Faithful Conversations: Same-Sex Relationships and the Christian Faith

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Submitted to the faculty of Western Theological Seminary
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Doctor of Ministry degree

Holland, Michigan

2017
Title of the Project: Faithful Conversations: Same-Sex Relationships and the Christian Faith

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Abstract

The evangelical Christian church’s collective heart is breaking over same-sex marriage; multiple congregations and denominations are splitting because they cannot live together with their differing convictions. In contrast, this project explores how a local congregation can grow in unity, purity, and peace while holding a variety of viewpoints on same-sex marriage. The project consisted of a congregation-wide event called *Faithful Conversations: Same-Sex Relationships and the Christian Faith*. First, the pastors complexified the conversation around same-sex marriage and the Christian faith beyond *for* and *against* by presenting five faithful Christian responses to same-sex marriage.

Second, a licensed therapist facilitated a panel discussion where people holding different perspectives on same-sex marriage shared their stories, values, and viewpoints. Third, the facilitator invited the congregation to interact with panel members using an adaptation of the Restorative Circles process for people experiencing conflict. Data from the project reveal that this congregation defied the pattern of division over same-sex marriage. In fact, the congregation grew in authenticity of relationships, mutual understanding, and theological insight. Based on the results of this project, the researcher developed a model called *Faithful Conversations: Same-Sex Relationships and the Christian Faith* for use in other congregations.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

I have a broken heart, and collectively we have a broken heart. Our hearts break over pain, anger, and disunity we observe and experience in our beloved . . . church.

--Bishop Bruce Ough, President of the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church

The church’s collective heart is breaking over same-sex marriage. Evangelical Christian congregations and denominations face an impossible choice: create schism in the church they love or give up their stance on gay marriage. Several denominations, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Episcopal Church, have already split in the midst of conflict over same-sex marriage,¹ and many others, including the United Methodist Church² and the Reformed Church in America,³ find themselves embroiled in disagreement. Is it possible for congregations and denominations to stay together in the midst of differing positions on same-sex marriage? This project explores how a local congregation can stay together while holding a diversity of viewpoints on same-sex marriage.

Christian faith within evangelical circles, particularly the Reformed Church in America, already has the commitments that can lead the way into a new way of talking


about homosexuality: unity, purity, and peace. This project provides a model for employing those commitments in difficult conversations and outlines practices for embodying them in local congregations that can also be used in families, parachurch organizations, educational institutions, and any Christian community facing difficult conversations regarding this topic.

**Problem**

The Sunday bulletin announced, "*CAN WE TALK? It’s unfortunate that many times we cannot, particularly when the issues are hard and emotional.*" This announcement advertising an educational event concerning healthy communication at The Community in Ada perfectly illustrates the problem this project seeks to address: evangelical Christians in the United States generally, and at The Community in Ada specifically, do not know how to talk to each other when the issues are difficult and emotional.

Why is it so difficult to talk to each other in the midst of difficult and emotional issues where we disagree with one another? This question will be explored in this chapter through several different frames: the human need for acceptance and belonging, the church growth movement, family systems theory, and contemplative spirituality.

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Acceptance and Belonging

The human need for acceptance and belonging provides the first frame for exploring why evangelical Christians do not know how to talk to each other in the midst of disagreement and conflict. People most naturally find love and acceptance through gathering in like-minded groups, and agreement and sameness reinforce the togetherness of like-minded groups. While exploring the increasing sameness of communities in the United States, journalist Bill Bishop interviewed Robert Baron, a professor of psychology. Baron described the origins of like-minded groups this way: “From our earliest moments on earth, we come to associate a wide array of positive outcomes with acceptance and love from others.”5 This kind of love and acceptance is most easily obtained from folks within our own tribe, and within these tribes, conformity becomes very important as a way to maintain acceptance and love. As a result, people develop a “very generalized belief that it is always bad to disagree with others.”6

Examining demographic data, Bishop noticed a trend in the United States since the middle of the twentieth century: people increasingly choose to live, work, and worship in places where people think, believe, and act like them, presumably finding and acceptance and belonging in communities where their own religious and social convictions are reinforced.7 Bishop called this phenomenon, “The Big Sort.”8 When we


7. Bishop, 159-181. Bishops findings continue to be confirmed. A study of polarization in the United States by the Pew Research Center in 2014 found that liberals and conservatives tend to desire different living conditions, meaning that they are increasingly clustering together in cities with more racial and ethnic diversity (liberals) or in suburban and rural areas where more people share their religious convictions (conservatives). “Political Polarization in the American Public,” posted June 12, 2014, accessed March 8, 2017, http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/. Not only are
gather in communities of like-minded people, we encounter people with different frames of reference less often, and opportunities to communicate in the midst of disagreement decrease. If Baron’s assertion that threats to safety increase the pressure for members of a community to conform is correct, then it becomes virtually impossible for communities facing difficult topics or conflicts to tolerate diversity or communicate in the midst of disagreement.

**Homogeneous Unit Principle**

The church growth movement provides the second frame for considering the reasons that evangelical Christians do not know how to talk to each other when the issues are difficult. The church growth movement has influenced evangelical churches to emphasize sameness and agreement rather than diversity and conversation. A few evangelical pastors have capitalized on the need to find safety in groups of like-minded people as a strategy to grow churches. Donald McGavran, missionary turned church growth guru, coined the term *homogeneous unit principle* and began teaching it to evangelical pastors in 1965, thereby limiting Christians’ exposure to both diversity and disagreement:

Men [*sic*] like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers. . . Men understand the Gospel better when expounded by their own kind neighborhoods and pew mates becoming more homogeneous, the study also found that people are also increasingly choosing media sources that reinforce their own political and social views, further limiting voices that challenge like-mindedness. “Political Polarization and Media Habits,” Amy Mitchell, Jeffrey Gottfried, Jocelyn Kiley, and Katerina Eva Matsa, posted October 21, 2014, accessed March 8, 2017, http://www.journalism.org/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/.


of people. They prefer to join churches whose members look, talk, and act like themselves.\(^{10}\)

The *homogenous unit principle* provided a welcome remedy as mainline churches began to shrink in the 1970s and beyond. Through McGavran’s institute at Fuller Theological Seminary, pastors become experts in the demographics of the communities surrounding their churches and learned to custom build their attitudes, sound systems, sermons, and church buildings for their homogeneous target audience. People loved it and came in droves to hear the gospel as it was marketed to them in their own values, language, and culture.\(^{11}\)

McGavran’s *homogeneous unit principle*, while effective at growing a certain type of congregation numerically, elicited critique.\(^{12}\) Theologian Robert Evans critiqued the idea that the numerical growth sought by the *homogeneous unit principles* fulfills God’s desires for the church:

> Can this suggestion that God demands growth be justified from a biblical and theological perspective? I can find no emphasis in the New Testament on a self-conscious strategy for church growth. It simply ‘happens’ sometimes in the course of being faithful and should be understood as the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit.\(^{13}\)

\(^{10}\) McGavran, 198.

\(^{11}\) Bishop, 170-171. This is how the megachurch was born. Megachurches are homogeneous not only on the macro level. In order to enfold new Christians into discipleship, megachurches sort people into small groups that separate people into micro-homogeneity by age, sex, and attitude. One megachurch pastor described it this way: “You just kind of go in and see the content of who’s in there and if you like those folks or not . . . By and large, people tend to herd up according to people they identify with.” Bishop, 167.

\(^{12}\) For an account of a discussion of the anthropological, historical, ethical, and theological implications of the homogeneous unit principle, including several critiques and defenses, hosted at Fuller Theological Seminary by the Lausanne Movement in 1978, see, “The Pasadena Consultation: Homogeneous Unit Principle,” Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, accessed September 19, 2016, https://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-1.

Robert Evans also critiqued the *homogeneity* that McGavran encouraged, arguing that it was diversity rather than homogeneity that characterized the community that Jesus envisioned:

Jesus frequently related the image of the kingdom to a great feast or banquet. Those at table would be Samaritans and Jerusalemites, Pharisees and slaves, harlots and the holy. It is, if I understood the image correctly, the greatest breaking down of homogeneous units we will ever know.\(^{14}\)

Decades later, religious historian Martin Marty critiqued McGavran’s work in light of the way that *homogeneity* undermines the church’s ability to create a center of dialogue for local communities. In an interview with Bill Bishop, Marty said,

I’ve always argued that what society needs are town meeting places where people with very different commitments can meet and interact. Churches have been that [place to have] an open encounter. People who were pro-Bush or pro-Kerry would talk. Fertilization would go on. Now it simply doesn’t happen.\(^ {15}\)

Rather than the fertilization of dialogue, people hear their own ideas and beliefs spoken and respoken by other people in their congregation. “They became more extreme in their thinking . . . Americans were busy creating social resonators, and the hum that filled the air was the reverberated and amplified sound of their own voices and beliefs.”\(^ {16}\)

Evangelical Christians do not know how to talk to each other when the issues are difficult because our churches have been built to be communities of sameness and agreement rather than diversity and conversation.

\(^{14}\) Evans, 304.  
\(^{15}\) Quoted in Bishop, 173.  
\(^{16}\) Bishop, 6.
The Togetherness Force

When considered through the frame of Bowen Family Systems Theory, the inability of evangelical Christians to communicate in the midst of disagreement illustrates what Bowen practitioner Ronald Richardson calls the *togetherness force*. Richardson says, “Under the influence of the togetherness force, there is a strong push for sameness in feelings, beliefs, thinking, and actions.”

In emotionally mature communities, the *togetherness force* is balanced by the *individuality force*, which drives people to create their own identities, beliefs, and sense of self, so that people can stay connected with others AND maintain their separateness at the same time. When stress levels rise in a community where the togetherness force is not balanced by the individuality force, the pressure for alikeness grows and tolerance for disagreement shrinks. In faith communities, expressions of spiritual beliefs become more and more uniform as the togetherness force rises:

Our spiritual beliefs are often quite susceptible to what others who are important to us believe. There is an emotional power and influence at work in the church as we respond to the preachers and teachers and to other leaders who openly express their beliefs. We go along with them, or we rebel against them. If acceptance by group members is the critical issue for us, we modify our beliefs to fit theirs. On the other hand, if we doubt what they say, we may remain quiet about it. Dogmatic and demagogic leaders rely on this conforming reality among people.

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19. Richardson, 32. Martin Luther King, Jr describes this phenomenon as it relates to racial desegregation. “Many people fear nothing more terribly than to take a position that stands out sharply and clearly from the prevailing opinion. The tendency of most is to adopt a view that is so ambiguous that it will include everything and so popular that it will include everybody. Along with this has grown an inordinate worship of bigness. . . This worship of size has caused many to fear being identified with a minority idea. . . Blind conformity makes us so suspicious of an individual who insists on saying what he
The togetherness force, when it’s not balanced by the individuality force stifles real conversation and brings fear of rejection for those with non-majority viewpoints. People fear that their sense of belonging in a community may be threatened if they express an opinion that doesn’t match the group. Pastor Ken Wilson, who is clearly not the dogmatic kind of leader mentioned in the quote above, described how the fear of rejection showed up as his congregation set out to discuss the emotion-laden topic of homosexuality and the Christian faith:

We’re anxious and fearful because we are afraid of losing relationships over this controversy. Those who believe all homosexual acts are wrong fear they will lose standing with those who see it differently. Those who believe that it is wrong to exclude people over this fear that others, who see it as a holiness issue, will reject them. People are afraid that if they change their position on this litmus test question, others in their family or close circle of friends will be scandalized. Where does the anxiety come from? Much of it comes from the fear that our relationships with people we care about will suffer. It comes, more precisely, from our fear that we won’t be accepted by people who disagree with us. Our belonging will be threatened.  

This fear of rejection also stifles conversation at The Community in Ada, the congregation where this project took place. A year before this project began, one member of the church described how the togetherness force has suppressed conversation on the issue of same-sex relationships: “People in this church don’t feel that they can discuss their convictions and questions because they’re afraid of being judged by their fellow church members.”


20. Ken Wilson, A Letter to My Congregation: An evangelical pastor’s path to embracing people who are gay, lesbian, and transgender into the company of Jesus (Canton, MI: Read the Spirit Books, 2014), 134-135, emphasis mine.

21. KJ, Open and Affirming Core Group conversation, April 28, 2014. Ruth Haley Barton describes it this way: “Sometimes there is an unspoken rule that we are not allowed to talk about these
Us Versus Them

The problem of not knowing how to talk to each other in the midst of hard or emotional issues, when examined through the frame of contemplative spirituality, reveals a dualistic and oppositional worldview. Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest and teacher of Christian mysticism, describes this worldview: “The human mind prefers to think by comparison and differentiation—from . . . Thus most groups divide into liberals and conservatives of some sort, thinking that by defeating the other, they will win.”22 Communities governed by conformity to the tribe, homogeneity, or togetherness force adopt a spiritual worldview of opposition: us versus them, right versus wrong, and agree versus disagree. Within this worldview, says Rohr, we don’t have to know what we are for, we just have to know whom we are against.23 Rohr describes the danger of this spiritual worldview: “It is hardly an exaggeration to say that ‘us and them’ seeing, and the dualistic thinking that results, is the foundation of almost all discontent and violence in the world.”24

And yet, there is hope: Pastor Ken Wilson describes how Christianity creates possibilities for community that embraces diversity:

things. Like the townspeople in the old fable, we are afraid to state the obvious - that the emperor has no clothes! None of us wants to be the little boy who shocks everyone by acknowledging the obvious. Pursuing God’s Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 81.


The gospel imperative to accept each other despite our differences over disputable matters is very good news indeed, if we walk in it. It’s good for us. It’s a relief to let go of all the pressure that comes with having to judge this matter correctly. It’s a relief to know that we can hold to our own convictions without our belonging being threatened.\(^{25}\)

Evangelical Christians in the United States generally, and The Community in Ada specifically, need a new model for conversations in the midst of disagreement, especially relating to the difficult topic of same-sex relationships. Christianity, particularly within Reformed traditions, has the commitments that can lead the way into this new model for conversation across this country: unity, purity, and peace. This project provides a model for employing those commitments in difficult conversations and outlines practices for embodying them in local congregations, families, parachurch organizations, educational institutions, and any Christian community facing difficult conversations regarding this topic.

**Defining Terms**

Before I describe the context in which this project took place, I will define some terms. The term *evangelical Christian* proves difficult to define in the politically polarized milieu of the United States in the 21st Century. The National Association of Evangelicals and LifeWay Research set out to clarify the term. They conducted a study of understandings of the term *evangelical Christian* among sociologists, theologians, and evangelical leaders and field-tested the results.\(^{26}\) Their definition of *evangelical Christian*

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\(^{25}\) Wilson, 134-135.

is theological rather than political, and this is the definition of evangelical Christian I draw from in this project. It consists of these four beliefs: 1) The Bible is the highest authority for Christian faith; 2) It is very important to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior; 3) Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of sin; and 4) Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation.27

In this project, homosexual refers to sexual attraction to a person of one’s own gender.28 Within Christian circles, homosexuality can be an unclear term, referring to either people who experience same-sex attraction, or to same-sex sexual activity, or referring to both at the same time.29 Sometimes an attempt is made to avoid this confusion by referring separately to same-sex sexual activity and homosexual attraction, but this separation is usually for the purpose of separating the sin from the sinner in Christian communities.30 Because sexuality is such an integral part of what it means to be human, I prefer not to make this distinction between sexual activity and sexual

29. The term “homosexual” emerged in the 1860s to describe same-sex attraction. Before that, in Western cultures, homosexual sex acts were a thought of as a sinful (and usually criminal) behavior that anybody might be tempted to engage in, not as a result of an enduring sexual desire. LeVay, 20.
30. This leads to “love the sinner, hate the sin” stance toward LGBTQ people, which leads well into requiring celibacy for LGBTQ Christians. For a theologically informed personal story of a gay Christian committed to celibacy, see Wesley Hill, Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).
attraction. In this project, I will expand references to homosexual people as LGBTQ people, (explained below), and I will refer to sexual activity using specific descriptors.

When speaking of people who experience enduring same-sex attraction or non-binary gender expression, I will use the abbreviation LGBTQ: lesbian, (a woman whose sexual attraction is enduringly oriented toward women), gay (a man whose sexual attraction is enduringly oriented toward men), bisexual (a man or woman whose sexual attraction is enduringly oriented toward both women and), transgender (a person whose internal sense of their gender does not match their external genitalia), and questioning or queer (people who prefer not to be identified in a distinct category of either gender expression or sexual orientation).

**Gender complementarity** is the view that God’s intention for human sexuality and gender expression is for men and women to complement or complete each other biologically (by way of the fittedness of male and female genitalia), emotionally (men are strong protectors and women are meek nurturers), and spiritually (men provide leadership while women play a supportive role). Within this perspective, marriage can only be a

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31. James Brownson describes the shame that results from this bifurcation: “On the surface, the gay or lesbian person is welcomed . . . but the desires and the emotional orientation of disposition of the person’s sexuality are shunned. Ironically, in this context, the more deeply the gay or lesbian person is welcomed and loved by the fellowship, the more profound the problem of shame becomes. The internalized message becomes something like this: “These people love me so much, they must be right when they say that my sexual orientation is a manifestation of sinful brokenness. Therefore, I must resist this part of myself all the more insistently . . . when desires for others of the same sex persist, the result is a deeply internalized sense of shame, frustration, and self-loathing. The self is divided, and the shame becomes toxic.” *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 215-216.

32. Gender is commonly understood to have two opposing (binary) expressions: male and female. A non-binary understanding of gender places gendered tendencies on a spectrum with male on one side and female on the other. Many expressions of gender exist between male and female. For a description of how non-binary gender expression has been understood cross-culturally, see LeVay, 22-23.

covenant between a man and a woman. In chapter four I will argue that gender complementarity relies upon theology which is inconsistent with the Reformed tradition.

Ultimately, human sexual relationships and gender expression play a part in the broader picture of human flourishing, which is captured in the biblical concept of shalom, a Hebrew word often translated as “peace.” Shalom is a state of wholeness or peace, particularly wholeness or peace in relationship with God, with self, with other people, and with nature. Nicholas Wolterstorff points out that the fullness of the meaning of shalom cannot be contained in the words “wholeness” or “peace.” Shalom’s meaning is much richer - at its highest, shalom means enjoyment in one’s relationships.

Shalom is God’s intention for the world, but it is not only God’s responsibility - God shares that responsibility with humanity:

Even though the full incursion of shalom into our history will be divine gift and not merely human achievement, even though its episodic incursion into our lives now also has a dimension of divine gift, nonetheless it is shalom that we are to work and struggle for. We are not to stand around, hands folded, waiting for shalom to arrive. We are workers in God’s cause, his peace-workers. The missio Dei is our mission.

The goal of this project is to promote the increase of human flourishing in human relationships within the congregation and the broader community.

One of the ways that this project seeks to increase human flourishing is by reframing conflict from a harmful dynamic to a transformative force. Interventions around conflict are often called conflict resolution, suggesting that conflict is a problem


that needs to be eliminated. Through this lens, conflict is an aberration from peace, a specific problem to be eliminated as quickly as possible. Conflict and shalom, then, cannot be held in the same space. John Paul Lederach describes the downside of approaching conflict this way: we tend “to view conflict by focusing on the immediate ‘presenting’ problems. We give our energy to reducing anxiety and pain by looking for a solution to the presenting problems without seeing the bigger map of the conflict itself . . without a real sense of the underlying causes and forces in the conflict.”

Rather than conflict resolution, Lederach calls this field conflict transformation, making the claim that, “Conflict is normal in human relationships, and conflict is a motor of change.” Conflict, then, is not necessarily the enemy of shalom, but rather can be part of the progress toward shalom. When people in conflict are supported by the values and practices of conflict transformation (which are described in chapter three), conflict has the capacity to transform a community and contribute to sustainable social change.

This project seeks sustainable social change in the congregation: to end destructive and divisive patterns of communicating in conflict, particularly conflict

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40. Lederach connects transformation with social change: “Transformation’s guiding question is this: How do we end something not desired and build something we do desire? . . Transformation envisions the presenting problem as an opportunity to engage a broader context, to explore and understand the systems of relationships and patterns that gave birth to the crisis.” Lederach, The Little Book of Conflict Transformation, 30.
around same-sex relationships and the Christian faith, and to build long-lasting communication patterns that promote shalom in the congregation in times of conflict.

This project employs conversation as a method for conflict transformation and sustainable social change. More specifically, Christian conversation. The practice of Christian conversation borrows from the ordination and membership vows taken by clergy and laypeople in the Reformed Church in America: “[I promise] to seek the things that make for unity, purity, and peace.”\(^{41}\) Christian conversation occurs when Christians within a local congregation uphold their vows to “Seek the things that make for unity, purity, and peace”\(^{42}\) while talking about difficult or conflicted topics. The practicability of unity, purity, and peace will be discussed in chapter three.\(^{43}\)

The Core Group refers to a group of eight members of The Community in Ada, including one of the pastors, who gathered to discuss advancing LGBTQ inclusion in the congregation.

**Context: The Community in Ada**

Mary didn’t want to talk about it.\(^{44}\) She had been yelled at, sent hateful letters, and given the silent treatment by people she had considered close friends, and she didn’t want


\(^{42}\) “Order for Profession of Faith,” Reformed Church in America, 39.

\(^{43}\) For advertisement purposes, I used the term faithful conversation in place of Christian conversation in the implementation of this project in the congregation. These terms will be used interchangeably in this paper.

\(^{44}\) Names have been changed, abbreviated to initials, or withheld by mutual agreement throughout this document. The following details of this story about Faith in Action Sunday were taken from an interview by the author with BS, Ada, Michigan, July 20, 2015.
to remember it. She had served as the vice president of the leadership board in her church, The Community in Ada, during a very difficult conflict ten years earlier while the pastor was on maternity leave. Now her new pastor, who had set out to learn about the history of conflict in the congregation, was asking her questions about this episode in her past. Hands and voice trembling, she yielded to the pastor’s questions, and shared her experience for the first time since the conflict occurred. Mary’s story provides a viewing point for the history of conflict at The Community and illuminates the social change that this project seeks.

Mary had been a member of this congregation for 35 years, and that painful period ten years ago was the first (and only) time she had served as an elder. She was first attracted to the congregation because of the way they cared for their fellow members. While raising their two daughters, she and her husband developed very close and supportive relationships with other parents of young children in the congregation. The beliefs of the church were a good theological middle ground for her and her husband’s disparate Christian upbringings, and yet the inward focus of the church and pressure toward conformity had always bothered her. She wondered if this inward focus and pressure toward sameness was preventing the congregation from sharing the love of Christ effectively. In her first twenty-five years at The Community, Mary remembers only one person coming to know Christ through the congregation. Many new members

45. The Community, An RCA Ministry in Ada, has been the name of this congregation since 2008. Though always the same entity, the church has had several names: Ada Reformed Church (1902), Ada Community Church (1922), and Ada Community Reformed Church (1936, reaffirmed in 1965 after some confusion). Celebrating 100 Years: Ada Community Reformed Church, 1902-2002, page 9. (Hereafter cited as Celebrating 100 Years). For simplicity, the church will be henceforth referred to as The Community in Ada, or The Community.
had come in those years (many had also left), but all except that one new convert had transferred from other congregations in the same faith tradition.

“The Way We Do Things at this Church”

The power of conformity and the togetherness force described above were strong in the first twenty five years of Mary’s life in The Community in Ada. Sameness was the rule, and it was reinforced in the rotation of people elected as lay leaders, in worship practices, and through suppressing conflict. Those elected and re-elected to serve as lay leaders were descendants of six families that were charter members of the congregation, and these families dominated: “They literally owned the church and all the activities and everything in it and they had the control. That’s not to say that they didn’t share with some people but it was understood that . . . this was the way we do things at this church.”

“The way we do things” changed very little for many years, according to another long time member:

We adhered to policies and practices that were in place for many, many years and didn’t want to deviate from those. Worship services were conducted in the same way for a number of years . . . The church for a long time was basically the same

46. This era of history at The Community in Ada fits roughly into what Penny Edgell Becker calls the Family model of congregational culture. Congregations in this type are often “run by a small group of long-time lay leaders who are all good friends and belong to extended family networks. Penny Edgell Becker, Conflict in Congregations: Local Models of Congregational Life (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 13. The 100th anniversary booklet contains a list of the church members who were fifth and sixth generation descendants of those charter families - there are 35 people listed from six family lines. Celebrating 100 Years, 17.

47. BS, 5, also BS, 4.
families. We had a fairly tight group of people and it’s only the last 10 or 15 years that outsiders have been coming in with new ideas and fresh approaches.\textsuperscript{48}

Conflict was most often suppressed in favor of sameness and togetherness.\textsuperscript{49} One interviewee described the dynamic this way: “I think our church, like most stereotypical Dutch families, tends to manage around conflict. We don’t openly discuss conflict very often. That can be dangerous, but also, you buy time until the conflict goes away.”\textsuperscript{50} Acceptance and love - the sense of belonging in a group of like-minded people - was protected and reinforced by keeping practices and people conformed to pre-existing standards.

In the late 1990s and 2000s, the congregation experienced a tumultuous transition period that began to break apart the sameness. “The way we do things” was no longer a given. As many as one hundred people left the congregation during this transition period, which one member called a “gradual time of upheaval.”\textsuperscript{51} In 2002, a senior pastor was pressured by the leadership board to leave. When a new pastor arrived in 2003, even as

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{48} TR, interview by the author, Ada, Michigan, August 11, 2015, transcript page 2. BS, 2 also describes this shift very succinctly, and correlates it with long-time members leaving the congregation.
\item \textsuperscript{49} The style of conflict in this first era at The Community also matches Becker’s family model. In the family model of church culture, conflict tends to be avoided and conversation involving different viewpoints is suppressed: “In congregations where people think of themselves as a ‘family,’ people are very good at handling most things by vote and other routine procedures that resolve disagreements before people come to think of them as conflict,” Becker, 95.
\item One interviewee had a memorable take on the ways that conversation between differing viewpoints is suppressed, particularly within the leadership board: “I refer to consistory as \textit{sheep}… They’re not people they’re sheep. They follow. Not everyone agrees, but they just raise their hands and say yes.” LC, interview by author, Ada, Michigan, July 28, 2015, transcript page 3.
\item \textsuperscript{50} GE, interview by the author, Ada, Michigan, August 18, 2015, transcript page 4. Passive dissent and disengagement from conflict does not mean that conflict is not occurring. It only means that conflict is not occurring in such a way that people can reap the transformative benefits that engaging in conflict in a healthier way can yield. To use the language of Bowen Family Systems Theory, people can appear very disconnected or independent outwardly but remain fused inwardly. For a discussion of these terms and how they relate to congregational life, see Richardson, \textit{Polarization and the Healthier Church}, 71-78.
\item \textsuperscript{51} GR, 12.
\end{itemize}
long time members continued to exit the congregation, new people began to come, and they challenged the power of the togetherness force with their new ideas. A new vision began to emerge; this vision brought the congregation beyond their walls to bring the love of Christ out into the world. The new vision required additional change. By 2008, the church had ended several programs that were no longer vibrant, including the Sunday evening worship services and mid-week programming; the church dramatically changed the structure of children's ministries, reordered the leadership structure, called and installed their first woman pastor, changed their worship style, and adopted a new name.

Congregation members no longer suppressed conflict during this leadership transition. The congregation was not able to uphold their vows to “seek unity, purity, and peace” in the midst of conflict, and often saw the conflict as a problem stemming from a specific person that they needed to end as quickly as possible. When communities view conflict as primarily personal, the quickest path to ending the conflict is for someone to leave: “The person in whom the problem resides needs to change or leave. The reasoning is this: If the person would just stop being so cold, such a troublemaker, or would just go away, then the problem would go away, too.” This is the primary way that conflicts have been “resolved” at The Community historically. One person summed

52. BS, 8-9. Another member also described this dynamic: IT, interview by the author, Ada, Michigan, August 2, 2015, transcript page 6.


54. The tumultuous transition era described by Mary bears many similarities to the mixed cultural model of congregational culture described by Becker, including viewing conflicts as interpersonal problems. Mixed cultural models are ones where various groups within the congregation, like long-term members and newcomers, have vastly different understandings of “Who we are” and “How we do things here” that come into conflict with each other. Becker, 151.

55. Becker, 94.
it up perfectly: “If you were to look at all of the conflicts in the last 40 years or so, they were resolved mostly by people leaving and finding another church.” However, disengaging from a conflict by departing the congregation does not actually resolve the conflict. Rather, it cuts off the relationship and therefore cuts off the possibility that conflict can transform relationships as described above.

Seeking a New Way

Eager to support the new vision of being involved in the community that had emerged during the transition period, Mary agreed to be nominated as an elder and was elected in 2007. At this time, the church was trying out various new ways to live out their new vision and engage the community. “Faith in Action Sunday” was one effort. The church leadership proposed that congregation members split up and form teams to do several service projects in the community, such as home repairs for elderly people or leading a hymn sing at a nursing home, in lieu of one Sunday morning worship service. The Faith in Action Sunday plan rolled out just as the pastor went on maternity leave, and Mary was left in charge.

Responses to the Faith in Action Sunday plan were quick and polarized, mostly split along the lines of length of membership: newcomers to the church loved it and longtime members strongly disliked it. Except Mary, a longtime member. She loved seeing people go out and “be the church, as opposed to going to church.” Mary was devastated by the responses of her long-time member comrades. Mary describes herself

56. BS, 10.
57. BS, 10.
as preferring to avoid conflict, and she hated coming to church during the weeks following the publishing of the Faith in Action Sunday plan because of the anger directed at her. She said, “There were people who were not normally that vocal, saying ‘you go out and work on Sunday, and I’m leaving this church so fast.’”

After receiving vitriolic letters and phone calls, the church leadership decided to compromise and hold an abbreviated worship service prior to the service projects. Mary wrote a letter to the congregation describing the reasons for change in the Faith in Action plan, and admonishing people for their unkind reactions. Faith in Action Sunday came and went. The following year the leadership board changed the outreach program to Faith in Action Saturday in order to avoid repeating the conflict. The program continued for a few years and then was discontinued due to low participation. The people who were the angriest about Faith in Action Sunday eventually left the congregation, and Mary still carries pain from the experience.

In the years following the Faith in Action Sunday, both the pace of change and the frequency of conflict slowed, and The Community in Ada began to seek out ways to have healthier conversations when the issues are hard and emotional. In 2012, during another pastoral transition, the elders of the church hosted the nonviolent communication and restorative circles educational session mentioned above. In 2013, the new pastors and elders of the church hosted an event giving people practice in nonviolent communication

58. BS, 6-7.

59. LCr, interview with the author, Ada, Michigan, August 17, 2015, transcript pages 2-3. The letter could not be found in the consistory archives.

60. BS, 7-8. Mary’s experience mimics the experience of others on consistory during this period. See RB, interview by the author, Ada, Michigan, August 18, 2015, transcript page 4.
and restorative circles. In 2014, eight people from the congregation were trained to facilitate Restorative Circles. In 2015, the elders and pastors set out to talk about same-sex relationships and the Christian faith using Restorative Circles.

