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# Being Christ's Body

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a conversation series  
about same-sex relationships,  
marriage and the church

PUBLIC ISSUES COMMISSION  
ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF  
CANBERRA & GOULBURN

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Written by The Ven Dr Wayne Brighton in consultation with the Rt Revd Professor Stephen Pickard and in appreciation of engagement with members of the Diocesan Public Issues Commission.

The introduction and Conversation 3 have been revised in view of amendments to the Marriage Act which permitted same-sex marriage that came into effect in December 2017.



# PREFACE

In September 2015, the Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn began a conversation about revisions proposed for the Marriage Act to include people in same-sex relationships.

Our conversation was focussed on the potential pastoral implications that might arise from proposed changes to federal law. The conversation proved thoughtful, prayerful and respectful. A majority of Synod members agreed that a set of resources designed help our members talk about these issues would be helpful. Synod members wanted to talk further about such things as:

- the nature of marriage;
- the power of government;
- the nature of religious conscience; and
- how LGBTQI people belong in the church.

Nevertheless, it was also apparent that Anglicans were not of a common mind about how our church should respond to the proposed change to the legal definition of marriage. Many were concerned about what potential impact recognition might have on our life as a church and the practice of pastoral ministry across our varied parishes.

This conversation starter is designed to do three things. First, encourage Christians to explore the issues surrounding same-sex relationships and marriage thoughtfully. Second, to encourage people to listen to each other carefully. Third, to focus attention on the pastoral implications associated with same-sex relationships and anticipated changes to Federal law to permit same-sex marriage.

Anglican liturgy affirms that marriage is between a man and a woman. Only our General Synod has the constitutional power to amend the rites of marriage. The Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn is not at

liberty to change how it marries people unilaterally. The impact on our church will depend on the scope of any legal changes passed by Parliament and our willingness to be the body of Christ together.

Since these conversations were prepared the Marriage Act has been amended and same-sex couples can now marry. So why discuss federal law when the Anglican Church may well remain committed to its present position on marriage or find it difficult to change how it marries people?

Such a discussion is worthwhile because of marriage's pastoral significance to many Anglicans, their families and LGBTQI people. Many people don't know what to do or think at present. My hope is that these conversations might help us to respond with greater pastoral awareness and sensitivity.

Many have asked, how can we be a coherent Church if our understanding of marriage is divergent and our pastoral response so varied?

History tells us that it has ever been thus in the church right back to earliest times. Perhaps a better question is, what does it mean today to be the one body of Christ in a church that is both diverse and subject to disagreements in significant matters in an ever changing world? This is a challenging question that does not admit of simple answers.

I believe this resource will be of great value to our Diocese as we seek to understand the issues surrounding same-sex relationships, marriage and the church.

THE RT REVD PROFESSOR STEPHEN PICKARD  
CHAIRPERSON  
PUBLIC ISSUES COMMISSION

# INTRODUCTION

Churches have been inundated with books, blogs, videos and sermons about homosexuality for years. Over the same period, public opinion concerning the recognition of same-sex relationships has changed markedly. Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States of America have all legalised same-sex marriage in recent years.

In December 2017, the *Marriage Amendment (Definition and Religious Freedoms) Act 2017* came into effect and granted same-sex couples the full legal status of marriage. The amendment followed a voluntary postal survey which asked, 'should the law be changed to allow same-sex couples to marry?' 7.8 million or 61.6% of respondents affirmed the need for legislative change while 4.8 million or 38.4% responded No. Every state and territory supported the change with the highest Yes vote returned in ACT and Victoria with 74% and 64.9% respectively.

Sadly, too few resources have been produced to help Christians talk about same-sex relationships in a constructive manner. Some people still feel uncertain and wary about the long-term consequences from these legislative changes for our nation and the church.

Anglicans approach social issues like same-sex marriage in different ways. Some will approach it as a matter of teaching through direct instruction. This approach endeavours to discern what Scripture says, identifies beliefs and behaviours deemed normative and then calls for the church to receive and faithfully comply. Such a method is often used by the church's varied doctrine commissions and their resources are widely available. A different but no less legitimate method emphasises context and conversation. Missionaries and chaplains globally

use such an approach to encourage transformation in relationships through conversation.<sup>1</sup> The conversational approach has the potential to create space for God's people to talk, pray and hear God's voice together on issues where different views are held.


*Being Christ's Body* is a conversation starter. To anyone who bakes bread, a starter is what makes sourdough bread rise. *Being Christ's Body* provides a framework for friends, family, neighbours and colleagues to explore the issues surrounding same-sex marriage through a relaxed and respectful conversation. It aims to help people to think, listen, ask questions and even express their disagreement in ways that are respectful and constructive.

The Public Issues Commission adopted the conversational approach because of its capacity to achieve three goals. First, to help Christians understand the many intersecting issues that surround the call for the Commonwealth Government to change the definition of marriage within the *Marriage Act 1961*. Second, to help Christians understand why people hold varied views about this call for legislative change, especially if and when a plebiscite is called. Third, to help Anglicans think about their response and its pastoral implications for all who call the Anglican Church home. That said, the Commission also believes that no parish, leader or group should feel obligated to use these conversations. Rather, these resources can be used by anyone who wants to participate in open-ended conversations about a host of very delicate pastoral matters.

The conversational approach is a deeply Christian approach to engaging with difficult public issues. At its heart lies Scripture. Each conversation begins with participant's life experience. Scripture is then

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of this approach, see Laurie Green, *Let's do theology: resources for contextual theology*. Rev ed. London: Mowbray, 2009.



drawn in as a source of knowledge for reflection, discovery, learning and action. This dynamic model allows the authority of Scripture to be encountered in the midst of different human stories which need to be heard. God's people are faithful to God's Word when they read it together in a spirit of openness to challenge and change. The authority of Scripture does not lie in the imposition of one person's viewpoint. Scripture is authoritative because God's Word brings Christ near so that his work of salvation can transform people and communities everywhere.


Some people may find this conversational approach unfamiliar, unsatisfying or unsatisfactory. Some might prefer a set of exegetical studies on key Scripture passages about sexuality and gender. Such studies are readily available elsewhere. The Commission thought it more important to produce resources that encourage people to listen to one another rather than to neatly resolve all the legal, theological or liturgical implications that confront our church. Others may be disappointed to find that these resources do not call for any change to marriage rites in the Anglican Church of Australia. Such a matter is for other groups to address. Some may feel the resources are theologically inadequate because Scripture is not quoted by chapter and verse throughout. Scripture is integral to every conversation in this series yet it is used in unexpected ways. Many Christians become accustomed to hearing only their own voice or opinion echoed in Scripture. By drawing in passages not commonly used in discussions about sexuality and gender the Commission hopes that participants might learn to hear perspectives that would otherwise remain silent to them.

The Commission recognizes that Christians find conversations about same-sex relationships and marriage challenging. Local congregations are places of diverse opinion where people are always learning to live together as church. Furthermore, everyone involved in such conversations want to be

faithful to God yet such faithfulness may be misunderstood. People of diverse sexual and gender identity often feel vulnerable because no one likes to be singled out as 'the issue' or have their personal life treated as a discussion topic. Nor is it helped by lobbyists who seek to frame it as a 'debate' where Christians have to choose between acceptance or bigotry, truth or love, standing up for God or committing a cultural compromise that will trigger the collapse of Christianity. When faced with such overly simplistic choices most Christians find the conversation confusing and become fearful about where it might all end.

The Commission recognizes that conversations about intimate relationships are pastorally important. To paraphrase H. Jackson Brown, most of a person's happiness or misery will flow from the choices they make about their life partner. People only talk about their choices with those they trust pastorally. Pastoral efforts that exercise power through control are often counter-productive. When relationships are characterised by an abundance of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness and self-control then trust and transformation can happen most readily. By approaching intimate relationships conversationally, the Commission hopes that people will find the pastoral resources that will enable them to respond better to the challenges of living as the body of Christ in a changing world.

Although you can start with any conversation, the series has been ordered in a way that moves from specific considerations to more challenging questions. Topics that are easily ignored or sidelined are put first. Some may object to this ordering preferring it to direct Christians with a detailed exegesis of texts about creation, sexuality and gender because everything flows from how such passages are understood. While consideration of such matters are vital, this approach often descends into a frustrating stalemate. Inevitably it becomes a



matter of wanting to prove the correctness of one's own interpretation while resisting any alternative point of view. The order and approach adopted in this resource is designed to help confidence and generosity grow as the conversations become more demanding.

The church is not only an organisation with beliefs, policies, practices and rituals. It is a community to which all Christians belong. As the body of Christ, the church is not simply a decision making forum but a people among whom God's work of redemption becomes a reality. As such, we have opportunity to live with those who see, act and engage with God and the world in different ways. Christ's body carries wounds arising from conflict and brokenness. These same wounds offer us the opportunity to find healing and redemption. Our prayer is that these conversational resources might enrich and enhance the church by encouraging participants to turn their theological swords into pastoral ploughshares.

### Using this starter

The conversations are modelled on the kitchen table format. This format has been used around the world when people need to talk about important social concerns, especially when disagreement is pronounced. It has been used to explore the treatment of indigenous peoples, the environment, affordable housing and gun violence. The format opens up dialogue between people who hold different views in a manner that is safe and fosters mutual understanding.

Dialogue about difficult issues is never easy. Talking about same-sex relationships and marriage is hard because it is highly personal and because so many issues get blurred together. Christians are prone to:

- fire artillery barrages comprised of Scriptures that confirm their prior knowledge and opinions;

- talk past each other, as some consider it a matter of justice while others see it as a matter of faithfulness;
- fall into empty platitudes; or
- simply avoid the conversation because of upset and division it causes.

Conversation works when people are prepared to listen to each other. Many people are suspicious about listening, especially when it involves views that are different. Many people can feel that listening implies disloyalty and the expectation that participants must change their minds. Consequently, conversation is dismissed either as a delaying tactic or the route to compromise.

In reality, conversation is a spiritual journey. The way Christians explore issues together is extremely important. It is an indicator of the presence and work of the Spirit of God in their midst. Conversation encourages people to commit to walking with Christ and with each other. It challenges everyone to grow deeper in faith.

Conversation has always been difficult for Christian communities. Jews and Gentiles found themselves called to live out God's new creation in Christ's body together. Yet they found listening to each other extremely difficult. Each came from profoundly different backgrounds with markedly varied expectations. We face the same challenge today as we work out what it means to be God's people together with integrity.

Although some participants may change their minds, others may not. Some may sense that the differences between groups run deeper than they imagined. Others may find their views become less firm than when they started. Together we seek a fresh appreciation of being the church in the midst of disagreement and matters that remain intractable and messy.

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As many people haven't used the kitchen table format before, it is important to understand the difference between being a participant, host or facilitator. Advice follows and is summarised in the appendices. Groups may wish to keep a copy of Appendix A on the table top for easy reference.

## Participating in a conversation

Kitchen table conversations are challenging but also rewarding. Each conversation is an opportunity to learn. They are as much an opportunity to listen, as to tell others what you believe. Participation requires openness and trust. We are open when we can acknowledge that our confidence in knowing what God desires may not be complete and that we all have something to learn from someone else. It takes trust because conversations move at their own pace and because we rarely know the destination at the beginning.

A successful group is one where people can safely express their opinions, ideas and concerns. It is not about reaching predetermined conclusions or a consensus. Nor is it about everyone thinking or believing the same thing. It is a spiritual journey, grounded in prayer where people are encouraged to step out of their comfort zones to listen and speak with others.

A group becomes successful when everyone shares the responsibility for making the conversation a worthwhile experience for all. Participants can do this by:


- speaking on their own behalf;
- being open to the ideas, opinions and emotions of others without fixing or correcting them;
- acknowledging that we may not know everything and that we might just have something to learn from somebody else;
- assuming that everyone is participating with the best of intentions;

- acknowledging their own emotions which may surface during the conversation either as anger, disappointment, frustration, regret, guilt, shame or the desire to defend God, the Bible or others;
- being gracious to each other, for although as our words and ideas can be expressed in a clumsy or embarrassing way they are often a sign of learning;
- keeping your comments brief and leaving space for others;
- asking questions to clarify what is being said;
- encouraging hesitant participants to join in when they feel comfortable to do so;
- politely reminding over-speakers to be mindful of others; and
- remembering that baptised members of the church share a common commitment to following Christ.

When Christians experience disagreement, it can be hard to recognise faithfulness in others. People often see biblical faith and tradition exemplified in their own view while denying that any good lies in an alternative opinion or person. Conversations get stuck if participants fear losing something or when fault-finding, anger and withdrawal takes over. It is okay for people to remain steadfast in their views. It is also fair, reasonable and faithful for others to explore new paths or possibilities together. The point is not that everyone has to agree or disagree. The point is that Christians are called to live generously and graciously with everyone. Christ's body is strengthened or weakened by how Christians treat each other, especially those whom they consider to be outsiders, wrong or misguided.

## Hosting a conversation

Choosing to host a conversation comes with some responsibilities. Foremost is selecting who to invite. Invite people who have expressed an interest to think more about same-sex relationships and marriage and are open to listening to others.



It is always good to have diversity in the group by age, gender, ethnicity and background. While they can be friends, neighbours and colleagues, participants should feel comfortable with each other. Not only do they need to share the space together they need to share each other's opinions and emotions also. Participants may have a faith that is active, nominal or simply no faith at all. Given the level of public interest, hosting a conversation is an opportunity for Christian communities to exercise hospitality and generosity towards everyone.

Conversations happen best when they are relaxed and informal. Choose a comfortable space for 6-8 people where you can talk free of distractions or interruptions for an hour or more. You might sit around a table or in a circle. Make sure people can see and hear each other easily.

These conversations are designed for people who belong to Anglican communities but not exclusively so. Any group is welcome to use these resources. We recommend using them with small groups of no more than 8 people. When groups become bigger, the conversation will become less constructive as people struggle to be heard or to listen to each other. If you choose to host a conversation in your parish, please discuss arrangements and progress with your congregational leader.

The host should make available the following items:

- sufficient copies of each set of conversation notes for the group;
- a copy of the guidelines about how to participate which should be introduced at the beginning of each conversation and kept on the table for the duration;
- pens and paper for those who want to take notes;
- a device capable of playing YouTube video clips;
- a Bible for the readings; and
- tea, coffee, water and nibbles to sustain the journey.

The host may act as the conversation facilitator or ask another person to play this role while they attend to the group's physical needs.

## Facilitating a conversation


Kitchen table conversations often need someone to help things move along. Facilitators take on the responsibility by ensuring the conversation is effective for everyone.

The primary concern of a kitchen table conversation is to open up and sustain a dialogue between people who hold divergent views. The facilitator's role is straightforward. Facilitators help by building trust between participants. This involves encouraging participants to express their opinions, ideas and concerns in a respectful manner that encourages acceptance and accountability. Facilitators should encourage participants to join in while ensuring that everyone has a chance to speak and be heard. Although every facilitator will have their own viewpoint, they should be capable of laying aside their opinions for the sake of the conversation when necessary. By helping in this way, facilitators can clarify issues, address prejudice and encourage further inquiry, prayer or pastoral care.

Don't be concerned if participants don't think or believe the same thing. The conversations are not designed for everyone to reach a pre-determined viewpoint. The conversation is not about reaching a consensus let alone expecting the group to make decisions about the direction of parish life. Facilitators may need to work hard to emphasize that listening and learning are valuable activities in their own right. Some may doubt its value when they can't see the conversation helping their own pre-determined outcome or position.

Everyone will want to share their opinion. The openness of conversation may make some feel uncomfortable. A few may find it so difficult or





frustrating that they will want walk away. No one should leave a conversation because of acrimony. If anyone should decide to leave they should know they go as someone beloved by Christ and the community.

Disagreements about sexuality can cause people's perspective to narrow. It is always helpful to remind participants gently that they are responsible for their actions, no matter how they feel. The group as a whole bears the responsibility to seek and practice reconciliation when they experience disagreement. The quality of our church life is measured not merely by our faithfulness but our capacity to love one another. Participants may need to be reminded that they share together in the life of the triune God; the loving, energetic presence of God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Participants will often make generalisations about the whole church based on their own limited experience. Facilitators may need to help people see the responsibilities and possibilities in church life between parish, diocese, national and international bodies. Our capacity to influence them and their influence upon us is always limited. God's church is always bigger than our part of it and grace is always wider than we imagine.

