

God Is Still Speaking, about Marriage

Resources for Study and Discussion
produced by

Wider Church Ministries
of the United Church of Christ

Dr. Olivia Masih White, Executive Minister

in consultation with each of the Covenanted Ministries of the
United Church of Christ

Justice and Witness Ministries,
Local Church Ministries,
Office of General Ministries

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- *The 1968 U.S. Supreme Court Decision, Loving v. Virginia*
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For more information, contact:

Rev. Mike Schuenemeyer
Office of Health and Wholeness Advocacy
Wider Church Ministries, UCC
700 Prospect Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44115

Phone: 216-736-3217

FAX: 216-736-3203

Email: schuenem@ucc.org

Web site: www.ucc.org

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God Is Still Speaking, about Marriage

A Discussion Guide

Introduction

About this Discussion Guide:

The purpose of this discussion guide is to help congregations and other groups facilitate healthy conversations and study about marriage. Recent concerns about marriage, particularly recent public debate about who may legally marry, provide an important context for these discussions. This discussion guide encourages participants to explore the various aspects of marriage and look at them more closely. Participants will have opportunities to share stories and experiences of marriage, explore biblical stories, look at various traditions, both sacred and secular, and then, consider the questions concerning equal marriage rights for same sex couples.

Suggestions for the Leader:

Designing the Process

This discussion guide is organized in parts. Each part may be used as a session, however, those organizing the study and discussion should discern the needs of their church or group and the time they have for the study. While we recommend at least four sessions, planners are free to choose and adapt materials as needed. If you only have time for one session, carefully choose materials from each of the 4 parts. For more than 4 sessions, sub-divide the parts you wish to spend more time on and check the UCC web site, www.ucc.org, for updated and additional materials. If you are unable to find the resources you need, please contact the Office for Health and Wholeness Advocacy and we do our best to help you find what you need.

Keys to facilitating good group study and discussion:

- Create an environment in which people are safe to share.
- Create a sacred space that evokes the sense of God's presence.
- Engage participants in the process/conversation.
- Follow the process design.

Creating Safe Space

...read the following articles:

- *A Call to Dialogue*, A pastoral letter from the Conference ministers of the United Church of Christ, June 4, 1997.
- *Talking About Tough Stuff...such as marriage*, by Rev. Peg Slater.

Sample Discussion Ground Rules:

- Always share your concern and beliefs
- Listen carefully to others
- Be willing to examine your own beliefs in light of what others say
- Speak your mind freely, but strive to maintain an open mind
- Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you
- Cooperate with the leaders to keep the discussion on track
- Don't monopolize the discussion
- Address remarks to the group and not at an individual
- Communicate your needs to the leaders
- Value your own experience and opinions
- Engage in friendly disagreement: avoid emotional argumentation, yelling and personal put-downs
- Remember that humor and a pleasant manner can go far in helping you make your points

Creating Sacred Space

We live in a world that is in need of peace, love and protection. Many members of faith communities are begging for a place to slow down, reflect and feel safe. They are searching for an inward journey that will help them stay connected to what really matters - their own values and the values of their faith community. And, they are seeking ways in which they can make a difference in the world.

To strengthen the experience of religious community in this journey, we suggest that the leadership give some thought to the creation of sacred space.

The sacred space may be created in any or all of the following ways:

- ✓ Bring a candle to light during the opening ritual or every session.
- ✓ Create a centering/focus area on a low table or on a piece of carpet on the floor. Some cultures use the circle throughout sessions, so you might set your chairs in a circle with an "altar" of sacred objects in the middle.
- ✓ Cover the centering/focus area with a cloth you bring in or have participants decorate a plain cloth with their names and a symbol of themselves. Fabric paint, fabric crayons, or permanent markers can be easily used for this activity.
- ✓ From time to time, bring in, or invite participants to bring in, appropriate symbolic objects to place on the table. You can vary the objects depending on the session theme, or you can display the same symbols throughout the program.
- ✓ Use a meditation gong or chimes to introduce a moment of silence.
- ✓ Use soft, meditative music for a time of reflection.
- ✓ Open and close each session with prayer.

