



RELATIONAL GUIDE FOR
CLERGY

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Introduction

Embracing an inclusive theology is a monumental step, the beginning of creating a safe and equitable religious space for the LGBTQ+ community. Many churches, although desiring to be supportive of LGBTQ+ people, often overlook the harm of binary, non-inclusive language, discriminatory employment policies, and promises to welcome LGBTQ+ persons without offering them full access to leadership or spiritual traditions.

I pastored a Southern Baptist church that I thought was a safe space for everyone. Little did I know that my church had always preferenced people who were straight and cisgender¹ like me. It didn't register that how I was pastoring LGBTQ+ people was harmful to them. When I finally got to the place where I decided to educate myself, I stumbled around, unsure of where to begin and what to do. Seminary didn't prepare me for the types of questions I was learning to ask. I didn't find resources within my own evangelical tradition which were of any use. I wish there had been something then written for pastors like me. So what I offer you now is the guidebook that I didn't have when I began my process.

This guidebook is intended for those who come from non-affirming² spaces, but are intentionally discerning how to better care for LGBTQ+ congregants. My hope is that it will challenge you to rethink your long-standing assumptions in light of the Great Commandment to love our neighbor. We might not always agree on various points of theology, because the call to love isn't about theological agreement. Rather, it is about being able to love well, even in the midst of disagreement, for the sake of our unity as the body of Christ. As Richard Rohr so eloquently stated, "Love isn't about being right, it's about being connected."

This guidebook, then, is for people who are intentionally discerning how to create safe and equitable spaces for LGBTQ+ people. So if you are reading this, you probably already sense that change needs to take place. My hope is that you will have an open posture toward listening and learning even when it is uncomfortable.

My Journey

Before my church was asked to leave the Southern Baptist denomination, I was an ordained Baptist pastor for twenty years who received my M.Div from Talbot Theological Seminary at Biola University.

1 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cisgender>

2 <https://www.churchclarity.org/score-definitions>

Given where I am now, it may surprise you to hear that my theological and pastoral beginnings were firmly rooted in Campus Crusade for Christ (now known as Cru). The heart of ministry was evangelism and missions; my goal was to make disciples of all people. This gave me a conservative evangelical foundation for my beliefs and practices as a clergy member.

From early on in my pastoral role I experienced congregants in the church disclosing to me that they were gay or lesbian. My response was to offer prayer and counseling so that they could begin to change their orientation. At the time, I believed that this was necessary for them to become faithful followers of Christ. But as the years passed, while still repeating this message to those I disciplined, it became clear as I walked with them that they could not simply change. Instead, I began to see the conversion therapy I had advocated for led to self-loathing, suicidal ideation, and the eventual loss of faith and community.

As I recognized the negative results of my beliefs and practices, I began to pay more serious attention to the personal stories of LGBTQ+ people, especially those who had left the church to freely live their lives as openly LGBTQ+ people. I started to see that there were so many things I was doing in my church that made it spiritually and emotionally unsafe for LGBTQ+ people to show up every Sunday. My developing relationships gave me insight into how I, from the pulpit, was often interpreting Scripture through the lens of my privilege as someone whose orientation and gender had always been affirmed as holy and God-given by my community.

One former congregant asked me to look across the coffee shop where we were meeting at a man sitting there, reading a book. My congregant asked me to imagine walking over and kissing that person. I know the look on my face clearly expressed what I was thinking: that's not what I was interested in doing, at all. This congregant looked at me and then said, "That's what you're asking me to do every time you encourage me to love someone I'm not drawn to love in a romantic way." I recognized that as inconceivable it was to me to change my orientation, I was asking her to do what was just as unimaginable for her.



Our Relational Guide for Clergy is intended for those who come from non-affirming spaces and are intentionally discerning how to love and support their LGBTQ+ congregants.

When Jesus said, “How hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:23), it wasn’t just about riches, but about the effect that power has on the souls of those who hold the power. People who were powerful have less understanding of how to live out the vision of God’s kingdom. But those who are poor and oppressed have greater access to the Kingdom by virtue of their lived experiences. “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). I began to see that reading Scripture from the vantage point of the oppressed, as opposed to from the perspective of those who are in power, leads to a very different understanding of God and faith. Jesus taught that the commandments were never intended to be a burden too great for people to bear; rather, the commandments were supposed to relieve burdens. Unfortunately, people with religious authority have often used Scripture without seeing the burdensome impact of our theology.

As Jesus read the commandments, he would develop an interpretation that helped those in need—because that’s what love calls us to do. If an interpretation of a commandment, such as Sabbath rest, meant that people would go hungry or remain sick, then Jesus taught that that interpretation wasn’t bearing good fruit and therefore wasn’t from God. The Scriptures were meant to give life, not to make people sick. And as I kept re-evaluating the effects of my theology on LGBTQ+ people, it became more evident that I wasn’t helping them flourish in God’s kingdom. I was making them spiritually sick. I began to seek to grasp the spirit of the commandment rather than holding to a wooden interpretation that led to harm. Eventually, due to these insights, I could no longer in good conscience hold to an interpretation of Scripture that forbade same-sex relationships or denied transgender identities.

I remember the moment this first came to my mind. I suddenly felt such a relief knowing that God had made people just as they were, and that there was nothing wrong with them. As I was still a conservative Southern Baptist pastor, though, my joy was short-lived. The reality was that this new belief would be problematic for my vocation. I wasn’t sure what to do. About a week later, I was alone in the car with my son, dropping him off for school, when a gay-affirming song began playing on the radio. I remarked offhand to my son that I enjoyed the song and he responded with brows furrowed, “Do you know what this song is about?”

“Yes,” I said. “That’s why I like the song. I’ve changed my beliefs about gay marriage, you know.”

And then my 15-year-old son said three words I’ll never forget: “Dad, I’m gay.”

Time stood still as I looked at my son with wonder and awe at the way God had brought us together to this moment. We embraced and wept. I was stunned. All that work over the years figuring out a theological way for me to better love the LGBTQ+ community had actually been making me a safe person for my son to come out to.

As we processed his coming out in the next few weeks, he said to our family, “If there was a pill that

I could take that would make me not gay, I would take it.” As a father, I knew this kind of self-loathing wasn’t healthy. The next day I said to him, “If there was a pill I could give you that would make you straight, I wouldn’t give it to you. This is who God made you to be. Stop fighting it. You are beautiful and perfect. I love you just the way you are.”

With those words, I realized that for the first time in my life, in speaking to a gay person, I was offering words of life, not death. This was what good fruit looked like. As pastors, church leaders, parents, family and friends, we must strive to bear good fruit in creating a safe community for LGBTQ+ people.

As I’ve said, the goal of this guidebook is to give clergy in non-affirming churches the guidebook that I never had, as they hold discussions around what it looks like to love LGBTQ+ people. The guidebook is set up as a six topic study that a church could go through together, with the necessary topics and discussion questions built in.

The goal of a study like this is not to arrive at doctrinal certainty. The goal is to understand what love looks like in community, even in the midst of potential theological disagreement. The Great Commandment tells us that all the Law and the Prophets hinge on how we apply love. Love, therefore, is how we maintain biblical faithfulness. This is a guidebook to lead you as you can lead your congregation through this path.

Why This Process Matters

As I’ve spoken to many church leaders all along the affirming/non-affirming³ spectrum, I often get the impression that the goal of many churches is just to implement the minimum amount of change necessary to remove the appearance of being unloving to LGBTQ+ people.

A bisexual friend shared a story with me about her frustration with the church she attended. This church had taken bold steps towards greater safety for LGBTQ+ people, but there were still some issues that the church wasn’t budging on. When my friend finally told the pastoral staff that she was contemplating leaving, they responded by reminding her of all the things that the church had done for her. The pastor had felt all along that they were doing my friend a favor by changing the church to become more welcoming of her. Instead, the pastor should have recognized the grace my friend had given them by agreeing to help them to change. But as it was, the church’s policies were still harming my friend and it was very unfair to expect her to remain in a place that was detrimental to her well-being. What we need to understand is that the church must move towards inclusion so that we no longer perpetuate harm towards LGBTQ+ people.

3 <https://www.churchclarity.org/score-definitions>

Much of the harm is undetectable to non-LGBTQ people. This guidebook will give churches and clergy members a way to recognize and halt the cycles of abuse that often are perpetuated when churches place undue spiritual weight on marginalized members to solve the problems within their churches. If a church is primarily made up of straight and cisgender people, it's easy for the majority to miss the needs of the LGBTQ+ minority. This lack of awareness toward minorities isn't new. It was also a problem in the early church, when Hellenistic Jews weren't being fairly treated (Acts 6).

