WISCONSIN CONFERENCE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Prepared by the
Task Force on Ministry
with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People

A Process to Initiate Dialogue in the Church
Around Issues of Conflict
SESSION 1

Unison Prayer
Gracious God who gives us life and sustains our needs, we ask you to join this gathering and abide with us throughout this journey. We have come to raise issues that are troubling to our hearts and minds. Grant that we might bring open minds, listening hearts, and honest voices for the work which lies ahead. Help us to trust one another and above all, to trust that your will and way will be our comfort and strength.

Bless us and our time together in the name of Jesus Christ, in whom all things become possible. Amen.

Introductions
Everyone present should introduce themselves even if they know one another.
Name
My religious background
I believe God is

Dialogue Time - Covenant Statements
In order to engage in dialogue, encountering disagreements, it is important to agree on some simple ground rules for being together. Each individual should have a moment to faithfully think and respond.

Can you say yes?
• I have come to learn more about God, my own feelings and those of my brothers and sisters of faith.
• I will listen to others without forming a defensive response.
• I will speak honestly from my own understandings and opinions.
• I will try my best to keep an open mind and heart.
• I will respect what others say and keep it confidential within this group.
• I will agree to honor disagreements we may discover.
• I will do my best to attend faithfully.

Listening Time – a practice of active listening
Something tangible (a stick, rock, candle) is passed around the circle. When someone has the object, they are entitled to speak and reflect, preferably in “I” statements. In turn, they pass the object to the next person. If someone prefers to pass, they simply pass the object on. Everyone else’s job is to listen.
1. How have you encountered gay and lesbian people in your life?
2. How does your faith inform your understanding of gay and lesbian people?
3. What makes you anxious and/or hopeful about participating in these sessions?

Unison Prayer
Merciful God, we give thanks for your amazing creation and the invitation you extend to each of us to be part of it. Your presence has been a welcome gift to us today. We give thanks for honest feelings, listening ears, open minds, trusting that you will guide our path. Hold us close until we meet again. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, who makes all things possible. Amen.
SESSION 2

Unison Prayer
Loving God who has shaped us in the image of your own generosity, we give you thanks for each day, each person, each blessing you provide. We ask again that you come to this table and abide with us. Hold our thoughts, feelings, doubts, angers and irritations as we turn to one another with the grace you have offered us. Give us your eyes this evening, that we might see one another through them. We ask this in the name of our brother, Jesus Christ, in whom all things are possible. Amen.

Listening Time – a practice of active listening
Everyone has a context in which they were shaped and in which they currently live. It’s “our story” and has great power in each of our lives. Sometimes we’d like to make changes but more often, we are unaware of the subtle ways this story unfolds in our lives.
1. If your family was an animal, which one would it be like and why?
2. What were the primary struggles your family lived out?
3. What are the greatest joys?
4. What were/are the unwritten rules for disagreement/argument in your family?
5. Who are the primary shapers of your faith story? What role did they play?

Dialogue Time
In small groups, consider the following questions.
1. How does this church resemble a family?
2. Do we believe the church should be a place to engage difficult issues?
3. How does this church family discuss important stuff?

Unison Prayer
Once again, loving God, you have pitched your tent among us. We give thanks for the richness of these stories and for your great story which has woven us together. Like water in the desert and manna for hungry bodies, you provide from the greatness of your heart. Dwell in each of us as we part and guide us to our next time together. Bless us, our families and friends as we live each and every day in the shelter of your grace. We ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our hope and our joy. Amen.
SESSION 3

Unison Prayer
Merciful God, we give thanks for the many gifts of life that you place before us and within us. We ask that you gather with us yet again as we explore your precious Word in Scripture. Give us the gift of your understanding and purpose that we might make your story a deeper part of our own. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, in whom all things are possible. Amen.

Scripture Exploration
Just as we live in a context which we began to explore last time, so God’s story with human beings was recorded in various contexts. Our task as baptized Christians is to explore this story, its background setting, what we hear, what we don’t hear, and to search for God’s intention in handing it down to us.

