

LEADER CONVERSATION GUIDE

How to Talk About Sexuality & More (with Pastor Rich Villodas) – Episode 344

How to Talk About the Tough Stuff (Part 2)

“I have sensed a need from God to be courageous in these moments and recognize that not everyone's going to be happy with what I'm saying.”

In this episode, Rich Villodas, Pastor of New Life Fellowship (a large, multi-racial church in Queens, NY), offers wisdom for discipling our diverse churches on tough topics like sexuality and politics.

Interview with Rich Villodas

In a post-Christian culture like that found in NYC, what are you finding to be the most tension-filled topics today?

- Human sexuality
- Racism/racial justice
- Politics
- Global tensions

How do you decide what you need to speak to and what maybe you shouldn't speak to?

- I think there are two key ways I can address an issue: naming things for prayer, and offering pastoral statements/reflections.
- When I sense there's enough people with questions around a topic, I consider the best way to respond. Not everything that I pray for requires a pastoral statement, but naming things for prayer is a good place to start.
- I pastor a very diverse congregation, so we don't have the luxury to say “We're just not going to mention it.” Mentioning the things that are on people's hearts is an act of love to our community.

Do you think those tough topics have shifted over time? What do you think is driving that?

- I do think social media has changed the landscape on so many of these things. It's not that these issues did not exist prior to social media, it's the fact that now we get an opportunity to hear every person's thoughts and opinions on whatever given matter. It adds a layer of

social pressure and tension because we are now very clearly seeing what people think about very complicated matters, which leads to all kinds of other conflicts.

- A good portion of the people that I pastor are being shaped by “cable news discipleship” and it’s changed how they view these tough topics like sexuality, racial divides, etc.
- As a pastor, I see the whole variety of perspectives online, and in some ways that makes me feel a greater sense of urgency to respond.

When you know that you are about to teach on something that may create tension for your congregation, do you prepare any differently for those messages?

- Every church now has, in many respects, a level of political diversity that probably didn't exist before. But I feel that very deeply in our church. So I’ve made mistakes in the past and realized, in light of the vast diversity of our church, I’ve had to make some changes.
- We did a series on God, Politics, and the Church before the election in 2020. I framed every sermon with this context: “Whether you vote for Joe Biden or Donald Trump, you're welcome to come to our church. I pray and hope that you see politics through the lens of Jesus and his teachings and not Jesus through the lens of your politics. I hope that we would be curious as to why different members of our community see the world differently, and that we would be humble and prayerful as we are engaging in these conversations.”
- We also did a ten week series on Human Sexuality, discussing everything from gender dysphoria to same sex marriage. That series took me a year and a half of preparation before I said a word. During that time, I worked with our elders, staff team, and leadership team to make sure we were all aligned. By the time the series happened, we all felt aligned and confident that we were together on this.
- Regardless of what you say, people will always have issues. But others will also feel seen and heard. Ultimately, these are matters that require a lot of care and grace.
- I also realize that some of these matters require such nuance and care that a sermon is just not the best place to give that level of articulation.

How do you approach those tough moments in your message?

- Like most pastors, I want to be liked. I don't want to cause unnecessary friction within our church. Yet at the same time, I have also sensed a need from God to be courageous in these moments and recognize not everyone's going to be happy with what I'm saying.
- I think I'm in good company with Jesus and with some other folks in the scriptures because not everyone liked what Jesus had to say.
- The biggest thing I'm hoping for is that my words are fueled and formed by the life, ethic, and teachings of Jesus. And if I can, with a clear conscience, get up there and do that and say “My words are reflective of Jesus,” then I can sleep well at night.

How would you recommend pastors equip believers to navigate these tough topics, especially in their most important relationships?

- Differentiation is about distinguishing myself from others without disconnecting from them. And so we have built a formation strategy around that concept for the last several years, focusing on: How do you grow in curiosity and humility? How do we listen well and speak well?
- The challenge is most churches have not built in a foundation like this, so it makes it very difficult to just go from zero to 100 and say, “Now we’re going to talk about sexuality, race, politics, etc.”
- We have created a particular emotional and spiritual foundation in order to go in these directions. But for many churches, the infrastructure of the church from a formational perspective has not been equipped enough to absorb this level of disruption/distress.
- We’ll never get to a perfect place, but we have to start by teaching people how to listen well, embrace curiosity, notice our own fears and anxieties, etc. The degree to which we’re teaching that is the degree to which we can go deep on the polarizing issues of our society.
- If we don’t do that first, we’re just creating disruption. The community won’t have the capacity to absorb what they’re being taught.

Any final encouragement you want to give pastors as they are preparing and delivering messages on the tough topics in today’s culture?

- Our primary task isn’t creating content. It’s the formation of our character.
- My primary task as a pastor and as a leader is to pay attention to my own interior life so that when I show up in these spaces, people see something in me that hopefully ripples out.
- The most important work that we have is our own interior work and our life with God.

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