

OUR WAY FORWARD

Navigating the 2020/24 General Conference Changes about Human Sexuality



“Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. All the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.” — John Wesley.



Graceful Conversations and Covenanting Process

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Resource

This resource was commissioned by the College of Bishops of the Northeastern Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church to help United Methodist congregations clearly and gracefully understand the changes in the 2020/24 Book of Discipline concerning human sexuality and discern a covenant statement that reflects their current understandings of human sexuality, their intentions regarding ministry with/by/to LGBTQ persons, and their commitments to promote unity in diversity. The covenant will not only guide the ministry of the congregation but also provide mission-critical information to the cabinet for appointment-making.

This resource *is not* intended to alter individual beliefs. It is designed to equip congregations with tools for engaging in thoughtful, grace-filled, and respectful conversations that recognize and honor the diversity of perspectives within the church on human sexuality and ministry with, by, and to LGBTQ people.

How to Use This Resource

The resource is formatted for small groups, leadership teams, and congregational settings. It includes reflection questions, conversation guides, and actionable steps for churches to process the changes collaboratively. It ensures that congregations have the tools needed to move forward in a manner that honors their members' beliefs and the diversity within the United Methodist Church.

Writing Team

Rev. Gina Yeske, Greater New Jersey, Convener
Rev. Ginger Gaines Cirelli, Baltimore-Washington
Ron Swift, Susquehanna
Darleen Di Domineck, Deaconess, Eastern Pennsylvania
Rev. Joseph W.A. Archie III, Peninsula-Delaware
Rev. Dr. Aaron Bouwens, Upper New York
Bishop Héctor A. Burgos-Núñez



UNITED METHODISTS
OF SUSQUEHANNA & UPPER NEW YORK



CABINET COVENANT

In this new season of ministry, the Susquehanna and Upper New York cabinets covenant to.

1. Seeing and welcoming all people and inviting them to experience the healing and liberating love of Christ in their lives.
2. Celebrating our rich diversity as a precious gift from God.
3. Acknowledging our leaders' and congregations' theological beliefs around ministry with and by LGBTQ persons.
4. Holding each other accountable in love to our shared commitment to do no harm.
5. Nurturing a culture of connection and collaboration among our disciples, leaders, and congregations.
6. Resourcing leaders and congregations to thrive in ministry, and
7. Promoting a vision of missional unity that is Christ-centered and that transcends our disagreements.

United Methodists are moving forward as a diverse, worldwide Christian community that welcomes people from all walks of life. Our faith and hope are anchored in Jesus Christ. Led by the Holy Spirit, our journey of faith and mission is grounded in Scripture and guided by our doctrine, polity, and social principles. We celebrate our rich diversity as a gift from God. Although we may not always agree on certain specific issues, we remain joyfully united in our love for Christ and our shared mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

In this new season, we accept God's invitation to live the gospel, be Christ's love with all our neighbors, and build the beloved community - all for God's glory.

www.susumc.org | www.unyumc.org

Process for Discernment, Covenanting, and Decision-Making

This *Graceful Conversations and Covenanting* process is designed to help United Methodist congregations clearly and gracefully understand the changes in the 2020/24 Book of Discipline concerning human sexuality and discern a covenant statement that reflects their current understandings of human sexuality, their intentions regarding ministry with/by/to LGBTQ persons, and their commitments to promote unity in diversity.

As your congregation embarks on this journey of *Holy Conferencing*, here is a recommended timeline.

1. The church council reviews the *Graceful Conversations and Covenanting* process and affirms engaging in it.
2. The church council forms a diverse team of respected/trusted leaders and congregation members to plan the conversation sessions and covenant-writing process. This team should represent various perspectives within the congregation. Depending on your church's size, the size of the planning team may vary from 5 to 8 members. It is strongly recommended that the pastor be part of the team.
3. The pastor informs the District Superintendent that your church will engage in the *Graceful Conversations and Covenanting* process to resource the congregation and keep them in their prayers.
4. The planning team finalizes the format of the conversation sessions, considering their context.
5. In collaboration with the pastor, the planning team promotes the *Graceful Conversations* gatherings among active members and constituents (for example, active professing, baptized members, and active frequent participants).
6. The congregation completes the *Graceful Conversations* sessions.
7. The planning team writes a draft covenant statement in consultation with the church council. The draft should include specific commitments, values, and goals to guide the congregation's ministry and relationship with its community.
8. The planning team hosts focus groups and/or town hall meetings to gather feedback and additional input from the congregation on the draft covenant statement. This step is critical as it ensures that the covenant reflects the congregation's collective beliefs, hopes, and concerns - not just the opinions of a few individuals/leaders.
9. The planning team edits the covenant, incorporating the feedback gathered.
10. The planning team shares the draft with the congregation for further input and revisions. This collaborative process allows for transparency and ensures the covenant represents the whole church community. Avoid rushing toward a vote. Instead, focus on ensuring that all voices are heard and valued. While it may not reflect unanimous alignment, the covenant should reflect a substantial portion of the congregation's collective perspective and commitment.

11. The planning team presents the final version of the covenant to the church council for approval. The council's consultation with the pastor ensures it aligns with the broader United Methodist Church doctrine/polity.
12. The pastor requests their District Superintendent to convene a Special Church Conference for final approval of the covenant.
13. Once approved, the covenant can be formalized in a worship service or special gathering where the congregation is invited to reaffirm their baptismal vows and dedicate themselves to the covenant in a spirit of grace and unity.
14. The congregation incorporates the covenant into its mission and ministry activities.
15. The church council establishes check-ins to regularly evaluate progress and adjust as needed, ensuring the Congregation's commitment to the covenant as written, providing the covenant remains a living, relevant, and active commitment of the Congregation's lived-out beliefs.