The United Church of Christ stems from denominations rooted in the Protestant Reformation, when the Bible took center stage as the authority and guide for Christian faith and living. The Reformation tradition influences how we approach and read Holy Scripture with these principles:

➢ The Bible is the authority for Christian faith and living, rather than the church, tradition or a person/pope.
➢ The Bible should be put into the hands of the people to study and have access to. – Bible translations, emphasis on education
➢ We rely on the Holy Spirit to help us interpret and understand the Bible. – be humble, pray for understanding as we study
➢ We read scripture in the midst of the community of faith; not just private devotions that reinforce our own prejudices and biases, but to listen to interpretations of others in the church to enlarge our understanding.
➢ We let scripture interpret scripture, understanding a passage within context and relating it to the whole of the Bible’s message. We seek to understand the ancient/original context of a passage before we jump to applying it to a situation (if situations do not match, the message may not apply).
➢ The Word of God (Jesus Christ, God’s grace) is the lens through which we interpret the words of the Bible.
➢ The Bible leads us to response/action/service.
➢ We remain in conversation with the living God (“I am convinced that the Lord hath more truth and light to yet break forth from his Holy Word.” Words of Rev. John Robinson to the Pilgrims, 1620)

It may be helpful to break into groups of 4-6 people for discussion. Depending on size, individuals or small groups choose a pair of passages to read. First, read them out loud. Spend a moment in silent meditation before speaking,

1. I Corinthians 6: 1-20
   Galatians 3: 23-)
2. I Timothy 1: 8-17
   2 Corinthians 5: 16-21
   Matthew 22: 34-40)
4. Leviticus, chapters 18 and 19
   Acts 10
5. Romans 1; 19 – 2:11
   and I Corinthians 12: 4-31a
Dialogue Time:
1. What do we know about the context of this passage?
   a. What situation(s) is it addressing?
   b. Who are the major players?
   c. What communities are represented?
   d. What’s happening to them?
   e. Where are they?
   f. Who or what is threatening them?
   g. How do they respond?
   h. What laws are they trying to follow?
2. Why do you think this story or passage was included in the Bible?
3. What can we learn about living lives that are faithful and pleasing to God?

Listening Time

"Whenever we pick up the Bible, read it, put it down, and say, “That’s just what I thought,” we are probably in trouble. The technical term for that kind of reading is ‘proof-texting.’ Using the text to confirm our presuppositions is sinful; it is an act of resistance against God’s fresh speaking to us, an effective denial that the Bible is the word of the living God. The only alternative to proof-texting is reading with a view to what the New Testament calls metanoia, ‘repentance’—literally, ‘change of mind.’" (from The Art of Reading Scripture, edited by Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, pg. 16)

Share what you/your group read. What did you learn? What insights come to mind?

Unison Prayer

Almighty God, you have written each of our stories and know them by heart. We give thanks that each of us has a place, a line, a chapter in your great story of faith. You have been present to us in your Word and in our words tonight. Gather all our murmurings and bless them. Help us to sift and sort and discover your intentions. Hold us together in what we share and even more where our understandings differ. Enable us to acknowledge and value all your good gifts. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh. Amen.
SESSION 4

Unison Prayer
Loving God, we give you thanks for the many ways you continue to reveal yourself to us. We trust you know where you need us to be and are leading us in the right directions, even though we may not give the same destination. Abide with us yet again. Help us to find our ways into your story and to join with the cloud of witnesses over the ages who have made similar pilgrimages. Stand for us when we cannot stand for ourselves and help us stand for others in your holy name. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ who stood for all that is love. Amen.

Dialogue Time
Last time, we explored scripture together; including some of the common passages used to refer to homosexuality. The Word of God is as old as God and as new as our grandchildren; yet we believe it remains relevant in and for every age. We also can acknowledge that there are a variety of ways to read, interpret and use scripture. With the following questions, let's explore these areas.

Each person should spend a few minutes with the following questions, then bring them to the group for reflection.

1. If you only had one story from scripture to live by, which one would you choose?
2. In what ways is this story reflective or been helpful in your own life’s story?
3. What point is God trying to make?
4. Are there stories from our last meeting that you have thought more about?
5. Were there connections to your own story that surprised you? Did anything sound familiar?
6. Why would God give so many of us a different slant on interpreting these stories?
7. Is it important for everyone in God’s household to interpret scripture in the same way? Is it possible?
8. How do varieties of reading and interpretation impact a community of faith?

Listening Time – a practice of active listening
Use this method to allow everyone to share what stories have meaning for them and what they may have discovered.

