

What Is Marriage For?

A LEADER'S GUIDE

Adapted from *At Issue: Marriage, Exploring the Debate over Marriage Rights for Same-Sex Couples*
Leader's Guide, by Scott Hirschfeld
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What Is Marriage For?: The Strange Social History of our Most Intimate Institution

by E.J. Graff

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This guide was adapted from *At Issue: Marriage, Exploring the Debate over Marriage Rights for Same-Sex Couples*, published by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). The complete 6-lesson guide is available from the GLSEN Bookstore at www.atlasbooks.com/glsen or 1-800-247-6553.

Introduction

In *What is Marriage For?: The Strange Social History of our Most Intimate Institution*, E.J. Graff describes marriage as “a kind of Jerusalem, an archaeological site on which the present is constantly building over the past, letting history’s many layers twist and tilt into today’s walls and floors.” Indeed, the institution of marriage has changed dramatically over the centuries to reflect evolving understandings of family, money, sex, love and power. Graff traces Western marriage customs and rules of law from their emergence in ancient times to the present.

Although many of the rules we consider to be “tradition” in marriage are surprisingly recent, dissenters have often claimed that changes in marriage laws would lead to “disease and the collapse of marriage, the family, children, . . . morality, and civilization itself.” But marriage persists, though constantly redefined. Western law since 1800 has increasingly supported sexual and emotional choice, and same-sex marriages inevitably progress from this movement. Graff explains why so many same-sex couples think the time is right to make a public claim to this institution.

This program will encourage your congregation to share ideas about evolving notions of marriage. The objectives of this program are:

- to investigate historical beliefs and practices with regard to marriage;
- to explore modern marriage customs and laws, and the belief system inherent in them;
- to examine attitudes toward marriage of same-sex couples against current beliefs about the purpose of marriage; and
- to develop a personal definition of marriage (both what it is and why we do it).

During the discussion sessions, participants will examine laws and customs of bygone eras to better understand underlying beliefs and assumptions. They will also explore current practices to determine the extent to which these practices reflect modern values and assumptions about marriage. Finally, they will consider how a faith community can honor each individual spirit as we “live up to the rigorous demands of love.”

The Beacon Press Discussion Guides for Unitarian Universalist Congregations aim to reflect and reinforce the Principles and Purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Getting Started

Promote the Program

Many congregations have a number of resources for publicizing new programs in the community. It is always a good idea to create flyers and post notices on bulletin boards and in newsletters. Announcements could also be made during meetings and services. You might consider targeting specific groups to embark on this journey. For example, your congregation's couples group might use this program to explore personal definitions of marriage. Some congregations promote new programs by organizing "Kick-off Sundays," which include a sermon by a minister or lay leader about a topic related to the program.

Adjust the Format as Needed

This program calls for participants to conduct brief interviews, read *What Is Marriage For?: The Strange Social History of Our Most Intimate Institution*, by E.J. Graff, write journal entries, and take part in two 90-minute discussion sessions. (The format can be adapted to one session.) We recommend a group size of no more than twelve people.

Provide a Comfortable Space

Hold the sessions in a comfortable, well-lit setting, preferably with cushioned chairs arranged in a circle. Some discussions will be carried out in small groups (3-4 people), so it is important to find a space that will enable uninterrupted discussion for small groups as well as for the larger group. The discussion sessions call for information to be recorded on newsprint, so you will need adequate wall space or easels to display what has been written.

Involve the Group in Setting the Tone

Make it clear to participants that everyone must take responsibility for creating an environment that is welcoming and conducive to open dialogue. Bring to the group's attention the importance of active listening, thoughtful responses and mutual respect.

Some people have a tendency to be more vocal than others. If a few people clearly dominate the conversation, you might need to open a space for those who have not had a chance to speak to do so if they wish.

As a discussion leader it is important to establish a balance between too much control and too little direction. It will be important to be responsive as you facilitate the discussion and draw people out, yet keep the discussion on track.

We suggest that the group draft a set of ground rules at the beginning of the first session, post them on newsprint, and review them at the beginning of the second session. If all participants give input, everyone will be accountable to the group's needs. Ground rules might include such items as: maintain confidentiality—don't repeat personal stories outside of the group; give full attention to the person who is speaking; turn off pagers and cell phones; and so forth.

Prepare for the First Session

Well in advance of the first session (3-4 weeks prior), let participants know that their homework assignment will entail the following:

1. Read *What Is Marriage For?*
2. Poll at least three people, and to write down their responses to these questions:
 - What is marriage?
 - Why do people marry?

Remember to photocopy enough of HANDOUTS #1 and #2 for everyone to have a copy during the first session. Also, you might ask volunteers to provide refreshments and perhaps a light snack.

