

**RESOURCES FOR FOSTERING COMMUNITY AND DIALOGUE**  
**For use by groups within synods, presbyteries, congregations, and seminaries**

**An Introductory Word**

*The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church discovered a number of ways to foster dialogue and discernment, as well as build trust and community with one another. This guide summarizes many of those tools and is offered as one model for groups throughout the denomination to engage in a similar experience as that of the task force. We hope you will find the approaches helpful as you develop your own groups.*

*The topics addressed in these resources include:*

- *format for group gatherings*
- *community building tools*
- *development of a group covenant*
- *worship, Bible study, and table fellowship*
- *tools for dialogue and discernment*

*Groups can engage in theological reflection by using the curriculum guide, the task force's final report, supplemental resource papers, video resources, and readings that the task force has used and developed. These can be found on the task force's Web site at [www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity](http://www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity).*

*"Resources for Fostering Community and Dialogue" can be found on the task force's resource CD or downloaded from the task force's Web site. You can receive a printed copy by contacting the Office of the General Assembly at (888) 728-7228, ext. 8038.*

*For the task force,*

*Gary Demarest and Jenny Stoner  
Co-moderators*

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**RESOURCES FOR FOSTERING COMMUNITY AND DIALOGUE**  
**For use by groups within synods, presbyteries, congregations and seminaries**  
*by Victoria Curtiss*

*Rev. Victoria (Vicky) Curtiss is a pastor and spiritual director in Portland, Oregon, and a member of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church.*

The General Assembly directed the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church “to develop a process and instrument by which congregations and governing bodies throughout our church may reflect on and discuss the matters that unite and divide us, praying that the Holy Spirit will promote the peace, unity, and purity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).”

The task force is offering the following resources to be used by groups that form within governing bodies or congregations. Additional resources in print, video, and online are available.

**FORMAT FOR GATHERING**

The task force met usually for three days at a time, three times per year. If you are newly forming a group, you will need to determine how often, for what length of time, and where you choose to meet. Consider meeting in a comfortable, informal setting for a block of two to six hours, which includes sharing a meal or refreshments together.

Each of the task force meetings included community building, worship (including celebration of the Lord’s Supper), study of Scripture, prayer, and either theological reflection and/or planning how to carry out our work. We met in both plenary and small groups.

A suggested pattern for your group gatherings is:

- Community building
- Worship, prayer, and Bible study
- Dialogue on topical reflection (theology, polity/history/governance, or other matters related to our unity and division)
- Eating together
- Discernment through listening
- Recording shared observations or consensus of direction
- Feedback re: communicating with your governing body
- Evaluation and/or affirmations
- Closing prayer

**COMMUNITY BUILDING TOOLS**

It is essential that relationships be nurtured among participants who have differing perspectives for there to be effective engagement in theological exploration. Group cohesion enables reflection and discussion to have more depth and breadth. Spending a high proportion of the group’s initial time together in community building fosters a climate of respect and trust. As the group’s life continues, a lesser proportion of time needs to be spent in community building, though it is a helpful element each time the group gathers.

A variety of ways can be used to help members know each other and appreciate each one’s unique gifts and life story. There may be one or two persons who are especially interested and gifted in leading the group in this area.

## **Suggested Tools for Building Community**

### ***Short Paper***

Each member writes a brief paper on his or her hopes, concerns, and ideas for participating in the group. These are then compiled and circulated to the whole group without names. This encourages all voices to be heard without risk of members being labeled.

### ***Paired Introductions***

In the first gathering of the group, each member of the group introduces a partner to the rest of the group. Have everyone pair up with someone they don't know well. For about five minutes each, learn about each other—family, work, home, hobbies, interests, a highlight from their church, and so forth. Persons may wish to take notes on what they learn. Then each person introduces his or her partner to the whole group.

### ***Covenant Formation***

Early in its life together, preferably at its first meeting, the group forms its own covenant. An initial outline or draft may be written by the facilitator(s) based on a compilation of the concerns, goals, hopes, and suggested norms gleaned from the short papers written by members (see above). If short papers are not written in advance, expectations may be shared at the first gathering.

You could begin by building on the purposes for theological reflection groups that were named by the task force:

1. engage in theological reflection and discussion on issues of Christology, biblical authority and interpretation, ordination standards, and power within the framework of the Reformed tradition;
2. reflect on other matters that may unite and divide us;
3. nurture relationships of persons across lines that may currently divide them;
4. pray for the peace, unity, and purity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Ask each person to write on a note card three to five values or behaviors they hope the group will live out. Have one or two persons collect the cards, summarize the content, and offer it back to the group.

