
VITAL CONVERSATIONS 4: RACE, CULTURE, THE CHURCH AND HUMAN SEXUALITY

A VIDEO SERIES FOR CHURCHES,
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

Study Guide for Sessions 1-11

Produced by the General Commission on Religion and Race
of The United Methodist Church



RELIGION & RACE

The United Methodist Church

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BIOGRAPHIES OF PRESENTERS



THE REV. ANNANDA BARCLAY is ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and, most recently, was in an interim appointment to the United Campus Christian Ministry at Stanford University. Annanda obtained her Master of Divinity degree at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. After graduating from seminary, Annanda spent a year as a student chaplain at the University of Illinois at Chicago Medical Center. She has served as co-moderator of the national board of directors for More Light Presbyterians and an occasional blogger for Believe Out Loud.



MARCUS BRIGGS-CLOUD is an Indigenous Maskoke (Muskogee/ Muscogee) person (son of the Wind Clan), community organizer, scholar and musician. He is partnered to Tawna Little, a Kvlce Maskoke person from the Skunk Clan, and together, they have two children. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, Marcus is the author of several peer-reviewed academic articles intersecting liberation theology, linguistics, ecology, race and gender identity. He is currently a doctoral candidate in interdisciplinary ecology at the University of Florida, manager of the Seminole Tribe of Florida's Creek immersion language-revitalization program, and director of Ekvn-Yefolecv Indigenous Maskoke Ecovillage centered in Weogufka, Alabama. A member of the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference of The United Methodist Church, Marcus was the invited guest musician for the 2012 General Conference Act of Repentance Service toward Healing Relationships with Indigenous Peoples. Later that year, he served as the composer and choir director for the Vatican canonization liturgy with Pope Benedict XVI for Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, as well as for her canonization Mass of Thanksgiving at St. Peter's Basilica.



JOY BRONSON is a third-year master of divinity student at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, Tenn., where she works in the Office of the University Chaplain and Religious Life. She is a candidate for ordination as a deacon in the West Ohio Conference of The United Methodist Church. Currently, she is developing a peace and justice ministry to help people of faith discern their work in creating and sustaining God-centered communities.



THE REV. ISAAC BROUNE, a United Methodist clergyman from Côte d'Ivoire, is a pastor and journalist serving in his home nation. He works for United Methodist Communications (UMCom), staffing the French-language news desk. He also produces radio programming in Côte d'Ivoire. He earned his master of divinity degree in 2018 from Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, Tenn.



RUKANG D. CHIKOMB is a commercial pilot and a missionary with the General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church. He is assigned as director of Southern Congo Wings of the Morning, the aviation ministry of the Southern Congo-Zambia Episcopal Area. This ministry provides transportation for hospitals, patients, church personnel and volunteers needing air travel. A native of Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Chikomb attended local United Methodist schools and earned diplomas in chemistry and biology.



THE REV. JERIC C. CORTADO, a United Methodist clergyman, is chaplain and associate professor at the Southern Philippines Methodist Colleges in Mount Apo Village, Poblacion, Kidapawan City, Mindanao, the Philippines. He teaches classes on theology, church history and worship. He also develops leads liturgy and worship for United Methodist and ecumenical gatherings around the world.



PHIL COBUCCI is president of BAM! Social Business, a boutique social media and digital marketing agency which he founded in 2009. Since then, his agency has grown and thrived, thanks to the creative culture and entrepreneurial drive seen throughout Nashville, Tennessee. BAM! was one of the first companies in Nashville to become a National LGBT Certified Business Enterprise through the Nashville LGBT Chamber of Commerce and the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce. Phil attended Liberty University in Virginia and received a Bachelor of Science in communications. During his college years, Phil held various marketing positions, including roles with the university radio station and Warner Music Group, which he parlayed into a career in the music business upon graduation. He is a graduate of the Small Business Administration's inaugural Emerging Leaders (Nashville cohort) program, the Nashville Emerging Leaders Class of 2016 and Belmont University's Mini MBA program. Phil also serves on the Nashville Emerging Leaders Board of Directors and is actively involved with charities throughout Nashville and the United States in variety of volunteer capacities. He is a past president of Nashville PRIDE.



THE REV. DR. IRVING COTTO is senior pastor of St. Paul United Methodist Church in Warrington, Pa., appointed there in summer 2018 after having completed a term as superintendent of the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference's North District. He also recently completed his doctorate in theology in a combined program with the Graduate Theological Foundation in Indiana and the Instituto Teológico Internacional de Puerto Rico. His dissertation is on liturgy and pastoral care ministry. Irving has been in pastoral ministry since 1976 when he started a new church as a student pastor in Aguas Buenas, Puerto Rico. He has served as pastor of several churches in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. For four years, he was director of congregational development/director of Latino ministries for the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. He has also served on the board of ordained ministry in both the Eastern Pennsylvania and the Greater New Jersey conferences. He is a member of the Order of Saint Luke, the American Counseling Association, the Society of Pastoral Theology and the National Association of United Methodist Evangelists. He is a founding member of the American Association of Christian Counselors. Born in New York City, he is married to the Rev. Lilian Lucrecia de Paz. They have three children: Julio, Andres and Alejandro.



DR. BRENDA DIAL DEESE is a member of the Lumbee nation and a resident of Pembroke, N.C. She is a retired educator from North Carolina. Other professional experiences include working with AmeriCorps Vista at the Boys & Girls Clubs – Lumbee Country, program coordinator with the Intertribal Talking Circle for the Prevention of Substance Abuse in Native Youth and adjunct faculty with the University of North Carolina – Pembroke in the educational leadership and counseling department. Action research was a major focus in her work as director for student services in the public schools of Robeson County. This work offered direct insight to decision-making practices and reckoning principles with leadership styles among people who represent lived experiences in historical trauma and institutional oppression. The work led to the design and development of the OBED Indigenous Leadership Styles assessment. She designed the OILS assessment tool specifically to identify and characterize strengths and weaknesses of indigenous leadership styles in relation to collectivistic, ancient practices; worldview; intergenerational trauma; internalized oppression; and the metaphysical connections to “Indian-ness.” Brenda holds a doctorate in curriculum, instruction and counselor education from North Carolina State University and is a North Carolina Licensed Professional Counselor Supervisor and a Nationally Certified Counselor. She has a master’s degree in school counseling, certification in educational administration and supervision, and a bachelor’s degree in elementary education.



PAUL GALLOWAY is a native-born Texan, now living in Nashville, Tenn. He is a faith-based social justice activist with more than 15 years of experience. The main officer for Galloway Public Relations for the past 12 years, he focuses on strategic communication and broadcast and print interview preparation, as well as conflict resolution and media monitoring. Most recently, he was executive director of the American Muslim Advocacy Center. For three years, he was executive director of the American Center for Outreach, focused on defending the religious liberty of all Americans. Paul also was the first executive director of the Islamic Society of Greater Houston and the first executive director of the Council on American Islamic Relations in Houston. Paul has been called “the Yoda of interfaith affairs.” During his time with Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston, his work was honored with a Jefferson Awards Certificate of Excellence for Public Service. He is a graduate of the FBI-Houston Citizens’ Academy. He is a student at Lipscomb University, where he is finishing his master’s degree in civic leadership.



DR. RICHARD LETSHU is a medical doctor who specializes in epidemiology and an active United Methodist layman from the Democratic Republic of Congo. He serves as bureau chief for the World Health Organization's provincial office in central Congo. The son of a United Methodist clergyman-father and active laymother, Richard teaches Bible study for congregations and church conferences. A former government official with the Congolese state, he has worked with the World Health Organization since 2004.



JORGE A. LOCKWARD is the minister of worship arts at The Church of the Village in New York City. A native of the Dominican Republic, he formerly served as director of the global praise program of the General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, and lectured on worship at Union Theological Seminary. Jorge was a committee member of the Spanish-language United Methodist hymnal, *Mil Voces para Celebrar*, and has served as consultant on other denominational hymnals. He is the editor of *Regocíjate y Canta* (1995), a collection of Latino worship choruses; *Tenemos Esperanza* (2001), a trilingual (Spanish, Portuguese, English) songbook and recording; assistant editor of *Global Praise 3: More Songs for Worship and Witness* (2004); and co-editor of *For Everyone Born: Global Songs for an Emerging Church* (2008). He has served as a member of the executive committee of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada (1999-2002), the consulting board for *Reformed Worship* magazine, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship (1999-2002) and the board of directors of Choristers Guild (1999-2002). As song leader and workshop leader, he models a passion for the ways congregational song reflects and shapes the theology and praxis of the assembled community. He is co-founder and conductor-in-residence of *Cántico Nuevo* (New Song), a worship and arts ecumenical project in New York City, and a popular workshop leader in the field of liturgy and music throughout the United States and abroad. As song leader, Jorge was part of the song-leading team for the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and for the 2010 quadrennial assembly of United Methodist Women in St. Louis.



FRAMER MELLA, a psychologist and educator, is president of the South Philippines Methodist Colleges, in Mindanao, where the four main areas of study are gender and development, Wesleyan theology and other spirituality, peace education and cultures, and environmental justice. She is a member of Branscomb Memorial United Methodist Church in Kidapawan City, Philippines, and a member of the board of directors of the General Commission on Religion and Race of The United Methodist Church.



THE REV. DR. JOY J. MOORE is an associate professor of homiletics and Christian ministry at Wesley Seminary at Indiana Wesleyan University. Joining the faculty in July 2017, she came from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., where she was the founding associate dean of the William E. Pannell Center for African-American Church Studies. An ordained elder in The United Methodist Church's West Michigan Annual Conference, Joy is a nationally respected academic leader who has taught in seminaries throughout the United States. She brings a passion for preparing pastors for leadership in the local church. She wants to help pastors witness to the holiness and justice promised and proclaimed by Jesus. Joy earned a bachelor's degree in education and mathematics, a master of divinity degree from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Ill., and a doctorate in practical theology from London School of Theology/Brunel University in England. She became a John Wesley Fellow in 2001 and is a member of the National Association of United Methodist Evangelists, the Wesleyan Theology Society, the Academy of Homiletics and the Society for Biblical Literature. She is currently president of the Christian Theological Research Fellowship of the American Academy of Religion.



THE REV. DR. KEVIN PARK is an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Currently, he is an assistant professor of theology at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Ga., where he directs the doctor of ministry program. He also is the interim director of Korean-American ministry at the seminary and the English ministry director (part time) for the Korean Central Presbyterian Church in nearby Atlanta. From 2008 to 2012, he was the associate professor for theology with the Office of Theology, Worship, Education with the Presbyterian Center (USA) in Louisville, Ky. Before that, he was pastor of Bethany Presbyterian Church in Bloomfield, N.J., for five years. He has served as an organizer and moderator for forums such as “A Cry from the Heart for Unity, Reconciliation and Justice: From Belhar to Ferguson” and the Racial Ethnic Stewardship Consultation. Kevin’s work has been published in several books and journals. Most recently, he has a chapter, “Korean-Americans and Jesus (and Confucius and Buddha),” in the book *The Meaning of My Neighbor’s Faith: Interreligious Reflections on Immigration*, edited by Alexander Hwang and Laura Alexander (Fortress Press, 2018). He also served as co-editor of *Living Faithfully: A Christian Curriculum for Korean North American Youth*. He also wrote the article “Korean American Churches Navigate Cultural Changes: Reaching the Next Generation” for *Presbyterians Today* (March 20, 2017).



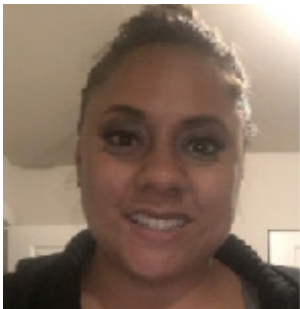
THE REV. DR. KIL JAE PARK is pastor of Teaneck (N.J.) United Methodist Church. He has an extensive ministry background, having served as a Christian education director with Bethany Presbyterian Church, as a children’s ministry pastor with Bethel Korean United Methodist Church in New York City, and as pastor of youth and young adult ministries in churches in New Jersey and California. In the early years of his ministry, he served the New York University Korean Christian Fellowship as its preaching pastor. He holds doctoral and master’s degrees from Princeton Theological Seminary and a master of divinity degree from Drew Theological School in Madison, N.J. His teaching interests include theory and practice of Christian education, multicultural Christian education, Asian-American experience and ministry, family life and Christian education, and the theology and practice of ministry. He has taught at New Brunswick Theological Seminary as an adjunct faculty member and with the Asian-American Youth Ministry Institute. His published writings include the article “Restoring the Wholeness of God’s Creation: An Understanding of Multicultural Christian Education” in the *Journal of Christian Education & Information Technology*. He also published “Yellow on White Background: Korean-American Youth Ministry and the Challenge of Constructing Korean-American Identity” in the *Journal of Youth and Theology*.



THE REV. RUDY RASMUS is a pastor, author, and humanitarian with a passion for outreach to the world's most challenged communities. He and his wife, Juanita Rasmus, co-pastor St. John's United Methodist Church in downtown Houston, Texas, a congregation that began with nine members in 1992. Today, St. John's has grown to thousands of members from every social and economic background who share the same pews. Rudy attributes the success of the church to a compassionate group of people who have embraced the vision of tearing down walls of classism, sexism, and racism and building bridges of unconditional love, universal recovery, and unprecedented hope.



THE REV. DR. VANCE P. ROSS is senior pastor of Central United Methodist Church in Atlanta, Ga. A sought-after preacher and presenter, Ross co-facilitates a doctor of ministry cohort at United Theological Seminary, teaches the course of study at Candler School of Theology, directs the Convocation for Black United Methodist Pastors, and is a coach for Strengthening the Black Church for the 21st Century Initiative for The United Methodist Church.



FRANCINE TAMAALII-BHANGOO (lovingly nicknamed "Bunnie" by family and friends) is a member of Spanaway (Wash.) United Methodist Church, where she volunteers in the nursery, serves as a liturgist and creator of the children's moment in worship, and is a member of the congregation's technology team. The daughter of a United Methodist pastor, she credits her father with modeling deep Christian faith and commitment to family. Proudly "full Samoan," Francine is married with one daughter, and works at Expeditors International of Washington.



JAY TAMAALII is a United Methodist layman and member of Spanaway (Wash.) United Methodist Church, where he directs youth ministries. A lifelong United Methodist, he says his walk with Christ and desire to serve the church began in childhood when he was a worship acolyte. From his close-knit, Samoan family—and his congregation—Jay says he learned love and acceptance, even after he came out as a gay man. Today he works in maintenance for a logistics company and as a security guard. He is confident that God has a divine purpose for his life, citing Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord. 'Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'"

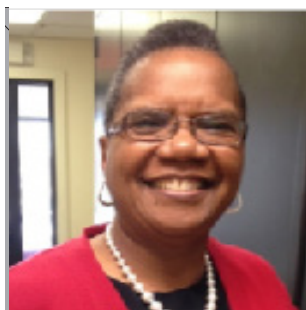


THE REV. DEBBIE DOW WEATHERSPOON is an ordained United Methodist elder in the California-Nevada Annual Conference. She served in pastoral ministry from 1997 to 2017. Most recently, she was in an interim appointment to United Campus Christian Ministry at Stanford University. Currently, she is on a one-year sabbatical to complete a doctor of ministry degree at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. Her focus is in public engagement, emphasizing the intersectionality of class, race and gender, with a focus on economic and racial justice. In addition, she is a co-supervisor in the national Justice Ministry Education program at Auburn Seminary. Debbie facilitates retreats, speaks at events for United Methodist Women and other organizations, and participates in multifaith engagement for social justice. She is a leader in the JustFaith Ministries movement, serving on the national board. A graduate of the University of Florida, where she focused on visual anthropology in Latin America, she spent time in studies and service in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Cuba. She is married to the Rev. Dr. Dale M. Weatherspoon, pastor of Easter Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond, Calif. Their teenage sons are Wesley and Justus Weatherspoon.



BONNIE WHEELER, M.A., L.M.S.W., is a nationally certified counselor with the Michigan State University Counseling Center. She has extensive experience in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, grief and loss, sexual assault and adults who were abused as children. She also is a licensed social worker with a master's degree. She has expertise in domestic violence, women's issues, multicultural issues and life transitions. She has focused on treatment of sexual trauma through the Masters and Johnson training. She holds an advanced bereavement-facilitator certificate from the American Academy of Bereavement. Bonnie has taken workshops such as "Death and Dying: Relationship-Centered" and "Death and Dying: An Invitation to the Soul" with N. Michael Murphy, M.D. She also did transformative grief training. She is active in her community, serving as dance coordinator since 1990 for the Looking Glass Music & Arts Association. She has been honored for her volunteer work with the Ingham County Women's Commission and for service to the Council Against Domestic Assault.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE FACILITATOR'S GUIDE



FAYE WILSON, ED.D., is a writer of curriculum-style materials. She is director of GeeFaye Associates, an education and music consulting firm. For 20 years she was a staff member of the General Board of Global Ministries. She has written several mission study books and leaders guides, including the children's resource on poverty "The Girl Under the Bridge." She has taught in more than 20 United Methodist Women's "Mission U" events across the United States and led workshops at United Methodist Women's assemblies. Minister of music and arts at Mount Zion United Methodist Church, Quantico, Md., in the Peninsula-Delaware Annual Conference, she is president of Salisbury (Maryland) District United Methodist Women.

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INTRODUCTION

After the 2016 General Conference, The United Methodist Church made a commitment to find a way forward on exploring the breadth and depth of human sexuality in the life of the church. The church is asking itself anew: How can we BE a church for all people? How can we say that all people are created by God and affirm that? How do we receive and experience the fullness of gifts of every person made by God?

The General Commission on Religion and Race also felt the leading of the Holy Spirit to provide space for people of color to share their diverse perspectives on the intersections of Christian faith, sexual orientation and gender identity. For at least 50 years, the worldwide United Methodist Church, in particular, has been in discussion, disagreement and strident discord about the status, role and rights of persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer/questioning (LGBTQ).

Too often, the face of this churchwide struggle has been a white, U.S. face. Rather than engaging people of color and United Methodists from beyond the United States in this discussion, those leading the discussions ignore, make sweeping and often erroneous assumptions about, or spread stereotypes and misinformation about how indigenous (Native), black, Latinx, African, Asian and other people think about a particular concern or situation.

In this 11-part video series, ***Vital Conversations 4: Race, Culture, the Church and Human Sexuality***, the General Commission on Religion and Race has invited church laypeople, theologians, pastors, campus ministers, LGBTQ individuals, ecumenical friends and outside-the-church friends – most of them people of color – to weigh in with their perspectives. Should The United Methodist Church fully accept and include or should it exclude from full participation those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersex? Could the church find and explore middle ground? What might U.S. people of color and people beyond the United States and beyond our denomination add to this conversation?

We further invited presenters to speak authentically in their own voices, using their vernacular. Those featured in this series represent their own cultures, languages and ideological perspectives. While some terms used may be unfamiliar and even unsettling for some, we encourage you to listen actively and open yourselves to these speakers.

The timing of this resource is deliberate. In February 2019, United Methodist lawmakers gathered at a specially called session of General Conference to determine whether or not the denomination would change its ban on ordaining people who are homosexual and against same-gender marriage. Although the entire LGBTQ community is not named specifically in church law, the actions by the 2019 General Conference and by the upcoming 2020 General Conference will also affect the status, role and inclusion/exclusion of these individuals and communities.

In each of these video conversations, two people who know each other, who work or have worked together, and who love each other, sit down – knee to knee, face to face, heart to heart – and share experiences, questions, history and hope for the ongoing journey forward.

We invite you to do the same. Whether you use this video series in your family, in your small group or as part of the preached Word, we ask that you commit to creating moments for conversation and caring, for discernment and discussion, and for healing and hopefulness.

Poet Michael Glaser wrote in his poem, “Gathered at the Table,” that “we need to be brave enough to invite our contradictions to the same party as our commitments.” This resource invites us to be brave.

We pray that you will find hope, strength and direction for moving forward in God’s church through using this series.

ABOUT THE COMMISSION ON RELIGION AND RACE

Our vision is to invite and lead the church into new conversations about our relevance and our calling from God to serve a world that is far different from when we began our work. The commission works to build the capacity of The United Methodist Church to be more relevant to more people, younger people and more diverse people in order to nurture disciples of Jesus Christ who will transform the world for the better. Our ministry model provides resources for congregations and church leaders to increase intercultural competency, institutional equity and vital conversations.

ABOUT THE “VITAL CONVERSATIONS” SERIES

In Isaiah 1:18a (ESV) the prophet writes, “‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the Lord.” Throughout the Scriptures, as God’s people endure hardship, war, famine and inevitable conflicts and disagreements, God invites the people of faith to “reason,” talk, engage, pray, deepen understandings and, thus, expand faithful living. Engaging in “vital conversations,”

through church school classes, affinity groups, covenant groups, and small-group and one-to-one sharing allows us to listen for and tell stories of our faith journeys.

Creating opportunities and resources for people of faith to discuss, debate, share stories and even disagree is central to the mission of the General Commission on Religion and Race. The diverse people of God do not always agree, but because we value all people as children of God, we may learn how to debate and disagree in remarkable and loving ways.

The ***Vital Conversations*** series comprises videos and accompanying study guides designed to foster spirited discussion in hopes that participants will learn together, increase understanding of one another's faith and life journeys, and grow in empathy and understanding. We urge you to use these resources in your ministry setting or small group. The first three series, available at www.gcorr.org, are:

1. *Vital Conversations 1: Racism and the U.S. Church*
2. *Vital Conversations 2: Race, Culture, Tribe and the Global Church*
3. *Vital Conversations 3: Young Adults, Social Justice and the Church*

GETTING STARTED: BEING A PART OF “VITAL CONVERSATIONS”

Sunday school classes, campus ministries and other affinity groups may use ***Vital Conversations 4: Race, Culture, the Church and Human Sexuality*** as a primary study resource. Each video has an accompanying study guide, which may be used for multisession or one-time study. Whether using just one session or all 11 sessions, participants will benefit from these resources.

This resource also includes sermon ideas for pastors who seek to broaden and strengthen the conversations in their local churches or community organizations in which they participate.

While Sunday school classes and small groups may have a designated facilitator, this guide is written so that individuals may volunteer to lead a specific video conversation. All sessions allow a multisensory interaction with the videos and most sessions may be completed within 60 to 75 minutes.

Common elements include the use of prayer and Scriptures, the call for discernment, and one-on-one and small-group sharing. The videos of all conversations may be viewed at <http://www.gcorr.org>. Leaders may assign class members to view each video before each study session OR show the video to the group at the start of each session.

HOW TO HAVE VITAL AND COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

Developed by Faye Wilson, Ed.D., GeeFaye Associates,
for 2018 UMW Assembly Seminar

Identify and own your truth and be prepared to share it and defend it without rancor.

Example: *This is what I have been taught and believe. I love you; however, I cannot agree with you at this time.*

Use the “I” message.

Example: *I do not understand. May I ask a question? How can I be more responsive to you even when we disagree?*

Commit to listening.

Example: *After focusing on what another person is saying, ask to double-check your understanding of the conversation. Either give a BRIEF synopsis and ask if that is accurate or ask for clarity on a specific point.*

Ask a caring question and accept the response.