Engaging in Graceful Conversations

This step-by-step guide is designed for congregations to engage in meaningful conversations regarding changes in the 2020/24 *Book of Discipline* on human sexuality. It offers practical methods for fostering fruitful dialogue across differing perspectives. The desired outcome is to foster a sense of community/unity in diversity where all voices are heard and valued so that communal insights and wisdom emerge, and congregations have the tools needed to move forward in a manner that honors both their own beliefs and the diversity within the United Methodist Church (UMC) within the context of the changes to the Book of Discipline as approved by the 2020/24 General Conference.

This *Graceful Conversations* experience is an adaptation of the *Courageous Conversation* resource from [Discipleship Ministries](#), a general agency of the United Methodist Church—a worldwide ministry made possible thanks to the generosity of our disciples and congregations.

The Role of the Pastor

Clergy persons appointed to local churches are called to be pastoral to all congregation members, especially in times of disagreement or conflict. Conversations about covenanting should not be initiated or led by the appointed pastor(s) based on their personal beliefs and attitudes toward LGBTQ persons. The role of the pastor is not to advocate for any given position but to lead all the people under their care with a shepherd's heart. Pastors must focus on inviting the congregation to display Christian hospitality, providing pastoral care to the congregation during the time of discernment, and ensuring a fair process that includes access to balanced information, that does not harm, and that is conducive to healing and reconciliation. In

consultation with their District Superintendent, the pastor may co-facilitate the discernment sessions alongside a lay leader from the local church, as needed.

OPTIONS

The process is designed for three 120-minute sessions. Users are encouraged to adjust the time as needed. While some participants, particularly extroverts, can be frustrated by a slower-paced conversation, this pacing will promote listening. Thus, it is advised that if you adjust the timeline, do so that it takes a more extended amount of time and is not shorter. The sessions can be facilitated over three separate dates or over a one day retreat setting.

The following outline is intended for a church-wide conversation but can be adjusted for small groups, Sunday school classes, and even dialogues with nearby churches.

NEEDED

- Baskets with numbers (as many as tables)
- Tables for small-group discussions
- Table numbers for each table (no more than 6 persons per table)
- Candles for each table
- Small crosses or some other markers to serve as [talking sticks](#)
- Paper and pencils for participants
- Printout or screen for displaying “Guidelines for Respectful Conversation”
- Printout of recommended prayers and songs
- Large sheet of paper and markers
- Tape or adhesive to post the large sheet of paper

RECOMMENDED

- Bell or chime for beginning and ending times of silence
- Microphone to enable everyone to hear the speakers clearly

SETTING FOR A WELCOMING AND SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Set up the room with tables (round tables are preferable) and no more than 6 chairs per table.

Place “Guidelines for the Conversation—Addendum A” in large print or on a projection screen around the room.

As participants enter the room, have them choose a number from a basket. Invite them to sit at the table marked with the number that matches the number they have drawn.

Graceful Conversations - The Journey Begins (Session 1)

The following is based on a 120-minute timeframe. Adjust as needed.

- Opening Prayer (3 minutes)
- Overview (5 minutes)
- Personal Assessment of the Situation (10 minutes)
- Opening the Circle (10 minutes)
- Widening the Circle (15)
- Break (10 minutes)
- Table Conversation Time (45 minutes)
- Large-Group Reflection (15 minutes)
- Closing Prayer (2 minutes)

Opening Prayer: Begin with silence and/or the lighting of a candle to represent God's presence. This time of silence is vital to center yourselves and to mark the space and time as unique. Have a copy of the prayer for everyone to follow along with or to participate in.

We gather in God's presence with hearts open to God's guidance and wisdom.

As we embark on this journey of learning and discernment, we seek Your Holy Spirit to illuminate our minds and spirits.

Lord, grant us the humility to listen, the courage to ask questions, and the wisdom to discern Your will.

May our discussions be filled with grace, compassion, and understanding. Help us to grow not only in knowledge but also in love for one another and You.

Guide our thoughts, words, and actions to align with Your purposes.

We offer this time to You and pray for Your blessings upon it. Amen

Opening Song: Spirit of the Living God #393 UMH

Overview: Welcome participants and remind them of the purpose and desired outcomes for the *Graceful Conversations* sessions. Read the *Respectful Conversation Guidelines* (Addendum A) and the *Best Practices for Active Listening* (Addendum E). Reinforce that this is meant to be a safe space for people to freely express their opinions and perspectives. Emphasize that participants are to listen to the assumptions underlying their own and other people's perspectives.

Clarify foundational assumptions. This *Graceful Conversations* series presumes that all participants affirm the following statements about one another.

- All genuinely profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the source of our faith and hope, and actively nurture their relationship with God through prayer, scripture reading, worship and other spiritual practices.

- All earnestly and humbly seek to follow Jesus' teachings and example in our discipleship.
- All are committed to our shared mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ to transform the world and maintain unity in diversity, even when we disagree on certain specific issues.
- For the exercise to be helpful, participants must be open, vulnerable, and nonjudgmental to feel safe to share with the group.

Personal Assessment Time: Make sure each person has a paper and pencil for this exercise. Give participants five to ten minutes to write down their position on human sexuality alongside biblical stories, passages, doctrine, facts, and other opinions that inform their stance.

Opening the Circle: Form people into pairs. Allow each participant no more than two minutes to answer the question, "What brought you here today?" Why does this conversation matter to you? Remind participants that this is a time of naming and deep listening, not discussion – that will come later.

Widening the Circle: Form people into groups of three. Allow each participant no more than four minutes to answer the following questions: "What is your hope for the *Graceful Conversations*? What is your concern?"

Break: Plan light refreshments/water are available for the breaks.

Table Conversations: The focus of table conversations is on *attentive listening*, not debating or persuading.

