

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

Author : John Stephens

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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.

On the other hand, the N.C. Legislature seeks 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](#)). [Update – on July 23, 2015, Governor McCrory [signed S.B. 22 into law](#).

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. 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 for everyone in a community will be satisfied with a specific 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. **There are very different views of the meaning of symbols of Confederate soldiers and leaders, both in North Carolina and beyond.**

Guidelines for Engagement on Emotional Issues

I offer these guidelines for all concerned citizens, and potential organizers who seek a proactive 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 view. It also is more likely for people to 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. *This step may be the only short-term action available if Senate Bill 22 is adopted.*
5. ***Avoid having a poll*** or use 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. ***Do not push too hard for "what we have in common."*** The history of Jim Crow, and

KKK lynchings, and other ways some Confederate symbols have been used in the 20th and 21st century leaves its marks, particularly on African-Americans. Disagreement will probably persist about what a flag or memorial means -- then and now -- and what should be done to honor or move beyond history of blood on the battlefield or in communities today.

7. Be clear about **who will decide**, and the **timeline for a decision**. As part of planning a forum or set of conversations, be sure the decision-makers can observe the conversation, but it is probably best for them to not weigh in at that 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 ways of listening across strongly held viewpoints and how differences are respected.