

Bridge Builders Bible Study

Outline

Facilitator: Rev. Sarah Sealand

What is the purpose? An intentional gathering, in a safe space, of people who are part of a church that has had difficult discussions, straw votes, or a Called Church Conference to discern disaffiliation from the United Methodist Church. First, the purpose of the gathering is to partner with God in healing the hearts, minds and souls of people who have been harmed by actions and outcomes of disaffiliation discernment processes at their local church.

Second, Pastors and lay people from other local United Methodist congregations were invited to come for one meeting. The purpose of this was for the hurting people to be invited and welcomed to new churches by the people of those churches. It is hard to go to a new church where you do not know anyone. Also, the lay people offered their Christian witness and love to their hurting brothers and sisters in Christ.

What is the shared understanding? This group is to use Scripture, prayer, active listening, naming our hurts and community to facilitate healing from the harm caused by people and institutions. Although this group will encourage naming and processing individual hurts aloud in this community, we are not gathered to gossip, condemn or push people to remove membership or transfer membership to a new church.

Who? We have learned through this discernment process that transparency is a common held value. To that end, this Bible Study was announced to the entire congregation with an open invitation. Personal invitations were sent to people who had voiced their pain and disappointment that their local church has voted to disaffiliate.

Who leads? This group was facilitated by a pastor but a lay person could lead as well. Each week the facilitating pastor sent participants reminders about the meeting date, time and location. Also, many of these participants were no longer in worship so the facilitating pastor kept the participants informed on important dates in the disaffiliation process ie. the special called annual conference. This transparency and laying out of expectations helped in the healing process. The facilitating pastor stated the shared understanding of the group each week, introduced the guest pastor, and

led the prayer requests at the end of the meeting. The guest pastor led a 20-30 minute Bible study. The facilitating pastor led the first week Bible study to set the tone for the group.

When do we do this Bible Study? We announced the Bible study two weeks after the final Church Conference vote for disaffiliation. The thought process was before the vote, the group might have formed into an action committee rather than its intention for healing from “church hurt.” Also, it is important to gather the people soon before they scatter and while the hurt is fresh so that they can process together in sacred community.

Where do we do this Bible study? The disaffiliating church is no longer a safe space for many people hurting from the effects of disaffiliation. Another local church may be used but also going into a new church building might be an emotional trigger for some people. We chose to use meeting rooms at a local library. This served as a neutral and central location for our group.

How long do we do the Bible Study? We chose to do 6 weeks so that this small group had adequate time to process. A longer gathering might form into a new church and that is not the purpose of this community. People were invited to come to one or all of the meetings. Each Bible lesson, although remaining in the theme of “Times of Transition,” was independent from other lessons.

What do we teach? Bible teachers were given these instructions, “Pastor or Teacher from local UMC church is asked to teach a Bible study lesson of his/her choosing based around the theme **"Times of Transition"** it might be about times God has called us to move to a new place ie. Abraham and Sarah, or times God has changed our direction ie. Saul to Paul.” By not having a specific curriculum this allowed each Bible study teacher to be influenced by the Holy Spirit. Also, this gave each participant a taste of the style, personality and leadership of the local church and/or pastor.

What Scripture passages were used? Again, each teacher had the freedom to follow the Spirit and choose Scriptures that spoke to them. Here is what was used but many others could be used as well;
Week 1: Galatians 2:11-19, 5:12-16 Paul’s letter to a church that is in crisis
Week 2: Ruth 1:14-22 Ruth and Naomi set out on a new path together

Week 3: Acts 8 God does not put a protective bubble on us, maybe God calls us somewhere else.

Week 4: John 14:1-7 Thomas had feelings of abandonment and tells Jesus

Week 5: Luke 1 & Acts 1 Disciples were told to gather together and care about each other

What did you do for week 6? All participants, pastors and lay people who had participated any week of the study, were invited to a “meet and greet” for the last gathering. This allowed folks to meet again and have individual conversations in a less formal setting. Also a few other local United Methodist churches were invited. Each participant was encouraged to ask one another questions about the churches they were thinking of visiting. Each church brought a light appetizer or dessert to share.

This was also a time for the members of the disaffiliating group to have closure with intentional goodbyes as they scattered to new United Methodist churches or away. This was a contrast to the way many of them had just had to walk away from a church they had been part of for decades with no formal goodbye or well wishes.

What was the agenda of each Bible study meeting?

The Bible study meeting was set for one hour.

1. Welcome (10 minutes) each of the lay people from an invited local church answered the question, What do you love about your church? Other participants said their name and answered the question, Where did you see God this week?

2. Invitation to new local church (10 minutes) Representatives from the invited local UMC church tells about their church, its worship style, times, children/youth ministries and other small group ministries. They offered an invitation to visit and provided handouts.

3. Bible study (30 minutes) pastor or teacher from local UMC church teaches a Bible study lesson of his/her choosing based around the theme "Times of Transition in the Bible"

4. Prayer- (10 minutes) participants shared their personal prayer requests. This is an important part of the healing as many felt cut away from their prayer network.

5. Announcements- tell participants which local church will be present the next week. Invite all participants to the week 6 meet and greet.

What else should I know? We did our best to invite people to these bridge building events. We were prepared that no-one or only a few people might

show up each week. If only one person came we would still offer presence, prayers and healing time as we witnessed to our Christian faith. It turned out many people came and voiced that this was needed, appreciated and helpful. Some folks who did not come still let us know they were glad it was offered and they were not just simply dropped or forgotten about by the United Methodist Church.

It is good to have a person trained in pastoral care or chaplaincy present at each meeting. This helped keep the group focused on healing rather than revenge or retribution. Many participants named anger as something that was a boundary to moving forward on their healing journey. A facilitator that can help address anger but not allow it to be the focus of the group discussion is important. Naming is different than venting in that venting can become unproductive, whereas naming allows people to speak their truth and know that others hear and care about their feelings even if they do not share the sentiments.

Many thanks to the participants and leaders who taught me so much, helped me heal and offered their time, presence, gifts and witness so generously to our small community. God's love through you brought each of us healing and hope again.

Specifically thank you to Rev. Amy Dunn, Rev. Wayne Snead, Rev. Chad Herndon, Rev. Michael Kendall, Rev. Michael Dettmer, and Rev. Joe Maslanka.