- Before breaking into small groups, remind participants of the *Guidelines for Respectful Communication*.
- Ask participants to sit with their assigned table number.
- Identify the cross on the table, plastic game timer, or other object to be used as a talking stick.
- Clarify that only the person with the talking stick may speak and the other group members are to practice attentive listening. Each participant has no more than five minutes to answer one or more questions.
- Print out and/or display the following questions:
 - Reflect on the recent changes removing the restrictive language from the Book of Discipline (specifically, the phrase "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching").
 - How has this affected **you** or those **close to you**?
 - What conversations or experiences have influenced your thoughts or feelings on this matter?
 - What is your greatest concern/fear regarding the restrictive language being removed from the Book of Discipline?

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

- What Bible stories or passages shape how you view people who identify as LGBTQ+?
- Where do you see God leading the church now that the restrictive language is removed from the Book of Discipline?

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

- How might this change affect our church's ministry in the broader community?
- What opportunities or challenges do you foresee?
- How can we foster an ongoing dialogue within our church that respects diverse viewpoints on this issue while moving forward together?

Large-Group Reflection Time. This is the time for the larger group to hear some of the statements made during the small group time and reflect on the perspectives of other participants. This part of the exercise will require the most from the facilitator. The facilitator should not voice their own opinions or comments but should encourage the freedom of participants to voice various other perspectives. The facilitator's role is also to clarify assumptions and issues for the group. Additionally, the facilitator will need to model calm when anxiety grows because of comments.

- Participants are to use "I statement", which allows all participants to take responsibility for their thoughts, feelings and understandings (i.e. "I believe", "I think", "I feel"). Give a time limit for how long each person may speak. If possible, ask participants to use a microphone when they speak so that everyone can hear.
- Allow any participant who would like to answer in one sentence, "*One new insight/learning that I will take with me from this conversation is...*"

Closing Prayer. End with silence and/or the lighting of a candle to represent God's presence.

Have a copy of the prayer for everyone to follow along with or to participate in.

Gracious God, we are grateful for the wisdom and guidance You have provided during our time of learning and discernment. As we conclude this meeting, we ask that Your Holy Spirit continue to dwell within us, guiding our thoughts and actions. Grant us the strength and courage to live out our faith daily, sharing Your love and grace with others. Watch over us as we go our separate ways and bring us back together in unity and purpose. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Closing Song. Somos Uno en Cristo, 2229 TFWS

Home Work: invite participants to read the *Wesleyan Theological Reflection on Human Sexuality* and the *Teachable Points on Human Sexuality* pieces (see addendums B and C) in preparation for session 2. (if applicable)

Gracious Conversations - Wesleyan Theological Reflection on Human Sexuality (Session 2)

The following is based on a 120-minute timeframe. Adjust as needed.

- Opening Prayer (3 minutes)
- Overview (5 minutes)
- Learning Together (10 minutes)
- Table Conversation Time (60 minutes)
- Break (10 minutes)
- Large-Group Reflection (30 minutes)
- Closing Prayer (2 minutes)

Opening Prayer: Begin with silence and/or the lighting of a candle to represent God's presence. This time of silence is essential to center yourselves and to mark the space and time as unique. Have a copy of the prayer for everyone to follow along with or to participate in.

As we gather today for theological reflection and discernment, we ask for God's wisdom and guidance.

Illuminate our hearts and minds with your truth and grant us the discernment to understand your will. Help us to approach this meeting with humility, openness, and respect for one another. May your Holy Spirit lead our discussion, and may we seek to glorify you in all that we say and do. In Christ's name, Amen.

Overview: Welcome participants and remind them of the purpose and desired outcomes for the Graceful Conversations sessions. Read the *Respectful Conversation Guidelines* (Addendum A) and the *Best Practices for Active Listening* (Addendum E). Reinforce that this is meant to be a safe space for people to express their opinions and perspectives freely. Participants must listen to the assumptions underlying their own and other people's perspectives. Review what happened in Session 1, as you might have some new participants.

Learning Together

OPTIONS – This exercise can be approached in two different ways: 1) At the end of session 1, invite participants to read the *Wesleyan Theological Reflection on Human Sexuality* and the *Teachable Points on Human Sexuality* pieces (see addendums B and C) as homework in preparation for session 2. 2) Select 3-5 people to read out loud to the large group addendums B and C, before proceeding to small group conversations.

Table Conversation Time

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

- Before breaking into small groups, remind participants of the *Guidelines for Respectful Communication*.
- Ask participants to sit with their assigned table number.

- Identify the cross on the table, plastic game timer, or other object to be used as a talking stick.
- Clarify that only the person with the talking stick may speak, and the other group members are to practice attentive listening. Each participant has no more than five minutes to answer one or more questions.

Print out and/or display the following questions:

- How can our congregation hold space for differing interpretations of scripture? How might this shape our approach to preaching, Bible studies, mission, and involvement within our community?
- How can our congregation honor tradition while remaining open to differing interpretations and insights, especially when considering the diverse experiences of individuals within our faith community?
- How can we use reason and experience alongside scripture and tradition to create a more inclusive and grace-filled dialogue that reflects John Wesley's emphasis on unity, grace, and transformation in Christ?

Large-Group Reflection Time

This is the time for the larger group to hear some of the statements made during the small group and to reflect on the perspectives of other participants. This part of the exercise will require the most from the facilitator. The facilitator should not voice their own opinions or comments but should encourage the freedom of participants to voice various other perspectives. The facilitator's role is also to clarify assumptions and issues for the group. Additionally, the facilitator will need to model calm when anxiety grows because of comments.

- Participants are to use "I statement", which allows all participants to take responsibility for their thoughts, feelings and understandings (i.e. "I believe", "I think", "I feel"). Give a time limit for how long each person may speak. If possible, ask participants to use a microphone when they speak so that everyone can hear.
- Allow any participant who would like to answer in one sentence, "*One new insight/learning that I will take with me from this conversation is...*"

Closing Prayer

End with silence and/or the lighting of a candle to represent God's presence.

