

Speaking Our Faith Leader Guide

*Equipping the Next Generations
to Tell the Old, Old Story*

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Introduction

Episcopalians, we're not God's "frozen chosen." We're God's introverted people. And we're kind of shy and polite. But most of what we tend to be as a church . . . we're not pushy people. That's not our way, and I don't think we need to pretend to be that. We need to be who we are. God's shy people need to share their stories in ways that are authentic to them and that matter.

—Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, speaking to Episcopal Communicators on April 21, 2016

Speaking about faith does not come naturally or easily to many people, particularly people who have been raised and nurtured in the Episcopal Church or another mainline Protestant denomination. The practice of evangelism has not been emphasized in our traditions. It too often seems to be the province of other sorts of Christianity, the sorts of Christianity that tend to make “God’s shy people” very uncomfortable.

But there is a fresh wind blowing through our church, as Episcopalians begin to answer Presiding Bishop Michael Curry’s call to join the Jesus Movement, the movement of love and reconciliation and justice that Jesus began on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and that has poured out through the ages wherever people are working to change the world—as Bishop Curry says—“from the nightmare it often is into the dream that God intends.” Part of that Jesus Movement is to bring people into deeper relationship with the loving, liberating, life-giving God whom we follow.

And that means that a significant aspect of the Jesus Movement is evangelism—telling the Good News, the “old, old story of Jesus and his love,”¹ as the old hymn puts it. “God’s shy people” are going to need to warm up and get more comfortable with speaking about their faith, their love of God, and their passion for Jesus and his Way. “God’s shy people” are going to need to be able to respond with a whole-hearted “yes” to Bishop Curry’s summons: “Now is our time to go. To go into the

1. Hymn 64 in *Lift Every Voice and Sing II*.

world to share the Good News of God and Jesus Christ. To go into the world and help to be agents and instruments of God's reconciliation. To go into the world, let the world know that there is a God who loves us, a God who will not let us go, and that that love can set us all free."²

"God's shy people" are going to need to learn to put words to their faith, to "always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet. 3:15). But this is not going to happen automatically or without preparation. If "God's shy people" are going to be able to share their stories in ways that are authentic to them and that matter, as Bishop Curry said, then they are going to need to get comfortable talking about faith, comfortable sharing their stories, and comfortable listening to the faith stories of other people.

That is why I developed Speaking Our Faith. Initially, I created it as a project to use with younger adults—people under age forty—to see if they could be better equipped to talk about faith with people their own age who did not share their faith. But it proved to be so transformative with those first participants, that other, older people in my congregation wanted a chance to try Speaking Our Faith, too. I trained five lay members of my parish to facilitate these groups and currently, more than eighty people in my church have participated in Speaking Our Faith. In the process, they got more comfortable speaking about faith. But they also found their faith renewed, and many of them became more engaged in the life and work of the church as a result. They got excited and joined the Jesus Movement.

This leader guide will help you to do the same thing, to help "God's shy people" get more comfortable speaking about faith. It is rooted in a series of five small-group conversational sessions, followed by a final gathering a month after the fifth session. In between the fifth session and the final gathering, participants are encouraged to go out and have a conversation about faith with someone they know who does not share their faith. Not an attempt at conversion, not a sales pitch, but an authentic interchange with someone they already have a relationship with. Just to talk, to listen, to share—person to person, heart to heart—something about their life with God, their walk with Jesus, or their life in a faith

2. "Presiding Bishop Michael Curry: This is the Jesus Movement, and we are The Episcopal Church, the Episcopal branch of Jesus' movement in this world," The Public Affairs Office, The Episcopal Church, November 2, 2015. www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-michael-curry-jesus-movement-and-we-are-episcopal-church (accessed June 1, 2017).

community. To give them their first taste of real evangelism—which is simply talking, sharing Good News, passing on the love of Jesus.

