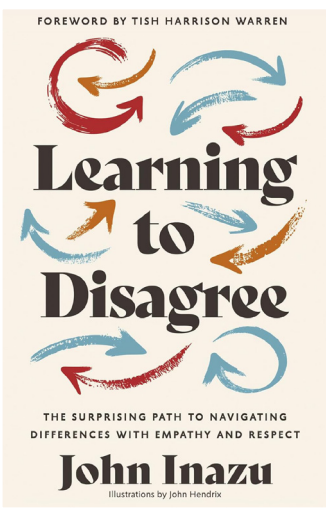
# CBF Book Discussion Guide

*by Meg Rooney*




## *Learning to Disagree: The Surprising Path to Navigating Differences with Empathy and Respect*

By John D. Inazu

### *About the Author*

As the Sally D. Danforth Distinguished Professor of Law and Religion at Washington University in St. Louis, Mo., John Inazu's teachings and works highlight the First Amendment freedoms of speech, assembly and religion with related questions of legal and political theory.

Inazu is the founder of the Carver Project and the Legal Vocation Fellowship. He is a Senior Fellow at Interfaith America, co-directing the Newbigin Fellows and Evangelicals in a Diverse Democracy. Inazu also serves on the boards of the Carveer Project, the John Burroughs School, and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, the advisory boards of the Bech-Loughlin First Amendment Center at the University of Texas School of Law and the Honors College at the University of Tulsa and is a Senior Fellow at the Trinity Forum.

Inazu received his B.S.E. and J.D. from Duke University and his Ph.D. in political science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He clerked for Judge Roger L. Wollman of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit and served four years as an associate general counsel with the Department of the Air Force at the Pentagon.

*Learning to Disagree: The Surprising Path to Navigating Differences with Empathy and Respect* is Inazu's latest work with his previous writings, *Liberty's Refuge: The Forgotten Freedom of Assembly* and *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving Through Deep Difference*, published in 2012 and 2016. Inazu is also the co-editor of *Uncommon Ground: Living Faithfully in a World of Difference* (Thomas Nelson, 2020).

### *About the Book*

As a constitutional scholar, legal expert and former litigator, Inazu has spent his career learning how to disagree civilly with others. In *Learning to Disagree*, he discusses what it means to disagree productively and respectfully without compromising one's convictions. Through a wide range of topics, including critical race theory, sexual assault, campus protests and religious freedom conflicts, Inazu helps readers engage empathetically with those whose perspectives seem strange, wrong or even dangerous.

Inazu also shares memorable personal stories that allow readers to see the humanity in each person so that they can sustain lifelong relationships even with those who think differently. Inazu aims for readers to understand what inhibits healthy disagreements, learn practical strategies that promote positive and genuine discussion and create spaces of empathy rather than judgment.

The book's narrative travels through an academic year, with each chapter addressing a particular question:

- August: How Do We Learn Empathy?
- September: Can We Know What's Fair?
- October: What Happens When We Can't Compromise?
- November: Can We Have Difficult Conversations?
- December: Can We See People Instead of Problems?
- January: Can We Trust Faith?
- February: Can Anything Be Neutral?
- March: Where is the Line Between Wrong and Evil?
- April: Is Forgiveness Possible?
- May: Can We Be Friends?

# Questions for Conversation

### August: How Do We Learn Empathy?

1. When conversing with those different from you, do you struggle to show or feel empathy for them? What makes it (or not) difficult? Are there some conversations that allow for more empathy than others?
2. When are you most empathetic in these situations? Least empathetic?
3. What does it mean to show up authentically while extending empathy and openness? Have you had experiences where you have not shown up authentically during difficult conversations? What did that feel like? How could it have gone differently?
4. What comes up in your body when you think of holding space for others with different values than you?

### September: Can We Know What's Fair?

1. In your own words, what does "fairness" mean?
2. Have you felt treated differently in the past? What kind of treatment? Positive or negative? Do you think this treatment was fair?
3. What is your experience with empathy and fairness? Do you think they are connected in difficult conversations? How and why?
4. Have you witnessed the unfair treatment of others? What happened? Why do you think it happened that way? What was your role?

### October: What Happens When We Can't Compromise?

1. How does it make you feel that compromise isn't always possible? What reactions do you have to the fact that the law picks winners and losers for sometimes no reason? Does that change the way you act or think?
2. What comes up for you when the situation only allows one clear winner? Have you experienced these situations before? What happened?
3. Can a society balance competing priorities? Can we know if those priorities are balanced?
4. Is having empathy possible for those where compromises won't occur? How do you deal with the disappointment with that reality?

### November: Can We Have Difficult Conversations?

1. What difficult conversations are you willing to have? Which ones are you not? How do you communicate these boundaries to others?
2. Have you ever pushed yourself to engage with others with very different views on an important issue? What happened? Did anyone's views change? How did you feel before the situation? What about after?
3. When do you decide to engage in these difficult conversations? When do you let it go? Does it matter who you are speaking with?
4. Can you separate personal connections from intellectual connections with your loved ones? Describe an experience when a loved one differed from you intellectually. What was the outcome? Was the conversation positive? Negative?

### December: Can We See People Instead of Problems?

1. Do you have strategies to help humanize those who think very differently from you? How and when do you use them?
2. Describe a time when you saw someone as a problem rather than a human.
3. During difficult conversations, have you ever been surprised by someone's story, competence or character? Have you ever been surprised about the end of the conversation versus the beginning?
4. What is the hardest part about seeing other people's humanities during disagreements? What do you wish could happen?

### January: Can We Trust Faith?

1. Does your faith come in when it comes to politics? How?
2. What does the separation of church and state mean to you? How does it inform your patriotism? Or does it?
3. How does religion inform America's national identity? Are there religions that are not present in America's national identity?
4. Describe a time when your religion made it difficult to be understanding or empathetic of someone with a different words, actions or beliefs.

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### February: Can Anything Be Neutral?

1. What does it mean to have a posture of neutrality versus a posture of nuance?
2. Do you identify more with neutrality or nuance when facing difficult conversations with others?
3. Describe a time when you noticed a lack of neutrality or a lack of nuance in a difficult conversation.
4. Is there a current view that you have difficulty finding the nuance?

### March: Where is the Line Between Wrong and Evil?

1. What are your working definitions for wrong and evil? Have you thought about their differences before?
2. Describe a time when you characterized an issue, situation or person/s as evil instead of wrong?
3. Does recharacterizing something as wrong instead of evil change the way you view the issue or people who hold that viewpoint?
4. Have you ever felt pressured to view an opinion as evil instead of wrong? What kind of culture are we perpetuating when we do this? How can we encourage others to change our language use?

### April: Is Forgiveness Possible?

1. Is forgiveness possible? Why or why not?
2. When do you find forgiveness difficult? Hopeful? Problematic?
3. Is there a way to forgive while also holding someone or something accountable? How can forgiveness be the first step in growth?
4. Describe a time when forgiveness felt impossible for you to do. What about when someone forgave you? What did that feel like?

### May: Can We Be Friends?

1. What is your definition of a friend?
2. Who are your closest friends? Why are they your friends? What characteristics do they have that you appreciate and look for in others?
3. Do all your friends have the same views as you? Are you closer to those with similar views? Or different ones?
4. Do you think it is important to befriend those different from you? Why?

### Closing Questions

1. What did you take away from this book and the discussion questions?
2. What do you wish was talked about more? Were there moments when you disagreed?
3. What do you hope other readers learned from this book?
4. Is there someone in your life that would benefit from reading the book?
5. As we approach Election Day and the holiday season, how can we apply this book to political disagreements and uncomfortable tension with those we love?