

WISCONSIN CONFERENCE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Prepared by the
Wisconsin Conference ONA Team

A PROCESS TO INITIATE DIALOGUE IN THE CHURCH

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 could be 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 the 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. *What makes you anxious and/or hopeful about participating in these sessions?*
2. *What issues are currently most conflictual for you?*
3. *How easy or difficult is it to confront people who disagree?*

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 during our time together, that we might see one another through them. We ask this in the name of our brother, Jesus the 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. Most 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

Creator God, you have given us the gift of Holy Scripture to help us live our lives, make decisions, and discern your will and way for us. As we gather to meditate on these passages, grant us your wisdom and understanding. May the Holy Spirit illuminate your Word in new and trustworthy ways. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Christ, your word made flesh. Amen.

Scripture Exploration

We think, make decisions, and live within the framework of our national culture, our family structure, and our personal values. In order to understand and personalize passages in Scripture, we must ask ourselves three questions:

- What was going on in and around this story? Who? What? When? Where? Why?
- How can I interpret this story in light of my own cultural and personal values?
- How does this speak to decisions that we are called to make as a church?

There are times when we may not fully appreciate the context in which a passage was written. Context serves to help us understand the lesson behind the words. If the cultural or national context is different; if the traditions of the time no longer apply to ours, it is probable that a purely literal reading of a text will offer an incomplete interpretation. On the other hand, if we are aware of the context, we may be able to discern a message that is different, possibly closer to God's intended truth. Is the issue in the passage what it appears to be at first glance, or if we examine the context, is a different message being conveyed?

For example, Genesis 19:1-11 is a passage often interpreted as being against homosexuality. The context is often overlooked. Lot offers the two men, strangers in Sodom, protection and hospitality as required. The men of the Sodom seek to rape and murder the guests, violating the hospitality code which Lot follows. Is this story about homosexuality, hostility or hospitality? Which theme might God want us to pay attention to?

Listening Time - a practice of active listening

When we point to a particular Scripture passage and say, "See, what it says proves my point," that is called "proof-texting." We all do this. Consider these questions.

1. *Describe how and why you believe the Bible was written.*
2. *Is the Bible for personal devotion, lessons to live by, mission outreach, community activism?*
3. *Do you usually rely more upon Scripture, tradition, experience or reason?*
4. *How can we be sure that our interpretation is the correct one?*

Dialogue time

It may be helpful to break into groups of 4-6 people for the following. Depending on size, individuals or small groups choose a pair of scriptures to read and discuss. If the group is small, have everyone read the same selected passages.

1. Genesis 19:1-11
Luke 10:5-12
2. Leviticus 15:16-24
Acts 10:9-16

First, read the passages out loud.

Second, ask the three questions listed above.

Third, come back together as one group and have an individual from each group summarize their group's discussion.

Finally, if each group did not arrive at the same conclusions, discuss the differing answers as a group.

Unison Prayer

Holy 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 the 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 all gain or be given the same destinations. 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.

Listening Time - a practice of active listening

1. *What scripture passage has been most helpful to you in life?*
2. *What story has been most challenging or difficult to understand?*
3. *What word would you use to summarize God's story of faith?*

Dialogue Time

During Session 3, we explored the interpretation of scripture together, including some of the passages commonly used to refer to difficult topics. While the bible may have been written thousands of years ago, the Holy Spirit is constantly speaking to us, urging us to apply it to our time and our culture. Because we are the church where "God Is Still Speaking," we have a responsibility to interpret scripture in our own lives, for our churches, and communities in ways that are relevant to contemporary society and issues.

On your own, review the passages printed below and decide which passage is especially relevant to you today. How is this particular passage speaking to you?

Then, as a group, consider how these personal insights can give a meaningful direction to your church when it is facing making difficult decisions.

1. Matthew 13:3-9
2. John 4:23-24
3. John 8:32
4. Luke 10:29-37
5. Acts 11:1-10

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 the 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 church with controversial issues is not just to come to our own conclusions, but to seek what God intends and find a common resolution about how we choose to act in Christian community. Voting on issues 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 leading 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 we:

1. recognize and acknowledge what God is doing and what God desires;
2. try to see a situation from God’s perspective;
3. have a sense of uncovering, rather than making, a decision
4. listen to the Holy Spirit who prays with and among us
5. listen 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)

***Consensus** does not mean:

- a. a unanimous vote;
- b. the result is everyone’s first choice;
- c. that everyone agrees 100%.