Taking the Bible Seriously

The biblical story is an important part of this process. Leaders are encouraged to talk about taking the Bible seriously, lifting up sound methods for interpreting the biblical message. The following web links are to three papers on biblical authority delivered at the Dunkirk Colloquy (October 2000).

[Taking the Bible Seriously: Paul Hammer](http://www.ucc.org/theology/hammer.htm) (<http://www.ucc.org/theology/hammer.htm>)
Dr. Paul Hammer is retired professor of biblical interpretation at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School in Rochester, N.Y.

[Taking the Bible Seriously: John Thomas](http://www.ucc.org/theology/thomas.htm) (<http://www.ucc.org/theology/thomas.htm>)
The Rev. John Thomas is General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ.

[Taking the Bible Seriously: Fred Trost](http://www.ucc.org/theology/trost.htm) (<http://www.ucc.org/theology/trost.htm>)
The Rev. Frederick R. Trost is the founding convenor of Confessing Christ and former President and Conference Minister of the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ.

Engaging Participants: Tips for Effective Discussion Leadership
(Courtesy of the Study Circles Resource Center, Pomfret, CT, www.studycircles.org)

The more participants engage in the discussion, the more the group will benefit. The following article provides helpful suggestions.

1. Be prepared

The leader does not need to be an expert (or even the most knowledgeable person in the group) on the topic being discussed, but should be the best prepared for the discussion. This means understanding the goals of the discussion, familiarity with the subject, thinking ahead of time about the directions in which the discussion might go, and preparation of discussion questions to aid the group in considering the subject. Solid preparation will enable you to give your full attention to group dynamics and to what individuals in the group are saying.

2. Set a relaxed and open tone

- Welcome everyone and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere
- Well-placed humor is always welcome and helps people focus differences on ideas rather than on personalities.

3. Establish clear guidelines for discussion

At the beginning of the study circle, establish the guidelines and ask participants if they agree to them or want to add anything:

- All group members are encouraged to express and reflect on their honest opinions; all views should be respected.
- Though disagreement and conflict about ideas can be useful, disagreements should not be personalized. Put-downs, name-calling, labeling, or personal attacks should not be tolerated.
- It is important to hear from everyone. People who tend to speak a lot in groups should make special efforts to allow others the same opportunity.
- The role of the leader is to remain neutral and to guide conversation according to the ground rules.

4. Stay aware of and assist the group process

- Always use your “third-eye”; you are not only helping to keep the group focused on the content of the discussion, but you will be monitoring how well the participants are communicating with each other—who has spoken, who hasn’t spoken, and whose points haven’t yet received a fair hearing.
- Consider splitting up into smaller groups to examine a variety of viewpoints or to give people a chance to talk more easily about their personal connection to the issue.
- When wrestling with when to intervene, err on the side of non-intervention.
- Don’t talk after each comment or answer every question; allow participants to respond directly to each other. The most effective leaders often say little, but

are constantly thinking about how to move the group toward its goals.

- Don’t be afraid of silence. It will sometimes take a while for someone to offer an answer to a question you pose.
- Don’t let anyone dominate; try to involve everyone.
- Remember: a discussion is not a debate, but a group dialogue. If participants forget this, don’t hesitate to ask the group to help reestablish the guidelines.

5. Help the group grapple with content

Make sure the group considers a wide range of views. Ask the group to think about the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of looking at an issue or solving a problem. In this way, the trade-offs involved in making tough choices become apparent.

- Ask participants to think about the concerns and values that underlie their beliefs.
- Don’t allow the group to focus on or be overly influenced by one particular personal experience or anecdote.
- Either summarize the discussion occasionally or encourage the group members to do so.
- Remain neutral about content and be cautious about expressing your own values.
- Help participants to identify ‘common ground’ but don’t try to force consensus.

