

SACRED GROUND

A FILM-BASED DIALOGUE SERIES ON RACE AND FAITH

FACILITATOR PREPARATION GUIDE



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This section is to help dialogue circle initiators and facilitators (who may or may not be the same people) prepare for hosting successful Sacred Ground dialogue circles. Please be sure to read the “Participant Preparation Guide” as well, as it covers information relevant to both participants and facilitators that is not provided below.

I. STRUCTURE/FORMAT

There are a few interconnected choices you will need to make about the structure/format of the *Sacred Ground Dialogue Series*. You may wish to take the lead in orchestrating these decisions ahead of time via one-on-one conversations with participants as they are considering signing up, or it may make more sense to have this be a set of group decisions made in-person during the first session.

a. Whether to watch the films together

A key decision is whether the dialogue circle watches the assigned films together and then discusses them, or whether participants watch the films on their own at home and then gather as a circle to discuss in the following session. The password for accessing the films can be shared with dialogue circle members so they can stream them online at home for viewing. Note: Please familiarize yourself with the restrictions that exist as part of The Episcopal Church’s licensing of the films and readings (which are explained in a section of the “Participant Preparation Guide”), and take leadership in making sure participants abide by them.

Watching the films together provides the opportunity to discuss them when participants are likely feeling the height of the emotional and spiritual impact of the film(s). But this requires scheduling longer sessions, or curtailing dialogue time, relatively speaking. Watching the films at home allows for more time for dialogue during sessions. Some people also prefer to have time to “digest” films before talking about them.

Another option is to do a hybrid: periodically opting to watch films together and, otherwise, watching them at home. Since there are some sessions that have two (shorter) films assigned, those could be occasions for watching one at home and one together.

An additional option is to create “buddies” or smaller sub-circles. People could plan to watch the films at home with one, two, or three fellow participants – thereby getting an opportunity for immediate heart-to-heart processing, prior to being in dialogue with the larger circle. This can be useful if some participants don’t have the necessary technology at home for optimal viewing.

b. Frequency of sessions

A related decision is how often to meet. If your circle of participants wishes to hold longer sessions for the sake of watching the films together, then that may be a good reason to hold the sessions less frequently.

In any case, it is not recommended that groups meet weekly. There is likely too much material to read and view (especially if watching the films at home) for most people to have time to keep up if sessions are weekly. And time to digest is essential. Please consider meeting every two or three weeks. Monthly is an option but may feel too infrequent to keep up a sense of momentum.

In order to give groups the freedom to start this dialogue series at any time of year, the series is not tied to the Church calendar. But the facilitator(s)/organizers may meet with their church leaders to consider how the flow of the series can resonate with the seasons of the Church year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost.

As you consider the content of the syllabus (amount of reading and viewing time), and the cycles of your church life, you may wish to entertain the following alternatives:

- Break up the series into two parts, such as Sessions 1-6 and then Sessions 7-10.
- Break up the series into three parts, such as Sessions 1-3, Sessions 4-6, and Sessions 7-10.
- Have more than 10 sessions, as the fullness of some sessions might suggest dividing some in two.
- Combine some of the sessions into a retreat or a daylong gathering, such as at the beginning (Sessions 1-2) and/or the conclusion of the series (Sessions 9-10).
- Decrease the amount of assigned viewing and reading in order to meet more frequently or to make the series more manageable. In this case, please use your discretion to cut some of the material in the syllabus.

c. Format of sessions

Please see the “Recommended Format for Sessions” document that will be available in the password-protected area of this site to dialogue groups once they have registered. In addition to adjusting the recommended format, you are welcome to consider adapting the syllabus. You may wish to add or substitute readings that are particularly relevant to your community, or that you have found effective in antiracism work in the past.

2. RESPONSIBILITY FOR FACILITATION

This *Sacred Ground Study Guide* is offered in the spirit of trusting that congregations can “do-it-yourself,” while also wanting to acknowledge that this material isn’t easy.

Facilitation will be important, and ideally, it should be done by people who are trained and/or experienced in leading groups, whether laypeople or clergy. This can either be one person or two co-facilitators who play that role throughout the series (two is preferable). There can be real value in having consistency in that role. Or, you may decide (by choice or necessity) to have rotating facilitators. That can be a way to cultivate a sense of shared responsibility, to honor the diversity of styles and outlooks in the circle, and to develop more people’s leadership gifts. Given the importance of having facilitators stay as neutral as possible during discussions, rotating the facilitation responsibility also can mean that every member of the group gets to wear a “participant hat” more fully.

If your group strongly desires a trained facilitator and no one in your circle has those qualifications, you can ask about trainers/facilitators associated with the antiracism committee in your diocese or province. There are many wonderful, skilled, trainers/facilitators in the Episcopal family. You also might check via other organizations or networks, such as the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation. There exist many local, regional, and national organizations specifically dedicated to dialogue on race/racism. You may need to budget to pay one or two facilitators.

If your group is an interracial circle, or taking a hybrid approach, it becomes all the more important to have co-facilitators: a person of color and a white person. If you are a group composed of white folks, there is still value in co-facilitation: for the sake of capturing some of the other forms of diversity in the circle (such as two congregations coming together), and to keep the responsibility from falling on one person.

Lastly, you can consider having a designated “deeper dive” person who is different than the facilitator, if possible. This person does more reading and viewing than the rest of the group, pulling from the “deeper dive” list of optional resources for each session (see the “Deeper Dive” document) and sharing resulting reflections with the group. This, too, can be a rotating role. At the start of the series, each participant could sign up to do the deeper dive for one or more sessions.