As we begin moving towards inclusion we must at the same time be aware of how our churches have further burdened an already publicly and privately burdened minority. We must begin to pay better attention to what our theology and practice do to LGBTQ+ people, and to reverse the perpetuation of their spiritual trauma. Moving towards inclusion isn't about we leaders doing favors for our LGBTQ+ people. Rather, it is about us aligning the practices of love that we avow from the pulpit with their needs and their dignity, so that we become more like Christ. It's about us moving away from violence towards love.

I wrote once on Twitter, "I've come to realize that LGBTQ+ people are the ones who are going after the sheep that lost their way. I'm the sheep that needed saving. Especially as a pastor, I'm the one who had squandered the good gifts of God and used them for violence."

MOVING TOWARDS INCLUSION ISN'T ABOUT WE LEADERS DOING FAVORS FOR OUR LGBTQ+ PEOPLE.

I understand that for many pastors, what I have been saying is difficult to hear. It reverses the way we have thought about LGBTQ+ people for so long. Perhaps they are not the lost; we are. Consider that they may be are our rescuers, that they are the ones who can help us back to God's love by showing us where we have gone wrong.

In Acts we hear the voice of Jesus confronting Saul with the question, "Why are you persecuting me?" I believe this is the same question God is asking us as leaders of congregations that include LGBTQ+ people, an oppressed community that God identifies with. Paul hadn't known that in his quest to uphold the Scriptures, he was actually persecuting Christ. It was with this awareness that the Apostle Paul's salvation and liberation began—the day he stopped oppressing people. We may not have recognized Christ's suffering in our LGBTQ+ congregants, but we can begin to find our restoration in them now.

My church too went through the process of transformation that you and your church may consider

embarking on. Shortly after my son came out to me, I told my church that I affirmed my son and all LGBTQ+ people. There was a lot that happened in a short period of time, but in the end our church decided to set aside a period of study, in order to be more informed. After that, our church would have to vote on what position we would take: affirming or non-affirming. What you have in this guidebook are all the things I wish we would have known at the beginning of our process.

I hope you will continue reading, listening and learning, because there is so much awareness and growth that can happen if you do. As a pastor, this journey has brought me immense joy because of my own liberation. I hope it will bring you joy too.

Before you continue, you need to find and maintain a posture of humility or the rest of this manual may not make a difference to you. A hard heart that is already convinced of its own rightness will not be able to learn from others' experience. My prayer is that your heart would be open to see what you may not have seen before-- to the idea that we have been wrong in our pastoral practices and in our interpretation of God's commands, and therefore have done untold harm to the LGBTQ+ people under our care.

The starting point of this guidebook is that conversion therapy, the practice of attempting to change a person's orientation, is harmful, because LGBTQ+ identities and experiences are real and God-given (if you have questions about this, there are resources you can find here). The question then becomes: How do we as a church practice grace and generosity to LGBTQ+ people? How do we stop harming LGBTQ+ people and instead create a place where they are truly loved? And is it enough for us to become a welcoming space? Or is there more to be done?



Welcoming, Affirming, Inclusive, & Third Way Spaces

Introduction

As you begin this process with your congregation, you may find that you'll need to define terms. It's quite common for the average churchgoer to not understand the practical implications of theological terms like "affirming" and "inclusive." The goal of Chapter 1 of your congregational study would be to lay the foundation for a more fruitful conversation down the road, in which congregants aren't speaking past each other due to simple differences in their understanding. Establishing a terminological common ground first is crucial, even though it may seem like you're not getting to the "meat" of the conversation. Use the following as the basis for a slide presentation or lecture.

Welcoming Churches

Many churches state on their websites or in their Sunday morning bulletins they are *welcoming* of either all people or specifically of LGBTQ+ people. It's difficult to generalize what this means, since churches use the word *welcoming* with many different meanings. That being said, typically, if welcoming isn't coupled with the word *affirming*, it usually means, "We welcome LGBTQ+ people to attend, but they can't become members, Sunday school teachers, or ministry leaders here, and we won't officiate their weddings."

Churches like these typically maintain a theology that believes marriage is only reserved for a man and a woman, and that identifying as a transgender person is a disorder. Since this theology is the basis of their practice, they refuse to officiate same-sex weddings. They prevent LGBTQ+ people from serving in positions of leadership, counsel transgender people away from transitioning, and communicate in various ways from the pulpit that LGBTQ+ people need to change and are unacceptable the way they are.

These practices have proven harmful to LGBTQ+ people. In many cases, LGBTQ+ people are coerced into conversion therapy or forced into accepting celibacy or pressured to identify in a way that doesn't align with their true experience of themselves. Unfortunately the "welcoming" label has been used by churches to cover up their true beliefs while giving the appearance of being a safe space. As much as we all would like to think our church is safe, in these circumstances it is not. When we tell LGBTQ+

persons that they are *welcomed* but not affirmed, we communicate that there is something inherently wrong with them.

When the exclusionary theology is hidden behind the word *welcoming*, LGBTQ+ people experience a communal bait and switch in unknowingly attending a non-affirming church. The theological teachings are often unclear at the start, and so LGBTQ+ people begin investing time and relational energy into a church which then turns out to be non-affirming. Then they often feel stuck. They don't want to abandon the good relationships that they have built, but they also find that staying is detrimental to their well-being. While churches may sincerely hold exclusionary views on marriage and gender identity and still wish to welcome others who don't, it is very disingenuous for them to use the word *welcoming* without being clear about what they truly believe.

Affirming Churches

Affirming churches, on the other hand, treat LGBTQ+ people with full equality. There isn't a different set



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of standards or rules for cisgender (cisgender and heterosexual) people than for LGBTQ+ people. LGBTQ+ people aren't barred from serving communion, teaching Sunday school, getting ordained, being members of the church, or getting married in the sanctuary.

Church leaders strive to use affirming and inclusive terminology. Language supports nonbinary (people who don't exclusively identify as a man or a woman) and transgender identities. Bisexual people are seen for who they are. Same-sex couples needn't think twice about displaying the kind of physical intimacy that straight couples don't think twice about.

Basically, affirming churches hold to a theology that affirms that God created each person the way

they are, and that LGBTQ+ members don't need to conform to cisgender, heteronormative social and religious constructs. Affirming churches tend to be very clear on their teachings regarding gender and human sexuality. Simply put, there is full and unqualified acceptance in their congregations, which gives LGBTQ+ people the ability to flourish and live as their true selves.

Inclusive Churches

There is, however, another category that is distinct from welcoming churches and affirming churches. *Inclusive* churches are similar to affirming churches, in that there is full and unqualified participation of LGBTQ+ people. They are granted membership and the ability to participate in the sacraments and leadership positions of the church. What makes inclusive churches distinct is that inclusive churches intentionally allow for differences in beliefs among their members, as long as those differences aren't being used to deny LGBTQ+ people their rights.

Inclusive churches allow people to live out their personal convictions as long as those in privileged positions (straight and cisgender people) don't force their beliefs on anyone else. This "do no harm" principle is key. If there is harm incurred by a vulnerable person based on another's personal conviction, this is problematic. The reality is, though, that many of the spaces we occupy day to day--workplaces, family homes, and schools--are inclusive spaces. We often operate within relationship circles that encompass different perspectives politically, theologically and socially.

Healthy relationships can exist between people who know how to be respectful of their differences in a way that doesn't force their opinions and practices on others, nor exclude them. When relationships are healthy, there is a way to talk about differences without communicating judgment. The focus becomes on what unifies the relationships rather than what divides them.

Inclusive churches attempt to bring these healthy social dynamics into the circle of church life. For instance, LGBTQ+ people who are theologically side B (LGBTQ+ people who affirm their identity while choosing to refrain from same-gender sex) can worship side by side with affirming Christians. Everyone is allowed equal participation in every facet of church life. People's differences of conviction are acknowledged and respected.

Third-Way Churches

It should be noted that there are many churches now that identify as *Third Way*. This term enjoys broad usage, in the same way that *welcoming* does, in that there are many ways in which Third Way churches express their theological positions. What they have in common is that they are somewhere in between an exclusionary church model and an affirming church model. It should be pointed out that in many Third Way churches, LGBTQ+ couples may become official members or serve as leaders, but there are also limits imposed upon them.

Usually the limit centers around whether the pastor can officiate a same-sex wedding or whether the ceremony could occur inside the church sanctuary. The difficulty for a Third Way model that restricts LGBTQ+ people is that straight cisgender people are reinforcing the inequity of power by dictating

what LGBTQ+ people can and cannot do. For a Third Way church to be fully inclusive, a church must admit LGBTQ+ people the same rights and privileges as straight and cisgender people. There is overlap between inclusive and Third Way churches, but not all Third Way churches are inclusive. Any Third Way church that restricts opportunities and privileges for LGBTQ+ people cannot be labeled as inclusive. On the other hand, the church I pastored was a Third Way church where I was not denied the ability to officiate same sex weddings. At the same time, we created space for LGBTQ+ people in the church who identified as Side B. My church was an example of a Third Way church that was inclusive.

