

Good News

A Congregational Resource for Reconciliation

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Introduction

This booklet is a pastoral tool designed for congregations in search of reconciliation.

The issues confronting any congregation will vary. They may be “global” as faith communities respond to national or international events in the life of the church. They may be “local” as congregations seek clarity and consensus for their own ministry. Either way, Good News offers a resource for reconciliation.

Reconciliation is not resolution. Good News will not “settle the argument.” In fact, Good News accepts the reality of change, conflict, and challenge as being ongoing in the life of any faith community. It is grounded in the understanding that the Christian faith is lived out by real people in the real world. Therefore, change is to be expected. Because things change, people will react in different ways. Conflict, whether it is a gentle disagreement or a serious breakdown, is to be expected, but not accepted as irreconcilable. The challenge for Christians is to work through conflict in a way that ultimately strengthens community.

The way to reconciliation is the way of Christ Jesus. Good News is a Christian resource based on the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Drawing on both the life and teachings of Jesus, it invites people to a deeper level of discipleship, especially when they feel caught in times of confusion or struggle. Good News presents the gospel as a path to reconciliation. It takes seriously the simple, but profound call of Christ: “come, follow me.”

Good News suggests a path for people to use in following Jesus to discover new ways to live together. At the end of that path, people may still disagree, but they will have found the peace of Christ which is at the heart of community. Consequently, this resource is for all persons. It is designed to be

common ground for “liberals” and “conservatives,” “traditionals” and “progressives,” those “pro” and “con.” To use Good News, no one is asked to give up his or her own opinions. They are only asked to enter into a shared journey with others to search for reconciliation. They are asked to take the path to peace, even if it means taking only a few steps at a time.

Three Signposts on the Path to Peace

Good News emerges from the pastoral experience of Episcopal Divinity School (EDS) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. EDS is a seminary of the Episcopal Church that educates lay and ordained leadership for the church. In fulfilling that ministry, EDS has developed a vision for how the church can embody unity in the midst of diversity. For example, EDS is a faith community that gathers people in worship and prayer, allowing them their differences, but focusing them on a shared devotion to God in Christ Jesus. It is a community that welcomes persons from every walk of life without exclusion, but challenges them to step out of their own perspective to encounter others for the sake of the gospel. The EDS experience shows that cultural, theological, and social differences can be bridged to create a faithful, working community.

Good News is based on three gospel principles that arise from the EDS experience: (a) the need for justice in human affairs, (b) the need for compassion in seeking justice, and (c) the need for reconciliation in living out compassion.

Justice, Compassion, and Reconciliation. These are the three signposts on the path to peace that emerge from the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are the context of reconciliation. They are the ongoing process by which Christian community is both built and sustained.

The Good News model offers congregations an opportunity to place any conflict into the context of the gospel through a focus on justice, compassion, and reconciliation. These three gospel lenses allow people to see the disagreements between them from a different perspective than “right or wrong,” “win or lose.” They challenge persons of all opinions to enter into the vision of Jesus: (a) to seek God’s justice, (b) to practice God’s compassion, and (c) to embrace God’s reconciliation.

Good News presents one view of these three fundamental aspects of the gospel of Christ. It shares an interpretation and welcomes a response, helping men and women to shift the focus of their conversation from a deadlock of disagreement to the common ground of discipleship. It seeks to move the axis of the argument away from demands for *resolution* and place it on the hope for *reconciliation*.

A Word About the Use of Scripture

Good News is centered in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Its content is drawn from the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Participants in Good News who are nominally familiar with these gospels will be able to easily identify the source of scriptural references. Persons who are less familiar with the scriptures will find in this resource a chance to deepen their own understanding of the Bible. They will need to read the gospels to refresh their insight. Either way, Good News *intentionally* does not cite each of the teachings of Jesus in the text with a quick parenthetical Bible reference. This choice itself has a point to make.

Good News challenges people to break the habit of using a familiar arsenal of isolated Bible quotations as weapons in their disagreements with other Christians. By not citing each individual passage line by line, people are encouraged to see the life, ministry, and witness of Christ as a *whole* teaching. This design invites people to see themselves within the story of Christ, rather than to see the story of Christ within themselves. In other words, the intention is to draw people together into the gospel, rather than to separate them by giving them permission to pick pieces from the gospel to support their own preconceptions.

How to Use Good News

Good News is a resource for dialogue. It may be used for personal reflection, but it is primarily for group interaction. The purpose is to bring people of different perspectives around the same table. The goals are (a) to promote a fair and respectful dialogue among persons who hold different opinions, (b) to offer a context of reflection on the shared values of the gospel, and, (c) to encourage a process of reconciliation within the life of community.

Three Simple Steps

I. Extend an Invitation

Two presenting questions need to be answered before an invitation to use Good News is offered within the congregation: (1) What is the nature of the conflict among us? and (2) Who among us needs to be invited to make a first response?

Some conflicts are much less serious than others. Some have their points of origin within the congregation itself. Others are impacted by external events. The congregation's leadership needs to assess the nature of the pastoral situation and determine how Good News might best be used. In some situations, it might be more appropriate for a particular group within the community to use this resource, for example, the vestry. In a broader context, it may be that an open invitation to all

interested community members be extended.

Either way, Good News should be presented in a way that welcomes participation by all involved. It should not be publicized as a way to “debate” the issues or even to “resolve” them. In fact, it seeks to avoid going over the same territory that most disagreements have thoroughly covered. Instead, Good News should be interpreted as a chance for people to come together to reflect on their discipleship to Christ Jesus in the midst of disagreement. It is a resource that talks about *how and why we stay united in Christ*, not a forum to discuss the issues.

People should also be aware that using this resource is challenging. It does require that participants be willing and able to enter into a time of deep personal reflection and a time of deep respectful conversation. Good News demands humility, a willingness to listen to others, and a trust in the Holy Spirit. It expects that all participants will come with an open mind and a loving heart.

II. Gather the Group

Good News works best in small group discussions of five to eight people. Larger groups can be gathered around its use, of course, but ideally they should be broken down into smaller sections for the actual dialogue. For example, if many persons from a congregation want to experience Good News together, they could be invited to a community Eucharist or pot luck meal (either before or after the discussion time) and then divided into smaller sections for the conversation.

Each discussion group will need a facilitator. This person should be someone who can be relied upon to help keep the group on task without being dominating (see the “Covenant” below) and who will be the timekeeper for each speaker.