Conversations about difficult matters are a rich opportunity for growth but not everyone in the conversation may be a baptised Christian or parish member. Prayer should be a part of conversation, anchoring it in God's grace and Christ's work of reconciliation. If people are not comfortable praying aloud, you may wish to use either the Lord's Prayer, the prayer suggested in Appendix C or an alternate resource appropriate to the setting. If participants are not Christian, beginning and ending with a moment of silence may be more appropriate.

Each conversation is designed to be open-ended. For most people, 70 minutes will be enough. There

might be energy to go longer but some will find the experience tiring. Each conversation contains video and written information. Facilitators may need to judge the participants level of engagement quickly. You may either:

- have each section read out loud, by yourself or participants;
- encourage each participant to read the sections silently;
- summarise each section in your own words;
- skip questions if they are neither relevant or productive for the conversation.

Don't worry if you need to stop sooner or that you didn't cover everything.

In order to ensure that the conversation is productive for all, the facilitator will need to:

- help participants recall the fact that baptised Christians share together a common commitment to knowing and following Christ;
- use moments of silence or prayer to help people focus and process the conversation experience;
- remind participants of the group's purpose, namely to encourage mutual understanding and the sensitivity of their pastoral response;
- ensure the conversation remains welcoming, gracious and forgiving;
- encourage participants to be mindful of the space and time they share so that everyone should contribute without over-speaking others;
- encourage participants to respect each other, so that it is okay to say no or express their disagreement without criticism, judgement or interruption;
- focus and re-focus the conversation, usually by asking for clarification and paraphrasing what is said to avoid miscommunication;
- be flexible when unexpected ideas, concerns or emotions emerge; and
- finish on time, even though some elements in a conversation won't get covered or be complete.

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We live in a fast paced world where it is tempting to cut to the final scene or last page. Your group may wish to meet more or less than six times to consider all the conversations. What matters is the journey together.

Ordinarily, opinions and emotions expressed during a conversation should stay in the room. Seek the permission of all participants before recording anything. Even then, only summarise the key points considered important by the group without naming individuals personally.

## A word about using the Word

Christians believe that Scripture plays a vital role in helping us to know God's character and saving purposes for human life. This is enshrined in Article 6 of the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion *Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation*. Christians engage in a process known as biblical interpretation whenever they endeavour to determine not only what Scripture says but also what it means for them now.

Christians often have important disagreements about how Scripture is best interpreted. Christians will often insist that the Bible speaks with one voice and that any verse only ever has one clear discernible meaning. Nevertheless, Christians discern different meanings and applications within any single verse. They vary as to what role or weight should be given to the witness of Christians through history. Similarly, they differ as to the role that reason should play or the degree to which scientific knowledge should inform our theological views or ministry practice. Christians also differ as to the role that experience should play when endeavouring to listen and follow God's Word.

In your conversation, people will give Scripture differing weight in relation to these other sources of knowledge by placing it either:

- over or above all other forms of human knowledge, often insisting that its requirements need to be followed prescriptively or that present communities have latitude so long as it is consistent with those requirements;
- alongside tradition while insisting on the importance of historical consensus between it and Church practices;
- under reason and experience, insisting that our understanding should be revised in light of scientific knowledge; or
- in a dynamic relationship with other sources so that interpretative practice is characterised by mutual encounter, reflection, action and review.

Many of these approaches were developed centuries ago. They emerged in response to the challenges arising in the church when attitudes concerning national control over ecclesial property, slavery, democracy and gender equality were changing. Christians are continually challenged to balance the meaning of specific biblical words and themes with Scripture's overall message.

Reading Scripture well is not simply about discerning what is said but asking why. The distance in time, space and culture between the original audience and ourselves is considerable. Determining what Scripture means today requires us to ask why things were said so that any underlying principles can be discerned and applied in new contexts. Consequently, interpretation requires us to examine the logic, values or concerns that underpin any particular verse. Figuring out how God's love and grace sits with Scripture's moral and ethical requirements has been a challenge to Christians everywhere. Of course, asking why quickly leads into questions about who. Who is this God who speaks us in this way?

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Reading the Bible is not an impossible task. God's spirit of wisdom reveals the mind of God in Scripture, pre-eminently in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would continue to help us to not only know him but continue the work that he began. Christians need to trust that the Spirit will lead them today, not only to understand what Scripture means but how they can be God's people to each other more fully. Christians need the community of fellow pilgrims otherwise they only ever hear their own voice in Scripture and never the wisdom that comes from others who share the same road.

Many will claim that their interpretation of Scripture represents authentic Anglican identity and practice. Some may use their interpretation to critique, criticise or correct those who hold a different view. Others may reduce all theological knowledge to a matter of opinion and individual conscience. Christians are all engaged in the task of interpreting the meaning of Scripture for people today. All Christians are reading a variety of ancient documents by using a variety of methods to answer their 21<sup>st</sup> Century questions in ways that are not only normative but life-giving and world transforming.

It is therefore important to listen not simply to what people believe Scripture says but how they are interpreting it and why. People will often cite verses and words that confirm or conform to their interpretation. They will feel frustrated and annoyed when people don't accept what they see as the Bible's plain meaning. But what is plain to some is opaque, ambiguous or no longer relevant to others. In short, even the plain reading of Scripture is rarely plain. The history of dispute and conflict in the church throughout the ages is testimony to this challenge.

Should your conversation experience difficulty about how any particular Scripture should be interpreted, you might like to ask the group:

- how are people seeing this verse, word or concept in relation to the larger fabric or logic of Scripture and why?
- what sources of theological knowledge are being weighed together or overlooked?
- why are these sources being used in this way and is there an underlying concern that is unacknowledged?
- is our understanding of Scripture abstract or removed from life or does it help others to deal with specific pastoral situations that arise in family or parish life?
- are we endeavouring to retain a historic pattern of interpretation or can new light break forth when circumstances change? What might Christians gain or lose by each approach?

Scripture is vitally important to our conversations about same-sex relationships and marriage. So too is the witness of Spirit-filled LGBTQI Christians who seek to live an integrated life of faithful discipleship. Each conversation should encourage participants to read Scripture more thoroughly but to also consider how and why they read it in the manner they do so.

# CONVERSATION 1.

## WORDS THAT WOUND AND HEAL

### Overview

This conversation focuses on identity and the labels used to construct it. It seeks to help participants understand what terms like lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or intersex mean. It is comprised of:

- an activity about the labels that we wear or that have been applied to us;
- a reflection which sets out how identity is structured together with a biblical story (Mark 2.1-12) which challenges how we view it;
- a discussion about what key words like orientation and LGBTQI mean. Facilitators may choose between a variety of YouTube videos of interest to conversation partners; and
- the introduction of the concept of how we understand our identity in Christ.

### Activity

We all bear names. Some of them are proper names like Angela or Matthew. Many more are labels that get put on us by others or ourselves. These labels shape our sense of identity, both as individuals and the social groups to which we belong.

Pass around the picture. If people are likely to find the picture offensive or distracting because the women are wearing underwear only, move to Question 2.



1. *How do you respond to this picture? What dynamics do you see? How does it make you feel?*
2. *What labels have been applied to you? How did these labels make you feel?*
3. *Why do people label others so readily? How does it affect us as individuals and groups?*

The picture is confronting for three reasons:

- the underwear symbolises that many labels are worn in private, obscured by social decorum;
- the black labels illustrate the negative labels people wear or place upon others. The labels are judgements about the women's personal worth and are often based on their appearance or character. Although men wear different labels their sense of self-worth is undermined in the same way; and
- the viewer sees that labelling others is bullying behaviour which destroys identity. The picture should cause the viewer to question how and why they label others and themselves.

## Reflection

Identity is a complex process of knowing who we are and our place in the world. It involves our sense of:

- self-image, which encompasses the past, present and future;
- social belonging, particularly the groups that accept or reject us; and
- the natural order, particular how we view the way things are or meant to be.

Identity is about a person's value, worth and what they might yet become. It is not necessarily intrinsic to a person but forms through their relationship with others. Identity emerges as a person understands their own character, temperament, beliefs and values as they encounter others through life.

Sometimes labels are helpful because they show people things about themselves that they may not appreciate, like being brave or compassionate. Other labels are unwanted and damaging because they are untrue or biased.

Whether a label is creative or destructive depends on the context. Labels can be creative when they encourage a person to grow. Labels become destructive when they limit or undermine growth. Great personal distress and conflict arises when a person's sense of self and the social expectations that surround them differ or diverge markedly.

The ability to create labels is an integral part of human identity. Genesis 1 and 2 show humans identifying and classifying the world in which they lived. Labels frame our perceptions and understanding of reality. They anchor us in communities that share a common way of seeing the world. People can use labels to open up new possibilities and opportunities or to shut down change. Jesus understood the power of labels to shape identity of both people and social groups.

Read Mark 2.1-17 together.

In these two events, Jesus does more than simply heal a paralysed person or dine with someone unpopular. Jesus challenges all the labels that surrounded them and were no doubt self-imposed also.

Being disabled in the ancient world was a disaster that had far reaching implications for an individual and their family. In that world, people viewed disability as a consequence of God's punishment for some wrongdoing by the person or their parents. Being a tax collector was worse because they chose to participate in an exploitative system run for the benefit of a foreign power. Sinners were people who ignored or did not bother to comply with religious law and custom. Consequently, they were seen to be outsiders who rejected the way of life and blessing (see Deuteronomy 30.15-20).

Jesus' pronouncement of forgiveness cuts through the labels. His willingness to share a table with those considered disreputable overturned many people's expectations. A person widely considered weak and worthless is called 'son' by Jesus, a label of intimacy. Where the man's life was once dominated by paralysis it is now characterised by forgiveness, healing and restoration. It is a pattern extended even to those who seemingly ignore God's way of life, like tax collectors and sinners.

4. *What does Jesus call the paralysed man and what does he say to Levi?*
5. *What effect does Jesus' words have?*
6. *How do the teachers respond and why?*
7. *In your Christian journey, how has encountering Jesus changed the labels you wear or apply to others?*

## Sexuality, gender and orientation

LGBTQI refers to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning or intersex. These terms are considered more respectful than older labels like homosexual or homophile that are often associated with prejudice. LGBTQI is often used to describe a broad range of people who are diverse or do not fit so-called normal expectations in their sexual orientation, sex or gender identity. Each group is distinctive with their own community, interests and perspectives.

It is hard to know how many people identify as LGBTQI. Estimates vary depending on how key terms are defined. Although more people are willing to identify themselves as diverse, many still find it safer to hide their sexuality or gender identity in public.

In the US approximately 3.5% of adults are estimated to self-identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual while many more may experience some degree of same-sex attraction.<sup>2</sup> According to the Human Rights Commission approximately 11% of people may be diverse in their orientation, sex or gender identity.<sup>3</sup> That's similar to the number of Australians who are left-handed. The proportion of intersex people is uncertain but a figure of 1.7% of births is often suggested yet varies according to which conditions are included. That's a proportion similar to Australians with red hair. Estimates of the transgender population range from 0.3% to 0.6% of adults but much depends on who gets counted and how. This means that most families, workplaces and even churches are likely to have people who may identify as LGBTQI.

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<sup>2</sup> Gary J. Gates, *How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender?* The Williams Institute, April 2011. Available online at <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Gates-How-Many-People-LGBT-Apr-2011.pdf>

Many Australians believe that a person's genitals and chromosomes to be determinative of their sex and gender identity. A person whose biological sex was male would be given a male name and expected to develop masculine traits. They would be expected to dress and behave appropriately for a boy or a man. Similarly, a person born female would be expected to develop feminine behaviours and appearance. They would be expected to engage in activities and relationships appropriate for being a girl or a woman. Human sexuality is therefore considered binary so that from birth people are either male or female. Furthermore, the alignment between a person's biological sex and their gender identity is expected and essential. People whose experience of gender matches their body or the sex they were born with are generally known as *cisgender*. This term comes from the Latin word meaning 'on this side of.' Many cultures consider any blurring of these unchangeable categories to be unnatural and something to be discouraged or repressed.

*Orientation* is a term that describes a pattern of romantic or sexual attraction a person experiences towards others. It reflects a person's preference for intimate relationships. Orientation is typically expressed towards people of the opposite sex because male and female are understood to be intrinsically complementary. A person with a heterosexual orientation finds their sexual desires and need for intimacy met by people of the opposite sex. The expectation that opposite sex orientation is not only normal but normative and even necessary is known as *heteronormativity*.

8. *Think of your own family experience. What does it mean to be a girl/woman or boy/man in your family?*

<sup>3</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, *Face the facts: lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people*. Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014. Available online at <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/face-facts-lesbian-gay-bisexual-trans-and-intersex-people>

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9. *What kind of traits or expectations about activities, appearance or orientation are associated with being a woman or a man, a boy or a girl?*

The only exception to this traditional binary understanding of human sexuality has been **asexuality**. In the ancient world, asexuality was associated with eunuchs or men castrated before puberty. Sometimes abstention or celibacy are treated as the same as asexuality but these are choices made for personal or religious reasons. **Celibacy** is the abstention from sexual intimacy and in many Christian groups it is often the ideal for every unmarried person.

Someone who is asexual generally does not feel attracted to anyone and often has a low level of interest in sexual activity. While asexual people have little sexual desire, they may still need companionship and romantic love from a partner. Some research suggests that ageing impacts the proportion of people who identify as asexual. Hormonal changes certainly affect people's experience of sexuality. Expectations about sexual activity continue to change as low desire and impotency are addressed by medical solutions.

Many Christians have understood heteronormativity to be nature's pattern and intrinsic to the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2. From this perspective, the physical and biological complementarity of sex and gender exists because of procreation. Complementarity is reinforced further by the experience of intimacy whereby husband and wife are said to form 'one flesh.' Consequently, feelings and behaviours outside these expectations have been regarded as abnormal and often framed as moral or spiritual failure.

People who identify as LGBTQI generally find that heteronormative expectations don't work for them personally. This is not simply about sexual activity

but their need for love, attachment, emotional intimacy, support, and commitment from another person. LGBTQI people have often experienced shame, punishment or discrimination for being different in their sexual orientation or gender identity. Many have needed to hide their relationships from public view until recently.

Central to the growing public acceptance of LGBTQI people has been a shift in understanding about human sexuality and gender. A consensus has grown in the medical and psychological professions that human sexuality is not simply binary but more of a spectrum or continuum. From this perspective, people may be exclusively attracted to the opposite sex, exclusively attracted to the same sex or experience attraction to people of either sex. Scientific study has come to see that same-sex attraction is a normal variation with no evidence of psychological abnormality.

These professions have concluded that orientation is highly resistant to change. This means that people who experience same-sex attraction are often unable to shift their desires or attraction even if their activity can be managed in the short-term. While some people have changed their orientation through therapy or spiritual help, most have found such efforts to be distressing and not enduring. The social pressure to change orientation often causes people to experience anxiety, depression and self-harm.

Scientists have realised that a person's experience of gender is not necessarily intrinsic to their biological sex. Rather, gender is something constructed by groups as they create certain ideals about what it means to be male or female. Individuals internalise these expectations. Yet some people's experience of who they are may not conform to these social expectations. They may feel like they don't measure up or that they identify more naturally with the other gender.

In western culture, expectations about gender have changed markedly. Traditional divisions between women and men playing sports, entering occupations, belonging to clubs have all diminished. People now have more scope to make personal choices about their behaviour, clothing and whether they want to be identified as male, female or indeterminate.

10. *Have attitudes and responses to LGBTQI people in your family changed in recent years?*

11. *How would you evaluate this change and why do you think it has occurred?*

## Being LGBTQI

Understanding the experience of people whose orientation and gender expectations are different to your own can be challenging and even confronting. What we find normal and desirable may not be shared by others. Sexuality is not simply about sexual activity but who we are as individuals and how we share companionship and intimacy with others. Sometimes, people may experience same-sex attraction or wish they were a different gender but not identify with being LGBTQI.