Sub-groups of no more than five in a group work to modify, add to, or refine a draft of the covenant. Then the total group hears suggestions from each sub-group and discusses them until there is consensus of direction. A new sub-group (which can have representatives from each of the former sub-groups) does some further refinement and brings back another draft for the whole group to make their own.

Developing a covenant is key to establishing shared expectations of one another, providing a means of support for and accountability to one another, and remembering the group's goals. Working together as a group on something in common also builds community. You may want to say your covenant together each time the group gathers.

### ***Community-Building Questions***

At the beginning of each gathering, invite members to share something of what is going on in their lives in response to a question such as:

- What is something new and something good that has happened since the group last met?
- What is a moment of grace you have recently experienced?
- What are you leaving behind and to what are you returning?
- What are a joy and a concern you have? (These can then be incorporated into prayer.)
- What do you most appreciate about the congregation of which you are a part?
- Who has significantly influenced your faith?

- What do you love to do in your spare time?
- What is an unselfish act you have witnessed or done?
- Who is someone or something that influenced you in choosing your work?<sup>1</sup>

## **WORSHIP, PRAYER, BIBLE STUDY, AND TABLE FELLOWSHIP**

Each gathering should include a time of corporate worship and prayer. Rotating the planning and leading of worship among different members provides richness in a variety of ways to sing, pray, and apply the Scriptures.

An important way to be the body of Christ is to pray for one another. One person may lead the whole group in prayer, but it is often more powerful to hear many voices praying for one another, our church, and our world. Before praying, participants can be invited to share personal joys and concerns, something for which they are grateful, or griefs and hopes for our world. Then the whole group may be invited to pray.

Bible study may be incorporated into or conducted separately from worship. The Reverend Steven Yamaguchi, who was not a member of the task force, led the first Bible study the task force did. Your group could also begin by using his Bible study (see Appendix). Or, you may start by using the first video produced by the task force, *Fostering Community and Dialogue*, Segment Three: “Interpreting Matthew 5:38-48.” Additional Bible studies in which the task force engaged are included with the final report of the task force.

Interacting in informal times, such as when sharing refreshments or eating a meal together, helps the group bond. Breaking bread together is best done in a private space rather than in a restaurant or while engaged in formal reflection.

## **DIALOGUE AND DISCERNMENT**

The primary purpose of reflecting on theological themes is not to come to a decision or reach agreement, but rather to explore, discover, and gain insights. In that process, we may also discern the Spirit leading us to a shared meaning or direction. One way we seek to discern the Spirit’s leading is through listening carefully to how the Spirit is speaking through one another, within ourselves, and as a whole group. Structured approaches and gifted facilitators help elicit input from all voices, provide for the silence needed to listen carefully to the Spirit, and draw forth ways to explore the assumptions, interpretations, and beliefs participants carry. The following tools are helpful.

### ***Framework Analysis***

- **Comparing Two Viewpoints:** Read articles from two different perspectives and name what the two hold in common, and where they differ. The task force read articles from two authors who came to different conclusions regarding Romans 1.
- **Seeing An Overview:** William Stacy Johnson developed a helpful framework on a range of perspectives within the PC(USA) regarding same gender relationships.<sup>2</sup> Task force members

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<sup>1</sup> Additional questions may be found in *Community Builders: 50 Exercises for Church Groups* by Rochelle Melander and Harold Eppley (Augsburg Fortress, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> See study paper by William Stacy Johnson, *Same-Gender Relationships in the Church: Seven Theological Viewpoints*.

shared how and why they resonated with these perspectives, as well as their hopes for the church in light of such a range of viewpoints.

- **Assessing Six Theological Viewpoints Papers:** The task force analyzed writings from a spectrum of perspectives using the following questions [for the specific papers used, see “Bibliography of Materials Read by Members of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church” (Section VI) on the resource CD or the task force’s Web site]:
  1. What sources of authority does the writer appeal to? Scripture? Reason? Experience? “Facts”?
  2. How is Scripture used? Proof-text? Broad appeals to scriptural themes?
  3. How are themes of creation and redemption reflected and related? How about the themes of nature and grace?
  4. What role does sin (as defined by the author) play in the account? How is sinfulness dealt with?
  5. What is the role of the church conceived to be? Corrective? Affirming? Transforming? Separate?

### ***Listening Pairs***

Group members pair up (preferably with persons they do not know well) and each takes two to five minutes to respond to a particular question, with the other not doing or saying anything except listening attentively. The only exchange may be a question for clarification. Someone should keep track of time and announce when it is the second person’s turn. After both have shared without interruption, it may be appropriate to share observations or connections.

