

Enough
Room
at the *Table*

A Conversation about Faith, Sexuality, and Gender

Facilitator Guidebook & Resources

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Dear friends,

Thank you for taking the time to engage in respectful, compassionate, and authentic dialogue about this intersection of faith, gender, and sexuality. The theologian Paul Tillich said, “The first duty of love is listening.” When we gather to genuinely listen to each other and participate in each other’s lives, something sacred happens. We start looking like the sort of people who are known by their love, which is what Jesus continually emphasized. Our differences in beliefs, theological paradigms, and practice don’t disappear; but we stop seeing each other as position statements or labels and instead see each other as fellow beloved children of God.

We have been dreaming of sharing this weekend of incredible dialogue with you all for some time now. When we traveled all over the U.S. as well as Australia and parts of Canada screening *Seventh-Gay Adventists: A Film about Faith on the Margins*, our documentary about the stories, challenges, and spiritual journeys of gay and lesbian Adventists, we met so many incredible people who wanted to continue the dialogue. We often wished we could gather these good folks in a room to meet each other and simply talk. And that’s the genesis for this dialogue film. Thanks to the backing of the incredible grassroots community that has supported this work, we were able to do that.

Filming a Dialogue

The group was intentionally diverse with pastors, theologians, educators, parents, and LGBT+* Adventists from differing perspectives. We had self-identified conservatives, progressives, soft-spoken types, major advocates, LGBT+ people in relationships as well as those who practice celibacy, academics, mere mortals, clergy, and lay people. (I was incredibly grateful to see all letters of the LGBT+ umbrella represented in the room too!).

The group didn’t know each other, and, except for the facilitator (a true peacemaker and bridge-builder), they didn’t even know who else would be participating. Some who are employed by the church had taken a great risk just by showing up and were trusting us far beyond what their bosses were comfortable with.

They were nervous. We were nervous.

But what unfolded was beyond beautiful. And it was exactly what we had hoped and prayed would happen. People got to know each other as people and not as labels or theological positions. They listened, laughed, and loved. The conversation continually transcended the typical divides and debates and kept getting to core of that which connects us as fellow human beings and pilgrims.

While we finished editing, I listened to a clip of one of the pastors in the room on the afternoon of the first full day. He said, “It hasn’t even been 24 hours, and already this is one of the most transformative experiences of my life. My view of God has been enriched and expanded just by meeting each of you, and I am so glad I’m here.”

Transformed People Transform Communities

The real impact, we hope, is all of you taking this next phase of the conversation into your own hands and hosting small group discussions around your dining room tables. That’s where the lasting healing happens: as transformed people transform their families, communities, and churches.

Our greatest hope and prayer is that this film models how we can dialogue, even about topics where we know we have differences, with love, respect, and compassion, making sure that all voices have a place at the table. Getting to know each other as people and not position statements or labels is what we believe is the first step in healthy community, and we are so deeply grateful to you for being willing to step into this space. It’s your turn to start a conversation that can start a transformative and healing process in your family, church, and community. It doesn’t need to be big—a few people gathered together is the perfect start. As you talk and dialogue, the ripple effect will grow, and that’s how we become the change we hope to see.

Behold, the Image of God

There’s a Jewish proverb that we love that seems appropriate for this project. It says that, unseen to us, there is above each person’s head an angel holding a sign that says, “Behold the image of God.” What would this world be like—what would our church be like—if we treated each person we encountered as the image of God in our life at that moment? We’d love to have each of you walk away from this film and your own dialogues feeling like you were treated (by yourself and others) as if an angel had a sign above your head that reads, “Behold the image of God.”

With love and gratitude,




Daneen Akers & Stephen Eyer
Co-Producers/Directors
Enough Room at the Table

<http://www.EnoughRoomFilm.com>

* LGBT+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other identities including intersex, queer, and asexual. Bisexual people are not “homosexual,” and transgender and intersex people may have any orientation, including “heterosexual.” As much as social group terms change over time (compare Negro > Afro-Caribbean > Black), it’s a painless expression of good will to use the most current consensus terminology for the people you’re referring to. When engaging specific individuals directly, use the terms that they use to describe themselves. Listen for their example and ask respectfully if you’re uncertain.

Facilitator's Welcome



Communication is the key to life. How we communicate with God, with one another, and with ourselves determine our eternal friendships and present fulfillment.

Listening is the communication skill we learn first, use most, and are taught least. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has rarely focused on listening. Instead we “preach the gospel,” “proclaim the truth,” “give the trumpet a certain sound,” “herald the three angels’ messages,” and “tell the world.” We tend to be terrible listeners.

Jesus of Nazareth knew how to listen. When He was 12 years old, He was “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46). Before choosing the twelve, He “went out to the mountain to pray; and all night he continued in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12). When “a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” the Life-giver asked two questions and listened (Luke 10:25-28). After His Resurrection,

when two of His disciples, Cleopas and friend, were leaving Jerusalem, Jesus “drew near and went with them” and then asked questions, listening intently (Luke 24:15ff).

As we know through the practice of prayer, God is the best listener in the universe. “The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you” (James 1:5).

God’s followers, all of us, should follow God’s example in creating sanctuaries for deep, authentic conversation. We too can learn to ask questions and hear beyond words, with generous hearts.

May this film provide the spark for a new, Spirit-led blaze of godly listening.

— Chris Blake,
Enough Room at the Table
facilitator

An Interview

with Co-Producer/Director, Daneen Akers

This dialogue film premiered at the Spectrum Ultraviolet Arts Festival in Glendale, California. Prior to the screening, one of the event organizers interviewed co-producer/director Daneen Akers. This interview was originally published on Spectrum.

What's the story behind the title of this film?

We didn't have a title for this film going into it but hoped one would emerge over the course of the filming. This new film is really meant to be a model of intentional, respectful, and inclusive dialogue about the intersection of faith, gender, and sexuality in the church. We invited 12 Adventists from around the country to participate for a weekend of conversation, and we intentionally invited a diverse group. The group included pastors, educators, parents, and LGBT+ Adventists (one who wouldn't now identify as gay but as same-sex attracted), all from differing theological paradigms, experiences, and perspectives. Nobody except the facilitator knew who else was going to be participating, but they all were the type of people who, no matter their beliefs, were open and willing to dialogue in a genuine and authentic way with others. Our hope is that this group would model what is possible when we can talk and share as people and not just labels or positions statements. And that's what happened—and it was a huge privilege to watch that happen.

The space where we were filming near Angwin, California was a great space, but it had a table that I didn't think would fit the whole group at once. This group proved me wrong. The first evening together after a day of incredible bonding and sharing, this group all pulled up chairs around the table and managed to fit everyone and continue sharing.

The next morning, the facilitator talked about how the previous evening “we discovered that we had enough room at the table for all of us.” And that phrase, “Enough Room at the Table,” just really jumped out as a perfect title that encapsulates the goal of dialogue like this. For too long the only people invited to the table to talk were a select few. In particular, LGBT+ people have been intentionally shut out of conversations about LGBT+ people. And that causes much harm, both for our LGBT+ brothers and sisters and their families, and for anyone who cares about how we treat each other, regardless of our differences.

Less than a day into the dialogue, one of the pastor participants said, “It hasn't even been 24 hours, and already this is one of the most transformative experiences of my life. My view of God has been enriched and expanded just by meeting each of you, and I am so glad I'm here.” That's the beautiful and profound space that is created when we truly engage with all of the voices that need and want to be at the table of conversation. We find that there is enough room at the table. And it's a beautiful thing! It's church at its very best.

You won't be able to be in attendance for this screening. If you had been able to be there, what would you have wanted to say to the audience that will be watching it?

I'm eight months pregnant with our second daughter, and so I'm beyond my capacity for traveling very far at the moment. Part of me is really disappointed about that because I love the conversational spaces that Spectrum creates, and I'm particularly thrilled with the artists presenting this weekend.

However, our goal with this companion dialogue film was really to model what we hope the community will now do. It's time for individuals to take control and be empowered to start conversations in their own circles, families, and churches. Our vision of this film isn't a cinema experience but a small group of five to ten people connecting and sharing in living rooms and around dining room tables. I know it can be a hard and scary thing to intentionally talk about topics that are often incredibly divisive. But these conversations are the crucial first steps for healing and helpful shifts, and the ripple effects of each of us taking up the call to provide a space for those conversations will be powerful. I love how this group models that. It is not a requirement at all to be in full agreement—it simply takes being open to walking with others in a mutually respectful and authentic way to start talking. And that conversation will lead to closer relationships, more authenticity, more healing, and more people at the table of fellowship that none of us owns but that we're all invited to. So I would simply encourage people to watch, listen, find others to engage with, and use the resources we're developing to host your own small group conversations. It's time for each of us to be the change that we want to see, and that starts with listening and talking together in intentional, authentic, safe, and inclusive spaces. This film is meant to model how that can happen.

Besides the obvious fact that you have a background in filmmaking, what makes film your medium of choice for exploring the topic of LGBT+ experiences within the Adventist context?

I think there's something about looking into each other's eyes and hearing each other's voices that has great power to connect us, even when we don't always agree. The medium of film humanizes and personalizes what has far too often been a purely abstract and disconnected theological debate. But the incarnation of Jesus and His ministry, which was intensely personal, really highlights the importance of connecting as people, as fellow beloved children of the Divine. Jesus engaged on a personal level, and He actually seemed to care little about theological debates except how God and the values of the Kingdom were depicted. His main emphasis was about how we treat each other. And so we want to model really seeing each other and engaging in that space of personal relationships in this conversation.

How do you feel about the present and the future of the Adventist Church's relationship with its LGBT+ membership?

It depends on whether I'm looking at the corporate church or what's happening in local congregations and between people. At the corporate level, it seems there has been a push to further define, contain, and draw firm boundary lines to exclude those who don't easily fit in the box. And I'm still regularly hearing really hurtful stories about how churches and families often respond to someone coming out as non-heterosexual or non-gender-conforming. But there's also more awareness than ever before that the status quo isn't working and something must change; that regardless of the differing theological paradigms and experiences, it's wrong to continue as we have. People in the pews are absolutely stepping up and starting to take risks in the name of love and listening to those currently excluded by the corporate church.

Thematically, the UltraViolet Festival is asking the question, "Where do you find hope?" How would you answer that question?

I find hope in people. More and more local churches and, most importantly, individual Adventists, are committing to doing the hard work to bring about real changes in how we listen and engage, particularly with those whom our current

“
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”

system is not just excluding but hurting. As a pastor in this dialogue film points out (referring to a Christian theologian's analogy), LGBT+ people are really the canaries in the coal mine. If our churches aren't safe for them, are they really safe for any of us?

Anything else you'd like to add?

I'd like to thank the grassroots community that made this film possible, and I just really want to encourage people to commit to taking this conversation to the next level in their own homes, churches, and communities. We know what we need to do, and it's time to do it! Watch *Enough Room* at the Table, download the facilitator's guide we're putting together at <http://www.EnoughRoomFilm.com>, and commit to getting a diverse group around your table for a day to simply begin talking and connecting as people and fellow companions on this journey.

And don't forget to check out the special features! This film was very difficult to edit as hearing this group talk is a real treat — I just haven't seen this sort of conversation before. Our cut of “must-have” content was five hours long! (The run time is an hour and 38 minutes now.) So we have extensive special features available along with the film. It's all on a pay-what-you-want model, so you can pay as little as 99 cents for the entire film and special features (or you can add extra to help keep this work going).

All of the resources are at <http://www.EnoughRoomFilm.com>. And if you have not yet seen *Seventh-Gay Adventists*, the character-driven, feature-documentary that we made first, please do so as it's simply a chance to step into the shoes of gay and lesbian Adventists wrestling with very real questions of faith, identity, and belonging. That film is also available on a pay-what-you-want model and can be found on iTunes or at www.sgamovie.com.

Quotes & Notes

to Set the Tone

LOVE IS patient.
kind.

– 1 Corinthians 13

“Stories can conquer fear, you know. They can make the heart bigger.” – Ben Okri

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, **love**, and a sound mind.”

– 2 Timothy 1:7

“The last message of mercy to be given to the world is a revelation of God’s character of **love**.” – Ellen G. White

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

– Rabbi Tarfon

The first duty of **love** is to listen.”

– Paul Tillich

“Perfect **love** casts out fear.” – 1 John 1:38

“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”

– Matthew 7:12

Conversational Contract

Chris Blake, the facilitator of *Enough Room at the Table*, says that the heart of conflict resolution is people feeling heard. In order to make that possible, we need to create spaces that are safe for people to show up authentically.

