

INTRODUCTION

The beloved hymn, “The Church of Christ, in Every Age,” speaks to the reality and challenges God’s church encounters. How does the ELCA proclaim the gospel and serve our world that is “beset by change?” The church has and continues to endure changes and challenges in the 21st century as it has in previous centuries. This session is a guide to help participants think about how their congregation deals with change and challenges.

FACING CHANGE IS NOT NEW

The year 2017 reminds us of the Reformation’s 500th anniversary and how dramatic were the changes of the 16th-century Reformation. Lutheran reformers preached that salvation – being made right before God as sinners – was a gift of God’s grace. It could not be earned or merited by human deeds or understanding. They also insisted that the living Word, not the church hierarchy, was God’s ultimate authority.

As the lead reformer, Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible and the liturgy into the common German language helped bring God’s Word to all people. His hymn compositions, theological texts, and the writing of the Small and Large Catechisms also helped lay a new groundwork for every believer’s ministry in daily life. Scholars agree that Luther and other reformers like John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli planted seeds for democracy and citizen engagement in public life. In short, the reformers’ ministry changed the church and the course of history.

The ELCA continues to proclaim the gospel to a needy world and encounter new challenges and opportunities. The sessions in this resource are crafted to help congregations have a conversation around one of today’s vital issues, the practical questions faced by many congregations about how to carry out ministry with and to same-gender couples and their families. As with every change God’s church has faced through the ages, such practical questions present both challenge and opportunity. As with every change God has promised the Holy Spirit as a guide for those who wish to discern together. *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect”* (Romans 12:2).

Parish conversation as a response to challenges and opportunities in the church is not new! The Acts of the Apostles describes the beginning of the church of Jesus Christ and the missionary journeys of Peter and Paul (Acts 15:1-31). Faithful Jews comprised the core of Jesus’ earliest followers, but when gentiles (non-Jews) were drawn in by the apostles’ evangelism, differences arose. Yes, the very first church experienced conflict and differing perspectives as people struggled with language, leadership, membership rituals and much more. But with the help of the Holy Spirit and the apostles’ leadership, the

Guide leaders

This resource guide encourages the use of a leadership team. If not already arranged, please consider offering to serve or take turns in one of these roles.

Moderator: Good conversation in a group benefits from having someone serve as a neutral moderator. This person simply directs the conversation, helps everyone participate and encourages participants to remain focused on the questions.

Recorder: A second important role is a record keeper. Someone with good listening skills could record key concerns, ideas, agreement and tensions or disagreements on an easel pad, electronically, etc.

Timekeeper: A third volunteer will keep time and help everyone stay on track.

early church discerned God's Word and worked through their differences. Peter identified the grace of God as a common value held by Jews and gentiles and Paul and Barnabas shared God's "signs and wonders" that took place on their evangelical journeys. Critical to this was recognizing they were bound together as one when baptized into Jesus Christ by water and the Spirit. As Peter put it, "And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us" (Acts 15:8-9).

It is in this baptismal unity that we turn to some key questions to discuss at the outset of this conversation series. We are no different than the early church or the 16th-century reformers as we have challenges and opportunities to find new ways to minister together.

DIALOGUE QUESTIONS

1. What are the particular ministry gifts that our congregation brings to the community? What makes us proud of our congregation? What makes us proud to be part of the ELCA?
2. What are the difficult issues our congregation is facing or has encountered in the recent past? How have we engaged in making decisions about these things? How did we try to discern God's will?
3. This conversation series focuses on ministry with and to same-gender couples and their families within our congregation. This effort is not about defining a "problem" or converting others to "my view;" rather, it is intended to engage all people in discussing the congregation's life and ministry. What questions come to mind as you think about this purpose?
4. By the conclusion of this four-part conversation series, what do we hope to accomplish?

Context

ELCA congregations are called to discern about their ministry within the framework set by the social statement "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" and the related ministry policies. Both were authorized on behalf of the ELCA at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly, the highest legislative body of our church. Both the statement and current ELCA ministry policies acknowledge as faithful to Lutheran heritage a certain range of convictions regarding the meaning of Scripture and what is responsible ministry with and to those in legal, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships. Both the [Introduction](#) to this resource and [Appendix 2](#) provide further explanation.

Forum covenant

- Be in prayer and seek the Spirit's guidance.
- Follow the Golden Rule.
- Speak for yourself and honestly convey your thoughts and feelings.
- Listen to understand. Keep an open mind and heart.
- Disagree respectfully with others' ideas.
- Move toward greater mutual understanding.

English language Scripture quotations in the booklet are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible © 1989 National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, unless otherwise noted. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

“A Guide for Talking Together about Shared Ministry with Same-Sex Couples and Their Families”
Copyright © 2017 Office of the Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

“Blest Be the Tie that Binds,” “How Firm a Foundation,” and “Lord, Speak to Us, That We May Speak”
reprinted in the public domain.

“The Church of Christ in Every Age” text by Fred Pratt Green, © 1971 Hope Publishing Company, Carol Stream, IL 60188. All rights reserved. Used by permission. Copying of this text is only allowed with a valid license. Reprinted under #78480.

The Office of the Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America wishes to express deep gratitude to the Rev. Dr. R. Gregg Kaufman whose service as primary writer of this resource truly exemplifies what it means to “go the second mile.” Rev. Kaufman is a retired ELCA pastor and university faculty member. He currently serves as a Kettering Foundation Research Associate and is a member of the National Issues Forums Institute network.

Permission is granted to reproduce this document as needed providing each copy displays the copyright as printed above. This resource may be downloaded at ELCA.org.