Conclusion

Love Undivided, a theme of one of Q Christian Fellowship's conferences, said it best: "Love Undivided not only deconstructs barriers that keep us from relational intimacy, it also fortifies connections to our neighbors—not by agreeing with their beliefs, but by cherishing who they are, from the inside out. Ultimately, Love Undivided prioritizes our position as God's children above the tensions we bear and the paradoxes we struggle to embrace. We are truly of one Lord and one faith. Whether your theology aligns with one side or another, it's time to abide side-by-side and center ourselves on what centered Jesus: love for God and love for our neighbors. We are eager to journey with you as we grow in Love Undivided. You are welcome here."

There are forces (theological, social, and practical) that prevent conservative communities from moving towards inclusivity. It's hard for conservative Christians to imagine a church in which they can be in full fellowship with people who believe differently. It's also hard for affirming Christians to imagine worshipping in the same space as people who aren't affirming. But as I stated before, the goal is not theological certainty. That's not what the Great Commandment is about. The goal to pursue it means to love our neighbor in community.

Questions for Further Discussion

1. What's an example of space you're a part of (apart from church) where people hold differing beliefs and yet live and work together?
2. For you, what does it mean to love our neighbor in community?
3. Where do you see your church falling along the Welcoming, Affirming, Inclusive spectrum?
4. If you belong to a Third Way church, do you place restrictions on what LGBTQ+ people can and cannot do? How does it impact the community?
5. Which of these types of churches do you find it hardest to reconcile with personally? Theologically?
6. Where would you like to see your church land on the Welcoming, Affirming, Inclusive spectrum?



Introduction to Common Questions & Concerns

Introduction

After the last chapter, your congregants will have had some time to process the new terms and ideas that were presented to them. There will likely be questions and concerns that members already had at the outset of this conversation and questions that arose during the talk last chapter. The goal of this chapter's study is to address some of these without singling out the people currently holding these ideas. Introducing these questions to the study as a whole allows you to address these concerns without having to focus on individuals. With your congregation in mind, use the following as the basis for a slide presentation or lecture.

1. Aren't conservative Christians making all the concessions when they move towards inclusion?

Conservatives may feel like they are the only ones offering accommodations. But LGBTQ+ people have been making greater concessions just to be able to be a part of spiritual communities. They are the ones who have been willing to enter into a space that isn't fully affirming. They are the ones who are extending grace by being willing to sit with people who believe they are practicing sin. It cannot be emphasized enough how difficult it is for LGBTQ+ Christians to remain in a space that doesn't fully affirm them. It's difficult to sit in a pew knowing that there are people around you that believe you are living in sin simply by accepting yourself as God made you. Yes, conservative Christians may make concessions in not enforcing some of their convictions on the community, but LGBTQ+ people are extending an enormous amount of grace to be present and engaged in a community that is in process (for this reason, many LGBTQ+ people won't enter into fellowship in a space that is still in process towards inclusion and they shouldn't be expected to remain).

2. Churches should be either affirming or non-affirming. What value is there in an inclusive space?

David Sinclair wrote an article addressing church communities that were willing to invite theological differences. As a married gay man, he stated that the advantages of Third Way spaces (the kind that

are fully inclusive) is the recognition that a “change of heart is not an event, it’s a process.” In these spaces, “pastors give their congregations permission to believe differently” but “gay is sin is no longer gospel truth.” More importantly, this “creates a safe space for conservative gay Christians and allies.” He writes this space “makes it more possible for gay people and our allies to come out in conservative congregations. This is great news for gay Christians who may feel most at home in theologically conservative faith communities. Living authentically is liberating. For too long, silence born of shame and fear has hindered change in the Church. As conservative Christians get to know and worship beside people who are gay, it becomes more likely that hearts and minds will be transformed.” I would recommend reading his article [here](#)¹.

3. As a conservative, I have to share my convictions. I feel like I’m being forced to remain quiet.

In the New Testament, the religious authorities often believed that they could correct and teach others without asking permission. But in everyday life we know this is offensive. I may confront and discipline my own children when they are acting inappropriately. But I haven’t developed that sort of relationship with most other people’s children. Accordingly, the best way I can have a productive and healthy dialogue with people I disagree with in my church is if I’ve already developed a healthy and meaningful relationship with them.

If they have already experienced my love towards them they will be more likely to feel that our interactions are meant to help one another, not to express judgment. We are more apt to listen to the advice of our friends than our enemies. And even when we disagree, in a close relationship I am more able to state my position in a way that doesn’t shame the other person. But also, it’s often best to keep my opinion of others’ lives to myself if no one has asked me for it. For instance, if you believe that being remarried is akin to adultery, I wouldn’t advise you to approach every remarried couple and inform them of your opinion that they are adulterers. (Note: there are times I do need to confront people, especially when they are causing physical harm to others.)

4. If we allow immorality to exist, we are being unfaithful to God.

If the greatest commandment is to love God and our neighbor, then the most immoral thing we can do is to not love our neighbor. Considering all the harm that has been done to LGBTQ+ people by the church, we have to consider that we have been the ones acting immorally. So yes, immorality already exists in the church. It’s immoral to treat another person with disdain. It’s immoral to cause a person to hate themselves. Our hope, therefore, is to pursue what it means to better love our neighbor. The church’s greatest concern has to be tied in to the Great Commandment. So our top priority is to examine whether

¹ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/unfundamentalistchristians/2014/10/to-gay-affirming-christians-who-dismiss-the-third-way/>

we are loving our people well, especially those on the margins. (Also note: Cisgender straight people have a tendency to police LGBTQ+ sexualities differently than we do our own; lust and divorce are prime examples of double standards.)

5. The Bible teaches us that marriage is only between a man and a woman.

Not necessarily. Another marriage described in Scripture is the marriage of Christ and the church. This marriage is not based on gender, but simply on covenant love. Therefore, there is a precedent set in Scripture that doesn't necessitate opposite genders in a marriage relationship. What is important is the covenant. Covenant love is what reflects the relationship of Christ and the church. Covenant love is evident when people make a relational commitment to one another regardless of gender. (We will examine other biblical texts in chapter 4.)

6. My reputation and job may be at stake if I lead my church on this journey.

This may actually be possible. When I first told my church about my change in theology, the elders of my church moved to terminate me. Their actions were overturned by a church vote. The question for pastors is—what does love call us to do? If the Spirit is creating dissonance between our hearts and our practices, it would be wise to follow the Spirit's leading. The hope of this guidebook is that it will help you bring the church through a process that allows healthy engagement.

7. This will upset too many people in my congregation. The main donors might leave.

The hope in this process is that church unity is maintained. But Jesus shows us a posture different from that held by the religious elite of his time, who wanted to maintain power at all costs. He taught us that if one sheep is lost, then the owner should leave the ninety-nine for the one that needs help (Luke 15:1-7). The opposite attitude was expressed by Caiaphas, the high priest, in addressing the religious leaders. They were afraid Jesus' influence would prompt Rome to take over their cherished temple and nation.



Covenant love is evident when people make a relational commitment to one another regardless of gender.

Caiaphas proclaimed, “You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish” (John 11:50). Caiaphas believed that it would be better to exterminate the one person that would cause them trouble than to lose their position of power and privilege. But the needy are preferred over the comfortable in Jesus’ philosophy of ministry. For some, the cost of coming alongside marginalized people is too much. But it is a cost that we all must consider and determine if we are willing to take. (As I’ve met with many faith leaders, it’s become evident that the pressure of loss of income often takes precedence even over theology.)

Questions for Further Discussion

1. How are you feeling after hearing these questions and their responses? Which generated the most fear or uncertainty?
2. Which questions did you resonate with the most? What further questions come up for you?
3. Did you feel like a question was asked or answered in an unfair manner?





A Different Hermeneutic

Now that you've addressed some of the surface level concerns that come up when churches engage in these conversations, chapter three is a good point to lay a new foundation for the last three chapters of study. This chapter, we'll be discussing the differing ways people can read Scripture. The goal is to prepare congregants for next chapter's topic, which will attempt to address some of the readings of the "clobber passages" (Scripture that has been used in condemn same sex relationships). This also gives the community a bit of a break between two potentially contentious topics. With your congregation in mind, use the following as the basis for a slide presentation or lecture.

Reading through a Jewish Lens

A young man knocks on the door of a great Talmudic scholar. "Rabbi, I wish to study Talmud."