Engaging in honest and authentic dialogue takes courage, vulnerability, and respect for ourselves and others. Just by showing up to dialogue, people are self-selecting to show up with these traits; but going over a conversational contract is still vital so people feel safe to be themselves and share. It's especially important to make sure the group agrees to use shared language (such as not using vague, sweeping, stereotype-laden phrases like "homosexual lifestyle"). For specific language suggestions, see the On Identity document in the next section. It's also crucial to abide by a shared conversational contract. Here are some suggestions. Review with the group to make sure there is agreement (and possibly solicit more for your particular group).

- Speak from your own experience.
- Use inclusive language (e.g. "those of us who are LGBT+" or "those of us who read scripture to affirm/forbid same-sex relationships" rather than an "us/them" framing)
- Don't interrupt others.
- Be mindful not to dominate the conversation.
- Have pauses and breaks for processing and self-reflection time.
- Practice active listening (more below).
- Try to continually see each person in the room as one part of the image of God.
- Be open to learning from others.
- Listen as much or more than we speak.
- Turn off our electronics to focus on the people in front of us.

Active Listening Skills

Active listening is listening with a purpose. It is more than just hearing, which is the act of perceiving sound. Using active listening skills can help to minimize or avoid unnecessary conflict. It can bring clarity and understanding to conversations and interactions with other people. To work, the listener focuses on the words and the feelings of the speaker for understanding. Active listening happens when the listener hears the various messages being sent, understands their meaning, and then verifies the meaning by offering feedback.

Characteristics of active listeners:

- Spends more time listening than talking
- Lets the speaker finish his or her own sentences
- Lets the other person finish speaking before responding
- Allows the other person to speak and does not dominate the conversation
- Aware of own biases
- Asks open-ended questions
- Makes sure everyone has a chance to contribute
- Paraphrases what he/she has heard; for example, "I hear you saying..."
- Gives encouraging and non-judgmental feedback (for example nods and makes simple comments to elicit more from the speaker's perspective, such as, "I see," "Tell me more," and "Thank you for sharing")
- Focuses on what is being said and not what one's response will be to the speaker

- Adapted from the Poyner Institute.

Tip: Use "and" rather than "but" when adding your thoughts to another comment. The conjunction "but" in English is meant to function as a rhetorical device to negate the clause that came before it. "And" works much better to add to rather than diminish. Imagine talking to our spouses or children about a household habit or routine that was problematic. Hear the difference between, "I love you, but you're driving me nuts" vs "I love you, and you're driving me nuts." Go for the "and"!

A beautiful set of questions has been developed by Dr. Wendy Gritter, author of *Generous Spaciousness*.
Allowing for generous spaciousness means:

What could bring about change, even if we don't all agree?

Well, for a start, a spirit of **HUMILITY** that says, "I don't understand but I could be wrong."

A spirit of **HOSPITALITY** that says, "Enough about me; who haven't we heard from?"

A spirit of **MUTUALITY** that says, "How might I see Jesus in you, my LGBT neighbor?"

A spirit of **JUSTICE** that says, "When I diminish you, I diminish myself."

Wendy VanderWal Gritter, New Direction Ministries www.newdirection.ca

ON IDENTITY

LISTENING DEEPLY,
SPEAKING THOUGHTFULLY
ABOUT GENDER & SEXUAL IDENTITY

People's views within the Christian community and elsewhere vary widely on gender and sexual identity. This document is offered as a guide to facilitate open dialogue that will lead to showing God's love and care for all people.

INSTEAD OF ASSUMING



TRY

- You don't know any lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or queer (LGBT+) people . . .
- You understand what someone else is experiencing . . .
- You're the first to have "this" conversation with the LGBT+ person . . .
- Sexual orientation is "contagious" . . .
- LGBT+ people chose their orientation . . .
- The experiences of all LGBT+ people are essentially the same . . .
- Being gay or bisexual means being promiscuous, predatory, or hypersexual . . .
- Sex and gender are identical . . .
- Sexual orientation and gender identity are the same thing as sexual behavior . . .
- Sexual orientation is the only important aspect of a person's identity . . .
- Debate is the only way to talk about LGBT+ lives or with LGBT+ people . . .
- You need to express your own perspective . . .
- Every space in church or on campus is safe for LGBT+ people . . .
- You know all you need or want to know . . .
- You need to advocate for a particular viewpoint . . .
- That God calls you to affirm or reject someone's identity . . .
- Acknowledging you likely do know someone, even if you may not be aware of who it is.
- Honoring each person's individual journey by listening with a caring attitude.
- Knowing that the person has probably had this conversation many, many times before. And it can be exhausting.
- Recognizing that sexual orientation is an aspect of identity.
- Remembering when you *chose* your orientation. (When was it, exactly?)
- Valuing each individual's story as unique.
- Assuming the very opposite. Does your own sexual orientation automatically mean you're promiscuous, predatory, or hypersexual?
- Understanding that sex is biological and gender is a social construct.
- Considering the different sexual behaviors of people with your own orientation. Sexual identity is not chosen. Behavior is chosen.
- Thinking about yourself and others in a more holistic way; we all have multiple aspects to our identity.
- Engaging in authentic conversation that requires deep listening and respect.
- Asking for and thoughtfully considering someone else's perspective.
- Being a safe person (for example, honoring confidentiality, and building a friendship) so the space is one person safer.
- Accepting that you don't know it all and can stand to learn more about the lives of people who aren't you.
- Practicing support of a particular person.
- Simply extending God's and your own love and compassion.

INSTEAD OF SAYING

- Homosexual
- Tranny
- Hermaphrodite
- Homosexual lifestyle

- Gay relationship
- *Those gay people . . . they . . .*
- Are you gay? Are you bisexual? Are you transgender?
- Love the sinner, hate the sin
- I understand. My niece is a lesbian.
- Have you prayed for God to deliver you?
- Let me tell you what I think.

TRY SAYING

- Lesbian or gay
- Transgender or trans (“tranny” is a slur)
- Intersex
- Nothing. There is no such thing as a “homosexual lifestyle,” just as there is no one heterosexual lifestyle. LGBT+ people visit libraries, attend movies, feed pets, and dine in restaurants. What people often mean by “lifestyle” is more accurately termed “same-sex sex.”

- Same-gender relationship
- Those of us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT+) . . .
- How do you identify? (If you *must* ask.)
- I love you.
- I want to understand more. Will you share your journey/story with me?
- Nothing. Assume, without asking, that the person has a friendship with God. Allow the person to express how God is guiding them.
- Would you share your thoughts with me?

CONSIDER THAT WHEN YOU SAY

- The gay lifestyle
- Love the sinner, hate the sin.
- I love you, but I can't condone your lifestyle.
- I can't agree with your choice to lead a homosexual lifestyle.
- I value you, but . . .

A PERSON WHO IS LGBT+ MAY HEAR

- A promiscuous, predatory, hypersexual, clubbing, drinking, drug-taking lifestyle
- You'll always be fundamentally flawed in my eyes.
- I can't love you unless you change what I disagree with or what makes me uncomfortable.
- I can't see you as anything beyond your sexual identity.
- I can't bring myself to truly, completely value you.

“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.” Matthew 7:12

Suggested Setup & Schedule for a Dialogue

Inviting people to dialogue on a topic about which many have witnessed contentious debate instead of respectful conversation and sharing is a daunting undertaking. That's why we made this dialogue film as a model. Please use it to inspire and instruct as helpful for your gathered circle.

Participants

The most important aspect of your dialogue will be who is participating. People who are willing to engage in a respectful dialogue where all voices are valued somewhat self-select, but try to make sure you invite as diverse a group as possible. It's especially important to try to include LGBT+ voices: for too long the conversation in churches about LGBT+ people has intentionally excluded LGBT+ people—and that harms all of us.

The Danger of a Single Story

If you haven't yet seen the hugely popular TED talk, "The Danger of a Single Story" by Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie, please take 20 minutes to watch it. She talks about how a single story of a country or a people leaves us very vulnerable to stereotypes, and we miss out on a larger, more nuanced perspective informed by real people and real stories.

For this intersection of faith, gender, and sexuality in particular, church and religious spaces have only allowed voices that conform to their doctrines and policies to speak or publish, which has had the effect of only telling a single story about an entire group of people who are as diverse and varied as any other group of people. So make a special effort to make sure your dialogue group includes as many LGBT+ voices as possible, or the burden will fall on the one person in the group to feel as if he/she is speaking for a whole group, and that's not healthy or realistic.

Time Frame

Ideally, plan for and ask participants to commit to a full day or two half-days (close together). One of the pastor participants in this dialogue film talks about inviting people into our homes to share a meal. As he says, "We are who we eat with." We greatly encourage structuring this dialogue around shared meals together.

Materials

- *Enough Room at the Table* film
- Journals or notebooks
- Pens/pencils/markers
- Masking tape (for Cross the Line intro activity)
- Refreshments
- Basket to store everyone's phones and digital gadgets (strongly recommend turning phones off for this time of sharing and connecting)

Possible Schedule

[20 minutes]

Welcoming activities and prayer (see "Opening Circle" in the next section for specific ideas)

[15 minutes]

Group introductions (pairing up and introducing our partners to the group works well; see next section for specific ideas)

[1 hr: 40 min]

Watch dialogue film (as a group or individually beforehand)

[20 min]

Break for quiet journaling time for personal reflection time and take-aways from the film (don't forget refreshments!)

[5 minutes]

Review conversational contract and ground rules again

[25 minutes]

Share responses (set a time limit of 3-4 minutes depending on group size). What surprised you? What touched you? What will you take away to keep pondering?

[1-4 hours, depending on group]

Group discussion (find times for personal reflection pauses and breaks; make sure to end on moving forward ideas)

[20 minutes]

Closing circle and prayers (see "Closing Circle and Prayer Suggestions" section below)

Opening Circle & Ice-breaker Activities

Even if your dialogue circle is full of people who know each other, it's helpful to begin with activities meant to get

to see each other through different eyes, as people and not as labels. Here are some suggestions modeled in *Enough Room at the Table*. If you have an odd number, make sure nobody is getting left out.

Birthline-up – Have the group arrange themselves in order by birthday (so January birthdays at one end and December at the other).

Dyad/Pair Introductions – After arranging by birthdays, have people turn to the person on their right or left and learn three or four tidbits of information to introduce that person to the group. So nobody is introducing him/herself but rather their neighbor. The examples from the film are: 1) Name, 2) Age you decided to follow Jesus, 3) Favorite dessert, 4) Something nobody here knows about you.

Cross the Line – Clear the center of the room and put a line of masking tape across the floor. Explain to the group that they will cross the line if the statement applies. Use statements that work in your area: are there favorite teams or local sayings? Here are some from the film:

Cross the line if:

- You have strong feelings for or against country music
- You have ever loved someone who didn't return your love
- You like Brussels Sprouts
- You have ever named your car
- You have ever had a dearly beloved pet die
- You have ever been the victim of discrimination
- You loved Pathfinders
- You have ever been deeply hurt by insensitive words
- You have ever hurt others with your insensitive words
- You want more healing, hopeful, and healthy conversations in the church about LGBT+ topics

Central/Peripheral – There are many ways in which we label and divide each other, yet often these labels mean almost nothing. One way to make our values more visible is by mapping how central or peripheral they are to us. Have the group get in a circle and take one or two steps inward if the statement is central to who they are and what they value. If it's really core, they'll be in the middle. If it's peripheral, they won't move at all, and they might even step backward. Some of the examples from the film are:

- Organized religion
- Vegetarianism
- Sabbath
- Ellen White
- James White
- Jewelry
- Loving your neighbor
- Jesus

If your group is like the one in the dialogue film, at the end with Jesus, everyone will be in the center. That's the core for

most of us who want to follow His example. It's a great time to have put arms around each other and have prayer.

Prayer – A great time to have opening prayer is when the group is gathered in the center together. If none of the items have drawn group members together, invite everyone in. Make sure either you or someone you trust leads prayer as sometimes prayer can become a time of pontificating and mini-sermonizing. The goal is simply to share openly and with the love of the One Christians say is at the heart of the church.

Transformative Experience – Share a short personal story about an experience related to this conversation that was personally transformative for you. Ask group members to do the same. Why are they here? Why does this conversation matter? Focus on a personal experience that is a focal point for their participation.

Helpful Terminology for Discussions

The terms “Side A” and “Side B” are helpful when it comes to this discussion as a succinct and simple way to communicate about theological paradigms and beliefs. Of course there are more than two “sides,” and many don't know exactly which side they agree with or articulate a different perspective altogether (like “Side Q” for “Quality of Relationships” as one of the dialogue film participants articulates).

Although he didn't invent these terms, Justin Lee of the Gay Christian Network has helped promote them as helpful dialogue tools. In brief:

Many Adventists have asked for more information on various views held on LGBT+ lives. Here are three basic approaches:

Side A – Same-sex relationships have the same value (and should be held to the same standards) as different-sex (heterosexual) relationships.