Evaluate the Program

Two evaluation forms are provided in the last pages of this guide. Participant Evaluation Forms should be distributed at the end of the final session so participants can give feedback to group leaders. (Note that questions 7 and 8 on the form give leaders a chance to pose their own questions to participants.) Also, be sure to send Beacon Press your completed Leader Evaluation Form. We are striving to meet the program needs of UU congregations, and your continued feedback and suggestions will bring us a long way toward reaching our goal. We really want to hear from you!

Materials: Copies of HANDOUTS #1 and #2 for each participant, newsprint, markers, pens, and masking tape

Opening and Check-In: (15 minutes)

Welcome participants and make sure everyone knows where to find restrooms, water, a telephone, etc. Introduce the program, allowing time for people to ask basic questions. Circulate a sheet of paper and ask everyone to write down their contact information for your records.

Both sessions will begin with a general check-in. In this first session, participants should introduce themselves and briefly state their expectations for the program.

Ask a volunteer to record on newsprint as participants determine ground rules for participation in this group (see “Getting Started”). Post the rules and review them at the beginning of the next session.

■ **Part 1**

Defining Marriage and Its Purpose (25 minutes)

As mentioned in the “Getting Started” section, participants should be given the following homework assignment 3-4 weeks before the first session:

Read *What Is Marriage For?*, by E.J. Graff, then poll at least three people and to write down their responses to the questions, What is marriage? and Why do people marry?

Activity:

Divide participants into groups of 3-4 to share the ideas they gathered from the interviews. Though the questions may initially seem simple and straightforward, they are deceptively complex and will likely elicit a broad range of responses. After about 10 minutes of discussion, ask each group to write on a piece of newsprint a definition of marriage that reflects their beliefs about the purposes and meanings of the institution. As each group finishes, ask them to post their definition on the wall. Invite participants to take a “gallery walk” to survey the statements that each group developed. If time permits, allow participants to respond to one another’s definitions, and to further explore the meaning of marriage.

Break: (10 minutes)

■ Part 2

Evolving Understandings of Marriage (30 minutes)

For the moment, set aside the group definitions of marriage. Note that thoughts about marriage have changed dramatically over the centuries as people's ideas about love and sex, money and power have developed. Examining past marriage practices and laws can provide us with some interesting insights into evolving understandings of the purposes of marriage.

Have participants break down into small groups (3-4) again, but encourage them work with different people as often as possible. Give each participant a copy of HANDOUT #1—Evolving Understandings of Marriage and the accompanying chart (HANDOUT #2).

Assign each group 1 or 2 of the items on the sheet. (Alternatively, cut the sheet into strips and hand 1 or 2 strips out to each group). Inform participants that the sheet (or strips) describes marriage laws or customs from a variety of cultures and eras. Inherent in each law or custom is a set of attitudes or beliefs about the purpose of marriage in that time and place.

Challenge participants to list as many attitudes as they can discern from the stated law/custom. For example, dowry requirements presume an understanding of marriage as an economic venture. Prohibitions of contraception and abortion point to understandings of marriage primarily as a vehicle for procreation. And interracial marriage bans support the idea that marriage is a way to perpetuate one's race, presumably with the dominant race considering itself to be superior to others. When participants have finished, allow time for them to share their ideas with the larger group.

Preparation for the Next Session: (5 minutes)

Tell participants that their assignment for the next session will consist of a journal entry reflecting their answers to the question below:

Graff refers to the right-wing assertion that marriage is “one single thing”—the union between one man and one woman. Do you agree with this definition? Why or why not? Do you view marriage, as we currently know it, as an institution to be preserved, or do you feel that it should change with the times? How would the definition/rules impact society?

Note that this is for participants' private reflection, and will not be turned in or shared.

Closing Circle: (5 minutes)

Joining hands, invite participants to share the first thing that comes to mind when they think of marriage, be it a song, poem, memory or humorous thought.

Materials: Copies of HANDOUTS #3 and #4 for each participant, newsprint, markers, pens and masking tape

Check-In: (5 minutes)

Ask participants to take a moment to meditate and center, breathing deeply and bringing themselves completely to the room. Briefly review the ground rules.

■ Part 1

Modern Understandings of Marriage (30 minutes)

Have participants separate into groups of 3-4, encouraging them to join individuals that they have yet to work with. Ask the groups to discuss the questions posed on HANDOUT #3—Modern Understandings of Marriage.

After about 15 minutes of discussion, have participants reassemble as one large group, and ask:

What are some of the ways in which modern understandings of marriage differ from those we discussed in the first session?

Elicit laws or customs that participants feel are reflective of current marriage practice and underlying values. List each on newsprint. For example, they may point out that many couples choose to live together prior to getting married, that married couples file tax returns jointly, or that some couples choose not to have children. These practices reflect the ideas that marriage requires compatibility, economic interdependence, and that marriage is first and foremost about love—not procreation. If no one brings it up, list the fact that marriage is legally defined as the union between a man and a woman, that marriage of same-sex couples is not legally recognized in any of the 50 states. Ask participants to consider whether this law is consistent with the attitudes/beliefs about marriage that they have listed.

