

# Love One Another: Listening in the Faithful Community

## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

### Introduction

This program guides small groups in approaching controversial issue by exploring the advantages of operating from a reconciling model rather than an adversarial one. After working through one issue, individuals can apply the model to other issues and situations.

The first section of *Love One Another* describes the orientation session, which introduces group members to concepts and skills they will need throughout the process. The next section describes the program used for each subsequent session: the “Microscope Method,” which is summarized in a handout. The resource concludes with remarks about closing a *Love One Another* series, and includes handouts (which can also be used as overheads) that you can reproduce.

*Love One Another* is not about solving problems or managing conflict. Rather, it is about using a teaching tool to open people up to the complexity of every issue. It’s about listening—for God, in each other, with each other. It demands that participants do a certain amount of self-reflection and self-disclosure. It takes commitment of both time and effort. It is not about “quick fixes.” Those who choose to utilize this program will find it rewarding and worth their investment.

### Overview of the Program

As baptized Christians we are joined in a body, the Body of Christ. The ministry of all baptized Christians is the reconciliation of the world through Christ. *We understand reconciliation as a process of mutual conversion* that leads to creative change in persons and relationships, not in ideologies or “positions.” Within an atmosphere of respect and trust, we know that we can shed our cultural shields as adversaries and become open, even vulnerable, to one another as human beings. We can allow ourselves to be affected by those with whom we disagree. We are open to listening for the truth in what someone else has to say. We can drop the strategy of the adversary—we can stop listening *only* for the weak points of what the other has to say. It is possible to speak what we perceive as the truth, including some of our own doubts and inconsistencies, because our goal is to arrive at a fuller realization of the truth, not simply to articulate an invulnerable position. In such an atmosphere, the Spirit of Christ is present and can draw us more deeply into the mystery of our life in God and God’s life in us. Only then may we all come to “see” aspects of the issue that were not apparent through the adversarial method.

*Love One Another* shows people in small groups a new way of coming at an issue, and lets them feel the difference it makes to operate from a reconciling rather than an adversarial model. Having worked through the model on one specific issue, individuals will see it as

applicable to a broad range of issues. And each person will have a true feel for the whole range of values—emotional, cultural, religious—that we bring to every position that we hold on any issue. Our positions can then be held in a reconciling rather than an adversarial mode. As we live within the tensions of our differences over time, we will all arrive at a fuller understanding of God’s will for the social order.

Our model for theological reflection is designed for small groups to explore the moral context of issues. Our assumption about social reality is expressed in the passage from Luke 24: “While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus drew near....” We have attempted to provide a structure by which people can, in dialogue with one another, organize and reflect upon their experience of the Christian tradition and our cultural norms.

Any controversial issue is not so much a problem to be solved as an invitation to enter more fully into the pain and confusion and struggle of our social order, not as adversaries but as reconcilers; not as invulnerable, but vulnerable; not as unaffected, but as deeply affected by one another; so that we can begin to heal our wounds. In this way, the risen Christ can draw near and open our eyes to God’s presence in our midst.

### **About the Leader’s Guide**

The Leader’s Guide is a step-by-step description of how to run a *Love One Another* group. The first section describes the orientation session, which introduces group members to concepts and skills they will need throughout the process. The next section describes the process used for each subsequent session: the *Microscope Method*, which is summarized in a handout. The resource concludes with remarks about closing a *Love One Another* series, and includes handouts (which can also be used as overheads) that you can reproduce.

The handouts can be distributed at the points indicated, or you may want to prepare a participant’s booklet. You can do that by copying most or all of the handouts and the introductory article (above). A cover page for a participant’s booklet is included, along with some additional pages you may wish to use if the group proceeds to developing an action plan.