To know what it means to live as a LGBTQI person means listening to their stories, especially how they came to the point of self-awareness and shared it with others. In order to understand this experience, a number of video resources are suggested below.

The *All of Us* videos were produced by the *Safe Schools Coalition Australia* program. This program was designed to influence schoolyard cultures by reducing incidents of bullying and fostering greater sensitivity towards LGBTQI people. The videos of young people sharing their experiences are insightful but may prove controversial as some Christian groups accused it of offering a radical perspective. Such objections resulted in some program

amendments. Given their running time, your group may only have time to view two or three videos. Individual videos are also available through YouTube by searching for *All of Us*.

**Lesbians** are women who are same-sex orientated. **Gays** are men who are same-sex orientated. Their sexual orientation or desire for sexual activity and romantic attachment is primarily or exclusively towards someone of the same sex. Strong sub-cultures that focus attention on the positive attributes of same-sex orientation and overcoming discrimination have emerged. A prominent feature of lesbian and gay sub-culture was the rejection of many heterosexual norms, especially marriage. Nevertheless, these sub-cultures are also changing as people desire not merely to be free from discrimination but to participate openly in every social institution, including marriage.

If your conversation wants to understand a young woman's experience of being a lesbian, watch Jaimee's video, a 17 year old high school leaver: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFVaKAqFgAA> (duration 8 mins 12 sec).

If your conversation wants to understand a young man's experience of being gay, watch Michael's video (duration 7 mins 27 sec): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Konwliq14U8>

**Bisexuals** are people who experience sexual attraction or romantic feelings towards both males and females. They may feel degrees of attraction to both but not necessarily to the same degree or at the same time. Some see bisexuality as a transitional phase that changes over time. Others see it as an expression of personal identity for those who may experience some same-sex attraction but not exclusively so. People who are bisexual may not necessarily identify with lesbian or gay culture.



If your conversation wants to understand a young woman's experience of being bisexual, watch Vivian's video (duration 6 mins 55 secs): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACLYVLg1DuY>

If your conversation wants to understand a young man's experience of being bisexual, watch Jordan's video (duration 7 mins 24 secs): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEf61GaOFQI>

Sometimes a person's psychological sense of being male or female and their biological sex are incongruent or inconsistent. **Transgender** refers to people whose gender identity is different to their biological sex or they feel gender-less. They often experience incongruity and some may desire to transition their bodies to conform to their preferred identity through medical means. A **trans-man** is someone who was born female but wishes to identify as a man while a **trans-woman** is someone who was born a man but who identifies and wishes to be known as a woman. Transgender people may be heterosexual, gay, lesbian or bisexual in orientation.

If your conversation wants to understand the experience of a trans-man, watch Nevo's video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5tTKCqlwEk> (duration 10 mins 49 secs).

If your conversation wants to understand the experience of a trans-woman, watch Margot's video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CduZq6OHXH4> (duration 9 mins 38 secs).

**Intersex** refers to a variety of physical conditions where a person's sexual development is ambiguous, incomplete or features associated with both male and female are present. They don't fit being either male or female because of chromosomal disorders or because their genitals do not develop in a consistent way. Historically, intersex people were known as hermaphrodites but such a term is rarely used today. Intersex people often experience great

difficulty with binary labels for gender and sexuality. While medical intervention was often used to assign gender, today parents are encouraged to let their children choose how and when they want to be identified, either as male, female or intersex.

If your conversation wants to understand a young woman's experience of being intersex, watch Phoebe's video (duration 8 mins 17 secs): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Tqpf-sSjC8>

The Q can stand for either queer or questioning. **Queer** can be an umbrella term that refers to the range of sexual identities and behaviour that do not conform to heterosexual norms. **Questioning** describes people who are unsure of their sexual identity, orientation or gender and are exploring or discovering who they are. This process is often called **coming out**.

Coming out involves a growing sense of self-identity and acceptance by others. Those who are yet to come out are often said to be in the closet as they prefer to keep their orientation or identity private. Coming out is never easy. It usually begins with internal confusion, turmoil and a sense of not belonging anywhere. Distress and fear are often significant especially when valued social groups fail to understand or accept the person's identity. As self-acceptance grows, the person typically forms connections with others who have the same orientation and eventually seek recognition and acceptance from their friends, family and workplaces. LGBTQI people often describe coming out as making a choice. This choice is not between whether to be LGBTQI or not. Rather, it is between living with greater coherence between their personal and public lives or enduring incoherence for the sake of social acceptance.

LGBTQI are not the only forms of diverse sexual identity recognised today. Another form that has suffered much social stigma is **cross-dressing**. It

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describes people who prefer to wear clothing associated with the opposite gender. People who cross-dress do so for many reasons. Some do so for public entertainment purposes while others do so for private reasons such as comfort or arousal. Cross-dressing has generally replaced the term transvestite, which is considered derogatory today. People who cross-dress don't necessarily have a same-sex orientation as many may retain a heterosexual orientation. While it has become increasingly common for women to wear men's clothing, disapproval of men wearing women's clothing and imitating feminine behaviour remains significant.

12. *If your group watched any of the videos, you might like to discuss them separately or together, asking:*

- *what surprised, interested or concerned you most about the person's story?*
- *what was the person's journey to understand their identity like?*
- *how did their friends and family respond?*
- *What labels do people use to understand themselves and what labels did others apply to them?*
- *What kind of relationships have you shared with LGBTQI people?*
- *If you have your time over again, would your relationship with LGBTQI be different?*

## Our Identity in Christ

We began this conversation by considering the labels we wear. One of the labels that God applies to us through Christ is righteous. Of course this is more than an external label that we wear. It belongs to our innermost life with God. Christians have endeavoured to understand what this new reality means for our identity, behaviour and way of life. How should being declared righteous change the way we live together and personally in terms of attitudes, lifestyle, cultural practices and worldview?

God's declaration of forgiveness has a profound effect on human life. Much like the creation accounts in Genesis, being a new creation in Christ and having a new relationship with God creates and reshapes personal identity by influencing our behaviour and values. The holy God calls us to be imitators of Christ and live holy lives of service and love.

It is a reality that Christians have held different expectations about the development of holiness, both personally and corporately. For some, holiness is about a radical orientation of life shaped by God's love. For others it is conforming to God's holy standards for the created order. These differences are not necessarily absolute and there is much overlap at times. These differences remain highly contentious among Christians today as groups endeavour to help their members navigate a world where people's understanding of sexual identity, behaviour and attendant rites and rituals are not only changing but diverging.

Christian groups often identify themselves by what views and values they accept or reject. They are distinguished not only by their theological outlook but their pattern of engagement with social norms. Sexual identity, expression and behaviour is becoming a boundary marker between various groups in the life of the church. Such boundaries can blind groups to many values they share. For example, Christians generally affirm that sexuality is a gift while also rejecting behaviour and attitudes that are exploitative, damaging or degrading.

Many Christian groups have held the view that orientation can be managed through faith, prayer, repentance, self-discipline, bible study and the support of others. Today, Christian groups differ as to whether a person's sexual orientation and gender identity can or should be realigned with traditional opposite-sex norms or not.

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Many Christian groups also encourage celibacy for unmarried people, irrespective of their orientation or gender identity. Singleness plays an important role in the lives of many Christians. Singleness teaches people about how friendship can develop between men and women. It can also help people learn about their desires and attachments, enabling them to distinguish between selfish motives or impulses and how to care and commit to another. They regard marriage as the most appropriate relational context to express and experience sexual desire. Furthermore, sharing such affection is vital to sustaining and nourishing any marriage.

For LGBTQI people in the church, expectations around singleness are more challenging. While opposite-sex oriented people have the option of marriage as a way to express their sexuality in a committed relationship, no such accommodation exists for LGBTQI Christians. Instead, abstinence is expected which tends to mean life-long suppression, avoidance and the denial of ever finding a life partner. Many LGBTQI Christians face the unenviable choice between remaining single for life or finding a life companion and losing their involvement with church.

During the 1980s and 1990s, ministries to LGBTQI people emerged with a focus on *reparative therapy*. Such groups sought to help LGBTQI Christians realign their behaviour and desires by prioritising religious identity over sexual and gender identity through counselling, prayer and support. In recent years, all but the most conservative Christian professional organisations have rejected reparative therapy as ineffective and harmful. Although some Christians experienced personal transformation, many ministries that once offered reparative therapy have since closed.

For other Christians, God's instructions about sexuality are designed to guide human flourishing.

From this perspective, the experience and expression of sexuality needs appropriate interpersonal boundaries so that people can become all that they can be in Christ. God's relationship with a person through Christ is neither established nor destroyed by their conformity to sexual and gender norms. What matters is living in a Christ-like way by respecting and caring for others rather than adhering to rules about purity. Being LGBTQI are variations of human existence rather than illnesses, addictions or inherently sinful lifestyles. As such, LGBTQI relationships are compatible with discipleship and amenable to the life-long covenant of marriage. The relationship between religious and sexual identity is enormously significant and it is explored further in a subsequent conversation.

*13. How has the ongoing encounter with Christ changed your experience of gender and sexuality?*

## Next Steps

Understanding the experience of LGBTQI people is not difficult. LGBTQI people are in participant's families and workplaces. While it's good to ask questions about another's experience we should always be respectful. No one welcomes intrusive questions of a personal nature. You might like to think about these questions for next time:

- Does your church talk about sexuality and if not, why not?
- How do people in your church talk about identity, holiness, sexuality, sex and gender?
- In what ways did the conversation help you to think more about identity, holiness, sexuality, sex and gender?
- If your church were to talk about identity, holiness, sexuality, sex and gender in a better way, what would that conversation look like?

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## CONVERSATION 2.

# KINGDOM, CHURCH AND TRIBE

### Overview

This conversation focusses on the connection between our understanding of being the church and our conversation about same-sex relationships and marriage.

It asks people to consider their understanding of God's kingdom or work in the world and the degree to which they operate in a tribal manner.

It seeks to highlight how the experience of conflict over same-sex marriage can be experienced as an opportunity for experiencing reconciliation. It is comprised of:

- a video which talks about how Christians engage in political issues;
- a reflection on Jesus' commission to the apostles (John 20); and
- a discussion about the nature of disagreement and reconciliation.

### Kingdom


The church's relationship with society has changed markedly since the 1960s. Christians grapple with their role and place in an increasingly diverse marketplace of ideas, values and practices. This often leads to disagreements about how we should respond to various issues (eg. the environment and asylum seekers) which impacts how we live together as disciples of Christ.

Such differences and disagreement are nothing new. The earliest Christians experienced significant disagreement as people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds found themselves together in

the same church. Some were social and political in nature. Citizens received preferential treatment that included the ability to own property, participate in city decision-making and to marry. Slaves had none of these rights. Other disagreements went to the heart of what it meant to love and serve God.

The book of Acts and many of Paul's letters tell us of some of these disagreements. The conflict between Judaic and Gentile believers was profound. Judaic believers rejected many features of Gentile life which they saw as incompatible with the covenant of Moses. They rejected public nudity, which was common not only at the gymnasium but public baths generally. They maintained strict customs about food which governed not only the preparation and consumption of meat (no pork or shellfish) but restricted with whom they could eat. Gentile believers sought a relationship with Jesus while continuing to enjoy many of the benefits associated with Roman life. This included theatres, communal baths and a diet comprised of a wide variety of meats slaughtered at the many pagan temples in any Roman city.

Paul's vision of God's work in Christ was expansive and had profound implications for how Christians lived together. Grounded in Christ, built up by teaching from the apostles and prophets (like Moses), Judaic and Gentile believers formed a community where God's presence could be seen and encountered throughout the whole world. His many letters made it clear that God's Kingdom and work in Christ took precedence over any previous tribal affiliation, whether Judaic or Gentile.



The earliest Christians struggled to live out Paul's vision and people soon began to exclude each other. Some believed that everything was permissible because Christians are all saved by grace. Other were more rigorous because of their conviction that followers of Jesus still needed follow the moral and ethical standards of God's law revealed to Moses. Christians from both backgrounds were challenged to learn how to be church together. Events did not turn out the way Paul had hoped as Jewish Christians struggled to adjust while Gentile Christians became increasingly anti-Semitic in outlook. An opportunity had been lost.

Read Ephesians 2.1-22. You may wish to take turns reading a paragraph at a time and discuss it in sections.

1. *What kind of groups was Paul addressing in this passage? (v. 11-12)*
2. *What did these people share in common? (v.4-8)*
3. *Were the transgressions and sins limited to one group alone? (v.1-2 & 8-9)*
4. *What effect should Christ's death have on the relationship between these two groups? (v.14-18)*
5. *What vision does Paul express for their life together? (v.19-22)*
6. *Is the vision that Paul expresses any easier or more difficult to live out today?*

## Tribalism

The earliest Christians found the reality of God's Kingdom difficult because they preferred the certainties of their own tribe. A tribe is characterised by a high degree of commonality either in terms of

descent, language, territory, culture and worldview. Tribes function by giving individuals a sense of worth and significance which is usually repaid through obedience and service.

Tribes are a natural part of life and are seen throughout the world. In contemporary Australia, tribes are most commonly seen at sporting contests where supporters have their own colours, anthems and places to sit in a stadium. Many people belong to multiple groups with overlapping boundaries that reflect their work interests, politics, sport, social networks or leisure pursuits.

While we can't live without being part of a tribe, tribalism often becomes problematic. The negative effects of tribalism emerge when the loyalty to one's own group takes precedence over all other considerations. What matters is demonstrating the group's strength while defending the institutions and traditions that maintain it. Anything less is believed to challenge or question the tribe's identity, worth or value. One negative effect of tribalism is that it can encourage people to hold very negative opinions of outsiders.

Congregations contain many tribes, most often along generational lines. These tribes have different preferences, beliefs and practices. It wasn't that long ago (1970s) when Christians were not supposed to have long hair, go to the movies or listen to rock music. Today, older Christians may wonder at the worldliness of youth while young adults marvel at how anyone could get stuck in the past. Other tribes are stronger and go by a variety of names like high church, low church, broad church, evangelical, charismatic or progressive. Each has a distinctive way of interpreting Scripture, worshipping God and participating in the work of Jesus.

In the church, tribalism becomes problematic when it undermines and weakens our capacity to be God's people together. Tribalism is often at work

when people start to think that they cannot be God's people together because of their differences. Christians have the opportunity to become God's people more deeply when they are able to put their differences into perspective. In fact, it is the very diversity of a particular part of the body of Christ that is a sign of a genuine community of disciples.

7. *Is tribalism an issue for your congregation? If so in what ways does tribalism impact your congregation?*
8. *How have people tried to overcome the negative effects of tribalism? Were their efforts successful or not?*
9. *How does tribalism get in the way of seeing God's Kingdom work?*

## The reality of disagreement

Disagreement is an ever present reality in the church. It arises because people hold different values, expectations and interests. It rarely occurs because people are malevolent. People interpret Scripture differently, belong to different groups or see the world in different terms. Such differences give rise not only to misunderstanding but the feeling that people are incompatible because they are moving in different directions. Do we focus on those matters of disagreement or can we find those broad and often underlying areas of commonality?

Watch the video – Disagree with tea <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23MESHLYoJ4> (duration 4 mins 20 sec).

The video was produced by the UK organisation called Christians in Politics. It is a discussion between three Christians with markedly different political affiliations and beliefs. Although their groups don't map on to the Australian political scene easily,

they broadly equate to the progressive, conservative and middle voices.


10. *What surprised you most about the conversation between Gareth, Andy and Sarah?*
11. *What did you understand by the view that God's kingdom needs to come before tribe?*
12. *Are acceptance and agreement the same thing? Should Christians who disagree over issues accept each other as fellow believers?*

The video highlights a number useful realities, namely that Christians can:

- hold a variety of views on any political issue and still be followers of Jesus, irrespective of whether their views are conservative, progressive or moderate in nature;
- belong to varied groups, even if they don't personally hold or agree with all each and every value, position or policy of a political party; and
- recognise each other as fellow believers who share a common cause, namely Jesus Christ.

