Difficult Discussions at Dinner

*The following is adapted from an online conversation with Nikki Toyama-Szeto, Executive Director with Christians for Social Action (CSA), Kristyn Komarnicki, Senior Director of Dialogue with CSA, and Andre Henry, Program Director for the Racial Justice Institute at CSA. You can listen to the full conversation at* <https://christiansforsocialaction.org/resource/difficult-discussions-dinner/>.

Nikki

I have been looking forward to this conversation, because Thanksgiving is just around the corner, and I know I will be interacting with some different viewpoints around the Thanksgiving dinner table. I read an article that said that in 2017, families with people who had different political beliefs spent 30 to 60 minutes less at the Thanksgiving table than they had in the past. All sorts of differences, not all political, come up in many family gatherings.

Kristyn, can you tell me a little bit about what do you do to get ready for these family-and-friends meals that can be so fraught with lots of disagreement? How do you prepare for family and friends at these kinds of dinners?

Kristyn

Preparation is really important. Identify your fears and identify the people you’re most anxious about. Start praying for them in advance, so that your heart will be ready for them, so that they will feel loved, accepted, seen and heard from the moment they walk into the house. Whether or not you’re the host, you can always reach out and make the difficult person feel welcome.

Think of the prayer attributed to St Francis: “Lord, help me seek to hear more than be heard and understand others more than be understood.” If you go in thinking “How can I serve this person?” or “How can I be a reflection of Christ’s love by hearing and understanding this person?”— that does a lot to defuse the tension early on. Go into the situation trying to understand that person as opposed to avoiding that person. People know if they’re the person others are always reacting to, or avoiding.

Nikki

Some hosts have a rule that there will be no discussion about a particular topic –like politics.

Kristyn

If you’re going to have a ‘no politics’ rule, you need to be very clear about it from the outset and you need to replace it with something else. One thing I have on my table at all times are these little cards from the [Ungame](https://www.amazon.com/Pocket-Ungame-All-Ages-Version/dp/B000BXJZ16/ref%3Dsr_1_3?keywords=ungame&qid=1566658591&s=sporting-goods&sr=1-3-catcorr). They are good conversation starters. Put one card under each person’s plate and at a certain point in the meal, invite guests to look under their plates. Ask for a volunteer to start, or start it of yourself, but make it optional and make sure each person gets 2-3 minutes to answer the question on their card (setting a timer can make it feel more like a game, which some groups might enjoy). In this way, you’re not just providing good food, you’re also providing good conversation. There are [free cards](https://www.livinglocurto.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Dinner-Conversation-Cards-Living-Locurto.pdf) you can download and lots of other [versions you can buy](https://www.tabletopics.com/). I also highly recommend the [conversation cards created by “The {} And](https://shop.theskindeep.com/)”.

Nikki

If you’re a guest and don’t have the ability to shape the space, what do you do if a situation with the difficult person comes up?

Kristyn

If someone is being very obnoxious, for example, proclaiming this politician is great and or that one is terrible, try moving it from the theoretical to the personal. Say something like, “I can see you’re really passionate about this! How long have you been interested in X? What was your first interaction with Y? Can you tell me a story that illustrates what Z means to you?”

Nikki

What does that do when you move it to the personal?

Kristyn

It just roots it in the person and invites that person to be more vulnerable. It becomes less an abstract opinion (with which anyone can disagree) and more an embodied story (which is not a matter of agreement or disagreement). Most people really like to talk about their story.

One word about respect: I think we often get confused and think we can’t show respect to people whose ideas we don’t respect, but they’re two very different things. We should always treat people with respect, even if we don’t respect their ideas at all. Those two actions are not exclusive of each other.

Nikki

That’s a very good point.

Another person who has been involved with this conversation is Andre Henry, who also works for CSA. He brought up this really great story the other day.

Andre

Yes, I was telling Nikki about an experience I had on Thanksgiving some years ago. My godmother and godfather are of Jewish ethnicity, and that side of the family is white. Another guest, who is a law enforcement officer, started talking about his encounters with people of color. He started naming a lot of generalizations about black people, people of color, suggesting that there is a lot of criminality in black and brown communities. I challenged him on this, and his response was: “You need to learn more about the white man’s struggle in this country…” I remember being so angry that I left. My godfamily said, “We had never seen you that upset.” So the next time I came to Atlanta, I met them for lunch and we talked about it. The solution they had come up with was “we are just not going to talk about ‘politics’ at the table.” That was so upsetting to me that I have not had a meal with them since, and that was years ago. It felt like we left this thing hanging in the air – we allowed someone to transgress in some way, and I wasn’t even given a voice – no one interrupted him, no one corrected him (at least not in front of me), no one even said to me, “We’re so sorry, we’re going to try to do something about this.” So, I get conflicted about “no talking about politics” approaches.

