



Leader's Guide to
**A Guide for Talking Together
about Shared Ministry with
Same-Sex Couples and
Their Families**



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

LEADER'S GUIDE

Thank you for your willingness to lead your congregational group through these conversations about ministry with and to same-gender couples and their families. This leader's guide explains the design and process of the series as well as offering suggestions for how to prepare and what other leadership is needed. May you be blessed by the Spirit's presence as you participate with your congregation or group in this important ministry conversation.

CONVERSATION SERIES DESIGN

One approach to learning and curriculum design is often called "backwards course design." We begin with the end in mind. What do we want to accomplish? For this conversation series, the primary goal is to engage participants in determining some specific steps for ministry that result in a constructive congregational culture that leads to doing ministry together that is life-giving for all. Through these sessions, participants also will advance their knowledge of communal discernment and deliberative dialogue – two methods of collective thinking. This guide provides a case study to explore a specific congregational ministry opportunity and concludes with a session devoted to talking about specific questions in your congregation's ministry with and to same-gender couples and their families.

Some congregations may want to use the conversation series in a four-week, 60-minute Sunday morning adult forum. If necessary, participants might desire more time. Alternatively, four 90-minute sessions during a weekday evening or a Saturday will feel less rushed because they offer more time for dialogue.

THE PROCESS

One key approach used in this resource is called "communal discernment" and has roots in Scripture and the church's prayer for the Spirit's guidance (Romans 12:1-2). It is used in tandem with "deliberative dialogue," an approach that arose from secular sources. They complement each other because they have deep commitments to life in community.

Communal discernment encourages attending to God's living Word through group discussion, worship and prayer that opens the group and the congregation to the Spirit's work in their midst. Encourage this approach by using open-ended questions during the session's devotional material. For instance: What key idea do you think God is conveying to us in the biblical text? Or, what is the apostle Paul trying to accomplish with these words? Or, in what ways do the hymn lyrics speak to your faith? How might our congregation "live out" what we "sing"? What could we add to the prayer to connect the words to our congregation's needs?

Deliberative dialogue is another form of cooperative thinking used in inter-dependent decision-making and is briefly described in the second session. Neutral moderation is a critical characteristic of deliberative dialogue. Contrasted to the "teacher" or "Bible study leader," moderators commit themselves to drawing everyone into a respectful conversation. They help people listen to one another's perspectives, even opposing views, and try to bring out the wisdom of the group. People articulate their

concerns based on deeply held values. For example, Lutherans often refer to values based in how God works through the law and, at the same time, how God works through the gospel. In fact, we often keep them in tension. A good moderator can point out how a group of deliberators favors accountability and obedience reflecting the law or leans toward the gospel's radical nature of forgiveness.

CONVERSATION SERIES LEADERS

Moderator. The conversation series can be led by arranging for a person other than a pastor to moderate. While pastors certainly can be moderators, others whose jobs require careful listening such as teachers, social workers, counselors, human resource professionals are good candidates as well. The moderator should follow the session directions in this Leader's Guide, remain impartial and focus on helping everyone participate in the discussion. The moderator should also help the group identify areas of agreement as well as disagreement or tension.

Each session includes a set of discussion questions. The questions are designed to help people express the spirit and culture of Christ's church in their particular locale. What are the congregation's spiritual gifts and talents, ministry opportunities and challenges? How are congregational members engaged in decision-making? If we were to place ourselves in another congregation's place, what would we do? And finally, what will the group recommend about how to inform and live out the congregation's ministry to and with same-gender couples and their families?

MODERATOR TIPS

While there is much to learn about moderating, there are several basic principles to keep in mind.

1. KEY NEUTRAL MODERATOR TASKS

- Carefully review the covenant guidelines with conversation participants. Set the tone for a respectful and civil conversation. (One resource for such guidelines can be found in the ELCA resource *Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues*. (ELCA.org/socialstatements, then click on "Moral Deliberation.")
- Model friendly and relaxed behavior and encourage everyone to feel comfortable in sharing his or her ideas.
- Remain neutral about the subject of the forum.
- Do not take on an "expert" role with the subject matter. Avoid letting participants treat you as an expert.
- Keep the conversation focused on the questions.
- Ask good follow-up questions to keep the dialogue fluid.
- Listen for values that motivate a participant's comments.
- Allow for pauses and silence.
- Encourage everyone to participate and respond to one another's comments.
- Help participants work through key tensions and find common ground.