Disagreement arises for many reasons. Sometimes it occurs because people perceive the need, value and importance of change differently. Other times, it happens because people hold different views or are pursuing incommensurate priorities, goals or objectives. Some people value disagreement because it is an opportunity to discuss and resolve matters that are either right or wrong. Other people will dislike disagreement because of its impact on relationships and individuals in a community.

People respond to change at markedly different speeds. Some will approach it with enthusiasm and press for a decision urgently. Others will resist and oppose change at every step of the way. Most people will want to sit in the middle and wait before making their decision. They will watch the



arguments flow back and forth, gauge the decision's impact and see if a consensus emerges before making their choice. It is embodied in the age-old proverbs: 'the one who hesitates is lost' or 'look before you leap'. Consequently, people can experience disagreement not only about the topic or issue at hand but also about their perceptions of its potential impact and how quickly a resolution is needed.

Christians disagree regularly over political matters but still find a way to be church together. Being church together gets far more challenging when Christians disagree about matters of theological, ethical or moral importance, especially same-sex relationships and marriage.

13. *Can you think of a conflict that you've experienced at church where people approached or viewed it differently?*

14. *In what ways did some people see the disagreement in terms of principles and were others focussed on its relational impact?*

15. *In what ways did people move at different speeds as they attempted to resolve the disagreement? Were some quick while others moved slowly? What impact did this have on the disagreement?*

## Reconciliation

When Christians find themselves in disagreement their relationships often break. It is easy to see Christians who hold different opinions as lacking authenticity, faithfulness, integrity or commitment. Relationships break and our conversations become stuck when we:


- look to blame someone for causing the disagreement while assiduously defending our own innocence;

- desire to stop any change by preserving the past or defending the status quo;
- imagine the loss and diminishment associated with change to be irretrievable or irreversible thereby allowing ourselves to be consumed by fear;
- withdraw from conversation because we are convinced by the essential rightness of our own perspective while those of a different view are not merely wrong but harbour malevolent motives also; or
- devalue relationships with others, arguing that truth cannot be compromised while behaving as though life would be enhanced if their opponent simply left the building.

Christians don't have to stay stuck in deep disagreement. They can choose an alternative pathway, generally known as reconciliation.

Reconciliation is a term that is often used to describe efforts aimed at healing the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. As Christians, we often use this word theologically to describe the work of Christ whose death and resurrection made friendship with God possible, in spite of our refusal to acknowledge or respond appropriately (Romans 5.10).

Christians can be reluctant to use the word reconciliation when talking about how to manage disagreements between themselves. Some are reluctant because reconciliation is associated with the unrepeatable work of Christ as a spiritual destination and not the mundane daily reality of human relationships. Christians can also back away from this term because reconciliation implies agreement. People don't pursue reconciliation because they can't imagine finding common ground with their opponent. People can also reject it when they are being told to change their minds or think more critically. If it sounds like compromise, then division and separation is often preferred.



Reconciliation is better seen as an open-ended process aimed to overcome distrust and animosity. It is not simply about pacifying or appeasing someone. Nor is necessarily about coming to the same opinion or viewpoint. Rather, it is about encouraging mutual acceptance in the midst of disagreement. Put another way, people can be reconciled or mutually accept each other when they disagree or hold different positions. Reconciliation fosters peace between conflicted tribes without necessarily dissolving their distinctive perspectives or practices. Reconciliation is about exploring opportunities and finding a new future for everyone. It is precisely because we have been reconciled to God in Christ that we are called to live reconciling lives with others. This is always an ongoing task for everyone baptised into Christ.

Christians can choose to emphasise reconciliation in their conversations. Christians can put God's Kingdom before their own tribe by:

- exploring the facts about an issue, the emotions that surround it and the patterns of loyalty expected by our tribes;
- recognising that everyone experiencing disagreement has the opportunity to either exacerbate or de-escalate the disagreement;
- taking personal responsibility for their behaviour and its consequences;
- choosing to be accountable for a conversation's outcomes by considering the views, needs and interests of others;
- focussing on finding new possibilities and opportunities rather than the problems; or
- looking for the gifts and generosity of others.

16. *Reflect once again on the disagreement experienced earlier. In what ways did the conversation ever get stuck?*

17. *How might the tools of reconciliation have been applied to the disagreement discussed earlier? What kind of difference would they have made?*

18. *In what ways are the tools of reconciliation challenging, both personally and as a church?*


## Disagreements about sexuality and marriage

In our last conversation, we saw that Christians can disagree markedly in their understanding of sexuality, gender and a person's religious identity in Christ. Christian communities disagree because they:

- read Scripture in varied ways, using different principles, holding distinct values to reach varied conclusions;
- hold different understandings of discipleship which value holiness, compassion, truth, love, individuality and tradition differently;
- hold different views about the nature of sexuality and gender. Some understand them to be binary, opposite-sex oriented and complementary in nature. Others view them as variations which are equal and characterised by the search for companionship and intimacy with a life partner;
- see the relationship between church and society differently. Some believe that these should separate and distinct realms, the mixing of which brings compromise. Others view them as connected even mutually dependent;
- have different experiences of diversity. Some Christian communities allow for a wider range of personal beliefs, opinions and behaviours than others;
- perceive God's work in the world differently. Some communities call Christians to resist and confront the world while other communities urge Christians to engage and participate constructively from within.

Such differences can mean that Christians get used to seeing sexual and gender identity issues through their perspective only. They can regard anyone who disagrees or holds a different view as being blind to truth and deaf to common sense. Christians can find





themselves locked in cycles of disagreement and at loggerheads with their colleagues, families, minister or fellow members with no visible way out. This is because sexuality and gender are personal matters that affect an individual's relationship with God and the church's identity corporately.

Differences about same-sex relationships and marriage in the church are sometimes reduced to being symptomatic of pre-existing divisions between groups in the church. Some groups believe that the church should adjust to new scientific and social realities. From this viewpoint, accepting same-sex relationships appears self-evident and necessary. Other groups believe that biblical authority or the church's traditional witness is of paramount importance, even when socially unpopular. From this viewpoint, accepting same-sex relationship threatens the church's authenticity and people's salvation. Why people hold such polarised views will be explored further in a later conversation.

While church life is presently characterised by groups holding divergent opinions about same-sex relationships, reducing our disagreement in this way is simplistic and unhelpful. Individuals often hold viewpoints that contrast with those held or associated with the groups to which they belong. Whether a congregation is conservative or progressive as a whole, individuals that hold contrasting views can always be found in either group. Not everyone who recognises same-sex relationships is necessarily liberal. Nor do theological conservatives automatically reject marriage as an option for same-sex relationships.

Tribalism in the church is at work when groups deny people the space or place to work out their own views or opinions.

Many Christians don't want to see the church become fragmented any further. They want a third way or a position where they can:

- uphold biblical authority, specially concerning Christ's work of salvation;
- accept LGBTQI people as thoroughly faithful Christians; and
- preserve the church's theological diversity.

They often want space for individuals and congregations to come up with something more creative and constructive. Such an approach can often emphasise pastoral care over fractious debate.

The pressure to succumb to tribalism is rising. Throughout the world, talking to those who hold a different view is often regarded as compromise. Listening to those who experience the world differently is depicted as weakness. On this view, strength requires resolving disputes and differences through conflict rather than reconciliation. Yet as Christians, we are reminded by Paul that Christ,

who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death –  
even death on a cross. (Phil 2.6-8, NRSV)

As the servant king, Jesus exemplified reconciliation in his life and work. His ministry was characterised by talking, listening and responding to human need without succumbing to the pressure of tribalism.

19. *In what ways are Christian conversations about same-sex relationships and marriage characterised by tribalism or reconciliation?*

20. *How might the tools and practices of reconciliation be applied by Christians to their conversations about same-sex relationships and marriage?*



## Next Steps

Christians disagree about many things. You might wish to reflect on the disagreements that have occurred in your parish and how tribalism affected the way people see God's Kingdom realised.

You might also like to think about these questions for next time:

- Are conversations in my church stuck and if so why or why not?
- How are the tools or patterns of reconciliation used by your church? Are they effective or not?
- How might your participation in church need to change in view of this conversation?

## CONVERSATION 3.

### WHAT DOES MARRIAGE MEAN?

#### Overview

The conversation about marriage in Australia is confusing because of the way legal and religious interpretations overlap in the public debate. For the sake of clarity, the legal aspects of marriage are considered in this conversation with Christian understandings explored in the next conversation.

This conversation focusses on how participants understand marriage in contemporary Australia. It is comprised of:

- a video that prompts participants to reflect on their experience of marriage, either personally or through their family and friendship networks;
- an overview about how marriage is framed in Australian law and how it has changed;
- a reflection about Jesus' attitudes towards the Judaic law;
- the case for changing the definition of marriage based in equality and anti-discrimination; and
- the case for preserving the traditional definition of marriage which is based in the view that difference is different from discrimination.

#### Why get married?

Why get married is a question that many couples ask in today's Australia. This doesn't mean that marriage is going out of favour but rather what people expect from it has changed markedly.

Watch the following video about 19 unexpected perks of being married (duration 2 mins 17 secs).  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-gYLzBqohg>


1. *What perks of marriage from the video struck you as silly or significant?*
2. *Are there other benefits to being married that you would identify?*

People get married for many different reasons. Today, people are more likely to get married because of love, commitment and companionship. Reasons like having children (often unexpectedly) and financial security appear to be much less important than they were a generation ago.

Marriage is no longer the pre-eminent threshold to adult life. Of those who married in the last decade, more than three quarters had lived together in a de facto relationship. In such relationships, marriage becomes a public declaration of commitment and love. Some have suggested that marriage has become something of a status symbol or a sign of personal success that comes after a career, house, spouse and even a family are all in place.

The reasons for these changes are complex. Rising education levels, improved economic opportunities for women, the provision of welfare services at times of need and legal reforms have all played a role. Today, Australians are more inclined to view marriage as a pathway to or sign of contentment rather than a means to achieve security or independence.

3. *What reasons for marriage do you believe are significant today?*
4. *Are these reasons different from when you were first married, and if so why?*



It is not only cultural expectations about marriage that are shifting. When it comes to getting married:

- the number of marriages continues to grow yet fluctuates annually depending on how well or poorly the economy is faring over all;
- the average age of those entering it has been rising steadily to 31.5 years for men and 29.6 years for women;
- over a third of all children are now born outside of marriage;
- over 4 in 5 couples who marry do so after living together; and
- approximately half of all de facto couples expect to marry their partner.

Another change that has occurred concerns who officiates or solemnises a marriage. More than three quarters of marriages are performed by civil celebrants. Celebrants have a great deal of capacity to customise marriage ceremonies. Couples can customise not only the music but the words, readings and vows used in the ceremony. Marriage ceremonies today are expected to reflect the needs, interests and personalities of the couple involved. They can be as formal or informal as the people involved. They can be held in almost any setting that is personally significant to the couple being married whether it is on the beach, the garden or a farm building.

The ceremony is highly significant to couples in many ways. It enables a couple to declare their life-long commitment to each other publically. The ceremony also asks family and friends to support the couple in married life. The public recognition and celebration of a wedding remains very important to many people.

5. *Think of your own experience or that of your family and friends. What changes in expectations, attitudes and practices concerning marriage have you observed?*

6. *Think again of your own experience or that of family and friends. Did your relationship change by getting married or not?*

7. *In what ways have you experienced support from friends and family in your marriage or relationship?*


## Marriage and the law

Irrespective of how people understand it culturally, marriage is a legal agreement or contract that alters each person's legal status while conferring new rights and responsibilities. While people may customise their ceremony, a celebrant must follow specific legal requirements to ensure the marriage's validity. Marriages deemed invalid are annulled.

The *Marriage Act 1961* sets out nationally uniform requirements that determine the validity of marriage across all States and Territories. In December 2017, the Marriage Act was amended so that the right to marry is no longer determined by sex or gender. Accordingly:

- celebrants are no longer required to establish that the couple seeking marriage are legally male and female usually with reference to official government documents like birth certificates and passports;
- each party must be of age (18 years for males and females);
- each party must not be already married;
- the couple must not be in a prohibited relationship, defined by kinship through descent or adoption;
- marriage must be entered into voluntarily with consent, without fraud, duress or mistake; and
- marriages may be performed by licenced civil celebrants or by religious celebrants using authorised rites and rituals.

Central to the ceremony's legal importance are the vows. While marriage partners can create their own



vows, each person is required to declare before the witnesses present their willingness to have the other as their lawfully wedded wife or husband, regardless of the sex or gender of the person saying the vows. Each party and the witnesses are then required to sign the marriage certificate.

Australia's marriage law is secular. This means that it is designed to operate independently of any community's particular beliefs and practices. Presently, the Act defines marriage as a life-long union of two people entered into voluntarily to the exclusion of all others. The Act is not concerned about what marriage means personally to those who enter it. It does not include any religious reference because it is meant to apply to anyone who lives in Australia. The Act requires ministers of religion to continue using the form or ceremony recognised or provided by the minister's religion. Religious bodies therefore have the power to determine and follow their own beliefs about marriage.

As a legal contract, marriage gives those who undertake it specific rights, responsibilities and obligations including:

- rights to control and inherit property;
- rights to visitation when a spouse is imprisoned or hospitalised;
- control over a spouse's affairs when they are incapacitated through illness; and
- guardianship or care of children and other family members.

Marriage law is important because of the way it intersects with important provisions in family law. Marriage gives rights for people to access services like adoption, fertility treatment as well as government social security benefits. It also provides a consistent framework by which relationships can be dissolved through divorce.

In December 2017, the definition of marriage within the Act was amended as 'the union of two people to

the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life.' This means that not all unions are recognised by law in Australia. Traditional Aboriginal customs and polygamy are not legally recognised. The change removed legal restrictions based on sex and gender.


8. *Reflect on your own relationship or those of family members or friends. Which legal considerations are most significant to you?*

9. *If you have experienced trouble or difficulty, what rights and responsibilities associated with marriage have been significant to you?*

## Changes to marriage law

Australian marriage laws have changed since Federation in ways that most people may not recognise. It has changed with respect to age requirements, uniformity, the celebrant, and the recognition of de facto relationships. These changes reflect Australia's complex constitutional arrangements between the Commonwealth and the State and Territory governments holding different powers. These arrangements mean that the Commonwealth is responsible for some areas of law concerning marriage and family and identity documents like passports. States and Territories are responsible for managing other areas of law like property and registering births, deaths and marriages. These arrangements give rise to variations and inconsistencies that can affect LGBTQI people in significant ways.

One of the most significant changes to marriage concerned the age requirements. During the colonial period, boys as young as 14 and girls as young as 12 years old could be married. States and Territories progressively raised these age limits yet variations persisted. The current requirement of 18 years old prevents child marriage. Child marriage tends to



limits girls' access to education and work opportunities while reinforcing the cycle of poverty. A second change was the adoption of uniform marriage laws. Australia has only had uniform marriage laws since 1961. Before then, each State and Territory operated their own marriage laws. This made for considerable diversity so that the legality of a couple's relationship could change by simply moving across state borders. All sorts of variations existed around age, rights to access government services or seek redress when a relationship broke down. In 1961, the federal government used its constitutional power to regulate marriage uniformly across the nation thereby bringing consistency across Australia's many jurisdictions.

A third change was the introduction of civil celebrants in 1973. Until then, all marriages were conducted in religious settings (according to the requirements of churches, synagogues, mosques or temples) or civil settings like the government registry office. Civil celebrants enabled many people to marry who might have otherwise felt uncomfortable with making religious declarations or conforming to religious requirements. This was particularly significant for those divorced or marrying someone from a different religious tradition. Civil celebrants offered people the opportunity to marry in a dignified ceremony that was personally significant and enriching, otherwise unavailable in a registry office. Couples can design their own ceremony because the celebrant's legal role is relevant to proceedings and not their personal beliefs or views.

