



Suggestions for a Five-Session Class

“To Plead the Cause” STUDY GUIDE

PREPARATION – To meet the needs of various time frames, this Study Plan can expand into 10 or 12 sessions, or the material can be condensed into two or three sessions. Each class member will need a copy of the booklet, “To Plead the Cause: Reconciling Ministries and United Methodism.” The printed 32 page booklet can be ordered, or it may be downloaded free and copied. For instructions see the note at the end of this piece. It will be helpful, although certainly not necessary, if class members have the opportunity to read the entire study, including footnotes, prior to the first class. The class facilitator might well gather books, pamphlets and articles on related topics, and seek to borrow several copies of *The Book of Discipline* for class use.

SESSION I. Church and Homosexuality in a Changing Society

A. Let’s begin at the end. Read and discuss the Conclusion of “To Plead the Cause.”

1. Do you see indications that the United States is in the midst of a “discomforting social transition” regarding homosexuality, as Stephanie Coontz suggests? She lists these three periods: a) individual and family stress, b) public debate, c) restabilization.
2. In which of the three stages do you see the mainstream U. S. culture? In which is the United Methodist Church nationally? In which is your local church? In which are you?
3. How can theology undergird (support) social change, as Eileen Lindner suggests?
4. How is or is not, theology already undergirding social/cultural change around homosexuality?
5. What makes homosexuality a difficult issue for discussion in the church and among Christians?
6. How might a study like this one help or hinder this social and cultural transition?

B. Read and discuss the Prologue and Section I, through “Contemporary Division.”

1. Look up the Bible references: Acts 8:26-40 and Acts 10:9-16.
2. What similarities do you see between the New Testament Church’s conflict over circumcision and our current conflict over homosexuality?
3. What other differences or conflicts are you aware of in this local congregation, especially conflicts between stated religious beliefs and actual personal behavior? What conflicts in United Methodism nationally? Are they being addressed? How?

C. For next week: (Class facilitator: you may wish to make this a handout.)

1. Read all of Section I, Our Need for Reconciliation, including the footnotes.
2. Try to find any books listed in the footnotes, or other books or articles on similar subjects. Read appropriate chapters and bring them to share at the next session. Note what they add to your understanding of this issue and how they challenge your perspective.
3. Be ready to make a 1 minute report on your outside reading and reflections.
4. Locate and talk with (interview) three lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered persons, at least one in this congregation, and at least one in no religious group. Ask: a) What do you believe the public misunderstands about homosexuality? b) What do you believe many churches misunderstand about homosexuality? c) What keeps you in or out of a church?

SESSION II. Reconciliation with Homosexual Christians

A. Hear reports assigned at the previous session. Did anyone find any books or other resources? What did they add to your understanding of this issue? Did they challenge your thinking in any way? What questions did they raise, what emotions did they stir in you?

B. Discuss Section I. Our Need for Reconciliation—Details which Divide. Here are the Study's nine misconceptions, listed as discussion questions.

1. Does the Bible condemn homosexuality? 2. Is homosexuality a choice? 3. Can homosexuality be changed by religious conversion or therapy? 4. Is the expression of homosexual intimacy sinful? 5. Are sexual acts only acceptable within marriage? Only between a married man and woman? 6. Is homosexuality a threat to marriage and family values? 7. Are homosexual life-partner commitments different from those of heterosexuals? 8. Should one's Christian belief remain permanent and unchangeable? 9. Will this congregation and the denomination lose members and income if homosexual Christians are welcomed?

For each misconception listed:

- a. Do you agree that this is a misconception?
- b. Has your awareness and understanding of homosexuality changed regarding this point?
- c. If so, what influenced that change?

C. For next week:

1. Talk with the pastor and a lay officer about whom they believe may feel included or excluded from your congregation.
 2. Read next week's passages from *The Book of Discipline*. How do you agree or disagree with each? (*Class facilitator may need to create a handout of this. Some are also available at the United Methodist Church website, <http://www.umc.org>.)*
- ¶ 4, Constitution Article IV, Inclusiveness of the Church, pg. 22.
 - ¶104 Our Theological Task, pp. 74-86.
 - ¶161 Social Principles. A. The Family, p. 99; C. Marriage, p. 99; G. Human Sexuality pp. 100-101;
 - ¶162 The Social Community, first paragraph, p. 104; H. Equal Rights Regardless of Sexual Orientation, p.107.
 - ¶202 Function of the Local Church, pp. 123-124
 - ¶332 Unauthorized Conduct, 6. "Ceremonies that celebrate...etc.," p. 220.
 - ¶806.9. "It shall be responsible... etc.," p. 453.

SESSION III. Inclusion and Exclusion in the Church

A. Discuss the assignment for last session. What did you learn from discussions with a pastor or lay leader? Did you personally ever feel included or excluded from any church? What helped or hindered those feelings? What surprised you about what you learned or experienced? Share your personal knowledge of persons who have been excluded, or felt that they were

B. Explain the United Methodist General Conference: how members are elected, how it works, how it votes, how The Discipline is written and changed. (*Class facilitator may wish to invite a pastor, or Annual Conference lay delegate, or new member orientation teacher, for this segment.*)

C. Read and discuss each of the Paragraphs from *The Book of Discipline*. For each reference, ask:

1. What does this reference say or imply about who is included and who is excluded, including lesbian and gay persons?
2. In what instances are these passages consistent or inconsistent with the rest of *The Discipline*?
3. How do you feel about these references, and about the inclusion of some persons in the community of faith, and the exclusion of some persons from it?

