

“AT TABLE” HANDBOOK FOR PLANNING HEALTHY CONVERSATIONS

A resource based on workshops offered in the Memphis and Tennessee Conferences in April, 2018, to foster healthy conversation in local churches on matters pertaining to the Commission on a Way Forward and the upcoming special session of General Conference.

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Introduction--Workshops for Healthy Conversations

In planning and leading two retreats focused on the controversy surrounding the marriage and ordination of LGBTQ people within the United Methodist Church, we have learned a few lessons about Christian dialogue on difficult issues. These overnight retreats were held in April 2018 and attended by lay persons and pastors from churches from across two annual conferences. They were co-sponsored by Memphis Theological Seminary and the Turner Center for Church Leadership, in partnership with the Order of Elders and Deacons and Fellowship of Local Pastors along with the Boards of Ordained Ministry of the Memphis and Tennessee Annual Conferences.

In this handbook, we'd like to share some of what we've learned. We'll do so by first by providing an overview of how we approached the task of designing these workshops. Then we offer an annotated agenda that includes comments on each section of the retreats, which we called *At Table: United Methodists Seeking a Way Forward*. Finally, there is an appendix with several sample documents.

In sharing our process and commenting on the agenda for these retreats, we hope that pastors and congregations will find encouragement and imagination for structuring dialogue on this as well as other difficult issues facing the church.

Overview of the Task

Engaging in civil, constructive conversation about controversial matters may seem like an impossible task in our current political climate. Differences in perspective and opinion are too often treated as egregious offenses that warrant outrage and counter attack.

Sadly, too often our churches are no better at discussing difficult topics because we end up simply mirroring what is happening in our culture. We offer our "At Table: United Methodists Seeking a Way Forward" initiative because of our conviction that the church can—and should—be a place that fosters and models healthy and constructive conversations on difficult matters. Pastors and lay leaders need guidance in knowing how to plan and lead conversations that have generative outcomes.

The United Methodist Church is facing a profound moment of decision with the work of the Commission on a Way Forward and the upcoming General Conference of 2019. The critical issues at stake range from what it means to be truly inclusive to what is the nature of Biblical authority. It is possible that at some point each congregation will have to decide which part of the larger church it is called to align with. Those conversations have the potential to either split churches or help them claim their identity. This handbook offers some basic principles to help with the planning and leading of such conversations, as well as examples of what the “At Table” workshop provided for participants.

Conversations as Work

Rarely do we think of conversations in terms of work. They happen so naturally and frequently, we view them simply as an inevitable part of daily life. Yet helpful, intentional conversations also require work--the expenditure of time, attention and energy in order to move toward a desired end. We must listen respectfully and speak appropriately, with the understanding that the overall outcome of a good conversation is new understanding and insight for all parties involved.

When people come together in a meeting, there are really only three kinds of work that they can do: a) exchange information, b) make a decision or c) brainstorm new possibilities. Some meetings involve more than one of these — depending on the subject and what the group needs at that time.

In planning a conversation on a difficult topic, it is vital first to be clear about what kind of work you need to get done. Does the group need to make a decision? Is the gathering mainly to help everyone understand the range of opinions on the subject? Does the group want input from a variety of perspectives to explore a full range of options?

Being clear about the work to be done helps in two ways. First, by communicating this purpose to the participants at the outset you reduce the chance that they are assuming something different might happen. For instance, if you are planning a meeting for people to share viewpoints, but some come to the meeting thinking

there will be a decision made, you will have people working at cross purposes during the conversation. Letting everyone know at the beginning of the session that the purpose of the conversation is to hear all viewpoints will remove the fantasy that there will be some unanimous decision by the end of the meeting.

The second benefit is that your purpose helps you design the format and structure of the conversation. The purpose provides the overall direction for the conversation, while the format and structure provide the boundaries within which the communication takes place. Proper format and a clear structure are critical to avoid the ever-present temptation simply to engage in arguing; one side asserts something, the other side responds with a “yes...but...” answer and the pattern repeats itself until eventually everyone quits in frustration.

This handbook offers guidance on how to plan and structure a conversation so that the outcome is helpful and appropriate for the community.

A Battle of Messages (Argument) or a Learning Conversation

One of the best analyses of the differences between a healthy and unhealthy conversation comes from the 1999 [updated and expanded in 2010] book Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most. In it the authors point out that every conversation, especially those about important matters, have three *levels*: a) the topic or subject (or the “what happened?” conversation); b) the emotion level (what feelings does this conversation evoke in each person?); and c) the identity level (what the outcome of the conversation means for each participant’s identity and sense of meaning).