Every person participating in the dialogue will need a copy of this booklet. If the material is to be covered in one day (e.g., as the focus for a retreat) then they should have read the whole booklet prior to coming to the event. If Good News is being used as a series of discussions (e.g., over the course of three Sundays) then they will need to have read the reflection (see “Gospel” below) on Justice, Compassion, or Reconciliation designated for that day’s conversation. It is important that people be given adequate time for these conversations.

To help schedule the most effective use of Good News, small groups should be allowed a minimum of one full hour for every dialogue. It is also imperative that people feel comfortable in discussing their feelings. Consequently, *confidentiality* should be expected of every participant. No recorder should be used within the small group. If there is a concluding plenary session after the smaller circles of conversation, then small groups may be invited to report out “how it went for you,”

or, participants may be invited to share their own commitments to the “Commissioning” exercise (see below) but there should be no opportunity at a Good News event for people to begin a debate on issues.

The goals of Good News are to promote a fair and respectful dialogue among persons who hold different opinions, to offer a context of reflection on the shared values of the gospel, and to encourage a process of reconciliation within the life of the community. These goals should be the guiding principle for any plan to use Good News. Anything that would tend to subvert these goals by offering a return to familiar soapboxes should be avoided.

III. Carry Out the Conversation

There are three main parts to this booklet: Justice, Compassion, and Reconciliation. Each section is a self-contained unit for the larger dialogue. Each section works in the same way.

Sections begin with a common prayer. This is a gathering prayer. It centers the group into a spiritual setting and invites the Holy Spirit to be present during the dialogue.

Following the prayer, the covenant is read aloud and each person is asked to verbalize his or her assent to it as guidelines for the conversation. These guidelines insure the fair and respectful treatment of all participants.

The heart of the dialogue emerges from the gospel meditation contained in each of the three sections. Written by the President and Dean of Episcopal Divinity School, the Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston, these are his reflections on the teachings of Jesus for people of faith who find themselves in conflict. They are intended to provoke lively discussion within the group around a series of fundamental questions. These questions should be the topics for discussion in each small group.

The group discussion questions are highlighted in the text of each reflection and then listed following the reflection to help initiate dialogue in the small group. The group facilitator should invite conversation around each question. Given the total number of persons in the group and the total amount of time allotted for the discussion, it is important that each person be offered an equal opportunity to respond to the questions from their own viewpoint. Keep in mind that it is not important for the group to reach consensus. It is important that the group exercises a commitment to deep listening.

At the end of the time allotted, the group is asked to practice the commission. This is when participants are asked to: (a) reflect on what they have heard, (b) focus on

what they can commit to personally for the sake of reconciliation, and (c) articulate that commitment in solidarity and love with others.

The facilitator should first ask the group to sit together in a time of silence for five minutes. People may close their eyes in prayer or just sit quietly. This is the time to reflect deeply on all that you have read and heard as part of this shared experience. Following the silence, each person should be invited by the facilitator to briefly (no more than a minute or two) describe one insight they have gained that they will actively share with others for the sake of reconciliation. These commitments are the process by which participants agree to be active agents of reconciliation in community. In making a witness to reconciliation in the small group, the person is pledging to share that same testimony in the larger community. Like leaven, these acts of peacemaking will help to spread the spirit of reconciliation among the whole community. The dialogue ends with the recitation of the closing prayer and the Passing of the Peace.

What Does the Name ‘Good News’ Mean?

Good News invites us to hold an image before us that we received from the ministry of Jesus. The acceptance of an openly gay person into the episcopacy is something very new for us. It stretches our understandings. It puts pressure on our relationships. It challenges our faith. The model described above does not seek to resolve that reality by a “win or lose,” “right or wrong” debate. After all, the Episcopal Church has debated human sexuality in these terms for almost 30 years and still not found resolution.

Instead, Good News offers the possibility of reconciliation. It reminds us that, as members of the Anglican tradition, we are all responsible to make the church a safe place for all people and to welcome diversity as a strength for carrying out the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now we are engaged in a time of testing. How far can we go in living out that tradition? This question is not just about human sexuality. It applies equally to people who hold different interpretations of the Bible or different social values. Can we all truly live together as disciples of Christ? Good News gives us a chance to find answers before we react to change in a rigid or inflexible way. It gives us breathing room. It helps us not to feel victimized by an emotional conflict that touches each of us so deeply at the core of our faith, but encourages us to put that faith to work to discover what God is trying to do in our time and in our place. Good News is not a final resolution, but a fresh start in claiming the love Christ has for us all.

Section One

Justice

Our Common Prayer

O God, as we come to this first reflection, we stand apart wondering what is right. We pray that you will send your Holy Spirit to open our hearts and calm our troubled spirits. Give us your grace as we make this journey together, through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Savior. Amen.

Our Covenant

As we gather in the name of Christ to share our thoughts, feelings, and ideas we accept this Covenant to guide our conversation along his path of love:

1. We will allow each person an equal amount of time to speak.
2. We will listen to each person without interruption or comment.
3. We will speak in a respectful way without criticism or rancor.
4. We will honor the feelings of others as genuine and sincere.
5. We will disagree without threats or accusations.
6. We will agree that we are all seeking the mind of Christ.
7. We will hold all that we share in confidence.

The Gospel

What do we do when we disagree about what is “right?”

This question has been at the heart of the Christian movement since the first day that Jesus called men and women to follow him. The story of the gospel is the story of everyday people seeking to receive the message of Christ, to understand it, and then to put it into practice.

Did they always get it “right?” No, not if we read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. What is amazing about the sacred scriptures of our faith is that they are not a collection of absolute truths delivered to us from God “on high,” but a sacred memory of how real people struggled to hear what Jesus said and put it into practice. Few other religions would present their first and foremost

saints as so confused, fallible, and argumentative. And yet, in the synoptic gospels, the Apostles are remembered as people who rarely got it “right.” In fact, they often drove their Teacher to ask them, “have I been with you so long and you still do not understand?”

Once Jesus had left them, the disagreements only intensified. While we memorialize Saint Peter and Saint Paul as the two leading figures of the ancient church, we also

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remember a moment in Antioch when they disagreed so strongly that Paul publicly challenged Peter’s ability to get it “right.” Their debate illustrated a deep division within the earliest Christian community. That division was ultimately settled by a compromise that allowed Paul to continue his work among the Gentiles, but it was only the beginning of early church controversies.

Ironically, although Paul is credited with inspiring many of the first churches in the ancient world, it was those same Christian communities that soon began to disagree with another. The first four centuries of Christian history are not a seamless story of the spread of a common faith, but rather a history of conflicts over who was “right.”

The men who are referred to as the early church “Fathers” are remembered because they were major participants in a generational theological argument that continues to this day. They not only confronted “heretics,” they challenged one another. They were supported by church institutions in many of the leading urban centers of their time, places like Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and Constantinople. Each laid claim to primacy in the growing Christian movement. Each claimed to be “right.”