While Speaking Our Faith is a small-group experience (and may be a perfect starting place if you want to begin a small-group ministry in your church), it is not a class, like *Alpha* or a Bible study. The knowledge that gets shared in these groups comes from the participants themselves. As they engage in a series of conversations, listening deeply to one another and sharing honestly, participants embark on a journey of constructive theology. Constructive theology is a way of thinking about God that approaches theology, not as a system of doctrines to be learned, but as a way of building a theology that engages with the world we inhabit. If a person's set of beliefs are like "a landscape—a vast and complex terrain holding within its borders all those images, stories, concepts, practices, and feelings that make up the sum total of 'what we believe in,'"³ then the Speaking Our Faith approach helps participants become theological map makers. By wrestling honestly with what they do and do not believe, and by hearing how others wrestle with their own faith, participants begin to make sense of faith . . . *their own faith*, as it has been taught by the church, formed by their life experiences, and owned and understood in their own hearts and minds.

As the group leader, it is your sacred task to lead them on this journey through their vast and complex landscapes of faith. It requires sensitive listening on your part, the ability to facilitate a group conversation so that every person can participate fully, and nonjudgmental respect for each participant's understandings and questions around God, Jesus, Spirit, church, life, the universe, and everything. But the group members themselves do the real work. It is really their own honesty, vulnerability, and willingness to participate that will make Speaking Our Faith a transformative experience for everyone. Your job is just to help them stay on the path, through a series of guided conversations that lead them, in the end, to the creation of a personal statement of faith. And then, of course, to the final challenge: having a conversation about faith with someone they know who does not share their faith.

This guide provides the template for hosting these "sacred conversations." It begins with the personal preparations you need to make as the group leader, in order to facilitate conversations that will free the

3. Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, eds., *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes with CD-ROM* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 9.

participants to put words to the faith that is in them. Then the five conversation sessions are fully outlined. They begin with a session that really helps the group members to get to know one another and to feel secure sharing their stories with one another. The sessions continue, beginning with the basic question of theology: how do we know what we know, and how do we know it is God? They move through basic theological ideas—who is the God that we know, and what are the qualities of that God? And then to questions of ethics and practices—how is one to live in relationship with this God?

The final session is the presentation of participants' own statements of faith, their own articulation of what they believe about God and what is required of them as a person who follows and worships this God. Finally, the group is gathered together again after several weeks apart to reconnect, and to report on the outcomes of the conversations about faith that they were able to have with others. In between the sessions, participants have exercises to work on at home.

As you enroll members for your group, please be sure they are willing to commit to the entire process. This includes five weeks of ninety-minute conversation sessions, the exercises in between sessions, and the final gathering. To have conversations at this depth, and to feel safe enough to speak and share honestly, participants need to be able to count on one another to show up and to engage fully.

"God's shy people" have been quietly faithful for a long time. To come out of their shells and speak about faith is a process. It doesn't happen quickly, but it can in fact happen. This may be the first step in a person's journey to evangelism, to being able to "tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love." The love and fellowship of Jesus that they experience in their Speaking Our Faith group can make all the difference in their willingness to step out and speak about that love and fellowship with others. Bless you, as a leader on this Speaking Our Faith journey, and may you find grace and transforming love in this process.

Facilitating Sacred Conversations

A Speaking Our Faith group is not like a typical church small group, where people might gather for Bible study and prayer, or for discussion about a book or a video. These conversations are meant to be less spontaneous, and more thoughtful and intentional. While people may laugh, joke, and connect to things someone else has said, it's not a space where people debate conflicting ideas or theologies or talk over one another, or

think harder about what they are going to say next than about the words that someone else is speaking.

If you are trained in one of the many current methods of facilitating deep conversations—Appreciative Inquiry, The Circle Way, World Café, The Art of Hosting, and the like—you will already understand the principles that make for a rich conversation. In my own work in the church, I have used these methods in various settings, so I applied these techniques and practices when I developed *Speaking Our Faith*. And one thing I learned as I developed this program—these groups are *not* discussion groups. They are conversation groups. And understanding the difference between the two is crucial.