### ***Paired Questions***

Reflecting on questions is grounded in a spiritual discipline of discernment formulated by Ignatius of Loyola, in which people sense God’s movement by noticing that which leads to consolation (a sense of peace and movement toward God) and that which leads to desolation (distress and movement away from God).

Examples of questions for prayerful reflection and sharing include:

- To say this group has succeeded means what for me? What would indicate failure to me?
- What did I find most meaningful about this (gathering, reading, dialogue, etc.)? What did I find least meaningful or troubling?
- What do I find hopeful? What do I find discouraging?
- When did we feel disconnected? How is trust being fostered among us?<sup>3</sup>

### ***Prayerful Listening***

The facilitator poses a question for all to reflect on in silent prayer. Sample questions are:

- What are God’s yearnings for the church?
- What pastoral word may God be leading us to share?
- What prophetic witness may God be leading us to make as a church?
- Toward what new vision may God be calling us?

The leader invites the group into quietness, then offers a brief prayer. The group sits in silent prayer and reflection for ten minutes or more. Some may want to jot down their thoughts. Then the leader invites each person to speak once, as he or she feels led, saying in a sentence or two what he or she is beginning

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<sup>3</sup> A fuller explanation of how reflecting on such questions is conducive for discernment may be found in *Sleeping With Bread* by Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Mathew Linn (NY: Paulist Press, 1995).

to hear. Encourage times of silence between each sharing. After all who desire have spoken, have the group return to silence to reflect on the question, “Through all the voices we’ve heard, what fuller or clearer beckoning of God do I begin to hear?” After another period of five to ten minutes of silence, invite persons to share again. A scribe may record thoughts. The facilitator may make an observation, or invite others to comment, about any shared themes or sense of direction that may have emerged. Close with a prayer and/or the passing of the peace of Christ.

### ***Silence***

Contemplative silence creates spaciousness for God. A time of quietness at the beginning and ending of a gathering can open a group to the One who is present to all. A period of stillness in the midst of heated exchange or division can center persons in the loving God and shed their defensiveness.<sup>4</sup> Quietness can help persons notice their own reactions and assumptions, which can lead to more freedom to choose how to respond. Many structured designs for communal discernment include stretches of silence, such as between times when participants speak or in the midst of weighing options. Rather than the collective experience being one of conversation or debate, it takes on a prayerful character of listening to God’s Spirit. The practice of silence allows people to pay more attention to what is going on within and among them.

### ***Taking the Pulse***

Periodically within a meeting, the group takes time to sense and share what they are mindful of or noticing about themselves or the group in the course of their work together. Each person takes a turn to share in a few sentences. Some of the questions suggested for paired questions could be used, or one could simply ask how participants are feeling about what has been going on.

### ***Ladder of Inference***<sup>5</sup>

The ladder of inference was developed by Chris Argyris to address problems that stem from the fact that the meanings people create are based on selective facts as they interpret them. Argyris contends that persons’ confidence in their own positions comes from the way the human mind works, moving quickly from concrete data to abstract judgments. The ladder of inference explores the way the mind processes experiences by quickly adding to them interpretations, analysis, abstract judgments, and beliefs. He uses the image of a stepladder, with each rung representing another level of movement from concrete experience to increasing abstraction.

A first step toward fuller awareness is to notice when one has drawn a conclusion or made a judgment. The next step is to ask oneself “What assumptions led me to that position or belief?” Naming these assumptions concretely and clearly is crucial. Once one has honestly looked at one’s own perceptions, the next question is “What meanings did I draw from particular events that led me to those assumptions?”<sup>6</sup>

The next step toward dialogue is sharing one’s thinking process with others, stating as clearly as one can the assumptions one is making, and inviting others to share theirs. One way to help others notice when they are holding a conclusion and how they got there would be to say, “I’d like to understand your experience and I’m not sure that I do. Can you help me?” The more people name their assumptions, especially those that are cross-cultural, the more layers of meaning can be discovered that otherwise are often edited or overlooked.

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<sup>4</sup> From a presentation by Stephen Doughty.

