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A Study Guide

Ten Moments for Reflection and Discussion in Voices of Witness



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How to Use This Study Guide

This study guide is a companion to the Voices of Witness DVD that was released by Claiming the Blessing in June 2006. The DVD can be ordered at www.voicesofwitness.org. A \$4.95 donation is requested to cover postage.

There is more to Voices of Witness than can be processed in one session. This study guide assumes that those viewing the DVD will devote at least two and, better yet, three sessions to this experience. Here are two possible models for viewing and discussing Voices of Witness:

Option One

First Session

Watch Voices of Witness in its entirety. After the viewing, take a short break and ask participants to introduce themselves and tell the group what they found intriguing about something one of the witnesses said. The leader should establish the firm expectation and ground rule that there will be no rebuttals or cross-talk: everyone is entitled to say what they say without fear of being contradicted or challenged.

Second Session

Engage the first five discussion/reflection points in the Study Guide. Again, the ground rules should make it clear that people are entitled to express their point of view, but this time we want to allow for more cross-talk and interactive discussion.

Third Session

The same as for session two, except this time use the last five discussion/reflection points.

Option Two

Using two or three sessions, go through the DVD Voices of Witness pausing after each discussion/reflection point to engage the ten discussion/reflection points. If you use this option, please establish firm ground rules about group norms and do some kind of introductory exercise at the beginning.

Remember: The purpose of this DVD and study guide is to get people to listen to the experiences of gay and lesbian people in the church. So the leader should establish and model a high value on respectful listening in these sessions. Sexuality is a loaded issue for all of us, and we are all vulnerable when we talk about it. Our call to respect the dignity of every human beings should be especially operative in these discussions.

1 Calls to Listen

We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ.—Lambeth Conference 1998 Resolution 1.10 Human Sexuality

The Lambeth Conference is a decennial (once every ten years) gathering of bishops in the Anglican churches around the world for consultation and dialogue. It is not an official legislative body of the church. While the world's bishops continue to disagree about several aspects of human sexuality, at every Lambeth Conference since 1978 the bishops of the Anglican Communion have called on the whole church to listen to the experiences of gays and lesbians as the churches think together and separately about how the church's policies and rites might best be responsive to its homosexual members. The video *Voices of Witness* is one response to this often repeated request.

Some background history: The Anglican Church was started when the Church of England separated itself from the authority of the Pope and the Roman Catholic church under the leadership of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I in the 16th century. The Anglican Communion began when the American Episcopal Church separated from the Church of England after the American Revolution. The Anglican Communion is a world-wide association of autonomous national churches, each one of which has authority over its own policies and practices and is in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Episcopal Church in the United States and the Anglican Church of Canada have taken the lead, over the past several decades, in the area of women's ministries

and the blessing of same-sex covenant relationships and the ordination of openly gay and lesbian clergy. In 1976 the General Convention of the Episcopal Church approved the ordination of women as priests and bishops. In the 1980s and 1990s many American and Canadian bishops began ordaining openly gay and lesbian clergy. In those same years, many congregations around the American and Canadian churches developed rites for the blessing of same-sex covenants. In 2003 the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire elected Gene Robinson (an openly gay partnered man) their bishop. In the same year the General Convention of the Episcopal Church confirmed Bishop Robinson's election.

In 2004 a special commission appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury issued *The Windsor Report*—which essentially asked the American church to apologize for having ordained an openly gay man to the episcopate. At its General Convention in 2006 the Episcopal Church declined to apologize but passed a resolution calling on diocesan bishops and standing committees "to exercise restraint by not consenting to the consecration of any candidate to the episcopate whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church and will lead to further strains on communion."

For Reflection

What does it mean really to listen to the experiences and aspirations of someone different from you? What do we need to let go of in order to hear someone whose racial or cultural or social or sexual location is different from our own?

For Discussion

Who should the Church be listening to in the 21st century? How do the accounts of those not normally present at our deliberations enrich the whole experience of the Christian community?

2 Voices of Witness

It's time for us to stop talking about being gay and start talking about God. And telling the story of how God has acted in your life and in mine. And when we tell that story people will come to see that the Jesus they know is the Jesus we know.—Gene Robinson

In Voices of Witness we hear from several women and men who have direct experience of what it means to be both homosexual and Christian. We hear from several of the speakers about the depth of their own faith and relationships. We hear from Christian women and men in same-sex couples about what it means to be both partners and parents. And we hear extensively the witness of the straight parent of a gay man and the community both have found in and through the church.

