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# DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

a quick look at how pastors can have  
effective discussions of hope and grace



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## Introduction

Pastors serve in so many ways, from preparing a theologically accurate sermon, to compassion ministry by being present with a family who is losing a loved one, to practicing with the worship team for the Sunday service. One area where I have had several pastors ask for further help is in how to have difficult conversation.

The ability to have a hard conversation with a church staff member or volunteer is a skill that every church leader needs to develop, regardless of what part of church you are pastoring. When handled poorly, these conversations can create distance, damage personal relationships, demotivate your team, and decrease productivity and impact. When handled well, it can become a catalyst for growth for both the person you are serving and the Church. Unfortunately, very few church leaders learn how to develop this valuable skill except through trial and error. As a result, many leaders feel a lot of anxiety about having to have tough conversations.

To be clear, when we say “difficult conversations,” people may interpret that a couple of different ways. We are not specifically referencing when you start a small group discussion about a controversial topic, debate the idea with the elder board of taking the church into a new missional direction, or other sermon-like conversations such as a need to increase tithing and the need for reading your Bible more. Instead, we are talking about pastoral care with one-on-one conversations or when families come to you for help. Maybe this is a mental health crisis, a tough talk a parent needs to have with their teenager, or a need for spiritual guidance about intimacy and pornography. It's your time to step in and serve from a very tangible point.

We also want to point out that this is not a guide on what to talk about specific topics. There are numerous resources out there to help pastors to discuss good Biblical parenting, the theological implications of homosexuality, how to help someone start to work towards sobriety, and marital counseling interventions. Instead, we are helping to have any kind of difficult conversation with the underpinnings which may create barriers for you to connect, communicate, and help transform.

In Barna's 2022 study, they asked which areas of ministry do pastors wish they would have been better prepared for and the top answer was handling conflict, up from second place in 2020. Further, they found that "younger pastors more often than their older colleagues wish they'd had better preparation to handle issues like conflict (47% of pastors under 45 vs. 37% of pastors 45+), crisis management (32% vs. 15%) and leadership demands (29% vs. 17%)."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-better-prepared/>

**OF THE FOLLOWING, IF ANY, WHICH ARE AREAS OF MINISTRY THAT YOU WISH YOU HAD BEEN BETTER PREPARED FOR?**

Please select all that apply.

● 2015 ● 2020 ● 2022



Source: Barna Group  
 n=584 U.S. Protestant senior pastors, September 6–16, 2022; n=408 U.S. Protestant senior pastors, September 16–October 20, 2020; n=900 U.S. Protestant senior pastors, April–December 2015.

The response options offered to pastors varied across the three surveys. A dash indicates that option was not offered in that year's survey.

In this book, we want to give you some quick practical skills to use that we have been taught as counselors and learned in a therapeutic environment. It should be noted that while reading about these skills is good to know, it means very little in the heat of the moment, if you do not practice these skills prior to the difficult conversations.

Our suggestion is for pastors to use this as a guide to work with a trained pastoral counselor, clinical counselor from your congregation, or partnering agency that wants to work with your church. For Christian counselors who are reading this, use this to connect with your local churches in offering free trainings as you network to empower the Church and help them get a better understanding of how you do your practice.

## Scenarios This May Be Used

As we previously stated, this guide is not going to get into specific examples of challenging conversations pastors might face, but we do recognize we want to give context for where you can use this. Below are several situations where you may need to address a church staff or congregation members concerning behavior:

- Confronting someone about gossip, disruptive behavior in services, or harmful actions within the community.
- Responding to theological disagreements.
- Navigating discussions with members who hold different interpretations of scripture on key issues.
- Counseling someone in crisis.
- Providing support and guidance to individuals dealing with personal struggles like addiction, mental health issues, or family conflict.
- Delivering bad news.
- Informing the congregation about a significant financial challenge, staffing changes, or a church closure.
- Addressing a complaint against another church leader.
- Investigating and resolving concerns about a pastor or staff member's conduct.
- Discussing sensitive personal issues with a member:
- Navigating conversations about divorce, grief, or a major life change.
- Responding to criticism of the church's direction.
- Addressing concerns about the church's focus on certain issues or programs.
- Handling conflicts within the church leadership.
- Mediating disagreements between different church boards or committees.

