

“My Mind Was Changed”

A New Way to Talk with Conflicted Christians about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in Church and Society





About Auburn

Auburn Media, a division of Auburn Theological Seminary, provides media expertise to religious leaders and religious expertise to the media. Recognizing that so many turn to mainstream media and the Internet for information, education and inspiration, Auburn Media equips religious leaders to communicate effectively through media channels and helps mediamakers and journalists connect with and cover the voices and stories they most need to hear. The Auburn team on this project and principal co-authors of this toolkit were Macky Alston, Ashley Harness, Susan Reed and the Rev. John Vaughn. www.auburnseminary.org

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About Fenton

Fenton serves the public interest by creating powerful issue campaigns that make change and accelerate progress. With our clients, Fenton has contributed to some of the defining change movements of the past three decades, from ending apartheid and curbing global warming to LGBT equality. The Fenton team on this project and principal co-authors of this toolkit were Robert Pérez, Justin Adams and Elysha Rom-Povolo. www.fenton.com



About Goodwin Simon

Goodwin Simon Strategic Research is a national public opinion research firm. We use cutting edge research methodologies to unpack emotional reactions and develop effective message frameworks on socially sensitive issues. Together, partners Paul Goodwin and Amy Simon bring more than 50 years of experience and a fresh, innovative approach to polling, social and political marketing, policy analysis and communications for clients in the political, public and private sectors. Research Associate Corinne Hoag also contributed to this work. www.goodwinsimon.com

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Toolkit Key

PURPLE BAR

Purple bars indicate the start of a new section.

YELLOW BOX

Yellow boxes provide more information.

Green Box

Green boxes define terms.

Dark Blue Box

Dark blue boxes lead to outside sources.

Light Blue Box

Light blue boxes deconstruct and explain key ideas.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Auburn, Fenton and Goodwin Simon would like to acknowledge the following people for making our work, and this toolkit, possible:

Rev. Jennifer Adams (Grace Episcopal Church, Holland, MI / Holland is Ready)
Michael Adee (More Light Presbyterians)
Danielle Atkinson (Michigan Voice)
Colette Seguin Beighley (LGBT Resource Center, Grand Valley State University)
Parker Blackman (Fenton)
Rev. Matthew Bode (Spirit of Hope, Detroit, MI)
Jennifer Butler (Faith in Public Life)
David Cagle (Fenton)
Nicole Calasich (Fenton)
Diane Cardwell (*The New York Times*)
Lisa Chen (Fenton)
Rev. Steve Clapp (Christian Community, Inc.)
Myron Cobbs (Arcus Foundation)
Thomas Costello (Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion)
Candy Cox (More Light Presbyterians)
Ann Craig (Craig Media Action)
Rita Crooks (Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion)
Julie Davis (Face Value)
Marianne Duddy-Burke (DignityUSA)
Dr. Margot Duley (Inclusive Justice)
Dr. Stephen Duncombe (New York University)
Rev. Janet Edwards (More Light Presbyterians)
Rev. Michael C. Fedewa (St. Andrews Episcopal Church, Grand Rapids, MI)
Todd Ferrell (The Evangelical Network)
Bishop Yvette Flunder (The Fellowship / City of Refuge UCC, San Francisco)
Rev. Paul Fromberg (St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church, San Francisco)
Antonio David Garcia (Kalamazoo Gay Lesbian Resource Center)
Greg Griswold
Dr. Sharon Groves (Human Rights Campaign)
Mark Harris (*Entertainment Weekly*)
Dr. Melissa Harris-Perry (Tulane University)
Dr. Kelby Harrison (Union Theological Seminary)
Rev. Ruth Hawley-Lowry (Reformed Church of America)
Rev. Dr. Katharine Rhodes Henderson (Auburn Seminary)
Jasper Hendricks (National Black Justice Coalition)
David Holtz (Progress Michigan)
Patrick Horton (The Michigan Fairness Forum)
Johnny Lee Jenkins, Jr. (Arcus Foundation)
Rev. Jay Johnson (Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry, Pacific School of Religion)
Larry Jones (Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion)
Dr. Robert P. Jones (Public Religion Research Institute)
Dr. Mark D. Jordan (Harvard Divinity School)
Tom Kam (Arcus Foundation)
Jay Kaplan (ACLU of Michigan)
Valarie Kaur (Groundswell, Auburn Seminary)
Rev. Harry Knox (Integrity USA)
Rev. Matthew Lancy (Kalamazoo First Congregational UCC/The Faith Alliance of the Kalamazoo Gay and Lesbian Resource Center)
Leslie Lipsick (Fenton)
Rev. Dr. Cindi Love (Soulforce)

Dr. Mary Lowe (Augsburg College)
Anne Marks (Face Value)
Dr. Selma Massey (Whoever Ministry)
Rev. Joyce M. Matthews (Christ Church Cranbrook, Bloomfield, MI)
Theresa D. McClellan (Gays in Faith Together)
Nora Mercicky (Fenton)
Sara Miles (St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church, San Francisco)
Rev. Dr. B. Jo Ann Mundy (Eliminating Racism and Claiming/ Celebrating Equality)
Ross Murray (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation)
Linda Karle Nelson (Fortunate Families)
Tom Nelson (Fortunate Families)
Max Niedzwiecki (Integrity USA)
Jessica Nusbaum
Katie Paris (Media Matters)
Sung Park (Believe Out Loud)
Karen Parry (Black Graphics)
Rev. Debra Peevey (More Light Presbyterians)
Troy Plummer (Reconciling Ministries Network)
Therese Povolo
Rev. QuanTez Pressley
Art Reyes III (Michigan Voice)
Patty Bannon Roth
Jason Riggs
Nick Sementelli (Faith in Public Life)
Rev. Ray Shipman
Clay Shirky (New York University)
Andrea Shorter (Equality California – EQCA)
Alicia Skillman
Rev. Bryan Smith
Rev. Canon Ronald Spann (Christ Church Grosse Pointe, MI)
Steve Spreitzer (Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion)
Dr. Sally Steenland (Center for American Progress)
Rev. Roland Stringfellow, (Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry, Pacific School of Religion)
Rev. Joseph Summers (The Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Ann Arbor MI / Oasis Transgender/Bisexual/Lesbian/Gay Outreach Ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of MI)
Rev. Dr. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite (Chicago Theological Seminary)
Jim Toy (Inclusive Justice)
Rev. Douglas Van Doren (Plymouth UCC, Grand Rapids, MI)
Rev. Rebecca Voelkel (Institute for Welcoming Resources / National Gay and Lesbian Task Force)
Ari Wallach (Synthesis Corp.)
Jacquelin Washington (Central United Methodist Church, Detroit, MI)
George Watson (Southeast Michigan Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)
Dr. Phyllis Watts (Wild Swan Resources)
Larry Williamson (Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion)
Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson (Metropolitan Community Church)
Dr. Diane Winston (University of Southern California)

We would also like to thank all those clergy and lay leaders who were assured anonymity, but whose participation throughout this process made it extraordinary and extraordinarily valuable.

Dear Friends,

Auburn Theological Seminary equips bold and resilient leaders to bridge religious divides, build community, pursue justice and heal the world. By leaders, we mean all of us. And our commitment to the full equality of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people is one way we work toward these four goals.

We know that in many American hearts and homes, the conversation about full equality is framed in religious terms.

We also know that in past LGBT equality campaigns, people of faith were often invited to speak for the movement when the game was on, but were not invited to the table when the rules of the game were determined.

At Auburn, we have made it our work over the past decades to do theology and ministry to, for, and as LGBT people with leaders of many faiths. Since the 1980s, many of us have been studying and teaching on the front lines of LGBT theology. In preparing this toolkit, we wrestled with the tension between the most liberative theologies and those we have found most effective at reaching Christians who have not yet resolved their internal conflict over the place of LGBT people in the church and society.

This toolkit offers what we believe to be the most powerful approaches to moving conflicted Christians from a place of standing against LGBT equality to standing for it, in church and state. To succeed, we must give conflicted Christians the emotional space to work through their discomfort. So, we hold close to our hearts John 16:12-13, where Jesus says to his disciples: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.” We believe strongly that this toolkit represents the best strategies to move conflicted Christian people to stand for LGBT equality. Simultaneously, we work toward the day in which the fullest messages of liberation are those that we shout from all mountaintops.

We celebrate the ethical, devoted, trenchant work of Fenton and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research in preparing this toolkit, as led by Robert Pérez at Fenton and Amy Simon at Goodwin Simon. We have heard widely from faith leaders about the alienating experience of being studied, surveyed, and assessed by outside “secular” firms. In fact, we have known that experience ourselves. Trust us, Robert and Amy are no outsiders. They brought their full selves—diverse religious, cultural, ethnic, identities—to this work, along with decades of movement building on this issue and others. We consider Robert and Amy Auburn’s new “life partners” and we recommend that you seek their partnership and counsel as you continue your work for justice.

We applaud the organizers—local and national—who have guided our every step. Your witness and walk are leading us to freedom.

And lastly, we thank the Arcus Foundation that has made this work possible and done so much to advance equality for all.

We hope that you will engage us in conversation about the findings and recommendations we offer in this toolkit. Call us at (212) 870-3178 or email us at auburnmedia@auburnseminary.org and tell us what you think. As we all know, movement building is a work-in-progress. May this resource strengthen you in your work and may we remain connected as together we trouble the waters and heal the world.

Your partners in change,

Macky Alston, Ashley Harness, Susan Reed and the folks at Auburn



One Conflicted Catholic's Change of Heart

When Tom Nelson tells his story, he describes himself as having had a “certitude about religion and morality.”

“I was brought up a strict, traditional type of Catholic and I went through 16 years of formal Catholic education, through college,” Tom says. “I knew all the rules and I thought I knew the reasons too, for those rules.”

An engineer at Ford Motor Company and a father of six children—five daughters and one son—Tom worked hard to shape the values of each of his children. He and his wife, Trish, encouraged family discussions at dinner as a way to shape those values.

One evening, one of his daughters broached the subject of gay people. “It was my time to climb on the podium and pontificate the church’s doctrine. It was very negative and demeaning if you were a gay person sitting there listening to me,” Tom recalls.

In fact, there was a gay person sitting at his dinner table: his son, Mark. Because of his upbringing, Mark believed being gay was the worst possible secret he could have. In his eyes, being open and honest with his family could mean being permanently ostracized.

“He went away to college as a freshman—800 miles from home,” says Tom. “Because he couldn’t tell his family who he really was, and there was no one he could talk to...he decided to end his life.”

Sitting in his dorm room, having made the decision that committing suicide would be easier than telling his family that he was gay, Mark swallowed a bottle of prescription painkillers.

Mark climbed into bed and waited for the pills to do their work. Then, something came over him. In that instant, he could feel God reaching out to him. He realized that God had created him just as he was. And if God accepted him as He had created him, then Mark should accept himself as well.

Fifteen minutes after taking the pills, Mark forced himself to vomit up the pills. His life had been saved.

Mark eventually came out to his father, and revealed the suicide attempt. The story devastated Tom. So as Mark’s emotional trauma began to subside, Tom’s was just beginning to grow.

“I knew that something was wrong with my intellect because this was my son who was perfect in every way,” Tom says, his voice beginning to crack with emotion. “He was a perfect son and I had failed him. I went out and got myself educated.”

Tom scoured libraries across Detroit and checked out every available book about homosexuality. He read and re-read his Bible. After much study, soul searching and prayer, Tom came to see his son and his sexual orientation in an entirely new light.

“He has turned out to be the greatest blessing in my life,” Tom says about Mark. “He really has. The things he has taught me most of all is what Jesus has tried to teach us all. And that is love. It supersedes every other thing in life. I learned that from my son. Wow.”

Now retired and living in Farmington Hills, Michigan, Tom has shared his story countless times. He has written about it in honest and vivid detail. It has been published in *Notre Dame Magazine*, for which it won an award. But, if you ask him, Tom will tell you he had no idea that the story of his spiritual journey would have the evangelical power it has had to help other Christians see that Jesus’ all-inclusive love is just that: all inclusive.



During our research, we came to believe that stories like Tom’s could be powerful in building acceptance of LGBT people among Christians. When we talked with Tom, he agreed to allow us to film his story and share it with Christians in a few focus groups.

The results were amazing. Tom’s story, and others like it, had an almost transformative power to help open the hearts and minds of Christians when it came to the welcome and inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the church.

Christ’s message of love superseding all was particularly moving and resonant.

“He was angry at himself and he got himself educated that Jesus, number one, is love,” said a Christian man from one of our focus groups, who at the beginning had volunteered that he was conflicted on gay issues. “The most important thing is love.”

Tom Nelson’s Story

To read Tom Nelson’s entire story, visit: bit.ly/MyMindWasChanged

WHY CHRISTIAN-BASED MESSAGING IS IMPORTANT

Seventy-six percent of Americans, over 230 million people, self-identify as Christian. There is no denying the power and influence Christians have had, and continue to have, on issues important to the LGBT community. For example, a post-analysis of the Proposition 8 campaign in California showed that those who attended church at least once per week overwhelmingly supported banning marriage for same-sex couples. And they were successful in doing so.