6. Use questions to help make the discussion more productive, such as:

- What seems to be the key point here?
- What is the crux of your disagreement?
- Does anyone want to add to (or support, or challenge) that point?
- Could you give an example or describe a personal experience to illustrate that point?
- What experiences or beliefs might lead people of faith to support that point of view?

7. Reserve adequate time for closing the discussion

- Ask the group for last comments and thoughts about the subject
- You may wish to ask participants to share any new ideas or thoughts they’ve had as a result of the discussion.
- If you will be meeting again, remind the group of the readings and subject for the next session.
- Thank everyone for the contributions.
- Provide some time for the group to evaluate the group process, either through sharing aloud or through a brief written evaluation.

Part 1: Opening the Conversation

1. Creating Sacred Space

- a. Provide and identify tangible symbols in the room, such as lighting a candle, to remind participants that the space in which this discussion takes place is sacred space. Some cultures use the circle throughout sessions, so you might set your chairs in a circle with an "altar" of sacred objects in the middle.
- b. Worship activity
 - Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27
 - Devotional: *A Call to Dialogue*, A Pastoral Letter from the Conference Ministers of the United Church of Christ, June 4, 1997
 - Prayer (may be offered in unison)

O God, we gather to celebrate your gift of love and its presence among us. We rejoice that two people may choose to commit themselves to a life of loving faithfulness to one another. We praise you, O God, for the ways you have touched our lives with a variety of loving relationships. We give thanks that we have experienced your love through the life-giving love of Jesus Christ and through the care and affection of other people. Help us to recognize your presence in our midst that we may hear and discern how you are still speaking to us today about marriage. Bless us with open minds and listening hearts, grounded in the gospel message of love, justice and compassion. Amen.

based on a prayer in the Order for Marriage from the UCC Book Worship

2. Creating a healthy/safe place for sharing and learning

- a. Values: Share values for having a healthy conversation about a difficult topic. You may wish to summarize the values shared in *A Call to Dialogue* and the article, *Talking about Tough Stuff...such as marriage*, by Rev. Peg Slater
- b. Ground Rules:
 - Read and post the ground rules for the discussion. (See the "Sample Discussion Ground Rules" in the introduction materials for suggested ground rules.)
 - Ask the group if there anything they wish to add.
 - Ask the group to agree to ground rules for the discussion.

3. Opening the Conversation

- a. Share your name and one question you have about marriage.
- b. Discussion Starter – In pairs or triads (groups of 2-3), share your earliest memory about marriage. How old were you? What happened? What were your impressions of what a marriage is? How were they similar to or different from your understanding of marriage today?
- c. On a poster board, newsprint or butcher paper, ask participants to take a marker and write some of their understandings of marriage today.

4. Why do people get married?

- a. Read the three stories, “Why I Got Married” and then the participants, “Why did the people in the stories get married?”

Why I Got Married: A Man from the 1940's

She was all that kept me going during my time serving in the Army. We had met in high school and graduated together in 1940. Our plans were for me to enter the Army and she was going to enroll in a two-year teaching program. We both did these two things - however, Pearl Harbor changed everything. My three-year commitment turned into five years - and she quit school to work in a factory. But, in 1945, we were married - three days after I returned to the states. Although we've had our tough times, our love today, after 59 years of marriage, is as strong as the love we shared while writing all those letters to each other during the War.

Why I Got Married: A Woman from the 1960's

I was told during high school that a woman's primary reason for going to college was to find a man to marry. Becoming a teacher or a nurse was the expected course of action. Sex was something that was talked about in negative terms - and my Mother told me that if I got pregnant before marriage, she would die. I did meet someone and we married before I graduated from college. We were married for 20 years and had three children. Now, I realize that our commitment to each other was very shallow - it was not based on intimacy and mutuality. I wish I knew then what I know now.