"Do you know Aramaic?"

"No."

"Hebrew?"

"No."

"Have you ever studied Torah?"

"No, Rabbi, but I graduated from Harvard summa cum laude in philosophy, and received a Ph.D. from Yale. I'd like to round out my education with a bit of Talmud."

"I doubt that you are ready for Talmud. It is the broadest and deepest of books. If you wish, however, I will examine you in logic, and if you pass the test I will teach you Talmud."

"Good. I'm well versed in logic."

"First question. Two burglars come down a chimney. One emerges with a clean face, the other with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?"

“The burglar with the dirty face.”

“Wrong. The one with the clean face. Examine the logic. The burglar with a dirty face looks at the one with a clean face and thinks his face is clean. The one with a clean face looks at the burglar with a dirty face and thinks his face is dirty. So the one with the clean face washes.”

“Very clever. Another question, please.”

“Two burglars come down a chimney. One emerges with a clean face, the other with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?”

“We established that. The burglar with the clean face washes.”

“Wrong. Both wash. Examine the logic. The one with a dirty face thinks his face is clean. The one with a clean face thinks his face is dirty. So the burglar with a clean face washes. When the one with a dirty face sees him washing, however, he realizes his face must be dirty too. Thus both wash.”

“I didn’t think of that. Please ask me another.”

“Two burglars come down a chimney. One emerges with a clean face, the other with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?”

“Well, we know both wash.”

“Wrong. Neither washes. Examine the logic. The one with the dirty face thinks his face is clean. The one with the clean face thinks his face is dirty. But when clean-face sees that dirty-face doesn’t bother to wash, he also doesn’t bother. So neither washes. As you can see, you are not ready for Talmud.”

“Rabbi, please, give me one more test.”

“Two burglars come down a chimney. One emerges with a clean face, the other with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?”

“Neither!”

“Wrong. And perhaps now you will see why Harvard and Yale cannot prepare you for Talmud. Tell me, how is it possible that two men come down the same chimney, and one emerges with a clean face, while the other has a dirty face?”

“But you’ve just given me four contradictory answers to the same question! That’s impossible!”

“No, my son, that’s Talmud” (Eretz Israel’).

My friend, Carlos Delgado comments on this story told by Peter Enns.

“Enns’ story about his Jewish professor and the story about Talmud help me see it’s possible (and not only possible, but a cultural norm, an assumption many have made for centuries and millennia) to enter into dialogue with this important thought in mind: many robust views can exist within all kinds of biblical debates; ours is not the first generation to navigate disagreement while we also are trying to stay together. In fact, it’s a long and beautiful Jewish tradition, and we ought to learn from it.

“It may just be that Christians (and that Protestants in particular) aren’t very good at it (yet). So rather than look only at our Protestant spiritual heritage, which includes postures of certainty and anathema, we might instead learn a new cultural norm. Can we view the Bible as ‘a problem to be solved’ more than ‘a message to be proclaimed’? Can we admit contradictions into the conversation—without diminishing our own views? Is it unfair to believe that we might learn from Jewish tradition, from a corporate posture of humility? That we might coexist with others whose views of the Scriptures differ from ours? Are we wide enough, are we large enough, as Walt Whitman might say, to contain these contradictions?”

“For Jews, the Bible is a problem to be solved; for Christians it is a message to be proclaimed.” (Noted Jewish biblical scholar Jon Levenson.)

Reading the Bible

There are many theologians who have opposing views to each other. And there are other theologians that make counterarguments from those opposing views. This back and forth could give anyone whiplash. Who do we choose to believe regarding the history and context of these passages? Is the understanding of the mind of God reserved for the educated? Or does God give ordinary people access to the Kingdom? Do we read Scripture like a legal document, or do we engage in it relationally?

Let me illustrate. Suppose you were a Jewish person living just before the time of Jesus’ public ministry. One day you heard that the synagogue leaders had discovered that there was an adulterer in the community. Everyone knew the Law which said, “If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife—with the wife of his neighbor—both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death” (Leviticus

1 <https://blog.eretzyisrael.org/post/134464365843/a-young-man-knocks-on-the-door-of-a-great-talmudic>

20:10, NIV). So the leaders began to pass out rocks to stone the adulterer. Imagine then that the person who was caught in adultery was your own son or daughter. Would you cast a stone? Would you take part in putting to death the one caught in adultery? Would you, in essence, be faithful to upholding the commandments of Scripture, or choose to save the life of your child?

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus was faced with a similar situation. The religious leaders had brought a woman accused of adultery to Jesus. John tells us that it was a trap, set to see if he would interpret the Law literally. But instead of taking part in the stoning, Jesus said, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7, NIV).

At this point, everyone left, and the woman was saved. However, according to Scripture, Jesus was without sin, and should have thrown the stone in accordance with the Law. But Jesus chose to not apply the Scriptures literally in order to save a life. There was nothing in the Law that said the adulterer could be released. This *apparent* disobedience by Jesus to the Law was what created animosity toward him among the religious leaders. It wasn't scandalous that Jesus said, “Go and sin no more.” But the scandal of the story, the main point, is that Jesus didn't apply the literal and traditional reading of Scripture when the religious leaders believed he should have.

I'm often critiqued for not applying a literal reading of Scripture. I often respond by pointing to this story and other stories to show that Jesus didn't read and apply Scripture literally. He chose to read Scripture through a hermeneutic of grace and compassion. The lens that seemed to pervade the application of Jesus was: Will this allow the person to thrive? Will this give life? Will this cause separation or bring people together through love? Simply put, at the core of Jesus' hermeneutic was the question: Is what is being taught bearing good fruit or bad fruit?

As I have walked with people in the LGBTQ+ community, my pastoral discernment has led me to believe that the traditional teachings which have led to disowning LGBTQ+ people, forcing them to change their orientation or not to accept their stated gender identity, have caused great harm. Jesus isn't asking us to parse Greek and Hebrew words in order to discern truth. He is asking us to examine the fruit. Jesus is asking us to pay attention to whether people are thriving or are being harmed. That is the basis of how we can tell truth from error because Scripture was meant to administer love and grace.



Jesus is asking us to pay attention to whether people are thriving or are being harmed.

The Apostle's Theological Test

There were at least two pillars of what it meant to identify as a faithful Jewish man. The first was to obedience to the Sabbath and the second was male circumcision. Jesus re-imagined an understanding of Sabbath obedience that allowed for non-traditional understanding of Sabbath keeping. Jesus healed on the Sabbath and allowed his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath. He even said, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27, NASB). Jesus was stating that the Sabbath should never be made a burden for people. If people are being harmed by your understanding of the Sabbath, then give preference towards the people. Let them work or help their animal escape from a ditch, even though the fourth commandment states, “You shall not do any work” (Exodus 20:10, NIV). The disciples saw Jesus’ application of the Scriptures repeatedly. What they didn’t realize was that they would soon be put to the test.

I’ve often wondered why Jesus never addressed circumcision in the Gospels since I think he knew it would be the biggest theological hurdle the disciples would face. But now I see it was purposeful. The life and ministry of Jesus showed the disciples how to read Scripture and apply it in a way that doesn’t exclude, but instead offered life to as many people as possible. So even though the disciples knew what Genesis said about circumcision being an eternal sign of the covenant between God and the people of Israel, the disciples chose to remove the requirement of circumcision. They said that there shouldn’t be a stumbling block for those who choose faith in Christ.

The removal of physical circumcision was an unprecedented theological change that shook the Jewish-Christian community to its core. The disciples were accused of no longer upholding the authority of Scripture. But what the disciples did was merely an extension of the way Jesus taught them to uphold the spirit behind the Law. And in discovering the spirit of grace and love, the Law would be upheld along with faithfulness to God.

So here you have the two biggest things of what it meant to identify as the people of God—Sabbath keeping and physical circumcision. Both of these were re-imagined in order to save life and include those who were excluded. The shift from conservative understandings of Sabbath and circumcision were far greater issues at the time Scripture was being written than our modern questions regarding orientation and gender identity. But the principles we apply to these questions remain the same. How do we read and apply Scripture as Jesus did? Because it’s not so much about what Scripture says, as much as it is about how Jesus applied what Scripture said.

Churches have historically placed a stumbling block before the LGBTQ+ community by their interpretations of Scripture, which have led to exclusion and harm. The same kind of criticism that had been launched towards Peter by the traditionalists regarding the authority of Scripture in excluding the uncircumcised Gentiles living outside the Law is being launched against LGBTQ+ people and their allies

who are seeking their inclusion in the church.

Jesus and the disciples set into motion what the church must continue to practice—a hermeneutic that practices compassion that moves toward inclusion. This is the radical nature of the Gospel—when it moves toward accepting people who were previously on the outside and told they were inherently disordered.