Unison Prayer
Dear God who guards our lives and draws us together in community, we give thanks that you reveal your Word to us in scripture and in the witness of others. For every tongue, color and culture, you provide a word of hope. You catch us when we stumble and lift us when we fall. You alone can heal the woundedness each of us bears, often so silently that only you are aware.

Draw us yet again into your story of faith. Accept our humble ways of receiving and enable us to find those words which bring your Word to life for yet other brothers and sisters. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ who boldly calls us friends. Amen.
SESSION 5

Unison Prayer

Creator God, Mother and Father of us all, we give thanks that you have created us with unique traits and individual gifts; a quilt of many colors and textures. As we gather, grant us wisdom in our discussion, love in our hearts and open minds willing to consider all the wonders of your creation. Help us to appreciate both our agreements and our arguments which draw you closer to each of us and all of us together. O God, who is always bigger than our minds can imagine or our spirits reflect, receive us and all that we bring as we strive to envision and live into your kingdom here on earth. In the name of Jesus Christ who is our brother. Amen.

The task we face in the church with issues of debate and controversy is not just to come to our own conclusions, but to find a way where we can come to common resolution about how to choose and act in Christian community. While we often vote on issues, this does not always "settle" an issue but rather turns it into a win/lose situation. Another way of resolving issues is to use spiritual discernment to lead us to a consensus.

A discernment model for decision-making: involves a humble yielding of control, as we grow in sensing God's gracious, freeing presence. It is a means that:

1. recognizes and acknowledges what God is doing and what God desires;
2. tries to see a situation from God's perspective;
3. has a sense of uncovering, rather than making, a decision
4. listens to the Holy Spirit who prays with and among us, listens to one another as channels of Holy Spirit. *

* "When the deepest desires of persons are aligned with God's deepest desires, life is marked by loving more freely, becoming dedicated to a larger goodness, and experiencing healing and reconciliation with God, oneself, and one another. That alignment should be consistent with the Word of God, as revealed in Jesus Christ through Scriptures, build up the body of Christ; and result in a sense of peace about decisions." (*"Discernment and Decision-Making", by Rev. Victoria Grace Curtiss)

Dialogue Time

Use these understandings as together we tackle this case study in groups of 3-5. Be sure every person in the group has a chance to speak.

What would you do?

Parents of a confirmation student ask to meet with the Consistory/Cabinet/Council. Their son has recently told them that he thinks he might be gay. They have been to see a counselor who has suggested they learn to accept this is not a choice for him but a part of who he is. The parents want to know: will our son be able to be confirmed in this church? If confirmed, will he be able to participate fully in the life of the congregation? Will he ever be considered for leadership? Were he ever to find a partner for life, would this church allow their pastor to bless their relationship? Could their ceremony be held in the church's sanctuary?

You are serving on the Consistory/Cabinet/Council, charged with responsibility to decide policy in the church and oversee membership. You have been this boy's Sunday School teacher in the past and this news has come as a surprise to you. This boy's behavior and participation in class have never caused you to worry about his growth in faith. You have questions about
whether someone can know their own sexual orientation at this stage of development, but you know these parents need an answer now.

1. What concerns you most about this situation?
2. What beliefs and values would influence your reaction as a person of faith?
3. What part would you want your pastor to play in this kind of situation?
4. What consensus action would you as a group take in responding to these parents? (see below^)
5. What do you think would be the most challenging about this situation for the congregation and how would you share your decision with them?

*Consensus does not mean:
  a. a unanimous vote,
  b. the result is everyone's first choice,
  c. that everyone agrees 100%

Consensus does mean:
- that views of all participants are encouraged and heard;
- all participants share in final decision;
- those who disagree are willing to support the decision;
- all agree to be responsible for implementing the decision;
- the group can move forward, together, responsibly, understanding why it is doing so,

Listening Time
What was this experience like for you?
What did you learn about spiritual discernment and consensus?
Would this discernment process be helpful to a current issue facing your church?

Unison Prayer
Gracious God, we give thanks that you have walked beside us during this time. All that we are is a gift from you and our sincere hope is to return a portion by the way we live our lives. In every possible way, help us carry what we have experienced and learned here forward that your kingdom might be made visible to those who need it most. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, your son. Amen.