



LIVING IN LOVE & FAITH

The Course

A 5-session course for groups

'Here is a course that is informative, thoughtful, challenging and engaging. Dealing with the sensitive and complex questions of identity, relationships and sexuality, it invites us to learn, reflect and pray together. It is about going deeper with each other and with God.

'We commend this course to you. Our hope and prayer is that as we engage with it together across the church, we will learn to live more fully in the way of Christ - in love and faith.'

The Archbishops of Canterbury and York



Living in Love and Faith: The Course aims to help Christians think more deeply about what it means to be human. It provides a structured and accessible way for local groups to engage in and reflect on *Living in Love and Faith*, a major new exploration of Christian teaching and learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage.

Each of the five sessions explores one key topic, with an opening reflection about learning together, followed by teaching, time for discussion and Bible study. The sessions end with an invitation to reflect on our learning, bringing it to God in prayer.

As well as providing notes for leading groups, the course signposts relevant chapters in the ***Living in Love and Faith*** book, films, podcasts and other digital resources available via www.churchofengland.org/LLF, where a video version of the course can also be found.

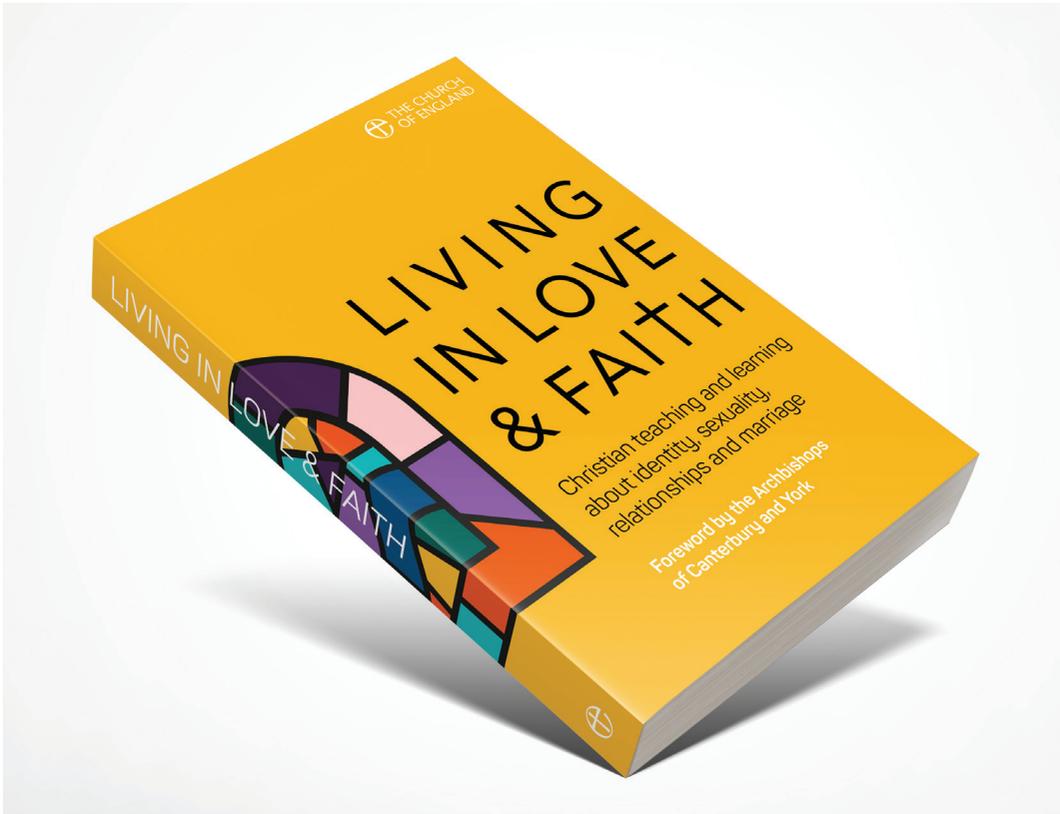
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Also available from



The LLF Book

Living in Love and Faith:
Christian teaching and learning
about identity, sexuality,
relationships and marriage

Foreword by the Archbishops
of Canterbury and York

www.chpublishing.co.uk

Commitments

In our learning and meeting together we commit to ...

