**Crossing Lines of Difference**

One of the most challenging aspects to living in community is authentically engaging those among us with whom we differ. Acknowledging and celebrating these differences are important aspects of living into the fullness and greatness to which we are called as a community. One of the first steps to learning how to engage in conversations about difference is to explore the roles of power and privilege in our lives and in the Church. Today’s session invites us to begin that exploration.

**A Reading for Reflection:**

From William M. Kondrath’s “God’s Tapestry: Understanding and Celebrating Differences”

This may be the most liberating chapter of the book for some readers. For others, it may be quite unnerving…In my experience, our ability to examine and our comfort in examining issues of power and privilege depend in large measure on how much power we have, or think we have, in various aspects of our life—and how much privilege we think we may lose if our privilege comes under scrutiny. Even if we are willing to look at issues of power and privilege—especially as they affect us personally—this examination may be difficult if we are used to thinking about power and privilege as something earned or acquired by individual effort. Those of us who are born white or male or in a wealthy family have certain economic and political advantages compared to those who are born persons of color, female, or poor. These advantages and disadvantages have more to do with the groups we are born into than they have to do with our effort or personality. Power and privilege are not randomly or equitably distributed, and so some of us may feel guilty about our comparative good fortune or angry about our relative ill fortune. Those of us who benefit from the inequality may be uncomfortable discussing it. Those of us who experience economic injustice or who struggle to attain greater access to power are often more than willing to speak about who has power and how the dynamics of power and privilege affect them.

By *power* I mean the ability to do or to be. The ability to do is often the capacity to bring about a change in oneself, in one’s circumstances, in relationships, even in the wider world. The ability to be refers to the ability to be oneself, to be free, to express one’s true thoughts and emotions…Power does not have to mean aggression—power *over* another person—or the limitation or diminishment of others.

By *privilege*, I mean the benefits conferred to members of the dominant group simply by virtue of their membership in that group. Such privilege is unearned, not the result of achievement or work, but conferred by the virtue of an unjust system of power distribution.

For those of us who move through life with little, or much less, power relative to those around us, talking about power and privilege ensures that conversations about differences will have substance rather than avoid the elephant in the middle of the room…For these people, discussions of differences that include reflections on privilege and power are liberating, though often painful…

Some people, by virtue of membership in dominant groups have a significant amount of power, privilege, and access to resources relative to others. Reflecting upon this imbalance of power, privilege, and access can be frightening if we have not done it before or if our prior reflection has been in an adversarial context. We may fear loss of power, privilege, status…We may prefer to think that we have earned the power and status we have: we have worked hard to get what we have, and we sure as heck don’t want to give it up. Our fear is amplified if we believe we live in a zero-sum world—that when one person gains power or resources, someone else has to lose.

**Questions for Discussion:**

1. Every one of us inhabits multiple social groupings, some of which may be dominant, and others non-dominant. Here is a list of groupings common in the U.S., identify to which you belong:
   1. Gender: Male/ Female
   2. Age: Middle-aged/ Elderly
   3. Sexual orientation: Heterosexual/ Homosexual
   4. Race: White / Non-white
   5. Religion: Christian / non-Christian
   6. Education: College-educated / not College-educated
   7. Employment: Employed/Un-employed

In your experience, which of each of these groupings has felt dominant? Non-dominant? In categorizing yourself from a to g, are there both dominant and non-dominant categories included? Do you have any experiences you want to share that arise from any of these specific categories? What have your experiences been in a dominant group? What about a non-dominant group?

1. Keeping in mind the possibility that you may have experiences as part of both dominant and non-dominant groups, what are your reflections on power? On privilege?
2. How are you experiencing this discussion? What feelings is it bringing up for you? What will you take away from it?

**A Prayer**

This prayer will have everyone join hands in a circle and then take a moment to silently complete the sentences:

I thank God today for…

I ask God today for…

Whoever feels moved to start the prayer begins by completing these two sentences for herself or himself. After he or she has shared, he/she squeezes the hand of the person to the right. That will be the signal for the next person to share his or her prayers. If the person does not want to  
share, he or she can simply pass the pulse to the next person. When the pulse comes back to the person who started, he or she can begin the Lord’s Prayer and invite everyone to join in.