D. For next week:

1. Read Part II. Our Foundation Documents.
2. Ask for volunteers to research and bring brief reports to the next class on each of the following.
 - a) The times in which John Wesley lived—18th Century England;
 - b) A brief biography of John Wesley;

- c) Wesley's ministry: his preaching, sermons, journal and other writings.
- d) The meanings of: creation, reconciliation, redemption
- e) The meanings of: heresy, sin, apostasy

(Facilitator: Suggest resources including *The Discipline*, church library, pastor's library, encyclopedias, public library and Internet. See also Resource Guide #1 for more references.)

SESSION IV. Exploring theology: Creation, Reconciliation, Redemption

A. Hear and discuss briefly the reports assigned at the previous session.

B. Read and discuss Part II, Our Foundation Documents.

First Part

1. There are important words we seldom use in daily life. Discuss the simplest meaning of each as you might use it, then look up the formal definition.
 - a) creation, b) re-creation, c) sacred worth, d) condone, e) Christian teaching, f) incompatible, g) self-avowed, h) practicing homosexual, i) heresy,
2. What do you think Wesley meant, "To be ignorant of many things, and to mistake in some, is the necessary condition of humanity"?
3. Why do you think the Study claims that "the General Conference has violated its own historic statements of faith"?

Second Part

1. Discuss both the simplest meaning and the formal meaning of:
 - a) reconciliation, b) the human ministry of the church, c) sin, d) means of grace, e) repent
2. What might Wesley have meant, "My belief is no rule for another"?
3. What does *The Discipline* mean by "Distinctive Wesleyan Emphasis" (§101)?
4. What inconsistencies do you see in the acceptance and rejection implied in the last paragraph of *The Discipline*, §161.G, p. 101? It begins, "Homosexual persons no less than...."
5. Why would Wesley defend a man in prison for sodomy? See footnote 14. Would you?
6. How can the Study claim that a pastor is forced into disobedience to *The Discipline* by either conducting or not conducting a holy union for a member?

Third Part

1. Discuss the simplest meaning and the formal meaning of:
 - a) redemption, b) divine initiative, c) ensnared in evil, d) apostasy, e) inclusive worshipping community, f) holy union/same-gender union
2. On what does Jesus say "hang all the law and the prophets"? What does that mean for us?
3. What do you think Wesley means by "a catholic spirit"? Does our church have it? Do we?
4. Why does the Study claim the General Conference has capitulated to, and become a participant in, the evils of anti-homosexual rhetoric and actions? Do you agree? What might this mean in our personal lives? In our congregation? In our denomination?
5. What do you think the Study means by "faithful obedience to the gospel of Jesus"? To what extent are you, are we, faithfully obedient?
6. What option does a Christian have when our understanding of obedience to God and our obedience to church law are in conflict?

C. For next week

Reread the Conclusion of "To Plead the Cause." What new information and what shifts in attitudes have you experienced as a result of this study? What questions remain unanswered for you? What struggles are unresolved for you? What new actions might we consider?

SESSION V. Plans for Further Learning and Action. What might we do? What will we do?

A. Share responses from the previous session's assignments regarding information, attitudes, remaining questions, and ideas for actions.

B. Review again and summarize the following:

1. Each of the nine misconceptions about homosexuality in Part I, Our Need for Reconciliation. Share ideas and feelings. How can reconciliation begin among those who disagree?
2. The three foundation doctrines: Creation, Reconciliation, Redemption, and their meaning for homosexuality and faithful Christianity in your church.
3. The Conclusion section. Invite participants to share responses, learning, questions.

C. Discuss the following questions:

1. Do you agree with the Study that perhaps a majority of Christians feel caught in the middle of the disagreement over homosexuality in the church? Why?
2. Do you think it is appropriate for a faithful United Methodist to seek to change church law? Why or why not? If so, how? In our local church? In the General Conference?
3. Are Christians ever justified in openly disobeying a church law, or a civil law? When? Why? See *The Discipline*, ¶164.E on civil obedience and disobedience.
4. Do homosexual persons feel welcome and accepted in your congregation? How can you tell?
5. Is it more important that we be peacemakers or justice seekers in our church? Can we be both?

D. What will be our next steps?

1. Encourage the group to outline and write a possible article for your church newsletter, explaining what they learned and any response they hope from their congregation.
2. How can we encourage more “theological discourse” on these issues, including more persons within and beyond our congregation?
3. Does your congregation appear to welcome and accept homosexual persons? What specific things could be done to indicate such a welcome? See Resource Guide “Including Non-traditional Families.”
4. Do homosexual persons actually feel welcome in your congregation? How can you tell?
5. What lesbian and gay sponsored events occur in your community? Find out and consider support and participation. Examples: PFLAG, GLSEN, Gay Pride March, Coming Out Day, a high school Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) student organization.
6. Encourage the group to write a petition to General Conference seeking to change its legislation and welcome homosexual persons at all levels of church life.
7. Help the group write a responsive reading, perhaps using words from Jesus, Wesley and *The Discipline*, as found in the Study.
8. Help individuals or the group together to write a prayer for the resolution of this conflict in our churches and our society. Ask the pastor to consider using it in a worship service.

#