- holding each other before God in prayer
- praying for the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit in all our conversations
- learning together from Scripture and from each other
- enabling everyone to speak
- making space for those whose voices have not yet been heard to contribute – but without putting people on the spot if they don't wish to speak
- avoiding interrupting each other, instead acknowledging what others say before moving on to have our say
- keeping confidential anything personal that is shared
- taking care about how we speak about others who are not in the room
- looking out for and being sensitive to people's feelings
- giving each other time to reflect before sharing with others
- taking time out as a group from time to time, offering one another an opportunity to say if there is anything in the discussion they have found difficult but haven't been able to express
- learning together how we can live more fully in the way of Christ.

**The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,
kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.
There is no law against such things.**

Galatians 5.22-23

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The Course

Christian teaching and learning
about identity, sexuality,
relationships and marriage



official publisher of the Church of England

Welcome

Welcome to the Living in Love and Faith course. This course aims to help us think more deeply about what it means to be human and about how to live in love and faith.

All around us we see changing understandings of human identity, changing patterns in relationships and families, changing sexual attitudes and activity. What does it mean for followers of Jesus to walk in love, faith and holiness today?

Each of the five sessions explores a particular topic. An opening reflection about learning together is followed by two sections of teaching, time for discussion, and a Bible study. The sessions end with an invitation to reflect on our learning, bringing it to God in prayer.

Don't forget to explore the LLF book, films, podcasts and other LLF resources shown in the 'Going further' section at the end of each session, which are all available free from www.churchofengland.org/LLF

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SESSION 1

Learning Together

The aims of this session are

- to get to know each other in our group
- to explore how we can create a safe space for our learning together
- to recognise the different ways that we learn as disciples of Jesus
- to think about what is involved in learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage.



An opening prayer

Use this prayer or some other way to gather together in God's presence.

O Holy Spirit,
Giver of light and life,
impart to us thoughts higher than our own thoughts,
and prayers better than our own prayers,
and powers beyond our own powers,
that we may spend and be spent
in the ways of love and goodness,
after the perfect image
of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.

from *Daily Prayer* (1941)
edited by Eric Milner-White and G.W. Briggs

Learning together

The gospels describe Jesus' followers as disciples. 'Disciple' just means 'learner'. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be learners.

We all have a variety of ways of learning: by doing, by reading, by listening, by seeing and by discussing with others. Most of us learn through a combination of these and probably all of us learn through stories.

Jesus understood this. Sometimes he started a conversation by asking questions. Other times he taught crowds in the synagogue or outdoors. And still other times he made his disciples go and do something. More often than not, he had a story up his sleeve.

In this course, too, we'll be learning in different ways: by reading the Bible, listening to teaching, hearing stories and discussing together.

To begin with, we will focus on something that may be even more important than learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. It's about learning and growing *together* as disciples of Jesus Christ.

By 'together' we mean the people who are in your group who may have very different life experiences and views.

But we also mean together with the people whose stories you can read about or watch on film. And we mean together with the people who have contributed to this course and the other LLF resources. They include lay people, clergy, bishops, and experts in a variety of subjects. Among these are people with different lived experiences of sexuality and gender, and different convictions. They are listed on the LLF website.

And we want to learn *together* with all the groups around the country who, like you, are using this course. Our experiences, learning and discernment will be gathered, listened to and reflected on by the bishops together with members of General Synod, as they discern the way forward for the Church of England regarding questions of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage.

Learning together in love and faith

**'Love one another with mutual affection;
outdo one another in showing honour.'**

Romans 12.10

The topics that we will be exploring affect us all – though we may approach them quite differently. So we will think about how we can learn together well, welcoming each other as followers of Christ.