Nikki

Kristyn, in a case like that, where actually talking and engaging with a difference may be more hospitable than ignoring or avoiding it, what would it look like to respect the people while not respecting their ideas? What’s appropriate and what’s not appropriate for Thanksgiving dinner?

Kristyn

For some groups and some cultures, debate is a part of the culture and is sometimes very vigorous – they might feel that it’s boring or shows indifference if you’re not disagreeing. If you have a lot of folks who want to have a vigorous debate, you can say (preferably ahead of time), “Hey, we have reserved the den over there for our discussion of politics.” Just have a designated area. Other people get really stressed out with conflictual conversations, and sometimes there are kids in the room, etc. All conversations are not suited for everybody. You can invite people to start—or continue—those kinds of conversations in the other room.

Andre

That’s a great idea and is something that might actually be workable.

Kristyn

Also, Andre, if you were to go back to that same group of people, you’ve been warned a little bit and you now know some of the dynamics. You can prepare by maybe getting an ally in the room, somebody who will have your back and will be like an informed bystander, who might say something like, “That’s kind of a hard comment; I’d like to hear what Andre has to say now.” Someone who might mediate a little bit. Also, if you don’t trust your own reactions, you can always say to somebody ahead of time, “If I start to really go off the rails, let’s have a code word like, for instance, *cumin*. Just say something like, *Is there cumin in these sweet potatoes? I really love CUMIN*!” Just talk ahead of time with some other people you trust who will be at the table and can help keep you aware of yourself.

Nikki

Kristyn, you talked a little bit about ground rules and expectations. What do you do with that family member who violates every rule?

Kristyn

I think there’s a little bit of a natural reaction that happens around that person – people will start to move away. If I were the host, I might tell that person that I need their help in the kitchen. Then just be straight with them about their actions and say, “That’s enough.” Or, you could just make a public comment like, “We’re going to change the topic of conversation now. We’ve heard your thoughts on this, and I want to make sure other people have a chance to talk about some things they’d like to talk about.”

Nikki

I have a family member who always begins with, “Well, you know our relationship is much more important than being right or wrong” and then immediately lunges into a diatribe about how their particular stance on immigrants is the right stance. For me it’s just about all I can do not to get hooked into that. Sometimes I choose to walk away and say to myself, I value more the humanity in the other person than my right to argue. But sometimes my heart takes over and… *I* want to be right!

Kristyn

You want to have the last word, right?

Nikki

Do you have any last helpful pieces of advice about surviving these differences at these holiday table gatherings?

Kristyn

Like I said, I’m big on prep. One thing I’ve started doing at the holidays in general, that speaks to people being heard and seen and, I think does a lot to diffuse things ahead of time, is to ask people ahead of time: “What is one thing without which this Thanksgiving or Christmas would not be Thanksgiving or Christmas to you?” I ask for a list of a few things that are important to them, that capture the spirit of the holiday for them. Then, when they come into the room, they already know that their thoughts and values have been considered. It might be a dish, it might be a tradition—*I really like it when MeMa reads stories to the children, or when we watch* It’s a Wonderful Life *or take a walk together.*

If you are the host you can really do a lot to create a landscape for the day to go the way you want it to. If you’re not, you can also talk to the host ahead of time. You can say, “This is really important to me, this was so meaningful in past times; is there any way we can build this in?” Depending on how controlling a person your host is, you may be heard or not, but it’s worth trying. I think we shut down too easily and decide too quickly that we won’t be heard, but I think any positive suggestions you can make, your host might be really, really grateful for.

Nikki

Well, Kristyn, this has been really helpful. I can already feel my own anxiety level as I head into the holidays. I’ve got a couple of things to do, traveling and that, but hopefully I’ll be able to hang out at the table 30 or 60 minutes longer than I did last year! Thank you for sharing your wisdom and your thoughts.

Kristyn

Absolutely. It was fun.