# Setting Up A Difficult Conversation

## **The first step is prevention and education.**

Difficult conversations traditionally are times when things have broken down. Certainly, there are times when God calls us to do hard things, and we need to rise to the occasion and stretch our faithfulness and resilience. But most conversations happen due to a shortcoming, failure-point, or need for changing course. In many cases, these difficult conversations could be avoided if we are preventative. And many times, it is due to a heart issue or sin like pride. We see this in Jesus' words in Luke 6:45:

*“A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.”*

This starts with knowing what your church needs, what it is doing well, what is low hanging fruit, and also seeking out the Holy Spirit to put it on the hearts of all that should come forward to be part of a mission together. See if your church can provide marriage and parenting conferences, promote young adult communities where we know they are transitioning into adulthood and need likeminded peers, set up compassion ministries, train and educate your youth ministry well, make sure all staff (at least, if not volunteers) are prepared for situations like suicidal ideation, mandated reporting, and hospice-type events. Small groups work well, discipleship is always important, offering service projects for not only youth, but families together and individuals, all while moving towards what Barna calls “practicing Christians”<sup>2</sup> as a minimum expectation for your congregation.

## **Not all difficult conversations are “bad.”**

As the often quotes Proverbs 27:17 says, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” The work of iron smithing does not use soft pillows and rainbows, the process is very taxing, the hammering of the metal taking strength, and the heat of the forge takes courage and practice. But the process produces something amazing.

So, it is with difficult conversations. When done correctly, both parties come out the other side better for it. You as the one giving the difficult conversation can take satisfaction in your part, but know that you will have to put good, hard work into it. Go into it with humility, courage, excitement, and patience, asking God to lead you the whole way through by prayer.

One person who can truly speak to this is Peter, many years after his time with Jesus, says in 1 Peter 4:12-14:

*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to*

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<sup>2</sup> “**Practicing Christians** identify as Christian, agree strongly that faith is very important in their lives and have attended church within the past month.” Cite: <https://www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church/>

*you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.*

### **Determine the real issue.**

Many times, when someone is confronted by someone else or in an emotional state, the details of the problems are not always clear. This occurs so often that there is a term for it: doorknob confession. This is when a client shares important information or emotions (the actual reason for needing to meet) right before a therapy session ends. Further, another therapeutic technique called the Johari Window is designed to help an individual understand themselves better and identify deeper attitudes and core beliefs about themselves as well as an unconscious bias they may have.

Before starting any conversation, take some time to determine exactly what needs to be addressed:

- What specific behavior or activity needs to change?
- What specific examples can you give?
- Is this a personality conflict or is it a correctable problem?

Pray through the issue and ask that God give you clarity, wisdom, and grace.

### **Create a safe environment for conversations.**

Sometimes these difficult conversations happen at the church and so having privacy is a must. We don't want to air out dirty laundry, so move the conversation from the lobby or hallway to somewhere more private. Understandably, many churches do not feel comfortable with or have policies against meeting behind a closed door without windows, so create a place or two that staff can have these difficult conversations before it's needed.

Other times, these conversations are going to happen after a crisis at a school, in public where it's hard to find privacy, or in a hospital where the individual is confined to their bed or room. Do your best to ask for privacy, allowing the individual to pick who is present that is appropriate, and think about the ambient noise, distractions, and need for calm.

### **Be oriented to the task with an objective.**

In moments of difficult conversations, it's easy for an individual to speak emotionally. While this can feel cathartic, it has its limits. This can become a time of blaming others, not focusing on what we can control, moving to topics not relevant to the conversation, dwelling to a point of obsession about things not fair, and sitting in our negative feelings that can lead to hopelessness and misery.

Part of your job is to keep the individual on task, allowing the individual to share authentically, but to be productive. Sometimes there is no solution to a problem. Grief of a loved one has no solution, but the grief itself is good. Yet it can move to how we screwed up, they were arrogant, or others didn't do what we wanted.

Finally, we have a term in counseling called countertransference which means the therapist has an emotional reaction to a client's self, whether it's how they look, behave, or attitude towards something. We need to make sure we address our own unresolved feelings about our own stuff before we decide to address other people. Can you be objective and open? If you are angry or frustrated, are you able to set those feelings aside so that you can have a constructive conversation? We encourage you to seek out supervision within the church, mentoring, coaching, or, if needed, your own counseling about this problem.

### **Remember the person(s) is a child of God**

Sometimes empathy is difficult, especially when the difficult conversation feels like an attack from the other person, or this is the tenth time we have had to have the difficult conversation. We need to remember the other person is a child of God. It's easy to go into difficult conversations with anger and frustration, it dehumanizes the person as "the problem," or to lose sight of God's place in the argument. But God loves them as much as He loves us. We are all sinners, we are all eligible for His mercy and grace, and we should treat each other in that light

We promote confession, repentance, and grace. We offer mercy, but we seek after their heart. They are more than the behavior, more than the diagnosis, and more than the sin. Jesus says it best when He is seeking to the Pharisees in March 12:31:

*The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."*

### **Know where to refer, if the conversation is beyond your ability.**

We have a whole guide called the *Pastoral Counseling Referral Checklist* to help you make sure you are prepared ahead of time in case what you are helping someone through is beyond your own personal ability.<sup>3</sup> Know when, where, and how to go about getting someone into a counselor that is right for them. In fact, as best you can, find these people long before you need them. If this task is too much, find a professional counselor and/or medically licensed staff in your congregation or trusted community that you can consult with in these urgent times.

### **Start and end with prayer for the intervention of the Holy Spirit**

The idea of education and prevention for difficult conversations must include the Holy Spirit. Before we are even at the point of addressing something with someone, I hope that you go to

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<sup>3</sup> <https://churchandmentalhealth.com/product/pastoral-counseling-referral-checklist-digital-download/>

God in prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to intervene. Beyond this, after you have had the difficult conversation(s), please go to God in prayer.

Christian counselors have many clinical skills and therapy models they can use that we learned in our Master's classes. The spiritual integration of prayer to the Great Counselor that can do more than we ever can, who can change hearts when we can only speak to them, is the one coping skill above all others. I have the motto that as a counselor, it is not my job to fix people, but to walk with them. But God can do so much more if we seek after God, plead to Him, and He sees fit to do so in His master plan.

End your time with the individual or family in prayer and ask that they seek after God's heart. Cover them in prayer in the following days. Ask your compassion ministry to continue to pray for them. Everything you do should be covered in prayer.

## Effective Communication Skills

For a pastor to navigate difficult conversations effectively, they need a combination of interpersonal, emotional, and spiritual skills to create a safe, compassionate space where individuals feel understood and supported. While this is a requirement of clinical and most pastoral counselor degrees, we have found that most pastors have not been directly trained in these skills. The below skills are some good head knowledge, but we encourage you to practice these skills on "not difficult" conversations before you practice with even harder situations.

(It should be noted these are skills that licensed clinical counselors traditionally learn in schooling as practice and observed work. As a guide, I am pulling from *Essential Interviewing: A Programmed Approach to Effective Communication*, designed to offer this education and practical examples for the reader.)

### Empathy

Empathy for a pastor working on difficult conversations involves deeply understanding and sharing the emotional experience of the person you're helping. It's more than just listening—it's being present, acknowledging their feelings, and offering a compassionate response without rushing to solve the issue. As a pastor, empathy also means being non-judgmental, showing care and concern, and creating a safe space for the person to express themselves. This allows them to feel heard and supported, helping foster trust and emotional healing. Empathy bridges the gap between the pastor's wisdom and the individual's emotional needs, showing that you're genuinely walking with them through their struggles.

### Active Listening

Active listening for a pastor is a process where the pastor is fully engaged in the conversation, focusing not just on the words being spoken but also on the tone, body language, and underlying emotions. It means listening with intent to understand, rather than to respond. This involves



giving the person your undivided attention, making eye contact, nodding, and using verbal cues like "I understand" or "Tell me more" to show you're following along.

Active listening also involves asking clarifying questions to ensure you're accurately understanding the person's concerns. For example, you might ask, "What do you mean when you say you feel stuck?" This helps the person feel heard and encourages them to express themselves more openly. It also creates an environment where they can process their feelings at their own pace, knowing they are in a safe, supportive space.

## Reflective Listening

Reflective listening is a technique where the pastor actively listens to what the person is saying and then reflects back what they've heard to ensure understanding. It's not just repeating their words, but also summarizing or paraphrasing their emotions and concerns. This shows the individual that you are fully engaged and care about their feelings. For example, if someone says they feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities, the pastor might respond, "It sounds like you're feeling really burdened by everything on your plate right now."

This approach helps clarify emotions, reinforces that the person's feelings are valid, and opens space for deeper exploration. It also encourages the person to feel seen and heard, which can bring comfort and emotional relief, especially in difficult or vulnerable moments. Further, it allows them to provide clarifying information they did not share or correct things you missed or what's most important. Finally, reflective listening helps break up length ramblings of the individual who may be vocalizing all of their concerns but not adding to the conversation.

## Boundaries

Boundaries for a pastor in counseling are the clear limits and guidelines that protect both the pastor and the person being counseled, ensuring the relationship remains healthy, professional, and spiritually grounded. These boundaries help the pastor maintain their role as a supportive guide without becoming overly involved or assuming responsibilities that belong to the individual.

By establishing and respecting these boundaries, pastors can create a safe, respectful space for counseling while maintaining their integrity, emotional health, and effectiveness as spiritual leaders. Effective boundaries might include:

- **Emotional Boundaries:** Recognizing the difference between supporting someone and taking on their emotional burdens. This prevents burnout and ensures the pastor can maintain their own emotional health.
- **Time Boundaries:** Setting limits on session length, availability, and meeting frequency to ensure a balanced approach to their ministry responsibilities.
- **Relational Boundaries:** Avoiding dual relationships (e.g., being both a counselor and a close friend) that can blur roles and hinder objectivity in providing counsel.

- **Confidentiality Boundaries:** Upholding trust by keeping private conversations confidential, except in cases where there's a risk of harm to the individual or others.
- **Spiritual Boundaries:** Avoiding overstepping by imposing personal beliefs or decisions on the individual. Instead, the pastor should guide them to seek wisdom and discernment from God.
- **Professional Boundaries:** Knowing when an issue goes beyond the pastor's expertise and referring the individual to a licensed counselor, therapist, or other professional when needed.

## Attending Behavior

Attending behavior refers to the intentional nonverbal actions a pastor uses to show they are fully present and engaged during a counseling session. For a pastor, this might include maintaining eye contact, nodding in agreement, leaning slightly forward to show attentiveness, and ensuring their posture is open and welcoming. These behaviors signal to the person being counseled that their feelings and words are valued.

By using attending behaviors, the pastor creates a safe, supportive environment where the person feels heard and respected. It also encourages the individual to open up more freely, knowing they have the pastor's undivided attention and care. These behaviors help convey empathy, active listening, and a commitment to understanding the person's struggles.

## Tone

With difficult conversations, tone is just as important as the words spoken. The way a pastor communicates can either build trust and encourage openness or create distance and hesitation. A warm, calming presence helps clients feel safe, while a judgmental or harsh tone can shut down meaningful conversation. At the same time, being overly passive can reduce the effectiveness of guidance. Striking the right balance—one that is firm yet compassionate, clear yet gentle—ensures that clients feel both supported and understood.

- Ensure that clients do not feel judged, as judgment can create barriers to open communication and healing. Instead, they offer guidance with compassion, understanding, and a desire to support their spiritual and emotional growth.
- Maintain a calming and warm presence, as a welcoming tone can help clients feel safe and heard. While corrective actions may sometimes need to be firm or direct, it is important to recognize that individuals may have trauma histories or emotional sensitivities that make communication challenging.
- Balance assertiveness with a peaceful demeanor—do not allow yourself to be passive or disregarded but also avoid coming across as aggressive or overbearing. Being firm yet gentle ensures that your guidance is received with respect and openness.
- Adapt your language to match the client's communication style, avoiding complex or academic terms when they use more straightforward or culturally familiar language.

Speaking in a way they understand helps build connection and trust in the counseling relationship.

## **Eye Contact**

Eye contact is a powerful but often overlooked aspect of communication in Christian counseling. It goes beyond simply looking at someone—it helps clients feel seen, heard, and valued on a deeper level. By being mindful of cultural differences, emotional sensitivities, and individual comfort levels, counselors can use eye contact to build trust and create a welcoming space for healing.