Side B – Only a male-female relationship in marriage is the Creator's intent for our sexuality. (Official Seventh-day Adventist Church stance.)

Side AB – Civil same-sex unions are allowable. Same-sex weddings should not be blessed by churches.

For a respectful, in-depth discussion of Side A and Side B, see “The Great Gay Debate” from the Gay Christian Network. Justin Lee, who is Side A, and his good friend Ron Belgau, who is Side B, do a fantastic job presenting their positions in a way that values and respects the other.

Note: Consider giving discussion participants personal journaling time here to free write about where they currently find themselves. Are they Side A? Side B? Somewhere in-between or elsewhere altogether? Can they articulate the beliefs, hopes, and fears of those on the other side?

Discussion Questions

These questions are real questions and scenarios that have been shared with the producers of *Enough Room at the Table*. They've been edited for clarity, length, and unified language/terms, but these questions are from genuine voices hoping for healthy and healing conversations in their church. To follow the structure of the conversation that's modeled in *Enough Room at the Table*, we'll begin with foundational questions and Side B voices.

Groundwork/Foundational Questions

What do you think is required before a church can actually have a healthy, informed, and helpful discussion on human sexuality?

What do you wish people would ask you before they talk about theology?

Personal Faith/Hope/Struggles

Can you describe a moment of personal transformation when it comes to this intersection of faith, gender, and sexuality? Why are you here? Why do you care about this conversation?

When it comes to this topic and the church, what's a high and a low for you personally? In other words, what gives you hope and what makes you feel less hopeful or even despair?

What does your ideal vision of a faith community look like? Have you experienced that at all in your own church or in another spiritual space?

For those who identify as LGBT+, what would you like to share with church leaders to help educate them about being LGBT+ and an Adventist? What do you wish people would ask you? What are you tired of being asked?

Jesus

Can you please talk about Jesus? The words of Jesus I hear quoted at LGBT+ people often is "Go and sin no more." But even if we equate adultery with same-sex relationships, we seem to forget that those words were spoken in private directly by God to a woman. No human witness was without sin to witness that exchange. Why do we feel like it's our job to judge other people? Can we ever let that go?

Jesus seemed to spend the bulk of his time with those the religious authorities of His day had deemed unworthy and unacceptable. What does His life and example teach us today, especially when it comes to this topic?

In Matthew 19, Jesus preaches a powerful lesson on eunuchs, who were definitely non-normative outsiders who were not even allowed in the temple during His time. What does that example have to teach us today?

Something called the "Christological hermeneutic" has transformed my life. It's basically about reading the things in the Bible that don't always make sense today or that seem to have contradictions through the lens of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. It's made a world of difference in how I approach

this issue and many others in the church. How can we really apply the life and teachings of Jesus to our interactions with others?

Why is there so much fear around this topic? Jesus said the most important commandments were: Love God and love your neighbor. What exactly are the fears of what will happen if we fully love and include LGBT+ people in the church?

LGBT+ People & Suffering

David Gushee, a prominent evangelical scholar on Biblical ethics, recently wrote a book about changing his mind on this topic. He said we cannot think about this topic through the lens of sexuality, but we must think about it in terms of human suffering. And more than most any other demographic in the church today the LGBT+ population has suffered, often at the hands of other Christians. I'm still trying to figure out what to make of that and would love to talk more with others who are committed to following Jesus' example.

I've heard a lot about the higher suicide rates of LGBT+ youth, and recently I seem to hear a lot about transgender people being killed. How can we address this?

How will non-Christians view the church's treatment of LGBT+ people and say, "I want to be a part of that community"?

From Side B Voices

How do those who advocate for fully including LGBT+ people into the church deal with the scriptural verses that seem clearly—at least to me—to forbid same-sex sexual intimacy?

The Bible is the foundation upon which I build my life. I want to love and welcome gays and lesbians, but I don't know how to without feeling like I'm ignoring scriptural imperatives.

I'm a pretty conservative pastor, and I know my congregation is even more conservative. How do we have a welcoming church for all people, including LGBT+ people, even if I believe in traditional marriage?

Are conservatives on this topic automatically and always going to be seen by progressives as backwards and bigots? How can we actually create space for all voices, including traditionalists like me, in our churches?

I was in a same-sex partnership for almost 10 years, but I became convicted that God did not approve of that behavior. I left my partner, and now I'm single. Technically I am living in alignment with what the church requires, and yet I still feel marginalized and suspect (or, sometimes even worse, I'm used as a poster boy and as an example to denigrate other gay people who do not feel called to celibacy). And the church asks me to be single and yet provides no real solution to the very human needs of companionship and support. I was just diagnosed with cancer—who will be there with me daily through the long haul ahead? I find the support to be minimal at best. If the church asks this of us, what is it willing to do to support that very difficult requirement?

Some of the people I know whose lives are clearly bearing good fruit are LGBT+ and in long-term committed relationships. How do I reconcile the witness of their lives with what I've always been told is a Biblical injunction against their relationships?

From Side A Voices

I'm a lesbian and want to know how I can use my spiritual gifts. After all, why do others who aren't perfect either get to make that call as to whether or not I'm worthy enough to use them? I don't want to be perfect; I just want to fulfill the purpose in life God has given me. And my wife and I just had a baby— what happens when I (or even more frightening—we) bring him to church?

How would this group talk me into coming back to church? How would they help me when I am feeling judged by members—not all, but definitely some? I've tried going back to church several times, often for years at a stretch, but I've always felt harsh condemnation and judgment from other members and even the pastors and elders. The last time I was involved in church, I became suicidal because of what I was hearing from the pulpit and how I was being treated. What would people in this group do if I came to their church? Could I actively participate?

My husband and I are a same-sex couple with a young child that we want to raise Adventist going to church on Sabbath, as that's still our belief system. We've found a church where we are generally welcome, especially with the younger parent age group, and we are grateful. But even still we are careful. We wouldn't ask to transfer our membership, and we don't pose for the family photos in the church directory or go to family retreats. Some of the other parents (who are straight) don't fully understand, but we walk a careful line. I'd love to fully drop my guard, but I worry that someone meaning to hurt us would say something to our child. What's a practical next step for churches so that families like ours don't have to be somewhat invisible and carry so much worry just to show up at Sabbath School?

I've had well-meaning church members and family members tell me that my being gay is just like being born with a tendency towards alcoholism. Maybe I can't change that, but I can get help and support to not be alcoholic. I find this comparison deeply offensive. Why do so many people use it to talk about me and people like me—even when we say that it's

offensive, denigrating, and not equivalent?

People have told me that everyone should be welcome in church, even gay people, adulterers, and murderers. I don't know why being gay is always compared to cheating on your spouse or murdering—or, worse, they often include pedophiles. I know they mean well, and most of these people think my same-sex relationship is sinful, as are these other things. But I see a big difference in my mutual, respectful, loving, committed relationship and these other things that deeply harm others. How do I talk to my well-meaning church and family members about how this language and comparison hurts me, even though I get that they don't approve of my relationship?

I often hear Christians say two things whenever this topic comes up—and these things are almost never said to non-LGBT+ people. One is “Love the sinner, but hate the sin,” and the other is something like, “Well, of course we should love people, but even Jesus told the woman caught in the act of adultery to ‘Go and sin no more,’ so we should do likewise.” I never can explain adequately how deeply painful those two phrases are to hear from people who profess to love me. Can you please try to talk about both?

From Parents

Note: This question comes from the mother of a gay son. She almost lost her son to suicide during his freshman year at college because he thought his situation was hopeless and God could never love or accept him.

When my son came out as gay in his 20s, I had nothing except six verses and a church statement telling me my son was not going to be saved. What can be done to have better resources for parents?

I went to a church-sponsored conference in my area that featured five people talking about how they were gay but now are either in a different-sex marriage or celibate. They all talked about being sexually abused as children or having a very bad relationship with a parent (usually their father) as a child. I just wanted to hide. I could tell that if my church knew my child was gay, they would automatically look at me and wonder what terrible things happened in our home. I'm in the closet too. How do we move past ignorance, fear, and finger-pointing that makes parents of LGBT+ people hide also?

There are too many questions. And suddenly I realize how bitter I am toward the church because my questions aren't nice. The nicest question I can write here is: what is it that the Seventh-day Adventist church organization thinks they

“
How do
we focus
on the
shared
desire to
follow
Jesus and
serve
others?”

stand to lose if they accept LGBT+ people as members? Is it about their reputation? Is it about keeping their good standing as a remnant church? My son was born with a different sexual orientation—not his fault, and he is powerless to change it, and God chooses not to change him. Where did the church's attitude of abomination drive my son? To end his life because he thought he was worthless in the site of God. Thanks be to God that he did not succeed. But I feel that in the eyes of the majority of Adventist leaders and church office holders, my son should be dead if he is unable to pray away his sexual orientation. So, my ultimate question: why would my son want to continue to be a part of such a "Christian" organization? And why would I want to stay a member?

I'm a woman married to a man who is gay. We both knew when we got married more than ten years ago, but at that time we were sure that if we just believed, tried hard, and prayed that this would change. He did love me—he does. But I now know that he is still gay, and he isn't fulfilled, and he can't love me the way I should be loved. And we have children (he's a wonderful father). Of course our church is the last place where we could be honest about what we are going through. What can change so that church isn't the last place we would ever be honest about our situation?

I was kicked out of my Adventist college for being a lesbian. I actually hadn't done anything at all; but when the dean accused me, I confessed that I had those leanings. And I was immediately dismissed. When I later had a child, I tried taking him to the local Sabbath School. When they found out I was a lesbian, they said he could come, but I would have to drop him off at the door—they didn't want me around the other children (he wasn't even two years old yet). How would you react if you knew that had happened at your church? How would you prevent others from being treated like I was?

My 28-year-old son has told us that he is transgender and is going to become a woman. This goes against absolutely everything I believe. And he has a son, our young grandson. I don't want to let my grandson see his father become a woman; and I've told my son if he makes that choice, we will do everything in our power to have custody. I don't know what to think or do right now, but everything about this feels wrong. What would you say?

Role of the Church/Church Life

What are some of the different ways that Adventist churches that you know of are handling this topic; and, even more importantly, the people in front of them who are LGBT+ or who care very much about how LGBT+ people are treated?

In the future, as will certainly happen, what will the church's response be to legally married gay couples that show up on their doorstep with young children and the request: "We want to raise our children in the church and be a part of this faith community"?

I want to talk about the practical applications of what the church teaches. There are all kinds of remarried heterosexuals in my church, and most did not get divorced originally because of spousal infidelity. Now they have children with their new spouses. There's no church I know of that would tell that couple that they should get divorced, break up their home, and make their kids go through all of that because they technically are committing adultery, even though that's what Jesus taught and what the church still officially teaches. So why are same-sex couples treated differently?

Why does the church change its policies (in practice if not on paper) when it comes to heterosexual divorce and remarriage but not LGBT+ people?

The church body disagrees about many things—how to keep Sabbath best, origins/creation, atonement theories, the role of women in ministry, the nature of the trinity, etc. Why is it that with all of those disagreements, we seem to still worship together even if we sometimes spar over the potluck table; but when it comes to those who are LGBT+ or who advocate for LGBT+ people, we're told to leave, that we're not really Adventist?

What can LGBT+ people teach the rest of the church that only they know from their experiences of being marginalized?

How do we move forward?

Is unity without uniformity possible on this topic?

Are there any churches that can be models? Do you know of churches who are modeling healthy, helpful, and healing practices and policies?

What do you hope is the next step for you personally and for your church?

Do haystacks, flannel story boards, and Pathfinder uniforms make people gay? ;-)

In all seriousness, we have so much more in common than not. How do we focus on the shared desire to follow Jesus and serve others?



Ideas

for Closing Circle & Prayer Activities

Drawing a group to a close with loving intention is one of the more challenging aspects of leading a dialogue because the intellectual discussion can often feel like it could continue for hours. But connecting as people and fellow travelers means we want to create space for closing the dialogue as well. Here are a few ideas:

- Set aside prayer journal time as a way to reflect on the discussion and time together. What did you learn? What did you observe in yourself? What questions do you have? What do you want to take home? What tangible next steps do you want to take? What is your prayer for yourself, for this group, for the wider community? Come back to share in pairs and prayer for each other.
- Get a sheet of paper for each person in the group. Have each person write their name and fold the papers up to place in a basket. Each person draws a paper and writes something positive they observed about that person and/or appreciated witnessing. After two minutes, pass each paper to the right. Repeat until each person has had every other person in the group write something positive about them.
- Spend time reviewing one practical and tangible idea for a positive next step from each person's journaling. Have someone keep a master list and write down one thing each person pledges to do individually and one thing the group decides to do.

