

How to Have a Courageous Conversation



#SEE ^{ALL} _{THE} PEOPLE

“We cannot disciple people that we are not in relationship with. Discipleship begins with relationship.”

Rev. Junius Dotson

General Secretary, Discipleship Ministries

www.SeeAllThePeople.org

This booklet is a companion piece to:

Engaging Your Community: A Guide to Seeing All the People

by Rev. Junius B. Dotson

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Introduction

If you're like me, just the thought of having a difficult conversation can send your conflict avoidance radar into overdrive. Need to speak with a spouse about an unmet need? No thanks. Need to speak with a co-worker or boss about an unhealthy office dynamic that involves him? Hide! Need to challenge a friend about her recent behavior? Avoid her. Church having a "holy conversation" about immigration, human sexuality, or some other social issue? Skip.

We all have our healthy and unhealthy ways of relating to conflict. However, growing as a disciple of Jesus Christ will require difficult conversations. They happen in all our relationships and even in our church communities. Learning to manage our emotions, being able to respectfully engage those with whom we disagree or have an unsettled issue, and owning our perspectives are not innate skills. Beyond just learning new skills, engaging in difficult conversations is also a key aspect to growing as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Group experiences of "holy conversations" create room for dialogue and reflection to help us better understand ourselves and God.

Being able to exhibit self-control, compassion, and grace in highly anxious situations reveals our maturity in Christ.

Instinctively, we might flee, freeze, or flight, but by learning to engage in these conversations as disciples of Jesus, we can experience healing and reconciliation. In a culture saturated with winning and losing, debate over dialogue, fear mongering, and an increasingly larger political divide, the church has an opportunity to nurture disciples who are willing to engage in difficult conversations and model for the world how to respectfully disagree in love.

This booklet and the resources connected with it serve as an invitation for you and your church to learn skills and trust in the transforming presence of God's grace that is available to us all as we engage in courageous conversations.

Nathanael's Willingness

Not many people naming Jesus' twelve disciples from memory would be likely to include Jesus' disciple Nathanael in the top five or six names. Yet, Nathanael's question about Jesus is an example of the dynamics at work in the Courageous Conversations project. He asked Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46) Nathanael's question reveals much about him and us.

Looking back, it is easy to laugh at Nathanael's dismissal of Jesus the Nazarene. Yet Nathanael's doubt was legitimate. Nazareth was so unimportant, it probably would not have shown up on any maps. If GPS had been available, it would have had a hard time directing anyone to the tiny city. In Nathanael's perspective, it seemed implausible to consider that the long hoped-for Messiah would have come from such an insignificant town.

For Philip to suggest to Nathanael that they had found the One predicted by Old Testament prophets seemed laughable to Nathanael. Had Nathanael remained skeptical and dismissive of Philip's advice to "come and see," Nathanael would have missed it. He would have missed Jesus, the

very One who would not only shape Nathanael's future, but the One who — for Christians — stands at the center of history.

While it might be easier to see ourselves in more prominent disciples like Peter, I contend that we also need to see ourselves in Nathanael. Skepticism and, in some cases, even cynicism, is ingrained in the American way. Recent polls show how little we trust our elected officials. Our political divisiveness has resulted in a lack of trust with those whom we disagree. This is also true theologically. Within The United Methodist Church alone, groups across the theological spectrum claim to be the “real” Wesleyan followers. Each group uses Scripture to authenticate its claims. The result is that we label and dismiss the perspectives of those we worship alongside and attempt to engage in mission to the world. Worse than merely disagreeing in love, we border on apathy, even toward those with whom we are called to love and serve. Instead of modeling for the world beliefs expressed in the axiom “unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, and in all things love,” we dismiss, and worse even, we divide. We, too, ask, “Can any good thing come from a Democrat? a Republican? a liberal? a conservative? a southerner? a Yankee? a fan of the SEC?”

When Nathanael was startled by Philip's belief that this Nazarene was the Messiah, Nathanael had to become willing to lay down his assumptions. Giving up long-held assumptions and beliefs is hard work. It takes courage to enter a space of uncertainty. But we see many others in the Bible move from being startled to becoming uncertain and

in faith grasping for God's guidance (Abram, Moses, Elijah, Saul/Paul, Hebrews 11). It is often when we are vulnerable enough to question our assumptions that we encounter God's grace, as Nathanael did.

This booklet and the Courageous Conversations project is aimed to help us, as Nathanael did, to be willing to move from skepticism to curiosity on to openness to encounter God's grace. Engaging in difficult conversations takes courage to move past our fears and skepticisms to come to the table with those we'd rather just dismiss. Even during the simplest conversations, there are internal and external dynamics that keep us from hearing and learning from one another. These forces also keep us from valuing other members in our churches and can hinder us from recognizing the image of God in others.

Being open to God's voice in others by taking a posture of listening and curiosity can help us to have the courage to come to and stay at the table of conversation as Christians. May we, like Nathanael, be willing to encounter the grace of the God who is among us in unexpected places.