In anticipation of the 2015 conversations about homosexuality, one long-time member of The Community in Ada described a dynamic in the way the church approaches conflict that is completely different than the relationship cutoffs of the previous era.\(^{61}\)

On matters of homosexuality there’s clearly not consensus, but there’s clearly an openness to individual interpretation... This is where the grace part comes in. In my opinion... our church does a fairly good job of acceptance. I don’t need to agree with you if it’s not a matter of salvation... It’s okay to disagree... Individuals need to be responsible for their own decisions, and the church doesn’t necessarily have to dictate right and wrong. It’s more important for the church to be a place to explore the issue than to decide the issue, because all we do is create division.\(^{62}\)

This introduction began with the question, “*Can we Talk?*” In the past at The Community in Ada, the answer has clearly been “*NO.*” But after numerous conflicts, cultural changes, and new efforts toward healthy conversation, maybe, just maybe, the answer can be a hearty, “*YES!*”

This project describes how The Community in Ada got to “*YES*” and lays out a path for other congregations to take a similar journey. Chapter two describes the methodology undergirding this project. Chapter three explores the theology of unity, purity, and peace and describes a conversation practice that helps Christians uphold unity,

\(^{61}\) In the years following Faith in Action Sunday, The Community in Ada has shifted from Becker’s mixed model of congregational culture to a community cultural model, where members expect that their congregation is a place to interpret for themselves what the religious traditions mean in their own life (Becker, 109). Community model congregations shy away from dogmatism and tend to avoid polarizing labels. They refuse to pin themselves down as liberal or conservative (Becker, 110, 116), and highly value tolerance (Becker, 100).

\(^{62}\) GE, 2.
purity, and peace when talking about difficult topics. Chapter four describes several evangelical Christian theologies of human sexuality, puts these theologies into Christian conversation with one another, and evaluates the theologies in light of parts of the Reformed tradition. Chapter five recounts what happened as the project played out at The Community, and chapter six explores the learnings that emerged from the project. Chapter seven details a model for faithful conversations for use in other congregations. Conflict in a congregation is always stressful to some extent, but I hope this project will help congregations to approach conflict faithfully so they can grow in relationships with each other as well as in Christian faith.
Chapter 2
Methodology

The project is rooted in the methodology of Action Research.¹ Action Research is based on cogenerative learning, which is learning that emerges from mutual reflection on shared experiences that pursues a liberating outcome.² The first task of Action Research as it relates to this project was to create a shared experience - an “arena for dialogue and mutual learning.”³ The shared experience in this project was a forum for faithful dialogue and mutual learning about same-sex relationships and the Christian faith. The dialogue was a joint experience within the congregation and included lay participants, lay leaders, pastors, and pastor-researcher. The purpose of the dialogue was to generate together a new kind of conversation regarding same-sex relationships and the Christian faith.

But if the dialogue were the end of the process, new knowledge would have only existed in a fragmented form in each individual participant. For new knowledge to emerge within the community at large, a second task was necessary: mutual reflection upon the dialogue. The participants and researcher engaged in mutual reflection on the dialogue using an Action Research process.⁴


² Greenwood and Levin, 134-135. I define cogenerative learning as new ideas or insights that rise out of a community sharing a new experience and reflecting on it together. Liberating Outcomes will be defined and discussed below.

³ Greenwood and Levin, 134-135.

⁴ Greenwood and Levin, 134-135.
Liberating Outcomes

Within the methodology of Action Research, this project’s goal was a liberating outcome. The project sought liberating outcomes in both process and outcome. First, the process of dialogue itself was constructed with a liberating goal in mind: a conversation about same-sex relationships and the Christian faith that upholds unity, purity, and peace within a cultural context where such conversations are often characterized by fear, judgment, and false assumptions. Secondly, mutual reflection upon the dialogue generated further liberating outcomes, including the new understanding that the congregation could live together in unity in the midst of disagreement.

Search Conferencing

This project was not only a process of developing cogenerative research, it was also a product of previous cogenerative learning in the congregation. The project was part of the congregation’s strategic plan that arose out of a process that Greenwood and Levin call “search conferencing.”

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5. Greenwood and Levin, 134-135. Greenwood and Levin hesitate to narrow liberating outcomes to a specific definition because what constitutes as liberation differs widely among on the situation of the participants. As a starting place, they offer this initial definition and clarification: “outcomes where local participants gain greater control over their own situation as a group.” We are not referring to personal liberation or the gaining of individual power by group members, but to the increased capacity of local participants to define and manage their own collective situation” (Greenwood and Levin, 35). For this project, the specific liberating outcomes could not be predicted at the outset, but we suspected it would have something to do with being transformed into the image of Christ as described in Romans 12:2: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (NRSV). The liberating outcomes that actually occurred will be discussed in chapters five and six.

Search conferences aim to both elicit stakeholders’ interpretations of history and develop a common vision for action plans. Eliciting congregation members’ understanding of the history of the congregation was done in at least two ways. First, the researcher made a 20-foot long historical timeline on butcher paper, taped it to the wall of the fellowship hall, and invited members to write their own version of church history into timeline at a congregation-wide event.\(^7\) Secondly, the researcher gathered stakeholders’ interpretation of history through extensive interviews of church members about their understanding of past changes and conflicts in the church. Searching also aims to develop a common vision for the future and looks for creative action plans toward that common vision. This happened during the development of a new strategic plan for the congregation, which began with significant storytelling and communal dreaming at church-wide events, and then took shape in the form of specific action plans that were discussed and approved by the leadership and the congregation. This project is one of the action plans that came out of that strategic plan.

**Project**

The project was introduced by a letter from the elders and pastors to the congregation.\(^8\) The letter stated the rationale and goal of the conversation series, which came out of the strategic plan adopted by the congregation in 2015.\(^9\) The letter invited

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\(^7\) See appendix A for photographs of the history wall. To learn more about this search conference tool, see “Creating a Shared History” in Greenwood and Levin, 146-147.

\(^8\) The letter is included in appendix B.

people to participate and outlined the process of the conversation series. Names and contact information were included for people who had questions or concerns.

The arena for dialogue and shared learning was a congregational event consisting of the Sunday morning worship service and a panel discussion over lunch afterward. The theme of the worship service was Christian unity in diversity. The sermon began with a brief teaching about Christian unity and then outlined the various Christian responses to homosexual relationships.\textsuperscript{10} All of the responses were presented as valid and faithful, and the pastors acknowledged that this congregation includes people from across the typologies. The pastors restated the goal of this process: for congregation members and leaders alike to be able to speak their opinions and experiences openly while also listening to others, and for the congregation to grow in unity while talking about same-sex relationships.

Immediately following the worship service, the event continued with a panel discussion in the fellowship hall of the church. First, the pre-conversation survey was distributed. Then, a facilitated panel discussion was held.\textsuperscript{11} The purpose of the panel was threefold: (1) Model the faithful speaking and faithful listening methods of Restorative Circles;\textsuperscript{12} (2) allow congregation members to hear the voices and experiences of faithful Christians who hold different perspectives on homosexual relationships in a way that may

\textsuperscript{10} James Brownson, “Theological and Pastoral Responses to Committed Same-Sex Relationships,” 2004. Used with permission. (See appendix D).

\textsuperscript{11} The facilitator was Ann McKnight, a therapist and Restorative Circles facilitator from outside the congregation.

\textsuperscript{12} Nine members of The Community, including half of the elder board who were serving at the time of this writing, have been trained as Restorative Circles Facilitators through Holland Restorative Circles in preparation of this project. To learn more about Restorative Circles, see “About Restorative Circles,” Holland Restorative Circles, accessed March 8, 2016, https://hrcircles.wordpress.com/.
have been new to them; and (3) provide an opportunity to try out the practices and skills of Restorative Circles.

The members of the panel, with the help of a facilitator, engaged each other using the values of Restorative Circles. The three values modeled were: 1) the sole purpose of listening in this context is to understand what matters to the person speaking;\(^\text{13}\) 2) disagreement is a natural part of living together and it does not have to be harmful to relationships;\(^\text{14}\) and 3) speaking authentically and listening deeply in the midst of disagreements enriches our relationships, deepens our self-understanding, and helps us discern the Holy Spirit’s leading.\(^\text{15}\) After each panel member spoke, mutual reflection on the shared experience began. The facilitator invited congregation members to respond to the panel, and then invited the panel to follow up on anything the congregation members said. For the last step in the panel discussion, the facilitator invited the congregation to share remaining curiosities and further wonderings.

Mutual reflection continued at the conclusion of the congregation-wide event, when the Critical Incident Questionnaire\(^\text{16}\) was distributed to panel members and participants. The CIQs were summarized, the summaries were collated and made

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15. Lederach, The Little Book of Conflict Transformation, 4-5.

16. Stephen Brookfield, “Critical Incident Questionnaire,” accessed March 8, 2016. http://www.stephenbrookfield.com/Dr._Stephen_D._Brookfield/Critical_Incident_Questionnaire_files/CIQ.pdf. Hereafter this will be referred to as CIQ. This tool, designed for use in the classroom, was adapted slightly to fit the congregational context. It is included in appendix E.
available to the participants at a later date after the event. The elders reflected on the responses in order to identify next steps.

**Consent and Participation**

Every effort was made to ensure that this research minimized harm to participants and relationships.17 Due to the awkward nature of seeking informed consent and the religious nature of the community, I did not seek signatures on consent forms. Rubin and Rubin describe well the pitfalls of seeking formal informed consent in the context of one-on-one interviews where the relationship pre-exists the research project: “Signed informed consent forms are . . . problematic. To the extent that the interviews are an extension of a conversation and part of a relationship, the legal appearance and formality of a consent form may be puzzling to the conversational partner and disruptive to the research.”18 Rubin and Rubin’s observations regarding one-on-one interviews are helpful for this congregation-wide conversation, where the research took place within the context of pre-existing relationships and regular community-wide practices like worship and adult education hour.

The participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the project so that they knew what would happen if they chose to attend. Bulletin announcements, spoken announcements in worship, and the introductory letter described above outlined the purpose and process of the event beginning a month before it took place. Another verbal

17. The highest possibilities for harm to participants in DMin projects reported by Tim Sensing read like a Pauline vice list: “anxiety, fear, ill will, doubt, anger, and conflict.” It is not hard to imagine how a conversation about homosexuality and the Christian faith could elicit this kind of harm. Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene OR, Wipf & Stock, 2011), 34.

announcement describing the purpose and process of the event was given at the beginning of the worship service when the project took place, in case anyone arrived at the worship service unaware. People were given an opportunity to leave during the opening song if they did not want to participate. No one did.

In order to protect participants’ confidentiality following the project event, the surveys and CIQs did not ask for names, and no identifying information is used in reporting to the DMin program at Western Theological Seminary, the congregation, or publications for broader reading.

Data

Participants were engaged and data gathered using two instruments. The first was the pre-conversation survey which was administered on paper to participants between the worship service and the panel discussion. The survey asked participants to identify themselves on Jim Brownson’s typology. Detailed descriptions of each category were included. The second instrument used was an adaptation of Brookfield’s CIQ for a congregational context, which was distributed on paper at the end of the event.

The responses from the survey containing Brownson’s typology were consolidated into graph form to show the distribution of viewpoints within the


21. See appendix E.
congregation. The responses to the CIQ were summarized and the results made available soon after the event. The data from both instruments were evaluated and coded using three analytic frames: convergence (that is, which themes and patterns emerge multiple times in the data), divergence (that is, which themes and patterns that seem to contradict each other), and silence (that is, what realities are not represented in the data). The story about how the event unfolded will be told in chapter five.

22. See table 2.

23. See Sensing’s detailed explanation of these analytical frameworks, which he calls themes, slippages, and silences, 197-202.
Chapter 3

A Theology of Christian Conversation: Unity, Purity, and Peace

“Seek the things that make for unity, purity, and peace.”¹ In the Reformed Church in America, the denomination to which The Community in Ada belongs, clergy and laypeople alike take these vows at crucial points in congregational life.² Unity, purity, and peace are central pursuits within the life of a congregation, and these pursuits form the theological framework for Christian conversation.³

But can a congregation pursue unity, purity, and peace at the same time? How is the purity of the gospel upheld as we strive for unity? How is unity upheld as we strive for peace? How is peace upheld as we strive for purity? Christian conversation imagines a congregation simultaneously pursuing unity, purity, and peace while talking about difficult or conflicted topics.

This chapter will discuss how unity, purity, and peace shape Christian conversation and will describe capacities and practices for embodiment of unity, purity, and peace in Christian conversation. Pursuing unity means people within the congregation do not divide themselves into “us and them” camps, even in the midst of


². This vow is made each time a Minister of Word and Sacrament is received into a new congregation or governing body. See the “Formulary for Declaration of Ministers of Word and Sacrament” in Reformed Church in America, Book of Church Order, 130. This vow is also made each time a lay person is received into the membership of a congregation. See “Order for Profession of Faith,” Worship the Lord: The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America, 39.

³. Christians converse in many arenas. This project narrows in on formal large-scale conversations, like a forum or gathering specifically for the purpose of speaking and listening. It may be the case, however, that the practices learned in those formal large-scale Christian conversations will filter down into informal conversations with a smaller scope.
diverse backgrounds, convictions, and opinions. Pursuing purity means that people within a congregation strive for holiness as they address conflict. Pursuing peace means that people within a congregation seek shalom, which is God’s holistic intention for human flourishing.

**Unity**

Richard Rohr sums up unity in Christian conversations perfectly: “It is not about being correct, it’s about being connected.” Evangelical Christians have gotten confused about the meaning of unity by mistaking the uniformity of beliefs and practices that comes from the homogeneous unit principle for unity. But it is diversity, not uniformity, that marked the origins of the Christian church - diversity of language (Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic), diversity in approaches to Old Testament laws (Jews and Hellenists), diversity in understanding of the role of good works in faith (Paul and James), and even a diversity of perspectives, resulting in four gospel accounts rather than one. Although

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5. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles to communicate the gospel in many languages (Acts 2:5-12). The Apostle Paul spoke both Greek and Aramaic, using whichever language his audience could understand (Acts 21:37-22:2). All observant Jews in the first century would have at least a rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew, which was the language of their scriptures.

6. The different approaches to Gentile Christians following the laws of Moses, especially circumcision, were settled at the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-21).

7. James emphasizes the importance of good works in the life of faith (James 2:14-26), whereas Paul deemphasizes the importance of good works (Ephesians 2:8-10).


For an easy to read yet in depth discussion of the diversity of the four gospel accounts, see Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So… Why Defending Scripture has Made Us Unable to Read It* (New York: Harper One, 2014), 73-89.
they shared faith in one God, worshipped one Lord, and practiced one baptism, the
curch of the New Testament encompassed an almost unimaginable breadth of diversity.
\textit{Difference} has been part of the Christian community since the very beginning of the
curch.

But what is the role of difference in unity? Does unity require that differences be
overcome? Or is there a deeper unity that includes and transcends difference? Jesus offers
sight into the role of difference in unity. The fire in Jesus’ belly for unity among his
ollowers drove him to pray earnestly for them to be one, as recorded in John 17:21b-23:

\begin{quote}
As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the
world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I
have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me,
that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have
sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.
\end{quote}

The oneness that Jesus prays for God to give his followers in John 17 is the oneness of
God’s unity in the Trinity.\textsuperscript{9} What is the nature of the unity of the Trinity? Unity in the
midst of differences: three distinct divine “persons”\textsuperscript{10} living in perfect oneness - oneness
characterized by difference and complexity.

David S. Cunningham uses a musical term to describe the Trinity: \textit{polyphony}, or,
many sounds.\textsuperscript{11} An orchestra performing a symphony plays \textit{many} notes and melodies
simultaneously, yet it plays only \textit{one} symphony. Cunningham describes the role of
difference in the unity of the Trinity this way:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{9} John 17:22b: “So that they may be one, as we are one.”
\textsuperscript{10} Theologians argue over whether “persons” is the best way to describe the three elements
within the Trinity. I will describe this below.
\textsuperscript{11} David S. Cunningham, \textit{These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology} (Malden,
\end{quote}
Christianity proclaims a polyphonic understanding of God - one in which difference provides an alternative to a monolithic homogeneity, yet without becoming a source of exclusion. Attention to any one of the Three does not imply a diminished role for the others; all three have their distinctive melodies, and all are ‘played’ and ‘heard’ simultaneously without damage to God’s unity.  

Difference, not homogeneity, constitutes unity rooted in the Triune God. Jesus prayed for his followers to live in unity - “That they may be one, as we are one.” This was not a prayer for agreement, uniformity, or sameness. It was a prayer for unity in diversity. Christian conversation modeled after the unity of the Trinity honors difference in the pursuit of unity.

The Trinity contains the difference of the other in perfect unity. People, on the other hand, have feared the other since the first sin in the Garden of Eden:

In our culture, protection from the other is a fundamental necessity. We feel more and more threatened by the presence of the other. We are forced and even encouraged to consider the other as our enemy before we can treat him or her as our friend . . . This is a direct result of what in theological language we call the ‘Fall of man.’ There is a pathology built into the very roots of our existence, inherited through our birth, and that is the fear of the other. This is a result of the rejection of the Other par excellence, our Creator, by the first man, Adam - and before him by the demonic powers that revolted against God. The essence of sin is fear of the other.

Fear of the other leads to associating difference with division. Associating difference with division means that difference (of culture, language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and, most relevant to this project, perspectives on LGBTQ inclusion) cannot be contained within one community in the way that the Triune God contains difference in perfect

12. Cunningham, 129.
13. John 17:22b
15. Zizioulas, 2.
community. Divisions rising from difference are a result of sin, and Christian conversations that pursue unity must envision a community modeled after (and empowered by) the Trinity - a community that gracefully contains difference.

In order to contain difference, Christian conversation must embrace complexity. The pursuit of unity does not leave space for Christians to split people, beliefs, or ideas into “us versus them” or “right versus wrong” polarities in the midst of disagreement and enmity. Richard Rohr describes the necessity for embracing complexity:

Most groups divide into liberals and conservatives of some sort, thinking that by defeating the other, they will win. This appeals to our competitive nature. The truth, however, is always something other than what one side says about the other. . . Polarity thinking avoids all subtlety and discrimination and creates false dichotomies.\(^\text{16}\)

These false dichotomies and dualistic polarities render true conversation impossible and drive the cycle of violence.\(^\text{17}\)

John Paul Lederach calls this discipline of embracing complexity “paradoxical curiosity:” “[Paradoxical curiosity] holds together seemingly contradictory truths in order to locate a greater truth” (paradox) and makes a habit of seeking truth beyond what is immediately apparent (curiosity).\(^\text{18}\) Paradoxical curiosity requires a capacity for a high degree of ambiguity in Christian conversation - suspending judgment and staying curious about both people and opinions other than our own.\(^\text{19}\) Rohr describes living with ambiguity as starting with Yes:

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\(^{16}\) Rohr, *The Naked Now*, 99-100.


\(^{19}\) Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 36.
By teaching ‘Do not judge’ (Matthew 7:1) the great teachers are saying that you cannot start seeing or understanding anything if you start with no. You have to start with a Yes of basic acceptance, which means not too quickly labeling, analyzing, or categorizing things as in our out, good or bad, up or down. You have to leave the field open, a field in which God and grace can move.\(^\text{20}\)

Pursuing unity in Christian conversation means people within the congregation do not divide themselves into “us and them” camps, even in the midst of disagreement. Rohr sums up unity in Christian conversations perfectly: “It is not about being correct, it’s about being connected.”\(^\text{21}\)

**Purity**

Unity means prioritizing staying connected over being correct. Given that the second virtue in Christian conversation is purity, however, we must delve further into this business of correctness. Does pursuing purity in relationship relate to moral correctness?

When I asked a group of children one Sunday morning about the meaning of purity in the church, one child answered, “Pure means one hundred percent of something, like olive oil. So, the church should be one hundred percent pure God.”\(^\text{22}\) Yes! However, in contemporary evangelical Christianity, discussions concerning purity have largely been reduced to moral flawlessness, particularly relating to sexual purity.\(^\text{23}\) While sexual

\(^\text{20}\) Rohr, *Yes, And...*, 363.

\(^\text{21}\) Rohr, *Yes, And...*, 389.

\(^\text{22}\) KA, age 9, conversation with the author during the Children’s Blessing in worship at The Community. Ada, Michigan, June 5, 2016.

\(^\text{23}\) A Google search for “Christian purity” on June 16, 2016 yielded twenty two million results. The first one hundred results (and likely many more after this) were ALL related to sexual purity for Christians. A search of the Bible (NRSV, using BibleGateway.com) for “pure” and “purity” yielded 108 results. None of them related directly to sexual purity. One reference to purity as relating to virginity occurs in the Apocrypha, in 4 Maccabees 18:8.
purity is of some concern for this project (this will be discussed in chapter four), the pursuit of purity in Christian conversation takes on a different emphasis - participation in the holiness of God. Since the Triune God’s holiness exists primarily in relational participation among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit rather than in isolated moral perfection, Christian conversations pursue purity/holiness best when they seek to build the holy relational participation witnessed in and through the Trinity.

The Triune God can be characterized by holy relational participation: three “persons” in one God. Augustine reportedly first used the phrase “persons of the Trinity,” merely as a way to answer the question, “Three whats?” when talking about the Trinity. Since Augustine, theologians have been dissatisfied with the term “persons” because it diminishes the depth of relationality among the three and conjures

J. Todd Billings describes a theological problem with understanding holiness as moral flawlessness: “If sanctification is a matter of me drawing deeply upon myself to do good things for God, then my own holiness and my own effort becomes an end in itself, and preaching should focus on Christ only to the extent that he is a moral exemplar who goads us to work harder. Why? Because in this way of thinking, since Christ’s justifying work is done, it is up to us to achieve our sanctification.” Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 46.


The Apostle Paul connects purity and holiness in his letter to the church in Thessalonica: “For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness” (1 Thessalonians 4:7, NRSV). To keep the connection between holiness and purity in the forefront of this discussion, I will use purity/holiness together when applicable.


27. Cunningham, 28.

28. For a description of the various ways theologians have described the three “persons” of the Trinity over time, see Cunningham, 25-29.
up the Enlightenment sense of persons - individual, solitary centers of consciousness. Three solitary centers of consciousness are precisely what the Trinity is not, since the three “persons” only exist in relationality with one another. David S. Cunningham endeavors to alleviate this misunderstanding by simultaneously describing the threeness and oneness within the Trinity as, “These Three are One.” None of the three can be called upon without calling upon the others: “The Three dwell in each other so completely that we cannot divide them, one from another . . . God is pure mutual participation - relation without remainder.”

If we believe that God made people in God’s own image, this holy relational participation is not merely a gratuitous look at God’s nature - it becomes the vision of humanity at its best - the vision that the Church must seek to make real. In Christian conversation, this means that participants envision themselves principally as dwelling in a web of relationships that are vital to their selfhood rather than disconnected individuals entitled to their own perspectives, and that they open themselves to the influence of others.

Christian conversation seeking holiness/purity requires participants to envision themselves not as independent individuals who choose to participate in relationships with other Christians in a congregation, but as people whose relatedness with others is primary

30. This is also the title of his book on the subject. Cunningham, 28.
31. Cunningham, 169.
32. Zizioulas 4-5, Cunningham, 194.
33. This is Lederach’s term. Moral Imagination, chapter 8.
to their identity. This is very different from the individualized relational style prominent in contemporary North American culture:

In our own lives, relationships are often trivialized; we often enter into them, and leave them, without much consideration. This tendency, due in part to the hyper individualization of our culture, displays its symptoms everywhere: from the easy abandonment of spouses and children to the amazing popularity of drive-through restaurants. Great or small, these symptoms remind us that ‘relationships’ have become for us an accidental enterprise: we have them when we want to, and we avoid them when we (think that we) need to.⁴⁴

In contrast to individuals entering and relationships based on convenience, holy relational participation modeled after the Trinity requires “mutual indwelling,” which can most naturally be understood by looking at nuclear families:

I am ‘related’ to my wife and daughters, yes, but more than this: I dwell in their lives and they in mine. They are fundamentally constitutive of who ‘I’ am. Therefore, when you ask me how ‘I’ am doing, my answer will reflect how ‘they’ are doing as well.⁵⁵

Mutual indwelling means that the well-being, identity, and destiny of individual “persons” intertwine with the well-being, identity, and destiny not just of family members, but of all human neighbors.⁶⁶ Our relationships are not just something that we have when it suits our individual preferences. No - our relationships are what constitute us as human beings created in the image of the Triune God. When participants in a Christian conversation view their identity as tied up in their relationships, leaving a congregation becomes an option only in the most extreme of circumstances. This deep relatedness creates a congregational culture where theological issues can be open for true

⁴⁴. Cunningham, 190.

⁵⁵. Cunningham, 169.

⁶⁶. Lederach calls this concept the “web of relationships” and approaches it via the very practical perspective of peacebuilding - constructive social change takes hold and keeps hold in communities of interconnected people sharing life together. Moral Imagination, 75-86. I will discuss this further below. Cunningham approaches this web of relationships from a theological perspective. Cunningham, 166-167.
exploration - relatively free from the fear of individuals or groups departing from the church (and taking their resources with them).

Holiness/purity modeled after the Trinity requires that all notions of individual autonomy must die away. This death to self is difficult to accept. And it lies at the core of following Christ. Paul said in Galatians 2:19b-20, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” Our autonomous selves die with Christ, and the Christ of “These Three are One,” gives us new life - life in radical relationship with the Triune God, self, and others.

Seeking holiness/purity as holy relational participation, while it requires death to self and rising with Christ, does not require that everything that makes us unique and different from one another must either be excluded or meld into uniformity. No. What changes is not the existence of particularity, but the way that the community lives with particularity - trusting that the Triune God uses particularity to shape the community according to God’s desires. We hold our own convictions with open hands and allow, even invite, other people’s stories, experiences, and perspectives to shape us in deep and fundamental ways, trusting that the Triune God is at work through the other. When we invite others to shape our perspectives and lives in deep and fundamental ways, we distance ourselves not only from the Enlightenment notion of the independent self, but also from fixed moralistic understandings of Christian faith. We live into the claim that God created the world out of nothing: “Becoming and emergence take precedence over fixed essences or a static notion of being . . . Christianity remains resolutely open to new

37. Cunningham, 165-166, 169.

38. Zizioulas, 9-10, Cunningham, 167 and 196.
insights and additions; however, it brings all this variety into harmony in the Body of Christ.” John Milbank brings us back to the analogy of music: “In music there must be continuous endings and displacements, yet this is no necessary violence, because only in the recall of what has been displaced does the created product consist.”

**Peace**

At first glance, it may seem that pursuing peace in a Christian conversation means that we keep conflict at bay. But this does not achieve the kind of peace that Christian conversation requires. Christian conversation works toward a robust and all-encompassing sense of well-being, the kind of peace captured in the ancient Hebrew concept of shalom.

*Shalom* is an ancient Hebrew concept of a robust and all-encompassing state of well-being. *Shalom* has a deep and wide range of meanings in its original Hebrew context in the Old Testament according to David Gowan, including: harmonious relationships

39. Cunningham, 133. *Becoming and emergence* become particularly important in how a Christian community interprets scripture, redeeming communal interpretations of scripture from attack and defense (which are not Christian conversation). Purity/holiness requires that we honor our relationships and wrestle with our various (particular) readings of scripture. Peter Enns surveys the Jewish tradition of debate as recorded in the Talmud and draws the conclusion that wrestling, not settling, is actually what God wants from human engagement with scripture: “The sages of Judaism debate the meaning of biblical passages, often arriving at contradictory explanations - and all of it is recorded and preserved as part of the sacred tradition, without any need to resolve the problem and arrive at a final answer . . . The debate keeps the conversation at the center of the community . . . The back-and-forth with the Bible is where God is found. Enter the dialogue and you find God waiting for you, laughing with delight, ready to be a part of that back-and-forth.” Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 242-243.


41. This is my definition of *shalom*. Nicholas Wolterstorff defines *shalom* as “The human being dwelling at peace in all his or her relationships: with God, with self, with fellows, with nature . . . Shalom at its highest is enjoyment in one’s relationships.” Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, 69. In the ancient Hebrew scripture, *shalom* has a complex and varied set of meanings. For a thorough discussion of the concept of *shalom* in both the Old and New Testaments, see Donald E. Gowan, *Shalom- A Study of the Biblical Concept of Peace*, CD-ROM (Pittsburgh: Kerygma, 2002), sessions 1-5.
between people, personal well-being of both people and animals, physical health, safety and security in reference to one’s relationship with a more powerful person, the completion of one’s life at a good old age, and achieving victory over one’s enemies.42

In the New Testament, the work of Jesus Christ is often referred to as bringing peace in the *shalom*-y sense. Consider the first announcement of Christ’s human birth by the multitude of angels: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those whom God favors.”43 Consider Peter’s first sermon to a group of Gentiles, where he sums up the work of Christ: “You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.”44 The Christological hymn in Colossians 1, similarly declares the supremacy and work of Christ: “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”45 In fact, peace in the *shalom*-y sums up the whole message of the gospel: “Peace’ provides for most New Testament writers a way of summing up the content of the gospel.”46 Nicholas Wolterstorff takes this deep and wide picture of shalom in scripture and defines it concisely: “Shalom is the human being dwelling at peace in all his or her relationships: with God, with self, with fellows, with nature . . . Shalom at its highest is enjoyment in one’s relationships.”47 *Shalom* is the kind of peace that Christian conversation pursues.

42. Gowan, 22-25.
43. Luke 2:14, NRSV.
44. Acts 10:36, NRSV.
45. Colossians 1:19-20, NRSV.
46. Gowan, 61.
Conflict and the Pursuit of Peace

Christian conversations do not seek peace by avoiding conflict but by trusting that staying connected through disagreement, even bitter disagreement, can bring about a more robust shalom. Interventions around conflict are often called conflict resolution, suggesting that conflict is a problem that needs to be eliminated in order to get back to peace as quickly as possible. Through this lens, conflict is an aberration from peace - a specific problem to be eliminated. Conflict and shalom, then, cannot be held in the same space. John Paul Lederach describes the downside of approaching conflict this way:

[We tend] to view conflict by focusing on the immediate ‘presenting’ problems. We give our energy to reducing anxiety and pain by looking for a solution to the presenting problems without seeing the bigger map of the conflict itself . . . without a real sense of the underlying causes and forces in the conflict.

The absence of conflict does not indicate shalom, and avoiding conflict does not promote shalom. Avoiding conflict might even perpetuate injustice.

In some cases where injustice runs particularly deep over a period of time, people have sought peace by severing relationships. Severing relationships might lead to an absence of conflict, but it does not bring shalom. This happens in interpersonal relationships in the Christian community - marriages end in divorce, churches split, friendships end - all in response to anxiety and hurt caused by conflict. These cut-offs attempting to attain peace also happen on a wider societal scale in the United States in the criminal justice system. Nicholas Wolterstorff and others penned a statement about

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48. For an overview of conflict resolution theories and practices, see Bercovitch and Jackson, Conflict Resolution in the Twenty-first Century.

49. Lederach, The Little Book of Conflict Transformation, 8.
Restorative Justice for the Christian Reformed Church\textsuperscript{50} in which they discuss how society attempts to achieve peace (not \textit{shalom}) by removing criminals from the community via imprisonment: “This amounts to large parts of our societies being healed by amputation.”\textsuperscript{51} Healing by amputation - cutting off relationship in order to end suffering does not lead to the \textit{shalom} God desires for us. Rather, it leads to further injustice. The report names devastating statistics (for example, much higher numbers of people incarcerated in the United States than any other country, wildly disproportionate rates of incarceration for Black and Hispanic men, and huge financial costs), and then describes some consequences of \textit{healing by amputation}:

These are often tragic stories, stories of abuse, of chemical dependencies, of bad choices, and of a hundred other human causes that catch up whole communities in webs of crime and poverty. These are lost lives, lives that are lived in a cycle of short-lived freedom and long incarceration. They are the forgotten, the underclass, the ragged remnants of rich societies. They and their victims are locked together in these dysfunctional systems.\textsuperscript{52}

Justice, a “radical respect for human rights and life,”\textsuperscript{53} envisions a society in which no one is harmed and where everyone’s rights are honored. Justice is a prerequisite for \textit{shalom}: “If individuals are not granted what is due them, if their claim on others is not acknowledged by those others, if others do not carry out their obligations to them, then \textit{shalom} is wounded.”\textsuperscript{54}

Christian conversation does not seek peace by cutting off either conflict or people.

\textsuperscript{50} “Committee to Study Restorative Justice,” \textit{Agenda for Synod 2005} (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 2005).