Gracious and loving God, as we conclude, we seek Your presence among us. Inspire us to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with You. May our discussions honor You and serve Your reign of justice and peace. Guide us with clarity, wisdom, and strength. Bless each of us and may we leave this place with renewed spirits and hearts ablaze with Your love. Amen

Closing Song: Nothing Can Trouble, 2053 TFWS

Graceful Conversations - Covenanting our Way Forward as United Methodists (Session 3)

The following is based on a 120-minute timeframe. Adjust as needed.

- Opening Prayer (2 minutes)
- Overview (5 minutes)
- Learning Together (5 minutes)
- Small-Group Time (60 minutes)
- Large-Group Reflection (30 minutes)
- Straw Poll (15 minutes)
- Next Steps (1 minute)
- Closing Prayer (2 minutes)

Opening Silent Prayer: Begin with silence and/or the lighting of a candle to represent God's presence. This time of silence is essential to center participants and to mark space and time as unique.

Opening Song: Spirit of the Living God #393 UMH

Overview: Welcome participants and remind them of the purpose and desired outcomes for the Graceful Conversations sessions. Read the *Respectful Conversation Guidelines* (Addendum A) and the *Best Practices for Active Listening* (Addendum E). Reinforce that this is meant to be a safe space for people to express their opinions and perspectives freely. Participants must listen to the assumptions underlying their own and other people's perspectives.

Learning Together

The facilitator or one of the participants can read out loud the following piece:

Covenant is an essential concept rooted in biblical tradition. It represents the sacred commitment God makes to individuals and communities and the community's commitment to God. Covenants in the Bible often involve a sign, ritual, or practice, symbolizing an ongoing and committed relationship. In the Christian faith, this understanding is carried forward in the New Covenant, where God's saving work through Jesus Christ invites a response through faith and baptism.

- Personal and Communal: Covenants can be personal (between individuals) or communal (involving larger groups or communities). The New Testament emphasizes the community's shared response to God's grace. Personal covenants include practices like the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer, fasting during Lent, and committing to tithe as an act of faith. Community covenants encompass promises within small groups, the clergy covenant, sacraments like

baptism and Holy Communion, and membership vows to support the church's mission.

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

- Before breaking into small groups, remind participants of the *Guidelines for Respectful Communication*.
- Ask participants to sit with their assigned table number.
- Identify the cross on the table, plastic game timer, or other object to be used as a talking stick.
- Clarify that only the person with the talking stick may speak and the other group members are to practice attentive listening. Each participant has no more than five minutes to answer one or more questions.

Print out and/or display the following questions:

- What specific commitments, values, and goals guide our congregation's ministry and relationship with the community?
- How does our congregation express Christ's love to all people, including LGBTQ+ persons, and how can this be further embodied in your mission?
- What specific guidelines should be established to ensure the covenant reflects the beliefs and aspirations of the congregation?
- How will your covenant foster a connection with the larger United Methodist Church, and how will it align with the principles and values set by the General Conference?

Large-Group Reflection Time. This is the time for the larger group to hear some of the statements made during the small group time and reflect on the perspectives of other participants.

- This part of the exercise will require the most from the facilitator. The facilitator should not voice their own opinions or comments but encourage the freedom of various other perspectives. The facilitator's role is also to clarify assumptions and issues for the group. Additionally, the facilitator will need to model calm when anxiety grows because of comments.
- Give a time limit for how long each person may speak. Participants are to use "I statement", which allows all participants to take responsibility for their thoughts, feelings and understandings (i.e. "I believe", "I think", "I feel"). If possible, ask participants to use a microphone when they speak so that everyone can hear.
- Allow any participant who would like to answer in one sentence, "*One new insight/learning that I will take with me from this conversation is...*"

Next Steps

Before ending the session, share the next steps with participants.

- The planning team will write a draft covenant statement considering the learnings/ insights from the gracious conversations.
- The planning team will host several feedback sessions to receive input on the covenant statement and conduct straw polls to gauge the support of the draft covenant statement.
- The planning team, in consultation with the church leadership team, will finalize the draft covenant statement.
- The church council votes to approve the covenant statement
- A Special Church Conference is requested to the District Superintendent to vote on the covenant statement.

Closing Prayer

End with silence and/or the lighting of a candle to represent God's presence.

Loving and wise God, as we conclude this time of listening, learning, and discernment, we thank You for the guidance and insights You have given us. May our reflections and decisions be shaped by Your grace and love. Continue to lead us with clarity, courage, and compassion as we go forth. May Your Spirit dwell within us, inspiring our hearts and minds to follow Your will, united in Your love. Through Christ, who makes all things possible, Amen.

Closing Song: Sent Out in Jesus' Name, 2184 TFWS

Covenant Writing

In consultation with the local church leadership team, it is recommended that the planning team write a covenant statement that considers the lessons and insights that emerged throughout the *Graceful Conversations* sessions.

Sample “Our Way Forward” Covenant Templates.

Covenant writing can be daunting. The following samples are provided to help congregations *begin* shaping their Way Forward Covenant.

Sample Covenant A:

As a congregation committed to the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Wesleyan heritage, we, the members of [Congregation Name], affirm the sacred worth of every individual and strive to embody Christ's love with all people. We commit ourselves to the following principles:

We believe that all people are created in the image of God and are of sacred worth. We welcome all individuals into our community of faith, offering love, support, and fellowship, regardless of their background or circumstances.

We understand marriage as a covenant between one man and one woman. Our congregational practices will gracefully reflect this belief in alignment with our understanding of scripture and tradition.

We commit to serving our community and engaging in ministry with all people in ways that reflect Christ's love, grace, compassion, and justice. We seek to be a place where all can encounter God's presence, experience Christ's healing and liberating love, and grow in faith and service.