Jesus Model

Jesus certainly had his share of courageous conversations. He rebuked Peter and other disciples (repeatedly), challenged his family, constantly disputed the interpretation of Jewish leaders, and even stood face-to-face against Satan's temptations, just to name a few.

John's Gospel records a time when Jesus was cornered into conflict. Jewish leaders brought a woman caught in adultery. Would Jesus side with the law that stated the woman must be stoned or side with lawless mercy and let her go? The leaders had manufactured the situation solely to bring charges against Jesus.

Perhaps you remember the story. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger in the sand. He paused. Perhaps we see Jesus' dependent relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit in stark relief as he searched for a solution. Backed into a corner with someone's life hanging in the balance, Jesus does not react, but responds, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7, NRSV).

We learn much more from Jesus' response than merely to be amazed at his answer. The lesson continues as the con-

versation turns to Jesus' interaction with the woman. Jesus addresses her in his typical fashion, using questions, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" Having just had her life spared, now she has to face another question. Yet in this question, Jesus allows the victim the opportunity to speak. Jesus empowers her voice.

Jesus presents a creative alternative. Jesus holds grace and truth in tension as he dealt with the Jewish leaders and the woman in his response, "Neither do I condemn you. Go on your way, and from now on do not sin again."

What would we have done if we were in Jesus' predicament? Would we have affirmed the holiness of the law and allowed the woman to die? Would we have affirmed sloppy mercy by undermining the law? Too often, our society presents false "either/or" predicaments where there are only two choices without the middle way being a viable choice. In Jesus, fully God and fully human, we see that what appears contradictory is held in tension — grace and truth.

Engaging in courageous conversations invites us to keep these dynamics of grace and truth in tension while being open to the Spirit's guidance. We engage in conversation believing that those we are in dialogue with are valued as people made in the image of God. Learning to hold these dynamics in tension during the anxiety of difficult conversations requires we learn or mature in our Christ-like qualities.

Courageous Conversations as Space for Growing in Christ

Growing or maturing in Christ requires learning (that's what being a disciple is — one who learns). As adults, we take an active role in determining what we will learn and accommodate into our lives. When we experience anxiety, as we do during a difficult conversation, our response is naturally a posture of “fight, freeze, or flight.” Any of these three options compounds the problem and inhibits learning. Instead of being open to learning and growth, we assume a posture of self-protection, defensiveness, and attack.

Postures such as self-awareness, self-reflection, and willingness to learn are required for learning, discipleship, and growth in Christ to take place. The largest obstacle the church has is in creating a courageous environment for learning. This obstacle is real when people come to the table of conversation determined to be “right” or to “win” or are defensive about their opinions. Another hurdle churches have to overcome is in persuading adults that

this conversation will not be futile or will result only in more divisiveness.

Creating a safe environment for learning is essential, but it is also difficult. Settings that foster hospitality, grace, and truth honor each person's unique gifts and perspectives by providing room to practice the ability to own our convictions with humility.

For deep learning to occur, everyone needs to believe his or her voice will be respected and heard. Part of our Methodist heritage from John Wesley is in displaying both humility and “provoking” one another toward love. In Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, he declared, “There is not love of God without patience, and no patience without humility and sweetness of spirit. Humility and patience are the surest proofs of the increase of love...True humility is a kind of self-denial. This is the center of all virtues.”¹

Balancing disorientation with a setting of nurture, humility, and openness can create an atmosphere for deep learning. Deep learning requires navigating complex issues by evaluating our assumptions, hearing diverse perspectives and experiences, and then assimilating these into our lives. Philip's invitation to Nathanael disoriented him enough to cause him to evaluate his assumption that the Messiah would hail from a noteworthy town. Nathanael was open

¹ Steve W. Manskar and Diana L. Hynson. *A Perfect Love: Understanding John Wesley's A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2003), (Q. 38 [2], 78).

and trusting enough to join the ministry of Jesus. While not always in a “safe” environment, being a follower of Jesus was safe enough in that it led Nathanael to revise his initial assumptions. This process (which often happens without us noticing) caused Nathanael to live differently by committing his life to learning to follow Jesus, the Messiah from Nazareth. This process may seem simple, yet the first parts can be the hardest: evaluating our assumptions and hearing the perspectives of others that do not align with ours.

The church, then, has an opportunity for holding courageous conversations. The church can serve as a learning organization since it can begin dialogue with a common starting place—God’s grace and truth. It is also in the church where we encounter the disorienting grace of God. We can all come to the table of dialogue, trusting that what has brought us here is a common experience with God’s grace from the Father, in the Son Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Spirit. Our experiences will have their unique nuances, to be sure. With each person being a vital part of the body of Christ, we have the

opportunity to create an environment where deep learning and maturation happens. Such spaces for intentional learning (discipleship) help the church display to the world the unity that exists and our genuine love for one another (John 13-14) despite our disagreements.

