid vulnerability, but it also objectifies those talked about, meaning that the conversation is restricted to generalities rather than deeply engaging in real-life situations.

BIG QUESTIONS

THE GIFT OF RECEIVING GOD IN ONE ANOTHER

We have suggested that conversations become creative when we respect and give space for each other’s personhood.

But arguably what is created in such moments is an encounter with God in and between conversation partners. Bishop and missionary John V. Taylor describes the Holy Spirit as working in the space between people, enabling them to see the image of God in one another. To read more about this and its significance for mission see Taylor’s book ‘The Go-Between God’, listed on page 40.

HOW CAN WE CULTIVATE AGENCY?

It is vital that we recognise the importance of cultivating personhood

and agency, along with the ways in which we so often default to making people passive, doing things for them instead of with them and reducing them to recipients of *our* agency. In the light of this you may be asking: how do I foster or facilitate the agency of others? It’s a good question but an even better one might be: how do I *recognise* the agency of others? Everyone has the capacity to act in some way within a situation, it may vary widely from person to person but it is there. Equally, it might be expressed positively or perhaps defensively, in protest at being side-lined. Cultivating agency starts with changing our fundamental assumptions that some people have more to bring than others. Instead, when we start from the conviction that everyone has different gifts to share and different ways in which they express themselves we start to *expect* people to exercise their agency, and

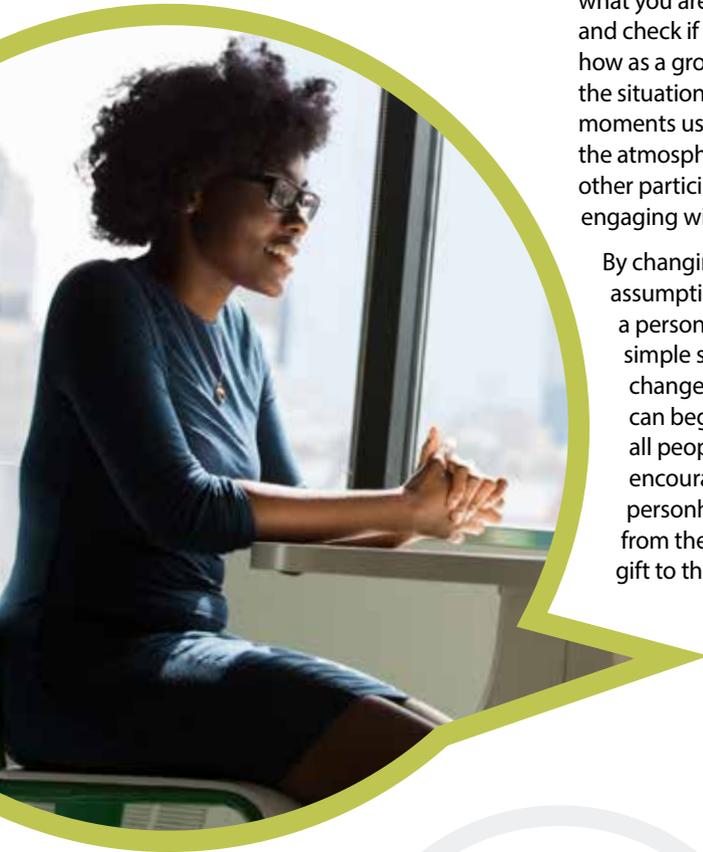
A Love
one
another

automatically leave space, or make room, for people to act in a situation.

This can feel counter intuitive when many of our models of leadership or helping involve 'doing for' people, coming with our agendas or strategies which leave no space for the agency of others. So, some simple tactics which help us relate person to person can be useful. Firstly, ask questions. If

you are not sure about what a person might think about something or how they might feel about participating just ask! Be aware that making assumptions fails to give the other person the opportunity to make a decision, thereby undermining their personhood. Secondly, share responsibility for the dynamics in the room by naming them. If you sense that a conversation suddenly feels awkward, bored or anxious gently share what you are sensing with the group and check if others feel the same and how as a group you might respond to the situation. Trying to gloss over such moments usually involves overruling the atmosphere, which again makes other participants passive, rather than engaging with it together.

By changing our underlying assumptions about who counts as a person, and by employing some simple strategies to practically change our interactions, we can begin to more naturally see all people as 'persons' and to encourage them to exercise their personhood so that we can learn from them and receive their unique gift to the world.



