

HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH:
A Structured Dialogue for Parishes and Other Communities

A RESOURCE BOOK

FORWARD TO THIS EDITION

This edition comes to its readers directly from the collaboration of the eight participants and two facilitators who were involved in the pilot dialogue on *Homosexuality and the Episcopal Church* sponsored by Bishop Thomas Shaw, Diocese of Massachusetts, in 1998, in collaboration with Essential Partners. This text outlines a structured conversation about sensitive and divisive topics that requires much of those who participate in it and offers much in return.

The intended audiences of this material are those who are considering convening, organizing and/or facilitating a dialogue on this topic along the lines presented in this text.

The authors are committed to the overall design which represents the best of what was tested in the pilot as well as improvements inspired by what worked less than well. However, minor changes in content, and significant changes in packaging, will be entertained on behalf of future users.

If this text falls into your hands, your prompt feedback is welcome. Please send your comments and suggestions to Essential Partners, Phone: 617-923-1216, Email: info@whatisessential.org.

The coordinators and editors of this draft acknowledge the committed and constructive participation of the eight participants in the pilot dialogue without whom this text would not have come into being.

OVERVIEW

PROGRAM

This program provides the resources for a facilitated dialogue among a small group of Christians who share a commitment to communicating respectfully and honestly with one another about the very divisive issue of homosexuality and faithful Christian living.

The goals of the dialogue are:

- to explore honest and heartfelt differences about homosexuality;
- to deepen mutual understanding;
- to increase individual and collective capacity to speak honestly with humility and listen deeply with respect;
- to generate fresh thinking about how we can remain in community despite our differences.

To reach these goals, participants will be asked to abide by a set of guidelines which experience has shown promote a safe, respectful atmosphere in which authentic speaking, receptive listening, and increased understanding can take place. Participants in this dialogue will not be asked to “agree” with what anyone else says about the matters under discussion or to change their minds about any of their views.

PARTICIPATION AND GROUND RULES

The conversation is designed for a balanced group of individuals who strongly hold differing perspectives about the issues and have:

- an ability to be a good listener;
- a commitment to learning about perspectives different from their own;
- an ability to maintain the confidentiality of the conversation and the anonymity of the other participants;
- an ability and willingness to abide by agreed-on ground rules;
- sufficient autonomy to speak as an individual and to explore new thoughts and ideas, rather than acting on behalf of a ‘side’, an organization, or a constituency;
- a commitment to participate fully in the conversation – attending all the sessions, and doing such preparation and follow-up as is necessary for each.

The success of the dialogue hinges on the participants’ commitment to communicate constructively. Participants are asked to abide by a set of ground rules.

Ground Rules

- Seek understanding. Avoid persuasion;
- Use respectful language. Avoid disrespectful language;
- Speak to the particular individuals in the room. Avoid stereotypes;
- Express strong feelings in ways that promote contact and learning. Avoid words likely to raise listeners’ defenses or increase antagonism and misunderstanding;
- Listen attentively and actively seek to understand all speakers, regardless of their views. Avoid making assumptions about their beliefs or motives or rehearsing a rebuttal while “listening”.

Some of these communication ground rules can be difficult to follow. They are not “natural” for most of us. They require participants to slow down the conversation, search for new ways to present ideas and concerns, ask genuine questions of people with different views, and sometimes bite their tongues. A commitment to remain faithful to them has proven to be essential to creating and maintaining the safe and respectful atmosphere needed for a successful conversation.

DESIGN

A series of five meetings over ten weeks is proposed. The conversation is designed for a group of eight persons, two sets of four sharing similar perspectives, facilitated by two experienced facilitators. The first meeting is designed for a full day, the following four, for three hours. A day long version of the final meeting is included for groups that want to consider taking collective as well as individual follow-up steps.

Since community building is essential to the development of trust, getting to know one another in the first meeting and continuing to ‘touch base’ is critical to the success of the program. Planning to do the initial part of each meeting over a meal will enhance the process.

Meeting #1: Faith, Experience, Participation in this Dialogue

Morning Goals:

- 1) to begin building mutual understanding and trust;
- 2) to orient the participants to the program and its facilitation;
- 3) to begin the dialogue.

Afternoon Goals:

- 1) to practice dialogue skills;
- 2) to approach the topic of the dialogue;
- 3) to identify what participants wish to understand about one another.

Meeting #2: Deepening Mutual Understanding and Bridging to Scripture

Goals:

- 1) to continue the dialogue by responding to questions raised in Meeting #1;
- 2) to prepare for a dialogue about Scripture.

Meeting #3: Approaches to Scripture

Goals:

- 1) to continue the dialogue by discussion of Scripture;
- 2) to continue the conversation about sexuality and homosexuality begun in Meeting #1;
- 3) to consider the teachings of the faith regarding sexuality in everyday life.