A discussion group:

- Meets to share ideas, reactions, and plans, as in a Bible study or a regular church meeting.
- May be highly energetic, with people leaning in, jumping on top of each other's sentences, and with a few people who are more extroverted and engaged leading the way.
- May surface opposing viewpoints, with participants vigorously defending their own positions.
- Often works at a “head” level, not a “heart” level.

In contrast, a conversation group:

- Relies on full participation from all the members of the group, regardless of whether they are introverted or extroverted, outgoing or shy.
- Emphasizes deep and respectful listening to one another, as much as speaking.
- Seeks common ground, while accepting differences.
- The facilitator may lead, but the group owns the responsibility for the success of the conversation.
- Allows space for meaning to emerge, often tapping into deeper emotions, convictions, and values than a more “heady” discussion might do.

So, to prepare to facilitate a conversation—rather than to lead a discussion—you will need to move intentionally through a series of stages: knowing yourself and knowing your group; creating a container for conversation; asking questions and honoring answers with intention; keeping your eyes, ears, and heart open.

Knowing Yourself and Knowing Your Group

Who are you, and who are the people in the group you are about to convene? Speaking Our Faith groups have been offered in many different constellations of leaders and participants. My original group was a mix of younger Christians under age forty. I was the pastor and priest for some of them, but not all. Most of them were Episcopalians, but a few joined in from other faith traditions—Presbyterian, Lutheran, and evangelical. They were students, parents, teachers, and private sector employees. They did not all know each other well prior to this Speaking Our Faith group, but they all entered the group willing to participate fully in the process.

After the success of that first group, I trained leaders in my congregation to lead Speaking Our Faith, and they convened groups of fellow parishioners of a variety of ages and life experiences. Some of these groups bonded tightly—one, a group of young mothers, continues to meet monthly. Others struggled to jell. As I shared Speaking Our Faith more widely, it has been used by a rector with a vestry, by a college chaplain with students, by a volunteer with a group of assisted-living residents. Each group has its own personality. So does each facilitator.

So, begin with some self-reflection on your part. Why are you facilitating this group? What is your objective—to make evangelists, to build stronger small groups in your church, to crack the “politeness barrier” in your congregation and get into a deeper level of dialogue? What do you hope will happen, and what do you fear will happen? Do you like people and enjoy hearing their stories? What pushes your own buttons when you are in a church group? What can you draw upon in your previous experiences leading or facilitating a group, and what do you think you still need to learn?

And it’s important to get to know the members of your group, too. Even if you are in a small church, and you think everyone in your group knows everyone else, you will be surprised at what you learn from people you may have known your whole life, once you start having these conversations. So about two weeks before your group meets for the first time, send its members this “getting to know you” email.

Dear <Name>,

I am so excited to begin the Speaking Our Faith sessions with you and the rest of our group on <date>. To help me guide our conversations better, I’d like to know a little bit about you and

where you are on your journey of faith right now. Could you answer the following questions in a reply to me? Thanks, and I will see you soon.

In Christ's peace,
<Your Name>

1. Say something about your current state of faith, where you are in your relationship with Jesus and with the church.
2. Do you talk about your faith with other people? If you do, who do you talk to and under what sorts of conditions? What do you say?
3. If you don't, what do you wish you could say to someone else about your relationship with God? What would you prefer to keep to yourself?
4. What strengthens your ability to speak about your own relationship with God?
5. What hinders your ability to speak about your own relationship with God?

And some basic information . . .

Age:

Ethnicity/national origin:

Gender and gender identity:

Educational level attained:

Were you raised in a family that practiced a religious faith? If so, which one?

Current denominational affiliation, if any:

As their replies come in, keep these emails in a safe and confidential location. I like to print them out and put them in a large envelope or manila folder, and then during my daily prayer time in the days before a group begins, I re-read their responses and pray for each group member. It is transformative to pray daily for these people prior to the group ever getting together. When you enter the space that first day and sit down with them, they will already be familiar and beloved to you, because you have known them first in prayer.

