

Having difficult conversations without destroying relationships



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

I'm no expert on civil discourse but I do have a fair bit of experience attempting to communicate in difficult situations, sometimes with difficult people (difficult: "needing much effort or skill to accomplish, deal with, or understand"). As I see it, the main question will always be how much effort we are willing to put into understanding other perspectives, and particularly how much we value sustaining a relationship through disagreements. Of course, we may find all the effort we can muster doesn't guarantee we will understand, or be understood. A personal example brought this home for me.

I had a difficult phone conversation with a relative who lives across the country. I sensed it would be challenging when she began with: "We're thinking of moving out of the country. It feels like a dictatorship!" Already knowing our political distance, I asked for more explanation. "They're trying to make us get jabbed with a vaccine when there

are so many unknowns. They can't force us to put something in our bodies when we don't know the effects it will have. People are dying from the vaccine!" I tried to calm her: "I haven't heard anything about people dying, except 450,000 dead from the virus."

A little backstory to this divisive family gap. I led this relative to Christ when we were teens. She was a party-girl and I was a young evangelist. She saw my devotion, how our fire-up youth group shared our faith, sang gospel songs and followed the long-haired rebel who promised happiness and heaven. She jumped on the bus of belief with us and joined in the fun. Life got more complicated for both of us and eventually we chose different paths of faith – we were separated by miles and mindsets. She chose a more evangelical, conservative worldview and I chose a more progressive, liberal worldview. Interesting irony there, especially since I was the one who chose an evangelical college and a path to ministry. She chose to drop out of college and leave a promising career to be a mother homeschooled her children. We both admired elements of one another's life choices, while carrying serious reservations about each other's beliefs.

There are times I wish I could pull her off the bus, lead her away from the

Christ who now stands to divide us. But I know how much she finds comfort and strength in her faith, so I don't wish to take that from her. I remember how long it took me to become a freethinker, choosing to leave faith behind and move forward with a more rational, humanistic view of life. Patience is good; respecting the freely chosen beliefs of others is good. Except ... what if you wait for a long time and there's no discernible growth, no openness to other opinions? What if it seems a person's faith isn't very healthy for them or others? What if they live in their own "God bubble," not accepting science, reason, facts? Do we avoid difficult conversations and let it go?

Our conversation became more heated. I explained that more people getting vaccinated helps protect everyone, reminding her we got "jabbed" as children – we survived – while many did not, and still don't, especially in poor countries. I brought up the climate emergency as another example of how human choices can harm others, that our actions contribute to our changing environment. She wouldn't accept the fact that a majority of scientists who study these things generally agree humans have a fundamental role in the crisis. I asked: "What about our responsibility to oth-

ers, not just ourselves? We can choose to live with our personal beliefs and choices, but how does that affect others?" She agreed that was an important consideration; she cares about other people too. I respect her sensitive nature. I believe she knows that faith (and being a good citizen) can't only be about her, her family, her God. I feel she understands that our beliefs have an impact, for good or ill, and we need to be mindful of the effect on others, even when they don't believe as we do.

Our conversation circled back around to the suffering of vulnerable people and her own suffering. I wondered how she was handling her own health challenges and her husband's illness. I assured her that we love them and want them to be safe and well. Death may not be a great concern to her but the rest of the family want her around for a while!

I admit, when we ended the call with "I love you," I was left feeling sad, uncertain. Did I make an impact? Should I even try? Maybe it's time to drop the difficulties?

I have faith in our relationship.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. Learn more at chighland.com.