Throughout history the church didn't wrestle with every major doctrine in the infancy of the church. The early church dealt with various heresies and were able to develop a more robust Christology. There was the issue of Modalism² and the doctrine of the Trinity. There were also, though, questions about slavery and biracial marriages. These questions were a result of push-back from marginalized and enslaved people that caused theologians to talk through what Scripture might really be saying in regards to biracial marriages and slavery. These wrestlings were in response to people who before didn't have a voice in the church but were now being given voice to speak. The church as a whole had never seriously questioned its longstanding beliefs around LGBTQ+ inclusion until recently, as more and more LGBTQ+ people are raising their voices.

One of the problems of every generation is the belief that they are the generation that has finally understood the full counsel of Scripture and that our beliefs no longer need to be challenged. But our theological history shows us that this is false. There must always be a posture of willingness to learn and be challenged in our assumptions. The church must always be willing to reform.

Helmut Thielicke said, "He who speaks to this hour's need and translates the message will always be skirting the edge of heresy. He, however, is the man who is given this promise, [the promise that] Only he who risks heresies can gain the truth." This is what many generations before us were willing to do—skirt the edge of heresy in order to gain the truth.

Questions for Further Discussion

1. How were you taught to read Scripture?
2. Were you familiar with the Jewish method of interpreting Scripture?
3. How do you feel about this methodology of reading Scripture?
4. How does this methodology impact the way we practice generosity to people who hold differing beliefs?

2 <https://www.theopedia.com/modalism>



A Look at Oft-Cited Passages

Building off of the foundation built last chapter regarding a different way of reading Scripture, you can now address new ways of reading the “clobber passages” used against LGBTQ+ inclusion. One thing to note is that in most churches, this turns out to be the most contentious conversation. This is because it centers personal convictions, not only around the issue of LGBTQ+ inclusion, but on the veracity of the Scriptures themselves. This means that the conversations can spiral down very quickly. It may be good to create boundaries for these conversations by acknowledging community guidelines that everyone present is willing to adhere to. Due to the dense nature of this content, you may want to consider making a two-section study, examining Old Testament verses one section and New Testament verses another. With your congregation in mind, use the following as the basis for a slide presentation or lecture.

There are many Bible-related objections that church leaders have to inclusion. Although the goal of this guidebook isn't to debate the biblical text, it will be difficult for some to move forward if certain texts of Scripture isn't addressed. I would like to briefly address the main texts and will list resources at the end of the guidebook for further study.

Genesis 1

Genesis 1 (along with other passages that reference this chapter) is often used to argue against nonbinary and transgender identities. It's often stated that since God created man and woman, there can be no other gender categories than male and female. However, as Kathy Baldock wisely stated, “God created man, woman and intersex.” We see through science and creation that there is biological gender variation in creation. People's biology isn't as binary as we are led to believe, and Scripture speaks of eunuchs, people who lived as neither male nor female.

What we can also see in the creation story is that, while God created day and night, that doesn't mean there is nothing in between. Dawn and dusk are expressions of creation that don't fall neatly into the categories of day and night. So when Genesis tells us that God created man and woman, it doesn't mean that we are limited to the two. In this world, there are nonbinary, genderfluid, transgender, and other multi-faceted expressions of the non-gendered image of God within creation.

Genesis 2

Genesis 2 tells the marriage story of Adam and Eve. However, the word “marriage” isn't used. Instead,

“one flesh” is used to describe their covenant relationship. “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). The “one flesh” reference to marriage is repeated twice in the New Testament, first by Jesus when he condemned the practice of men divorcing their wives (Matthew 19:4-6), and also in Ephesians, when Paul talks about marriage: “For we are members of his body. ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:30-31).

In Ephesians, Paul expands the definition of marriage. He uses the language of marriage, the coming together of “one flesh,” to describe Christ’s marriage to the church. Here, Paul no longer limits marriage as something that happens between one man and one woman, but between Christ and the church. We find that marriage is not based on gender, but rather on covenant. Gender difference is therefore not a requirement of marriage.

Genesis 19 (cf. 18:20)

Throughout Scripture there is a condemnation of sexual immorality, which is often specified to mean sexual abuse (1 Thessalonians 4:6). It is wrong to forcibly take advantage of someone sexually. The story of Genesis 19 is that the men of Sodom wanted to rape Lot’s guests. This is the sin of Genesis 19—the attempted gang rape. Unfortunately, this story is often used as a proof text against same-sex relationships even though there is no condemnation of consensual sexuality in Genesis 19.

Also, Ezekiel tells us that the sin of Sodom was about inhospitality. “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen” (Ezekiel 16:49-50, NIV). Jude 7 does say that there was sexual immorality and perversion in Sodom. But the immorality and perversion was about sexual abuse and not about same sex consensual relationships.

Leviticus 18:22 (20:13) and Deuteronomy 23:17-18

Leviticus is an interesting look at a legal system foreign to us. In Leviticus we are told that you can’t worship God if you’re physically imperfect. If you’re disabled, if you have eczema, if you have crushed testicles, you are forbidden to enter places of worship. There are many things labeled abominations: clothing made out of mixed cloth, eating pork, and intercourse with menstruating women. There were many things defined as unclean that we no longer consider forbidden.

As Mary Douglas (*Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*) points out, when you see dirt in the garden, you don’t label it “dirty.” But if dirt is on your clothes, then you deem

it dirty. She explains that the issue of purity in Leviticus has to do with maintaining distinctions. Blood in itself wasn't a problem; it became problematic when skin broke because blood was supposed to be contained within the skin. The prohibition against shrimp and lobsters occurred because these sea creatures had legs, which blurred the understanding of what made land and sea animals distinct. Anything that broke away from the distinct categories that were spoken of in the creation account were problematic, which is the basis for the passage that says, "Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman" (Leviticus 18:22, NIV). So even the idea of holiness was about making distinctions and separating one thing from another. The idea was that one thing was a contagion and the other was something that could be contaminated. Categories were established to maintain order, purity and holiness.

But Jesus brought in a re-creation ethic that disrupted the ideal of Levitical purity. Jesus touched people with skin diseases. Jesus wreaked havoc by healing on the Sabbath and allowing his disciples to work by picking grain. And if this wasn't enough, God told Peter, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 11:9, NIV). The categories rooted in a binary understanding of creation were uprooted. Purity was no longer about reflecting the binaries of creation; it was about breaking down the walls of hostility. All days, not just Sabbath, are now holy. There is neither Jew nor Gentile; all people are chosen. The curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the less-holy is torn; all is sacred. And we are no longer bound by an ethic of separation; now the commandments are rooted in love. In Christ, there is a nonbinary multifaceted beautifying of every person that more closely reflects the image of God.



In Christ, there is a nonbinary multifaceted beautifying of every person that more closely reflects the image of God.

Romans 1

There are deeper cultural issues that we must be aware of before Romans 1 can be understood. Romans 1 requires a much lengthier discussion than we have space for. But to make things as simple as possible, Romans 1 is Paul's attempt to speak to Gentile believers about the righteousness of God. And since Paul can't use the Jewish Law in a way that would be meaningful to Gentiles, he instead references Greek thought.

The philosophy of Stoicism, especially the ideal of being in tune with nature and the ideal of self-control, is embedded throughout this chapter. Paul calls attention to the need for people to not go overboard, to maintain discipline, to avoid sexual excess. Paul uses Greek thought to address the type of excess called lust. The Gentile Christians would have understood Paul condemning overindulgence, which was contrary to their value of harmony. What we don't see is Paul condemning disciplined, loving relationships between two people of the same gender.

Also, Paul's use of the word "natural" in the context of sex was meant to indicate only sexual intimacy intended for procreation. Therefore, when the passage says, "Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones" (Romans 1:26, NIV), the early church fathers saw this as referencing any sexual acts that didn't lead to procreation, i.e. non-vaginal penetration. It wasn't until the fourth century that church fathers began interpreting Romans 1 as a prohibition on specifically woman with woman sexual intimacy. So what we find described in Romans 1 is sexual behavior contrary to what was culturally viewed as natural: disciplined and procreative. The word "natural" in itself is specifically referencing cultural norms, not rooted in absolute principles, in the Epistles. A man with long hair was also noted as being against nature (1 Cor. 11:14).

WHAT WE DON'T SEE IS PAUL CONDEMNING DISCIPLINED, LOVING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE OF THE SAME GENDER.