Creating a Container for Conversation

Your primary task as group leader is to create and hold the space where the group can come alive in its conversations about faith. When

it comes to speaking about faith, I have found that three themes keep emerging: *vulnerability*, *not having all the answers*, and *learning to speak one's own truth*. These themes highlight the barriers to speaking about faith, as well as the joys of speaking about faith. People come to these groups with their guard up. Speaking about faith is not widely done in our tradition, and people may be hesitant for a variety of reasons. The first is that it requires a certain amount of vulnerability to share one's life and experiences with God. Our relationship with God can be intimate, intense, powerful, distant, joy-filled, a struggle, and possibly life-changing. To talk about those sorts of things requires the ability to be vulnerable. Brené Brown, well-known researcher specializing in shame and vulnerability, defines vulnerability as *uncertainty*, *risk*, and *emotional exposure*.⁴ The members of your group may become more comfortable with one another over time, but please remember that at the outset they are opening themselves up in ways that may feel unfamiliar and even dangerous to them. The group needs to be a safe place for vulnerable conversation.

One of the reasons group participants feel vulnerable is because they don't feel comfortable with *not having all the answers*. They have not been theologically trained, generally. They may have mixed feelings about the difference between the theology in their current church, versus the theology they learned in the faith or denomination they have left behind. They may believe that everyone else in the room knows exactly what it means to be a Christian, and that if they express doubts or questions, they will be exposed as an imposter. They may be struggling with their own faith and find it hard to be honest about that struggle. They may be embarrassed by the speech of other kinds of Christians in the world, and while they know they don't believe *that*, they may worry that what they *do* believe is wrong or heretical. The group needs to be able to listen and respond without judgment as people struggle with their uncertainty and confusion.

And finally, the group process can lead people to the point where they are able to *speak their own truth*. But it's not realistic to expect that people are ready to speak their own perfectly realized faith statements in the very first week. The process of conversation, conducted

4. Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Gotham, 2012), 34.

with trustworthy people in a safe space, can lead people to greater ability at speaking about God and faith. But they may be halting, hesitant, and unsure at first, because this is an unfamiliar experience for them.

As leader, you help the group construct the norms and guidelines that will create a strong holding environment for their conversation. In the first session, much of the time is spent on introductions, exploratory questions, and the setting of norms for the group. Good norms are especially important in creating a safe space for conversation. The group should develop its norms under your guidance, and every week when you gather again, review the norms, and check in with your group to be sure everyone remembers the guidelines the group established and is still willing to honor them.

Your leadership in conversation will also help to create the holding environment. You must model the kind of speaking and listening that you want the group members to practice. When someone is speaking, give them your full attention, without peeking to see what the next question is that you might want to ask. When someone finishes, say things like, “Thank you for sharing that.” Or, “what do other people think?” Or, “was that hard or easy for you to say?” Practice respectful listening and respectful speaking. Also help the group to maintain its own norms. If someone tries to cut in, gently remind them that “X has not finished speaking yet.” Then when person X finishes, turn to the interrupter and ask, “Was there something you wanted to add to this?” Think of yourself as a conductor of the conversation, drawing out the shy folks, muting the more talkative folks, honoring the words that are said, and all the time moving the conversation forward and deeper as you go. If the group members feel secure in your leadership, they will feel safe enough to open up with one another.

And even the environment of your meeting space helps to create the container. It should be a place where confidential conversation can be safely held. So probably not a local coffee shop or pub, but maybe the usual church classroom or meeting room. Or the living room of your own home, or a group member’s home—if family members and pets aren’t continually wandering through the space. Will you feel more comfortable sitting around a table, or in an open circle of chairs or sofas? You can also put a focal image in the center of your circle, like a candle or icon, a bowl of water, or a photograph. This gives you all something to look at that can refocus attention that starts to wander.

Asking Questions and Honoring Answers with Intention

The process of Speaking Our Faith is like a guided group interview. Each session frames the questions of faith in a different light. The questions provided for the leader are meant as a road map, or a guide, to lead people through the process of talking about their faith on a specific topic. You probably won't get through all the questions in any of the sessions. The questions are there to be sure you have enough material at your disposal to guide the conversation.

