

Supplement to “Healing Democracy Action Circles Guide” for Churches

Wisconsin Council of Churches, June 2012

Introduction

This supplement is designed to be used with the “Healing Democracy Action Circles Guide” from the Center on Courage and Renewal (<http://www.couragerenewal.org/actioncircles>), a six-session discussion guide based on the book *Healing the Heart of Democracy* by Parker Palmer. The Guide explores each of five “habits of the heart” that are essential for sustaining a healthy democracy:

- An understanding that we are all in this together;
- An appreciation of the value of ‘otherness’;
- An ability to hold tension in life-giving ways;
- A sense of personal voice and agency; and
- A capacity to create community.

The Wisconsin Council of Churches has prepared this supplement for using the Guide in church groups. It connects the five habits with biblical passages, drawn mostly from St. Paul’s letters to churches in the First Century. (Supplements are also available for use in other faith communities.)

St. Paul was dealing with conflicts within Christian communities, whereas we are also concerned with polarization over political or social issues in our state or nation as a whole. But the distinction is not clear-cut. In our time, as well as in St. Paul’s, divisions with a congregation arise out of religious disagreements, or reflect divisions in the wider society, or are a combination of both.

Setting Goals for these Sessions

Before you start planning and promoting your sessions, think carefully about the goals for the sessions in light of the interests and attitudes of your congregation’s members, such as:

- Developing skills for having respectful conversations with others, whether family members, coworkers, or strangers;
- Creating a supportive environment for people to share their experiences, hopes, and fears about talking across dividing lines about public issues;
- Bringing together people from different perspectives and walks of life to practice civil dialogue with one another.

How you frame your invitation to participate and the persons you choose to invite personally will depend on your goals for the group. In practice, however, the group and its members may be motivated by more than one purpose to one degree or other, and you may need to be flexible.

Using the Study Circles Guide and this Supplement.

The Guide and Supplement can be used in a variety of formats. For example:

- A series of Sunday morning adult forums;
- A series of evening or weekend discussion groups;
- An ecumenical discussion series with other congregations; or
- A retreat for your church council or social witness committee

There is no set time limit for the Study Circles sessions or their parts. If the timeframe you adopt for your discussions isn't long enough to include all the discussion questions, readings, videos, etc. in a single meeting, you may wish to take two meetings to cover each session, or cut out some parts of the session.

We urge you, however, to be sure to include five or ten minutes in each session for reflection on the Bible passages and questions in this supplement. This will help you to think together about how practicing civil conversation in the church can help to build up "the body of Christ" in today's world. Instructions on where to insert these exercises in the discussion are given with the readings and questions for each session below.

You should be aware that the exercises in the Study Circles guide include watching and discussing several online videos. We encourage you to use these – but be sure that you have the necessary computer and projector available, set up, and tested well before your session.

Facilitator Training Sessions

You may wish to take advantage of facilitator training sessions offered by the Wisconsin Council of Churches. Check for information about the "Season of Civility" project on the Council's website, www.wichurches.org

Session 1: An understanding that we are all in this together

Following “Introduce the five habits” and before “Explore the first habit,” read or ask someone to read aloud **Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16** while the others in the group follow along in their own Bibles.

DISCUSS. *How do you understand the relationship between the unity and the diversity of Christians, not only around the world but also in your own congregation? Does the image of the “body of Christ” help you to understand this relationship, or is there another image that you find more helpful? What can we do as members to help strengthen or increase the unity of the church?*

Continue the session with “Explore the first habit.”

Session 2: An appreciation for the value of “otherness”

Following “Show & Tell” and before “Explore the second habit,” read or ask someone to read aloud **Luke 24:13-35** while the others in the group follow along in their own Bibles.

DISCUSS. *Is there a time when you received information or insight from a stranger or some other unexpected source? In what times or places of your daily life are you most likely to hear from someone with a very different perspective on the world? How might we think about such encounters that will make us more open to learning from those who are “other”?*

Continue the session with “Explore the Second Habit.”

Session 3: An ability to hold tension in life-giving ways

Following “Show & Tell” and before “Explore the third habit,” read the following passage from **Parker Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, p. 149.**

In Christian tradition, the broken-open heart is virtually indistinguishable from the image of the cross. It was on the cross that God’s heart was broken for the sake of humankind, broken open into a love that Christ’s followers are called to emulate. Even as a physical form, the cross – with arms that stretch left and right and up and down – symbolizes the tension, the “excruciating” tension, that can open the heart to love.

Then, read or ask someone to read aloud **Romans 8:14-27** while the others in the group follow along in their own Bibles.

DISCUSS: *Do you see a connection between your own broken-heartedness and the broken-heartedness of Jesus on the cross, or the brokenness of creation? Why or why not? Are there any spiritual practices – e.g., prayer, meditation, Bible study, worship -- that deepen your awareness of the Spirit’s power for dealing constructively with tensions or brokenness in your life?*

Session 4: A sense of personal voice and agency

Following "Show & Tell" and before "Explore the fourth habit," read or ask someone to read **Matthew 15:21-28** aloud while the others in the group follow along in their own Bibles.

DISCUSS: *How does the Canaanite woman use her personal voice and agency? How do Jesus' responses (note the plural) to her compare to the response she gets from the disciples? What do you learn from this exchange that applies the use of your own voice and agency?*

Continue with "Explore the fourth habit."

Session 5: A capacity to create community

Following "Show & Tell" and before "Explore the fifth and last habit," read or ask someone to read **Romans 12:9-21** aloud while the others in the group follow along in their own Bibles.

DISCUSS: *Think of the community that Paul is urging his readers to become as if it were a garden. How would you describe that garden in a word or a short phrase? What habits or practices are the "seeds" of community to be nurtured in this passage? What are the "weeds" that need to be removed?*

Continue with "Explore the fifth and last habit."

Session 6

Following "Show & Tell" and before "Consider the Future," read or ask someone to read **1 Corinthians 13:1-13** aloud while the others in the group follow along in their own Bibles.

DISCUSS: *How would you apply these "touchstones" of love to our efforts to help heal democracy in our time and place? Can understanding these habits as expressions of Christian love in community deepen your understanding or appreciation of them?*

Continue with "Consider the Future."