

Beyond Small Talk

Having respectful conversations across difference

BY MARGY-JEAN MALCOLM



Beyond Small Talk is a community initiative by Taranaki Quakers. It's a leading that has been simmering away, one conversation at a time, since Parker Palmer suggested, some years ago, that our Quaker processes might be our best contribution in a divided world. He pointed to Valerie Kaur's¹ work which we explored in our Spiritual Nurture group. Then the 2025 Quaker NVC Book group pointed to learnable skills that could bridge divides. Conversations with local F/ friends about increasing "them and us" local dynamics around Te Tiriti, Māori Wards, cycleways, local and national politics started to shape ideas about creating a safe space for connection and conversation across difference. Therefore in 2026 we decided to just get started and listen, learn and adapt as we experimented with what might work.

A small local group of Quakers and non-Quakers hosted a trial event in March and, from May, have been running two sessions a month: one on a weekday and one at a weekend. We use the community lounge at our local Puke Ariki library and offer afternoon tea with home baking as part of creating a relaxed, safe, lightly structured space.

The vision is to support people to learn, practice, and share skills for meaningful conversations across difference and connect as human beings, based on four core values:

- Curiosity — to understand feelings, needs, values, and what sits beneath the surface
- Respect — for each person's humanity, lived experience, and whakapapa
- Openness — to hearing others' stories, without needing to agree
- Peaceful intent — to build connection, not to fix, persuade, or change minds.

We have produced a guide of six conversation ingredients for dialogue across difference. Each session we practice some of these through different activities, usually in pairs. For example, skills for active listening and inquiry; noticing and challenging our assumptions; identifying our own and others' needs, while building trust and respect in a new relationship. We describe these ingredients as a bit like soup making – a light touch recipe to adapt:

- Pause
- Stay curious
- Listen deeply
- Show empathy
- Share stories & find connection
- Explore shared values & vision.

We have new and returning attendees at each session, and over 40 on an email list, including people keen to come who haven't made it yet. We have reached out to a lot of local groups and networks, done an Access Radio interview which has received a lot of interest. Trust takes time to build and expanding participation is not easy. We know that those with the most polarised views are less likely to be interested in coming.

However, those who are coming value the opportunity to identify strategies and practise skills they are taking into personal situations in their own whānau, teaching and community contexts. Feedback from participants (paraphrased below) has indicated they are appreciating:

- the structured activities that enable connection; modelling of strategies for contentious conversations; a safe environment for skills practice

- our handouts and library resources they can take away, and other recommended² for further learning which we share by email
- genuine exchange; feeling heard; simply trying to understand someone else's view; and the power of finding out why someone felt the way they did about something rather than 'converting' people

the focus on the art of conversation; exploring ways to discuss differences away from fact-based and without anger; growing confidence to have conversations; surprised to find we were more in agreement than expected - diametrical opposition dissolved in careful listening; challenged to rethink how to engage with opinions I don't necessarily agree with.

We have tried working with whatever issues are alive for people attending, and more recently have chosen specific topics like the proposed LNG terminal, racism, homelessness. We are specifically reaching out to invite people with interest and a variety of views on these topics. We are exploring options for sessions in coming months on Nonviolent Communication and Peace Trolling.

We appreciate the support of Quaker Education and Testimonies Fund. Their faith in us has supported our courage, confidence and capacity to keep holding this subtly subversive space for disrupting division and promoting peace.

1 Valerie Kaur, (2020). See No Stranger: In a time of rage, how do we lead with love? Octopus Publishing, London

2 For example, <https://www.enemiesproject.org/>



Deeper conversations trying out the conversation ingredients offered