For Reflection

What experience of God—grace, love, judgment, forgiveness—has brought you to the table of Jesus and his companions? How has that experience changed you as a person?

For Discussion

What areas of Christian faith and practice do all believers—conservative, liberal, gay, straight, have in common? How can Christians of diverse beliefs and practices work together to find common ground?

3 Christian Marriage and Covenant

We expect a high standard of a relationship that includes fidelity, monogamy, mutual respect, and lifelong commitment. We are challenging all

couples, gay and straight, to live their lives in relationship within the context of Christian community both supported by and accountable to their brothers and sisters in Christ.—Susan Russell

The Prayer Book defines marriage and its purposes this way: “The union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God’s will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord.” [Book of Common Prayer, p.423] When Voices of Witness talks of a “high standard” for both heterosexual marriage and same-sex covenant, that standard comes out of the values articulated in the Church’s teaching as set forth in the Prayer Book. Though teaching about marriage has never been a central part of Christian doctrine, the Christian community has always upheld the notions of faithfulness and mutuality as deeply rooted in our understanding of how Christian people live in relationship with each other. Over time, the church has developed a theology of marriage which, we believe, applies to both heterosexual and homosexual couples.

For Reflection

Think about relationships—family, friendship, colleague, spouses, lovers—in your own life that are characterized by faithfulness and mutuality. How have those values been concretely lived out for you? What is your own definition of a family?

For Discussion

How is a relationship both “supported by and accountable to” the Christian community? Why do church and society have an interest in supporting and holding accountable households and families?

4 God's Blessing and Fruits of the Spirit

The Church should bless everything that the Holy Spirit touches. We have a great, great way of understanding what the fruit of the Spirit is. It's in the fifth chapter of Galatians, verse twenty-two. It says that wherever joy and peace and patience and long-suffering and maturity and generosity of spirit are, there is the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, you don't judge anything but by the fruit that it bears. And we judge the fruit of relationships here. And if they're lifelong, and if they're mutual, if they're mutually respectful if they're loving, and if they bear all the fruits of the Spirit, the church should definitely be blessing them.—Ed Bacon

In his New Testament writings, Paul was constantly arguing for the full membership of some (non-Jewish Christians) whose status was often questioned by others (Christians observing the Jewish law). In Galatians Paul goes to great lengths to explain that there are no divisions in Christ—neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free [Galatians 3:28]. But for Paul to say that there are no divisions does not mean that there is no accountability. So two things are profoundly true at once: God calls all people to new life in Jesus, and God's consistent criteria (of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control") always obtain. Just as God calls both Jews and Gentiles to gather around the same table in Christ, so God calls all people (male, female, slave, free, and by extension gay, straight) into one united fellowship of love and discipleship. What matters is not the human categories of those in the relationship; what matters is the spiritual and moral values that the relationship lives out of.

For Reflection

If blessing is a declaration of God's favor, what does it mean to bless something? What people or gifts in your life do you experience as blessings? How do they exemplify Paul's Galatians values?

For Discussion

Look at Galatians 5:22. As you think about marriage and covenant, do "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" serve as criteria for all Christian relationships? What are the hallmarks of an egalitarian, loving, and mutual relationship? How might heterosexual marriage be held accountable to the same standard?

5 Baptism and Human Dignity

The Baptismal Covenant is the basis for that whole theology. Nowhere in that Covenant is there a question asked of the adult or the child or the baby, "Are you gay or are you straight?" When you're baptized you are baptized into the fullness of the church—all of its rites and its ceremonies, privileges and its obligations. I remember at General Convention when women were being voted on for ordination. There was a button that people were wearing that said, "Ordain women or stop baptizing them." I think that's a great model for all of this.—Randy Kimmler

Baptism is the Christian sacrament that confers both identity and ministry on us as Jesus' followers and companions. "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever." [Book of Common Prayer, p. 308] We receive our name as a sign of our true identity as someone made in God's image are redeemed in Jesus Christ. And at the same

that we take on our true identity we are commissioned to ministry in the service of the world. The duties and obligations of this ministry are sketched out in the five questions of the Baptismal Covenant [Book of Common Prayer, pp. 304-305] Baptism is that which marks us as God's beloved people and empowers us to be God's agents of love, peace, and justice in the world. The argument about human sexuality, same-sex blessings, and the ordination of openly gay and lesbian people to all the orders of Christian ministry is essentially an argument about the nature of Baptism and the community it creates. All baptized people are fundamentally commissioned to the same ministry. And all baptized people are fundamentally given their identity (in all its particularity, even sexual and gender identity) in the act of being baptized. Therefore, we believe that all baptized people are entitled to all of the ministries and responsibilities of the larger Christian community.