Sit quietly for a few moments and notice your breathing.

Become aware of the sensations of your feet on the floor and your body on the chair where you are sitting.

TIME TO REFLECT

Take some deep breaths and notice your lungs filling and relaxing with each one. Right now, as you are, you are a 'person', loved, worthy and gifted, simply with existence. What's more, right now, as you are, you make a difference in the world. You take up space and can influence the people and situations around you. This is true of every human being.

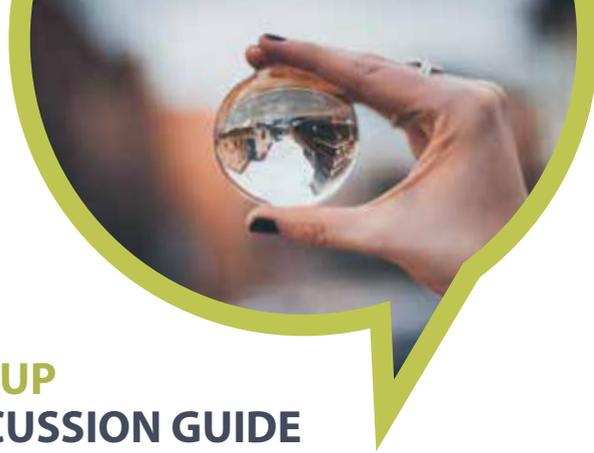
Reflect on your experiences over the last few weeks and this chapter drawing on these questions if they are helpful.

- What did I do differently in my conversations in response to the chapter on Shaping Stories? What did I learn from the experience?
- How do I feel about the idea of personhood? Do I find it easier to see myself and others as worthy for what we do or say rather than simply for our existence?
- Do I tend to withhold myself in conversations, perhaps lacking confidence? Or can I go the other way and not leave space for others to express themselves?

Spend some time in prayer asking God to show you how you can both bring the unique gift of your personhood in your community and be an encourager of others to bring themselves, especially those who are usually left out.

What might you do next to act on these reflections? Take a look at the **GIVE IT A TRY** section below for some ideas.





In your small group or mission team reflect together on your actions over the last few weeks and this chapter using these questions.

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

- What worldviews have you become more aware of in yourselves over these last few weeks?
- Did you try to name differing perspectives in your conversations? What happened?
- Read the story of the woman with chronic bleeding in Mark 5:25-34 together. This encounter shows us Jesus' response to people who are crushed and left out in our societies.
 - ➔ How does Jesus give space for this woman's personhood?
 - ➔ What message would this have sent to the crowd who witnessed it?
- Do you find it easy to recognise the personhood of people who are different from you?
- How can you use the strategies of asking questions and sharing responsibility for a conversation in your setting?

Consider what you might do next to respond to the ideas in this chapter. Take a look at the **GIVE IT A TRY** section below for some ideas. In prayer thank God for the gift of each person in your group, and each person in your community, simply for existing.

Having spent some time in reflection, how will you take action?

GIVE IT A TRY

- Reflect on the conversations in a group of people you meet regularly. Are there some people who don't always seem to bring themselves into the conversation? Why might that be? Are they lacking confidence in their own personhood or is the presence of others so large that there is no room? What could you do to create more mutuality in that situation?
- Try setting up a creative conversation (refer to the other chapters in this guide to help you). Ask people to participate and explain to them what you are hoping to do. Let them know that participating means bringing themselves to the conversation and encourage them that as a group you can help less confident people speak out and more dominant people listen more. Try it together and afterwards reflect as a group on how it went using these questions:
 - ➔ What did we see of each other through our conversation?
 - ➔ Did it feel like a mutual conversation in which everyone participated equally?
 - ➔ What new insights did we notice together?
 - ➔ Do we want to try this again?

FURTHER READING & RESOURCES

- <http://restorativejustice.org/>
- <https://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/areas-of-research/trust-peace-social-relations/>
- <https://www.acornchristian.org/about-us/>
- **The Go-Between God** by John V. Taylor, 1972.
- **Respectable: Crossing the Class Divide** by Lynsey Hanley, 2017.





“What do you
want me to do
for you?”

LUKE 18:41

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CHAPTER 4
**THE ROLES
PEOPLE PLAY**

“What do you want
me to do for you?”