We're not always good at doing this. By no means everyone experiences our own church – the Church of England – as a welcoming, kind and safe environment. In fact, some have experienced rejection, hostility or scorn.

As we gather to learn together, we all need to be assured this is a safe space in which we may relate honestly, graciously and lovingly to one another. This will involve turning away from ways of speaking and behaving that cause hurt and prevent us from hearing God together. It will involve renewed commitment to better ways of relating, learning and discussing together.

To help us do this, each of the sessions begins with a short reflection based on one of the Church of England's 'Pastoral Principles for Living Well Together' (www.churchofengland.org/PAG). Their purpose is to help church communities to examine afresh their life together in the face of difference and diversity.

The Pastoral Principles for Living Well Together will help us

... to address ignorance by learning together about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage in the light of our call to be faithful to both Scripture and the church's tradition;

by learning together with people who have different perspectives and lived experiences in relation to identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage.

... to acknowledge prejudice by welcoming people as they are, loving them unconditionally and seeking to see Christ in them;

by reflecting deeply on our attitudes and behaviour in order to nurture understanding and respect between people who disagree.

... to admit hypocrisy by not condemning certain behaviours and attitudes while turning a blind eye to others, remembering that we are all weak, fallible, broken and equally in need of God's grace;

by learning from one another about the challenge to holy living and the wideness of God's mercy as the Spirit moves within, among and between us.

... to cast out fear by consciously demonstrating and living out what it means for perfect love to cast out fear even in situations of disagreement;

by modelling openness and vulnerability as each of us wrestles prayerfully with the costliness of Christian discipleship.

... to speak into silence by remembering that we are the Body of Christ, called to relate deeply and openly with one another, sharing what is on our hearts as well as in our minds;

by practising deep listening without a hidden agenda that encourages conversations about questions of human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage.

... to pay attention to power by being alert to attempts to control others, remembering that God's Spirit alone can bring transformation into our lives and the lives of others;

by following Christ's example of service and compassion as we accompany one another in following the way of the cross.

The first of these reflections is about listening and speaking - addressing ignorance and paying attention to power.

Talking about listening and speaking

When it comes to learning *together* two things are needed.

We are called to listen – to God and to each other as we study the Bible and the world around us together. And we are called to speak – about our own experiences and understanding. We are called both to listen and to speak, open to learning from each other and from God.

Listening and speaking to each other in this way is joyful because it allows the love of Christ to flow between us. It is powerful because it enables us to grow together as disciples of Christ even when we disagree. Not listening is powerful too, but in unhelpful ways. It silences and disempowers people and deepens our divisions.

The subjects we're exploring are deeply personal. We may have very strong feelings and convictions about them. This can make both speaking and listening hard.

Think about a time when you were listened to attentively, and how that made you feel. Listening well is a gift and an act of love. It affirms the person being listened to. It is a way of expressing God's love.

And think about the opposite experience, of sharing something important, and realising the person you were speaking to wasn't really listening. Perhaps they were too eager to tell you what they thought. Perhaps they hadn't noticed how important it was to you. Perhaps they just contradicted you or dismissed your words. That can be a painful experience that makes us wary of speaking up again.

Our first challenge is to listen deeply to each other. This means giving whoever is speaking all our attention. It means putting aside our instinct to interrupt. It means noticing our own feelings of fear, empathy or anger and not allowing them to get in the way of our listening. It means remembering that the person who is speaking is loved and cherished by God. It means checking that we have listened well by reflecting back what we have heard and asking if we heard correctly what the person said.

Listening shows that we don't want to be **ignorant** of each other's experiences and perspectives. It helps us to pay attention to the **power** we and others can wield in the way we relate to each other.

Our second challenge is to be willing to speak: to share our stories and to talk about our feelings, views, convictions, doubts and fears. We might be afraid to do this because we're worried that others will oppose or even judge us or dismiss what we have to say. We might have had bad experiences that make us afraid to speak up. Everyone needs to make their own judgement about what to share. Nobody should pressure anyone to share more than that, but we can all help to create a safe space by listening respectfully and showing as we do how much every person in the group is loved by God.