When you ask the conversation questions, don't be afraid of spaces of silence. People sometimes need to get their thoughts in order before they speak. One of the longest silences I had in a group was after I asked the question, "Who is the God that you know?" Once they got past the superficially easy answers, like "God is love," there were longer and longer gaps of silence as each person really probed their own thoughts and ideas about God before they could start putting words to their beliefs.

Also, be sure each person has had a chance to answer a question before you move on to the next. This means keeping track of who has not gone, even if the question sparks some interchange among group members. It's easy for the shy folks to sit quietly while others talk—and it's ok to directly ask the shy ones, "Did you want to say something about this question?" Or, "What do you think?"

Honoring group members' answers with intention means really listening to what they say, and responding in ways that affirm, go deeper, or frame the question in a more accessible way. If a person says that a certain prayer brings them closer to God, and it's also one of your favorite prayers, it's fine to tell the group that. You don't have to simply be a kind of detached interviewer. But you also don't want to dominate the conversation, either. This is their space and their time. Saying, "Thank you for sharing that," is also always a good affirmation. Reminding them that what this person is saying connects to what another person said in an earlier conversation can let them know you are hearing what's being said, and also help them to hear one another better.

You may have to be creative in your questioning. In the conversation about "who is the God that you know?", I had to frame the question three different ways to get the group to really dig in to the topic. First, I said, "I thought today we might talk about, not what we don't know about God, but what you *do* know about God out of your own experience and life and knowledge." That generated the series of short answers with long silences in between. And finally, Mike, one of the participants,

said, “You’re almost asking for our personal theologies that we’ve built up, and I don’t know if I could define them quickly, or easily, or clearly even.”

So, I tried another approach: “That’s why I was interested in what was the first thing out of everybody’s mouth, because that’s where we start from, right? So, what else might one say about God?” They continued to struggle, not really able to answer the question. So I reworded the question again: “Maybe another way to get at it is *who* is the God you pray to. So, what’s the nature, the qualities of the God you pray to?” That way of wording the question finally opened up the conversation, and they really began to explore their ideas about God. So the session questions in this guide may not necessarily work as written with your group. You may need to rework, reword, and rethink what is being asked to help your group to explore the topic. The important task is to facilitate your own group’s exploration. Don’t be afraid to improvise.

Keeping Your Eyes, Ears, and Heart Open

Everybody has a story. And everyone is in the midst of a human life, which is their own personal drama of love and loss, joy and sorrow, despair and redemption. As group leader, you need to keep that notion of story—life as personal drama—in the back of your mind at all times. The participants may come wanting to share their thoughts about God, but they may be coming from a hard family situation, a struggle at work, or the stress of a job interview. While you don’t want the stories to overwhelm the conversation, as group leader, you will also know those stories are lurking under the surface, and they may need to emerge from time to time. If they do, try to connect where those personal stories intersect with the discussion you are having that day, so you don’t get too far off the track. What *does* that hard family situation have to do with a loving God? How *does* your relationship with Jesus get you through the struggle at work? How *might* the Holy Spirit sustain you during the stress of the job interview?

This is part of keeping your eyes, ears, and heart open to the group. Being aware of the emotional process going on among group members is important. Observe if someone seems unduly quiet or on edge that day. Divert the discussion if it gets heated or personal. Remind the group of the norms it established, if necessary. Also, pay attention to the person who looks like they want to say something, but who hasn’t jumped in yet. As leader, you can invite them to share and draw them out. You

are listening to what is *not* being said, even as you are listening to what is *actually* being said. It's like having two sets of ears: one for the ongoing conversation, and one for the silent conversation beneath it, the one that is expressed in body language, tone of voice, and level of engagement.

What if one or more group member doesn't participate appropriately? Not everyone is perfect, and not every group is perfect, and in the life of the church it is possible that you can have that cranky, obstructionist, self-focused, disagreeable person (and I'm sure some particular person came to mind as you read those words) sign on to be part of your group. So, what will you do with that person? You can't change people. But as leader, you can set the standards for conversation in your group.