In time, this debate over who was “right” led to the great break in the church between East and West. But the struggle did not end there. By the 16th century, the Western church was split by disagreements so profound that Christians routinely referred to one another as the “anti-Christ.” Predictions of the death of the church were common. In fact, death itself became real as Europeans slaughtered one another in a series of religious wars in which all sides proclaimed their position as truth.

With the colonization of the Americas, this legacy of conflict was imported to our own hemisphere. Early colonists justified the burning of women as witches or the killing of Native Americans as being sanctioned by the Bible. The writings of Saint Paul were used by Christians in the South to justify slavery. Christians in the North used Saint Paul’s writings to support the overthrow of slavery. The patchwork quilt of denominations which characterize the American religious experience testify to the vast number of Christian communities that can each claim to be “right” in their reading of the Bible and in their way of living out the gospel.

What have we learned from our own history of conflict in the church?

Over the centuries, our Christian ancestors have used many strategies to deal with conflict. They have killed one another and they have compromised. They have claimed absolute truth and they have changed their minds. They have splintered the church into competing factions and they have sought to bring it together in community.

Whatever position we take in our contemporary situation, we all stand together in the light of Christian history. We all stand at the same crossroads when deep divisions threaten to tear us apart. We can draw a line in the sand. We can say that this is the last straw. We can turn our backs and walk away. We can even threaten and become violent. And we can do all of these things because we can claim to be “right.”

While Christians who identify as being either “conservative” or “liberal,” “traditional” or “progressive,” may believe they have nothing in common, this much they share: they all believe they are “right.”

Each can find biblical sources to sanction their opinion. Each can find charismatic leaders to give voice to that opinion. Each can claim to embody a tradition. Each can point to other Christian communities around the world who support them. Each can say that they are the church. If we have learned anything from our own history, it is that being “right” is much easier than being reconciled.

Do we all have to be “right” to be reconciled?

Thankfully, mercifully, no. If one thing seems clear in the gospel of Christ Jesus, it is that we may all be reconciled to God (and to one another) whether we get it perfectly “right” or not.

Jesus did not expect his disciples to always be “right.” That was both the miracle and the scandal of his teaching.

Jesus lived in a time when religious “rightness” was at the very height of its importance in his own culture. There was a “right” way for almost every thing. The “right” way to eat, the “right” way to think, the “right” way to pray, the “right” way to worship, the “right” way to treat other human beings. There were whole schools of lawyers to enforce these “right” ways and scribes to record them as lists of rules. People who conformed to these “right” ways were considered holy and pure. Those who did not were “unclean” and damned.

And yet, as a Teacher, as the Messiah, Jesus seemed to do everything the “wrong” way. He broke rule after rule. He welcomed people into his company whether they were “right” or not. He argued with the lawyers and

challenged the leaders who claimed to have the “right” reading of scripture. He blessed those that others condemned. In the end, when asked what was the most important thing for people to do, Jesus did not say that it was for them to be “right.” He said it was for them to love.

Love is not about being “right.” It is about being in relationship. The priority of the gospel is love. Jesus called us to be in love with God. He called us to be in love with one another.

In the end, when asked what was the most important thing for people to do, Jesus did not say that it was for them to be ‘right.’ He said it was for them to love.

How does the commandment to love speak to our situation?

One of the shorthand phrases that is often popular when Christians disagree about human behavior is: “hate the sin, love the sinner.” While on the surface that may seem to be a charitable expression, it masks a deeper, implied judgment. It begins on the assumption that I can judge what is sinful. In that way, it gives me the “right” to judge others and still claim to love them.

But isn’t sin real? Don’t we believe that some human behaviors are sinful and contrary to the will of God?

Absolutely. In fact, there are many behaviors people engage in that are sins. Some seem very clear to us (lying, cheating, murdering) while others are contentious among us (abortion, homosexuality, just war). The fracture lines in communities of faith begin to form when people either do not agree about whether a particular behavior is sinful, or, when they seek to elevate one particular sin as being of special importance.

Reconciliation does not mean that we must stop believing in sin. It says that we must stop pretending that another person’s “sin” is different than our own and that, consequently, we have a “right” to set ourselves apart from them and act as their judge.

Standing under the command to love as Jesus presents it to us in the gospel, we must be careful about making this sly caveat to our own behavior. The love Jesus calls us to has nothing to do with any right of judgment on our part. He tells us point blank: judge not. As the Lord, Jesus reserves judgment to God. God alone will weigh all of our sins and decide who among us has sinned more grievously than another. Since we are all in that same boat together, it is hypocritical for us to withdraw from another. In fact, it is contrary to the command of Jesus who told us to love one another as he loved us: and Jesus loved us all without ever putting us in a pecking order of sin.

How do we love one another as Jesus loved us when we disagree?

We follow his example. We imitate Christ. Although we may never be completely “right,” we try to live into the image of God.

In the gospel, Jesus told us that he would never withdraw from us. He promised that he would always be with us, even to the end of the ages. Through those many ages of human history, when we have hurt one another so often by trying to be “right,” we believe that Jesus has always been with us: with all of us which ever “side” of an argument we professed. His love has been unconditional and it has been enduring. If we strive to fulfill the commandment to love one another as he loved us, then we must accept the fact that separating from one another, condemning one another, or hurting one another is not an option for us.

No matter how painful the disagreements may be, we must remain in relationship with one another. The love of Jesus does not depend on our conformity. It does not depend on all of us being “right.” It depends on our willingness to remain faithful to the same love God has shown us, a love that expects us to be human more than holy. In fact, his love assumes our disagreements. Otherwise, why would he have promised us the presence of the Holy Spirit?

Jesus told us that in trying to love one another, God would provide us with both a counselor and a comforter. The living Spirit of God would be available to us all without regard to our politics or passions. The purpose of this Spirit would be to help us heal when we hurt, understand when we were confused, and reconcile when we were estranged. In short, the action of the Spirit was to be the expression of the love of Christ after Jesus had returned to be with God.

If we try to follow the example of Jesus and receive the presence of the Spirit, then we remain together in love, however much we disagree, and we seek the wisdom and consolation of the Holy Spirit, however irreconcilable our differences may seem.

If we remain together, what witness do we make to the world?

One of the hidden fears we face is the fear of guilt by association. In the gospel, this fear kept many people from following Jesus. When Jesus would be seen in the company of “sinners,” his critics would shout that this was proof of his own blasphemy. How could a person who was “right” consort with people who were so obviously “wrong?”