\textsuperscript{51} “Committee to Study Restorative Justice,” \textit{Agenda for Synod 2005}, 555.

\textsuperscript{52} “Committee to Study Restorative Justice,” 533.

\textsuperscript{53} Lederach, \textit{Little Book of Conflict Transformation}, 4.

\textsuperscript{54} Lederach, \textit{Little Book of Conflict Transformation}, 71.
Rather than conflict resolution, Lederach calls it conflict transformation, promoting the understanding that, “Conflict is normal in human relationships, and conflict is a motor of change.” When people in conflict are supported by the values and practices of conflict transformation, conflict has the capacity to transform people and relationships. Christian conversation creates space to address conflict, sin, injustice, and harm in a way that honors relationships and allows God to transform the community toward the justice of shalom.

When Shalom is Broken

If cutting off relationship does not restore shalom when injustice has occurred, then what is a response to injustice that is more likely to reestablish shalom (or establish it for the first time)? Ethicist David Stubbs argues that an appropriate response to broken shalom requires a certain kind of understanding of injustice. Stubbs points out that the church has tended to define acts of injustice in terms of laws broken by perpetrators. In this law-breaking view of injustice, restoration requires some kind of penalty be put upon the person who broke the law, (for example, imprisonment). However, as mentioned above, this solution often contributes to additional injustice rather than contributing to shalom.

55. Lederach, Little Book of Conflict Transformation, 4-5.

Understanding injustice in terms of relationships rather than laws creates space for a better response when shalom is broken. The field of Restorative Justice argues that responses to broken shalom should start with conversation rather than cut-off and punishment. People affected by the harmful action need to come together with the person or people who perpetrated the action to speak truthfully and authentically and to listen with grace and humility for the sake of understanding the motivations and consequences of the action. The affected individuals and community then discern together a way forward that addresses the realities that emerged from the conversation. Stubbs argues that this way of responding when shalom has been broken captures more fully the biblical picture of God’s intention for shalom than imposing penalties for laws broken. He points out that from the New Testament vantage point, the law serves as a set of guidelines only for how people will behave when relationships are whole, and not for how they will respond when relationships are broken. Christian conversation responds to broken shalom not by severing relationships but by engaging in the relationships where injustice has occurred. A practice for this kind of relational engagement is discussed below.

Four Capacities and a Practice of Christian Conversation

Christian conversation that pursues unity, purity, and peace requires participants to develop counter-cultural practices and capacities. Lederach suggests several practices

57. Restorative justice rose out of the peacebuilding sensibilities of the Mennonite community and has applications in classrooms, families, faith communities, as well as the so-called criminal justice system. The seminal book in the movement is a quick and profound read: Howard Zehr, The Little Book of Restorative Justice, rev. ed., (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2015).

58. Stubbs, 8-9. This is similar to the conversational practice I will describe at the end of chapter three.

59. Stubbs, 9.
that flow well from the above discussion.\textsuperscript{60}

1. Develop a capacity to \textit{understand yourself in a web of interconnected relationships}. “Who we have been, are, and will be emerges and shapes itself in a context of relational interdependency.” As such, your actions contribute to patterns of both harm and health - take responsibility for both.

2. Develop a capacity for \textit{paradoxical curiosity}. Embrace complexity over dualism, suspend judgment, ask questions.

3. Provide space for the \textit{creative act}.\textsuperscript{61} Christian conversation need not be only face-to-face speaking dialogue. Unity, purity, and peace can be pursued powerfully in mutual play, mutual work, sports, laughter, and art.\textsuperscript{62}

4. Develop a \textit{willingness to take risks}. Christian conversations will take you into uncharted territory. Expect to feel the “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” that accompanies the vulnerability of trying out new ways of speaking and listening.\textsuperscript{63}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{60} Lederach, \textit{Moral Imagination}, 34-39. These practices are rooted in Christian faith but are applicable for leaders who seek to build peace in any kind of community.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Lederach, \textit{Moral Imagination}, 38.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Lederach, \textit{Little Book of Conflict Transformation}, 59. Edwin Friedman also discusses the vital role of playfulness in healthy communities: "The relationship between anxiety and seriousness is so predictable that the absence of playfulness in any institution is almost always a clue to the degree of its emotional regression." Edwin Friedman, \textit{A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix} (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), 64.
\end{itemize}
The Restorative Circles process developed by Dominic Barter in Rio de Janeiro in the 1990s provides a specific practice of conversation that embodies Lederach’s capacities. While Barter is not specifically Christian, his work fleshes out the vision for Christian conversation pursuing unity, purity, and peace. Restorative Circles is an intentional form of dialogue that supports people experiencing conflict. A Restorative Circle involves those directly involved in the conflict, those who were impacted by the conflict, and the community around them. The goals of Restorative Circles are to encourage all participants to share power, to grow in mutual understanding, to take appropriate responsibility for actions and consequences, and to move forward effectively.

The Restorative Circle happens in three phases: Pre-circle (in which a facilitator invites people connected to the conflict to describe the conflict, its meaning for them, and name people who will be invited to participate), circle (in which each person is given the opportunity to say what they want others to know about how they are now in relation to the conflict, what was going on for them at the time the conflict happened, and what they would like to offer or request as next steps), and Post-circle (in which participants are

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64. Dominic Barter has not published written materials describing Restorative Circles. For a video of him describing the origins and results of Restorative Circles in Brazil, see “Dominic Barter on Restorative Circles,” posted May 12, 2009, accessed April 12, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-AUlwX61-34.

65. An adapted form of the Restorative Circles process was developed for the engagement of this project - this is described in detail in chapters two and five.


invited to check in about how they are doing in relationship to the conflict and the agreed upon actions). 68

Figure 1. Restorative Circle Summary

**Conclusion**

Christian conversation creates space for difference while seeking unity, draws participants into the holy relational participation of the Trinity (holiness/purity), and makes space for conflict on the way to the justice of full *shalom* (peace). In short, it’s all about relationships.

68. “Restorative Circle Summary,” Holland Restorative Circles.
Can unity, purity, and peace be sought in the midst of conversations regarding same-sex marriage and the Christian faith? The next chapter will attempt to do just that. I will present, explore, and evaluate various evangelical Christian theologies of human sexuality and put them in conversation with each other - a Christian conversation marked by unity, purity, and peace. I will conclude the chapter by assessing each theology and evaluating them in light of parts of Reformed tradition.  

Chapter 4

Theologies of Human Sexuality in Christian Conversation

My evangelical Christian church, school, and parents taught me a narrow perspective on how Christian faith shapes sexuality, a perspective that did not prepare me for conversations beyond the Christian bubble. This chapter will explore a different kind of conversation about human sexuality in evangelical Christianity through 1) stories from my childhood, 2) evangelical perspectives on human sexuality, and 3) the theologies underlying these perspectives. I will conclude by assessing and evaluating the theologies in light of a Reformed understanding of Christian faith and scripture.

Growing Up in the Name of Jesus: Stories from Childhood

I grew up in a conservative Christian environment that was influenced by Dr. James Dobson.¹ I remember my parents, my friends’ parents, and my first boss listening to Dobson’s daily radio broadcast, Focus on the Family, in which Dr. Dobson would exhort people toward traditional Christian morality in sexuality and family life. In my Christian high school, the religion teacher required us to read Dobson’s book, Life on the Edge: a Young Adult’s Guide to a Meaningful Future.² I especially remember the sexuality section of the book where Dobson cites the work of Dr. Desmond Morris, a

¹ Dr. James Dobson is a psychologist and author, and founder of Focus on the Family, an evangelical parachurch organization that supports traditional family values (www.focusonthefamily.com). Dobson is no longer affiliated with Focus on the Family - in 2010 he founded Family Talk, where his radio programs continue (http://drjamesdobson.org/).

sociobiologist prominent in the 1960s.3 Morris argues that the strongest marital relationships are between men and women whose physical bonding follows a certain sequence, which he calls the “Twelve Stages of Intimacy.”4 As we talked about this section of the book, the teacher gave us a sheet of paper with the twelve stages on it. Steps 9-12 (hand to body, mouth to body, touching below the waist, and intercourse) were set apart with the label “marriage.” He asked us to spend time in prayer and draw a line on the paper as a sign of our commitment to sexual purity before marriage. He asked us to tuck the paper into our Bibles as a reminder of our vows. I had never even kissed a boy at this point in my life, and I remember thinking, “How can I possibly make this vow for sexual purity with so little information?” This was the only kind of conversation I remember about human sexuality from authority figures - ALL sexual activity is sinful until you’re married.

This narrow vision of human sexuality may have convinced some of my classmates to delay sexual intercourse (hallelujah!), but at sixteen years old, I was nearly a decade away from any kind of sexual encounter. Taking a vow to maintain sexual purity did very little to prepare me for the situations I did encounter in my teens and early


twenties involving sex: supporting other young women and working in a harm reduction program.

The Girls and the Scary Diseases

A few weeks after the sexual purity vow, a very different conversation about sexuality emerged after a school-wide presentation about the dangers of sex before marriage. The presentation included gross pictures of body parts afflicted with sores and overly graphic descriptions of the non-coital activities that could lead to those infections. I was on my way to my locker after the presentation, still disturbed by the images, when another student came out of the backstage door, saw me, and said, “Oh good, Mara. We were looking for you. You’ll know what to do.” Confused, I followed her into a small dressing room where three of my female classmates sat with tears and mascara streaming down their faces.

Growing up in the church parsonage, this was not the first time I’d found myself with people in crisis. Because my dad was a very caring pastor who always offered a shoulder and a prayer, I thought I knew just what to do. I sat down, put my hand on the nearest knee, and asked what was going on. In between sobs the girls managed to reveal that the scary sex presentation left them convinced that they had latent chlamydia, gonorrhea, and herpes from various non-coital activities with their boyfriends. They described each activity to me - down to the last detail.

The teaching I’d received about human sexuality would have led me to say something like, “This is why God says sexual activity before marriage is wrong. How can I help you to stop these sinful behaviors and save you from these scary diseases?” But
these girls were scared to death, and so was I. The sinfulness of their behaviors was not the most pressing issue at hand. In a flash of brilliance (or an active savior-complex), I found my own way to approach the situation. I snuck them out the side door of the school and drove them to the county health department in my mom’s Mazda. I presented them to the nurses to get tested for the scary diseases I was pretty sure they didn’t have. After their needle sticks and cheek swabs, I returned them to school just in time for our last class of the day. Our escapade was completely undetected by the school. Each of the girls received a clean bill of health. I wonder if any of them changed their behavior. I never knew; this event was never spoken of again.5

Harm Reduction: Condoms on the Street

After college I worked at a substance abuse counseling center providing crisis intervention in a harm reduction program.6 The program sought to reduce the potential for harm caused by risky behaviors, including drug use and sexual activity. When I wasn’t meeting with a client inside the counseling center, it was my job to stand on the sidewalk behind the bins of free male condoms, female condoms, dental dams, and various types of lubricant. My colleagues were playful and friendly, respectfully telling

5. I never spoke about this event to anyone until beginning preparations for this DMin project. I suspect that this is related to vulnerability and shame. All three of Brené Brown’s descriptors of vulnerability were certainly present in this situation: uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure (Daring Greatly, 34). Brown defines shame as, “the fear that something we’ve done or failed to do . . . makes us unworthy of connection” (Daring Greatly, 69). I suspect that I kept silent about this event because I was afraid that if teachers, parents, or pastors found out how I handled the situation they would disapprove. In high school, disapproval was like death.

6. Harm reduction programs emerged in the 1990s out of a social justice movement that promoted the rights and dignity of all people, especially people who use drugs and engage in sexual activity that increases their risk for harm. Regarding drug use, harm reduction incorporates a spectrum of strategies from safer use, to managed use, to abstinence, depending on the needs and readiness of the individual. For more information, see “Principles of Harm Reduction,” Harm Reduction Coalition, accessed March 16, 2016, http://harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/.
people how to use the various barriers so that their sexual activity would be safer. I pretended that I was comfortable with these conversations, wondering if my clients and colleagues could see that I was blushing. I remember one training session participants shouted out slang terms for penis and vagina while a facilitator wrote them on butcher paper taped to the wall. I thought of one: goodies. I didn’t shout it out.

What my faith tradition taught me about human sexuality (that sex before marriage is bad) left me unprepared for these harm reduction conversations and also for relating to my co-workers. These people were social workers, house-wives, nurses, and retired folks. Largely volunteers, they were passionate about human beings caring for each other. Most of them were gay or lesbian. When they learned I was leaving the program to attend seminary, a few of them shared with me how they had been hurt by the church because of their sexual orientation. I experienced a strong disconnect between what my faith tradition had taught me about homosexual people and what these people I had grown to love were teaching me.

The primary thing my church, family, and school taught me about sexuality was how to judge a narrow set of sexual behaviors as sinful or not. They could have helped me ponder the divine intention for sexual expression; they could have taught me about delight and playfulness and pleasure and the holiness of seeking the well-being of another human being; they could have taught me about the joyful duty of being faithful to a covenant between God and yourself and your spouse. They could have taught me the incredible capacity human beings have to inflict pain upon one another when we use sex to dominate, hurt, or manipulate. They could have taught me how to seek to understand
my own sexuality rather than judge the sexual ethics of people who are different than me. The church, including the one I pastor, must do better.

**Responses to Same-Sex Relationships: Not Just Two Views**

While conversations about human sexuality within the evangelical Christian world often become polarized into two stances around same-sex relationships (those who approve and those who do not), there are actually many Christian responses to same-sex relationships. Dr. James Brownson identifies those various responses as a broad continuum and describes five points along the continuum. Brownson’s continuum of responses to same-sex marriage is included in table one.

Beginning on the right side, the first point on the continuum is purity of the church. People who have this response to same-sex relationships say that homosexual activity is an active choice to rebel against God’s design for people to live in heterosexual marriage, and the church’s role is to call homosexual people into repentance and change. This is the only perspective that posits that homosexual orientation is an active choice.⁷

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⁷. The development of sexual orientation will be discussed later in this chapter.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1: Purity of the Church</th>
<th>2: Consistent witness</th>
<th>3: Pastoral concession</th>
<th>4: Redemptive accommodation</th>
<th>5: Welcoming and affirming</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homosexual activity is quite simply a choice against God’s will for human life. The church must call gays and lesbians to repent, resist temptation, and change their behavior. The only issue at stake here is the truth of God’s Word and the integrity of our obedience.</td>
<td>A homosexual orientation is not usually chosen. Despite this tragic dimension to the issue, the only paths of faithful Christian expression for human sexuality are either heterosexual marriage or celibacy. The church must welcome gays, but must also call them to abstain from homosexual activity.</td>
<td>God’s intention for faithful human sexuality is either heterosexual marriage or celibacy. Yet gays and lesbians should be welcome in the church, and if they are unable to remain celibate, committed lifelong partnerships can be tolerated as a concession to brokenness, but should not be understood to be under God’s full blessing.</td>
<td>God’s intention for human sexuality is that it should be expressed in the lifelong covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. But God’s redemptive accommodation for gays and lesbians is that they express their sexuality either in celibacy or within a single committed, lifelong relationship. Such a relationship is under God’s redemptive blessing.</td>
<td>Committed lifelong marriage is God’s intention for partnership and sexual expression of gay and lesbian persons (whom God both created and intended to be gay or lesbian). Such marriages should be celebrated and consecrated by the church.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is “gay marriage” legitimate?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Maybe</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are “civil unions” good public policy?</td>
<td>Not preferred</td>
<td>Some yes, some no</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordain gays and lesbians in committed relationships?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committed gays and lesbians come to the Lord’s table?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key ethical analogy</th>
<th>Marriage as committed love</th>
<th>Remarriage after divorce</th>
<th>Cohabitation without marriage</th>
<th>Incest or adultery</th>
<th>Addiction to pornography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key theological category</td>
<td>Goodness of creation</td>
<td>Sanctification as partial and progressive</td>
<td>Sin as brokenness</td>
<td>Sin as departure from divine intention</td>
<td>Sin as rebellion against God</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Consistent Witness recognizes that homosexual orientation is not usually a choice, and requires that homosexual people who want to be faithful Christians live a celibate life or enter heterosexual marriage. Pastoral Concession posits that God’s intention for human sexuality is heterosexual marriage or celibacy, and yet, if neither of those are possible for a LGBTQ person, “Committed lifelong partnerships can be tolerated as a concession to brokenness, but should not be understood to be under God’s full blessing.”

Redemptive accommodation states that God’s intention for human sexuality is for heterosexual marriage or celibacy, and that God makes redemptive accommodation for LGBTQ people to live in lifelong covenanted monogamous homosexual relationships, which might or might not be called marriage. On the left side of the spectrum is Welcoming and Affirming. In this view, God creates people with a diversity of sexual orientations and gender expressions. Lifelong covenanted monogamous relationships (marriage) are God’s intention for human sexuality, and both heterosexual and homosexual couples can enter into marriage under God’s full blessing.

These evangelical Christian responses to same-sex relationships rise out of particular theologies of human sexuality. I will discuss three theological ideas that undergird these Christian responses to committed same-sex relationships: 1) gender complementarity, 2) graceful accommodation, and 3) kinship bond. While these theological ideas differ in important ways, they share a crucial foundation: they are evangelical Christian theologies. As such, all three theological ideas view scripture as

8. Brownson, “Theological and Pastoral Responses…”

9. See “Defining Terms” for the definition of evangelical Christian assumed in this project.
authoritative for faith and life, and the convictions of all three theologies emerge from their interpretation of scripture,\textsuperscript{10} which I will discuss further below.

Gender Complementarity, which is likely the theology undergirding purity of the church and consistent witness, is thoroughly described by Dr. Robert Gagnon. Gagnon holds the view that God’s intention for human sexuality and gender expression is for men and women to complement or complete each other biologically (by way of the fittedness of male and female genitalia), emotionally (men are strong protectors and women are meek nurturers), and spiritually (men provide leadership while women play a supportive role). Within this theology, marriage can only be between a man and a woman.\textsuperscript{11}

A second theological idea regarding human sexuality, which I am calling graceful accommodation, undergirds the “pastoral concession” and “redemptive accommodation” parts of Brownson’s typology and is most significantly summarized by Lewis Smedes.\textsuperscript{12} Graceful accommodation views sexuality as “the radical self-giving, the unique self-exposure, and the unreserved sharing of selves.” It is the climax of the communion in which God created humans to live.\textsuperscript{13} Gendered complementarity plays a role in graceful accommodation: individual men and women need to be in communion with each other in order experience the fullness of being human.\textsuperscript{14} God intended sexuality to be expressed

\textsuperscript{10} Gagnon, 23; Brownson, \textit{Bible, Gender, Sexuality} 3-13; Smedes, \textit{Sex for Christians}, 9-12.

\textsuperscript{11} For a succinct of gender complementarity in scripture, see Gagnon, 488.


\textsuperscript{13} Smedes, \textit{Sex for Christians}, 19.

\textsuperscript{14} Smedes, \textit{Sex for Christians}, 16.
between a man and woman in marriage, and same-sex attraction is an aberration from God’s intention: “Homosexuality is a burden that some of God’s children are called to bear, an anomaly, nature gone awry.” However, God’s mercy is wide, and God gives grace for LGBTQ people to live in “marriage-like covenants,” which may be the best they can do given the circumstances.

A third theological idea regarding human sexuality, the one that undergirds the “welcoming and affirming” category on the typology, is called kinship bond and is described by Dr. James Brownson. This viewpoint posits that God’s intention for human sexuality is for human beings to develop and reinforce “a delight in the other; a deep desire for gratification and union; the attendant call to honor and serve the other in committed bonds of loving mutuality; and a fruitful vision of committed love that overflows in many ways - in procreation, adoption, service to the community, and hospitality to others” within the context of covenantal faithfulness. Kinship bonds, like gender complementarity and graceful accommodation, involve complementarity. But in this case complementarity finds its origin in the unique qualities that each partner brings to the relationship that complement the other rather than characteristics that are necessarily tied to gender roles or genitalia. The kinship bond theology of human sexuality argues that God intends people to exist in a diversity of sexual attractions and


gender expressions,\textsuperscript{19} and the covenant kinship bond can exist in a marriage between partners of opposite sexes or partners of the same sex.

**Theological Ideas in Christian Conversation: Unity, Purity, and Peace**

Now that I have described the spectrum of evangelical Christian responses to committed same-sex relationships and have briefly described the theologies that undergird them, I will put the theologies into a Christian conversation with each other using their perspectives on Romans 1:18-32 and Genesis 2:24 - a conversation that is marked by unity, purity/holiness, and peace.

**Romans 1:18-32: Unity and Purity/Holiness**

Christian unity and purity/holiness modeled after the Trinity, as described in chapter three, require embracing both particularity and relatedness within the Christian community.\textsuperscript{20} For the purposes of this section, I will use the terms divergence and convergence rather than particularity and relatedness. In order to pursue unity and purity/holiness in this Christian conversation involving theologies of human sexuality, I will honor both the convergence and divergence within the various interpretations of Romans 1:18-32.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though

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\textsuperscript{19} Brownson does not state directly that God intends for people to be gay in *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, but does say it outright in the description of “Welcoming and affirming” on the typology, which is the category in which *Bible Gender, Sexuality* falls. “Committed lifelong marriage is God’s intention for partnership and sexual expression of gay and lesbian persons (whom God both created and intended to be gay or lesbian).” Brownson, “Theological and Pastoral Responses…”

\textsuperscript{20} Cunningham, 127-230.
they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

The three theologies from Smedes, Brownson, and Gagnon converge around four foundational convictions relating to Romans 1. First of all, each one agrees that this text is the most central and comprehensive in all that scripture says about homosexuality. Secondly, each one agrees that the sexual behaviors Paul describes in Romans 1:26-27 are sinful and harmful and go against the moral claims that the gospel puts on the lives and behavior of Christians. Third, each agrees that following in the way of Christ means denying self, submitting to God’s ways, and seeking the well-being of the other. Gagnon puts it this way: “A transformed existence that entails death to self and life for God is

21. Gagnon, The Bible and Homosexual Practice, 229; Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality, 14; Smedes, Like the Wideness of the Sea, 10. Their agreement is the reason I chose to focus on Romans 1:18-32 in this chapter.

22. Brownson, Bible Gender, Sexuality, 261-262; Gagnon, 273; Smedes, “Like the Wideness of the Sea,” 10. Brownson acknowledges that he and those on the other side of the debate, whom he calls “traditionalists,” agree on both this and the related point that “both sides accept the authority of the text in what it is directly teaching.”
both a free gift and a grace-empowered requirement for those adopted into God’s family.

. . A transfer of sin to Christ requires a transfer of self to Christ.” 23 Similarly, Brownson says, “At the root of all sin is the will to power that resists the posture of humble gratitude and trust that marks human life as God intended it.” 24 Smedes describes it this way: “Fidelity in partnership is commitment to an ongoing, dynamic, changing, sensitive facing off of two people bent on the total well-being of each other.” 25 Lastly, they see a significant connection between sexual sins and idolatry. 26

These areas of convergence are important because they illustrate unity in Christ. All three scholars believe that following Christ puts certain parameters around sexual behavior. All three scholars understand that Paul is calling Christians to deny unholy passions and behaviors in order to worship God and seek the well-being of others. It is easy to get so caught up in disagreements and forget that Christians already live in unity in Christ. This is the deeper truth that keeps Christians connected in diversity; we are brothers and sisters in Christ. Christ draws us into the unity of the Trinity, where “difference can exist without contradiction or confusion.” 27

Unity does not only honor convergence and agreement - unity also honors diversity, holding differences together with curiosity and embracing complexity rather


24. Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality, 152.

25. Smedes, Sex for Christians, 155-156.

26. Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality, 153; Gagnon, 264-268; Smedes, Sex for Christians, 36-37.

27. Cunningham, 143.
than settling things into fixed categories of right and wrong. Unity requires Christians to seek to lovingly understand the different values and perspectives of others - what Rohr calls a “Yes of basic acceptance” that leaves the field open for God’s grace to move.

While Smedes, Brownson, and Gagnon agree on several aspects of Romans 1, their interpretations diverge in at least four ways. I will explore these divergences through Rohr’s “Yes of basic acceptance.” While Smedes, Brownson, and Gagnon agree that idolatry and sexual sin are connected, they disagree about the nature of that connection. Brownson and Gagnon both comment on the connection between idolatry and sexual sin in Romans 1. For Brownson, Paul connects the sinfulness of idolatry with the sinfulness of certain kinds of same-sex acts in Romans 1 because they are rooted in egocentrism. Idol worshippers approach whatever gods will help them advance their own agendas, status, and honor, rather than seeking to know and follow God’s agenda. People who engage in the kind of sex Paul describes are egocentric: seeking more and more pleasure for themselves rather than seeking the desires of God and the well-being of others. Brownson states: “The central problem with lust in Romans 1 is that it is an expression of idolatry in a specific sense: lust involves serving one’s own self-seeking desires rather

28. This is what Lederach calls paradoxical curiosity, which was referenced in chapter 3. Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 35-37.

29. Rohr, *Yes, And...*, 363.

30. Rohr, *Yes, And...*, 363.

31. It is a little difficult to find a portion of Romans 1 that clearly delineates this point. 1:21 comes close: “For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking.” However, if you look at Romans 2, which Brownson and Gagnon agree is a continuation of what Paul begins saying in Romans 1, Brownson’s point becomes more clear: “... to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury” (Romans 2:7-8).
than worshiping the one true God.” In the end, however, this self-seeking leads not to heights of honor and status, but enslavement to lustful passions.

Gagnon identifies a different link between sexual sin and idolatry in Romans 1:26-27. He argues that Paul relates idolatry to sexual sin because they both go against what is self-evident in nature. He calls them both an “absurd denial of natural revelation.” According to Gagnon, nature obviously displays God’s greatness over everything else, so to worship anything else is ridiculous and sinful. He cites Paul in Romans 1:20-21: “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse.” In the same way, Gagnon says, nature so obviously displays the biological fittedness of the penis and vagina, as well as the workings of procreation and mutual pleasure in sexual intercourse, that to have sex any other way is ridiculous and sinful. This fittedness, which he calls “complementarity,” is the logic behind his reading of all that the Bible says about human sexuality.

Smedes makes a connection between idolatry and sexual sin independently of Romans 1. He says that sex itself can become an idol. It happens in the same way that anything can become an idol: “Slice one piece of created reality off the whole and expect miracles from it . . . We make an idol of sex by first isolating one dimension of sexuality - the genital. Then we either expect everything from it that we need to be happy or we

32. Brownson, 153.
33. Gagnon, 268.
34. Gagnon, 254. Brownson offers a very helpful critique of this understanding of “nature”, which I will discuss below.
35. Gagnon, 37.
fear that it will hurt us. Either way, sex has become an idol.”

The second area of disagreement is the meaning of “natural intercourse” that Paul discusses in Romans 1:26-27. For Gagnon and Smedes, “natural” relates to biological aspects of sexual activity. Smedes refers to the physical creation in his exploration of “natural” sex, and argues that sex according to nature is “at least capable of conceiving children.” But he goes on to say that the categories of natural and unnatural shouldn’t be used to classify homosexual sex as sinful or not because, “Not many modern, evangelical Protestants think that only baby-making sex is natural.” For Gagnon, “nature” means biology, specifically the structural fittedness and reproductive function of genitalia. Gagnon aligns the created world that reveals God (“the things he [God] has made”) in verse 20 with what Paul refers to as “natural intercourse” in verses 26 and 27, presupposing that the created world and the “nature” referred to in “natural sex” are the same thing.

Brownson’s discussion of “natural” is different. He recognizes that throughout Paul’s writing and the larger ancient world, the concept of what is “natural” refers to

36. Smedes, Sex for Christians, 36-37.
37. Smedes, Like the Wideness of the Sea, 11.
38. Smedes, Like the Wideness of the Sea, 11. In this discussion, the main things at stake in the sinfulness of homosexual relationships is exclusion from being a church member in good standing.
39. Smedes, Like the Wideness of the Sea, 11. To me, this ends up being an unsatisfactory argument. Just because most people don’t hold the view anymore, we don’t need to consider it? As someone who holds scripture in high esteem, the fact that it’s in the Bible means we need to wrestle with it to determine its meaning. However, Smedes’ main point in this article is not to provide a thorough interpretation of Romans 1, but to draw a connection between the Christian Reformed Church in North America allowing divorced and remarried people to be members in good standing and allowing homosexual people living in committed partnerships to be members in good standing. Also, as a theologian and a Christian ethicist, Smedes’ priorities are different than those of a Bible scholar.
40. Gagnon, 256-257.
more than just biology. What is considered “natural” to Paul, according to Brownson, involves a convergence of three different spheres: a person’s individual inclinations, the conventions of the culture, and biology.\(^{41}\) Paul condemns same-sex sexual activity in Romans 1 not only because it is “unnatural” according to biology (it doesn’t follow the fittedness of sex organs or allow the possibility of procreation), but also due to social conventions (for a man to experience penetration during sex was shameful because that’s a role reserved for women), and personal inclinations (in the ancient world, they had no concept of an enduring same-sex attraction - heterosexual attraction was the only natural possibility).\(^{42}\)

Translating Brownson’s trivalent understanding of “nature” forward into the 21st century raises some new questions: Wouldn’t it be “unnatural” and therefore sinful for someone whose personal inclination is toward same-sex attraction to engage in sex with someone from the opposite sex? And in a world where social conventions no longer expect men to be active and women passive in sexual intercourse, should we still consider a passive sexual role for a man (whether in a heterosexual or homosexual partnership) to be unnatural and therefore shameful? And do we as 21st century people, with an understanding of human sexuality that goes beyond penis, vagina, and procreation, to a longing for companionship, an expression of connectedness, and a reinforcement of kinship, really want to say that all sex acts that don’t fit the penis into the vagina so that a pregnancy can potentially occur are “unnatural” and therefore sinful?

When we bring Brownson’s expanded understanding of what Paul means when he calls something “unnatural” into contemporary society, condemning homosexual sex at

\(^{41}\) Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 255.

\(^{42}\) Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 255.
large in the way Gagnon does might no longer makes sense. Brownson invites humility in
discerning what elements of the Bible are particular to the culture of the authors and
what elements are universal to all times and places.

A third area where their paths diverge is the understanding of the scope of the
sexual sins Paul describes in Romans 1:26-27. For Gagnon, the scope of the sinfulness of
same sex acts is broad, including all sex in all forms of same-sex relationships. Since
Gagnon believes that the sexual sins Paul lists are sinful because they are contrary to the
gender complementarity that God so obviously built into the world, it follows that he
would believe that all sex acts that do not involve the fittedness of penis and vagina
would be sinful, including steps nine through eleven of Dobson’s twelve steps of
intimacy: hand to body, mouth to body, and touching below the waist.

Brownson and Smedes narrow the scope of which same-sex activities are sinful.
Brownson’s interpretation allows that some same sex sexual acts are sinful and some are
not because some are self-seeking and some are not, just like heterosexual sexual
behaviors. Brownson argues Paul most likely did not have committed and loving
homosexual relationships in his mind when he wrote against same-sex eroticism in
Romans 1 because in the Judeo-Christian world of Paul’s day these types of relationships

43. Gagnon, 347-349. Gagnon barely mentions heterosexual sex acts that do not involve the fitting
together of the penis and vagina, revealing a hierarchy in types of complementarity. He cites in his section
on Levitical law (page 135) that heterosexual anal sex is not prohibited and says this is because the
principal problem with fitting the penis into the anus is not the mixing of semen and excrement (though this
is a secondary problem because of the wasting of procreative seed), but the “abhorrent violation of gender
boundaries for sexual intercourse.” Gender roles thus becomes a more important category of fittedness or
complementarity than biological fittedness.

