

DISCUSSING TOUGH ISSUES
A RESOURCE TO HELP CONGREGATIONS
DISCUSS ISSUES AROUND THE
CONFLICT WITH IRAQ
Presbyterian Peacemaking Program
January 2007



"The United Presbyterian Church does not teach a single response to war which all members must accept, for God alone is Lord of the conscience and not the state or the church. Both the agonized participant in war and the pacifist who objects to war—can draw equally upon the church's teaching. And it is also clear that a third group—individuals who object to particular wars which they judge to be unjust or unconscionable—is entitled to appeal to the teaching of the Church. Faced with the agonizing choices of war, each Christian must satisfy his [/her] own conscience. that any war is 'just and necessary.' "

The 181st General Assembly (1969) of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.

In times of crisis, war, or threat of war people often feel more vulnerable and have an increased need for security and safety. During such times, many people also need a caring environment where they can express their concerns, fears, and opinions. This resource has been designed to assist congregations as they seek to be a supportive environment for wrestling with tough questions related to the conflict in Iraq and sharing different opinions in light of our faith.

PLANNING

If you are interested in facilitating a gathering to talk about these issues, the following suggestions might help you plan an event or series of events:

- Consider working with a team of people to plan the gathering.
- Read all the material carefully before deciding which exercises to use.
- Choose exercises that you think will work best with your group and will fit within the time frame you have available.
- Feel free to adapt or change the exercises to meet your group's specific needs.

These exercises may be used in the context of the Christian education hour on Sunday morning or at another appropriate time. They may be used for one session or a series of sessions.

SUGGESTED PROCESS

- Briefly introduce the subject.
- Invite participants to share their names, unless everyone in the group is acquainted.
- Invite the group to pray. This might be a time of silent prayer or a time when people might pray out loud if they choose. Ensure that the time of prayer provides an opportunity to invite God's presence into the midst of the gathering and is not used to manipulate participants into accepting a particular point of view.

- Set guidelines for the group's time together. This may be done in a variety of ways:
 1. The group might use the *Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement*:
 - **ACT** in a spirit of truth and love;
 - **RESPECT** each other, believing that all desire to be faithful to Jesus Christ;
 - **LEARN** about the various positions on the topic;
 - **RESPOND** after stating what we have heard and asking for any clarification;
 - **INDICATE** where we agree as well as disagree;
 - **SHARE** our concerns directly with the individuals or group with whom we disagree;
 - **SPEAK** from our personal experiences related to the subject of disagreement;
 - **FOCUS ON IDEAS** instead of questioning people's motives, intelligence or integrity;
 - **REFRAIN** from name calling or labeling of others;
 - **MAINTAIN COMMUNITY** with each other though our discussion may be tense; and
 - **PRAY** seeking God's grace to listen attentively, speak clearly, and remain open to the vision God holds for us all.

Order the pocket-size *Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement* for each participant by calling 800-524-2612. Ask for PDS #70-270-06-033; free.
 2. The facilitator might ask participants what guidelines they think are important for providing an environment where healthy, honest dialogue can take place. Together the participants create and affirm the guidelines.
 3. The group might use the Respectful Communication Guidelines and the Mutual Invitation Process developed by Eric Law. These resources are found at www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/iraq/biblestudies.htm#2.
- Lead the exercise(s) selected for the session.
- After the exercise is completed, discuss what would be helpful next steps. Bear in mind that discussing these difficult issues can be a very heavy burden. Most people can grapple with these issues more effectively if there are tangible ways they can respond. The following are some possible ways to take action:
 1. Pray for the people of Iraq.
 2. Pray for American soldiers and their families, including those from your church and community, who are serving in Iraq.
 3. Pray that world leaders will have the wisdom to act in ways that help end the violence in Iraq.
 4. Pray for those who perpetrate violence.
 5. Share your concerns with elected officials. The Presbyterian Washington Office has helpful suggestions. Visit www.pcusa.org/washington to send email.
 6. Support efforts to strengthen the church in Iraq through the Extra Commitment Opportunity, 051722, "Iraq: The Peace Fund for Solidarity with the Churches." For more information, visit www.pcusa.org/give/online.
 7. Learn more about Iraq. Visit www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/iraq.
 8. Initiate or strengthen interfaith relationships in your community.
- Close with prayer.