That fear is the wedge that has consistently fractured the Christian community for generations. To show the world that they were “right” and pure, countless Christians have followed the strategy of separation. Rather than taking the risk that Christ took, they have settled for the safe bunker of conformity. Rather than accept the reality of conflict, they have made conflict even more real by institutionalizing it.

While it has rarely been followed, the Jesus option remains available to us. In the gospel, Jesus told us that there would be times of great turmoil, dissension, and even persecution. During those times he warned us that it would be tempting to retreat from his open and loving path to find shelter in an exclusive community where things seemed “right.” He also encouraged us not to take that easy way out, but to hold fast to the kind of love he had shown us. He invited us all to remain faithful to being in community, in love, with one another. He told us to rely on the Holy Spirit and never be discouraged.

What would the world see if it saw us following the example of Christ? What would the world think of us? We are not alone in having suffered. Around the world today billions of people live with the daily threat of sectarian violence, prejudice, hatred, and a seemingly endless cycle of human pain. Like us, they are heirs to a long history of conflict. If they see the Christian family tear itself apart, what hope do we give them? If they hear calls to join this faction or the other in order to be “right,” what example do we set for them? And if, in the end, the Episcopal Church becomes just another casualty in the long, sad story of religious intolerance, what faith have we shared with them?

Jesus said that, as the people of God, we were people of a deep spiritual contradiction. We were “of the world,” but we were also, “not of the world.” Basically, he was saying that we were very much a part of our time, place, and history, but that we also embodied an alternative to business as usual in that history. We could, if we choose, operate out of a different context. That context is the gospel. It is a sense of community that is grounded, not in our always agreeing with one another and not in our always trying to be “right” on every issue, but rather in our love for one another.

Today we stand at a time of decision. A time of choice. We can choose one of the old strategies for dealing with disagreement and repeat the familiar cycles of conflict and separation. Or we can try something different. Something radical. Something risky. We can choose the Jesus option. We can choose love. We can decide that for us it is more important to seek reconciliation than resolution. We can stand as a witness to how Christians can remain together, even in the midst of deep difference. And we can continue to seek the wisdom, guidance, and comfort of the Holy Spirit as we walk together in discipleship to the Christ who loves us all.

Questions for Reflection

1. What do we do when we disagree about what is “right?”
2. What have we learned from our own history of conflict in the church?
3. Do we all have to be “right” to be reconciled?
4. How does the commandment to love speak to our situation?
5. How do we love one another as Jesus loved us when we disagree?
6. If we remain together what witness do we make to the world?

Our Commission

As the conversation draws to a close:

1. Take five minutes to sit in silence together. Consider all that you have heard and learned in the course of this dialogue. Be attentive to the action of the Holy Spirit in guiding you to a deeper understanding.
2. Give each person an opportunity to briefly describe one message they have learned from the dialogue that they will agree to share with others in the larger community. Consider the healing that will be released by this action.
3. Conclude with this commissioning prayer as you go out:

Dear God, thank you for the presence of your Holy Spirit in this conversation. We ask that the Spirit will go with us as we leave this place to be your ministers of justice, compassion, and reconciliation. Give us grace to be healers of what hurts us and heralds of what makes us whole. In the blessed name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

4. Share the Peace of Christ with one another.

Section Two

Compassion

Our Common Prayer

O God, as we come to this second reflection, we bring our hearts to you. We bring our fears and our hurts. We bring our joys and our hopes. Send your Spirit to be our Comforter and our Counselor, through Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen

Our Covenant

As we gather in the name of Christ to share our thoughts, feelings, and ideas we accept this Covenant to guide our conversation along his path of love:

1. We will allow each person an equal amount of time to speak.
2. We will listen to each person without interruption or comment.
3. We will speak in a respectful way without criticism or rancor.
4. We will honor the feelings of others as genuine and sincere.
5. We will disagree without making threats or accusations.
6. We will agree that we are all seeking the mind of Christ.
7. We will hold all that we share in confidence.

The Gospel

What do we do with the anger and hurt we feel when we are in conflict?

One piece of homespun advice that most of us have heard is that if we want to avoid conflict in conversations with others we should avoid two subjects: politics and religion. Why? Because both of these topics are potentially volatile. People hold very strong opinions about matters of their faith, whether it is faith in a political cause or faith in God. Often, the two are mixed, but of them both, the religious convictions are the most jealously guarded and deeply felt.

Our religious beliefs are our most intimate beliefs. They are our identity. They are our passion. They are strongly held, but when they are questioned, they make us feel threatened and vulnerable. Our religious convictions touch us on almost every

level of our emotional spectrum. In matters of faith, we can experience the heights of human spiritual ecstasy or the depths of human grief. We can feel enormous peace and joy or great sorrow and contrition. What we believe is what we feel. Religious opinions are not intellectual opinions; they are heartfelt commitments that we have made to what we consider the most central part of our lives. In fact, many of us feel that we have literally staked our lives on what we believe.

Is it any wonder then that disagreements about “religion” can cause us the deepest levels of pain, anger, or defensiveness? When someone challenges, or even attacks, our religious opinions, we feel that they are challenging or attacking us. We take these kinds of disagreements very personally. We feel them deeply and the emotional aftershocks of religious conflicts are among the most long lasting and bitter. If we doubt this, we have only to consider the tragic consequences of the religious divide between Christians, Jews, and Muslims. The hatred, recrimination, and revenge that are endemic to this global level of religious disagreement are ample testimony to how differences of opinion on issues of faith can be translated into emotional feelings that are so hardened and enduring as to seem absolutely irreconcilable.

Do we have to live in emotional turmoil as the price of disagreement?

No, not according to the gospel of Jesus. In his own time, Jesus lived in a religious climate that was supercharged with emotion. His people were living under the Roman occupation. They felt that their religion, which was their way of life, was being suppressed, defiled, and threatened by others who they considered “sinners” and blasphemers. Internally, they were divided between many schools of thought about their own religion. The followers of some of these schools, like the Essenes or the Pharisees, took their faith to heart with such emotional commitment that they led lives of rigid self-discipline. They defended their opinions vigorously and claimed to be guardians of the truth with fervor.

As for the average person alive during the ministry of Jesus, the expectation of an imminent intervention from God kept emotions at a fever pitch. People were looking for the coming of the Messiah. They were expecting their Savior. As different claimants to this title came and went, people would ride the unsettling emotional roller coaster of having their hopes lifted only to find their dreams betrayed. Many of the most seriously ill must have sought out would-be Messiahs only to discover that he or she was a fraud. In such an atmosphere of religious emotionalism, a few turned to rage as an outlet. The Zealots were people who could no longer contain the pressure of their emotions. They struck out in violence against those who were standing against them. In doing so, some of them became suicide martyrs to their faith.

