

COME, LET US TALK TOGETHER

A conversation guide for the October 2026 Alberta Referendum by Rev Dr Paul Walfall, Referendum Task Group member; minister at Pilgrim United Church, Edmonton.

Come, Let Us Talk Together is an optional resource for congregational conversation. It is not intended to tell members how to vote for any political party. Its purpose is to help the congregation reflect together on how Christian love can shape the way members listen, speak, disagree, and respond to neighbours affected by the Referendum.

This resource is designed to help you get the most out of your conversation. It comes to you in four parts:

PART 1 THE LESSON PLAN

We recognize that many who may lead this conversation are not trained in biblical studies. Hence, the lesson plan includes an outline of the main points from the selected passage. The lesson plan also includes concerns to bear in mind when leading this conversation, along with strategies to address them.

You are free to adapt the plan to meet the needs of your context.

PART 2 SUGGESTIONS TO PREPARE FOR THE CONVERSATION

As you prepare, we want to help you have a successful conversation. This section outlines what you may need to have in place. These are suggestions only.

PART 3 AGENDA FOR THE CONVERSATION

Here we offer you the process for the conversation. Time limits are offered to help you be a good steward of everyone's time. The conversation is estimated to take 60–90 minutes. Change things around to suit your context.

PART 4 POST CONVERSATION FEEDBACK

The Region Council is interested in knowing how useful this conversation was for your congregation. You are invited to ask participants to complete this short survey. Please ask participants not to include their names. Use of this survey is completely voluntary, but it will help the Region Council plan for future activities. Here is the link to the form:

<https://forms.cloud.microsoft/r/nf5vQTpmNE>

PART 1 - LESSON PLAN

AIM: To facilitate a congregational conversation about how the Christian value of love can guide the way members discuss and respond to the issues raised by the Alberta Referendum.

OBJECTIVES: At the end of the congregational conversation, members will be able to:

- a) Explain the role of the church in political issues;
- b) Discuss why a Christian response is important for the referendum issues.
- c) Analyse the issues raised by the Alberta Referendum through the lens of love as taught by Jesus.
- d) Identify ways to love in response to the Referendum.

BIBLE PASSAGE: Matthew 22: 34 – 40

KEY PASSAGE: 1 John 4:20b (CEB)

“After all, those who don’t love their brothers or sisters whom they have seen can hardly love God whom they have not seen!”

BIBLE INSIGHT: The passage in Matthew follows Jesus's answers to many questions about religious law and faithful obedience.

- Matthew indicates that, because Jesus has answered the Sadducees well, the Pharisees come to ask which commandment in the law is most important.
- Jesus responds first by quoting the Shema from Deuteronomy 6. It is called the Shema because it begins with the Hebrew word for “hear” (shema),
- The Shema is a foundational statement for the people, as it affirms the theological reality of the Oneness of God and the people's expected response to that reality.
- The response is to love God.
- To the Jews, there is no real compartmentalising of the human person (e.g. mind, soul, and spirit); that is a Greek understanding. So, when Jesus says to love God with heart, soul, mind, and

strength, it should not be interpreted as referring to separate compartments of the human person. It describes the full extent of the expected response.

- The response is that we are to love God with our whole being, and there should be nothing we think, say, or do that does not reflect a person's love of God.
- Significantly, Jesus joins the Shema with a reference from Leviticus 19:18, which speaks about the importance of loving the neighbour.
- In doing so, Jesus has tied the love of God and the love of others together.
- Love, as used here in both the Old and New Testaments, is not an emotion. It is not about how we feel.
- Love, especially in the choice of word used in Matthew, speaks about the choice made to seek the highest good.
- Dr Thomas Oord, a biblical scholar, **defines agape as “an intentional sympathetic response to promote overall well-being when confronted by that which generates ill-being.”**¹
- Jesus therefore points out that discipleship is about choosing to love both God and our neighbours.

LEARNERS:

- Some people in the church and community do not believe that the church should get involved in politics.
- Some church members see religion as a purely private matter unrelated to how they view and treat others.
- Some people believe that the church's responsibility is spiritual and that when it speaks about political issues, it is stepping outside its "lane."
- Many church members are eager to see how their faith is relevant and applicable to everyday living.
- Many church members may have associated love with emotions and not appreciated that it involves making choices.

¹ (Oord 2010: 36)

CONTEXT:

The government of Alberta has called for a referendum in October 2026 under the theme: “**Stand for a sovereign Alberta within a united Canada.**”

There are ten questions on the referendum ballot, divided into three categories: immigration, constitutional issues, and separation from Canada.

