

Space 4 Grace

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In 2015 the National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia received a report from its Multi and Cross-cultural Ministry Reference Committee. The report repeated an invitation to the wider church and Australian multicultural society more generally, to include the stories and experiences of diverse people in our processes and deliberations. By doing this we demonstrate valuing one another and the blessings of God in all our lives.

The invitation concluded:

“We invite people to meet in coffee shops and clubs, in lounge-rooms and around fine mats, at the dinner table and in parks, in the sands or on the beaches, in the shade of ancient trees and landscapes ... please talk about marriage (the specific focus of the time) ... please experience and nurture ‘one-anothering community’ in Christ: they are gifts of grace, and we do well to treasure our conversations about it.

[We] can model creating spaces of safety, even of silence, in which we as God’s people may hear each other’s voices, and in them the voice of the Holy Spirit herself. This is not about culture/language differences, but about how in our personal and communal living out of our faith in the One God, we discern, hear and respond to the Spirit of God in our midst. Delight(ing) in and risk(ing) living in God’s grace margin made possible through the acts of the Creator God in every land and place and people since creation itself.”

These are spaces for grace! In this booklet are foundations for, reflections on, and some tools and examples to aid God’s people in recognising and intentionally entering such space.

How to facilitate a conversation using *Space for Grace*

What is *Space for Grace*?

"Space for Grace" provides a method for community discernment. "Space 4 Grace" involves a commitment to:

1. Going beyond our normal boundaries of safety into a space where we trust the Spirit of God to move us into sacred relationships. We call this "the grace margin". This can be done with a trusted facilitator who assists in holding people to respectful behaviours
2. Forming a community of *respectful listening*, using *mutual invitation* to speak (see below) - allow room to listen - don't move into analysing or deconstructing people's stories but recognise that they are subjective and represent the reality that person has experienced
3. Identifying themes in common and of differences to be further explored
4. Sharing hospitality (e.g. break bread together, snacks, meals, Eucharist)
5. Covenanting to keep each other's stories as sacred (safe and treasured, because they are the stories of the children of God), only to be shared with the express permission of the story-teller
6. Continuing to research together (beyond the initial subjective stories) - identify what can help people to pursue discernment while still maintaining respect

... after that, groups usually get imaginative about what they might do next. Several groups I have worked with have entered into relational covenants and made commitments about what kind of relationships they can continue to pursue.

Goals

"Space for Grace" was developed over several years among culturally and linguistically diverse leaders, seeking to find ways to stay in community relationships, despite different backgrounds and world-views.

The first goal is to bring God's people together.

The second goal is to develop behaviours that will move from being a gathered community into *communitas* (God's Spirit-empowered community).

The third goal is to discern God's will for the community.

The fourth goal is to develop actions to live out being God's Spirit-Community.

Outline of Steps

Step 1	Prepare the Space and clarify the area to be addressed
Step 2	Introduce RESPECT Guidelines
Step 3	Introduce Mutual Invitation
Step 4	Active Listening
Step 5	Identification of Themes/areas for consideration/agenda items
Step 6	Validation of Themes/agenda - Check with Group
Step 7	Prioritize Themes/agenda to work on (park the others to be addressed later)
Step 8	Theme conversations
Step 9	Determine any directions or decisions the group agrees to pursue.
Step 10	Determine what will happen to the 'parked' themes.
Step 11	Report

This journey is not one that can be simply trimmed into an hour or so for convenience. Depending on how well a group knows and trusts one another, establishing a 'space for grace' may take a number of days, whether this consists of one meeting or is spread across a number of meetings. The process intends that every member of the group is understanding of and able to move to the next step together.

Throughout the Gathering, there needs to be structured space for building and strengthening relationships. Sharing in hospitality is an integral element in this.

Step 1 Prepare the Space and clarify the area to be addressed

Spiritual

Pray over the preparations and in the physical space (before, during and after!)

Physical

Welcoming Ensure a comfortable and defined space (use flowers, comfortable chairs?)

Offer refreshments, as hospitality-sharing is a key component.

Provide name-tags (how people wish to be called, but don't guess), spelled correctly

Symbols – that remind and shape us about who and whose we are (Bible, Candle?)