Into this emotionally electric world came Jesus of Nazareth. The gospel tells us that his coming was prophesied by John the Baptist, a preacher of emotional

passion who challenged the religious authorities of his time. John saw the Messiah in the explosive chemistry of both political and religious terms. He believed that this Messiah would destroy the rule of Rome and set the poor over the rich. John was a prophet of spiritual emotion. His fiery sermons drew crowds of people to the Jordan River. In John's emotional imagery, the axe would be laid to the root of the tree and the wheat would be separated from the chaff and the chaff would be thrown into "unquenchable fire." Few modern sermons from even the most emotional preacher could rival John's apocalyptic prophesy of the coming of Jesus.

Jesus so contradicted
John's predictions
that John himself
sent disciples to ask Jesus,
'Are you the one,
or, should we expect
another?'

But what happened when Jesus did come? Was he the warrior Judge of John's prophesy? Did he fulfill John's emotional portrait of an angry Messiah who would come to vindicate the opinions of those who were "right"?

No. Jesus was just the opposite. Instead of heralding the resolution of the religious conflicts of his time with the clear-cut victory going to one side while the others were all damned, Jesus preached mercy, forgiveness, and understanding. He did not separate those who disagreed into "winners" and "losers." In fact, he invited those from every faction (including the Romans) to join him in a new community. He actively crossed all boundaries of religious conviction between "conservatives" and "liberals" and openly welcomed them equally into his company. He made no distinctions between them. He even warned them not to play the dangerous game of theological correctness or pietistic arrogance. He refused to let them

establish any pecking orders of control over one another. He frustrated their attempts to say that some among them were superior in knowing God's will or closer to him personally than any others. He told them not to forbid others to share their opinions if the goal was to teach and understand the gospel. Ultimately, Jesus so contradicted John's predictions that John himself sent disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one, or, should we expect another?"

Jesus confused John because Jesus was not the Messiah of an emotional extreme. He was not concerned with blaming those who were "wrong" in order to justify those who were "right." Instead, Jesus invited all people to a common ground that he repeatedly referred to as a place of peace. "My peace I give to you," he said, "not as the world gives, but as God gives." The peace of Christ is the fear free zone where all human beings can leave their anger at the door and enter into reconciliation. As the Messiah of peace, Jesus offers us a way to calm our emotions, soothe our hurts, and discover our love.

What does the "peace of Christ" mean to us in the midst of our struggles?

The ministry of Jesus offers us peace. It shows us that however hurt, angry,

or confused we may feel: there is a place of true peace for us all. The gospel gives us a clear picture of a Messiah who was not a champion for any human religious faction, but the Christ who was willing to stand in the crossfire of all factions to invite people to a place of peace. Jesus was not a religious politician. He was something much more important. He was a healer.

The gospel describes Jesus as a spiritual healer of mind, body, and spirit. People followed him to find release from their suffering. Unlike the other claimants to the role of savior, Jesus did not disappoint them. He was able to heal them. So much so, in fact, that the gospel tells us “multitudes” of people began to gather around him where ever he went. They came with physical illnesses and mental disorders, but they also came with hurts that were not of the body, but of the human spirit. They came because they were emotionally troubled.

The gospel says that Jesus often spoke to them directly about their feelings. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” he said, and “blessed are those who mourn.” It also says that he cast out many “demons,” the gospel shorthand for all of the things that trouble the human mind. While the physical healings were dramatic and gave rise to talk of miracles, these spiritual-emotional healings were probably far more common. To have attracted so many people for so long, Jesus must have been able to offer them something they genuinely needed: compassion.

People came to hear Jesus teach because they were looking for answers. Given the time in which they lived, a great many must have longed for a way to calm the storm of emotion that swirled around them. Like so many of their descendents in the Middle East today, they were exhausted by the apparently endless cycles of religious conflict that pulled them in different directions and left them feeling victimized by their own emotions. The gospel tells us that Jesus understood this because he lived it with them. Like them, he longed for peace. For hope. For reconciliation. The gospel tells us that he saw the crowds gathered around him like innocent flocks of sheep that were lost and vulnerable. His heart went out to them. He wanted to give them what they needed. And, therefore, according to the gospel, he had “compassion” on them.

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What kind of compassion did Jesus practice?

The gospel tells us that he had the kind of compassion that transcends sympathy. Jesus did not just feel sorry for the people of his time. He actively healed them and changed their lives.

In working with people, Jesus dealt with their anger, bitterness, frustration, and confusion. Because he was a grassroots Messiah living and teaching in the

midst of the crowds that pressed around him, he both heard and understood their needs and expectations. He literally felt as they felt. The gospel reminds us that Jesus was a person just like you or I. He could feel anger (as he turned over the tables in the Temple), or grief (as he wept for Lazarus), or frustration (as he so often felt exasperated with his disciples). In all of these ways, he was fully human. But as the true Messiah, Jesus had something else: he had the ability to bring all of these emotions under the peace of God's healing compassion.

The healing of Jesus goes to the core of our emotions. It deals with the source of our pain. It recognizes that real people will always feel real emotions. The compassion of Christ seeks to enter into those feelings, acknowledging their power in our lives, but bringing them together in ways that offer us a chance to heal and to love again. As a physician of the human spirit, Jesus knew that if reconciliation was to occur, if peace was to be found, then people would have to do two things: face their deepest fear and offer their highest love. His compassion worked because it dealt with the source of our anger, fear, and the source of our healing, forgiveness.

How do we face our fears and forgive one another?

Over and over again, Jesus tells his disciples: "do not be afraid." In fact, this theme of overcoming fear was so powerful in the gospel that it is immortalized in the dramatic image of the disciples lost in the storm-tossed boat. Jesus is asleep as the disciples are overwhelmed with fear. He is the visible embodiment of calm in the midst of their emotional turmoil. He rises and stills the waves and wind, telling his disciples they do not have to be afraid any more.

Why is this kind of teaching about fear so prevalent in the gospel? It is there because fear is so often at the core of our emotional reactions. We are afraid we are going to "lose." We are afraid things are out of our "control." We are afraid we will be "guilty." And because of our fear, we become defensive, belligerent, arrogant, hostile, depressed, angry, or any of the other emotions that feed on our deepest insecurity.

