

Framework for Conversation¹

2010-2011

I. Welcome

For the most part the usual procedures used for Annual Conference business serve us efficiently and well. Sometimes, however, we are faced with difficult and potentially contentious issues requiring a special process that can provide broader opportunities for open discussion of differences and the possibility of affirming points of convergence, so that God's voice can be heard even when sisters and brothers in the faith strongly disagree. Today's conversation is a part of such a special response process that we will review more fully in a moment.

As we begin, let us come to God in Word and prayer. Hear these words from Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians:

II. Scripture Reading – 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

1 Corinthians 12:12 - 27 (NRSV) ¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

¹ Much of the wording in this framework comes directly from *A Structural Framework For Dealing with Strongly Controversial Issues* (2009), *Resolution Urging Forbearance* (2008), and the study guide developed in 2010 by the Special Response Resource Committee.

III. Prayer for a spirit of understanding

Gracious God, as a people of faith, sincere in our commitment to heal and care for the body of Christ, we pray for wisdom, guidance and understanding. Grant us courage and strength to respect the dignity and intrinsic worth of each participant. To honor moments of tension between us as opportunities for the Spirit to teach and lead. To be open to the varied insights emerging from our shared study of scripture. To be honest about our individual doubts and fears. To listen carefully, speak gently, and prayerfully consider perspectives that are different from our own. And to begin from a place of trust that you, O God, will be present with us in this process. Allow this sacred place of conversation to speak to us as individuals and as the body of Christ. AMEN

IV. Introduction

In 2009, delegates to the Church of the Brethren Annual Conference meeting in San Diego, CA approved submitting two items of business to the just passed *Structural Framework for Dealing with Strongly Controversial Issues*. The two business items included *A Statement of Confession and Commitment* produced by the 2008 Standing Committee and affirmed by the 2009 Standing Committee, and a *Query: Language on Same Sex Covenantal Relationships*. Since then, the documents have been available for prayerful review along with a series of Bible studies designed to prepare us for today's conversation by a Special Response Resource Committee especially called to the task.

Although today's gathering is unique in number and personality, the framework for today's conversation is the same framework used at each Standing Committee sponsored gathering. The purpose of the framework is to have a conversation that is transparent in its process and broad in its invitation, fostering a spirit of openness, promoting community rather than uniformity and understanding rather than debate.

My name is _____ and I am facilitating today's conversation. With me is _____ who is taking notes so that we can be prepared to share the themes that emerge out of this conversation. Here's how it works: Using a series of "Questions for Conversation," together we will prayerfully discuss each of these items of business and consider how to share the fruit of our conversation with Standing Committee. First we will consider questions about *A Statement of Confession and Commitment*. Then I will ask the same sorts of questions about *Query: Language on Same Sex Covenantal Relationships*. Finally, we will have an opportunity to talk together about how we can hold each other together as we acknowledge differing perspectives in the body.

Today's conversation is one of many taking place in an ongoing process of discernment throughout the body. Everyone's full participation will be necessary so that we can have a true sense of God's leading of the body as a whole. And yet, we must acknowledge that the issues that bring us together today are issues that also divide us. In fact, that is the very reason we are using *A Structural Framework For Dealing with Strongly Controversial Issues*. So before I ask if anyone has any questions, I'm going to ask that we all agree on three things:

1. To listen without interrupting.
2. To speak only for yourself.
3. To listen and speak with respect.

Can we all agree on these three expectations? Are there any questions about the process I've described?

V. Questions for Conversation

- a. Make sure everyone has a copy of *A Statement of Confession and Commitment* and has time to read through the document, or perhaps take turns reading the statement aloud.
 1. What do you hear in this statement?
 2. What positive personal stories or experiences can you share that would help our understanding of the statement?
 3. What negative personal stories or experiences can you share that would help our understanding of the statement?
 4. Can you imagine why some might have differing perspectives about the statement? If so, what would those perspectives be?
 5. In light of our conversation today, what would you want Standing Committee to know as it prepares its response to this statement?
 6. In your understanding of God's leading us today, what would you want Standing Committee to recommend to Annual Conference regarding this statement?

A few moments to transition: Perhaps sing a hymn, have a minute of silence and/or offer a short break.

- b. Make sure everyone has a copy of *Query: Language on Same Sex Covenantal Relationships* and has time to read through the document, or perhaps take turns reading the query aloud.
 1. What do you hear in this query? What is it asking?
 2. What positive personal stories or experiences can you share that would help our understanding of the query?
 3. What negative personal stories or experiences can you share that would help our understanding of the query?
 4. Can you imagine why some might have differing perspectives about the query? If so, what would those perspectives be?
 5. In light of our conversation today, what would you want Standing Committee to know as it prepares its response to this query?
 6. In your understanding of God's leading us today, what would you want Standing Committee to recommend to Annual Conference regarding this query?

A few moments to transition: Perhaps sing a hymn, have a minute of silence and/or offer a short break.

- c. How can we hold each other together as we acknowledge differing perspectives in the body?

- VI. Closing – Thank you for participating in this conversation; both your listening and your sharing. A written record of the themes that emerged from this conversation will be sent to a special Standing Committee sub-committee responsible for reviewing the information and producing a summary of all recorded conversations. As we prepare to leave this place, let us hear again the words of Apostle Paul.

I Corinthians 12:12 - 27 (NRSV) ¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Moment of Silence

Closing Prayer

*Creator of a new creation in Christ,
we have gathered as your people
to seek new things revealed to us through your Spirit in this community.
As Christ reconciled us to you,
may we be witnesses to the ministry of reconciliation
in our covenant with one another to heal and care for this body.
Amen.*