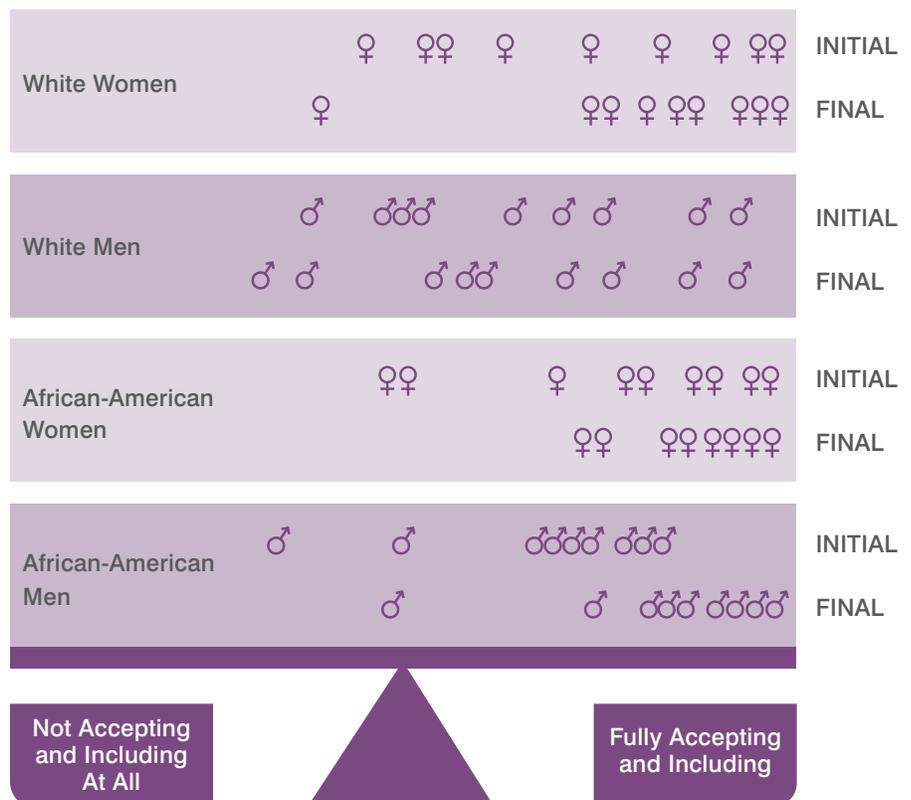
If we are to make full inclusion in our churches and in our society possible, we need to better understand the views and feelings of Christians. And, if we can help Christians see how their faith, built upon the teachings of Jesus Christ, supports being all-inclusive and welcoming, we can help change hearts and minds on the place of LGBT faithful in the church.

Our Goal

In America, there are many Christians who remain conflicted about the place of LGBT people in their churches and in society. They want to embrace fairness and inclusion, yet also worry about what they have been taught, especially in church, about LGBT people.

Our research has helped us find a meaningful way to talk with conflicted Christians—a way that helps to open their hearts and minds to the welcome and inclusion of gay and lesbian people. It’s an approach that we share with you in this toolkit.

The results from our focus group testing can be seen below. At the beginning of the focus groups, participants were asked to place themselves on a spectrum. The left side of the spectrum represents a position of not accepting gay and lesbian people in church. The right side of the spectrum represents a position of fully accepting gay and lesbian people. As you can see, by the end of the focus groups—after hearing our new, Christian-based messaging—there was a consistent and profound shift toward acceptance and inclusion by the participants.



Use of “LGBT” or “Gay and Lesbian”

Throughout this document we use the terms “LGBT” (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) or “gay and lesbian” in the way that most accurately describes our research while still remaining faithful to our inclusive vision of equality.

At the start of this project, we wanted to make certain that we could use our limited budget in a way that allowed us to develop the greatest insight into a critical target audience. To this end, our scope of research focused primarily on a new way to talk to Christians about gay and lesbian welcome and inclusion. While we believe that our findings are helpful to our movement’s fully inclusive efforts for LGBT equality, more research should be done to further strengthen this approach on behalf of bisexual and transgender welcome and inclusion. In fact, we hope to use this research as a stepping stone for further research on how to foster broad acceptance of all LGBT people among Christians.

With that in mind, we use LGBT when speaking of the greater movement for inclusion. We use gay and lesbian when our research and findings specifically apply to these communities.

During our research process we also found that while Christians are capable of becoming more supportive of gay and lesbian equality, few messages are helping them shape the conversation in a way that helps to open their hearts and minds. Activists and advocates have given them countless secular reasons to support inclusion, but these Christians are looking for the *religious* reasons to do so. And, without these reasons, it is difficult for them to move past their discomfort.

Our goal in developing this toolkit is threefold:

1. To give a deeper understanding of the views and feelings of Christians, conflicted Christians in particular, on **LGBT** inclusion in the church;
2. To help make change possible by sharing effective approaches to advocate for full LGBT inclusion and genuine welcome in the church; and
3. To demonstrate effective strategies that counter the negative, Christian-based messaging that is so often employed against LGBT people and issues.

What Do We Mean by Conflicted Christians?

We use the term “conflicted Christians” because, unlike terms such as “moveable middle” or “undecideds,” we think it more accurately reflects the complexity and nuance of how this critical audience thinks and feels, and ultimately makes decisions on the religious inclusion and civil equality of LGBT people.

Conflicted Christians are more likely to be moderate Catholics or mainline Protestants rather than evangelical or fundamentalist Christians and likely to be moderate to conservative on social issues. They see themselves as fairminded, but they also get stuck on the parts of the Bible that speak about homosexuality as an “abomination.” These conflicting ideas result in an emotional and theological tug of war; their emotions and religious values are competing against each other. For most conflicted Christians, the source of their personal conflict comes from the fact that they know someone who is LGBT (over 77 percent of Americans today say they know someone who is gay or lesbian, up from 42 percent in 1992).[†]

This audience more often than not votes against, or opposes equality for LGBT people. But, our research shows that if we make the Christian case for moral and civil equality, it is possible to see these Christians embrace a more inclusive, welcoming belief.

[†] bit.ly/MyMindWasChanged

WHO SHOULD USE THIS TOOLKIT?

This toolkit is designed with two specific audiences in mind:

- 1 Pro-LGBT Christian people of faith** who seek a better way to communicate with conflicted Christians about Jesus' message of being all-inclusive and welcoming, and
- 2 Secular advocates** who want to better understand, spark a dialogue with, and move conflicted Christians to support pro-LGBT issues.

In other words, if you or your organization is working for religious inclusion or civil equality for LGBT people, this toolkit is for you.

Theory of Change: The Christian-Based Case for LGBT Inclusion and Welcome

For too long, the movement for LGBT equality has been searching for a catchphrase or slogan that will flip on the “equality switch” in the minds of those voters who oppose equal participation in society.

Based on our research and the communications approach that we tested, we have developed a more holistic way to engage conflicted Christians that touches on how people feel, believe and work through emotional and spiritual discomfort and ultimately come to see their views transformed.

Our theory of change is straightforward. To build support for religious and civil equality, we must:

1. Make the Christian-based case for LGBT religious and civil equality;
2. Help Christians work through and ultimately transcend their emotional and religious-based conflicts with LGBT equality in both church and state; and
3. Take this new communications approach to the places and spaces where Christians get information—from church pews to newspapers and everything in between.

If amplified and pursued as part of a long-term strategy, this Christian-based approach will strengthen support for religious and civil equality by helping Christians find a new way to think and talk about LGBT people.

Before we start to talk more about the audience, it's important that we first understand what the public discourse has been on this issue. Some Christians—both church leaders and laypeople—are spending time and effort working to convince others that their views are the most Christian. This is true for both Christians who support LGBT equality and Christians who oppose LGBT equality. So, what are these people actually saying?

After analyzing nearly 1,000 media articles and opinion pieces—online and off—our research has identified how those who oppose and support LGBT equality are **framing** the public narrative.

Opposition Frames: How They're Talking

1 *Family, Children and Moral Decline*

The first opposition frame that appears is that LGBT equality threatens the family, the institution of marriage (between a man and a woman), as well as children, community and society. Further, the frame talks about how LGBT equality can lead to other kinds of moral and societal decline. While the threat to the family and moral decline are sometimes talked about separately our research shows that they are linked; when one comes up, the second usually follows.

"...If those advocating the gay agenda can get this ordinance passed, **they will come after marriage and other family values.**"

—*Letter to the editor, Kalamazoo Gazette, October 9, 2009*

"One of the greatest meanings behind the idea of marriage is its role in **building families, producing children** or, if I may suggest, continuing the growth of our community by producing more children for the next generation. Start messing with that ancient meaning and you **open the door for all kinds of silliness...**"

—*Joe Coffman, Column, Holland Sentinel, June 8, 2009*

"**For our children's sake**, Michigan voters remain firmly committed to preserving the institution of marriage between one man and one woman."

—*Gary Glenn, President of the American Family Association of Michigan, Detroit Free Press, June 14, 2009*

"**What has happened to American morals?** We have godless organizations, and homosexual people who are trying to force people with morals to accept their sinful way of life. **Preserving the traditional family is vital to the future of America.**"

—*Letter to the editor, Flint Journal, May 27, 2010*

What Do We Mean by Frames?

A cultural framework is how individuals and communities think about an issue and the associations—positive or negative—that they make with it. For example, the associations you may have with the terms "drilling for oil" versus "energy exploration" are likely very different, even though they may be referencing the same exact activities. Frames work when they reference a shared set of values—like Christ's message of love. The idea behind the frame is triggered by stories, images and personal experiences. Frames are reinforced through repetition and by messengers and messages that embody them.

These mastheads represent a selection of the publications we reviewed in our media audit.

Detroit Free Press

KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

TRAVERSE CITY RECORD EAGLE

2 LGBT Equality Hurts the Church and Religious Freedom of Expression

The second, frequently-found opposition frame is that LGBT rights hurt the church. A commonly cited example is that LGBT rights would infringe upon the religious freedom of expression of pastors who oppose the so-called LGBT “lifestyle.”

“This will cause an ever greater loss in members and finances. I can’t believe the church I loved and served for 40 years can condone what God condemns.”

—Rev. Richard Mahan in an article about the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America opening ordination to LGBT people, Grand Rapid Press, August 22, 2009

“By enshrining ‘sexual orientation’ and ‘gender identity’ as protected categories in employment law, the anti-discrimination ordinance will harm businesses and jeopardize the historically protected First Amendment freedom of religious expression.”

—Letter to the editor, Kalamazoo Gazette, October 29, 2009

“...[T]he efforts of the homosexual community to intimidate Hope College is an abomination. The behavior of homosexuals toward one another is of no concern whatever. However, increasing attempts to escalate visibility to the general population by flaunting the strange lifestyle, especially in religious and educational circles, is outrageous and frightening to witness... [This] has created tragedies that have split the Episcopal Church, inspired terrible perversion in the Catholic Church that covered up the perverted crimes of priests, and seriously compromised the beautiful image of San Francisco...”

—Letter to the editor, Holland Sentinel, December 15, 2009

METHODOLOGY REVIEW

Our process consisted of three phases: a media audit, clergy and Catholic lay leader roundtables, and voter focus groups. In addition, we involved, and were guided by, both secular and religious stakeholders at the national and local levels throughout the process. Our efforts were focused in the state of Michigan—a bellwether state with a robust and diverse Christian population, a strong organizing community, and yet virtually no protections for LGBT people. Roundtable and focus group participants self-identified as: African Methodist Episcopal, American Baptist, Baptist, Catholic, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Christian Reformed Church, Eastern Orthodox, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Non-Denominational, Presbyterian, Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, and Unaffiliated. While our research focused on Michigan, and we sought strategies that worked across denominations rather than focusing on denominational differences, we believe our findings and recommendations potentially apply to a broad range of Christian communities, not only within but also beyond the state of Michigan.

MEDIA AUDIT

We reviewed and analyzed nearly 1,000 articles and opinion pieces that constituted two years worth of Michigan LGBT-related print and online media coverage from July 2008 to July 2010. In addition, we reviewed a subset of other press to give an added layer of depth to our analysis: six months of Michigan LGBT press; Michigan television and radio coverage of the August 2010 Proposition 8 ruling in California (we were limited to this topic by the nature of broadcast clippings); two years of Michigan-and-LGBT-related national coverage; and a scan of digital posts including blogs, social media and online comments.

CLERGY AND CATHOLIC LAY LEADER ROUNDTABLES

We hosted and facilitated four roundtable discussions with Michigan church leaders about the role of Scripture, theology and church community in regard to the inclusion and welcome of gay and lesbian people. These discussions were held in February 2011 with a total of 61 participants: 42 Protestant clergy members, 18 Catholic lay leaders and one Catholic priest. Some of the clergy were personally supportive of full LGBT inclusion, some were conflicted and others were not welcoming. Most clergy who participated had congregations that were not fully supportive, even if the clergy person was. Therefore, a mix of views was represented in each of the four discussions.

3 *The Word of God is Inerrant; Being LGBT is a Choice*

This third opposition frame presents the idea that God’s Word in Scripture clearly states that intimacy (and by extension, marriage) between two men or two women is a sin. People who hold this worldview often believe that being LGBT is a choice. This worldview is also based on the idea that God’s Word is infallible, inerrant and never changing.

“God’s laws are absolute and His position on homosexuality is absolutely clear.”

— *Letter to the editor*, Holland Sentinel, April 29, 2010

“It’s offensive to me to say this is the same thing as civil rights...”

Homosexuality is a lifestyle choice.”

— *Rev. Michael Brown in an article about a proposed nondiscrimination ordinance*, Kalamazoo Gazette, October 25, 2009

“...[Some say] homosexuality is merely an alternative lifestyle, whereas God says that it is detestable and an abomination.”

— *Letter to the editor*, Holland Sentinel, November 1, 2009

“...we are also called to battle evil because the fall of Adam and Eve has left each one of us with a sinful nature. That is the message of Scripture. As such, **the Bible is not like a box of chocolates where we pick and choose particular verses that support our views.** Instead, it is to be read and learned in totality so that it guides our lives today — even if what it asks is difficult — and fills us with hope for tomorrow when **all struggles (including those with gender issues) will be resolved in God’s loving presence.**”

— *Rev. Michael Pinto, Op-Ed*, Kalamazoo Gazette, May 10, 2010

These mastheads represent a selection of the publications we reviewed in our media audit.



VOTER FOCUS GROUPS

The voter focus groups were designed to explore the views of religious voters in the Detroit area on the acceptance and inclusion of gay and lesbian people in Christian churches. Our recruitment criteria selected participants who:

- Self-identified as Catholic, Protestant, or another kind of Christian; and
- Were “conflicted”—With focus group research on sensitive topics, a methodological risk is having the screening questions reveal the topic, so that people uncomfortable with the topic self-select not to participate. To avoid having focus groups comprised solely of people comfortable talking about LGBT people, we asked their positions on a range of high profile topics—the most important issue facing Michigan, federal health care reform, legalizing marijuana, and same-sex marriage. We accepted only those who were weak supporters or weak opponents of same-sex marriage, or who were unsure. Same-sex marriage was chosen as a screening criteria because it is high profile and in the news,

along with other topics we asked about, and because voters are about evenly split on the issue. Same-sex marriage is often a line in the sand—the defining issue that separates those who are fully accepting and supportive of LGBT people from those who are conflicted.

STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

In addition to these key inputs, we also cannot emphasize enough the critical role that Michigan stakeholders and national movement leaders had in this work. Through regular check-ins as we developed our process, scrutinized our data, and drew our conclusions, these critical partners provided ideas, critiques, and insights that were essential to this process and its outcomes.