Break: (10 minutes)

■ Part 2

Attitudes toward Same-Sex Marriage (20 minutes)

Continue the discussion by asking the following questions:

If marriage is primarily a reflection of love, spiritual devotion, economic commitment, and so forth, is it justifiable to exclude individuals from the institution based upon sex/sexual orientation? Just as we have changed marriage laws to incorporate modern ideas about birth control, gender equality, and divorce, is it time again to amend the institution to protect the rights of sexual/gender minorities?

How deeply do we as a congregation support and affirm the needs and rights of sexual/gender minorities?

How can we as a faith community grow in our effort to honor each individual spirit as we “live up to the rigorous demands of love,” particularly in regards to marriage customs and laws within our congregation and in the larger society?

■ Part 3

Revisiting Our Definitions (10 minutes)

After participants have had ample time for discussion, ask them to revisit the definitions of marriage that they wrote in the first session. In their original small groups, ask them to consider whether or not their ideas about the meaning and purposes of marriage have shifted as a result of the class discussion. Give each group the option of revising their original definitions to incorporate new understandings. Re-post and share these statements before the session ends.

Closing Circle: (10 minutes)

Have participants gather together and join hands, and ask each person to offer an appreciation about the person standing to her/his left side.

Evaluations: (5 minutes)

Distribute Participant Evaluation Forms (HANDOUT #4). Ask participants to complete them and return them to you.

For further reading, we recommend the following Beacon books:

Here Lies My Heart: Essays on Why We Marry, A Beacon Anthology, 1999.

In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age, by Judith Stacey, 1996.

Homophobia: How We All Pay the Price, Warren Blumenfeld, ed., 1992.

A More Perfect Union: Why Straight America Must Stand Up for Gay Rights, by Richard D. Mohr, 1994.

Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue, by Leslie Feinberg, 1998.

Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman, by Leslie Feinberg, 1996.

Our Chosen Faith, by John Buehrens and Forrest Church, 1998.

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HANDOUT 1

Evolving Understandings of Marriage

1. In many societies, members were forbidden to marry outside the tribe, clan, culture, or religion, while marriage within the family was considered acceptable. The ancient Hebrews, for example, enforced strict rules against marrying foreigners, but had only the barest of rules against marrying within the family. The Romans allowed first cousins to marry, and early Germanic clans gave the nod to uncle/niece marriages.
2. For centuries, and in many different parts of the world, marriage could not take place without a *dowry*—the money, goods, or estate that a woman brought to her husband in marriage, or a gift of money or property by a man to or for his bride. In 1425, the city of Florence, Italy, even launched a savings-bond institution in which a family could invest for a daughter's future dowry with returns of up to 15.5% compounded annually, with both capital and interest paid to the husband after consummation.
3. For centuries, the most enduring slave systems—including the Greeks, Romans, Hebrews, medieval Germans, and Americans—denied legal recognition to slave marriages.
4. In many cultures, *polygamy* (marriage in which a spouse may have more than one mate at the same time) has been commonly practiced for centuries. At one time, Jewish law required a man whose first wife did not bear a child within ten years to marry another—with or without divorcing the first. In many African and Middle Eastern cultures, polygamy is still practiced today.
5. In the 1700s and 1800s, many laws extended the biblical idea that a husband and wife become “one flesh.” In British law, a 1765 statement by Lord Blackstone read, “In law husband and wife are one person, and the husband is that person.” This meant that a wife could own no personal property, make no personal contracts, and bring no lawsuits. The husband took over her legal identity—a concept called “coverture,” because his identity “covered” hers.
6. Before the 20th century, contraception (deliberate prevention of conception or impregnation) was widely viewed as immoral within the institution of marriage (especially in the West and among Christians). The 1876 book *Conjugal Sins* insisted that contraceptive attempts “degrades to bestiality the true feelings of manhood and the holy state of matrimony.” During a period of escalated anti-contraception feelings and backlash laws in the 19th century, more than half of the states in the U.S. enacted laws that criminalized and prevented any sex acts that “made love without making babies.”

7. In 1850, Indiana's State Legislature passed the most open divorce law the United States had ever known. It stated that judges could grant divorce for any reason at all—not just under conditions of adultery, attempted murder, or other extreme circumstances. Though scandalous at the time, divorce has become a common and acceptable practice within mainstream American society.
8. In 1948, the California Supreme Court led the way in challenging racial discrimination in marriage and became the first state high court to declare unconstitutional an anti-miscegenation law (miscegenation means a mixture of races, especially marriage or cohabitation between a white person and a member of another race). In 1967, the United States Supreme Court struck down the remaining interracial marriage laws across the country, and declared that the “freedom to marry” belongs to all Americans.
9. In 1976, the West German Civil Code was revised to eliminate traditional matrimonial phrases requiring “husbands to support wives” and “wives to obey husbands.” It now reads “The spouses are mutually obliged to adequately maintain the family by their work and property....”
10. In 1987, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a Missouri prison's refusal to allow its inmates—convicted felons, “people who couldn't vote much less support their wives or future children”—to marry, since “inmate marriages, like others, are expressions of emotional support and public commitment...having spiritual significance.”