A fourth change was the recognition of de facto relationships in family law. De facto relationships are unions formed when two people live together in a voluntarily domestic partnership. Such a relationship is constituted by affection, usually with sexual relations, and public recognition by family and friends. Historically, de facto couples lacked many of the protections that married people took for granted. De facto relationships were subject to a maze of

different State and Territory laws concerning the sharing property and the care of children. Considerable variation existed with regards to the length and quality of cohabitation required for recognition. These legal differences were often justified on the basis of protecting marriage. In an effort to address this injustice and the many anomalies in law, States and Territories gradually extended the same rights accorded to married people to de facto couples. De facto couples are treated in family law as if they are married but they still confront a web of inconsistent and unclear State laws when property is concerned.

States and Territories provide the legal means for de facto couples to register their relationship. This is significant because without it, couples need to prove their relationship whenever applying for benefits or services. By contrast, married couples need only to provide a marriage certificate when applying for benefits or services. Importantly, sex and gender are not considered relevant factors to the registration of a de facto relationship.

10. *Think of your own relationship or those of family members or friends, how significant are these changes?*

## Reflection

Christians have long been interested in the relationship between social values and the legal system that shapes the pattern of everyday life.

In one of the most significant exchanges in Scripture, Jesus is asked about the morality of supporting the legal system of his day. In the ancient world and today, coins carried images that were not merely nationally significant but symbolised whose rule people lived under. Jerusalem was living under occupation and many nationalists resented the rule of a Gentile emperor in far-away Rome. For his opponents it was a great opportunity for them to

force Jesus to take sides. Did he support a corrupt government or did he desire see God's rule truly established in Jerusalem?

Read Matthew 22.15-22 together.

While Jesus' words are clear, what he meant and their significance for his followers has been the subject of considerable conversation by Christians ever since. When Christians have sought to clarify the link between God and the prevailing political authority seen in this passage, a variety of positions have been identified:

- a complete separation of secular and religious life, so that while the coin is Roman Jesus had his own spiritual agenda to pursue;
- a partial separation where leaders can be religious and still recognise the government using the coin either for good or ill;
- involvement with the state because it is far better to have a Christian emperor instituting laws on the basis of Christian religion.

11. *How were Jesus' opponents attempting to trap him and why?*

12. *How do you understand Jesus' response?*

13. *How and why might Christians reach such disparate understandings of Jesus' words?*

Australian law has developed in a way which gives no privilege to any particular religious group while respecting their need to operate with integrity. The significance of religious conscience will be explored in greater depth in a conversation that follows.

## Should the legal definition of marriage change?

The debate about the legal recognition of same-sex marriage is complex. Perspectives tend to either favour equality or defend difference.


Those who supported the amendment of the legal definition of marriage to include same-sex couples did so on the basis of equality. This perspective is grounded in a broad understanding of human rights and the commitment to remove legal discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and identity.

Equality doesn't mean that same-sex and opposite-sex relationships are identical in every way. Rather, arguments about equality focus on fairness. It is argued that sex and gender should no longer be considered relevant to people's ability to access services or exercise their responsibilities. To limit access or recognition on the basis of sex or gender is to act unfairly in a discriminatory manner. This discrimination not only effects people in same-sex relationships but impacts transgender and intersex people in unexpected ways.

Australian law is grounded in the expectation that everyone is entitled to equal protection of the law without discrimination. Discrimination occurs when a distinction is established between favoured and disfavoured groups. This distinction means that particular privileges are granted to one group while being withheld from another without any reasonable or relevant grounds for doing so.

Over the past 30 years, Australia has developed a robust framework to protect people from discrimination by governments who create laws that favour one group over another and harassment by individuals who deny access or service to others. This framework has developed as community expectations have shifted. The creation of this framework has encouraged community values to shift as particular behaviours and conduct have been labelled as offensive and unlawful.

The earliest parts of Australia's anti-discrimination framework were developed in the 1970s. The initial focus was racism in employment, housing and access to services. Laws preventing discrimination



on the basis of sex, marital status, gender and family responsibilities followed in the 1980s. Provisions to prevent discrimination on the basis of disability whether physical, intellectual, psychiatric or illness followed in the early 1990s. Age discrimination followed in 2004. Prohibitions against sexual orientation and intersex status were added in 2013. Anti-discrimination law doesn't prevent people from holding negative opinions of others. Rather, this body of law gives people who are harassed or denied services the capacity to seek redress through legal means.

14. *Have you ever experienced discrimination? How did it make you feel?*
15. *Was such discrimination ever justified, fair or unreasonable?*
16. *Anti-discrimination has broadened considerably. Are these widening of provisions worthwhile or problematic?*

## Recognising same-sex relationships

The legal recognition of LGBTIQ relationships has been slow and marked by considerable unevenness between jurisdictions. Such inconsistencies and anomalies are considered unjust. This is because their rights vary according to where they live. From the perspective of equality, LGBTIQ couples should be treated fairly with the same rights and access to services as any opposite-sex couple, irrespective of where they live in Australia.

When the Marriage Act came into force in 1961 it wasn't necessary to define marriage as being between a man and a woman. This was because same-sex activity was illegal in every State and Territory. Many of these colonial era laws prohibited same-sex activity between men, irrespective of their privacy. Such laws were rarely applied to women.


These prohibitions existed because same-sex activity was regarded as either a psychological disorder or a moral and ethical failure that required sanction.

The States and Territories began to repeal these laws during the 1970s. Progress was slow and uneven with Tasmania being the last jurisdiction to do so in 1997. During the 1990s, the States and Territories began to extend de facto recognition to same-sex relationships, albeit in an uneven manner. This extension occurred as governments recognised that discrimination against LGBTIQ people was not only unjust but also damaging to them and their children. Since 2013, some State and Territory governments have expunged historic convictions for same-sex activity, although Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory are yet to provide such redress.

While State and Territory governments moved to bring parity for de facto couples, the Commonwealth government lagged behind. In 2004, the Commonwealth amended the Marriage Act to define marriage as between a man and a woman. This amendment impacted people in four ways. First, same-sex people legally married overseas lost their recognition on arrival in Australia. Second, State and Territory governments were prevented from making arrangements for same-sex marriage as this power vested solely with the Federal government. Third, the prohibition complicated the ability of transgender people to marry or have their chosen gender recognised on government documentation. Finally, the prohibition denied intersex people the opportunity of marrying their-life partner because they may not be legally male or female.

A report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 2007 found that same-sex de facto relationships were denied equal treatment in 58 areas of federal law. They were





denied equal access to carer's leave, the Medicare safety net, tax concessions, superannuation, death benefits, veteran pensions, and aged care. These restrictions caused great financial and emotional strain. These restrictions constituted a breach of human rights because they rendered same-sex couples and their children as second-class citizens. These legal impediments were removed in 2009.

Legal reform federally and between the states moved at an uneven pace. Some states like ACT, New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and South Australia removed legal prohibitions to services like adoption, IVF and surrogacy arrangements for same-sex couples sooner than other jurisdictions. Prior to the Marriage Act's amendment, same-sex couples could register their relationship only in Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales and the ACT. Civil partnership registration in Queensland was created then removed and reinstated again following changes of government. Other legal quirks remained. Couples where one partner transitions after marriage remain married. However, the married couple may need to divorce in order for the gender transition to be recognised via a changed birth certificate.

Those who wished to amend the Marriage Act's definition to include same-sex relationships did so because it would:

- remove the necessity of celebrants to establish whether a party is legally a man or a woman, which can prohibit transgender, intersex or people with indeterminate sex from marrying;
- remove uneven rights and responsibilities that exist under State and Territory law which affect LGBTQI people disproportionately;
- allow legal same-sex marriages conducted overseas to be recognised appropriately;
- affirm that marriage is a personal choice and a matter of dignity that expresses a person's identity and their commitment to another person; and

- remove any stigma about being second-class citizens.

17. *How has this changing legal landscape affected the LGBTQI people and their children that you know?*


18. *Imagine your relationship was impacted by a similar lack of recognition or harassment. What you would do?*

## Retaining the existing definition of marriage

A range of positions exist among groups that want the existing definition of marriage as between a man and a woman retained. It is important to distinguish between those who:

- oppose all efforts to recognise same-sex relationships because of moral or religious objections to homosexuality;
- want the traditional definition of marriage preserved for moral or religious reasons while supporting the removal of all other discriminatory provisions in law against LGBTQI people;
- want to see same-sex relationships receive full recognition albeit under a different name; or
- believe that changing the Marriage Act's definition is unnecessary because all discriminatory provisions have been removed.

Between September and November 2017, many Christian groups argued that the traditional definition of marriage needed to be retained for a variety of reasons. At root is the significance of difference. From this perspective, opposite-sex and same-sex relationships are considered to be intrinsically different and this difference is a relevant consideration for the definition of marriage. As same-sex relationships are not identical to opposite-sex relationships their unions should not be identified as marriage. Consequently, opponents to



legal reform wanted a different legal term to be used or the existing prohibition retained.

Proponents for traditional marriage contended that making a distinction on the basis of orientation is not the same thing as discrimination. Many advocates for the traditional definition of marriage find discrimination and harassment towards LGBTQI people to be unjust and unjustified.

For Christians, the desire to preserve the definition of marriage as between a man and a woman is often motivated by theological reasons. Their desire is to preserve with integrity their own distinctly spiritual understanding of marriage. They want to retain the capacity to practice their rituals of marriage unchanged and often fear that any expansion will unnecessarily threaten the freedom of religious believers and religious celebrants from exercising their faith. Specific religious arguments against expanding the definition of marriage will be explored in the next conversation.

A variety of arguments to retain the traditional definition of marriage didn't rest on explicit biblical foundations. Some of these arguments are based on the view that same-sex relationships are not natural but harmful. These arguments often highlighted:

- human sexuality as binary and complementary by nature;
- the intrinsic difference is between procreation or its potentiality for opposite-sex relationships while same-sex relationships are about friendship;
- child raising is optimal in traditional marriages because a child's development requires the presence of opposite-sex parents; and
- poor physical and mental health outcomes for people in same-sex relationships and their children.

The evidence offered to support such claims is mixed. Same-sex orientation is no longer viewed as a disorder by health professionals. Research about child raising and health outcomes of LGBTQI people are very contentious. Nevertheless, LGBTQI people appear to experience three times the rate of depression and anxiety compared to the general community.<sup>4</sup> Rates of self-injury and attempted suicide, especially among people aged under 25, are twice and five times greater than peers of a similar age. LGBTQI people are also much more likely to have experienced verbal abuse or violence with most attacks going unreported. LGBTQI people have higher rates of smoking and drinking at unsafe levels. These outcomes are often attributed to the impact of discrimination and harassment.

Other arguments highlighted undesirable consequences associated with legislative change. In particular, the importance of social cohesion and the need to protect vital social institutions from erosion or disrepute was emphasised including that:


- government should not over-reach because marriage is a bedrock social institution that should not be subject to social experimentation;
- unintended consequences that would further undermine and destabilise opposite-sex marriages;
- restrictions on religious freedom as traditional marriage proponents risk being accused of discrimination which will curtail their efforts at evangelism and maintaining their religious identity; and
- open the door to subsequent expansions to include polyamorous arrangements because if any two individuals can be married why not three or more?

Many of these arguments appeared conjectural or speculative. Concerns about unwarranted

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<sup>4</sup> National LGBTI Health Alliance, *The statistics at a glance: the mental health of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex*

*people in Australia*. Cited on 25 August 2016. Available online at: [www.lgbtihealth.org.au/statistics](http://www.lgbtihealth.org.au/statistics)



government intrusion or social decay appeared to exaggerate community fears.

In the end, such arguments did not garner public support as 61.6% of respondents to the marriage survey voted Yes to allow same-sex couples to marry while 38.4% voted No. Voting patterns across Australia were strongly correlated with religious affiliation. Electorates that voted Yes most strongly had low levels of religious affiliation when correlated with ABS Census figures. Conversely, electorates with a high No vote had high levels of religious affiliation, particularly among Muslim and Catholic communities. In the aftermath of the survey, concern among religious leaders shifted to the need for greater legislated protection for religious conscience even though the capacity of religious groups to conduct marriages according to their own beliefs and practices was retained in the Marriage Act.

19. *What arguments concerning marriage do you hear in your networks?*

20. *In your opinion, what arguments for equality or difference do you find the most convincing or unconvincing and why?*

Christians often feel torn between the need to maintain their religious identity and the importance of addressing injustice. Jesus no doubt felt a similar pressure when challenged about the legitimacy of paying taxes to an oppressive regime.

Australian society has become more sensitive to the impact and consequences of discrimination, especially when benefits are given to one group but denied to others. Some may feel that the extension of such rights, responsibilities and obligations to people in relationships they consider to be different or inadequate either morally or ethically is problematic. We shall explore these dimensions further in the conversations that follow.

## Next Steps

Reflect on the arguments presented for or against same-sex marriage that you saw on TV or in the newspapers. Ask yourself:

- what does equality mean?
- how are same-sex relationships similar or different to opposite-sex relationships?
- who is making the case and what evidence are they offering?
- does the evidence exaggerate concerns or fears or is it reasonable?
- what implications do the speakers draw about their argument and that of their opponents?

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## CONVERSATION 4.

# CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE IN A CHANGING WORLD

### Overview

This conversation focuses on the theology of marriage. It aims to help participants understand that Christians hold different views about the nature and purpose of marriage. It does not examine the theology of same-sex relationships in detail. It is comprised of:

- an introduction that highlights the spirituality of marriage including a video by a prominent contemporary Christian leader, Tim Keller;
- a biblical reflection about holiness (Galatians 5.13-26);
- an overview of the Anglican marriage ceremony;
- a discussion about how Christians view the nature, purpose, indissolubility of marital roles and the capacity to rethink marriage theologically; and
- examines how marriage has become a symbol that speaks of concerns about faith in a changing world.

### The spirituality of marriage

Discussion about marriage equality often focuses on the legal, economic and social benefits. For many Christians, marriage also has a spiritual dimension whether the couple is religious or not. This spiritual dimension is easily overlooked because it often seems intangible. However, a person's relationship with God always shapes their sense of identity, direction and satisfaction in life.

Watch the video, *The Meaning of Marriage* by Tim Keller <https://vimeo.com/77534379>. (Duration 1 min, 28 secs.)


1. *What lies at the heart of marriage? Do you agree or disagree with the video?*

Most people regard marriage as good for human wellbeing, family and community life. The conversation about same-sex marriage has arisen because many believe same-sex relationships should be recognised as marriage because they exhibit the same qualities as those of opposite sex couples who are married.

For the Christian community, the spiritual dimension of marriage causes many to pause. This is because marriage is understood as a gift or something good given by God for human flourishing. The spirituality of marriage is essentially concerned with the experience of intimacy and holiness.

Intimacy is the formation of deep multifaceted connections with other people either socially, emotionally, physically or sexually. Intimacy grows when people are honest and open about who they are, what they need and contribute to a relationship. It is important for our sense of wellbeing. Intimacy enables people to be resilient and it can withstand all manner of trials and difficulties except complacency and indifference.

Intimacy is not confined to marriage. People experience intimacy through friendship, family, church fellowship and collegiality at work. Intimacy



in these relationships is always limited while in marriage the experience is fuller because of the relationship's unconditional, voluntary and life-long nature. Intimacy grows best when relationships are characterised by mutual consent, respect, mutuality, equality, commitment, fruitfulness and justice. Control, indifference, convenience, consumption or exploitation undermine intimacy, particularly between people who are married.

Marriage is important for family. A marriage is more than the sum of the economic or social benefits that accrue to individuals. Marriage is a partnership where each person commits to enhance another's life, without a sense of entitlement or dependence. It is an invitation to create something greater by learning to give of ourselves. Many of these deepest lessons are learnt through child raising as people set aside their own desires, needs and interests for a time for the sake of others.

Marriage builds resilient communities. People who care for another become capable of caring for strangers. Married people often function like trees in an oasis by providing stability, integration and the means for building prosperity. Socially, marriage encourages people to be tolerant, patient and invested in peace.

*2. How important is the spiritual dimension of marriage to you?*

## Ordering life

Our capacity to grow in intimacy is affected by our experience of holiness. Holiness is concerned with the quality of life arising from a person's relationship with God. Holiness is a transformational process where the Holy Spirit uses the trials and difficulties of daily life to create within the individual the likeness of Christ. As Paul the Apostle explained, holiness happens when people take off the old self and clothe

themselves by being renewed in God's image (Col 3.5-17).