Why I Got Married: A Woman from 2003

We dated for six years and lived together for two years before we married. We are different people - he's the romantic one and I'm more pragmatic. We're both passionate about justice issues however and have had some good arguments about how to go about 'making' peace and justice happen. He was raised in a different faith than mine but we both respect each other's

faith journeys. All I know is that he brings out a part of me that I like - and I do the same for him. We're in 'it' for the long haul.

- b. Ask participants to reflect and share why they think people get married...
 - c. Ask who would share why they got married, or would like to get married. Recognize that for a variety of reasons, some people choose not to marry, and that is a valid/honorable choice, but try to focus on the reasons one chooses or desires to get married.
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5. A Closer Look at Marriage: Ask participants to read, "The Baggage in the Marriage Carriage" and discuss the questions in the article.

 6. Close the session with a prayer.

Part 2: Marriages in the Biblical Story

1. Creating Sacred Space
 - a. Provide and identify tangible symbols in the room, such as lighting a candle, to remind participants that the space in which this discussion takes place is sacred space.
 - b. Worship activity
 - i. Scripture: Ruth 1:16-18
 - ii. Brief Devotional or Meditation
 - iii. Prayer
2. Creating a healthy/safe place for sharing and learning
 - a. Review values and the Ground Rules
3. Opening the Conversation
 - a. Share your name and briefly tell who is one of your favorite biblical characters and why?
4. Preparing for the Bible Discussion
 - a. Read and briefly discuss the contexts for biblical interpretation in the article, *Taking the Bible Seriously*: Paul Hammer
5. Stories of Marriage and Family from the Bible
 - a. There are many examples of marriage and family life found in the stories of the Bible. Think about the favorite biblical persons named in the discussion starter.
 - i. Pick three or four and learn/share what the story says about their married and family life. Discuss how those marriages and family settings are the same or different from marriages and family settings today.
 - ii. Look at the following stories of significant biblical characters. What do their relationships tell us about marriage and family life in the Bible? How are they similar or different from marriage and family life today?
 - b. In the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament):

- i. Adam and Eve: Genesis 2:18-4:9
- ii. Abraham and Sarah: Genesis 16, 21:1-14
- iii. Jacob, Leah and Rachel: Genesis 29:1-30:24
- iv. Ruth and Naomi: Ruth 1:16-18
- v. Queen Esther: Esther 2
- vi. David and Bathsheba: 2 Samuel 11;1-12:25

- c. In the Christian Scriptures (New Testament)
 - i. Zachariah and Elizabeth, John: Luke 1
 - ii. Mary and Joseph, Jesus: Matthew 1:16-25
 - iii. Jesus' Disciples: Mark 4:16-20, Luke 14:25-33
 - iv. Paul: I Corinthians 7:7-9

6. A Biblical Ethic for Marriage

- a. Read and discuss: *The Gospel vs. Scripture? Biblical theology and the debate about rites of blessing*, an interview with Walter Brueggemann by Julie Wortman for [The Witness, November 2000](#)
- b. Read the following passages and discuss the question:
 - i. Read and reflect/discuss the following scriptures commonly used in marriage and other covenanting services:
John 13:34-35; 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a; Ephesians 3:14-21;
1 John 4:7-12; Colossians 3:12-17
 - What are the Gospel values expressed in these passages that make for good relationships?
- c. Sacred Covenants: Explore 3 or 4 liturgies for marriage or other covenanting services* and discuss the following:
 - i. How is God present?
 - ii. What is the role of the witnesses (congregation/guests)? Where is the accountability and support for the relationship?
 - iii. What are the promises given and received?

- iv. How are the values of the gospel (e.g., love, justice, compassion...) expressed in the liturgies?
- v. As we consider marriage today, who should be encouraged to live according these values and make these covenant promises?

*A liturgy for marriage may be found in the [UCC Book of Worship](#). It is also available at the UCC web site: <http://www.ucc.org/worship/tmch/marriage.pdf>

- 7. Close the session with a prayer.