Practising

A good place to start is by listening to one another. Start by reading the 'Commitments' on the inside front cover and committing to them. Then, either as a whole group or in threes, take turns to tell each other

- something about your own story, and
- what hopes and fears you have about doing this course together.

After each person has said something, why not ask someone else to reflect back what they heard?

What did you notice ...

- when you were the speaker?
- when you were the listener?
- when someone reflected back what you said?



Studying the Bible together

Matthew 7.24-29

[Jesus said] ²⁴Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!

²⁸Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

These verses come at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, the first section of Jesus' teaching in the gospel of Matthew. Here Jesus is teaching about the way of life that embodies the kingdom of heaven. Matthew records four other sections of Jesus' teaching in chapters 10, 13, 18 and 20–25. In between, he tells of the miracles that Jesus performed and of the other events of his life, death and resurrection. It's as if the gospel's structure is deliberately designed to emphasise the connections between learning and living, hearing and doing.

At the beginning of chapter 5, Matthew tells us that 'When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them ...'.

Beginning with the Beatitudes, Matthew records Jesus' teaching about a whole host of topics including anger, adultery, divorce, forgiveness, giving to the poor, prayer, fasting, worrying and judging others.

He finishes with this story about the wise and foolish builders. The crowd is 'astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority.' Here is Jesus the teacher teaching his disciples, teaching us, so that we can learn to truly live as people of the kingdom of God.



Reflection

It's all too easy to skip over the details of this familiar story. Maybe you heard it or sang about it when you were younger? Read verses 24 to 27 again, slowly.

- What have you noticed that you hadn't seen before?
- What do you think it tells us about learning and about life as a follower of Jesus?
- Can you remember a time when you were 'astounded' by Jesus' teaching?

Learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage

We've seen how the people in this passage described Jesus' teaching not only as 'astounding' but as 'having authority'. When we set out to learn about something, we want to be sure that the person who is teaching us really knows what they're talking about. We want them to be people who are trustworthy, people we can rely on to tell us the truth.

For followers of Jesus that true teaching is found first and foremost in the Bible. We believe that the Bible gives us the most truthful account of who God is and who we are. It sets the story of Jesus within the story of the God who reached out in love, creating the world and all of us in it. It tells how humankind turned, and continues to turn, away from God's love and how the whole world is affected by our turning away, our sin.

It tells of Israel, called to be the people of God. It tells of the failure of God's people to obey God's life-giving commandments for their own well-being. It tells of God calling us back to the immensity of God's love again and again. It tells how God, seeing that we could not help ourselves, came among us in Jesus Christ and proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God. It tells of Jesus' arrest, torture and execution, suffering the condemnation that should be ours. And it tells of Jesus, raised by God from the dead, now gloriously alive and still with us by the Holy Spirit, making everything new. It tells of the certain hope that one day this transformation will be complete, and Christ will return.

The Bible is central to the life of the church. But how do its many kinds of writing – poetry, laws, history, letters – relate to our questions about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage? How do we discern the wisdom of God especially when it is often seen as foolishness in the world (1 Corinthians 1.20-27)? How do our questions relate to questions that the Bible addresses in different languages and cultures from our own?

Answering these questions involves listening carefully to one another, to other Christians who have passed the faith on to us, and to people who have given their lives to studying the Bible. We will find that Christians understand the same texts in different ways, and that will raise questions about how the Bible is to be interpreted. We will explore these issues further in the sessions that follow.

The Church of England teaches us that the Bible ‘contains all things necessary for salvation’ and that it ‘uniquely reveals the faith we profess.’ God has also given us other ways of knowing about the world and God’s work in it. The Bible itself, for example, encourages us to learn from the past and from nature.

The Psalmist says,
I remember the days of old,
I think about all your deeds,
I meditate on the works of your hands. (Psalm 143.5)

and
The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge. (Psalm 19.1-2)

That is why we, too, will be exploring what history and the sciences can teach us.