Christians understand and approach holiness differently. For many, holiness happens when people keep God's rules. The experience of holiness is defined by the individual's practice of obedience and submission to God's intentions. Holiness grows when people experience God's presence through word, sacrament and prayer. It is a bit like an upward spiral towards God where people avoid sinful things and focus on purity and godly living. Holiness functions as the necessary condition for belonging to the Christian community because the right lifestyle follows from having or upholding the correct beliefs.

For others, holiness is what God does within people and socially through their personal experience of grace and forgiveness. People become holy when they become synchronised with God's heart and interests through word, sacrament and prayer. It is a bit like God reaching downwards into a person's lived experience so that their personal priorities and social outlook in life are transformed. The experience of God's generosity creates an appetite for righteousness in thought and action.

*3. Where does holiness come from and how does it shape relationships?*

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are desirable qualities in all human relationships and often associated with holiness. These qualities are foundational to strong relationships and they enhance our well-being greatly. These qualities can never be made, forced or faked. They are called gifts because they are received from the Holy Spirit when people live in tune with God.

Activity - Read Galatians 5.13-26. Using a sheet of paper, draw a vertical line and mark one column holy and the other unholy.

4. *What is Paul's call to the Christians of Galatia? (vv.13-15)*

Paul endeavours to help Christians understand how they have received mercy and grace, unconstrained by Old Testament laws. Some are concerned that others are misusing their freedom by living a life that looks anything but godly.

5. *What behaviours does Paul classify as holy or unholy? (vv.19-24)*

Sexual licentiousness and impulsiveness causes jealousy, envy and exploitation to emerge. Divisions, rivalries and dissensions multiply. Anger and efforts to self-medicate proliferate, often through drunkenness. Such behaviour is often associated with wrongdoing because these things erode wellbeing and community life and are therefore counter to God's intentions.

Conversely, the fruit or outcomes of God's Spirit result in human life flourishing. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control emerge when people are open to grace and mercy.

6. *What do you make of Paul's call at the passage's conclusion? (v.25-26)*

Paul's emphasises the need to live by the Spirit. It involves cultivating a spiritual life with God and others that yields what our heart desires but can never manufacture for itself. The presence of problems or fruitfulness in a person's life are often used as indicators that speak to the commitments and loyalties of believers and non-believers alike. They become symbols of the fleshly and spiritual life.

Christians recognise that relationships take work, especially in marriage. God's presence can be a profound source of joy, strength and hope, especially during times of hardship. God's presence means that tomorrow is a new day, that our mistakes can be put aside and that our capacity for intimacy can be refreshed. Marriage encourages people to reject things that are harmful while embracing attitudes and behaviours that give life. The desire for intimacy and wellbeing can encourage the growth of holiness. At the same time, the pursuit of holiness can deepen and enrich our experience of intimacy.

For Christians, the importance and presence of holiness makes the discussion about same-sex marriage challenging. Some Christians consider holiness to be mutually exclusive with sexual activity and relationships between people of the same sex. From this perspective, such relationships do not conform to God's requirements concerning sexuality and gender. Consequently, it is impossible for someone in such a relationship to be considered holy and for the church to recognise same-sex marriage.

Other Christians contend that God's intentions are concerned with development of character and the capacity to bring life to others. From this perspective, same-sex activity and relationships are not intrinsically unholy. Rather, holiness emerges when people are committed to growing in love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Consequently, LGBTQI people can be holy and their relationships characterised by holiness when they live in accordance with God's intentions for compassion and kindness. What's problematic is hostility and exclusion because holiness is inconsistent with anger, malice and abuse.

7. *How important is holiness for marriage and can same-sex relationships be holy?*

## Marriage in the Anglican Church

The marriage service is a ritual that highlights core Anglican beliefs about the spiritual significance of marriage, particularly concerning intimacy and holiness. The Anglican understanding of marriage has been profoundly shaped by *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662). It remains the official standard for doctrine for the Australian Church. Nevertheless, the church's understanding has developed whereby *A Prayer Book for Australia* (1995) reflects a more contemporary approach to marriage.

Activity – make copies or distribute the marriage service from:

- the traditional *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) OR first order *A Prayer Book for Australia* (1995) and
- the more contemporary second order *A Prayer Book for Australia* (1995).

Marriage is not something that the church performs in isolation from civil authorities. Anglican clergy are government-licensed celebrants who must conform both to the Marriage Act's requirements and the liturgies authorised by the Church nationally. While ministers can personalise the ceremony with readings, prayers and music they can't change the defining features of marriage as a voluntary, life-long and exclusive relationship between a man and a woman.

8. Compare the preface in the Book of Common Prayer with the gathering in God's name (APBA second order). What themes stand out the most?

Each preface indicates that marriage is a public event between a man and a woman instituted by God that recalls the creation (Genesis 1 & 2). The couple seeks not only the support of their family and friends but God's blessing for their life together.

Consequently, the service encourages the couple to live in tune with God's intentions by growing in holiness. It also calls on them to grow in intimacy by giving of themselves in love and service to each other and to raise children with security, love and care.

Comparing the services, two shifts in focus might be noted. First, the 1995 service presents marriage as a joyful, intimate union. The 1662 service contains this element but presents marriage as a negative benefit or remedy against (sexual) sin, thereby allowing people to avoid fornication. Second, it places companionship prior to procreation. Why the change?

In the medieval world from which the *Book of Common Prayer* emerged, marriage was an arrangement between families to preserve and enhance wealth and power. Having heirs and descendants was critically important while intimacy between husband and wife was valued much less. The marriage service reflected the dominant and subordinate status of men and women, whereby the man had legal rights while the woman forfeited all her civil rights and lived under his protection. Husbands and wives also routinely lived apart for extended periods, either for work or service. Such concerns were evident in the courts of Elizabeth I and her father Henry VIII.

In the contemporary world, which is reflected in *A Prayer Book for Australia*, marriage is understood in an egalitarian way. Marriage is not understood to be a concession to our lower fleshly nature. Rather, intimacy between husband and wife is expected and celebrated thereby reflecting the greater importance of companionship. Men and women also enjoy full legal equality and expect to live together as husband and wife. The way William and Catherine, Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, live illustrates how much circumstances and assumptions have changed.

9. Consider the consent and the vows (called the wedding in both orders), what themes stand out the most?

Today, many people view vows as a constraint or rule to be obeyed. In fact, vows point the couple towards a new way of life. To experience this new life, each must let go of their own separate past and reach into the future together. It asks them to make the most generous commitment possible, without caveats or escape clauses.

As a pledge, the vows take seconds to utter but a lifetime to master. They can bring guidance in uncertain times. Every success or failure to live up to these promises presents a fresh opportunity to grow in faith, hope and love. Over a life-time, they enable a couple to grow in intimacy and holiness of life so that together a couple can withstand the storms of adversity, illness and infirmity that come later in life.

The promise to obey has been omitted from the woman's vows in the contemporary service. For centuries, the vow represented the social expectation that the woman surrendered not only her legal status but even her wishes too. Women were expected to obey or comply with their husband's will in return for protection and security. Sometimes the use of force between husband and wife was regarded as legitimate when necessary. The subordination implied by such one-sided vows has become increasingly unacceptable, both socially and theologically.

10. How are the vows viewed by your church? Are they rules to be kept or a way of life to be entered?

## Which Christian marriage?

When Christians talk about marriage today, it seems that there is a consensus about its nature and purpose. However, Christians have understood

marriage in markedly different ways historically. Christians in Catholic, Reformed and Radical Churches have believed different things about the holiness, purpose, nature, indissolubility and immutable quality of marriage.

Anglicans have often incorporated Catholic and Reformed perspectives while resisting Radical ideas associated historically with Anabaptist groups. More recently, Christians have differed in their views about gender roles in marriage.


### Holiness

For centuries, holiness and marriage were difficult to reconcile. Marriage embodied all the cares of worldly life. It required property and fealty while having responsibility for a partner and children. All of this detracted from service to God. Medieval Christians often viewed sex as incompatible with holiness with sexual pleasure often identified as the forbidden fruit consumed by Adam and Eve. Put simply, sex was selfish and fleshly while spirituality was about self-denial and divine encounter.

To ensure holiness among the clergy, the medieval church required clerical celibacy as a symbol of their wholehearted dedication and commitment to serve God and others, freed from worldly worries. Conversely, marriage was expected of the laity because children were integral to building family and nation, especially in a world wracked with disease and warfare. The capacity for procreation therefore rendered sex in marriage as holy.

The Reformation changed how some Christians viewed marriage. For Protestants, marriage became the expectation for clergy. Marriage became a symbol of the clergy's ability to serve others and so they were expected to exemplify the highest domestic ideals. At the same time, marriage offered the practical means to avoid the immoralities associated with monasteries.





Attitudes towards the expression of sexual desire have also changed. As sex began to be understood as a divine gift marriage shifted from being a necessary safety valve to an opportunity to participate in God's creative and redemptive work. As sexual pleasure in marriage became acceptable, historic distinctions between procreative and non-procreative activity progressively broke down.

11. *How does your church view the relationship between marriage and holiness?*

### **Purpose**

All Christians draw on the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2 for understanding the purpose of marriage yet they differ in understanding its significance.

The Catholic tradition believes that Genesis 1 and 2 highlights the primary importance of procreation as the realisation of the command to be fruitful. Consequently, only procreative sex is appropriate and married couples are expected to abstain from both artificial contraception and sexual activity that lacks any procreative capacity. Refusal or incapacity are considered grounds for marriage annulment.

Reformed and Radical churches recognised the importance of procreation yet balanced it with the need for companionship. From this perspective, Genesis 1 and 2 are understood to show that God gives marriage because it is not good for people to be alone. Companionship can be developed in many ways, including through mutual sexual pleasure. Consequently, these churches tend not to distinguish between procreative and non-procreative sexual activity and often accept all non-lethal means of contraception.

12. *How are these different emphasises between procreation and companionship reflected in congregational life?*

### **Nature**

Christians differ as to whether marriage is a sacrament, a blessed union or a spiritual covenant. Marriage is a sacrament in the Catholic tradition but only when made between two baptised people in accordance with the church's prescribed rites and rituals. Performed in such a way, the church creates a new eternal and unbreakable bond with Christ that confers grace, which profoundly effects each person's salvation. Outside of these conditions, marriage confers no salvific benefit.

Among Reformed churches, marriage became a blessed union. It was a civil arrangement entered for civic purposes with assistance from the church. The rite conveys no salvific effect because only faith in Christ can do so and is sacramental only in so far as God's grace can be encountered through the ordinary things of life. Consequently, marriages are blessed through the church when the couple see it as an opportunity to enter a life of holiness together.

Among churches in the Radical tradition marriage was viewed as a spiritual covenant. Marriage existed independently of state or church recognition, a view founded in the belief that Adam and Eve were joined together by God and not by a magistrate or a priest. Such a view developed because these churches were often subject to state persecution. As marriage was controlled by an established church, getting married often required affirmations that went against their religious conscience. Although such couples were married privately, for centuries the government treated them as cohabitating and excluded by civil law.

13. *What difference is there between viewing marriage as sacrament, union or spiritual covenant?*

## Permanence

The nature of marriage has significant consequences for how churches view the permissibility of divorce and remarriage.

Marriage's sacramental nature means that it is permanent, irrevocable and unrepeatable for those in the Catholic tradition. Remarriage is only possible when the original marriage was annulled or declared void for reasons of infertility, impotence or never having been a sacrament in the first place. Although couples may use civil proceedings to divorce only the church has the power to dissolve a sacramental bond. Consequently, remarriage without annulment is adultery. Consequently, divorced and remarried Catholics have long been excluded from receiving Communion because they have broken unity with the church.

In the Reformed tradition, divorce has been viewed as undesirable yet permissible under certain circumstances such as adultery, abuse and abandonment. Remarriage was available to the penitent with the new relationship having no necessary impact on a person's salvation. Among Radical groups, divorce could even be encouraged and was used historically to discipline unbelieving, wayward and unfaithful spouses.

14. *How does the permanence of marriage affect your experience of being married?*

## Immutability

Immutability concerns the capacity of churches to adjust their doctrine about marriage. Each tradition gives varying weight to Scripture and tradition, science and experience while locating the power to determine such doctrine differently.

Catholicism and Anglicanism have found it difficult to change their doctrine of marriage because of the

way their institutional life is structured. Catholicism places great stock in continuity while its highly-centralised structure means that any doctrinal change concerning marriage, sex or family life requires an almost universal consensus. Anglicanism is less centralised and so its regionalised structure means it is more able to change its view about marriage when key assumptions are rethought. Growing variation and diversity among Anglican partners has caused significant disruption and upheaval at national and international levels.


Reformed churches have been most amenable to change. This tradition values new knowledge and has often integrated science with its understanding of Scripture and tradition. Denominational decision-making bodies include stronger lay representation thereby allowing them to revise and develop their understanding of marriage, especially concerning contraception, divorce and sexuality.

Churches in the Radical tradition tend to see themselves as associations or fellowships of congregations. These groups often distinguish between primary and peripheral matters of doctrinal importance. When marital relations are regarded as a secondary matter it is subject to individual conscience, local autonomy and diversity of practice. The theological conservatism of such groups means that their understanding and approach towards marriage is often traditional.

15. *What advantages and disadvantages do you see with how each tradition locates the authority to decide matters about marriage?*

## Different or equal

One area where churches have rethought marriage doctrine concerns gender and the nature of the partnership between husbands and wives. Christians have often shared broader cultural



assumptions about masculinity and femininity and their respective roles for either public leadership or private matters like child raising. Their interpretation of Scripture often reflects and reinforces beliefs about the nature of men and women and their intimate relationships.

Pressure for women's legal equality resulted in many significant social reforms. Women received the right to own property during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the right to vote in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Access to education, healthcare, employment equality and freedom from sexual harassment followed slowly. While women's rights in the world expanded, Christian communities grew concerned about feminism. Many accepted and adopted these changes while others continued to resist them, often for theological reasons.

Christians recognise that sin distorts our intimate relationships. Yet they differ markedly in how that distortion is understood and the solution required. Paul's metaphor of marriage (Eph 5.21-33) has been particularly influential. Many Christians have applied its description of the relationship between Christ and the church to relations between married men and women in different ways.

Complementarianism is often found in all traditions. This understanding of marriage contends that men and women are of equal worth and have equal access to God yet are created to fulfil separate but complementary functions in the family, church and society.

Sin disrupts this pattern of complementary roles when men seek to dominate women or fail to exercise their headship. It is also disrupted when women usurp men's authority and responsibilities. The divine pattern is restored only when people practice Paul's instructions. Consequently, husbands are to care for their wives deeply. Wives are to submit, cooperate or rely on their husbands. Contemporary complementarians stop short of suggesting that husbands are responsible for their

wife's salvation. Similarly, the use or threat of violence to enforce obedience is widely rejected and deplored absolutely. Nevertheless, the practice of headship and voluntary submission is considered vital for both happy families and faithful churches.


Egalitarianism also features in all Christian traditions but more prominently in some Reformed and Radical churches. Egalitarianism does not mean that men and women are identical or that gender is immaterial in marriage. Rather, it holds that God gives his gifts to individuals irrespective of their gender. Consequently, one is not inherently superior or inferior to the other. Equality means that men and women are of equal worth and status with the same potential for leadership in family, work or church life.

The divine pattern of equality is damaged when people impose fixed gender roles that discriminate or limit what men and women can do in the home, church or world. Theological justifications about headship and submission are considered particularly problematic because they introduce unnecessary barriers and limitations. As Christ restored the divine pattern, Paul's instructions are interpreted as encouraging equality through respect, mutuality and partnership. Faithful Christians are to help every man and woman become whatever God calls them to be. Consequently, men and women can and should exercise their leadership gifts whether in the world, home or church.