- Welcome additional ideas.
- Ask the group to consider people who are not present and try to imagine their perspectives.

2. HANDLING STUMBLING BLOCKS AND CHALLENGES

- Do not allow people to personalize their disagreements – no “put downs.”
- Do not let the group get hung up on or debate facts.
- Avoid having a talkative person dominate the dialogue. Gently remind people: “We want to hear from everyone and value their perspectives.”
- Try to avoid critiques of the conversation resource. The resource is not perfect but remains a starting point for dialogue and is designed to help people focus on the congregation’s ministry.
- Help participants avoid generalized assumptions or misrepresent opposing viewpoints.
- Affirm that people have strong feelings but help people speak for themselves by using “I language.” I am very concerned about” I feel strongly about” I care deeply about”

Recorder. Another aid for good group process requires recruiting someone with good listening skills to record highlights of the conversation on an easel pad. Date and number each page and save each week’s recording results. Recorders listen for points of general agreement as well as tensions or disagreements on specific issues. By the conclusion of the four sessions, the congregation will have a helpful list of the congregation’s spiritual gifts and talents, decision-making procedures, and ministry opportunities relative to the subject at hand. The recorder’s notes on specific recommendations made through this process are available to the pastor and congregation and should be retained as a reference for future conversations.

Timekeeper. A third moderating responsibility involves simply keeping time. The moderator will determine how much time is required for each portion of the conversation series sessions. Sessions 1, 2 and 4 are organized into three parts – devotions, conceptual material and dialogue. Session 3 is organized in a different manner. (Suggested time segments are indicated below under Session 3.) The timekeeper should indicate when a session segment has two or three minutes remaining so that the moderator can ask for final comments.

A simple covenant

Moderators are encouraged to review a forum covenant with participants before each session. Here is a simple example:

- Be in prayer and seek the Spirit’s guidance.
- Follow the Golden Rule.
- Speak for yourself using “I” language and honestly convey your thoughts and feelings.
- Listen to understand. Keep an open mind and heart.
- Disagree respectfully with others’ ideas.
- Move toward greater mutual understanding.
- Endeavor to identify the common good.

NOTES ON LEADING EACH SESSION

SESSION 1: WHAT CHALLENGES DOES THE CHURCH ENCOUNTER?

Use communal discernment to reflect on the hymn, text and prayer. Sing or read the hymn lyrics. Read and discuss the text briefly. Spend some time in silent prayer and use the prayer to conclude. (5-7 minutes)

Share the purpose of the conversation series. Consider reviewing a timeline of important ELCA actions, past to present. (For a full explanation see Appendix 2 in the conversation series)

- Nearly two decades of denominational studies of human sexuality
- 2009, "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" social statement
- 2009, Ministry policy resolutions
- 2013, Churchwide Assembly request for conversational resources
- 2015, Working group report
- 2017, Conversation series

Consider the reality that the church has experienced conflict and argued over critical issues for 2,000 years. We are no different from our ancestors in faith when it comes to having disagreements with one another. Use the discussion of the early church and the Reformation to transition to the dialogue questions. Give adequate time to as many questions as possible, especially the final question.

Close with prayer and the Lord's Prayer.

SESSION 2: WHAT HELPS CONGREGATIONS CONFRONT CHALLENGES IN MINISTRY?

Use communal discernment to reflect on the hymn, text and prayer. Sing or read the hymn. Discuss the text briefly. Spend some time in silent prayer and use the prayer to begin praying together. (5-7 minutes)

Two items of background may be useful to talk about as your group works through the sessions:

1. Acknowledge that Americans live in an increasingly polarized culture. The Gallup Poll and Pew Research organizations report on "ideological silos" with a significant decline of people describing themselves as living in the median or "purple zone" between the poles. The Gallup Poll reports declining trust in American institutions including Congress, education institutions and religious organizations. Clearly, the church is not immune to America's polarized culture. How do we reverse this trend?
2. Despite these trends, congregations and other faith communities of all religions share a number of common features that make them good places for constructive conversation. They bring people who are both faithful believers and patriotic citizens together on a weekly basis and they use their facilities to support congregational and public activities. Twelve-step organizations, Girl and Boy Scouts, pre-schools and nonprofit organizations depend on faith community spaces. In many respects, faith communities have an unusual capacity to bring together people with diverse perspectives and provide safe space for discernment and dialogue.