We learn from history, including the Church’s own history. We learn from the wisdom of its practices tested over time, but also from its mistakes and failures. As the experiences of different minority groups in the Church and wider society remind us, however, learning from history can be complex. It depends on whose history is being told and who is doing the telling.

The sciences teach us by showing the amazing complexity and diversity of the natural world. Doing science glorifies the God who created all things. But science never has the last word: there is always more to discover. We’ve seen this during the COVID-19 pandemic: ‘listening to the science’ has not always provided simple answers to our questions about what to do. That doesn’t lessen its importance. It just means that science, like history and the Bible itself, is not always straightforward to interpret.

There are two other things to think about as we prepare to learn together.

As Christians, the Bible is our source for Jesus' teaching. Like many other parts of the Bible, that teaching is rooted in its own time and place. Jesus was born as a Jew at a specific time, in the particular political, social and cultural context of the Middle East in the first century. However, because of who Jesus is, how he lived and what he taught, we believe his teaching relates to all times and places and has authority for us today. We need to understand both Jesus' context and our own to grasp what he is asking of us. We will need each other's help to think about these things.

Finally, we learn by listening to the real-life stories of followers of Jesus today, telling us how they have understood his call upon their lives. Some of these stories are available in the LLF book and on film, but we all have our own stories to share. And each of us will have in mind the stories of family members or of friends which relate to the questions we're exploring. All these stories remind us that we're exploring questions that have real life consequences – for ourselves, for our families – for everyone.

Stories invite us to step out of our own world and concerns into those of someone else. They remind us that all of us are imperfect, often with complicated and messy lives. And they bring us face to face with our differences. By paying attention to the stories of people who have very different lives and sometimes opposing understandings, we're taking a step towards being a community of believers who love one another with the love of Christ – and are open to the possibility that Jesus is teaching all of us through our learning together.



Discussion

- Can you remember a time when 'the penny dropped' about something significant or complex? Perhaps some aspect of what it means to follow Jesus? What helped you to come to that understanding?
- What kinds of questions trouble you most about identity, sexuality, relationships, marriage and the church?



Prayer and reflection

Today you have started to get to know each other. Spend a moment thanking God for each other.

Have enough tea lights so there is one for each person in the group. Invite everyone to take turns to light a candle while praying quietly or out loud, 'Thank you, Jesus, for _____', naming the person on their right.

Here is a prayer that you might use to say together to finish:

Lord Jesus,
write the story of your grace and truth
into the lives of your people
that, believing in you,
the world may have life in your name.
Amen.

Going further

Here you will find lists of other LLF resources that relate to this session. They are all available via www.churchofengland.org/LLF



Films to watch Introducing the Living in Love and Faith Project • Introducing the Pastoral Principles • Pastoral Principles in Conversation



Podcast 1 Living in Love and Faith – What's the conversation?
Podcast 3 What's the conversation? Learning together
Podcast 5 What's the conversation? Our alliance with science
Podcast 15 Seeking answers; How do we hear God through experience and conscience?



The LLF book An Invitation, Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, 15, 16, 17 and Encounters

SESSION 2

Identity

The aims of this session are

- to **understand** the Bible's joyful vision of God's purposes for human life and to receive it afresh ourselves
- to **explore** questions of gender and identity in the light of the Christian faith
- to **meet** followers of Jesus whose beliefs and experiences concerning gender and identity are different from ours.



An opening reading

Use this responsory or some other way to gather together in God's presence.

Fear not, for I have redeemed you.
I have called you by name; you are mine.

**Fear not, for I have redeemed you.
I have called you by name; you are mine.**

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.
When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned.

I have called you by name; you are mine.

Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit.

**Fear not, for I have redeemed you.
I have called you by name; you are mine.**

Common Worship: Daily Prayer,
from Isaiah 43

Talking about confidence and casting out fear

'You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you'

Isaiah 43.4

In this session we will be thinking about who we are.