16. *How does your church understand gender roles within marriage and what is its effect on family and congregational life?*

## The symbolism of marriage

Just as the Australian flag is not simply a piece of material on a flagpole but a sign of Australian identity so marriage is symbolic of our expectations, hopes and dreams for a fulfilling life. Symbols are powerful because of the way they tap into deep emotions and



social assumptions about how life ought to be lived. When people talk about the value and importance of marriage they are often contrasting it against other forms of sexual expression, be it singleness, friendship and promiscuity. Marriage is also a symbol contrasted against concerns about social identity, belonging and cohesion, particularly family dysfunction and brokenness.

Marriage is richly symbolic for non-religious people. It symbolises the love that exists between two people and their hopes for a future together. It is often a secular and private matter between the couple and their loved ones. Interference by third parties is an unwelcome intrusion, especially by religious institutions whose views are easily perceived as regressive and relying on claims to authority which are no longer appropriate.

Marriage for Christians is also symbolic about how life should be lived but also the church's place in an increasingly secular world. Marriage symbolises not only God's intentions but what Christians believe is necessary for human relationships to flourish. Therefore, marriage represents the ideals for life, discipleship and the limits of belonging to the Christian community.

Of course, the symbolic importance of marriage varies between Christians. To some, it symbolises the space of blessing where sexuality can be expressed and experienced safely and responsibly. Sexual expression outside marriage is symbolic of human rebelliousness and brokenness. Marriage is a symbol of humanity's calling by God and their need for forgiveness as most fall short of God's standards and intentions. More deeply, marriage has come to symbolise the different standards by which Christians live in the world today. From this perspective, it speaks to faithfulness and the need to maintain high standards in a world where sexual expression is increasingly self-centred and permissive. In many communities, marriage serves

as a bulwark for orderliness and authenticity in an increasingly disordered world.


To other Christians, marriage symbolises a person's preparedness to embrace partnership with another and with Christ. From this perspective, marriage is part of the internal process of discipleship where grace and responsibility are embraced daily. Marriage symbolises growing personal maturity, especially the rejection of selfish sexual expression and the willingness to invest in others' wellbeing. Theologically, marriage represents the highest aspirations for equality and the dismantling of cultural dynamics concerned with dominance and subordination. From this perspective, traditional views seem overly legalistic, dated and counterproductive.

Any conversation about marriage is always set against a backdrop of broader expectations about changing social values and perceptions about the church's institutional influence. Consequently, deep frustration can be experienced when people operate with different and often opposing sets of symbolic reference points.

17. *Review the list of changes below that have occurred in Australian society. How have these changes affected the symbolic importance of marriage for Christian and non-Christian people?*

Contraception – Historically, Christians regarded all forms as contrary to God's will for fruitfulness in marriage and an innovation that promoted immorality. Many churches have accepted most artificial methods for family planning and protection against disease.

Censorship – Historically, many Christians avoided the cinema and dances because of their association with sexual permissiveness. Today, such limitations are often considered archaic. New cultural platforms have changed how people develop and express



their sexual identity. While sex is more easily obtained, intimacy appears more difficult to attain than ever before.

Sex work – many jurisdictions have legalised sex work to reduce the violence and improve the poor health outcomes for those engaged with it. Although many Christians see such policies as encouraging immorality some religious groups are actively engaged with the workers' social, physical and spiritual needs.

Pre-marital sex – Christian denominations have long viewed sexual experience or activity outside marriage as intrinsically sinful. Many promote virginity, sexual abstinence and purity rigorously, yet such moral guidance is widely ignored even among their members. Consequently, many people come to marriage with a sexual history that can be welcomed or prove challenging.

Cohabitation – Churches have often had an ambivalent view yet many couples seek marriage after a long period of living together in a de facto relationship.

Sexual activity – Christians disagree as to what activities are sinful, even within marriage. Self-stimulation, oral and anal sex are often thought to be immoral but have become increasingly common in society. Today, few people would ask clergy for advice about sex given the plethora of advice now freely available.

Mixed marriages – Most churches once counselled members to only marry those from the same denominational or racial background. Such marriages were rejected on the basis that they would divide loyalty and promote religious laxity. Attitudes have changed as tolerance and inclusion are exemplified by mixed marriages.

Affairs, divorce and remarriage – All churches take a dim view of adultery yet many have slowly embraced the need for divorce and remarriage, often as a way of caring for the betrayed partner. Where such behaviour was once the subject of moral censure, today civil proceedings are commonplace if emotionally turbulent.


Domestic violence – Christian churches have not always responded well to victims of physical and sexual violence or emotional abuse between intimate partners. While some congregations were supportive, others encouraged women and children to endure it patiently and prayerfully for the sake of keeping the family together. In recent years, many denominations have sought to provide more effective care to those affected by it while developing violence prevention programs that encourage gender equality and respectful relationships. Nevertheless, changing the way men view and treat women is a long-term work for churches everywhere.

## Causes for good or ill

Same-sex marriage is a symbol that highlights the fears and hopes of various groups in a changing world. Sadly, the pastoral needs of LGBTQI people can get drowned out when people fight these larger battles.

Christians who consider faith to be inconsistent with same-sex orientation, attraction and behaviour often worry about society's drifting moral moorings and the rejection of Christian heritage. It evokes a vision of faith where the church must be faithful by resisting a fallen world. It is a line which, if crossed, threatens the church's purity, distorts its identity and undermines its relationship with God.

To other Christians, marriage for LGBTQI people is important because of its benefits to wellbeing, family and community life overall. From this perspective,



the church is called to be an agent of mercy and grace in a world that is filled with violence and prejudice. The refusal to cross this line symbolises intransigence rather than faithfulness.

Marriage is always more than the relationship between two people living together. It is a symbol of our personal hopes and social expectations for a worthwhile life. It also speaks to the Christian community's capacity and unspoken expectations about influence and anxieties about its exclusion from the public square. The challenge of articulating a compelling theology of marriage remains for Australian Christians as the diversity of belief and practice is expected to grow rather than lessen with time.

18. *What does opposition or support for same-sex marriage symbolise in your congregation or church?*

19. *How might these larger symbolic concerns impact the life of LGBTQI people in your congregation or church?*

## Next steps

Christians are being challenged to think more deeply about their theology of marriage. The issue of same-sex marriage is but the latest in a series of matters concerning sexuality and family to arise. Over the centuries, varied traditions have reached different conclusions concerning the holiness, purpose, nature and permanence of marriage.

None of this thinking occurs in isolation but is often provoked by our experience or that of those closest to us. As Christians, we need to be aware that the varied conclusions reached by Christians reflects the varied theological methods they use.

- How does holiness work in the life of your congregation – is it a pre-requisite for encountering God's grace or a consequence of such an encounter?
- How does your congregation value or help people to develop intimacy in marriage?
- How important is it that the church's view of marriage remain the same or should it have the capacity to revise its views from time to time?

## CONVERSATION 5.

### LIVING TOGETHER

#### Overview

This final conversation outlines how people view same-sex relationships in the life of Christian communities differently. This conversation encourages participants to consider the Christian response to LGBTQI broadly. It is comprised of:

- an introductory video that illustrates the pain and possibility of peace building;
- a Bible reflection concerning the core requirements of Christian faith, namely loving God and neighbour (Mark 12.30-31);
- an overview of the positions that have emerged among Christians as they endeavour to respond to LGBTQI people;
- a discussion about balancing civil liberties and civil rights; and
- an opportunity to review the conversation and its outcomes.

#### Tough conversations

Talking about same-sex relationships and marriage is not easy. Many view the topic as too hot to handle. Others worry that even having a conversation is evidence that Australia is changing in unacceptable ways and the church isn't too far behind. Some despair that society isn't changing fast enough. Recent boycotts and protests make many Christians worried about the loss of religious freedom, conscience and speech when upholding traditional views about marriage.

Most expect the problem to be solved by parliament and politicians. In the church, people can expect their leaders and theologians to use their authority to resolve the matter by simply telling everyone what to

believe or do. Such approaches might silence people but they rarely end public debates. People will continue to hold markedly different visions of marriage privately. Families and congregations will still need to talk about same-sex relationships because of how it affects their members and loved ones.

Smaller private conversations can achieve more than any large public debate. Coffee tables give people the space to talk, think, listen and walk the extra mile in the shoes of someone else. Only through listening can people find a way through whatever fear, pain and worry they and others hold.

Watch the video: Growing up gay in the bush. <https://www.facebook.com/thefeedsbsviceland/videos/399313967068982/> (Duration 9 mins 13 secs). The video is about Ivan and his experience of exclusion in his home town of Tumut. Ivan returns, meets with the Sam who played a role in his exclusion and reconciliation starts to grow.

1. *What was it like for Ivan and Sam to meet after such a long time?*
2. *What might Ivan and Sam gain by talking about their difficult past?*

#### Love God, love your neighbour

When Jesus' opponents pressed for him to state his principles, he said:

*"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord God with all your heart, and*

*with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12.30).*

No doubt all the good religious people nodded at his wholehearted depiction of faithfulness. But he went on:

*“And the second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12.31).*

Jesus juxtaposed one commandment with universal appeal with another that was overlooked by many. Jesus’ move brought those with disabilities, unclean spirits, the sick, those who failed to fast or keep the law into a new light. The holy ones or Pharisees not only excluded and damned such people but blamed them for the nation’s predicament. The problem suddenly shifts from those struggling to those who believe themselves to be faithful and blameless.

3. *How might the crowd have responded to Jesus’ summary about the law?*
4. *Is Jesus’ summary relevant today and if so, how?*

In Luke’s account, a leader observes how broad Jesus’ guidance is and asks for clarity. Jesus replies with the parable about the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.29-37). The one who behaves as a neighbour is not someone expected or desired. It is not a faithful person (a priest) or someone committed to doing God’s work (the Levite) but someone otherwise considered objectionable, unclean and faithless (the Samaritan) who acts compassionately.

Christians organize these two commandments either:

- hierarchically, as though the command to love God has precedence OVER the command to love our neighbour, which can cause us to drift into legalism;

- in reverse, as though loving our neighbour matters MORE than loving God, which can cause us to drift into mercy fatigue; or
- disproportionately, as though our duty to God AND neighbour means that the self doesn’t matter, which can make people targets for abuse.

The challenge is to keep Jesus’ instructions balanced so that they work together.

5. *How does your congregation view and order these commandments?*
6. *In what ways are LGBTQI people your neighbours?*

## Finding consensus

Christians are yet to arrive at a common mind about the same-sex marriage either in society or same-sex relationships in the church. Finding consensus is difficult because popular attitudes towards legal recognition have changed much more quickly than attitudes held by religious people and their communities.

Christians may find themselves and others holding a variety of positions outlined below. This creates significant challenges because each position construes love for their LGBTQI neighbour in different ways. The difficulty can be compounded because the cultural gap concerning beliefs, values and behaviour between the church and LGBTQI communities can be wide. The gap is wider still when reasons for supporting or rejecting same-sex marriage are grounded in religious arguments concerning God’s intentions and identity, both personal and communal.

7. *Review the positions below. Why might Christians support each position?*



**a. LGBTQI identity is an anathema where exclusion and even persecution is condoned, either overtly or tacitly**

From this perspective, all same-sex activity, gender confusion and even support for LGBTQI people is considered sinful. LGBTQI people are not part of God's people, even if they attend church.

Scripture's instructions are interpreted in a broad yet uncompromising manner. The spiritual experience of LGBTQI people is irrelevant to biblical interpretation where marriage is between a man and a woman only and all same-sex activity is prohibited. LGBTQI people are excluded from eternal life because of their immorality.

LGBTQI people must repent by becoming heterosexual or have consistency between their sex and gender identity. What matters is the soul and not the body. Salvation is a matter of belonging to God's people and not individual identity. Exclusion, and for some Christians even persecution, is condoned as a means of helping people to realise their error and prevent such behaviour from becoming socially accepted or tolerated.

LGBTQI people have few rights in those nations where this view prevails. Although this outlook is less common in Australia today, many LGBTQI people continue to experience rejection by family or worse. LGBTQI people unable to change often need to hide their orientation and experience great uncertainty and fear. Casual encounters can be preferred because of the difficulty and danger associated with sustaining life-long relationships. Such conditions have encouraged LGBTQI people to develop their own cultural identity and to advocate strongly for their civil rights.


**b. denounce same-sex orientation, diverse identity and become heterosexual**

From this perspective, same-sex orientation and gender diversity are considered sinful, in terms of both identity and behaviour. Indeed, many question whether LGBTQI people can be Christian at all and their sincerity about loving God is questioned when their behaviour doesn't change.

This position understands Scripture's prohibitions in a more nuanced manner. Rather than being framed in terms of unchangeable law, same-sex relationships are understood through the lens of God's intentions. From this perspective, God's intentions for human sexuality are confined to marriage between people of the opposite sex. Any sexual behaviour outside of marriage is considered sinful and shameful, a consequence of living in a fallen world. While scriptural prohibitions are upheld, violence and exclusion are inconsistent with God's intentions and contrary to Christian values.

From this perspective, same-sex marriage in both the world and church is rejected. Salvation for LGBTQI people is possible when sexually diverse people repent of their orientation and identity. Repentance is not simply abstention. It means that an LGBTQI person is expected to become heterosexual or gender consistent. This renewal can be achieved through prayer and other restorative therapies whereby LGBTQI people are encouraged to forgo their past and trust in the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit to renew their identity and behaviour. Consequently, LGBTQI people are expected to experience decisive and permanent change to their orientation and identity.

Where this view prevails, many LGBTQI people will experience shame and attempt to either conform or hide their orientation and identity. Exclusion from congregational and family life can still occur to encourage repentance and prevent the acceptance



of sexual immorality by God's people. While some same-sex oriented people experienced a radical change, many others have found restorative therapy to be ineffective at redirecting their orientation or identity.

**c. renounce same-sex relationships and live in abstinence**

From this perspective, a distinction emerges between identity and behaviour for LGBTQI people. Scripture's prohibitions are interpreted with sensitivity towards the experience of LGBTQI people. While the prohibitions are upheld, nevertheless it is also acknowledged that many are unable to change their gender identity and orientation permanently and expecting them to do so is harmful.

Consequently, salvation is not limited by a person's identity but by their actions. LGBTQI people can be saved and belong to a church without necessarily changing their orientation or gender identity. The expectation is not for healing from homosexuality but being freed from following through on their inclinations. Consequently, LGBTQI Christians are called to abstain from sinful behaviour by living a life of self-denial and celibacy.

This position is often described as being welcoming but not affirming. Being same-sex orientated or identifying as gender diverse is not an obstacle to receiving God's love. Rather, sexual activity outside of marriage and acting in a gender diverse manner is considered sinful. Christ loves same-sex oriented and gender diverse people who have faith and will empower them to control their body, which may or may not include changes to sexual orientation and identity.

At the core of this view is the conviction that a person's identity is in Christ and is not defined by their orientation or gender. Following God is a joyful

but occasionally sorrowful experience for everyone. Same-sex oriented and gender diverse people can be open about their identity. Self-sacrifice is required as people are called to refrain from desires and behaviours that are inconsistent with God's holiness. The life of sexual abstinence for straight and gender consistent people is often temporary because marriage is a future possibility. For LGBTQI Christians, abstinence means being perpetually single because marriage is unattainable.


The Holy Spirit empowers people who are not married to live a functionally asexual life. LGBTQI people can experience and share love yet are expected to abstain from sexual activity, intimacy and same-sex culture. Christians often emphasise the blessing of singleness for devotion to God and service to the church (Matt 19.12 & 22.30). While some LGBTQI people embrace this position, others find it isolating and difficult to sustain with integrity.

**d. live a celibate friendship with a partner**

This perspective recognises that people are born with a same-sex orientation and gender identity. It acknowledges that God's love includes LGBTQI people who are called to live a life focussed on Christ and expressed through repentance.

Scripture's prohibitions are interpreted more narrowly. Being same-sex oriented or having a gender diverse identity is not considered inherently sinful. Rather, Scripture's prohibitions apply only to specific behaviours, principally sexual intercourse between people of the same-sex. Again, Christ loves the person and the Spirit empowers LGBTQI people to control their bodies.

This position is characterised by considerable ambiguity. This position acknowledges the value of having a life-long, exclusive relationship and that LGBTQI people experience harm through exclusion. It also acknowledges that complete abstinence over



the entire lifespan is very difficult. As a way of minimising harm, it encourages platonic friendship between people of the same-sex. LGBTQI people can share a home and live as friends so long as they refrain from inappropriate sexual activity. LGBTQI couples have a limited capacity to show affection to their partner, which can prove dissatisfying and difficult to maintain with integrity.