**Most conversational
settings involve
different people
taking a variety of
roles. This chapter
focuses specifically
on people who
might host the
conversation in
some way.**

This could be you if you are thinking of trying to facilitate creative conversations; it could be as hands-off as an organisation providing the space for the gathering and thereby setting the tone a little, or as involved as a translator who might help conversation happen across different languages. Whether a conversation includes such host people and how they behave, will have a bearing on how creative the conversation can be. It's important to acknowledge that people often fall into specific roles even in very informal, spontaneous conversations. While much of this chapter refers to conversations that are intentionally convened it will also be relevant for spontaneous interactions, and can help you become more aware of the roles you often slip into and those that others adopt.

In the light of the need to affirm the personhood of participants and give space for their agency one question you might consider is whether there needs to be a host or convenor at all. If you are hoping to be a part of intentional creative conversations in your community, how might the organisation of these be as collaborative as the conversation itself? Developing self-awareness about where power lies in your situation can help you to mitigate against any damage it might cause. For example, don't assume that because you are the church you have moral authority to lead such an initiative or assume that the church building is the right place to do it. This risks





inviting people to a conversation on your terms and on your turf, and is unlikely to help people fully be themselves.

To enable the mutuality and equality needed for a creative conversation we must be aware of the different roles people play in our conversations and talk openly about them. Where there is a need for a helping person such as a host, facilitator or translator, consider carefully what they bring and the power dynamics that their involvement might lead to. Wherever possible let them be a full participant rather than an authoritative outsider to the conversation, encouraging them to bring their full selves while giving space for the personhood and agency of others.

WHAT HELPS TO ENABLE CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS?

1. RECOGNISING THAT "EVERYONE HAS A PIECE OF THE WISDOM"

"No one here is the 'expert', but all of us have 'expertise' to bring." Deliberately setting this mutual tone from the start respects people's personhood, recognising that "everyone has a piece of the wisdom" and gives space for them to bring their unique 'expertise' i.e. their experiences and insight, to the conversation.

"Let's nominate Jean, she's a good listener. She can keep time for us and if anyone feels uncomfortable they can let her know and she'll help us talk about it." While, as we've seen, a facilitator or convenor is not always necessary, in some settings you may decide to nominate one. The best approach is for them to be a full participant with the host role being a part of them bringing their personhood to the conversation. This can help participants relax and enable more open conversation. Just be careful that the facilitator is able to help the group navigate difficult subjects together rather than just smoothing over difference or affirming the status quo.

2. TALKING ABOUT THE ROLES WE PLAY

"How powerful do you feel in daily life? Where do you think that comes from? Job, race, family status, gender?" "Do you think your confidence in your views comes from your role in society? I don't think I have that confidence – maybe poverty damages your self-esteem." Practicing talking about our roles and the ways we experience power and personhood can help us name difficult dynamics and learn from each other.

3. DRAW ON PERSPECTIVES FROM OUTSIDE THE GROUP

"I saw a comment about this online, it made me wonder..." Referring to outside sources such as social media can open up conversation and help identify good conversation partners. It also provides a way of extending a conversation beyond one time and place.

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS?

1. RELYING ON A MEDIATOR

"You know everyone, you should lead us." Some apprehension is natural in a situation where people who are different to one another are meeting for the first time or in a different setting. There may be a strong temptation to look to someone to mediate the encounter due to fear or a lack of confidence. But this will inevitably mean that people connect more with the mediator than with each other. Creative conversations involve people engaging person to person. Talking about any nervousness and the hope to listen well and learn from each other, can enable a group not to default to a mediator but to push through the nerves and communicate person to person.



2. LETTING SOMEONE ELSE TAKE THE WEIGHT OF OUR DIFFERENCES

“Well we all disagree with them!” Becoming aware of how different you are from others can feel uncomfortable. People often try to avoid this discomfort by letting someone else name the difference (a buffer) or by finding a common enemy (a scape-goat). Creative conversations happen when we are at peace with our differences and so can own them, name them and not try to ‘fix’ them.

3. HIDING BEHIND AN ‘EXPERT’

“Oh he can handle all the difficult questions.” Creative conversations are not about knowing the answers or sharing information. They are about sharing our experiences and wisdom and learning from each other. Everyone will have things they know more about than others, but when a group defaults to an ‘expert’ and makes their word authoritative they fail to take responsibility for sharing themselves and mutuality in the group is lost.

