

Conversational skills for hostile environments

For we who hold this faith dear, the growing negative attitudes toward our faith that are being fed within our society are a challenge to adapt to. Likewise consider the wider cultural trend of seeking to silence voices that some don't want to hear. It's only natural that many will fall silent to avoid tension. The problem is that this silence can be very costly. The unchallenged sceptical belief of today quickly becomes the intolerant dictate of the tyrant tomorrow. Courage to engage conversations is necessary if good is to prevail – and also if the gospel is to prevail!

The importance of conversational skills for hostile environments

While few churches may have taught this topic in their pulpits, small groups or youth groups yet, it has relevance and we need look no further than Jesus to find a role-model to follow.

Jesus in conflict

Because Jesus was both perfectly clear in his thinking and secure in who he was, he was uniquely clear-thinking in the way he handled conflict. He didn't relate to every person in the same way. Every conversation was different because every person was different. He asked questions to discern what was in a person's heart; to work out how to best encourage them. To summarise,

Jesus engaged with the interested, while only intriguing the disinterested and sceptical and deflecting the hostile.

Jesus also intentionally created conflict at times. For example, he challenged the religious leaders to their face, or drove out those selling in the Temple courts. However, he picked these battles carefully – sometimes also retreating or saying nothing.

For an example, when asked about paying taxes to Caesar (Matthew 22), Jesus discerned that it was a toxic question and a trap. If he said anything to undermine Rome's authority he could end up dead. It wasn't therefore wise to answer the question directly. Sometimes we are wise not to answer questions directly too.

Jesus therefore replied to their question with a question. 'Why are you trying to trap me?' He then deflected with profound wisdom, asking to see a coin, getting them to state whose face was on it, then saying, "give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." The point is that Jesus was able to thrive despite cultural prejudices and misunderstandings – and so can we!

Jesus said, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16). If our environment really is becoming more hostile, the solution is simple: We need to adapt!

What if our churches and church movements were to be intentional in their learning and teaching on the conversational skills of Jesus for hostile environments?

Resources:

- **Short videos:** 'Because We Care' – Series 3: AllTogether.co.nz/equipping-videos-members
- **Sermon and discussion series:** 'Hostile Environments' – AllTogether.co.nz/sermons-studies