- End with a one-word group prayer. Have one person assigned to begin and end ahead of time. At the appropriate time, have people call out one word that encapsulates their prayer, hope, or blessing when it comes to this intersection of faith, gender, and sexuality in our churches and families.
- Consider singing this song to the tune of the Doxology as a closing prayer:

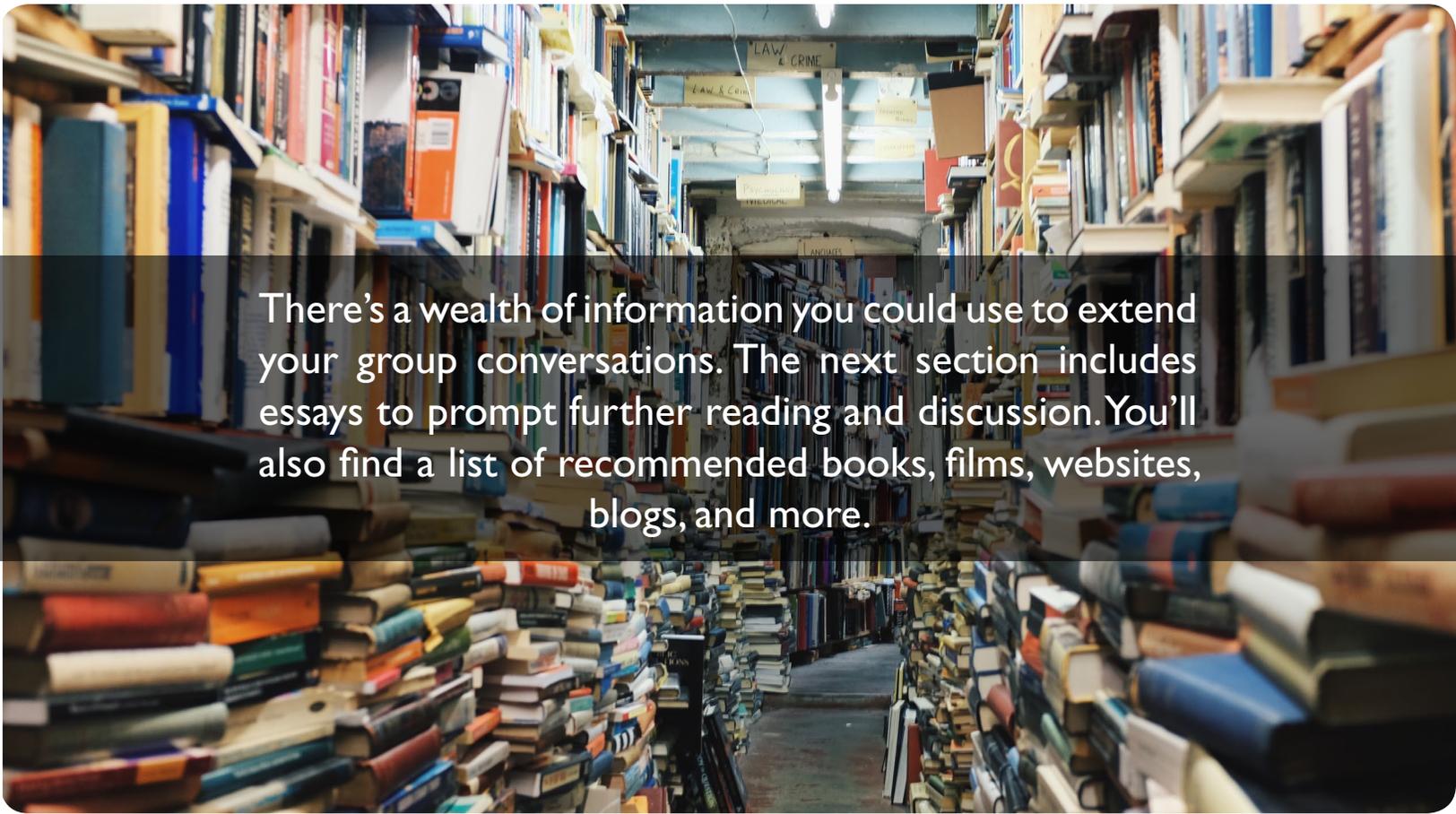
Diverse in culture, nation race,
We come together by your grace.
God let us be a meeting ground
Where hope and healing love are found.

God let us be a bridge of care
Connecting people ev'rywhere.
Help us confront all fear and hate
And lust for pow'r that separate.

When chasms widen, storms arise,
O Holy Spirit, make us wise.
Let us resolve, like steel, be strong
To stand with those who suffer wrong.

God let us be a table spread
With gifts of love and broken bread
Where all find welcome, grace attends
And enemies arise as friends.

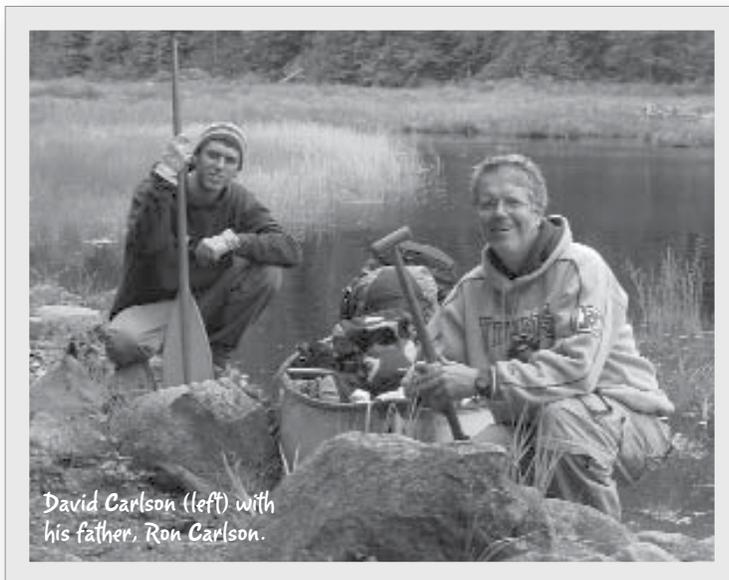
Additional Reading & Discussion Materials



There's a wealth of information you could use to extend your group conversations. The next section includes essays to prompt further reading and discussion. You'll also find a list of recommended books, films, websites, blogs, and more.

I'm a Pastor and My Son Is Gay | BY RON CARLSON

**“Trust Me.
Love him.
Don’t push
him away.”**



That was the beginning of my special journey with David thirteen years ago. I quickly called reliable friends and family for advice. Soon I discovered organizations and counselors familiar with same-sex attraction and reached out to them. David, a sincere Adventist Christian, was willing to do anything to understand and deal with his unwelcome feelings.

Yet the stress took a toll. Later in the summer, for no discernible medical reason, his back went into spasms so he could barely

The phone rang on a warm Sunday afternoon. My seventeen-year-old son David was on the other end. He was working at our summer youth camp between his junior and senior years of academy. I could tell he was not calling simply to say hello. After a few minutes of small talk, his voice broke a bit.

“Dad, I have a crush on a guy, and I don’t know what to do.” I knew I had heard him correctly but wasn’t sure how to respond.

“Tell me about it,” I said, sending up silent prayers. I lay on my back in the grass of our backyard, listening to his description of fears and confusion about feelings he could not deny. We talked for more than an hour. During that time, amidst all of my own fears and confusion, I heard my answer from God. It was: “Trust Me. Love him. Don’t push him away.”

walk. Today we believe it was a result of the extreme emotional stress he was experiencing.

David and I talked regularly, sharing deeply. When school began, we had arranged for him to begin phone sessions with a therapist on the West Coast who claimed to eliminate same-sex attractions. The academy chaplain was made aware of David’s situation and acted with grace and professionalism.

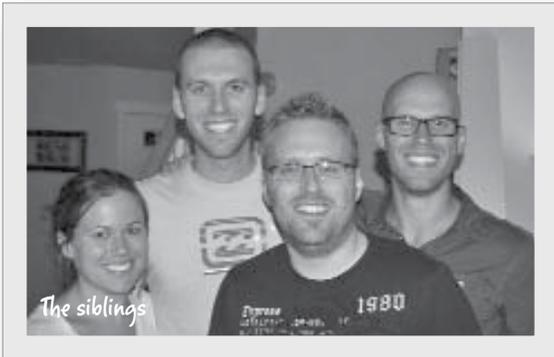
He stayed involved in academy life, participating in gymnastics, choir, drama groups, and worships. His religious life remained open and authentic. He became a leader in the dorm and school, was elected student body president, and graduated with honors. He even had a girlfriend, so I breathed some prayers of thanksgiving. I didn’t try to dig into what his counselor told him, yet I was always willing to listen whenever he wanted to talk.

College journeys

David was impressed by the therapists working with him, so at Union College he majored in psychology. He became an advocate for marginalized people, demonstrating a passion to help the hurting and those feeling cornered by their circumstances. As a student leader he brought in speakers to address relevant issues such as pornography, eating disorders, and self-esteem. He became known on campus for his love for people as well as his faith in God. He dated a couple of very nice Christian girls at different times, but neither worked out.

By then he had attended several retreats designed to help him connect with his manhood. I attended a weekend retreat in the woods of northern Minnesota with him. When he came home from one of the retreats, I sensed he wanted to tell me something. His face glowed and his body vibrated with excitement.

"Dad, I'm not gay!" he exclaimed. We embraced, and neither of us could hold back the tears. He told me he had discovered that he needed more male companionship than most guys did and that maintaining regular physical contact with guys was critical. It was an emo-



tional moment. Maybe for the first time we both realized the level of fear and tension we had been carrying.

During these years David and I made our annual summer trips to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness on the Minnesota-Canada border. The hard work, days in the wilderness, gorgeous scenery, and poor attempts at fishing proved priceless. In the evening as we lay side by

side in our little tent, after reviewing the day and making certain everything was prepared for any unexpected night storm, we prayed. I was humbled to hear his sincere and specific prayers for his friends, many facing tough times and some making poor decisions. He was my son. I was proud of him, and I loved him deeply. Still, I knew he was still in an emotional wilderness himself, with more questions than answers.

College life for David went quickly. His brothers were graduating and getting married, both entering careers in pastoral ministry. His sister was one year behind him, preparing to be an elementary teacher. Faculty and staff would often stop my wife and me on campus to tell us what an amazing guy David was and extol his faith and leadership. Some knew about his journey of sexual orientation, others did not.

Yet five years into this, in spite of therapy, retreats, prayers, and the loving, unconditional support of his family and friends, David was still attracted to men. David told me he pleaded with tears in his private prayer times that God would heal him of this curse and cause him to be attracted to women. Only as I began to realize that his attraction to men was just as powerful and involuntary as mine was for women could I even slightly enter his reality.

"What would you think?"

One day after some awkward silence in the car, David asked, "Dad, what would you think if I were to try dating guys?" I was learning not to react. I asked a few questions, trying to buy time and waiting for God to give me that "fix-all" answer. No easy answer appeared. The only answer I seemed to hear from heaven was the one I had heard lying in my backyard several years before: "Trust Me. Love him. Don't push him away." So we talked. We confirmed God's love, grace, and care for us. I confessed my fear and confusion. Yet, I trusted God and I trusted David's walk with Him. No conclusions were reached.

I expected him to begin dating guys, but he didn't. College degree in hand, David determined to expand his ability to serve people by learning

**David
became known
on campus
for his love
for people as
well as his
faith in God.**

Spanish. He enrolled for a summer session at our Adventist college in Spain and then a full school year at our Adventist college in Argentina. His year overseas seemed good for him. Through letters and Skype he told us about his new friends, his experiences, his plans for his future. He believed God was calling him to get a master's degree in counseling. He wanted to earn his degree from a highly respected school, yet one that taught from a Christian perspective. When David received his letter of acceptance from George Fox University in Portland, Oregon, he sensed God was confirming his dreams for his future. David knew that God had never left him.

We will never forget the day we pulled away from his new apartment near Portland, seeing a few tears in his eyes as tears ran down our cheeks. Our son, now twenty-three, would have to deal with the reality of who he was without the support of Adventist schools, friends, family, and everything familiar. Eventually, all of us have to face ourselves. David made good Christian friends, both male and female, at GFU. He excelled in school, attended an Adventist church,

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“Dad, I’m
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he exclaimed.**



and explored the beauty of the Pacific Northwest.