Your first set of standards is in the group norms developed in the first session. Review them at each session. Refer to them if someone starts to push the boundaries, and remind the group that these are the standards for behavior that you all agreed to. You can ask the group to take time reworking and renegotiating the norms if they seem to need to be strengthened.

You also set standards by how you respond to the members when they speak. Telling someone that "X wasn't finished talking yet. Let's give her a chance to finish her thought," when that person begins to interrupt, reminds the whole group that the goal is for everyone to be able to speak fully and freely. If a participant says something that seems odd or out of place, you can use follow-up questions: "Why do you bring that up now?" Or, "Would you like to unpack that a little more for us? I'm not sure I understand what you mean." Or, "How does that connect to the question we're discussing?" If you are a layperson leading this group, and you feel like you are getting out of your depth, please share your concerns with your clergy person. If you are clergy, and you have a group member who is seriously affecting the group's ability to function, you may have to set a private appointment with that person to share your concerns. Don't let one person ruin this experience for the rest of the group.

But I also encourage you to give even the "hard case" person the benefit of the doubt. With a strong holding environment for conversation, that person might open up in ways you had never imagined. Remember, they also are afraid of being vulnerable, and often the prickly surface of a person is there to protect a tender soul. "Love one another as I have loved you," Jesus tells his friends. Making this group a place where the

love of God can be experienced among its members is an important and basic goal of Speaking Our Faith.

Between the Sessions—Yes, There Will be Homework

When the group comes together, the participants need to have some material to draw on for their conversation. This is where the “homework” comes in. It begins with the email mentioned above. When you send this email to your group before the sessions even begin, it primes the pump. It gets them thinking about faith, talking about faith, and wondering about faith. They will have something to say the minute they enter the group, because they have been thinking about it ahead of time.

So, each session of Speaking Our Faith ends with an assignment. It is very important that your group knows up front that there will be an assignment for them to do after every session. Tell them the assignments are to expand on the topics you are discussing. Some of them are artistic, right-brained exercises. They should not fear these less-logical assignments, but give them a good try. You will find some people will love to draw their “faith as a house.” Others will be completely baffled by the metaphor. Your task is to encourage them to dig into the assignment as best as they can. If nothing else, they can begin to explore why they don’t want to do the assignment. Why is it difficult? What is getting in their way? What does that say about their faith life?

The group gets going at the beginning of each session by reviewing the exercises they did during their time apart.⁵ In between the first and second session, participants work on their “River of Faith,” the story of their lives and how God has been active in those lives. Between the second and third session, participants are supposed to choose something from their “spiritual workbench”—something that exemplifies the state of their faith right now, and bring it to share. This can be a song, a poem, a picture, or an object. Sharing these items opens up the group conversation and makes it easier to go deeper. Between the third and fourth sessions, participants are asked to draw their “house of faith.” If the state of their spiritual life was a house, what would it look like? Where would

5. The leader is positioned as a facilitator of the group’s conversations and not a full participant. Letting the time be for the group members is most important, with the facilitator taking a back seat in contributing to the conversations as much as possible.

God be present or absent? And the final assignment is for each person to write his or her own statement of faith, using the Baptismal Covenant from the Book of Common Prayer as a jumping-off point.

Finally, group members get a challenge at the end of the last session. Between the end of the last conversation and the final re-gathering celebration, each member should attempt to have a conversation about faith with someone they *already know*, but who does not share their faith. Then they get to report how that went at the reunion celebration a few weeks after Speaking Our Faith ends.

If you can be clear at the beginning about the purpose and importance of these exercises, it will help the group members to buy in to the idea. And then you will have lots of very fruitful material to work with in each session, as they share the results of their homework reflections.

With all this in mind, you are now ready to facilitate sacred conversations. So, let's dive into the meat of Speaking Our Faith: the conversation sessions.