Meeting #4: Scriptures, Faith, Sexuality and Homosexuality

Goal:

- 1) to continue the conversation about sexuality and homosexuality in the context of participants' faith and their views about Scripture and the church.

Meeting #5: Toward a More Christian Community; Harvesting the Fruits and Ending the Dialogue

Goals:

- 1) to focus and distill what the group has learned during this dialogue;
- 2) to sort out the implications of these learnings for other contexts;
- 3) to identify ways in which individuals intend to reap the fruits of the dialogue in the world;
- 4) to bring the dialogue to a meaningful close.

Additional goals for the day-long version of this meeting include:

- 1) to identify ways the group as a whole or a balanced subgroup can share the fruits of the dialogue with others;
- 2) to develop plans to do this.

STANDARD FORMAT FOR MOST MEETINGS

Orientation

Welcome and brief run through the goals and broad outline of the agenda. [5 minutes]

Touching Base

This is time for participants to connect personally. It can be more or less formal, more or less structured, as long as each person has a roughly equal chance to speak. Having this section take place during a meal or refreshments is highly desirable, especially at the first meeting. [30 minutes]

Prayer

A brief prayer is said or led by a different participant each time. [5 minutes]

Agenda, Organization and Resources

During this time the agenda is revisited in more detail, logistics are handled and handouts are distributed. [10 minutes]

Dialogue

This is the heart of each meeting. Attention turns to the carefully prepared discussion topic and a thoughtful sequence focuses and moves the conversation along. Although the overall sequence of issues and the framework for their consideration is established in advance and some starter questions are provided, participants are encouraged to raise their own questions about each session's topics. By filling the flexible interior of the structures provided with their questions and reflections, participants put their collective fingerprint on each dialogue giving it its own unique direction and texture. [1 hour and 45 minutes]

Feedback about The Meeting

This is a time for participants to say what worked and what was problematic about how the meeting went and to make suggestions for the conduct of the next one. [10 minutes]

Closing Sentence, Phrase or Metaphor

This is a time for those who want to punctuate the end of the dialogue section with a few words to say them. [5 minutes]

Closing Business: Questions and Assignments for Next Meeting

Closing business includes revisiting confidentiality, recruiting two people to lead the prayers at the following meeting, distributing preparatory readings and questions for reflection, and the logistics of between-meeting planning, if any is needed. [10 minutes]

Closing Prayer

A brief prayer is said or led by a different participant each time. [5 minutes]

A detailed description of the five meeting plans follows.

MEETING #1: FAITH, EXPERIENCE AND JOINING THIS DIALOGUE

MORNING SESSION

- Goals:
 - To begin building mutual understanding and trust;
 - To orient the participants to the program and its facilitation
 - To begin the dialogue

ORIENTATION [20]

- Welcome and Goals
- Overview of First Meeting
- Laying the foundation for Dialogue: Commitment to Process and Each Other
- Confidentiality

PRAYER [5]

TOUCHING BASE: INTRODUCTIONS [25]

[3 minutes each]

What would you like us to understand about who and where you are in your life as we begin this dialogue?

AGENDA, ORGANIZATION AND RESOURCES [20']

- Overview of Meeting Series and 'The Arts of Dialogue'
- Listening for Understanding and Resonance
- The facilitators' role
- Note taking and its uses [introduce pads here]

DIALOGUE

What Do Your Bring Here? Part I[An invitation to respond to some of the following:]

Why are you here?

What hopes do you have for our time together?

What personal resources-traits, skills or experiences do you bring that you are likely to draw on during the dialogue?

What concerns or fears did you have to overcome in order to be here, or do you bring with you that you would be willing to mention? [3 minutes]

Go round [3' each = 30']

Questions of Clarification [10]

What Do You Bring Here? Part II

Share a story from your life experience that might help us to understand:
how your faith sustains you *or*

how your Christian commitments guide you or manifest themselves in your life (unrelated to the issue of homosexuality)? *or*

how your participation in this dialogue reflects your faith?

[5' introduction and preparation + 3' each = 30']
Questions of Clarification [15]

CLOSING PRAYER 5'

TIME: 3 HOURS

LUNCH 60

AFTERNOON SESSION: Faith , Convictions, and Questions

- Goals:
To practice dialogue skills;
To approach the topic of the dialogue;
To identify what participants wish to understand better about one another.