Practical – (something non-intimidating for recording data – flip-chart paper, sticky notes, whiteboard – where themes can be visibly parked for later attention)

Relational

Option 1 – See Sample Profile –prepare before so people can place these on a welcome wall. During the pre-gathering time, people can read each other's profiles.

Option 2 (with more time) – ask people to share about themselves, perhaps some central values about how they express their faith. Introductions should avoid sharing that emphasises power or privilege differences (i.e. This is an encouragement for people to relate with one another as people using personal insights, rather than status or authority.)

Emotional Be aware when people respond emotionally. People experiencing heightened emotions may not respond easily to logical or reasoned trains of thought. Remember the RESPECT Guidelines (following). Such responses are not inappropriate, but should be treated with care and wise guidance so as to remain respectful and respected, and not determine the direction, manner and purpose of the discussion and community. Try to avoid assumption about what individuals or communities might react to and how those reactions might be expressed.

Mental Have a question for people to reflect and pray about before they come

Area to be addressed:

Clearly identify the area to be addressed. Make it clear that there are no pre-determined outcomes and no decisions which must be made. If there are to be outcomes, decisions or reports, these will flow naturally from the life of the group.

Step 2 Introduce RESPECT Guidelines

Our meeting is to be shaped by values of RESPECT, as taught by Episcopalian scholar Rev Dr Eric Law, who has visited and worked with the Uniting Church in Australia.

- R – Responsibility. Take responsibility for what you say and feel. Use “I” statements.
- E – Empathetic listening. Use empathetic listening. Put yourself in other’s shoes. Don’t have to agree. Create a goal of mutual understanding.
- S – Sensitive. Be sensitive to differences. Some people talk stories. Some people give succinct points. Some people spiral around a topic. Some people communicate through silence.
- P – Ponder. Ponder what you hear and feel before you speak.
- E – Examine. Examine your own assumptions and perceptions.
- C – Confidentiality. Confidentiality is different from secrets. Share constructively to uphold the well-being of the community. Individuals decide and speak. What is shared in the group can openly be shared with others if those involved give specific permission.
- T – Trust. Trust ambiguity — we are not here to debate who is right or wrong.

Eric Law, from the Kaleidoscope Institute http://www.ecfvp.org/files/uploads/Resources_from_Eric_Law.docx

Step 3 Introduce the Mutual Invitation Process

In order to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak, we will proceed in the following way:

The leader or a designated person will share first. After that person has spoken, he or she then invites another to share. Whom you invite does not need to be the person next to you. After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share.

If you are not ready to share yet, say “I pass for now”, invite another to share now, and we will invite you to share later on. [Original: If you don’t want to say anything at all, simply say “pass” and proceed to invite another to share. Note: Without pressuring, we have found some people, who pass, appreciate the opportunity to be invited later on when they have developed trust in the group.] We will do this until everyone has been invited.

We invite you to listen and not to respond to someone's sharing immediately. There will be time to respond and to ask clarifying questions after everyone has had an opportunity to share.

(from *The Wolf Shall Dwell With the Lamb* by Eric H. F. Law)

Because there will be participants with different perceptions of power, facilitation that exclusively uses the “volunteer style” of interaction that favours those from individualist cultures excludes those whose interactions favour a collectivistic culture. Therefore, the Mutual Invitation process is used in order to insure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak when the facilitator gives the instruction to do so.

As group members become more accustomed to using this tool, they make connections with everyone in the session, because they are required to invite each speaker by NAME. The person who is invited may or may not be someone from whom she/he ordinarily wants to hear. When Mutual Invitation is used, it encourages deep and holy listening to one another, because [the inviter ensures] there are no interruptions or refutations allowed until every- one has spoken who wants to speak. It is important to remember that in some cultural settings, group members will not speak up in a discussion unless they have been invited. The reasons for this may be gender- or age-related or other traditions embedded deeply in one’s culture.

There may be those who are uncomfortable singling a person out to share. For them it may feel like when they were a child and were being selected (or not selected) to play on a team. There are two safeguards built into the process that can assuage people’s fears.

One: each person invited has three options: share, pass for now (which means “I am not ready, please come back to me”), or pass (which means “I do not chose to share on this topic”). However, no matter which option is selected, the one invited has the privilege of inviting another person in the group. (Note: This is not a memory test, but it is helpful to use names where possible, recognising the Human identity of each participant.)