Dialogue vs. Debate

Courageous Conversations is an invitation for interpersonal dialogue instead of debate. A debate has the goals of persuasion and to win the argument or be on the right side of the perspective. Debate differs from dialogue. In dialogue, the conversation's outcome is often unclear. The aim is more about attentiveness to differences and openness to new possibilities. Dialogue uncovers people's assumptions and their unique experiences that inform their perspectives in hopes of new insights or possibilities. In our pragmatic, sound-bite driven culture, dialogue appears too slow and indecisive. Thus, most of us are more familiar with debate.

Our title, *Courageous Conversations*, is accurate because it truly takes courage to enter into dialogue. It takes courage to admit we might be wrong. It takes courage to place the importance of relationship ahead of the need to be right. It takes courage to revise deeply held beliefs. It takes courage to hold our beliefs with humility and to provoke others toward love. It takes an equal amount, if not more, courage to stay in dialogue when someone is pushing our buttons or stating things we find demeaning, offensive, or hurtful. The natural road is "flight, freeze, or fight," to

create false either/ors, or to be dismissive of those with whom we disagree.

As Christians who regularly gather around the Table of the Lord's Supper where our unity is expressed, whether we realize it or not, we share the presence of Christ. We are the body of Christ with diverse experiences, opinions, races, ages, and genders. The vows we take in baptism and the liturgy we express in Communion call us to commit to come to the Table and stay at the Table. It takes courage, as Nathanael had (and as Philip had in suggesting he had found the Messiah in nowheresville), to be willing to come to the table of dialogue; and it takes courage to stay at the table of dialogue.

Forces That Keep Us Divided

Seeing the opportunity that the church has for being a venue for courageous conversations is one thing; actually engaging in courageous conversations is another. There are many forces that keep us from listening to one another. Social dynamics and interior biological and neurological reactions come into play when we engage in difficult conversations. Making ourselves aware of these dynamics can go a long way in overcoming the forces that keep us locked in to assumptions and locked away from one another.

Societal Dynamics

It should not surprise us that we continue to have disagreements in the body of Christ. Disputes and divisions are not new. We see in the New Testament that Corinth had factions. Acts 15 recounts how the early believers disputed and even debated the role of circumcision within the new covenant of Christ.

Christena Cleveland in her book *Disunity in Christ* names a number of these subtle group dynamics at work within the church. One dynamic is what Cleveland calls the “outgroup homogeneity effect,” the tendency to assume that people of a different group are all alike. “They” (whoever “they” are) are all alike, whereas the people in our group (the in-group) have diverse characteristics. While “they” all think alike, we notice nuances in our camp. So we might lump all liberals as thinking similarly, while we see the varieties of opinions within conservative positions (and vice versa). We can do this with males, females, children, older adults, and so on. Consequently, we end up with inaccurate assumptions about what others believe, or we box people into positions they may or may not hold.

Another subtle force that keeps us divided that Cleveland names is the “Gold Standard Effect.” This dynamic exag-

gerates differences among groups and allows one group to believe that its group is normative, right, or just better. Since our beliefs are what should be “normal,” we perceive all other groups as inferior. Not only is this attitude antithetical to listening and being open to diverse perspectives, but we may come to believe that we do not need the perspectives of another group. In the Apostle Paul’s language, we become an eye saying to a foot, we have no need of you! (I Corinthians 12:15)

Jonathan Haidt, in his book *The Righteous Mind*, takes this a step further by noting that by nature “we are selfish and we are groupish.”² These insights remind us of our doctrine of sin. Sin is not simply a disobedient act, but a condition we all share.

Therefore, we must affirm that simply listening better will not be the cure-all. Even if we listened well, examined our assumptions, and gained an appreciation for a different perspective, unity is no guarantee. In fact, better listening might reveal just how deep our disagreements are. Thus the goal of engaging in courageous conversations is not unity that equates to uniformity or “GroupThink.” Courageous conversations aim for respectful listening, honoring the unique presence of Christ in others, and growth in Christ such that we model love that is compassionate and committed to others (John 13–15). As Cleveland reminds us,

² Jonathan Haidt. *The Righteous Mind* (Vintage Books, 2012), 369.

We need to adopt the belief that to be a follower of Christ means to care deeply about and pursue other followers of Christ, including the ones that we don't instinctively value or like. We need to adopt the belief that to be a follower of Christ means to allow our identity as members of the body of Christ to trump all other identities.³

³ Christena Cleveland. *Disunity in Christ* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2013), 97.

Political Dynamics

It is not news that the American church is situated in an increasingly polarized society. Pew Research and other groups have charted the increasing split between conservatives and liberals over the past forty years. As Michael Slaughter and Charles Gutenson highlight in their insightful book *Hijacked* ⁴, this split has had an impact on the church when we have allowed our politics to inform our theology instead of the other way around.

Our cultural biases and assumptions influence how we read Scripture and serve to further divide “us” from “them.” Too quickly, we conclude “they” are not reading the Bible “faithfully,” “plainly,” or “as God intends.” Hearing other people’s interpretations of Scripture can seem so disorienting or egregious that our impulse is to dismiss it. It is precisely at such moments that we can recognize our need to be like Nathanael. Perhaps this will serve as an opportunity for growth.

