

# RECOMMENDATIONS IN ACTION

Let us show you our recommendations in action. We've taken a piece we used during our focus group testing that participants responded well to and deconstructed it, noting the key elements that made it so powerful.

Choose a headline that creates curiosity and hints at the outcome of the story, but doesn't give away the ending.

Identify the moral authority of the protagonist early on. It's also helpful to choose someone who is an unusual suspect.

It's useful to demonstrate the moral imperfection of the protagonist. You can even use religious language—like the sin of pride. At the same time, it's important not to demonize the protagonist for his or her beliefs.

Fear is the biggest obstacle to changing a conflicted person's mind. Familiarity helps to quiet the fear—like familiar Bible stories.

To challenge stereotypes of LGBT people, it's important to spotlight the moral character of LGBT people in our stories. Participants in the voter focus groups regularly said things like, "They've been together for 20 years—that's longer than many straight marriages." Highlighting small details like "Yvette came to church every Sunday without fail" also helps to establish LGBT characters as matching their values and sense of morality.

Spiritual exploration—especially exploring God's Word—has proven to be an important theme in persuasion parables.

Notice that the transformation is not complete until nearly the end of the story. No earlier detail gives away the outcome.

Be explicit in naming the moral of the story for the protagonist.

## 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?

This language is a good example of the importance of making sure the story is authentic to the protagonist's voice. Our original headline was "I changed my mind." The minister we interviewed for this piece asked us to change it to this headline, saying, "I didn't change my mind, my mind was changed by studying Scripture."

Early on in the story, name the protagonist's position on LGBT equality.

In literature, this event—his discovery of "countless examples of people formerly excluded from religious participation being welcomed into the body of Christ"—is called the inciting incident or the narrative hook. It's important to include an inciting incident early on in the story because it's what creates a conflict and first propels action in the story.

It's important to make sure that a protagonist doesn't change his or her mind quickly or easily. He or she should mirror the same emotional and spiritual struggle that your target audience is going through. The increased tension in the story will also make it likely that folks will continue to read on to discover the outcome of the story.

While the story protagonist will always be a conflicted straight Christian, it's important to include LGBT characters in the story, too. In fact, in a separate story-telling piece that we tested where there was no LGBT character, voter focus group participants commented that it seemed unrealistic that someone would change their mind without at least meeting an LGBT person.

The idea that single Bible verses have been used throughout history to defend things that we now consider to be morally repulsive was an effective way to help people understand and move past the verses that are always used against LGBT people—like Leviticus 18:22.

Scripture works best when worked into the narrative and as reinforcement for the moral of the story.

It's critical to make our persuasion parables Christ-centric.

# TOOLKIT QUICK LOOK

## OVERVIEW

Seventy-six percent of Americans, more than 230 million people, self-identify as Christian. 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.

With this in mind, Auburn Media, Fenton, and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research—with a grant from the Arcus Foundation—set out to find the best way to help Christians see how their faith, built upon the teachings of Jesus Christ, supported being all-inclusive and welcoming. We wanted to help change hearts and minds on the place of LGBT people in the church. This toolkit is the result of that work. For more on our methodology, see pages 8–9.

## DID IT WORK? YES.

The results of the research showed that by having safe conversations, highlighting real-world stories, and basing messages in a clear moral framework, we were able to move audiences of conflicted Christians.

## LAY OF THE LAND: HOW THEY'RE TALKING

We analyzed nearly 1,000 media articles and opinion pieces to learn how opposition and supporters are framing their ideas in the media.

### Opposition frames:

- 1 Family, Children and Moral Decline:** That LGBT equality is a threat to marriage (between a man and a woman) and to children. This frame is often linked to the idea that society is, or will be, in decline if we accept LGBT people.
- 2 LGBT Equality Hurts the Church and Religious Freedom of Expression:** That LGBT rights hurt the church, usually by infringing upon the religious freedom of expression of pastors who oppose the so-called LGBT "lifestyle."
- 3 The Word of God Is Inerrant and Being LGBT Is a Choice:** That God's Word in Scripture is infallible and clearly states that intimacy (and by extension, marriage) between two men or two women is an avoidable sin.