**e. live in a legally recognised civil relationship**

This perspective becomes possible in societies where LGBTQI relationships have achieved a measure of legal recognition. LGBTQI people can share a home, function as a family and have their relationship recognised in law. Although civil marriage for same-sex relationships may exist, the church may lack the denominational capacity to bless or recognise such relationships through formal liturgical means.

From this position, the distinction between identity and behaviour for sexual and gender diverse people diminishes. Scripture's prohibitions are interpreted in a way that distinguishes between same-sex relationships of the ancient and contemporary world. The biblical writers are understood to condemn relationships that are exploitative and harmful rather than same-sex activity and identity generally. It pays more attention to the experience of LGBTQI Christians where acceptance of same-sex orientation and gender diversity is considered compatible with faithfulness.

God loves LGBTQI people, who share the joys and challenges of discipleship and family life like anyone else. It recognises that LGBTQI Christians can have exclusive, life-long relationships which includes sexual intimacy but stops short of affirming such relationships in a religious context.

Same-sex couples may attend church and participate in congregational life. They may be

encouraged to have their relationship recognised in accordance with legal arrangements made available by the state. Nevertheless, the denomination may lack the necessary consensus to bless such relationships. The degree of welcome and belonging extended to LGBTQI people is fragile as LGBTQI relationships are recognised in the world but not the church formally.

**f. have that relationship blessed**

From this perspective, diversity in orientation and gender identity is recognised both culturally and by the church. No distinction between identity and behaviour for sexual and gender diverse people is drawn and neither are considered intrinsically sinful. Scripture's prohibitions are interpreted in a way that distinguishes between contemporary practice and those found in the biblical world. Same-sex orientation, activity and gender diversity are not inherently sinful but rather behaviour that is exploitative, controlling and casual is damaging and destructive.

God's work of redemption, healing and restoration includes LGBTQI people in body and soul. Consequently, God calls LGBTQI people to live in exclusive, life-long relationships with the acceptance and support of family and church communities.

This position recognises that the Spirit works through LGBTQI people. It affirms their unions as something that God can and does bless. Although same-sex relationships share many features of marriage they may be viewed as intrinsically non-procreative because the capacity to have children depends on prior relationships, IVF or surrogacy. Consequently, churches that consider procreation to be an essential feature of marriage may offer liturgical alternatives as a symbol of LGBTQI inclusion and equality.

## g. be celebrated with a religious marriage ceremony

From this perspective, orientation and gender diversity need to be expressed in appropriate and life affirming ways by the Christian community. It acknowledges that God loves LGBTQI people and calls them to live in exclusive, life-long relationships for the sake of their well-being, family and community. It interprets Scripture as calling the church to participate in God's redemptive work whereby LGBTQI people are included fully and to repent of past injustice.

This position recognises that God blesses and uses LGBTQI people without equivocation. Although LGBTQI people may not be able to create children without external assistance, the capacity for child raising and enriching community life means that these relationships are procreative and fruitful. Denominations that have arrived at this view have often adjusted the marriage service to accommodate the needs of LGBTQI people.

8. *Looking at the positions above, is there one you find more compelling than others, and if so why?*

## Peace or conflict?

For much of Australia's history, Christians didn't think too much about LGBTQI people. The threat of imprisonment meant that LGBTQI people often hid their orientation and disguised their gender identity from their families and congregations generally. Many of these policies and practices that excluded LGBTQI were justified by religious arguments about morality or the natural order.

Religious opinion and sentiment towards LGBTQI people around the world has changed greatly in the last 50 years. In some places, attitudes towards LGBTQI people have warmed as churches have adjusted to new cultural horizons and legal realities. In other locations, attitudes have hardened as


traditional views about marriage and other social matters have gained popularity so that LGBTQI people are more vulnerable than ever before. Many churches find that their members hold a diversity of views with all seven positions finding some expression.

Christians find themselves living in a culture where opinions are polarising and intensifying. In such an environment, the pastoral response to LGBTQI people is increasingly framed as a debate between unity or truth, injustice or equality, civil rights or religious liberties where the winner expects to take all.

Opponents to same-sex marriage easily feel that their religious conscience and liberty is at stake. Recent events such as the Bible Society's effort to talk lightly about same-sex marriage highlights how the scope to hold religious views that differ from public opinion is narrowing. Many worry about being labelled as religious extremists when all they seek is to be faithful to their understanding of God in belief and practice. Proponents of same-sex marriage inside the church can also feel that their conscience and liberty are inadequately respected by those eager to draw battlelines between the church and the world.

We can miss the fact that the conversation about loving God and neighbour raises questions about the quality of our church life together. Whether Christians like it or not, the prohibition on same-sex marriage is likely to be removed, sooner or later. Whether we like it or not, Christians will continue to hold different and sharply divergent views about the theological acceptability of same-sex relationships, the importance of civil recognition and how churches should welcome LGBTQI people.

Perhaps the most pressing question confronting Christians is not what they should do when the right to marry is extended to LGBTQI people, but how will



they work with Christians who hold a different perspective and desire divergent outcomes? Put simply, how will we live together as Australians and siblings in Christ?

*9. How are relationships between Christians changing because of the conversation concerning same-sex relationships?*

At present, Australian parliaments at Federal, State and Territory levels are endeavouring to strike a balance between civil rights and religious liberties. They seek to guard against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity because the detrimental effects for LGBTQI people are profound. On the other hand, space for religious conscience and freedom of speech for those who uphold a traditional view of marriage needs to be preserved. Everyone agrees that discrimination is dangerous and unwanted.

Australian churches are exempted from marrying same-sex people and ministers are required to use the form or ceremony that is recognised or provided by their religious body. However, ordinary Christians and many religious agencies working in welfare and aged care that are not formally recognised as churches will not receive such exemptions. Christians working in such roles will need to reconcile the need to provide marriage services to same-sex couples with their religious conscience. They will be challenged to think about their values, why they hold them and what their church permits, especially when LGBTQI members seeks to marry.

Australian churches may need to find ways of balancing rights and liberties in their internal life too. Many Christians welcome religious exemptions on the basis that it allows them to disagree with community values while retaining their religious integrity. It remains to be seen whether these communities will grant the same freedom and capacity to operate with integrity to those who

support same-sex marriage. Institutions that demand exemptions for some members while refusing to recognise the religious conscience of others may find themselves exposed.

*10. Contemporary Christians are being confronted with a choice. Are they to build peace or pursue conflict in the name of loving God and their neighbour?*

Peacebuilding is slow, expensive, painful work. The Prince of peace went to the cross so that redemption for fallen people might become a reality. Whether it is Rwanda, Northern Ireland, South Africa or Nigeria, Christians have sought to make reconciliation between groups of polarised opinions and divergent theological views a lived reality. Peace building is never predicated on agreement or compromising with error. Rather, peace grows when people choose to make the future different from the past.

Peace and conflict in the church flows from many small decisions that people make concerning their life together. The seeds of peace and conflict stir when people choose to either read Scripture and pray together or only with those whom agreement is shared. Each grows when people listen to or ignore their neighbour's views. Each gathers energy when people decide to walk the path of reconciliation or to single-mindedly pursue their own agenda. Each then flourishes when the future is either an inclusive place which makes space for the other or an exclusive space reserved for themselves. Peace and conflict win when the circle for being authentically Christian includes or excludes those with whom we disagree.

*11. What choices are Christians making about their life together concerning same-sex relationships?*

*12. What are Christians gaining or losing by choosing to nurture peace or conflict in their relationships with each other?*



## Ending well

In a world of strong opinions, where media often serves only to reinforce pre-existing points of view, few people have any opportunity to hear and learn from someone who sees the world differently.

Spend a moment to reflect on the journey shared together. Consider the moments that were painful or joyful, either for you or the group.

- How did you benefit from being a part of this conversation?
- In what ways were these conversations challenging?
- Have your views and opinions of same-sex relationships changed because of your participation?
- In what ways might the conversation have worked better?



## Appendix A

### Participating effectively

Participating in a conversation is not simply about telling others what you think but listening to others so that a better pastoral response might emerge.

As a participant of this group, we share in the task of making the conversation a worthwhile experience for everyone. We do this when we are mindful about the way we are participating. We are better participants when we:

- speak on our own behalf;
- listen openly to the ideas of others and pay attention to their body language;
- are curious about other people rather than make assumptions;
- acknowledge that we may not know everything and that we might have something to learn from somebody else;
- assume that everyone is participating with the best of intentions;
- acknowledge our own emotions, which may surface, and remain calm;
- are gracious to each other, especially when our words and ideas can be expressed in a clumsy or embarrassing way;

- keep our comments brief and leave space for others;
- ask questions to clarify what is being said and our own understanding;
- encourage hesitant participants to join in when they feel comfortable to do so;
- remind over-speakers politely to be mindful of others; and
- remember that baptised Christians share a common commitment to following Christ.

Conversations are always open-ended because we are never sure at the beginning where they will end.

The quality and effectiveness of the conversation depends on whether we choose to:

- stay stuck in a situation, where the conversation becomes characterised by fear of loss, fault-finding or blaming others, anger and withdrawal; or
- explore a new path, where the conversation is allowed to focus on new possibilities, encouraging personal accountability and the creation of community.

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## Appendix B

### Advice for Hosts

If you decide to host a conversation, you might wish to discuss arrangements with your congregational leader, especially:

- seek their support for hosting the conversation;
- address any questions they might have about the conversation; and
- keep them informed about how the conversation is unfolding.

As a conversation host:

- select a suitable venue where 6-8 people can hear and see each other comfortably;
- invite participants who may be people from your congregation or friends, colleagues and others who are simply interested in thinking more about same-sex relationships and marriage;
- identify a conversation facilitator beforehand and introduce them;

- be welcoming and stay calm as you help people come to know each other; and
- make available the following:
  - sufficient printed copies of each conversation for group participants;
  - a copy of the participant guidelines, which should be introduced at the beginning of each conversation and kept on the table for the duration;
  - pens and paper for those who want to take notes;
  - a device capable of playing YouTube video clips;
  - tea, coffee, water and nibbles to sustain the journey; and
  - where to find the bathroom.





## Appendix C

### Pointers for Facilitators

The facilitator is responsible for ensuring that the conversation is effective for everyone. It will involve:

- laying aside your own personal views temporarily to facilitate engagement by others;
- helping Christians recall their common commitment to knowing and following Christ together;
- guiding people through the conversation material provided. Explanatory notes are provided in each conversation to enable you make decisions about the conversation's direction and duration;
- encouraging participants to join in while ensuring that everyone has a chance to speak and be heard;
- asking questions to clarify participant's understanding;
- de-escalating disagreement by attending to people's emotional responses;
- intervening when the group is unable to resolve conflict;
- watching the time and bringing the conversation to a close in the period agreed; and
- helping the group to feel like the conversation 'goes somewhere' without being worried about achieving a consensus or reaching a decision or outcome.

#### Dealing with conflict

People are likely to hold firm views about the legitimacy of same-sex relationships and strong emotions can emerge. Sometimes a conversation might trigger memories and unresolved feelings which can surprise everyone. Some participants may endeavour to change the minds of others which can create tension in a group.

The facilitator can help groups deal with the expression of strong emotions and conflict. Facilitators help by containing and absorbing intense emotions so that conversation can unfold in a calm and safe manner for everyone. If you are feeling uncomfortable or bothered, it might be a sign that others are feeling the same way. Be proactive and protect the group's purpose.

The nature of same-sex relationships and marriage is complex with multiple overlapping issues. Although the conversation is structured, participants may want to talk about issues in a different order or sequence. You may wish to:


- remind participants that the issue can be explored further in the next conversation;
- suggest that you can speak privately about the matter at the group's conclusion.

When disagreement escalates to become conflict, the facilitator can help by asking the group the following questions:

- how are we doing as a group?
- I'm observing... (describe the disagreement). What impact is this having on the group?
- how can we handle this situation better?

If someone is dominating the conversation, it is best to remind participants of the group's purpose without making it personal or confrontational by asking:

- I'm observing that one (or more) people are doing most/all of the talking. What impact is this having on the group?
- thanks for sharing but we haven't heard from others yet. I wonder what they might be thinking?



If people are interrupting or going off track, you might wish to ask:

- I'm observing that people are interrupting (or going off track). What impact is this having on the group?

The key to dealing with disruptive behaviour is to focus on the pattern and its consequences for the group rather than making it personal. It is always best to be direct and invite the person to change rather than condemning them. In rare situations, when participants are intentionally disruptive and refuse to heed any containment or direction, it may be appropriate to stop the conversation. You may wish to talk to the host about whether the disruptive person should leave the group. In such situations, appropriate follow-up pastoral care to all participants may be required.

## Preparing beforehand

Effective facilitation depends on good preparation. You can prepare beforehand by:

- reviewing all the conversation material a week ahead of the meeting;
- reading through the conversation topic two days before;
- succinctly explaining your role to help people work through the conversation;
- thinking through possible ways participants might respond and how a crisis might be handled;
- talk with the host about the conversation and preferences for managing silence or prayer the day before. Be mindful that people can sometimes use prayer as the means of fixing or correcting others.

You may wish to use a moment of silence, the Lord's prayer the following prayer or another liturgical resource appropriate to the setting:

*Gracious God,  
you have reconciled us to yourself through Christ  
and given us the ministry of reconciliation.  
Help us to see each other,  
as you see each of us.  
Help us to listen to each other,  
as you listen patiently to each of us.  
Help us to love each other,  
with the love that you have for each of us.  
Renew us by your Holy Spirit,  
so that our conversation may be  
characterised by  
love, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness,  
faithfulness and self-control  
for the glory of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

## Suggested timing


Although some conversations will go longer than others, it is suggested that facilitators allow 70 minutes for each session.

- 2mins welcome, overview and housekeeping
- 1mins opening time of prayer or silence
- 15mins introductions of facilitator and participants
- 50mins conversation
- 2mins closing time of silence or prayer
- 1mins Housekeeping matters for next meeting

## Setting the tone

At the beginning of the conversation, you will need to:

- suggest that listening, learning and developing trust rather than achieving any agreement is the primary purpose of the group;
- explain how the conversation might work through material together;
- explain your role as a facilitator;

- 
- distribute copies of the conversation notes so that participants might see and follow the material to be covered;
  - remind participants how they can make the conversation productive by going through the sheet Participating effectively (Appendix A);
  - indicate that the next steps section is an opportunity for individuals to reflect and explore issues further;
  - gain agreement about what time the group will finish;
  - thank people in advance for their participation and the opportunity to facilitate the conversation.

## During the conversation

As the conversation unfolds, you should always try to:

- stay calm as this will help you contain any strong emotions that may emerge;
- refocus the conversation so that it remains welcoming, gracious and forgiving;
- encourage participants to be mindful of the space and time they share so that everyone can contribute without speaking over others;
- encourage respect so that it is OK to express disagreement without criticism, judgement or
- ask questions for clarification and paraphrasing to avoid miscommunication;
- be flexible by helping the group to deal with unexpected ideas, concerns or emotions that may emerge;
- finish on time, even though some elements of a conversation won't get covered or be completed;
- use moments for silence or prayer to regulate the group's emotional temperature. Although space is suggested at the beginning and end, your group might need at other times when necessary.

## Wrapping up

When the conversation is about to finish, you might wish to:

- thank people for their participation, the host for drawing the group together and the opportunity to facilitate the conversation;
- review the next steps section, indicating this is an optional extra for personal reflection and exploration and that participants may wish to discuss their insights briefly at the next conversation;
- indicate the date, time and place of the next conversation.

## Following up

When the conversation is finished and everyone has gone home, the facilitator should:

- follow-up with participants who found the conversation difficult, challenging or a highly emotional experience;
- review the conversation with the host about what worked or didn't work within a day or two;
- let the congregational leader know about the conversation's progress, especially if participants had a strong emotional reaction and further pastoral care is required;
- provide constructive feedback to the Public Issues Commission.