THE EXERCISES

Exercise 1—Understanding Ourselves and Each Other

(40-45 minutes)

1. Ask the participants to find a partner.
2. When everyone has a partner, ask them to determine who will talk first and who will listen first.
3. Explain the process:
 - The goal of this exercise is to share faith experiences.
 - Each person will have the chance to speak and to listen.
 - It is important to stay in the role of “listener,” speaking only when it is your turn.
 - The facilitator will be the timekeeper, reminding the pairs when to switch roles.
 - Ask if there are any questions before proceeding to the next step.
4. Invite the participants to divide their lives into thirds based on their age (i.e., someone who is sixty would divide it into the first twenty years, then the second twenty, and finally the last twenty years; someone who is thirty would divide it into ten-year periods). Invite the people who are to speak first to share one watermark on their faith journey from each third of their life. Once the first person has shared, ask the listener to paraphrase what he or she heard the speaker say, to see whether he or she understood the other person.
5. After five minutes invite the pairs to switch roles. The “listener” will speak and the “speaker” will listen. Repeat the checking process.
6. When the group has completed this dialogue, invite them to repeat the process, taking turns to share who or what helped shape the way they feel about peace and peacemaking. Allow each person about six or seven minutes to share.
7. Once the second round of dialogue has been completed, invite participants to share any new insights or understandings. It might be helpful to remind participants that each of us is shaped by our experiences and it is only natural that we have different views about difficult issues facing the church and the world. *Peacemaking: The Believers' Calling* reminds us that:
Basically, at the heart, it is a matter of the way we see the world through the eyes of Christ. It is a matter of praying and yearning. It is an inner response to God, who loves the whole world and whose Spirit calls for and empowers the making of peace.

Exercise 2A—Bringing Our Faith to This Issue

(35-40 minutes)

Invite the participants to gather in groups of three or four. Invite each group to identify teachings of Jesus or other biblical texts that might relate to the situation in Iraq. After a few minutes, ask each group to choose a text and discuss the following questions:

What does this say about the situation in Iraq?

What insights, questions, or values does it bring to the situation?

What does this mean I should do as a Christian?

Allow thirty minutes. Invite each small group to share two or three key insights.

Exercise 2B—Bringing Our Faith to This Issue

(35-40 minutes)

Materials needed: paper and pencils

Distribute paper and pencils. Ask participants to reflect quietly on the following question: If Jesus was right here, right now, what would you like to ask him about the war in Iraq? When the group has had a few minutes to consider the question, invite the participants to write down the questions they would like to ask and how they think Jesus might respond. When most of the group is finished, ask if anyone wishes to share his or her reflections, reminding them that they do not need to share.

Exercise 3—Reasons Why: Putting the War in Iraq in Context

(30-35 minutes)

Materials needed: newsprint, markers, and tape

Invite participants to create five groups. Ask each group to choose a spokesperson and a recorder. Give each group newsprint and a marker and assign one of the following categories to each group. Ask them to print “all the reasons that”

- We should stay in Iraq
- We should withdraw our troops from Iraq
- We should increase the number of troops in Iraq
- Victory in Iraq is essential to our safety from those who resort to acts of terror

Allow ten to fifteen minutes for the groups to work. This will encourage a good small group discussion. Ask each group to report the reasons they have listed to the large group. If time is limited, the group facilitator can briefly review each group’s list. After each group has finished, invite the participants to discuss some or all of the following questions:

- Do any of these categories or lists make you uncomfortable? Why?
- What did you notice during this exercise?
- What did you get from this exercise?
- How can you use what you got?