The dialogue questions in this session explore how congregations confront ministry challenges. Help participants share what they feel good about and what they feel could be improved relative to addressing differences. Emphasize the vital characteristics of fairness, intellectual integrity and honest humility as a guide to reflect on deliberation in the congregation's history. Participants may want to rush to the subjects of human sexuality and same-gender relationships. Acknowledge those concerns, but let them know that the third and fourth sessions will be devoted to practical questions related to those issues. The purpose of this session is to first gain an understanding of how people think about the way the congregation addresses challenges and opportunities.

Before concluding the discussion, have the recorder share a summary of the notes. In particular, were there any areas of agreement or disagreement?

Close with prayer and the Lord's Prayer.

SESSION 3: WHAT SHOULD FIRST LUTHERAN DO?

Use communal discernment to reflect on the hymn, text and prayer. Sing or read the hymn. Discuss the text briefly. Use the prayer to conclude. *(5-7 minutes)*

Session 3 is intended to engage people in a conversation about a hypothetical issue in a Lutheran congregation, the specifics of which are drawn from several actual situations. Moderating this session's discussion requires effective time management.

First, give everyone a few minutes to read the brief case study. *(3 minutes)*

Invite people to share some personal, from-the-heart concerns by saying:

"I want us to share a personal thought about why this issue is important or real to each of us in a brief sentence or two. You may want to begin by saying 'I feel ...' or 'I am concerned ...' Briefly share your heart-felt comments. We will have plenty of time to discuss our ideas and opinions later, but for now just a personal thought. You may 'pass' if you wish." *(5 minutes)*

There are three options or approaches to addressing First Lutheran's situation: Request help from another ELCA congregation, seek clarity from the congregation council, or engage congregation members in discernment and dialogue. Devote 10 minutes of discussion to each option. *(30-36 minutes)*

Spend your remaining time discussing and recording the reflection questions.

Close with prayer.

SESSION 4: HOW WILL OUR CONGREGATION SHAPE ITS MINISTRY?

Use communal discernment to reflect on the hymn, text and prayer. Sing or read the hymn. Discuss the text briefly. Use the prayer to conclude. *(5-7 minutes)*

The suggested time frame for this final session – assuming an hour forum – could be 10 minutes for

devotions, 40 minutes for dialogue about the congregation's ministry, and 10 minutes to debrief the conversation series. A 90-minute forum would provide 10, 60 and 20 minutes for the three segments.

Over the past three weeks, the conversation series was designed to "scaffold" participants' dialogue by first considering the congregation's gifts and challenges, then discussing the way ministry challenges are addressed in the congregation, and thirdly, exploring a case study related to a same-gender couple issue. The final session offers participants the opportunity to identify and discuss one or more particular concerns related to human sexuality or same-gender couples' relationships in their congregation.

While the focus of the conversation series is ministry to and with same-gender couples and their families, the "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" social statement speaks to the full range of human sexuality related issues. As background, you may wish to read the introduction to the statement by Dr. Roger A. Willer, originally done for Lutheran Woman Today. It can be found by clicking this link: "[Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust.](#)"

The final session's purpose ideally ought to surface common conclusions and provide an opportunity to discuss some next steps. This could be to find ways of welcoming same-gender couples and their families or to make other recommendations that may lead to congregational leaders developing a parish ministry decision. Be sure to allow sufficient time and have means to record visually the main points of the conversation. The concluding questions offer an opportunity to evaluate the four sessions and the discernment and dialogue process.

As the sessions come to an end, ask the participants to offer prayer requests. Thank God for courage to engage in the conversation series and ask for guidance and the Spirit's help as you move forward in faith.

Again, thank you for devoting time and energy to the critical task of leading this process. May God bless you in this ministry of leadership!