ORIENTATION [5]
Share goals for the afternoon

PRAYER [5]

AGENDA, ORGANIZATION AND RESOURCES [5]
Listening for Understanding and Resonance [a reminder
Using the two-column tablets [a reminder

DIALOGUE: APPROACHING THE HEART OF THE MATTER [90]

First Go Round

Can you tell us about a personal experience that you connect to your involvement with the issues we are here to discuss? [3 minutes] [30']

Second Go Round

What is the core of your perspective - what are the bedrock convictions that frame or capture your engagement with the issue of homosexuality and the church? What is the heart of the matter for you? [3 minutes] [30']

BREAK [5]

Third Go Round

Do you experience any mixed feelings, value conflicts, uncertainties, or gray areas or dilemmas within your overall perspective on this issue that you are willing to mention? [3 minutes] [30']

QUESTIONS OF CLARIFICATION [20]

PERIOD FOR PRIVATE REFLECTION [20]

Handout: "Asking Constructive Questions"
Develop one question for each other participant that you hope he or she will reflect on and respond to next time.

EXCHANGE OF QUESTIONS [60]

Each person reads the seven questions they have developed, one for each other participant in the dialogue

CLOSING SENTENCES, PHRASES OR METAPHORS [5]

FEEDBACK ABOUT THE DAY AND CLOSING BUSINESS [10]
REVISIT CONFIDENTIALITY

FOR NEXT TIME

Reflect on the seven questions you were asked. Focus your reflections into a 5 minute response to share next time.

CLOSING PRAYER [5]

Total time = 4 hours

MEETING 2 DEEPENING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND BRIDGING TO SCRIPTURE

4 PART OPENING SEQUENCE [45]

Meetings 2-5 will begin with a four part 45 minute sequence of Orientation, Prayer, Touch Base and Agenda, Organization and Resources which is not spelled out here to keep it simple.

DIALOGUE: RESPONDING TO ONE ANOTHER'S QUESTIONS

Go round of responses to one another's questions [5]+ breathing time between=45]

Opportunity for clarification, amplification, sharing of: surprises; matters better understood or of particular interest; common themes, shared experiences or values discerned; and fresh questions as a preface to more organic discussion as time and group readiness permit. This section could end with an invitation to identify one way this conversation enriched each person's understanding of what participants share and where and how they differ. [35]

BREAK [10]

BUILDING A BRIDGE TO THE SCRIPTURES

• Time for Personal Reflection[15]

Read handout sheet citing two passages of scripture and a list of starter questions.

Read the questions on this list through the lens of tonight's conversation. Which strikes you as the most promising catalyst for further deepening mutual understanding? What question would you add or prefer?

Consider the questions on the list as well as those that arise in your own mind and select one to propose one for the group's consideration.

• Group creates a list of eight questions for everyone to reflect on before the next meeting. [15]

USUAL CLOSING [25]

Meetings 2-4 will end with a sequence of: 1) Opportunity for final metaphors, phrases or sentences. 2) Feedback about the meeting and suggestions for facilitation of future one; 3) group business; 4) closing prayer.

Total time = 3 hours

For Next Time

Read the two designated passages of scripture and be prepared to speak about:

What meaning does it have for me? How does it speak to me? How does each passage connect with my life? How does it effect how I think and how I live my life?

How do I deal with this passage? What do I bring to my reading of it? Where do I begin? How do I proceed? What are the defining moments in my engagement with it?

Bring your Bible.

MEETING 3 APPROACHES TO SCRIPTURE

USUAL STARTING SEQUENCE [45]

DIALOGUE

- **Read two agreed on passages aloud [5]**

- **Go-round 3' [25]**

What meaning does it have for me? How does it speak to me? How does each passage connect with my life? How does it effect how I think and how I live my life?

How do I deal with this passage? What do I bring to my reading of it? Where do I start? How do I proceed? What are the defining moments in my engagement with it?

- **Questions of clarification** followed by a dialogue that takes off from what has just been shared and is informed by collective awareness of the questions generated by participants last time. A 10 minute break can be taken somewhere in the middle.[50]

The dialogue is an opportunity for clarification, amplification, sharing of: surprises, matters better understood or of particular interest, common themes or shared experiences or values discerned, and fresh questions as a preface to more organic discussion as time and group readiness permit. This section could end with an opportunity to identify one way this conversation enriched each person's understanding of what participants share and where and how they differ. [35]

PREPARING FOR THE NEXT MEETING

- Handout sheet a list of starter questions about scripture, sexuality and homosexuality. [5]

Starter Questions: A Handout

What is your relationship between your faith, your relationship with scripture and your view about sexuality and homosexuality?

What is your ideal of a Christian sexual relationship? What are the sources of your ideal?

- Time for Personal Reflection[15]

Keeping tonight's conversation and the topics of the next meeting in mind, what question strikes you as the most promising catalyst for further deepening mutual understanding?

What do you most want to learn in a conversation about sexuality and homosexuality in the context of faith, scripture and the church? What question might elicit what you want to learn? What do you most want others to ask you?

Consider the questions on the list as well as those that arise in your own mind and select one to propose one for the group's consideration.