Example: *Why is my opinion important to you? Why are you committed to getting me to change my mind?*

Lead with love; lead with a positive.

Example: *I am here because I want to understand more. I am here because you are very important to me.*

Practice acceptance.

Example: *Because of your friendship with my daughter, I am glad to talk with you.*

End with appreciation.

Example: *I cannot say that I have changed my mind, but thanks for sharing your time and thoughts with me.*

PREPARING TO LEAD THE DISCUSSIONS

Pray: Ask God for help to guide a conversation about sexuality that may have polarized your church and biological family. Ask for courage, understanding that, for some people, just the call to conversation evokes strong, negative emotions. Ask God to bless the time for people to listen as well as hear. Ask God to send you help: those who would invite, bring and nurture others in these key and necessary conversations.

Invite: Many groups and individuals might benefit from using **Vital Conversations 4**. Invite baby boomers and millennials. Invite people from various faith traditions and ethnicities. Invite co-workers and family members. Use a variety of methods: the community calendar on your public-access channel, Facebook and Twitter, a billboard, e-blasts, an ad in the paper or on an internet server. Walk the mall and the grocery store or market, strike up a conversation and give the invitation. Invite the person with whom you have not yet been able to have a civil conversation.

Review: For each session you lead, be sure to watch the video more than once. List the things you would like your study group to “look for” or “listen for.” Be sure to make notes on things that challenge your personal thoughts. Expand the list of Scriptures referenced.

Plan: Gather supplies before each session (laptop or tablet, projector, markers, chart paper, notecards). Read through the directions for specific activities so you can lead the group seamlessly. You may have to choose among optional ideas to share with the group. Advanced planning will support flexibility in guiding the session. If the job of study leader rotates among several people, you may wish to meet and plan together.

Commit: When working in a defined group of people around sensitive or challenging topics, it is important that group members create a covenant of care for the spiritual and emotional well-being of each person. Even if the group members change from session to session, be sure to review a covenant statement at the beginning each study session. Commit to ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to speak and be heard and to listen actively and respectfully to others. Commit to holding each person’s stories in confidence. What is said in the group should stay in the group, UNLESS you decide as a group (and with permission of the individual) to share an idea, concern or question.

COVENANT OF CARE AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Wherever and whenever God's people gather, we should commit to providing a space for everyone to share as well as commit to holding sacred and in confidence things that are shared as part of the discussion.

It is important to keep in mind that some discussion may evoke frustrating, sad or angry memories and responses. Below are some suggested guidelines for use in leading discussions for **Vital Conversations 4**. However, it is often recommended to have the study group generate its own. This sample covenant of care and confidentiality states that:

Every participant is valued.

Everyone has a right to speak.

No one is to use her/his/their voice or actions to hurt another.

No one is to dismiss the words and concerns of another classmate.

What is said in class remains in the group.

No one's story shall be shared without that person's permission.

We will provide empathy and care where appropriate.

We will refrain from use of electronic devices that might distract learning.

GUIDELINES FOR LEADING DISCUSSION GROUPS

Offer everyone a chance to speak.

Be on the lookout for someone who is willing to share but reluctant to volunteer.

Offer time-based responses to ensure that many voices can be heard. A gentle direction such as “Please share your thoughts in two minutes or less” often helps.

Be prepared to interrupt firmly any person who feels the need to dominate the discussion or be dismissive of someone else’s experience. Call the group’s attention back to the covenant of care and confidentiality; then ask the speaker to summarize their thoughts in 30 seconds without disparaging the ideas of another.

Give time for people to think, reflect and discern. Use a concept called “pause to reflect,” which is usually a silent time of three to five minutes, before inviting participants to speak. This is especially helpful for people who do not formulate and articulate ideas as quickly as others.

Honor the time commitment of the group. If the group is to meet for an hour, try to bring things to a conclusion by that time. Offer to stay after the session ends if two or three people want to continue the discussion.

10

HONORING PERSONAL INTEGRITY IN THE MIDST OF COMMUNITY*When ideologies diverse, church friends find hope*

The Rev. Dr. Irving Cotto and Jorge Lockward

PREPARATION

Select a room or location conducive to reflection and conversation, and one that has reliable internet access so that you may show and project the video. Be sure to do a run-through to make sure the internet and computer equipment work properly. If this is a group that meets regularly, you may offer everyone the opportunity to preview the video at home prior to coming to the discussion group.

Preview the video and read through the discussion guide. Also, read the sermon ideas and intercultural competency primers. Review the sample Covenant of Care and Confidentiality (page 20) for the discussion group or draft your own or invite the group to create one together.

Gather the following materials:

- At least two translations of the Bible for reading the Scriptures
- Write these STORY PROMPTS on newsprint and post in the room OR type them on a sheet of paper (leaving space between each one) with a copy for each participant
 - You were not invited to a friend’s party (birthday, retirement, wedding).
 - You were asked for a divorce or a romantic breakup.
 - You were asked to step down as a leader.
 - You were fired or laid off from a job.
 - You were left out of a parent’s will.
 - You were not invited to go on a trip or attend an event (concert, sports game).
- 4 x 6-inch white index cards (or all one color) – one for each participant
- Pens/pencils
- Basket (for collecting the cards)
- Blue painter’s tape
- Assorted hymnals and songbooks

NOTE: One of the conversations concludes with the two participants singing the chorus from the Latin American hymn “Tenemos Esperanza” (“We Have Hope”). Written by Federico J. Pagura with music by Homero R. Perera. The words ask us to believe this: “In hope we are forever celebrating, with courage in our struggle we are waiting, in trust and reassurance we are claiming: this is our song of freedom for all people.” (“Tenemos Esperanza” is found in the songbook by the same name, featuring 20 hymns and songs from Latin America. Visit www.umcmmission.org/store to order it online.)*

THE DISCUSSION SESSION

GET STARTED (10-15 MINUTES)

Welcome everyone to the session. If this is not an ongoing group meeting, invite people (in one or two minutes) to share their first names and what draws them to participate in this “Vital Conversations” group. Share why you have accepted the role of facilitator and your visions for the time together.

If this group meets regularly and new people are present, make them feel welcome. Share why you have accepted the role of facilitator and invite them to say their first name and say briefly what drew them to the conversation. Ask everyone else to introduce themselves. Ask for two volunteers to say why they are in the “Vital Conversations” group.

If necessary, take care of routine matters (location of restrooms, general time frame for the session). Remind the group of its commitment to the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality (page 20).

Opening: Prayer (use prayer below or invite a volunteer to pray)

God, we come together to strengthen our resolve to be your witness in the world. We come with ears open to hear and hearts ready to learn. We acknowledge that we may not be prepared for all that we might hear and may not easily accept all that is placed before us. But we are here. We are here for brothers and sisters and friends we are yet to meet. We are here for family members whom we deeply love. We are here for ourselves, seeking wisdom, if not understanding. We are your children, God, and we ask for your guidance. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

TELLING STORIES (15 MINUTES)

Divide the group into pairs (including yourself, if possible). Share with the group that life is full of challenges and sometimes it is good to name and discuss ways in which we have faced difficulties and overcome them. Ask each person to identify a time in her/his/their life when he/she/they were barred from community and FOCUS ON THE FEELINGS that were generated. Share story prompts such as:

- You were not invited to a friend's party (birthday, retirement, wedding).
- You were asked for a divorce or a romantic breakup.
- You were asked to step down as a leader.
- You were fired or laid off from a job.
- You were left out of a parent's will.
- You were not invited to go on a trip, attend an event (concert, sports game).

Ask people to choose ONE story that may be shared in three to five minutes and to write down key points. Explain that the notes will help them tell the essence of the story within the guidelines. Ask them to focus stories on how they felt about their experiences. Do they experience lingering pain or was the situation resolved?

VIEW THE VIDEO (10 MINUTES)

Conversation between Jorge Lockward and the Rev. Dr. Irving Cotto

FIRST, WE MUST LISTEN (5 MINUTES)

Observe a period of reflection and discernment. Invite participants to answer three or more of the following questions:

- What was emotional?
- What was exciting?
- What was the struggle?
- What was the pain?
- What was the breakthrough?

GATHER AND SHARE (15 MINUTES)

Gather in groups of three or four to talk about their answers to the questions and their response to the video. Ask for a volunteer from each group to answer one of the questions. Continue calling on each group until, ideally, a response has been received to each question.

DID YOU HEAR THAT? (15 MINUTES)

Read aloud the statements below – one by one – from the video conversation. Some may have already been shared in the earlier discussions. Invite participants to call out their thoughts and responses.

Lockward: If love and grace go to extremes, some fear that the effects on society would be harmful.

Cotto: If I hear you well, God has called you to Word and Sacrament, but you cannot give full expression of your faith, your anointing.

Lockward: Remember the issue is not *human* sexuality but *homosexuality*; I don't have the luxury of not dealing with it. I try not to take it personally.

Cotto: What held me is our friendship (speaking of when Lockward withheld a vote for him as bishop). I hope that the church can find a place where everyone can look at each other and say, "We have each other."

Lockward: Because God took a risk, we have hope.

Cotto: Preserving the institution is important, but not as important as preserving the movement (of salvation, justice).

HEAR THE SCRIPTURES (10 MINUTES)

Ask volunteers to read aloud the Scriptures below; encourage use of different Bible translations.

- Luke 19:1-10 (Zacchaeus)
- John 4:4-42 (woman from Samaria)
- Acts 10:44-48 (Cornelius)

Ask group members to share aloud their takeaways from those Scriptures as they think about the conversation between the Rev. Dr. Irving Cotto and Jorge Lockward.

THEN SINGS MY SOUL (15 MINUTES)

Call the group's attention to the song sung together by Jorge Lockward and the Rev. Dr. Irving Cotto ("Tenemos Esperanza"), which Lockward says is one of the most famous hymns in all of Latin America, and which celebrates that everyone has hope because God entered into the world.

Invite the group to look through hymnals and songbooks. Ask them to find a song that signifies hope, signifies their commitment to Christ and/or serves as a guidepost for the direction of the church.

Remind the group that they are not limited to the songbooks. They can identify another hymn or spiritual song that speaks their truth or nourishes their soul. After everyone has had an opportunity to select a song, ask each person to announce his/her/their song (singing one verse or one chorus if they so desire).

(OPTIONAL) HEAR FROM THE PASTOR (5 MINUTES)

Share a quote or insight from the sermon helps that were prepared by the Rev. Dr. Benita Harris in relation to the video conversation (examples given – feel free to make your own selection).

I remember on one occasion, I was part of a group in my Ph.D. program, and I wanted to add a section to our research project. The group said "no," and when our instructor came to approve the project, she looked at the part that had been rejected by the group and asserted that it had value to the study and asked them to put it back in. I thought things were fine and the study went extremely well.

The next semester, our instructor had each group leader put the names of their group on the board. The board was full of names because there were around 25 to 30 of us at that time, and the instructor asked, “Is there anyone whose name is not on the board?” and I was the only one who raised my hand. The group that I had been a part of for three years decided I no longer had worth or value to that group and never told me. I suddenly became, metaphorically, a Gentile to them. There was an awkward silence in the room for a few seconds; it seemed like an eternity, and another group told the instructor to put my name in their group. In the following two years until our degrees were complete, the first group never spoke to me about their decision to dismiss me. Wow! That was hard!

Our world is so full of boundaries, marked and invisible. We don’t see “No trespassing” signs to warn those of us who are uninvited to stay out. I wish I would have had that kind of warning. You know, it makes me think of the invisible fences used for pets; you can’t see it, but, boy, it lets you know when you hit it! There are lines in gyms and sports fields to show us when we are out of bounds. A pool is divided by a rope that warns us what is deep and what is shallow. We live on this or the other side of the railroad tracks. Rivers or mountain ranges form borders that divide nations. And, in general, borders and boundaries seek to keep the insiders in and the outsiders out. Borders segregate and function to reinforce our specific identities, often not leaving room for others who are different from ourselves.

CLOSING: I HAVE HOPE (10 MINUTES)

Remind the group that Jorge Lockward expressed hope for the upcoming General Conference session. He said that a first step for him would be deleting all exclusionary language in the United Methodist *Book of Discipline*, so that all church members could walk the journey together “without guns on the hip.”

Give everyone a blank index card and pens/pencils, if needed. Ask participants to write their “hope” in one or two sentences and to refrain from putting their names on the cards. Ask them to fold their cards in half to preserve privacy and confidentiality.

Collect the cards in a basket. Then have the group gather in a circle. Come as close and as comfortably as possible to each other – hand to hand, heart to heart, shoulder to shoulder, eye to eye, feet on the ground. Pass the basket and ask everyone to pull a card (people should look at the card to ensure they have not pulled their own card).

Once everyone has a card, go around the circle, asking each participant to read aloud what is on the card. Once all hopes have been shared, express appreciation for participants’ willingness to share.

Thank everyone for coming and sharing. Re-emphasize that the goal of each session is twofold: to hear and have a conversation without necessarily choosing one side or the other, and to increase the opportunity for expressing love amid disagreement. Remind the group about respecting confidentiality.

Share a closing prayer or affirmation (use the one given here or invite a volunteer to pray):

God, we thank you for the opportunity to speak with each other. Help us in our desire to know and do your will. Help us to put our shoulders to the wheel and do everything with a heart full of love. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

INTERSECTIONS OF RACE, LANGUAGE, ORIENTATION, IDENTITY AND STATUS

An Intercultural Competency Primer

Hispanic or Latinx Americans make up nearly 18 percent of the U.S. population, according to the Pew Research Institute and the U.S. Census Bureau. Additionally, a study by the Williams Institute reveals that approximately 1.4 million Hispanic LGBTQ adults currently live in the United States. Of the 146,000 Latinx same-sex households in the U.S., 29.1 percent are raising children.

LGBTQ Latinx people tend to live in areas of already-high concentrations of Latinx people, with one-third of same-sex Latinx couples residing in New Mexico, California and Texas. Specific concerns for U.S. Hispanic/Latinx people who are also LGBTQ run the spectrum from widespread exploitation of Latinx migrant workers to immigration and detention policies to the beliefs and practices of the Christian churches in which they participate.

Many Hispanic congregations in large Christian denominations tend to view homosexual, bisexual, transgender and queer individuals as living contrary to biblical teaching and theological tradition. These beliefs date back to the colonial period, when European and North American missionaries introduced Christianity to Latin American people.

While some congregations and denominations have relaxed these stances somewhat, the ethos is still largely anti-LGBTQ, especially among Hispanic Christian congregations. Latinx LGBTQ individuals who seek acceptance in white or interracial Christian churches that may be more accepting of LGBTQ people often face racial bias in those spaces. Their sexual orientation and gender identity may be affirmed, but racism often stymies full participation in predominantly white spaces.

For those new to the United States, especially those who are undocumented, being Hispanic and LGBTQ renders these people as targets for harassment and mistreatment. According to the U.S. Human Rights Campaign, more than 900,000 of LGBTQ immigrants living in the U.S. are Latinx people, and more than 267,000 of them are also undocumented. A 2013 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that one in five substantiated sexual abuse and assault cases in Immigration and Customs Enforcement facilities involved transgender detainees.

LGBTQ individuals who are Hispanic also are disproportionately targeted in hate crimes and workplace violence. Again, the Human Rights Campaign reports that, with regard to hate speech and violence against LGBTQ and HIV-affected communities, 15 percent of homicide victims are Latinx. Additionally, Latinx survivors of hate-based violence are 1.7 times more likely than non-Latinx persons to experience police violence. Additionally, Latinx people are 1.5 times more likely to experience discrimination and 1.5 times more likely to experience hate violence in the workplace.

The situation is especially dire for transgender Hispanic women, who experience alarmingly high rates of violence and harassment compared to other members of the LGBTQ community. However, few are willing to turn to the police for help out of fear of discrimination, revictimization and abuse by law-enforcement personnel.

Compiled from various sources. This intercultural primer is not offered as a blanket statement about or definition of a particular group but rather to provide some insight into the cultural realities and nuances of belief found within non-dominant communities.

*This resource uses the terms *Latinx and Hispanic* (together and interchangeably) to include men, women and people of Latin American descent who may identify as homosexual, bisexual, transgender or gender-expansive. It is also specific to the experiences of LGBTQ people living in the United States who identify as Hispanic and/or Latinx.

SERMON STARTER: SHOCKED BY GOD'S GRACE

Prepared by the Rev. Dr. Benita Harris

“While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came down on all those who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speaking in other languages and declaring the greatness of God. Then Peter responded, ‘Can anyone withhold water and prevent these people from being baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay for a few days.”

– Acts 10:44-48, *Holman Christian Standard Bible*

Liturgy/Greeting

One: O God, your ways are higher than ours.

Many: **Help us to seek your ways, not our own.**

One: Help us not to trust in our own understanding,

Many: **But fully rely on yours.**

One: Show us your love that never fails, even when we do.

Many: **Help us to seek that kind of love for others.**

Prayer

God of all grace and mercy, you are too good to us; yet, we struggle to be good and give grace to others. Help us to love our neighbors; help us to honor all of your creation; help us to see you and your love in those most similar to us and in those who are very different from us. Give us the strength to make a difference in the world because we are yours. Amen.

Thoughts

Have you ever been somewhere where you felt as if you were on the outside looking in, even if you were on the inside? Have you ever felt “less than” because you weren’t or couldn’t be part of the group? Or were you the one who didn’t welcome someone or make them feel a valuable part of whatever event or meeting was taking place?

Many of us have been in either place at one time or another in our lives. (*Use a personal example here or this example.*) I remember on one occasion I was part of a group in my Ph.D. program, and I wanted to add a section to our research project. The group said “no,” and when our instructor came to approve the project, she looked at the part that had been rejected by

the group, felt it had value to the study and asked them to put it back in. I thought things were fine and the study went extremely well.

The next semester our instructor had each group leader put the names of their group on the board. The board was full of names because there were around 25-30 of us at that time, and the instructor asked, "Is there anyone whose name is not on the board?" I was the only one who raised my hand. The group that I had been a part of for three years decided I no longer had worth or value to that group and had never told me.

To them I suddenly became, metaphorically, a Gentile. There was an awkward silence in the room for a few seconds; it seemed like an eternity. Finally, another group told the instructor to add my name in their group. In the following two years during which we finished out degree programs, members of that first group never spoke to me about their decision to exclude me. Wow! That was hard!

Our world is so full of boundaries, marked and invisible. We don't see "no trespassing" signs warning us to stay out. I wish I had had that kind of warning. You know, it makes me think of the invisible fences used for pets; you can't see them, but, they certainly let you know when you hit it!

There are lines in gyms and sports fields to show when we are out of bounds. A pool is divided by a rope to warn us what is deep and what is shallow. We live on this side or the other side of the railroad tracks. Rivers or mountain ranges form borders that divide nations, and, in general, borders and boundaries are created to keep the insiders in and the outsiders out. Borders segregate and function to reinforce our specific identities, often not leaving room for others who are different from ourselves.

Acts 10 recalls an encounter between Peter and Cornelius that is a monumental event in the life of the early church. The men were nothing alike, and in that time, they shouldn't even have been talking with each other, let alone staying in each other's homes. Earlier in the chapter, Peter, a Jewish Christian influenced by religious laws about food and circumcision, was in Joppa at the home of Simon, the tanner.

While in Joppa, Peter went up on the roof to pray and had a vision from God that he didn't understand. Scripture tells us that Peter was hungry and wanted something to eat. While it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven open and something like a large sheet come down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air, considered off limits for Jews of the day.

for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” The voice said to him again, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

As Peter was pondering the vision, men sent by Cornelius arrived, and the Holy Spirit said to him, “Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.” So, Peter went down to the men and said, “I am the one you are looking for. What is your reason for coming?”

They told him that a holy angel directed Cornelius (a centurion and an upright and God-fearing man, well regarded by the whole Jewish nation) to send them to Peter to hear what he had to say. So, Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.

The next day, he went with them and some of the believers from Joppa to Caesarea. When Cornelius met Peter, he fell down and worshipped him. Peter told him to get up and explained that he was only a mortal. A large crowd had gathered at Cornelius’ home, and Peter said that they all knew it was unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. Then Peter explained that God had shown him in a vision that he should not call anyone profane or unclean. “So when I was sent for,” Peter said, “I came without objection.” Cornelius answered that they were in the presence of God and were to listen to what the Lord had commanded Peter to say.

Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” He went on to talk about the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus. “All the prophets,” he said, “testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Finally, we get to our Scripture today. “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them also speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So, he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Why were the believers so shocked by God’s grace? They had experienced it! Why are we? We have experienced it! Why do we continue to reject and feel rejected when we could be sharing our lives in ways that honor the kingdom of God here on earth? Why is it so hard for us to give up our own stubborn self-will to offer the grace to others that Christ has offered us? Our faith is not an exclusive club; it is gift offered to everyone.

One author asserts that neither Peter nor Cornelius is the hero of this story. The Holy Spirit is the real hero because the Spirit has the ability to break down barriers constructed by humans to accomplish the work of God.

Retired United Methodist Bishop William Willimon states, “The real hero of this story – the ‘star’ of the drama – is neither Peter nor Cornelius but the gracious and prodding One who makes bold promises and keeps them, who finds a way even in the midst of human distinctions and partiality between humans.” Only the Holy Spirit can initiate and complete such a powerful transformation. Perceptions about who was to be included and who was to be changed, not by their own doing, but by the work of the Holy Spirit within them. Their old concepts of the inner circle kept widening to the point that their old or assumed boundaries were no longer legitimate.

Peter said that God shows no partiality, and that was a radical departure for him of who or what is clean or unclean. Only the Holy Spirit can give us new eyes and new hearts concerning inclusion. Our society and our churches have not overcome racism, sexism, classism, ageism, nationalism and other prejudices. We continually foster segregation in many forms as we hold dear the invisible boundaries between “us” and “them.” But no boundaries are impassible for the Holy Spirit!

The question for us today is, “Metaphorically, who are the Gentiles in your life?” How do we allow the Holy Spirit to transform us into disciples of Jesus Christ that love God’s creation, all of it? Frankly, I can only think of one way – continuing to grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ and allowing Jesus to be Lord of our lives in all that we do. Now, if we make that decision, then we can employ the spiritual disciplines in our growth process, but until we make the decision to follow Jesus with abandon, our prejudices will continue to be a part of who we are.

I want to grow, change, learn and live in relationship with God and others because I don’t want to miss any single part of what God has for me, and much of that comes through the unexpected gift of really knowing one another and loving each other anyway.

What are you willing to do this week to grow in your faith? It was Jesus’ greatest desire that all his followers, both Jews and Gentiles, become one people. His passionate plea to the Father before going to the cross was “that they may be completely one, so that they world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23b, *NRSV*).

Challenge the Congregation with These Questions and Ideas

- What are you willing to do this week to grow in the faith?
- Our Scripture tells us that the believers were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. Who are the people or people groups you hold at arm's length?
- Ponder how you feel about the gospel of Jesus Christ being available to all people. Are you willing to consider seeking someone very different from yourself and building a relationship with them, even if it may be difficult?

Charge to Congregation

Go in the name of God, seeking to know, really know, one another and, in knowing, learn to love as God loves. Amen.