Supportive Frames: How They're Talking

1 *Equal Rights and Nondiscrimination Are Separate from the Bible and Morality*

Overall, supporters of LGBT inclusion aren't talking in moral or religious terms when they make their case, while those opposed are—and often. As a result, they are largely ceding religious and moral grounds to their opponents. Supporters tend to dismiss morality and/or the Bible and instead talk in secular terms about equal rights. In our research, we saw this pattern frequently, even when the pro-LGBT equality messenger was a church leader.

"I'm just asking for equal rights for the people in the city of Holland."

— *Rev. Bill Freeman in an article titled, "Minister proposes gay discrimination ban at Holland City Council," Holland Sentinel, May 14, 2010*

"Either we are all equal, or we are not..."

We do not believe this is a morality issue, except to the extent that discrimination and inequality are immoral — and illegal."

— *Letter to the editor, Kalamazoo Gazette, October 25, 2009*

"You are entitled to your beliefs, however grounded in Bronze Age bigotry they may be, but you have no right to impose them on others. Contrary to (apparently) popular belief, the Constitution was not transcribed from the Bible."

— *Letter to the editor, Ann Arbor News, December 18, 2008*

What Is Proof Texting?

Proof texting is the act of using short passages or individual Bible verses (often out of context) to make or justify a point.

2 *Logical Flaws and Verse vs. Verse*

When taking on the opposition on religious grounds, we often saw supporters "proof texting." They would also often fall back on the argument that the Bible says plenty of other things we disregard today. These are both intellectual approaches. In some cases, supporters even implicitly or explicitly dismissed the Bible as a source of religious guidance in people's lives. Proof texting does use the Bible, but this mode of rhetoric is, again, based more on logic than on emotions or values. It's also worth noting that when this frame is played out it often comes across as strident and derisive, even to the point of seemingly name-calling.

"Today, those who see same-sex behavior as being outside their Judeo-Christian faith should also oppose planting two different grains in the same field or wearing clothes made of two different cloths..."

— *Letter to the editor, Kalamazoo Gazette, June 7, 2009*

"One could assemble a dozen Christians together and come up with several different 'absolutes.' Isn't that why there are so many denominations and so many synods within the same faith communities?"

— *Letter to the editor, Holland Sentinel, May 14, 2010*

“Much of what we do today is prohibited somewhere in the Old Testament and much is demanded. Today in America most of both are ignored, such as the called-for ritualized blood sacrifices, the prohibition of the wearing of mixed fiber clothes and the death penalty for adultery.”

—Letter to editor, *Traverse City Record Eagle*, February 13, 2010

“But Proposition 8 is something else, too: It’s religious bigotry... The Old Testament ban on homosexuality in Leviticus has no more relevance today than its ban on shellfish, which everybody ignores. And aside from several comments attributed to St. Paul (and of questionable authenticity), there is no mention of gays or gay marriage in the New Testament. If homosexuality were so evil, don’t you think Jesus would have said something about it?”

—Bill Press, *Column*, *Macomb Daily*, November 14, 2008



3 God Is Love; God’s Welcome Is All-Inclusive

This frame came up often during our roundtables with faith leaders. And during our focus groups, it proved effective at persuading conflicted Christians to be more accepting of gay and lesbian people. Yet, this idea came up only a handful of times in our review of hundreds of opinion pieces and media statements from those most vocally decided and accepting of LGBT people.

“My faith, which was greatly shaped by my experience at Hope [College], has taught me to respect the dignity of each person, seek the things that make for peace, be kind and believe that love conquers fear.”

—Letter to the editor, *Holland Sentinel*, October 31, 2009

“I was heartened to see a denomination make these decisions. People are longing for a church that’s inclusive and welcoming. We stepped more fully into that call.”

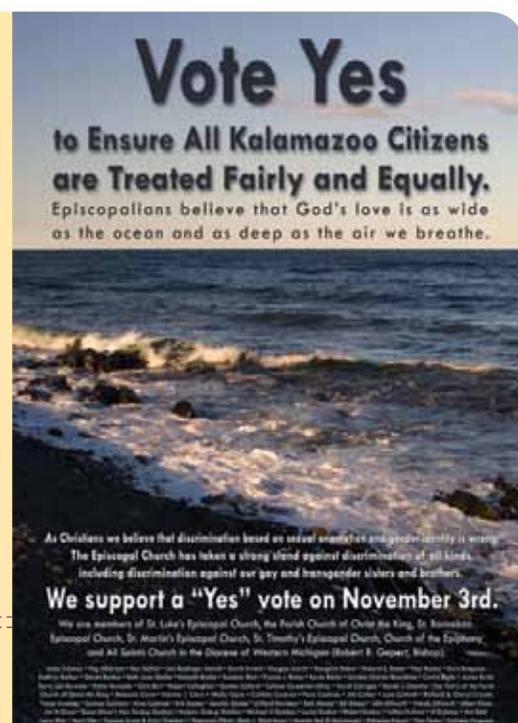
—Rev. Jennifer Adams in an article titled “Local delegate supports Episcopal vote to bless same-sex unions,” *Grand Rapid Press*, July 25, 2009

GOD’S INCLUSIVE LOVE OR EQUAL RIGHTS?

In November 2009, voters in Kalamazoo, Michigan adopted an anti-discrimination ordinance that protected the rights of LGBT people. During our media audit, we found that Christian-based arguments played a big role in the debate around the ordinance.

When the Roman Catholic Bishops announced publicly that they were opposed to the ordinance, a group of Episcopalians raised \$7,000 in individual donations to run this full-page ad in the *Kalamazoo Gazette*.

This ad illustrates the kinds of messages we saw from supportive Christians in our media audit. Note the mixture of both secular (“treated fairly and equally”) and Christian messages (“God’s love is as wide...”), but notice the prominence of the secular over the religious.



LAY OF THE LAND: CONFLICTED CHRISTIANS



There is a great deal of nuance in how Christians feel and talk about the inclusion of gay and lesbian people. We spent time facilitating safe conversations with church leaders—key moral and social influencers—at roundtable discussions. Before we tested any messages or materials, we talked with everyday churchgoers (those who church leaders influence) in focus groups to find out what words they use, what they are feeling, and what values they hold on gay and lesbian equality.

A Conversation That Wants to Happen

One of the most common refrains we heard among congregants was that even if the conversation around moral equality for gay and lesbian people isn't happening, many are eager to have it. Conflicted congregants described it as an “elephant in the room” or something that “everybody knows but no one talks about.” For clergy, even those who are supportive said that they avoided the topic for fear that it would divide their churches. Others believed that their congregations would accept LGBT members only if the subject of their sexuality isn't talked about openly.



“I've seen homosexuals worshipping along with everybody else and everybody knew and nothing was said.”

— *African-American Christian man,
Southfield*

“People are talking about it all over the place. The one place people are not talking about it is the church, and so just allowing that space for that conversation to happen was a very important thing.”

— *White Protestant clergy person,
Grand Rapids*

“Our congregation is accepting as long as we don't talk about it... We had one of our members announce that he was getting married in Florida to his partner... The fallout afterward was we lost a family that had five children... [I]t was very sad... [People] know that there are some folks who are, but as long as no one talks about it, as long as it's not in front of us, then it's okay.”

— *White Protestant clergy person,
Dearborn*

Confusion and Discomfort When Talking about Sexuality

In focus groups especially, we observed confusion about sexuality in general. While most people thought that gay and lesbian people are born gay or lesbian, they also talked about how life experiences could shape their sexuality.

"I think a lot of them have some issues like yes, you can be born gay but most of them you will find out somebody did something to them at some point because maybe they were a little weak or something like that and somebody took advantage of them or their parents weren't there."

— *White Christian man, Southfield*

"I think there is a genetic component but I also think there is a social component."

— *African-American Christian man, Southfield*

There were also questions about how to talk to children about sexuality.

"[Church is] a school for your kids to teach them right and wrong or the way it is, and I just don't want my children to be confused about their sexuality. I don't want them thinking it is right..."

— *White Christian man, Southfield*

"It goes back to the 9-year-old asking, 'Well, mommy, if he is a boy and acting like a girl...' It's easier now I think but it is hard to explain different mannerisms and the way things are and where everything should be or supposed to be to kids."

— *African-American Christian woman, Southfield*

Underlying much of people's feelings—often unspoken—is discomfort with sex and sexuality in general. **Christians who are conflicted tend to believe that heterosexual relationships are about love and commitment, whereas same-sex relationships are only about sex.**





Sticking Points: Marriage and Leadership

Many Christians we talked to felt that gay and lesbian people should be welcomed in their churches, as long as they don't "show it." We also heard that there is a level of comfort with gay and lesbian people in the choir, as ushers, and those collecting the offering. There is less comfort with gay and lesbian people in positions in which the person is expected to be a moral exemplar, such as an elder or deacon. For this reason, there is even less support for openly gay or lesbian clergy. Marriage for same-sex couples in churches is also a big sticking point, even for people who otherwise are inclined to be supportive of full inclusion.

"In terms of people being gay and lesbian, I don't have, personally, no problem with that because I have relatives who are... I guess I was really concerned about the extent of being married and certain rights and what would that do..."

— *African-American Christian woman, Southfield*

"I believe religion gives you a conscience that tells you right from wrong... I don't want them in leadership roles by any means."

— *White Christian man, Southfield*

"They sing in the choir. They usher."

— *African American Christian woman, Southfield*

"They can be fully involved in the church but I'm just not sure whether they should be allowed to be married in the church."

— *White Christian woman, Southfield*

"...there are obviously members of our church who are not heterosexual, most notably in our music department, and they are... because they're great tenors and altos, and so we appreciate their presence partially because of their talent. But that's something that is not talked about publicly."

— *African-American Protestant clergy person, Detroit*

"We have some gays but don't try to run for elder or deacon or any office in the church. That would cause controversy, so they come, and they're okay just as there."

— *White Protestant clergy person, Dearborn*

"Marriage is very sacred to me and that's a tough one."

— *White Christian woman, Southfield*

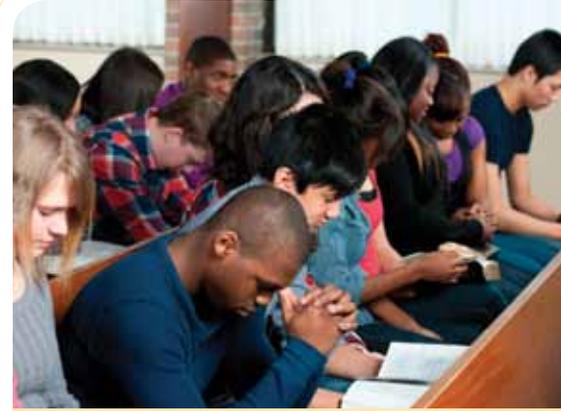
A New Way — Developing a Communications Approach to Reach Conflicted Christians

We want equality. We want it now. Unfortunately, not everyone agrees. In fact, there are many who are actively working to roll back the progress we've made towards equality in the last few decades. And when you start to break down the arguments opposing full equality for LGBT people, you'll notice that a significant number of them are framed along moral lines, rooted in religious beliefs. However, when LGBT advocates respond to those arguments, the responses are usually framed in secular frames—like equality.

For a moment, imagine that you've just won a trip to Italy. You're extremely excited—you've never been there before and it's always been a dream to go—but as the trip approaches it begins to sink in that you're heading to a small town where your language isn't easily understood and you don't know any Italian. Before you is a choice, one that will affect your entire experience: wing it and spend all your time trying to get people to understand what you're trying to say, or take a little time to learn some key words and phrases that allow you to begin a conversation with locals. Learning some basic language will not only help you get around, it will also help you connect with people and make your experience that much more rich.

In similar ways, the secular and religious worlds each have their own language. Though each may be able to recognize the words of the other, there are different vocabularies and different emphases on meanings and themes. And just like on this imaginary trip to Italy, we can greatly improve our outcome—and in this case, reach our common goal of equality—if we approach our communications by starting the conversation with our audience in the language that is best understood.

As we've said, our primary audience with which to begin these conversations is conflicted Christians. The following recommendations provide a new communications approach to reach, and move, these Christians.



MEETING CHRISTIANS WHERE THEY ARE

Conflicted Christians are in a very different emotional place from those who are welcoming and affirming of LGBT people. In addition to religious concerns, there may be familial and peer influences, as well as social or community pressures, that reinforce their choice to oppose inclusion or at least prevent their conflict from being resolved.

If we are to have a meaningful dialogue, with the hopes of having these Christians become more open and affirming, it's important as we help them to work through their conflict to meet them where they are and to journey with them to a new place.

Recommendation I: Use Clear Moral Frameworks Based on Christian Values

One of the major takeaways from our research is that the right Christian messaging from credible messengers does move people to be significantly more supportive of equality and inclusion for gay and lesbian people. This was the case even when we balanced pro-inclusion messages with opposition messages.

This messaging had a key element critical to its success—a clear moral framework. It moved the conversation away from the secular idea of equality and toward moral inclusion.

There is indeed a thirst for a Christian argument for supporting LGBT inclusion and equality. When core Christian sacred texts are the basis for this justification, Christians are supplied with a new Christian-based platform that actually trumps the dated arguments upon which the Christian opposition has relied upon.

Our tested approach accomplished one more important thing: it reduced the sense of “otherness” between the Christians hearing the messages and the gay and lesbian people being discussed. It moved people from a place where they were thinking of gay and lesbian people as only sexual objects, to a place where they thought of them as human beings. In the end, it prompted participants in our focus groups to genuinely agree with affirming statements made by clergy such as “our humanity rises above our sexuality” and “for Jesus, our heart orientation supersedes our sexual orientation.”

WHY WE MUST MAKE THE CHRISTIAN CASE FOR INCLUSION

Whether it's marriage for same-sex couples or simply holding positions of leadership in the church, LGBT inclusion and equality is being raised in places of worship, workplaces and homes. The absence of supportive Christian messages from our side is leaving a vacuum. This is problematic because Christians inclined in their hearts to be supportive often find no satisfying Christian basis for their feelings. Therefore, they feel a strong conflict between their Christian beliefs and their experience knowing, respecting and even loving LGBT people in their lives.

In addition, while the issue of LGBT inclusion and equality in the church is being talked about more, it is still the elephant in the room for many. As part of our

research process we brought together both clergy and lay leaders in Michigan for an open and frank conversation about LGBT inclusion and equality. What we found, to our surprise, was relief. These participants were relieved to have a safe space to talk about what they saw as unspoken issues, and to do so in both a pastoral and theological context with their Christian colleagues. This is what many of them needed in order to work through their own internal conflicts.