Part 3: Marriage, Yesterday and Today

1. Creating Sacred Space
 - a. Provide and identify tangible symbols in the room, such as lighting a candle, to remind participants that the space in which this discussion takes place is sacred space.
 - b. Worship activity
 - i. Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13
 - ii. Brief Devotion or Meditation
 - iii. Prayer
2. Creating a healthy/safe place for sharing and learning
 - a. Review the Ground Rules
3. Opening the Conversation
 - a. Share your name and a word or phrase that you think describes marriages in your grandparents' generation and culture?
 - b. Discussion Starter:
4. Marriage in the Christian Era
 - a. Read the article: *A Brief History of Marriage in the Christian Era*
 - i. The First 1500 Years
 - How was marriage viewed by the church?
 - How was marriage for nobility and landowners different from the marriages of peasants?
 - ii. Reformation and Victorian
 - How did Martin Luther change the way the church viewed marriage?
 - How did the industrial revolution change marriage in the 19th and early 20th centuries?
 - b. Read the article: *How marriage has changed in the last 50 years*
 - How have the roles of women and men changed? What has influenced this change?

- How has the percentage of married people changed? What has influenced this change?
 - How has the average age of persons marrying changed? What has influenced this change?
 - What has happened to the rate of divorce? What has influenced this?
 - Read the article: *The 1968 U.S. Supreme Court decision, Loving v. Virginia*. What fears were expressed about this decision and how do they compare to the fears expressed about the freedom to marry today? How did this decision actually change marriage for today?
5. What is the appropriate role of the church concerning marriage...
- a. ...in discerning the viability of a relationship for marriage?
 - b. ...in preparing the couple for marriage?
 - c. ...in designing and administering the ritual and blessing of marriage?
 - d. ...in the ongoing nurture and support of the marriage relationship?
6. Civil/Legal Marriage
- a. What is the different between civil/legal marriage and religious/sacred marriage?
 - Civil/legal marriage is a marriage legally recognized by the state. All the legal rights and responsibilities accorded to those who are married are based on civil/legal marriage.
 - Religious institutions have the right to regulate who is married according to the rules and teachings of each particular religious institution. This has no bearing on the recognition of civil marriages by the state.
 - b. What is the appropriate role of the state concerning civil/legal marriage?
 - i. In what ways might the right to civil/legal marriage be an important aspect of the right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?”
 - ii. How does civil/legal marriage create and protect such rights, benefits and responsibilities that provide stability for the family unit, including the care and protection of children?

Read the following articles:

 - Civil Marriage – What’s at Stake, Legal/Economic Protections
 - The General Account Office Report on Federal Laws Involving Marital Status

- iii. How should the value of “equal protection under the law” make a difference in the practice of civil/legal marriage?
- iv. Who should define the sanctity (sacredness) of marriage, individual religious institutions, such as a church, or the state and why?
- v. Who should sign the legal marriage documents and why?

7. Close the session with a prayer.

Part 4: Equality in Marriage?

1. Creating Sacred Space
 - a. Identifying sacred symbols
 - b. Provide and identify tangible symbols in the room, such as lighting a candle, to remind participants that the space in which this discussion takes place is sacred space.
 - c. Worship activity
 - ii. Scripture: Galatians 3:28
 - iii. Brief Devotion or Meditation
 - iv. Prayer
2. Creating a healthy/safe place for sharing and learning
 - a. Review the Values and Ground Rules
3. Opening the Conversation
 - a. Share you name and one reason you think marriage might be important to some same gender couples.
 - b. Discussion Starter: Read and select questions to discuss from the article, *There's More to Marriage than a License* by Mitch Albom
4. Ask the group to make a list of values important to healthy, lasting, committed relationships?
 - a. For example: love, freedom, choice, faith, compassion, justice, power, communication, responsibility, accountability, sex, faithfulness, integrity, flexibility...
 - b. Which five do you think are the most important and why?
 - c. How is equality an important dynamic in marriage or other covenanted relationships?
5. Considering equal civil marriage rights for same gender couples (Civil/Legal)
 - a. Read: *Case Studies* and discuss the "Questions to consider."
 - b. Discuss the difference between marriage and civil union?
6. Read *Relationships: Blessed and Blessing*, James B. Nelson and discuss the issues related to the church's blessing of same gender relationships.
7. Close the Session with a prayer.