Hymns on Reconciliation from *The United Methodist Hymnal*

- No. 383 – “This Is a Day of New Beginnings”
- No. 431 – “Let There Be Peace on Earth”
- No. 560 – “Help Us Accept Each Other”
- No. 666 – “Shalom to You Now”

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02

OFFERING PASTORAL CARE WHEN CONGREGANTS HAVE DIFFERING VIEWS

Korean-American clergy extol the importance of extending pastoral care to all

The Rev. Dr. Kevin Park and the Rev. Dr. Kil Jae Park

SESSION 2

PREPARATION

Select a room or location conducive to reflection and conversation, and one with adequate internet access so that you may show and project the video. Be sure to do a run-through to make sure the internet and computer equipment work properly.

If this is a group that meets regularly, you may offer everyone the opportunity to preview the video at home prior to coming to the discussion group.

Preview the video and read through the discussion guide, sermon ideas and intercultural competency primer. Review the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality (page 20), or draft one of your own or invite the group to create one.

Gather the following materials:

- At least two translations of the Bible for reading the Scriptures
- In advance, write words from the “Pass the Hat” activity on individual slips of paper or index cards
- Candle (8” taper) and lighter

THE DISCUSSION SESSION**GET STARTED (10-15 MINUTES)**

*Welcome everyone to the session and invite people (in one or two minutes) to share their first names and what draws them to participate in this “Vital Conversations” group. Share why you have accepted the role of facilitator and your visions for the time together. (**This may be omitted if the group meets on a regular basis.*)

Take care of logistical (location of restrooms, general time frame for the session). Remind participants that the group uses the Code of Care and Confidentiality (page 20) in each session.

Opening: Prayer (use prayer below or invite a volunteer to pray)

God, we come together to strengthen our resolve to be your witnesses in the world. We come with ears open to hear and hearts ready to learn. We acknowledge that we may not be prepared for all that we might hear and may not easily accept all that is placed before us. But we are here. We are here for brothers and sisters and friends we are yet to meet. We are here for family members whom we deeply love. We are here for ourselves, seeking wisdom, if not understanding. We are your children, God, and we ask you for your guidance. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

VIEW THE VIDEO (10 MINUTES)

Conversation between the Rev. Dr. Kevin Park and the Rev. Dr. Kil Jae Park

FIRST, WE MUST LISTEN (5 MINUTES)

Take a moment for the group to reflect and discern. Invite participants individually to respond to three or more of the following questions (may want to make written notes):

- What was emotional?
- What was exciting?
- What was the struggle?
- What was the pain?
- What was the breakthrough?

GATHER AND SHARE (10 MINUTES)

Next, ask participants to gather in groups of two or three to talk about the answers to the questions. Finally, hear from a few of the groups; ask a volunteer to respond to one (and only one) of the questions.

CONNECTING WITH 'MY' FIRST TIME (10 MINUTES)

Invite group members to reflect individually on the questions below. Then invite one or two people (preferably those who have not responded in the earlier activity) to speak to one of the questions below. Note: Use this activity especially if someone new has joined the group.

- Why do I believe that homosexuality (or sexuality other than heterosexuality) is a sin?
- When did I first become cognizant of sexuality beyond male-female?
- When did I first develop a friendship or a relationship with a person who identifies as an LGBTQ person?
- When did I first defend my own or someone else's point of view on human sexuality?
- When did I first understand human sexuality as a point of challenge or conflict in the faith-based setting?

PASS THE HAT (10 MINUTES)

Place these words and phrases that were used in the video in a hat (or basket); feel free to add others that you hear from the video. Ask each person to take one, then pass the hat to the next person. Ask them to consider these words/phrases from the conversation and prepare to share where they have applied and heard them, and how they can apply and discuss them in this context:

- Fear
- Conservative
- Turbulent
- Sexuality is a spectrum
- Challenging assumptions
- Progressive
- Everything is done in context of relationship
- Grace of God is transformative
- Tension always exists, not resolved until we meet Jesus
- Walk toward openness
- Family honor, family disowning loved ones

HEAR THE SCRIPTURES (5 MINUTES)

Ask volunteers to read aloud the Scriptures below; encourage use of different Bible translations.

- Matthew 22:37-39
- Romans 3:23-24

Ask group members to share aloud their takeaways from those Scriptures as they recall about the conversation between the Rev. Dr. Kevin Park and the Rev. Dr. Kil Jae Park.

EMBRACING YOUR FAITH JOURNEY (10 MINUTES)

In discussing their faith journeys, Kevin Park said, “I was a bona fide fundamentalist before seminary ... there was a distinction between cerebral and lived theology ... as we follow Jesus, we will change.” Kil Jae Park said, “It is personal; it is ministry; it is a pastoring issue.”

Pair 'n Share: Invite group members to pair up (preferably with someone different from the first discussion) and tell a story of their individual faith journeys regarding their understanding of their own sexuality and the broader conversation about sexuality. Ask each to describe the impact of the Scriptures read aloud on that understanding.

(OPTIONAL) HEAR FROM THE PASTOR (5 MINUTES)

Share a quote or insight from the following sermon helps prepared by Bishop Hee-Soo Jung in relation to the video conversation (example given – feel free to make your own selection).

God's grace is relentless. God loves creation, including all humans. We know love because God loves us. Standing on our principles and stating our beliefs do not give us permission to be cruel or judgmental. For too long, Christians have erred to the side of judgment rather than grace.

Humility dictates that we must respect others and not reduce everything to right and wrong. We must listen to others with a commitment to understand them, not make assumptions. While many do not want to discuss difficult and potentially divisive topics, others hunger to think together, wrestle with difficult ideas and move beyond either/or thinking. Many laity avoid talking about LGBTQ people because they live in a culture of shame. Most who hold very strong beliefs one way or another nonetheless do not want their denomination to split over relationships to LGBTQ people. Many laypeople are very sad that the church is not a safe place to address these thoughts and feelings.

CLOSING: SITTING KNEE TO KNEE (5 MINUTES)

Ask the group to make two lines with each row of chairs facing the other so that everyone has a partner. Encourage participants to move their chairs forward so they are sitting knees to knees with another person as desired; respect people's need for personal space.

Light the candle. Repeat the phrase: "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." Thank everyone for coming and sharing. Reemphasize that the goal of each session is twofold: to hear and have a conversation without necessarily choosing a side and to increase the opportunity for love amid disagreement. Remind the group about maintaining confidentiality between sessions.

Say a closing prayer or affirmation (use the one given here or invite a volunteer to pray).

God, we thank you for the opportunity to speak with each other. Help us in our desire to know and do your will. Help us to accept each other as you have accepted us. Lead us on the way forward. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

UNDERSTANDING HUMAN SEXUALITY CONVERSATION IN A KOREAN CULTURAL CONTEXT

An Intercultural Competency Primer

Social and cultural taboos against homosexuality among many Koreans and Korean-Americans are deeply rooted in the ancient philosophy of *yin* and *yang* (a Chinese principle dating from the third century B.C.), which asserts that all things exist as inseparable and contradictory opposites, for example, female/male, dark/light and old/young.

In fact, *yin* and *yang* is so important that it is the central symbol in the South Korean national flag. The *yin* (which represents female, north, moon and water) and *yang* (male, light, south, sun and fire) symbolize the things in nature and philosophy that are equal and independent and in tension with each other, yet are also dependent on each other. They represent the interconnectedness of all things; two opposing aspects working together to sustain life.

It is the same for genders. In this traditional cultural understanding, union of female with female or male with male or any pairing other than male/female has not been accepted and is considered taboo as it breaks the balance. This is not to say that, historically, no individuals of LGBTQ orientation existed; however, they were rendered invisible by a disapproving society, so that other-than-heteronormative and cisgendered people were seldom acknowledged.

Adding to the taboo was the influence on Asia of 19th-century Christian missionaries from Europe and the United States, and the resulting spread of the faith by Korean church leaders. The church reinforced the notion that homosexuality was counter to the natural order and against God's law.

Starting in the late 20th century, however, Western media's influence brought increasing awareness of and support for LGBTQ individuals in Korea and in Korean communities across the globe. It is still not a topic easily and openly addressed, but the Korean government is under more pressure than ever before to establish official recognition and protections for LGBTQ people.

For Christians of Korean descent in North America and Europe, more open conversation about LGBTQ inclusion is hindered by two major facets: the deeply ingrained cultural understanding of *yin/yang* and an orthodox biblical and theological orientation. This is not to say that Korean-

American United Methodists totally reject LGBTQ individuals and their presence and experiences. When asked, many Koreans would say that LGBTQ are welcome in their churches. What everyone in our faith communities needs are opportunities for deep, culturally relevant conversations built on strong biblical and theological foundations.

*Written by **the Rev. Grace Pak**, a United Methodist clergywoman in the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference and director of cross-racial/cross-cultural leadership for the General Commission on Religion and Race.*

This intercultural primer is not offered as a blanket statement about or definition of a particular group but rather to provide insight into the broad cultural realities and nuances of belief found within non-dominant communities.

SERMON STARTER: THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Prepared by Bishop Hee-Soo Jung

Two longtime friends, the Rev. Kil Jae Park, a United Methodist pastor in Teaneck, N.J., and the Rev. Kevin Park, a Presbyterian professor and pastor from Atlanta, discuss the topic of LGBTQ inclusion/exclusion and its impact on the church. Both men share an evolving understanding that has moved them from thinking about LGBTQ as a theological *issue* to a pastoral-care challenge that moves them to evaluate the role of Christian *relationships*.

Both men were raised in socially and theologically conservative environments where human sexuality was difficult to discuss. For many Korean-Americans, these topics are still difficult to discuss. Settings where people adhere strictly to a straightforward reading of Scripture offer little openness for discussion. Movement from a rejection of LGBTQ people to acceptance or inclusion requires significant shifts in the way Christians think and act.

First, it is essential that we begin by meeting where they are. An LGBTQ person is much more than a category or label. Flesh and blood incarnate is an abstract concept. In Matthew 22:37-39 (NRSV) Jesus instructs followers “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it reads, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” He charged believers to care for others as though they are our father, mother, child or sibling. Relationships have power to change us.

Second, God’s grace is relentless. God loves creation, and we know love because God knows and loves us. Principles and stating our beliefs do not give us permission to be cruel or judgmental. For too long, Christians have erred to the side of judgment rather than grace.

Third, humility dictates that we must respect others and not reduce everything to right and wrong. We must listen to others with a commitment to understand them, not to make assumptions. While some may not want to discuss potentially divisive topics, others hunger to think together, wrestle with difficult ideas and move beyond either/or thinking. Many laity avoid talking about sexuality at all because they live in a culture of shame. Most who hold strong beliefs one way or another still do not want their denominations to split over disagreements about sexual orientation and gender identity. Many laypeople are very sad that the church is

not a safe place to address these thoughts and feelings.

Fourth, God's church has room for all people. No human being is perfect. "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23-24, NRSV).

We will never grow together if we continue to avoid talking about the things that matter most deeply to us. And the church holds a unique position to provide a "grace margin" for mutuality in diversity, for unity beyond our differences and for an environment defined by respect, civility, compassion, the Love of God and justice for all.

***Bishop Hee-Soo Jung**, elected to the episcopacy in 2004, oversees the ministries of the Wisconsin Area of The United Methodist Church.*

03

INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY AND OPPRESSION IN THE CHURCH

Campus ministers on reaching young adults and limitations of the institutional church

The Rev. Annanda Barclay and the Rev. Debbie Dow Weatherspoon

SESSION 3

PREPARATION

Select a room or location conducive to group reflection and conversation and with internet access so that you may show and project the video. Be sure to do a run-through to make sure the internet and computer equipment work properly. If the group meets regularly, you may offer everyone the opportunity to preview the video at home prior to coming to the discussion group.

Preview the video and read through the discussion guide. Also, read the sermon ideas and the intercultural competency primer, making notes for possible discussion. It would be interesting to see the ways in which participants' thoughts mirror or differ from the writers of the sermon helps and primer. Review the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality (see page 20) with the group, or to draft one of your own or invite the group to create one.

Gather the following materials:

- At least two translations of the Bible for reading the Scriptures
- Blue painter's tape
- White poster board or cardstock paper, 9 x 12 inches
- Markers (assorted colors)

THE DISCUSSION SESSION**GET STARTED (10-15 MINUTES)**

Welcome everyone to the session. If this is not an ongoing group meeting, invite people (in one or two minutes) to share their first names and what draws them to participate in this "Vital Conversations" group. Explain why you have accepted the role of facilitator and your visions for the time together.

If this group meets regularly and new people are present, make them feel welcome. Review why you accepted the role of facilitator and invite them to say their first names and tell briefly what drew them to the conversation. Ask everyone else to introduce themselves. Ask for two volunteers to say why they are in the "Vital Conversations" group.

If necessary, take care of routine matters (location of restrooms, general time frame for the session). Remind the group of its commitment to the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality (page 20).

Opening Prayer (use prayer below or invite a volunteer to pray)

God, we come together to strengthen our resolve to be your witnesses in the world. We come with ears open to hear and hearts ready to learn. We acknowledge that we may not be prepared for all that we might hear and may not easily accept all that is placed before us. But we are here. We are here for brothers and sisters we are yet to meet. We are here for family members whom we deeply love. We are here for ourselves, seeking wisdom, if not understanding. We are your children, God, and we ask you for your guidance. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

VIEW THE VIDEO (10 MINUTES)

Conversation between the Rev. Annanda Barclay and the Rev. Debbie Dow Weatherspoon.

FIRST, WE MUST LISTEN (5 MINUTES)

Engage in a time of reflection and discernment. Ask participants to answer three or more of the following questions (may want to make written notes):

- What was emotional?
- What was exciting?
- What was the struggle?
- What was the pain?
- What was the breakthrough?

REFLECT (15 MINUTES)

Gather in groups of three or four and ask participants to discuss their answers to the questions and their responses to the video. Ask a volunteer from each group to answer one of the questions. Continue calling on each group until, ideally, a response to each question has been offered.

EXAMINE AND RESPOND (20 MINUTES)

Read aloud these words and phrases from the video; some may have been shared earlier. Ask participants to remain in their small groups to reflect on these phrases. If possible, assign one or two words/phrases per group.

Ask the group to consider where they may have heard the words or phrases before, and to consider how they can apply and discuss them in the context of their faith journeys.

- “We have no room for them (people/students who are LGBTQ) in the church.”
- “We need more than a shift on paper (in words); we require a relationship.”
- “Confession: I am not worried about words; show me the transformation.”
- “Love your neighbor is second; the first is to know yourself and own your stuff.”
- “We have multiple identities (ones we are given and ones we have given ourselves).”
- “How exhausting this work is! Self-care is crucial.”
- “True love is always worth it.”

HEAR THE SCRIPTURES (10 MINUTES)

Ask volunteers to read aloud the Scriptures below; encourage use of different Bible translations.

- Matthew 5:21-26
- Mark 7:24-30
- Galatians 3:26-28

Ask for “popcorn” sharing (participants voluntarily “pop” out of their seats and to offer a new revelation inspired by the Scriptures, especially in light of the conversation between the Rev. Annanda Barclay and the Rev. Debbie Dow Weatherspoon.

MAKE A PORTRAIT (15 MINUTES)

Restate the phrases:

- “We have a multiple identities (ones we are given and ones we have given ourselves).”
- “How exhausting this work is! Self-care is crucial.”

Ask participants to use paper and markers and to draw a self-portrait. The “portrait” may actually be a collection of words, phrases, skills, hobbies and interests that brings a picture of their multiple identities. Ask them to highlight (adding an asterisk or underline) those “identities” that are given to them by society, family, vocation or relationship.

Create a frame for the portrait with examples of self-care. These could be the names of people who support them, their churches or support group, favorite vacation locations, a garden, a pet or a retreat center.

Ask for two or three volunteers to share their portraits. If time permits, tape the portraits on the walls and allow time for participants to walk through silently and view the portraits. No comments are necessary; just enjoy these gifts of clarity and honesty.

(OPTIONAL) HEAR FROM THE PASTOR (5 MINUTES)

Share a quote or insight from the sermon ideas prepared by the Rev. Robina Winbush in relation to the video conversation. (Examples follow. Feel free to make your own selections.)

Writing to the church at Galatia, Paul addresses the question of the relationship of the “law” and “faith.” It is a question of what justifies us before God and how this defines our relationship with one another. Paul writes to the early church that was wrestling with the relationship between Christians who came to faith in Jesus out of the teaching and tradition of the Jewish faith and people who came to faith in Jesus from outside of the Jewish tradition.

Galatians 3:26-28 speaks to a radical transformation in identity and relationship. We are no longer defined by our human location, but by our identity as being clothed in Christ, which is also the identity that unifies us with other Christians.

CLOSING: FEET ON THE GROUND (5 MINUTES)

Sit or stand in a circle, as participants are able. Ask all group members to lift one foot from the ground (holding for a count of 30 to 60 seconds). Then ask them to put both feet back on the floor. Explain that in order for love to be shown amid disagreements, challenges, heartaches and frustrations, we must be willing to have our feet on the ground. Ask them to look attentively at another’s feet. Ask everyone to engage in silent prayer for themselves and each other, praying that we all can keep our feet on the ground to support true love in our world.

Share a closing prayer or affirmation (use the one given here or invite a volunteer to pray).

God, we thank you for the opportunity to speak with each other. Help us in our desire to know and do your will. Help us to put our shoulders to the wheel and do everything with a heart full of love. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

GENERATIONAL VIEWS OF SEXUALITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY OF RACE, ORIENTATION AND IDENTITY

An Intercultural Competency Primer

While U.S. and international Catholic and Protestant church lawmakers still grapple with the appropriate status, role, rights and “holiness” of LGBTQ persons among their ranks, the number of U.S. adults identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender increased to 10 million, nearly 1.75 million more than in 2012, according to the Gallup organization.

Millennials (defined for the poll as those born between 1982 and 2004) drive virtually all of the increases observed in overall LGBTQ self-identification. The portion of that generation identifying as LGBTQ increased from 5.8 percent in 2012 to 7.3 percent currently. LGBTQ identification among Generation X remained relatively stable over the five-year period at 3.2 percent, while declining slightly (from 2.7 percent to 2.4 percent) among baby boomers and from 1.8 percent to 1.4 percent among traditionalists.

Further, Gallup reported that increase was more dramatic among U.S. women, Asian-Americans and Latinx/Hispanic-Americans.

The Rev. Annanda Barclay refers to the concept of intersectionality, a theory that acknowledges that various social identities (such as race, gender, sexuality and class) contribute to the specific type of systemic oppression and discrimination experienced by an individual or group. She speaks about the Christian community’s ongoing debate over the status, roles, rights and “rightness” of members who are LGBTQ. Further, she acknowledges the complexity of her experience as an African-American woman who is a lesbian and who is in ministry among white Christian congregations, campus ministries and Presbyterian judicatories.

Both Barclay and her colleague, the Rev. Debbie Dow Weatherspoon, say the millennials they serve, as a whole, generally accept people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex or “gender fluid.” And, they add, their students are also more likely as a group to eschew institutions that draw a hard line against full participation of any person based on their identity.

With young people's increasing acceptance, even among Christians, of LGBTQ individuals and premarital sexual relationships, how can the church best connect with, engage and provide authentic teaching and arenas for discussion with these and other young adults?

Compiled from various sources. This intercultural primer is not offered as a blanket statement about or definition of a particular group but rather to provide some insight into the broad cultural practices and nuances of belief found within non-dominant communities.

SERMON STARTER: A QUESTION OF THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

Prepared by the Rev. Robina M. Winbush

“True love is always worth it.” (The Rev. Annanda Barclay)

As co-leaders of a campus ministry, the Rev. Debbie Dow Weatherspoon and the Rev. Annanda Barclay worked with college students who often lamented the Christian church, in general, did not welcome them in the wholeness of their lives because of differences of their gender identities and sexual orientations. The clergywomen raise critical issues around inclusion, accommodation/transformation and confession/reparations.

The following is a three-part Bible study/sermon outline that may be used in three parts or as part of one sermon or study.

Mark 7:24-30: From Exclusion to Inclusion

The Syrophenician woman’s encounter with Jesus in the streets of Tyre is pivotal in the trajectory of Jesus’ ministry. When the Syrophenician woman comes to Jesus begging for healing for her daughter, who is quite ill, Jesus gives the shocking response, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” He further justifies his response that he was sent only to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Not easily deterred, the woman responds, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” At this point, Jesus grants the woman’s request, and he moves from an exclusive calling to an inclusive assignment.

In what ways might people (particularly young adults) who are sexual minorities (or LGBTQ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning or intersex) feel that the church treats them as less than human and less than worthy?

Is the church intended to be an exclusive community? How does the church justify this idea biblically and theologically? Is such exclusion consistent with the teachings of Jesus? What is your vision of the church as the beloved community of Christ? How do you experience (relate with) sexual minority (LGBTQ) individuals seeking inclusion in the beloved community? What are the biblical and theological resources that might allow them inclusion in ways consistent with Jesus’ response to the Syrophenician woman?

Galatians 3:26-28: Accommodation and Transformation

Writing to the church at Galatia, Paul addresses the question of the relationship between the “law” and “faith.” It is a question of what justifies us before God and how this defines our relationships with one another. Paul writes to the early church as it wrestled to define the appropriate relationship between Christians who came to faith in Jesus from the teaching and traditions of the Jewish faith and people who came to faith in Jesus who had been outside of the Jewish tradition.

Galatians 3:26-28 speaks to a radical transformation in identity and relationship. We are no longer defined by our human locations but, rather, by our identity as being clothed in Christ, which is also the identity that unifies us with other Christians.

What does your baptism mean to you? How do you understand your baptism in relationship to other Christians?

Does your baptism eliminate the particularities of your life and social location? How do you bring the richness of your life into relationship with the richness of the particularities of other Christians’ lives?

In what ways are people expected to accommodate dominant expressions and identities within the community of faith? How might this diminish possibilities for a transformed community?

Discuss ways the community of faith in which you participate has been transformed by your life experiences. Discuss ways in which you have been transformed by the life experiences of others in your community of faith. How has Christ been revealed in these transformative experiences?

Matthew 5:21-26: Confessions and Reparations

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches a series of lessons on both the relationship between humans and God and the relationship among humans.

In this portion of the sermon, Jesus speaks directly about anger and woundedness in human community. This particular passage discusses how broken relationships among humans affect our relationship with God. And the responsibility for correcting a broken relationship is placed upon the offending party. This is not an optional request. It is a divine mandate.

In what ways has the church wounded LGBTQ individuals? In what ways has the church negatively affected our own relationships, individually and collectively, with God?

How does the church participate in the healing of the wounds within the LGBTQ community?
What might reparations look like between the church and the LGBTQ community?

What impact might this have on the whole community? How does this change the church's relationship with God?

***The late Rev. Robina M. Winbush** of Louisville, Ky. was associate stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (USA). She died suddenly in March 2019, shortly before this study guide was published.*

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INDIGENOUS IDENTITY AND INCLUSIVENESS

Maskoke and Lumbee Christians explore aspects of inclusive community*

Marcus Briggs-Cloud and Dr. Brenda Dial Deese

INTERESTING NOTE TO SHARE

Brenda and Marcus are from two different indigenous/tribal communities. They came to know each other after Brenda's daughter, Beth, and Marcus started corresponding. Through genetic research, they soon discovered that they share a common indigenous ancestor, making Brenda and Marcus relatives.