For Reflection

Look over the Baptismal Covenant (Book of Common Prayer, pp. 304-305). How do you understand your own call to serve God through the five areas outlined there? What gifts and skills do you bring to God's service that are unique to your own identity?

For Discussion

How does grounding the discussion of marriage, blessing, and ordination enhance your understanding of the claim of all people to entitlement to the pastoral and ordained ministries of the Church? Are there other ways in which the Baptismal Covenant calls our church practices into judgment?

6 The Bible, Women, and Homosexuality

If you or I have moved to a point where we agree with women priests, saying "Yes, women are fully equal and able to be ordained," and so on, well then you're done something with the scriptures, you've done something with your argument. You've traveled a journey, that if you're going to be consistent you have to end up supporting gay and lesbian people and the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the church.—Wilma Jakobsen

In 1973, the Episcopal Church's General Convention adopted new marriage canons which allowed divorced people to remarry under the pastoral supervision of their priest. In 1976, the same body adopted new ordination canons which allowed women to be ordained as priests and bishops. Both actions changed centuries of church policy, and both were done with the full awareness that scripture presented serious concerns about both divorce (Jesus expressly forbids it) and women priests (Jesus appointed no female apostles). So the "journey" which the church has traveled with regard to scripture is in some ways a journey that steers by a deeper logic of love, salvation, and universal human dignity than some of the specific proof-texts might support. In the same way, even though some biblical texts seem to condemn homosexual practice, we now see that they have some of the same kind of limited cultural specificity that characterized the sayings on divorce and the early church's choice of leaders. Jesus never said anything about homosexuality, and his practice of gathering his followers without regard to category or distinction is an important warrant for a more egalitarian and inclusive way of gathering the church.

For Reflection

What is your own “journey” with regard to scripture? What parts of scripture do you hold precious? What parts do you emphasize less? What are the deep values of the Bible? How do they sustain and nourish your life of faith?

For Discussion

Why are we willing to make exceptions to scriptural “rules” for one group and not another? Doesn’t the answer have something to do with who we know and whom we empathize with? How might the whole church have this conversation not “about” gays and lesbians but “with” gays and lesbians?

7 Another Kind of Blessing: the Role of Gays and Lesbians in Church Leadership

Those of us who support the actions of our General Convention, who advocate for the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people into all orders of ministry, and for equity between same-gender partnerships and heterosexual marriage do so out of our deep conviction that these actions are our response to the Gospel as we receive it.—Susan Russell

Many of those who call themselves “traditionalists” make the argument that those “who advocate for the full inclusion of gay and lesbian people” do so out of a social and not a theological agenda. They also suggest that only the conservatives are standing up for “biblical Christianity.” But as the voices of witness make clear, the call for

equity for same-gender partnerships and heterosexual marriage is one made out of deep engagement both with the stories of gay and lesbian people and with the Church’s understanding of scripture. In this postmodern era, there is no longer one single point of view which is privileged to call itself “biblical” or even “Christian”. What we have are the experiences and witness of Christian people in an infinitely diverse array of social and spiritual and pastoral contexts. This is not a “Christian versus secular” debate; this is a conversation within the household of the Christian family.

For Reflection

How does the particularity of your own life (age, gender, economic status, birthplace) account for some of the values you bring to the conversations about the equity of opposite and same-sex relationships in Christ? When confronted with a person whose values are quite different from yours, how do you find a basis for dialogue?

For Discussion

As Christians from different cultures differ about major questions of faith and practice, how can both sides be open both to their own truth and to the truth which the other has to tell? How does both ecumenical (within Christianity) and interfaith (the world’s religions) dialogue enhance our understanding of both the truth and contingency of our own viewpoint?