Jesus understood this and he spent an enormous amount of his time trying to reassure us that we did not have to be victimized by such fear. He reminded us, that no matter how "out of control" our situation seemed, God was in control and God would never let us down. "Behold the lilies of the field," he told us, and went on to remind us that we are all precious in the sight of God. What ever our religious convictions, we are never outside the scope of God's grace. Therefore, we are all under the protection of God and do not have to be afraid. Not about the resolution of our disagreements. Not about one another.

If we are free from fear, then how do we respond to one another? We no longer have to try to control one another. We do not have to blame one another. We do not even have to try to "win" in order to overcome the fear we will "lose." Instead, through the grace of God in Christ Jesus, we are called to do something else that

will calm our emotions and open us up to even deeper levels of understanding. We are told in the gospel, over and over again, to simply forgive one another.

This is not as easy as it sounds. Jesus was no pretender to the role of messiahship, dispensing bliss and cheap grace. He was a person of his own times, fully aware of how much pain and hurt surrounded him. But in dealing with that kind of raw emotion, he offered a prescription that would be hard for many of us to swallow. He told us: forgive one another, especially when it is almost impossible to do so.

Saint Peter graphically illustrated this point when he asked Jesus how many times we had to try to forgive before we could give up and walk away. Peter was thinking of the worst case scenario, a conflict that was so bitter and divisive that it could never be healed. But if he expected Jesus to acknowledge that some disagreements are irreconcilable, he was mistaken. "Is seven times enough?" Peter asked. "No," replied Jesus, "I say seven times seventy." The meaning is: we never give up. We never walk away in the search for reconciliation. If we want to put fear to rest, we must practice radical forgiveness.

What kind of forgiveness did Jesus practice to build community?

Some of us might hope that it would be the "I'm right and you're wrong but I forgive you" kind. But that's not what the Lord had in mind. While Jesus prohibits us from judging one another, he insists on our forgiving one another. He tells us that we must forgive and forgive and forgive. Over and over. Why? Because this kind of constant forgiveness is exactly like God's forgiveness of us.

Jesus invites us into a living relationship with God. That relationship is love, but the love is sustained through forgiveness. Forgiveness is what keeps us from being lost to God. It is what keeps us from being lost to one another. Forgiveness is our life line in the storm. It is our path to peace. In the gospel, Jesus makes this connection by drawing a spiritual circle of forgiveness around us. He tells us that we cannot stop forgiving because if we do we will stop being in relationship. For his healing to work in our lives, for peace to be possible, we must keep the living link that only compassion can offer. It is the deep acknowledgement that none of us stand outside the Jesus circle in our need for forgiveness. None of us has a corner on the market of forgiving others because they have sinned greater than ourselves. "Who will cast the first stone?" he asked those who wanted to judge another's sin. Within the love of Jesus, there are no corners in which to hide, only the circle of forgiveness that is his healing compassion.

As a physician of the human spirit, Jesus knew that if reconciliation was to occur, if peace was to be found, then people would have to do two things: face their deepest fear and offer their highest love.

Compassion is the power of God to bring forgiveness into even the most violent conflict. Forgiveness is the mercy of God to bring people back into community even after the most hurtful separation. Community is the grace of God to bring peace into human lives even in a world of fear.

Questions for Reflection

1. What do we do with the anger and hurt we feel when we are in conflict?
2. Do we have to live in emotional turmoil as the price of disagreement?
3. What does the “peace of Christ” mean to us in the midst of our struggles?
4. What kind of compassion did Jesus practice?
5. How do we face our fears and forgive one another?
6. What kind of forgiveness did Jesus practice to build community?

Our Commission

As the conversation draws to a close:

1. Take five minutes to sit in silence together. Consider all that you have heard and learned in the course of this dialogue. Be attentive to the action of the Holy Spirit in guiding you to a deeper understanding.
2. Give each person an opportunity to briefly describe one message they have learned from the dialogue that they will agree to share with others in the community. Consider the healing that will be released by this action.
3. Conclude with this commissioning prayer as you go out:

Dear God, thank you for the presence of your Holy Spirit in this conversation. We ask that the Spirit will go with us as we leave this place to be your ministers of justice, compassion, and reconciliation. Give us grace to be healers of what hurts us and heralds of what makes us whole. In the blessed name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

4. Share the Peace of Christ with one another.

Section Three

Reconciliation

Our Common Prayer

O God, as we come to this last reflection, we stand on the border to your Kingdom. We pray that your Holy Spirit will be with us to guide us in our discussions. Lead us into that place where we can live at peace. Reconcile us through the love of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Our Covenant

As we gather in the name of Christ to share our thoughts, feelings, and ideas we accept this Covenant to guide our conversation along his path of love:

1. We will allow each person an equal amount of time to speak.
2. We will listen to each person without interruption or comment.
3. We will speak in a respectful way without criticism or rancor.
4. We will honor the feelings of others as genuine and sincere.
5. We will disagree without threats or accusations.
6. We will agree that we are all seeking the mind of Christ.
7. We will hold all that we share in confidence.

The Gospel

How do we create community in the midst of conflict?

The gospel tells us that Jesus was a community maker. He did this not by creating a religious institution, but by creating a working family. He welcomed people who thought that they had nothing in common and helped them to discover one another as brothers and sisters. He invited people who were in violent disagreement and showed them how to live in a productive peace. He embraced people who thought they had to be “right” to please God and showed them that what pleases God most is when we love those we think are “wrong.”

It was not always easy, of course, to be part of the Jesus family. He required its members to maintain humility, to avoid power plays, to expect

change as natural, to stay together even when they disagreed among themselves. He made them remain alert for the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives. He sent them out to be reconcilers and healers, knowing that they would be misunderstood and even vilified by others who wanted to keep the old exclusive definitions of “community” in place. He said that if they wanted to be part of this new way of living, then they would need to be a part of him: as willing to love one

another as he was willing to love them. After he was no longer physically present, people remembered the kind of community he had created. They remembered that it was adaptable, growing, and always inter-related. They remembered that it was a reflection of who he was as a person: loving, forgiving, merciful, and unafraid. And so they named it after him. They called it the Body of Christ.

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Community is *organic*.

It is not structural,

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What does the “Body of Christ” teach us about being a diverse community?

The community Jesus created was not bound together by religious rules or social conformity. Religiously, the early Jesus followers were from many different points on the religious compass. Socially, they were from all walks of life, including people who were considered marginal or even “unclean” in the eyes of society. Consequently, the Body of Christ was no monolithic organization. It was a strange, diverse collection of human beings all held together by a single rule: they were to love one another in imitation of the “head of the body,” Jesus.

