

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS ...

BY NADINE PARKINSON, TEARFUND

Honestly, who likes difficult conversations? They are by definition 'difficult', and sometimes awkward and painful. They don't always end well so we have a natural wariness about embarking on them. And yet when leading others they are an inevitable part of life, unless we shirk our responsibilities. Some of us are more fearful of confrontation than others, but it is important that we all learn to find ways of 'speaking the truth in love' when required. So here are a few practical ideas about how to help those conversations go as well as possible – offered up by someone who has had plenty of them, some better than others!

PRAY AND LISTEN

It goes without saying that we should pray. But how?

When we are working with someone who is doing or saying things that we want to challenge, who maybe frustrates us, we have one of two ways to go. We can easily slip into a judgemental spirit and feel superior, that we need to put them right. A dangerous path. As John Stott writes on Matthew 7:1-2 'If we enjoy occupying the bench, we must not be surprised to find ourselves one day in the dock!'

An alternative way is to ask God to help us see them as he does. He has compassion on all he has made, and is motivated in all he does by heartfelt care, concern and understanding. What a better way. So it is always good to pray for those who we are finding difficult – it helps keep our hearts pure. It ensures that we are acting out of love rather than frustration, anger or any other negative emotion.

Secondly, we should listen. The Holy Spirit acts like an inner prompt, helping us to know those moments when we should button up; a voice inside, the minute before I speak, saying 'Don't!' In that moment I have the choice to withhold words or speak them out. Slowly I am learning to pay attention to that still small voice, but it is still disappointing to realise that I regularly choose to ignore it and regret it a split second later.

'Set a guard over my mouth, Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips' (Psalm 141:3) has been a helpful reminder to me that the Holy Spirit can act as a sentry at the door of my mouth. Words once spoken can't be taken back. The wrong words can do so much harm. Listening to the prompts of God's Spirit can help us to



know what not to say, and give us wisdom in what to say when, and how best to say it.

SPEED RESTRICTION

Sometimes the issue is one of speed. We see or hear of something which concerns us that we think needs addressing: an unhelpful attitude, things that have been said, evidence of a brewing problem, unhealthy working practices. Some of us may be inclined to go straight in based on the evidence we have, and it is likely that those we are addressing will feel judgment or disapproval. It is always better if they come to see the thing for themselves.

Recently, I sat on something for months waiting for the right moment to address it. I knew from previous incidents that the person concerned never reacted well to being challenged, and I was waiting for God to reveal a way and the right moment. Wonderfully, the person humbly admitted the weakness to me before I raised it with them, and we were then able to talk it through without them overreacting or feeling challenged.

Another conversation underlined to me the value of going in slowly and with an open mind. My inclination was to go in all guns blazing, to defend someone who I felt was being treated unfairly. Mercifully I had felt the Lord caution me to go slow and ask questions, and boy, I was glad I did!

A completely different picture emerged as I spoke to those concerned. In many ways the perspectives of both parties were true, it was just that I didn't have the whole picture until I had talked to more than the one person. By asking questions I was able to address the issues from both sides, whilst being seen to support those I had set out to challenge. Ironically, those I had gone to challenge expressed heartfelt thanks for the care I had shown them. How different it would have been had I gone in with a fixed opinion, a pointed finger and a cross word.

RISK ASSESSMENTS

Difficult conversations can be draining and time consuming. There are times in our lives when, for whatever reason, we don't feel we have what it takes to follow through. Maybe we are under pressure and seeing signs of stress in our own lives.

Sometimes there is a conversation to be had but we know that the fall-out from it is going to require time and emotional energy, and we are unsure we have enough of either at that specific time. A while back a close friend advised me in such a situation to do a risk assessment: to consider seriously if I had the capacity for such a difficult conversation; to consider the effect it would have on me; to ask myself whether it could wait.

Another close friend, who is a clinical director for adult mental health services, told me he is forever telling his staff team, 'Just because you see a problem doesn't mean you need to be the one to address it or that it needs dealing with now.' There is real wisdom in both these comments. We need to be prepared to consider the after effects of a conversation and whether we have the capacity to embark upon it. Very often things can wait and people come to no harm. It's alright to have times when we say no to others because we are caring for our own needs. In this way we protect ourselves for the long haul.



SOME QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

- How do I feel about difficult conversations? Does anything (fear?) hold me back from speaking the truth in love?
- What attitudes do I have towards others when facing a difficult conversation? Judgemental? Annoyance? Is there someone who repeatedly frustrates me?
- How do I recognise the still small voice of the Holy Spirit warning me not to say something that is on the tip of my tongue?
- Which of the suggestions in this article would it most benefit me to take on board?