**Maskoke is a more phonetically correct spelling of the tribe that is often spelled "Muskogee" or "Muscogee."*

PREPARATION

Select a room or location conducive to group reflection and conversation, and one that has internet access so you may show and project the video. Be sure to do a run-through to make sure the internet and computer equipment work properly. If this is a group that meets regularly, you may offer everyone the opportunity to preview the video at home prior to coming to the discussion group.

Preview the video and read through the discussion guide, including sermon ideas and intercultural competence primer. It would be interesting to see the ways in which participants' thoughts mirror or differ from the those of the resource writers. Review the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality (page 20) for the discussion group. Feel free to draft one of your own or invite the group to create one.

Gather the following materials:

- At least two translations of the Bible for reading the Scriptures
- Music from YouTube: Wynonna Judd's "Testify to Love," Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water" or the hymn "Blessed Assurance," UMH No. 369. You may choose other songs.

THE DISCUSSION SESSION**GET STARTED (10-15 MINUTES)**

Welcome everyone to the session. If this is not an ongoing group meeting, invite people (in one or two minutes) to share their first name and what draws them to

participate in this “Vital Conversations” group. Explain why you have accepted the role of facilitator and your visions for the time together.

If this group meets regularly, and new people are present, make them feel welcome. Explain why you have accepted the role of facilitator and invite them to say their first names and share briefly what drew them to the conversation. Ask everyone else to introduce themselves. Ask for two volunteers to say why they are in the “Vital Conversations” group.

If necessary, take care of housekeeping matters (location of restrooms, general time frame for the session). Remind the group of its commitment to the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality (page 20).

Opening Prayer (use prayer below or invite a volunteer to pray)

God, we come together to strengthen our resolve to be your witness in the world. We come with ears open to hear and hearts ready to learn. We acknowledge that we may not be prepared for all that we might hear and may not easily accept all that is placed before us. But we are here. We are here for brothers and sisters we are yet to meet. We are here for family members whom we deeply love. We are here for ourselves, seeking wisdom if not understanding. We are your children, God, and we ask for your guidance. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

VIEW THE VIDEO (10 MINUTES)

Conversation between Dr. Brenda Dial Deese and Marcus Briggs-Cloud

FIRST, WE MUST LISTEN (5 MINUTES)

Invite the group into a period of reflection and discernment. Invite participants individually to respond to three or more of the following questions (may want to make written notes):

- What was similar to your life experiences?
- What was new?
- Which concepts can you easily embrace?
- Where did you see struggle for the participants? For yourself?
- What was the pain?
- What was the breakthrough?

GATHER AND SHARE (20 MINUTES)

Ask participants to gather in groups of two or three to talk about their answers to the questions. Allow time for each group to share their answers to three of the questions above. Ask the group to choose a spokesperson (preferably a different person for each question).

Use the round-robin approach. Ask a group to name ONE question that was part of their discussion and for a person to share their reflections. Move to the next group and repeat. Once each group has shared, reverse the order. Ask the last group to report to identify their second question and share what was discussed. For the third question, begin in the middle and alternate right, then left, until each group has reported.

Note: If you have only three groups, for example, begin with one group for the first question, then move to the next group for the second question and so on. This helps to ensure that each group has one opportunity to share first. Remind the groups to choose only one question to share. If you hear a reporter say “and we also...,” interrupt the speaker and say, “We will come back to your group so that you can report on that later.”

AND WE ALSO HEARD (10 MINUTES)

Look at the phrases below. If any were not raised in the earlier discussion, pose them to the group and ask, “What does this mean to you?”

- Dial Deese: We are a collectivistic society; we are created from the image of God; we always accepted people, other tribes. One of most ancient values is that there are people who carry wisdom and the spirit of our Lord and Savior. We look to those people for leadership; it is about influence.
- Briggs-Cloud: My position derives from a decolonization paradigm; I want regularly to interrogate how we live our lives; we have documentation of indigenous peoples on this continent as having embraced LGBTQ.
- Dial Deese: Anyone who walks on this earth has gifts. Our purpose is to share gifts; what is your accountability when you are talking about sexuality?
- Briggs-Cloud: Those who stand in the middle have special value attributed to these individuals – can see different perspectives; some were medicine practitioners, could heal people; their role was greatly valued.
- Dial Deese: We are inclusive; we love you even though someone is doing something about which we disagree.
- Briggs-Cloud: Why did indigenous people convert on their own terms to Christianity? They were drawn to Jesus as a healer. Being healers, we want to hear their words, their wisdom and their spiritual perspectives from the pulpit.

HEAR THE SCRIPTURES (10 MINUTES)

Ask volunteers to read aloud the Scriptures below; use different Bible translations.

- Genesis 1:26-27
- Exodus 3:1-6
- Deuteronomy 10:19
- Galatians 3:23-28

Ask for popcorn sharing of the takeaways from those Scriptures as participants think about the conversation between Dr. Brenda Dial Deese and Marcus Briggs-Cloud.

CELEBRATE OUR GIFTS (15 MINUTES)

Brenda Dial Deese said, “Anyone who walks on this earth has gifts; our purpose is to share gifts.” Ask everyone to take a moment to think about themselves, identify some of their gifts and choose one to share with the group.

Next, ask everyone to think of someone who they know or about whom they have heard who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or other. Invite volunteers (it does not have to be everyone) to say that person’s name (first name only) and share one or two of their gifts using this phrase: **“Today, I celebrate _____ (first name) whose gift(s) to me or to the world are _____ and _____.”**

Example: *I celebrate my friend Bruce whose gifts to me are his teaching my grandson about animals of the planet. Without prompting, my grandson began calling him “Uncle Bruce;” his partner is called “Mr. John.”*

(OPTIONAL) HEAR FROM THE PASTOR (5 MINUTES)

Share a quote or insight from the sermon helps that were prepared by the Rev. Mattheue B. Locklear in relation to the video conversation (examples follow the Scripture – feel free to make your own selection).

PART OF THE FAMILY OF GOD

“Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’”

– Mark 3:31-35, NRSV

Indian communities always honor our elders, veterans and healers. Common themes found in most Indian tribes include the four directions, the dance circle and the drum – the rhythm of our people. Powwows are a display of the unique cultures each Indian tribe brings. Just as I cannot name a single color, pattern, dance, style of music or food as purely and exclusively Native American, I cannot say one theology is pure and exclusive Native American theology. This is a Native American’s response, and in no way can I speak for the thousands of Native American tribes in the United States.

In this passage from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is inside a house teaching the disciples and caring for a multitude of people when his brothers and his mother call him from outside. The Gospel suggests that his family doesn't believe he is the Messiah and they want him to come outside, so he can go home with his family.

Jesus replies that he has a new family, a family of faith, one that Jesus called and who believes he is the Messiah. One with whom he wants to be in ministry. Jesus has redefined his family. It is the people inside the house – those 12 disciples and the crowds who believe the wondrous signs Jesus has done.

CLOSING: SHALL WE DANCE? (10 MINUTES)

Ask everyone to stand or sit in a circle. Some may want to form pairs or groups of three or four dancers. Remind or tell the group about the dance circle that is key to many Indian tribes. Remind the group that there was always a place for everyone – including what some people may regard as the “other,” according to Marcus Briggs-Cloud.

Play the song “Testify to Love,” by Wynonna Judd (available on YouTube). Or choose another song such as Simon and Garfunkel’s “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” or invite the group to sing a hymn such as “Blessed Assurance,” No. 369 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*.

Let the music begin and invite everyone to sway or dance before God in celebration of unity and new beginnings.

After the song ends, give a closing prayer or affirmation. Use the one here or invite a volunteer to pray.

God, we thank you for the opportunity to dance with each other. Guide our footsteps as we seek to know and do your will. Help us to accept each other as you have accepted us. Lead us on the way forward. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

THE HISTORY OF ‘TWO-SPIRIT’ PEOPLE IN NATIVE AMERICAN HERITAGE

An Intercultural Competency Primer

In the 18th and 19th centuries, non-Native, non-indigenous anthropologists observed and wrote about people in Native tribes commonly known to embody the gender identity (and sometimes sexual orientation) and roles that defied heterosexual and cisgender norms. Different tribes called these people by different names — from “jewels” to “more than male or female.”

Another term was “two spirit,” which has gained increasing recognition and use among indigenous people in North America after a 1990 meeting of men, women and transgender people from various tribes in Winnipeg, Canada, in which participants sought to create a term to unite the LGBTQ Native community. However, “two spirit” does not simply mean someone who is a Native American/Alaska Native and gay.

According to the Bureau of Indian Affairs website, two-spirit people historically were male, female and sometimes intersexed individuals who combined activities of both men and women with traits unique to their status as two spirit.

In tribes where two-spirit males and females were referred to with the same term, this status amounted to a third gender. In other communities, two-spirit females were referred to with a distinct term and, therefore, constituted a fourth gender.

Despite important variations in two-spirit roles, the bureau website asserts, they shared some common traits including traditional arts (weaving, pottery making and leather works), healing, hunting and warfare. For example, among the Navajo, the bureau reports, two-spirit males often became weavers, usually women and men’s work, as well as healers, which was a male role. Two-spirit females engaged in activities such as hunting and warfare, and became leaders in war and even chiefs.

Two-spirit identity was widely believed to be the result of supernatural intervention in the form of visions or dreams and sanctioned by tribal mythology. In many tribes, two-spirit people filled special religious roles as healers, shamans and ceremonial leaders.

Two-spirit people typically formed sexual and emotional relationships with non-two spirit members of their own sex, forming both short- and long-term relationships. Among the Lakota, Mohave, Crow, Cheyenne and others, two-spirit people were believed to be lucky in love and able to bestow this luck on others.

The disruptions caused by conquest and disease, together with the efforts of white Christian missionaries, government agents, boarding schools and white settlers, resulted in the loss of many traditions in Native communities. Two-spirit roles, in particular, were singled out for condemnation, interference and, many times, violence by church and school leaders.

Today, the understanding of and affirmation for two-spirit people varies among Native American tribal groups, religious groups, individuals and families. And many communities that embrace missionary-formed Christianity may disavow LGBTQ and/or two-spirit people on biblical and theological grounds. Still, more than 24 U.S. Native American tribes recognize same-sex marriage, including Arapaho, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Confederate Tribes of Siletz, Oneida, Puyallup and Salt River Pima-Maricopa.

National gatherings of two-spirit people have been held since the early 1990s, and regional gatherings are held in many parts of the United States.

Compiled from various sources. This intercultural primer is not offered as a blanket statement about or definition of a particular group but rather to provide some insight into the broad cultural expression and nuances of belief found within non-dominant communities.

SERMON STARTER: BEING PART OF THE FAMILY OF GOD

Prepared by the Rev. Mattheue B. Locklear

Part of the Family of God

“Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’” (Mark 3:31-35, *NRSV*)

I love going to powwows! Networking and meeting Native people from all over the country is life-giving to me. My Native family is big, culturally diverse and full of pride. At the powwows, I love to watch the dancers’ beautiful regalia. Each dancer creates in themselves the intricate designs, bead work and fabulous colors. All have a story to tell. It is a living tapestry of life.

I marvel at the different dancing styles and various songs sung by each “drum” group. One can always tell the northern tribes, with their high-pitched songs, from the southern singers’ beautiful baritone songs. Powwows are a sharing of a tribe’s culture and language. I listen reverently as each tribe shares its different stories of oppression, survival and victory. No one has the same story to tell. That’s why they gather to tell the stories of their ancestors that have been handed down for generations. They come to dance and to eat. Anytime Indians get together, inevitably, it is all about the food. The food is sacred, too! The food must be good, or you don’t get invited back.

Indian communities always honor our elders, veterans and healers. Common themes found in most Indian tribes include the four directions, the dance circle and the drum – the rhythm of our people. Powwows are a display of the unique cultures each Indian tribe brings.

Just as I cannot name a single color, pattern, dance, style of music or food as purely and exclusively Native American, I cannot say one theology is pure and exclusive Native American theology. This is ONE Native American’s response, and in no way can I speak for the thousands of Native American tribes in the United States.

Brenda is a Lumbee educator, and Marcus is a Maskoke community developer, musician and language-immersion director for Maskoke language. Both are United Methodists and represent Native American ministries in Indian communities. We are proud of the fact that most of the

Indian ministries throughout the nation are Indian-led and need-based. Long gone is the old missionary model of white people coming into Indian country trying to “save the Indians.”

Brenda and Marcus are proud of their culture and clearly articulate who they are as Christians who happen to be Native. They clearly walk in two distinctive worlds; in one, they are nurtured by their Indian community, and in the other, they are interpreters of Indian people to the greater church and community. They strive to live as Christ would have us all to live. They each work in unique Native American communities responding to the needs and call of Jesus to be in ministry among the least, the lost and the last, and although they have different views in regard to LGBTQ communities, each is committed to doing effective ministry.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is inside a house teaching the disciples and caring for a multitude of people when his brothers and his mother call him from outside. The Gospel suggests that his family doesn’t believe he is the Messiah and they want him to come outside, so he can go home with his family.

Jesus replies that he has a new family, a family of faith, one that Jesus called and who believes he is the Messiah. One with whom he wants to be in ministry. Jesus redefines his family. It is the people inside the house – those 12 disciples and the crowds who believe the wondrous signs he has done.

Brenda and Marcus are in the house with Jesus. Although they don’t agree completely on the place for LGBTQ community in the church, they acknowledge that they are an important part of our fabric of indigenous peoples’ lives. Their work is different, serving in different parts of the U.S. with Indian communities. It reflects the colorful tapestry that is ingenious people of North America. But their work is the same: Both are United Methodists serving Jesus Christ. They both are part of the family of God.

What is the role of LGBTQ individuals in the church? Are they standing outside calling out to Jesus or has Jesus indeed called them to his house? This is where we are as a church and as a denomination. As we face the upcoming called General Conference, let us keep in mind the Native American communities all around us that represent a diverse group of people.

As indigenous people, we struggle each day with our own sense of identity, place and work in the church. What motivates us to remain in the church is a love of God and his son, Jesus Christ, and a desire to see all people find their place in Gods’ house.

Further Notes on Native American Ministries

Indian communities are everywhere in the United States. Every state and annual conference has within its borders Indian communities that are either state or federally recognized by the

Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs. Each state should have an Indian commission that names each Indian community within its borders.

Each United Methodist annual conference should have a committee on Native American/ indigenous ministries. Local congregations should do all they can to name and work with the indigenous people who live in their community!

Second, there is no one theology to which all indigenous people ascribe!

Questions for Discussion

- Why is it important for indigenous people to be in ministry with their own tribe and community?
- Is it still important for white people to come into Indian communities and be in ministry? Why or why not?
- What are some of the common cultural experiences that you have experienced from your culture?
- How have you valued diversity in your cultural context?
- Who is outside and who is inside?

***The Rev. Mattheue B. Locklear** is pastor of First United Methodist Church in Pembroke, N.C., and a member of the North Carolina Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church.*

INTERFAITH BRIDGE-BUILDING

Two men form unlikely friendship after Pulse nightclub shooting

Phil Cobucci and Paul Galloway

PREPARATION

Suggest in advance that group members read about the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting, to which the speakers refer. Synopsis at www.britannica.com/event/Orlando-shooting-of-2016.

For the study, select a room or space that allows opportunity for reflection and conversation. Choose a room with internet access so that you may show and project the video. Do a run-through ahead of time to ensure the internet and computer equipment work properly. If this is a group that meets regularly, you may offer participants the opportunity to preview the video at home prior to coming to the discussion group.

Preview the video and read through the discussion guide. Also, read the sermon ideas and intercultural competency primer for this session. It will be interesting to see the ways in which participants' thoughts mirror or differ from the resource writers. Review the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality (page 20). You may use this, draft one of your own or invite the group to create one.

Gather the following materials:

- At least two translations of the Bible for reading the Scriptures
- 4 x 6-inch index cards (at least two for each participant)
- Blue painter's tape
- One-minute timer (or use a stopwatch app on your cellphone or tablet)
- Red construction paper
- Scissors
- Markers (blue, black, purple, brown)
- Candle (8" taper) and matches or a lighter, or an electric candle

THE DISCUSSION SESSION

GET STARTED (10-15 MINUTES)

Welcome everyone to the session and invite people (in one or two minutes) to share their first names and what draws them to participate in this “Vital Conversations” group. Share why you have accepted the role of facilitator and your visions for the time together.

Review the schedule, location of restrooms, child care options (if applicable) with your group. Review the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality (page 20). Invite the group to review and adopt it or to adapt it for their work together. You could also invite the group to create its own.

Opening: Prayer (use prayer below or invite a volunteer to pray)

God, we come together to strengthen our resolve to be your witness in the world. We come with ears open to hear and hearts ready to learn. We acknowledge that we may not be prepared for all that we might hear and may not easily accept all that is placed before us. But we are here. We are here for those we are yet to meet. We are here for family members whom we deeply love. We are here for ourselves, seeking wisdom, if not understanding. We are your children, God, and we ask you for your guidance. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

VIEW THE VIDEO (10 MINUTES)

Conversation between Phil Cobucci and Paul Galloway

FIRST, WE MUST LISTEN (5 MINUTES)

Observe a period of reflection and discernment. Invite participants individually to respond to three or more of the following questions (may make written notes):

- What was emotional?
- What was exciting?
- What was the struggle?
- What was the pain?
- What was the breakthrough?

GATHER AND SHARE (10 MINUTES)

Next, ask participants to gather in groups of two or three to talk about their answers to the questions.

HERE'S WHAT I HEARD (15 MINUTES)

Give each participant two index cards. Ask them to write down phrases and thoughts that remain with them from the video. Invite three or four volunteers to read their phrases aloud and then tape their cards on a wall, under a sign that reads, "And this is what I heard." After several have spoken, ask everyone to tape their cards on the wall.

Then ask participants to go to the wall and silently read what has been shared. Once everyone has returned to her or his seat, add to the discussion by sharing phrases from the video (if not posted) such as:

- *We feel pressure to speak about things for which we are not responsible.*
- *Make a small gesture to be involved.*
- *Stand up for people's value; speak for human dignity.*
- *The burden, the heavy weight is on LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning) people.*
- *Faith should honor life; share messages of hope; remember the God of your understanding.*
- *Kindness is the new cool.*
- *We must create a new, safer space for everyone.*

Ask two or three volunteers to disclose what stands out for them or what action they might take as a result of this conversation.

THIS IS MY STORY (10 MINUTES)

Invite participants to reflect on their memories of the Pulse nightclub shooting or another act of hatred toward a person or persons because of their sexuality or identity. Or ask participants to share an act of justice and solidarity they have witnessed or in which they have participated. Allow time for people to gather their thoughts and make notes. Invite two or three to give a "one-minute witness" about their experiences. Note: Set time limits for speakers in advance to allow the maximum number of people to contribute to the discussion.

To prompt conversation, share this example: *I was in fourth grade when I first observed an act of hatred toward someone. His name was Ronald, and the kids teased him relentlessly. They called him a "sissy." He acted very feminine. One day, he came to school with polish on his fingernails. I felt sorry for him. I wondered why he was the way he was. Looking back, I felt there was nothing or no one in our small town for him to emulate. This was way before television and the internet. I wonder what happened to him. I can still see his tears.*

HEAR THE SCRIPTURES (10 MINUTES)

Ask volunteers to read aloud the Scriptures below; encourage use of different Bible translations.

- Leviticus 19:18 and 34
- Matthew 22:37-39
- Luke 6:31
- Luke 10:25-37
- Colossians 3:11

Invite popcorn sharing of the takeaways from those Scriptures as participants think about the conversation between Phil Cobucci and Paul Galloway.

HEART TO HEART (10 MINUTES)

Give each participant a sheet of construction paper and a pair of scissors. Instruct them each to cut out a large heart. On that heart, have them write down a concern, a challenge, an affirmation or a person's name that has come to mind because of the group discussion.

Once everyone has finished, ask the group to gather in a circle. First, encourage everyone – as able – to make loving eye contact (in silence) with as many people in the group as possible. Second, remind the group of their covenant of care and confidentiality and that this exercise asks them to “hold the hearts” of others in their prayers during the week.

Ask for volunteers to give their hearts to someone else. The person receiving the heart should respond with a caring phrase such as “I receive your heart with love and care.” They should take that heart and fold it in half. Ask the rest of the group to exchange their hearts. By the end, everyone should have the folded heart of another person in the group.

Finally, ask participants to hold up their hearts to the sky/ceiling and simply say (repeating after you), “Lord, these are our dreams, our prayers, our concerns, our loved ones. We lift our hearts to you. Amen.”

Encourage the group to lift up their hearts to God throughout the week that prayers may be answered, understanding given and support received.

(OPTIONAL) HEAR FROM THE PASTOR (5 MINUTES)

Share a quote or insight from the sermon helps that were prepared by the Rev. Glenn Catley and the Rev. Dr. Larry Pickens (see pp. 70-73) in relation to the video conversation (examples below – feel free to make your own selection).

The Rev. Glenn Catley writes:

[An] example is Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10:25-37, where the hero of the story is a Samaritan, which came as a shock to those listening. But notice the setting for this parable, as an expert in the law asks Jesus a question that may have been intended to trap him. Rather than treat him as an adversary, Jesus has a conversation showing respect, asking questions to discover what the lawyer thinks, not to embarrass him. Can we learn from Jesus to do the same?

The Rev. Dr. Larry Dr. Pickens writes:

All people are made in the image of God. Respect for the human dignity and the worth of every person regardless of age, abilities, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, nationality, race and religion is foundational to our faith. Our faith compels us to ensure that human life, physical security and personal safety are upheld in law and institutions.

CLOSING: HAND TO HAND (5 MINUTES)

Ask everyone to sit in a circle. Light the candle.

Share the phrase: "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness."

Ask everyone as they are able to extend (if able) both hands toward the center of the circle. Next, if comfortable, ask them to place their hands "palm to palm" with people on either side of them in the circle.

With participants holding that position, thank everyone for coming and sharing. Reemphasize that the goal of each session is twofold: to hear and have a conversation without necessarily choosing one side or the other and to increase the opportunity for love amid disagreement. Remind the group about observing confidentiality.

Share a closing prayer or affirmation (use the one given here or have a volunteer pray).

God, we thank you for the opportunity to speak with each other. Help us in our desire to know and do your will. Help us to accept each other as you have accepted us. Lead us on the way forward. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

MUSLIM BELIEFS ON SEXUALITY

An Intercultural Competency Primer

As with Christians and Jews, Muslims around the world hold widely divergent views on sexuality, gender identity, sexual orientation, marriage and LGBTQ acceptance. Writing for whyislam.org, Pakistani Muslim theologian Abdul Ghafoor explains that Islam affirms sexual desire and physically intimate contact as God-given means for married couples “to satisfy each other’s sexual drives without promiscuity,” and helps create a “foundational family unit for raising children and perpetuating the human race.”

Alternately, Ghafoor explains, traditional Islam (as with traditional Christianity) holds that premarital and extramarital sex, pornography, prostitution, pedophilia and all other avenues of sexual expression are considered deviations. In the United States, the beliefs of Muslims about sexuality generally mirror those of the general population.

