

## Holy Conversations: Introduction

One of the ways in which the MCC Theologies Team seeks to “create opportunities and provide resources that will enable ‘holy conversations’ within our denomination about our various beliefs” is by providing resources that will help encourage and facilitate those discussions in local congregations. This resource is our first attempt to do so. This primer includes a suggested structure, some background material, and discussion questions on a number of theological topics. We are also working to expand the topical resources on an ongoing basis in order to supplement this initial material. We hope this resource will become a tool for local churches that want to create safe spaces for theological dialogue. We invite your feedback about the material, your experience of using it in your context, and your ideas for additional sessions.

## Goals of Holy Conversations

It is probably most helpful to begin by stating what the goals of this study are NOT before moving on to a brief explanation of what we hope this resource will accomplish.

This study does NOT:

- aim to indoctrinate participants in a particular way of understanding the topics presented;
- define what is a “normative” understanding of any topic for the whole of MCC, a particular local church, or any church member;
- attempt to provide THE one right answer to any question posed.

This study DOES invite and encourage participants to:

- reflect on their own experiences of various issues, and especially their thoughts and/or feelings about what was “Holy” about that experience (e.g. how God was present or at work in it);
- articulate and share their experiences with others, and to listen to and respect the experiences and reflections of others, whether or not they agree or disagree;

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- explore the connections between their various beliefs about a particular topic and the testimony offered in the experiences, opinions, and questions of others ... including the witness of Scripture and Church Tradition(s);
- make friends with any ambiguity or tension that might be present in the midst of conversations with diverse and divergent truths being claimed;
- notice and honor God (the “Holy”) *in* the conversation itself, rather than the materials that we hope will serve to meaningfully facilitate that discussion.

## Contextualization

**W**e are very aware that a number of things determine the “Context” of a particular local church at any given time (e.g. location, language, culture, identity, ideology, religious background, demographics of the group, or major events in the life of participants, the local church, and/or the world to name a few). What contributes to a very meaningful and transformative experience in one context might not work at all in another. It is also true that the specific format and structure of conversation and/or religious education and/or spiritual formation programming will differ from church to church (see note below on suggested structures). Therefore, we have attempted to compile some background material that will be useful at introducing the topic, as well as some questions for small and large group discussion. Each session begins with personal story(ies) to root these conversations in personal experience, and then moves on to a broader discussion “about” the topic, conversation we believe works best after participants have connected with and shared their own experiences. We have suggested a closing ritual or prayer for each section, hoping that participants can honor their time together and bless one another as they move forward on their spiritual journeys. We hope that you will be able to use most, if not all of this material, but we also know that context demands more than a “plug and play” resource.

You are the best authority on your community, and on the things that are most likely to encourage this type of “Holy Conversation.” You know the hopes and fears of your community, the flash points and the issues around which there may be pre-existing tension, uneasiness, or controversy. Please use these materials in the way you think will be most effective. Supplement them with additional material and resources, structure the conversations in whatever way works best for you, and use the questions that work best for you.

## Sample Structures and Formats

**Format.** This resource will lend itself to a variety of formats and structures, from a discussion series of varying lengths to a retreat setting. Here are a few ideas:

- **Weekly Discussion Session.** This could occur in a Sunday School format (pre- or post-worship) or a consistent evening of the week. It could run consecutively for as many weeks as there are topics, or in smaller segments (e.g. 2 sets of 5, 3 sets of 3, etc.).
- **Monthly Discussion.** “Theology Monday” (First, Second, Third, or Fourth Monday or another day of the week) or “Theology Sunday” with a lunch/session after worship. This could keep people talking regularly throughout the year, making these types of conversations fairly natural and normal over time (a desirable outcome!).
- **Quarterly or Twice Annual Retreat Day** (or half-day)

**Introductory / Orientation Session.** We encourage you to have a session that is devoted entirely to a discussion about the goals of the study, guiding principles, and guidelines for dialogue and listening. It is important for participants to understand what these holy conversations are all about and what the ground rules will be for future sessions. This can also be a time for you to distribute the reading materials in print (or collect email addresses for electronic distribution). If you are unable to have a session to cover these things, it will be important to devote time during the first (and perhaps subsequent sessions) to review the guidelines.

**Duration.** The minimum time required for a particular conversation is probably around 90 minutes. If you need time to go over the guidelines for dialogue and listening, you may want to add another 30 minutes. You could also stretch a conversation over a couple of sessions or for a longer half-day or day-long session. For the latter, you may want to add in such things as time for journaling or a creative/experiential art project as a way of helping people connect with their own experiences prior to engaging in group discussions.

**Small & Large Groups.** 5-6 people is probably ideal for small group discussion in order to optimize the amount and quality of sharing that can take place. If your full class is fewer than 10-12, you may elect to have all of the conversations take place in one slightly larger group. If your space allows for it, space in separate rooms with enough space for contained conversation is ideal. You could be flexible and just allow the group to talk together, or if you feel it would be helpful or necessary, you could select a group leader and/or recording person in advance.

**Topic Order.** The order of these sessions is arbitrary. You can choose to present and engage in discussions about these topics in any order that suits you. You may want to group subjects that seem to go well together if you are having smaller series. We are hoping to develop additional topical resources that will be available throughout the year. Please let us know if you have specific topics you would like resources for.