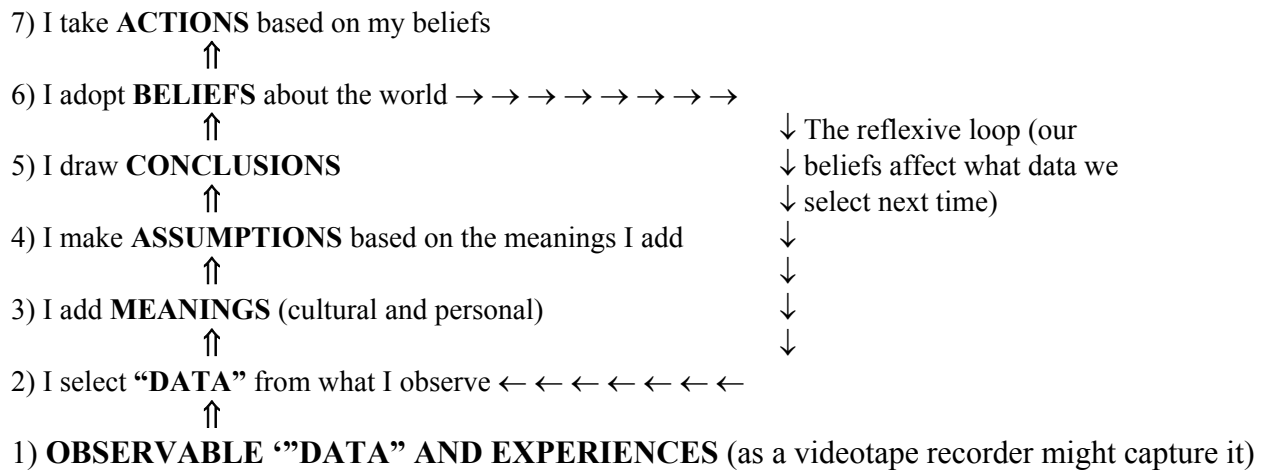
<sup>5</sup> Peter Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard B. Ross, Bryan J. Smith. *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*. (New York: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 245-259.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Wirth, *The Path of Contemplative Dialogue*. (The Yardley Group, Inc., 2003), p. 13.

Walking up and down one's own ladder of inference, and aiding others to do the same, can resolve many misunderstandings and miscommunications. Openly talking about these with one another can help clarify potential differences long before they get to a stage of conflict. As persons become more conscious, the Spirit can work through them to create new possibilities.

**Ladder of Inference**, developed by Chris Argyris

*(start at the bottom rung of the ladder)*



*Ways to make your thinking process visible (walk up the ladder of inference slowly):*

Here's what I think, and here's how I got there...

I assume that...

I came to this conclusion because...

To get a clear picture of what I'm talking about, imagine that...

*Publicly test your conclusions and assumptions:*

What do you think about what I just said? Do you see any flaws in my reasoning?

What can you add?

Here's one aspect you might help me think through...

Do you see it differently?

*Ask others to make their thinking process visible:*

What leads you to conclude that? What data do you have for that?

Can you help me understand your thinking here?

What is the significance of that? How does this relate to your other concerns?

Where does your reasoning go next?

I'm asking you about your assumptions here because...

*Compare your assumptions to theirs:*

How would your proposal affect...? Is this similar to...?

Can you describe a typical example?

Am I correct that you're saying...?

### ***Biblical and Theological Reflection***<sup>7</sup>

To be a spiritual community that seeks God's guidance, we need to know how to listen to God's Word together. We need both to study and meditate upon scripture as we lead the church.

To do this, we weave our story, issue, or concern with God's master story. As we consider a need in the church, we reflect together on Scriptures that might speak to this situation. As we do so, we are trusting the Holy Spirit to guide our thoughts and to lead our meditation together.

Here is a simple process that can help us learn how to weave our story with God's story.

Step 1: Identify a significant issue for consideration.

Step 2: Look at all the many sides of the issue. Share with each other relevant information regarding this issue.

Step 3: Discuss how this issue personally affects the members of the group. How does it come close to each member's personal experience?

Step 4: Ask members of the group to share aloud Scripture passages that might help guide the group as they listen for God's will. Does a particular Bible passage come to mind that might speak to this situation? Is there a similar story in Scripture? Discuss these Bible passages as a group and choose one that the group will reflect upon together.

Step 5: Read the passage aloud and invite members of the group to speak their responses to the following questions. Comments are simply shared and not discussed. A slight pause is appropriate between each comment to take in fully what has been shared.

- The first reading is for group members to get a feel for what is happening in this Scripture. Allow a moment of silence for them to consider the context and what is being said.
- After the second reading, ask, "What one word or phrase leaps out to you from this passage?"
- After the third reading, ask, "What is one way you see God working in this passage?"
- After the fourth reading, ask, "How does this Scripture speak to our situation?"

Step 6. Return to the issue at hand. Did this Scripture reflection offer any new insights or wisdom to this situation? How do these insights influence the group's sense of God's leading? Discuss these connections between our situation and God's story.

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<sup>7</sup> These principles were compiled by the Reverend John E. Anderson and drawn from the books, *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* by Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, and *Listening Hearts: Discerning God's Call in Community* by Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward.

