

## Talking About Things That Matter—A Way of Deepening Community

### Introduction to the Model

This model comes out of an awareness that our society is deeply divided, and it seems harder than ever to talk across those divides. We have seen this wider societal dynamic impact our congregational life, and our awareness of this division has awakened in us a deep desire to grow our capacity to have conversations about things that matter. It also weaves together several threads that have emerged in our congregation:

- The desire to gain skills in listening to others, especially those who think differently.
- The desire to practice skills that would equip us to bridge divides in our congregation and in the wider community.
- The desire to practice talking about things that matter.
- The desire to know one another's story more deeply.
- The desire to share table fellowship with one another.
- The desire to ground ourselves more deeply in our *Baptismal Vows*.
- The awareness that one of the chief ways we form ourselves to live the way of Jesus is *by watching one another do life as faithful, struggling people*.

We developed the *Practices for Talking About Things That Matter* from norms we had developed in our Book Study Group and Vestry. We now use these norms throughout our congregation to good effect.

This model blends a structured conversation with unstructured fellowship time over a shared meal, ending with shared prayer and worship.

One of the unusual facets of this model is *the way we share*. Each person shares their story without interruption and without feedback, not even clarifying questions. At first, this seemed rigid and awkward, but it has proved to be invaluable. We have learned that we rarely listen without formulating a response. We are learning that we hear differently when we are fully attentive without thinking of our rebuttal. We are also discovering the freedom that comes in sharing when others are not interrupting. This also protects the group from offering advice or counsel, which often is not desired, nor are we qualified to give. We have also learned that holding sacred silence with someone in pain *is* a response of profound empathy. While we cannot fix or resolve the pain of another, our attentive silent presence does embody the presence of God and bearing witness to that presence with one another is powerful.

The *Conversation Prompts* have been our starting place. Feel free to use them, or to generate your own. In fact, this whole model is yours to use as the Spirit guides you and to adapt as seems best in your community. We started with these *Conversation Prompts* because we had an intuition that if we could understand the stories that have shaped us from our childhood and life experience and faith, then it might illuminate how we have come to think as we do about other matters of concern. We also believed that knowing these stories would allow us to see complexity in one another, and we sensed that we just might have more in common than we think we do. With time and practice, we have begun to tackle “hot issues” making good use of the *Practices for Talking About Things That Matter*.

It has been a fascinating journey. It has not been perfect, and this too has been an opportunity to learn and go deeper with one another in community. We hope you will join us in this grand experiment as we seek to gain the skills and generosity of spirit we need to be the ministers of reconciliation that Jesus calls us to be, to be repairers of the breach, to help knit back together the fabric of our society. We wish you peace and blessing along the way.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks  
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC