

Peacemaker Starter Pack

An Introduction to Peacemaking





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Introduction to the Peacemaker Starter Pack

Peacemakers who sow in peace, reap a harvest of righteousness. (James 3:18)

Religious faith shapes our lives. The power of our faith communities can restore lives and give hope for the future. But the strength of our religious communities and institutions can be turned against us, too. Churches can be uniters or dividers. When division and distrust enter our faith communities, they create powerful “us against them” dynamics that pull neighbors apart.

Today, these destructive forces come in the form of political polarization, misinformation, and an increasing sense that Americans can’t communicate with one another anymore. Responsible leaders want to do something to calm the emotion, improve the tone of rhetoric and find solutions. But that seems more difficult than ever.

So, what can we do? This Peacemaker Starter Pack serves as an introduction to addressing these problems in your community by hosting constructive dialogue and spotting problems before they start.



You are called to be a peacemaker

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

Faith leaders are some of the most well-positioned people to build peace. Faith leaders are influential and trusted people within their communities, with assets for bringing people together and networks of other influential community members who can help.

Peacemaking is about *building and sustaining* peace in your community. That means cultivating the things that bring us together and whittling away at the problems that put us in conflict with one another. Sometimes that means learning to disagree better, or focusing on what really matters instead of the latest political controversy. Occasionally, it means drawing the line and deciding what is unacceptable for the health and happiness of your community.

Above all, it means staying connected and engaged with your community, keeping calm and facing these challenges head-on.

What are the barriers to peace?

Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. (John 4:8)

We know some of the things that stand in the way of spiritual peace: holding grudges, materialism, holding yourself above others. Today, similar shortcomings threaten to break our communities apart. Three of the most destructive trends are *moral disengagement*, *supremacist thinking*, and the *conspiracy mindset*.

Moral Disengagement means abandoning the moral codes that should guide a person's life. Moral disengagement often sets the stage for acts of betrayal or violence against family, neighbors, or violence against people with whom we disagree politically.

“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” (Genesis 9:6)

Supremacist Thinking means falsely claiming inferiority and superiority between entire groups of people. This is different from merely believing that some ways of life are better than others. Supremacist thinking assumes *inherent* inferiority of whole groups with certain characteristics—such as religions, sexual orientation, or disabilities—and concludes that domination and even extermination are justified against “inferior” groups.

A *Conspiracy Mindset* believes that events in the world do not occur randomly or naturally, but rather are a result of orchestration by external parties—secret societies or powerful elite cliques. This is different from believing that divine forces such as God and the devil, good and evil, shape our lives and

the course of history. Instead, a conspiracy mindset looks for human “puppet masters” instead of accepting the complexity of our world.

It is He who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.
(Jeremiah 10:12)

These problems weaken the ties that bond our faith communities together. They sow conflict and mistrust, splintering our places of worship. If allowed to thrive, these forces can easily lead to extremism.

Extremism is the belief that one group of people is in direct and bitter conflict with other groups who don't share the same racial or ethnic, gender or sexual, religious, or political identity. Extremist ideologies separate the world into simplistic, black-and-white categories of “us” and “them,” and believe that conflicts can only be resolved through separation, domination, or other forms of violence

These forces increasingly affect our churches, our schools, and even our families. When they do, we must see them for what they are: a danger to the peace and stability of our communities.

Why do people embrace destructive attitudes?

People adopt these destructive outlooks because they meet certain social and emotional needs, and because such content is readily available.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Experts will often speak of both a supply side and demand side for extremist materials. On one hand, demagogues and propagandists offer a *supply* of ideological material, imagery, entertainment, and opportunities. This material is often slick, professional, and highly emotionally stimulating. This stimulation is essential to unlocking the *demand* side of the problem. People consume such material—and ultimately become absorbed by it—because of the psychological needs it promises to meet. Moral disengagement offers permission to act on our darkest impulses of selfishness and rage. Supremacist thinking confers feelings of power and value. The conspiracy mindset promises easy answers to a world of frightening complexity.

RISK FACTORS

When people experience loss, trauma, and uncertainty, they are more likely to seek out and embrace destructive belief systems. In psychological literature, this is called a search for *compensatory control*. That is, when our lives feel out of control, we seek to compensate through activities and beliefs that promise certainty and power.

However, trouble in life is not the only cause of destructive behavior. We must acknowledge that there is also a kind of pleasure that people take from the emotions of outrage, superiority, and even hate. Faith leaders may be especially well-equipped to address the role of destructive pleasure in causing strife in the community.

RED FLAGS

If someone seems to have these risk factors, you may offer them extra help to ensure they heal in healthy ways. Look out for language that seeks to blame entire groups for complex problems. Listen for talk that frames political disagreements and cultural controversy as matters of ultimate urgency. While it is not possible, or even desirable, to keep track of every new conflict and conspiracy, try to stay aware of broad trends in political extremism so that you can recognize common symbols and slogans used by extremist groups (see “**An ounce of prevention is a worth a pound of cure**”).

Whether you choose to speak up or stay silent, there will be a price to pay. Failure to act against moral disengagement, supremacist thinking, conspiratorial mindsets, and related problems will be taken as quiet support. As these destructive forces increase, the speed with which they spread increases, too. Speaking up pays dividends of peace, but staying silent brings more division and strife.

Perhaps now you're thinking, *That is very serious...but how do I begin?* The following pages will give you simple but practical steps to take as you begin to address these problems, while cultivating positive dialogue and cooperation.



Show up

Peacemakers show up

Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.”
(Acts 18:9-10)

Sometimes, these problems may seem too overwhelming to face. Some people may seem impossible to reach. Sometimes it feels like “going along to get along” is the best way to keep the peace.

Please don't make this mistake. Ignoring these problems allows them to continue to grow. They begin to drive ordinary people away from participation in their churches and wider communities. If a community member feels personally targeted, they are likely to feel excluded, sidelined, and “on the outs.” Exclusion or sidelining drives conflict, instability, and violence. These problems cause people to withdraw from their communities—which usually makes things worse.

The simplest step to peacemaking in your community is also the most important: *be with people*. Spend time alongside both the troublesome members of your community and those who are experiencing the worst effects of division. Try to meet in

person, rather than using phone calls or video chat. Never rely on texting or social media to discuss sensitive topics. The terse nature of texting and the combative style of social media tend to sow more negative conflict.

Maintain a firm but steady presence, even in the face of outbursts and provocation. Try not to focus exclusively on the negative behaviors. Instead, weave these sensitive issues into broader discussions of shared values and goals (see **“Collaboration, not conflict”**). Difficult community members are less likely to feel attacked this way. Address the problematic behavior and its negative effect on those shared goals, rather than the person. This will make them less likely to become defensive. By incorporating gentle correction into discussions of shared values and goals, they are more likely to see that peacemaking is in their best interests, too.

An ounce of prevention is a worth a pound of cure

- It is impossible to keep up with every trend or political controversy. Don't get trapped in the outrage cycle, and try to keep your community out of it, too. However, do stay on the lookout for larger concerning trends, such as calls for political violence and openly expressing racism. For reliable sources, see the **“News Resources”** section at the end of this kit.
- Learn the red flags of manipulative media. [Propaganda Critic](#) offers an excellent list of common forms of manipulative rhetoric. Share these lessons with your community. Teach your community about the dangers of moral disengagement, supremacist thinking, and conspiratorial mindset. When people are able to spot

manipulative tactics, they are freer to make up their own minds, and will generally make better decisions. Remind them that emotionally charged media actually takes away their freedom to make up their own minds. This relieves pressure on you, too, since you will not need to argue politics or policies. Instead, you can focus on the shared goal of reaching honest conclusions based in faith and reason and unaffected by manipulative propaganda.

- Pro-actively set goals with your faith community that deal with issues of unity, inclusion, political polarization, and the difference between constructive disagreement and destructive conflict. Focus on shared interests, values, and goals, and work to separate people from problems. Help your community to understand that they are working on a shared project of fellowship and spiritual growth.

Collaboration, not conflict

Whether you're holding a difficult conversation or simply going about business as usual, remember not to think of people as problems. Find shared values and agreed-upon goals that further the cause of peace in your community. Work towards those goals together, rather than engaging in winner-takes-all debates.

Even if you disagree strongly with one another, it can be helpful to *act as if* you were all “on the same team,” so to speak. Frame your statements in terms of the shared values and the challenges you both face together.

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Try this simple exercise: Close your eyes and imagine a white line like the kind you see on a football field. On your side of the line, you see everyone in your community, even the people with whom you disagree strongly. On the other side of the line is the problem: broken relationships, congregations in conflict, schools as ideological battlegrounds. Ask yourself: *How do we solve this problem as a team? How do we cross that line and move towards the peace beyond it?*

Focus on Fundamentals

It is not always best to attack a problem head on. Sometimes, it is better to “step over” it by shifting focus onto things that really matter. If you can redirect people’s energy toward positive goals based on shared values, you may be able to wait out the latest controversy while building trust and open dialogue.

Determine your shared values. For example, today there is a great deal of conflict over school curricula. The teaching of history, in particular, has been politicized. Anger and outrage generate profit for a few, while the actual business of education suffers. And yet, most people agree: it is good to help children learn.

You might direct your community’s energies toward that goal while avoiding hot button issues. Charitable works like a school supplies drive, tutoring and homework help, or uncontroversial lessons in local history, can help people to see that they share common ground. Churches and other faith communities have an added advantage here, since prayer is a powerful unifying force, which can be directed toward hopes and values that transcend politics and popular culture.

When you focus on fundamentals, you can begin to open space for difficult conversations. Working toward shared goals builds trust. We come to realize that our neighbors have good intentions. We are more likely to speak thoughtfully and less likely to erupt in anger. And if things threaten to get heated, we can set the conversation aside and focus on the task at hand.



Make space, but hold the line

While faith emphasizes the need for forgiveness, some behaviors threaten the very survival of your community. It is not compassionate to allow someone to act in ways that can ruin your community in this way.

Most churches, for example, do not allow cursing or other graphic language. We can draw a similar line when it comes to the words and actions driving our communities apart. Explicitly supremacist language or calls for violence violate the boundaries of a healthy faith community. In order to enjoy lively discussion—and even disagreement—in order to truly practice our freedom of speech, we have to learn to draw the line.

Decide where you draw the line when it comes to words and actions that you will not allow. Some lines are easy to draw. Few would tolerate calls for violence against people in their own community. And most people recoil at openly racist

statements. However, other boundaries are more difficult. If a congregant is repeating conspiracy theories, you may want to keep him engaged with dialogue. However, if he is spreading conspiracy theories to your congregation, you might insist that he stop.

These “gray area” cases are difficult to judge. That’s why you must plan ahead for them.

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Take time to reflect, pray, and try to answer these questions: *Do these ideas encourage seeing a whole group as inferior? What kind of language will prevent my entire community from participating in the life of our church? What topics will drive people apart if we allow them to become the subject of ongoing debate? Where do these ideas logically lead? What is the point of no return? What are the consequences of diverting attention away from our mission?*

Change takes time

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:11)

Unfortunately, you may not always succeed in this work. When failure comes, do not blame yourself, but do look for lessons that will help you do better in the future.

As a peacemaker, it's helpful to build a peer community that shares your mission. Peacemaking can be hard work, but it shouldn't be lonely work. When the going gets tough, reach out to this network for emotional support and advice. A coalition of peacemakers can make great strides together, over time, learning and caring for one another.

Do not get discouraged when these problems don't go away overnight. There are deeply entrenched problems in our nation which make this work difficult—but also necessary. Progress will not always be linear. Don't think of challenges as “two steps forward, one step back.” Instead, think of change as a long and winding road. Occasionally, you may seem closer to where you started, but that is just a bend in the path.

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By working steadily, you will gradually move away from the threat of negative conflict and toward peace.

News Resources

These organizations are committed to sober analysis of trends in extremism. They are reliable sources for information that avoid emotionally charged coverage.

[Anti-Defamation League](#)

[Life After Hate](#)

[The McCain Institute](#)



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