### ***Common Ground Dialogue Process***<sup>8</sup>

**The practice of dialogue lies at the heart of the common ground approach.** Dialogue differs from debate. Debate is about persuading others that your views are “right” and that the views of others are “wrong.” The spirit of dialogue is to acknowledge and honor the humanity of all persons present regardless of their point of view. The goals of dialogue center on increasing understanding and being understood. A carefully constructed dialogue process enables hard issues to be addressed without leading to bad feelings.

**The common ground approach is a search for what is genuinely shared.** This idea can be illustrated by two interlocking circles. Each circle represents a point of view about an issue. A common ground process recognizes the integrity of each circle as a complete set of concerns, beliefs, and values around this issue. It primarily explores the area of intersection.

**Common ground is not a sacrifice.** Searching for common ground is not about compromising to reach a middle position, but about focusing on areas of genuinely shared values and concerns. People are not asked to change their views on an issue or sacrifice their integrity. Participants seek to understand one another, not to force or pretend agreement where it does not exist.

**A common ground approach encourages looking beyond labels and stereotypes.** This approach assumes that even in a polarized conflict, people’s views fall on a continuum. The idea of a continuum encourage awareness of how little we can assume about another person’s set of beliefs if all we know about them is that they choose one label over the other.

**A common ground approach encourages connective thinking.** Debates tend to focus attention on the weaknesses of a speaker and to encourage a search for the flaws in what is said. Dialogue encourages connective thinking that focuses attention on the strengths of the speaker and encourages a search for the gems of wisdom, or pieces of truth in what is said.

**A common ground dialogue encourages the sharing of personal experience.** Each person has experienced life in a unique way. Personal experiences cannot be argued about or agreed or disagreed with. They just are.

**A common ground dialogue encourages genuine questions.** Genuine questions are questions asked in a spirit of real curiosity and a sincere interest in hearing the answers. Rhetorical or leading questions are usually asked to test or trap someone whom we view as an opponent. Genuine questions are asked to increase learning.

**The search for common ground acknowledges our shared membership in this society.** Common ground involves acknowledging the connections that exist between people related to one another by a shared community, faith, and/or citizenship.

**Ground Rules for Common Ground Dialogue:** Act, speak, and listen respectfully. Listen to seek understanding, not necessarily agreement. Speak for yourself. Offer and accept views without attempting to convert or convince. Observe confidentiality. Anyone has the option to pass without comment, explanation, or negative connotation.

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<sup>8</sup> Based on resources from Common Ground Network for Life and Choice, [www.searchforcommonground.org](http://www.searchforcommonground.org).

### ***Graced Communal History***

Graced communal history assists a group to become aware of the impact of its past on its current life, recognizing the movement of the Holy Spirit through consolations (peace, vitality, joy) and desolations (discomfort, loss, sadness). It was developed by Fr. John English,<sup>9</sup> who taught that there is always consensus in a group; the issue is to discover that consensus.

One way to discern is through memory. The premise of graced history is that one's personal graced history is within communal history, which is within God's salvation history. God is present in each person's life story and also in the history of a community or group. This history can be reflected upon in the context of God's constant, loving presence. The three classic movements within salvation history are grace, sin, and resurrection/hope. There may be overlap among the three categories.

For this exercise, a facilitator and a scribe are needed, as well as a long sheet of butcher paper on the wall and three different colored marking pens to create a history line. The focus can vary, but the task force used this for issues surrounding same-gender relationships and issues. They followed these steps:

Step 1: Each participant spends thirty to sixty minutes in individual silent prayer reflecting on the following questions:

- How have you encountered God's grace (forgiveness, liberation from oppression, reconciliation, restoration, cleansing, homecoming, blessing) as you have engaged issues surrounding homosexuality—whether through the study of Scripture, life encounters with others, or membership in a denomination that is in a conflict over matters of sexual orientation?
- How have you encountered sin (exile, disobedience, bondage, constricted vision, judgment, separation from God and others)—in your own life as well as elsewhere—having been part of a church that struggles over issues surrounding homosexuality?
- In the midst of our church's struggle over issues surrounding homosexuality, what have you encountered as signs of resurrection (dying and rising, hope, forward movement, drawing good out of evil, creating new life)—points at which God is working in you and through our struggle as a denomination to bring new life?

Step 2: The group reconvenes and each person takes one turn to address the three questions, one at a time. It is not a time for interaction, unless there is a question for clarification. At the end of each sharing, the speaker will tell the scribe what few words to use to capture thoughts on the butcher paper—the history line. The scribe uses a different color for all thoughts related to grace, to sin, and to resurrection. Participants may speak as they are moved to do so. Silence is fine—let the silence invite the sharing. The facilitator and scribe are also afforded an opportunity to speak.