- Good eye contact is not about staring but about ensuring that the client feels truly “seen”—not just physically but also emotionally and cognitively. It communicates that they are valued, heard, and understood in the counseling space.
- Maintaining appropriate eye contact can signal understanding, showing the client that you are engaged and present in the conversation. A gentle, steady gaze can provide unspoken feedback, reassuring them that their thoughts and feelings matter.
- Avoiding eye contact can unintentionally communicate disinterest or discomfort, while excessive staring can feel intimidating. Striking a natural balance allows for connection without making the client feel overwhelmed or scrutinized.
- Adjust your eye contact based on cultural differences, personal comfort levels, and the emotional weight of the conversation. Some clients may appreciate steady engagement, while others may feel more at ease with periodic breaks in eye contact.
- Using eye contact alongside warm facial expressions and active listening cues, such as nodding or leaning in slightly, can enhance trust and create a safe space for clients to share openly.

## **Language**

Effective language in difficult conversations goes beyond the words spoken—it includes how, when, and even if something is said. Thoughtful communication helps create a space where clients feel heard, understood, and encouraged without feeling pressured or overwhelmed. By being intentional with language, counselors can build trust and create an environment where healing conversations can flourish.

- Using minimal encouragement, such as short verbal affirmations like “okay,” “yeah,” “uh-hmm,” and “alright,” can show that you are actively listening without interrupting the client’s flow of thought. These small verbal cues reassure them that you are engaged while allowing them to continue expressing themselves.
- Balancing open-ended and closed questions helps guide the conversation effectively. Open-ended questions, such as “How are you feeling about that?” encourage deeper

reflection and sharing, while closed questions, like “Did that help you feel better?” can clarify specific points or confirm understanding.

- Silence is a powerful form of communication that should not always be rushed to fill. Allowing moments of quiet can create space for deeper thought, encourage the client to process emotions, and demonstrate patience and presence in the conversation.
- Silence can give individuals time to think and respond in a meaningful way. If a moment of silence feels awkward, take a step back and assess whether the discomfort is coming from you rather than the client. Being comfortable with silence allows for more thoughtful and intentional discussions.

## **Facial Expression**

Facial expressions play a crucial role with difficult conversations, often communicating just as much as words—if not more. When talking with someone, they may not always remember exactly what was said, but they will remember how they felt in your presence. Subtle reactions, whether intentional or not, can either foster trust or create distance. By being mindful of facial expressions, counselors can create a welcoming space where clients feel understood, valued, and encouraged to open up.

- Be mindful of facial expressions that might unintentionally communicate judgment, disbelief, or confusion. A raised eyebrow, a furrowed brow, or a sudden look of shock could make a client feel self-conscious or hesitant to continue sharing.
- Avoid expressions that suggest, “*What in the world did you just say?*” Even if a client shares something surprising or difficult to understand, maintaining a calm and accepting expression will help them feel safe rather than embarrassed.
- Refrain from looks that might convey, “*What in the world happened to you?*” While curiosity and concern are natural, an expression of shock or alarm can make the client feel like their experiences are too extreme or overwhelming to discuss.
- Never let your face say, “*How am I supposed to help with that?*” Even in complex or heavy situations, a reassuring and empathetic expression communicates that you are present, listening, and ready to walk with them through their struggles.
- Be careful not to project an expression that implies, “*What’s wrong with you?*” Clients need to feel understood and accepted, not as though they are being judged or analyzed in a negative way. A neutral yet compassionate expression encourages openness and trust.
- If the thought, “*This person really needs a therapist... oh yeah, that’s me,*” crosses your mind, ensure that your facial expression remains professional and engaged. A moment of humor or surprise internally should not be reflected in a way that makes the client feel dismissed or unimportant.

- Aim for facial expressions that are warm, empathetic, and responsive to what the client is sharing. A nod, a slight smile of reassurance, or a look of concern at the right moment can help validate their feelings and foster a trusting relationship.

## Conclusion

My hope is that these difficult conversations are you about to take up do not happen in isolation of the other parts of the Christian discipline. Whether this leads to evangelism and salvation by grace for those searching for something more, discipleship and sanctification by a refiners fire of deep exploration of their self, redemption from sin, and something much deeper in their relationship with God, or of service to family, friends, community, and other that leads us to be ambassadors and prophets of God, we can see people (and coincidentally ourselves) transformed in these difficult conversations.

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