

RECONCILING CONGREGATION: A DISCERNMENT EVENT

The Packet

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Reconciling Congregation: A Discernment Event

The Packet

This event has been designed for use in a local church. It has been written so that it may be used as it is to plan for and to hold an event. It may also be adapted to fit the needs of a particular situation. Feel free to adapt questions and instructions to fit your particular needs.

Included in the packet are 1) some general instructions for the leadership, 2) a basic agenda, 3) a detailed agenda, 4) Supplement A - Communal Discernment, 5) Supplement B - "A Collage of Images", 6) Supplement C - A Case Study, 7) Supplement D - "Reason": some facts about homosexuality, and 8) a bibliography.

If you have questions about using the packet feel free to contact Affirmation.

Purpose of the Event

The purpose of this event is to provide an opportunity for a local congregation to consider the church's concern in relation to homosexuality and whether the church should respond to the concern by becoming a Reconciling Congregation.

At the end of the event, the participants should

1. know/be clear about their conclusions from the experience
2. know/be clear about a group consensus or direction from the experience
3. have a recommendation on the Reconciling Church program to take to the administrative body of the congregation

A major part of the methodology for this event is discernment. The choice of this process means that the event is one which is guided by God, which does not presume participants will accept one particular viewpoint, and which is holy by reason of The Spirit's participation.

Who should participate

This event is designed for a group of 15 to 20 people. This figure should include two to three leaders, three to five gay men and lesbians, and 12 to 15 persons from the local church.

Each person involved should have a desire to participate and should commit himself or herself to be present for the entire

event. This commitment is crucial for each individual involved. Be sure that participants understand this commitment.

It may be helpful for participants to receive a letter explaining the history of the local church's involvement in planning the event, the church's expectations, and the purpose of the event. This letter could also include the schedule and the commitment each participant is asked to make.

Leadership

A team of two or three leaders would be ideal for this event. It is best if the leadership comes from within the congregation. If outside persons are brought in, it is best if they are a part of a team which includes some persons from the congregation.

It is important for the leaders to have integrated their own feelings/opinions about the concern of homosexuality. They will be the key resource persons in situations which may involve both internal and external emotion and conflict.

It is important for the leadership to have an understanding of the purpose of the event and to prepare adequately for leading by becoming familiar with the suggested agenda and content. The leaders may want to read some resources on group discernment in preparation for the weekend. A list of readings is included in the discernment segment of the packet (Supplement A). An adequate understanding of the discernment process will be important for the leaders.

The setting and atmosphere of the event is crucial and prepared leaders will be integral in its creation. The atmosphere should be one of openness to exploration and loving acceptance. The leadership style should promote affirming and listening to those who are different rather than arguing and attempting to change others. Leaders should inspire trust among the participants and the leaders should be willing to share their own questions and uncertainties during the event.

Gay Men and Lesbians as Resource People

It will be very important to include gay men and lesbian women as resource persons in the event. It is strongly recommended that these persons be included as participants for the entire event.

Who to invite: It would be helpful to include three to five Christian gay men and lesbians to represent the variety of experiences which are a part of the gay/lesbian culture. The best situation would be if you have gay men or lesbians who are part of your church and who would be willing to participate. It is helpful

to have gay men and lesbians who are familiar with the United Methodist Church. (Affirmation may be able to help you find people in your area who could serve as resource persons.)

Preparation: Share the schedule with the resource persons and make sure they understand their role - to be participants in the event with special input on Saturday morning. For the Saturday morning input, have them think about the following topics: their life as a gay man or lesbian; their relationship with God and their faith struggles; how the church has affected them; their struggles with the church; their hopes, joys, and fears as ordinary persons.

Note: Sharing in this fashion may be a frightening thing for people. Remember to be sensitive to this fact and be available for support of the resource persons in their initial time of orientation on Friday night. It is especially important to help folks get acquainted if the resource persons are newcomers to your congregation.

Since the gay/lesbian persons are participants in the event, it is recommended that they be introduced as participants on Friday night and that the sharing of their sexual orientation be left, at that time to their individual discretion. Saturday morning, they should be introduced as gay/lesbian people who bring the resources of their lives.

Worship for the event

There are several times during the event when a worship experience is appropriate: Friday night, 9:30; Saturday morning, 9:00; and Saturday afternoon, 4:30.

It would be helpful for these to be planned ahead of time by the leaders or by another participant in the event. These times of worship may be special times of sharing for the group. Music may add warmth to the worship experiences as well as to the event as a whole.