Step 3: After all who desire have shared, the total group is subdivided into smaller groups in which members discuss what common themes or dimensions they observe from all the sharing. Each sub-group reports these for further reflection on what themes are common among all the subgroups. These are recorded as learnings or affirmations upon which all can agree.

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<sup>9</sup> John English was a Jesuit priest who expanded the use of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius for group discernment. He taught at the Guelph Centre of Spirituality in Guelph, Canada.

### ***Mutual Invitation***

Mutual Invitation was developed by Eric Law<sup>10</sup> while he worked in a variety of multicultural settings. This tool is based on the premise that people carry different perceptions of their personal power. In groups, those who view themselves as having high personal power (able to influence change) will tend to dominate the conversation and set a quick pace of interaction. Those who see themselves as having less power in relation to others in the group tend to need to be invited directly for their input. They may also come from a culture that emphasizes the collective over the individual, so it is harder for them to speak as an individual. An essential dimension of this approach is that each person has the opportunity to invite who speaks next. This tool helps balance input between the talkative and the quieter participants.

Much of one's perception of one's own personal power is culturally shaped—Eric Law has seen this dynamic especially in interracial groups. Perceptions of personal power can also vary with differences in social or political rank, such as age, gender, sexual orientation, income level, area of expertise, vocational status, or length of participation in a group.

Mutual invitation works best in groups with four to fifteen participants. They should sit in a circle so they can see one another. To estimate time needed for each round of sharing, multiply the number of participants by five minutes.

- How to Proceed
  1. Let participants know how much time is set aside for this process.
  2. Introduce the topic to be discussed or question(s) to be explored.<sup>11</sup> Write this on newsprint and display on a wall so everyone can see it.
  3. Introduce the process by reading the following: “In order to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak, we will proceed in the following way. The leader or designated person will share first. Afterward, he or she then invites another to share. Whom you invite does not need to be the person next to you. After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share. If you don't want to say anything, simply say, ‘Pass,’ and proceed to invite another to share. We will do this until everyone has been invited.”
- Problems to Anticipate

When this is used for the first time with a group, it may be awkward. The tendency is to give up on the process and go back to the “whoever-wants-to-talk-can-talk” way. If one persistently uses this process, the group will eventually get used to it and experience its benefits. A good way to ensure the process goes well the first time is to make sure there are a couple of people in the group who have done this before; have the facilitator invite them to speak first.

If a person speaks very briefly and then does not remember to invite the next person, do not invite for him or her. Simply point out that this person has the privilege to invite the next person to speak. This is especially important if a person “passes.” By ensuring that this person still has the privilege to invite, one affirms and values that person independent of that person's verbal ability.

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<sup>10</sup> Eric H. F. Law is an Asian-American Episcopal priest who wrote, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community*. (Chalice Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Examples of questions are listed under “Prayerful Listening.”

***Polarity Management***

Sometimes groups and organizations address the same issue again and again because they are treating it like a problem that needs a solution when, in fact, the issue revolves around a set of polarities. Polarities are two values that appear to be opposite of, and in tension with, each other, but in reality are interdependent. They can't function well independently—both are needed for the long-term health of an organization.

Organizational consultant Barry Johnson created a tool called polarity management that can help a group recognize the difference between a problem that can be solved and a set of polarities that can be managed.<sup>12</sup> Johnson's approach helps a group move beyond dualistic, right/wrong thinking. Instead, persons can see the beneficial qualities of both poles, and the downsides of both that emerge if either side alone is emphasized.

The Theological Task Force found the polarity management exercise useful for clarifying when it would be beneficial or detrimental to have portions of their meetings “open” or “closed” to the public. Below is a portion of the polarity map the task force developed on this issue. The polarity management exercise has also been used with a few presbyteries as part of a presentation on the work of the task force, using the polarities of “unity” and “purity.”