Each of us is a child of God with a unique story to tell. We may feel confident about telling some parts of our story: our hobbies, the food we like, or perhaps our achievements. But there are other aspects of our story that we might be more hesitant to share.

We might be afraid that people will not be interested in what we have to say or that they will laugh at us. Maybe we're afraid that people will judge us, reject us and turn their backs on us because they disapprove of or disagree with what we have revealed about ourselves. Maybe we fear that we will become the focus of unwanted attention. Maybe we fear that we will be challenged about our identity and way of life in unhelpful and insensitive ways, by people who have not taken the time to know us and understand us.

Living in love and faith is about celebrating God's gift to us of life, relationships and sexuality. It is also about acknowledging our fears as we share with one another and discuss challenging questions. It is about learning to trust one another.

Fear can also stop us from listening to someone who wants to share their story with us. It may be that we're afraid to hear about someone who is different from us, afraid that we won't cope with what they tell us or won't know what to say or how to respond. We may be afraid of approving something that we might think is wrong.

No one wants to live in fear. Fear can cause us to retreat from others and become imprisoned in loneliness and even despair. Fear can cause us to lash out or to refuse to see a different reality to our own.

This kind of fear is particularly acute when we talk about our gender identity and sexuality. Some Christians experience fear because their convictions about sexuality are met with scorn. Many LGBTI+ people experience fear because their identity or sexuality is met with hostility and rejection. This occurs within our church communities as well as in wider society. Sometimes, it has tragic consequences. It has had a serious effect on many LGBTI+ people's mental health, and has led even in some cases to suicide.

The opposite of fear is a feeling of confidence and safety. Thankfully, most of us have one or two people with whom we feel really safe. Usually that's because they know us well and accept us as we are. When we know we're all in the same boat there is no sense of anyone being better than anyone else.

And that, of course, is how we all are as children of God, equally loved and cherished and equally in need of forgiveness and grace. This kind of safety frees us to be the people God created us to be.

As we enter into conversations about identity, sexuality, gender and relationships we remember that we are children of the God whose perfect love casts out fear. One of our challenges is to remember that, without exception, we all stand in need of God's mercy and grace. Our job is not to judge one another but to welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed us.

What do we mean by identity?

Some of us may not often consciously think about identity, but identity is who we are. It can refer to our deeply-rooted sense of ourselves – although for Christians, that is not the whole story. The Bible tells us that we are made in God’s image. We are God’s children, members together of God’s family. That means our identity is rooted in God’s creative love, whether we realise it or not.

We may not often think about identity, but it affects everything about us. It’s shaped by our genes, our environment, our relationships, our past experiences, our present circumstances, and our future hopes and fears. It affects how we fit into the world around us and how we respond to the people and circumstances of our lives.

There can be many different aspects of identity, including class, race, and nationality. Our focus here is on sexual orientation and gender. It’s important to acknowledge right at the start, though, that we disagree in the church about how we understand these aspects of our identity. We also disagree about how they relate to our identity ‘in Christ’. In this session we want to open up that conversation to help us understand these different views – and each other – better.

What we believe about these matters also affects the words we use to describe them. We need to be sensitive to the fact that one way of talking might be offensive for one person but liberating for another.

To understand each other’s identities, we need to listen to each other’s stories. They are not necessarily the ‘whole’ story, but they will help clarify our questions and ground our learning in the realities of each other’s lives and relationships.

The Bible, too, tells stories – Noah, Isaac and Moses, Ruth, Mary and Martha, Paul, Barnabas, and many, many others. These windows into people’s lives help us to understand what shapes human identity.

They tell us that people are shaped by the places and the times in which they live. They tell us that identity is relational. From the moment of our birth we are shaped both positively and negatively by relationships, first with family and then with an ever-wider circle of people. It is within these relationships that we learn more fully who we are.

Our identity is also influenced by the communities and culture in which we live. This includes the church: we both shape and are shaped by the communities of faith to which we belong. We see this in the Old Testament where the stories of individuals and the story of Israel are connected, each influencing and shaping the other. The New Testament addresses us, the people of God together as well as individually, showing what it means to be members of the body of Christ, the Church. Christian identity is something that we hold together, worked out in individual lives, yet not individually.

