

# Model for Faithful Conversations

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## 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*;<sup>1</sup> 2) Restorative Circles;<sup>2</sup> and 3) John Paul Lederach's peacebuilding practices for sustainable social change.<sup>3</sup>

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

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1. *Building an Inclusive Church: A Welcoming Toolkit 2.0* (Washington: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Institute for Welcoming Resources, 2013), Accessed September 12, 2016, <http://welcomingresources.org/welcomingtoolkit.pdf>. Hereafter referred to as *Toolkit*.

2. Restorative Circles is an intentional form of dialogue that supports people experiencing conflict. 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 peacebuilding skills and capacities. While Barter is not specifically Christian, his work fleshes out the vision for Christian conversation pursuing unity, purity, and peace. 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.

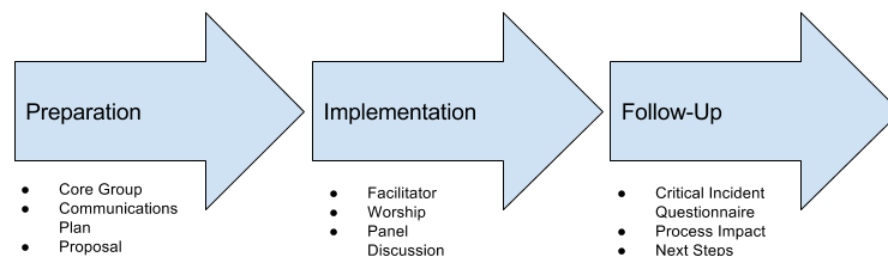
Dominic Barter has not published written materials describing Restorative Circles. For a video of him describing the origins and results of Restorative Circles in Brazil, see this video: "Dominic Barter on Restorative Circles," posted May 12, 2009, accessed April 12, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-AUwX61-34>.

3. Lederach has written several books. Here I rely on John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) and John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation: Clear Articulation of the Guiding Principles by a Pioneer in the Field* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003).

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 web of relationships within the congregation; and 5) To increase the congregation's ability to embrace LGBTQ people.<sup>4</sup>

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

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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."

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 bureaucratic culture of a congregation.”<sup>5</sup> The most important tool of relational organizing is the one-on-one conversation,<sup>6</sup> 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].<sup>7</sup>

“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].

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5. Rev. Louise Green, “Sustainable Action: Planting the Seeds of Relational Organizing,” *Toolkit*, 14.

6. Rev. Louise Green, “Sustainable Action: Planting the Seeds of Relational Organizing,” *Toolkit*, 14.

7. The *Toolkit* includes a very helpful process for structuring your story for the most impact. See Marshall Ganz, “Telling Your Public Story: Self, Us, Now,” *Toolkit*, 37.

“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.<sup>8</sup>

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

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8. *Toolkit*, 6.

identified in their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Assure them that you will check in with them periodically.<sup>9</sup>

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 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*<sup>10</sup> 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 *Toolkit*:<sup>11</sup>

Graceful engagement is:

- Living together in relationship and compassion
- Fully valuing other people and their beliefs, even when they differ from our own

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9. *Toolkit*, 4.

10. Contemplative Outreach, “About Lectio Divina,” Accessed November 28, 2016, [http://www.centeringprayer.com/lectio\\_divina.html](http://www.centeringprayer.com/lectio_divina.html).

11. *Toolkit*, 12-13.

- Listening more than speaking
- Meeting people where they are, not where we want them to be

Graceful engagement is NOT:

- Debate
- 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.<sup>12</sup>

The second tool for understanding and engaging conflict effectively is a small book by John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*.<sup>13</sup> 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?

## The Communication Plan

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12. *Toolkit*, 13.

13. Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation: Clear Articulation of the Guiding Principles by a Pioneer in the Field* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003).

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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 to discuss how our church

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14. Communication Plans are a tool of the business world for marketing and public relations. For template for developing a communication plans in the non-profit sector, see Catholic Relief Services, "Develop a Communication Plan in Nine Steps," accessed November 28, 2016, <https://www.crs.org/sites/default/files/crs-files/communication-toolbox-template-develop-a-communication-plan.pdf>.

15. 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.

engages people who are LGBTQ.<sup>16</sup> 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.

### **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.

### **Identify Key People**

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<sup>16</sup> Be sensitive to language. People may not understand the LGBTQ acronym. You may want to begin by saying, “lesbian and gay 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.<sup>17</sup> 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<sup>18</sup> 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 influential innovators/early adopters and the late majority/laggards.<sup>19</sup> The people in these relationships are

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17. *Toolkit*, 5.

18. Everett Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* 4th ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1995), chapter 7.

19. Lederach says, “Watch for and build hubs where the cross-linked relational spaces connect the not-like-minded and the not-like-situated” (*Moral Imagination*, 85).

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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

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

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20. E. Rogers calls this “audience segmentation” (*Diffusion of Innovation*, 275).

21. *Toolkit*, 4.

wisdom for their process from those who are hesitant.<sup>22</sup> 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

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22. Lederach describes how pessimists can be a gift to a community trying to change. Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 51-63.

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:<sup>23</sup>

- What happened?
- How did the person respond to you?
- How did you feel throughout the conversation?
- What concerns and ideas were raised?<sup>24</sup>
- 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?<sup>25</sup>
- What needs to happen next?

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

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23. The *Toolkit's* "One-to-One Reflection Form" provides a helpful structure for documenting details of strategic conversations with congregation members. *Toolkit*, 17.

24. *Toolkit*, 17.

25. *Toolkit*, 17.

(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.<sup>26</sup>
- 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?

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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.

- 5) Cost: Include the cost of hiring a facilitator from outside the congregation,<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> Involve the 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.

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27. 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.

28. 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 30, 2016, <http://www.restorativecircles.org/practice-groups>. The Shalem Mental Health Network provides facilitators for restorative practices in congregations. See "Restorative Practice: When Harm Affects Us," accessed November 30, 2016, <http://shalemnetwork.org/support-programs/support-programs-restorative-practice/>. The author of this model is also available to facilitate Faithful Conversations. Rev. Mara Joy Norden, [marajoycooper@gmail.com](mailto:marajoycooper@gmail.com).

## **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,<sup>29</sup> models Lederach's practices for peacebuilding: the centrality of relationship, paradoxical curiosity, space for the creative act, and willingness to risk,<sup>30</sup> 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

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29. See appendix C.

30. Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 34-39.

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)<sup>31</sup> 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

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31. See appendix D.



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.

### **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.”<sup>32</sup> This aligns with one of the five goals of the Faithful Conversations model: to increase the congregation’s ability to embrace LGBTQ people.<sup>33</sup> 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

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32. *Toolkit*, cover page.

33. 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.”

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.<sup>34</sup>

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, 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.

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34. Rev. Dr. Anita L. Bradshaw, "How Does Change Happen in Churches or Any Organization?" *Toolkit*, 30-31.