4. DOMINATING BEHAVIOUR

“I think we all agree that... don’t we.” Dominant personalities or people who feel very confident in the situation due to their position or role can squash the expression of personhood from others and can fail to give space for others to exercise agency. They might confidently assert claims without giving room for others to disagree, or act as a gatekeeper to the conversation, making it difficult for others to join. Such dominance is not always loud or aggressive, it may be softly spoken but nonetheless powerful. If the situation is one where people are invited to be vulnerable, dominant personalities can lead to people being guarded and anxious, self-conscious rather than openly self-aware. The issue here is that power is concentrated in one person rather than shared equally.

BIG QUESTIONS

WHAT ABOUT LEADERSHIP?

By emphasising mutuality and equality you might be wondering ‘what about leadership?’

Leadership is often understood and experienced as a figure (frequently male) in a position of authority, who knows more about things than other people and therefore is expected to tell us what to do and how. This view of leadership is so familiar that we assume it is the only way, and often people in positions of leadership feel a lot of pressure trying to live up to it.

We know that everyone is uniquely made in God’s image and their experience of life is different. We also know that people flourish when they are valued for who they are and when they are able to make a contribution to the world. But for everyone to be seen in this way and therefore

flourish we need a different kind of leadership. Instead of most people simply doing what they’re told, we need leaders who have conversations and collaborate with people, drawing on the unique gifts and skills of others. The gift is that this frees leaders from the pressure to be perfect or to know all the answers. It is a more human way of being both for those in positions of responsibility and those who work alongside them.

To find out more about collaborative leadership see the links and references below.



Take some time to ponder this chapter and consider your experiences of conversation in the light of it.

TIME TO REFLECT

- Have you had a go at gathering people for a creative conversation recently? What have you learned in the process?
- What kind of role do you find yourself falling into in group settings? Why might that be? Is it helpful for enabling creative conversations?
- Reflect on your own gifts, skills and life experiences. Are you able to listen well and give space for the agency of others or is it something you find hard? Are there others you know who clearly have those gifts? Can you encourage them in using those skills by sharing with them what you see in them and how important you feel it is.

Can you journal some specific insights that are emerging for you through reading this guide? Thank God for speaking to you through this process and think about how you might continue to grow in participating in creative conversations. As usual, check out the **GIVE IT A TRY** section for some suggestions for next steps.

In your small group or mission team reflect together on your actions over the last few weeks and this chapter using these questions.

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

- Did you have a go at gathering people for a creative conversation after your last session? If so, what happened and what did you learn?
- When Jesus encountered the blind beggar in Luke 18:35-43 it would have been understandable had he simply healed the man's sight and asked questions later. But he didn't. Jesus asked the man "what do you want me to do for you?" Reading this passage together, reflect on how Jesus' ministry enabled others rather than 'lorded it over' them.
- Do you recognise yourselves in the descriptions of different roles in this chapter?
- Can you think of times when you have seen facilitating a conversation done really well? What did you like about it? Or a time when it was done badly? What effect did it have on you and other participants?

What are the next steps for your group in participating in creative conversations? Spend a little time praying about this together and draw on the **GIVE IT A TRY** section if it is helpful.

Challenge yourself/selves to have a go at something new in your conversations.

GIVE IT A TRY

- Think about conversations you already participate in, how do the different people involved conduct themselves?
- Try participating in a conversation organised by someone else and notice the roles people play. For example, attend a 'death café' (<https://deathcafe.com/>), a world café event, or an interfaith conversation in your area.
- What could you change in the way you participate in conversations to help avoid people defaulting to the 'expert', relying on a mediator or using a safe person as a buffer?

FURTHER READING & RESOURCES

- **Missing the Point: Leadership, Brian D. McLaren in Adventures in Missing the Point** by Brian D. McLaren and Tony Campolo, 2010.
- **Who do we choose to be: Facing reality, claiming leadership, restoring sanity** by Margaret Wheatley, 2017.
- **For resources and discussion of facilitation methods that promote mutuality and equality see the Art of Hosting website:** <http://www.artofhosting.org/>



“What do you want me to do for you?”