### Supportive frames:

- 1 Equal Rights and Nondiscrimination Are Separate From the Bible and Morality:** That the Bible is irrelevant in debates about equal rights in secular government. This is the frame most often used by supporters.
- 2 Logical Flaws and Verse vs. Verse:** That the Bible says many things we disregard today, thus what it says about intimacy between two men or two women is also irrelevant.
- 3 God Is Love and God's Welcome Is All-Inclusive:** This Christ-centric frame only appeared a handful of times in our review of hundreds of opinion pieces and media statements, yet proved especially effective in our research.

For more on how they're talking, see pages 7–11.

## LAY OF THE LAND: CONFLICTED CHRISTIANS

Once you begin looking beneath the surface of the media dialogue, you'll see there is an incredible amount of nuance in how Christians feel and talk about LGBT inclusion. Here are a few top line findings about how conflicted Christians come into the conversation.

**The conversation wants to happen.** One of the most common refrains we heard among congregants and clergy was that, while the conversation around LGBT moral equality isn't happening, many are eager to have it.

**For many, there is a general confusion and discomfort when talking about sex and sexuality.** We especially saw this among the conflicted Christians in our focus groups, and it played out in a few ways. For parents, there's a great deal of discomfort in answering questions raised by their young children about sexual orientation and any type of gender non-conformity. We also heard contradictory statements on the question of nurture vs. nature. While most people thought that LGBT people are born LGBT, they also talked about how life experiences could influence whether someone grows up to be LGBT.

**The sticking points are marriage and leadership.** Most of the Christians we talked to felt that LGBT people should be welcomed in their churches, but were uncomfortable with the idea of same-sex marriage or LGBT people in leadership positions.

*For more on how conflicted Christians enter the conversation, see pages 12–14.*

## RECOMMENDATION: USE FRAMES THAT WORK

Messages based in a clear moral framework can move people, especially when combined with the other elements of this toolkit. Here are the three Christ-inspired frames we tested that worked:

### 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."

### 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."

### 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."

## RECOMMENDATION: TELL STORIES

Real-world stories featuring compelling, identifiable protagonists are an especially effective mode of communication when attempting to persuade a conflicted audience. Some of the biggest transitions we saw in the focus groups were reactions to real-world, first-person stories of people who had made a journey with regards to their thinking on LGBT moral equality. But, we also found in the focus groups that not all stories are created equally. For more on the *do's* and *don'ts* of storytelling for a conflicted audience, see page 20. You can also check out an example of a "deconstructed story" on the back of this page.

### Find and Develop the Best Stories

**Find.** Tap your networks with a specific ask.

**Interview.** Start with broad questions and then dig deeper. If you are making a video, do a pre-interview before you start filming.

**Develop.** Follow the structure outlined in our example of a "deconstructed story" (page 22).

**Test.** Once you've completed a first draft of a story, share it with the person you interviewed. Their edits will ultimately make the story more compelling.

**Refine.** Finally, make changes to your story based on what you have heard and learned.

*For more on how to find and develop the best stories, see page 22.*

## RECOMMENDATION: START A SAFE AND HEARTFELT CONVERSATION

The conversation about LGBT moral equality wants to happen and it's important to find ways to create the safe spaces where it can take place. We used the following guidelines to create the type of space needed for a safe and genuine discussion.

- 1 Choose the Most Effective Moderator.** In all discussion groups, the facilitator should be chosen with great care. To create a safe space for straight people to have a genuine and heartfelt discussion about their own personal and religious conflicts, without fear of hurting LGBT people in the room, consider the option of a straight-only discussion group with a facilitator who identifies as the same sexual orientation, gender, religion and ethnicity as the people in the group.
- 2 Be Choosey When Developing Your Invitation List.** A referral system 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.
- 3 Make It Clear That You Welcome an Open and Honest Conversation.** From the invitation to the closing, it should be clear that you've created a safe space for honest dialogue.
- 4 Give Them a Safe Way to Share Their Discomfort.** 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.
- 5 Sequence the Conversation—Beginning With the Positive.** The facilitator plays an important role in guiding the discussion. For an example discussion guide, see page 29.
- 6 Feed People—Break Bread.** There is something inherently social about sharing a hot meal together that helps to ease people into the conversation.
- 7 Continue the Conversation.** Just because the meeting comes to an end, it doesn't mean the conversation is over.

*For more on how to start a safe and heartfelt conversation, see page 27.*

**We hope you find these recommendations to be useful. If you have any feedback or further insights, we would love to know about them. You can contact us at: [auburnmedia@auburnseminary.org](mailto:auburnmedia@auburnseminary.org)**

**Power to you and be in touch.**