Yet a deep loneliness haunted him. David reached out to a male friend he'd made at some of the retreats he'd attended, and this friend visited David in Portland. While there, their relationship moved past a platonic friendship, and this left David feeling very unsettled, especially because his friend had a wife. David witnessed a life divided between what society expected and his actual attractions. It was a vivid example of what it meant to be in denial of one's sexual ori-



entation. David believed in a God of health, wholeness, and honesty and wanted to live an authentic Christian life rather than a life of pretending. He did not want to be gay but couldn't deny that there was no change in his sexual attraction after years of doing everything possible to change it. Feeling trapped, for the first and only time in his life he considered suicide. He saw no hope in his future. Late one night in the middle of a panic attack, David phoned us—life was caving in on him. Our own panic, 1,800 miles away from our son in distress, was killing us too. We were able to reach two of his close friends, who went to his aid and helped him through the darkness.

Because most of us have “normal” sexual attractions, where guys like girls and girls like guys, we rarely realize how much our sexuality defines us. In spite of years of therapy, love, prayers, and understanding, David still did not know who he really was. As a result of recent painful discoveries, he believed that he couldn't stay true to the God he loved while living in denial of who he was. David prayerfully and deliberately chose to begin mixing with other gays. Again I heard God's voice: “Trust Me. Love him. Don't push him away.”

A few weeks later, David let me know that he had an upcoming date with a guy. A friend had set them up, and they were meeting for dinner. We talked. We prayed. Repeatedly on the day of David's date, his mother and I prayed. We had learned by then that the only request we could feel confident with was to ask God to speak to David's honest, God-loving heart and lead him. David called the next day to tell us that his date never showed up.

David realized quickly that, just like straight people, gays are kind and cruel, trustworthy and corrupt, morally strong and decadent, people of faith and agnostics. This was a precarious road.

His oldest brother, Jeff, had finished studying at the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary and was assigned to a church in Auburn, Washington, just a few hours north of where David lived. Jeff and his wife, Mary Ellen, are both wise and deeply compassionate people, and they provided a safe haven for David. Occasionally, David would make the trek north for the weekend and worship with them on Sabbath.

David heard about a gay Christian network and a special weekend in Portland that year, where gay Christians come together for inspiration, safe worship, and fellowship. When he told us he would be going there, we prayed our prayer of trust in God's unchanging love for David, confidence in David's faith-filled heart, and that the combination of those two would be enough for us.

The next thing we heard was about Colin. He was a wonderful Christian young man from Vancouver, British Columbia. David met Colin at the event, they were both blessed by it, and they decided to stay in touch. We prayed some more. Several months later, David asked if he could bring Colin home for Christmas to meet the entire family.

Jeff and Mary Ellen had already met Colin several times and agreed with David that he was an extremely nice guy, a deeply committed Christian gay man. Like David, Colin was raised in a loving home where Jesus was honored and faith was welcome. His story of teenage confusion and pain closely mirrored David's.

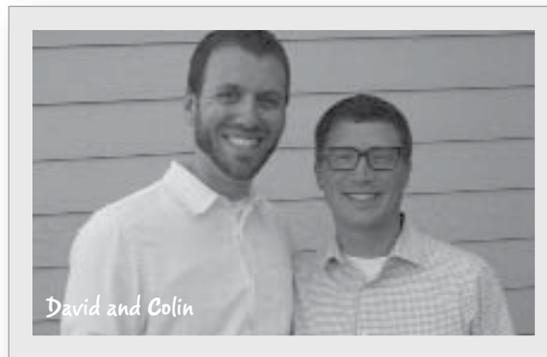
One change

All of our children came home to Topeka for Christmas 2010 with spouses and babies, to open gifts, eat, sing, pray, laugh, play games—and to meet Colin. This was new territory for all of us. Everyone was committed to allowing God to lead while enjoying the holidays. There were even a few “gay” jokes, as only Jeff can get away with.

Today, David and Colin are married and liv-

ing in Surrey, British Columbia. Our whole family attended their wedding in 2011. David finished his post-graduate degree and is a full-time counselor for children and youth. Colin and David attend church each week. There aren't many churches for them to choose from that will allow a gay couple to attend. Colin is a loved part of our family. They have started the process of adopting children from the foster care system and are praying for siblings who need a home and don't want to be split up.

Is this what we prayed for or expected? No. Has it been a confusing and sometimes painful



journey? Oh, yes. Have we been told that our son is living in sin? Not directly. We are surrounded with very nice people but are aware that many Christians believe just that. Have we heard about families who have rejected their gay children? Yes, sadly. Have we heard all the theological arguments on either side? Yes. Do our hearts go out to families with gay children? Yes! A thousand times, yes!

After thirteen years on this journey with David, my only clear answer from God now carries a slight change from what I received before: “Trust Me. Love them. Don't push them away.” ■

Ron Carlson grew up in Minnesota and graduated from Union College. He has served as a pastor in North Dakota, Missouri, and California for about twenty-four years before transitioning to church administration and has been president of the Kansas-Nebraska



Conference since 2006. Ron and Sue have four children and four grandchildren. Ron enjoys preaching, camping, running, and building model ships. Grandchildren now top his list!

**David
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that God
would heal
him of
this curse.**

Homosexuality — Through One Parent's Eyes

by Dr. George Babcock with his wife, Fern

I first heard of homosexuals in the 1950s when I was in academy. Rumor had it that one of the dorm guys was a “homo.” That caused quite a bit of underground buzz among a few students, but others remained totally oblivious. When a famous Seventh-day Adventist psychologist spoke at boys’ dorm worship, he addressed the subject rather briefly, assuring the boys that although they might have occasional attractions to other boys, it would all go away once they were married. Unfortunately, some believed him and wrecked the lives of innocent women before deciding that their attractions to other men were not a teenage whim.

During the 1960s when my wife and I were working for the Adventist church in the field of education, we heard rumors of a pastor who had been dismissed for homosexuality. We were shocked, as we’d not heard of such a thing before. Infidelity or adultery, yes, but not homosexuality. Then we heard of a teacher fired for the same reason. It seemed like a growing thing—but looking back now, we think that the gay movement was just beginning to come out of the closet.

In the ‘70s, we began to discover that some of our friends were gay. One of our classmates divorced her husband for that reason, and we sympathized with her as she tried to raise her two girls. Ten years later she confided to us that one of the girls was a lesbian—but by then her ex-husband had died, and she was more understanding of the problem and maintained a good relationship with her daughter. Another friend went into the hospital and died of AIDS. After his death his wife revealed his gay orientation and became part of a support group for wives of gay men. By this time, we had nothing but sympathy for gay men who tried to be straight but failed and for wives who were abandoned and struggling.

In the 1980s, I was in the General Conference Education Department when SDA Kinship, an organization I’d never heard of, distributed flyers on the Andrews University campus offering a phone number to call if you weren’t sure of your sexual orientation. This outraged the General Conference president who called me in and ordered me to find out who this “Kinship group” was and what was going on.

I contacted the SDA Kinship president who invited me to an upcoming board meeting and asked that I provide the

worship thought for the day. There in California I met a group of gay and straight Seventh-day Adventists, sincere and respectful, working together to figure out how to encourage LGBT Adventists to hang onto a relationship with the Lord and avoid despair and depression. What could Kinship do to contact troubled youth and how could the church members’ attitudes be softened toward those who through no fault of their own seemed unable to relate romantically to people of the opposite sex? When I heard how many gays commit suicide and how many unsuccessfully tried and prayed and worked for a change in their lives, my heart ached. Surely this whole group of people should not be shunned or despised. Christ wouldn’t have treated them as some of His people did. I returned to the GC with my report, but it didn’t make the brethren very happy.

In the 1980s the AIDS epidemic swept America and the first AIDS quilt commemorating those who had died from the disease was spread out on the National Mall near the Washington Monument. Thousands of people walked past the quilt, each block representing an AIDS victim. Some had pictures of the deceased, personal T-shirts, flowers, and memorabilia of all types. I remember the picture of a baby who died of AIDS, his tiny toys sewed onto the quilt. Suddenly all the anonymous victims began to seem real, their hopes and dreams dashed, the people who loved them grieving. They were no longer disgusting gays. They were real, hurting humans. The quilt worked.

In the middle of the ‘80s, our family’s whole outlook on the issue of homosexuality was severely challenged. Our daughter, Sherri, who had traveled to Pohnpei in the South Pacific to teach math for a year at the island’s Adventist school, climbed the hill that held a satellite dish and called the States. Amidst tears and static, Sherri told her mother she just had to talk to Daddy. Wasn’t he in Asia somewhere? No, she couldn’t explain the problem because the phone line wasn’t secure. Just try to find Daddy. My wife caught the desperation in her voice and assured her she would try to get in touch with me. At the time, I was in the Philippines visiting and evaluating schools as part of my job at the General Conference.

When the message reached me, I became alarmed. Sherri had always been a steady, non-emotional girl, pastor of two of her high school classes, valedictorian and president of her

senior class. I'd never known her to be frantic and crying for her daddy. She wouldn't insist on seeing me unless it was really important. I quickly cancelled some appointments and found a plane to Pohnpei. Unfortunately, only one plane from Manila flew in and out of that island each week. But I reached my daughter and spent the week with her. She eagerly showed me her island, took me by motorcycle to see beautiful places, and said not a word about any "problem" until the last night of my visit. As we sat together in the dark on the flat roof of her student missionary quarters she began to cry. Then she said words I can never forget.

"Dad, I am a homosexual."

A thousand thoughts raced through my head. What would this mean in her life? What would it mean to our family? How would our church react to this news? The church had rules and I was an ordained minister. But my weeping daughter came first.

Wrapping my arms around her, I cried with her and assured her of my love and her mother's. She feared that as a minister I might be fired for having a lesbian daughter. She told me of her struggle to be heterosexual, of the days, months and years she'd spent trying to do everything right according to the rules of the church. She had prayed in vain that God would change her, give her a new heart, a new outlook. She'd even given a year of her life to student missions. But nothing had changed. She loved God but couldn't help how she was wired.

The next morning I flew off to resume my itinerary while my wife in the States waited impatiently for my return. I did assure her that our daughter was not pregnant or raped, and I'd be home soon to explain.

That year proved difficult for all of us. The island school begged her to stay another year, but she returned to Andrews University and changed her major from math education to engineering. She was beginning to realize that she would never be able to teach math in an Adventist school as she'd planned. At Andrews she received counseling, but nothing seemed to help. After that year she transferred to Walla Walla College for engineering.

As usual, she did exceptionally well scholastically and became the lead student in the engineering class. But that year convinced her that she was alone with her problem. Not daring to talk to anyone, she threw herself into her schoolwork and tried to forget. Isolated and lonely, she made it through her junior year and returned home that summer to work in the General Conference.

Her senior year proved more difficult and stressful. At one point she had a daunting final project that required hours of computations on her engineering calculator.

Wanting to get outside for a bit, she and another girl walked to a nearby park, settled themselves under a tree, and began to work. Several hours later, the girls got up to stretch and run

to the edge of the lake which was within viewing distance of their study area. The nearly deserted park only contained a few students, and Sherri left her backpack and books lying on the blanket. Although she wasn't gone long, when she returned, her backpack, high tech calculator and the meticulous notes she had taken all quarter for all of her subjects had vanished.

That night she called us in tears again. She just couldn't face doing all that work over, pages of calculations had disappeared along with her engineering calculator. She had a deadline to reach, end of quarter tests were coming up, and she had no notes on any subject. As she saw it, her engineering career had gone up in smoke, she was still struggling with her sexuality, and everything had gone wrong. She just wanted to quit college. Our daughter sounded so hopeless and despairing that we were alarmed.

At that point, I remembered the SDA Kinship organization and told Sherri about it. I made her promise that if she would stay in school and finish her last quarter before graduation, I'd contact SDA Kinship and see if there was anyone she could talk to about homosexuality. And meanwhile, she would talk to the professor who had assigned the large project and plead for extra time to reconstruct her work. At last she promised to stay and finish.

I called Kinship, and was given the names and phone numbers of two lesbian members in southern California who were willing to talk to a young woman in distress over her sexuality. When Sherri called them, they welcomed her call, talked to her for hours, and finally invited her to visit them during her upcoming spring break.

Before leaving for break, she told her teacher about the stolen backpack and pled for mercy. Knowing that Sherri was always honest and did faithful work, the good man assured her that he would accept her paper after the vacation and reaffirmed her ability to complete the project with excellence.

That vacation proved to be a turning point for all of us. The Kinship women welcomed her with understanding and acceptance. They encouraged her and gave her the name of a safe faculty member to talk to at Walla Walla. She returned to Walla Walla, finished her paper, and contacted the safe faculty member who sympathized, gave her books to read, and helped her understand more about her sexuality. Just having someone to talk to, someone non-judgmental and supportive gave her the courage to finish the year and graduate at the top of her class. We thanked God for caring, loving people who could nurture and comfort our daughter when we were a continent away. I was so glad that I'd become acquainted with SDA Kinship before I ever knew we'd need their support.

