



Civility across Differences

Karen Georgia Thompson
General Minister and President

We are in the midst of yet another national election cycle in the United States. In these days leading up to the election, the political ads are appearing on our televisions with every commercial break, while the fliers and circulars are finding their way into our mailboxes, daily touting one candidate over another. And, if that is not enough, our social media feeds have become repositories for surveys, polls on our political preferences, and the political opinions of friends, family, and complete strangers. With all of this activity, it seems it is becoming harder and harder to engage in civil discourse around the issues that are presenting themselves in the public square. The comments we witness are sometimes vitriolic, leaving very little room for questions or discussions. Opinions are laid bare on social media platforms with comments sections on posts becoming argumentative and even hostile.

Our inability to have conversation on difficult topics is evident. The political divide continues to widen, with few options for bridging the chasm between positions on the most important issues that affect our everyday lives and those of others. Civility in the public square and the exercise of civil discourse seems to be escaping us, as our communities become more polarized around issues of justice and solutions to social ills.

The truth is that any topic we choose has the possibility of multiple opinions, varying interpretations of causes, and a variety of solutions. And while we know these things to be true, we are still challenged to listen to the opinions of others, particularly when those opinions are experienced as different from the opinions we hold. Rather than taking the time to listen, there is a tendency to defend the positions we hold and to experience the opinions of

the other as a threat.

Civil discourse involves more than just politeness; it involves disagreement without disrespect, seeking common ground, listening beyond preconceptions, and remaining present in dialogues despite deep disagreements. The practice of civil discourse seems to be lost among us. Where diversity of opinion is present, we have diminished the skills we need to navigate conversations among ourselves that afford the opportunity for us to learn and grow together in community. Civil discourse requires time and intention. Listening to each other with respect should be an exercise of our faith and our commitment to love our neighbors as ourselves.

It is easy to spend our time with people who hold the same opinions we do and make the same choices we do. Yet, even in the church, there are a variety of opinions present and different ways people vote when they go to the polls. Voting is a right we hold dearly. The right to vote transcends political affiliations. Each person has the right to vote. A person does not have to tell another person who they decided to vote for or who they are going to vote for, and before we even get to the polls, no one has to share who they are going to vote for and why. If we choose to discuss our voting decisions, civility does not alienate or judge; it is marked by mutual respect, beginning with mutual consent for the conversation itself.

The practice of civil discourse invites us to share in ways that provide an opinion on the subject without trying to convince the other that our opinion is right and theirs is wrong. If we want to be heard, then the telling of our story should be couched in respect for all. When we are listening to someone else, attentive listening with an amiable posture helps to further our commitment to conversation.

Our differences do not have to be divisive, whether in the church or in society. Our commitment to loving each other is a foundation for civility and civil discourse. Hatred, prejudice, fear, and dismissive comments continue to widen the divide between us. We can choose to engage each other with civility even through our differences of opinions, differing values, and through another election cycle.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson is the General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ.

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