Consensus does mean:

1. that views of all participants are encouraged and heard;
2. all participants share in the final decision;
3. those who disagree are willing to support the decision;
4. all agree to be responsible for implementing the decision;
5. the group can move forward, together, responsibly, understanding why it is doing so,

Listening Time - a practice of active listening

1. *Do you have concerns about using consensus as a way to dialogue about difficult issues?*
2. *Does discerning what God wants seem worrisome or thorny?*
3. *Would a discernment/consensus process be helpful to a current issue facing our church?*

Dialogue Time

In groups of 3-5, discuss this hypothetical situation. Be sure every person in the group has a chance to speak and share his/her thoughts without judgment and without negative criticism. Decide as a group what the issues and answers would be to the questions posed following the situation.

“My Son is Gay”

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?
5. What do you think would be the most challenging about this situation for the congregation?
6. How will you share your decision with them?

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 the Christ. Amen.

Dialogue Time

In groups of 3-5, discuss this hypothetical situation. Be sure every person in the group has a chance to speak and share his/her thoughts without judgment and without negative criticism. Decide as a group what the issues and answers would be to the questions posed following the situation.

“The War is Wrong”

In small group discussions, your church has discussed the war in Iraq. Members have heard sermons from the pulpit that speak about the innocent lives lost in war and the seeming lack on the part of our government to seek a meaningful dialogue about peace. A new family joins the church. In the coffee hour one morning, you find out that the couple actively supports the war in Iraq, that the father is a Marine Recruiter, and that a daughter no one has seen is serving in Iraq with the Marines. Your son comes home one day and tells you that the teenage boy in the family is a senior at his high school and talks “all the time” about the glories of war and serving in the Marines when he graduates. In fact, on that particular day, the son gave a speech about why the U.S. should be killing as many people as possible in Iraq or there will never be peace because they’re all “a bunch of terrorists.”

At the next Church Council meeting, you receive a request from the father to use the church to conduct a recruitment meeting for the Marines since the local school prohibits recruiters from the armed services from presenting on school property. The father explains that not only do the armed services provide a chance for young people to grow, but the advantages towards getting a better job and/or an education later are substantial.

1. What concerns you most about this situation?
2. What decision should the Council make since no current policy exists prohibiting the father’s request?
3. What personal beliefs and values would influence your decision?
4. Would past church discussions regarding peace have any influence on your decision?
5. What reasons can you give regarding your decision whether it is affirmative or negative?
6. If the vote is affirmative, how would the pastor react?
7. If the vote is negative, how would the church react?

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.

Dialogue Time

In groups of 3-5, discuss this hypothetical situation. Be sure every person in the group has a chance to speak and share his/her thoughts without judgment and without negative criticism. Decide as a group what the issues and answers would be to the questions posed following the situation.

“Capital Punishment”

A serial killer is on the loose in your community, having escaped from the state maximum security prison where he is serving twelve (12) concurrent life sentences. His crimes were especially brutal and involved the torture and killing of his female victims. He is tracked to a local elementary school and takes eight students in the second grade as hostages. As the police and SWAT team surround the school, shots ring out from the classroom and you hear an announcement that the eight year old daughter of a member, as well as five of the other students, has been killed. The remaining two are in extremely critical condition in a nearby hospital. When asked why he shot the children, he replied, “Why not?” Prior to his first trial and sentencing, the ballot contained a referendum to compel the state to institute the death sentence by lethal injection. It lost.

A referendum to seek the death penalty is again on the ballot. Your church is sponsoring a discussion regarding this initiative. The church and the pastor appear to be against the death penalty. The Council has decided to include a panel discussion with two participants for the death penalty and two against. The father of the eight year old child who has been killed is extremely bitter about the death and has taken the stand that had the state had the death penalty in the first place, his daughter would still be alive. Needless to say, he is aggressively supporting the death penalty referendum.

He appears before the Council and requests the Church reverse its stance against the death penalty; allowing only speakers who are for the death penalty at the discussion. In addition, he requests to make a presentation before the entire congregation supporting the death penalty.

1. What concerns you most about this situation?
2. Should the Church Council consider one or both of his requests?
3. If your child was killed, would your opinion change about the death penalty?
4. If the Council agrees with both requests, what Christian principles will you use for granting the requests?
5. If the Council denies both requests, what Christian principles will you use for denial of the requests?
6. How will the church react to the decision that the Council makes?

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 the Christ. Amen.