44. Morris, Intimate Behaviour, chapters 2 and 3.

45. Brownson, 261.
either didn’t exist or were kept secret. Brownson says that in non-biblical literature from the time of Paul, same-sex sex is always understood as an over-the-top form of heterosexual lust: “not content with women alone, but is driven to ever more exotic and unnatural forms of stimulation in the pursuit of pleasure” at the expense of others. According to Brownson, people in Paul’s day simply did not conceive of committed, let alone covenanted, same-sex relationships that “reflect disciplined desire . . . a self-giving and loving heart . . . a desire to honor the partner . . . [and] an intention to live out a form of life that is in harmony with one’s self, with others, and with the natural world.”

In fact, Brownson argues, Paul might have been referring to a specific instance of sexual sin in Romans 1, which would dramatically narrow the scope of homosexual relationships to which Paul is referring. Brownson cites Neil Elliot’s work connecting Paul’s language in Romans 1 with the notorious behavior of Gaius Caligula, emperor of Rome shortly before Paul wrote Romans. Gaius Caligula, similar to other emperors, would have been a frequent topic in the news in Rome as an idolater (setting up images of himself in temples and declaring himself divine) and as someone who exhibited out of control lust (raping his sisters while his wife watched, raping wives of dinner guests and

46. Gagnon argues that Paul DID have committed and loving same-sex relationships (in addition to predatory homosexual sex) in mind when he wrote Romans 1. He cites many extra biblical sources describing such relationships. Gagnon, 350-360. Brownson points out that the sources Gagnon cites come from the fourth century BCE and the third century CE, nowhere close to the time that Paul lived. Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality, 156.

47. Brownson, 156

48. Brownson, 262. He has some other beautiful descriptions of long-term committed love. “This bond is formed when the desire for self-gratification (eros) comes to recognize that one’s own gratification is only possible in the context of love self-giving to the other (agape). Hence, longing turns to loving, as intimacy unfolds into long-term kinship bonds of service, commitment, and mutual care” (263). It’s so much more full and inspiring than Gagnon’s description of marriage as fittedness in its various forms.

commenting on their performance, and same-sex encounters). Of special note is Gaius Caligula’s sexual humiliation of a military officer who later murdered Caligula by stabbing him in the genitals. In that way, he literally “Received in his own person the due penalty for his error” as Paul says in Romans 1:27b. Brownson argues, “Gaius Caligula graphically illustrates the reality of which Paul speaks in Romans 1: the movement from idolatry to insatiable lust to every form of depravity, and the violent murderous reprisal that such behavior engenders.”

Gaius Caligula is “the archetypal manifestation of human idolatry, sinfulness, and rebellion against God,” and Paul may be referring to him and his extreme lustful, self-seeking and other-destroying behavior, rather than to the sinfulness “typical” of Roman Christians. In this way, Brownson points out, Romans 1 could become “completely non-controversial.”

Smedes also allows that same-sex sexual relationships within covenanted partnerships need not be considered sinful based on Romans 1. Smedes argues that Paul is not talking about “Christian homosexual people in covenanted partnerships.” Unlike the people Paul describes in Romans 1:23-32, Christian homosexual people in covenanted partnerships in the 21st century have not abandoned God, have not turned from their natural tendencies, (since their tendencies were always homosexual), and are not merely lusting after each other but longing for the honest and deep companionship that comes from joining lives and bodies.

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50. Brownson, 156-158.
51. Brownson, 166.
52. Smedes, Like the Wideness of the Sea, 10-11.
53. Smedes, Like the Wideness of the Sea, 10-11.
Genesis 2:24: Peace

The last divergence between Gagnon, Brownson, and Smedes is the most foundational because it has to do with each scholars’ understandings of what God intended for human sexuality as part of human flourishing. The scholars use different language to describe God’s purpose and goal for the creation of human sexuality: Brownson uses the term “moral logic” to capture the picture of God’s intention for human sexuality, Gagnon uses the phrase “God’s will for sexual unions”, and Smedes uses “normative patterns.”

Central to the question of what God intended for human sexuality as part of human flourishing is the meaning of “one flesh” in Genesis 2:24. After God decides that is not good for Adam to be alone and does not find a suitable partner for him among the animals, God creates the woman and presents her to the man. This introductory story of sexual partnership ends this way: “Therefore, a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.”

Gagnon and Smedes both describe the meaning of “one flesh” by talking about the complementarity of male and female bodies joined together in sexual intercourse. Gagnon calls the “one flesh” union described in Genesis 2:24 a “reunion” that restores Adam “to his original wholeness . . . [as] a single, composite human being.” He bases this idea of a “composite human being” on a third-century rabbi who conceived of Adam

54. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 8-10; Gagnon, 37; Smedes, *Sex for Christians*, 29.

55. Genesis 2:24, NRSV.

as androgynous before the creation of Eve: “When God created Adam, he created him facing both ways,” with two fronts, one front side male, and the other front side female.\textsuperscript{57} Genesis 2:21-22 says that God created Eve from Adam’s rib, (tsela in the Hebrew). Gagnon points out that tsela can also be translated side. So, in order to create Eve from Adam’s side, God “sawed him in two and made two backs, one for each figure.”\textsuperscript{58} Sexual intercourse between a man and a woman in marriage, then, is a “reunion that not only provides companionship but also restores adam to his original wholeness. The woman is not just ‘like himself’ but ‘from himself’ and thereby a complementary fit to himself. She is a complementary sexual ‘other.’”\textsuperscript{59} Gagnon argues that this “perfect fit” of penis and vagina is authoritative for determining God’s intent for human sexuality - heterosexual marriage.\textsuperscript{60}

Smedes also discusses the differences between male and female bodies, but their differences come together for the larger purpose of reflecting the image of God.\textsuperscript{61} Smedes describes how the man comes to know himself more completely after the creation of the woman:

Now the male knew what it was to be male, for he now saw himself in relation to one who was the same as he, but with the crucial difference. The male and female know themselves only in relation to each other because they are made for each other. This is the deep origin of the powerful drive of the sexes to come together.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{57} Gagnon, 60n44.

\textsuperscript{58} Gagnon, 60n44.

\textsuperscript{59} Gagnon, 61. Brownson points out many problems with these arguments in Bible, Gender, Sexuality, 25-29.

\textsuperscript{60} Gagnon, 62.

\textsuperscript{61} Smedes, Sex for Christians, 19.

\textsuperscript{62} Smedes, Sex for Christians, 16, emphasis mine.
Male and female bodies are “made for each other,” but with a higher purpose that Gagnon does not consider: reflecting the image of God. The sexual drive “begins in our glands and climaxes in communion. . . [and] that personal communion is what the image of God is all about.”63 Because of the crucial difference of sex organs, this climax of communion and fullness of the image of God can only apply to opposite-sex partners. However, the ultimate normative goal of human sexuality for Smedes is the reflection of the self-giving image God.64

Brownson agrees with Gagnon and Smedes that complementarity comprises an essential element of the “one flesh” bond in Genesis 2:24, and he agrees with Smedes that self-giving modeled after the Triune God is the purpose of sexual union.65 But Brownson reframes complementarity by broadening the possibilities beyond the fittedness of different body parts to the broader concept of otherness:

Perhaps what heterosexuals are experiencing in marriage is not essentially a complementarity of gender understood biologically, but simply a form of otherness . . . One need not relinquish complementarity; one must only loosen its essential link to a hard-wired understanding of gender in order to take into account a wide range of experience of longing, love, and intimacy amidst difference - shaped in long-term bonds on love and faithfulness.66

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63. Smedes, *Sex for Christians*, 20. Smedes does not elaborate on the precise meaning of partners living in personal communion as it relates to the image of God. He clarifies two things: First, single people can experience the fullness of the image of God by giving themselves to other people in non-sexual ways: “Through a life of self-giving - which is at the heart of sexual union - they become whole persons.” *Sex for Christians*, 21. Second, Smedes clarifies that childbearing is not the goal of sex in marriage. Rather, childbearing is a blessing that can result from sexual union. Smedes says, “To make reproduction the essence and ultimate goal of sexuality is a put-down of God’s creation.” *Sex for Christians*, 23.

64. Smedes, *Sex for Christians*, 21.

65. The self-giving image of God is a Trinitarian viewpoint, but neither Smedes nor Brownson names it as such. Cunningham touches on a Trinitarian ethic of sexuality: “Trinitarian doctrine helps us to think about ‘bodily matters’ by reshaping our priorities . . . Bodily relationships should be marked by mutual participation.” Cunningham, 301. He goes on to say that the Church needs a trinitarian theology of human embodiment beyond what he provides. Cunningham, 302.

Brownson’s idea of otherness encapsulates the essence of complementarity without limiting it to biology or gender. The purpose of human sexuality, then, is a joining together of two complementary “others” that goes beyond sex organs and gender roles:

A delight in the other; a deep desire for gratification and union; the attendant call to honor and serve the other in committed bonds of loving mutuality; and a fruitful vision of committed love that overflows in many ways - in procreation, adoption, service to the community, and hospitality to others.67

Human sexuality has a divine purpose. The three scholars agree wholeheartedly that God desires people to experience the profound communion of sexual intimacy in the context of covenanted relationships. And, their visions for how people ought to experience that communion diverge, sometimes sharply, especially concerning sexual expressions that fall outside the heterosexual norm. LGBTQ Christians wonder, often with great pain, what they must do to live faithfully as sexual persons. Evangelical Christian scholars bear a responsibility to ensure that the constraints placed upon sexual expression make way for the realization of God’s vision of human flourishing rather than placing undue burden on God’s people by holding up sexual standards that rise out of norms other than those of the Kingdom of God. The wellbeing of these brothers and sisters in Christ lies at the center of this inquiry, and the quest for shalom requires a deeper analysis and evaluation of these arguments concerning God’s intention for human sexuality.

67. Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality, 278.
Assessing and Evaluating the Theologies within the Reformed Tradition

Assessing and evaluating an interpretation of scripture and the theology that arises from it is difficult. The goal is to define personal theology while staying connected to brothers and sisters in Christ. But how does one stay connected in the midst of disagreements? How does one evaluate arguments fairly without needlessly inserting personal bias? These are difficult and vital questions for Christians.

FACT: A Borrowed Assessment Tool

In order to assess and evaluate the three scholars’ understandings of God’s intentions for human sexuality revealed in the Bible, I will borrow a discipline from the field of healthcare chaplaincy called the spiritual assessment. Healthcare chaplains regularly assess the spiritual wellness of patients based on the patient’s own spiritual values and religious commitments. Spiritual assessment 1) Names desired outcomes for the patient’s wellness based on his or her values and commitments, 2) Creates a care plan, and then 3) Measures the effectiveness of the interventions. As a healthcare chaplain myself, the discipline of spiritual assessment allows me to understand, evaluate and work for the wellbeing of patients with whom I profoundly disagreed - exactly the skills called for in this project.

There are many tools for spiritual assessment. I will use FACT (an acronym for


69. For a description of several types of spiritual histories and assessments compared to FACT, see Mark LaRocca-Pitts, “FACT: A Chaplain’s Tool for Assessing Spiritual Needs in an Acute Care Setting,”
the assessment areas: faith, application, concerns, and treatment), which is easy to remember and flexible for use in a wide variety of situations. The questions that explore each assessment area can be modified based on the needs of each situation. For application of the assessment tool in this setting, I have chosen the following questions for each assessment area:

- **F(ath):** How does each author understand Christian faithfulness? How does each one interpret the Bible? What are the foundational confessions of their faith traditions?
- **A(pply):** How do those beliefs apply to each author’s views regarding homosexual relationships and the Christian faith?
- **C(oncerns):** How does each author understand the nature of the growing openness to homosexuality in contemporary American society? What worries each one?
- **T(reatment plan):** What outcome does each author desire? What interventions are needed to achieve that outcome?

**Faith:** How does each author understand Christian faithfulness? How does each one interpret the Bible? What are the foundational confessions of their faith traditions? All three scholars express deep commitment to Christian faith and each of them have been ordained to church offices in Reformed traditions. Three shared beliefs across

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70. See appendix F for a detailed description of FACT and its use in healthcare chaplaincy settings.

71. Smedes was an ordained minister in the Christian Reformed Church, James Brownson is ordained as a Professor of Theology in the Reformed Church in America, and Robert Gagnon is ordained as an elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
Reformed traditions are that 1) salvation is by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ and not through good works,\textsuperscript{72} 2) the Bible alone is the authoritative word of God,\textsuperscript{73} and 3) the church must continually seek to form and reform itself according to Scripture.\textsuperscript{74}

Each scholar places different emphases on both what it means to live by faith in Jesus Christ. Brownson’s description of Christian faith centers on following the self-sacrificial way of Christ: “Christian faith is . . . about the sacrificial offering of lives to one another in hope and love.”\textsuperscript{75} Gagnon and Smedes describe Christian life from a morality standpoint. Gagnon says that living faithfully means to love God by living a holy life and to love one’s neighbor by reproving those who are “engaged in self-destructive or community-destructive behavior” so they can be enfolded into the realm of God’s redemptive work by submitting to the Lordship of Christ.\textsuperscript{76} For Smedes, Christian living means obedience to God’s will motivated by gratitude for the grace of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{72} The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 23, Question and Answer 60. The Christian Reformed Church in North America, the Reformed Church in America, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) all ascribe to The Heidelberg Catechism.


\textsuperscript{75} Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality, 71.

\textsuperscript{76} Smedes, Sex for Christians x-xi; Gagnon, 33-35, 490.

\textsuperscript{77} Lewis Smedes, Mere Morality: What God Expects from Ordinary People (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 243. According to Smedes, Christians know God’s will through the ten commandments, through Jesus’ interpretations of the commandments, through the discernment of the community of faith, and “in the cries of the hungry children of our world” (Smedes, Mere Morality, 5, 12-13).
Obedience to God’s will frees people to “enjoy our humanity, and in our joy to glorify our Creator.”

The second matter having to do with faith in the Reformed traditions is scripture interpretation. There are many facets of the interpretation of scripture - one is pertinent to this discussion: the relationship between ancient human cultures and biblical interpretation. The relationship between ancient human cultures and biblical interpretation involves the discernment between what is in the Bible because it reflects the cultural assumptions of the biblical authors, and what is in the Bible because it reflects the values and assumptions of God’s intention for human flourishing. The authors’ interpretations of Genesis 2:24 and the nature of the one flesh bond is an excellent example. All three scholars agree that the creation story assumes that heterosexual relationships are normal in the culture and mind of the author of Genesis 2:24. They also agree that the one flesh bond has something to do with complementarity. They disagree about whether the gendered complementarity of the one-flesh union in Genesis 2:24 is normal or normative; that is, whether the complementarity is gendered because that’s what the author assumed to be normal, or whether God inspired the author to write about the one-flesh union along gendered lines because that’s the way God intended sexual relationships to work in all times and places.

The requirement of the church to form and reform itself according to the Word of God also plays a role in the assessment of the nature of faithful living in the three theologies of human sexuality. As the cultural situations of the church change and new questions emerge about how to live faithfully, the church must always return to Scripture

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for answers to these new questions, because the message of the Bible is “living and active” and will always speak to contemporary life as new realities arise. All three scholars see new realities emerging in the church regarding homosexuality (these new realities cause concern for all three scholars, which I will describe below) and all three bring those new realities into the light of God’s word in order to determine what faithful Christian living looks like in those new realities. Gagnon determines that Scripture’s message concerning same-sex relationships remains unchanged: LGBTQ Christians must practice celibacy. Brownson and Smedes find space in the Biblical witness for LGBTQ Christians to live in faithful, covenanted same-sex relationships. I will describe these determinations in detail and evaluate them below.

**Apply**: How does each scholar’s view of Christian faith affect their view on homosexual relationships? All three scholars communicate deep care for people with homosexual orientation that is rooted in their Christian faith, and all three scholars believe that the Christian faith places constraints around people’s sexual activity. Since Gagnon and Smedes approach Christian faithfulness as holy living (Gagnon as submission to the Lordship of Christ and Smedes as grateful obedience), and holiness involves living according to biblical morality, and biblical morality involves gender complementarity, Gagnon and Smedes both regard homosexual relationships of any kind as against God’s intention for human flourishing and therefore sinful. Gagnon is stronger

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79. Hebrews 4:12, NRSV.

80. Gagnon, 341-396.


on this than Smedes, claiming that all homosexual relationships are a rebellion against God.  

Smedes adds compassion to his concern for morality, describing homosexual orientation as a burden to be carried as morally as possible. If a homosexual person cannot live in a heterosexual relationship and is not called to celibacy, a committed monogamous homosexual relationship is an acceptable accommodation in the name of compassion and morality.

Brownson draws no distinction between what is required of heterosexual Christians and what is required of homosexual Christians for faithful sexual expression: turning away from all sexual promiscuity and turning toward “holiness, self-restraint, and sacrificial love in the cultivation of one-flesh unions . . . [using] the bodily language of love to nurture lifelong bonds of faithfulness and allegiance”. This is the essence of the one-flesh kinship bond that Brownson claims is the central purpose of the marriage covenant: “To ensure that what they say with their bodies fully expresses the deep commitments and values that shape their lives as a whole.” It is those deep commitments of the marriage covenant that establish the ties of kinship - not merely the joining of bodies (no matter whether they are of the same sex or different sexes). The kinship bonds form the “essential and foundational building block of human

83. Gagnon, 449-450.
84. Smedes, Sex for Christians, 49.
85. Smedes, Sex for Christians, 57, 239.
86. Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality, 108.
87. Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality, 108.
C(onscerns): How does each author understanding the nature of the growing openness to homosexuality in contemporary North American society? All three scholars identify new realities in the Christian church and American culture around human sexuality - realities which raise concern. Smedes and Gagnon see a negative change regarding human sexuality in contemporary culture in the United States. Smedes calls it the sexual revolution, a breakdown of sexual morality, and humanity is suffering because of it: AIDS, babies born to unwed mothers, and broken relationships. Gagnon sees a “growing number of zealous crusaders for gay ‘rights’” who are causing a whole array of social problems: health problems for homosexual people, an increase in pedophilia, an increase in general sexual promiscuity, destruction of gender norms, and marginalization of those who regard homosexual relationships as sinful. Gagnon also expresses personal concerns regarding the vicious attacks he anticipates as a result of taking a stand against homosexual relationships, including being labeled homophobic, intolerant, resistant to diversity, uncritical and outmoded in his scholarship, and promoting violence toward homosexual people. While Brownson briefly mentions problems relating to gender and sexuality like high divorce rates and AIDS as reasons for polarization within Christianity concerning homosexuality, the new reality that concerns Brownson most is how

88. Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality, 108.
89. Smedes, Sex for Christians, ix and 231-235.
90. Gagnon, 35.
93. Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality, 3.
Christians who are living openly as LGBTQ people can faithfully follow Christ in their intimate relationships. These LGBTQ Christians are asking questions the church has never had to answer. LGBTQ people are too often being hurt by how the church handles these questions.\textsuperscript{94}

\textbf{Treatment:} What outcome is hoped for, and what interventions are needed?

Smedes advocates for mercy for LGBTQ people in the church who are in long-term committed relationships. He argues for full inclusion as church members and for welcome at the sacrament of communion, which provides comfort and nourishment so that LGBTQ Christians can “do the Lord’s will even though the Lord’s ideal is out of reach.”\textsuperscript{95} The intervention needed in order to get to that goal is for the church to apply the same hermeneutical lens to Romans 1 as the church has with Jesus’ teachings on divorce and remarriage. This hermeneutic would allow LGBTQ Christians to be church members in good standing after years of exclusion.\textsuperscript{96} Gagnon mentions several outcomes that he desires. The first is for the church to grow in love of God and love of neighbor. In order to love God, Gagnon calls people to live holy lives. Second, in order to properly love neighbors, he appeals to the Golden Rule and the need for reproof when the neighbor is engaging in immorality.\textsuperscript{97} A third outcome that Gagnon names is for the church to submit to the Lordship of Christ, which is key to Gagnon’s understanding of the Christian life, as mentioned above. In order to submit to the Lordship of Christ, the church must care for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{94} Brownson, \textit{Bible, Gender, Sexuality}, 11.
\item \textsuperscript{95} Smedes, \textit{Like the Wideness of the Sea}, 11. The “Lord’s ideal” is heterosexual marriage (\textit{Like the Wideness of the Sea}, 12). Smedes does not discuss whether LGBTQ people should be allowed to be ordained to offices of the church.
\item \textsuperscript{96} Smedes, \textit{Like the Wideness of the Sea}, 8-10.
\item \textsuperscript{97} Gagnon, 33-34.
\end{itemize}
and minister to LGBTQ Christians who engage in any kind of same-sex intercourse and offer grace when they genuinely repent. 98 When they do not repent, submission to the Lordship of Christ requires that they be ineligible to hold church office. In most cases they would also be ineligible for church membership and/or subject to church discipline in order to keep the church under submission to Christ. 99

The outcome that Brownson desires is different - a deeper conversation regarding sexual ethics in the church that engages the collective imagination of the gathered community so that it can see the Bible in fresh ways and embody its overarching story about human sexuality more deeply in this new cultural context. 100 In order to achieve this fresh conversation, Brownson seeks not just interpretations of the few texts relating directly to homosexuality but a coherent sexual ethic based on both the individual texts and the broader movements through whole canon of scripture, hoping to present a “new way forward in this controversy that is both more faithful to Scripture and also more effective in guiding men and women today (gay, lesbian, and straight) into the fullness of life in Christ.” 101

Evaluating the Theologies

In healthcare chaplaincy the final step of spiritual assessment is “follow-up,” where the patient’s progress on the outcomes is examined and the success of the

98. Gagnon, 489.

99. Gagnon, 490. Celibate people with homosexual attraction should be permitted to serve in all church offices. Gagnon, 491.

100. Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality, 13.

101. Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality, 15.
interventions are evaluated. My evaluation of the theologies of human sexuality will argue that Brownson’s theology of human sexuality is more consistent than Gagnon’s, and, to some extent, Smedes’ with both a Reformed understanding of how to interpret scripture and with the Reformed emphasis on salvation by grace alone.

Brownson’s theology of human sexuality (kinship bond) is more consistent with a Reformed understanding of how to interpret scripture in two ways: 1) the distinction between what is *normal* in the text and what is *normative* for God’s intention for human flourishing, and 2) the relationship between contemporary life experience and interpreting scripture.

**Evaluating Hermeneutics: Normal versus Normative**

Distinguishing between what was *normal* for the particular culture in which the biblical authors were situated and what is *normative* for God’s intentions for human flourishing in all times, places, and cultures is a central task in interpreting and relating the Bible to contemporary life for Reformed traditions. The Reformed Church in America’s statement on scripture defines this distinction this way:

Holy Scripture was committed to writing by chosen men inspired by the Holy Spirit, and the human aspect of Scripture must be held in conjunction with the divine. Scripture is the Word of God in and through the words of men. According to the witness of Scripture, the Holy Spirit used the language, literary form, thought world, and the vocabulary of the human authors consistent with their individuality, time, and place in history. This historical character of Scripture is fully consonant with its divine origin and nature, and constitutes the impenetrable miracle and mystery of its inspiration . . . Scripture as the Word of the faithful God is infallible and inerrant in all that it intends to teach and accomplish concerning faith and life.  

The miracle and mystery of Scripture is that it comes to us through the particular

cultural contexts of the people whom the Holy Spirit inspired to write it, and that it’s infallible and inerrant message is not lost in the translation across thousands of years, languages, customs, and places. Yet, the statement includes the phrase, “in all that it intends to teach and accomplish.” The miracle and mystery of the intention of God in Scripture is not always easy to uncover.

We must grapple with this miraculous mystery. We run the risk of placing requirements on people that are determined by ancient cultures, requirements which might create undue burden and might not promote human flourishing as God intends. Consider, for example, the kosher laws in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, which include prohibitions against eating meat from camels, rock badgers, and hares. Might these dietary restrictions promote healthy eating in ways that were specific and considered normal to the ancient Hebrews but would make no difference in the health of contemporary people? If so, living according to those requirements might not promote God’s intentions for human flourishing and therefore those requirements need not be considered normative or be followed today.

Because the Reformed traditions hold that “ALL scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,” a closer look at these kosher rules is warranted. Perhaps there were spiritual aspects to these dietary restrictions - possibly having to do with distinguishing the Hebrew people from their neighbors who worshipped different gods, or giving a structure for a

103. The Church Speaks, 7.
104. Leviticus 11:4-7 (NRSV).
105. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NRSV).
disciplined relationship with food. If this is the case, discerning the underlying meaning of these dietary laws might help promote God’s intention for shalom, and in that case, underlying meanings should be considered normative for shaping modern life according to God’s intention for shalom.\(^{106}\)

As stated above, Gagnon and Smedes agree that heterosexual relationships are both normal and normative and that the complementarity of the one-flesh union in Genesis 2:24 is based on the sexual fittedness of male and female genitalia. By expanding the possibilities for complementarity within the one flesh kinship bond, Brownson makes a distinction between what is normal in the mind of the author of Genesis 2 (that sexual relationships are ordinarily between a man and a woman), and what is normative for God’s design: human flourishing in covenantal relationships.

Gagnon and Smedes begin with the assumption that gender complementarity is the norm and standard for all texts about human sexuality. Gagnon reads gender complementarity into the texts rather than reading the text for what it was saying in its own time and place. He makes normal normative. Gagnon fails to distinguish between the cultural particularity of gender roles that were assumed in the various cultures of the Bible and their transcultural significance as a gospel truth. Even within the Bible there is no one standard of gender roles, since how humans live out gender roles has always been deeply influenced by cultural forces, and there are many different cultures at play in different parts of the Bible.\(^{107}\) Gagnon fails to recognize this, as well as the larger

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\(^{106}\) Brownson clearly lays out these interpretive issues, making a distinction between what the Bible says, and what it means for modern readers. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 5-9.

\(^{107}\) Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 262. Later, on page 277, he says, “Not everything that the biblical writers assume or take for granted is to be considered normative for Christians today,
trajectory of transformation of gender roles in the New Testament. While Smedes, like Gagnon, makes the normal of gender complementarity normative, he acknowledges that the Bible does not tell us everything we need to know about same-sex relationships in modern life, and argues that grace makes space for LGBTQ Christians to live in covenanted relationships.

Brownson considers the diversity of the settings and purposes behind the texts relating to human sexuality and looks for the moral logic underlying them. Then he puts them together and articulates a meaning of covenant sexual relationships that pervades all of the Bible: the one-flesh kinship bond. In doing so, Brownson dramatically decreases the terrifying possibility of subjecting modern Christians to the cultural norms of the ancient world rather than the norms of the gospel. Brownson’s interpretation of Scripture relating to sexuality frees people from the unnecessary, stifling, and damaging effects of gender complementarity and sexual mores that are connected to ancient cultural expectations and not connected to living a life that pleases God. People are free to discover what living in gratitude for the gospel requires of them as sexual beings - gay or straight, bisexual, transgendered, queer: to live in life-affirming relationships that are

108. Women played central roles in Jesus’ life and the early church. For example, Lydia was a leader in the early church (Acts 16:12-15, 40; Philippians 1:1-10), Tabitha is named a disciple (Acts 9:36-39), and Mary Magdalene, who was the first to see the resurrected Christ, preached the first sermon (Luke 24:1-12).


110. Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality, 8-10.
marked by covenants and held together in communities of grace for the flourishing of humanity and the glory of God. 111

**Evaluating the Role of Modern Realities**

The second way in which Brownson’s theology of human sexuality is more consistent with a Reformed reading of Scripture than Smedes and Gagnon has to do with the task of constantly seeking to be reformed by the word of God. The question at hand is: What happens when new realities emerge and the church seeks reformation by bringing these new realities to scripture? The church asks questions that the authors of scripture could not have imagined, questions that require new discernment around what God intends to teach in Scripture.

The *new* questions rising from modern life in the conversation concerning same-sex relationships and the Christian faith are three-fold. How does the ever-growing scientific knowledge about the biological origins of sexual orientation affect the church’s response to same-sex relationships? How should the church in the United States respond to the legalization of same-sex marriage? What is the most faithful way to respond to the increasingly open questions of LGBTQ Christians regarding how to live faithfully in their sexual relationships?

**Science and Sexuality**

Scientific knowledge concerning sexual orientation is growing, creating new knowledge that the authors of the Bible could never have imagined responding to in their writing. Studies of sexual orientation in the last several decades have revealed consistent

percentages of people with homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual orientation.\textsuperscript{112} The vast majority of people report heterosexual attraction, and homosexual and bisexual attraction make up small yet stable minorities. 3.1 percent of men and 0.9 percent of women report homosexual attraction; 0.6 percent of men and 0.8 percent of women reported bisexual attraction.\textsuperscript{113}

How do people become gay? Is sexual orientation predetermined by genetics? Or is it the result of childhood experiences? Or a combination of both? The topic remains an object of scientific inquiry. Neuroscientist Simon LeVay summarizes the body of scientific evidence available regarding the origins and development of sexual orientation this way:

Sexual orientation is an aspect of gender that emerges from the prenatal sexual differentiation of the brain. Whether a person ends up gay or straight depends in large part on how this process of biological differentiation goes forward, with the lead actors being genes, sex hormones, and the brain systems that are influenced by them.\textsuperscript{114}

In fact, adult men and women with homosexual orientation have, as a group, a variety of traits that are different than adult men and women with heterosexual orientation. For example: finger length, type of gait, voice quality, the size and shape of several parts of the brain, cognitive traits, and personality.\textsuperscript{115} However, LeVay also says, “Cultural forces greatly influence how homosexuality is expressed in different societies and across


\textsuperscript{113} Laumann, chapter 8. LeVay names the stability of the presence of homosexual orientation: “Sexual orientation is indeed a fairly stable aspect of human nature, and that straight, gay, and bisexual people have existed across many, perhaps all, cultures.” \textit{Gay, Straight, and the Reason Why}, XII.


Le Vay is clear, however, about the inefficacy and harmful nature of some non-biological theories regarding the origins of homosexual attraction, for example, unhealthy relationships with a parent, early sexual experiences and/or sexual trauma, abnormal gender learning and/or modeling, and choice.\textsuperscript{117} The reason for this scientific concern is precisely articulated by Gagnon and other non-science scholars from Christian communities. After reviewing biological, behavioral, and demographic evidence, Gagnon argues that family, cultural, and environmental influences shape homosexual attraction much more than genetic influences.\textsuperscript{118} He concludes this:

Cultural norms, not some form of genetic determinism, play the dominant role in manipulating how and whether homosexuality will come to expression. Cultures that become increasingly accepting of one or more forms of homosexuality can expect to see over a period of time marked increases in the incidence of homosexual behavior in the population.\textsuperscript{119}

Much of the current scientific knowledge regarding the biological origins of sexual attraction has been published in the fifteen years since Gagnon’s book was published. However, as the dangers of efforts to try to change sexual orientation continue to be revealed,\textsuperscript{120} Gagnon continues to promote the possibility of sexual orientation change.\textsuperscript{121}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{116} LeVay, \textit{Gay, Straight, and the Reason Why}, XII.
\item \textsuperscript{118} Gagnon, \textit{The Bible and Homosexual Practice}, 401.
\item \textsuperscript{119} Gagnon, \textit{The Bible and Homosexual Practice}, 416.
\item \textsuperscript{121} Robert Gagnon, “Smearing Sexual Orientation Change” \textit{First Things}, April 15, 2015, accessed October 29, 2015, https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2015/04/smearing-sexual-
Scientific observation regarding the enduring rates and origins of sexual orientation raises theological questions for the Christian faith and our reading of Scripture. Did God envision homosexual orientation as part of human flourishing? And, more broadly, can Christian communities discover new ways in which specific parts of Scripture are culturally particular to the day and time in which the Bible was written, and can Christian communities discover new transculturally significant ways to understand the gospel with and for contemporary culture?