The Body of Christ introduces a fundamental understanding of community from the gospel perspective. Community is *organic*. It is not structural, organizational, or doctrinal. These were the forms of community against which Jesus struggled. The rigid systems imposed

by the religious establishment or the oppressive systems imposed by the Roman state were the kinds of artificial “communities” that Jesus sought to replace. He welcomed people into relationships that allowed for differences, tolerated uncertainties, and respected the dignity of every human being. His vision of community was a reflection of the natural, organic process by which things become interdependent, change, and grow.

People did not begin to call this kind of community a “Body” by accident. In the same way, Jesus did not use the organic metaphors that were so common to his own teaching by accident. When Jesus told people about his alternative community, he used images that were drawn directly from natural life. He spoke of water, seeds, and salt. He literally grounded his vision of community into the everyday, earthy experience of real people. His purpose was to help us understand community, not as a set of laws passed down from above, but rather as a series of relationships grown from within.

He told us, for example, that we were to think of these relationships as a “vine with many branches.” The vine itself is Jesus, our Teacher and Savior. We are the many branches. Natural images such as this bring his notion of “community” into focus. Vines are alive because they grow and change. They are always linked to a common source of strength and nourishment, but they are also unique and distinct. They are not rigid, but flexible. If we believe that Jesus chose his own words carefully, then we need to be mindful of why he would use these kinds of organic metaphors in describing the nature of the community he wished to create. We need to reflect on the fact that he was trying to tell us something about how to remain in community even in the midst of difference.

How do we stay in community if we disagree about who is “connected” to Jesus?

One of the symptoms of breakdown in community is when some branches claim that other branches are no longer connected to the vine. When communities experience stress, it is common for people to react by clinging to those who seem most like themselves. Fearful of losing their link to the source, they hold ever more tightly to their own opinions. As the stress increases, they may begin to proclaim that their link to the truth is the only viable one. Whether they think of themselves as “liberal” or “conservative,” they can begin to disassociate with other branches in the Christian family. In fact, they begin to cut off these other branches by claiming that those who disagree with them are no longer part of the organic whole. This can be expressed in aggressive ways by labeling others as “sinful.” It can be expressed in passive ways by labeling others as having “abandoned” the community. The pressure of this fear accounts for the state of siege mentality that forces people into ever smaller groups. They begin to imagine themselves as a “faithful remnant,” the true believers who are upholding that truth against attack. What was once a healthy vine with many branches begins to wither into a single dry branch.

Sadly, the history of Christian community is the history of this same process repeating itself over and over again. The stress that we feel today is the shock of change and disagreement that prompts us to begin a retreat into isolation and paranoia. Already both the aggressive and passive responses are clear to see. But their outcome is equally clear: the predictable retreat from the vision of Jesus for his new community.

But do we have to live in a state of siege with one another? If the promise of a new community in Jesus is so open and loving, does it have room for all of us whether we agree with one another or not?

The joyful answer of the gospel is yes. There is a community where people can find common ground under the care of God. In describing it, Jesus did not use organic metaphors, but a different kind of image with which people would have been very familiar. He described it as the “Kingdom of God” or the “Reign of God,” a time

when people would live together in relationships that were not fearful, but loving. In fact, the message of the gospel, the Good News, was to proclaim to all people that this “Kingdom” had drawn near to them. In other words, that it was accessible and available to them even if their lives were fractured by conflict and anxiety. The community Jesus envisioned was an alternative. It was an option for humanity, a choice we could make to live together in a different way.

What does the “Kingdom of God” offer us as a model for reconciliation?

A great many of the passages in the gospel refer to the ways that Jesus sought to explain the “Kingdom of God” to the people of his time. The fact that he took so much time to describe it is a clue to how important it was in the minds of his listeners. The people who followed Jesus were very accustomed to living in a kingdom. They had the experience of Herod. They had the experience of Rome. Kingdoms were brutal, intolerant, oppressive, dominating, idolatrous, and fearful for most of the poor people who came to hear Jesus teach. Therefore, when he tried to describe the alternative community that God intended, it is no wonder that they were full of questions.

The answers Jesus gave embody one of the central themes of the gospel. Time and time again, Jesus spoke about the new “kingdom” that people could inherit as their own. He described it as something precious. He said that we should seek it above all things. He warned us that it would be difficult to discover, especially for people addicted to wealth or power. He said that it would be easy to miss in all of the claims and counterclaims that would be scattered around us like seeds tossed onto the earth. He promised us that it was not only something we could experience after we died, but something that was already around us if we only had the vision to see it and the heart to embrace it.

When he taught us to pray “thy kingdom come,” Jesus was joining us in praying that the community of God would be present in our own time. He offered us the hope that we were not condemned to live in the communities we often create to protect ourselves from one another. He gave us a promise of a free and open community which could exist today as a taste of what was to come when he returned. But what would it be like? How were people to behave if they were to try to live as though this kingdom had come?

In the gospel, Jesus brings the “Kingdom” down to Earth. He said that we were his partners in bringing it into being. He gave us authority to be its architects. He sent us out into the world to let other people know that they were welcome to join us in developing it. The Jesus “kingdom,” therefore, is a community without borders. It is not limited to any one culture or society. It has no theological border guards. Every person is able to obtain citizenship. Faith is the passport into the kingdom. Love is its only pledge of allegiance.

The irony of the gospel is that the “Kingdom” of God was proclaimed by a “king” who had no need to act like a king. Jesus was not intent on building just another empire of the ego. Given his popularity, he could have easily persuaded people to follow his laws, no matter how drastic or rigid they might have been. He could have drawn up lists of who was acceptable and who was not, condemning people for their political views, religious persuasions, sexual behavior, or social standing. He did not. Instead he created an anti-kingdom: the opposite of what the world offered. He set in motion a new kind of human relationship that was to be the driving force behind his vision of community for generations to come. He taught that if we were willing to take the risk, we could help him bring God’s kind of love into all of our lives. But to do that, we would have to make room for one another. In short, we would have to be willing to be reconciled.

What is the reconciliation that Jesus calls us to practice?

The reconciliation of Jesus is an invitation to behave in ways that are both different and difficult. Different because they are alternatives to the way the world behaves. Jesus said that the “Kingdom of God” is *in* the world, but not *of* the world. It is a choice we can make in our lives right here and right now, but it will often feel contrary to what we have experienced as the usual strategies for survival in a broken reality. Although we may be tempted to retreat to our usual passive or aggressive ways of dealing with one another, we will have to try something else. Something that is not based on blame or on fear. Something that does not permit us the luxury of isolation.