In addition, the authors point out that in discussions where significant differences are present, there are two *types* of conversations: a “battle of messages” (or argument) and a “learning conversation.” Here is a chart that identifies contrasting assumptions and goals for the two types of conversation on the three levels (adapted from the chart on pp. 18 & 19 of Difficult Conversations).

LEVELS OF CONVERSATION	A BATTLE OF MESSAGES (AN ARGUMENT)	A LEARNING CONVERSATION
<p>THE SUBJECT LEVEL Challenge: the topic is more complex than either side fully understands.</p>	<p>Assumption: I know all I need to know about the subject or incident. Goal: Persuade them that I am right (and they are wrong).</p> <p>Assumption: I know what the others' real motives and assumptions are. Goal: Get the others to see how misguided their motives and purposes are.</p>	<p>Assumption: Each of us is bringing different information and perceptions to the conversation and there are likely to be important things that each of us does not know. Goal: Explore each other's stories and how we understand the issue/situation and why.</p> <p>Assumption: I know what my motives and assumptions are and how I react to others' assertions. Goal: Share what is at stake for me and listen to understand what is at stake for the other person.</p>
LEVELS OF CONVERSATION	A BATTLE OF MESSAGES (AN ARGUMENT)	A LEARNING CONVERSATION
<p>THE FEELING LEVEL Challenge: the issue is emotionally charged and it is difficult to know how to manage intense emotions.</p>	<p>Assumption: Feelings are not very important for the conversation and maybe inappropriate to share. Goal: Try to avoid talking about personal feelings.</p>	<p>Assumption: Feelings are at the heart of the issue and are usually complex. I may have to work a bit to fully understand my feelings. Goal: Acknowledge and address feelings (of all participants) without judgment.</p>

<p>THE IDENTITY LEVEL Challenge: The issue can feel threatening to our identity.</p>	<p>Assumption: I am completely correct in my views. Goal: Protect myself from any painful insights that might threaten my identity.</p>	<p>Assumption: All participants have a lot at stake emotionally in the conversation. Each of us is complex, with some good and valid points and some not so valid. Goal: Understand the identity issues for all involved and be open to a more complex self-image.</p>
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This chart provides a stark contrast between the dynamics of a win-lose argument and a conversation that helps all participants gain a deeper understanding of what is at stake in the discussion. Healthy, productive conversations acknowledge the emotions and identity dimensions present in any discussion of a challenging topic. Church leaders who want to navigate the difficult discussions related to the work of the Commission on a Way Forward will find that structuring them to be less argumentative and more exploratory will make a profound difference in the experience church members have.

[In their work over sixteen months, the members of the Commission utilized a similar distinction between “positions” and “interests.” Gil Rendle, the process consultant for the Commission, has a five minute video explaining how the group sought to identify the interests underlying the positions that they took on various questions. The video is available at <https://tinyurl.com/COWFRendleParable>.]

Getting Started

The first thing the church leadership needs to do is to identify the team of people responsible for the planning of the conversation. It is critical that the members of the team understand the importance of designing the meeting to be a learning conversation, not a forum for arguing or debate.

Secondly, the team must specify the outcomes desired from the conversation. In other words, they need to think about what they want to have happened once

the meeting is over. Outcomes can include gaining new information, having a specific kind of experience or presenting an opportunity. A good learning conversation can have several desired outcomes, but the planners must be realistic in what can be achieved. Appendix B offers some examples of questions that churches may want to focus on.

Thirdly, the planning team should think through what steps or stages of conversation will be most productive for its own community. In the At Table model, for instance, there were a number of parts to the workshop which were structured in such a way as to build upon the work done in prior conversations. In our opening session, we acknowledged that we needed to spend time getting to know each other and to find our common bonds as United Methodists. This, then, allowed us to divide the larger group into smaller discussion groups for various conversations.

Fourth, the team needs to identify the ground rules for healthy conversation that will be expected of all participants. Appendix A is the set of guidelines we used at the At Table events. This is provided merely as an example of the kinds of issues addressed by helpful conversation guidelines.

