

COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

Focus: Human Sexuality

Setting for a Safe Environment:

Set up the room with tables (round tables are preferable) with no more than six chairs per table. Place Guidelines for the Conversation around the room in large print or on a projection screen. As participants enter the room have them choose a number from a basket. Invite them to sit at the table marked with the number that matches the number they have drawn.

Needed:

- Basket with numbers
- Tables for small-group discussion
- Table numbers for each table
- Candles for each table
- Small crosses or other markers to serve as talking stick
- Printout or screen for displaying "Guidelines for the Conversation"
- Printout of prayers (see the Courageous Conversations Prayer Guide)
- Large sheet of paper and markers
- Tape or adhesive to post the large sheet of paper

Recommended:

- Bell or chime for beginning and ending times of silence
- Microphone to enable all to hear the speaker(s) clearly

Estimated Timeline:

The following is based on a 90-minute timeframe. Adjust as needed.

Opening Prayer (3 minutes)

Overview (5 minutes)

Opening Circle (10 minutes)

Personal Assessment of the Situation (10 minutes)

Conflict Spectrum (15 minutes)

Break (5 minutes)

Small-Group Time (25 minutes)

Large-Group Reflection (15 minutes)

Closing Prayer (2 minutes)

Opening Prayer

Begin with silence and/or the lighting of a candle to represent God's presence. This time of silence is important to center yourselves and mark the space and time as unique. Have a copy of the prayer for everyone to follow along or participate in the prayer. (see the Courageous Conversations Prayer Guide)

Overview

Give an overview of the main topic of discussion. Point out and read the conversation guidelines. Reinforce that this space is a safe place for people to freely express their opinions and perspectives.

Opening Circle (modified)*

Form people into groups with no more than three persons in each group. Allow each participant no more than two minutes to answer the question, "What brought you here today?" Remind participants that this is a time of naming and listening, not discussion – that will come later.

Personal Assessment of the Situation

Make sure each person has a piece of paper and pencil for this exercise. Give participants 5-10 minutes to write down biblical stories, passages, doctrine, facts, and other opinions that support their position on human sexuality.

[The purpose of this exercise is at least twofold: (1) It gives participants a chance to write out and reflect on their beliefs [and hopefully assumptions]. (2) It will help counterbalance any ideas that might provoke or derail the conversation since participants have had a chance to calmly consider their positions previously.]

Conflict Spectrum*

The purpose of this exercise is to allow participants to name where they are on a spectrum from progressive to traditional. It is helpful to begin in a lighthearted manner. Introduce the conflict spectrum with fun topics such as "cat lover or dog lover," "vacation at the beach or vacation in the mountains," "prefer summer or winter," "lover of sweets or lover of entrees." (This exercise is best done by using local references.) Try to transition from the fun spectrum to the more serious spectrum of where people stand on the position of homosexuality. (For example, traditional worship or contemporary worship, Identify with God as Father or God as Holy, etc.)

Designate places in the room as ends on the spectrum, so that people have to physically move themselves from one side of the room to the other and anywhere on the spectrum they would like to place themselves. (For adults with limited mobility, allow them to raise one arm or another.) Once people are at a place on the spectrum, allow roughly 15-30 seconds for people to talk to those around them about why they positioned themselves on the spectrum for the more serious topics.

End with the topic of homosexuality: The spectrum is traditional or progressive (or whatever language is better for your context – affirming or traditional marriage). Once people have positioned themselves on the spectrum, allow them to form into at least three groups (left, middle, right). Assign each group to a table to talk about why they identified themselves as they did. Ask each group to prepare a list of strengths and weakness of its position on a large sheet of paper. At the designated ending point, have each group post its list for display.

After people have gathered back into their groups, give them one minute of silence (use a bell or chime). Allow participants, in silence to walk around and read each of the group's statements.

(Break)

Small-Group Time*

This style of group dialogue emphasizes clarity of thought and naming assumptions or perceptions about the topic. The focus here is on attentive listening, not debating or persuading.

Ask participants to sit with their assigned table number. Identify the cross on the table or other object to be used as a talking stick. Clarify that only the person with the talking stick may speak, and the other group members are to practice attentive listening. Each participant has five minutes to answer one or more questions.

Print out and/or display the following questions:

- How has this issue had an impact on you or someone you know?
- What is your greatest concern/fear regarding homosexuality?
- What are you most curious about regarding homosexuality?
- What is it in you – your assumptions, wounds, biases, etc. – that causes you to react so strongly to the issue of homosexuality?

Once complete, repeat the same process for the following questions:

- What Bible stories or passages shape how you view homosexuality?
- Where do you see God leading the church regarding homosexuality?