If Romans 1 doesn't address woman with woman relationships, then there are no passages in all of Scripture that condemn intimacy between women. This would make sense because much of the understanding behind what was "natural" is that sex ought to lead to procreation. Culturally, marriage between Roman citizens was valued primarily for cementing one's status as the head of a household and contributing to society by opening the avenue for procreation. A marriage ensured offspring you could impart your inheritance to. So men pursued marriage and women accepted it not primarily because they fell in love, or because of attraction, but for social status and for procreation. Unlike today, Roman marriages were not based on romantic attraction. A marriage was the result of two families coming together to agree on an arrangement. People whose marriage was arranged for them didn't have a valid objection if their sole reason for not wanting to marry was because they weren't in love. Having children was considered a social responsibility to one's family and to the Empire. So one significant reason why gay marriage wasn't addressed in Scripture was because it wasn't a cultural issue; marriage between two people of the same gender was out of the question, since romantic feelings was not the reason for marriage—procreation was.

The idea of a personal sexual orientation was foreign to them. There was a deep cultural understanding of the societal purpose of marriage that no longer exists in our Western context. Marrying or being in a relationship for reasons other than love is now looked down upon. People in Western societies value romantic attraction and compatibility as the basis of intimacy. Romans 1 addresses sexual excess and lust that went contrary to a cultural purpose for sex and marriage which is largely foreign to us. In other words, Romans 1 does not discuss same-sex love but rather same-sex excess and the violation of cultural familial norms.

I Corinthians 6:9 & I Timothy 1:10

Before 1946, there were no Bibles that contained the word “homosexual.” The Greek words mistranslated as “homosexual” have historically been translated as “sodomites,” “abusers of themselves with mankind,” “liars with mankind,” “perverts,” and “buggerers.” Prior to 1946, “malakoi” was translated as “soft” or “effeminate.” Theologians admit that arsenokoitai and malakoi are very difficult words to translate. Unfortunately, the 1946 Revised Standard Version New introduced the word “homosexual” into our English Bibles, and many other English translations chose to follow their example. Simply put, the translations that chose to use the word “homosexual” are in error. The essence of the original Greek word “arsenokoitai” is exploitative in nature. It wasn’t simply an issue of homosexuality but the abuse and exploitation of another person as a demonstration of power. For further reading on the history of this mistranslation, see Kathy Baldock’s article¹.

Beyond Understanding

Theologians have debated these passages for years. There are literally hundreds of debates you can find online in regards to these verses. You’ll find that there is a counter-argument to every point I have made. And if you keep looking, there is a counter-argument to that counter-argument and so on. Which theologian do we trust? How do we know who is right?

What’s been interesting to me is that Jesus prayed, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children” (Matthew 11:25, NIV). Did you hear that? The things of the kingdom are often hidden from people who are wise and learned. And yet, our traditions place so much weight on those who can parse Greek words and explain systems of theology. Jesus knew that the truths of the Kingdom had to be accessible for anyone, especially the poor and uneducated. So Jesus gave us a simple tool that had nothing to do with theological ivory tower discussions. He simply said, Look at the fruit. Is it giving life? If it isn’t life-giving and being received as love by those affected most, then our exegesis is probably wrong. After this chapter’s reading, I encourage you to go back to the previous chapter and ask yourselves, “How can we

1 <http://canyonwalkerconnections.com/word-homosexual-first-introduced-bible/>

read and apply these verses the way Jesus read and applied Scripture?”

Questions for Further Discussion

1. How are you feeling after that discussion?
2. What's one new insight that you will be taking home with you?
3. What is challenging about these readings of Scripture?
4. What do you make of Jesus' prayer when he thanked God that wise and educated people are somehow unable to understand the way God's kingdom works? Is that an uncomfortable thought?
5. How can you read these passages with the same hermeneutic shared in chapter 3?





Moving Towards Inclusion

Having made the case for inclusion from a communal and scriptural basis, your congregation may be interested to hear how they can move toward inclusion in your church. With these suggestions, you can begin the process of making your church a more inclusive and equitable space for your LGBTQ+ members. With your congregation in mind, use the following as the basis for a slide presentation or lecture.

Starting the Process

Becoming an inclusive space requires a process. Christians who are raised in a theologically conservative environment may have different experiences and beliefs that keep them from moving in that direction. Our tendency is to move towards separation whenever there is disagreement. But separation dampens the possibility of a robust love. Hebrews 12:14 encourages us to “make every effort to live in peace with everyone” (NIV). The reality is that it is possible to maintain unity in the midst of differences. It is possible to remain in the tension of disagreement for the sake of unity and the love of Christ.

That being said, navigating your church towards being a truly safe place won't happen in a straight line. And the discussion of faith as it relates to gender and sexuality is extremely complex. The danger of oversimplification is that you may assume you have a good grasp on how to care for people because you have a gay friend or church member. But being straight and cisgender automatically limits us in our understanding of what it means to be LGBTQ+ and Christian. As a friend has stated, “Straight people will always be a step behind in understanding what it means to be gay and Christian.” She meant by this that straight people will always understand the intersection of these identities from the outside rather than experiencing how the two coexist in someone's core self.

Cisgender people won't know firsthand what gender dysphoria feels like or the feeling of being misgendered. Straight people don't experience the exhaustion of living in a heteronormative world that constantly challenges non-straight identities. This is why it is so vital that we pay attention to LGBTQ+ voices. This requires a willingness to admit what we don't know, and to recognize that many of our unquestioned assumptions about LGBTQ+ Christians and how they experience our church life are probably misinformed. We have inherent biases that keep us from having a deep understanding of what the kingdom of God looks like for gender and sexual minorities.

Obstacles To Overcome

LACK OF FAMILIARITY WITH LGBTQ+ PEOPLE

Dallas Willard said, “Understanding is the basis of care.” The only way we can truly care is if we are willing to listen in a way that seeks to understand. It is imperative that you become familiar with LGBTQ+ stories. But it is difficult for LGBTQ+ people to come out in conservative communities. They fear that they won’t be accepted or that they will be banished. As a result, conservative spaces silence the voices of LGBTQ+ people. This means that conservative leaders often have the least amount of interaction with LGBTQ+ people. If they do interact with them, oftentimes it is in trying to counsel them not to live out their identities. This kind of conversation hinders our ability to learn from the person that we need to understand. And if we cannot learn from them, our attempts to love them will always fall short.

TOKENISM

Realize that having gay people in your church is not proof that your church is safe for LGBTQ+ people. Just because a few minorities are able to exist in a space doesn’t mean it is safe for all minorities. We often tokenize LGBTQ+ people and other minorities this way. Pastors will often cite the existence of people of color or LGBTQ+ people within the church to feel better about themselves and how they pastor. When this occurs, minorities are used as tokens. This then perpetuates the idea that the space is safe and not much work has to be done to improve. But one minority’s story doesn’t reflect the diverse and multifaceted experiences of LGBTQ+ people, especially as it intersects with different parts of their identity. Tokenism is a subversive way that churches perpetuate harm to LGBTQ+ people. Tokenism maintains the power and privilege of heteronormativity by giving the community an appearance that all is well. This is difficult for cisgender and straight people to understand because our actions seems to be well intentioned, but our reasoning is deeply flawed because of our privilege. And often, when our well intentioned privilege is pointed out, our reaction can become defensive.

FACING OUR FAILURES

If there are LGBTQ+ people that you know who have left your church, ask them if they would be willing to speak to you about their experiences. This must be done with humility and kindness, not expecting anything in return. If they are willing to meet with you, assure them that it will be a time to listen and not debate. Be careful not to attempt to explain away anything that they share. Don’t preach or quote Scripture at them. Don’t correct their experience of reality if it doesn’t coincide with yours. And be particularly prepared to apologize for harmful things that you or your community may have done to them. However, it’s important to note that any request for LGBTQ+ people to help you understand is a request for a gift, and not something that should be demanded. There are many LGBTQ+ people who have no desire to engage in this type of conversation for many legitimate reasons, including prioritizing their self-

care, not aggravating their spiritual trauma, protecting their time, and simple disinterest, among others.

ATTEMPTING TO HIDE BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Many pastors become evasive when they are asked what the church's beliefs and practices are towards the LGBTQ+ community. They know that it could be a contentious issue. But keeping quiet and remaining unclear is not only harmful for LGBTQ+ people, it is very unfair. It is important to be publicly clear about what your church believes and practices regarding LGBTQ+ people. Is your church affirming or non-affirming? Are there restrictions for the LGBTQ+ community? If your church is in process and intentionally discerning its policies, it would be good to disclose that, as well as what practices are in place during the discernment process.

MENTAL HURDLES

For conservative Christians, trying to embrace our LGBTQ+ neighbor isn't just about reevaluating our interpretation of Scripture, but about reexamining how we were socialized. This is especially true for the older generation that was continually fed only negative stereotypes of LGBTQ+ people. If you were raised in that environment, your socialization reinforced an understanding of Scripture that was based on your negative perceptions.