<p><b>L+</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keeps us on our best behavior</li> <li>Gives uninterrupted flow of information</li> <li>Gives the church multiple perspectives on what we're doing</li> <li>Ensures more balanced representation</li> <li>Models openness and process for dealing with controversial issues</li> <li>Invites feedback</li> <li>Provides accountability to &amp; from press</li> <li>Builds and enhances trust</li> </ul> <p><b>OPEN SESSIONS</b></p>	<p style="text-align: right;"><b>R+</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increases opportunity to play with ideas without them being represented as facts</li> <li>Prevents premature reaction to ideas being tested but not finalized</li> <li>Allows freedom to express doubts and fears, and not represent particular constituency</li> <li>Lessens risk to professional reputations</li> <li>Minimizes some of the misunderstandings of our work</li> <li>Models an appropriate way for portions of meetings to be closed</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>CLOSED SESSIONS</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inhibits task members from speaking</li> <li>Lessens ability to test creative hypotheses, half-baked ideas</li> <li>Makes it harder to build relationships</li> <li>Hinders taking risks</li> <li>Inaccurate reporting interferes with deliberations</li> <li>Allows grandstanding, bullying</li> <li>Creates anger toward press</li> <li>Leads others to premature conclusions</li> </ul> <p><b>L-</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Loses perceptions of critics and supporters</li> <li>Lacks as much accountability</li> <li>Breeds suspicion</li> <li>Lessens credibility of task force</li> <li>Undercuts purpose of modeling process</li> <li>Carries potential for carelessness</li> <li>Departs from standard procedures</li> <li>Seeds perceptions of not living openly</li> <li>Lessens awareness by others of what we're doing</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>R-</b></p>

<sup>12</sup> Barry Johnson, *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvables Problems*. (Amherst: Human Resource Development Press HRD Press, Inc., 1992, 1996).

## ***Polarity Management (continued)***

### ***Advance Preparation***

Make handouts of a polarity map that has four quadrants, adding **L+** in the upper left quadrant, **R+** in the upper right quadrant, **L-** in the lower left quadrant, and **R-** in the lower right quadrant, with space on either side of the quadrant for the name of each pole. Use tables or spaces within a room for subgroups of ten or so persons to gather.

*OR*

Use a large clear floor space. Create polarity maps with masking tape on the floor by making a cross with four quadrants, each quadrant being large enough for six to ten persons to stand in it. Create enough maps on the floor for every six to ten persons in the group. Provide each subgroup with a pen and a handout with a polarity map on it.

### ***Identify Polarities vs. Problems***

Present the following: To determine whether there is a polarity to manage or a problem to solve, two questions are helpful:

- Is the difficulty ongoing?
- Are there two poles that are interdependent?

Problems to solve have a solution that can be considered an end point in a process. The solution can stand alone to work over an extended period of time. Polarities to manage, on the other hand, are ongoing and do not get “solved.” There is continual shift in emphasis or focus from one pole to the other.

Work with one polarity identified by the group, or preselect a polarity. Examples of polarities within the Presbyterian tradition (as noted in the task force’s final report, pp. 24-29) include:

- *Communal discernment and individual discernment*: honoring discernment in community of the will of God and the Spirit’s leading, while also respecting that God alone is Lord of the conscience under the authority of Scripture
- *Adherence and freedom*: adhering to essential and necessary beliefs and practices that bind the faithful into the body of Christ, while also respecting freedom in non-essential matters of belief, worship, piety, witness, and service
- *Presbyterian identity and ecumenical cooperation*: emphasizing a distinctive Presbyterian and Reformed witness to the world, while also pursuing cooperation in mission with other Christians
- *Original jurisdiction and oversight*: affirming the rights and responsibilities of governing bodies that have original jurisdiction in church governance, while also affirming the rights and responsibilities of governing bodies that have the power of oversight and review.

Write the name of one side of the polarity on the left side of the map, and the name of the other polarity on the right side.

Share with the participants the following: “The polarity map is represented by two poles. The left half represents one pole. The right half represents the other pole. The upper half of each pole represents the positive outcomes that result from focusing on that pole. These are the benefits of that pole or its ‘upside(s).’ The plus sign (+) in the upper half of each pole is a symbol that means whatever is put in that quadrant is considered positive or good. The lower half of each pole represents the negative outcomes that result from focusing *only* on that pole and neglecting the opposite pole. These are the disadvantages of that pole or ‘downside(s).’ The minus sign (–) in the lower half of each pole is a symbol that means whatever is put in that quadrant is considered negative or bad.”

“When one pole is valued to the exclusion of the other, the downsides of that pole are experienced. Whenever there is a push for a shift from one pole of a polarity to the other, it is because those pushing are: 1) experiencing or anticipating the downsides of the present pole which they identify as the ‘problem,’ and 2) they are attracted to the upsides of the other pole which they identify as the ‘solution.’”<sup>13</sup>

### ***Moving Through the Quadrants***

Each sub-group moves to a table, space, or polarity map on the floor. A recorder is chosen. All participants start in the (L–) quadrant and make a list of the downsides of focusing **only** on that pole. Get at least one contribution from each group member. You do not have to agree on the list. Whatever a person wants to add is written down.

When you are through with the (L–) list, the whole group moves up to the (R+) quadrant of the opposite pole. While there, make a list of those things associated with the upside of that pole. Get at least one contribution from each group member.

Continue by moving next into the (R–) quadrant, and then the (L+) quadrant and naming its aspects.