That summer Kinship held a Kampmeeting in Maryland, not far from our home. Sherri came home and worked at the General Conference again that summer, but took time to attend the gathering of Seventh-day Adventist gay and lesbian people. She urged us to join her on Sabbath, and we agreed,

not knowing quite what to expect.

We found the Kinship group having worship, sharing life stories, listening to a guest minister presenting a sermon on one's relationship with Christ, singing hymns, laughing at one another's jokes, and relaxing in the safe camp atmosphere. Young people told of when they first knew they were different, if and when they had come "out" to their parents and friends, and how they had been treated since. We listened with heavy hearts as some told of parents who had disowned them, churches who had disfellowshipped them, and friends who dropped them. When the group found out we were Sherri's parents, several came to thank us for attending and supporting not only our daughter, but them as well. One girl whose mother had rejected her came to my wife and said, "I wish you'd been my mother. Would you give me a hug?" My wife complied at once, and for the rest of the day tried to minister to this hurting young lesbian.

After the news about our daughter hit the Adventist hotline, we got all sorts of advice. Take her to this group for "change ministry," get her away from her evil friends, help her to understand that as long as she's living this lifestyle, she is not welcome at home. And on and on. Very few said we should just love her and keep her!

Some declared that we should love the sinner but hate the sin, a non-Biblical concept at best. I've not seen that work very well. Frequently the church says, "We love you, but you can't sing in our choir. It would be a bad example for others." Or "We love you, but you can't sing or play for special music anymore." Or "We love you, but don't speak up in Sabbath School class. Your comments wouldn't be appreciated." "Yes, you're an excellent teacher, but we can't hire you." "Wouldn't you be more comfortable in the church across town?" When I heard of the children of lesbians who had been denied a Christian education because of their mothers' orientation, I wondered "Where is the love?" I cannot imagine a loving Jesus saying such unloving things.

As I read the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy, I discover that the revelation of God's love is the last and most important message He has for us to give to the world. Not a message of rules and regulations, not just a warning about the end time and sudden destruction, but a message of unconditional love. I do not argue theology with the church, but I certainly take issue at the way some members treat people who are not just like themselves. This applies not only to gays and lesbians, but to those of various ethnicities or races.

Fortunately, attitudes are changing, I believe. More churches welcome anyone to join in their worship. Many are realizing that churches are hospitals for sinners, not fortresses for saints. I'm thankful that my daughter's local Adventist church is warm and welcoming, that her spouse can sing in the church choir, and their two children are accepted in the church school. When I baptized my eldest granddaughter in

that church two years ago, it was with a very thankful heart that she had been under the influence of Christian parents and school teachers.

When gays began making news some years ago, I had no idea that gay couples would ever be allowed to form permanent legal unions. Now many of the couples we know are legally bound together, and we think that's a good thing for stability and family.

When Sherri found her love, Jill, it seemed an answer to her prayers. Raised as a good Methodist, Jill had a relationship with Jesus, delighted in her social work with the elderly, and had a wonderful sense of humor. Jill's father, an administrator of a local Methodist conference and delegate to their General Conference, had been assigned to investigate the "homosexual issue" for his church before two of his daughters revealed that they were lesbian. God seems to have prepared both our families to understand and accept the girls He gave us.

Sherri and Jill have been together for 23 years now. Jill has proven to be a wonderful mother, and we couldn't ask for a better daughter-in-law. She is so loving, hard-working, and caring, organizing Adventurers in the Adventist church and visiting the sick and hurting, helping with potlucks and transportation to the Adventist school. Since losing her own mother to cancer a few years ago, Jill treats my wife as her mother and calls her frequently for advice or to talk about our two grandchildren, Grace and Faith.

As more information about sexual orientation comes to light, I am hoping that people will realize that one doesn't choose one's sexuality. I'm hoping that more Christian people will decide that this matter is one that must be left in God's hands and that we are not here to judge, but to love one another.

When my granddaughter Grace was four, my wife took her into a side room during a Kinship Kampmeeting so she could play with felts while I preached to the group. Evidently she was listening as she played, because when I declared, "What we need is grace!" She flew out of the room and up the aisle calling, "Here I am, Grandpa!"

What an object lesson! I treasure it still, and I think the key to the future for our LGBTI brothers and sisters is "lots of grace" and a heart full of love. We're leaving the judging to God.



Dr. George and Fern Babcock have served as missionaries, educators, and administrators in the Adventist church for their entire careers. They are currently retired and living in Collegedale, TN, near Southern Adventist University where George served as the Senior Vice-President for Academic Administration for many years and Fern as the Director of the Teaching Materials Center.

Case Study of a Family Seeking Church: Philip, Alberto, & Dalia



Alberto and I met at an Adventist boarding school twenty years ago. We were in the same class, but didn't know each other very well. Alberto was actively involved in a variety of sports and student leadership; I was in band and choir and editor of the newspaper. Our interests didn't overlap much. But then in college we realized that we had one very important thing in common.

As gay students at an Adventist college, we self-selected into the same circle of supportive friends. There weren't many of us, but there were enough that I never felt isolated or intimidated. We weren't activists; we didn't try to change the institution's views or policies on gay students, but we also didn't try to hide who we were. When we started dating in our senior year we didn't hold hands in the cafeteria, but even a casual observer would have known that we were more than just friends.

Seven years later, while living in Massachusetts, which at that time was the only state that allowed gay marriage, we were married in our tiny (microscopic!) Boston apartment with a few of our closest friends as witnesses. Both of us had always known that we wanted to be fathers – a commitment to family is one of the things that drew us together in the first place – and we immediately began the process of trying to have a child through surrogacy. That journey took another six years; but two years ago in June, our daughter Dalia was born.

The amount of love we feel for that little girl is not something that I can confine to these few paragraphs, so I'll just say that we want her to have the richest family, social, and spiritual life possible; while, at the same time, we want to shield her from as much hurt as we are able.

Our relationship to the Adventist church is a complicated piece of that.

Alberto and I continued to identify as Adventists after college, although we rarely attended church. In Boston, we went to a local congregation several times, but stopped attending after we started to attract attention. We were getting too old to pretend to be just roommates and bachelors. No one ever asked if we were gay and no one ever made us feel explicitly unwelcome. But it was an undercurrent of every conversation. We always felt that condemnation was a few inexpertly dodged questions away.

Instead, we started “having church” in our living room every Sabbath. We would pray together, study our Sabbath School quarterly, and have rich, theological discussions. In a lot of ways, this helped us to define our individual beliefs (we disagree on several things) and to grow spiritually. At noon we would wind up our discussions and eat lunch while watching Dwight Nelson on 3ABN.

This version of church worked for us. We felt spiritually fulfilled in a safe space where we didn’t have to pretend to be anything we were not and we didn’t attract attention. But having a daughter changed that. We’re no longer looking for anonymity. Instead, we want a community. We want to find a church that provides her with the same, positive experiences we had growing up Adventist. We want Cradle Roll and potlucks and Pathfinders. We want her to have other Adventist friends who understand why she can’t go to the movies on Friday night. We want her to have positive, Christian role models. Church in the living room, delivered via cable, is not going to fulfill what she needs from the Church at this age.

But we also don’t want to expose her to judgment. We don’t want church members to undermine her relationship with us or our authority as spiritual mentors. We are good people who love our neighbors and contribute to our communities, and we want the people who influence her spiritual life to underscore those qualities. But we are afraid that we will be reduced to our sexuality. We’re afraid that this one aspect of our lives will overshadow our interaction with the Church. We’re afraid that she will be hurt by attacks aimed at us.

Ultimately, what we are looking for is a church family that will accept us as the loving family we are, and leave the issue of our sexuality between us and God.

Alberto and Philip live in the San Francisco Bay Area with their daughter, Dalia. Philip works as a finance manager for a nonprofit and Alberto is returning to teaching after being a stay at home dad. In their free time they enjoy running, eating, traveling, and spending time with their families. They attend church regularly on Sabbath mornings, but have not yet settled on a home church.

Update

In the year or so since I wrote the Case Study above, Alberto, Dalia and I spent several months attending a half-dozen churches in our area. We found a range of reactions to our family. We no longer blend in like we used to. Dalia moves easily between us in a way that makes it clear we are both her fathers. As we went from church to church, we never felt hostility, which we expected to find at least in the margins of our interactions with the local church members. We didn’t notice any unkind stares or hear any whispers. We often felt like we made people uncomfortable, but they handled it well, usually by focusing their attention on Dalia. A few times someone went out of his or her way to make us feel welcome. We even felt actively recruited by the youth pastor at one church in particular.

In the end, there was one church family that made us feel most at home. It helps that I have a history with this church and know many of the members in a context other than “Gay Parent”. But the majority of our friends at this church are people that we only met a few months ago. They have made Dalia’s Sabbath School class (I guess it’s Tiny Tots now, but I still call it Cradle Roll) a welcoming space for the three of us. We talk with the other parents in the class about parent things: potty training, discipline, Sesame Street vs. Daniel Tiger, where to get inexpensive toddler clothes, why my daughter won’t eat anything green, etc. In many ways, we don’t feel any different from the other daddies and mommies.

And yet...

There is still an undercurrent of danger. When visitors come to the class I can sometimes sense their discomfort. When we leave the Sabbath School classroom and go to the sanctuary for Church I feel like I’m walking a tightrope without my safety net. In some ways it feels like it could all collapse suddenly.

And it’s hard to deny that we are different. We remain silent during conversations about what to wear for the church directory picture or about who is going to Family Camp at the regional Adventist retreat center next summer.

Maybe the feeling of danger will fade with time, as people outside our group of Cradle Roll families become more used to us. We’ve been regulars at this church for several months now and the congregation hasn’t descended into a pit of moral relativism. But as Dalia gets older and we participate in more and more church activities (she’s going to look very cute in one of those Adventurers outfits) we will come into contact with a wider circle of members. She will become more aware of the context of our associations at church. I hope what she finds is a group of people (including her parents!) intent on modeling the love of Christ in all of their interactions.

You Love Gay People? That's Great. Prove It.

by Justin Lee, from the blog "Crumbs from the Communion Table"

When conservative Christians find out I'm gay, they almost all say the same thing: "I know gay people think Christians hate them, but I don't. I love gay people. I may not agree with them, but I love them." You'd be surprised how often I hear this. Christians are constantly telling me how much they love me.

If they treat me disapprovingly, it's because they "love the sinner and hate the sin."

If they preach at me, they're "speaking the truth in love."

If they distance themselves from me, it's because they're showing "tough love."

Yet they wonder why gay people don't feel very loved.

It reminds me of a scene from the 1964 musical film *My Fair Lady*. Eliza Doolittle, a poor flower girl, has worked hard to overcome her Cockney accent and pass as a proper English lady, but she eventually tires of being treated as a trophy by her diction teacher and others. So when a young suitor named Freddy—who barely knows anything about her—begins to sing a song professing his love, she humorously interrupts him with a song of her own:

*Words, words, words! I'm so sick of words!
I get words all day through,
First from him, now from you!
Is that all you blighters can do?
Don't talk of stars burning above;
If you're in love, show me!
Tell me no dreams filled with desire;
If you're on fire, show me!*

"Show me," she says. As a gay man, I feel the same way.

Do you love me? Don't talk about it. Show me.

Show me!

You know why LGBT people have such a bad impression of Christians? It's not because of protesters with "God hates fags" signs. We know they're extremists. It's because of daily being dehumanized by the Christians who lecture and preach at us, treating us as issues instead of as human beings—and because of the Christians we know who stand idly by, thinking that if they're not actively hating us, that counts as loving us.

That's not love. Talk is cheap. Telling me your opinion on my life is easy. Real love takes more than that.

*Sing me no song; read me no rhyme!
Don't waste my time! Show me!
Don't talk of June; don't talk of fall;
Don't talk at all! Show me!
Never do I ever want to hear another word.
There isn't one I haven't heard.*

It's true. Anything you could say, all that "speaking the truth in love," I've heard it all before. So if you're really serious when you say you love me, you're going to have to prove it. Show me.

Not sure how? Here are some ideas.

Support my rights. Okay, maybe we don't agree on the definition of marriage, but can we at least agree that people shouldn't be able to fire me or kick me out of my home just because they found out I'm gay? If you agree, help me make those legal protections a reality. If you don't agree, it's hard to believe you really care that much about my well-being.

“
Telling me your
opinion on my life
is easy.
Real love takes
more than that.

”

Stick up for me, even when I'm not around. Don't let people make gay jokes or speak derisively about LGBT people. You never know who might be listening. I was, before you knew I was gay.

