



Diversity, Privilege, and Faith: Studying Connections

By Ben Roe

Last March my church discovered a new word!

One General Conference petition presented to our administrative board called for regional and national meetings on “Heterosexism and the Mission of the Church.” This petition generated significant discussion because the word *heterosexism* was new to most people present. Our church affirmed this petition—with the condition that we study heterosexism by the time Annual Conference met in early June. In May, I offered the three one-hour sessions outlined below.

Session 1: A Question of Diversity

Introduced idea that racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism are about privilege, prejudice, and power.

Discussed a provisional definition of heterosexism:

“the assumption that all people are heterosexual, that being heterosexual is normal, and that heterosexuality is either the best way or the only way to be, along with the institutional supports for these assumptions.”

Discussed what heterosexuality is and *suggested* a definition:

“the attractions that individuals have for persons of the ‘opposite’ or ‘other’ gender, the willingness to act on these attractions under appropriate circumstances, the structures that support the relationships that develop: dating, romance, marriage, family, school, church, law, culture, arts, speech, medicine; and the lifestyles that are associated with these relationships.”

Introduced concept of sexual orientation with handout of Klein grid which suggests seven parts to sexual orientation (attractions, sexual behavior, fantasies, emotional and social preferences, self identification, and lifestyle) and allows individuals to rank themselves using Kinsey scale (0=other sex only to 6=same sex only).¹ Participants took exercise home to fill out in private and reflect on their own experience.

Showed 40-minute excerpt from movie *Word is Out*.² Introduced by noting these were people whose lives had been greatly affected by heterosexism. Movie intercuts interviews of twenty-six gay men and lesbian women into a story of oppression, hope, and triumph. At one point, group wanted to stop viewing; the oppression was so painful it was hard to watch.

Discussed group’s feelings; acknowledged need for ministry.

Session 2: A Question of Privilege

Opened with discussion of previous week’s session.

Repeated suggestion that the “isms” have to do with privilege, prejudice, and power.

Suggested, through use of article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” that a set of unconscious and invisible privileges are attached to being white in American culture.³

Read quickly through a handout of twenty-six realizations from article.

Challenged group to modify each statement to make it true for heterosexual privilege. For example, “I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time” became “I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my orientation most of the time”—a privilege heterosexual people regularly enjoy. Never made it to all statements. Discussion seemed enlightening.

Session 3: A Question of Faith

Discussed petitions church had affirmed.

Offered overview of the larger church debate on homosexuality.

Identified and discussed Warren Church’s present ministry of hospitality. (“A Community of Reconciliation Serving Capitol Hill” is posted on our bulletin board though we are not a Reconciling Congregation.)

Closed with excerpt from videotape of musical *Home: The Parable of Beatrice and Neal*, exploring idea that God’s grace is available to all.⁴

Participant Reactions

Jane Riecke (new pastor): "Part of the obstacle was the amount of time we needed just on the definition of heterosexism. It reminded me of talk when I was growing up about just what prejudice was."

Kate Rose: "We shouldn't run away from the discomfort others have; it's OK just to let them be uncomfortable. We need to treat each other with gentleness in the midst of the discomfort."

David Dunn: "We need to learn how to relax with our anxieties so they don't blow us into our minds but deeper into our hearts. ...The exercise on racism and heterosexism transformed the dialog by recasting the discussion, taking it out of the realm of gender into an area equally difficult but a bit more comfortable."

Next time I would

- +offer at least four sessions.
- +replace the videos with real people if possible. As it was, three or four participants shared some of their gay/lesbian-related experiences.
- +choose a room more conducive to the intensity of the subject than our large, open Adult Forum space.
- +plan a biblical study to focus on hospitality, diversity, and ministry, as well as on biblical interpretation of passages commonly associated with homosexuality. ▼

Notes

¹Fritz Klein, Barry Sepekoff, and Timothy Wolf, "Sexual Orientation: A Multi-Variable Dynamic Process" in *Two Lives to Lead: Bisexuality in Men and Women* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1985).

²Video rental stores with a gay clientele may carry it.

³Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" *Peace and Freedom* (July/August, 1989), pp. 10-12.

⁴Videotape is quite usable with other denominations. See p. 32.

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A Litany for Freedom

By Randy Miller

Soloist: "God of our weary years"—

People: How long shall we wait, O God, and when shall we be free?

Leader: We are your people, scarred by prejudice and disfigured by privilege, Seemingly forgotten by all save Jesus.

People: When shall we be free?

Soloist: "God of our silent tears"—

Leader: Trapped in closets not of our own making
Caught in ghettos not of our choice
Our silent tears still flow, O God;
Our cries rise up to you.

People: We are weary, bleeding, bruised, and tired,
Tempted to lay down our burdens and softly steal 'way home.

Soloist: "Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way"—

Leader: And lovingly called us yours,
And sweetly whispered our names:

People: Not oppressor and oppressed but "wholly redeemed"
Not privileged and deprived but "child of God"
Not master and slave, but "disciple of Christ."

Soloist: "Lest our feet stray from the places our God where we met thee.
Lest our hearts drunk with the wine of the world we forget thee."

Leader: Locked in power struggles we cannot escape
Blindly turning privileges to our advantage.

People: Our daily fears enslave us, O God
When shall we be free?

Soloist: "Shadowed beneath thy hand,
May we forever stand"—

Leader: And not only stand, O God, but dance—
For your daughters have visioned it,
And your sons have dreamed it.

People: Someday we all shall be free!

Soloist: "True to our God, true to our native land."

Leader: And to your New Earth, O God.

People: True to ourselves as you have seen us.

Leader: True to the vision of a brighter day to come.

All: Amen.

Source

Solo is excerpted from verse 3 of "Lift Every Voice and Sing." Full text and music can be found in *Songs of Zion* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981). Spoken parts are adapted from a litany originally published in *Open Hands* in Spring 1987. It may be reprinted for local worship events with full credits attached.