“At Table: United Methodists Seeking a Way Forward”

Annotated Planning Document

(Please note: *We’re placing the full planning document we used for the retreats on this site. If needed and helpful you can print it out to view alongside this annotation)*

We’ve learned the answer to the question “Can’t we all just get along?” is, of course, no, we can’t—unless by “getting along” we mean “avoiding all conversations around deeply held convictions and beliefs.”

We’re fairly sure there is theological truth in this, harkening back to the opening chapters of Genesis and continuing throughout the Old and New Testaments. We may be created in the image of God, but to say that we’ve strayed from what John Wesley called the perfect love of our Creator is obvious. In the end, working

through differences over things that matter—to us and to the church—is rarely easy. Careful and thoughtful preparation isn't just important, it is essential.

At Table: Comments and Guidelines

Section 1:

1. Worship:

Our work was done (and yours will be done) in the context of Christian life and faithfulness. Therefore we began with worship. Aware that our group contained a diversity of beliefs on the particular issue at hand, we chose the texts, songs and litanies carefully, not with any position in mind, but with the conviction that worship reminds us that any work we do together is about being in the presence of and, as a body, listening to God.

2. Introductions:

For us, personal introductions of all of the participants were necessary because our event involved lay and clergy from a wide variety of churches, most of whom did not know one another. In order to build trust we chose to have persons share more than names and church contexts, but also to share something each person loved about his/her church. One of our leaders began the sharing to demonstrate what we wanted the introductions to look like.

In congregational contexts introductions can also be very helpful, especially when preparing to address difficult issues. Inviting participants to share something that moves toward his/her story can help set the context and tenor of the sharing ahead. It reminds us that the issues are always, in some way, about our own stories. It also reminds us that we are listening for God's story in relationship to the issue at hand. For instance, the leaders might ask church members present to tell what it was that brought them to the church, or why they chose to stay.

3. Review:

The work of the special commission was very clearly on the minds of our participants. Even though the focus of our workshop/retreat was not on the commission's work, we knew it was necessary to give the best information we had about that work in order to move into the work we had planned. Dr. Michael Turner of Memphis Theological Seminary provided a 20 minute presentation on

the events that have led us to this point in our Church's history. [This is available at <http://methodisthouse.org/2018/07/18/way-forward-resources/>.]

In your context, it may be important to review information or events related to annual conference or the special commission or general conference. If so, be clear that this is merely a brief session for information. Focusing too much on what is happening elsewhere can become a way of avoiding the depth of dialogue and conversation needed in your church.

*We allowed an hour and forty-five minutes for all of Section 1 because we were a large group from over twenty churches. This work can be done in less time in smaller groups that are more familiar to one another.

Section 2:

1. Overview and ground rules/touchstones of our work in groups:

While brief, this is a crucial orientation to small group work. Attached to this manual is a slide presentation that discusses three levels of conversation and the importance of avoiding "yes, but" statements. Even in affinity groups (composed of people with similar positions on a topic) where it typically feels a bit more "safe" to articulate different perspectives, participants need guidelines that help them to begin practicing ways of listening and sharing toward greater depth. A video of this teaching presentation is also found at <http://methodisthouse.org/2018/07/18/way-forward-resources/>.

2. Small group facilitators:

Choosing and training small group facilitators is essential and can't be stressed enough.

Several of our leaders were already well-trained small group facilitators. Even so, we sent out some very simple but specific guidelines for the small groups (attached with this manual) and required the leaders to participate in a session dealing with expectations, ways to orient and, when needed, methods for redirecting group dialogue. We also provided the groups with guidelines for respectful dialogue and instructed the leaders to go over these guidelines to set direction for the small groups throughout the workshop/retreat.

Leaders must be prepared for group participants who are inclined to dominate or make dialogue difficult. It cannot be stressed enough how essential it is to discuss ways for facilitators to redirect the conversation if someone is failing to follow the ground rules for conversation. For instance, if a small group participant begins his/her sharing by saying “Every true Christian believes...” the facilitator should gently intervene and ask the person to speak for him/herself rather than assuming all should be in agreement.

*Both the Turner Center in Nashville and the Center for Pastoral Formation at MTS in Memphis are resources for training leaders when there is a need.

3. Why start with Affinity Groups?

This may or may not be necessary in certain congregations, but our experience is that sharing across differences can be intimidating and/or difficult for many people. Beginning with groups who share a common position can make participants more willing to articulate and explore their own positions and discuss why they believe what they believe. In our case, we had participants indicate when they signed up for the workshop whether or not they were for “keeping the Book of Discipline unchanged,” “changing the Book of Discipline to remove the restrictions on participation of homosexuals in the life of the church,” or “undecided.” This allowed us to form groups with people who had self-identified with one of those three positions.