Exercise 4 – Worry Pie: Understanding Our Feelings about Speaking on These Issues (15-20 minutes)

Materials needed: newsprint, marker, paper, pen or paper for each participant

Prior to the gathering, write the following on newsprint and post it visibly in the room:

I worry about:

- Feeling like a traitor or at least an outsider
- What is happening to those who are serving in Iraq
- What is happening to the people of Iraq
- My family's safety related to the conflict in Iraq
- People being killed in my name
- Finding a good way out of this war
- The possibility that the violence cause by the invasion and occupation of Iraq will spread to other regions in the Middle East
- Other

Give each participant a piece of paper. Ask the participants to draw a large circle on the paper. Note the list of worries on the newsprint. Ask the participants if they would like to add any other worries to the list. When the list is complete, ask participants to divide their circle into pieces as if the circle were a pie. Each piece should correspond to an item on the list of worries. The more they worry about an item, the larger that piece of pie should be. Invite the participants to share any of their findings in this exercise they choose to share. Respect the right of participants to pass if they choose to do so. Invite the participants to discuss some or all of the following questions:

- What did you notice during this exercise?
- What did you get from this exercise?
- How can you use what you got?

Exercise 5—Agree/Disagree: A Values Clarification Exercise (15-20 minutes)

Materials needed: signs saying AGREE and DISAGREE

1. In advance, make a sign that says, "AGREE" and another that says, "DISAGREE." Place one sign on one side of the room and the other sign on the other side of the room.
2. Explain to the group that you will read several statements, one at a time.
3. Ask participants to move to the side of the room that best corresponds to their response to each statement as it is read. This exercise encourages participants to move and visually demonstrates where people stand on issues. Some participants will be uncomfortable taking one side or another, but encourage them to choose the side based on their first response when the statement is read. Sometimes individuals are surprised to discover they are not alone in their views. In other cases, the facilitator may need to support the individual who has the courage to stand alone on an issue.
4. Choose the statements that best relate to your participants and add your own.
5. Read the statements one at a time.

6. After each statement is read, ask the groups to discuss why they chose what they did.

Statements:

- Any reason a person prefers peace to war is an acceptable reason to me.
- Loving your enemies is just not practical and shouldn't be taken literally in national crises.
- Patriotism means I support my country whether I completely agree with its actions or not.
- The draft should be reinstated for males and females.
- The world is so complex that I have to depend on those who know more than I do to make wise decisions
- Peace is always better than war.
- I am a pacifist.
- I believe in the just war doctrine.
- The events of September 11, 2001 changed the way I feel about war.
- I trust our national leaders to make the best decisions for our country in matters of war or peace.
- I believe that the United Nations should be given a bigger role in ending the conflict in Iraq.
- I worry about what people who disagree with me will think of me.
- I believe that the United States is safer because of the conflict in Iraq.
- I believe that the war in Iraq is helping efforts to overcome terrorism.

Invite the participants to discuss some or all of the following questions:

- What did you notice during this exercise?
- What did you get from this exercise?
- How can you use what you got?

Exercise 6—Understanding How Others Influence Us (30-35 minutes)

Materials needed: copies of the handout "Family and Friends" for each participant

Distribute copies of the handout found on the other side of this page. Ask people to fill out the handout. Allow three to five minutes. When the group is finished, ask participants to discuss their answers in small groups for ten minutes. Then gather as the whole group and invite participants to share their insights. Make sure that everyone who wants to share has an opportunity but also remind the group that it is OK to pass. To encourage discussion, ask the following questions:

- If individuals have family or friends who are opposed to their views about war, how do they handle that relationship and that issue?
- Do others take a different approach?

“Family and Friends”

Give a value (1 to 5) to the following statements:

1= “not at all” or “very little”

5= “very much” or “a lot”

- ___1. My immediate family supports my views on the war with Iraq.
- ___2. Other relatives support (have a favorable attitude toward) my views on the war with Iraq.
- ___3. My friends outside of church support my views on the war with Iraq.
- ___4. My friends at church support my views on the war with Iraq.
- ___5. My friends at work support my views on the war with Iraq.
- ___6. A significant person in my life (family, relative, or friend) opposes my views.

Complete the following statements:

7. My family supports me in my views by

8. My family worries about my views because

9. My family hinders me in my views by

10. If I could say anything to my family about how I feel about the war with Iraq, I would like them to know that

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.) RESOURCES ONLINE

General Assembly Statements

www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/iraq/

Resources for Prayer, Bible Study, and Worship

www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/iraq/#1

Resources for Pastoral Care

www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/iraq/#2

Other Resources

www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/iraq/#5

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Call

888-728-7228, ext. 5788

Write

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Louisville, Kentucky 40202-1396

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