LUKE 18:41

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

ECCLESIASTES 3:11

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CHAPTER 5 VIRTUALLY A CREATIVE CONVERSATION?

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

Is it possible to have a creative conversation online, and how can we make the most of online tools in our community connections?

We began research for this guide in 2018 and now find ourselves writing the final draft in 2020 in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic and a UK lockdown. Lockdown has involved a range of measures keeping the majority of us at home for much of our time over the last few months, restricting our interactions with people outside of our immediate households to two meters distance and, increasingly as the distance reduces, to wearing face masks. The risk of infection has led to a wariness of social interaction, and perhaps imperceptibly to a suspicion of ‘other people’: *“Have they washed their hands?” “Why aren’t they wearing a mask?” “You call that two meters!”* These fear-induced responses impact our wider community connections while at the same time many people are also adapting to conducting their relationships in different ways, online via social media or video conferencing software such as Facetime, Zoom and Teams. In the light of this it seems appropriate to offer some reflection on creative conversations online, and in a time of pandemic. We have drawn on the research conducted for this guide but recognise that online interactions were not our initial focus, and so any comments here are simply an invitation to more reflection and research.

There are two key areas which feel important to name: firstly the gifts, challenges and importance of building community in a time of



physical distancing; and secondly the distinctiveness of video conferencing as a mode of conversation, and its potential for creative conversations. Inevitably in such a unique moment in history, there seem to be more questions than answers right now, which is perhaps in itself a gift. By articulating what we notice and the questions it raises without rushing to conclusions we remain open to learning as we all, as a diverse society, navigate uncharted territory together.

BUILDING COMMUNITY IN A TIME OF PHYSICAL DISTANCING

There has been much attention paid during lockdown to the upsurge in local community spirit. From neighbours shopping for one another, community groups rallying to deliver prescriptions and the weekly Clap for Carers initiative,

in both formal and informal ways part of our response to lockdown has been to look out for those in our immediate neighbourhoods. What is interesting about this is that it has often been reported as novel, surprising even; as a 'heroic' activity, to be applauded. The assumption seems to be that we are, as humans, basically disinterested in our communities and so any behaviour which is more inclined towards community solidarity is taking us out of our natural habitat. While it is true that much of our Western, contemporary, consumer-oriented society is set up to focus on us as individuals and cause us to forget our need of others, this is not our inherent human condition. We are sociable people, made in God's image: as and for community. We are *interdependent*, vulnerable in relationships and needing the support of others around us not only for survival but in order to flourish. We are also dependent on the ecosystem of our planet, part of a much bigger picture which hinges on mutuality and care.

Perhaps, because of our cultural context of individualist consumerism, our community skills are a little rusty. But one of the central ways that people have been limbering up in this time of crisis is via the street Whatsapp or neighbourhood Facebook group. These groups have provided a way

for residents to connect with one another, share resources and needs and build camaraderie in an otherwise isolating time. They have offered hints of a more local, connected and rooted way to do life together in communities and arguably they have been one of the great signs of hope within the challenge of the pandemic. So how can we maximise the potential of these green shoots of community living? What are the questions they ask of us? And what does our research about creative conversations have to offer us in this scenario?

Embracing social media as an expression of local community solidarity beyond the pandemic would seem to be an important step. It draws people in in specific ways and enables grassroots connectivity and responsiveness. However, a first question has to be about inclusion – who is left out of the social media world? A lack of internet access, restricted financial resources leading to limited data, unfamiliarity with new and emerging technologies, a personality type which simply doesn't relish the no holds barred banter of internet chat. All of the above can lead to exclusion of whole groups of people from our social media gatherings. This means that, as in any gathering, there has to be intentional reaching out, asking who is not here and enabling connecting points beyond the existing group.

Relatedly, enabling groups who have found one another online to bridge

to face-to-face connection and relationship for the longer term is a challenge. Social media groups can create their own bubble, in which people feel uninhibited in a particular way as they post comments from the safety and intimacy of their own personal space and their own phone. This can often *feel* like 'private' communication, whereas meeting the same group of new people in the 'public' of a street or community centre would feel very different. For a social media group in a time of crisis to transition to a mixed economy of relationships conducted both on social media and face-to-face requires a healthy group culture online and a willingness to find ways to connect offline (on doorsteps, in gardens) and to discover the longer term shared interests and concerns of group members. Approaches such as





effort and intention online, as we engage alone from our own homes, rather than being immediately aware of the physical presence of another person. Self-awareness and openness to others are vital for online groups to be life-giving, and engaging in these spaces as ourselves, participating and encouraging others to participate is the starting point in creating a culture of mutuality.

