**Facilitating a Local Conversation**

**The basics:**

**1. Be yourself.** You can do this. Thank you for taking the lead in hosting the conversation.

Take a breath and remind yourself of whatever skills you already bring to the table: compassion, a relationship with others, local knowledge, a sense of humour, gravitas, fluidity. Maybe you happen to be the kind of person who really cares — or handles fear well — or is graceful under stress — or is human. Share that! You may already know the group. All groups of people will have tensions (positive and negative), issues of social identity, varied knowledge, and different people’s motivations. Know the group - but trust yourself to host a conversation.

**2. Within the conversation engage people frequently and in varied ways.**

The very best way to keep people from going off into other things is to keep them engaged

with the conversation. As a general rule, we recommend aiming to not have anyone talk for more than 3-5 minutes at a time without pausing for at least a simple engagement of participants.

Try to make sure you don’t always engage everyone the same way. For example, don’t always

ask yes/no questions. Don’t allow people to talk for to long and dominate the conversation. It may help to set ground rules for the conversation at the beginning: **Remind people of the pre-read in good time. This will give them chance to engage at the right level.**

**Ground rules: (Shared on a separate resource sheet also)**

Everyone has something to share.

Everyone has something to receive.

Listen actively and attentively.

Ask for clarification if you are confused.

Do not interrupt one another.

Challenge one another but do so respectfully.

Critique, or discuss ideas, not people.

Everyone takes responsibility for the quality of the conversation.

Build on one another’s comments; work towards shared understanding and quality feedback.

Consider anything said in the conversation as confidential, do not share another’s story without their permission.

Trust the conversation host, and make this as easy as possible for them.

**3. Manage energy (yours and the groups!)**

Limit session length. We have planned these sessions at 90 minutes, with some pre-read. If you think you need longer time, then feel free to shorten the meeting and hold a couple of sessions spread over time. You are free to adapt the material and resources to your own community.

**4. Honour people’s emotional state**

Both in this crisis (Covid-19) and in their emotional attachment to the subject of our conversation.

People care about the things we will be talking about. Sometimes the most eloquent and experienced people can find it difficult to talk about matters of faith. Sometimes the deepest thought can be expressed in simplicity.

You are going to find people in your sessions tired, angry, and impatient. They may be passionate, fired up and highly engaged. Stress over life under the threat of covid-19 will cause many to be at odds with loved ones and feel powerless. A good many will be struggling to cope. People are going to be over-stimulated, fearful and reactive - every participant is going to bring their emotional state

into their sessions. And in the middle of a global pandemic, that is going to be an ongoing,

unrelenting wave. Don’t be afraid to call it out, name what is happening, and take a short break.

**5. Track participation**

A common challenge in leading a group conversation is that we end up in a one-way conversation with people talking at each other and not with each other. As a ‘host’ you can moderate this – if asking for feedback don’t always pick the quickest response. Instead of picking the first person to indicate they have something to say look for opportunities to support less-heard voices. Make a point of being invitational. Make sure all people can participate fully. Try to always provide alternative options for participation. Set people up for success. For example, rather than asking “who doesn’t understand this” you can ask “what haven’t they explain clearly.”

**6. Release yourself and your group from perfection**

Don’t get us wrong — we really hope you have a great conversation – but also, we want a ‘good enough’ conversation! Prepare yourself for the reality that there will be bumps in the road.

There are things you can do to minimize a variety of problems, but the most important thing you can do is take a deep breath and prepare yourself to stay calm and do your best to support your group through whatever will inevitably come up.

Social distancing can be challenging. People are struggling, so creating new ways to stay connected is crucial to keeping us strong, mentally and physically healthy, well-balanced, and grounded. Patience, caring, and loving is our most important task, so let’s model it with wisdom and intention.Living out our faith is important to us, and we all do it in different ways, so ‘Love one another’ – and go easy on yourself!

**7. If holding the conversation online-**

**Practice the technology beforehand.**

Set up your video. Make sure your face can be seen. If you are on a phone, find a place to put it down so it is stable. Make sure you don’t have strong light coming from behind you. Consider the background, like a plain wall or a semi-tidy view of your house with minimal distractions. Try out the system. Make sure you can log-in. If you are using headphones or external monitors, test them.

Minimize people’s multitasking.

People on screens are often used to jumping from window-to-window to search the web, play music, and respond to a message. The temptation and likelihood of participants getting distracted or multitasking is significantly higher than when you are in-person. This challenge should not be underestimated. It impacts every aspect of how we hold conversations online. This means we have to keep people engaged.

**Some strategies:**

Set the expectation before your session: In emails or posts reminding people about your

online session, encourage participants to take steps that will help them have as few

distractions as possible. For example, say “When connecting, please join from the quietest

place with the strongest internet connection available.”

Set the tone at the beginning of your session: Naming that distractions are a challenge

can help participants pay attention during the session. Even better: invite everyone to

remove distractions at the beginning of a session. You can do this in a gentle, playful way.

“Prepare yourself to be fully present during the session. Do you need to remove a pet from

the room or hide your mobile phone? We won’t be using email during this session, so you

can close your email inbox, too, if it’s open!”

**Schedule breaks**. For a one and a half hour session, you might take as little as thirty seconds about half way through to invite people to stretch and look away from their computer or device to rest their eyes, etc. For a two hour session or more, giving 5-10 minutes in the middle for people to walk away from their computer and come back is ideal.

New online facilitators often try to squeeze every ounce of information from people’s videos. You can sometimes see if people have their heads turned elsewhere, are typing at the computer, or are smiling/frowning/laughing. But in our experience, what you see from people’s video ends up being guesswork — and can be very inaccurate. Is someone looking away because they’re bored, someone walked in, or they’re being thoughtful? Thankfully, there are other strategies:

**Use general check-in questions**. “Take a moment to type in the chat: is this clear so far?

What’s not clear still?”

Let people know you “see” them. The more you make it clear that you are reading the group in an ongoing way, the more that people will feel “seen.” The more seen people feel, the more they are likely to engage. They are also more likely to send you clear non-verbal signals through their web camera when they get the signal that someone is looking back through their screen.

Here are a few examples of what those signals might look like. The facilitator says:

“It looks like only about half the group has shared ideas in the chat box. If anyone

is having trouble with the chat, let us know, or you can share out loud.”

“I see [name] that you just came off mute. Is there something you’d like to add?”

“I see a lot of people are saying ‘yes’ in the chat box, so yes, let’s shift to talking

about the second topic.”

“It looks like [name] has stepped away, so we’ll come back to them when they’re

back.”

This takes attention but you will be well-rewarded by the effort.

**Ask for help. If possible, have a ‘tech host’ who can share the load.**

**Limit the number of people in an online conversation.** We have found that more than 8 brings a new dynamic, and 12 is to many for a conversation. If you need to go above 12 then consider holding two conversations or using break out rooms with facilitators to take notes.