

FINAL DRAFT LESSON PLAN ON CHURCH UNITY

Title: Church Unity

Resources:

- Required: St. Francis Prayer, Unity Promise, A Divided UMC – How We'll Fail at the Main Thing, MVUMC Survey of Preferences and Attitudes, Excerpt from Catholic Spirit, Whiteboard, Bibles.

Outline:

- Opening. (7 Minutes)
 - Welcome participants and introduce this session as the first in a series of constructive conversations designed to prepare our congregation for the denominational decision regarding any changes that may or may not take place at the February 2019 General Conference relative to human sexuality/homosexuality. Future sessions will deal with biblical views of human sexuality and various plans being considered by our denomination to address the issue of homosexual inclusion by our church.
 - Invite the participants to pray the Saint Francis Prayer.
 - Review the Unity Promise.
- Jesus prayed for the unity of the church. (15-20 Minutes)
 - Read John 17:20-23.
 - How does Jesus expect us to be united?
 - Jesus expects us to be united to God and to one another in love.
 - Why does Jesus want us to be united?
 - We should be united so “that the world may believe.”
 - Unity is important to our mission and ministry in the world.
 - How might conflict and division negatively impact our ministry and mission?
 - Distribute James Howell’s piece “A Divided UMC: How We’ll Fail at the Main Thing.”
 - Ask participants to read the article and identify various ways a church split will negatively impact our mission and ministry. Answers might include:
 - Property questions: Who gets the property & the debt?
 - Congregational division, conflict, and lobbying.
 - Lost members as losers are forced out or they simply leave.
 - Lost faith as people grow disgusted and abandon active participation in any congregation.
 - Loss of giving resulting in reduced staff to execute the mission of the church and fewer resources available to give beyond the church.
 - Unemployment among clergy and clergy families.

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- Despite Jesus' prayer for unity, differences of opinion emerged early and still exist within the church. (15-20 Minutes)
 - Can you give examples from the New Testament of differences of opinion in the early church?
 - Read First Corinthians 1:10-17 to illustrate the fact that differences of opinion and style have existed in the church from the very beginning.
 - Much of the New Testament was written in response to differing views within the church; the church was never united in opinion.
 - What are some different opinions that might be present today in our own congregation?
 - Some people voted for President Trump; others did not.
 - Some people believe we should reduce taxes to stimulate the economy for the benefit of all; other people believe we should raise taxes on the wealthiest (however defined) and increase services to the neediest among us.
 - Some people believe deregulation is a good thing, that unfettered capitalism is the best economic system producing the greatest wealth for the greatest number of people; others believe significant regulation is required to prevent capitalism from further producing income disparity, thereby enriching the "have's" while neglecting the "have-nots."
 - Some people believe building a border wall is a responsible way to manage illegal immigration and reduce the risk of drugs, terrorism, and crime; others believe it would be an unloving response to our neediest neighbors who are often fleeing from poverty, disease, and unjust systems of government in their own lands.
 - Some people believe human activity is responsible for a significant portion of climate change; others don't believe in climate change or don't believe humans are responsible in any significant way.
 - Some people believe a government-run single-payer health care system would improve the delivery of healthcare in America; others are deeply suspicious of the government's ability to manage such a large portion of our economy and oppose the idea as a consequence.
 - Some people believe the death penalty is biblically sanctioned and serves as a just deterrent to crime; others believe it is often unequally applied, and denies the possibilities of redemption and transformation in the lives of the condemned.
 - Some believe that war is wrong, that Jesus teaches us to love our enemies and to turn the other cheek; others believe God has entrusted the government with the responsibility of defending its citizens, promoting justice, and punishing wrongdoing.

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- Some believe that homosexual activity is wrong – a human choice which defies God’s will for the exercise of our sexuality – and should therefore be condemned; others believe homosexual activity is a natural variation in human sexuality and the proper exercise of this sexual orientation through lifelong monogamous relationships is acceptable to God.
- **Note:**
 - None of this is said to suggest that truth is relative or non-existent – though we must be willing to admit that our ability to know the truth on any given subject may be limited by a variety of factors.
 - Nor is any of this said to suggest that every opinion is just as good as every other opinion, i.e. that it doesn’t matter what you believe so long as you believe it passionately.
 - Furthermore, while our opinions may differ, we should distinguish between informed opinions vs. uninformed opinions, and opinions driven by self-interest rather than opinions driven by the greater interest. We should always be willing to base our opinions on the best possible information and the greatest possible good – changing our opinions if needed to meet these criteria.
 - With all of that said, this exercise does remind us that there are already many different opinions among us. And yet we have been one, still are one, and hope to remain one as we worship and serve together!
- Many things hold us together but some differences remain. (15-20 Minutes)
 - So what unites you to this church?
 - Instruct participants to work together at their tables. Ask them to make a list of the things at Mountain View that draw them to this place. Allow time for them to do this. As the discussion wanes, ask each table to report their findings.
 - Use the Congregational Survey on Preferences and Attitudes to add additional comments regarding the things that hold us together.
 - Although many things unite us, some difference remain. One of the differences among us is our attitudes toward homosexual behavior. In our recent Survey of Preferences and Attitudes, we discovered that 58% of our congregation would favor greater inclusion of homosexual persons in the life of the church (to include the ordination of practicing homosexuals and the performance of same sex marriages by clergy) and 42% would not favor this type of inclusion.

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- How we respond to one another and to these differences is critical to the life and health of our congregation.
 - Here's a description of an unhealthy way to respond to those with whom you disagree. "When...two people disagree the first thing that often happens is that one thinks that the other just isn't listening so they begin to talk louder. But when that doesn't work, one begins to think the other doesn't really know...So they proceed to educate each other. Perhaps they point to the Bible, bring out their favorite commentary, or refer to what the preacher said last Sunday. But they still disagree. Seeing that they can't educate one another, each comes to believe that the other person is just stupid. The facts are simply lost on the other person who must be incapable of understanding. With increasing frustration, the disagreement moves to another stage. Although we might admire that neither has given up on the other, both begin to think that if the other has the facts but still can't understand them and is stupid then maybe the problem is deeper. Could it be the other person is evil?" (Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2017, pp. 13-14)
- John Wesley gives more helpful advice on dealing with differences in his sermon, *Catholic Spirit*.
 - Distribute the excerpt of *Catholic Spirit* and ask the participants to read it, highlighting/underlining those parts they consider most important.
 - What are some of the lessons you learned from Wesley about dealing with differences of opinion?
 - Differences of opinion are inevitable – paragraph 2.
 - We may be wrong in our own opinions – paragraph 3.
 - We should allow liberty of opinion or freedom of conscience on many disputable matters – paragraph 4.
 - We should remain united with those who believe in God and in his Son Jesus Christ, and who are attempting to love God and neighbor in all they say and do – paragraphs 5-6.
- Closing Conversation (5-10 Minutes)
 - Read Ephesians 4:29.
 - Ask participants to review the Unity Promise and Guidelines and then discuss what they found most meaningful about today's discussion.
 - Close with Saint Francis Prayer.