CAN VIDEO CONFERENCING ENABLE A CREATIVE CONVERSATION?

With so many of us using video conferencing for social, church and work related gatherings, new possibilities are being opened up alongside the losses felt by many in isolation. There has been much commentary on the rise in people attending live-streamed church services during lockdown with many seeing this as an important missional moment for our country. Here though we are focusing not on live-streaming, which is essentially a consumer experience, but on the potential for creative conversations among people who are different using video conferencing technology such as Zoom and Teams. This software is participative, creating a virtual

meeting room in which people gather from their own locations. But, as you may well have noticed, engaging in conversation in these spaces has its own dynamics and comes with both gift and challenge.

In terms of inclusion, while video conferencing suffers from many of the same access issues as social media described above, taking gatherings online has meant that they are much *more* accessible to people with disabilities or chronic illness, parents of young children or simply over a much wider geographic distance. One of the interesting tensions of these times has been the hyper-local neighbourhood support networks alongside church and other usually local gatherings attracting national and even international participants. This raises good questions about how the gains in terms of inclusivity can be continued going forward and whether a wider national or international reach is appropriate for particular expressions of church and community gatherings. The place and nature of 'locality' in our lives is now both more concrete and more fluid. How the significance of our immediate localities *and* our national and global interdependence can be fostered into the future is an exciting challenge to be faced.

In chapter one we considered the physical environment of a conversation and on whose 'turf' it occurs. In one sense a virtual meeting room is the host's turf and managing the technical

aspects of hospitality, welcome and enabling full participation is an important task in fostering mutual sharing, setting the scene for a creative conversation. However, participants also each engage from their own turf, and one of the distinct dynamics of video conferencing conversations is the interaction with the background of each participant. There is something uniquely intimate about finding yourself looking into someone's home behind them as you enter an online gathering. The curtains, pictures, pets and people often become a part of the conversation and are a way for us to get to know our conversation partners in new ways – in their 'private' space rather than simply their 'public' presentation of themselves. This has the potential to aid creative conversation in that it invites the





sharing of our whole selves rather than the careful editing that many of us do in other contexts.

Another distinctive of the video conference is the need to avoid disrupting the sound quality by interrupting one another. Many of us will have had the experience over the last few months of meeting people online who we would usually meet in person, and the difficulty of adjusting our usual easy banter to an online setting. It is a reminder of just how often we interrupt, talk over or across one another. Furthermore, it draws attention to the fact that many of our in person group gatherings are more a collection of intersecting and

shifting one-to-one or one-to-two encounters rather than the enforced face to face with the whole group on a video conference, a dynamic which can feel unnatural and takes some getting used to. Silence in this online environment can be more common, due to the need not to interrupt, and also more awkward. But when silence is acknowledged, and people are given permission to think and take time to reflect before they share, it can be a powerful experience.

It would seem that video conferencing does have potential as a setting for creative conversations. While it is important to state that virtual conversation is not our natural way of interacting, it does tend towards promoting careful listening, focused conversation and thoughtful contributions, and can engage groups of people who might not otherwise be able to meet together. But for conversation to become creative participants must be engaging as equals, with their personhood respected and affirmed. In online settings therefore the role of meeting host and/or facilitator has to be handled with considerable care as there is an inherent privileging of the person with the power over the technology. Also, groups need to recognise who is missing or left out of the conversation, acknowledging

the loss of valuable perspectives which inevitably results.

The experience of a national lockdown has been different for each of us, and corporate language of us all being “in this together” has been rightly tempered by the counter statement “but not all in the same boat”. Within the context of restriction of personal freedoms and a national narrative of responsibility and “following the rules” we have seen people respond in a variety of ways. Large scale obedience, altruism and a fundamental willingness to help someone else where we can has underpinned our responses to the pandemic. Alongside this, anger and protest have emerged at the injustices which this situation has exposed in our society, in relation to under-valued key workers in health and social care and particularly BAME communities who have been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19.