Introduction to the Input Segment - The Wesleyan Way of Theology

United Methodists are blessed by the Wesleyan Way of Theology (the Wesleyan Quadrilateral) as a "balance of power" for our Christian living and learning. The section on Content (Saturday morning) has been loosely structured around this model. Reason comes in the form of a handout to be given to participants on Friday evening and read prior to the Saturday morning session. Experience comes both in the sharing of the stories of gay men and lesbians with other participants and in the experience of another church with the concern as described in the Case Study. Scripture and Tradition are brought in the form of the "Collage of Images."

AGENDAFriday Night

- 6:30 p.m. Gathering
- 7:30 p.m. Introduction
Agenda
Centering Activities
Discernment as a Process
- 8:00 p.m. Placing ourselves in the Context: Personal Experience
- 9:30 p.m. Closing Worship

Saturday Morning

- 8:30 a.m. Informal Fellowship - tea, coffee, light snack
- 9:00 a.m. Devotion
- 9:15 a.m. Input from Experience: The stories of Gay Men and Lesbians
- 10:30 a.m. Break
- 10:45 a.m. Input from Scripture and Tradition:
A Collage of Images
A Case Study
- 12:30 p.m. Lunch - a time for sustenance and conversation
- 2:00 p.m. Dialogue for Action: A process of Discernment
Individual Assessment
Group Assessment
Plan for Action
- 4:30 p.m. Closing Worship

Detailed Agenda

Friday evening:

6:30 Gathering - Depending on what is appropriate for your group, this could include making name tags, greeting one another, registration, etc. Provide hot water for coffee and tea and a bowl of fresh fruit for snacks.

7:00 Introduction

A. Event

1. Welcome everyone and begin with a short prayer.
2. Introduce the leaders for the event.
3. State the purpose of the event.
For example: "We have gathered here this weekend in order to consider whether this church should become a Reconciling Congregation. We have been instructed by our Council on Ministries (or insert the name of your church's administrative body) to consider the concerns and bring back to them a recommendation on how they should proceed. We come to the event with open minds and hearts and with an openness to discernment of God's will for our congregation."
4. Commitment and Expectations - the leader(s) should list his or her expectations for the event. The leaders should begin the list and have participants add their own responses. For example:
 - a. Each person agrees to participate in the entire event.
 - b. Each person agrees to listen to what others are really saying, refraining from judgment.
 - c. Each person agrees to. . .
5. Assumptions that are a part of the design (i.e. held by the designer of the event):
 - a. That people who are present have made a commitment truly to struggle with the concerns in a spirit of openness and integrity
 - b. That God's Spirit works in periods of silence and discernment
 - c. That individuals may discern God's calling for this church whatever that calling may be. (The designer is not assuming that the group will come out a particular way.)

6. Ask the group to share their assumptions.
- B. Discernment as a part of the process (see Supplement A)
1. What is discernment?
 2. The importance of discernment as a part of the process.
 3. The way discernment will be used.
- C. Centering Activities - Lead the group in activities which aid in centering and group building. (Centering is a process of turning inward and clearing one's mind of unnecessary thoughts.) For example:
1. Have five minutes of silence in which persons imagine themselves cleaning out their minds of unnecessary thoughts and throwing this clutter away.
 2. For a group in which persons already know each other: In groups of five to six, ask each person to share a recent significant event in their life, and what has led them to participate in the event.
 3. For a group in which persons do not know each other: In groups of five to six, ask each person to share their name, one thing they would really like persons to know about them, and what has led them to participate in the event.

8:00 Placing ourselves in the context: Personal Experience

- A. Individually (10 min.) and then in small groups of three to four (15 min.), answer the following questions: (While persons are working, a leader may want to write the questions on newsprint or a chalkboard.)
1. What are the images which come to my mind when someone brings up the topic of homosexuality?
 2. What are the feelings it raises in me?
 3. What is my biggest fear about this event?
 4. What is one hope that I have for the outcome of this event?
 5. Do I know any homosexual persons? If I do, what are several words which describe them?
- B. Individually (5 min.) and in small groups of three-four (10 min.), answer the following questions:

1. Look at this continuum and place an X where you see your understanding of what the Bible is.

The Bible is a history/story book	Scripture is rightly read and understood within the believing community and its in- terpretation is in- formed by the tradi- tions of that community	The Bible is the infalli- ble word of God
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The Discipline

2. What do you think the Bible says about homosexuality?
- C. Individually (5 min.) and in small groups of three-four (10 min.) answer the following questions:
1. On a sheet of paper draw a circle representing your world and mark the paper where you see the United Methodist Church, your local church, and the universal church.
 2. Mark on the paper where you see United Methodist lesbians and gay men.
- D. In the total group, list on newsprint or chalkboard the sharings from the groups. Make a list from each question of common themes or learnings.
- E. End with a five-minute period of silence. The leader may say, "Let us be silent for five minutes. Calm down your thoughts and imagine yourself opening up to that still, small voice of God. Are there things that you have become aware of tonight? Are there feelings that you need to tag to give attention to later? Do some listening to your own inner voice and the voice of God in you."