There is indeed a thirst for a Christian argument for supporting LGBT inclusion and equality. When the texts are core to this justification, they provide Christians with a new Christian-based platform that actually trumps the unequal foundation upon which they've been resting.

Three Christ-Inspired Frames That Work

There are common characteristics that connect all three of the frameworks that we have developed. Each framework is:

- **Based on simple moral truths and Christian tenets.** These are core Christian beliefs that our target audiences already agree with. We don't have to pull them to our value system. The conversation starts with a moral framework that already resonates with the target audience.
- **Built around the search for God's truth and leads conflicted Christians to a God-inspired revelation.**
- **Grounded in moral clarity.** There is no moral wiggle room because the frameworks are inspired by God-given moral absolutes. Moral clarity is key to developing effective frames—especially for an audience that is conflicted and searching for truth and meaning.
- **Christ-centric.** That is, they are built around the moral teachings of Christ. Our framing analysis shows that Christ-centric framing is underutilized—even when pro-LGBT clergy and faith leaders are messengers.

You'll note that we begin each of the Christ-inspired frameworks in the first-person voice. This is a useful construction when developing a framework because it puts you in the mind of the target audience. You'll also note that the typical political messaging—"it's the economy, stupid" or "change you can believe in"—is missing. Bumper sticker messaging and pithy talking points will not work to move this group of conflicted Christians. Rather, our entire theory of change is built on the idea of introducing a new moral framework and reinforcing those frames through elements we'll discuss in more detail later—stories, Scripture, and personal conversations.

1 *Christ-Inspired Frame: Inclusion*

I believe that all are welcomed to participate fully in the church and in society because Christ welcomed everyone—even those shunned by society.

This frame is inspired by the Christian belief that we are all children of God—"for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). For conflicted Christians, this moral framework is stronger than the secular equality framework for two reasons.

First, it is framed as a Christian absolute, which ranks higher in the minds of this audience than a secular argument for equality.

Second, the inclusion frame appeals to a more conservative part of the brain that defines the world as either in-group or out-group ("you are either with us or against us"). The traditional, secular framework of equality is built around the idea of "fairness for others"—where the emphasis is placed on "the other."



THREE FRAMES THAT WORK

1 INCLUSION

I believe that all are welcomed to participate fully in the church and in society because Christ welcomed everyone — even those shunned by society.

2 LOVE

When asked, Jesus told us that the greatest commandment was to love. I believe that God's love knows no limits. He cares for all of us because he created each and every one of us. Nothing God does is in vain.

3 JUDGE NOT

When I'm honest with myself, gay people sometimes make me uncomfortable. I was taught that the Bible says homosexuality is wrong. But I've come to understand that despite my beliefs and discomfort, it is ultimately not for me to judge others.

This framework emphasizes our common humanity, which quiets fear of the other by emphasizing both that only God gets to determine who is part of the in-group and that Scripture makes it clear that God's welcome is all-inclusive.

The Inclusion Frame in Action:

"One day, I began a deep study of early baptismal practices. I was interested in learning whether anything could hinder or prevent someone from being baptized. Paging through my worn Bible, I became aware of countless examples of people formerly excluded from religious participation being welcomed into the body of Christ.

The Good Samaritan. Levi the tax collector. Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. The Gentile Cornelius. All examples of people shunned by society—and all now being welcomed into the body of Christ."

—*Conservative minister describing his spiritual journey toward inclusion*

2 Christ-Inspired Frame: Love

When asked, Jesus told us that the greatest commandment was to love. I believe that God's love knows no limits. God cares for all of us because God created each and every one of us. Nothing God does is in vain.

This frame is built on the Christian ideal of love—specifically God's love for all humanity. It taps the natural caregiver in all of us. This framework is rooted in the secular idea of compassion for all—probably the most dominant liberal value. But, this framework has the ability to resonate more deeply with social moderates and conservatives for a few reasons.

Like the *Inclusion* frame, the *Love* frame is framed as a Christian absolute, which has more moral value for a conflicted Christian than a secular argument for compassion.

More importantly, this frame appeals to the more conservative part of our brains by touching on authority and respect for God. It's not just that God loves all that God creates, but it's also that God does nothing in vain. To question the idea that LGBT people are deserving of God's love would be to question the wisdom of God.

Finally, it should be noted that because this framework taps our caregiver brains, it's a great frame to evoke when talking about the relationship between Christian parents and their LGBT children.

The Love Frame in Action:

"Lillian and her husband, Charles, are faithful and prayerful Christians who submit joyfully to the Lordship and love of Jesus Christ. If these two wonderful people raised this fine young man who turned out to be gay, I realized that there's something I'm not seeing that I need to see.

Upon prayer and reflection, I came to recognize that the only thing that had changed was how God's Word—that Jesus loves us all—was continuing to reveal itself to me through the power of the Holy Spirit."

—*A conservative Christian aunt finds peace in accepting her gay nephew*

3 *Christ-Inspired Frame: Judge Not*

When I'm honest with myself, gay people sometimes make me uncomfortable. I was taught that the Bible says homosexuality is wrong. But I've come to understand that despite my beliefs and discomfort, it is ultimately not for me to judge others.

This frame comes from the Christian understanding that judgment belongs solely to God—“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged” (Matthew 7:1). This frame is best suited for those conflicted Christians who either fear or believe that God says that same-sex sexuality is an “abomination.” At the same time, they are not comfortable adopting a stridently anti-gay posture. They are in search of a third way that will allow them to integrate LGBT people into their moral **worldview** while still adhering to their perceptions of God's Word.

This framework is different for a few other reasons, too. Unlike the *Love* and *Inclusion* frames, which are affirmative, *Judge Not* is framed in the negative. In other words, it tells us what not to do rather than what we should do. We find that those who are more socially conservative are also more concerned about concrete rules. These conflicted Christians are likely to be especially sensitive to the *Don't* parts of the Bible (“you shall not kill” or “you shall not steal”) rather than the *Do* parts of the Bible (“love your neighbor as yourself”).

This framework is also different because there is a more explicit appeal to authority. Respecting authority is an important value to those who are more socially conservative. The idea that “it's not for me to judge” is very telling. In respecting God's omniscience, one gives sole authority for judgment to God and to God alone.

Finally, our research found that this framework is most effective when paired with one of the two affirmative frames—love or inclusion.

The Judge Not Frame in Action:

“It also gave me deeper insight into what belongs to me and what belongs to God. Judgment isn't something that belongs to me—it belongs solely to God.

In another verse in Matthew, Jesus says, ‘Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?’”

—A church elder from a conservative Christian background working through his discomfort with a gay couple

Two Competing Worldviews

A moral conflict arises when two worldviews collide. For conflicted Christians, the two worldviews we see at play can be summed up as “God is love” and “God is judge.”

“God is love” encompasses welcome, inclusion, and treating all with fairness and compassion. Important pieces of this worldview are the commandment to “love your neighbor,” and the example of Jesus reaching out to those shunned by society.

The “God is judge” worldview opposes evil. It believes that if you allow evil to flourish, your own soul is at risk of damnation. This perspective is aligned with the ‘though shall not’ commandments.

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STORYTELLING HELPS US ACCEPT NEW IDEAS

According to an article in *Scientific American*, Psychologist Melanie C. Green, an expert on the influence of narrative on individual beliefs at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, found that information that was labeled as “fact” increased critical thinking. In contrast, information that was in narrative or story form had the opposite effect—increasing the likelihood that people would more easily accept the ideas. You can read more here:

bit.ly/MyMindWasChanged

Visit bit.ly/MyMindWasChanged for more information on persuasion parables.

Recommendation 2: Tell Effective Stories

Why Stories Are Important

Real-world stories featuring compelling, identifiable protagonists are an especially effective mode of communication when attempting to persuade a conflicted audience. And storytelling—especially from the pulpit—has been tradition in American Christianity. People who listen to or read a story are more likely to be empathetic. That’s because there’s something about the narrative form of communication that transports us to the empathic part of our brains where we are likely to process information through the eyes of the protagonist. Stories not only engage the audience, the emotions of the audience become inextricably linked to those of the characters, especially the story’s protagonist.

Conversely, when simply sharing facts or information outside of a narrative, the listener or reader is more likely to process information in the critical-thinking part of the brain—and therefore, is more likely to raise objections to the “change” you are asking them to consider.

Persuasion Parables: Do’s and Don’ts

Our research has shown that all stories are not created equally. We have uncovered a formula for what we call persuasion parables—stories that help conflicted Christians to work through their emotional conflict and end up in a place where they are able to embrace the moral equality of gay and lesbian people. For stories to persuade, they should follow the guidelines and include the elements outlined below.

DO *Choose a Morally Credible Messenger as Your Protagonist*

For stories to work as a persuasion tool, it’s critical to choose what the audience would perceive to be a morally credible messenger as the protagonist. In addition, the audience must be able to identify with the messenger or else the message they are sharing may not resonate.

Fear is often a significant barrier to changing one’s point of view—fear of God’s judgment, fear of social isolation or just fear of change. To quiet the fear, this audience of conflicted Christians must trust that the protagonist values tradition, faith and morality. For our audience to identify with the protagonist, they must also be heterosexual (as noted below, LGBT characters have an important complementary role in these persuasion parables). Male clergy or parents who are regular churchgoers make the ideal protagonists. But, all messengers who are able to make the Christian case for inclusion should be encouraged to share their stories.

DO *Choose an Unlikely Messenger as Your Protagonist*

Unlikely messengers — like someone who identifies as “conservative” — also make great protagonists. Our brains are wired to recognize patterns. That’s what helps us to learn. When a pattern is interrupted — by say, a conservative Christian supporting LGBT equality — not only are we more likely to notice it, we are also more likely to pay attention and more seriously consider the moral of the story being told.

DO *Spotlight Your Protagonist’s Moral Imperfections*

All human beings are morally imperfect. Those imperfections contribute to emotionally compelling stories as the protagonist explores his or her shortcomings in a search for a deeper understanding of their faith. At the beginning of your story, your protagonist should be someone who opposes the full and equal participation of LGBT people in the church — and perhaps questions the moral equality of LGBT people. To allow the audience to get inside the head of the protagonist, the most impactful and authentic stories are told from a first-person perspective. You should also name the reason for their opposition — “because I was taught that being gay was wrong” — while also being careful not to use the language of the opposition (abomination, sin, perversion, etc.). While highlighting the moral shortcomings of your protagonist, it is equally important to avoid a judgmental tone in describing the protagonist’s opposition to LGBT moral equality. These protagonists should be nuanced, multi-dimensional, relatable and ultimately sympathetic to our target audience.

DO *Tell the Story of a Spiritual Journey*

These stories are ultimately about a spiritual awakening and transformation. Transformation and awakening are familiar themes in religion, especially the Christian tradition. To kick-start the action, the protagonist’s moral worldview should be thrown into question at the beginning of the story — known in literature as an “inciting incident.” This inciting incident — either spiritual or circumstantial — in the protagonist’s life should spark an emotional and religious conflict that forces him or her to question previously held beliefs. While the event raises serious questions for the protagonist, he or she should not easily abandon their previous moral worldview. In fact, the story will ring most true if you can show how the protagonist had to confront several emotional hurdles (fear of the church being split, judgment from God, social isolation, etc) before reaching an emotional resolution. Resolution ultimately comes as a result of deep spiritual exploration (prayer, Bible study, listening to the Holy Spirit, etc).



The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

HOW TO FIND AND DEVELOP THE BEST STORIES

This set of tips will help guide you in crafting your own persuasion parables.

1 FIND

We were surprised by how easy it was to find stories by simply tapping our networks. To find clergy and faith leaders for our roundtable discussions, we asked the supportive clergy and faith leaders that we already knew, which proved very productive. We also found great stories by reaching out to organizations, like More Light Presbyterians, that work to make their denominations more welcoming for LGBT people. Be as specific as possible about the type of person and story you're looking for (i.e. a formerly conflicted clergy person who is now supportive or a Catholic father who was conflicted, but now affirms his gay son or lesbian daughter).

2 INTERVIEW

When you find a person with a great story, interview them to get the texture and color you need. We recommend starting the interview by asking broad questions. If you jump directly to questions about the protagonist's emotional transformation ("What made you have a change of heart?"), you'll likely miss telling details about their religious journey. We suggest beginning with broad questions like, "When did you first know that you were a Christian?" Starting broad will allow you to discover important details and themes to include in your story. If you're creating a video, we recommend starting with a pre-interview to get all of the important details before first filming your protagonist. Doing so will help you to choose the best questions to ask during the formal taped interview.

3 DEVELOP

Following your interview, you should develop a first draft of your story. For both videos and written pieces, you should follow the structure outlined in our example of a "deconstructed story." Begin the story with the protagonist in their "ordinary world"—the emotional place before any change occurs. Share key details about their identity ("I'm a life-long conservative Christian...") as well as their position on the moral, religious or civil equality of LGBT people ("I was taught that it was morally wrong").

Then, introduce the inciting incident—the event ("I became aware of countless examples of people formerly excluded from religious participation being welcomed into the body of Christ") that introduces conflict and kick-starts the action in the story. Make certain to include enough detail about the protagonist's ongoing emotional struggle so that it doesn't appear that he or she instantly had a change of heart. Conclude the protagonist's story with a clear statement that defines their new moral understanding ("Love opened my eyes to God's Word and I now fully embrace and accept my nephew..."). Most importantly, like any traditional story, don't give away the ending until the actual end of the story. Using a narrative style is what makes this communications approach so powerful and effective.

4 TEST

Once you've completed a first draft of your story—you should share it with the person you interviewed. We found that the back and forth of the editing process helped us to refine and strengthen our stories and ensure that we captured the protagonist's authentic voice. Even small tweaks can make a big difference. For instance, we used the headline "I changed my mind" in our first draft of the story shared on page 38. The minister we interviewed pushed us to change it to "My mind was changed." Initially, we preferred our headline because it was a more active declaration. However, we were convinced when he explained further that his mind was changed by God and by the study of Scripture. If possible, it also helps to test the pieces with members of the target audience—perhaps someone's aunt, cousin or co-worker.

5 REFINE

Finally, make changes to your story based on what you have heard and learned. We made tweaks to our materials between days one and two of our focus groups and found that the updated materials tested much better on the second night of the focus groups.