HANDOUT 2

Evolving Understandings of Marriage (Chart)

Handout #1 describes marriage laws and customs from a variety of cultures and eras. Inherent in each law or custom is a set of attitudes or beliefs about the purposes of marriage in that time and place. For each law/custom, list as many underlying beliefs as you can identify.

Example:

Law/Custom: The German guilds didn't allow a man to become a master and run his own business unless he had a wife.

**Underlying Attitudes/
Beliefs:** Marriage was a way to acquire a business partner
Marriage was a complete plan of labor.
All men were expected to marry.

Law/Custom # _____

Underlying Attitudes/Beliefs:

Law/Custom # _____

Underlying Attitudes/Beliefs:

HANDOUT 3

Modern Understandings of Marriage

In her book, Graff refers to the “infamous 1950’s marriage model” that was common during her parents’ youth. What was that model and what were its limitations and/or beliefs? In what ways do the values of those times impact our current attitudes toward marriage?

Graff points out that 20th century economic independence has brought heightened choice and freedom with regard to marriage. To what extent do you believe young people today are truly free when it comes to marriage? What modern pressures, constraints and obligations operate upon individuals in today’s world?

HANDOUT 4

Beacon Press Discussion Guides Participant Evaluation Form

Name (optional): _____ Date: _____

Group Leader: _____

Book Title: _____

Please indicate your evaluation of the following:

meeting space	poor	fair	okay	good	great
pacing	poor	fair	okay	good	great
content	poor	fair	okay	good	great
overall	poor	fair	okay	good	great

1. Do you think the sessions were: (Please check one)
_____ too long _____ about right _____ too short

How long would you like the sessions to be? _____

2. Do you think there were: (Please check one)
_____ too many sessions
_____ the right number of sessions _____ too few sessions

If you thought there were too many sessions, which one(s) would you leave out?

3. If your large group broke into smaller groups for discussion, did this process work? Why or why not?

4. Is there anything that you would like to have talked about that was not included in the sessions? If so, what?

5. What activity(ies) did you especially like? Why?

6. If there was an activity that you feel did not work in this context, can you tell us which activity and why?

7. Question:

8. Question:

9. Please rate your group leader's skills in leading the session(s): (Circle one)

Excellent Good Average Fair Poor

10. What suggestions would you offer to the group leader to improve the way the group is conducted?

Thank you very much for taking the time to give us your feedback! Please return your completed form to:

Beacon Press Discussion Guides

Leader Evaluation Form

Name: _____ Date: _____

UU Society: _____

District: _____

Book Title: _____

1. Do you and/or your participants think the sessions were: (Please check one)
_____ too long _____ about right _____ too short

How long would you like the sessions to be?

2. Do you think that there were: (Please check one)
_____ too many sessions
_____ the right number of sessions _____ too few sessions

If you thought there were too many sessions, which ones would you leave out?

3. If your large group broke into smaller groups for discussion, did this process work? Why or why not?

4. Is there anything that you would like to have talked about that was not included in the sessions? If so, what?

5. What activity(ies) did you especially like and why?

6. If there was an activity that you feel did not work in this context, can you tell us which activity and why?

7. Do you think the discussion guides will help to promote a stronger sense of community in your congregation? Why or why not?

8. Can you suggest other books or subjects that might work in this context?

9. If you changed the format, please describe the changes you made and your reasons for making them.

Thank you for taking the time to give us your feedback!

Please return this form to:

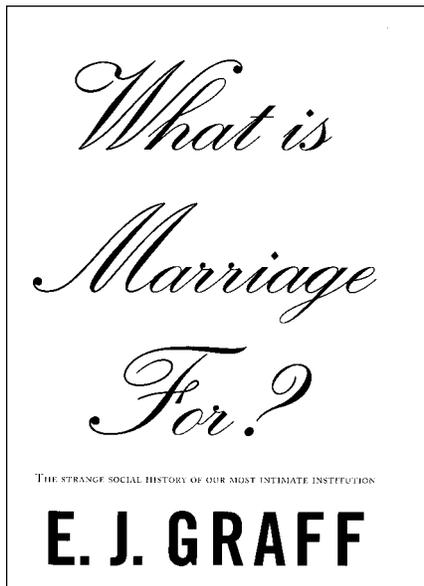
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