In fact, a 2017 report by the Pew Research Center found that American Muslims are more accepting of homosexuality than self-described white, evangelical Christians. According to the study, 52 percent of U.S. Muslims said homosexuality should be accepted by society – an increase of 25 percent since 2007. Comparatively, only 34 percent of white evangelical Protestants said they believed homosexuality should be accepted, the smallest percentage of any group surveyed.

Again, internationally the views on LGBTQ individuals are widely diverse among Muslims and other people of faith.

Compiled from various sources, including <http://whyislam.org>. This intercultural primer is not offered as a blanket statement about or definition of a particular group but rather to provide some insight in the cultural sources and nuances of belief found within non-dominant communities.

AFFINITY GROUPS AND NIGHTCLUBS SEEN AS SAFE, SPIRITUAL HOMES FOR LGBTQ PEOPLE

An Intercultural Competency Primer

Among marginalized people, social and affinity groups and their gathering places become surrogate homes and safe spaces, when traditional families, houses of worship, workplaces and other social settings reject them.

For communities of color, churches, schools and colleges, social clubs, political groups and Greek organizations are traditional breeding grounds of united political action, comradery, celebration and even escape. During the Civil Rights era, for instance, African-American churches were common gathering places for everything from summer picnics for the community to planning anti-racism demonstrations.

Despite a growing acceptance of people who are LGBTQ in the United States, nightclubs catering to the community are still of vital importance, providing space for people to dance together, show affection, openly support one another, and plan equal-justice strategies.

Less than 50 years ago, a majority of global medical professionals asserted that homosexual, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer individuals were mentally ill, and labeled them as amoral cultural subversives, child molesters, predators and disease spreaders. Therefore, the social clubs that welcomed LGBTQ people often were targets of harassment and complaints from orthodox religious and government authorities.

For instance, according to writer Patrick Sisson, in the 1950s and 1960s in the United States, “Lesbians could be arrested for ‘impersonating a man’ if caught with the ‘wrong’ outfit. Cross-dressers or transgender individuals were persecuted.”

For those who support, affirm and accept LGBTQ individuals and expressions, LGBTQ-positive night clubs have been gathering places of support, acceptance and belonging.

Christians and others who earnestly believe that same-sex relationships and gender-nonconforming persons are contrary to orthodox religious teaching and God’s will for humanity might view LGBTQ-positive nightclubs as fostering behaviors and associations that are

spiritually, emotionally and physically unhealthy for patrons. When a self-described Muslim man murdered 49 patrons and staff at the Pulse Nightclub in Florida 2016, he was also attacking a space that symbolized LGBTQ pride and solidarity.

Compiled from various sources. This intercultural primer is not offered as a blanket statement about or definition of a particular group but rather to provide some insight in the cultural sources and nuances of belief found within non-dominant communities.

SERMON STARTER 1: HAVE CONVERSATIONS THAT MODEL RESPECT

Prepared by the Rev. Glenn Catley

This conversation between Paul Galloway and Phil Cobucci presents a model of respect, even though they hold different perspectives on life and faith. Is this a biblical model? How did Jesus handle conversations with those who may disagree with him? Let us examine Scripture for insights on how we can have our own respectful conversations with others.

In the Old Testament, we find multiple passages encouraging hospitality for foreigners or strangers. Leviticus 19:34a, CEB, reads, “Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt.”

Jesus quotes this passage and Leviticus 19:18 when answering the question of the greatest commandment, saying for us to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. Note that the immigrant, the stranger and those who see life differently are included as those to be loved and respected.

In Genesis, Abraham and Sarah welcome strangers and offer hospitality, not knowing that they are messengers from God. References to the respect they demonstrated are noted elsewhere in Scripture and can even be found in the New Testament: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2, NRSV)

For Jesus, we have two vivid accounts of how he approached people that others in society rejected because of their gender or their nationality. The woman at the well combines both a prohibition for a Jew to speak to a Samaritan and for a man to speak to a woman. Jesus starts a conversation, even though she questions why he would speak to her. Their conversation leads to a transformation in her life, in part because of the respect she has been shown.

Another example is Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10:25-37, where the hero of the story is a Samaritan, which came as a shock to those listening. But notice the setting for this parable, as an expert in the law asks Jesus a question that may have been intended to trap him. Rather than treat him as an adversary, Jesus has a conversation showing respect, asking

questions to discover what the lawyer thinks, not to embarrass him. Can we learn from Jesus to do the same?

Judith Glaser in her book, “Conversational Intelligence,” classifies three types of conversations: one that gathers information, one that tries to influence others and one that encourages collaboration. Jesus demonstrates how, through mutual respect, we can find ways to create community that leads to collaboration. “In this image there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all things and in all people.” (Colossians 3:11, CEB)

***The Rev. Glenn Catley** is a retired clergy member of the Peninsula-Delaware Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. He currently serves as interim pastor of Epworth United Methodist Church, Rehoboth Beach, Del., a Reconciling Ministries church, open to all people. Catley also serves on the Dover District Task Force on Racial Inclusiveness.*

SERMON STARTER 2: BIBLICAL LOVE, JUSTICE AND PEACE. A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE MARGINALIZED AND EXCLUDED

Prepared by the Rev. Dr. Larry D. Pickens

Both Phil Cobucci and Paul Galloway felt the impact of this event (Pulse nightclub shooting) on their communities. It became clear that it is challenging for groups to engage in dialogue when they are surrounded by trauma and fear.

Furthermore, the Pulse scenario included a self-described Muslim man targeting and shooting LGBTQ people in a club that welcomed this community. The absence of trust and a heightened sense of anxiety must have prevailed. In such an anxiety-ridden situation, we can find basics around which we can meet in order to build understanding. Both communities are in many ways marginalized in the U.S. context.

Scripture has a great deal to say about marginalized people, reconciliation and creating transformative community. The major question facing people of faith is how we build community when our tools are either inadequate or broken.

As people of faith, we all generally affirm the sacredness of all human life and the sanctity of creation. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. ... So God created humankind in his image.” (Genesis 1:1, 27, NRSV)

All people are made in the image of God. Respect for human dignity and the worth of every person regardless of age, abilities, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, nationality, race and religion is foundational to our faith. Our faith compels us to ensure that human life, physical security and personal safety are upheld in law and institutions.

“He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matthew 22:37-39, NRSV).

The ethical mandate “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 19:19) reflects that all are created in God’s image. Being in the image of God is a relational issue.

In community building and dialogue, the idea of *imago Dei* affirms the unbreakable interrelatedness of God, human beings and the world. Theologically, it is generally used to emphasize the essential equality, value and unbreakable relationship between human beings and between human beings and God.

When we view our sisters and brothers as existing in the image of God, it is a call to relate respectfully to all sojourners, to all people, even when they are different from ourselves. Willem Visser ’t Hooft, the first general secretary of the World Council of Churches, asserted that there is “no horizontal advance without vertical orientation.”

Our love of God should be reflected in how we engage and relate to our brothers and sisters in the human family. God’s saving action in the lives of individuals, and the interpretation of God’s grace, is centered in human relationships. Our relationship to God is ultimately a call to community and the expression of God’s love to all of humankind.

“Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31, NRSV) is a call to uphold the dignity of all people. Furthermore, the divine command, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” reminds us that the inclusive kingdom of God knows no human-made barriers, no foreigners and no “others.” It provides a place for people who are neighbors to one another, equally part of the kingdom-community, equally gifted with talents. Our relationships are reciprocal; thus, we promote love by loving the stranger, the friend and even our enemies.

In closing, the context of our national debates and the reality existing within most of our churches are too often grounded in uncertainty and fear. The United States and its people, including Christians, are rife with division, discord and fear.

Historian Jon Meacham says this about fear: “Fear feeds anxiety and produces anger; hope ... breeds optimism and feelings of well-being. Fear is about limits; hope is about growth.”

Against this backdrop, we do our work as individuals seeking Christian unity, while creating an atmosphere of hope. Hebrews 11:1, NRSV, tells us, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Community building is about taking the first step, even when you cannot see the staircase.

The Rev. Dr. Larry D. Pickens is ecumenical director of the Lehigh Conference of Churches in Allentown, Pa., and former general secretary of the United Methodist General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns. He is a member of the Northern Illinois Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church.

06

VALUES, LAW, MARRIAGE AND THE BIBLE

Longtime friends stay connected despite different points of views and no easy answers

The Rev. Dr. Joy J. Moore and Bonnie Wheeler

PREPARATION

Select a room or location to offer the opportunity for reflection and conversation, and with internet access so that you may show and project the video. Be sure to do a run-through to make sure the internet and computer equipment work properly. If this is a group that meets regularly, you may offer everyone the opportunity to preview the video at home prior to coming to the discussion group.

Preview the video and read through the discussion guide. Also, read the sermon ideas and view the video response to the conversation. You may wish to play the response portion of the video clip for the group toward the end of your gathering. It would be interesting to see the ways in which participants' thoughts mirror or differ from the response.

Review the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality (page 20), or draft one of your own or invite the group to create one.

Gather the following materials:

- At least two translations of the Bible for reading the Scriptures
- 4 x 6-inch index cards (at least two for each participant)
- Basket (for collecting the cards)
- Blue painter's tape
- Sheets of newsprint/chart paper (post on wall)
- One-minute timer (could use your cellphone)
- Markers (blue, black, purple, brown)
- Candle (battery-operated taper or wax; matches or lighter needed for latter)

THE DISCUSSION SESSION**GET STARTED (10-15 MINUTES)**

Welcome everyone to the session. If this is not an ongoing study group, invite participants to take one or two minutes to share their first name and what draws them to participate in this "Vital Conversations" group. Explain why you have accepted the role of facilitator and your visions for the time together.

If this group meets regularly and new people are present, make them feel welcome. Share why you have accepted the role of facilitator and invite them to say their first name and share what drew them to the conversation. Ask everyone else to introduce themselves. Ask for two volunteers to say why they joined this group study.

If necessary, take care of housekeeping matters (location of restrooms, general time frame for the session). Remind the group of its commitment to the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality (page 20).

Opening: Prayer (use prayer below or invite a volunteer to pray)

God, we come together to strengthen our resolve to be your witness in the world. We come with ears open to hear and hearts ready to learn. We acknowledge that we may not be prepared for all that we might hear and may not easily accept all that is placed before us. But we are here. We are here for we are yet to meet. We are here for family members whom we deeply love. We are here for ourselves, seeking wisdom, if not understanding. We are your children, God, and we ask you for your guidance. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

VIEW THE VIDEO (10 MINUTES)

Conversation between the Rev. Dr. Joy J. Moore and Bonnie Wheeler.

FIRST, WE MUST LISTEN (5 MINUTES)

Observe a period of reflection and discernment. Invite participants individually to respond to three or more of the following questions (may want to make written notes):

- What was similar to your life experiences?
- Who supported you during your college years?
- What was the struggle?
- What was the pain?
- What was the breakthrough?

GATHER AND SHARE (10 MINUTES)

Next, ask participants to gather in groups of two or three to talk about their answers to the questions.

HERE'S WHAT I HEARD (15 MINUTES)

Give each participant two index cards. Ask them to write down phrases and thoughts from the video that affected them on one of the cards. Have everyone place these cards in the basket.

Invite the group to arrange their chairs to sit in a circle with their backs to each other. (They will need a pen or pencil and their blank index card.) If this is not possible, ask group members to sit facing away from others. Once everyone is settled, explain to the group that you will pull cards randomly from the basket and read them aloud. Be sure to read the phrase clearly; you may want to read each phrase twice. Allow time for group to make notes.

Ask members to respond to make notes on their index cards in response to your reading: write three to five thoughts and concepts that resonate with them and three to five phrases with which they disagree or experience a struggle. After you have read all or several cards aloud, be sure to add any of the statements below that have not been noted from group members' cards:

- You were always there – those long-night conversations.
- Be willing to give a hearing.
- Might be different, understanding others' perspectives is key; don't get bogged down in defense, otherwise cannot hear.
- Instead of saying, "You are wrong," ask, "What makes you say that?"
- It is the "othering" of LGBTQ people that puts somebody "out"; this is my disagreement because I am all about community.
- Christianity changed the "fluid" sexual status that men had, improving the status of women who were disposable.
- Churches are human creations with flaws and sometimes deadly biases (reference the medieval Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, various isms).
- If marriage is an institution that is about God, that's the question the church needs to address.
- Against law allowing for same-sex marriage because Jesus valued the institution of marriage: What does that look like in a culture of multiple marriages or premarital sex with multiple partners?

CAN WE TALK? (10-15 MINUTES)

Ask for three volunteers to stand (if able) and read one concept or phrase from their card and ask, "Will anyone talk with me about this?" People can talk one to one or within a smaller group of two or three persons. If someone has not responded to an invitation, form a group with them and invite them to share something that stands out from their list.

After eight minutes, invite each small group to give a one-minute summary of a key learning or emotional response to their conversation.

HEAR THE SCRIPTURES (10 MINUTES)

Ask volunteers to read aloud the Scriptures below; encourage use of different Bible translations.

- Genesis 1:26-27
- Exodus 3:1-6
- Deuteronomy 10:19
- Galatians 3:23-28

Ask participants to share popcorn style their takeaway learning from the Scripture as they think about the conversation between the Rev. Dr. Joy Moore and Bonnie Wheeler.

CALL TO ACTION (10 MINUTES)

Invite group members to observe a period of discernment. Members may return to their seats, remain where they are or go to another part of the room. Ask for quiet; perhaps play music softly.

Call the group back together. Draw their attention to the newsprint on the wall (or table). Ask for volunteers to use the markers and share an action plan. Once everyone has shared, read aloud some of the commitments that have been listed.

(OPTIONAL) HEAR FROM THE PASTOR (5 MINUTES)

Share a quote or insight from the sermon helps that were prepared by the Rev. Robin Dease in relation to the video conversation. Examples are given; feel free to make your own selection.

Expanding the community: God is so other that we never fully come to know God, and even when we do, we are amazed beyond explanation (Genesis 1:26-27). Inviting dialogue often makes people suspicious and defensive. We think it is a tactic to change one's mind. However, even when we are defensive, dialogue is necessary. We can agree, disagree and remain in Christian relationship, even when we cannot always understand another's perspective. When we avoid faith-filled conversation, we place more value on our sense of moral correctness, instead of identifying the image of God in our conversation partners.

What does it say about God when you talk about same-gender love and sex? We argue about sexuality; yet, we cannot talk honestly in our churches or with our children about *any* kind of sex and desire. Pervasive silence and reticent behavior say homosexuality is a sin without in-depth exegesis or dialogue. *Otherness* means we accept the stranger, the alien and foreigner (Galatians 3:28). Identity in Christ supersedes any sexual identity or orientation. Are we just arguing church policy and not respecting the historic Scripture position which is clear? *Yes, it is better to be kind than right.*

CLOSING: PASS THE CANDLE (5 MINUTES)

Ask everyone to sit in a circle. Begin this time by sharing the phrase: “It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.” Then, turn on a battery-operated taper candle (or wax candle).

Thank everyone for coming and sharing. Reemphasize that the goal of each session is twofold: to hear and have a conversation without necessarily choosing one side or the other, and to increase the opportunity for love amid disagreement. Remind the group about observing confidentiality.

Invite participants who are willing to say aloud how they will “be a light” in vital conversations that acknowledge the humanity and human sexuality of all. Offer some possible statements:

- I am going to pray that I will release some hostility that I have toward people who disagree with me.
- I am going to let _____ know that no matter what s/he claims as sexuality, I still am part of her/his/their circle of friends.

After all who wish to speak have shared, give a closing prayer or affirmation. Use the one given here or have a volunteer pray.

God, we thank you for the opportunity to speak with each other. Help us in our desire to know and do your will. Help us to accept each other as you have accepted us. Lead us on the way forward. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE TRENDS: A GLOBAL VIEW

An Intercultural Competency Primer

Since the turn of the 21st century, more than two dozen countries have enacted national laws allowing gays and lesbians to marry, mostly in Europe and the Americas. While objections to such marriages on cultural and religious grounds still prevail in many countries, others have yielded to local, national and global advocacy from civil- and human-rights groups to relax age-old prohibitions against same-sex marriage:

According to a global study by the Pew Research Center:

- In 2010, the Mexican Supreme Court issued a ruling, saying that same-sex marriages performed in Mexico City were valid and that they must be accepted throughout the country (Mexico City had legalized gay marriage in December 2009).
- In 2016, Colombia became the fourth country in Catholic-majority South America to legalize same-sex marriage, following Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil.
- The South African parliament legalized same-sex marriage in 2006, one year after the country's highest court ruled that the previous marriage laws violated the South African constitution's guarantee of equal rights. The law also allows religious institutions and civil officers to refuse to conduct same-sex marriage ceremonies, according to their beliefs. The new measure passed with support from both the governing African National Congress and the main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance. However, the traditional monarch of the Zulu people, who account for about one-fifth of the country's population, maintains that homosexuality is morally wrong.
- Same-sex couples in Canada gained most of the legal benefits of marriage in 1999, when the federal and provincial governments extended common-law marriages to gay and lesbian couples. In 2005, the Canadian Parliament legalized same-sex marriage nationwide.
- In 2017, Germany became the 15th European country to enact legislation allowing same-sex couples to wed.
- In 2015, Ireland (a majority-Catholic nation) became the first country to legalize same-sex marriage through a popular referendum. While some Catholic Church leaders opposed the change, Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin wrote a commentary in *The Irish Times* newspaper before the referendum, saying that he would not tell people how to vote and that he had "no wish to stuff my religious views down other people's throats."

- Since 2009, gay/lesbian couples in Norway have had the legal right to marry and adopt children. The largest religious group in the country, the Lutheran-affiliated Church of Norway, initially voted to prohibit its pastors from conducting same-sex weddings, but reversed the ban in early 2017.

Adapted from “Gay Marriage around the World,” a 2017 article at the Pew Research Center website. This intercultural primer is not offered as a blanket statement about or definition of a particular group but rather to provide some insight into the cultural sources and nuances of belief found within non-dominant communities.

SERMON STARTER: EXPANDING THE COMMUNITY

Prepared by the Rev. Dr. Robin Dease

Our points of agreement can come when we get past the otherness of different beginnings, rules or values. God is so other that we never fully come to know God, and even when we do, we are amazed beyond explanation (Genesis 1:26-27).

Inviting dialogue makes people suspect. We think it is a tactic to change one's mind. Even when we are defensive, dialogue is necessary. We can agree, disagree and be Christian, even when we cannot always understand another's perspective. Relationships are trumped by ethics. More value is placed on moral correctness, instead of identifying the image of God in our conversation partners.

However, otherness may be beyond individual comprehension (Exodus 3:1-6). Often, we refer to people by terms that keep them at a distance. I do not see you, and when I do, I see you as "different," as "other." We see sin. We see evil. When we draw lines of demarcation, it sends the message that one side is right and the other is the enemy. We cease to live in community.

When Jesus asked the question, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" he was expanding the community as a means of extending the kingdom because God offers welcome to all people who commit to obey God (Matthew 12:48).

Allowance of civil unions is given because it is a legal arrangement. A Christian marriage is a moral one. We do not see otherness as moral by Scripture. Yet, in the Old Testament, we are reminded to love the "stranger in our midst" (Deuteronomy 10:19). Community embraces the otherness, which is the mosaic of the human experience.

What does the church value? It depends on time and travel. The status of women, diseased children and even foreign-born people improved. Rules are harder to change morally. The value of men versus women depends on exposure, pride or maybe education. Jews versus Gentiles? The law stayed with the Jews, and grace went with the Gentiles. Christian versus nonbeliever? We are to value each other so that nonbelievers get to live in faith (Galatians 3:23-26).

sex and desire. Pervasive silence and reticent behavior say homosexuality is a “sin” without in-depth exegesis or dialogue.

Embracing *otherness* means we accept the stranger, the alien and the foreigner (Galatians 3:28). Identity in Christ supersedes any sexual identity. Are we just changing policy and not respecting the historic Scripture position which is clear? Yes, *it is better to be kind than right*.

The church was created by humans; therefore, it is fault-filled and unfair in values and relationships. If the church does not change, we lose community. If the church does not change, the community will search out other places to gather: at the pool of Shalom, in the leper colony, at the well with the Samaritan woman. The gospel is about a God who is on the side of humanity ... ALL humanity.

The Rev. Dr. Robin Dease is superintendent of the Hartsville (S.C.) District of The United Methodist Church and a member of the South Carolina Annual Conference.

07

REMEMBERING OUR ROOTS AS UNITED METHODISTS*Samoan-American siblings commit to share the love of Christ*

Francine Tamaalii-Bhangoo and Jay Tamaalii

PREPARATION

Select a room or location to offer the opportunity for reflection and conversation, and one that has internet access so that you may show and project the video. Be sure to do a run-through to make sure the internet and computer equipment work properly. If this is a group that meets regularly, you may offer everyone the opportunity to preview the video at home prior to coming to the discussion group.

Preview the video and read through the discussion guide and sermon ideas. Review the sample Covenant of Care and Confidentiality (page 20) for the discussion group or draft your own or invite the group to create one together.

Gather the following materials:

- At least two translations of the Bible for reading the Scriptures
- 4 x 6-inch white index cards (or all one color) – one for each participant
- Pens/pencils

THE DISCUSSION SESSION**GET STARTED (10-15 MINUTES)**

Welcome everyone to the session. If this is not an ongoing group meeting, invite people (in one or two minutes) to share their first names and what draws them to participate in this “Vital Conversations” group. Share why you have accepted the role of facilitator and your visions for the time together.

If this group meets regularly and new people are present, make them feel welcome. Share why you have accepted the role of facilitator and invite them to say their first name and briefly say what drew them to the conversation. Ask everyone else to introduce themselves. Ask for two volunteers to say why they are in the “Vital Conversations” group.

If necessary, review the location of restrooms and the general time frame for the session. Remind the group of its commitment to the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality.

Opening Prayer (use prayer below or have a volunteer to pray)

God, we come together to strengthen our resolve to be your witness in the world. We come with ears open to hear and hearts ready to learn. We acknowledge that we may not be prepared for all that we might hear and may not easily accept all that is placed before us. But we are here. We are here for Godly family members we are yet to meet. We are here for family members that we deeply love. We are here for ourselves — seeking wisdom if not understanding. We are your children, God, and we ask you for your guidance. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

HOW DO YOU FEEL? (15 MINUTES)

Give each member of the group a blank index card (and a pen if needed). Share that one of the questions raised in the video they will be watching is focused on “feelings.” Francine asks her brother, “How do you feel about our church?” Ask group members to take two to three minutes to reflect on how they feel about their own houses of worship and their church (the denomination). Ask them to jot down a phrase or sentence on the index card.

Next, have the group sit in a circle. Ask volunteers to share their feelings for the church where they worship. For example, a person might say, “When I found my church, I began healing from a deep hurt” or “I feel my church doesn’t know how to reach out to people who are looking for a relationship with God.”

After two or three volunteers have shared, then ask the group to share their feelings about The United Methodist Church (or their denomination or religious organization). Encourage members to share joys and challenges. After a few persons have shared, thank the group for their contributions, affirming that being able to share from the heart is key to having vital conversations.