Recognizing the diversity within the United Methodist Church, we pledge to uphold the unity of the body of Christ through grace-filled dialogue, compassionate action, and the continual reaffirmation of our shared mission.

We aim to create an environment where Christ is at the center of our ministry, and differences are navigated with grace, ensuring that all members feel valued, heard, and loved as part of our faith community.

May God guide us, in the power of the Holy Spirit, as we journey together in unity and purpose, honoring our diversity and our shared calling to love one another as Christ has loved us, living the gospel and being Christ's love with our neighbors in all places.

Sample Covenant B:

As a congregation committed to the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Wesleyan heritage, we, the members of [Congregation Name], affirm the sacred worth of every individual and strive to embody Christ's love with all people. We commit ourselves to the following principles:

We believe that all people are created in the image of God and are of sacred worth. We welcome all individuals into our community of faith, offering love, support, and fellowship, regardless of their background or circumstances.

We commit to being a community where all people, regardless of their identity or orientation, can experience God's love, acceptance, and transforming grace.

We affirm that LGBTQ+ individuals are fully embraced within Christian teaching and are beloved members of Christ's family. We affirm the ordination, licensing, and appointment of LGBTQ+ candidates for ministry based on their gifts, calling, and faithfulness. We welcome and celebrate the appointments of LGBTQ+ clergy, recognizing their invaluable contributions to the life and mission of the church.

We affirm that our pastors have the freedom to perform weddings for same-gender couples, and our church facilities are open to host such ceremonies. We celebrate these unions as genuine expressions of love, commitment, and the sacred covenant of marriage.

We commit to serving our community and engaging in ministry with all people in ways that reflect Christ's love, grace, compassion, and justice. We seek to be a place where all can encounter God's presence, experience Christ's healing and liberating love, and grow in faith and service.

Recognizing the diversity within the United Methodist Church, we pledge to uphold the unity of the body of Christ through grace-filled dialogue, compassionate action, and the continual reaffirmation of our shared mission.

We aim to create an environment where Christ is at the center of our ministry, and differences are navigated with grace, ensuring that all members feel valued, heard, and loved as part of our faith community.

May God guide us, in the power of the Holy Spirit, as we journey together in unity and purpose, honoring our diversity and our shared calling to love one another as Christ has loved us, living the gospel and being Christ's love with our neighbors in all places.

Sample C

As a congregation committed to the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Wesleyan heritage, we, the members of [Congregation Name], affirm the sacred worth of every individual and strive to embody Christ's love with all people. We commit ourselves to the following principles:

We believe that all people are created in the image of God, and are of sacred worth. We welcome all individuals into our community of faith, offering love, support, and fellowship, regardless of their background or circumstances.

We strive to be a church where everyone, regardless of identity, background, or beliefs, feels welcomed, valued, supported, and loved as part of Christ's family.

We acknowledge that we hold diverse perspectives on scripture, including on matters of human sexuality, yet we are united by our commitment to Christ's love, grace, and welcome for all. We seek to hold these differences in grace, fostering an environment where all are free to live out their faith in line with their beliefs focusing on Christ's central message of love, grace, compassion, mercy, and justice.

We commit to creating a safe space for open conversation, where people can share their beliefs and questions without fear of judgment. Through study, prayer, and mutual support, we will encourage each person to deepen their relationship with God while respecting and learning from each other's unique perspectives.

We affirm marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant that brings two people of faith into union with one another and into a deeper relationship with God and the religious community. While some members affirm a traditional view of marriage as a covenant between one man and one woman, others embrace marriage as a covenant between any two adult persons. We will respectfully allow each person to live out their personal convictions in a manner that honors our commitment to belonging and mutual respect. Our pastors are given the freedom to decide if they feel called to officiate a wedding. Our church policy allows for hosting all weddings while permitting members to respectfully step back from direct involvement in events that may not align with their personal beliefs.

Recognizing the diversity within the United Methodist Church, we pledge to uphold the unity of the body of Christ through grace-filled dialogue, compassionate action, and the continual reaffirmation of our shared mission.

May God guide us, in the power of the Holy Spirit, as we journey together in unity and purpose, honoring our diversity and our shared calling to love one another as Christ has loved us, living the gospel and being Christ's love with our neighbors in all places.

Communication Strategies for Congregations

Communication should foster unity, understanding, and respect as your congregation navigates changes or clarifies its beliefs. Clear and compassionate messaging is essential both internally and externally.

Guideposts for Navigating Theological Diversity Together:

- Affirm that each person is a beloved child of God and sacred worth.
- Let love for God and neighbor guide your words and actions.
- Act and speak in ways that avoid harm to others.
- Reject language and actions that leave room for hate.
- Be curious rather than certain; seek understanding.
- Be mindful of the language you use in conversations.
- Be gracious when others do not share your perspective.
- Invite correction with humility rather than demanding it.
- Preach and advocate for love over hate.
- Practice the art of honoring without necessarily agreeing when differences arise.
- Acknowledge differences without minimizing them, and avoid judgment.
- Remain open to the possibility that our understanding may be incomplete or flawed.
- Use leadership roles to build bridges, not barriers.

Internal Communication: Congregations are encouraged to share information in clear, sensitive ways that foster unity. This can be done through well-crafted messages shared in newsletters, small group settings, or church-wide gatherings. Communication should emphasize care, using inclusive and compassionate language to ensure all members feel heard and valued, even in the presence of differing opinions. Providing opportunities for open, respectful conversation helps maintain a spirit of grace and understanding throughout the congregation.

External Communication: When communicating with the broader community, transparency is important, ensuring clarity and sensitivity. Resources like the Purple Church Initiative and the General Commission on Religion and Race (GCORR) emphasize inclusive and empathetic messaging, reflecting the congregation's values while respecting different viewpoints.