It is difficult to not retreat from one another because it will challenge us to live into an obedience to God that is not based on law, but love. As much as we would like to resolve our conflicts with hard and fast rules about how to judge one another’s behavior, we will have to accept the fact that we will rarely agree on what is “right.” Instead, like the living branches of a vine, we will have to grow together. We will have to be guided by love, by the example of Jesus as he taught us to be open, merciful, forgiving, and faithful. Consequently, we will have to be open to change, to compromise, to humility. Our faithfulness will not be measured by how “right” we are, but by how loving we are.

In making this invitation, Jesus is clear that he is inviting us to take a risk. Reconciliation is dangerous. Jesus lost his life because he was willing to place

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reconciliation above resolution. Many of those who accepted him as the Messiah wanted him to resolve the conflicts of their time by simply imposing his own “kingdom” over all of the other competing “kingdoms.” They wanted a quick and clear answer to what was “right.” Others who rejected him as the Messiah saw his efforts to bring people together as a threat. They felt they already knew what was “right” and would lose their authority if he succeeded.

Ultimately, Jesus paid the final price for reconciliation. He paid with his life. He was killed because he represented the kind of alternative that fear and anger can never

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tolerate. Most earthly “kingdoms” survive because they have some other group to fear. Even if they have to invent imaginary enemies, still the fear is real. Out of fear grows ignorance and hate. Human relationships are reduced to who is “right” and who is “wrong.” Other human beings are demonized as being sinful or evil. Even innocent persons can be portrayed as being “outside” the will of God and, therefore, expendable.

This is exactly what happened to Jesus. Jesus died for our sins. But not for our sins of sex. He died because we chose fear, not forgiveness. He died because we were unwilling to take his risk.

We would not love one another as he had loved us. We were afraid of change. We were afraid of what people might think of us. He died because we wanted to be “right.” We did not want community, but control. We did not practice compassion, but power. He died for our sins because we were satisfied to live in conflict rather than to seek reconciliation.

If we choose to take the risk of reconciliation what practical steps can we take?

The whole gospel of Jesus Christ is the answer, but here are ten steps to reconciliation that emerge from his gospel. They are offered here as a summary of what this three part reflection has tried to share:

That justice can be served without one side having to be “right.”

That compassion can be practiced with a forgiveness that overcomes fear.

That reconciliation can occur without the need for resolution.

These Ten Steps to Reconciliation come from the teachings of Jesus. Like resting places on the road to reconciliation, they are markers for any community to follow in keeping its eye on the prize of peace.

1. Seek first the Kingdom of God. Agree to make reconciliation the priority. Before you opt for any other strategy, make a covenant to search for the peace that passes your current understanding.

2. Do not be afraid. Agree to work on your fear. Do not let rumors, accusations, threats, or disagreement overwhelm your faith that God is present in all that is happening around you.

3. Judge not. Agree to suspend your need to know who is “right” or to judge others as “wrong.” Stand together in humility before God and work on fulfilling the Great Commandment.

4. Forgive seven times seventy. Agree to live in a place of forgiveness. Do not let old hurts or new hurts dictate your feelings for one another.

5. Be servants first. Agree to keep the servant mission of the community above your own self-interest. Do not use conflict as an excuse to lord it over one another or to abandon the poor.

6. Stay awake. Agree to keep watch together for the movement of God in your lives. Do not be lulled into thinking that this is the last time you will face challenges for the sake of the gospel.

7. Ask so you may receive. Agree to a covenant of prayer with and for one another. Pray that you might more fully understand those with whom you disagree.

8. Trust the Holy Spirit. Agree to a covenant of discernment in welcoming the Holy Spirit into your community. Do not accept abandonment, but expect adoption through the grace of God.

9. Go into all the world. Agree to share your witness to reconciliation without shame or reservation. Do not be apologetic for the risk you are taking since it is the same risk Jesus took for you.

10. Love one another. Agree to love unconditionally. Remember that through the love of Christ Jesus nothing can separate us from one another or from the God who loves us in return.

How will these Ten Steps to Reconciliation help us in this time of conflict?

That's for you to discover with the help of God. The purpose of this booklet is not to give you all of the answers or all of the possibilities, any more than it is to persuade you to accept any opinion as being the "right" one to hold. Like the gospel, it is simply an invitation. How you choose to use it is up to you. But it comes to you with a word of blessed assurance.

No matter how much we may think we are caught in a crisis: God is here. God is in the midst of us—all of us, no matter what position we may take.

Therefore, our reconciliation is assured. We do not have to be fearful or angry or confused or embarrassed. Jesus told us to expect these kinds of feelings. He warned us that there would be days when we felt like sheep in the midst of wolves.

Today, those wolves may seem like the men and women who disagree with us. They may seem like issues we can not resolve. But resolution is not what we seek. Thanks be to Christ Jesus, we do not always have to live in a perfect way. We can live in very human times of uncertainty and even of conflict, knowing that Christ is with us. We do not have to take on his role of judgment. We do not have to worry that we are wrong if we stay in relationship with people whom the world would condemn. In fact, following in discipleship to Christ, we are expected to stay with them, and with one another, as a witness to the alternative God offers in a broken world.

Use this small resource with confidence. Use it with creativity. Let it not be the last word, since it certainly does not pretend to be so, but only as the beginning to a process of reconciliation that will bring you to where God is leading you. And may the love of Jesus go with you.

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Episcopal Divinity School

Purpose Statement

The purpose of Episcopal Divinity School is to educate lay and ordained leaders for Christ's Church and for the world, who serve and advance God's mission of justice, compassion, and reconciliation. A seminary for the Episcopal Church, USA, Episcopal Divinity School is grounded in the Anglican tradition and committed to growing in relationship with other Christian and faith traditions. Episcopal Divinity School is an academic community of biblical, historical, and theological inquiry that respects students as responsible learners with valuable experience, supports spiritual and ministerial formation, and provides tools for the lifelong work of social and personal transformation.

The school's dedication to God's transforming mission challenges us to become an anti-racist and multi-cultural community, embodying diversity and seeking constructive change. These commitments lead to educational programs enlivened by theologies of liberation, especially the many voices of feminist, congregational, ecumenical, and global studies. In our educational life we value critical intellectual engagement, prophetic spirituality, and social action. Sustained by contemplation, worship, and prayer, Episcopal Divinity School forms leaders of hope, courage, and vision to witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

About the Author

The Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston is president and dean of the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Bishop Charleston is a member of the Choctaw Nation and has served as the Episcopal Bishop of Alaska, as well as the executive director of the National Committee on Indian Work at the Episcopal Church Center. Over his career Bishop Charleston has been deeply involved in exploring different models of theological training to meet the needs of a changing church. He has been an advocate for theological education that is culturally sensitive and meets the needs and concerns of local faith communities.

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