All ten questions will affect the lives of people living in Alberta, and beyond.

The five immigration questions ask about limits and controls on immigrants' ability to access services such as education, health care, and other social services in Alberta. The questions assume that immigration has placed a burden on the Alberta economy. Still, the document does not identify evidence for that assumption.

The four constitutional questions ask for revisions to the Canadian Constitution to allow greater provincial control over matters like the selection of judges and the use of natural resources.

The remaining question asks whether the people want the provincial government to begin the process of formally separating from Canada.

All 10 questions affect the lives of people in Alberta, particularly immigrants, Indigenous peoples, trans and gender-diverse people, people living with disabilities, and people in other minority groups.

HISTORY:

- Between 1867 and 1914, millions of immigrants came to settle western Canada seeking a new life.
- The displacement of Indigenous peoples underpinned this movement into the region.
- Many motivations brought immigrants to Canada, including greater economic opportunities, improved quality of life, and escape from oppression and persecution.
- Immigration policies at that time reflected the bureaucratic views about ethno-racial superiority of white Europeans in Canadian society.
- Immigrants to Alberta included British, Chinese, Dutch, Finnish, French, Germans, Hutterites, Icelanders, Mennonites, Mormons, Poles, Romanians, Danes, Norwegians, Swedes, and Ukrainians.

CAUTION:

The referendum questions have caused much polarisation in Alberta society, and caution should be exercised to ensure that this polarisation does not appear in the congregation.

For some people, partisan political issues run deep. Care must be exercised to ensure that the conversation does not become a venue for partisan political views.

Some people may be offended because they do not believe the church should be involved in politics. Care should be exercised to explain clearly why the church is addressing this issue through the lens of Christian love rather than partisan politics.

Facilitators should be attentive to participants who may feel personally affected by the referendum questions. They should avoid putting anyone on the spot to speak for a whole community or group.

PART 2 - SUGGESTIONS TO PREPARE FOR THE CONVERSATION

Timing:

Plan for 60–90 minutes. If time is limited, use the shorter suggested times; if the group is engaged, allow the longer times for discussion and reflection.

Context:

This conversation has been designed as a stand-alone event. However, it may be adapted for use during a Sunday morning worship service if that best suits the congregation.

Preparation/ Equipment/Supplies Needed:

- Invite in advance two congregants to briefly share their/ their family's immigration to Canada story, noting what brought them here, and how the process felt.
- Copies of the "Holy Manners" handout for all participants, or a projected version visible to the group.
- Copies of the referendum questions for the facilitator and, if possible, for each participant or small group.
- Bibles or printed copies of Matthew 22:34–40 and 1 John 4:20b.
- Printed copies of the agenda or conversation outline for the facilitator and participants.

- Projector, screen, laptop, and any required cables or adapters, if visuals will be used.
- Whiteboard, flip chart, or large sheets of paper for recording key ideas and group responses.
- Markers, pens, pencils, and notepaper for participants and small groups.
- Timer, clock, or phone to help the facilitator keep the conversation within 60–90 minutes.
- Name tags, if participants may not know one another well.
- Tables and chairs arranged for whole-group conversation and small-group discussion.
- Copies of any additional handouts that participants may take when they leave.
- Refreshments.

WORKS CITED

- The Manual*. 2026. (United Church Publishing House: Toronto).
- Oord, Thomas Jay. 2010. *Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific and Theological Engagement* (Brazo Press: Grand Rapids).

PART 3 - AGENDA FOR THE CONVERSATION

1. Welcome, prayer, and purpose — 5–10 minutes.

Welcome participants, open with prayer, and emphasise to the group that the conversation is not intended to tell anyone how to vote. Emphasise that the goal is to reflect together on how Christian love can shape the way members listen, speak, disagree, and respond to neighbours affected by the Referendum.

Distribute sufficient copies of “Holy Manners” or project it onto the screen. Explain to the gathering that the group will use it as a guide for healthy conversation. Read the document aloud. Ask whether participants understand what it says, then ask for a show of hands to confirm the group’s agreement to abide by this covenant.

Facilitator's note:

If disagreement becomes tense, pause the conversation and return to the covenant of Holy Manners. Remind participants that the purpose is not to win an argument, but to practise love of God and neighbour while discussing issues that may affect people differently.

2. Review the aim and objectives — 5 minutes.

Briefly introduce the aim of the session and name the objectives: understanding the role of the church in political issues, discussing why a Christian response matters, viewing referendum issues through the lens of love, and identifying loving responses.