Why LGBT people as Complementary Characters?

Our target audience—conflicted Christians—have moved from being totally opposed to LGBT welcoming and inclusion towards being torn about it. This opening of their hearts, the potential for them to move to being more fully welcoming, is born primarily from their contact with LGBT friends, co-workers, family, or fellow parishioners. They have come to see the individual LGBT people they know as “just regular people” and so their sense of discomfort with those individuals has diminished. Yet, their journey to full acceptance is not complete, as they often see those few LGBT people they know as exceptions.

Hearing other straight Christians tell their personal journey stories—including credible and detailed references to their own gradual acceptance of LGBT people they know as just people—helps to move them further along on their journey, by helping them to realize that all LGBT people are children of God, not just the few they have come to know personally.

DO *Introduce LGBT People, But as Important Complementary Characters*

LGBT people play an important role in these persuasion parables. To reduce the otherness of LGBT people, they should be introduced at some point during the protagonist’s spiritual journey. It’s important to include just enough detail to demonstrate the strong moral integrity of the LGBT characters. To challenge stereotypes and misperceptions of LGBT people, it’s particularly important to spotlight LGBT characters in relationships and to highlight details about the “committed” and “long-term” nature of those relationships. Finally, our research showed that this target audience is either confused by, or reacts negatively to, the LGBT acronym. They are either unfamiliar with it or it signals a type of political correctness that is off putting. Since our strategy is character-driven, we encourage you to reference the sexual orientation or gender identity of the specific characters in your story. And when referring to the entire community, you should just spell out “lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender” people.

DO *Include Telling Details and Dialogue Between Characters*

The inclusion of small, telling details (“paging through my worn Bible” or “noticing the simple gold bands each wore”) helps to strengthen the authenticity and credibility of persuasion parables. Research shows that those details also increase the likelihood that the person reading or hearing the story will both remember it and believe it. To help transport the listener or reader into the mind of the protagonist, it is also important to include actual dialogue between characters. Without dialogue, the persuasive power of the narrative form is lost.

DON'T *Equate the Fight for LGBT Equality with Other Struggles*

We are often inspired and learn from the struggles of other communities and movements. However, while sharing and telling stories it’s important not to equate the fight for LGBT equality with other social justice struggles. Every community’s struggle for equality, fairness and dignity is unique and attempts to draw comparisons rarely reflect that nuance. Along those lines, you should refrain from using “civil rights” as language to describe efforts to win LGBT equality. That language has a long and proud history that is inextricably linked to African-American communities. It is, however, effective to remind conflicted Christians that the Bible has been used before to defend acts now universally condemned, such as slavery and the silencing of women in church. This approach works because it uses the power of comparison while not equating the struggles between communities, which can feel offensive if the person making the comparison does not share a common culture, history and experience.

Recommendation 3: Reinforce with Scripture

Our research showed that there is a thirst among conflicted Christians for faith-based reasons to support the moral and civil equality of gay and lesbian people. We were struck by how eager conflicted Christians were to nod their heads in support when given the opportunity to consider a Christian case for why gay and lesbian people should be fully welcomed into their churches and society.

We should absolutely use Scripture to make the case for equality. The absence of Scripture would signal to conflicted Christians that there is no legitimate religious reason to embrace equality. At the same time, our research shows that when it comes to using Scripture, some things work and others do not. Here's our list of the *Do's* and *Don'ts* of how to use the Bible to persuade conflicted Christians.

DO *Use Scripture to Reinforce Frames, Stories and Simple Moral Truths*

“Keep it simple, sister,” one white Catholic mom volunteered during our research process. She said she would say this to herself as she struggled to come to terms with her son's sexual orientation. It was her way of reminding herself to seek comfort in the basic Christian tenets—to love, to welcome, to judge not.

Keep it Simple, Sister (KISS)

“Again, I give it to God. Keeping it Simple Sister, KISS, just keep it simple. A simple law, love your neighbors. That's where I'm standing. That's so much easier to live like that.”

—White Catholic mom during research process

This mom's use of the **KISS** (keep it simple, sister) principle is a good reference for the effective use of Scripture. The Bible should be used to reinforce our frames, stories or simple moral truths that the audience already believes. That doesn't mean quoting one-off Bible verses, which is actually ineffective as a persuasion tool. In fact, you'll notice that we do not include a list of recommended Scripture passages because doing so might encourage those reading this guide to engage in proof texting debates. Through our research we discovered that using a debate “tit-for-tat” style to argue about the meaning of Scripture actually shuts down conversation. Talking about one's unique experience and insight about the Bible—especially as illuminated in a story—allows for a more open and productive dialogue on the issue.

Instead, Scripture should be used in stories—where its meaning is intertwined with the moral of the story—and the more widely cherished the texts, the better. Our research showed that the use of Scripture helped to define a character's values and moral worldview—especially for protagonists who were working through their own emotional conflict on their way to embracing equality.

What Is Proof Texting?

Proof texting is using short passages or individual Bible verses, many times out of context, to make or justify a point.

DON'T *Engage in Proof Texting Debates*

Debates on **proof texts** do not change hearts and minds. A clear moral framework is often absent from most proof text debates. Least effective is the oft-repeated, “Let me tell you what else the Bible says...” Based on our media audit, we found that this approach is very common when religion and sexual orientation are debated in the media. They tend to mirror this letter to the editor:

"Today, those who see same-sex behavior as being outside their Judeo-Christian faith should also oppose planting two different grains in the same field or wearing clothes made of two different cloths..." —Kalamazoo Gazette, June 7, 2009

This approach employs the standard "high school debate" technique to demonstrate logical flaws—a decidedly rational approach to something that is deeply emotional and spiritual.

We recognize that the instinct to engage in these proof text debates is in response to clobber texts like Leviticus 18:22, which are regularly used to condemn same-sex sexuality. We found that an effective way to push back against clobber texts is to reference how single Bible verses had been used throughout history to justify acts or beliefs now universally condemned. In one story, a clergy member shared the following revelation:

"I came to recognize that I was so certain in my beliefs that I never explored the true meaning behind God's Word. I then came across Colossians 3:22—"Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything," and thought about how single Bible verses had been used to justify acts now universally considered repulsive—like slavery or women being forced to remain silent in church."

This approach will be most effective as part of a personal narrative of spiritual discovery. Note in the passage above that Colossians 3:22 isn't mentioned as a stand-alone, but it is given meaning as part of a moral worldview and related to the common Christian theme of God's Word continuing to reveal itself over time.

DON'T "Queer" the Bible

While we affirm and benefit from the work being done by LGBT theologians that many refer to as "queering" the Bible, which we define as interpreting the Bible through a queer lens, including reading Biblical characters as gay, such as Jonathan and David, Ruth and Naomi, and Jesus and the beloved disciple John, we found that it is unhelpful as a persuasion technique and makes conflicted Christians bristle. We saw this emotional reaction play out in two distinct ways in our focus groups.

During the first night of focus groups, we tested a print brochure where a conservative Christian minister shared the story of his personal spiritual journey. Near the end of his story, the protagonist references the following verse inspired by Galatians 3:28 where the minister updates the Bible verse to reflect his new understanding:

Today, inspired by Galatians 3:28, I now affirm:
*All of us who have been baptized into Christ have been clothed in Christ.
 There is no issue of ethnic identity except citizenship in God's kingdom,
 no issue of servitude except the service to Christ,
 no issue of gender or sexual orientation, except the bonds of covenant faithfulness,
 for all of us are one in Christ Jesus.*

WHAT WORKS... AND WHAT DOESN'T?

We learned a great deal about what was and wasn't working with our message-testing material during our first set of focus groups with white Christians. We were able to take that feedback and refine the materials so that by our second set of focus groups, with African-American Christians, we had materials and messages that were much stronger and resonated more deeply.

1 SAMPLE FROM FIRST FOCUS GROUPS



2 SAMPLE FROM SECOND FOCUS GROUPS



For more specifics on what worked and what didn't, please see the Appendix on page 38.



We included this updated version of Galatians for two reasons. First, this brochure is inspired by a true story in which this conservative minister reflected this new understanding of Galatians 3:28. Second, we wanted to test how the target audience would react to a Bible verse being changed in this way. As we suspected, folks strongly rejected the reinterpretation.

The next night we tested the exact same piece, but changed the verse back to the original Galatians 3:28 language:

And, I am now inspired by Galatians 3:28:
*There is neither Jew nor Greek,
there is neither slave nor free,
there is neither male nor female;
for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

We discovered that our target audience can make the mental and emotional leap without changing language or inserting an LGBT subtext. One African-American man's response to Galatians 3:28 demonstrated the resonant power of Bible verses used in the appropriate way:

"It kind of shines more light on things where we just have to humble ourselves and put ourselves in other people's situations versus us judging before we can understand the situations that they've been through."



DO *Choose Descriptive Language with Purpose and with Care*

Our research shows that words are powerful. They have the ability to dramatically reframe people's perceptions of gay and lesbian people and their place in the church and society. It's particularly important not to reinforce the negative language found in the Bible—like sin, abomination, or unclean. Even when trying to share positive messages, one negative word has the power to trip someone up. We saw this play out during our research. In a video vignette featuring a supportive white minister who was using the inclusion frame in talking about Christ, he said:

"Christ didn't just go around not judging people; He went around including people, welcoming people and touching people who were supposed to be unclean."

Members of the focus group reacted negatively to his use of the word "unclean." A white woman in one focus group reacted in this way:

"It looks to me like he is saying they are unclean because he said [Jesus] touched the unclean—sick people—so [Jesus] can touch gays...I was a little startled."

It is understandable why this minister would use this language—because we are likely to repeat the common vernacular of Bible stories. And yet, it made it more difficult for some to hear the positive nature of the story that he was telling.

On the flip side, this same minister demonstrated the positive power that the right words can have in reframing people's perceptions of LGBT people. In the same statement, that minister said the following:

"I look at Christ, he seemed much more concerned about whether people are being faithful, caring for each other, whether they are being gracious, loving, supportive. I've really come to believe that Christ wasn't concerned so much about people's sexual orientation as their heart orientation."

Many focus group participants reacted positively to this idea of judging people based on their "heart orientation," not their sexual orientation. One white woman said:

"... it's just about relationship with God or loving each other as people not necessarily about sexual orientation. It's just what you feel on the inside."

Another white woman said:

"Christ was more concerned about love than about sexual orientation."



Recommendation 4: Start a Safe and Heartfelt Conversation

As mentioned previously, during our research process an interesting insight emerged. We discovered that one of our key inputs, our clergy roundtable discussions with faith leaders, was also effective in helping the conflicted Christians in the rooms work through their emotional discomfort.

Therefore, we recommend finding ways to create the range of safe spaces needed for these types of conversations to take place. In developing our roundtable discussions, we used the following guidelines to create a particular kind of space that clearly advances progress moving conflicted Christians.

DO *Take Care in Choosing the Most Effective Moderator*

For some conflicted Christians, creating a space for a genuine and heartfelt discussion requires that the facilitator of the group is seen as both neutral and culturally appropriate. To be seen as neutral, the facilitator should not be an **LGBT person**. This may mean training an ally to facilitate the conversation. Based on experience, we know that people who are working through their conflict around LGBT inclusion make significant progress when they can share their honest opinions; and that they are often reluctant to do so if they think they will offend an LGBT person in the room. To be clear—we encourage you to continue the range of engagement strategies and conversations with many different and diverse groups of people. However, we have seen conflicted Christians make significant progress and have heard them express the need for this kind of safe space to process their feelings in the company of their peers.

In addition, the facilitator should not express personal opinions. The facilitator should also be a culturally appropriate match for the group of participants. For instance, if you're hosting race- or ethnic-specific groups, it's ideal to have a facilitator of that racial or ethnic group.

Different Kinds of Conversations

Conflicted Christians can be moved in all kinds of conversations. Hearing the stories of LGBT people from LGBT people has proven to be a powerful way to break through stereotypes and create personal connections with LGBT people that, for some conflicted Christians, did not previously exist. In the course of this study, we observed the value of a different context for discussion—one in which straight people in the company of one another can have a genuine and heartfelt discussion about their own personal and religious conflicts about LGBT people and Christianity. Many expressed the fact that they had never had that opportunity before and that it provided a unique opportunity to express and consider points of view that they never had previously without the danger of hurting the feelings of LGBT people present or being labeled a bigot.



DO *Be Choosey When Developing Your Invitation List*

We recommend that you make the event an invitation-only discussion and develop your invitation list through referrals. In many ways, this type of work is based on a community organizing model of knowing the community and identifying the right people to include in the conversation. By identifying likely social influencers, you will tap the types of people who can help to reach other key influencers.

A referral program will also help you identify the right type of participants. It's helpful to have a mix of individuals who are supportive along with those who are more conflicted about the moral and civil equality of LGBT people. Participants who are stridently opposed to LGBT equality can inhibit the discussion. Similarly, supporters who are sensitive or dogmatic can also inhibit the discussion. Invariably, once the invitation goes out, you'll get a phone call or two from individuals who were not on the invite list, asking if they can attend. To ensure that attendees whose sole goal is to sabotage the conversation don't attend, we recommend building your list through referrals only.

DO *Make It Clear That You Welcome an Open and Honest Conversation*

From the moment you begin your outreach, you should signal that this is meant as an opportunity for honest conversation. As you can see from the invitation we sent to clergy and faith leaders, we made it clear that honesty was welcomed:

The discussion is informal and off-the-record so that participants can be honest and straightforward in the views they express.

For this religious roundtable, we welcome clergy who are personally welcoming LGBT people into their congregations, even if they have not spoken about it in their congregations. We also welcome clergy who are either personally conflicted about issues relating to LGBT people and Christianity, or who have congregations that are currently in struggle or dialogue about issues related to LGBT people.

In order to have fruitful dialogue, we do need to have clergy who are friendly, honest and respectful, and not easily offended by others' honest input.

When beginning the discussion, it's important to again frame it as a safe space for honest dialogue from the very start. This is how we kicked off the clergy roundtable discussions:

We've heard a lot of Christians struggling with this issue. On the one hand they might know and respect people who are gay or lesbian, family, friends, co-workers, fellow church members, and feel they are good people, good Christians. On the other hand they feel that their church or their understanding of the Bible says that homosexuality is wrong. And they're struggling to reconcile their experience in the world with real people and what they hear or have heard in church. So we want to get a deeper understanding of how Christians are really talking and thinking about this.

