

So someone in our congregation wants to talk about
Developing More Light Ministry
Suggestions from More Light Churches Network

Here are some suggestions on how to consider this important ministry. The pages which follow provide more detail.

- Review the meaning, history and potential for this ministry
- Assess the congregation before starting
- Agree upon goals for study process
- Identify steps in the process, and keep it open
- Consider the major questions to include in the study process
- Review the available resources
- Think carefully about the first gathering in the congregation
- Monitor and adjust the process as necessary

We recommend examples of the process used by several congregations. These documents are available from More Light Churches Network:

- Report to *Session*, from the Ad Hoc Task Force on the Church and Homosexuality. Downtown United Presbyterian Church, Rochester, New York
- *A Study Series during the Season of Epiphany*, Downtown United Presbyterian Church, Rochester, New York
- *A Letter to the Congregation from the Session*, Third Presbyterian Church, Rochester, New York
- *Session Homosexuality Workshop*, Third Presbyterian Church, Rochester, New York
- *Is Everybody Welcome?*, First Presbyterian Church, San Rafael, California
- *Homosexuality and the Church*, Summerville Presbyterian Church, Rochester, New York
- *New Possibilities Workshop*, an outline by Charles S. Collins

Review the meaning, history and potential for this ministry

Review the brochure, *What is the More Light Churches Network?* and the Statement of Mission

Assess the congregation before starting

At some point, the idea will be discussed by a committee of Session. The following questions may be significant for your congregation:

1. Why is this congregation considering More Light ministry:
 - a. Personal experience of member(s)
 - b. Raised as a justice issue (maybe from the “church and society” committee)
 - c. some experience with homophobia has raised the issue (e.g., Amendment 2 in Colorado or Measure g in Oregon)
 - d. Desire for a special ministry
 - e. Others
2. How divisive is this issue likely to be in this congregation?
3. How “sophisticated” is the congregation on the issue? Do gay/lesbian groups already meet in church space? Are there openly lesbian/gay people as members? Is the church in an area with a lesbian/gay population?
4. Are there lots of personal and intellectual resources available to help the congregation talk about the issues?
5. Are there natural leaders on the issue who can be drawn from the congregation? Are there people who are likely to feel very uncomfortable and try to block the discussion?

Agree upon goals for study process

There is no single way to discuss More Light ministry. Generally, direction will come from a committee, often reporting to the Session. Sometimes the session will assume this responsibility itself. Some essential goals to consider:

1. All discussions are part of a sincere attempt to be faithful to the spirit, ministry, and teachings of Jesus Christ and the process is to be carried out with humility and openness to the directions of the Spirit. If people believe this, they may not try to evade the issue by saying that it will split the church.
2. The discussion will be open and the outcome a congregational decision. There are no foregone conclusions; it is not a set-up. This needs to be communicated clearly. Without this understanding, the process has little credibility.
3. Methods will be employed in the process of discussion to ensure that all sides are heard.
4. High standards of civility, fairness, and respect for human dignity are to be employed.

Identify steps in the process, and keep it open

Avoid setting a rigid timeline for the process, even though it may take several years of on-again, off-again discussion to find where the congregation wants to be regarding More Light ministry. However, it is a good idea to let the congregation know the steps in the initial process. For instance, a congregation may establish a committee to plan a study process at the end of which there will be a congregational vote as to whether discussion should proceed. Or, a study process will be followed by a recommendation from the Session to the congregation about the next step. The point is to keep the process open and the congregation in the know and involved.

Consider the major questions to include in the study process

1. What can gay, lesbian, and bisexual Christians share about their faith relations with the church and the local congregation? What about parents and relatives of lesbian and gay Christians? Probably no discussion of More Light ministry is complete without putting flesh on the label “gay.”

2. What does Scripture say about homosexuality? Presbyterians are a scripture people and studying scripture is an important step. Usually it is important to begin this discussion reviewing approaches to interpreting scripture.
3. What does Church law, of this denomination and others, say about lesbian and gay membership and ordination?
4. What does ministry to and with gay and lesbian Christians mean? What could it mean specifically for this congregation?

Review the available resources

Numerous resources are available. Refer to the *Recommended Resources* list. In addition to print resources, consider the following:

1. Scripture
2. Scholarly interpretation and theological reflection, either provided by readings or, preferably, by local “experts”, perhaps professors, ministers, or others.
3. Sharing from gay and lesbian Christians
4. Sharing from parents, relatives and other friends of gay and lesbian people
5. Sharing from lesbian and gay people in the community about the homophobia they encounter
6. Videos. There are several reviewed in the Recommended Resources, including “Maybe We’re Talking About A Different God.”
7. Worship. Work to make it inclusive, both in terms of language, concerns, and participation.

Think carefully about the first gathering in the congregation

Whatever the shape of your congregation’s process, the first session is crucial and should be planned carefully. One needs to establish the inclusiveness of the discussion, i.e., those against More Light ministry will be given full chance to share, and those for this is ministry will also, as will gays and lesbians. Also it is important to establish and discuss the initial steps and goals for the process.

A great deal of effort and sufficient time should be spent in honest sharing. People usually have feelings, sometimes strong, about the matter, and they need to have a place to share them. The first gathering can be a place where they share those feelings in a safe atmosphere, where the feelings and opinions will be respected even if not agreed with, where the bonds of community in Christ can be affirmed. If everyone feels validated and heard in the first meeting, the rest of the process may be less tense and divisive.

One effective method is to hold relatively small group sessions (8-11 persons) in which each person is asked to give one reason why the congregation should become a more light congregation and one reason why it should not.

Another icebreaker is to go around the small group and let each person share some experience they have had with the issue.

Honest sharing in a supportive community often deepens people's ties with one another and actually strengthens the congregation's commitment to "do the right thing."

Monitor and adjust the process as necessary

As the process continues, watch for the following and find ways to adjust appropriately.

1. Are all sides being heard, and do all sides "feel" they are being heard?
2. Are issues being framed fairly and neutrally? Watch for defensiveness in the framing of questions relating to gays and lesbians, e.g., Is it possible to be gay and Christian? Are gays morally responsible and acceptable as leaders?
3. Are there blocks to discussion, for instance, the claim that "this will split the congregation." Does everyone truly accept the idea that the process is fair, that everyone will be heard, and that in Christ all things are possible?
4. Do people understand homophobia as a real attitude that lesbian and gay people must face? A possible exercise is to bring letters to the editor demonstrating homophobic sentiments. A powerful variation on this is to bring those letters with the words "jew" or "African American" substituted for gay.
5. Watch for the tone of the discussion. Is this becoming mutually accusatory reflecting an "us" vs. "them" attitude, with them being the "homophobes" or the "militant homosexuals" or "unrepentant gays and lesbians"? When such attitudes or labels are detected an exercise helping people find other labels may be useful.
6. Are things moving too fast or too slowly? Would it be good to take a break and plan to come back after a few months?
7. Is there support for the people most vulnerable during such discussions, e.g., lesbian and gay members or parents and relatives of gays?
8. Are certain empty phrases interfering with real communication, e.g., "the homosexual agenda," "special rights," "homophobia" used unthinkingly, "I love the sinner but hate the sin." It is useful when such phrases occur to gently ask for a personally derived definition of the phrase or word.

Editor's note (added May, 1998)

Jim Tiefenthal transferred this document from paper to electronic format in May, 1998, at Rochester, NY. Caryl Qualich proofread the text. Although loving care was taken to preserve the original text, MLCN cannot guarantee accuracy.

More Light Churches Network can be reached at:
932 E. 28th Street
Oakland, CA 94610
www.MLCN.org