- Remind people that the church's role is to equip members with tools to discern reliable sources and make informed, faith-based decisions aligned with their values.
- Let the group know that the church will:
 - a. Not tell people how to vote;
 - b. Encourage people to vote;
 - c. Encourage people to seek good information; and
 - d. Encourage people to reject misinformation.
- The Northern Spirit Regional Council recommends for you to vote “NO” for the first nine Referendum questions, and to vote to stay in Canada. This we believe is consistent with the teachings of Jesus and the Christian faith. However, your decision is your own, and we are here to discuss a wide range of beliefs.

3. **Read and reflect on Scripture — 10–15 minutes.** Read Matthew 22:34–40 and 1 John 4:20b aloud. Invite participants to identify words or phrases that stand out, especially love of God, love of neighbour, and the connection between faith and how people treat others.

4. **Explore the Bible insight — 10–15 minutes.**

- Briefly explain that Jesus joins love of God with love of neighbour and that love is not simply an emotion but a choice to seek the highest good.
- Remind the group that the Greek word used for the love Jesus speaks about is “agape”.
- Introduce the group to the definition of love offered by biblical scholar Dr Thomas Oord: Love (agape) is: **“an intentional sympathetic response to promote overall well-being when confronted by that which generates ill-being.”**²
- Ask: What stands out to you from Dr Oord's definition?
- Ask: What does it mean to choose love when the issue is difficult, political, or divisive?
- Ask: What does it mean to love God and neighbour when political issues affect different people in different ways?

Who are the neighbours most affected by the referendum questions?
What would it look like for the congregation to speak and act in ways that seek the highest good of those neighbours?

5. **Name the context respectfully — 10–15 minutes.**

- Read the Referendum questions verbatim to the gathering.
- Note to the group: the questions raise concerns about immigration, constitutional issues, separation from Canada, and the lives of people in Alberta, particularly those most affected.
- Invite participants to name hopes, concerns, or questions they bring to the conversation.
- Ask members of the congregation to consider what these questions could mean for the lives of immigrants, Indigenous peoples, and visible minority groups.
- Remind participants that apart from the Indigenous peoples, all others are descendants of immigrants to this country. Ask participants to think

² (Oord 2010: 36)

about their family history. Invite one or two people to share their family's immigration story with the group.

6. Small-group or whole-group discussion — 15–20 minutes.

Divide the group into groups of four or five people. If there are not enough participants to form groups, remain together as one general group.

Project the following words onto the screen, write them on a board that is large enough for groups to see, or print them on a sheet of paper for each group: neighbour, politics, Christian, choice, doing the highest good, well-being, and Referendum.

Ask groups to consider:

Who is my neighbour in this situation? What would it look like to seek the highest good of those affected? How can the congregation disagree without harming one another?

7. Identify loving responses — 10–15 minutes.

- Invite the group to name TWO OR THREE practical responses the congregation can take before, during, and after the referendum conversation. Possibilities may include listening more carefully, correcting misinformation without hostility, praying for those affected, creating space for immigrants and migrants, Indigenous people, and gender-diverse people to speak, making public statements; and, overall, refusing to treat political differences as permission to wound others.

8. Closing summary and prayer — 5 minutes.

- Summarise the main insights.
- Thank participants for engaging respectfully.
- Call the members' attention to the available handouts. Invite each person to take one of each when they leave.
- Close by returning to the central question: What does love of God and neighbour require of us?
- Invite participants to leave with one practical commitment to practise the love of God and neighbour in how they listen, speak, vote, and care for people affected by the Referendum.
- End with a prayer.

APPENDIX 1

Holy Manners³

The Very Reverend Marion Pardy introduced Holy Manners as a resource for the 38th General Council 2003. Holy Manners has been used as a resource for conducting meetings by subsequent General Councils and their executives. It has been adapted here for use as a resource by all councils and church bodies.

We will

- keep God at the centre of everything we do;
- each speak for ourselves;
- speak for a purpose;
- separate people from problems;
- allow for full and equitable participation;
- attend to others carefully without interruption;
- welcome the conflict of ideas;
- take a future orientation;
- demonstrate appreciation;
- honour the decisions of the body;
- commit to holding one another to account when we do not keep our holy manners;
- keep the discussion at the table;
- be mindful of our body language;
- check in about good use of time;
- allow the quiet people to speak, with an invitation to speak; and
- sincerely say what we really feel.

³ (*The Manual* 2026: 190)