I want to start by saying that this is a safe space. All views are welcomed. It's quite likely that you will not agree with one another and that's okay. We want to hear what you really think. There's the idealized world we all work towards building, and then there's the world we live in today. We want to hear about the world we live in today.

DO *Give Them a Safe Way to Share Their Discomfort*

Even in a room full of straight people and even after taking all the steps to invite honest discussion, we also know that individuals may still be uncomfortable sharing their own discomfort and misgivings. Therefore, we invited participants to share what they have heard other people say. By allowing them to start the conversation in the third person, you're more likely to get an honest conversation started. Invariably, some people will shift from speaking in a third-person voice to sharing their own personal views.

DO *Sequence the Conversation—Beginning With the Positive*

These are not free-for-all conversations. The facilitator plays an important role in guiding the discussion. We recommend starting with Christian-based reasons for fully including and genuinely welcoming LGBT people in the church. Once these have been discussed and written in a way that all can see them, the facilitator can then guide the conversation to the reasons that people have heard for excluding LGBT people from the church. The conversation ends with participants looking at the two lists—one for and one against inclusion—and sharing their thoughts about how to move their conversations forward in a constructive way.

We used the following questions to guide our conversations:

- What are the reasons you have heard others say that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people should be both genuinely welcomed and fully accepted in the body of Christ, that is, in the church that is the body of Christ?
- Are there certain parables, Bible stories, or words of Christ or his apostles or prophets that you feel or that you've heard others say that express or illustrate why gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are children of God who should be both genuinely welcomed and fully accepted in the body of Christ? What are they? Why are they important to you?
- What are the reasons you hear other people offer for why gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people should not be both genuinely welcomed and fully accepted in the body of Christ?
- How would you respond to those concerns?
- Some would describe two different veins of Christian beliefs about God. One is articulated as "God is love," while another is described as "God is judge." Thinking about each of these separately, how would you speak to a "God is love" Christian about why they should genuinely welcome and fully accept gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people into their church? How would you speak to a "God is judge" Christian about why they should genuinely welcome and fully accept gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people into their church?

DO *Continue the Conversation*

Just because the meeting comes to an end, it doesn't mean the conversation is over. Make sure to email out a "thank you" to your participants, inviting them to continue a dialogue through email or by phone. The more this conversation continues, the better chance you have of getting a conflicted Christian to think through and better understand this new way of seeing LGBT people.



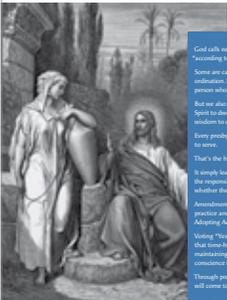
FEED PEOPLE— BREAK BREAD

This may seem like simple advice, but offering food and refreshments (and reflecting this in your invitations) goes a long way toward setting the tone of your conversation. By providing lunch or dinner (cookies and coffee are not enough!), you signal to those who attend that you value and respect their participation and the opinions that they are going to share. There is also something inherently social about sharing a hot meal together that helps to ease people into the conversation.

REAL WORLD CASE STUDY: PRESBYTERIANS SHINE A LIGHT ON INCLUSION

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony.

JOHN 4:39



God calls each of us to receive our gifts according to the grace given us.
Some are called to Christ's ministry, including women. Like the Samaritan woman, the person who answers that call may surprise us. But we also know that God sends the Holy Spirit to dwell in us to give us the insight and wisdom to discern those fit for ordination. Every presbytery will choose those best suited to serve.
That's the heart of Amendment 10-A.
It simply leaves with women and presbyteries the responsibility to discern and determine whether the standards have been met.
Amendment 10-A will restore the ordination practice and principle affirmed in the Adopting Act of 1792.
Voting "Yes" on 10-A will return us to that time-honored Presbyterian way of maintaining unity by respecting freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture.
Through prayerful discernment, we hope you will come to vote "Yes" on 10-A.
Each community should decide. It's the Presbyterian way.
Yes on 10-A.

My mind was changed.

I am a 60-year conservative Presbyterian. I never got very excited about the issue of gay and lesbian participation in ministry, simply assuming that things had been set for two thousand years.

I was so using that I never explored God's Word on the matter any further. Then a study of early biblical practices led me to Acts 9 and 10. I became aware of a progression of calls for a broader inclusion in the church beginning in Luke 9:44. Luke names Levi among the invited four. He invites Samaritans, and talks about a "Good Samaritan." He stresses the separation in 19:14 and the baptism of the eunuch. He has great mercy on Cornelius and the Holy Spirit falling on the Gentiles. All of these call for the inclusion of persons formerly excluded.

I came to recognize that I was so certain in my beliefs that I never explored the true meaning behind God's Word.

Tables, inspired by Galatians 3:28, I now affirm:

All of us who have been baptized into Christ have been clothed in Christ. There is no issue of ethnic identity except citizenship in God's kingdom, no issue of ethnic origin except the issue of Christ. No issue of gender or sexual orientation, except the bonds of covenant faithfulness, for all of us are one in Christ Jesus.

Moved by the study of Scripture, my mind was changed on the place of faithful gay and lesbian Christians in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).



Rev. Dr. Arlo D. Daba
Former Director of Admissions
& Director of Chapel
Former Executive Director
Former Dean, University of Delaware
Theological Seminary

I hope you will join me in voting "yes" on Amendment 10-A.

To read more and continue the conversation with Rev. Daba, go to <http://bit.ly/RevDaba>



The Consequences Will Surprise You

When I was ordained in the fall of 1988, my congregation approved ministers for clergy and deacons. One minister was Sally, a long-time Presbyterian and a beloved member, who was also a lesbian in a long-term relationship.

I was shocked and dismayed. My deep theological foundation shook. I feared that the roof would fall in. I feared a divided congregation. I was pretty sure the Session was not of one mind on this matter. And I was right. It wasn't.

The Sally and her partner cared for each other in sickness and in health. But there were serious constitutional questions that the Session could not, and would not, ignore or deny.

Session met for a week to reexamine the Book of Confessions, Book of Order and Bible in light of the preceding questions. When it reconvened, each elder spoke - some for ordination, some against. Elders listened to each other's reasons. Then we took a unanimous vote to be alone, pray and vote by the Spirit.

When we came back together, each elder, one by one, offered reasons - supported by the Bible and the church constitution - for his or her vote. It is hard to overstate the critical questions that focused the Session's mind when we had our beloved Sally over our call and were asked to vote on her.

The outcome wasn't at all what I anticipated. The vote was unanimous - all ten for ordination! I was stunned. It was, in a sense,

to believe a demonstration and celebration of God's infinite and all embracing love. Did our Presbytery investigate and discipline us? No.

But since Sally's ordination, the Lord has blessed us. Many changed believers are entering. Many "yes churches" are coming in. Our Sunday School is booming and our youth group keeps growing. Our youth speak out - proud and grateful for their church that publicly welcomes gay and lesbian.

By God's grace we meet our Presbytery's shared mission "boldly" and support all denominational special offerings. We have added staff and voluntary support building projects. All of this since the day I thought the roof would fall in.

I now believe that all of this and proper polity explanations in the world would never have had the operational power of that one simple, public, act of ordination to ministry.

It's true, I was afraid. But the consequences surprised me. "Sally" says the Lord, "I am doing a new thing, can you not see it?" (Isaiah 43:18)

And I say to you, my brethren and sisters, *Rejoice. Be not glad.*

In Christ,
Rev. Dr. RANDALL TERESA
Member of Word & Sacrament
Department, Presbyterian Church
of the South, 10000 Highway 101
Nashville, Tennessee 37203



To learn more about Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church you can visit <http://bit.ly/RevTeresa>

For decades, groups like More Light Presbyterians have been working toward the day where LGBT people are fully included in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In 2010, these faithful Christians achieved a big victory: The top-level governing body of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved opening ordination to LGBT candidates.

However, this wasn't the end of the process. The Presbyterian Church requires ratification through a grassroots, democratic vote that takes place over the course of six months in regional governing bodies called presbyteries. The church leaders who have a vote in this process have traditionally skewed older and more conservative than the general population. They've also historically opposed LGBT inclusion in leadership positions. In 2009, when votes were cast for a similar amendment, it failed to reach the majority needed by nine presbyteries.

This time around, More Light Presbyterians brought on Fenton to develop a narrative and an advertising campaign that would run in the largest Presbyterian magazine during the course of the voting. Fenton saw this as a perfect opportunity to try out the tactics described in this toolkit with a real group of conflicted Christians.

Fenton started the process by listening and getting familiar with the mindset of conflicted Presbyterians. The vision was to base messages in language that struck a chord not only through Scripture and values but also within the denomination's history.

The first set of ads talked about how, "Like the Samaritan woman, the person who answers that call may surprise us," and featured a Scripturally-based argument for LGBT ordination rooted in language that resonated with the denomination. This set the stage for what was to come.

The second series, "My Mind Was Changed," featured a self-identified conservative Presbyterian minister who claimed that his mind "had been changed" about LGBT inclusion after finding countless examples in Scripture of "people formerly excluded from religious participation now being welcomed into the body of Christ." The final set of ads, "The Consequences Will Surprise You," featured the story of a minister who came back from sabbatical and found, to his dismay, that his church had nominated a lesbian to a leadership position. In the ad, he told his story of working through his initial shock and eventually seeing his church reap the benefits of inclusion.

Visit bit.ly/MyMindWasChanged for more information and to view the ads.

Besides appearing on the pages of the largest Presbyterian magazine, these ads were used by on-the-ground organizers as hand-outs at presbytery meetings leading up to votes. This meant that they made it into the hands of the conflicted Christians all over the country, right as they were discerning their votes.

So, what was the outcome?

After decades of effort, in mid-May 2011, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) reached the voting milestone to open ordination to LGBT candidates. Twenty-three presbyteries flipped their votes from “no” to “yes” since the last similar vote in 2009. What’s more, many of these presbytery flips were in traditionally conservative places—Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Tennessee.

As of this writing, Fenton is working with More Light Presbyterians to tell the next chapter on inclusion with the media and church-based audiences: the stories of LGBT candidates for ordination.

These mastheads and headlines represent a selection of the historic publications that covered the historic Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) vote.

Los Angeles Times

Presbyterian Church U.S.A.: Faith and gay rights



Presbyterian Church (USA) Passes Vote Allowing LGBT Ordination

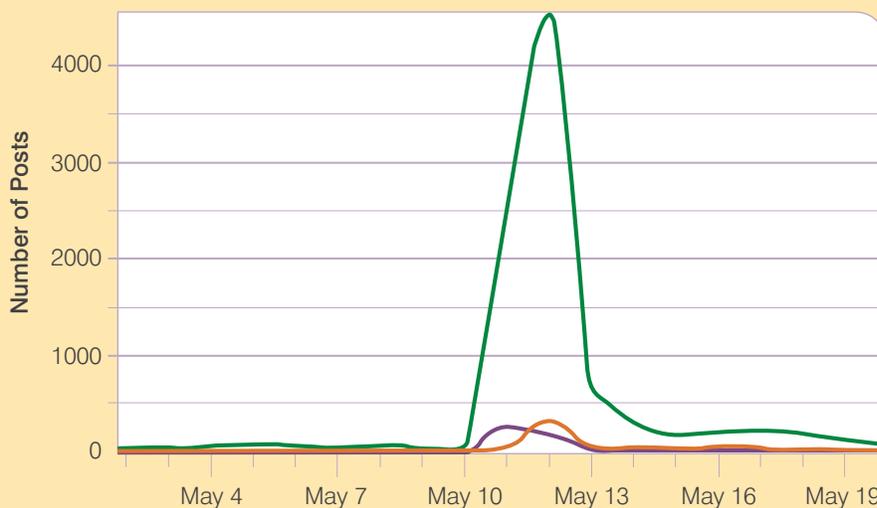
The Washington Post

Presbyterians discover support for gay equality in surprising places

REFRAMING IN REAL TIME

On the day that the voting milestone was reached, May 10, there was news interest almost immediately. The problem: these early stories focused on the fact that celibacy was no longer a requirement for ordained office. The story More Light wanted to tell—that the church would be more welcoming and ultimately stronger—wasn’t being heard.

It was time for rapid response. By deploying the best, most relatable messengers as commenters, and helping them shape and share their stories into op-eds, Fenton and More Light Presbyterians were able to quickly shift the frame from negative to positive, focusing the story around “love.”



Green line — represents all the news, blog posts, and social media that mentioned the word “Presbyterian”
 Orange line — represents those same posts that also mentioned “love”
 Purple line — represents the posts that mentioned “celibacy”

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?



Whether you're a leader in your faith community working to foster inclusion or the leader of a secular organization working to achieve equal rights, the strategic recommendations in this toolkit have the potential to change the tone and tenor of the conversations we're having with Christians.

There's a lot in this toolkit that will help you to transform the way that we're shaping the conversation with conflicted Christians. There's also more work to do to deepen our understanding—especially in areas that we were unable to explore in our research. Here are our thoughts on where you should get started and where we should go from here.

1 *Start the Christian Conversation...Today*

There is a deep desire among conflicted Christians to have Christian-based reasons to support the welcome and inclusion of LGBT people—both in the church and in our society. The sooner we begin a conversation with them in this way, the sooner we can help them resolve their emotional and spiritual conflict.

2 *Build Bridges and Foster Partnerships*

A community works best when it works together. If we want to see a change in our community, it's important that we get as many people as possible working together to achieve it. That's why building bridges between faith communities and secular groups that work towards equality for LGBT people is so important. The two groups are not mutually exclusive after all; there are many LGBT people in faith communities and many people of faith in groups working towards equality. Recognizing our common ground and fostering partnerships that allow for a growing number of supporters will help create the space for positive change to happen.

3 *Seek Out Stories and Messengers*

Another benefit of building bridges and fostering partnerships is that it opens up new possibilities for finding stories and messengers that can help conflicted Christians see a new way. These stories can show them that they're not alone and that others have both overcome their conflicts and are better for it. As you meet with, talk to, or email new partners, make sure to listen for and seek out the types of stories that would resonate with conflicted Christians. Also be on the lookout for people who would be seen as trusted messengers.