⁴ Charles E. Gutenson and Mike Slaughter, *Hijacked: Responding to the Partisan Church Divide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012).

Neurological Dynamics

When we encounter opinions that startle us or cause us to question our deeply held beliefs, our natural reaction is usually not openness and curiosity. The more deeply we hold the belief, the setting in which we are called to question the belief (safe or unsafe), and the manner in which the challenging perspective is presented can cause us to take a posture of defensiveness or even hostility.

If we feel anxiety, our brain sends signals throughout the body to prepare for battle. Our brain begins operating from its survival parts (limbic systems) instead of the thinking part (prefrontal cortex). In a heated discussion, we might wonder why we're saying what we are saying and/or why we are stating it with such ferocity. It's often because the anxiety of the moment narrowed our ability to think.

Instead of being in a posture of curiosity and able to see creative alternatives, we were in a posture of fighting. And we didn't even realize it!

In order to adopt a posture of curiosity, we need to feel safe. The next time you find yourself in "the heat of the

battle,” recognize that for some reason you don’t feel safe. Rather than engage with emotional fists, notice the tone and anxiety level of the conversation. Then, “Don’t get mad, get curious.”

Trust

One of the biggest barriers to fruitful conversation is trust. Without trust, there is no room for safety. Without safety, we will not be open to engage on a meaningful level and move the conversation forward.

Mistrust leads to hasty conclusions or even assigning ulterior motives. If we believe all people who support gun control have the ultimate goal of pacifism or socialism, whenever someone makes a comment in favor of gun control, we might jump to false conclusions. The reality might be that someone supports gun control but rejects both pacifism and socialism. Entering into courageous conversations requires that we suspend our judgments about someone else's motives, so we can adequately hear his or her unique perspective. If we perceive that every time our teenager leaves her bed unmade as a subtle slap at our authority, we might overlook her need to slow down and reduce the number of activities she is participating in.

As Christians attempting to hold courageous conversations, our overriding perspective should be that we are all far from perfect and all continuing in the process of sanctification. This means we extend grace to one another by trying our best to not judge motives and not assuming

everyone has had the same life-shaping experiences. We also realize when we are creeping into *confirmation bias*; that is, trusting only that information that supports our previously held beliefs.

When we are tempted to get mad or when we feel our minds narrowing, we need to step back and get curious. We need to ask, “Why do they hold that position that seems so radically different from my own?” “How does their faith inform their perspective?” “What formative events that are different from my own have shaped their perspectives?” In *Turning to One Another*, Margaret Wheatley asserts, “Curiosity is a great help to good conversations. It’s easier for us to tell our story, to share our dreams and fears, when we feel others are genuinely curious about us.”⁵

If nothing else, the 2019 special called General Conference in St. Louis revealed just how little trust is in the United Methodist system. This lack of trust makes it more imperative that we take on a posture of curiosity.

⁵ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning To One Another* (San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002), 30.

Practical Advice

Having explored the reasons for engaging in courageous conversations and some of the dynamics that keep us from one another, let's explore some practical steps we can take to make sure our interpersonal and church dialogues are safe spaces for learning. Some are obvious and seemingly easy, such as prayer. Others might not occur to us as readily and require us to have the courage to be vulnerable.

Prayer

My favorite definition of prayer is: “intentionally being in the presence of God.” Prayer can be simply bringing ourselves before God in stillness and humility. Like the examples of Job (Job 40:1-5) or Elijah (1 Kings 19:11-13), discerning God’s will often happens when we do the hard work of intentionally quieting the noise, being still, and listening.

During such times of prayer, we make ourselves available to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Here, God can reveal to us where we are being self-centered or acting out of fear or insecurity. Prayer can be the place the Holy Spirit guides us into creative spaces that open us to possibilities we might have not considered.

While we normally think of prayer as a solitary activity, group time benefits from intentional times of silent prayer as well. Making time for silent and guided intercessory prayers in groups that are tackling complex issues can be the most meaningful use of time. These might serve as the most valuable times together in centering people’s emotions and perspectives on God’s ways instead of their own.

Starting with Ourselves

The best place to start any difficult conversation is by focusing on the one thing we can control — ourselves. This one piece of advice can be the most valuable. Without realizing it, our habits can be counterproductive to improving conversations because we are unaware of our internal dynamics.

It might be that we blame others for making us mad. The reality is that we alone are responsible for our emotions. No matter how much others “push our buttons” or say something that is our “pet-peeve,” we control how we react.

One hint for productive dialogue that helps each person own his or her opinion is by using “I” language. “You” language is often received as aggressive. So instead of, “Why don’t you ever tell me you love me anymore?” we would state, “I need to feel more appreciated.” Instead of, “Your mother-in-law is out to get me!” it becomes, “I need to hear why you think that is the case. I don’t understand.”