One Reformed tradition speaks clearly about this. The Presbyterian Church (USA)’s statement on the understanding and use of Scripture says this:

Out of their individual and corporate experience members of the church become sensitive to dimensions of Scripture not previously discerned. These questions and insights, when offered for corporate consideration, can spur and illuminate the church to different and deeper understanding of Scripture. Therefore, the church in its institutional life must not discount the experience of its members, but hear their questions and receive their insights as opportunities to read Scripture again in the continuing search for positions and patterns of contemporary faithfulness. For their part, individuals and groups should not allow their own concerns and convictions to isolate them within the community or use them to judge the church in self-righteousness. Instead, they should bring them patiently and insistently to the church to ask whether the larger community of believers can confirm or correct or share their understanding of Scripture.¹²²

According to this statement from the Presbyterian Church (USA), questions and insights that rise out of individual and corporate life experience of the church ought to be understood as opportunities to go back to scripture to search for wisdom about how to live faithfully within circumstances the biblical writers never imagined. This kind of orientation-change.

interpretation of scripture honors the painful questions and insights of LGBTQ brothers and sisters in Christ and lets that pain motivate a fresh discernment of scripture.

Brownson and Smedes understand the pain and questions raised by LGBTQ brothers and sisters in Christ to be new questions. They say that it is unlikely that biblical authors, in particular Paul, had any conception of an enduring homosexual orientation. Rather, the things they wrote concerning the sinfulness of homosexual sexual activity were responding to other sins that people were committing in the context of same-sex intercourse, like over-the-top lust for sexual pleasure, not content with heterosexual sex alone; human trafficking; exploitation; or practices used in worshipping idols. Covenanted life-long relationship between two faithful LGBTQ people was not a contextual question or concern. When these new questions about how people with enduring homosexual or bisexual orientation should live faithfully in their intimate relationships are brought to the Bible, the Bible can say things differently than previous generations of the church could never have imagined.

For example, the interpretation of Romans 1 becomes quite different when read with the assumption that Genesis 2 tells the story of Eve’s suitability as a partner for Adam arising from her similarities to Adam rather than her difference. None of the animals that God paraded before Adam proved a suitable partner - perhaps we could say the cattle, birds of the air, and animals of the field were too different from Adam.

When Adam saw Eve, he said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”\textsuperscript{127} This could sound like an exclamation of delight in Eve’s similarity. Eve was Adam’s match not because of the complementarity of the differences of their sex organs but because of the similarities of their bodies and their intellects in comparison to the animals. If similarity is the reason that Adam and Eve fit together, it could be true that people who say the modern equivalent of Adam’s “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” in response to someone of the same sex might rightfully “Leave [their] father and mother and cling to [their same-sex spouse]” and “become one flesh” with a same-sex partner in a marriage covenant. If same-sex partners could participate in the faithfulness of the marriage covenant based on Genesis 2,\textsuperscript{128} then Romans 1:18-32 can be interpreted as a condemnation of excessively seeking self-advancement and pleasure through both idolatry and over-the-top lustful sexual activity that occurs outside covenanted relationships, rejects the Christian call to humble oneself before God and seek the wellbeing of others, and is willing to harm others for the sake of their own “degrading passions.”\textsuperscript{129} None of these condemnations would refer to covenanted same-sex relationships in which partners are honored above self and sexual intimacy expresses and strengthens lifelong kinship bonds.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{127} Genesis 2:23 (NRSV).
\item \textsuperscript{128} New questions regarding covenanted same-sex relationships also need to be brought to bear on the other texts having to do with homosexuality: Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, I Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:10. Several authors have done this thoroughly and arrived at responsible interpretations that create space for affirming covenanted same-sex relationships. See Brownson, \textit{Bible, Gender, Sexuality}, 268-279; Matthew Vines, \textit{God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Gay Marriage} (New York: Convergent Books, 2014), 59-116; Jack Rogers, \textit{Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church} (Louisville, KY: WestminsterJohn Knox Press, 2009), 66-87.
\item \textsuperscript{129} Romans 1:26 (NRSV).
\end{itemize}
Gagnon, on the other hand, argues that our questions are not new questions. Examples of enduring same-sex orientation and committed homosexual relationship did exist in the ancient world, and these relationships were in the minds of biblical authors when they wrote about the sinfulness of same-sex sexual activity. He states it quite strongly:

Even on the surface of it, the notion that mutually caring same-sex relationships first originated in modern times sounds absurd. Are we to believe that nobody with homosexual or lesbian urges in all of antiquity was able to provide a healthy example of same-sex love?  

He goes on to cite many examples of same-sex relationships in non-biblical writing from Greco-Roman contexts. However, Gagnon himself says that “pederasty [sexual relationships, sometimes long-enduring ones, between older, more powerful men, and younger men] was the most common form of homoerotic expression” in the ancient world, not equally-paired partners as in the modern world. He quotes several ancient sources who describe love and affection between partners in pederastic relationships and says, “Victimization simply did not factor significantly in the arguments that Jews and Christians made in the ancient world.” These relationships were close enough to modern covenanted same-sex relationships to warrant continuing to deem all modern same-sex sexual relationships sinful. In short, questions about how to interpret Scripture concerning same-sex relationships in light of knowledge concerning the enduring nature

130. Gagnon, 350.


132. Gagnon, 360.

133. Gagnon, 360. How modern understandings of human trafficking spur new understandings of these pederastic relationships would be a worthy hermeneutical pursuit.
of homosexual orientation and its probable biological roots are simply not new questions. Our questions, according to Gagnon, need not and should not consider new interpretations of these texts.

Significant problems arise with Gagnon’s argument due to the sources he cites. The Greco-Roman sources that Gagnon cites that mention loving same-sex relationships and display an enduring concept of homosexual orientation are from either several hundred years before Paul or several hundred years after Paul. None of his sources are in proximity to Paul’s historical period.\textsuperscript{134} Since Paul lived and wrote within the approximately 700 year period of apparent silence respective to favorable portrayals of same-sex relationships, it is difficult to assume that the documents Gagnon cites are part of the cultural knowledge from which Paul wrote. If it is not the case that Paul was writing against positive portrayals of enduring same-sex relationships, then it might be the case that Paul’s writings against homosexual sexual activity were referring to sex acts involving over-the-top lust, exploitation and human trafficking, and idol worship, and Paul’s writings might leave space for modern Christians to discern that covenanted and enduring same-sex relationships could be part of a faithful Christian life.

On the surface, Gagnon’s quoting of biblical and extra-biblical sources refuting the possibility that covenental same-sex relationships could have a legitimate role in Christian faithfulness seems robust and well-defended. However, a closer look reveals significant problems. Historical inconsistencies show that he is not doing right by his brothers and sisters in Christ who are raising new questions. Rather than encouraging the back-and-forth nature of scripture interpretation that is needed to continue the “reformed

\textsuperscript{134} Brownson points this out in \textit{Bible, Gender, Sexuality}, 156n8.
and always reforming” nature of his Reformed tradition, Gagnon’s work has the effect of silencing the pain-filled questions of his brothers and sisters in Christ through high-level scholarly arguments. He does not allow their questions and experiences to “spur and illuminate the church to different and deeper understanding of Scripture.”

While Gagnon silences questions, Smedes and Brownson allow their study of Scripture to be informed by them. Smedes discusses how personal experiences with divorced and remarried people who live faithful Christian lives and yet are excluded from church membership and the Lord’s supper spurred his denomination to reconsider Jesus’ teaching on divorce and remarriage and advocates for a similar re-examination of Scripture based on personal experiences with faithful Christian LGBTQ people in covenanted relationships who desire to be accepted by their faith communities. Brownson’s exploration of Scripture around human sexuality was motivated by the questions raised when his son told him he was gay. Brownson allowed these questions rising from his son’s sexual orientation to do exactly what a reading of scripture should do according to the Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture statement: “Hear their questions and receive their insights as opportunities to read Scripture again in the continuing search for positions and patterns of contemporary faithfulness.”

135. Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture, “The Fallibility of all Interpretation.”
138. Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality, 10-11.
139. Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture, “The Use of Experience.”
Evaluating Perspectives on Faithful Living and Salvation

Brownson’s theology of human sexuality is more consistent with the Reformed traditions’ emphasis on salvation by grace alone than Gagnon’s because of the way Gagnon understands the meaning of faithful Christian living and the nature of salvation. For Brownson, faithful Christian living primarily takes the shape of union with Christ. Gagnon’s picture of the Christian life is quite different.

Faithful Christian life in Gagnon’s view involves submission to God’s will:

The whole of what we do and who we are should proceed from a desire to please the sovereign God . . . To love God with one’s whole being and to pray for the coming of God’s rule entails submitting one’s pursuit of sexual pleasure to the revealed will of God . . . God calls us to live holy lives subject to the divine will and not according to our own desires.\(^{140}\)

Gagnon’s logic appears to go like this: to please God is to love God. To love God is to submit yourself to the divine will. The divine will for human sexuality is gender complementarity. Therefore, to please God in our sexual lives is to engage in gendered complement relationships.

A closer look at what Gagnon means by love illuminates the inconsistency with the Reformed understanding of salvation by grace alone. For Gagnon, to love God means to submit to God’s will, and the corresponding command to love the neighbor means to exhort them to also submit to God’s will.\(^{141}\) In discussing love of neighbor, Gagnon cites the Golden Rule, (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” Luke 6:13), but then confuses love with law by interpreting the Golden Rule not with Jesus’ own

\(^{140}\) Gagnon, 33-34

\(^{141}\) Gagnon, 33-34.
explanations in Luke 6, but with Leviticus 19:17-18. Gagnon applies this love of neighbor to love of homosexual people by saying,

Love and reproof are not mutually exclusive concepts. If one fails to reprove another who is engaged in self-destructive or community-destructive behavior, or any conduct deemed unacceptable by God, one can hardly claim to have acted in love either to the perpetrator or to others affected by the perpetrator’s actions. Without a moral compass love is mere mush.

Here’s the problem with interpreting Jesus’ Golden Rule teaching using the moral code of Leviticus 19: In Matthew’s version of this teaching, Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” Jesus is not content for love to be “mere mush” either. But the moral compass that Jesus applies to love is not reproof, but humility, mercy, and submission:

Do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back . . . Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.

The kind of love that Jesus describes here does not involve the primary concern for morality that Gagnon advocates. Rather, it involves a surrender of power, which is a

142. “You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

143. Gagnon, 34.

144. Matthew 5:17, NRSV.

higher and more Christ-like standard than mere morality: practicing mercy over judgment, setting aside condemnation and taking up forgiveness, and being more concerned about your own sin than the sin of others. Why, then, does Gagnon talk about the necessity for reproof as part of loving LGBTQ people?

He needs reproof to be part of love because of what he fears: “Ecclesiastical and societal affirmation [of homosexuality] will lead to an increase in the incidence of homosexuality and bisexuality, which in turn will lead to a larger number of people afflicted with serious health problems.”¹⁴⁶ Here’s the line of thought: the more the church and culture accept same-sex relationships, the more same-sex relationships there will be. The more same-sex relationships there are, the more people will be sick, and the more society will be ruined. However, his fear goes deeper this. Gagnon fears that the very salvation of LGBTQ people may be at stake if they engage in same-sex intercourse:

The practicing homosexual’s own relationship with the Creator will be put in jeopardy. If we are to believe Scripture, the failure of the church to help the homosexual make the transition out of homosexual practice and into sexual wholeness will make the church an accomplice to the very form of behavior that God finds detestable. The church will become an enabler of the practicing homosexual’s loss of spiritual transformation and, possibly, salvation.¹⁴⁷

If salvation is, in fact, at stake for practicing homosexuals, then Gagnon’s fear is warranted and exhorting LGBTQ people to remain celibate is appropriate. The fear of losing salvation, however, does not fit within the Reformed community in which Gagnon was ordained as an elder, the Presbyterian Church (USA).

¹⁴⁶ Gagnon, 472-473. Strangely, at the top of the list of health problems, is “decreased likelihood of establishing or preserving a successful marriage,” which is not a health problem. The rest of the list includes: twenty-five to thirty year decrease in life expectancy, chronic liver disease, immune disease, rectal cancer, infectious disease, higher incidence of suicide.

¹⁴⁷ Gagnon, 489.
Salvation by grace alone is one of the core beliefs of the Reformed tradition. The Heidelberg Catechism, a core confession of the Reformed tradition embraced by the denominations of all three scholars, says this:

How are you right with God?

Only by true faith in Jesus Christ.

Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God’s commandments and of never having kept any of them, and even though I am still inclined toward all evil, nevertheless, without deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never been a poor sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me.

All I need to do is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart.¹⁴⁸

According to Gagnon, accepting this gift of salvation with a believing heart is not enough for an LGTBQ person. They must also remain free of what Gagnon considers sin if they want complete assurance of salvation. This amounts to making gender complementarity higher than the redemptive power of Jesus Christ and using fear of condemnation, the very condemnation that Jesus tells his followers to set aside in Luke 6:37, to try to motivate submission to gender complementarity rather than submission to the love of Christ.

Smedes takes a more nuanced approach to Christian faithfulness. He builds his exploration of sexuality in the Christian life on the premise that Christian living means

¹⁴⁸. The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 23, Question and Answer 60.
moral living. He makes two important distinctions concerning Christian morality - it must involve *creative compassion* and it is never *moral tyranny*. Christian morality must involve *creative compassion* - “Creative compassion provides the sensitivity with which the moral law can be introduced into concrete situations - not to soften the law, but to apply it realistically . . . Creative compassion offers the possibility of dealing with real people whose acts may be wrong in light of the moral law.”

Christian morality must never involve moral tyranny. Smedes defines moral tyranny this way: “Moral tyranny operates wherever the rules of a community are given a force equal to the will of God.”

Similar to the hermeneutical task mentioned earlier of differentiating between what is in the Bible because it was *normal* in the cultures of the biblical writers and what was in the Bible because it is *normative* for God’s intention for human flourishing, Smedes says that Christians must always work to discern between the expectations of God and the expectations of human communities. Giving the expectations of human communities the same weight as the expectations of God amounts to moral tyranny.

These careful distinctions around morality create space for Smedes to advocate for the church to make accommodation for covenanted same-sex relationships. First, the avoidance of moral tyranny creates space for Smedes to consider whether condemnation of all same-sex marriage is part of God’s moral expectation or part of the moral expectation of human communities. Second, when Smedes looks with creative

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149. In the foreword of *Sex for Christians*, Smedes says that the book is about sexual morality. Smedes, *Sex for Christians*, ix.


compassion at the plight of LGBTQ Christians who want to enter covenantal monogamous relationships and be accepted by their churches, he sees a complex moral situation. Their partnering may be technically morally inappropriate, but given that they are not responsible for their sexual orientation, it might be the best moral good these LGBTQ Christians can do.  

Smedes argues that homosexual orientation is “nature gone awry,” “a genetic lapse.” An unintended implication of Smedes’ argument is that covenanted relationships between LGBTQ Christians will always be morally less than heterosexual, even when both partners are saved by the grace of Jesus Christ, because they don’t reach the standard of heterosexual marriage. This unintended implication is inconsistent with the view of salvation in Reformed traditions, where redemption comes by grace alone, and never because of any human achievement (or orientation). And yet, Smedes’ argument plays a significant role in the Reformed tradition because of the how his idea of redemptive accommodation paved the way for Brownson’s work years later.

For Brownson, Christian faithfulness primarily concerns union with Christ. True to the Reformed tradition, it is Christ who redeems and sanctifies people with both homosexual and heterosexual orientation by grace alone. God calls Christians not merely into covenanted sexual relationships which follow moral law (Smedes), and not merely into covenanted sexual relationships involving gendered complementarity (Gagnon), but into covenanted sexual relationships in which individuals lay down their own life for the well-being of the partner. Brownson clarifies, “Life in Christ invites us to a deeper form

153. Smedes, Sex for Christians, 243.

154. Smedes, Sex for Christians, 243.
of life, which is located in relationships with others, where desires are sanctified by the Spirit to lead us more fully into life in Christ rather than into self-defeating grasping after our own gratification."\textsuperscript{155} In this way, both covenanted homosexual and heterosexual Christian relationships can become a "context in which desires can be disciplined and sanctified, where the restraint of selfish impulses can be learned, and where the interplay of sacrifice and self-giving with the surprising reception of unmerited love may create a dance of the Spirit, drawing couples into the triune life of love."\textsuperscript{156}

Evangelical Christianity needs a better conversation about human sexuality - one that goes deeper than "don't have sex before marriage," and one that creates space for more complex conversations than merely whether something, especially same-sex relationships, is right or wrong in light of Christian faith. Here I have shown a diversity of perspectives on human sexuality within Reformed traditions and have described the theologies underlying some of those perspectives. I gave an example of Christian conversation among the three theologies, and I argued that theology that affirms and welcomes LGBTQ people in covenanted relationships is most consistent with the "Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Scripture" statement and the Reformed traditions' emphasis on salvation by grace alone.

The next step in this project involves a Christian conversation among people in a local congregation whose convictions, some well-thought out and some unexamined, roughly reflect those of Gagnon, Brownson, and Smedes.

\textsuperscript{155} Brownson, \textit{Bible, Gender, Sexuality}, 198.

\textsuperscript{156} Brownson, \textit{Bible, Gender, Sexuality}, 198.
Chapter 5

Practicing Faithful Conversations Concerning Human Sexuality

In classical music we don't talk to each other. Classical music is like a Midwestern dinner table: we don't talk about anything. In rock and roll we have to talk about everything.

--Ben Folds, Performance Today

Songwriter Ben Folds crosses boundaries and overlaps classical with rock and roll and invents a new musical genre that he calls “chamber rock.” Chamber rock brings together something new and exciting: music where regimen and expression, following the score and improvisation, can come together. This project sets out to create a space for chamber rock, where the once-silent people at the Midwestern dinner table find reasons and ways to “talk about everything.” The result is a new conversational genre that I call “faithful conversation.”

Worship: Liturgy, Sermon, and Communion

After the elders and pastors at The Community explored how to talk about same-sex relationships and the Christian faith for nearly a year, the elders and pastors sent a letter to the congregation detailing the goals and process of the conversation and inviting their participation in the event. The conversation occurred on a Sunday morning in October of 2015 and included the worship service with lunch and a panel discussion afterward.

One hundred eighteen people attended the worship service, which was co-led by the two pastors, my husband Billy and me. The worship service centered on the theme of

Christian unity using Galatians 3:25-29:

But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring heirs according to the promise.

The sermon, co-preached by the two pastors, started with a brief explanation of why we were talking about same-sex relationships. First, because people are talking about it everywhere outside the church and therefore we need to talk about it in the church. Second, because we had heard Christians talking about people who disagree with them about same-sex relationships in hurtful and hateful ways. Third, we believe that as Christians we can talk about this with unity, purity, and peace, and set an example for others to follow.

After a brief teaching on Christian unity from Galatians 3:25-29, we discussed the fact that Christians are not divided into two camps: for or against same-sex relationships. Rather, there are at least five different responses to committed same-sex relationships in the evangelical Christian world, and we love people holding all five views in our congregation. We explained the typology of evangelical Christian responses developed by Jim Brownson and described each response. We stressed that each of the perspectives is a valid, faithful, Christian perspective, that each perspective values faithful Christian living and Scripture, and that in Christ we all belong together.

We shared our hope with the congregation that by the end of the panel discussion each participant would be able to identify their response to committed same-sex

2. An audio recording of this sermon can be found here: http://thecommunity-ada.org/sermons/faithful-conversations-same-sex-relationships-2/.

3. The typology is discussed in chapter 2 and chapter 4 and is included in appendix D.
relationships and begin to talk about it with others in the church with honesty and authenticity. In order to model the kind of honesty and authenticity we were asking from congregation members, we shared our own their perspectives on same-sex relationships and the Christian faith during the sermon, clarifying that we came to these perspectives after years of prayer, study, and relationships. We warmly invited direct conversation from anyone who was upset or curious about our perspectives.

During the sermon the congregation was extremely still - there was very little whispering, shuffling of papers, or shifting in the pews. In congregations more accustomed to lively interaction during preaching, it might have seemed that people were tuned out or asleep. But at The Community in Ada, silence means that people are laser-focused on our every word and something important must be happening.

The sermon concluded and the congregation celebrated the sacrament of Holy Communion. During the opening words, the pastors reminded the congregation whom Jesus shared the communion meal with - not only his favorite disciples, but also Judas - the one who would betray him. Holy Communion is not a meal of surface level community or a gathering of like-minded people, but a meal where we come together across great divides as brothers and sisters and are made one in Christ.

Panel Discussion

Eighty-five people attended the panel discussion in the fellowship hall following the worship service. First, we ate lunch together - a continuation of breaking bread at the communion table. Following lunch, attendees were invited to fill out a survey before the panel began. The survey, which is included in appendix F, described Brownson’s
typology of five responses to same-sex relationships the co-pastors had outlined in the sermon (slightly adapted to use language laypeople would understand) and asked participants to circle the perspective that best matched their own.

The facilitator, Ann McKnight, opened the panel discussion. First, she affirmed her love for the congregation. She explained how she had led two educational sessions about Restorative Circles at the church and had been so impressed by the church members’ desire to engage difficult conversations differently as followers of Christ. She expressed gratitude and admiration that the church was continuing to follow this desire in this event. She continued by describing two types of listening: the kind of listening you would do if the person you were with was a math problem, and the kind of listening you would do if the person you were with was a beautiful sunset. She stressed that different kinds of conversations require different kinds of listening and encouraged people to listen as though they were in the presence of a beautiful sunset rather than a math problem. She invited participants to: 1) listen to appreciate, honor; 2) seek to understand the other person rather than to analyze, fix, or critique; and 3) to hold what’s being shared with the utmost respect.

The Panelists Speak

Four panelists participated. Brian is a straight, married man with college-aged children, and a commissioned pastor in the Reformed Church in America. Jenny is a straight, married woman with small children, who is a member of a Reformed Church in America congregation in another part of town. Todd is a single gay man in his thirties

4. Ann McKnight is a licensed therapist and Restorative Circles facilitator in Holland, Michigan.
who is a member of a Reformed Church in America congregation in another part of town.
Michelle is a straight, married woman with high-school aged children; she is a minister in
the Christian Reformed Church. Her mother is a lesbian. All of the panel members are
white and upper-middle class.

Ann began the panel discussion by asking, “What is it that you would like us to
know about how you came to where you are right now regarding same sex relationship
and the Christian faith.” Brian answered the question first. He started by affirming the
pastors of The Community: “You have great pastors. Undertaking a project like this is
courageous, trailblazing, and takes guts and humility along with fear and trembling.” The
congregation applauded. Before he described his viewpoint, he said three things. First,
Jesus Christ is building his church through these conversations - these conversations do
not weaken the church. Second, God’s grace is deeper and wider than we can even
imagine - there is no sin that God cannot or will not forgive. And third, that God doesn’t
keep score - everyone sins. He introduced his viewpoint by saying, “I’ve never been less
interested in being right. I know the grace of God, I think this about same-sex
relationships and the Christian faith.” He explained his position this way: “Though I
didn’t know this until today, I hold the “welcome and abstain” perspective. Because God
is holy and calls us to live as holy people, Christians who are homosexual must strive,
through the power of the Holy Spirit, to be celibate.” He followed the explanation of his
perspective by calling for the church to repent for being overly focused on sexual sins
and by expressing compassion for the difficulty of the celibacy to which he believes
LGBTQ people are called.

Before the next panelist spoke, the facilitator stopped to invite the congregation to
write down things that seem significant to each of the panelists, and also how they were impacted by those things. After each panelist had spoken, the congregation would have an opportunity to share, either by raising their hand and speaking or by handing in a written response.

Jenny spoke next. She began by stating her position: “welcome and affirm.” Then she clarified her beliefs that support her position. Both homosexual and heterosexual marriages can glorify God; God cares more about the love and commitment that two individuals have for each other than the gender or genitalia of the couple; early Christians had only a rudimentary understanding of sexual orientation; homosexuality is a fixed and normal expression of human sexuality and attempts to modify it are neither safe nor effective; celibacy is a gift that God gives to only some people (both straight and gay) and to mandate celibacy for all LGBTQ Christians is unbiblical. After explaining her beliefs, she discussed her hope for churches, which she called “the third way:”

In all disputable matters, and I do believe that the interpretations of the Bible on homosexuality are disputable matters that faithful Christians disagree on, we should agree to disagree but err on the side of full inclusion of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. They should be allowed to marry, be ordained, and express their gender as they feel led.5

She continued by describing how she came to her position. She described how she once approached same-sex relationships with from the perspective of “love the sinner but hate the sin.” The more she grew to know and love her LGBTQ friends, the more of a disconnection she felt between the understanding of her conservative Christian culture and who she knew her LGBTQ friends to be. The discomfort of the disconnection led her to prayer, reading, listening, and deeper friendship with LGBTQ people, and through the

leading of the Holy Spirit, she came to her current view.

She described the difficulty of this journey. Some people chose to break relationship with her due to her view. But she also gained friends and has been able to help other people who are wrestling with their own understanding. Her own pain pales in comparison to the pain of exclusion, rejection, and discrimination that LGBTQ people have experienced at the hands of fellow Christians and church families.

Jenny named the “radical table fellowship” that Jesus practiced, encouraging unity in the body of Christ: “Jesus made religious people uncomfortable as he gathered with people they deemed unworthy. Tax collectors, adulterers, Samaritans, lepers, and Judas, who was named in during communion in the worship service today, were frequent companions of Jesus.” 6 Jenny told the congregation how she and her husband have chosen to be part of a congregation where the majority of people don’t support LGBTQ inclusion, but Jenny and her husband choose to focus on the many things they agree on rather than the few areas of disagreement. Praying for the day when the whole church will embrace LGBTQ inclusion, Jenny said, “First and foremost, we are called to be in relationship with one another and to bless one another.” 7

Todd spoke next. He introduced himself as a lifelong member of the Reformed Church in America and named similarities he shared with many in attendance: he has a Dutch heritage, he went to Christian schools, and his faith is very important to him. Discounting the “homosexual lifestyle,” he said that his life isn’t different from anyone else; he goes to church, to work, to school. “My life isn’t anything radical like you see on

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Todd declared his hope that one day the Reformed Church in America would be fully open and affirming to all of God’s children. Until that happens, he said, he’ll keep telling his story. He concluded his brief remarks with a story of both exclusion and support in different Christian communities. A parachurch organization in which he led worship as a guitar player excluded him from leading when he told them he was gay. This was very painful for him. However, when his home church heard about the exclusion, they sent letters to the parachurch organization naming his gifts and encouraging them to reconsider. Todd concluded by saying,

I’ve been unsure about whether I wanted to stay in the Reformed Church in America and support a denomination that doesn’t affirm me, but this made me realize that your church is about your people, not the denomination itself, and I am grateful to have their love and support.

Michelle was the last panelist to speak, and her comments were the most extensive of the four panelists. She began by naming the risk she felt in participating in this event as a minister in the Christian Reformed Church. She didn’t elaborate on the nature of the risk, but continued by saying that she felt honored to be invited to participate because she feels it’s a very important conversation for the church to be having.

Michelle described a duality in her upbringing. On the one hand, she experienced “liberal Portland” as an open-minded culture with politically-oriented Democratic parents and step-parents, gay friends, and multiple divorces and remarriages for both her mother and father. On the other hand, her church taught that homosexuality was sinful and not


biblical, and gay people were not welcomed in the church. Michelle never questioned her church’s teaching on homosexuality until she was seventeen, when her mother, after her third failed marriage, told Michelle that she was in a relationship with another woman. Michelle was overcome with shame.

Michelle then shared her story of how her perspective on same-sex relationships and the Christian faith changed over several decades from “welcome but change” to “welcome and affirm.” For the first several years, Michelle exhorted her mother over and over again to change, until one day a friend asked her,

“Does your mom know how you feel about her being a lesbian?”

“Yes, she does.”

“Do you think she’ll continue to know how you feel, even if you give up trying to convict her of her sin?”

“Yes, she will.” Michelle said, “By the grace of God, I was able to stop telling my mom she was a sinner. And then I got to this tolerant place. Not welcoming, just tolerant.”

Yet, she also believed in human rights for LGBTQ people; not because they are a special class of people, but because they are human beings. Michelle heard her mother’s voice echo in her own as she taught her children and her parishioners, “Treat each other with dignity and respect. With insurance and benefits and things like that, just give people what makes sense, what shows them respect. Not gay rights, human rights.” This was still separate from her Christian faith.


For more than a decade, she remained connected to her mom, yet disconnected from her mom’s sexual orientation. Michelle kept her experience with her mom (and, as the years went on, her kids’ experience with their grandma) separate from what the church taught her about homosexuality. Even through her first five years of seminary she avoided the topic of homosexuality. In her last semester of seminary, Michelle was assigned a case study to present to a panel of professors - randomly, according to the professor - homosexuality and the church. She said she felt God telling her, “You’re not getting out of seminary without digging into this. And I was grateful!”

She read all kinds of Christian responses to same-sex relationships, including all of the Christian Reformed Church’s synodical documents, where she learned that since the 1970s the Christian Reformed Church has officially welcomed gay people into their community. Joking about how these official positions never made it into church practice, she said, “Really? I didn’t know that! I’ve never seen it in practice!”

Everyone laughed.

Michelle went on to describe her experience of reading a wide variety of Reformed theologians, who had a wider variety of perspectives on same-sex relationships than she had previously known existed. “I realized that it wasn’t Mom over here, the church over there, and no connection between them. I began to see that there’s more to this story.” She didn’t identify herself precisely on Brownson’s typology like the other


panelists did. Rather, she said, “That’s where I am on this. There’s more to the story.”

Michelle continued by describing the passion she’s discovered within herself as she has delved into the more to this story. She has committed herself to work against the profound failure of the church around care for and welcome of LGBTQ people. In ministry her leading question has become, “How the church can be a more welcoming community and love on these people who have been marginalized and told for years that there’s no place for them here. That’s where my heart is.”

The Congregation Responds to the Panelists

After the panel members spoke, the facilitator invited feedback from the congregation. “When people share with such vulnerability and honesty, one thing we want to make sure we do is let them know how we’ve been impacted by it.” She told the congregation that the panelists would be given an opportunity to respond to the congregation members’ comments in the next segment of the event.

Following a moment of silence where people were shifting in their seats awkwardly, one congregation member stood and said, “Todd, I want to thank you for sticking with the RCA. I imagine it hasn’t been the most comfortable thing sometimes, and we are blessed to have you in our denomination.” Several people applauded.

More comments followed affirming or expressing appreciation for specific things that the panelists had said:

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“I appreciated Michelle referring to human rights rather than gay rights.”

“Jenny described how I hope we can live together - that this is a ‘disputable matter’ and we need to err on the side of grace.”

“I had never heard before that celibacy is a gift and a calling that shouldn’t be forced on gay people.”

“Michelle: it’s cool that God pursued you until you paid attention.”

“My uncle is gay, and I remember him being excluded from the family when I was a kid. It always upset me - it still does. I’m understanding him better because of your story, Todd.”

Other people on what happened inside them as the panelists spoke:

“Thank you to all of the panelists for humanizing this - taking it from an ‘issue’ to people whose stories we know.”

“I am encouraged that we can live together in unity.”

Tearfully: “This is helping me love my gay friends.”

“I grew up being taught that homosexuality was a sin. Even reading the letter with information about this event caused me to start to think differently about this. I think my mind could be changed.”

“I wonder how we can be more inclusive of LGBTQ people.”