# Orientation Session

**Supplies** needed for this session:

- Newsprint/Handouts/Overheads:
  - ▶ Attending.
  - ▶ Listening.
  - ▶ Love One Another.
  - ▶ The Task of the Listener.
  - ▶ The Task of the Communicator.
  - ▶ Communicator, Listener, Sacred.
  - ▶ Metaphor.
  - ▶ Choosing a Story.
  - ▶ Microscope Method.
- Name tags.
- Magic markers, newsprint and masking tape.
- Bible or copies of the scripture passage, Luke 24:13-35.

**Introduction**

*Plenary*

**25 minutes**

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Describe the objectives for this session:

**Objective:** the orientation session prepares the group for the rest of the *Love One Another* program. By the end of the session, participants will have:

- Established a contract or agreement together about common commitments to the group and about ground rules.
- Explored and practiced good listening skills.
- Explored their own and others' expectations.
- Learned to identify metaphors or images as a basis for theological reflection.
- Lead an introductory discussion, including:
  - The purpose of *Love One Another*.
  - The group's contract; write agreements on newsprint.
  - Confidentiality.
  - Schedule (when, start, end times).
  - Leader's role (facilitate, not give answers).
  - Participants' roles.

- Use of “I-language” (“I feel” vs. “They say” or “We should”).
- Expectations.

Briefly present, in your own words, the concepts in *A Statement of Theological Context* (above). You may also want to distribute this as a handout before or after the meeting, or include it in a participant’s book.

**Getting started** *Plenary* **10 minutes**

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Post the following working definitions on newsprint  
 Project them on an overhead **and/or**  
 Distribute them as a handout

**Attending** is a manner of being present to another person.

**Listening** is what we do while we attend.

**Love One Another—Working Definition:** Listening for the sacred is a kind of listening, open to that which speaks to both of us as we listen to one another.

Invite discussion about these subjects.

Post a newsprint entitled **The Task of the Listener**

Make two subheadings:

**Things one pays attention to  
 when listening carefully**

**Skills necessary  
 for good listening**

Then ask the participants to generate lists to be entered under each heading. These lists should include:

## Things to pay attention to

### when listening

- What is the person describing?
- How is the person feeling?
- Where does the person place the emphasis?
- What produces the most energy?
- What kinds of words, metaphors, and images do they use?
- What does their body language say?
- Summarize: There are many levels to listen for.

### listening skills

- Paying attention to the speaker; communicating care.
- Understanding his or her point of view.
- Making no interpretations or criticisms.
- Asking questions to clarify one's understanding only.
- Concentrating.
- Listening is work!

Remaining work in this session includes:

<b>Practice Session</b>	<i>Pairs</i>	<b>25 minutes</b>
<hr/> <b>Reflecting on the Listening Experience</b>		
<b>Take a break!</b>		<b>10 Minutes</b>
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<b>Introduction to Theological Reflection: Bible Study, Luke 24: 13-35</b>	<i>Plenary</i>	<b>30 minutes</b>
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<b>Looking toward the next session</b>	<i>Plenary</i>	<b>15 minutes</b>
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The following pages summarize a portion of the Microscope Method used in subsequent sessions:

## Samples from the Microscope Method

The **Microscope Method** is the heart of *Love One Another*. It is presented here in a form adapted by permission from Education for Ministry, the theological education by extension program of the School of Theology of the University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee. What follows is a step-by-step description of the process, with notes of explanation and clarification.

There are several ways to help participants learn this method. If this is to be a training session for several ongoing small groups, invite one person to be the *presenter* for this session so all can see how the method works. Then have each small group repeat the process with other group members taking the role of the presenter. If this is a group which is exploring an issue, invite one person to be the first presenter with the understanding that other participants will be the presenter later. Then lead the group through the process outlined below. If you have more than eight people, divide into smaller groups.

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**Preparation** *Plenary* **10 minutes**

Welcome participants and begin with a prayer or opening worship.

Review “The Listener’s Task” from session one. Remind participants that it is their task to be good listeners for steps 1 through 4.

Review also “Choosing a Story” (distributed as a handout at the end of the previous session) to remind the first communicator of his or her task.