In chapter three we alluded to a pattern of restraint and release which can occur when people are constrained by dominant characters or worldviews and feel unable to express their own personhood in a situation. They may, for a time, restrain themselves, submitting to the dominant view; but the stress of this may become too much and they may assert their personhood forcefully in order to redress and equalise the situation. In a group conversation this is a micro act of protest, just as dominance is a micro act of aggression. In these last months we have seen

both injustice and protest come to the fore in the micro and macro settings of local conversations and national movements such as Black Lives Matter, in the context of extreme national stress. These unique times have something to teach us about the essential personhood of every human being, and how far we still have to go in our society to truly recognise and value this. In both our micro and our macro contexts, connection, and therefore creative conversations, will only be fostered as we reach for understanding, promote kindness and gentleness even as we challenge, and as we resist judgement and the dehumanising of others in our communities, society and world.





Sit with your phone, tablet and laptop or computer and become aware of God's presence with you, you might find it helpful to light a candle.

TIME TO REFLECT

These tools carry the weight of all of our online interactions: joyful connection with family and friends, work meetings and tasks, comedy cat videos, comparison with the lives of others and difficult or offensive worldviews. Take time to receive God's peace and wisdom in all this mixedness. You might consider:

- How do you relate to online communication, is it a source of life or a frustrating challenge?
- Do you participate as yourself in conversations on social media? If not what prevents you from doing so? How might you intervene if a group is becoming dominated by a particular person or worldview?
- Where do you see others being dehumanised in your community or in our society? How might you respond?

Spend some time in prayer and reflection on what **specific actions** you might take in response to the ideas in this chapter.

In your group, if you usually meet in person perhaps try meeting online to discuss this chapter.

Or, if you are usually online, try meeting face-to-face if you can. Reflect together on your journey in creative conversations so far and the ideas we have offered here.

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

- Reflect on your own experiences of online conversations, do you agree with the thoughts presented in this chapter?
- Ecclesiastes 3:11 is an expression of hope and flexibility along with depth and uncertainty. God gives beauty to all things, and counts humanity as infinitely precious; but we don't understand it all. Reflect together on the new, emerging and unexpected aspects of life and conversation with those who are different from you. How easy do you find it to be at peace with not being able to 'fathom' it all out?
- How can you handle difference and dissent well in online conversations?
- What might practising kindness and resisting judgement look like in your conversational settings?



Pray together for vision and wisdom as you engage in online conversations, and consider what might come next for your group as you draw to the end of this guide



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A GUIDE TO CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS

CONCLUSION

Now let your reflection lead to some new actions in your community.

GIVE IT A TRY

- If you haven't already, could you experiment with video conferencing as a space for a creative conversation?
- Challenge yourself to engage more courageously in your local social media groups and try bridging the social media world and the street by meeting a fellow group member in person.

FURTHER READING & RESOURCES

- **Missio Dei In A Digital Age** edited by Jonas Kurlberg, 2020
- **The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online** edited by Heidi Campbell, 2020. Available electronically from <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/187891>.
- **Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture** by Heidi Campbell, 2016.
- **Y 45 Youth Ministry in a Digital Age: Understanding and Reaching a Generation of Digital Natives** by Liz Dumain, Grove Books.
- **Durham University's Centre for Digital Theology have a range of reading and resources available through their website:** <https://www.dur.ac.uk/digitaltheology/ewo/>

We hope that you have enjoyed reading and reflecting on this Guide to Creative Conversations, and that you have found it helpful as you seek to grow in your relationship with God and your mission.

This resource is the product of a research collaboration between **Church Mission Society, Urban Life** and the **International Baptist Theological Seminary**.

Funded by Common Awards (Durham University) we gathered an international group of five researchers to help us explore the question "what makes for generative conversations between people who are socially or culturally different from one another?" Researchers undertook participant observation in different conversational contexts and were then themselves interviewed about their experiences. A collaborative process of data analysis led to the ideas arising in this resource.

For more information about the research process or to chat with us more about the themes in this guide please contact **Cathy Ross** (CMS) **Anna Ruddick** (Urban Life) or **Mike Pears** (IBTS). We pray that you will be increasingly aware of God's presence and enlivening power as you experiment with missional encounters in your communities and networks. May you discover the gift of God's image in those who are somehow different from you as you engage in the richness of creative conversations.