Conclusion

Congregations that have engaged in thoughtful, respectful dialogue about their differences provide potent examples of how covenanting together can lead to transformation. These stories remind us of the importance of patience, humility, and openness when navigating theological diversity. Share these stories often, especially within the UMC connection. They offer models of hope for other congregations seeking to engage with grace while remaining true to the mission.

As congregations progress, staying grounded in their mission is vital. The UMC's structure supports and equips congregations to navigate these changes with grace, patience, and a commitment to unity. Honoring each person's sacred worth and dignity remains central, ensuring that theological differences do not overshadow the church's mission but strengthen it through diverse perspectives and experiences.

These principles encourage congregations to live into their calling with grace, fostering a spirit of unity even when theological diversity is present.

Wesley's Covenant Prayer

"I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt; rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full; let me be empty. Let me have all things; let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And let the covenant I have made on earth be ratified in heaven. Amen."

ADDENDUM A

Best Practices for Healthy Conversations

Ensure the environment is respectful and open, where individuals feel safe expressing their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment or dismissal. This includes establishing ground rules that prioritize listening, respect, and confidentiality.

Approach conversations with a willingness to learn and understand the perspectives of others. Ask open-ended questions like, “Help me understand why this is important to you?” This approach emphasizes valuing the person rather than debating their views.

Identify areas of agreement and shared values as a foundation for dialogue. Emphasize the importance of preserving the unity in Christ and a collective commitment to grace and love, even amidst differences. This helps keep the conversation constructive and oriented toward mutual understanding rather than division.

Eric Law’s “Respectful Communication Guidelines”

- R** – take Responsibility for what you say and feel without blaming others
- E** – use Empathetic listening
- S** – be Sensitive to differences in communication/cultural styles
- P** – Ponder what you hear and feel before you speak
- E** – Examine your own assumptions and perceptions
- C** – keep Confidentiality
- T** – Tolerate ambiguity because we are not here to debate. There are no “winners” or “losers.”

Principles for Bible Study (from Disciple Bible Study)

1. The Word of God is Jesus Christ, and the words of the Bible tell us about that Word. Therefore, when we study the words of the Bible we always look behind, in, and through those words for God’s Word – Jesus Christ.
2. No Christian has a monopoly on understanding either God’s Word or the words of the Scripture. This includes biblical scholars and the most unlearned Christian. All of us must listen to one another as we seek to understand the richness of God’s gifts.
3. We must assume everyone has Christian integrity and not accuse one another of being unchristian, no matter how unusual the opinions are.
4. We must further assume that we will arrive at different understandings of portion of Scripture and that that will not disturb God as much as it will some of us.
5. Few of us will know Hebrew or Greek, and we therefore need to use a variety of English versions to try to understand the text.
6. While we accept our differences, we do not feel that those differences are unimportant, or that they should be ignored or treated as if they did not matter.
7. Different biblical understandings can remain among us, but we can still be warm Christian friends. In fact, as we grow to better understand our differences, we can grow in our appreciation of one another.

ADDENDUM B

Wesleyan Theological Reflection on Human Sexuality

Our Wesleyan Tradition: John Wesley emphasized grace, holiness, and unity in Christ. Wesley's legacy encourages Methodists to see theological diversity as a means of experiencing God's grace more fully. In *The Character of a Methodist*, he focused on being transformed by God's grace rather than on rigid theological distinctions. Diversity in theology can become an opportunity to deepen our expressions of love and grace.

Wesleyan Quadrilateral: The UMC relies on the Wesleyan Quadrilateral - Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience as a framework for understanding theology.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral is a method of theological reflection that is attributed to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. It encompasses four sources of theological understanding:

1. **Scripture:** The Bible is considered the primary and authoritative source.
2. **Tradition:** The historical context, teachings, and practices of the Church are taken into account.
3. **Reason:** Rational thought and critical thinking are employed to interpret and understand theological concepts.
4. **Experience:** Personal and communal experiences of faith and spirituality are considered in theological reflection.

Methodists and other Christian denominations often use this quadrilateral to form a more rounded and comprehensive approach to understanding and practicing their faith. It blends tradition and innovation to maintain a balanced and holistic theological perspective.

This approach allows for a nuanced view of human sexuality by integrating biblical teachings, church tradition, contemporary knowledge, and personal stories.

Scripture:

Interpreting biblical texts on human sexuality requires understanding the historical context and the variety of translations available. Theologians interpret scriptures around human sexuality in different ways. Some take a literal approach, reading passages as fixed moral guidelines; others apply a historical-cultural lens, considering the context and practices of biblical times to differentiate them from modern relationships. A theological-ethical

perspective focuses on broader biblical themes like love, inclusion, and advocating for the dignity of all individuals. Meanwhile, a liberation approach emphasizes scripture's call to uplift the marginalized, viewing the inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons as part of Christ's mission for justice and equality.

Engaging biblical texts and scholarly resources on the subject reveals a range of possibilities when it comes to translating specific words and understanding the historical context in which the texts were written. Experts in the field of biblical studies acknowledge that the biblical texts in question leave room for more than one plausible interpretation.

One perspective holds that the biblical texts clearly and consistently prohibit same-sex relationships. This view interprets passages like Leviticus 18:22, Romans 1:26-27, and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 as explicit condemnations of homosexual acts and that these prohibitions are rooted in God's design for human sexuality, which is intended to be expressed only within a heterosexual marriage between a man and a woman for the purposes of bonding and procreation. While we may fall short and sometimes are blinded to how we hurt others or ourselves, we cannot shy away from holding ourselves and others to God's standard of holiness in all areas, including sexuality. Proponents of this view see the Bible as affirming a consistent pattern for sexuality and marriage across both the Old and New Testaments, emphasizing the importance of upholding biblical authority and resisting reinterpretation to accommodate cultural shifts.