Invite me to dinner. Or a party. Or a movie. Or a game night. Or to hang out at the mall. Make it something I enjoy, and don't use it as a pretext for anything other than having a good time together.

Take an interest in my life and relationships. Ask about the person I'm seeing, or the person I'd like to be seeing. (No need to tell me how much you disapprove.) Find out about my hobbies, favorite movies, favorite music, and other things I'm passionate about. Learn to see me as a multifaceted human being.

Ask about my experiences as an LGBT person. Don't comment. Just listen.

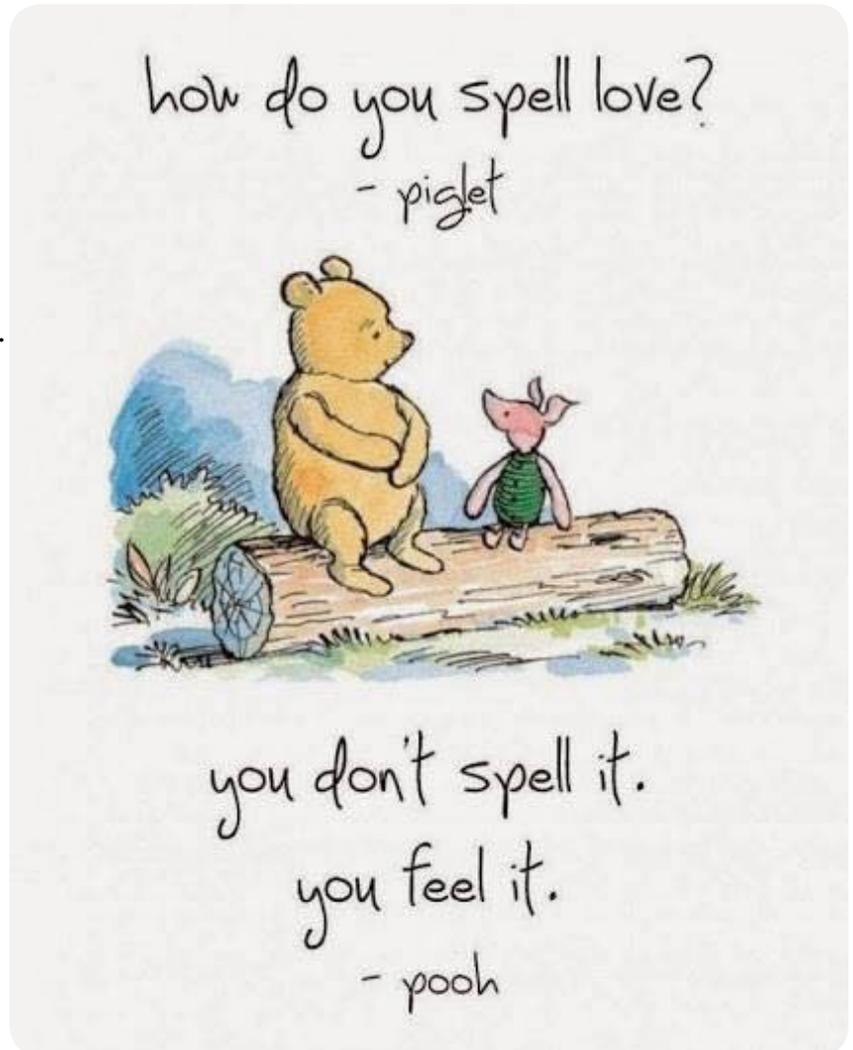
Learn the language I use for myself, and use it. For instance, I don't call myself "homosexual"; I call myself gay. If you call me "homosexual" in spite of my disdain for that term, it doesn't feel very loving to me.

Get involved in causes LGBT people care about. Join the fight against LGBT bullying in schools. Learn about the homeless LGBT youth population in your city. Volunteer at a charity serving people with AIDS. Don't bring attention to what a good Christian you're being; just do it because it's the right thing to do.

Instead of asking me to join you in settings where you're most comfortable, look for opportunities to join me in settings where I'm most comfortable. Maybe I have a favorite coffee house, or I love to hike a local trail, or I go bowling with friends every [Saturday] night. And hey, maybe you could get to know my friends instead of expecting me to fit in with yours.

Be the conservative Christian in my life who doesn't quote the Bible at me. I know; you're worried that not expressing disapproval will make me think you approve of all my decisions. It won't. It just shows me that you care more about me than about our differences.

Most importantly, don't do any of these things with a hidden agenda. Do them because you love me. You said you love me, right? Okay, then. Show me.



The Third Way in a Nutshell

The “Third Way” is a new approach to being together in a faith community centered around Jesus. Forged in the LGBT+ controversy, it applies to any issue over which Christians agree to disagree. The term was coined by Ken Wilson, author of “A Letter to My Congregation.”

What is it?

It is drawn from the counsel of Paul to the church in Rome (Romans 14-15).

Third Way recognizes that we can enjoy a deep unity in the Spirit, indeed have an obligation to guard this unity given, despite having severe disagreements over important moral questions. In other words, our unity in the Spirit transcends our shared moral consensus.

While the precise issues Paul addressed in Rome are not clear, many scholars, including N.T. Wright, James Dunn, and others contend that the disputed moral question were not trivial in their time. Likely possibilities include whether Christians could eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, or whether Sabbath observance was obligatory (first and fourth commandment issues respectively.)

Paul regarded these questions as “disputable matters” and enjoined the members of the church to “agree to disagree” over such matters. He called for members of the church to fully accept each other in Christ, even if some were regarded as gravely mistaken in their beliefs or practices in the disputed matters.

He insisted that they refrain from judging each other, trusting in the Risen Lord to judge correctly in due time. He urged them to maintain their respective convictions, honoring those who had differing ones so long as they were sincerely seeking to please the Lord.

The church often practices Third Way (implicitly if not explicitly) after a controversy has run its course...In a different time and place, they were church-rending controversies. Examples include whether and when remarriage after divorce is accepted, or whether killing in war is the moral equivalent of murder, or whether the biblical injunctions against usury apply to charging interest on loans. These issues are not trivial. They are not matters of indifference. In a different time and place, they were church rending controversies.

But in his letter to the Romans, Paul addressed the church in the throes of controversy over what were then regarded as first order moral concerns. The Third Way is not just for yesterday’s controversies, but today’s.

How does it apply to LGBT?

Which brings us to our own situation as we grapple with the question of how to regard Christians in same-sex relationships

bound together by a covenant made before God. Are such couples and those seeking to enter such committed relationships to be accepted and received in the same way that different-gendered couples are accepted and received?

A Third Way approach says, yes. It is not a “middle way” in which the church attempts to “split the difference” on exclusion—allowing gay members, for example, but disqualifying them from positions of leadership (if only pastor, or lead pastor.) Various attempts at a middle way, however “lenient,” are grounded in the conviction that faithful Christians may not disagree over this question: the Scripture is absolutely clear and differing readings or interpretations are not legitimate.

Hence, Third Way is itself controversial inasmuch as it asserts that the question is indeed debatable. It requires careful examination of Scripture, of the tradition of the church and its impact, and of the experience of Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. It is not a way to avoid the controversy but to be faithful to God through the controversy. The Third Way requires discernment, decision, and commitment to implement. And sometimes it exacts a cost to implement.

While Third Way is fully inclusive with respect to same sex couples, it is distinguished from the practice commonly referred to as “open and affirming.” While the language of affirmation in this context is an attempt to express love and concern for same sex couples, it carries with it some (perhaps unintended baggage.) The language of affirmation implies that as Christians we are called to extend moral approval to each other. In fact, the gospel transcends moral approval as the basis for acceptance, belonging, or unity in the Spirit. As people following the way of Jesus we are not called to give, demand or receive moral approval from each other. We don’t need to because we are in Christ, who receives the approval of the Father.

The advantages of Third Way are these: 1. It requires a full embrace of the gospel truth that our unity in Christ is contingent on the faithfulness of Jesus Christ alone, and nothing else. 2. It requires exacting discipleship to Jesus who calls his followers to refrain from judging each other—fully abandoning the original sin of seeking to be like God through pursuing the knowledge of good and evil. 3. It provides witness to a polarized world of the power of Jesus to unify those who would otherwise have little hope of maintaining bonds of loyal love. 4. It provides hope that humans can find a way to pursue the truth without violating love by constant and recurring division over disputed matters—which show no sign of resolving so long as we “see through a glass darkly.”

From <http://www.readthespirit.com/third-way-newsletter/about/third-way-nutshell/> by Pastor Ken Wilson

Singer Jennifer Knapp Shares Her Story of Being Christian and Queer



This interview was originally published on Spectrum before Jennifer Knapp headlined their UltraViolet Arts Festival.

Ahead of headlining at Spectrum's UltraViolet Arts Festival, award-winning recording artist Jennifer Knapp shares a little bit about her music and her advocacy for LGBTQ people of faith.

Question: You are the headline artist at our upcoming arts festival. What can people expect to hear?

I'll mostly be playing songs from the "SET ME FREE" record [3], but I'll also include some older music. Whenever I'm in front of an audience that is familiar with conversations of faith, I open up quite a bit about the spirituality within the songs. Being a queer person of faith comes into play as well, so elements of the concert will be in narrating what that journey has been like through the music. I'll be speaking more in depth about being LGBTQ inside of faith community. I'll share about what my experience has been like, while also highlighting the importance of the support that needs to come from faith communities.

You have toured all over the US, and played all kinds of venues, from churches and bars to big events like 1999's Lilith Fair. What are your favorite kinds of concerts to play?

I truly enjoy playing intimate environments like clubs.

They are usually small, packed, sweaty and very conversational. We're all so close together, we can really connect with each other during the concert.

But really, wherever I play, it's the days when I get to meet people and feel like we can really hang out that are the best. I find that playing a gig and being a diva is all well and good, but it's much more fulfilling when the circumstances allow us all to truly discover something about each other.

For any readers who are less familiar with your music, what are the three songs they should listen to? And why?

Oh, how do I choose? I suppose in the songs I'm playing right now, I'd pick "Remedy," "Set Me Free" and "Mercy's Tree [4]." In that order, it's almost a cross section of my biography. Where I've come from, what I've been through to get here, and where my hope lies going forward.

After two hit records and a Grammy nomination in the late 1990s and early 2000s, you took a seven-year hiatus from music, traveling the world, including a long stint in Australia. You said you needed a break after an intense recording and touring schedule. Why did you decide to come back?

To make a long story short, I left having imagined that I had completely retired from music because I was, for the most part, convinced that I had nothing left to offer. My retirement, as it were, really just ended up being an exercise in choosing not to use my gifts. It took seven years to figure it out, but I discovered that music was as vital as having air in my lungs. It's a part of me.

It finally dawned on me that I was spending a lot of energy in ignoring what I was inclined to naturally do, mostly because I was afraid that it would lead me into public spaces again.

My sexuality was definitely one of the hurdles, knowing that returning, I'd be inclined to reveal it. I can't imagine songwriting without a healthy transparency, but I needed time to get comfortable about being so public about something so intensely private.

It's a funny thing. Songwriting seems to consistently lead me on a journey toward social connection and vulnerability. I think that after I'd somewhat regained my energy, and renewed my own confidence in what I had to offer the people around

me, it was easier to open the guitar case back up.

You were known as a Christian recording artist, but the two albums you have recorded since your return, *Letting Go* (2010) and *Set Me Free* (2014) have not been marketed toward Christian radio. Why the change? You have said that your faith is still important to you. Are you still asked to perform primarily at Christian events?

The most basic change is that I'm simply not writing about Jesus in every song, nor do I see my purpose as being exclusively "Christian." When it comes to the specific genre and market place of Christian music, simply being a Christian isn't enough. There's a real necessity to have the content always pointing toward a language that is specific to Christianity. For me, personally, I feel the pull to rise to the challenge of couching the spiritual lessons I've learned into a broader perspective.

I left Christian music, in part, because I didn't feel comfortable creating music that predetermined a path of spiritual resolution for another person. Life is messy and getting through it, celebrating it or even challenging the status quo is part of growing as a human being.

For those who are familiar to concepts like grace and forgiveness, I hope they can continue to see these common themes in my music in uncommon ways. And for the times that I speak more openly about my faith experience, I hope to leave space for the experiences of others.

All that being said, these days, if and when you find me in a church, I'm largely talking about LGBTQ issues. That's not a music career decision, it's a personal choice I've made to engage my faith community in a very specific way.

You came out as a lesbian, and spoke of your long-term partner, in 2010, which sparked a lot of conversation in the Christian music industry. In the five years since then, I'm sure you have heard various reactions from your fans and others. Have they mostly been positive and supportive, or negative and condemning?