Another way to have people self-identify is to offer a continuum of positions from 1 to 9, with 1 representing a strong desire to be inclusive and 9 representing the preference to keep the church positions on homosexuality the same. Each participant is given an index card and asked to write on it the number from 1 to 9 that represents where they see themselves at the time. Then when the leaders want affinity groups, they can ask those who put 1-3 on their cards to assemble in one place, those who put 4-6 on their card to another and those who put 7-9 in a third group. [Later, mixed groups can be formed by asking the even numbers to go to one group and the odd number folks to go to another.]

These Affinity Groups are helpful in other ways as well. Participants almost always discover differences within their shared position. This sets the tone for greater curiosity and willingness to engage with persons who have different positions.

4. Choosing questions wisely:

As simple as it sounds, choosing and shaping the questions for each session is very important. We went through several drafts working on the questions and, during the workshop, we revised questions for later small group work according to our experiences in the initial large and smaller group experiences. In short, plan these questions well and don't get so attached to your wise planning that you fail to adjust! [See attachment #3 for examples of questions a church might identify for its conversation.]

Section 3:

1. Small Groups reporting back to the Big Group:

All participants come back to the big group after their affinity group has met and the leaders ask a representative of each group to share key insights from their group's conversation. If done well, this can be an opportunity for participants to hear a wide range of approaches on the subject (within Affinity Groups as well as across differences). It can also lead to clarifying questions that nudge participants toward mutual respect.

It is important that the leader model respect and curiosity as each group shares. Writing down what is shared and posting this writing on walls can also help participants feel taken seriously and heard more deeply.

Section 4:

1. Breaking into groups with differences:

We created groups made up of individuals with different views and opinions based on their self-identification in relationship to the issue. This experience clearly works best if you have an even number of persons (or close to it) from each perspective.

Do not form a group in which one person ends up alone in his/her perspective/position. A participant rarely, if ever, feels free to share thoughts and convictions when she is the only one with such thoughts and convictions in the group.

2. Sharing in groups with differences:

As stated earlier, each group needs to review the guidelines for sharing. Just saying that we'll have respectful dialogue isn't helpful.

That said, our experience has been that when diverse groups agree to and embrace these guidelines, they often feel a greater freedom and sense of safety. When people with very different perspectives engage one another with curiosity and respect, it reminds us that Christian community is possible in this world.

To re-emphasize what we said earlier, trained leadership for these groups is essential. Some participants agree to the guidelines but break them when something is said with which they strongly disagree. Leaders who are able to stop the conversation, call for silence, and be clear with the group (not just the individual) that the work we're doing is hard but possible, make all the difference.

3. Reports from the smaller groups:

Again, reporting on the experience of the smaller groups to the larger group helps. Following our first experience with diverse small groups, the large group sharing was, in a sense, less about "content" and more about the experience of sharing across differences. The leader of the larger group-sharing exercise needs to focus on and draw out the experience (positive or negative) of sharing with others across differences.

In both of our retreats we were surprised at how positive the reports were from these diverse groups. People across perspectives felt heard and felt that they experienced, if not community, at least a deeper sense of connection to one another as fellow members of Christ's Body.

4. Evening Prayers:

In our setting (a two-day retreat) beginning with worship and ending the first day with evening prayers reminded us that all our work is done in the context and presence of God.

Whatever the setting or structures for sharing on difficult issues, for Christians the beginnings and endings need to be marked with worship and prayer.

Sections 5,6 and 7

1. Morning prayers: See above!

2. Methodist Tradition: We had a brief presentation on how our Wesleyan history and tradition can be a guide and offer hope as we address difficult social and theological issues. This presentation by Dr. Turner, the Methodist Chair at MTS., is on the website for use along with this manual.

3. Lay and Clergy Groups:

In our context, breaking up into lay and clergy groups was important. Our experience was that this provided the laity a context for sharing more freely and with greater confidence. Sometimes laity are too willing to defer to the pastor! In the local church, pastors will need to be aware of this and will need to create contexts where laity feel free to explore their ideas, convictions and theologies. We tried to make each of these groups well balanced with diverse thoughts and opinions represented in each group.