3. THE SETTING AND SETUP OF SPACE FOR CIRCLES

Here are a few important considerations:

- Consider the value of rotating between churches if members of several congregations are part of your circle.
- If your group is small, you may wish to consider meeting in rotating homes.
- If you have decided to watch films together, you will want to arrange the equipment for streaming and projection: ideally a hardwired internet connection to a laptop, a connection between the laptop and a projector, a screen, and speakers. Or, if your congregation has a large enough television screen, you can use that if it connects to a laptop for streaming online content, or if it has internet connectivity built in.
- Comfort matters (temperature, warm light, comfortable chairs).
- Think about food and drinks (for instance, since this series asks participants to be vulnerable and perhaps eat some “humble pie,” participants could take turns bringing pies that have a family or cultural significance for them).
- Have hymnals available if you wish to sing together at each session.
- Arrange access to a labyrinth if you wish to walk it for some sessions. (Once you register for this series, please see more on using a labyrinth in the “Notes to facilitators” section of Session 1 of the *Study Guide*.)

We also want to underscore the value of the dialogue circle – of setting up your chairs in an open circle. Many cultures value the circle. Here is one articulation of that, by George Tinker, from his book *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty* (p. 48):

Our prayers are most often said with the community assembled into some form of circle. In fact, the circle is a key symbol for self-understanding in these tribes, representing the whole of the universe and our part in it. We see ourselves as coequal participants in the circle standing neither above nor below anything else in the created world. There is no hierarchy in our cultural context, even of species, because the circle has no beginning or end. Hence all the createds participate together each in their own way, to preserve the wholeness of the circle. So when a group of Indians forms a circle to pray, all know that the prayers have already begun with the representation of a circle. No words have yet been spoken.

4. GROUP AGREEMENTS, EFFECTIVE FACILITATION, AND WEBINARS

Please take care to establish norms in the group for gracious, generous listening and sharing, and prepare yourself to be effective at facilitating this kind of transformative dialogue.

a. Establish group agreements or norms for dialogue

A suggested set of group norms is provided for download once congregations register and receive access to the *Study Guide*, or you can see them now here. You may use these recommended ones, you may have some that you are already accustomed to using, or your group may wish to devise its own together from scratch. The process of deciding how you want to “be” together is of fundamental importance in itself, as it gets at core concepts, such as what it means to truly listen, to share in vulnerable ways, to respect differences of opinion and of communication style, to track power dynamics, to argue in healthy ways, to be open to persuasion, to allow silence, and to invite grace. It becomes an immediate opportunity to “practice the way of love” here and now with each other. If you use any preexisting guidelines (versus ones you create together), it can be helpful to take the time to ask for conversation on each one, inviting dialogue circle members to share what they see as the meaning and importance of each. You may find that the agreements need revisiting periodically.

b. Prepare for effective facilitation

Facilitators obviously have an essential role to play in making transformational dialogue possible. Your leadership will be a gift to this process. We encourage you to read through the following web-linked resource on effective facilitation offered by the University of Missouri’s Division of Inclusion, Diversity & Equity: *Guide to Facilitating Dialogues*. We also recommend an article by the Rev. William Kondrath called “Feelings, Substitution, and Emotional Transparency,” which is connected to his book *Facing Feelings in Faith Communities*. His articulation of how to cultivate emotional intelligence in church settings is very relevant to the emotionally-loaded conversations on race you will be facilitating.

c. Participate in webinars

The Episcopal Church’s Becoming Beloved Community team and our partners will offer several webinars to support Sacred Ground dialogue circle organizers and facilitators:

- During the process of organizing a dialogue circle (or deciding whether to)
- During implementation of the dialogue series – this will be a chance to receive guidance, troubleshoot, compare notes with each other, and give us feedback on how things are working

Stay tuned to the website and/or be sure to share your email address so we can alert you to upcoming webinars. We will be eager to receive feedback, especially from those who engage in this project in its first phase of rollout, so that we can update the *Study Guide* with improvements generated from your experience.

5. ENGAGEMENT WITH YOUR CONGREGATION(S)

The wider congregation(s) should be welcomed to engage with those who are taking the Sacred Ground journey. This broader community can lend its spiritual attention and support to those who are, on behalf of the congregation, seeking to discern how God is calling the community to grow toward becoming beloved community. Here are a few suggestions on how to do that. You may envision other ways, too.

a. Commissioning service

Before beginning this series with your newly formed local dialogue circle, please consider, with the relevant church leaders, “commissioning” participants during a regular worship service. This would be a powerful way to ask for blessings and prayers, at that moment and ongoing. Ideally, the service would involve not only a commissioning prayer/ritual, but also a sermon dedicated to some aspect of the congregational aspirations for Becoming Beloved Community/Sacred Ground. Such a service could also be a way to set an intention and expectation for sharing at the conclusion of the dialogue journey. If there is more than one congregation involved, there can be multiple commissioning services.

b. Reporting back and engaging the congregation in next steps

It is expected that, at the conclusion of the series, participants will wish to take some concrete next steps. Be generous and engage fellow parishioners in those commitments. Please collaborate with church leaders to determine what form this reporting back and engagement might best take.

c. Closing liturgy

In addition to having some form of closing ritual for your dialogue group, please also consider engaging the congregation(s) in a liturgy to mark the conclusion of your Sacred Ground journey. With support from clergy, members of the circle could design elements to incorporate into Sunday worship by way of sharing their learnings (one or more participants doing the sermon, a liturgical component, special hymns, prayers, etc.). If a new group wishes to start a dialogue circle, its members could be commissioned at this service.