



Mini-Manual for Conversation Café Hosts

What Is a Conversation Café?

Conversation Cafés are lively, hosted, drop-in conversations among diverse people about our feelings, thoughts and actions in this complex, changing world. The simple structure of Conversation Cafés – and their spirit of respect, curiosity and warm welcome – help people shift from small talk to BIG talk. Though the format can be used anywhere – in churches, around the dinner table, in schools, in retirement communities, at workplaces – Conversation Cafés are usually held *real* public cafés because those venues promote the spontaneity and inclusivity that can surprise us into new insights and greater understanding.

Conversation Cafés are unique because the hosts are not distant facilitators but rather active conversants. Cafés are unique because they foster inquiry rather than debate—minds *and* hearts are both involved. And they are unique because everyone is welcome and participants have great freedom to say what is on their minds.

What a Conversation Café Isn't...

Conversation Cafés are not clubs for any one point of view. Diversity rules. There's no organization to join, no dues to pay (except, perhaps, buying a bite to eat at the café), no books to read or assignments to complete.

No ideologies are promoted. The goal is Conversation not Conversion. They are not places to press your ideas on others nor are they places to network for business or romance. After the conversation is over, people can exchange business cards or phone numbers, pass out flyers, or sign petitions. The magic of the conversational space rests in part on the safety of knowing that no one will be pressured in any way. Although Conversation Cafés may facilitate connections that engender projects and action, their fundamental purpose is to serve as a welcoming space where everyone can deepen and broaden their points of view.

Why Conversation Cafés?

Because when you put strangers, caffeine and ideas in the same room, brilliant things can happen. For that very reason, the British Parliament banned coffeehouses in the 1700's as hotbeds of sedition.

Might we brew up a similar social liveliness now? With democracy, critical thinking and "the ties that bind" all under siege, it's worth a hearty try. Conversation Cafés foster:

- **Connection** – We may go to church, to work, to school, and to vote, but we still feel separate from those around us – everyone is in a hurry, competing for advantage and making small talk. Conversation Cafés are *not* lonely-hearts clubs, but they do provide space where people can speak, listen and learn in a spirit of curiosity, respect and warmth.
- **Wisdom** – The world is changing – fast. As the people of this planet, we are challenged to respond with new ways of thinking and living. None of us knows how to do this – but *all* of us can be social innovators if we meet in hosted, lightly formatted conversation. At Conversation Cafés, wisdom comes not just from one person, but arises from the conversation itself – like steam from a collective brew.
- **Democracy** – If we truly want a government of, by and for the people, we the people must re-learn to form our views in the respectful presence of those who don't agree with us. Without forums for critical thinking and neighborly connection, democracy for most is simply voting.

Why Host a Conversation Café?

Hosts are vital to the success of Conversation Cafés. They:

- Create a welcoming environment, where strangers can become friends.
- Conduct a simple Conversation Café process that practically runs itself.
- Simply through their presence, welcome and willingness to move the participants through the stages of the conversation, hosts create the safety necessary for the magical shift from small talk to BIG talk.

At the same time, hosts benefit as they:

- Engage in a fascinating spiritual practice of attending to both their interior conversation and the group conversation. A host has a dual role humble participant and weaver of meaning and connection.
- Become valued in the community as people who

listen gently, speak thoughtfully and understand group process.

- Have a meaningful outlet for service as we, the people, search for meaning, connection and intelligent action in the world as it is today. Hosting is activism.

Starting a Conversation Cafe

What do I do if I want to be a host? Read through this manual to catch the spirit and learn the simple processes and tips for success. It may be helpful to have a friend who enjoys conversation co-host with you. Ask yourself: Can my co-host and I promise that one of us will be at every event? Your natural humanity – and your reliability – will make your café a success.

Find a café where you are comfortable. Decide how often you would like to meet (daily, weekly, bi-weekly or monthly), and on which day of the week and at what hour. And be prepared to promote your café (more help on this below).

How do I get a café owner to agree? There are two ways to establish a Conversation Café at a particular location. With independent establishments, ask the owner/manager if a group may meet there. Explain that a Conversation Café will bring benefits: repeat customers, new customers, enhanced sales, and free publicity. Ask for the schedule you want, but be willing to settle for a time when their business is slack. Ask to put a poster in the window announcing the time. (A poster is included in the Conversation Café kit online.)

When approaching corporate chains, you may need to use a slightly different approach. Chains often cannot risk granting permission to community groups that might disturb the flow of business nor do they usually encourage the posting of flyers. If you select a franchised establishment, it is possible for you to operate as any would group that chooses to meet in that setting--after all, it is a public space. If you encourage your group to order beverages or food during the Conversation Café, any owner will be glad for your business. Meeting in a café has a major advantage over a rented, private space. Not only can you attract "strangers," you also don't have rental fees, contracts, etc.