Others, while acknowledging the authority of Scripture, believe that faithful Christians can interpret these texts differently. They suggest that the biblical passages traditionally cited against homosexuality should be understood in their *historical* and *cultural* context, noting that they may refer to practices like temple prostitution or exploitative relationships rather than consensual, loving same-sex partnerships. This approach emphasizes the need for dialogue and unity amidst differing beliefs while welcoming LGBTQ+ individuals and practicing love, grace, and humility as the church discerns a path forward.

Another perspective interprets the biblical texts through the lens of cultural, historical, and linguistic analysis, arguing that the passages traditionally used to condemn homosexuality do not address modern understandings of sexual orientation or committed same-sex relationships. This view emphasizes broader biblical themes of love, justice, and inclusion, seeing Jesus' teachings and actions as examples of embracing the marginalized. It suggests that the church

should fully affirm LGBTQ+ relationships and ministries, aligning with the belief that God's love is inclusive and expansive and that interpretations should adapt to new understandings of human relationships and identity.

The Christian community has long embraced diversity in understanding and interpreting scripture. Approaching this topic with sensitivity allows individuals and congregations to hold space for differing interpretations. This approach goes beyond tolerance; it requires courage to uphold our convictions while holding space for others' beliefs, and it challenges us to listen and grow together. The foundation for unity lies not in uniformity of thought but in shared commitment to core values such as love, grace, and respect for one another as members of the body of Christ

Tradition:

The UMC values tradition while recognizing the diversity within historical church practices regarding sexuality. For some, honoring tradition involves upholding long-established teachings on marriage and human relationships. Others emphasize John Wesley's view that tradition should be re-evaluated if it contradicts God's Word, encouraging openness to new interpretations in light of contemporary contexts.

Reason:

Theological understandings vary in how reason is applied. Some use reason to affirm traditional views, considering the theological and moral implications of sexuality through a historical and scriptural lens. Others engage contemporary insights from sexuality, psychology, and human rights to foster dialogue about LGBTQ+ inclusion, seeking a balanced approach that integrates modern knowledge with spiritual values.

Experience:

Personal and communal experiences play a crucial role across the theological spectrum. Some find that their own experiences or those of their faith communities affirm traditional views of human relationships. Others emphasize the importance of engaging with and listening to the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals as a way to shape a compassionate and informed theological response, allowing faith to adapt to the realities of people's lives.

ADDENDUM C

Changes to the Book of Discipline and Reflection on Social Principles

The 2024 General Conference brought significant updates to the United Methodist Church's *Book of Discipline*, particularly concerning human sexuality. These changes include the removal of language that deemed the practice of homosexuality "incompatible with Christian teaching" and the elimination of restrictions on the ordination of LGBTQ+ individuals and on clergy who officiate same-sex marriages.

In addition, the General Conference legislation explicitly protected the rights of clergy and churches regarding same-sex weddings.

The newly adopted language clarifies that no clergy will be penalized for performing or choosing not to perform same-sex marriage ceremonies. It underscores the importance of honoring all clergy's desires without judgment. Additionally, it ensures that no local church will be required to or prohibited from hosting a same-sex marriage ceremony on its property.

To uphold our general rule of doing no harm, care must be taken with any couple, and particularly same-sex couples, who seek to be married in one of our congregations and are denied. This may mean a clergyperson makes a referral to another pastor or congregation.

The resident bishop, in consultation with the Cabinet, will continue to collaborate with churches and clergy to ensure the best possible theological matches during the appointment process. This work includes reviewing clergy and church profiles and engaging with District Superintendents to identify fruitful appointments. Moving forward, it will be critical for clergy and congregations to update their profiles every year to ensure the bishop and the cabinet have the tools for faithful appointment-making and oversight.

The revisions in the *Book of Discipline* reflect the values expressed in the UMC's Social Principles, particularly the sections on human sexuality and marriage. The updated Social Principles now state:

The Social Community: Human Sexuality: "We affirm human sexuality as a sacred gift and acknowledge that sexual intimacy contributes to fostering the

emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being of individuals and to nurturing healthy sexual relationships that are grounded in love, care, and respect."

The Social Community: Marriage: "Within the church, we affirm marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant that brings two people of faith, an adult man and woman of consenting age, or two adult persons of consenting age into union with one another. While The United Methodist Church does not recognize marriage as a sacrament, we celebrate and cherish this union as an expression of the couple's faith, grounded in their relationship with God and one another."

The Political Community: Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities: "Because all people are of sacred worth and certain basic human rights are due to everyone, we are committed to supporting the equal rights, liberties, and protections of all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity."

Implications of the Changes

The polity updates ensure that LGBTQ+ individuals are no longer excluded from full participation in ministry. This means that LGBTQ+ persons are eligible for ordination and can be appointed within the UMC based on their gifts for ministry without fear of disciplinary action. Congregations are also empowered to support same-gender marriages and to offer their resources to ministries that affirm LGBTQ+ persons.

The revised *Social Principles* and *Book of Discipline* provide space for congregations to navigate these changes thoughtfully. While they have removed discriminatory language and penalties, they maintain room for theological diversity. Clergy and churches are given the freedom to decide how they will approach these issues, ensuring that they can act according to their beliefs while respecting the broader connectional nature of the UMC.

The emphasis is on holding space for differing views while upholding the General Rules to do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God. The updated framework promotes a balance where congregations and clergy are encouraged to engage in prayerful discernment, support one another, and foster an environment where all individuals, regardless of their theological stance, sexual orientation, or gender identity, are treated with respect and dignity.