Then review **The Microscope Method** (also distributed as a handout last time)

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**Step 1: Tell A Story** *Plenary* **5 minutes**

Invite the storyteller to tell their “slice of life” experience.

- People in the group are permitted to ask questions for clarification only, not to interpret, problem-solve, or criticize. They are, rather, to “hear” the storyteller—to listen carefully enough to try to understand what the experience

meant for the speaker. For this session, they are on the speaker's side. They are giving the speaker the gift of attention (refer to newsprint/handout: Attending/Listening).

- At first, group members may need to be gently reminded of their task as listeners. Help them distinguish between listening and evaluating.

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**Step 2: List the Shifts in Action** *Small Groups* **10 minutes**

Ask the storyteller and the group together to rehearse the outline of the story. This is the “reporting back” part of listening.

As convener, list the different steps in the outline on newsprint.

Then ask the group to help the storyteller decide which shift in action was the key one for the person. Or, if there is more than one key moment, decide together which one to use as a focus. The focal moment needs to be **one moment**—not a day or year, but a moment of experience.

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**Recapture Thoughts and Feelings** *Small Groups* **2-3 minutes**

The storyteller responds to two questions, and the convener lists the two or three sentence-long responses to each one:

- “How did you feel at that moment?” and
- “What thoughts went through your head at that moment?”

This only needs to take a couple of minutes.

This step is the storyteller's job alone. Other group members will be tempted to add their thoughts and feelings in response, especially if they didn't have enough time to clarify their impressions in step 1. If they do, gently point out what they are doing, and remind them of the limited focus of this step: understanding the storyteller's moment from his or her own point of view.

Group members may also ask for clarification at this point, making observations about the storyteller's presentation and asking questions about the person's thoughts and feelings based on the story. The storyteller can respond, which will also help differentiate between a group member's careful listening and observations on the one hand and interpretation or evaluation on the other.

In steps 1 and 3, while participants are learning listening skills, they may ask leading questions of the sort, “You mean, you didn't feel...?” or “Did you see what

the other person was probably feeling...?” These questions communicate the desire to problem-solve, interpret, or criticize; and you as the convener must identify them as “off-task.”

You must also protect the integrity of the story that has been told, and of the storyteller who has taken the risk to open up about his or her own life. In discussions about highly charged topics, chances are that people will react to others in judgment, anger, or with another strong feeling. It is natural that such feelings are generated by conflicts in deeply-felt convictions, values, and commitments, and there can be room for them in a *Love One Another* group. You must help both parties see the personal basis of their feelings—in life experiences. Then remind the group that the task at hand is to listen and understand—not to make decisions or change another’s point of view. You may have to remind participants that each person will have the opportunity to be the storyteller—that is, the center of attention—and that the group must give each person in turn the same quality of attention.

After the group has heard the storyteller’s thoughts and feelings and clarified any confusion or questions about the focal moment, move on.

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**Step 4: Empathetic Feedback: Identifying the Attitudes, Opinions, and Beliefs of the Presenter**      *Small Groups*      **5-10 minutes**

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In this step, the group gives the storyteller a gift. You will record their observations about what they see to be the attitudes, opinions, commitments, etc., shaping the way the presenter experienced the focal moment.

Then give this record of qualities others have seen to the storyteller. In this step, it is especially important for group members to provide observations rather than criticism.

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**Step 5: The Group Identifies with the Feelings and Thoughts Associated with the Focal Moment**      *Small Groups*      **10 minutes**

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We will not be returning to the initial story. And in step 5, we move away from the focal point as well. In this step, draw the group’s attention strictly to the newsprint listing, “Thoughts, 1, 2, 3...” and “Feelings, 1, 2, 3...”

Give participants a few moments to think of times they felt those feelings or when those thoughts went through their minds.

Give them five minutes or so to relate these experiences to each other as they choose.

**Step 6: Generate a Metaphor** *Small Groups*

**5-7 minutes**

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**—End of Sample Pages—**

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