Resources

Index of Article: * Indicates the article is not yet available.

- *A Biblical Ethic for Marriage**
- *A Brief History of Marriage in the Christian Era**
- *A Call to Dialogue, A Pastoral Letter from the Conference Ministers of the United Church of Christ, June 4, 1997*
- *Case Studies*
- *Civil Marriage – What’s at Stake, Legal/Economic Protections*
- *Civil Marriage or Civil Union, What’s the Difference?**
- *How Marriage Has Changed in the Past 50 Years**
- *Relationships: Blessed and Blessing, James B. Nelson*
- *Separating Church and State Issues Concerning Marriage**
- *Taking the Bible Seriously* by Paul Hammer
- *Talking About Tough Stuff ...such as marriage, Peg Slater*
- *The 1968 U.S. Supreme Court decision, Loving v. Virginia**
- *The Baggage in the Marriage Carriage, Mike Schuenemeyer*
- *The General Account Office Report on Federal Laws Involving Marital Status*
- *The Gospel vs. Scripture? Biblical theology and the debate about rites of blessing, an interview with Walter Brueggemann by Julie Wortman for The Witness, November 2000*
- *There’s More to Marriage than a License, Mitch Albom*
- *Tips for Effective Discussion Leadership, Courtesy of the Study Circle Center, Promfret, CT*
- *Order for Marriage, UCC Book of Worship (available from UCC Resources, 800-537-3394)*
- *UCC General Synod Policy Statements Relating to Families, Marriage, Same Gender, and Other Covenanted Relationships, compiled by Mike Schuenemeyer*

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Same Sex Marriage, A Christian Ethical Analysis, Marvin Ellison, Pilgrim Press, January 2004

Same Sex Marriage: Pro and Con: a Reader, edited by Andrew Sullivan, Vintage, March 1997

Pilgrim Press selections may be ordered from the Pilgrim Press web site: www.pilgrimpress.org

All other selections are available through the various online bookstores, such as Amazon.com.

The resources for “God Is Still Speaking, about Marriage” are produced through the collaborative efforts of the following staff of the Covenanted Ministries of the United Church of Christ.

Mr. Kenneth Brown	Associate for Youth and Young Adult Empowerment, JWM
Mr. Lorin Cope	Minister for Conference Relations, OGM
Rev. Pat Conover	Legislative Director, JWM (Washington DC)
Rev. Sidney Fowler	Minister for Worship, Liturgy, and Spiritual Formation, LCM
Rev. J. Bennett Guess	Editor: United Church News, OGM
Ms. Ann Hanson	Minister for Children, Families, and Human Sexuality Advocacy, JWM
Rev. Bill Johnson	Executive Associate, WCM
Mr. Delbert Lancaster	Minister for Affirmative Action and Diversity Initiatives, OGM
Mr. Andy Lang	Web Coordinator, OGM
Rev. Rodney Mundy	Executive for Ministries Interpretation and Public Relations, LCM
Rev. Sala Nolan	Minister for Criminal Justice and Human Rights, JWM
Rev. Kenneth Ostermiller	Minister for Curriculum Development
Rev. Lois Powell	Minister and Team Leader for Human Rights, Justice for Women, and Transformation Ministry, JWM
Mike Schuenemeyer,	Executive for Health and Wholeness Advocacy, WCM, Minister for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Ministries, Minister for HIV/AIDS and Global Health Ministries
Rev. Margaret Slater	Inclusive Ministry Coordinator, LCM
Rev. Vilma Machin-Vazquez	Minister for Multiracial, Multicultural Transformation, JWM

Abbreviations:

JWM – Justice and Witness Ministries

LCM – Local Church Ministries

OGM – Office of General Ministries

WCM – Wider Church Ministries