9:30 Closing

- A. End the evening with a short liturgy or song and prayer together.
- B. Housekeeping
 1. Before people leave, pass out the "Reason" sheet of facts for them to read before the next morning. (See Supplement D)
 2. Find five volunteers to read "A Collge of Images" to be presented Saturday morning. Give them each a copy so that they can prepare. (See Supplement B)

3. Remind people what time things begin the next morning.

Saturday morning:

8:30 Informal fellowship - As people are gathering, provide tea, donuts or bagels, and coffee.

9:00 Devotion/Meditation

Begin with a short time of meditation, prayer, or centering. Prepare or invite another participant to prepare a short reading or scripture on which to meditate.

9:15 Input from Experience: The stories of Gay Men and Lesbians

Introduce the resource persons. Some people should already know them since they participated in the previous session. The resource persons should have prepared short story about themselves. Things they may include are:

1. storytelling about their lives.
2. their relationship with God.
3. their struggles with the church.
4. their hopes, joys, and fears as human beings.

The resource persons should allow time for questions from the group. (Storytelling and sharing - 45 min., questions - 30 min.)

10:30 Break

10:45 Input from Scripture and Tradition: A Collage of Images

(See Supplement B for instructions on use of the "Collage of Images")

11:00 A Case Study

Move directly from the Collage into the Case Study. You may find the Case Study and instructions for its use in the packet. (See Supplement C)

End the session with a five minute period of silence. Ask people to meditate on what they have heard and identify feelings and thoughts which have surfaced. Close with a prayer of thanksgiving and discernment.

12:30 Lunch - a time for sustenance and conversation

It may be helpful to provide simple sandwich makings for folks to eat at the site. Encourage relaxation and reflection.

2:00 Dialogue for Action: A process of Discernment (See Supplement D)

A. Individual assessment

1. Discuss in small groups the following questions: (10 min.)
 - a. What are my reactions to what has happened?
 - b. What are my feelings?
 - c. What questions do I have?
 - d. What conflicts does it raise?
2. Take five minutes to center and then consider prayerfully and silently: (30 min.)
 - a. What, if anything, is God saying to me, to us now? Attempt to listen for God's voice and to screen out feelings and expectations which may drown out God's voice.
 - b. Ask the question, "Is God moving this congregation to action of any sort? to more study? to more input? to any decision?"

B. Group assessment

1. Share together in groups of six to eight:
 - a. What has come out of my meditation?
 - b. What happened?
 - c. What did I hear?
2. Silently consider what people have shared. During the silence ask yourself: (5 min.)
 - a. Are there elements which seem to be a common thread?
 - b. Are there directions which seem to be emerging as God's calling for us?
3. Share in the small group any learnings from the short silence.
4. Share in the total group what has come from the reflection in small groups.

C. Plan for Action

1. Ask the following questions:
 - a. Are there any conclusions which may be drawn for this congregation at this time?
 - b. What is the next step for us?
 - c. Is there a clear direction for us? (If there is not a clear direction, it could be that more time for discernment is needed.)

2. Possible next steps could include:
 - a. A recommendation to the Administrative body of the congregation concerning the Reconciling Congregation program.
 - b. The writing of a Covenant
 - c. Further study for this group, this church.
 - d. Planning a ministry with gay men and lesbians or their families.
 - e. Offering this experience to other congregations.

This planning for action is a totally open-ended process. The leaders will need to be sensitive to where the group is and provide whatever guidance or encouragement is needed. Take whatever time is needed to achieve an understanding of the direction(s) to go.

4:30 Closing Worship

End the event with a simple liturgy. Include time for expressions of evaluation, thanksgiving, and people's important insights and learnings.

Supplement A: Communal Discernment

A definition: Communal discernment of God's will means "a process undertaken by a community as a community for the purpose of judging what God is calling that community to do." (Jules J. Toner, "A Method for Communal Discernment of God's Will," 1971.)