VIEW THE VIDEO (12 MINUTES)

Conversation between siblings Francine Tamaalii-Bhangoo and Jay Tamaalii

FIRST, WE MUST LISTEN (5 MINUTES)

Have a Period of Reflection and Discernment. Invite participants to answer three or more of the following questions:

What was emotional?

What was exciting?

What was the struggle?

What was the pain?

What was the breakthrough?

GATHER AND SHARE (15 MINUTES)

Gather in groups of 3 or 4 persons to talk about their answers to the questions and their response to the video. Ask for a volunteer from each group to answer one of the questions. Continue calling on each group until ideally a response has been shared from each question.

DID YOU HEAR THAT? (15 MINUTES)

Read aloud the statements below — one by one — that were shared in the video (some may have already emerged through the earlier discussion). Invite participants to state their thoughts and responses.

Francine: We are so blinded by our culture ... people like to push it aside, like it's not OK; I have no idea how to confront this.

Jay: What I love about Dad is that he's coming around — in order for God's Word to be perpetuated, we have to adjust to the times.

Francine: More people need to hear it, more people need to see it (in reference to Jay's comment, "My faith is the same as yours.").

Jay: We are thinking about now, but not thinking about the future ... we create this church that is loving and accepting except for this.

Francine: We are all looking to God for something; we all came to look for something in church.

Jay: We are shying away from our traditions, our faith. We are known to share the love; how can we love God and not accept God's children?

HEAR THE SCRIPTURE (10 MINUTES)

Ask volunteers to read aloud the Scripture below; encourage use of at least two Bible translations.

Acts 8:26-38 (Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch)

Ask group members to share aloud their thoughts and takeaways from this Scripture as they think about the conversation between Francine Tamaalii-Bhangoo and Jay Tamaalii.

SING A SONG THAT BRINGS STRENGTH (15 MINUTES)

Call the group's attention to Jay speaking about his fears, even a fear about being a part of the video conversation. Then remind them of the song that helped him: "Great is Thy Faithfulness" (The United Methodist Hymnal, No. 140). Ask participants to recall a time when they experienced fears and frustration. Invite them to name hymns or songs that helped them — and say why. Also, encourage them to sing a verse or refrain from the song and invite the group to sing along.

(OPTIONAL) HEAR FROM THE PASTOR (5 MINUTES)

Share a quote or insight from the sermon helps that were prepared by a clergy person in relation to the video conversation.

CLOSING: STAND WITH ME (10 MINUTES)

Remind the group of the advice that Francine gave her brother, to go out there and share the love ... that she is right behind him.

Ask the group to form two lines, both facing in the same direction, one person behind another (join the group if necessary to make a pair). Leave enough space so that the person in the rear can stretch out her or his arm toward the other person's shoulder, near but not touching.

Tell the persons in the front row that they have the option to gently lean back until they feel the hand of another on their shoulder. Lead the back row in this affirmation, asking them to repeat after you:

You are my family	you are my family
No matter where you go	no matter who you love
I pray for you	I stand with you.

Ask the group to turn and face the opposite direction (back row now becomes the front row). Repeat the directions (front row persons have the option to lean back to feel a hand on their shoulder; back row persons say the words of affirmation).

SHARE A CLOSING PRAYER (USE THE ONE GIVEN HERE OR HAVE A VOLUNTEER PRAY).

God, we thank you for the opportunity to speak with each other. We thank you for the opportunity to hear from Francine Tamaalii-Bhangoo and Jay Tamaalii. May Francine's words, "Go out there and share the love," become our theme. Help us to be your witnesses to the love you brought to the world through Jesus. In Christ's name, Amen.

HONORING PARENTS AND ELDERS CENTRAL TO PACIFIC ISLAND CULTURE

An Intercultural Competency Primer

Pacific Islands are the islands of the Pacific Ocean. This vast region cannot be generalized as one culture. However there are some specific values shared by many islands, particularly the islands of the Polynesian and Melanesian groups. These values are the basis of this primer.

Respect and honor of the elders and the first generation. The value of children honoring their parents and elders is a cornerstone of Pacific Island culture. The communal family system is an intricate web of relationships bound together by mutual obligations and responsibilities. Children honor their parents, particularly the father, who is considered to be the head of the family. The father-child relationship commands a great deal of respect, flowing from child to father. In fact, there are various social rules that help to keep that relationship sacred.

In the Tongan tradition, for example, it is taboo for a child to touch her father's head, or to eat his leftover food. Though practices may differ, the respect and honor that binds one generation to another are the underlying basis for much of the practices that define everyday life for Pacific Islanders.

This value continues to define Pacific Island culture here in the United States, particularly in church settings. The church becomes the village of the native island setting. Hence, the practices that defined the village life continues to be lived out in the immigrant church setting. Within the family or church circle, young people behave accordingly, with due deference and respect to their parents and elders.

Love and acceptance of everyone. Everyone in the family or community is loved and accepted as they are. Hence, a boy who “acts like a girl” is accepted for who he is. Moreover, this level of acceptance sometimes rises to affirmation, as the community affirms this dual existence, by encouraging it. It is not uncommon to see a group of women encourage a young boy who is feminine to do the chores associated with girls, such as housework and cooking.

In addition, the Pacific Island way of life is defined by many social obligations which translate to a variety of rituals and events. Members of the family and community all share in carrying out such events and rituals, with particular duties and tasks to be done. Many of these tasks are gender specific. However, people who cross gender lines or flout traditional

roles are often able to do more and contribute more to the system. They become an asset, and hence, their dual existence is affirmed and appreciated.

Faith. A deep sense of faith in God is a hallmark of Pacific Island life. There is a certainty that all things will turn out well for those who believe in God. Though there are insurmountable challenges and obstacles, faith in God allows Pacific Island people to continue to live, knowing that God is in control.

Monalisa Tu`itahi, an attorney and United Methodist lay servant, was born in the South Pacific Island of Tonga, and immigrated with her family at a young age, settling in Hawaii. She describes her calling from God as one where she engages in advocacy and seeking justice for all people. She is married to the Rev. Dr. Siosaia Fonua Tu`itahi, and is the mother of four wonderful young adults. Monalisa is a leader in the Pacific Island National Caucus of United Methodists (PINCUM).

SERMON STARTER: THE JOURNEY TO ACCEPTANCE AND PACIFIC ISLAND THEOLOGY AT WORK

Prepared by the Rev. Dr. Siosaia Fonua Tu'itahi

“Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.” (Ephesians 4:15-17, NRSV)

1. Christ as Head: Pacific Islanders resonate with the concept of Christ as the head as it is consistent with our indigenous value system and social order that promote harmony within the Pacific Island society. This deep and life-forming theological value is the prototype for healthy communities of all types, within the Pacific Island setting. Within the family, the father is seen as the head of the family, and there is clarity about his role as protector, guide, provider and disciplinarian, among other things, is valued and respected. Accordingly, children’s role to honor and respect their parents — and particularly, their fathers — is a fundamental part of living in the Pacific Island community. Hence, the Christian value further strengthens the already existing value of order within the Pacific Island setting.

•Jay and Francine are blessed in many ways, one of which is their relationship with their father. There is clarity about their father’s role in their lives. This is a double blessing for Jay, as he celebrates his father’s willingness to journey with him, even as his father struggles with his own beliefs and values. Jay’s father affirms his love for his son, and in doing so, provides a safe place for Jay to continue to grow in his own identity as a gay person. In addition, Jay’s father’s affirmation can be a bridge to his own generation, some of whom have not accepted Jay.

2. A work in progress: The Wesleyan concept of “moving on to perfection” is at work here, as members of the body see their Christian walk as a journey toward greater maturity. Members “grow up in every way” into him who is the head, into Christ” through the daily practice of worship, small groups, fellowships and personal devotions. There is always something going on at church that helps to shape the individual’s personal journey. It is the very act of gathering, singing, praying and other means of grace that nurture the individual to become more like Christ. This is an ongoing journey, in which there is no real place of arrival. Such a journey is only possible when it is sustained by love of Christ, as well as love of others within the body and beyond.

- Jay and Francine are a part of body that is on a journey. Their experiences within their own family, church family and beyond have given them hope for greater empathy and acceptance. Though they are fully aware of the existing norm, their own engagement with the body has given them a great sense of belonging and a desire to remain and influence the body, even as they continue to be a part of it.

3. An interrelated web of mutuality and reciprocity promotes a healthy body: The Apostle Paul's metaphor of the church as one body with many parts is uniquely understood and lived out in the Pacific Island setting, and most particularly in the church setting today. A large percentage of our present church communities are immigrant churches. As such, the church becomes the new village, and the practices that sustained life back in the islands are promoted and desired. These practices are close to the hearts of these first-generation immigrants, and they become tools for coping and for sustaining life as they knew it. There is a sense of refuge in the communal body, as many struggle to make a living in this new world. Hence, once again, social norms and biblical norms coincide to provide a way of living. Its basic tenet is for each member to do their part, reciprocal and mutual duties that flow back and forth from each member. Each member is needed and valued. As "each part is working properly," it is nurtured and sustained, and as a result, it "promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." Indeed it is the very act of "doing your part" that sustains oneself, and also helps to build up the body.

- Jay and Francine grew up in a setting where children knew their places, as part of a thriving body. As they became young adults, their roles and responsibilities also changed. You get a sense, particularly from Jay, of him affirming his roles and living it out within the body. And, it is in living out those duties, reciprocal duties, that Jay is sustained and nourished. As he does his part, he is strengthened, even in spite of an apparent lack of acceptance that may be present within the body. As Jay carries out his role, he helps build up the body in love.

Conclusion: Perhaps, Jay will one day find full acceptance within his family, church body and/or Pacific Island community. But it is the journey that is strengthening him, as well as building up the body in love. It is the very act of living within the body that is life affirming for Jay and Francine, as well as for the body itself.

***The Rev. Dr. Siosaia Fonua Tu'itahi**, pastor of Santa Ana (Calif.) United Methodist Church, was born and raised on the island of Tonga and migrated to the United States in 1981. He earned his undergraduate degree from the University of California, San Diego, and his master and doctorate of ministry degrees from Claremont (Calif.) School of Theology. He is married with four children, and serves as co-chair for the Pacific Islanders Commission of the California Pacific Conference.*

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FINDING A CHURCH TO CALL HOME

Seminarians explore finding acceptance, extending hospitality to all
Joy E. Bronson and the Rev. Issac Broune, presenters

SESSION 8

PREPARATION

Select a room or location to offer the opportunity for reflection and conversation, and one that has internet access so that you may show and project the video. Be sure to do a run-through to make sure the internet and computer equipment work properly. If this is a group that meets regularly, you may offer everyone the opportunity to preview the video at home prior to coming to the discussion group.

Preview the video and read through the discussion guide and sermon ideas. Review the sample Covenant of Care and Confidentiality (page 20) for the discussion group or draft your own or invite the group to create one together.

Gather the following materials:

- At least two translations of the Bible for reading the Scriptures
- Write the phrases below on individual sheets of newsprint and post around the room OR type them on a sheet of paper (leaving space between each one) with a copy for each participant
 - o Hospitality is our motto
 - o He/She is God-gifted in what s/he is doing
 - o Taking the Bible as it is is not enough
 - o What brings us closer to God
 - o Not how we solve a problem, but how we love people
 - o My first time seeing a lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer/intersex person at church
- Blue painter's tape
- Construction paper, assorted colors (9 x 12 or larger)
- Scissors
- Markers (blue, black, purple, brown)

THE DISCUSSION SESSION

GET STARTED (10-15 MINUTES)

Welcome everyone to the session. If this is not an ongoing group meeting, invite people (in one or two minutes) to share their first name and what draws them to participate in this “Vital Conversations” group. Share why you accepted the role of facilitator and your visions for the time together.

If this group meets regularly and new people are present, make them feel welcome. Share why you accepted the role of facilitator and invite them to say their first name and briefly say what drew them to the conversation. Ask everyone else to introduce themselves. Ask for two volunteers to say why they are in the “Vital Conversations” group.

If necessary, take care of housekeeping matters (location of restrooms, general time frame for the session). Remind the group of its commitment to the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality.

REFLECTION (10 MINUTES)

Either direct the group’s attention to the phrases posted on the wall or distribute a handout with these phrases on it:

- Hospitality is our motto
- He/She is God-gifted in what s/he is doing
- Taking the Bible as it is is not enough
- What brings us closer to God
- Not how we solve a problem, but how we love people
- My first time seeing an LGBTQ person at church

Ask group members to write down what first comes to mind when they read these phrases. Encourage them to respond to each one if possible, and a minimum of three if not all.

Ask for volunteer sharing on a few of the phrases (limit to two responses per phrase). Share with the group that these phrases come from the video and the goal is to look for the context in which the phrases are given or how they may mirror their reflections as they watch the video.

VIEW THE VIDEO (10 MINUTES)

Conversation between Joy Bronson and Isaac Broune

FIRST, WE MUST LISTEN (5 MINUTES)

Have a Period of Reflection and Discernment. Invite participants to see how their responses to the phrases was similar or different to how the phrases were understood in the video. Also, ask them to consider their answers to three or more of the following questions

What was emotional?

What was exciting?

What was the struggle?

What was the pain?

What was the breakthrough?

GATHER AND SHARE (15 MINUTES)

Next in one group ask 3 – 5 volunteers to talk about their answers to the questions and their response to the video. Be sure to go back to the phrases posted (or on the handout) to see what emerges. Encourage people to say what stands out for them

I HEARD THE BELLS (15 MINUTES)

Ask each participant to take a sheet of construction paper and a marker. Remind them of how Joy Bronson said she went to the church where “the bells woke me up every Sunday” ... and where she found “love, life, heart and spirit in the people.”

Ask group members to draw a bell and write a couple of words that signify the heart and spirit of the church where they worship OR what they dream the bells of their church would convey to people who want to be in a relationship with God.

Ask for 3 – 4 volunteers to talk about what their bells say, then collect drawings and tape them to a wall using the statement “AND THIS IS WHAT THE BELLS SAY TO ME.” After several persons have spoken, ask everyone to tape their bells on the wall.

HEAR THE SCRIPTURES (10 MINUTES)

Ask volunteers to read aloud the Scriptures below; encourage use of different Bible translations.

John 13:34

I Corinthians 14:34-35

Colossians 2:18

I John 3:16 – 18

Ask for popcorn sharing of the takeaways from those scriptures as they think about the conversation between Joy Bronson and Isaac Brune.

(OPTIONAL) HEAR FROM THE PASTOR (5 MINUTES)

Share a quote or insight from the sermon helps that were prepared by a clergy person in relation to the video conversation. See examples below; feel free to make your own selection].

There is Power in Love

This means a church is to be a witness for the people beyond the church. The world outside the congregation cries for a love-filled, intervening entity. The example of the love of Jesus impacting situations that are not “church” is essential for the sermon. Where has a church or church member reached out and powerfully shown this Jesus-type love for the uninvited? How can people of God represent and share the love of Jesus beyond the community of faith?

The lack of love permeates the land. Will you and I love so that it overcomes the vile “isms” of the earth? Episcopalian Bishop Michael Curry, in his sermon at the 2018 wedding of Britain’s Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, said: “O, there’s power in love. Not just in its romantic forms, but any form, any shape of love. There’s a certain sense in which when you are loved, and you know it, when someone cares for you, and you know it ... it actually feels right.”

CLOSING: LEAN IN (5 MINUTES)

Ask everyone to sit in a circle as tightly as possible. Ask every person to “lean in” – turning their right shoulders toward the center of the circle. Share that you are asking them to emulate the concept of putting their shoulder to the wheel, which means putting in one’s full effort to accomplish something.

There is a song written by William L. Thompson, a member of the Church of Christ, titled “Shoulder to Your Wheel.” A variation of this song was used as a camp meeting song with the words: Everybody put your shoulder to the wheel; do your duty with a heart full of love; if you don’t mind working in my God’s vineyard, everybody put your shoulder to the wheel.

With participants holding that position in place, thank everyone for coming and sharing. Re-emphasize that the goal of each session is twofold: to hear and have a conversation without necessarily choosing one side or the other, and to increase the opportunity for love amidst disagreement. Remind the group about observing confidentiality.

Share a closing prayer or affirmation (use the one given here or have a volunteer pray). God, we thank you for the opportunity to speak with each other. Help us in our desire to know and do your will. Help us to put our shoulders to the wheel and do everything we do

THE CHALLENGE OF ENGAGING IN CONVERSATION ABOUT SEXUALITY FROM AN 'AFRICAN' CONTEXT

An Intercultural Competency Primer

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.” (1 John 4:7-10)

No matter where you live in the world, engaging in open and candid conversations about human sexuality can be challenging, especially in church settings. This is particularly true when dealing with such complex, and often controversial, issues such as same-sex attraction and variations in gender identity.

In this regard, the questions and concerns facing United Methodists living in African countries are no different than those faced by Christians anywhere: What do the Scriptures say about homosexuality and variations in gender identity? What additional information can be gleaned from science and medicine as well as Christian theology and our experiences of living in community together? What fundamental rights and protections must be guaranteed to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons? How can we respond with understanding, compassion and love to those struggling to reconcile their Christian faith and their identities?

While these questions and concerns are common to many Christian communities, there are some distinctive contextual factors that set African communities apart:

- o There is no single or unitary “African” cultural or religious perspective. Instead, the continent of Africa is an amazingly diverse place and home to 54 countries, 13.1 billion people, and more than 2,000 different ethnic groups — each with its own tribal dialect.
- o Public discussions of human sexuality is generally considered taboo. This has led to a dearth of opportunities to learn about sex or sexual diversity in families, churches and schools.
- o Complex terms and concepts such as gay, lesbian, transgender and intersex frequently lack equivalent words and meanings in traditional African languages. Typically, English or French terms are used, which require lengthy interpretation and explanation.

- o Same-sex behaviors and practices are outlawed in 34 of the 54 African countries. Moreover, even where there are no legal statutes prohibiting such conduct, gay men and lesbian women, in particular, face heavy social shaming which, in turn, has led to the loss of basic rights, police entrapment and harassment, rapes and other forms of sexual violence and, in some cases, killings.

The Zulu concept of ubuntu, which emerges out of Southern Africa and emphasizes our common humanity and mutual interdependence as well as the need to respond to others with compassion and care, provides a perfect starting point for engaging in conversations about human sexuality.

Today, an increasing number of people throughout Africa are openly identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersex. It's likely that others, while aware of their sexual orientation and gender identity, have decided, due to fears of rejection, stigma and discrimination, to hide this part of themselves from families, friends, schools and congregations.

Not every Christian pastor or congregation may be ready to learn more about these issues, but for those who might be, here are some important steps you can take:

1. Read the Scriptures daily and earnestly seek God's guidance in discerning what they have to say about human sexuality and how we are to respond to those with a sexual orientation or gender identity that might be different than our own.
2. Draw on the expertise of doctors, psychologists and other health professionals who have undergone education and training related to human sexuality issues. Hopefully, they can shed more light on the complex terms and concepts.
3. Create opportunities for those who may identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersex and those working with these populations to share their stories and experiences. It's important to hear from those most directly impacted.
4. Affirm the dignity and worth of everyone. The United Methodist Social Principles support equal rights for all people, regardless of sexual orientation. The Social Principles also call for equal protection under the law and support efforts to end the use of violence and coercion.

***Dr. Randall Miller** is a management consultant and executive coach in private practice and an adjunct professor of Christian social ethics at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, Calif. He spent the last four years traveling through much of the continent of Africa, supporting educational trainings and religious dialogues dealing with issues related to homosexuality and gender identity. He also partnered with African LGBT groups in their efforts to combat stigma, discrimination and violence.*

SERMON STARTER: THE POWER IN LOVE

Prepared by the Rev. Dr. Vance P. Ross

“We know by love by this, that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” (1 John 3:16–18, NRSV)

One: The agape love proclaimed by followers of Jesus lives beyond thoughts through the committed expression and standards of loving deeds. Regarding distinctions in the human family, how do we focus on love of people as the text suggests? How does illustrated love, as a sermon focal point, find disciples of Jesus as representing and “re-presenting” him?

Two: The society seems determined to use distinctions as shortcomings. These are not spaces of love. Where do we see this in the society? Where in our context? What film, song or current event shows unloving in material ways (on the ground, tangible)? The sermon needs to address this.

Three: The sermon can invite the church to be better. How can the church as the Body of Christ, the followers of Jesus, “re-present” Jesus within the context of its corporate life? How do ministries of the church (such as the choir, a men’s group, the church staff, etc.) show love as a remedy and an alternative to the lack of love for those deemed “different?” How is this done within the life of the congregation?

Four: This means a church witness for the people beyond the church. The world outside the congregation cries for a love-filled intervening entity. The example of the love of Jesus impacting situations that are not “church” is essential for the sermon. Where has a church or church member reached out and powerfully shown this Jesus love for the uninvited? How can people of God “re-present” Jesus beyond the community of faith?

Five: The sermon can reiterate the power that exists in love (see John 13:34). The lack of love permeates the land. Will you and I love so that it overcomes the vile “isms” of the earth? Bishop Michael Curry, in his sermon at the recent wedding of Britain’s Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, said: “O, there’s power in love. Not just in its romantic forms, but any form, any shape of love. There’s a certain sense in which when you are loved, and you know it, when someone cares for you, and you know it ... it actually feels right.”

These ideas, prayerfully, can offer ideas and constructions for making a difference in the world. Racism, homophobia, sexism, xenophobia (along with other “isms” and phobias) can be challenged, even changed, by the power of the preached word.

The Rev. Dr. Vance P. Ross is senior pastor of Central United Methodist Church in Atlanta, Ga., and former director of annual conference relations and vital congregations for Discipleship Ministries, an international agency of The United Methodist Church.

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BEING THE CHURCH THAT CHANNELS GOD'S LOVE

A pastor and a college administrator from the Philippines share their dreams for Christianity

The Rev. Jeric Cortado and Framer Mella

PREPARATION

Select a room or location to offer the opportunity for reflection and conversation, and one that has internet access so that you may show and project the video. Be sure to do a run-through to make sure the internet and computer equipment work properly. If this is a group that meets regularly, you may offer everyone the opportunity to preview the video at home prior to coming to the discussion group.

Preview the video and read through the discussion guide and sermon ideas. Review the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality (page 20) for the discussion group or feel free to draft your own or invite the group to create one together.

Gather the following materials:

- At least two translations of the Bible for reading the Scriptures
- Construction paper
- Markers
- Large wicker basket (to hold the papers)

THE DISCUSSION SESSION**GET STARTED (10-15 MINUTES)**

Welcome everyone to the session. If this is not an ongoing group meeting, invite people (in one or two minutes) to share their first name and what draws them to participate in this “Vital Conversations” group. Share why you have accepted the role of facilitator and your visions for the time together.

If this group meets regularly and new people are present, make them feel welcome. Share why you have accepted the role of facilitator and invite them to say their first name and briefly say what drew them to the conversation. Ask everyone else to introduce themselves and invite two volunteers to say why they are in the “Vital Conversations” group.

If necessary, take care of housekeeping matters (location of restrooms, general time frame for the session). Remind the group of its commitment to the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality.