ADDENDUM D

Teachable Points about Human Sexuality

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

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

- Traditionally, people point to six passages regarding homosexuality in scripture: Genesis 19:1-10; Leviticus 18:20, 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10.
- Each of these passages has been explored and interpreted in multiple ways. For example, it is pointed out that what is condemned, especially in the Old Testament passages, primarily are acts of violence and abuse of power more than consensual adult homosexuality.
- The household code of Ephesians 5:21-6:9 can be a confusing passage for many reasons. It is important to note that Paul frames the passage with verse 5:21, "Submit to one another." Within this passage, Paul uses the analogy of Christ and the church as a model for marriage in which the foundation is mutual self-giving and loyalty. Just as Christ's love for the church is marked by sacrifice and commitment, so should the relationship be between spouses.
- We should remember about all these passages to look long and hard not to see "what we wish were there," but to see what is actually there. This can be difficult for a variety of reasons. The way we use words changes. Further, scholars differ in their translations of biblical passages. (See, for example, the way various Bible versions translate 1 Corinthians 6:9.) Many people point out that the way homosexuality was practiced during the Roman empire of Paul's day (between people with unequal power and/or age) is not the same as today.
- While some point out that Jesus never mentioned homosexuality, others will point to Mark 10:1-12 as Jesus affirming what normative marriage should look like. Others point out Jesus' radical inclusion of the marginalized: women, tax collectors, lepers, and non-Israelites as an imperative for inclusion. As well, Jesus commanded his followers to love and "not to judge" (Matthew 7:1).
- Given the patriarchy of certain passages and a failure to address "modern" issues such as bisexuality and transgender issues, some see the Bible as offering little to no guidance in these areas.

While some rejoice at the actions of General Conference, others are disappointed. It is helpful to remember Paul's admonition that "now we see in a mirror dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12) as well as James's advice, "let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger" (James 1:19).

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

In the Revised Social Principles, passed by the 2024 General Conference, the section titled "The Nurturing Community" has a subsection devoted to "Human Sexuality." There we read,

"We affirm human sexuality as a sacred gift and acknowledge that sexual intimacy contributes to fostering the emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being of individuals and to nurturing healthy sexual relationships that are grounded in love, care, and respect." The next section states, "Within the church, we affirm marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant that brings two people of faith [adult man and woman of consenting age or two adult persons of consenting age into union with one another and into a deeper relationship with God and the religious community."

This issue often highlights related questions such as: What is the role of experience in biblical interpretation (see Book of Discipline ¶105)? What in scripture is "time-bound" to a particular culture and what should transcend culture and time? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding interpretation within the community of believers?

ADDENDUM E

Best Practices for Active Listening

Active listening is a vital skill for deepening connections, understanding others, and fostering meaningful dialogue. Here are some best practices to enhance your ability to engage in active listening:

1. **Be Fully Present:** Give the speaker your undivided attention. Avoid distractions like checking your phone or letting your mind wander.
2. **Use Open Body Language:** Maintain eye contact, nod occasionally, and position yourself to show engagement without crossing your arms or looking closed off.
3. **Reflect and Paraphrase:** Summarize what you've heard to ensure clarity and show understanding. For example, "What I hear you saying is..."
4. **Resist the Urge to Interrupt:** Allow the speaker to express themselves fully without interjecting with your thoughts or solutions.
5. **Ask Thoughtful Questions:** Show genuine interest by asking open-ended questions that encourage the speaker to elaborate, such as "Can you tell me more about that?"
6. **Validate Feelings:** Acknowledge the emotions being expressed with phrases like, "That sounds really challenging" or "It's understandable that you feel that way."
7. **Avoid Judgments:** Stay neutral and open, focusing on understanding rather than evaluating or criticizing.
8. **Comfortable with Silence:** Pauses can give the speaker time to collect their thoughts and signal you're reflecting on their words.
9. **Listen Beyond Words:** Pay attention to tone, pace, and body language, which can convey meaning beyond what's being said.
10. **Respond Thoughtfully:** When the speaker is finished, respond in a way that shows you've listened and considered their perspective.

Other Resources and Articles

Theological Diversity as a Means of Grace Author: David N. Field

This article discusses how theological diversity can be a means of experiencing God's grace, drawing on the sermons and thoughts of John Wesley. It offers practical steps for engaging in theologically diverse communities with humility and love.

[Ministry Matters - Theological Diversity as a Means of Grace](#)

Diverse People of God: #BeUMC

What does it mean to you to be United Methodist? Discover inspiring stories from fellow United Methodists, and share your own experience, includes congregational guide and videos to inspire your congregation to Be UMC.

<https://www.umc.org/en/who-we-are/our-people/beumc>

Fostering Unity in the Purple Church Initiative Author: Rev. Beth M. Crissman,

This initiative aims to help local congregations engage in healthy, constructive conversations on theological differences. It provides a model for judicatories to facilitate these discussions.

Links: [Fostering Unity in the Purple Church](#), [The Purple Church Initiative](#)

How to Disagree About Theology Without Kicking Each Other Out of the Church/ Bonnie Kristian

This article explores maintaining unity within the church while holding differing theological views. It features the Concentric Circles of Theology model, which helps distinguish essential beliefs from opinions.

Link: [Missio Alliance - How to Disagree About Theology](#)

How to Stand Where Jesus Stands: The Messy Middle Author: Kris Beckert

This resource provides insights into navigating the “Messy Middle” of theological discussions, emphasizing curiosity, understanding, and clarity while maintaining a learner's posture.

Link: [Missio Alliance - The Messy Middle](#)

25 Traits of the Beloved Community Publisher: General Commission on Religion and Race (GCORR)

This foundational resource shares values for creating and nurturing a diverse and inclusive community within the church.

Link: [GCORR - 25 Traits of the Beloved Community](#)

“*Five Steps for Congregational Healing*,” article by Laura Buchanan.

<https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/five-steps-for-congregational-healing>