- Participants generate a list of eight questions for everyone to reflect on before the next meeting. [15]

USUAL ENDING SEQUENCE =25

Total time = 4 hours

FOR NEXT TIME

Reflect on the questions on the list put together by the group.

What do you most want to learn about others' views about sexuality and homosexuality in the context of their faith, their views about scripture and the church?

What do you want others to understand about your views about sexuality and homosexuality in the context of you faith, your views about scripture and the church?

Begin reflecting on what have you learned from your participation in this dialogue about "how we can remain in Christian community despite our differences?"

MEETING 4 SCRIPTURES, FAITH, SEXUALITY AND HOMOSEXUALITY

USUAL STARTING SEQUENCE [45]

DIALOGUE

Go-round 3'=25+5=30

What do you want us to understand about your views about sexuality and homosexuality in the context of your faith and your views about scripture and the church?

Response and Conversation

Opportunity for questions of clarification, followed by amplification of views, sharing of: surprises, matters better understood or of particular interest, common themes and shared experiences or values discerned, and fresh questions as a preface to more organic discussion as time and group readiness permit. This section could end with an opportunity to identify one way this conversation enriched each person's understanding of what participants share and where and how they differ. [80] This time includes a ten minute break somewhere in the middle of this conversation.

USUAL ENDING SEQUENCE =25

TOTAL TIME=3.0 hours

FOR NEXT TIME:

What have you learned from your participation in this dialogue about "how we (persons in context X) can remain in Christian community despite our differences?" [3]=30]

What have been the "fruits" of this dialogue for you as an individual? How will you bear witness to these "fruits" in the days ahead?

If ending with the seven hour version add:

If this group were charged with designing a 'big tent' within which the eight of you could sit with safety and integrity what would you propose for your first set of blueprints? What are the leading elements of your vision? What challenges does your first draft need to address? What resources have you become aware of that you can draw on in addressing these challenges? [60]

What have you learned from your participation in this dialogue about how persons in X (a relevant context) "can remain in Christian community despite our differences?"

What ideas do you have about how you collectively might bear witness or share the fruits of your time together with X (relevant context(s))?

MEETING 5 TOWARDS A MORE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY: HARVESTING THE FRUITS

USUAL BEGINNING 45

DIALOGUE

Starter Question

What have you learned from your participation in this dialogue about how persons in X (a relevant context) “can remain in Christian community despite our differences?”

3’ Go round 30

Conversation

Opportunity for questions of clarification, followed by amplification of views, sharing of: surprises, matters better understood or of particular interest, common themes and shared experiences or values discerned, and fresh questions as a preface to more organic discussion as time and group readiness permit. This section could end with an opportunity to identify one way this conversation enriched each person’s understanding of what participants share and where and how they differ. [50]

Break [10]

Closing Business [10]

Closing go round [3’+5=30]

What have been the “fruits” of this dialogue for you as an individual? How will you bear witness to one or more of these “fruits” in the days ahead?

Closing Prayer [5]

TOTAL TIME=3.0 HOURS

WHOLE DAY VERSION OF MEETING #5 [7 HOURS INCLUDING LUNCH*]

*=If the group is willing to meet for eight hours some conversations can be extended.

USUAL BEGINNING 45

INSERT: If this group were charged with designing a ‘big tent’ within which the eight of you could sit with safety and integrity what would you propose for your first set of blueprints? What are the leading elements of your vision? What challenges does your first draft need to address? What resources have you become aware of that you can draw on in addressing these challenges? [60]

Break 10

- *What have you learned from your participation in this dialogue about how persons in X (a relevant context) “can remain in Christian community despite our differences?”*

3 min. each Go round [30]

Opportunity for questions of clarification, followed by amplification of views, sharing of: surprises, matters better understood or of particular interest, common themes and shared experiences or values discerned, and fresh questions as a preface to more organic discussion as time and group readiness permit. This section could end with an opportunity to identify one way this conversation enriched each person’s understanding of what participants share and where and how they differ. [60]

Lunch [60]

INSERT: HARVESTING COLLECTIVE FRUITS [1 hour and 55 minutes]

What ideas do you have about how you collectively might bear witness or share the fruits of your time together with X (relevant context(s))?

Collection, clarification and integration of ideas followed by discussion to discern if any ideas attract a critical mass of interest or energy. Collect responses to “what are you prepared to contribute to a collective action of this kind?”

Break

Action planning around proposal that have most support.

Closing Business [10]

Two closing go rounds [50]

- *What have been the “fruits” of this dialogue for you as an individual? How will you bear witness to one or more of these “fruits” in the days ahead? [25]*
- *Is there something you wish to say or do to bring your participation in this dialogue to a satisfying close? [25]*

Closing Prayer [5]