4. Church pairs and Wrapping Up:

In our context, the lay person and clergy from each church were invited to imagine next steps for sponsoring dialogue in their local church context. They were also free to form a group with pairs from other local churches if they believed that would be helpful. In reporting back, these church pairs articulated an excitement about doing this work in their congregations. They felt that the retreat helped model a process, while also making it clear that none of us are alone in this work.

As these church pairs shared creative ideas, they inspired each other. We were reminded of resources within the United Methodist Church that were available and helpful in dealing with this and other difficult issues (UMW resources in particular).

In local church contexts, having pairs of laypeople break up to discuss next steps could be a helpful exercise. If the pairs are asked to report and then entrust the next steps to a smaller designated group (pastor and original planners, e.g.), the exercise could help the larger group feel a sense of ownership in those next steps. What needs to be avoided is trying to “plan” those next steps with too much detail in too large a group. Later time for reflection and organization will be important.

5. Closing Eucharist:

Opening with worship, marking our time together with prayer, and closing with the Eucharist reminded us that we only move “forward” when we are at table with Christ. In the end we were very aware that however carefully we planned and tried to nurture sacred dialogue on difficult issues, the quality of our conversation and time together depended on how deeply we availed ourselves of the grace God offers us in our brokenness and in our yearnings.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS FOR CHURCH WORK

APPENDIX A

TIME FRAME	Present→January, 2019	February 2019	After General Conference	
INFORMATION NEEDED	Provide material on the work of the CWF; Provide information about the proposals coming before GC; Let Church know who the conference delegates are and ways to communicate with them.	How to keep up with General Conference work?	If One Church Model (or similar model) is approved	If the Book of Discipline remains the same (and, perhaps, becomes more punitive for clergy who violate its mandates)
CONVERSATION	Significant Biblical passages and other guides in discerning the issue of human sexuality and the Body of Christ	The way General Conference works	Time frame for decisions	
QUESTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Does our church want to speak as one voice to the delegates about our understanding of Christian faithfulness on this issue? *Can our church speak as one voice to the delegates about Christian faithfulness on this issue? *How will you feel if the One Church model passes? *How will you feel if the One Church model fails? 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Where is God leading us in relationship to the ongoing life of the UMC? *If we are led to continue as United methodists, where is God leading us in relationship to same-sex marriages in our local church? *How will we discern whether to accept someone who is LGBT as our pastor? *Where do we believe God is leading our conference regarding the ordination of LGBT candidates? *How will God help us deal with ongoing differences and conflicts related to this decision? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Where is God leading us in relationship to the ongoing life of the UMC? *How will God help us deal with ongoing differences and conflicts related to this decision?

At Table....

Guidelines to be on the table and shared aloud with each small group

*IDENTIFY A NOTE TAKER TO RECORD MAIN IDEAS AND VIEWS.

1. Be respectful
2. Everyone deserves to be heard.
3. One person speaks at a time.
4. Speak for yourself, not for others.
5. If you are offended or uncomfortable, say so—and say why.
6. Disagreements are okay, but don't make them personal—no name-calling or stereotyping.
7. Stick to the issue.
8. Everyone helps the facilitator keep the discussion moving and on track.
9. Personal stories stay in the group unless people decide it's okay to share them

Guidelines for Small Group Facilitators

Parker Palmer, observes in his book, *A Hidden Wholeness* that the soul is often reluctant to show itself. Palmer's book shows us ways to create "circles of trust." A circle of trust is simply a created space safe enough for our elusive souls to rise to the foreground and speak in a way that we can hear them, where each person feels that what they have to offer the group is honored.

In this retreat we are seeking to create such circles. Here are some simple guidelines that may be helpful:

1. Encourage brief silences after a person shares so that what he/she has shared is heard and honored. Quick responses often appropriate what the other person has shared.
2. Encourage follow up, open ended, curious questions that seek clarity.
3. Discourage rhetorical questions that are statements in the disguise of statements (e.g., "*Don't you think it would be better if...?*")
4. Encourage the group to avoid "yes, but" statements that imply correcting the other person.
5. Midway through the sharing, pause for approximately 2 minutes and ask everyone to "be still and rest in the Spirit." Silence is as important as speech when the goal is listening together for God and discernment.
6. Be clear that your responsibility as group director is to see that each person has the opportunity to share and that no one dominates the time the group has for sharing.