The Panelists Respond to the Congregation

Then the panelists responded to the feedback given by the congregation. Brian responded to the question, “How can we be more inclusive of LGBTQ people?” He didn’t give answers; rather, he reflected on the importance of the question and how the
church has failed:

Having a position is important, but it is not the most important . . . The thing that would bless God and bless God’s people the most is to get the ‘welcome’ part right . . . there’s enough bandwidth within ‘welcome’ that we can agree to disagree. But if we can’t get the ‘welcome’ right, then we’re not functioning as the church.¹⁸

Michelle added to Brian’s statement by discussing the necessity of pastors’ determination to welcome and encourage LGBTQ people. She told a story from a pastoral care class in seminary, where the professor provocatively said, “All pastors are required to be pro-gay pastors, because we are pro-people pastors - that’s not negotiable.”¹⁹ She told how many of her classmates balked at this, and then reminded us again that since the 1973 Synodical Statement, CRC pastors are directed to encourage their gay brothers and sisters in their faith and encourage them to use their gifts. She then re-stated the question asked by the congregant: “But how do we do that?”²⁰

The Congregation Shares Further Curiosity

The facilitator posed the final question to the congregation: “As we get ready to wrap up this event, what are you still curious about either for the panelists or within yourself?”²¹

Members of the congregation named areas of curiosity.

● “I see two separate issues here - what is welcoming and what is ‘right.’”


• “I am a little embarrassed to say that I don’t know the Bible that well. I’m curious where the Bible says that homosexuality is a sin.”

• “My children don’t understand why the church has so much conflict about homosexuality. They and their friends are clear about ‘welcome and affirm.’ I’m concerned about the next generation thinks as they watch us struggle with this.”

Some of the members’ comments elicited responses from the panelists. One congregation member asked, “Could any of you talk about the origins of sexual orientation?” Todd responded by telling a bit more of his story: “Every day for all of my growing up years, I tried to ‘pray the gay away.’ That never changed anything. Being gay is inborn, it’s part of who you are. It’s not something people choose - why would anyone choose to be on the outside and be marginalized?” He talked about his commitment to encourage other LGBTQ Christians to “come out” and let people know they are gay, so that everyone will know that good faithful gay Christians are living right alongside you.

Following Todd’s story, one congregation member asked another member of the congregation, a psychologist, about the scientific community’s understanding of homosexuality. The psychologist answered by explaining the American Psychological Association’s official stance: homosexual orientation is within the normal range of expressions of human sexuality and has not been considered a disorder needing treatment since 1973.


Another person expressed a desire to know more about B and Q people in LGBTQ. "I know several gay and lesbian people, but bisexual and transgender people seem kind of invisible in these conversations." Panelist Jenny responded. “I’m glad you brought that up because we have a 40 percent suicide rate for transgender teens. An area we can all agree on is that children should not be bullied or mistreated.”

One congregation member shared her family’s story. Two years earlier, her sister got married to another woman. “It’s torn our family apart - we don’t even get together for holidays anymore.” She wondered tearfully if her family can ever be brought together again.

Michelle responded by sharing how she felt about her mother’s marriage to another woman, which also happened two years earlier:

That was a hard wedding for me to attend. My kids were very excited for their Grandma and ‘Auntie Barb.’ It wasn’t an issue for them. But believing one thing your whole life and then being led into thinking something else is hard, even if you’re convicted about that new way of thinking. Have compassion on yourself, and for those of you who have been in that place a long time, have compassion on your brothers and sisters in Christ. Having your mind changed is hard.

Until this point of the panel discussion, both of the co-pastors participated in the panel discussion as members of the congregation rather than in a leadership role. At this point, one man from the congregation elicited a response from one of the pastors when he said, “I don’t know how people with the ‘welcome and change’ perspective can even call themselves Christians. I can’t stand Christians who want to exclude people.” After a long


moment of silence, one of the pastors said,

I would actually like to respond if it’s okay. I hear you saying that you believe Christians should never exclude people. People in the various viewpoints have different values and beliefs that lead them to their perspectives. For people in the “welcome but change” perspective, a certain kind of holy living is their highest value, which usually means living according to a certain moral code. If that is your highest value, then it makes sense to require that homosexual people change their behavior, and possibly even their orientation, because going against that moral code has very high stakes. I hear you saying that you have a different highest value - inclusion. What we are trying to do here is understand people from different perspectives and grow in love and unity.

The facilitator announced that there was time for one more comment. The final comment came from a congregation member. He challenged the “welcome” language that had informed so many of the previous comments:

I’m curious about what it sounds like for people outside the church, especially gay people, when we talk about ‘welcoming’ them. It makes the church sound so great and high and mighty - like we are doing everyone a favor by letting them in. I didn’t grow up in the church, so this is all a little foreign to me. Maybe we should talk about how we get off this pedestal and go out to embrace people rather than waiting for them to come to us.

The facilitator thanked everyone for their honest and authentic sharing. She again affirmed that she was excited to see how God continued to work in and through this church as we engaged courageously. One of the pastors closed in prayer, expressing gratitude for each person who participated and asking God to continue to give the congregation wisdom and clarity about how to live together in unity.

The facilitator asked participants to complete the post-event survey before they

26. While planning this event, the pastors had negotiated a stopping time with the leader of one of the men’s groups. The group had a golf event planned for the afternoon and needed an early afternoon tee time so everyone could finish their 18 holes before dark. This is not insignificant - I believe this congregation’s emphasis on play builds the relational groundwork for these difficult conversations.

27. This survey is slightly adapted from Stephen Brookfield, Critical Incident Questionnaire. http://www.stephenbrookfield.com/Dr._Stephen_D._Brookfield/Critical_Incident_Questionnaire_files/CIQ.pdf. The adaptations adjust the language to fit a congregational rather than classroom setting. It is included in appendix E.
left, and the people were dismissed.

Feedback, Affirmation, and Fallout

In addition to the data described above, I received feedback after the event was over, some verbal and some over e-mail. Many people expressed general appreciation and gratitude shortly after the event. In the week following the event, one woman came to my office and described her experience at the event as a kind of conversion:

Growing up in the church, I had always been taught that God loves everybody. But as I grew up I began to realize that not everyone was welcome in the church. I had gay friends, but I knew I could never bring them to church. During the panel discussion, it was like God was telling me that my gay friends needed to be able to be part of the church. If God loves everybody, then the church needs to love everybody too. I couldn’t help but cry, right there in front of everyone!

Several people gave feedback through e-mail. Two members, whom I assume are more conservative on same-sex relationships, expressed general gratitude and affirmation for the event. A regular attender wrote, “Thanks to both of you for a courageous service today. And especially thanks for letting us non-members be part of it. It is a topic we have struggled to discuss. So just thanks for opening your doors!” An elder sent an e-mail after the event sharing reservations about the panel being slanted to the welcome and affirm side. He said this:

I thought that the discussion was a bit slanted to the left side. I’m not sure it could be anything else when the pastors come out and state that they are on the far left side of the spectrum. Please don’t take that in the wrong way, I appreciate your stance and how you got there. This is an issue of scripture interpretation, however, and I have great respect for folks on both sides of the issue. Unfortunately, we did not have anyone on the panel this morning who was on the far right of the process. While you may not agree with their position, they do come to it through prayer and study just as you came to the far left in that manner... As I do not believe this is a heaven or hell position but simply one of personal interpretation, I think we need to spend more time on how do we discuss this together and less time on where we stand either right or left. So the question now before us is,
‘How do we proceed?’ I’m comfortable having differing opinions on scripture. I realize that many would disagree, but that’s where I am. So I’d like to let people know that we can live together and believe in one God who is big enough to understand and love all of us even if we have a hard time as sinful humans doing that. Thank you for being honest and open; I pray that taking a position as you have will allow you to be seen as people who care, but also people who want others to be able to live together regardless of their position under the Grace of our wonderful God.

A week after the Faithful Conversations event, a couple from the congregation who did not attend the event made an appointment to talk with me and Billy. The couple had been members of the church for approximately ten years, and they told us that they were leaving the church because they couldn’t be part of a congregation whose pastors didn’t think homosexuality was a sin. “You two are like the king and queen of the church. What you say goes, and you say homosexuality isn’t a sin. We can’t be part of that.”

We asked them to share their perspective on same-sex relationships. She said, “We believe people choose to be gay, and that is a sinful choice - it says so in the Bible.” Then he proceeded to read Genesis 2:18-25 (the creation of Adam and Eve from the second creation story) from the Bible as well as the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from Genesis 19.

My husband stopped him before Lot’s wife turned to a pillar of salt, saying,

‘We are very familiar with these texts, and I’m happy to see that you know and value them, too. If you want to, we could discuss the various interpretations of scripture about same-sex relationships. Would be helpful to you? Or, maybe there would be something else that would help you discern whether or not you can stay in this congregation.’

After some silence, I said,

‘One of the things I think we said loud and clear in the Faithful Conversations event was that there is a wide spectrum of perspectives on same-sex relationships in our congregation, and that we, as pastors, believe that we can live together in unity that encompasses diversity. In fact, I think our church is stronger because of this diversity - we keep each other honest, and we help each other hear aspects of
scripture that we might not otherwise hear. I love you and respect your perspective. I think there is a place for you in this congregation. I understand that it might be an uncomfortable place for you, and you might not choose it, but I want you to know there is a place for you here, and we will be diminished if you leave.'

The couple affirmed their love for the congregation and personal fondness for us, and then we shared stories of our relationship: church campouts, fishing, and some struggles within their family. Finally, they said again that they just couldn’t stay in this church and named a few other factors in their decision to leave. They felt unappreciated; they had disagreed with the direction of the church several times before and didn’t feel like their concerns and perspectives were heard; they didn’t agree with women being pastors; their only friends in the church, another couple with similar perspectives on same-sex relationships, were also leaving.

We expressed our sadness and understanding. The man closed the conversation with a lovely prayer of blessing. As we walked them out of the building, we said they were welcome to call us or come back any time, and we would be happy if they did.28

One other couple left the congregation around the time of the Faithful Conversations event - the friends of the couple who had come to talk with us. They had both been part of the church for more than 40 years and also had a history of disagreeing with the decisions and direction of the church. We reached out to them several times and never received a response, so we were not able to determine whether the Faithful Conversations event was a factor in their departure.29

28. They haven’t been back to worship. However, they remain connected to the congregation through a weekly small group.

29. This couple has not been back to worship since then either. They remain somewhat connected to the congregation through personal relationships, but much less connected than the other couple who left around the same time.
Preliminary Interpretations

Several things emerged clearly from the data: 1) the power of personal stories; 2) the congregation’s perspective on LGBTQ Christians leans toward inclusion; 3) a strong desire for conservative members of the church to feel listened to and included; and 4) gratitude, relief, and surprise that a church could discuss homosexuality in a non-divisive and grace-filled way.

First, the transformative power of personal stories came through very clearly in the data. Overwhelmingly, people reported in the CIQ that they found the personal stories of the panel members and, to a lesser extent, the stories of the congregation members, to be the most engaging and affirming and/or helpful part of the whole event. Making it even more personal, when people mentioned specific stories in the CIQ that they felt to be most engaging and/or affirming, they most often mentioned the ones that were the MOST personal - Michelle, whose mother married a woman, and Todd, who is gay, rather than the stories of Brian, whose comments were mostly of a theological nature, and Jenny, a straight woman whose passion for LGBTQ inclusion came about through gay friends. The transformational power of telling and hearing personal stories is a deeply theological matter, and I will explore this further in chapter six.

Second, the feedback and data from the event suggest that this congregation’s perspective on LGBTQ people and the Christian faith leans toward inclusion. Fifty-nine percent of the people who filled out the pre-survey based on Brownson’s typology\textsuperscript{30} indicated that they were either “welcome and accommodate” or “welcome and affirm” or in between those two categories. Twenty-two percent indicated a middle perspective -

\textsuperscript{30} The survey, included in appendix C, described the five evangelical Christian responses to same-sex relationships that the co-pastors had outlined in the sermon. Participants were asked to circle the perspective that best matched their own.
either “welcome and tolerate,” or on either side of “welcome and tolerate.” Only fifteen percent were in the “welcome and abstain” category or between “welcome and abstain” and “welcome but change.” No one indicated holding a “welcome but change” perspective. These results are summarized in table 2.

I said earlier that the data and feedback suggest that the congregation leans toward LGBTQ inclusion. But the suggestion is not necessarily reality. While fifty-nine percent of the people who attended the event held the “welcome and accommodate” or “welcome and affirm” perspective, one should not assume that fifty-nine percent of the congregation holds those perspectives, because congregation members were free to attend the event or not, and people who already have an interest in LGBTQ inclusion were probably more likely to attend the event than those who are not interested in inclusion. So the results skew toward “welcome and affirm.” Also, people in the congregation who hold the perspective of “welcome but change,” such as the couple who
left the congregation after the event, may balk against even *talking about the possibility* of LGBTQ inclusion, and therefore would be less likely to attend. The tone and data are then, again, skewed toward LGBTQ inclusion. What can be said with confidence is that thirty-six people in our congregation hold either the “welcome and accommodate” or “welcome and affirm” perspective on LGBTQ inclusion. In a congregation with one hundred seventy-nine members, that’s not an insignificant number.

The panel was also skewed toward inclusion. The elder’s e-mail after the event captured this well: “I thought that the discussion was a bit slanted to the left side . . . Unfortunately, we did not have anyone on the panel this morning who was on the far right.”

He’s correct. After reaching out to a variety of denominational and regional sources, the most *conservative* person recommended to me who would participate in an *event like this* was Brian, who indicated that he was in the “welcome and abstain” category. Again, it may be that holding the “welcome but change” perspective precludes the possibility of conversation where LGBTQ inclusion is worthy of consideration. A conversation can only be held between people who are willing to hold the conversation.

While the feedback and data suggest that the congregation leans toward LGBTQ inclusion, they also show a strong concern for people who lean away from inclusion to feel heard and welcomed in the congregation. One respondent summed it up best:

*I was surprised (and encouraged) at how far to the ‘left’ of the spectrum most of the people in the congregation were based on their comments. I figured there*

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31. Another group of people who were noticeably absent from this event were several older congregation members known to have gay children and siblings. In a small congregation such as this where people know each other’s stories, I wonder if it felt too visible, like everyone would be watching for their reactions.
would be more diversity. It makes me think that more of our challenges may be ostracizing those on the ‘right’ of the spectrum.

I wonder why the people on the right of the spectrum did not attend the event. Perhaps it was the coincidence of scheduling conflicts among several of the conservative members. But I suspect that their absence holds meaning. I will explore this further in chapter six.

Third, the grace-filled and non-divisive nature of the conversation about same-sex relationships and the Christian faith surprised the congregation. Participants expressed gratitude, relief, and awe at both the high participation level and the sense of peace that filled the room as we discussed a topic that so often results in discord and division.

Surprisingly, several elements that often cause division in conversations about same-sex relationships and the Christian faith in other contexts did not show up prevalently here: whether same-sex relationships are sinful or not, the interpretation of scripture relating to homosexuality, and ordination and marriage of LGBTQ people. Each of these things received only one or two comments in the CIQ. There are at least two possible interpretations for the absence of these concerns: this congregation is conflict-weary and people don’t want to bring up potentially divisive topics, or, people place a higher value on relationships than sin, scripture interpretation, ordination, and marriage. This will be discussed further in chapter six.

*Faithful Conversations: Same-Sex Relationships and the Christian Faith* defied the way Christians tend to polarize and fight over homosexuality and created space for something new and beautiful - deep consideration of same-sex relationships in the context of sincere faith, personal stories, disciplined listening, and authentic responses.

Like Ben Folds’ *Chamber Rock* combines the best of structured classical music with the best improvisational features of rock and roll to create a new genre that gets the
people at the previously-silent Midwestern dinner table to talk in an open yet disciplined way, *Faithful Conversations* took the best of Christian faith, (unity, purity, and peace), and combined it with the best of Restorative Circles, (disciplined listening and honest speaking), to create a new kind of open and disciplined conversation about human sexuality.
Chapter 6
Learnings and Next Steps

A few months after my infant son nearly died from a serious illness, the West Essex Ministerial Association, an interfaith clergy community in North Jersey in which I was active, asked me to give a ten minute speech about prayer in the Christian faith. I would speak in between a rabbi and imam, who were also speaking on prayer in their faith traditions. The vastness, the power, and the varieties of prayer in the Christian faith overwhelmed me as I prepared. How would I tell Jews and Muslims about Christian prayer? When I told the director of the group my quandary, he said simply, “What’s most particular is usually the most universal. Tell your son’s story.” In this project, this was one of the principle conclusions. In this chapter, I will frame the learnings from this project by telling the story of the origins of the project, and I will structure my description of the learnings using Lederach’s disciplines for sustainable social change. I will conclude by offering suggestions for further inquiry and outlining a model for other congregations who want to undertake a Faithful Conversations project.

Preparation for the Project

The preparation for this project was long and winding. Lay leaders of The Community began to discuss the possibility of some kind of congregation-wide conversation about homosexuality beginning in 2011 when the previous pastor was departing the congregation. She reportedly encouraged a few people (who were eventually appointed to the search committee) to begin to think about a way to move the
congregation toward welcoming and affirming LGBTQ people - she thought they were ready. During the pastoral vacancy when the consistory began to think about the kind of pastor they would search for, the ability to lead difficult conversation such as LGBTQ inclusion became one of several priorities. In the interviews for the new pastor, the search committee’s questions included an inquiry into how each candidate would lead a congregation in conversations about human sexuality.¹ They eventually called a set of co-pastors - me and my husband, Billy.

A few months after the new co-pastors arrived, formal discussion about LGBTQ inclusion slowed down for two reasons. First, the co-pastors sensed that the congregation was not as ready for a formal, pastor-led conversation about LGBTQ inclusion as it seemed during the interview process.² Second, one of the pastors attended the Building an Inclusive Church training³ with two lay leaders from the congregation and learned both the importance of relational equity between the congregation and the pastors for conversations about LGBTQ inclusion, and the wisdom in lay people initiating these conversations. The co-pastors took two steps: they backed off from talking about same-sex relationships in order to take time to build trust with the congregation, and they encouraged the two lay leaders to keep talking about LGBTQ inclusion behind the

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¹ KM, interview with the author, Skype, January 4, 2012; VJ, conversation with author, Holland, MI, June 20, 2016.
² While KM and VJ both reported knowledge between the search committee and the consistory, several people on the elder board (part of consistory) in 2013-2014 were completely surprised when they heard that the search committee had asked candidates about how they would lead conversations regarding LGBTQ inclusion. This could be due to the usual elder term turnover or misunderstandings between the two groups of people.
³ Building an Inclusive Church is a faith-based community organizing tool developed by the Institute for Welcoming Resources, an ecumenical organization that promotes LGBTQ inclusion in churches, to help leaders move their congregations toward becoming fully open and affirming. http://www.welcomingresources.org/communityorg.htm.
In January of 2013, the two lay leaders gathered a small group of lay people who were passionate about LGBTQ inclusion. Calling themselves *The Core Group*, they met monthly to discuss ways to encourage LGBTQ inclusion within the congregation using the methods provided by *Building an Inclusive Church*. They invited the co-pastors to meet with them, and one of them did.

Several important things happened in the core group. First, one of the two lay leaders of the group was elected to the elder board, and she began to report the activities of the group to the elders. Initially, her monthly reports included things like, “There is a group of people in the church who are interested in LGBTQ inclusion, and we are meeting together for discussion and study.” As time went on, the reports became more and more specific about what we were learning until one report revealed that the group was preparing to propose a congregation-wide conversation about LGBTQ inclusion.

Second, the core group shifted its focus from moving the congregation toward becoming open and affirming to LGBTQ people, which is the stated goal of *Building An Inclusive Church*, to helping the congregation speak and listen to each other about homosexuality so that we could discern God’s leading together.

The shift in focus developed within the core group during the discussion about change dynamics included in *Building an Inclusive Church Welcoming Toolkit*. While discussing LGBTQ inclusion, the youngest member of the core group said, “Inclusion has to mean inclusion for all people - including the more conservative folks and the LGBTQ

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people. Otherwise it’s not really inclusion.” The group pondered this while studying the section on change management in the *Toolkit*, which teaches Everett Rogers’ five approaches to change: innovators (the 2.5% of most groups who are brave when adopting new ideas), early adopters (the 13.5% of most groups who are change fairly quickly), early majority (the 34% of most groups who watch and listen to and eventually follow the early adopters), late majority, (the 34% of the most groups who are very skeptical of change), and laggards (the 16% of most organizations who are not going to change).

The *Toolkit* suggests: “Don’t design [change processes] for the Laggards or the Late

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Adopters, which is usually what is done. They are not going to change and focusing on convincing them will only slow the process down or end it all together.\textsuperscript{8}

However, when members of the group thought of the laggards and late adopters in our congregation, they thought of people whom they loved deeply. Laggards are our people, people whom the core group knew were hurt during many of the changes in the congregation during the last decade.\textsuperscript{9} They felt a burden for their inclusion in our congregation - a burden that held equal weight to the burden for the inclusion of LGBTQ people. Leaving them behind wouldn’t help reach the vision of full inclusion that the group’s youngest member had put forth.\textsuperscript{10} As the group continued to hold out this vision of full inclusion, the goal of the group began to shift away from solely encouraging the church to become open and affirming to LGBTQ people. But at this point, the way to encourage full inclusion was not clear.

The need to find a way to full inclusion was made even more obvious during an

\textsuperscript{8} Toolkit, 30. Upon further research into Rogers’ innovativeness and adopter categories, I realized that Bradshaw’s work on organizational change in the Toolkit misrepresented an important part of Rogers’ work. Rogers never suggests that change agents shouldn’t design processes for the laggards and late adopters. On the contrary, he suggests designing a different communication strategy for each adopter category, a process Rogers calls audience segmentation: “One might appeal to innovators who adopted an innovation because it was soundly tested and developed by credible scientists, but this approach would not be effective with the late majority and laggards, who do not have a favorable attitude toward science. They will not adopt a new idea until they feel that most uncertainty about the innovation’s performance has been removed; these late adopters place greatest credibility in the subjective experiences of their peers with the innovation, conveyed to them through interpersonal networks” (E. Rogers, 275). Bradshaw’s misrepresentation of Rogers’ work takes an adversarial view of the laggards and late adopters: “... From there you are able to make change even against the resistance of the Laggards or even some of the Late Adopters. Laggards can be resilient, but do not give them more energy than they deserve. They are a small percentage that will sound like they are the majority. They are not. You should hear them, but do not let them control the process” (Bradshaw, Toolkit, 31). Heeding Bradshaw’s advice could lead to the kind of polarization in a congregation that the rest of the Toolkit seeks to avoid.

\textsuperscript{9} This hurt came out in the interviews about the history of conflict at The Community that were conducted at an earlier phase of this Doctor of Ministry program.

\textsuperscript{10} Data from the Critical Incident Questionnaire and other feedback from the panel discussion show that this concern for keeping space for the most conservative people in the congregation while finding ways to include LGBTQ people is a concern shared by church members outside this group as well.
elders’ meeting. During her usual report, the elder-leader of the core group informed the elder board that the group intended to present a proposal to the elders in the coming months for a congregation-wide conversation about homosexuality. Frank responded that the church should definitely not have a congregation-wide conversation about homosexuality, “because it will cause unnecessary conflict, and it’s not even an issue in our church.”

I challenged the elder: “Actually, it is an issue here.” I began to name congregants who had gay family members. Frank interrupted me after one man’s name: “It’s not widely known that he’s gay.” Embarrassed and shocked that I may have just “outed” someone against their will, I became quiet. Another elder chimed in: “Actually, I went to high school with him, and he was publicly ‘out’ even then. I think it’s widely known.” Frank answered, “Maybe, but it’s not widely known in our church.” As the conversation went on, Frank said,

I just don’t think we need to dredge up conflict. People here think differently about homosexuality, but we have a way of living together in quiet respect. We don’t try to change each other’s minds. If I get any whiff that you’re going to try to change my mind about PQRS people in any of these conversations you’re proposing, I’m not going to participate.

I had been quiet, but my frustration had been building since he interrupted me. When he said, “PQRS” instead of LGBTQ, I became upset: “LGBTQ. If we are going to talk about this, you’ve got to listen well enough to get the letters right. L. G. T. B. Q! ‘PQRS’ feels incredibly dismissive to me.” I began to cry, and awkward silence fell over the room. When I regained composure, I said,

I feel a little sheepish about crying, but I guess the tears are helping me understand how important this conversation is to me. I’m very passionate about LGBTQ inclusion, and balancing my personal passions with my role as a pastor and leader is new to me. I hope you’ll be patient with me while I figure this out.
Frank, I love you, and I want to continue to be able to be your pastor through this. We moved on to other business, and at the end of the meeting, Frank gave me a hug and said he loved me too and was so glad to have me be his pastor.

Reflecting on this heated encounter, I began to realize that Frank and I each had to learn to talk about our thoughts, feelings, and passions around LGBTQ issues, and then we needed to learn to listen to each other. It was a microcosm of what needed to happen in the congregation. After talking with the core group about the experience in the elders’ meeting, I wrote this in my journal:

Do we want to implement an educational process that moves this organization in a certain direction, or do we want to build community and deepen relationships? If change management is what we want, then we need to focus on the moveable middle and not worry too much about the resisters like Frank. If building community and deepening relationships is what we want, then we need to begin with a focus on the strongest resisters. Can we listen to those who are different? Can we expand our hearts to include that with which we disagree in our realm of respect? Can we learn to live together with differences? This impacts how we live in every area - from church to corporate board room to youth soccer field.

The core group met again to brainstorm ideas about how to build community and deepen relationships while talking about homosexuality. Since the congregation had already hosted two educational sessions on Restorative Circles\textsuperscript{11} in recent years and knew that Restorative Circles provides a format for having difficult conversations in an honest way that is supported by community, the core group quickly settled on using an adapted version of Restorative Circles as a format for the proposed conversation about homosexuality.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} See the discussion regarding Restorative Circles in chapter three.

\textsuperscript{12} Restorative Circles is a process designed for communities experiencing a specific conflict episode. Restorative Circles is described in detail in chapter three. This project adapts Restorative Circles for use in potentially conflicted conversations that don’t arise from a specific conflict episode.
The shift from encouraging the congregation to become open and affirming of LGBTQ people to learning to speak honestly and listen well as a way to encourage full inclusion was complete. Within eight months of the heated conversation in the elder board meeting, the core group and copastors presented the proposal for the congregation-wide conversation about same-sex relationships and the Christian faith and the elders approved it unanimously, including Frank. In fact, using an adapted version of Restorative Circles to have conversations about difficult faith topics became part of the strategic plan of the congregation, and nine leaders from the church became trained Restorative Circles facilitators. The event unfolded as described in chapter five.

Learnings

This project reveals four elements necessary for changing potentially conflicted conversations into transformative conversations in a congregation: 1) the importance of relationships between people, 2) complexifying issues beyond the polarities of for and against, 3) the capacity to live with discomfort, and 4) the courage to let something new emerge. These four learnings affirm the four disciplines that John P. Lederach describes for long-term peacebuilding and social change in conflicted communities. Lederach’s disciplines structure this chapter: the centrality of relationships, the practice of paradoxical curiosity, space for the creative act, and the willingness to risk.13

The Centrality of Relationships

At every stage of this project we learned the importance of strong relationships. Relationships with LGBTQ people motivated the pastors and core group to start conversations. Relationships with people in the congregation motivated the Core Group to change their goals. Relationships between congregation members and among the panel members and the congregation strengthened the group’s ability to stay connected and grow in the midst of disagreement. Lederach calls it the “web of relationships” and says, “Who we have been, are, and will be emerges and shapes itself in a context of relational interdependency.”

The relational web grows when people tell each other their stories. Personal stories connect people in deeper relationships, and connected people have higher capacity to navigate difficult conversations while upholding unity, purity, and peace. Psychologist Carl Rogers described his experience with this:

What is most personal is most general. There have been times when in talking with students or staff, or in my writing, I have expressed myself in ways so personal that I have felt I was expressing an attitude which it was probable no one else could understand, because it was uniquely my own . . . I have invariably found that the very feeling which has seemed to me most private, most personal, and hence most incomprehensible by others, has turned out to be an expression for which there is a resonance in many other people. It has led me to believe that what is most personal and unique in each of us is probably the very element which would, if it were shared or expressed, speak most deeply to others.

The panelists each told their own unique stories - their private and personal feelings, passions, and experiences - and found, like Rogers, that their stories spoke deeply to the congregation. When panelist Michelle talked about how difficult it was to

14. Lederach, Moral Imagination, 35.
attend her mother’s marriage to another woman, one congregation member felt free to share with the congregation for the first time her family’s suffering after her sister’s same-sex marriage. She said, “We can’t even be together on the holidays anymore. I feel like this conflict has stolen Thanksgiving and Christmas from us.” Because Michelle told her story, this congregation member was able to share hers, and open herself to the care and compassion of the church.

Rogers describes in further detail the elements necessary for transformative relationships as well as the potential growth that can happen when these elements are in place:

If I can create a relationship characterized on my part:  
by a genuineness and transparency, in which I am my real feelings;  
by a warm acceptance of and prizing of the other person as a separate individual;  
by a sensitive ability to see his world and himself as he sees them;  

Then the other individual in the relationship:  
will experience and understand aspects of himself which previously he has repressed;  
will find himself becoming better integrated, more able to function effectively;  
will become more similar to the person he would like to be;  
will be more self-directing and self-confident;  
will become more of a person, more unique and more self-expressive;  
will be more understanding, more acceptant of others;  
will be able to cope with the problems of life more adequately and more comfortably  

. . . It seems to me that we have here a general hypothesis which offers exciting possibilities for the development of creative, adaptive, autonomous persons.”

The pastors did exactly what Rogers recommends for deepening the web of relationships. We were genuine, transparent, and real about our personal views on same-sex relationships with the congregation. We validated the perspectives with which we

disagreed as faithful Christian responses and showed warm acceptance of people holding those responses. During the sermon portion of the event, Pastor Billy said,

When I describe these other viewpoints on same-sex relationships, I am not talking about mere ideas. I’m imagining real people, people in this room right now, whom I love and respect. I hear their voices as I describe these viewpoints. I might disagree with them, but these are people I love.

I made this real in the panel discussion when a congregation member said he couldn’t understand how people who hold the “welcome but change” viewpoint could call themselves Christians. I sensitively described how people with the “welcome but change” viewpoint see the world and themselves. I demonstrated that, though I disagreed with them, I understand and respect this viewpoint. People in the room with that perspective, who may have felt ostracized, were able to hear me articulate their values and beliefs clearly and respectfully. The strength of the relational web increased because the pastors shared authentically and communicated deep understanding of others.

Several CIQ responses illustrated people’s new openness to deeper relationships with one another and with God:

- “[This event] truly helped to open my heart and mind towards something I was once so closed-minded to.”
- “It was great to hear personal stories as opposed to generic discussion. [The stories] put faces with ‘positions.’”
- “[I was surprised by] my willingness to listen, really to hear with my heart.”
- “If God loves everybody, then the church needs to love everybody too.”

Frank’s email after the event displayed remarkable growth in understanding the necessity of a strong web of relationships for turning potentially conflicted conversations into transformative conversations. A year earlier, Frank refused to discuss same-sex
relationships or be put in a situation where he might change his view, let alone encourage the congregation to talk about something that might create conflict. In the email he wrote after the event, however, he showed a much greater desire to strengthen relationships in the congregation than to define a stance on homosexuality:

I think we need to spend more time on how do we discuss this together . . . I'm comfortable having differing opinions on scripture. I realize that many would disagree but that's where I am. So I'd like to let people know that we can live together and believe in one God who is big enough to understand and love all of us even if we have a hard time as sinful humans doing that.

Loving the Laggards

Division and violence thrive in communities who act with the implicit belief that “desired change can be achieved independently of the web of relationships.” When leaders implement change without engaging the entire web of relationships, division follows. Engaging the entire web of relationships means that leaders must focus on the most resistant or reluctant members of the community. Lederach calls those community members, “Pessimists,” and, more positively, “Grounded Realists.” Everett Rogers calls them, as discussed earlier, “Late Adopters” and “Laggards.”

