



CONVERSATION



BY STEPHANIE JOYNER

AN INVITATION...

I'm excited to invite you to a series of informal gatherings just to hang out with our leaders and get better acquainted with them and they with you!

Our church family is just large enough that getting to know one another can be a bit of a challenge. Mix in a pandemic and it gets even more complicated! It's my hope that everyone who calls North Wake home would have a connection to at least one of our leaders so that if you had a question or a need, you'd be comfortable giving them a call. Enter Stephanie Joyner and her NW Ministry Intensive project - "The North Wake Living Room."

If you know Stephanie, you know she is an avid conversationalist! And she is eager to spread that joy throughout our church family by creating space for conversations with our leaders that will often take place - you guessed it-in our living rooms! The information included in this little booklet will explain the importance of these kinds of conversations among our church family along with why we want you there. We hope you'll find it a source of encouragement.

We can't wait to have you over to our living room!

Pastor Larry

A CALL TO CONVERSATION

As we stand looking back at this unique season, I fear we are all a bit weather-beaten and weary. Our communities, both churchwide and worldwide, are observing the damage and finding various splintered boats, dragged ashore by the great storm of this year. One of those beached boats has the name “Conversation” written on its delicate hull.

The storms didn’t roll through while our God was sleeping. On the contrary, He has been both wide awake and at work. With that in mind, now is a good time to assess how we, His people, can be sure that our efforts in the various stages of storm clean-up reflect His love to one another and the world at large. We do have work to do ahead, and that work is always best done together. Conversation is one of the most vital pieces of this work.

We live in a time when most conversations, especially the important ones, are happening from afar. I don’t know if you’ve ever attempted a conversation from great distances, but it doesn’t really work. In fact, if you’ve tried it, you know that it necessitates yelling and leaves absolutely no breath for clarity. One must simply choose the fewest words and yell them across the bay, for the goal is the basic and urgent relay of information. There are no whispers. We miss out on gentle “mmhmms” that signify a knowing empathy. We lose eye contact and a loving hand on one's shoulder. Oftentimes it is these subtle gestures that give intimacy to our interactions.



Take a moment and recall a time in your life when you felt understood by someone simply because of their presence. Perhaps it was a gentle embrace when they didn't have an answer. Perhaps it was smiling eyes, creased at the corners, as you described something God was doing that brought you hope. In that moment, you realized that God was giving them hope too. They didn't have to say anything for you to know it. These are moments we've been missing. These are moments we were made for because we were made in the image of a conversational and intimate God.

Psalms 27 reminds us of this when David begs,

*"Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud;
Be gracious to me and answer me!
You have said, "Seek my face."
My heart says to you,
"Your face, Lord, do I seek."*

God reminds us in this psalm that He is the divine conversationalist. He both listens and speaks, and He has the pursuit of intimacy in mind. He says to "seek his face." Do you have a memory of a time, perhaps it was even as a child, that someone gently took your face in their hands, intent to look at your eyes while speaking words of intended importance to you? It's a tender, intimate, and loving gesture. And here's the thing, that exchange doesn't happen out of necessity. It isn't needed to relay the information, but it deeply changes the way that information is received.

There's a raw and rugged tenderness involved. This is what God wants to do with us, and it's what he wants us to do with one another when we pursue conversation. During a time when most of our conversations have consisted of exchanges on a computer screen, it is easy to grow discouraged about this possibility. It is easy to forget that conversation is part of being truly human when it can seem so harsh and, frankly, inhumane. Friends, let's not forget that we learn how to be human from our Lord. God's aim for conversation is not simply informational in nature. It isn't primarily about getting the right information to the right place or winning a debate.

Conversation is one way in which we seek to reflect God's attentiveness to others. Our attention manifests God's love. It's a way that we act like God-imaging human beings. It's something his people should be known for. It's something that may need some clumsy practice after all this time in isolation, and there's ample grace for us all. My hope for this small booklet is that it will leave you both encouraged and equipped as we set back out on the water.

Will you join me in imagining new conversational spaces at North Wake? Let's work together to make room for soul-shaping conversations in our family. We can pursue attentiveness to one another and attentiveness to God as we converse. Though this year may have been hard on our souls, and though it seems that everyone is alone in one way or another, let's gather to seek God's face, and may we hold one another's faces along the way.



A CONVERSATION PRIMER

Everyone knows that conversations can be intimidating. Horrible things can happen in a conversation. Miracles can happen through a conversation. Either way, it feels a tad risky, doesn't it? I, personally, love conversations. The adventure of it all seems a marvel. In the same way that some enjoy a hike through the mountains, I enjoy a good chat. I actually think that conversations with people are a lot like a nature hike.

It might be a wild adventure in the unknown and humbling backcountry. It could just as likely be a leisurely and comforting stroll through the park. Either way, you're likely to have the opportunity to enjoy God's creation. Do you realize people are the very pinnacle of God's creation? If you think an amber and purple-hazed sunset is striking, take a few minutes and listen to a person made in God's image, sharing their innermost thoughts with you. I bet, more often than not, you'll be strengthened and perhaps even renewed by your exploration.