In Scripture, we see a similar bias developed around the different classifications of people who were considered unclean. Unclean people were viewed with contempt. People who had skin problems were considered untouchable. Uncircumcised Gentiles were believed to be incapable of holiness. Clean people wouldn't worship with them, and would shun those who did. This is why the Apostle Peter had a hard time embracing the Gentiles when they began to come into the church.

This socialization of categories creates a sense of discomfort within us that is very hard to overcome. But we must understand that this discomfort isn't innate or natural; it is passed down to us. In regards to food, there are certain cultural cuisines some of us would never eat. This is because disgust is a learned behavior, and the foods appear wrong to us in our cultural context. In a traditional Christian worldview, same-gender relationships have been treated with contempt.

Our upbringing and socialization into this belief system creates an internal aversion that we believe to



Keeping quiet and remaining unclear is not only harmful for LGBTQ+ people, it is very unfair.

be natural. But again, distaste is learned. When this learned disinclination is coupled with theological arguments, it becomes very difficult to unlearn what we have been taught. Our socialization towards these negative stereotypes keep us from seeing the beauty in people. This is why it's important for us to listen to the stories of LGBTQ+ people. This helps us undo the years of harmful socialization. We must be aware that we are social beings who are affected by social interactions, which in turn affect our understanding of Scripture.

Questions for Further Discussion

1. How are you feeling after this presentation?
2. What negative stereotypes of people did you grow up with?
3. As you look internally, are there any obstacles that you can see that you'll have to overcome to continue in this process?
4. What do you think the collective obstacles for your community are?



Some Steps to Take

Now that you've discussed the obstacles to this process, you can begin to discuss as a group the ways in which your church will begin to move towards inclusion. This last section can be divided into many conversations depending on what your church needs. It's important to remember that these are tools, as opposed to rules, for this process. Not every construction project requires every tool. This process will be the same. What's helpful is to have the tools there for your community if and when you need them. Once you assess where your church currently is, then you can decide which of these tools would be most helpful for you in your process. With your congregation in mind, use the following as the basis for a slide presentation or lecture.

Steps for Clergy

1. As you begin to create an environment where LGBTQ+ people can share their stories, don't negate their experiences. When they express feeling unsafe in your community, don't get defensive. Listen well even when those feelings aren't expressed in a manner that seems appropriate to you. For example, there are times where I hear women speak about the atrocities of patriarchy, sexism, and toxic masculinity. Every so often I hear women say, in anger and frustration, "I hate men!" As a man, I could respond to the stories of their experiences in a variety of ways. I could be offended, and say, "I feel like you've stereotyped all men, because I'm not that way." Or I could say, "Other places might treat women that way, but not my church." People in power--men, in this instance--experience an emotional fragility when hearing complaints directed against them--against privileges and behaviors they've never had to question, and have considered above reproach. This can happen in relation to whatever position of social power or privilege we might hold. We see the same in discussions on race. And in the case of the LGBTQ+ community, straight cisgender people often feel threatened by hearing from LGBTQ+ people that we have been unloving toward them. But if we respond defensively, the conversation and our ability to understand them is hampered. LGBTQ+ people will recognize that we aren't safe to talk to, nor the kind of community which is willing to listen to and respect their pain.
2. Do the homework of understanding the difference of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. Lead your congregation to do the same. The Human Rights Campaign has a resource here¹.

1 <https://www.hrc.org/resources/%20glossary-of-terms>

3. Discern areas where LGBTQ+ people are being discriminated against in the church. Are they not allowed to be members or to serve in the children's ministry? Are they not allowed to hold office or staff positions in the church? Are they not allowed to take communion or to display affection toward their partners and friends in ways which would be considered normal for straight/cis people? Are they not allowed to be in public romantic relationships or to be married in the church?
4. Publicly confess the harmful practices which the church has engaged in. For example, if a leader makes an inappropriate joke during a service, address it publicly rather than sweeping it under the rug. This can be proactively achieved by stating what you expect of everyone who appears on your stage and the course of action you will take if inappropriate words are shared. This will help LGBTQ+ people see that you won't allow bullying or microaggressions towards them.
5. Educate yourself on the trauma that LGBTQ+ people face. Begin sharing stories in your sermons on how LGBTQ+ people have been wronged by the church.
6. Don't limit the discernment process to only the highest level of leadership. It might start there, but work towards expanding the conversation. The more you can invite the congregation to engage in the process, the better it will be for LGBTQ+ people. When the process is done behind closed doors, it keeps people in the dark. And when there is a lack of clarity, it contributes to the emotional exhaustion that LGBTQ+ people already face.
7. Don't expect sexual minorities to always be ready to educate you. Be aware that this expectation comes from a place of privilege. Straight and cisgender people sometimes feel like we have a right to their stories. But they are not responsible to teach us. We need to do the work of self-education by means of whatever resources are publicly available. LGBTQ+ people have every right to choose not to share their stories without having to explain the reasons why.
8. At the same time, seek to have LGBTQ+ people at the table when the leadership engages in conversation. It is unhealthy to create policies that affect the community without their presence. Rather than talking about LGBTQ+ people, talk with them.
9. When the time is right, invite willing LGBTQ+ people to share their stories via panels or small group settings. Always make sure that there is a moderator to manage people who attempt to start a debate or make the discussion unsafe. Make it clear that questions must be intended for clarification or to seek further information, and that there will be no room for antagonism. If you aren't sure this can be managed, it may be better to have the audience write down their questions, which can then be read by the moderator to the panel. Here is a list of questions that

could be helpful from Love Boldly².

10. Be aware of catering and showing preference to the feelings of straight cisgender people who are offended by LGBTQ+ people. If you want your church to be a safe place, the safety of the minority needs to be more important than the feelings of the majority.
11. Be aware of power dynamics in the church that give preference to cisgender and straight people. When churches make decisions, they often lean towards protecting the majority. Churches also rely on the generous donations of individuals, so special attention is given towards the people who give more. These undercurrents influence many church policies. Since LGBTQ+ people are often minorities within churches, their needs are often subordinated to ensuring the satisfaction of those who give. This power dynamic preferences the need to keep the church financially sound at the expense of doing what is most loving and right.
12. Develop a non-creedal, “centered set” posture. Many churches are moving towards this approach. In the book *The Shaping of Things to Come* by Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, the authors use the analogy of wells and fences to illustrate the difference between a “bounded set” versus a “centered set” approach to communal identity. If a rancher wants to keep their livestock within their property, they can choose to build a fence. But there are times when building fences isn’t practical, especially when a property is too big. So some ranchers will often dig a well at the center of a property to ensure their livestock will stay close to the water rather than venture out too far. Using this analogy, a bounded church uses creeds and doctrinal statements like a fence around their property to determine who is in and who is out. But a centered set church places the community’s core values at the center like a well to draw people in. That way, it’s not about whether people are on the outside or inside, but about how close they are to the center.

In a centered set approach, the center is the ethos of the Spirit: justice, mercy, compassion, kindness, and grace. The community identifies themselves by prioritizing kingdom living that honors God and people. Many Christians are recognizing the inherent problems that a creed-based community has because it lends itself towards division. Because of this, many churches are now using other ways to describe their church. Some use storytelling or poetry to delineate their core values and communal identity, which puts less emphasis on drawing lines and creating fences. This method of self-identification is often met with resistance from conservative communities because it seems risky. But this path moves towards grace and unconditional love.

13. Be aware that people’s emotions may run high. Create rules for dialogue and engagement. Talk about what conflict resolution looks like before conflict actually happens. This allows people to be

2 https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/3de758_e68bacc160db4291b8319676f52bf006.pdf

aware of the potential for conflict and also the intentional process towards reconciliation.

14. Seek out other pastors who have successfully navigated through the process of becoming an inclusive church. Q Christian Fellowship has a list of pastors who are willing to come alongside churches in process. You can also contact me at pastordannycortez@gmail.com to get connected.