There was condemnation and it still comes across my radar in a fairly consistent trickle, but what is interesting is that it largely comes from faceless, anonymous voices. It lacks the potency of sincerity when you compare it those who are willing to be visible and positively supportive. As far as the ratio, it's truly far more positive, audible, and visible support I've received that far outweighs the negative.

I think what most people tend to rally around is the idea that it's tragic to shame anyone into believing they are worthless. Religion or not, there's really no excuse for limiting the potential of another human being. I've been so fortunate to have a fan base that lifted me up during the worst of the storm. They remind me daily that there is more to life than arguments over sexual orientation. They really care about the journey I am on and they are very, very vocal in celebrating the fact that it takes a lot of courage for any person to reveal their true identity

to the outside world.

You don't have to be gay to understand what it's like to be rejected by those you rely upon to love you. Nor do you have to be Christian to understand what anyone means when they say that God hates who you are. All I know is that, as a pessimist, I'm never truly surprised when I see the ugly side of people; but the upside is the exhilarating realization that we all have the ability to rise to the occasion to be agents of love.

You have said it can be hard to hold on to one's faith, and to the person one loves (of whatever sex) at the same time. Why is that?

Maybe it's just me, but somewhere along the way I think I was taught to believe that loving God and loving people were in two different categories. As if the love of another human being requires an entirely different skill set than that required in learning to love God; or that perhaps we must concede one for the other. All I know is that if falling in love has taught me anything, it is that I would have never been capable of it without an insight into the love I had learned from a divine perspective. And at the same time, I don't think I would have understood just how life-changing faith can be without the tangible, physical connection with other human beings.

In a lot of ways, I feel like I'm learning to undo a teaching that has challenged me to see love on earth and divine love as in competition, when what I have started to experience is that love is love. It is fragile, requires kindness, patience, faith — and the occasional reward of being able to touch the source of inspiration.

You have launched an advocacy organization for LGBTQ people of faith called *Inside Out*. Can you tell us more about that organization and your involvement with it?

The principle goal of *Inside Out Faith* [5] is to advocate for the expression and inclusion of LGBTQ people in their respective faith communities. One of the challenges of facing faith communities is simply getting exposure to what it's actually like being LGBTQ. The thought has long been that gay people are gay because they've lost their faith or that they've left their church because they've lost some spiritual battle. What we're finding is that people leave their churches because their churches have exiled them, silenced them or have grown weary of being treated as less than. The reality is that losing a church is not the same as losing one's faith. There's also the opportunity to draw attention to those churches who have known this all along.

These days, there is a growing willingness from the pews to the denominations as a whole to be seen as actively inclusive. *Inside Out Faith* helps to put the face on the issue by using social media and speakers who are willing to live out what love can look like when we support our LGBTQ community.

IOF was born out of a need. I didn't fully understand it at the time, but when I came out, there were (and still are) so

few people willing to risk offending their conservative peers by expressing both their faith and their sexual orientation. Like so many others, I personally had to weigh the option of whether to leave or stay involved in faith community due to others' reaction to my sexuality. As a former Christian artist, it was a shock to many that I would even show my face, let alone claim my faith. But what I discovered by opening up and talking about it was that I wasn't just an anomaly. There have been faithful, spiritual LGBTQ people and their allies worshipping together for years, but in times of crisis, it can be dangerously stressful trying to find the spiritual support that's needed if there isn't a clear invitation. The sanctuary should be exactly that: safe and a place of refuge for all who enter.

What message do you have for Christians (especially young people) who identify as LGBTQ or have questions about their sexual orientation?

I think the first is to give yourself permission to be honest with where you are. You don't have to have everything figured out in one day. It often takes a little time to for things to feel like they make sense enough to start talking about them with others. It's also important to find someone you feel safe to talk to.

There's no timeline on coming out. You might be a teenager, or much, much older. I was a "late bloomer." It took me a long time to figure out what was going on. Once I had a good handle on what my sexual orientation was, I started to educate myself. I read...a lot. I read up on what the Bible said and what some Christians say that it says. All across the board, Christians disagree with other Christians about a lot of different things, but one thing that should never be argued is that you are beautiful and worthy of love, just as you are.

Do you feel that the attitude of Christian churches toward LGBTQ members is changing? What do you think churches and church members need to do for the LGBTQ community?

I think that if we're going to define a trend of "change" it's not so much a theological shift from sin to not sin, but rather a willingness in faith leaders, believers and denominations to be abundantly clear of the affirming positions that they've previously kept close to the chest.

Theological evolution is a touchy subject for some, but experience and contact with human need has a tendency to open the door to compassion. It's not just that LGBTQ people of faith are coming out, it's that their straight brothers and sisters are coming out as allies along side them, unwilling to leave them to exile. I love what Methodist Bishop Melvin Talbert has said, that ultimately he's compelled by the Gospel to err on the side of love. "It's possible that I could be wrong... but I doubt it."

As far as the direction we can go as church and church members, there's the concept we have long valued in the form of testimony shared by people who have discovered faith. We don't just encounter God in terms of religious tradition or solely inside the four walls of the church — we do so by the experience of living. We've silenced the story of our LGBTQ people of faith for so long, maybe it's time we started to listen

to the overwhelming stories of hope and faith and perhaps find something that can lift us all up?

What does Christianity mean to you, personally?

Even after 20 years of being on this journey, all I can say is that the word "Christian" is a single word that still challenges me perhaps more than any other. From the day this all started, I've wrestled with the expectations of the religion and suffered long episodes of complete doubt and skepticism, but I cannot escape the life-changing experience of having understood just a portion of the grace through the lens of Jesus.

I am, to this day, compelled to be inspired to follow on if by nothing else, than by faith. That if I continue to seek to love as Christ is said to have loved, that it may, in fact, turn out to be Divine.

Singer-songwriter Jennifer Knapp has multiple Dove Awards and two Grammy nominations to her credit, as well as a memoir called *Facing The Music: My Story* (Howard/Simon & Schuster). Since coming out as a lesbian — a noteworthy story that made her the featured interview subject of an episode of *Larry King Live* — Knapp's willingness to speak on behalf of LGBT people of faith has created a new role for her as one of their foremost advocates.

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Additional Resources

Websites, Blogs, Books, Films, & More

Online Articles

Ask a Gay Christian

<http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/ask-a-gay-christian-response>

Ask a Bisexual Christian

<http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/bisexuality-christian-inclusive-eliel-cruz>

Ask a Celibate Gay Christian

<http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/ask-a-celibate-gay-christian-response-2>

Interview with a Transgender Adventist

<http://spectrummagazine.org/article/2015/06/15/adventist-story-switching-sexes>

The Great Debate

by Justin Lee & Ron Belgau

<http://www.gaychristian.net/greatdebate.php>

Justin Lee, founder of the Gay Christian Network, and his friend and long-time debate partner, Ron Belgau, both write about their experiences as gay Christian men and their Side A/Side B views on same-sex sexual intimacy. While they have opposite beliefs, their respect for each other and deep friendship are evident.

Someone To Talk To

by Carrol Grady

<http://someone-to-talk-to.net>

The first open ally in the SDA church over 20 years ago when her son came out as gay and a beloved grandmotherly figure in the LGBT+ Adventist community, Carrol Grady has a whole series of articles just for Adventists discussing science, gay rights, same-sex marriage, what the Bible says and more. A very good resource specially written for LGBT+ Adventists and their families.

The Danger of a Single Narrative

by Rachel Held Evans

<http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/single-story-evangelicalism-homosexuality-butterfield->

Why we need to let LGBT+ voices speak for themselves and make sure we aren't falling into the trap of only allowing a single narrative.

I'm an Evangelical Minister and Now Support the LGBT Community

By David Gushee

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/11/04/im-an-evangelical-minister-i-now-support-the-lgbt-community-and-the-church-should-too/>

Widely read Christian ethicist David Gushee came out in support of the LGBT+ community in 2014, and it sent shock waves through the evangelical world. He argues that we must change our focus from sexuality to suffering, and few demographics in the church have suffered like the LGBT+ community.

The Magic of Shame: Sexuality and the Seventh-day Adventist Church

by Keisha E. McKenzie

<http://mackenzian.com/blog/2013/06/03/magic-shame/>

A powerful summation of the Adventist church's interaction with its LGBT+ members, including the history of one of the very first "ex-gay" programs in the United States which was funded by the Adventist Church and run by Colin Cook, a former Adventist pastor who promoted himself as "living proof" that people could be delivered from the "homosexuality problem." (He later was exposed for molesting clients, but the Adventist Church never officially retracted his claims or apologized for funding his center.) Part II and III of this series are also accessible from this article.

Film Resources

Seventh-Gay Adventists: A Film About Faith on the Margins

<http://www.sgamovie.com>

A feature documentary about three gay and lesbian Adventists as they wrestle to navigate questions of faith, identity, and belonging. It was the impact of this film and the ensuing discussions that inspired this dialogue film. *Seventh-Gay Adventists* is available on a pay-what-you-want model for as little as 99 cents. You can also find it on iTunes.

It Gets Better (for Adventists Too)

<https://vimeo.com/26611546>

Dedicated to the memory of a gay Adventist who died from suicide during the making of this film, this project is meant to give hope to LGBT+ Adventists, particularly youth, that it gets better, even in the church.

We Are Seventh-Day Adventists

<http://www.wearesdas.com>

A dozen short video profiles of LGBT Adventists. This series shares even more voices than are available in *Seventh-Gay Adventists* or *Enough Room at the Table*.

The New Black

The New Black is a documentary about how the African-American community is grappling with the gay rights movement and marriage equality.

Additional films on iTunes, Netflix, and other online platforms:

For the Bible Tells Me So
Trembling Before G-d
Love Free or Die
Prayers for Bobby

Books

Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gay vs Christian Debate

by Justin Lee

<http://www.amazon.com/Torn-Rescuing-Gospel-Gays-vs-Christians-Debate/dp/1455514306>

The founder of the Gay Christian Network shares his personal story of being a conservative Christian and realizing that he was gay. It includes current information from science and theological perspectives with Lee's characteristic humor and generous tone.

My Son, Beloved Stranger

by Carrol Grady

<http://www.amazon.com/Son-Beloved-Stranger-Carrol-Grady/dp/1886360111>

The Adventist mother and pastor's wife shares their family's experience of having a son come out as gay. This was one of the very first books ever published by an Adventist about this topic and helped pioneer this entire conversation.

Christianity and Homosexuality: Some Adventist Perspectives

Edited by Dave Ferguson, Fritz Guy, and David Larson

<http://www.amazon.com/Christianity-Homosexuality-Seventh-day-Adventist-Perspectives/dp/0967369428>

A compilation of autobiographical essays and academic articles from biology, sociology, theology, politics, and more about the intersection of faith, gender, and sexuality. This is a unique collection of Adventist voices from a wide range of disciplines, and it's another pioneering work in this conversation.

Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church

by Jack Rogers

http://www.amazon.com/Jesus-Homosexuality-Revised-Expanded-Edition/dp/066423397X/ref=dp_ob_image_bk

The Reverend Rogers considered himself a compassionate conservative with no real interest in this topic until he was asked to sit on a committee at his church examining this topic in depth. His explanation of a Christological hermeneutic and the historical uses of the Bible to justify oppression are particularly helpful

Generous Spaciousness:

Responding to Gay Christians in the Church

A call to mutual and inclusive dialogue around LGBT+ topics in the church that challenges both traditionalists and progressives.

Facing the Music

by Jennifer Knapp

Singer/songwriter Jennifer Knapp's memoir about her experience with music, the Christian music industry, coming out as a lesbian in that context, and becoming an advocate on behalf of other LGBT people of faith.

Support and Community

Seventh-day Adventist Kinship

<http://sdakinship.org>

Kinship has been supporting and advocating for LGBTI Adventists and those who love them for over 35 years and has regional chapters all over the world and many private Facebook groups for talking to people who understand exactly what it's like to be both Adventist and LGBT+.

Intercollegiate Adventist GSA Coalition

<https://www.facebook.com/IAGCAAdventist>

(IAGC) The IAGC is just a few years old, but it's growing quickly. It's the umbrella group for GSAs on Adventist colleges and universities, and they work to promote dialogue, awareness, and support for LGBT+ students on Adventist campuses. There's a public group and a closed group for additional support.

Gay Christian Network

<https://www.gaychristian.net/>

GCN (Justin Lee, GCN founder is linked above as well) is a support organization for LGBT+ Christians who are both Side A (believe same-sex unions can be blessed by God) and Side B (believe celibacy is the only option). Their annual conference is a space for worship, networking, and connecting with other LGBT+ Christians and allies/advocates.

<http://www.EnoughRoomFilm.com>

“And by this will they know that you are my disciples,
if you love one another.” - John 13:35