Just because I find conversations with others invigorating doesn't mean you do. Perhaps you consider yourself an introvert. Or possibly you, like myself, have been completely exhausted with the amount of conflict you've witnessed in recent months. It has been a socially exhausting season for us all. Whether from social isolation or from social overstimulation online, one can find themselves weary of the effort to converse—especially about things that really matter. So, perhaps I can serve you with some simple practical tips for those of us a little rusty at the art of human conversation. Please note that these insights come from a sincere combination of passion and personal weakness. I am prideful and enjoy my own voice far too much.

I've also been profoundly shaped by God's loving voice and long to live in unity with my brothers and sisters. Whether you're a shy, inarticulate, introvert or a babbling, dynamo of ideas, conversation can hold unique pitfalls. Perhaps your pride looks like over-sharing or perhaps it looks like under-sharing. Either way, *you* remain central, instead of *God*. Let's envision spaces where conversation exists mainly to feed our souls. Let's explore the invigorating freedom of conversation with God at the center. It is still possible. God will be faithful to us, brothers and sisters. He will help us in this endeavor. If we believe God is with us, and for us, we can be brave. Here are a couple of helpful tools as we embark on the expedition. I think a useful starting point is to think of conversation as two simple things: **Listening & Speaking**

LISTENING

01 MAKE EYE CONTACT

This may be obvious, but it's also rare and appreciated. Make a conscious decision to look at someone's eyes instead of your feet, your phone, or...well, anything else. You're in this conversation because of the value of this person.

02 KEEP IT HUMAN

Do everything you can to keep distractions at a minimum when you're seeking to be attentive to human beings in your presence. Play music in the background, but only to the degree that it makes people comfortable and fosters rather than replaces conversation. Be yourself. If you allow yourself this freeing privilege, others will feel they have it too. There are few gifts as sweet as this to give a person, and it's one God freely offers us.

03 WAIT

When someone else is talking, be prepared to wait. Wait for them to finish. Wait to begin. Wait longer than you expect. A moment where they seem to finish may simply be one to take a breath. If you jump into the conversation prematurely, you will likely miss the gem your brothers and sisters are working to get to.

04 DISCOVERY

Don't presume you know where someone is going. Remember, people are one of the most remarkable and complex mysteries in creation, and your conversation is seeking to enjoy that mystery, not manage it. If you listen well, you're likely to discover something about this person. You're likely to discover something about yourself. You may even discover something about your glorious God.

05 HUMILITY

Go into a conversation as an explorer and a student. Go into the room with a heart to say, "There you are!" Rather than saying, "Here I am." And together we are more likely to recognize, "Here He is!"



SPEAKING

01 EPHESIANS 4:29

“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

May we all consider memorizing this passage and reciting it under our breath often, as is needed, especially in conversations where we disagree with one another. When you are unsure if you should say something, consider using these questions as a filter.

- Does it build up/encourage?
- Does it fit?
- Does it give grace?

02 ASK QUESTIONS

If you don't understand, don't agree, or just need more information about something someone says, ask a good question. Can you tell me more about that? What do you mean exactly when you say _____? Exhaust your questions before considering disagreeing.

03 ENCOURAGE

If anyone has ever spoken encouraging words over you, you know what a remarkable and precious gift they are. Sometimes a few words can even last a person a whole lifetime. You don't have to get that creative. Most people are reflecting God's beauty in some way. You simply get a chance to acknowledge what it is. In a world ready to spread all sorts of messages, let's be a people recklessly throwing encouragement around like confetti.

04 PRESUME THE BEST

We've all grown used to the sound of dissent and confusion. One of the worst things you can do right now is to presume that you know exactly what someone else is thinking-especially if you haven't had a personal conversation with them. As soon as you hear yourself thinking, "I bet..." remind yourself that you're just as likely to be wrong about someone when you assume the worst as you are when you assume the best. Neither assumption is more foolish than the other, but one is certainly more loving.



THE LIVING ROOM

The Living Room was borne out of a desire to help our church grow in the practice of the very type of conversation you've been reading about in this booklet.

We desperately need a space for familial, soul-shaping conversation. We are a church that is strong in the pursuit of teaching, so we naturally lean towards creating classroom spaces. Though the classroom is very valuable, sitting in a classroom is not the same thing as sitting in a living room. God has chosen to call us a family, and we should seek to reflect that reality with grace.

I also kept hearing a consistent longing within our congregation. The leaders longed to connect with the members. The members longed to have more connection and communication with their leaders.

It is with this longing in mind that our leaders want to open up their front doors and welcome you into their living rooms. They want to hear from you, and I pray you want to hear from them. My hope for *The Living Room* is that it creates places for us to gather as a family and talk about the things that matter most to us—to our world—and to our church. My dream is that this will also make familial conversation more natural to us in all matters of church life. It is wonderful to be part of a family. It is also challenging to be part of a family. But we long to be a healthy, God-honoring family. We desperately need your voice and your involvement as we gather in living rooms for this precious family time. I pray you'll consider coming, listening, and speaking. And I pray that as we share company, God's company will bless us all.



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