We might ask ourselves, “Why am I reacting this way?” It might be that you noticed during or after a conversation that you were more heated than you meant to be. Instead of stating your position clearly and calmly or asking for clarification, you retreated into silence or became aggressive in both tone and the words you used. Take time to reflect on conversations you have had in the past that did not go the way you hoped and ask yourself, “Why did I react that way?” “What am I afraid of?” Taking time to reflect on our reactions might reveal dynamics about how difficult conversations were handled in our family growing up, how we have built up stress, or even just having eaten bad meatballs. Either way, the best place to begin to start the conversation again is with confession. We are not perfect and are continuing the process of growing in Christ (Philippians 1:6).

One way to focus on our response before and during a courageous conversation is to be clear what we are hoping to achieve by the conversation. Are we aiming to clarify our parenting styles? to win the debate? to be right? to mask an insecurity? to learn more about another person’s perspective and/or a particular topic? Often, we find that we have a mix of motivations. Clarifying the goal helps us stay on track and gives us more control over our emotions. Additionally, getting clear on the goal might also make us ask whether the conversation is worth it or if now is the best time for this specific conversation.

To focus the goal for particular conversations, the authors of *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are*

High suggest three helpful questions: (1)“What do I really want for myself? (2)What do I really want for others? (3) What do I really want for the relationship?”⁶

We could add one more: “As best as I can discern it, what does God want in this situation?”

⁶ Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillian, Al Switzler, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* (New York: LaGrawHill, 2002), 34.

Church-Wide Courageous Conversations

The element that will have the most impact in having meaningful courageous conversations as a local church will be the ability to create an environment of trust and hospitality. If people feel that they are being heard and respected, they are more likely to voice their opinions. The opposite is also true, however.

There are a number of ways to achieve an environment of hospitality (please see the resources at the end of this booklet and the Courageous Conversations section of UMCdiscipleship.org). If possible, the church should create a task force to design the logistics for the conversations. Factors such as the physical environment of the room (large circle or small tables), guidelines for the dialogue, the use of talking sticks, and candles and other religious symbols are great reminders of God's presence during the conversations. Clarifying and displaying expectations or guidelines for the conversations can serve as reminders during the conversations, but also set the expectations

from the beginning about how the conversations will take place.

Another key factor is the role of the facilitator. If the facilitator is not trusted by all parties and/or does not have the skills needed to facilitate a good conversation (i.e. always feels he or she has to impart opinions, etc.), this person will shut down the conversation. Make sure all parties see the seriousness and thoughtfulness that has gone on in designing the conversations so that they will also be able to see the gentleness (fruit of the Spirit) of the conversation.

Interpersonal Courageous Conversations

Much of the skills that work at a group level are also true for courageous conversations in our interpersonal relationships. We've already mentioned the focusing question, "What is it I really want?" Another strategy when you notice the anxiety level going up is to focus more on trying to understand the other person's perspective more than proving your point.

To slow the conversation down, see the conversation as the beginning of an ongoing dialogue instead of as the only time you will be able to address the issue. Rehearsing with a friend to clarify your thoughts can also hone your conversational skills.

Sometimes the mere thought of the conversation can be paralyzing because you are unsure of how the other person will react or where you need to begin. Trusting that you are better off attempting the conversation than not

and that God's presence will be available as you listen and speak from your needs should lend a spark of courage.

When we view courageous conversations from the vantage point of growing as disciples of Jesus Christ, we realize that these skills and practices help us as individuals and as a community of believers to model the love of Christ we are called to embody (John 15:12, 17).

And Finally

What might happen if we decide to engage in courageous conversations? We might engage in some painful and scary conversations with those closest to us. We might name some of our deepest fears. We might have to swallow our pride. We might learn to hear someone's perspective that challenges us to new heights in our relationship with God and others. A scarier question might be, "What if we fail to engage in courageous conversations?"

Growing as a disciple often requires hard work on our part. It takes the courage of posturing ourselves with openness and curiosity like Nathanael and like Jesus did in offering grace and truth. We end with Margaret Wheatley's advice, "I hope you'll begin a conversation, listening for what's new. Listen as best you can for what's different, for what surprises you. See if this practice helps you learn something new."⁷

⁷ Wheatley, 36.

Courageous Conversations Prior to the Next General Conference:

Session 1 Outline

Introduction

The following is a two-session outline for guiding a local church conversation prior to the next General Conference. This is only a sample. While the setting and sequencing is intentional, adjust as needed. Session one focuses on participants' emotional responses leading into the next General Conference. Engaging emotions first will enable more thoughtful and discerning conversations, which are the focus of session two.

Why have a Courageous Conversation prior to General Conference? The intent is not to raise the anxiety level of a local congregation or further divisiveness. The hope is that by engaging in meaningful dialogue prior to the

next General Conference, participants will become familiar with the format of a Courageous Conversation and grow in trust-filled relationships. A helpful analogy is that of a cauldron over fire. When fire heats up the elements within the cauldron, pressure will build. What will contain the pressure exerted on the cauldron is the thickness of the walls. Trust is like the walls of the cauldron. The thicker the walls of the cauldron, the more pressure it will be able to handle. Building trust takes experience and time. It cannot be rushed. Taking the opportunity to inform your congregation about the process of General Conference is important. But information is not enough. Taking the opportunity to hold a Courageous Conversation-styled event builds relationships and trust, so that if there needs to be a more specific decision or outcome by the church community, there will be less chance for divisiveness to be the result. This sample outline seeks to equip congregations to engage in the slow process of relationship building and learning to hold fruitful dialogues.