I have chosen this methodology to be a part of the event because it reflects both the serious nature of the discussion of homosexuality and the community's commitment to struggle with this sometimes difficult and emotional subject.

The methodology, in the form of silence and reflection among members of the group, has been built into the schedule of the event. It would be helpful for the leaders to spend time studying discernment. You can find a list of resources at the end of this Supplement. It will also be important for participants to understand discernment so that they may utilize it throughout the event.

It is important for the process that participants have a "Freedom of Spirit." "Freedom of Spirit" means being open, listening to God, and trying to put aside preconceived opinions and definitions about homosexuality. Success depends on:

1. Desire of the participants to do God's Will, whatever it is, before knowing it;
2. Their trust in God and in one another, and thus their commitment of themselves beforehand to the decision that will be reached;
3. Their readiness to give all the time and energy that are needed and possible to give;
4. Freedom from prejudgments of the issue.

(Toner, "Method," p. iii)

The method uses a combination of individual reflection and sharing of learnings in the group. 1. Individual reflection. A discernment process begins with the centering of the individual. Centering, turning inward, clearing one's mind of unnecessary thoughts, is a crucial first step. When a person is centered, then they may reflect upon the questions which are asked. They should continually be asking, "What is it that God is calling forth in me at this time?" 2. Group reflection. After times of individual silent reflection, the next step is group reflection. Individuals share what happened during their silent time. They should try to be alert to what is God's voice and what may be their own inner expectations surfacing. After each individual person has shared, then there may be

dialogue on what has come forth (dialogue, rather than debate, is the more appropriate method for this section).

3. Refinement. This process of refining continues as individual reflection is followed by sharing, by group reflection, and by individual reflection until there seems to be consensus developing in the process.

Important pieces of discernment include listening carefully to God and to other persons, refraining from judgment of what surfaces for individuals, an openness of heart in each person, a readiness to speak, and a trust of the process.

Readings on discernment include:

Futrell, John Carroll, S.J. Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience. Vol. 4, No. 5. St. Louis: American Assistancy Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality, November, 1972.

Larkey, Ernest. Silent Presence: Discernment at a Process and Problem. Dimension Books, 1981.

Orsy, Ladislav, S.J. Toward a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment. Vol. 5, No. 5. St. Louis: American Assistancy Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality, October, 1975.

Toner, Jules J., S.J. "A Method For Communal Discernment of God's Will." Copyright, 1971, by the American Assistancy Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality, Fusz Memorial, St. Louis University, 3700 West Pine Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63108.

Supplement B: "A Collage of Images"

Instructions for Collage:

This "Collage of Images" is written for five people. Readers may be either male or female. It may be helpful to ask one of the gay/lesbian participants to read one of the parts so that the resource persons may be seen as participants within the event. Assign parts and pass out copies of the readings on Friday night so that persons may have opportunity to prepare. Encourage the "cast" to meet and rehearse the reading. Remind the readers to speak slowly and clearly enough to be understood by the group. At the 10:30 break on Saturday morning, arrange five chairs for the readers. Make sure that each reader can be seen and heard.

A Collage of Images

Reader 1: "And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? How do you read?' And he answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have answered right; do this, and you will live.' But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" Luke 10:25-29

Reader 5: "Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth, who need the ministry and guidance of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship which enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self." Discipline, para. 71f

Reader 4: "I went back and forth between the Christian community and the lesbian feminist community. I was never totally satisfied with either. The Christian community offered truth and some sense of direction. The lesbian feminist community offered support, love, and a deep caring for one another. . . . There is a deeper sense of community in the (secular) women's movement than there is in the church. . . . the Christian community seems to be more concerned with a respectable appearance than acting with compassion and responsibility. The church is not reaching out in love, it is erecting steel barricades." anonymous lesbian¹ who is studying to enter active Christian service

Reader 2: "So-called gay folks (would) just as soon kill you as look at you." Jerry Falwell, 1977²

Reader 5: "Homosexuality is that mark of Cain, of a godless and soulless culture which is sick to the core." Fascist pamphlet, Nazi Germany³

Reader 4: "Question 17: 'Does this Conference acknowledge that slavery is contrary to the law of God, man, and nature and hurtful to society?' Answer: 'Yes'"
Baltimore 1780 General Conference⁴

Reader 3: "I strike at the root of this complicated villainy. I absolutely deny all slave holding to be consistent with any degree of Natural justice. . . . much less is it possible that any child of (humanity) should ever be born a slave. Liberty is the right of any human creature as soon as he (or she) breathes the vital air and no human can deprive (a person) of the right." John Wesley⁵