OPENING PRAYER (USE PRAYER BELOW OR HAVE A VOLUNTEER TO PRAY)

God, we come together to strengthen our resolve to be your witness in the world. We come with ears open to hear and hearts ready to learn. We acknowledge that we may not be prepared for all that we might hear and may not easily accept all that is placed before us. But we are here. We are here for brothers and sisters we are yet to meet. We are here for family members that we deeply love. We are here for ourselves — seeking wisdom if not understanding. We are your children, God, and we ask you for your guidance. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

VIEW THE VIDEO (13 MINUTES)

Conversation between the Rev. Jeric Cortado and Framer Mella

FIRST, WE MUST LISTEN (5 MINUTES)

Have a period of reflection and discernment. Invite participants to answer three or more of the following questions:

What was emotional?

What was exciting?

What was the struggle?

What was the pain?

What was the breakthrough?

GATHER AND SHARE (15 MINUTES)

Gather in groups of 3 or 4 persons to talk about their answers to the questions and their response to the video. Ask for a volunteer from each group to answer one of the questions. Continue calling on each group until ideally a response has been shared from each question.

MAKE A WISHING WELL (20 MINUTES)

Recap for the group Framer Mella's words: "How I wish the church would be a channel of God's love for all of God's creation." Ask the group to think of their "wishes" for the church.

Next, give each person a sheet of construction paper and a marker. Ask them to write down their wish for the church and for the community. When done, have them place their wishes in the basket.

Then ask if they will sit in silence, with their eyes closed. Facing the group, randomly pull sheets of paper from the basket and share what is written. Begin each reading by saying “I wish...” Allow a pause between each reading. Invite the group, if desired, to pray silently for the wishes that speak to their hearts.

End this exercise by asking the group to open their eyes.

HEAR THE SCRIPTURE (10 MINUTES)

Ask volunteers to read aloud the Scripture below; encourage use of at least two Bible translations.

Acts 10:1-20 (Cornelius and Peter)

Ask group members to share aloud their thoughts and “takeaways” from this Scripture as they think about the conversation the Rev. Jeric Cortado and Frammer Mella.

(OPTIONAL) HEAR FROM THE PASTOR (5 MINUTES)

Share a quote or insight from the sermon helps that were prepared by a clergyperson in relation to the video conversation [examples given – feel free to make your own selection].

In memory of her...Verses 39-42

Matthew 26 and Mark 14 are texts that tell us of Jesus’ anointing by a woman. Both texts end with, “Wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.” The narrative on John 4 on Jesus and the Samaritan woman ends with, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.” In the conquest of cultures and nations, women’s voices and actions are forgotten and dismissed. It is a denial of women’s share in history.

CLOSING: DRAW THE CIRCLE WIDE (5 MINUTES)

Ask the group to come together in a circle, standing or sitting shoulder to shoulder, eliminating as much space between each person as possible. Then ask each person to carefully take a step back (or move back a bit), then another.

Finally, ask members to look around the circle and softly say, “I want God’s love to shine through me.” Repeat this phrase at least three times as a way of conveying hopefulness for the well-being of all of God’s children.

Share a closing prayer (use the one given here or have a volunteer pray).

“God, we thank you for the opportunity to speak with each other. We thank you for the opportunity to renew our capacity to create harmonious relationships and empowering communities. May our actions be guided by your love. Help us we pray. Amen.

SERMON STARTER: JESUS AND THE WOMAN AT THE WELL. A FILIPINA THEOLOGIAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON JOHN 4: 1-42

Prepared by the Rev. Lizette Galima Tapia-Raquel

INTRODUCTION

There are so many ways to look at the text. As a Filipina whose nation's history is one of colonization alongside conversion and evangelism, I am compelled to study the text from the perspective of women and as colonized people. Musa Dube, an African feminist theologian, proposes doing postcolonial feminist readings by asking the following questions:

- How does imperialism affect men and women of ancient and present times?
- How does this text construct difference: Are there dialogue and mutual interdependence or condemnation of all that is foreign?
- Does this text employ gender representations to construct relationships of subordination and domination? If so, which side am I reading from: the colonizer, the colonized or the collaborator?
- How can one reread this text for relationships of liberating interdependence between genders, and among races and other social categories of our worlds?

READ JOHN 4: 6-14

Reflect on the following questions:

1. Who needed a drink?
2. Who was thirsty?
3. Who is Jesus and who is the woman from Samaria today?
4. In the face of diverse cultures and religions, how do we as Christians or as a Church engage people in dialogue and conversation?

Jesus needed a drink. Jesus was thirsty. And Jesus came to the well. But in the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, he convinces her that she needs his living water. The Samaritan woman drew water from well a in Samaria, her own land, and she knew her ancestors, Jacob. Before Jesus came, she did not care for "living water" and was sustained by the water in her well. Why did Jesus have to come and offer her something she did not need?

In the story of Zipporah and Moses, and in the story of Rachel and Jacob, it is the women who draw from the well and offer drink to all who are thirsty, even if they are strangers. But this very same act opens our communities and societies to domination and subordination. In the Philippines' experience, the Spanish came with the cross and the sword, and the Americans came with the Bible and the gun. It was not a "holy conversion." Caroline Brewer, a historian, calls what happened to the Philippines a "holy confrontation." Today, communities who once welcomed strangers with thirst-quenching water cannot access their own wells and springs because of transnationals' water rights.

READ JOHN 4: 16–26

Reflect again on the following questions:

1. How was Jesus being characterized in the text? Is it a good characterization of a male?
2. How was the woman from Samaria being characterized in the text? Is it a good characterization of a female?
3. Does the exchange promote gender equality and mutual respect of cultures?

Jesus' questions have been interpreted—especially in Europe and North America—as a judgment on the woman's morality. The Samaritan woman offers no excuses when Jesus states that she has had five husbands and now lives with a man who is not her husband. She does not explain that she had levirate marriages, where women are forced to marry the brother of her husband in the event of his death, so that she may bear a son for the dead husband. Who would want to marry five husbands?

Many postcolonial readers of the Gospel according to John argue that the narrative characterizes Jesus as the ultimate, the unlimited and the undeniable savior: the great "I am." These passages have been interpreted in exclusive, dominant and imperialistic ways as Christianity, which began as a people's movement, but gradually assumed imperialistic and oppressive institutional forms.

IN MEMORY OF HER...JOHN 4: 39-42

Matthew 26 and Mark 14 are texts that tell us of Jesus' anointing by a woman. Both texts end with, "Wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her." The narrative on John 4 on Jesus and the Samaritan woman ends with, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." In the conquest of cultures and nations, women's voices and actions are forgotten and dismissed. It is a denial of women's share of history.

Questions for personal reflection or group discussion:

1. How has our faith impacted other races and religions? Can you share the positive and negative ways we as a church affected the lives of communities who have welcomed us?
2. What practices can we change in the way we do ministry and mission so that the Christ we bring is the Christ who embodies solidarity and not domination?

The Rev. Lizette Galima Tapia-Raquel is an ordained deacon in the United Methodist Church, and serves as assistant professor at Union Theological Seminary, Dasmariñas, Cavite, Philippines.

THE BABAYLAN AS A MODEL OF AN EMPOWERED WOMAN IN PRE-COLONIAL PHILIPPINES

An Intercultural Competency Primer

In Zeus Salazar's research of pre-colonial Philippines, he divided the socioeconomic structure into the following domains of indigenous deity: (1) the political, which was the sphere of influence of the datu; (2) the technological, which was the field of the panday, and; (3) the cultural, which was the realm of the babaylan (a Visayan term identifying an indigenous religious leader who functions as a healer, seeing and community miracle worker).

In the field of healing, religion and literature, the babaylan had the absolute power and influence. In pre-colonial Philippines, the babaylan is predominantly female. She was the chief mourner of the dead, the executor of ritual dances and songs, maker of sacrifices, performer of the wedding ritual and the religious authority. The babaylan was believed to have the power to communicate with the spirits and the supernatural being.

More than that, she was a person with some extraordinary charisma. This responsibility came as a natural course because of women's participation in agricultural life. The woman was perceived first as the embodiment of nature's ability to bear fruit and originate life in her innate ability to create life as a mother and, second, as the guardian of the secrets of life and nature, which was beyond the grasp of men. In the animistic nature of indigenous religion, women were looked upon as the source and keeper of nature's mysterious and divine design.

As a religious practitioner, the babaylan is never separated or withdrawn from her environment and she remains an integral part of the community. Therefore, she is conscious of the needs and aspirations of the people she serves. Also, because a woman (or, sometimes, a man) can only become a babaylan in middle age, she has acquired wisdom through her experiences as daughter, wife, mother and the other roles, which require her to exercise her creative and nurturing potentials.

Finally, the babaylan's status is not acquired from educational degrees or associations but from her ability to embody and connect the visions of the people and the revelations

of the Divine. Sex and gender were not the determinants in assuming the role of a babaylan. Rather, it was “femininity.” The traditional belief was that “femaleness” in a human being allowed her or him to experience the spiritual realm. Women were believed to possess inherent characteristics that empowered them to be the spiritual leaders of the community, in that they embodied life and Creation. This was exhibited by the babaylan, who wore colorful ceremonial clothes, perfumed their unbound hair with oil, initiated rituals with singing, danced with rhythmic drums and practiced secret and mysterious knowledge to facilitate life and meaning in the community. That was the reason that men assuming the role of the babaylan dressed like women. In fact, many of them were effeminate and — outside of their roles as shamans — dressed and acted more like women than men. When effeminate men were rejected by the male groups, they were adopted by the females and affirmed as babaylans.

In the 16th century, after the Philippines was occupied by Spain and Roman Catholicism was introduced to the native peoples, the babaylan was demonized and the women, previously empowered as leaders, were relegated to the bottom of the Spanish hierarchy. So the white “father” God was at the top and Filipina woman was at the bottom.

Although the babaylan was denounced and demonized, she may also have been the reason why Roman Catholicism took a strong hold of the Filipino people. The reverence given to the babaylan was transferred to Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The Rev. Lizette Galima Tapia-Raquel is an ordained deacon in the United Methodist Church, and serves as assistant professor at Union Theological Seminary, Dasmariñas, Cavite, Philippines. Materials in this primer are excerpts from the Master of Divinity thesis.

1 Santiago, Lilia Quindoza, *In the Name of the Mother: 100 Years of Philippine Feminist Poetry*. (Quezon City, University of the Philippines Press, 2002), pp. 26-27

2 *Essays on Women*, edited by Sr. Mary John Mananzan, OSB, (Manila: The Institute of Women’s Studies, St. Scholastica’s College, 1987), p. 17.

3 Santiago, Lilia Quindoza, *In the Name of the Mother: 100 Years of Philippine Feminist Authority*. (Quezon City, University of the Philippines Press, 2002), p. 26.

4 Brewer, Carolyn, *Holy Confrontation: Religion, Gender and Sexuality in the Philippines, 1521-1685*, (Manila: The Institute of Women’s Studies-St. Scholastica’s College, 2001), p. 244.



Council of Bishops

The United Methodist Church



Friday, November 9, 2018

**The United Methodist Church
Philippines Central Conference
College of Bishops**

**In Jesus Christ We Are One Church
(A pastoral letter to United Methodists in the Philippines)**

"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

As United Methodist bishops called to serve in the Philippines Central Conference, we value and celebrate the unity of our global connection. Our witness to a broken world thirsty for hope and love is made more evident and powerful when we stand together as a vital part of the Body of Christ, united in the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

We are grateful for the fruits of our unity. Through our connectional relationships, our local churches and conferences are in partnership with our general agencies, and engaged in mission initiatives with United Methodist congregations and conferences in many parts of the world. Together, we have started new congregations and established medical facilities, as well as educational institutions. Many of our church leaders have received scholarships to study in our denomination's prestigious seminaries and universities. When faced with devastating typhoons and natural disasters, our United Methodist Committee on Relief has always come to our rescue. As new mission work is opened in Southeast Asia, Filipino United Methodists have been given the opportunity to learn and lead. With a spirit of gratitude for the missionaries that brought Methodism to our islands, we now send our own missionaries to bring the love of God around the world. All these are the blessings of a church united in the mission of Jesus Christ.

We recognize the sense of uncertainty expressed by many in our flock over the future of The United Methodist Church. Our church is not of one mind regarding matters of human sexuality, and this division has caused pain and harm to many, especially in the United States. As we prepare for the called 2019 General Conference which will decide our way forward through this impasse, we offer words of hope and share these affirmations:

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- As your bishops, we remember and continue to uphold our consecration vows to seek and strengthen the unity of the church. The cross and flame is an emblem that welcomes all people and we will strive to keep our fellowship together.
- We believe that the foundation of our unity as a church is Jesus Christ, our Rock and Redeemer. Through Christ we all receive grace as we walk the path toward perfection in love. Our oneness in Christ has broken down all the walls that divide us. Indeed, no one and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.
- We affirm our first General Rule as promulgated by John Wesley, the founder of our Methodist movement, to do no harm. Any form of schism jeopardizes our witness to the world and is harmful to many who regard the UMC as their spiritual home.
- We seek a way forward that allows respectful space for contextualized ministry, preserves and strengthens our connectional unity, and promotes vibrant United Methodist presence in as many places as possible.

We implore Filipino United Methodists to continue in holy conversation and prayer leading up to the 2019 General Conference. Let us join together in fulfilling the prayer of Jesus Christ for the Church - that we may be one, so that “the world may believe” (John 17:21).

To God be the glory!

Bishop Pedro Torio, Jr.

Bishop Daniel Arichea

Bishop Ciriaco Francisco

Bishop Solito Toquero

Bishop Rodolfo Juan

Bishop Leo Soriano

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This pastoral letter was drafted and signed by Filipino bishops of the United Methodist Church and forwarded to church members around the world ahead of the 2019 Special Session of the General Conference, where the discussion centered around the status and role of LGBTQ person in the mission, ministry and leadership of the denomination.

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**REMEMBERING OUR PRIORITIES: MAKING DISCIPLES,
TRANSFORMING LIVES**

Two pastors ask: Are we really following that guy — Jesus?

The Rev. Rudy Rasmus and the Rev. Dr. Vance P. Ross, presenters

PREPARATION

Select a room or location to offer the opportunity for reflection and conversation, and one that has internet access so that you may show and project the video. Be sure to do a run-through to make sure the internet and computer equipment work properly. If this is a group that meets regularly, you may offer everyone the opportunity to preview the video at home prior to coming to the discussion group.

Preview the video and read through the discussion guide and sermon ideas. Review the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality (page 20) for the discussion group or feel free to draft your own or invite the group to create one together.

Gather the following materials:

- At least two translations of the Bible for reading the Scriptures
- Construction paper
- Markers
- Blue painter's tape
- flashlight

THE DISCUSSION SESSION**GET STARTED (10-15 MINUTES)**

Welcome everyone to the session. If this is not an ongoing group meeting, invite people (in one or two minutes) to share their first name and what draws them to participate in this “Vital Conversations” group. Share why you have accepted the role of facilitator and your visions for the time together.

If this group meets regularly and new people are present, make them feel welcome. Share why you have accepted the role of facilitator and invite them to say their first name and briefly say what drew them to the conversation. Ask everyone else to introduce themselves. Ask for two volunteers to say why they are in the “Vital Conversations” group.

If necessary, take care of housekeeping matters (location of restrooms, general time frame for the session). Remind the group of its commitment to the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality.

OPENING PRAYER (USE PRAYER BELOW OR ASK VOLUNTEER TO PRAY)

God, we come together to strengthen our resolve to be your witness in the world. We come with ears open to hear and hearts ready to learn. We acknowledge that we may not be prepared for all that we might hear and may not easily accept all that is placed before us. But we are here. We are here for brothers and sisters we are yet to meet. We are here for family members that we deeply love. We are here for ourselves — seeking wisdom if not understanding. We are your children, God, and we ask you for your guidance. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

THINK ABOUT IT: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO FOLLOW JESUS? (10 MINUTES)

Lead the group in singing the song “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus” (No. 2129, in *The Faith We Sing*) or say the words: “I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus — no turning back, no turning back.”

Tell the group that many of the disciples gave up their livelihood (Peter and John gave up fishing to follow Jesus). Some even lost their lives. Ask the group to share aloud what it means to follow Jesus in their community, in their context. Ask the group what they know about the cost of discipleship in other areas of the world.

Ask them to listen intently (as they watch the video) for reflections on what the speaker say about following Jesus.

VIEW THE VIDEO (13 MINUTES)

Conversation between the Rev. Rudy Rasmus and the Rev. Dr. Vance P. Ross

FIRST, WE MUST LISTEN (5 MINUTES)

Have a Period of Reflection and Discernment. Invite participants to answer three or more of the following questions:

What was emotional?

What was exciting?

What was the struggle?

What was the pain?

What was the breakthrough?

GATHER AND SHARE (15 MINUTES)

Gather in groups of 3 or 4 persons to talk about their answers to the questions and their response to the video. Ask for a volunteer from each group to answer one of the questions. Continue calling on each group until ideally a response has been shared from each question.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND IT? (15 MINUTES)

Have an “open mic” time for people to give a ONE-MINUTE rave or rant about statements that stand out for them from the video [keep the time – allow for a 30-second pause between statements].

For example, Rev. Rasmus said, “I don’t understand it ... what is the real issue? ... I think it’s fear. Dr. Ross asked: Is it fear or power? What other things stand out and call for someone’s witness or wondering?”

What about the statement that it is “about the “3 P’s” – property, proceeds and power”? Or another assertion on research that indicates that the people that the church is counting on for its future (millennials) have little to no concern about human sexuality.

At the end of the sharing, read Micah 6:8 “What the Lord Requires.”

HEAR THE SCRIPTURE (10 MINUTES)

Ask volunteers to read aloud the Scripture below; encourage use of at least two Bible translations.

II Kings 4:3-15 (Four Lepers Save the Day)

Ask group members to share aloud their thoughts and “takeaways” from this Scripture as they think about the conversation between the Rev. Rudy Rasmus and the Rev. Dr. Vance P. Ross. Ask, “Who can carry the message?”

HEAR MY CRY (20 MINUTES)

Remind the group about the challenges that Rasmus and Ross see facing the church and the communities they serve.

Give each person a sheet of construction paper and a marker. Ask them to write down their heartfelt cry for the church and/or for the world.

Ask them to post these on available wall space. Ask the group to “walk in silence” and feel the heart cries of the people in the room. Invite them to offer prayer as they read the statements. Ask them to return to their seats and ponder in silence the needs of the world.

End this exercise by saying that God hears our cries and prayers and that we are encouraged to take our burdens to the Lord and seek God’s direction and guidance.

(OPTIONAL) HEAR FROM THE PASTOR (5 MINUTES)

Share a quote or insight from the sermon helps that were prepared by a clergy person in relation to the video conversation. Examples below — feel free to make your own selection].

What is wondrous and wonderful is that the letter of the law kills while the spirit gives new life and new understandings. God through Christ breathes spirit into us and then sends us out as preachers to breathe life into the broken hearts of the world. These affirmations and Scripture references are an important part of ongoing conversations, dialogues and sermons. To live in the spirit of God empowers one to live in community. To live in community is to define ourselves with the other as opposed to against the other. “In Christ’s family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal.” (Galatians 3:28-29, The Message)

CLOSING: SHINE A LIGHT ON IT (10 MINUTES)

Pick up the flashlight, turn it on, and point it to the ceiling. Tell the group that as we follow Jesus, we are called to shine his love and light in places of despair and frustration. Invite anyone who wishes to come forward, pick up the flashlight, and make a statement about an issue or concern to which she or he is committed to shining the light upon.

CLOSING PRAYER (USE THIS ONE OR HAVE A VOLUNTEER PRAY).

God, we thank you for the opportunity to speak with each other. We thank you for the opportunity to renew our capacity to create harmonious relationships and empowering communities. Help us we pray. Amen.

JUSTICE, COMPASSION AND LOVE IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN LGBTQ COMMUNITY

An Intercultural Competency Primer

WARRIORS FOR JUSTICE

Queer people of color exist. They live their lives at various intersections of race, class, sexuality, gender and various disabilities. They have always been present in the fight for civil rights, often putting their bodies on the line for queer, gender and racial rights. The 1969 Stonewall Inn demonstrations in New York City were led by transgender women of color, including Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera and Zazau Nova. They became founders of the first LGBTQ activist group, The Gay Liberation Front, whose broad platform included support of anti-war and anti-racism organizations like the Black Panthers.

Members knew that their struggle for legal rights were linked to fighting for those same protections for all women and people of color.

During the 1960s Civil Rights Movement for African Americans, queer people such as Bayard Rustin and James Baldwin played pivotal roles in organizing mass demonstrations and messaging, although their participation was often kept quiet because of their LGBTQ identities.

Today, this work continues through Black Lives Matter, a movement started by queer black women that not only calls out police brutality against black people but speaks up for the many murdered black transwomen of color whose deaths often go unnoticed and uninvestigated. These heroes are examples of people who chose to embrace the duality of multiple oppressions and combatted it in multiple forms.

COMMIT TO SUPPORT

Even if someone thinks that sexuality and gender are not a problem for them or have no ill feelings toward someone in the LGBTQ community, failing to engage in their fight for liberation makes a person complicit in their oppression. It is very similar to people who express color blindness or no affinity toward race but are passive in the ways white supremacy grips this country.

Engaging in the conversation and understanding how a group is marginalized leads to coalition building and change in social structures toward the oppressed group.

There is no guarantee that just because someone identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer in any way that person is also nonracist or dedicated to tearing down white supremacy and white racism. However, the reverse is also true.

All sides must understand that dismantling oppression is not an either/or situation. For many people, anti-oppression work must be both/and as they are not able to separate or choose one part of themselves to be free. Dismantling white supremacy, white racism and patriarchy will only help in the cause of disrupting heterosexism and gender binaries.

THE WORK OF THE CHURCH

This work must be done in the church because Christianity has considerable social influence in the United States (and across the world). Even though we are a nation with a supposed separation of church and state, religious values have helped to develop laws and cultural norms followed by society. Sexuality can be a non-issue only if the church no longer places moral sins and condemnation on those that are not heteronormative. Most arguments against LGBTQ rights and communities, both politically and socially, derive from religious doctrines and beliefs. These moral teachings must be challenged the same way slavery and the doctrine of racial superiority/inferiority had to be confronted in religious institutions.

NOTE: The Rev. E. Dewey Smith, pastor of House of Hope in Atlanta, challenged pastors in African-American churches to match their beliefs with their practices. View one of his sermons on homosexuality at <https://youtu.be/rOe3siDAyJA>.

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SERMON STARTER: GOD AFFIRMED ALL LIFE AS GOOD

Prepared by the Rev. Dr. Yvonne V. Delk

The conversation caused me to reflect on the many conversations that I have engaged in about human sexuality. They result in passionate convictions that inevitably lead to an inspection of what the Bible has to say about the matter. For many, the Bible offers a consistent prescription for sexual conduct that promotes heterosexual conduct at all costs. For others, the Bible is a liberating document and its universal message of God's love can be expressed through and for anyone, regardless of sexual orientation.

As a preacher, I have been working on shifting the narrative from a debate about what the Bible says to an affirmation of who God is and what it means to be created in the spirit of God. Sermons can cause persons to think and act differently. The challenge is not to allow biases to become the only basis for opinions. What one sees depends on where one is sitting.