Although it will be tempting for churches not to include a practice dialogue as outlined below, this can be beneficial for participants to feel a different style of conversation. It sets the tone that listening and learning from all participants is encouraged and valued. The moments of silence, while perhaps awkward, will be appreciated as times for personal reflection. Additionally, elements such as food, singing together, *lectio divina*, and a ritual such as Communion should not be easily dismissed, as they forge relationships and remind us of the God we worship and who is with us as we do the work of discernment.

While the two sessions could be done on one day, it is advisable to hold the sessions on different days and even a week, or more, apart. Churches may consider extending into three or more sessions to focus on specific exercises. Another option to consider is ending one or each of the lessons by a “Remembering Your Baptism” service instead of Communion. Having a meal together before or after the dialogue will help reinforce relationship building. Although you probably do not want to over-structure that time, there are ways to build some intentionality by asking participants to sit at different tables or by using guiding questions such as, “What does this church mean to me?” or “What was your most memorable activity or experience as part of this church?”

Setting

- It is important that the setting be intentionally reverent. It is imperative to create a setting of neurological safety. When anxiety is high, blood drains from our brains to our feet and our fists. We are ready to flee and fight, not learn. Only when we feel safe can we learn. The aim of the structure involved in this outline is to promote a setting for learning. It might be helpful to distinguish a safe space (where participants are cautious with their language so as to not offend) from a brave space (where exploratory questions are encouraged). The intent to create a dialogue for learning and not a debate. In a debate, we look to win and attack other’s weaknesses. In a dialogue, we are looking to build relationships and learn from one another.

- Project or post a covenant or conversation guidelines. A covenant or set of guidelines helps participants know what to expect in terms of the tone of the conversation.
- Round tables or even circles of chairs without tables are useful for participants to be able to communicate within their small groups.
- As participants enter the room, they choose a number that corresponds to a numbered table or set of chairs. Participants sit at the corresponding table or circle of chairs. Six people per table or area is recommended for the best small-group dynamics.
- Each table or open area of a circle of chairs should include a centerpiece (for example a cross), some identifying marker for participants to know their table assignment (could use numbers or fruits of the spirit), and a talking stick and/or timer. Another optional component is to have cards with conversation starters for early participants to begin to relate with one another. A talking stick can be a small cross or a plastic two-minute game timer. The beneficial feature of the game timer is that it also serves as a timer to limit the speaker to two-minutes before having to pass the talking stick to the next participant (most cell phones can also be used as a talking stick and a timer).

Materials

- Communion elements (or pitcher and basin if doing a “Remember Your Baptism” service).

- Audiovisual equipment for any presentation and microphones for participants during the large-group time. While many participants don't think they need a microphone to be heard, encourage all participants to use a microphone in case anyone is hearing impaired.
- Print outs or slides of the “Comparison of Proposals” Chart,” <https://cdnsc.umc.org/-/media/umc-media/2020/02/26/15/21/General-Conference-UMC-Plans-Chart-V7>.
- Slips of paper or index cards for participants to write down questions during the break.

Lesson Outline

MEAL OR SNACKS

- As participants show up, offer snacks or—even better—a meal. This gives participants the opportunity to have casual conversations and relationship building before the event.

INTRODUCTION (5 minutes)

- Housekeeping items (restrooms, snacks, audiovisuals, etc.)
- Review the Covenant. One option is to read each line as a group. Another option is to randomly assign parts of the covenant to different participants.
- Explain the purpose of the random table assignments and the intent of the event. It is helpful to reinforce

that the intent of the event is to hear different perspectives. Changing one's perspective is not the intent. We grow in understanding our own perspective and other perspectives when we are challenged to think through divergent understandings.

- Opening Prayer

CENTERING: EPHESIANS 4:1-6 (10 minutes)

- *Lectio Divina*-style centering exercise
- Have as many as three different people read the passage. Pause after each reading for reflective questions:
 - What word or phrase sticks with you from the passage?
 - Where do you hear God speaking to you in this passage?
 - Who is God calling you to be in light of this passage?

OPENING QUESTION (10 minutes; 1 minute per person)

- **"What brought you here?"** (5 minutes; 1 minute per person at the table)
 - After reading (or posting on a slide) the question above, pause for one minute of silent reflection. A time of silent reflection allows introverts (and extroverts too) time to process before speaking. It will also enable participants to listen more instead of concentrating as much on what they will say when it is their turn to speak.

- Around the circle, allow each participant no more than one minute to answer the question. Whoever would like to do so may begin.