### ***Observations***

To manage a polarity effectively, one needs to see the whole picture, or all four quadrants of the polarity map. When participants have finished all four quadrants, discuss how their group or organization can manage to enhance the positive qualities of each pole and avoid the negative consequences of too much or exclusive emphasis on either pole.

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<sup>13</sup> Johnson, p. 7.

## APPENDIX

### Sample Initial Bible Study

The Reverend Steven Yamaguchi, executive presbyter of Los Ranchos Presbytery, led the first Bible study for the Theological Task Force. Steve, a Japanese-American, focused on how God works through those of us who live in more than one world. You may choose to have one of your group tell his or her own story of living with a bi-cultural background, rather than using Steve's story. His questions are conducive for participants' self-disclosure, which is especially helpful in the beginning of the group's life.

Scripture passages:

- Exodus 2—4:12
- Acts 16
- Philippians 3:4—11

The following is a condensed version of Steve's thoughts:

Moses was tormented over his bi-cultural identity as both the prince of Egypt and the son of the Hebrews. His bi-cultural identity is also what made Moses fit for particular service to God. My bi-cultural friends think that the reference in Exod. 4:10 to Moses being "slow of tongue and speech" means that Hebrew was not his first language. Moses did not belong fully in either place—that of the Hebrew people or of the Egyptians. He was not completely at home in either world—there were people and aspects of each place that made him feel like a foreigner.

Saul/Paul also carried a bi-cultural identity as both a Jew but "not a Jerusalem home boy" and a Roman citizen, native of the Roman colony at Tarsus. He received a Roman education and was steeped in Roman politics. Though Paul counts all of this as "rubbish" (Phil. 3:7), God used all of whom he was to be an apostle who reached many.

Many people of our church feel as if they live in two worlds, particularly women and racial ethnic minorities. All of the members of the task force live in two worlds. The co-moderators felt they couldn't scratch any of you from being on this task force, because you are able to move in more than one world in a trustworthy way.

I am a third generation Japanese-American who grew up in an urban Japanese-American neighborhood. Eighty percent of the students in school were Japanese-American. We had tofu delivery door to door. My Japanese-American parents and many neighbors had been ordered into internment camps during World War II. As a kid, I was part of the majority, part of the world on top. Jews, Chinese-Americans, and African-Americans were in the minority. Later, I moved to Orange County, where the John Birch Society reigned. It seemed as if I had died and gone to hell, but it was also the place I met Jesus Christ. There were numerous places I lived after that—serving an inner-city church, studying at the Ivy League Harvard Divinity School, attending Gordon-Conwell College and Fuller Seminary, living in Tokyo. Each place shaped who I am and the gifts I bring to the body of Christ. The people I feel most loved by and whom I can best serve are the ones who get to know the other worlds about me. In one congregation I served, ninety percent of the parishioners were survivors of detention camps, and no one had connected their story with God's story. They were moved to recognize themselves as people held captive who are now freed.

One question for us is, how do we adjudicate between competing truth claims? We live in more than one sphere of influence. My six-year-old and nine-year-old daughters have learned that if you look Japanese and are in a Japanese restaurant, it's considered polite and appreciative to slurp your noodles—but not when eating spaghetti in an American restaurant.

People are shaped and formed by their contexts and experiences. Sometimes “different” looks scary because we don’t understand each other’s worlds. We need to bear witness and give grateful testimony to our experience by listening and learning from each other. The prologue in the Gospel According to John describes truth as incarnational.

If we live in a different land, it’s quite different from being a tourist. We learn to understand what seemed strange at first. There are many in our church who are afraid of “them others,” and they often deal with each other as caricatures, not flesh and blood.

It takes grace—a gift of God—to listen and appreciate the experience and the ideas of others who come from different worlds. What I’m praying for is that you, the task force, can use all of your experiences to lead the church on a spiritual discovery, to help the whole church search with not only our minds, but our whole souls and hearts and strength. It’s a flesh-and-blood incarnational adventure that we need to be about. The Spirit alone can bless us with the gifts of recognition and appreciation.

In the Japanese culture, long periods of silence are acceptable. Part of our life of prayer needs to be like that. It is constitutionally difficult for some to speak up and converse as the way to do Bible study. I invite you now to spend some time sitting quietly and reflecting on these questions on your own for five minutes. Then we will share with each other in groups of five.

### **Questions for Personal Reflection and Sharing**

1. What are the places/worlds/contexts that God has used to shape me? (my loves, my language, my manners, my dreams and passions)
2. How might they have shaped my view of God?
3. How might they have shaped the things of Christ’s church about which I care most passionately?

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