The temptation to place the desired outcome for social change, in this instance, the core group’s desire for the congregation to become open and affirming to LGBTQ people, at a higher level of importance than the quality of relationships within the

18. E-mail message to author, October 4, 2015.
19. Lederach, Moral Imagination, 35.
20. Lederach, Moral Imagination, 55.
community, runs deep, especially in communities where religious ideals are involved. According to Lederach, however, putting the desired change, even religious ideals, ahead of relationships creates an unsustainable, and even dangerous environment in the community: “Distance and apathy go hand in hand. When the change processes are molded and shaped without engagement [with the pessimists] . . . then the process is held at a distance, and a sense of apathy and manipulated change emerges and grows.”22 As Frank said memorably in the early elders’ meeting, “If I get any whiff that you’re going to try to change my mind . . . in any of these conversations you’re proposing, I’m not going to participate.”23 And if Frank, a well-respected and well-connected elder, didn’t participate, two undesirable things could happen: the conversation would go nowhere, or it would create dissension and division. In order for this conversation to create some kind of transformation, everyone needed to engage.

The youngest member of the core group knew the importance of relationships intuitively, especially relating to the late adopters and laggards, and he changed the entire trajectory of this project when he named it: “Inclusion has to mean inclusion for all people - including the older more conservative folks and the LGBTQ people. Otherwise it’s not really inclusion.”24 We needed to love the laggards as much as we love LGBTQ people, and more than we loved the idea of inclusion.

While the transition away from the set course and relatively predictable outcome laid out in the Building an Inclusive Church Toolkit produced anxiety for the core group

22. Lederach, Moral Imagination, 55, 57.


and pastors alike, stepping into the uncharted territory and unknown outcome of adapting
Restorative Circles for the conversation concerning same-sex relationships and the
Christian faith proved to be an incredible gift. Lederach describes the laggards and late
adopters as pessimists, and claims that pessimism is a gift:

[Pessimism] arises from hard-won experience as a guide that tests the quality of
engagement. This pessimism is a gift, not a bad attitude, lack of engagement, or
bitterness gone wickedly off track . . . What it seeks to engage is a deep
understanding of human affairs, the true nature of how change happens, and the
necessity of integrity as a condition for surviving manipulation and mendacity.25

In short, loving the laggards led the core group to propose a process with more integrity
and authenticity, a process that ultimately brought the congregation into deeper
relationships with one another while considering LGBTQ inclusion.

Some of the late adopters, like Frank, participated in the Faithful Conversations
event and enriched it tremendously. But some of the laggards in the congregation, the
people most reluctant to accept change, either did not come to the Faithful Conversations
event, or came and were quiet. Participants noticed and grieved the absence of their
voices, both on the panel and in the congregational participants: “I wish the more
conservative folks, which I am sure we have, would have said something.” “I would have
liked to see more diversity in the speakers - more conservative opinions may have led to
more variety in discussion.” Even the more liberal people wished for more participation
from the more conservative folks: “I was surprised (and encouraged) at how far to the
‘left’ of the spectrum most of the people in the congregation were based on their
comments. I figured that there would be more diversity. It makes me think that more of
our challenges may be ostracizing those on the ‘right’ of the spectrum.” This feedback

25. Lederach, Moral Imagination, 55.
shows that this congregation is more interested in unity than uniformity, in the purity of relational health more than moral purity, and in difficult conversations that ultimately pursue peace rather than simply an absence of conflict.

Even though we tried to love and engage the laggards, some of them, like the two couples who left the congregation in the weeks following the Faithful Conversations event, chose not to participate. I wonder why. Perhaps the pain of feeling left out in previous changes in the congregation made them hesitant to participate in another potentially painful arena. For conservative members with gay family members, perhaps it felt too vulnerable to engage in a setting where so many people were able to observe their reactions.

The absence of some conservative members was frustrating. The Core Group had worked very hard to change their whole approach in order to create a conversation where conservative voices were welcomed and needed, and some of them didn’t attend. As a result, the Faithful Conversation process was less faithful.

However, some of the more conservative members who didn’t participate in the first Faithful Conversations event did take part in the second phase, which is mostly outside the scope of this project. This second phase focused on the diverse interpretations of scripture regarding marriage and sexuality and occurred in a small group setting.

Why did they join the second phase but not the first? Perhaps a small group setting felt more comfortable than the large group setting of the panel discussion event. Perhaps they needed to observe the fruit of the first event from afar before they could feel safe enough to risk speaking about their convictions and experiences. This speaks to the fact that faithful conversations regarding difficult topics need to be multi-faceted and
occur over a long period of time so that trust can be built and so that people with different needs can participate in a way that feels accessible and safe enough for engagement.

Even with somewhat limited attendance from conservative people, having designed a process to engage and include the laggards made a difference. Those who departed left in the context of a loving and affirming conversation where both the pastors and the members were able to grow in understanding of one another. It is hard to imagine this kind of departure happening if the core group had not found a way to love the laggards in the Faithful Conversations process.

Paradoxical Curiosity

Evangelical Christians typically divide into two camps on same-sex relationships: for and against. In the increasingly polarized contemporary American culture, it is rare that any community could harmoniously contain more than one view on just about anything, let alone a Christian community on such a heated topic as same-sex relationships. However, the ability to not only contain but also understand and respect multiple views on same-sex relationships nurtures true unity in the body of Christ. This polarized society wants to force both individuals and the church into forced categories of for and against same-sex relationships. However, this congregation found life in exploring no less than five views on same-sex relationships.

Beginning the Faithful Conversations event with an explanation of Brownson’s five evangelical Christian views on committed same-sex relationships complexified the

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26. See appendix D.
possibilities and diminished opportunities for people to retreat into the *us* and *them* and *right* and *wrong* categories that encourage division.

The goal of this event was not to move toward a stance on same-sex relationships, which would have been polarizing and divisive. The goal of this event was to grow in mutual understanding and to complexify our perspectives. In order to grow in mutual understanding, we implicitly asked people to the suspend their *right/wrong* judgment\(^{27}\) and to seek out the ways that all five viewpoints are valid.\(^{28}\) In doing so, the congregation experienced a truth deeper than *right/wrong* judgment that fueled a vision for a new way of being together: unity in diversity. The vision that emerged clearly from this event, something that few people would have been able to articulate before, is a congregation who wrestles with difficult issues in a context of love, maturity, and belonging rather than a congregation who declares didactic uniformity.\(^{29}\)

\(^{27}\) The suspension of judgment encapsulates the *paradox* part of *paradoxical curiosity* (Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 37).

\(^{28}\) Seeking out the validity of all viewpoints is the *curiosity* part of *paradoxical curiosity* (Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 37).

\(^{29}\) Lederach describes the power of paradoxical curiosity in the context of peacebuilding: “Far from being paralyzed by complexity, paradoxical curiosity . . . relies on complexity as a friend not an enemy, for from complexity emerges untold new angles, opportunities, and unexpected potentialities that surpass, replace, and break the shackles of historic and current relational patterns of repeated violence.” (Moral Imagination, 37).

This style of relating in conflict fits with Becker’s community model of congregational culture, confirming the shift from the family model to the community model that I suggested in chapter one. In the family model of church culture, conflict tends to be avoided and conversation involving different viewpoints is suppressed: “In congregations where people think of themselves as a ‘family,’ people are very good at handling most things by vote and other routine procedures that resolve disagreements before people come to think of them as conflict,” (Becker, 95). In the community cultural model, members expect that their congregation is a place to interpret for themselves what the religious traditions means in their own life (Becker, 109). Community model congregations shy away from dogmatism and tend to avoid polarizing labels. They refuse to pin themselves down as liberal or conservative (Becker, 110 and 116), and highly value tolerance (Becker, 100).
“Some truths are worth dividing over if necessary and some are not.” The schismatic history of the Protestant church illustrates that Protestant Christians know how to divide over essential truths when necessary. However, since the inception of the Church, not dividing when it isn’t necessary has proven more difficult. The threat of division loomed in the earliest church in Rome. In Romans 14-15, Paul urged two groups of Christians who disagreed about significant lifestyle choices (whether to eat meat or not, and whether to observe certain holidays or not) to stop passing judgement on each other and to accept each other for the sake of their witness to the gospel:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. Paul does not condemn either the “weak” Roman Christians (who have more traditional views on eating meat and observing holy days) or the “strong” (who have progressive views on eating meat and observing holy days) for their viewpoints. He condemns their judgement of one another over these non-essential matters. Paul encourages them to stop giving each other a hard time and start “pursuing what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding.” To use Lederach’s term, Paul desires that they live with *paradoxical curiosity.*


31. Romans 15:5-7, NRSV.

32. Romans 14:17, NRSV.

33. Romans 14:19, NRSV.
Jenny, one of the panelists in the Faithful Conversations event, declared her belief that committed same-sex relationships are a “disputable matter” in the Christian faith. Jenny was following the path tread by Pastor Ken Wilson, who applied the term to same-sex marriage, calling it the “third-way approach.” Wilson describes the “third-way approach” this way:

A third way departs from the ‘open and affirming’ and the ‘love the sinner, hate the sin’ approach by regarding the question of whether and how the biblical prohibitions apply in the case of monogamous gay relationships as a ‘disputable matter’ in the Romans 14-15 sense. A third way approach says, ‘We can agree to disagree on this question’ without separating from each other. We can hold our respective positions as firmly as our conscience dictates. But we have chosen not to treat this matter as something we have to hold in common in order to share a true unity of the Spirit.

The third way approach calls for churches to embrace LGBTQ Christians in committed same-sex relationships “for the sake of Christ” just as they embrace people who believe these relationships to be sinful. Since the New Testament never singles out homosexuality as a sin that disqualifies people from ordained leadership, people in committed same-sex relationships should be allowed to seek ordained leadership in the church while being held to the same moral qualifications as the rest of the candidates. Richard Hays describes mutual acceptance this way:

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34. Wilson, 104-110.
35. Wilson, 112-113. Christians disagree about whether same-sex marriage is a disputable matter or not. Wilson gives an excellent review of scholarship on Romans 14-15 and offers these criteria for determining disputable matters: 1) When the matter doesn’t involve basic Christian dogma defined by the ecumenical creeds (Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed, Chalcedonian Creed, etc); 2) When the question brings two or more biblical truths into conversation using faithful interpretations of Scripture (such as law/grace, mercy/judgement, etc); and 3) When faithful Christians find themselves holding different perspectives. Wilson, 107-108.

37. Wilson, 116-118.
This means that for the foreseeable future we must find ways to live within the church in a situation of serious moral disagreement while still respecting one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. If the church is going to start practicing the discipline of exclusion from the community, there are other issues far more important than homosexuality where we should begin to draw a line in the dirt: violence and materialism, for example. 38

This embrace is for the sake of Christ because it widens the welcome of the church and gives more people access to the gospel while leaving judgement of sin to God. 39

The Core Group read Ken Wilson’s book, A Letter to My Congregation in preparation for the Faithful Conversations event and balked against the term “disputable matter” for two reasons. First, several members of the group felt that LGBTQ Christians might not feel fully welcomed into a congregation who determined the validity of their most significant relationship to be “disputable.” Second, members of the group felt that “agreeing to disagree” allows Christians to avoid talking about this difficult issue and stifles the discernment that comes from conversation. One longer term member of the church suggested that “we agree to disagree” had been a major way that The Community had dealt with conflict following a period of explosive conflict. “People feared the shouting matches of the past and said they would ‘agree to disagree.’ But really they just swept their disagreements under the rug to avoid fighting. We don’t want to do that anymore. We need to talk about this.”

However, a closer read of Wilson’s book reveals that the key phrases “disputable matter” and “agree to disagree” don’t capture the full nuance of Wilson’s argument. In fact, the full nuance matches the learnings of the Faithful Conversation event quite well.


in at least two ways. First, Wilson clarifies that controversies around “disputable matters”

might be a step on the way to settling the dispute. He says,

Disputable matters might remain in dispute indefinitely, or with time, a common
discernment may form in the community and the dispute disappears . . . The third
way provides room for the Spirit to work in the community - to practice
acceptance during the period of disagreement and to eventually settle some
matters.40

The Community in Ada finds itself in that middle space where same-sex marriage
remains a matter of dispute. But the elders of the church have determined that the
congregation will not stay in this dispute indefinitely. The stated goal of the elders is to
continue both informal and formal Faithful Conversations regarding same-sex
relationships until the time comes to make a decision. What that decision will be or how
the need to make the decision will arise remains unclear, but one thing is certain: the
disciplines of Faithful Conversations provide a crucial tool which empowers the
congregation to both identify the need for a decision and to make the decision
courageously.

Second, several months after reading Wilson’s book, members of The Core Group
felt a strong call to approach the conversation about same-sex marriage in a way that
invited the inclusion of people with all viewpoints on same-sex marriage. Similarly,
Wilson points out that “the third way approach” challenges liberals41 to accept their
conservative brothers and sisters. Members of The Core Group balked at the phrase
“disputable matter” in reference to same-sex marriage because they were liberals who

40. Wilson, 116.

41. Wilson acknowledges the pitfalls of categorizing people who affirm same-sex marriage as
“liberals” and those who do not affirm same-sex marriage as “conservatives.” But he uses the terms
anyway because of the line of many commentators who identify the “weak” in Romans 14-15 with
conservative people and the “strong” with liberal people. Wilson 120.
had not yet become fully aware of the judgments they implicitly pronounced upon conservatives in the congregation. After several months of wrestling, one of The Core Group members described it this way: “Inclusion has to mean inclusion for all people - including the more conservative folks and the LGBTQ people. Otherwise it’s not really inclusion.” Wilson aptly described the journey of the liberal Core Group: “The liberal in the third way approach is called to trade the pleasure of sharing faith in a like-minded group for the challenge of sharing faith in a diverse one. The liberal’s instinctive commitment to diversity will be tested under the third-way approach.”

Space for the Creative Act

Lederach argues that professional mediation techniques alone will not build sustainable social change. Professional techniques can create a framework for social change, but the framework will not hold together over time without the infusion of creativity, art, and spontaneity. Professional techniques that value order, timeliness, and propriety, while helpful and necessary, can squash spontaneity, creativity, and art. But a prudent peacebuilder creates both literal and conceptual space for spontaneity, creativity, and art that allows something new and unexpected to emerge.

This project created literal space for a creative act by calling the congregation together and naming the parameters for the Faithful Conversation. Sharing private and personal feelings, passions, and experiences does not always result in a deeper relationship, especially when dealing with a contentious topic like human sexuality.

42. MR, core group meeting, Ada, MI, July 15, 2014.
43. Wilson, 124-125.
44. Lederach, Moral Imagination, 38.
Setting the tone and parameters for the community conversation makes all the difference. Beginning with the letter introducing the event, the tone and goal was clear: to gain mutual understanding around a difficult topic. During the event itself, the pastors and facilitator set the tone that all viewpoints were valid, and again stated that the goal of the conversation was to understand each other. As a result, the congregation was largely able to set aside the need to evaluate the viewpoints of the panelists so that the stories of the panelists could deeply impact the congregation in a transformational way.

The Ah-Hah Moment

The project created conceptual space for the creative act. The path from difficult conversations to deeper relationships is not paved primarily by information about an opponent or difficult topic. People need to connect pieces of information with their observations and experiences and integrate it all with their intuition in order to experience transformation of conflicts into deeper relationships. This is the creative act necessary for sustainable social change. Lederach says,

> We might call them the moments of the aesthetic imagination, a place where suddenly, out of complexity and historic difficulty, the clarity of insight makes an unexpected appearance in the form of an image or in a way of putting something that can only be described as artistic. . . These are moments when all involved feel a collective ah-hah.45

These “ah-hah” moments cannot be engineered with peacebuilding techniques. They simply arise in the course of conversation, often beginning in the form of images and metaphors created by participants. When people give the metaphors and images proper

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space, “they take on lives of their own and they speak to the conflict, to the problems, and to the ways forward.”

A significant ah-hah moment happened during the Faithful Conversations event when one participant spoke in metaphor:

I’m curious about what it sounds like for people outside the church, especially gay people, when we talk about ‘welcoming’ them. It makes the church sound so high and mighty - like we are doing everyone a favor by letting them in. I didn’t grow up in the church, so this is all a little foreign to me. Maybe we should talk about how we get off this pedestal and go out to embrace people rather than waiting for them to come to us.

This is the power of the creative act: in just a few words a layperson set up two contrasting images that captured the personal stories of the panel members and easily communicated the entire field of missional ecclesiology. More than a year after the event, Pastor Billy remembered those images as the most significant learning from the event, and this ah-hah moment provided a lasting image of what this congregation does not want to be.

The Internal Creative Space: Emotion

Ah-hah moments, the times when something new or unexpected emerges, happen in group settings, but they can also be deeply personal. A complex and powerful surge of emotions was the creative space from which these internal ah-hah moments sprung up as I prepared for and led the project.

46. Lederach, Moral Imagination, 72.

47. Missional Ecclesiology has four emphases: 1) God sends the Church into the world; 2) the Church participates in God’s kingdom but does not encompass all of God’s kingdom; 3) the Church is incarnational rather than attractional; and 4) every member of the Church is a minister of God’s mission. Craig VanGelder and Dwight Zscheile, The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 4.
This internal creative space opened up for me during the elders’ meeting I described earlier, where I was trying to show up and speak from my passion for LGBTQ inclusion, and I ended up crying. I wanted to be the cool, calm, and collected leader, but there I was, a bumbling mess. I wanted to run and hide. Thankfully, I’ve had enough practice with these moments to know that something important was happening, and I was able to stay in my seat, look within myself, and consider my emotions with curiosity.

What were the emotions behind my tears? I felt ashamed because elder Frank suggested that I had outed a gay person connected with our church, I felt diminished and angry when elder Frank said, “PQRS” rather than “LGBTQ,” and I felt foolish - surely I had almost let my congregation sink into ruin by talking about homosexuality! In addition, I felt sad and confused about how to live with my passion regarding LGBTQ inclusion as a pastor in somewhat conservative congregation.

I resisted the urge to run across the hall and hide in my office, and I named what I was feeling out loud in the elders’ meeting as best I could. I shared this quote from my journal earlier, but it bears repeating:

I feel a little sheepish about crying, but I guess the tears are helping me understand how important this conversation is to me. I’m very passionate about LGBTQ inclusion, and balancing my personal passions with my role as a pastor and leader is new to me. I hope you’ll be patient with me while I figure this out. Frank, I love you, and I want to continue to be able to be your pastor through this.

The elders nodded quietly and said they appreciated my honesty, and we moved on to the next agenda item as though nothing had happened.

While my response in the elders’ meeting sounded like I had this emotion thing figured out, everything became un-figured out when I got home. I felt like a gigantic, hopeless failure. In this time of anxiety, the congregation needed a competent leader, and
I had no idea how to lead through this. I hated Frank. Feeling like I was face down in the
mud was my space for the creative act - space where something new and even
revolutionary opened before me. Brene Brown calls the creative act the revolution:
“Having the courage to reckon with our emotions and to rumble with our stories is the
path to writing our brave new ending . . . owning our story, taking responsibility for our
emotions - this is where the revolution starts.”\textsuperscript{48}

As I wrestled with my emotions and my feelings of shame and hopelessness, as
well as my supposed hatred of Frank, I had several epiphanies: First, I don’t hate Frank; I
love Frank. I could imagine that Frank might be feeling vulnerable and maybe afraid that
his church is going to split. Second, I feel vulnerable, too. Leading in an area where I
have personal passions is new territory, and there’s no road map. I am afraid I’ll make
mistakes and cause the church to split. Third, Frank and I actually care about the same
thing. There’s no \textit{us} versus \textit{them}. There’s only \textit{us}. That was my revolution, and, at the
same time, the congregation’s - there’s only \textit{us}.

\textit{There’s only us.} This revolution rose out of the creative space of my complex and
powerful surge of emotion. I could have pushed aside the emotions that came out of the
heated interaction with Frank, labeled him a laggard, and pushed on with the change
management process recommended by the \textit{Toolkit}. The discipline of opening up space for
the creative act, though it was uncomfortable, allowed me to realize that \textit{there’s only us}.
In Christ, there’s only \textit{us}. In this congregation, there’s only us. We must not be afraid of
people with different viewpoints because we are all one in Christ. We must find ways to

\textsuperscript{48} Brown, \textit{Rising Strong}, 97.
speak and listen to each other, seek the leading of the Holy Spirit, and live in unity that is much deeper than uniformity. There’s only us. We’ve got to do this together.

My second epiphany was that settling into a plan for the Faithful Conversations event was going to be uncomfortable and unpredictable, exactly how Lederach describes creative space.49 Creative space is new territory without a pre-existing road map. But this is precisely the territory that transformational leaders must travel: “lean in to discomfort and vulnerability,”50 because the discomfort of the unknown is precisely where the creative act can take shape.51

Willingness to Risk

“Risk is mystery. It requires a journey. Risk means we take a step toward and into the unknown.”52 This project was transformational precisely because people were willing to take risks. The panel members risked. Michelle, the panel member who is a minister in the Christian Reformed Church, began her remarks by naming the risk she took by speaking publicly about her affirmation of committed same-sex relationships. She did not elaborate on the precise nature of the risk, but it is not difficult to imagine the possible negative consequences of a minister communicating viewpoints that depart from the stated position of her denomination. Despite the risk, Michelle communicated clearly that she was honored to speak because she strongly believes that the church needs to talk

49. Lederach, Moral Imagination, 38.
50. Brene Brown, Rising Strong, 8.
51. Lederach, Moral Imagination, 39.
52. Lederach, Moral Imagination, 39.
about same-sex relationships. Michelle’s willingness to risk created an environment where others became courageous to risk. After Michelle shared the story of her mother’s wedding to another woman, the congregation member struggling with her gay family member felt brave enough to share the story of her family’s suffering, and other congregation members were moved to compassion for this family.

Panelist Mike, the pastor with the “welcome but abstain” viewpoint on same-sex marriage, also risked by agreeing to participate in the panel. He ministers in an area of his denomination that might frown upon a minister even entertaining conversation with people who hold the “welcome and affirm” viewpoint. And yet, he spoke boldly, calling for Christians to figure out how to welcome LGBTQ people even though they disagree regarding whether they should be celibate. Todd, the gay panelist, risked vulnerability and rejection by speaking about his sexual orientation with a group of people he didn’t know. Jenny possibly took the least personal risk by speaking on the panel. And yet, she described friends cutting off relationship with her due to her openness about affirming same-sex marriage.

Not everyone was willing to take the risk of participating in this event. For some, the risk was too high. But no one entered that event did so without taking a risk. Each person who attended the Faithful Conversation event risked having their mind changed. The pastors of The Community risked rejection by the congregation as well as causing undue conflict in the church. But without people taking these risks, the project would not have produced transformative results.
**Uncharted Territory**

By definition, risk accepts vulnerability and lets go of the need to a priori control the process or the outcome of human affairs. It is the journey of the great explorers for it chooses, like the images in the maps of old, to live at the edge of known cartography. Risk means stepping into a place where you are not sure what will come or what will happen.\(^5^3\)

After The Core Group had the realization that the *Toolkit* was not going to match our values for the conversation on same-sex relationships and the Christian faith, the joint decision to leave behind the known course of the *Toolkit* wrenched my gut. We were stepping into territory for which there was no map, no manual to consult, no experts to engage, and no assured outcome. I had no idea how to move forward. There was only a sense of God’s calling, the learning that led to the commitment to loving both the laggards and LGBTQ people, and the new questions that resulted from that commitment. It didn’t feel like enough. Elder Frank’s anxiety rang in my ears: “I just don’t think we need to dredge up conflict.” I wondered if I was leading the congregation into ruin.

Tod Bolsinger describes the difficulty of facing uncharted territory:

> At exactly the moment when the congregation is looking to the leader to give direction, the leader’s own anxiety and inner uncertainty is the highest. But this is the moment when the transformational leader goes off the map and begins to lead differently.\(^5^4\)

After several months of feeling stuck in my anxiety and uncertainty, I took the risk of experimenting with leading differently with The Core Group. I let go of the need to have the answers and began to engage The Core Group and other leaders in the learning necessary skills and capacities to navigate this uncharted territory well. After The Core Group wondered whether Restorative Circles would provide a helpful framework, I was

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tempted to try to attend a training myself in order to be the expert so that I could figure out how to adapt it to the church’s needs. But I chose to take the risk to lead differently. Bolsinger names the importance of engaging others in learning and transformation as a skill that builds capacity for leading well in uncharted territory. I invited nine people to learn to facilitate Restorative Circles, and together we figured out how to adapt Restorative Circles for this difficult conversation. When I tried to lead on my own in uncharted territory, I got stuck. But when I took the risk to let go of my need for control and share leadership, we navigated the unknown territory well and shared both the vulnerability and the joy of participating in a transformational process.

As a result of the willingness to take these risks, the change in this congregation was groundbreaking. Before the event took place, one congregation member remarked, “People in this church don’t feel that they can discuss their convictions and questions because they’re afraid of being judged by their fellow church members.” After the event, participants reported quite the opposite: “[I was] surprised by the openness of church members; “I was surprised at the considerate manner in which the discussion took place;” “[I was surprised by] how open everyone was and loving toward all the discussions;” And, most strikingly, “[It was helpful] that we could all speak our mind without feeling judged or wrong in our beliefs.” The revolutionary result of Faithful Conversations was a congregation who grew in mutual understanding, trust, and fondness while they talked about homosexuality.

55. Bolsinger, 90.
The Long View

Perhaps the longest-term risk in this project involves pastors and parishioners alike needing to hold their own convictions with open hands in order to allow, and even invite, the Triune God to shape us in deep and fundamental ways through other people’s stories, experiences, and perspectives over time. I am convinced that God smiles upon faithful covenanted relationships between same-sex partners, and I am convicted that the church needs to make extra efforts to enfold LGBTQ people and seek forgiveness for the harm done over centuries of exclusion. While my congregation currently holds diverse convictions regarding same-sex marriage, I long for my congregation to move toward unity in openly affirming same-sex marriage.

And, I want this change to be authentic and long-lasting, which requires a long view. It took ten years for God to change my mind about same-sex marriage. If I want God to deeply change people’s hearts and minds about same-sex marriage, I must practice patience and persistence in gently continuing the conversation while trusting that God is at work to bring about the shalom that LGBTQ people so desperately need.

Since my congregation holds diverse views, I recognize that other people hope that God will use Faithful Conversations over the long haul to move the congregation away from affirming same-sex marriage. Until God settles this, I must hold my conviction with open hands and risk being wrong if that is how God leads. If I’m not willing to be wrong, I’m merely trying to argue my position rather than opening up space for true faithful conversations where God can change hearts and minds in deep and compelling ways. That is where real sustainable social change and real strides toward unity, purity, and peace take hold.
Next Steps

The next steps for The Community in Ada with regard to Faithful Conversations fall into five arenas: 1) new conversations around difficult topics within the congregation, 2) development of individual members’ ability to change conflict into an opportunity for growth in their work, family, and friend relationships, 3) partnerships with other organizations doing similar work, 4) continued conversation around same-sex marriage within the congregation, and 5) a model for Faithful Conversations for use in other settings. The model is included in chapter seven.

As the values and disciplines of Faithful Conversations have become integrated into the culture and relational style of The Community in Ada, new topics for Faithful Conversations have arisen. For example, The Community used an adaptation of the Faithful Conversations process to discuss the redevelopment of the church’s building and property. After a transparent (and long) research process, church leaders presented five possible redevelopment plans to the congregation. After giving members two weeks to think and pray about the plans, we held a congregational gathering with a paid facilitator where small groups of members shared their responses, concerns, questions, and excitement with each other in a conversational space facilitated and recorded by church leaders. Next, the paid facilitator invited members to write their questions, concerns, and excitement on sticky notes of three different colors and post them on large sheets representing the five potential plans. This created a dramatic visual expression of the questions, concerns, and excitement of the congregation as a whole around the five potential plans. At the conclusion of the event, the paid facilitator gave each member two sticky dots (a different color than the sticky notes) and invited them to place the dots on
the plan or plans into which they felt God was leading the congregation. Again, this
created a dramatic visual representation of the discernment occurring in the congregation.
One of the plans clearly emerged as the one with the most energy and sense of God’s
leading around it. Leaders of the church tabulated the information from all the sticky
notes and dots and made a recommendation for which plan to pursue based on the results.
Because of this congregation-wide process, members who expressed significant concerns
around the plan that the congregation decided to pursue witnessed the energy and
excitement of other congregation members, and those who were excited about the plan
heard the concerns and questions raised by those who were hesitant. As a result, the
congregation has been able to move forward together with unity, purity, and peace.

Individual members of The Community can also give the gift of living in unity,
purity, and peace in the midst of conflict to their families, neighborhoods, sports teams,
workplaces, and so on. Imagine the possibilities for transformation when the coach of a
children’s soccer league can model resolutely listening to two children in conflict and
then teach them how to speak and listen to each other. Or what could happen when a
manager seeks to understand the reasons behind an employee’s angry e-mail rather than
blindly reacting. Members of The Community are learning how to do this; this is the
Church following Christ in mission and transforming the world.

Exploring partnerships with other groups doing similar work could bear fruit. The
Colossian Forum, an ecumenical Christian organization whose mission is “to equip
leaders to transform messy cultural conflicts into opportunities for spiritual growth and
witness,” could learn from the experience of The Community, and The Community

could be a test site for the programs The Colossian Forum is developing so that we can work together to advance unity, purity, and peace together.

The Community in Ada needs to keep talking about same-sex marriage. Phase one involved the event outlined in this project. Phase two involved small group study of how the Bible speaks to marriage and same-sex relationships. Further phases are needed as the congregation continues to grow and discern the future into which God is leading us.

As of March 2017, same-sex marriage remains a “disputable matter” at The Community in Ada. The pastors and elders have resolved to keep the faithful conversations going until the time that God leads us to settle the dispute. This time might come when a child of the church reveals that they are LGBTQ, a same-sex couple requests a marriage ceremony or baptism for their child, an LGBTQ person shows obvious gifts for ministry, or a change arises in denominational policy. When this time comes, an adaptation of Faithful Conversations can help the congregation make the necessary decisions together.

In the meantime, as I figure out how to live with my passion for LGBTQ inclusion and my role as pastor to this lovely congregation, I can attest to the truth of Ken Wilson’s words: “The liberal in the third way approach is called to trade the pleasure of sharing faith in a like-minded group for the challenge of sharing faith in a diverse one. The liberal’s instinctive commitment to diversity will be tested under the third-way approach.”57 And, I remain convinced that the larger vision put forth by the youngest member of the Core Group echoes God’s vision: “Inclusion has to mean inclusion for all

57. Wilson, 124-125.
people, including the more conservative folks and LGBTQ people. Otherwise it’s not really inclusion.”

As The Community continues to practice the disciplines of Faithful Conversations, both the congregation as a whole and individual members are developing a tremendous gift to share. This is already happening; news about a congregation tackling the contentious topic of homosexuality without dividing travels fast. We have set an example to show that it can be done. The model for Faithful Conversations outlined in chapter seven can help other congregations do it, and leaders from this congregation can provide mentoring and support.

Chapter 7

Model for Faithful Conversations

Introduction

This model is designed for use in local evangelical Christian congregations whose members hold different viewpoints on same-sex marriage. It draws from three sources: 1) The Building an Inclusive Church Toolkit; 2) Restorative Circles; and 3) John Paul Lederach’s peacebuilding practices for sustainable social change.

These values create the foundation for the work Faithful Conversations: 1) The sole purpose of listening in this process is to understand what matters to the person speaking; 2) Disagreement is a natural part of living together and it does not have to be harmful to relationships; and 3) Speaking authentically and listening deeply in the midst of disagreements enriches our relationships, deepens our self-understanding, and helps us discern the Holy Spirit’s leading.