8 Authenticity, the Incarnation, and the Image of God

The whole coming out thing isn't a political thing at all. It's whether one can be an authentic human being or not. And how can one be an authentic human being if one can't be oneself, can't define oneself, and can't share oneself. So we're really talking simply about authenticity, the incarnation, and being created in the image of God.—Malcolm Boyd

In New Seeds of Contemplation, Thomas Merton describes salvation as the discovery of one's authentic self. For Anglicans the Incarnation—the doctrine that God took on human life and experience in Jesus—is a core tenet of our understanding of the faith. And Genesis 1:26 tells us that God created human beings in God's one image. So the implications of Merton's definition of salvation are clear: each human person, created in God's image, expresses something unique about the nature and person of God. We have to be true to ourselves not out of self-interest but out of faithfulness to the God who made us as we are. Each human being makes incarnate some part of God that is unique to who they are. The journey of the Christian faith is the journey toward claiming and celebrating one's true identity or authentic self.

For Reflection

How, in your life, have you come to know and accept your authentic self? What were the forces or circumstances which caused you to deny it? What helped you find your way toward it?

For Discussion

The church has a long history of “don't ask don't tell” with regard to homosexuals in the ranks of its ordained ministers. In the light of Merton's idea of salvation as the discovery of the authentic self, how would self-knowledge and self-acceptance make the church's leaders both happier and healthier? What would a church led by honest and authentic ordained and lay leaders feel like? How would it impact the world?

9 A Time for Anglican Witness

I do believe strongly in this Anglican middle way, as we say the “via media”, and I do believe that in the church we have room for people with differences. I do believe that if there is a actually church that would be helpful and would be able to model that for others it would be the Anglican Communion.—Abel Lopez

The Church of England and its worldwide successors have consistently stood as faith communities where membership is pragmatic (based on actions rather than faith statements) and inclusive (open to people with a wide variety of theological and social orientations). When Queen Elizabeth I brokered the “Elizabethan settlement” as outlined in the Book of Common Prayer 1559 that settlement called for unity in things essential (doctrine) and allowed for diversity in things indifferent (ritual practices). What has long characterized the Anglican churches is a spirit of comprehensiveness: our churches “hold together” (comprehend) a wide and diverse set of parties and points of view. We are the *via media* (or “middle way”) not because we are the lowest common denominator of Christian movements but because we allow both individuals and

communities a wide amount of latitude to pursue their own vocations and values within a broad and comprehensive larger structure.

For Reflection

Many Episcopalians talk about their appreciation for the church's respect of the individual's "liberty of conscience". What are some areas of Christian faith where you feel free to disagree with others in your own faith community? How does it feel to have the freedom of this permission?

For Discussion

All Christian denominations are engaged to some extent in the current debate about human sexuality, blessings, and ordinations. How can the Episcopal Church's experience help our brother and sister Christians in other traditions make their ways forward? How can we model living together with difference, being both visionary and comprehensive at the same time?

10 The Universal Horizon of God's Love

Jesus did not say "I, if I be lifted up, will draw some." Jesus said, "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all"—black, white, yellow; rich, poor; clever, not so clever; beautiful, not so beautiful. It's one of the most radical things. All belong: gay, lesbian, so-called straight. All are meant to be held in this incredible embrace that will not let us go.

—Desmond Tutu

"And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." [Isaiah 40:5] The belief that God aims to save, redeem, and bless the entire human community (and not just one small part of it) is deeply engrained in both the

Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Archbishop Tutu quotes Jesus in John 12:32: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Christian faith is both particular and universal: yes, God has called and saved you and me and has told us that we are precious unique creatures made in God's image. And yes, God calls us to spread that knowledge of love and acceptance to the entire human community. It is a common presumption for us to assume that we can only be saved if others are not. But the greatest gift of all finally is the assurance that God will not be stopped until "all belong" to God—not to one particular brand of religious expression, but to the community of those who know that the love and forgiveness and compassion of God as expressed in the life of Jesus is for them.

For Reflection

How have you experienced "this incredible embrace that will not let us go"? How has the knowledge that God loves you enabled you to live in ways you could not attempt before?

For Discussion

How does the idea of the universal horizon of God's love impact our discussion of the place of gay and lesbian Christians in the church's life? How might we, as a church and as individual Christians) find ways to become living expressions of God's incredible embrace?



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