If you want to host but haven't found a café yet, you can contact Leslie@conversationcafe.org and she'll hold your name until there's a need for a host in an established place.

How do I get people to come? You can start by inviting your friends and acquaintances. Your enthusiasm will attract people. You can register your Café location and time on the calendar at www.conversationcafe.org (e-mail to

claudia@conversationcafe.org) Anyone looking for a Café can check availability there. You can post flyers (samples available at www.conversationcafe.org) in the café itself and distribute them in your community (at libraries, grocery stores, bookshops, etc.). Your enthusiasm will attract people – and the Conversation Café initiative will be doing broad publicity about Cafés in general. Since we hope that every Café will have at least two hosts, at worst you'll have a great conversation with a great person.

How can I stay in touch with other hosts? Send your email address to claudia@conversationcafe.org and request that you be put on the general distribution list for the Host Learning Circle. You will be encouraged to post brief stories and insights from your Cafés as well as engage in dialogue about the art and practice of hosting.

Preparing for Your Conversation Cafe

On our website - www.conversationcafe.org - you will find the following materials for you to use for your Café:

- A table card that lists the Agreements and Process for a Conversation Café. Make copies so participants can take this home and start conversations in other cafés, at dinner parties, in churches, at schools -- anywhere people gather to talk.
- A "Welcome" sign, which can be posted on the back of a chair above a stack of "Agreements and Process" sheets, so that others in the café can feel invited to join the conversation. Making the Conversation Café table visible is essential – newcomers have overcome many taboos to show up: Don't talk to strangers; Don't let people in; Don't say what you really think and feel. Visibility = welcome.
- A Poster, which a willing café owner can post in the window.

Other supplies to bring include:

- Index cards or paper and pencils for participants to use for note-taking
- Nametags, if desired
- A "talking object" (any palm-sized object that's handy or meaningful) to be held by whomever is speaking.
- In addition to the Agreements and Process card, it's useful to have some flyers with a list of all the Conversation Café's around the city, so that people can tell their friends.
- Some hosts use colorful signs, bright tablecloths, or even balloons so that newcomers can easily identify the Conversation table.

Hosting a Conversation Cafe

The Conversation Café process almost facilitates itself. The table hosts are like any hosts -- getting things started and keeping them going. It starts with a couple of rounds of individual sharing with no general discussion, and then blossoms into respectful conversation. A brief guide for table hosts follows.

What makes a good conversation? In some way, good conversation feels like magic, but there are many common elements. Among these are: a lively topic of interest to all, an open and receptive mood, people willing to listen as much as to speak, a willingness to drop preconceptions and explore many ideas, a comfortable setting in which people can easily hear each other, a group small enough that everyone gets a turn to speak. A good conversation is more like a game of hacky-sack than a game of tennis -- the objective is to keep the ball in the air, not to defeat your opponent. At its best, such conversation gets deeper and richer the longer it can be sustained. Here are some tips for achieving those things:

Generating a Topic for a Conversation Café

Conversation Cafés spread rapidly in the months following the September 11 attacks. People had a profound need to tell their stories and to make meaning of everything in the wake of the event. Three general questions arose in many Cafés: "How is 9/11 changing your life?" "Where do you see reason for hope?" "What are you now called to do?" Variations of these questions may prove to be fertile for years to come. Notice that these three questions address the head, the heart, and the need for action. This triad could be a guide for generating questions on any topic.

As the nation and the people moved on after 9/11, topics in Conversation Cafés also evolved. Building community, the good, true and beautiful, the news, ethics, friendship, war, freedom, democracy, politics, movies, identity, time, patriotism -- all of these have brewed delicious conversations. (Go to www.conversationcafe.org for a long list of topics -- or see below for ways to create your own).

- The two rounds during which people speak without feedback may surface topics of common interest, which a sensitive {an alert?} host can feed back to the group for consideration.
- A modified version of "Open Space" can happen after the first round or two of sharing. "Open Space", invented by Harrison Owen, is a way for a group of people to spontaneously generate topics for discussions and workshops. In a Conversation Café it would work like this: the host invites anyone to write on a card a topic they'd like the group to discuss. Give a few minutes of quiet for people to think and write. The cards are then read

and the group determines which topics have appeal to at least a few people. If more than one topic is alive for people, then split up to various tables for the rest of the time.

- The host can choose a powerful question for the group to consider. It can be philosophical, political, psychological, comical -- anything that is engaging. That topic can be "advertised" to the host's networks as well as posted on the website.