Two: Throughout the process, the invitation to speak passes back and forth, and no one is left out of the process.

Step 4 Active Listening

Divide into story-trust groups – you probably need 8-12 people for adequate diversity (where people are from a non-dominant culture group, there usually needs to be at least 2-5 people from minority cultures, who help each other to communicate, possibly assisting with translation or clarifying questions).

Role	Inviter (and Carer, if the full group divides into smaller groups) <i>Note: Every member of the group is invited to participate in this Inviting and Caring</i>	Story-sharer <i>Note: Every member of the group is invited to participate in Story-sharing</i>	Facilitator/Listener	Reflective Listeners
Action	The first person invites another person to share a story related to the issue being explored. If the second person becomes the story-sharer the Inviter takes on the role of Carer. If the second person 'passes', the Inviter asks someone else.	The person in who has been invited may choose to share a story OR may 'pass'. If the person decides to 'pass' they are invited again after others have shared (and may choose to share or not share).	The Facilitator gives the instructions and acts as overall Moderator, ensuring a safe environment.	If there are multiple groups, the Facilitator will also need to identify some intentional Reflective Listeners for each group.

<p>Responsibility</p>	<p>As Carer, the Inviter is responsible for ensuring that the story-sharer is heard without interruption or the interpreting of others.</p> <p>The inviter may ask the others if there were any words or images or actions that were unclear – and then the Inviter may ask the storyteller to clarify. (Note: Care needs to be taken that this is not an invitation to comment, judge or analyze a story's content. This is purely a recognition that some terms used may not be understood.)</p>	<p>The Story-sharer has the responsibility of sharing their own story or a story that they are intimately connected with. It should be a 'grounded' story – a true story – not a parable or hearsay. The purpose of the story is to bring one of many lenses through which to see an issue. The Story-sharer should not share the story of someone else if they do not have permission to share the story. Also, if they do have that permission, they should not name who they are talking about.</p>	<p>The Facilitator listens to the story-sharing and monitors that people engage with the Inviter/Carer/Sharer process, reminding people (when necessary) how to do this, until it becomes established in the group.</p> <p>The Facilitator takes on the role of key Listener, and may ask others to take on Reflective Listener roles to assist in identifying themes. During breaks, the Facilitator and Listeners start to identify together the themes being raised. These may be listed or mind-mapped for later sharing with the whole gathering.</p>	<p>Reflective Listeners identify themes from the stories. If some themes recur, they may be highlighted or asterisked. Reflective Listeners do not make Feedback about stories, although they may need to clarify terms. Later, at the invitation of the Facilitator, may ask their group if there are theme areas that should be added to the whole based on the stories shared.</p>
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Step 5 Identification of Themes

During a break, the Facilitator and Reflective Listeners collate possible themes from what they have heard. (If using Groups: It is even possible to colour-code these according to different groups, so the groups can check on their material and so it is possible to see if different groups shared stories with similar themes.) If some theme areas were recurring in different stories, the theme area might be highlighted or asterisked.

E.g. In the early "Space 4 Grace" conversations about a Christian Theology of Marriage, the facilitator of a very diverse group identified a range of issues to be explored:

- cultural expectations
- gender roles in different contexts
- parental responsibilities in marriages (and impacts when marriages are broken)
- unfaithfulness and adultery
- abuse within marriage and when is divorce needed
- third gender and marriage
- age of people marrying
- who decides who marries (including arranged marriages, permission-giving or blessing)
- responsibilities related to ageing parents, in-laws, etc
- property

- betrothal
- family implications (including stepchildren)
- is marriage between two people or two communities/families
- marriages involving transgender or ambiguous gender identity
- same gender family implications

Step 6 Validation of Themes - Check with Group

When the Facilitator and Reflective Listeners have collated possible themes, the whole group should be presented with the list or mind-map (for the purpose of validation).

The whole group now gets the opportunity to add any themes that may have surfaced during the sharing *of the stories*. It is not a time to introduce themes that did not arise from the experienced stories. This is not the forum for introducing external ideas or additional stories. The themes arise from the diverse stories of this particular community in this particular time.

If small groups are being used, it is appropriate to break back into the small groups and check: are the various themes we covered on the list? Are there any we need to add? Every named theme is valid because they arose from carefully listening to the shared stories.