What is wondrous and wonderful is that the letter of the law kills while the spirit gives new life and new understandings. God through Christ breathes spirit into us and then sends us out as preachers to breathe life into the broken hearts of the world.

These affirmations and Scripture references are an important part of ongoing conversations, dialogues and sermons.

1. God as the creator of all of life created diversity — not sameness and affirmed all life as good. “God spoke: Earth, generate life! Every sort and kind: God saw that it was good.” (Genesis 1:24-25, The Message)
2. Life is a gift from God. Sexual orientation is a gift of creativity. “And there it was. God looked over everything he had made; it was so good, so very good!” (Genesis 1:30, The Message)
3. To live in the spirit of God empowers one to live in community. To live in community is to define ourselves with the other as opposed to against the other. “In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal.” (Galatians 3:28-29, The Message)

4. To live in the spirit of God is to be freed from the fear of the other. When we exhale our fear, we inhale the life-giving breath of God. “We don’t evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don’t look at him that way anymore. Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it! All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other.” (2 Corinthians 5:17, The Message)

5. To live in the spirit of God is to be freed from determining who is worthy and who is not; who has value and who has not. “You’re no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He’s using us all — irrespective of how we got here.” (Ephesians 2:19, The Message)

6. To live in the spirit of God is to love. God loves us where we are and as we are. “Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples — when they see the love you have for each other.” (John 13:34-35, The Message)

The Rev. Dr. Yvonne Delk is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. She is the former executive of the UCC’s Office for Church in Society and Community Renewal Society of Chicago. She also served as the moderator of the World Council of Church’s Programme to Combat Racism. She is the founding director of the Center for African American Theological Studies.



WALKING WITH THE GOD WHO LOVES US ALL

Congolese layman and pilot agree that African church must continue the conversation

Rukang Chikomb and Dr. Richard Letshu, presenters

PREPARATION

Select a room or location to offer the opportunity for reflection and conversation, and one that has internet access so that you may show and project the video. Be sure to do a run-through to make sure the internet and computer equipment work properly. If this is a group that meets regularly, you may offer everyone the opportunity to preview the video at home prior to coming to the discussion group.

Preview the video and read through the discussion guide and sermon ideas. Review the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality (page 20) for the discussion group or feel free to draft your own or invite the group to create one together.

Gather the following materials:

- At least two translations of the Bible for reading the Scriptures
- A discussion guide for exploring community and cultural norms. Type the following phrases on a single sheet of paper. Have a copy for each person.
 - o What expectations did your family have for your life?
 - o Were you expected to be like an older sibling (i.e., make good grades, excel in sports, be popular)?
 - o What expectations were given to you after high school (college, military, marriage)?
 - o What were some taboo topics in your family?
 - o What were some taboo experiences in your family or community?
 - o If you have moved beyond what was expected, how did you do that? How did that feel?
 - o Who talked to you about sex between a woman and a man? About sex between persons of the same gender?
 - o What are some similarities between your cultural norms and those identified in the video?
 - o What words about sexual experiences or sexual orientation would you like to ban or transform?

THE DISCUSSION SESSION

GET STARTED (10-15 MINUTES)

Welcome everyone to the session. If this is not an ongoing group meeting, invite people (in one or two minutes) to share their first name and what draws them to participate in this “Vital Conversations” group. Share why you have accepted the role of facilitator and your visions for the time together.

If this group meets regularly and new people are present, make them feel welcome. Share why you have accepted the role of facilitator and invite them to say their first name and briefly say what drew them to the conversation. Ask everyone else to introduce themselves. Ask for two volunteers to say why they are in the “Vital Conversations” group.

If necessary, take care of housekeeping matters (location of restrooms, general time frame for the session). Remind the group of its commitment to the Covenant of Care and Confidentiality.

Opening Prayer (use prayer below or have a volunteer to pray)

God, we come together to strengthen our resolve to be your witness in the world. We come with ears open to hear and hearts ready to learn. We acknowledge that we may not be prepared for all that we might hear and may not easily accept all that is placed before us. But we are here. We are here for brothers and sisters we are yet to meet. We are here for family members that we deeply love. We are here for ourselves — seeking wisdom if not understanding. We are your children, God, and we ask you for your guidance. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Name That Belief (10 minutes)

We learned in elementary school that once it was believed that the world was flat. Just for fun, name some things that you once believed or once were taught and have abandoned or no longer hold sacred. Feel free to share an example from personal experience or one of the following:

- If you eat watermelon and crabs in the same meal, you will die.
- If you wash your hair and go outside without it being fully dry, you will catch a terrible cold.
- If you step on a crack in the cement, you will “break your mamma’s back.”

After sharing, say that having vital conversations often ask us to reconsider what we know or what we accept in our lives, offering opportunities to learn or challenge ways of thinking.

VIEW THE VIDEO (13 MINUTES)

Conversation between Rukang Chikomb and Dr. Richard Letshu

First, We Must Listen (5 minutes)

Have a Period of Reflection and Discernment. Invite participants to answer three or more of the following questions:

What was emotional?

What was exciting?

What was the struggle?

What was the pain?

What was the breakthrough?

GATHER AND SHARE (15 MINUTES)

Gather in groups of 3 or 4 persons to talk about their answers to the questions and their response to the video. Ask for a volunteer from each group to answer one of the questions. Call on each group until ideally a response has been shared from each question.

EXPLORE CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY NORMS (15 MINUTES)

Give each member a copy of the paper with questions about cultural and community norms. Next, ask each member of the group to find a partner, preferably someone who was not in their small group. Have the pairs spread apart as much as possible and talk about the questions on the sheet. They do not have to discuss the questions in the order in which they are listed.

- What expectations did your family have for your life?
- Were you expected to be like an older sibling (i.e., make good grades, excel in sports, be popular)?
- What expectations were given to you after high school (college, military, marriage)?
- What were some taboo topics in your family?
- What were some taboo experiences in your family or community?
- If you have moved beyond what was expected, how did you do that? How did that feel?
- Who talked to you about sex between a woman and a man? About sex between persons of the same gender?
- What are some similarities between your cultural norms and those identified in the video?
- What words about sexual experiences or sexual orientation would you like to ban or transform?

Draw these conversations to a close by saying that remembering what we learned and how we learned things keeps us primed for gaining more knowledge.

HEAR THE SCRIPTURE (10 MINUTES)

Ask volunteers to read aloud the Scripture below; encourage use of at least two Bible translations.

Acts 10:1-20 (Cornelius and Peter)

Ask group members to share aloud their thoughts and takeaways from this scripture as they think about the conversation between Rukang Chikomb and Dr. Richard Letshu.

(Optional) **HEAR FROM THE PASTOR (5 MINUTES)**

Share a quote or insight from the sermon starter that was prepared by a clergy person in relation to the video conversation.

CLOSING: RETURN TO LOVE (5 MINUTES)

Read aloud John 3:16 (NRSV): For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Encourage the group to hold on to the truth that each of us and all of us are loved by God. Even when we cannot agree, when see something from a different angle, commit to showing and remembering God's love for all of us.

Share a closing prayer (use the one given here or have a volunteer pray).

“God, we thank you for the opportunity to speak with each other. We thank you for the opportunity to hear the experiences of your people throughout the world. May all our actions be guided by your love. Help us we pray. Amen.

LEGAL RIGHTS AND RESTRICTIONS FOR LGBTQ PERSONS ACROSS AFRICA

An Intercultural Competency Primer

Legal rights are diminishing for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people across the African continent.

Uganda

It's already illegal to be gay in Uganda. If you're found to have had a same-sex relationship, you can expect to spend seven years in prison. But Uganda's anti-gay laws have become even harsher.

In December 2013, the notorious Anti-Homosexuality Bill was passed by Uganda's Parliament. It has lengthened sentences for consensual homosexual sex and extended punishments to those "promoting" homosexuality.

Nigeria

Nigeria already outlaws same-sex relationships. But the conditions of imprisonment have become wider, and the punishment much harsher, since Nigeria's president passed amendments to existing laws in January 2014.

Mozambique

Mozambique recently removed the Portuguese colonial-era laws that criminalized homosexual behavior, removing a clause that outlawed "vices against nature." However, the organization that successfully lobbied the authorities to make the change, Lambda, is still not officially recognized as an NGO.

Where homosexuality is legally punishable by death

Mauritania, Sudan, Northern Nigeria, Southern Somalia

Where homosexuality is illegal

Algeria, Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Comoros, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe

Where homosexuality is legal

Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, South Africa.

From a May 2018 report from Amnesty International UK. See full report at <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/lgbti-lgbt-gay-human-rights-law-africa-uganda-kenya-nigeria-cameroon>.

SERMON STARTER: MEETING GOD AT THE INTERSECTION OF DIVERSE HUMAN EXPERIENCES

Prepared by the Rev. Kalaba Chali

As United Methodists, we approach our faith and Christian discipleship using the Wesley Quadrilateral (tradition, reason, experience, Scripture). While there is a temptation to neglect these four marks, it is the willingness to live with all four in tension that makes us a unique Christian community called United Methodists.

As an African-born clergyperson, I have read several Scriptures through the lenses of others beyond my culture, particularly from theologians from Europe and the United States. However, when we look at Scripture with our full humanity as individuals and a community, our interpretation of isolated passages will be done with one chorus, saying, “God loves all of us equally and God requires us to work for the healing and liberation of ALL.”

How do we reclaim God’s story of healing and liberation for all people? Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a prominent Ghanaian theologian argues that cultural hermeneutics asks the following questions: “How do I understand one’s experience? How does it relate to my context? Who is benefiting from it? Is it just?” The aim of cultural hermeneutics, says Oduyoye, is to let any cultural practice be critiqued from within its own socio-cultural location.

Cultural hermeneutics equips Christians with the tools to look at their own cultural beliefs and practices and to challenge them through the understanding of Scripture. The interpretation and understanding of Scripture is done through the community of believers, especially those who are affected the most by the system or practice. Theology in the context of cultural hermeneutics takes seriously the life experiences of the people and how God uses ALL these experiences to fulfill God’s mission.

Scripture

From Oduyoye’s articulation of cultural hermeneutics, how do we approach Scripture, particularly the debate of human sexuality in our different cultural contexts? What nuances emerge as a result of our individual and collective human experience? How are the practices of human sexuality condemned in the Bible different from one’s sexual orientation?

Read John 3: 16-17 and consider how the love of God invites us not to harm others, but rather bring life to all.

Reason

What does reason (i.e., science) say about human sexuality? [At this point, I recommend playing all or a portion of the video of Mr. Chikomb and Dr. Letshu.] Reason ought to be understood in the context of the common good for all members of society. Kenyan theologian John Mbiti declares, “I am because we are; because we are, therefore, I am.” In other words, I am aware of my existence because I experience the existence of others. The only way I am aware of my own oppression is through my neighbor’s oppression. This is different from Western philosophy, which is based heavily upon one’s singular existence and beliefs. For example, French philosopher René Descartes asserted, “I think, therefore, I am.” In the perspective of Oduyoye, when reason is about self-protecting and self-interests, benefits to the whole of society are often deemed less important.

Tradition

What does Christian tradition say about homosexuality? How has the Church universal dealt with cultural challenges throughout history? The first Christian ecumenical council, recorded in Acts 15 and comprising a debate over circumcision, gives us an example on how to overcome our own debate of human sexuality. As the two groups — Jews and Gentiles, all claiming belief in Christ — struggled to find true common ground on which to strengthen the early church’s ministry, God poured the Holy Spirit upon them. In the same way, God has been pouring the Holy Spirit upon both LGBTQI and straight persons. We need to continue to struggle together.

Experience

What is our experience of marginalizing people in the cultural, socioeconomic, racial, religious and sexual minority? How does this shape and inform the way we read and interpret Scriptures, and particularly cultural issues such as the debate of human sexuality? In his book, *Reading The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes*, the Rev. Dr. Justo Gonzalez reminds us that, when dealing with the poor, the question is not what the Bible says about the poor. Rather, the question for believers is, “What do the poor find in the Bible that is good news for all?” God came to give us life and give it abundantly to ALL people (John 10:10), in our unique and personal experiences so that we can testify collectively to the wonders of God’s creation, God’s mercy and God’s love.

Is there room to live in tension with all four Wesleyan marks?

The challenge with Western school of thought is that we have been trained to think that one of these four tools — Scripture — must be considered infallible. It is helpful to view them as helping us to live in tension with all of them, for when we fully embrace living in tension with Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, we experience some kind of liberation for ourselves and for our neighbors. And God’s will for us becomes clearer as we struggle together in faith.

What does the call from Dr. Richard mean for us today?

In his remarks in the video, Dr. Richard Letshu reminds us that we need not impose our own way, but rather, we need to tell our own stories and listen to the stories of others. When we can seek greater understanding with other Christians with whom we may not agree, what we learn from one another broadens our understanding of God, and humanity.

We are all part of God's family in our ubuntu experience

Engaging in liberation for all people through ubuntu (Xulu for “respecting each one’s humanity) is not about pinpointing those who don’t get it or those who are reluctant. It is about building a communal foundation to support learning and understanding, and supporting a closer walk with God for all. At the core of our being is the reality that we are all humans created in the image of God and members of God’s family, and there is no way to live life abundantly when some members of our community are hurting. In the journey toward ubuntu, faith is like a midwife: offering encouragement, whispering words of courage, reminding us that we have the strength to overcome our difference and learn from each other, and helping us birth to a new and more vibrant faith community and movement for the world.

Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Gaborone, Botswana: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1990.

Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. *Introducing African Women’s Theology*. Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2001.

***The Rev. Kalaba Chali**, who was born in Zambia and raised in the Democratic Republic of Congo, is coordinator of mercy and justice ministries for the Great Plains Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.*



RESOURCES FOR CONVERSATIONS ON HUMAN SEXUALITY AND THE CHURCH

UNITED METHODIST RESOURCES

Renfro, Rob and Walter Fenton, *Are We REALLY Better Together? An Evangelical Perspective on the Division in The UMC* (Nashville, Tenn., Abingdon Press, 2018)

Brian Milford, editor, *Holy Contradictions: What's Next for the People Called United Methodists* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tenn., 2018)

Oliveto, Karen P., *Our Strangely Warmed Hearts. Coming Out into God's Call* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tenn., 2018)

"Being The Church Amid Disagreement, from the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church, as recorded in the 2012 Book of Discipline. (Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tenn., 2012)

Brubaker, Ellen A., *The Bible and Human Sexuality. Claiming God's Good Gift* (United Methodist Women, 2016)

Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality: Toward a Faithful United Methodist Witness, edited and published by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of The United Methodist Church, 2017

OTHER RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Revathi, A. and Nandini Murali, *A Life in Trans Activism* (Zubaan Books, 2016)

De La Torre, Miguel, *A Lily Among the Thorns: Imagining a New Christian Sexuality* (First Edition. Jossey-Bass, 2007)

Chou, Rosalind S. *Asian-American Sexual Politics: The Construction of Race, Gender and Sexuality* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015)

Gilley, Brian Joseph, *Becoming Two-Spirit: Gay Identity and Social Acceptance in Indian Country* (University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

Roscoe, Will, *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

Pinn, Anthony B., et. al., editors, *Creating Ourselves: African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans on Popular Culture and Religious Expression* (Duke University Press Books, 2009).

Jackson, Stevi, Liu Jieyu and Wood Juhyun, editors, *East-Asian Sexualities: Modernity, Gender and New Sexual Cultures* (Zed Books, 2008).

Lewing, Ellen, *Filled with the Spirit: Sexuality, Gender and Radical Inclusivity in a Black Pentecostal Church Coalition* (First Edition, University of Chicago Press, 2018).

Yarhouse, Mark A., *Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors and Friends* (Bethany House Publishers, 2010).

Fukuyama, Francis, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

De La Torre, *Liberating Sexuality: Justice between the Sheets* (Chicago Press, 2016).

Cane, Caly, *Live Through This: Surviving the Intersections of Sexuality, God and Race* (Cleis Press, 2017).

Stephens, Darryl, et. al., *Out of Exodus: A Journey of Open and Affirming Ministry* (Cascade Books, 2018).

Heise, Tammy, *Religion and Native American Assimilation, Resistance and Survival* (Oxford Research Encyclopedias online, November 2017).

Kippley, John F., *Sex and the Marriage Covenant: A Basis for Morality* (Second Edition, Ignatius Press, 2005).

Harbison, Bill and Phil Cramer, *The Fight for Marriage: Church Conflicts and Courtroom* (Parnassus Books, 2018).

Sprinkle, Preston, et. al., editors, *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church* (Counterpoints: Bible and Theology, Zondervan, 2016).

De Young, Kevin, *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* (Crossway, 2015).

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

BISEXUAL: A person whose primary sexual and affectional orientation is toward people of the same and other genders.

CISGENDER: Gender identity, or performance in a gender role, that society deems to match a person's assigned sex at birth. The prefix cis- is from the Latin word meaning, "on this side of," and refers to people who are not transgender or intersex.

COMING OUT: The act of voluntarily making public one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity. ("Being out" means that one is not concealing one's sexual orientation or gender identity.)

CULTURE: A learned set of values, beliefs, customs, norms and perceptions (often unstated, but nonetheless communicated) shared by a group of people that provide a general design for living, a pattern for interpreting life, and the lens through which to interact with and evaluate one's self and other individuals and groups.

CULTURAL HUMILITY: A way to engage people and groups across cultural differences while understanding and acknowledging systems of oppression, including how one's own cultural group might benefit from such oppression. Cultural humility includes a commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, and seeking partnerships with people and groups working to eradicate power differentials at the systemic level.

ETHNICITY: A social construct that divides people into smaller social groups based on characteristics such as shared sense of group membership, values, regional culture, behavioral patterns, language, political and economic interests, history, geographic heritage and ancestry.

GAY/LESBIAN: Describes sexual and affectional orientation toward people of the same gender. **Gay** usually refers to one who identifies as male and who is attracted to other males; **lesbian** usually refers to a person who identifies as female and who is attracted to other females.

GENDER: A social construct used to classify a person as a man, a woman or some other identity. Fundamentally different from the sex one is assigned at birth.

GENDER EXPRESSION: How one expresses oneself, in terms of dress and/or behaviors. Society, including the church, and people who make up society characterize these expressions as "masculine," "feminine" or "androgynous." However, individuals may embody their gender in a multitude of ways and have terms beyond these to name their gender expression(s).

GENDER IDENTITY: A sense of one's self as woman, man or some other identity, which may or may not correspond with the sex one is assigned at birth.

HETEROSEXISM: The assumption that all people are or should be heterosexual. Heterosexism excludes the needs, concerns, lived experiences and reality of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people, and privileges and makes normative the experiences, concerns and experiences of heterosexual people.

HETEROSEXUALITY: Describes a sexual orientation in which a person feels physically/emotionally attracted to people of a gender other than their own.

HOMOSEXUAL/HOMOSEXUALITY: Describes a sexual orientation in which a person feels physically and emotionally attracted to people of the same gender. Some modern activists are moving away from this term as limiting, outdated and historically used to pathologize gay and lesbian people. (Current United Methodist Church law refers only to “the practice of homosexuality,” declaring the practice “incompatible with Christian teaching,” banning ordination of “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” and forbidding clergy to perform same-sex marriage rites.)

INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION: Feeling or expressing fear and self-hate of one’s own identity. This often happens among marginalized people, who learn negative ideas about their racial/cultural/ethnic group/identity groups throughout childhood from the dominant cultures and groups. One form of internalized oppression is the acceptance of the negative myths and stereotypes applied to the oppressed group.

INTERSECTIONALITY: A term coined by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s to describe the way in which multiple systems of oppression interact in the lives of those with multiple marginalized identities (i.e., a woman who is Native American, lesbian and living in poverty in the United States may be affected by sexism, racism, heterosexism and systemic discrimination against the poor).

INTERSEX: Describes the experience of naturally (that is, without any medical intervention) developing primary or secondary sex characteristics that do not fit neatly into society’s definitions of male or female. Many visibly intersex people were born with male and female sexual organs, but were assigned in infancy and early childhood by doctors to make the individual’s sex characteristics conform to society’s idea of what “normal” bodies should look like. (“Hermaphrodite” is an outdated and inaccurate term that has been used to describe intersex people in the past.)

LGBTQ: Abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and an umbrella term that is often used to refer to these persons as a whole community.

ORIENTATION: Orientation is one’s attraction or non-attraction to other people. An individual’s orientation can be fluid, and people may use a variety of labels to describe their orientation. Some – but not all – types of attraction or orientation include romantic, sexual, sensual, aesthetic, intellectual and platonic.

QUEER: Historically, “queer” has been used as a slur against people whose gender, gender expression or sexuality does not conform to dominant expectations. Some people have reclaimed the word queer as a celebration of not fitting into norms/being “abnormal.”

QUESTIONING: The process of exploring one's own gender identity, gender expression and/or sexual orientation. Some people may also use this term to name their identity within the LGBTQ community.

RACE: Traditionally refers to a person's physical characteristics, such as bone structure, skin color, hair texture and color, or eye color. The actual scientific study shows that racial genetic difference is weak, except in skin color. However, those perceived distinctions have been used to justify dominance of one race over another in nations around the world, and so racism is real and pervasive. (Race differs from ethnicity; one's race may be white, for instance, while one's ethnicity may be German, English, Russian and so forth.)

RACISM: Any idea, attitude, action or institutional practice backed up by institutional power that subordinates people because of their color. This includes imposition of one group's racial culture in such a way as to withhold respect for, demean, criminalize or destroy the culture of other races.

SEX: A medically constructed categorization. Sex is often assigned by medical professionals or parents (either in ultrasound or at birth) based on the appearance of the child's genitalia.

SEXISM: The cultural, institutional and individual beliefs and practices that privilege men, subordinate women and devalue ways of being that are associated with women.

SEXUALITY: The components of a person that include their biological sex, sexual orientation, gender identity and sexual practices.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION: Describes emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction – or non-attraction – to other people.

STEREOTYPE: An oversimplified generalization about a particular group, race, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, age and so forth, which usually carries a negative and derogatory implication.

TRANSGENDER: Adjective (frequently abbreviated to "trans") that describes a range of identities and experiences of people whose gender identity and/or expression differs from conventional expectations based on their assigned sex at birth. Not all trans people undergo medical transition (surgery or hormones).

TWO SPIRIT: From the Ojibwe phrase *niizh manidoowag*, this describes the place of gay men in Native society in the 18th and early 19th centuries, according to some anthropological and historical research. The phrase came into wider usage among indigenous people in North America after a 1990 meeting of men, women and transgender people from various tribes in Winnipeg, Canada, in which participants sought to create a term to unite the LGBTQ Native community. "For me, the term 'two spirit' resists a Western definition of who we are and what we should be. Two spirit [people] are integral to the struggle of undoing the impacts of historical trauma, because our roles in tribes historically were part of the traditions taken away from us with Westernization." - Zachary Pullin (Chippewa Cree), May/June 2014 "Issues of Native Peoples."

NOTES:

LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK!

We invite you to share your thoughts and feedback about this resource to help GCORR improve our products and services.

Provide your feedback on Vital Conversations 4 here:

<http://bit.ly/VC4survey>

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RELIGION & RACE

The United Methodist Church