4 *Understand the Stakes for Conflicted Christians and Proceed with Care*

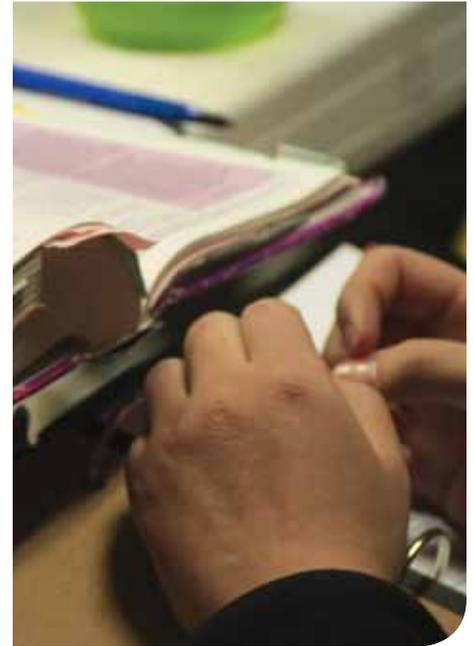
Every year, we see both progress and new challenges to the welcome and inclusion of LGBT people in the church, and to the equality of LGBT people in our society. Whether it's a vote over inclusive ordination standards in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America or a vote over banning same-sex couples from adopting in Florida, the stakes are high in the minds of Christians on both sides of the issue. To achieve the change we want to see, we must better understand the stakes as they are understood by conflicted Christians, and approach the idea of change with respect and care. This is a moral issue that taps into deeply-held Christian beliefs and requires both time and many touches—conversations, stories, personal witness, etc.—to help those who are conflicted over LGBT inclusion to open their hearts and minds.

5 *Conduct More Research*

Though we discovered a great deal throughout this research process, there are still questions that, if answered, can help us to have even more effective conversations—with a broader audience—around the inclusion and welcome of LGBT people in the church and in society.

While our approach proved effective at moving conflicted Christians regardless of their denomination, we also recognize that this work would benefit greatly from a deeper understanding of denominational differences. It is also crucial that there be more research to further our understanding of how to talk to conflicted people of other faiths and how to more specifically talk about the inclusion of bisexual and transgender people.

Finally, while we've already seen the success of these recommendations in action on a national level, as demonstrated by the case study of Fenton's work with More Light Presbyterians, more research on whether this approach proves effective in a range of other states and regions of the country would go a long way in demonstrating the effectiveness of this new model.



CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this work, our goal was to find a meaningful way to talk with Christians about the welcome and inclusion of gay and lesbian people.

Today, we believe we've made some great strides toward a new day when LGBT people are fully welcomed in churches and society. What we know now is that changing the conversation is possible. Opening hearts and minds to God's all-inclusive love is possible.

Most of all, we hope that those who are working toward full inclusion can learn from what we've learned.

If you have any questions about this document, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

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APPENDIX: TESTED VIDEO AND PRINT MATERIALS



My mind was changed.

I am a life-long conservative Christian and a minister.

I never thought about gay and lesbian issues, simply assuming I knew what God's Word said. I am so grateful that I never explained God's Word on the matter any further.

Over the last year, I have studied my Bible and prayed. I am convinced that God's Word is clear and that we should love all people as ourselves. I have found that the Bible does not condemn people who are gay or lesbian. I have found that the Bible does not condemn people who are gay or lesbian. I have found that the Bible does not condemn people who are gay or lesbian.

When Jesus speaks to you, will you have the ears to hear?

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When Jesus speaks to you, will you have the ears to hear?

I was raised in a traditional Christian family. And I have never met a church in my life. My wife, Theresa, and I have raised our son, Michael, and daughter, Patricia, to be good Christians and lead happy lives in our community.

She was youth leader for Matthew 23:12. When asked to come to the general conference, she said she had been asked, "Can you lead your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength?" This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is this: "Love your neighbor as yourself." These have been my goals for the last 10 years. I have been a member of the church for 10 years. I have been a member of the church for 10 years. I have been a member of the church for 10 years.

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When Jesus speaks to you, will you have the ears to hear?

Love opened my eyes.

As noted earlier, our focus group research included conflicted African-American and white Christian voters. The focus groups were divided by both race and gender for a total of four focus groups. The two focus groups with white Christian women and white Christian men, respectively, took place on the first night. The two focus groups with African-American Christian women and African-American Christian men, respectively, took place on the second night.

Focus group participants were shown alternating print and video messages from supporters and opponents of gay and lesbian acceptance and inclusion in the church. Below, we have highlighted transcripts of some of the tested positive video messages and examples of some of the tested positive print materials.

We have highlighted key elements of what worked in each of the messages, including responses from focus group participants in reaction to the tested materials. After the first night of focus groups, we learned a great deal about what worked—and what didn't—and therefore adjusted the print materials for the two African-American focus groups. We have highlighted and provided commentary on some of those changes.

Video Transcript: QuanTez Pressley, African-American Pastor



It's important to identify the moral authority of your messenger early on.

It's important to state the protagonist's early position on lesbian and gay people before their spiritual journey begins.

Focus group participants wanted these persuasion parables to include interaction with lesbian and gay characters.

Participants appreciated the message that lesbian and gay people need to love themselves, including one African-American Christian man who said, "People have to embrace themselves. If you don't love yourself then who is going to love you?"

There needs to be a clearly defined moment in the story in which the protagonist's position on lesbian and gay people changes.

Stories that ended with a reinforcement of Christ's teachings were most effective.

"I like that he said that no one but God can serve as judge," said one African-American Christian woman.

"I was raised in a very religious household and now I serve as Youth Pastor at a local church here in Detroit. My views on gay and lesbian equality, to borrow a quote from our President, 'is evolving,' but the one thing that I am for sure and confident is that they are people and they are human beings. They have the right to be treated as such. I don't make any delineations, discriminations between gay and lesbian and straight people. I see them as people first and foremost. I understand that their humanity sits above their sexuality."

"I started preaching when I was 6, raised in the church, a small family church, Baptist tradition, 14 years old, really start preaching, so I really had a fundamental theology. I have very strong lines on what was acceptable, what was not acceptable, what God loved and what He found as an abomination. I had all of that and I decided to go to Morehouse College. There was a significant population that considered themselves to be homosexual and, for me, my original position towards them was you are committing sin. You are going to hell."

"But there was a gentleman who was my next door neighbor in the dorm that I stayed in. He was a homosexual and he was a Christian. He went through a moment where he saw his homosexuality as a sin. He tried his hardest to purge himself of it. He got rid of all his friends; he was fasting. He would go to all type of church services. He would have pastors pray over him. But he couldn't, he couldn't. Time and time again this urge was there and so it made me have to reconsider what I was saying because here was a person who was adamantly trying to leave this 'lifestyle,' if you want to use that terminology but it was authentically him. It got to the point where he had to realize that God wanted him to embrace himself. That was powerful, and like I said that is why I said, look at the individual in order to be able to respect his dignity, difference and who he was authentically as an individual."

"I call myself a Christian, which means that I follow the teachings of Christ and just looking at his ministry, it was always one of inclusion. One that promoted the basic principle of love and one that did not seek to condemn but to meet people where they were. There is no one but God who is adequate enough to serve as judge. We really do ourselves a disservice as Christians, as a religious community, by focusing on differences as opposed to building on commonalities. We need to shift and focus less on divisions and really find those things that draw us closer to one another."

Video Transcript: Tom Nelson, White Catholic Father



“I have 6 children—5 daughters and 1 son. It turned out my son was gay. I think it would be helpful to understand where I came from. I was brought up a strict, traditional type of Catholic and I went through 16 years of formal Catholic education through college. I knew all the rules and I thought I knew the reasons too for those rules, so when I discovered my son was gay, which came quite—I think he was probably around 17 or 18 years old when he came out of the closet to me. The subject of homosexuality was broached. It was my time to climb on the podium and pontificate the church’s doctrine. It was very negative and demeaning, if you were a gay person sitting there listening to me.”

“Of course, I didn’t know my son was gay. He went away to college as a freshman, 800 miles from home and decided that the solution, because he couldn’t tell his family who he really was and there was no one he could talk to, he decided to end his life. And—but God intervened. The Lord has a way of rescuing us when we need it the most and He somehow convinced Mark. He spoke to Mark in a very special way and said Mark, I made you just the way you are and you are good. Mark ran into the bathroom at that point and vomited, he forced himself to vomit the poisons that he had taken some 15 minutes prior to that.”

“He survived but I didn’t know he was gay. I went out and got myself educated. I knew that something was wrong with my intellect because this was my son who was perfect in every way. He was a perfect son and I had failed him. It all turned out great because he has turned out to be the greatest blessing in my life. He really has. The things he has taught me most of all is what Jesus has tried to teach us all and that is love, it supersedes every other thing in life. I learned that from my son. Wow.”

Details that identify where the protagonist starts his journey are really important.

It’s important to show the moral imperfection of the protagonist without demonizing him or her.

Although participants may not have had the same experience as the father, they were able to relate to his regrets on a very personal level. They were pained when they saw the damage cause by his judgmental words. One man went so far as to compare the damage caused by anti-gay preaching to driving drunk and killing someone.

White Christian voters responded positively to the fact that the father wanted to change, including one white Christian woman who said, “I admire him for being able to change his mind and accept his son.”

This line resonated the most with focus group participants and was one that they were able to relate to on multiple levels—as parents and as Christians. One white Christian woman summed it up best when she said, “If my son came to me with that too, I would love you no matter what and I think God says that because you are my son, I love you no matter what...the bottom line is ‘no matter what.’”

Print: My Mind Was Changed, White Minister

My mind was changed.

I am a life-long conservative Christian and a minister.

I never thought twice about gay and lesbian issues, simply assuming I knew what God's Word said.

I was so prideful that I never explored God's Word on the matter any further.

One day, I began a deep study of early baptismal practices. I was interested in learning whether anything could hinder or prevent someone from being baptized. My study led me to Acts 8 and 10 and to the Gospel of Luke. Paging through my worn Bible, over the course of several months, I became aware of countless examples of people formerly excluded from religious participation being welcomed into the body of Christ.

The Good Samaritan. Levi the tax collector. Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. The Gentile Cornelius. All examples of people shunned by society – and all now being welcomed into the body of Christ.

This particular study didn't convert me easily or quickly. I got the impression that God was simply nudging me bit by bit and taking me where I didn't want to go. In that sense, it was difficult to change, to admit that I had missed this Scriptural theme.

With more study, I started to feel increasingly uneasy. Eventually, it removed the scales from my eyes.

I came to recognize that I was so certain in my beliefs that I never explored the true meaning behind God's Word. I then came across Colossians 3:22 – "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything," and thought about how single Bible verses had been used to justify acts now universally considered repulsive – like slavery or women being forced to remain silent in church.

Today, inspired by Galatians 3:28, I now affirm:

All of us who have been baptized into Christ have been clothed in Christ. There is no issue of ethnic identity except citizenship in God's kingdom, no issue of servitude except the service to Christ, no issue of gender or sexual orientation, except the bonds of covenant faithfulness, for all of us are one in Christ Jesus.



Moved by the study of Scripture, my mind was changed on the place of faithful gay and lesbian Christians in the Church.

When Jesus speaks to you, will you have the ears to hear?



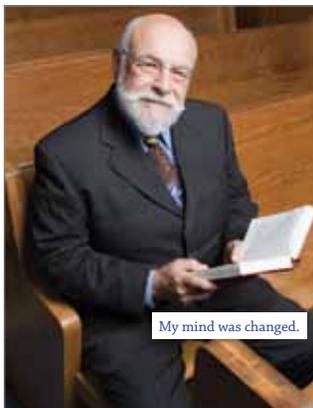
As noted earlier, we made changes between the first night of focus groups (with white Christian men and women) and the second night (with African-American Christian men and women).

Participants really appreciated that the Minister really studied the Bible to come to his conclusion and change his mind on lesbian and gay people. One white Christian man quoted a passage he liked, "I never thought twice about gay and lesbian issues, simply assuming I knew what God's Word said. I like that because when he looked more into things, he opened up."

In our original version, we wanted to see how participants would react to a Bible verse that was changed to include sexual orientation. The reactions of participants confirmed our hunch: folks react negatively to Bible verses that have been queered.

To simplify the design, we also removed the images of the Bible verses between the first and second evening.

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These indicate the page numbers of the tested materials.

Print: My Mind Was Changed, African-American Minister

One important change that we made between the first and second nights was the introduction of a lesbian couple, including a congregant who expressed an interest in becoming an elder. We did so after focus group participants commented that it was strange that a person would change their mind by simply reading the Bible, including one white Christian man who said, "I find it hard to believe that just from reading the Bible he formed a different opinion. There had to be some kind of outside forces on him at that time in order to make him see those words or read those words differently."

The "slaves obey your earthly masters" verse connected strongly with African-American Christian voters who agreed that it is a clear example of how people can use one single Bible verse to justify acts now universally considered repulsive. The verse also resonated with some white Christian voters, including one white Christian man who said, "It does kind of date the Bible—shows how far back it goes to where that was acceptable that it still wasn't for homosexuality at that point, but things have changed."

Galatians 3:28 resonated strongly among African-American Christian men, with one man saying, "It kind of shines more light on things where we just have to humble ourselves and put ourselves in other people's situations versus us judging before we can understand the situations that they've been through."

My mind was changed.

I am a life-long conservative Christian and a minister.

I never thought twice about gay and lesbian issues, simply assuming I knew what God's Word said. I was so prideful that I never explored God's Word on the matter any further.

One day, I began a deep study of early baptismal practices. I was interested in learning whether anything could hinder or prevent someone from being baptized. Paging through my worn Bible, I became aware of countless examples of people formerly excluded from religious participation being welcomed into the body of Christ.

The Good Samaritan. Levi the tax collector. Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. The Gentile Cornelius. All examples of people shunned by society – and all now being welcomed into the body of Christ.

This particular study didn't convert me easily or quickly. I got the impression that God was nudging me bit by bit and taking me where I didn't want to go. With more study, I started to feel increasingly uneasy.

During this time, I was approached by Yvette, a long-time member of our congregation who expressed interest in becoming an elder. For nearly 20 years, Yvette came to church every Sunday without fail. And always seated next to her was Gwendolynne. Though unspoken, I understood that Yvette and Gwendolynne were in a long-term, committed relationship.

I came to recognize that I was so certain in my beliefs that I never explored the true meaning behind God's Word. I then came across Colossians 3:22 – "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything," and thought about how single Bible verses had been used to justify acts now universally considered repulsive – like slavery or women being forced to remain silent in church.