HYMN – UPBEAT SONG OR HYMN (5 minutes)

- Singing together reminds us that although we don't think alike, we all worship the Triune God together.

PRACTICING DIALOGUE (10 minutes)

- **Topic:** Which experience do you prefer? Sunday school or small groups? Or which worship experience do you prefer? Traditional or contemporary? You can even use less theological topics such as, “Would you prefer to vacation at the beach or in the mountains?”
 - Using one of the above questions or choosing one of your own, allow participants to get a feel for this style of conversation. (Ideally, the practice topic is one where participants have different perspectives but are not overly passionate about them.) Most adults are used to butting in and talking over one another. A true dialogue style is uncomfortable to many participants. It can feel mechanical or forced. It is normal for participants to feel slightly constrained or frustrated. However, dialogue reinforces listening and learning.
 - After reading (or posting) the question, pause for one minute of silent reflection.
 - After the minute of silent reflection, whoever would like to speak first should use the talking

stick. Whatever is being used as the talking stick should be passed to the next person who would like to speak. That person can indicate a desire to talk by raising a hand or by passing the talking stick to the right or left. Participants may pass if they don't have anything to say.

HOW WE THINK/PROTOCOL (15 minutes)

- It is helpful to remember how complex our thinking is. It is overly simplistic to think we can change other people's minds. People do not change their perspectives quickly or easily. We can be duped into believing that if others just learned the facts as we have, they would change their minds. That is not likely. As is represented in the charts provided, facts are filtered through layers of cultural values and biases. For people to change their perspective requires sustained conversation within trust filled relationships.
- It is helpful as we enter a time of dialogue to keep our expectations in check. Instead of seeking to change minds, we need to examine our own assumptions and listen for ways we can grow in our perspectives.
- The downloadable PowerPoint contains some information regarding the Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation. Feel free to add additional information for your group as needed. This should be focused on information. Unfortunately, misinformation has already made news headlines.

Use this time to keep participants working from the same information.

EXPRESSING EMOTIONS (5 minutes)

- Have colored circles (at least green, yellow, and red) in the middle of the table or circle of chairs.
- Ask participants to choose a color and in one minute explain why they chose that color:
 - “Leading up to the next General Conference, I chose the color _____ because _____.”
- Another option is to use cut outs of emoticons to help participants express their emotions.
 - Before engaging issues directly, it is helpful to engage our emotions. If we jump too quickly to the dialogue, it will be tempting to talk based on emotions alone.

BREAK (5 minutes)

- During the break, allow participants to write down any questions they have about the upcoming General Conference. These should be filled out anonymously. These questions can be about the conference, about the local church, and so on.
- Have a common collection place for the questions, so that they can be read later.
- If there is time and if the answers are brief, answer the questions in this session. If there is not time, tell the

group that answers will be given in the next session. (These questions might also shape the next session, if need be.)

SMALL GROUP DIALOGUE (35 minutes)

- As in the practice dialogue, be sure that one minute of silence precedes dialogue for each question. Talking sticks should guide the conversation. Post the questions for all to see.
 - What are your hopes for the next General Conference? (15 minutes)
 - How might the actions (or inactions) of the next General Conference affect you and your congregation? (20 minutes)

LARGE-GROUP TALK BACK (10 minutes)

- **What did you learn? What did you hear that was new? or What did someone else say that you would like to affirm? What did you hear that has you thoughtful?**
 - This is a time for participants to hear from different groups.
 - One best practice is for this time to be facilitated by a trained facilitator or moderator. Facilitators keep the group focused on the process and enable participants to hear what is being expressed in the best possible light.

COMMUNION (10 minutes)

- Ending with Communion reminds us that during our anxiety and uncertainty, our faith remains firmly in the hands of God who “is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

120 MINUTES TOTAL

Session 2 Outline

Setting

See the setting notes for Session 1

Materials

- Communion elements.
- Audiovisual equipment for any presentation and microphones for participants during the large-group time. While many participants don't think they need a microphone to be heard, encourage all participants to use a microphone in case anyone is hearing impaired.

Lesson Outline

MEAL OR SNACKS

- As participants show up, offer snacks or—even better—a meal. This gives participants the opportunity to have casual conversations and build relationships before the event starts.

INTRODUCTION (5 minutes)

- Housekeeping items (restrooms, snacks, audiovisual, etc.)

- Review the Covenant. One option is to read each line as a group. Another option is to randomly assign parts of the covenant to different participants.
- Explain the purpose of the random table assignments. The hope is to hear different perspectives. We grow in understanding our own perspective and other perspectives when we are challenged to think through divergent understandings.
- Opening Prayer

CENTERING: *James 3:8-12 or Philippians 2:1-4* (10 minutes)

- Lectio Divina-style centering exercise
- Have as many as three different people read the passage. Pause after each reading for reflective questions:
 - What word or phrase sticks with you from the passage?
 - Where do you hear God speaking to you in this passage?
 - Who is God calling you to be in light of this passage?