Steps for the Greater Church Community to Understand

1. Respect people's pronouns. There are many different pronouns people use to describe who they are. The most common are "he/him/his," "she/ her/hers" and "they/them/theirs." Gender neutral pronouns like "they/ them/theirs," used in a singular way, indicate a person who does not want to be categorized within the binary gender constructs of "women" and "men." People will sometimes use a combination of pronouns. You can help them feel free to share theirs, and normalize the practice of sharing pronouns in your church, by making it a practice to introduce yourself with your pronouns. For example, when I introduce myself, I say, "My name is Danny and I use he, him, his."
2. Be aware of how your faith space uses gender-biased language. For example, male bias is shown in using "he/him/his" as the default when talking about pastors or athletes. Practice using inclusive words when generalizing people. Rather than saying "guys," use "people." Or when referring to a position such as a "chairman," use "chairperson."
3. Don't assume everyone present is straight and cisgender--this is statistically unlikely.
4. Don't use phrases like "gay lifestyle," "gay agenda," or "sexual preference."
5. Don't associate LGBTQ+ people with deviant behaviors.
6. Don't use the word "homosexual." It is a term that was used historically to reduce an identity to a psychological disorder. It was discredited by the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association in the 1970s. But it is still used by anti-LGBTQ extremists today.
7. Be aware of statements like "I knew you were gay," or "I have a cousin like you," or "Who's the man in the relationship?"--statements which reduce people to stereotypes rather than individuals.
8. Don't assume someone isn't bisexual because they are dating a person of the opposite gender--bisexual people remain bisexual regardless of who they're with.
9. Don't comment about trans people's appearances or ask personal questions about transitioning--

respect their privacy.

10. Don't ask details about people's personal sexual practices.
11. Don't ask details about a parent's sperm donors, surrogates, or procreation journey without being invited to do so.
12. Realize that identifying as gay or lesbian or bisexual isn't about sex. For example, my being straight isn't about me engaging in sex. Being heterosexual affects how I view the world, how I engage in friendships, how I experience life, and so much more. Our identities are not just about sex.
13. Be aware of the different forms of microaggressions that occur in cis-heteronormative spaces--small, frequent ways in which we treat LGBTQ+ people as abnormal. There are many ways we express microaggressions toward LGBTQ+ minorities. For a good primer on words and phrases to avoid, download Love Boldly's PDF³.

Steps for Clergy and Church Community Members

1. Begin conversations with the leadership team. Do book readings together. Have your staff attend local and national Christian conferences affirming of LGBTQ+ people. Q Christian Fellowship sponsors a yearly national conference in January.
2. Invite the church to participate in small group trainings and discussions on becoming an LGBTQ+ ally. Host small group book studies with LGBTQ+ people present to help lead the discussion. Utilize documentaries and relevant movies as resources.
3. Seek for ways that give LGBTQ+ people a voice. Offer opportunities, if they desire, to share their stories.
4. If possible, church leaders should pursue relationships with willing LGBTQ+ people, both inside and outside the church. There are many LGBTQ+ organizations who are willing to help churches in their understanding of LGBTQ+ people. Contact me at pastordannycortez@gmail.com to get connected.
5. Invite LGBTQ+ public leaders to speak to your church.

3 <https://www.loveboldly.net/post/words-can-crush>

6. Create spaces for LGBTQ+ only meetings. Often times, it's difficult for LGBTQ+ people to be completely honest about how non-LGBTQ people are being hurtful and unloving, knowing they will not always be understood. Minorities are left to limit what they say in order to not be offensive to cisgender, straight people. Gatherings exclusively for LGBTQ+ people will allow them a safe space to process experiences without having to guard their thoughts.
7. Create bathroom spaces that are not gender-specific.
8. Understand that justice issues are interconnected. The issue of LGBTQ+
9. inclusion isn't an isolated subject. It interacts and intersects with other areas of oppression and inclusion, such as race, class, ability, gender, and more. Be especially aware that a patriarchal church structure is contrary to being a safe space for LGBTQ+ people.
10. Be willing to confront individuals and groups who make the church unsafe for LGBTQ+ people. Address it publicly if necessary.
11. Be clear to the congregation of the policies you have in place when someone confides in the pastoral staff about their sexuality. Assure that there will be confidentiality and listening support. Also make it clear that the church rejects all forms of conversion therapy.
12. Be visible in your support. Often LGBTQ+ people are left guessing at who is an ally. It's best to be as clear as possible what your beliefs and practices are. Church Clarity⁴ is a great resource that encourages churches to be clear about their beliefs and practices in the area of LGBTQ+ inclusion within the church. They do this by scoring local churches on how they communicate and enforce their policies towards LGBTQ+ people.
13. Create liturgy that can be recited each week that speaks of unity, love and steadfastness. Emphasize areas of theological agreement and create an ethos of church as family.

Questions for Further Discussion

1. How are you feeling after this section?
2. What are the steps you could see your community taking within the next 6 weeks?
3. What steps could you see your community taking within the next 6 months?
4. What steps could you see your community taking within the next 1-2 years?

4 <https://www.churchclarity.org/>



Final Thoughts

Years ago I was hiking down a river trail in Maui that eventually led to the ocean. As I reached the end of the river, it began to flow into a small body of water where it became relatively calm. I noticed that there was a sign that said it was an estuary. On this sign, it said that an estuary was a biodiverse place, a place of transition, a place that was teeming with life. I also learned that there were freshwater fish that used this space to transition into becoming saltwater fish. It surprised me because I never knew that freshwater fish could become saltwater fish. All my life I had been told that there were two types of fish, that we lived in a binary world. But in the estuary, there exists a place in creation that is nonbinary—a safe place where aquatic life can transition to become something else.

When I attended my first Q Christian Fellowship conference (formerly known as Gay Christian Network), I remember being in awe of all the different places people were at in their faith journey. A space where people could co-exist in spite of their differing theological perspectives. It was a beautiful and inclusive space where people were allowed to exist and embrace mystery.

I said to myself, “This is an estuary.”

As someone who came from a very conservative theological background, it was helpful to find a place like Q Christian Fellowship. My wife Abby and I were at different places in our journey at the time and we needed somewhere that we could co-exist together. It was here that I was no longer being harassed for where God was leading me or my wife in our journey. It gave me a concrete example of what love can look like, especially within the community of faith.

Matthew’s gospel tells us that when Jesus saw a crowd, he “was moved with compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest’” (Matthew 9:36-38, NIV).

When Jesus looked at the multitude, he saw people as being harassed. I used to believe this passage was just about personal evangelism—that we needed more workers in the harvest field who would help people pray to receive Christ (there’s nothing in the passage to indicate this). But now I see that Jesus was asking for more workers who would stand in the gap to help people who were being harassed, who needed help. For Jesus, what love looked like was helping them not be taken advantage of. Love took the form of helping to protect vulnerable people.

As a pastor, my task of love is to help foster an environment where marginalized people are no longer harassed. As church leaders, this is our calling for our community. This is what love actualized looks like—creating communities that push back against systemic forms of harassment in order to enable human flourishing. What I've experienced in my own process has been nothing short of liberation. I hope you and your congregation will experience it too.





Resources

Videos of Affirmation and Inclusion

1. [Dave and Tino Discuss Their Marriage](#)
2. [Through My Eyes: Stories of LGBTQ+ Christians](#)
3. [Vicky Beeching, singer and songwriter](#)
4. [Ling Lam, psychologist](#)
5. [Yvette Flunder, bishop](#)
6. [Paula Williams, church planter, pastor](#)
7. [Amber Cantorna on self-acceptance](#)
8. [Danny Cortez, Southern Baptist pastor leading his church towards inclusion](#)

Books on LGBTQ+ Stories

1. Emmy Kegler, [One Coin Found: How God's Love Stretches to the Margins](#)
2. Jeff Chu, [Does Jesus Really Love Me?: A Gay Christian's Pilgrimage in Search of God in America](#)
3. Austen Hartke, [Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians](#)
4. Justin Lee, [Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate](#)
5. Jonathan S. Williams, [She's My Dad: A Father's Transition and a Son's Redemption](#)
6. Amber Cantorna, [Refocusing My Family: Coming Out, Being Cast Out, and Discovering the True Love of God](#)
7. Vicky Beeching, [Undivided: Coming Out, Becoming Whole, and Living Free from Shame](#)

Building Bridges for Faith Communities and Families

1. Christena Cleveland, [Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart](#)
2. Ken Wilson, [A Letter To My Congregation](#)
3. Wendy VanderWal-Gritter, [Generous Spaciousness: Responding To Gay Christians In The Church](#)
4. Greg McDonald, [Embracing the Journey: A Christian Parents' Blueprint to Loving Your LGBTQ+ Child](#)
5. Susan Cottrell, [Loving Your LGBTQ+ Child and Strengthening Your Faith](#)
6. Deborah Jian Lee, [Rescuing Jesus: How People of Color, Women, and Queer Christians are Reclaiming Evangelicalism](#)

Affirming Theology

1. Megan DeFranza, [*Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God*](#)
2. Kathy Baldock, [*Walking the Bridgeless Canyon: Repairing the Breach Between the Church and the LGBT Community*](#)
3. Linda Tatro Herzer, [*The Bible and the Transgender Experience: How Scripture Supports Gender Variance*](#)
4. Matthew Vines, [*God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships*](#)
5. James Brownson, [*Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*](#)
6. Colby Martin, [*UnClobber: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality*](#)



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