So, I welcomed Yvette as our congregation's newest elder. And, I am now inspired by Galatians 3:28:

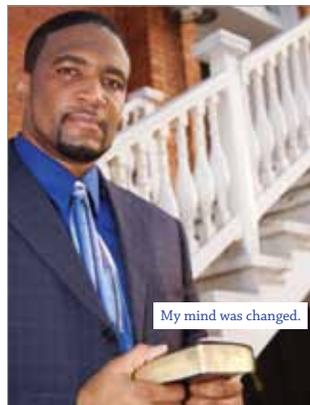
There is neither Jew nor Greek,
there is neither slave nor free,
there is neither male nor female;
for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Moved by the study of Scripture, my mind was changed on the place of faithful gay and lesbian Christians in the Church.

When Jesus speaks to you, will you have the ears to hear?



2



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I am now inspired by Galatians 3:28:
There is neither Jew nor Greek,
there is neither slave nor free,
there is neither male nor female;
for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Print: Judgment Belongs to God, White Elder

I was raised in a traditional Christian family. And I now serve my church as an elder. My wife, Doreen, and I have raised our son, Michael, and daughters, Patricia and Janet, to be good Christians and load bearing pillars of our community.



Since my youth I have looked to Matthew 22:37. When asked to name the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ These have been my guide for faithful living and a test for Christian behavior. It has challenged both my personal choices and informed my opinions on the direction and actions taken by my church.

Six months ago I was faced with a situation that caused me to reflect deeply on that verse from Matthew and on what the Lord requires from me. As I began a welcoming conversation with Joe and Luke, two new members of my church, they informed me that they were in a relationship. At first, I didn’t understand. They were both men. Noticing the simple gold bands each wore, I understood. They were a gay couple.

Perhaps, sensing my unease, Joe volunteered, “We’ve been together in a committed relationship for 23 years.”

I simply nodded.

“Having a church community has always been an important part of our relationship,” Luke added.

I had conflicting thoughts and emotions after my conversation with them. The Lord requires me to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly but I was raised to believe being gay was wrong. Even though these two men were devout followers of Christ, it caused me a sense of unease.

Over the next several months, I thought about it and prayed. Humbly reflecting that God’s Word continues to reveal itself to me and all Christians, I came to realize that Matthew 22:37 had shown me more than just what the Lord required of me.

It also gave me deeper insight into what belongs to me and what belongs to God. Judgment isn’t something that belongs to me – it belongs solely to God. In another verse in Matthew, Jesus says, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”

So while I’ll always have my own opinions, I humbly accept that judgment belongs to God, not me.

During our first night of focus groups, white participants reacted negatively to the idea of raising your kids “to be good Christians” and thought it communicated a level of moral superiority that they did not like. So, we removed this language in the print materials we tested with African-American Christian voters.

People subconsciously look for the moral authority of the messenger. A white Christian man appreciated that the elder raised his children to be pillars of the community, saying, “My dad used to take us to church and really force me to become like an Eagle Scout. I like the way that is stated. I think I help out in the community and I think that is a good thing.”

Small details—like the number of years that a couple has been together—are important. One white Christian man said, “that’s longer than most marriages.”

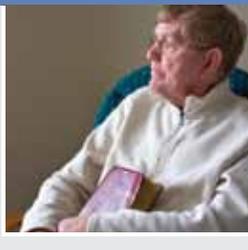
The *Judge Not* frame of this piece resonated strongly with both white Christian men and women. One white Christian man repeated the language saying, “Judgment isn’t something that belongs to me; it belongs solely to God. I like that, actually.”

Responses from focus group participants show how the *Judge Not* frame is a transition for those not fully accepting of gay people. Another white Christian man said, “I just liked he didn’t judge them. He never says I accept it. I like it. He didn’t say he disliked it, but he didn’t judge them. He just said they are good people no matter what they are.”

We also thought our original pieces could be shorter and punchier. As such, we deleted content that we didn’t feel was critical to advancing the story.

2

Judgment Belongs to God.



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“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”
MATTHEW 22:37

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Print: Judgment Belongs to God, African-American Elder

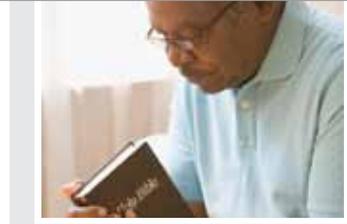
I was raised in a traditional Christian family. And I now serve my church as an elder. My wife, Corrine, and I have raised our son and daughters to be load bearing pillars of our community.

Since my youth I have looked to Matthew 22:37. When asked to name the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” These have been my guide for faithful living and a test for Christian behavior.

Six months ago I was faced with a situation that caused me to reflect deeply on what the Lord requires from me. As I began a welcoming conversation with Joe and André, two new members of my church, they informed me that they were in a relationship. At first, I didn’t understand. They were both men. Noticing the simple gold bands each wore, I understood. They were a gay couple.

Perhaps, sensing my unease, Joe volunteered, “We’ve been together in a committed relationship for 23 years.”

“Having a church community has always been an important part of our relationship,” André added.



I had conflicting thoughts and emotions after my conversation with them. The Lord requires me to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly but I believed the Bible taught me being gay was wrong. Even though these two men were devout followers of Christ, it caused me a sense of unease.

Over the next several months, I thought about it and prayed. Humbly reflecting that God’s Word continues to reveal itself to me and all Christians, I came to realize that Matthew 22:37 had shown me more than just what the Lord required of me.

It also gave me deeper insight into what belongs to me and what belongs to God. Judgment isn’t something that belongs to me – it belongs solely to God. In another verse in Matthew, Jesus says, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”

So while I’ll always have my own opinions, I humbly accept that judgment belongs to God, not me.

Throughout all of our testing, the one thing that tested the best was the theme of journey and transition. One African-American Christian man said, “It pretty much showed this guy making a transition from not fully understanding or maybe not understanding, but experiencing a relationship with homosexuals. Then once he had that relationship and spoke with God about it, he realized that he couldn’t judge and he went from there to be able to do what he was supposed to do.”

2

Judgment Belongs to God.



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“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”
MATTHEW 22:37

Print: Love Opened My Eyes, White Aunt



My goal in life is to love my Jesus and to let others see how much Jesus loves us. You might say that I'm traditional when it comes to my faith. I simply believe in living by God's Word – and celebrating it with those close to me.

I've always celebrated my life and my faith with my sister, Eileen. There's no one in the world that I'm closer to. We got married and started families around the same time. We each have two sons who are now all grown up. We've supported each other as we raised our families. And we've gone to the same women's Scripture group for more than 10 years.

About two years ago, I found out that my sister was keeping a secret from me. All along, I could tell that something was wrong, but when I pressed her, she smiled unconvincingly and said, "Everything is fine."

I finally pushed her to open up.

"Mark is gay," she murmured.

I stared blankly at her – the words still registering. "Mark?" I wondered to myself. "Her son, Mark?"

"Oh," was all I could manage.

"I want to discuss it on Saturday during our Bible study group," she said.

"Of course," I said. "That's a great idea."

Eileen went through a lot of turmoil over the next several months. Not wanting to be judgmental, I tried to keep my comments positive, while not staking out a position on the question of sin. Still, I wondered where Eileen, and her husband, Jerry, went wrong.

It was hard for me to see her pain. It was even harder for me to reconcile my feelings. I loved Mark as my own son, but I believed that being gay was a sin.

One day she seemed at peace.

"Jeremiah 1:5," she volunteered.

I gave her a puzzled look.

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you," she added.

Still confused, she continued, "God's love knows no limits. Nothing He does is in vain. I have to believe that in His infinite wisdom, He creates gay people like Mark – knowing him in my womb."

Uncomfortably, I responded, "You are right. God's love knows no limits."

I was happy that Eileen was now at peace. The struggle was now mine.

I prayed and reflected on it for several months. I came to realize that Eileen and Jerry are good Christians. And I know they raised their kids to be. After Mark came out, I came to see how my own two sons, two good Christian men, comfortably interacted with Mark – as if nothing had changed.

And that is when it hit me. The only thing that has changed was how God's Word – that Jesus loves us all – was continuing to reveal itself to me through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Gospels say that "There are more truths to be revealed to you."

I came to realize that God's work is always a mystery. That's what makes God God, and not us God. When we act as if we know fully and completely for all time and in all places exactly what God is doing, that's a sin against God.

Eileen and Jerry are good Christian people who submit joyfully to the Lordship and love of Jesus Christ. If these two wonderful people raised this fine young man who turned out to be gay, I realized that there's something I'm not seeing that I need to see.

While it wasn't easy, love opened my eyes to God's Word – and in doing so, I now fully embrace and accept my nephew for who he is.

Participants who read this brochure said that it is a powerful story, one that teaches us that God is testing us all.

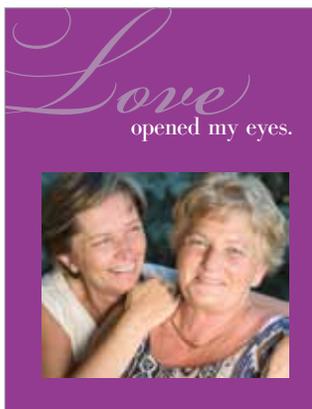
Between the two nights of focus groups, we made several changes to this piece. First and foremost, we shortened the piece considerably and looked for places to cut down copy.

This verse from Jeremiah resonated with many of the white Christian women. One white Christian woman said that while God gives us free will and know that we will make good and bad choices, "He still loves us and nobody else has a right to judge anybody but Him." It reinforces the point that Scripture is most effective when woven into the narrative of a story.

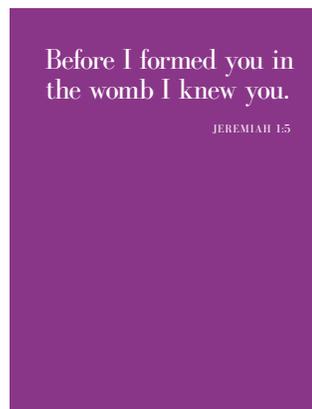
The message that "God's work is always a mystery" stood out for many white women, including one white Christian woman who said, "We are not God and we don't know how God thinks."

Participants commented that the aunt, who seemed to love her sister and her nephew, came across as too judgmental. We eliminated some of the language that came across as overly judgmental.

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Print: Love Opened My Eyes, African-American Aunt

We recognized the need to demonstrate the close relationship that the aunt had with her nephew, which is why we added key details like, “He was the one who helped me clean up after everyone else had gone to bed.”

You’ll also note that we changed the sequencing of several paragraphs. The changes reflected a better sense both for the narrative and how we imagined the aunt would process her emotional discomfort. For instance, we felt that it was important for her to recognize and acknowledge earlier in the story that her sister and brother-in-law were “good Christian people.”

The unconditional nature of God’s love is highly resonant among African-American Christian men. One African-American man pointed out that the aunt in this story originally had a conditional kind of love for her nephew, as opposed to the love without limits that God has for us all, saying, “Nothing He does is in vain so God knew before the child was here what issues he would have or what things become of his life. So for her to have conditional love is something that stuck out to me.”

One African-American Christian man said, “If it wasn’t her nephew, she would have a different opinion. The only reason that she accepted was because family and because how tightly knit they were raised.” This same point was echoed by a few other African-American men, which highlights the importance of including lesbian and gay characters in the stories that we tell. Stories without lesbian and gay characters come across as inauthentic.



My goal in life is to love Jesus and to let others see how much Jesus loves us. You might say that I’m traditional when it comes to my faith. I simply believe in living by God’s Word.

I’ve always celebrated my life and my faith with my sister, Lillian. There’s no one in the world that I’m closer to. We got married and started families around the same time. We each have two sons who are now all grown up. We’ve supported each other as we raised our families. And we’ve gone to the same women’s Scripture group for more than 10 years.

About two years ago, I found out that my sister was keeping a secret from me. I could tell that something was wrong, but when I pressed her, she said, “Everything is fine.”

I finally pushed her to open up.

“Mark is gay,” she murmured.

I stared blankly at her – the words still registering. “Mark?” I wondered to myself. “Her son, Mark?”

“I want to discuss it on Saturday during our Bible study group,” she said.

Lillian went through a lot of turmoil over the next several months. It was hard for me to see her pain. It was even harder for me to reconcile my feelings. I loved Mark as my own son, but I believed that being gay was a sin.

One day, before Bible study, she seemed at peace.

“Jeremiah 1:5,” she volunteered. “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,” she said.

I gave her a puzzled look.

She continued, “God’s love knows no limits. Nothing He does is in vain. I have to believe that in His infinite wisdom, He creates gay people like Mark – knowing him in my womb.”

I was happy that Lillian was now at peace. The struggle was now mine.

I was taught that being gay was a sin. But I also know my nephew. He was the one who helped me clean up after everyone else had gone to bed. And he was the one who would always take the extra five minutes to ask me how I really was.

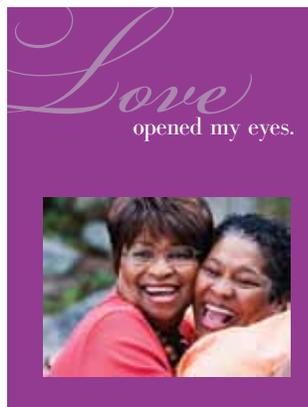
Lillian and her husband, Charles, are good Christian people who submit joyfully to the Lordship and love of Jesus Christ. If these two wonderful people raised this fine young man who turned out to be gay, I realized that there’s something I’m not seeing that I need to see.

Upon prayer and reflection, I came to recognize that the only thing that had changed was how God’s Word – that Jesus loves us all – was continuing to reveal itself to me through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Gospels say that “There are more truths to be revealed to you.”

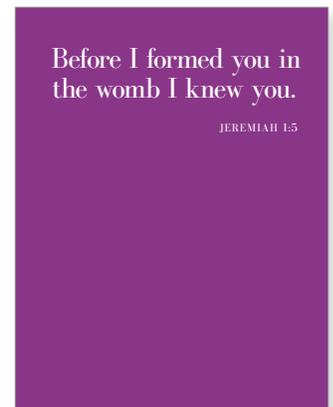
I understood that God’s work is always a mystery. That’s what makes God God, and not us God. When we act as if we know fully and completely for all time and in all places exactly what God is doing, that’s a sin against God.

While it wasn’t easy, love opened my eyes to God’s Word – and in doing so, I now fully embrace and accept my nephew for who he is.

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