

# Conflicting Views on Confederate Flag, Memorials, Symbols: What to do in a “Post-Charleston” Environment?

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**Categories :** [Group Process](#), [Organizational and Personal Leadership](#)

**Tagged as :** [community](#), [confederate](#), [controversy](#), [discussion](#), [hot topics](#), [leadership](#)

**Date :** July 21, 2015

There are strong feelings and many ideas about what to do with Confederate flags and memorials in the aftermath of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church murders.

The Confederate battle flag and flagpole were removed from the South Carolina Statehouse grounds on July 10th, after emotional debate in the S.C. Legislature.

North Carolina Governor Patrick McCrory believes the state should stop issuing Sons of Confederate Veterans car license plates which feature the Confederate battle flag. One writer calls for taking down the NC Capitol Confederate Memorial. Some other local flashpoints have included the Salisbury Confederate Statue, the use of the Fayetteville Market House as a town symbol, and several reports of vandalism of Confederate statues and memorials. [Update – on July 23, 2015, Governor McCrory signed [S.B. 22](#) into law ]

On the other hand, the N.C. Legislature seems to be moving to preserve a range of memorials and markers by restricting what state agencies and local governments can do about current statues, memorials or monuments on public property (S.B. 22 - [Historic Artifact Mgt. and Patriotism Act](#))

## Having the “Right Conversation”

While the Confederate flag is a potent symbol, an equally important way to express community values is to seek respect and understanding as a city or state decides what to do about local memorials and displays of the Confederate flag at government institutions.

I have worked with many N.C. local government leaders to address difficult issues on the environment, land use, public safety and community planning. For example, from 1998-2006 I facilitated United Methodist Church groups across the U.S. as they struggled to stay together despite their differences on whether to ordain gay and lesbian ministers or to hold gay weddings in their churches.

It is unlikely that everyone in a community will be satisfied with any particular outcome about flag

display or memorials. But seeking understanding amidst differences is a way to grow individual and community character and strengthen the invisible glue that holds communities together.

## **Guidelines for Engagement on Emotional Issues**

I offer these guidelines for city and county managers, elected leaders, cemetery committees and others who wish to have a proactive, strong way to engage people who care about these matters:

1. Be sure to have input from different viewpoints as you plan the meeting or forum. Participants are more trusting when the announcement comes from people who share their views. Practicing diversity within the planning process increases the likelihood that people will see the gathering as open and fair.
2. Include small group conversations. Avoid the standard one-speaker-at-a-time model which often inflames the atmosphere. Aim for a “kitchen-table” style setting, where people talk and listen better by talking with rather than at one another.
3. Set some clear rules for respect. Listening without interrupting, and summarizing someone’s views before offering your thoughts are good first steps. Another rule is to ask genuine questions: not courtroom cross-examination style, but out of true curiosity. There will be a lot of “how can you believe that?” coming from a feeling of exasperation or anger. The key is to turn down the temperature and let everyone say what they believe – and where they are uncertain – without being attacked.
4. Try to get beyond either/or choices. Some people may only focus on removing or changing a particular flag display or memorial. Other steps could involve honoring community history not tied to war or Jim Crow discrimination, but to add memorials, markers, or celebrations which enhance the history of a community.
5. Avoid having a poll or using any group to represent the community as a whole. Separating the talk and deliberation about an emotional issue from the decision-making stage helps people focus on the substance rather than play to the audience or the board who controls the Confederate memorial or flag display.
6. Be clear about who will decide, and the timeline for a decision. As part of planning a forum or set of conversations, ensure the decision-makers can observe the conversation. Weighing in with their opinions is probably best saved for a later time.

Fortunately, civic leaders can call on various resources to be sure that many voices are heard, and that people are respected in the conversation. Community mediation centers and the [UNC-Chapel Hill School of Government](#) have skilled facilitators. Local ministerial associations, and community relations commissions can be helpful, too.

Flags are potent symbols of history and identity. N.C. leaders – in and out of government – have the opportunity to express community values and shared identity by how the hot feelings about Confederate memorials and flags bend - but do not break - the bonds of civility and neighborliness. Part of wise leadership is creating ways that draw people together ahead of a tough decision.