Large-Group Reflection Time

This time is for the larger group to hear some of the statements that were made during the small-group time, reflecting on the perspectives heard from other participants.

This is the part of the exercise that will require the most from the facilitator. The facilitator should not voice any of his or her own opinions or comments but encourage the freedom of various other perspectives. The facilitator's role is also to clarify assumptions and issues for the group. Additionally, the facilitator will need to model calm when anxiety grows as the result of particular comments.

If possible, ask participants to use a microphone when they speak so that everyone can hear. Give a time limit for how long each person may speak. One way to emphasize attentive listening is to have participants state only what others have stated. This is intended to keep people from stating their own perspectives (and often pet agendas). An optional closing exercise would be to ask, "Imagine you get to heaven and your belief about human sexuality is wrong. What did you overlook?"

Before ending, allow any participant who would like to answer in one sentence, "One thing that I will take with me from this conversation is..."

Closing Prayer

End with silence and/or the lighting of a candle to represent God's presence. Have a copy of the prayer for everyone to follow along or participate in the prayer. (see the Courageous Conversations Prayer Guide)

Teachable Points about Human Sexuality

The following is a minimal representation of teachable points. We should be aware there are many others that could be included. The aim of these outlines is more about listening and uncovering assumptions than hosting a debate or passing on information. The point is not providing more information or arriving at a consensus.

Scripture passages of note (a minor sampling of what could be drawn upon)

- There are traditionally six passages that people point to regarding homosexuality in Scripture: Genesis 19:1-10; Leviticus 18:20, 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10.
- Each of these passages has been explored and interpreted in more than one way. For example, it is pointed out that what is condemned, especially in the Old Testament passages, primarily are acts of violence and abuse of power more than consensual adult homosexuality.
- We should remember with regard to all these passages to look long and hard not to see "what we wish were there," but to see what is actually there. This can be difficult for a variety of reasons. The way we use words changes. Further, scholars differ in their translations of biblical passages. (See, for example, the way various Bible versions translate 1 Corinthians 6:9.) Many people point out that the way homosexuality was practiced during the Roman empire of Paul's day (among unequals of power and/or age) was not the same as today.
- While some point out that Jesus never mentioned homosexuality, others will point to Mark 10:1-12 as Jesus affirming what normative marriage should look like. Others point out Jesus' radical inclusion of the marginalized: women, tax collectors, lepers, and non-

Israelites as an imperative for inclusion. As well, Jesus commanded his followers to love and “not to judge” (Matthew 7:1).

- Given the patriarchy of certain passages and a failure to address “modern” issues such as bisexuality and transgender issues, some see the Bible as offering little to no guidance in these areas.

The recent Supreme Court decision regarding same-sex marriage has brought increased anxiety and complexity to this issue for churches in America. The situation faced by denominations and local congregations can be summarized as to, “whether the full inclusion of LGBT persons of faith represents a prophetic movement of God’s Spirit parallel to the full inclusion of women and racial/ethnic minorities in the church, or whether it represents a movement away from fidelity to a normative understanding of human sexuality as revealed in Scripture and tradition.” We should remember Paul’s admonition that “now we see in a mirror dimly” (1 Corinthians 13:12) as well as James’s advice, “let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19).

There are scholars and (“Bible affirming,” “Jesus loving”) Christians who disagree on this issue. At their best, those on all sides of this issue affirm that all people should experience “abundant life.” Those on both sides of this issue (affirming or traditional) also believe they are speaking prophetically (one taking a minority stance within the Christian tradition and another taking a minority stance within the culture). Yet all sides can affirm that sexuality is a gift of God that entails responsibilities (commitment) and privileges (being self-giving). All sides agree that sexuality should be among equals and in the context of a committed relationship.

The *2012 Book of Discipline*, in the Social Principles section titled “The Nurturing Community” has a subsection devoted to “**Human Sexuality**.” We read, “We affirm that sexuality is God’s good gift to all persons. We call everyone to responsible stewardship of this sacred gift.” And later, “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God’s grace is available to all” (§161). Additionally in “**The Social Community**” section, §162J, “Equal Rights Regardless of Sexual Orientation,” we find: “Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to supporting those rights and liberties for all persons, regardless of sexual orientation.”

This issue often highlights related questions such as: What is the role of experience in biblical interpretation (see BOD §105)? What in Scripture is “time-bound” to a particular culture and what should transcend culture and time? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding interpretation within the community of believers? If persons are born with a particular orientation, and God has termed people “very good,” does that entail God’s affirmation of that orientation?