A Dialogue in Biblical Interpretation and Human Sexuality
Dunwoody United Methodist Church
Discussion Guide

Introduction
On April 24, 2019, Dunwoody United Methodist Church, in conjunction with Candler School of Theology, hosted a public event titled, “A Dialogue in Biblical Interpretation and Human Sexuality.” This event was intended to model how devout followers of Christ can and do disagree on specific aspects of biblical interpretation even as they mutually affirm the authority of Scripture and pursue open, honest, and constructive dialogue, especially as it relates to the results of the called General Conference of the United Methodist Church in February 2019.

The event featured presentations by two Candler professors, Rev. Dr. Kevin Watson, Associate Professor of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies, and Rev. Dr. Kendall Soulen, Professor of Systematic Theology. In their presentations, Watson and Soulen offer opposing biblical perspectives on marriage and homosexuality within Christian communities. The two presentations were followed by a time of audience Q&A. Rev. Dan Brown, Senior Pastor of Dunwoody UMC, and Dr. Jan Love, the Mary Lee Hardin Willard Dean of Candler School of Theology, co-moderated the event.

You are invited to watch the videos of the two presentations as well as the ensuing audience Q&A. The discussion questions below are intended to help Sunday School classes, Bible studies, or small groups process and respond to what they heard, adding their own questions, comments, and insights.

Question 1
Did you hear your own view on the issue of marriage and human sexuality reflected in the dialogue? If so, by which speaker?

Question 2
After hearing both sides of the dialogue, what one thing did you come away better understanding or appreciating about the other view?

Question 3
Dr. Watson argued that the UMC’s position forbidding Christian marriage and ordination to gays and lesbians represents the church’s resistance to the dominant culture: “The church is always in danger when its values run too closely in alignment with the dominant culture.”
a. If you favor the Traditional Plan, to what extent is it because you think that church should resist the dominant culture’s support of same-sex marriage?
b. If you do not favor the Traditional Plan, can you think of an instance in which the church would agree with the dominant culture on a given topic but in a way that is still faithful to the gospel?

Question 4
Dr. Soulen argues that marriage is a “school of holiness” – an instrument to train individuals to become more Christ-like in their love.

a. In your opinion, does, or how does, the gender of the spouses affect whether a marriage can function as a school of holiness?
b. Regardless of your view on same-sex marriage, what do you find helpful about this understanding of the purpose of marriage?

Question 5
Dr. Watson argues that there is a “narrative arc” in Scripture that would allow one to affirm women in ordained ministry even though a handful of biblical texts prohibit it. But, he argues, no such narrative arc exists with respect to the issue of homosexuality.

a. What biblical stories or themes can you think of that might lead one to believe the ordination of gays and lesbians is permissible, even in the absence of explicit texts that say “thou shall ordain gays and lesbians”?
b. If you favor the Traditional Plan, what would you say in response to texts like these?

Question 6
Dr. Soulen reminds us that the Scriptures condemn a variety of sexual practices that are accepted in the church today. One example is remarriage after divorce. The United Methodist Church does allow those who have been remarried to be ordained. Do you find the UMC’s position on permitting remarriage for heterosexuals but not permitting marriage for homosexuals to be inconsistent? Why or why not?

Question 7
Both Dr. Soulen and Dr. Watson expressed respect for and friendship with each other. At the beginning of his lecture, Dr. Watson—even while opposing Dr. Soulen’s view—pointed to Dr. Soulen and said, “this is a follower of Jesus Christ.” How does beginning conversations in this manner change the way the conversations end?

Question 8
What was the most helpful thing you learned from this dialogue? What is one question you still have about this topic?