OPENING QUESTION (5 minutes; 1 minute per person)

- **"What gives you hope for this conversation?"** (5 minutes; 1 minute per person at the table)
 - After reading (or posting on a slide) the question above, pause for one minute of silent reflection. A time of silent reflection allows introverts (and

extroverts too) time to process before speaking. It will also enable participants to listen more instead of concentrating as much on what they will say when it is their turn to speak.

- Around the circle, allow each participant no more than one minute to answer the question. Whoever would like to do so may begin.

HYMN – UPBEAT SONG OR HYMN (5 minutes)

- Singing together reminds us that although we don't think alike, we all worship the Triune God together.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS (15 minutes)

- Have a facilitator read the questions that have been submitted from the exercise the week before. As best as possible, give answers to the questions or suggest where comments and question can be directed.

SMALL-GROUP DIALOGUE (20 minutes)

- Use the same method of small-group dialogue as in lesson one. Use the following questions:
 - Where do you believe God is guiding the church?
 - What Bible stories or passages shape how we might view this?

BREAK (5 Minutes)

MONOLOGUE WORLD CAFÉ STYLE (30 minutes)

- **Process/Rules**

- In small groups, participants speak one at a time for no more than two minutes.
- Participants should begin their sentence with either the word “I” or “My.” For example, “My concern is...” “I feel that...”
- Participants should express their perspectives as they finish the following statement: “My hope for the church is...” (15 minutes)
- Following each participant’s monologue, the group sits in silent contemplation for twenty or thirty seconds (using a timer is recommended – this will feel awkward.)
- Participants should not comment on what other participants are saying (the point is listening, not debating at this point).
- Participants cannot speak a second time until everyone has spoken once.
- After fifteen minutes, ask participants (who are able) to randomly change tables. The hope is that participants will now be at tables with different participants. Repeat the monologue process. (If there is time available and enough participants, the process could be repeated a third time.)

LARGE-GROUP DIALOGUE (10 minutes)

Use the following questions to guide the dialogue.

- **“What do we hope the community hears from this local church? What is our witness to the community during this time?”**
 - Answering these questions can give context to our relationship with the community God has entrusted us to serve.
 - Post or project this question for all participants to see. Offer a minute of silence before allowing responses.
 - One option is for participants to spend two minutes in silent reflection, writing down their answers before opening large-group dialogue.
 - A best practice is for this time to be facilitated by a trained facilitator or moderator. Facilitators keep the group focused on the process and enable participants to hear what is being expressed in the best possible light.

WRITTEN EXERCISE (5 minutes)

- **“What do you need to move forward? What do you still need to resolve?”**
 - This could be done in a large-group or small-group format.
 - Either way, allow participants a minute or two to write down answers to these questions. Partici-

pants should be invited to place the answers to the questions on papers in a basket before receiving Communion.

COMMUNION (10 minutes)

- Ending with Communion reminds us that during our anxiety and uncertainty, our faith remains firmly in the hands of God who “is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

Resources

Upper Room Prayer Guide

<https://umcprays.org>

2020 General Conference Information & Resources

www.resourceumc.org/en/churchwide/general-conference-2020

Major proposed plans coming to General Conference

<https://cdnsc.umc.org/-/media/umc-media/2020/02/26/15/21/General-Conference-UMC-Plans-Chart-V7>

FAQ about the Protocol

www.umnews.org/en/news/protocol-of-reconciliation-and-grace-through-separation-faq

"Local Church Options under Separation Plans"

<https://www.umnews.org/en/news/local-church-options-under-separation-plans>

Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation Protocol Website (Legislation and FAQs)

www.gracethroughseparation.com/legislation

Bibliography & Additional Reading

Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2013).

Charles E. Gutenson and Mike Slaughter, *Hijacked: Responding to the Partisan Church Divide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012).

Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* (Vintage Books, 2012).

Steve W. Manskar and Diana L. Hynson, *A Perfect Love: Understanding John Wesley's A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2003).

Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillian, Al Switzler, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* (New York: LaGrawHill, 2002).

Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning To One Another* (San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002), 30.

To connect further regarding resources for Courageous Conversations:

ONLINE

Main Website

www.UMCdiscipleship.org/topics/courageous-conversations

Courageous Conversations following GC2019

www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/courageous-conversations-following-the-special-called-general-conference

PODCAST

Small Groups in the Wesleyan Way

Co-host Scott Hughes and Steve Manskar

Episodes include interviews with Kevin Watson, Scott Kisker, M. Scott Boren, and James K. A. Smith. Topics include Group Dynamics, Downside of Printed Curriculum, Bands, and Class Leaders.

CONTACT

M. Scott Hughes

Executive Director, Congregational Vitality & Intentional Discipleship; Director, Adult Discipleship

shughes@umcdiscipleship.org

[@UMCAdultForm](#)



DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES

The United Methodist Church

This and many other See All The People resources are available for download and purchase at:

<https://store.umcdiscipleship.org>

1908 Grand Avenue, Nashville, TN 37212

UMCdiscipleship.org

877.899.2780

info@UMCdiscipleship.org

COM906RV20