Step 7 Prioritize Themes to work on

(park the others to be addressed later)

Option 1 – The whole or small groups may undertake a List-sort to prioritize

Option 2 – Prioritize through discussion and consensus

Step 8 Theme Conversations

Ask what Traditions, Biblical material and ways of Reasoning could assist in this conversation.

Invite explanations about relevant **Traditions** from different cultures, to better inform the whole group. Some traditions can be spoken about. Others may be better explained by acting them out or sharing a song, dance or ritual.

e.g.1 In some traditions, the first time a husband and wife clearly see one another's faces is in a mirror (literally seeing in a mirror dimly) at the time when their marriage is blessed by a family member, who reminds the couple of the importance of reflecting the relationships that have formed them in their new relationships.

e.g.2 In some cultures, the giving and receiving of gifts/rings has symbolic significance.

e.g.3 Korean spouses usually retain their family of birth name at their marriage. In some other cultures, one or the other spouse changes their name. Decisions about naming may hold different import in different cultures.

e.g.4 Numerous cultures have traditions around the establishing of new household or crossing thresholds or being welcomed into new relationships.

To undertake *shared Bible Study*, it may be necessary to identify different relevant passages and different styles for addressing them. Many forms of Bible Study disadvantage minority voices, so it is helpful to consider how to encourage active participation.

Option 1 - Deep Talk (this can be undertaken as soon as a group has identified a Bible passage)

“Deep Talk” resources (based on Lectio Divina and Godly Play wondering questions) may be useful for groups undertaking Bible Study at this point. Such wondering together invites multiple ways of thinking and reasoning, rather than privileging a dominant style or attitude. (All Synods have Godly Play contact people who are aware of Deep Talk strategies.)

Deep Talk

— takes a number of Godly Play principles and some Godly Play stories—along with some new stories—and adapts these for a spiritual process suitable to secular and religious settings, to help groups consider their organisation’s / workplace’s vision, mission, issues or challenges. This has been used in Finland in secular and church contexts usually with existing adult teams (such as a staff team).

Deep Talk sessions

—similarly to Godly Play—begin with the making of a circle; the showing of a story; and the wondering time; but then everyone changes places and a dialogue game is played, arising from the story: when the group explores their work and life together. Then a celebration and chance to say farewell.

Option 2 - Prepared studies

When people return to a Space for Grace gathering, Bible Study Scholars and Leaders bring studies about the agreed passages. Small Groups could use some of the Deep Talk wondering.

Option 3 - Lectio Divina

Once a passage has been identified, it can be read 2-3 times with pauses, allowing people to reflect, before shared discussion takes place. For the purposes of Space for Grace, there should be multiple passages, rather than one or two.

Ways of Reasoning

While some people are comfortable with taking a linear approach to reasoning, others undertake reasoning through identifying relational questions. The first

approach may place less emphasis on relationship factors. The latter approach may only value a reason if it enhances relationship strength.

Reasoning also reflects different language thought processes. e.g. People with German-stem languages will often prioritise Time-Manner-Place in organising data, while Indigenous Australians are more likely to prioritise Kinship and Land-links.

When reflecting on stories, biblical inputs and traditions, it may be helpful for the Facilitator to ask, "*what is being prioritised here?*"

IMPORTANT

**** Check if the various Traditions, Experiences, Biblical learnings and forms of Reasonings have been integrated into the group's thinking BEFORE moving to proposals or decisions. ****

Step 9 Determine any directions / decisions the group agrees to pursue.

This may involve the development of Proposals.

Step 10 Determine what will happen to the 'parked' themes.

Who will work on them?

Will we refer them on?

What needs to happen to them?

'Parked themes' should not be lost. If there is no-one to pass them on to, they should at least be included in the reporting/findings from the gathering.

Step 11 Report

The Facilitator is responsible for ensuring there is a report/record from the gathering. This is to be circulated to all participants.

The report/record should not include evaluation or analysis of issues unless directed by the group.

The group may determine who else to send the report/record to.

[STEP 1 – SAMPLE Relational Profile for Sharing]

Profile

Photo

Preferred Name

Three things about my life

1.

2.

3.

Two things about my home

1.

2.

Something about God and me

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Why I accepted the invitation to come today

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