The goals of this model are: 1) To complexify people’s understanding of Christian viewpoints on same-sex marriage beyond for and against; 2) To create a safe enough space for congregation members to hear personal stories of people with viewpoints and experiences different than their own; and 3) To create a safe enough space for congregation members to speak their own stories and viewpoints; 4) To strengthen the

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1. Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit 2.0 is described in chapter five.
2. Restorative Circles is described in chapter three.
3. Lederach’s peacebuilding practices are found in The Moral Imagination and The Little Book of Conflict Transformation.
web of relationships within the congregation; and 5) To increase the congregation’s ability to embrace LGBTQ people.4

Figure 2. The Faithful Conversation Model

Preparation: Talk about Talking about It

Laying the groundwork for Faithful Conversations requires time and energy, but the investment will pay off in the later parts of the model. The tasks of preparation are to gather the Core Group, design and implement a communication plan, and present a proposal to the leadership of the congregation.

Form the Core Group

The process begins with the people who want to talk about same-sex relationships gathering together and organizing themselves into the Core Group. The Toolkit calls this process relational organizing: “Relational organizing is working with and beyond the

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4. This stated goal may cause discomfort for those who believe same-sex marriage is incompatible with Christian faithfulness. But even if same-sex relationships are sinful, the church must welcome sinners because Jesus made a habit of welcoming sinners (Luke 15:2, NRSV). Being in the presence of Christ calls people out of sin no matter how sin is defined, but being in the presence of Christ needs to come first. One panel member who holds a more traditional view of same-sex marriage said in a Faithful Conversations event, “Having a position is important, but it is not the most important . . . The thing that would bless God and bless God’s people the most is to get the ‘welcome’ part right . . . there’s enough bandwidth within ‘welcome’ that we can agree to disagree. But if we can’t get the ‘welcome’ right, then we’re not functioning as the church.”
bureaucratic culture of a congregation.” The most important tool of relational organizing is the one-on-one conversation, and these individual meetings are both the principal strategy for forming the Core Group and the method the Core Group uses as they prepare for Faithful Conversations.

A pastor or layperson, or a combination of both, can begin to initiate conversations with congregation members to determine whether they have interest in joining the core group. Start with people whom you know to be passionate about LGBTQ inclusion - their passion is likely to motivate them to do the work of the Core Group.

These initial conversations might begin with the pastor or layperson saying something like this:

“You may or may not know this about me, but . . .” [Tell a brief story about why you’re interested in conversations about LGBTQ inclusion, perhaps a story about the impact of an LGBTQ friend or family member].

“As a result, I am really interested in our congregation talking about same-sex relationships. I wonder what you think about this . . .” [Listen to their thoughts].

“Would be willing to join me and a few other people to talk about this? I’d like to invite you and a few others to a gathering so we can share our ideas and questions.” [Give information about the gathering].

“Is there anyone else you think I should invite?”

Two important factors to consider in gathering the Core Group are whether or not the pastor(s) and LGBTQ people will participate. If you know that the pastor(s) is/are open to LGBTQ inclusion, invite them to the initial gathering and ponder together the


time commitment and political factors involved in joining the Core Group. If the pastor(s) decide(s) to join, think carefully about whether or not they should lead the group. In many cases, people may be more open to discussion about LGBTQ people and the Christian faith if it is promoted by their peers rather than by their pastors. If the pastors are not open to discussing LGBTQ inclusion or you are not sure, do not reach out to them until the Core Group implements the communication plan. The Toolkit gives helpful advice for Core Groups whose pastors are opposed to LGBTQ inclusion:

If your clergy is against the process, it is very difficult to proceed. They do not have to be ardent supporters, but active opposition to a conversation about LGBTQ inclusion on the part of the clergy makes it very difficult for the conversation to succeed. If you have clergy opposition to a conversation . . . focus on relationship-building with the clergy and informally work within the congregation . . . until the clergy are no longer opposed.  

As you discern how to include LGBTQ congregation members in conversations around the formation of the Core Group and subsequent developments, ponder this insight from the Toolkit:

[This] can be a difficult time for LGBT members of your congregation. They may not be supportive of the process at all, fearing that a negative outcome will mean a loss of their sense of community. They may be concerned that this process will put them under a spotlight. They may be supportive of the process but not feel called to a leadership role. They may also be excited about the process, awaiting an invitation to participate. As a Core Team, check in with known LGBT members of your congregation. Determine their preferred role in the Welcoming Process, and their willingness and ability to be publicly identified in their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Assure them that you will check in with them periodically.

At the initial gathering, begin by briefly sharing the story of why you are passionate about same-sex relationships and the Christian faith. Invite others to share

8. Toolkit, 6.

their stories. Share the Faithful Conversations model with them, and ask whether they think it would work in your congregation. Ask them whether they are willing to commit to joining the Core Group.

Once you have gathered the Core Group (ideally five to seven people), the next task is the formation of the Core Group into a cohesive community of mutual support, accountability, and learning. Plan to meet regularly. Practice spiritual disciplines such as prayer and Bible study (using texts not specific to homosexuality at this stage); these are essential for grounding the group in Christian discipleship. I suggest using the contemplative practice of reading and praying scripture called Lectio Divina\textsuperscript{10} at each meeting as a tool for growing in faith together and forming a cohesive group.

The Core Group must decide what they need to learn together in order to do their work. The most crucial area for learning is reframing understandings of conflict and changing responses to conflict. The congregation cannot face difficult conversations concerning same-sex relationships without a Core Group of people who can model a non-destructive, even transformative view of conflict. I suggest two resources for this. The first is the discipline of “graceful engagement” outlined by the \textit{Toolkit}:\textsuperscript{11}

Graceful engagement is:

- Living together in relationship and compassion
- Fully valuing other people and their beliefs, even when they differ from our own
- Listening more than speaking
- Meeting people where they are, not where we want them to be

Graceful engagement is NOT:

- Debate


\textsuperscript{11}. \textit{Toolkit}, 12-13.
- Forcing our opinions on others through argument
- Exclusion or outright condemning those with whom we do not agree
- Leaving the church to find a place ‘where everyone agrees’

Although we may wish to always be models of Graceful Engagement, it can be a challenge to maintain this perspective. You may need the support of your Core Team in the days to come. Knowing your own ‘triggers’ (those things that we know are likely to pull us away from being able to Gracefully Engage) can help us be ready when those situations arise. Lead a discussion about situations or conversations that might come up that may be difficult for each member of the Core Team. You might want to role-play specific scenarios to prepare possible responses. Remember that sometimes the most graceful option is to end a conversation rather than listening to abusive or hurtful comments. After pondering potential challenges, have each member share a time when they most clearly experienced Grace. Remembering these Grace-filled moments can also help in more difficult times.12

The second tool for understanding and engaging conflict effectively is a small book by John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*. Read and discuss the book together as a group.

In order to gain clarity and find their voice on LGBTQ inclusion, the Core Group may also want to explore psychological, biological, theological, and biblical issues around homosexuality and the Christian faith. I suggest reading and discussing chapter four of this project for an overview of various perspectives on these issues. Where did group members find resonance with their own views and experiences? Where did group members find themselves resisting the views and experiences of others? What further questions need exploring?

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The Communication Plan

After the Core Group has engaged mutual support, accountability, and learning for several months using the strategies described above, the next task is to form a communication plan. The communication plan is another strategy for relational organizing. The goals of the communication plan are to: 1) Clarify the general message the Core Group wants to communicate; 2) Decide what the team wants to learn or hear from congregation members; 3) Identify key individuals and groups for targeted conversation; 4) Determine the best communication approach for each target audience and the team member who can best engage each one; 5) Establish a time-frame for the communications; and 6) Provide accountability and support in completing the communication.

Clarify the Message

The first step in developing the communication plan is to clarify the message that the Core Group wants people in the congregation to hear. The Core Group will need to determine how much they want to communicate. At the most basic level, the message is the existence of the Core Group, the general reason for the Core Group’s gathering, and the individual group member’s story describing their motivation for participating. For example, “A group of five people have been meeting for several months because we want


14. If the Core Group needs help determining the readiness of the congregation for conversations about LGBTQ inclusion, the Toolkit offers a thorough assessment tool. Toolkit, 18-25.
to discuss how our church engages people who are LGBTQ.\textsuperscript{15} We believe that our church can talk about homosexuality in a non-divisive way. I am part of that group because . . . ” [briefly tell your story].

Depending on the culture and readiness of the congregation for a conversation about LGBTQ inclusion, the group might decide to include the group’s intentions to propose that the congregation have a Faithful Conversations event or not. If not, plan to form a second communication plan at some point in the future to communicate the Core Group’s intentions to propose a Faithful Conversations event. If the Core Group is in doubt about how much to communicate, err on the side of caution in order for more time to pass for discerning the readiness of the congregation.

\textbf{Identify Desired Learning}

The second step in the communication plan is to decide what the Core Group wants to learn from the congregation. The communication plan is two-sided: it plans for both speaking and listening. Does the Core Group want to know how congregation members feel about their goals? Do they want to invite their target audiences to share their viewpoints on LGBTQ inclusion? A Core Group member might simply say, “I wonder what your response is to what I just told you.” Or, “I’ve shared my story about why I’m passionate about LGBTQ inclusion. I’m wondering if you’d be willing to share your perspective on this.” Be sure to ask whether it is okay to share their responses with the Core Group.

\footnote{15. Be sensitive to language. People may not understand the LGBTQ acronym. You may want to begin by saying, “lesbian and gay people.”}
Identify Key People

The third step in the communication plan involves identifying key individuals and groups for targeted conversation. Begin by listing known LGBTQ congregation members. They are your first priority in the communication plan.

Identify more key people by examining the web of relationships in the congregation with a keen eye for strategy. First, conduct a power analysis.\(^{16}\) Make a list of the people with influence in your congregation. They might be people with positions of authority (for example, pastors, elders, deacons, or staff members) or they may simply be people whom others respect. List as many people as you can. Next, consider Rogers’ categories of innovativeness\(^ {17} \) and try to determine which category the influential people in your congregation fit into. List them by innovativeness category.

- Innovators (value creativity and novelty)
- Early adopters (open-minded and information seeking)
- Early majority (desire unity, are willing to listen)
- Late majority (are skeptical, will change when the majority of the congregation has changed)
- Laggards (the last to adopt new ideas)

Then, spend some time identifying the “laggards” in your congregation. List as many as you can, whether they are influential or not. The last step in identifying the key people for the communication plan is to identify the already-existing relationships between the...

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influential innovators/early adopters and the late majority/laggards. The people in these relationships are your second priority in the communication plan. The people in the late adopter/laggard categories are your third priority.

**Determine the Approaches and the Team Members**

Design a separate communication strategy for each conversation and assign a team member to initiate each one. Build on relationships that already exist. Divide the more difficult conversations between Core Group members. Adapt the communication strategy for the innovativeness category of the congregation member and their position in the relational web. For example, the innovators may desire to get involved right away, while the laggards need to be heard and given opportunities to influence the process.

Begin by reaching out to the known LGBTQ people in the congregation:

Check in with known LGBT members of your congregation. Determine their preferred role in the . . . process, and their willingness and ability to be publicly identified in their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Assure them that you will check in with them periodically.

Next, plan for meeting with the congregation members who are well-connected across innovativeness categories. Involve the innovators/early adopters who are relationally connected to the late majority/laggards in strengthening the web of relationships by asking them to initiate conversations about LGBTQ inclusion with the late majority and laggards, compassionately listen to any concerns, and pass them on to


the Core Group. This builds an environment of open conversation throughout the congregation, increases trust, and helps the Core Group gain wisdom for their process from those who are hesitant.21 The Core Group’s task with the late majority/laggards who are relationally connected to the innovators and early majority is to introduce the basic message, listen with compassion, and then let the relational web do its work, following up as necessary.

The Core Group must attend to the late majority/laggards who are not well-connected in the relational web. Other than people in the congregation who are LGBTQ or have a close family member who is LGBTQ, these people have the most to lose in conversations concerning LGBTQ inclusion. They need the most care. Gently deliver the basic message and listen to their responses. Listen. Listen, and listen some more. *Listen in order to understand their perspectives, not to defend, correct, or argue.* Find out what is important to them; what causes them concern; how they feel, and why. Other than delivering the basic message and telling your story briefly, plan to listen more than speak. Make it your goal to learn about the person and find ways to love and appreciate them. These may be very challenging conversations, but they will be fruitful in strengthening the web of relationships over time. Don’t try to change people’s minds; you won’t be successful, and changing minds is not your goal. The goal is to create safe enough space for the late majority/laggard to speak authentically and be compassionately heard. This builds their voice. The more voice the laggards have and the more love you have for them, the more courage they will have to take the risk to stay connected in the midst of disagreement.

Establish a Time-Frame

Agree upon a reasonable time frame for each conversation and ask the Core Group members. Don’t be afraid to space out the conversations over several months, but don’t let this phase of Faithful Conversations continue indefinitely. If the Core Group feels compelled to slow the process down in the midst of executing the communication plan, adapt the plan and the time-frame accordingly.

Provide Accountability and Support

During the execution of the communication plan, spend a significant amount of time at each gathering of the Core Group processing the conversations each member has initiated. These are some possible questions to provide structure to the processing:22

- What happened?
- How did the person respond to you?
- How did you feel throughout the conversation?
- What concerns and ideas were raised?23
- What did you learn about the person that you didn’t know before?
- What did you do well? What do you want to do differently next time?24
- What needs to happen next?

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22. The Toolkit’s “One-to-One Reflection Form” provides a helpful structure for documenting details of strategic conversations with congregation members. Toolkit, 17.

23. Toolkit, 17.


When a Core Group member identifies something that they want to do differently in the next conversation, role playing will help people to try out new strategies and practice them to give them more confidence in the next conversation. Role playing will take people out of their comfort zones. Do it anyway. Faithful Conversations do not take place inside the comfort zone.

Give particular attention to processing the conversations with the late majority/laggards who are not well-connected in the relational web. Sharing details about these conversations (without breaking confidentiality) can increase the connectedness of these disconnected people as Core Group members share with others how they came to appreciate and even love them. Fondness can be contagious. In the cases where fondness is not possible, Core Group members can share each others’ burdens and ponder together what the next steps might be.

The Proposal

After the Core Group has executed the communication plan (or possibly at some point during the communication plan), they need to present a proposal for Faithful Conversations to the appropriate leader or leadership body. The proposal might include:

1) Rationale: Why this congregation needs to talk about same-sex relationships

   (Perhaps an event or request relating to homosexuality in the congregation, decisions being made with larger church governing bodies, or general societal engagement). Situate the rationale for the event in the stated mission and/or vision of the congregation or a significant value shared by the majority of members.25

26. The Toolkit has a helpful set of exercises designed to help name the values of a congregation and frame conversations around LGBTQ inclusion within those values. “Framing Worksheet,” Toolkit, 32.
2) Values and goals for Faithful Conversations (They are listed at the beginning of this model).

3) Outline of Faithful Conversations Event (See “Implementation” below for a possible outline)

4) Timing: When might the event be held?

5) Cost: Include the cost of hiring a facilitator from outside the congregation, honorariums for panel members, refreshments, child care, publications, etc.

6) Staff Investment: How much time will a Faithful Conversations event require from facilities, administrative, and pastoral staff?

If the leadership rejects the proposal, don’t give up! Go back through the preparation phase. Concentrate on the formation of the Core Group in support, accountability, and learning. Reassess the mood of the congregation, and design and implement another communication plan. Trust that the God works in the waiting. If the congregational leadership approves the proposal, celebrate! Determine who will lead the planning efforts and proceed with implementation. Don’t forget to stay in contact with LGBTQ people in the congregation throughout the process.

**Implementation: Talk about It**

The first step in implementation is engaging a facilitator. A person trained in facilitating Restorative Circles or other restorative practices would be ideal. Involve the

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26. It may be helpful to suggest a facilitator in the proposal, especially if it is someone that the congregational leadership already trusts. See “Implementation” for suggestions for identifying possible facilitators.

27. Here are two resources for finding a facilitator. Restorative Circles practice groups meet in various cities throughout North America. See “Restorative Circles Practice Groups,” accessed November
facilitator as well as the pastors in modifying the plan for the event based on their expertise and wisdom. In addition to planning the logistics of the event (publication, location, refreshments, and the like), the leaders must also find four or five panel members who hold various viewpoints on same-sex relationships, commit to graceful engagement, and are willing to share their personal stories.

Invitations

Invitations from leaders increase attendance. Begin with a letter introducing the event. Naming the goals and values for the event in the introductory letter will help structure the respectful conversational space. Because of the communication plan executed by the Core Group, very few people should be surprised by the invitation. Leaders should follow up written invitations with personal contacts for people in the late majority/laggard category as well as LGBTQ congregation members.

Faithful Conversations Worship Service: Christian Unity

The worship service focuses on Christian unity in diversity, possibly using Galatians 3:25-29. In the sermon, the preacher expounds on Galatians 3:25-29, outlines Brownson’s typology of responses to committed same-sex relationships, Lederach’s practices for peacebuilding: the centrality of relationship, paradoxical


28. See appendix D.
curiosity, space for the creative act, and willingness to risk,\textsuperscript{29} and names the goals and values for the event. The pastors must model the kind of engagement that Faithful Conversations seeks to create.

**Panel Discussion**

At the conclusion of the worship service, the congregation transitions to the panel discussion, perhaps in another room over lunch. One of the leaders of the event prays an opening prayer and passes the leadership over to the facilitator. If congregational leaders want to know the perspectives of congregation members on same-sex relationships, a survey containing summaries of Brownson’s five responses to committed same-sex relationships could be distributed at before the panel discussion begins. An example of such a survey is included in appendix C.

The facilitator gives a preamble, setting the parameters for the panel discussion using the values outlined in the introductory letter, and explains how the panel discussion will unfold.

First, the panelists speak for four to five minutes each, responding to this question: “Where are you right now regarding same-sex relationships as it relates to your Christian faith, and what would you like us to know about how you came to that place?”

Second, the congregation responds to the panelists, answering this question: “What did you hear was significant to the panelists, or what struck you about what they shared?”

Third, the panelists respond to the congregation to clarify or expand their story.

Fourth, the congregation shares further wonderings: “Is there anything you have more curiosity about for the panel or for yourself?”

Fifth, the panel responds as appropriate.

To close the event, the facilitator, pastor, or lay leader closes the gathering with prayer, naming before God some of the things that unfolded in the event.

**Follow Up: Talk about What It Was Like to Talk about It**

Before the congregation is dismissed, ask them to complete a Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) to gather feedback about the event. In the week following the Faithful Conversations event, compile the CIQ responses and distribute them to everyone who participated in the event so people learn about the impact of the event on others. Congregational leadership can use the CIQ responses to process the event, discover the how the congregation experienced Faithful Conversations, and create further opportunities for engagement.

The Core Group should not miss the opportunity to celebrate the results of their work following the event. Review the CIQ responses, remember the difficult moments along the way, give thanks to God and each other for the transformation that occurred, and ponder what might happen next. Don’t forget to follow up with the LGBTQ people in the congregation after the event.

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30. See appendix E.
Theoretical Considerations in the Model

The stated purpose of the Toolkit is to help “your congregation become a community that openly welcomes people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.” This aligns with one of the five goals of the Faithful Conversations model: to increase the congregation’s ability to embrace LGBTQ people. However, the Toolkit’s method for encouraging congregations to welcome LGBTQ people involves change management techniques that don’t tend to the whole web of relationships in the congregation. The Toolkit says this about the laggards and late adopters:

Don’t design for the Laggards or the Late Adopters, which is what is usually done. They are not going to change and focusing on convincing them will only slow the process down or end it all together . . . Laggards can be resilient, but do not give them more energy than they deserve. They are a small percentage that will sound like they are the majority. They are not. You should hear them, but do not let them control the process.

When resisters are kept at arms’ length, true unity, purity, and peace all suffer. When full LGBTQ inclusion is won at the expense of the marginalization of the late adopters/laggards, the Church has ended one kind of exclusion by shifting it to another segment of the community. I’ve heard advocates for this kind of movement toward LGBTQ inclusion say, “If the conservative people leave our congregation because of this,

32. Toolkit, cover page.

32. This stated goal may cause discomfort for those who believe same-sex marriage is incompatible with Christian faithfulness. But even if same-sex relationships are sinful, the church must welcome sinners because Jesus made a habit of welcoming sinners (Luke 15:2, NRSV). Being in the presence of Christ calls people out of sin no matter how sin is defined, but being in the presence of Christ needs to come first. One panel member who holds a more traditional view of same-sex marriage said in a Faithful Conversations event, “Having a position is important, but it is not the most important . . . The thing that would bless God and bless God’s people the most is to get the ‘welcome’ part right . . . there’s enough bandwidth within ‘welcome’ that we can agree to disagree. But if we can’t get the ‘welcome’ right, then we’re not functioning as the church.”

there are ten other churches in the area who will accept them. If we don’t accept LGBTQ people, there is nowhere else for them to go.”

This is a false choice between having to exclude one group or another, and it perpetuates the theologically incorrect idea that unity cannot exist in the midst of diversity, or at least not that kind of diversity. This false choice does not reflect or seek the true purity/holiness of God, which consists of profound diversity existing in perfect unity. This false choice also works against the mystery of peace/shalom that God calls the Church to promote, and allows a fear of the other to reign. God has set the bar higher. Christians can (and must, for the sake of the world), live together in unity, purity, and peace in the midst of different viewpoints on this moral issue.

As a result, this model seeks to build relationships across the whole congregation, strengthening the entire web of relationships so that there’s no us versus them. There’s only us.

Conclusion

Time will tell whether same-sex marriage remains a disputable matter in evangelical Christian communities or if the matter becomes settled one way or the other. In any case, The Community in Ada (and the larger Church) needs to continue to practice the disciplines of Faithful Conversations. If the legitimacy of same-sex marriage in the context of Christian faithfulness will be settled, courageous storytelling and resolute listening will provide creative space for the Holy Spirit to speak and the people to hear and change as necessary. If God intends for evangelical Christians to live with a diversity of views regarding the legitimacy of same-sex marriage over the long haul, courageous
storytelling and resolute listening will spur Christian communities to live together with unity, purity, and peace.
Appendix A

Collaborative History Timeline of The Community in Ada

Produced February 23, 2014 in Ada, Michigan
Appendix B

Faithful Conversations Introductory Letter

September 15, 2015

Dear Friends -

This fall we are going to embark on a series of conversations about same-sex relationships and Christian faith. We think the time is right - the conflicted proceedings of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (the denomination to which we belong) in June about how to respond to homosexual people and the decision of the Supreme Court to legalize same sex marriage have sparked lots of discussions in the wider circles surrounding our congregation. It’s time for us to talk about this, too.

But we’re preparing for a different kind of conversation than the divisive and polarizing ones we’ve heard going on around us. Because our congregation both holds a diverse set of perspectives on same-sex relationships AND values relationships characterized by respect and acceptance, we seek to nurture a true, humble, and safe conversation about same-sex relationships and Christian faith. We’re calling it, “Faithful Conversations: Learning to Listen, Learning to Speak.”

We do not seek to change people’s minds. We do not wish to take a stance on same-sex relationships. Our goal is simply to learn to speak and listen to each other, to honor the diversity of perspectives God put into our community, and to grow in unity amidst that diversity.

The conversation will begin with a three-part sermon series on Christian unity on September 13, 20, and 27. On Sunday, October 4th, Pastor Billy and Pastor Mara will co-preach on the various Christian perspectives on same-sex relationships. Following the worship service, we will share a simple lunch together and will witness a panel discussion involving Christians who have diverse perspectives on same-sex relationships. The panel discussion will be facilitated by Ann McKnight, LMSW, who will give participants the tools to speak experiences, questions, and convictions from their hearts as well as tools to listen deeply to each other. Our hope is that you will grow in wisdom, knowledge, and compassion by listening to the panel members. We trust that more faithful conversation will happen informally in the weeks and months that follow, or in another formalevent if that seems wise. We pray that God will use these conversations to continue to shape us into a church that follows in the way of Jesus by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

We hope that you can join us for this event - look for the sign-up sheet in the coming weeks so we know how many to plan for the no-cost-to-you lunch. Childcare will be provided.

In Christ,
Pastor Mara, Pastor Billy, and the Elder Board
Appendix C

Faithful Conversations Pre-Conversation Survey\(^1\)

Circle the statement that *best describes your current thoughts and feelings* about same-sex relationships and the Christian faith. Do not put your name on this form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Welcome but Change</th>
<th>Homosexual activity is quite simply a choice against God’s will for human life. The church must call gays and lesbians to repent, resist temptation, and change their behavior. The only issue at stake here is the truth of God’s Word and the integrity of our obedience.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welcome and Abstain</td>
<td>A homosexual orientation is not usually chosen. Despite this tragic dimension to the issue, the only paths of faithful Christian expression for human sexuality are either heterosexual marriage or celibacy. The church must welcome gays, but must also call them to abstain from homosexual activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome and Tolerate</td>
<td>God’s intention for faithful human sexuality is either heterosexual marriage or celibacy. Yet gays and lesbians should be welcome in the church, and if they are unable to remain celibate, committed lifelong partnerships can be tolerated as a concession to brokenness, but should not be understood to be under God’s full blessing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome and Accommodate</td>
<td>God’s intention for human sexuality is that it should be expressed in the lifelong covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. But God’s redemptive accommodation for gays and lesbians is that they express their sexuality either in celibacy or within a single committed, lifelong relationship. Such a relationship is under God’s redemptive blessing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome and Affirm</td>
<td>Committed lifelong marriage is God’s intention for partnership and sexual expression of gay and lesbian persons (whom God both created and intended to be gay or lesbian). Such marriages should be celebrated and consecrated by the church.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Table 4
(Copy of Table 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>5: Welcoming and affirming</th>
<th>4: Redemptive accommodation</th>
<th>3: Pastoral concession</th>
<th>2: Consistent witness</th>
<th>1: Purity of the Church</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Committed lifelong marriage is God’s intention for partnership and sexual expression of gay and lesbian persons (whom God both created and intended to be gay or lesbian). Such marriages should be celebrated and consecrated by the church.</td>
<td>God’s intention for human sexuality is that it should be expressed in the lifelong covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. But God’s redemptive accommodation for gays and lesbians is that they express their sexuality either in celibacy or within a single committed, lifelong relationship. Such a relationship is under God’s redemptive blessing.</td>
<td>God’s intention for faithful human sexuality is either heterosexual marriage or celibacy. Yet gays and lesbians should be welcome in the church, and if they are unable to remain celibate, committed lifelong partnerships can be tolerated as a concession to brokenness, but should not be understood to be under God’s full blessing.</td>
<td>A homosexual orientation is not usually chosen. Despite this tragic dimension to the issue, the only paths of faithful Christian expression for human sexuality are either heterosexual marriage or celibacy. The church must welcome gays, but must also call them to abstain from homosexual activity.</td>
<td>Homosexual activity is quite simply a choice against God’s will for human life. The church must call gays and lesbians to repent, resist temptation, and change their behavior. The only issue at stake here is the truth of God’s Word and the integrity of our obedience.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is “gay marriage” legitimate?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Maybe</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are “civil unions” good public policy?</td>
<td>Not preferred</td>
<td>Some yes, some no</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordain gays and lesbians in committed relationships?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committed gays and lesbians come to the Lord’s table?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key ethical analogy</td>
<td>Marriage as committed love</td>
<td>Remarriage after divorce</td>
<td>Cohabitation without marriage</td>
<td>Infert or adultery</td>
<td>Addiction to pornography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key theological category</td>
<td>Goodness of creation</td>
<td>Sanctification as partial and progressive</td>
<td>Sin as brokenness</td>
<td>Sin as departure from divine intention</td>
<td>Sin as rebellion against God</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key issues between various positions

1 & 2
• Is sexual orientation freely chosen?
• Can sexual orientation be changed?

2 & 3
• Does Jesus allow us to sharply differentiate between the inclination to a sinful action and the sinful action itself, in light of Matt 5:22 & 28?
• Why exactly is same-sex eroticism wrong, and does this speak categorically to all forms of same-sex love, including committed relationships, or can we and should we differentiate between greater and lesser forms of sin?
• How do we work with people where they are, and not where we wish they would be?
• Can we recognize each other as Christians if we disagree on this issue?

3 & 4
• Can gay or lesbian unions be understood to fulfill the central purposes of God for marriage, at least sufficiently to be considered as marriages?
• What, exactly, places a marriage under God’s blessing? Can marriages which are unable to fulfill all of the divine purposes for marriage still stand under divine blessing?

4 & 5
• What is the difference between “civil unions” and marriage, and what significance might this distinction have for the church and for society?
• Is a gay or lesbian sexual orientation “natural” as part of the purpose of God?
• How central is procreation to marriage?
Appendix E

Faithful Conversations Post-Survey

Please take about five minutes to respond to the questions below about this morning’s events. Don't put your name on the form - your responses are anonymous. If nothing comes to mind for any of the questions just leave the space blank. Thanks for taking the time to do this. What you write will help us make future conversations more responsive to your concerns.

At what moment in worship or the panel discussion did you feel most engaged with what was happening?

At what moment in worship or the panel discussion were you most distanced from what was happening?

What action that anyone (pastors, worship leader, panel facilitator, panel member, audience member) took during worship or the panel discussion did you find most affirming or helpful?

What action that anyone took during worship or the panel discussion did you find most puzzling or confusing?

What about worship or the panel discussion surprised you the most? (This could be about your own reactions to what went on, something that someone did, or anything else that occurs).

1. This survey is slightly adapted from Stephen Brookfield, Critical Incident Questionnaire. http://www.stephenbrookfield.com/Dr._Stephen_D._Brookfield/Critical_Incident_Questionnaire_files/CIQ.pdf. The adaptations adjust the language to fit a congregational rather than classroom setting.
Appendix F

FACT: A Spiritual Assessment Tool

A Spiritual Assessment Tool: FACT
An acronym for healthcare professionals when taking a spiritual assessment: FACT.

Any properly trained healthcare practitioner can use the FACT Spiritual Assessment Tool. This tool includes a short history with three questions (Faith, Availability and Coping) plus an outcome (Treatment). It can form part of a larger clinical intervention, such as the physician’s history and physical, a nursing admission assessment, a more in-depth chaplaincy assessment (see below), or can be used as a stand-alone intervention. This tool is most effective when used conversationally, instead of as a checklist.

The FACT Spiritual Assessment Tool is a hybrid tool (three parts spiritual history and one part assessment), which is designed for an acute care setting (it is short and easy, versatile, and focused). A spiritual history obtains information on a person’s spiritual life, history, and practices and on how these affect their ability to cope with their present healthcare crisis, which the first three questions of FACT address. A spiritual assessment involves an informed judgment concerning treatment options based on the spiritual history, which the last question of FACT addresses. Among these treatment options, one involves a referral to a professional chaplain for a more in-depth spiritual assessment.

Faith or spirituality is a fact in the lives of many people. It is also a fact that many people use their faith or spirituality to help them cope with a health crisis. Finally, it is arguably a fact that a person’s faith or spiritual practice affects their medical outcomes. The FACT Spiritual Assessment Tool provides a quick and accurate determination of whether or not a person’s current health crisis is affecting their spiritual well-being and then based on that determination, it suggests a treatment plan.

The Acronym
F – Faith (and/or Beliefs, Spiritual Practices)
A – Active (and/or Availability, Accessibility, Applicability)
C – Coping (and/or Comfort), Conflict (and/or Concern)
T – Treatment Plan

Specific questions that may be asked to help discuss each element of the tool:
F: What is your faith or belief?
Do you consider yourself spiritual or religious?
What things do you believe that give your life meaning and purpose?

A: Are you active in your faith community?
Are you part of a religious or spiritual community?
Is support for your faith available to you?
Do you have access to what you need to apply your faith (or your beliefs)?
Is there a person or a group whose presence and support you value at a time like this?

C: How are you coping with your medical situation?
Is your faith (your belief) helping you cope?

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Bibliography


Enns, Peter. *The Bible Tells Me So . . . Why Defending Scripture has Made Us Unable to*


------“Like the Wideness of the Sea.” *Perspectives* (May, 1999): 9-12.