The Beginning: Opening the Cafe

- Welcome everyone to the conversation and state the theme or topic for the Café, if one is already set.
- Agree on a few conversation guidelines (see suggestions on the table cards) to help participants stay conscious of the space and time. You might want to read these Agreements aloud, or have each participant read one.
- An alternative would be to have the group generate the Agreements. What factors would help them feel comfortable, safe and engaged? Ask them to think of a conversation they've had that was wonderful: What were the elements that made it so good? This begins the sense of ownership of the process and helps people begin to know one another.
- Set an ending time, leaving room for closing comments (perhaps 5 to 10 minutes)
- Invite people to hold a moment of silence to relax, settle into the space and reflect on the topic if one has already been set.
- If there are more than 8 people, it's best to divide into two groups. If latecomers swell the group to over 8, divide into two groups after the first round of speaking.
- **Round 1** - go around the circle once, inviting each person to say their name and speak to what is on their mind and in their heart regarding the theme (people may pass if they like). Remarks should be succinct (1-2 minutes at most per person) to allow time for everyone to speak. Pass the talking object. Listen to each person, with no feedback or response.
- **Round 2** - Go around the circle again, giving each person another chance to speak - again, briefly - without feedback or response. In this round people can home in on a theme or subject they want to delve into more deeply; they can also respond to what others have said. Use the talking object.
- Open up the conversation. Keep in mind the Agreements.

The Middle: The Conversation

Here are some general suggestions for hosts and participants alike.

- Speak to share and inform, raise or answer questions, offer an insight, help focus the discussion, state an opinion.
- Listen to understand -- to expand your insights, to see differences and similarities, to learn.
- Be inclusive -- share the airtime, encourage everyone to join in, avoid dominating or interrupting.
- Search for deeper meaning
- Offer specifics rather than generalizations
- Ask for a time out if the conversation seems to be fragmenting, confusing or chaotic. A moment of silence can be helpful.
- If the conversation gets hot, with interruptions and excited sparring, consider using the talking object.
- Take time to summarize and reflect, come back to the central question or issue
- Remind each other to share the time if need be
- If stuck in disagreement or debate, respectfully acknowledge your differences and change course to explore underlying assumptions, differing information, beliefs, values, etc.
- Look for deeper needs or values underlying people's feelings.

Helpful attitudes

- Curiosity: in a spirit of inquiry, ask people questions that will draw them out.
- Warmth: be sincerely and personally interested in what others are saying.
- Respect: honor others' points of view.

Helpful conversation assists:

- "Can you say that in another way?"
- "Am I correct in understanding you to be saying...?"
- *(after verifying your understanding of a person's ideas or feelings)* "I'd like to offer another point of view..."
- "I'm having some strong feelings here that come out of my need/belief/value around..."
- *(if someone has been silent)* "I'm wondering if you have some thoughts or feelings about what you've been hearing?"
- *(if someone's response indicates that they didn't understand you)* "Would you be willing to tell me what you heard me say?"
- "If what you are proposing came to pass, how would things be different?"

The Ending: Closing the Conversation

- Remind participants as the time for the closing comments nears.
- At the agreed upon time, stop the conversation, and let each person take a minute to make a

closing comment. The host can ask, "What is the most interesting or important thing that you take from this conversation?"

- One useful option is to ask everyone to write their answer to that question on an index card and give it to the host. This is useful feedback about what people are getting from these Cafés and often reveals nuggets of wisdom the group has mined from the conversation, which hosts can then share with the Host Learning Circle.
- Get email addresses of all those who would like to be kept informed of Café activities.
- Close by thanking each other ... set a time and place for another conversation if desired

After the Ending

Consider staying awhile and talking further with others who may have the time, energy or similar interest.

Contextual Material

Our most important role, as host, is not to facilitate a successful conversation flawlessly - but to hold the space - and be part of the space - of community/safety/love... We are stewards; we are safeguarding the space for people to share their vulnerability, their confusion, and to explore deeply enough to find out what they really think and feel about the topic/events. Part of this safety is that WE are also making ourselves vulnerable - sharing our own thoughts and feelings. We are part of the process. We honor the folks who come to these Cafés, honor the risk they may be taking in coming to a public conversation, and hope to provide a space that is safe enough, broad enough, and deep enough to embrace all.

Part of this safeguarding is accountability. If your café is listed on the Conversation Café schedule, people are counting on you to be there at the appointed time. If you can't make it, be sure to find a replacement host. To create a culture of connection through conversation and move away from the culture of isolation, we need constancy and continuity.

Hosting is simple - just as breathing is simple. It can be as minimal as showing up, introducing the process, and keeping track of the time. Yet the practice of hosting can be very profound. It is a dynamic, honest, humble process of staying present to your own reality while drinking in the reality of everyone else at the table. It contributes to the reweaving of the web of community. It builds critical thinking, social engagement and conviviality. A culture where this kind of conversation is common would make America a truly great country again and humanity an intelligent partner in preserving the living earth.