We all have our own stories to tell, but, as followers of Jesus, we know that we're part of a much, much bigger story. This story begins with creation. Human beings receive God's gift of life in the moment of their creation (Genesis 2.7). We're made in the image of God (Genesis 1.27). It is only when we look to God, therefore, that we can truly understand who we are, individually and together. It also means that when we look at each other, we see a reflection of God's infinite love and glory because every human person is created in the image of God and is the object of God's care and love.

The creation story speaks of the God-given diversity of creation. Human beings, too, display this wonderful diversity. Each of us is unique. Our bodies, personalities and abilities differ. Yet each of us is created and loved by God. We echo that love when we love one another in all our diversity. We fail to echo that love when we deny that diversity or treat others as inferior.

Some of the differences between human beings are not matters to celebrate, however, but are fractures or distortions. The difficulty is that, in the Church, we disagree about how this applies to sexuality and gender. What some see as God-given diversity, others may see as forms of brokenness.

The Bible tells a story of re-creation – the story of the salvation of the whole world through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That means that our deepest identity is to be found 'in Christ' (2 Corinthians 5.17). That includes everything about our gender and sexuality, and all our relationships.

This identity in Christ is already ours – it's a gift to be received by grace. But we also discover this identity as we are changed into Jesus' likeness (2 Corinthians 3.18). We know that this transformation will affect every area of our lives, including how we inhabit our gender and sexuality – but we disagree about what to affirm and celebrate, and what needs healing and repentance.



Discussion

- What words do you use to describe yourself to others?
- What have you learned about what it means to be human that gives you joy, pain?
- In some people's experience, the 'silence' surrounding sexuality and gender identity is a source of mental ill health. How might your church respond to that?



Studying the Bible together

A central way that, as Christians, we discover our identity is by reading the Bible and seeking to live within its story. That story tells us who we are as God's creatures, and who we are in Christ. Consider this verse:

**So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.**

Genesis 1.27

This verse marks the climax of God's creative work. Every person is made in God's own image, but within this unity a distinction is made between male and female. This differentiation is also highlighted in Genesis 2 and by Jesus in Matthew 19. It's why the Church has historically seen our God-given human identity as involving a clear differentiation between male and female.

Some scholars, though, offer different readings. They might emphasise inclusion more than differentiation. Or they might emphasise the complexity that these poetic words can encompass.

The creation story makes clear distinctions between 'day and night', for example, yet God also creates dusk and dawn. Some would suggest that 'male and female' work the same way – describing a world in which not everyone is straightforwardly one or the other. Jesus himself, after quoting 'male and female' in Matthew 19, speaks of 'eunuchs', who appear to fit neither category – and some see there a reference to those who today might experience themselves as intersex or trans.

Consider another verse:

**There is no longer Jew or Greek,
there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male and female;
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.**

Galatians 3.28

This verse sheds more light on our deepest shared identity, although it, too, raises questions about gender.

A central focus of Paul's letter to the Galatian church is that the division between Jews and Gentiles is no longer decisive for people's identities. For Paul, the primary identity of all Christians, Jewish and Gentile, is as children of God, siblings of Christ, and heirs of Abraham through faith.

Paul adds two other common contrasting identities marked by privilege and oppression in his world: 'slave or free' and 'male and female'. This doesn't tell us exactly what happens to these distinctions 'in Christ Jesus'. Each of the three pairs appears to work slightly differently. It does suggest, however, that 'in Christ Jesus' there is a new equity, a new levelling, a new shared identity between male and female. Paul is saying to the Galatian Christians – 'in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith' (3.26).



Reflection

- Does Genesis help us understand our different experiences of being gendered?
- What does it mean to have a new identity in Christ that is more important than other identities, even 'male and female'?

Identity, sexual orientation and gender

More and more people are coming to describe themselves as trans, lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, intersex or even gender fluid. How are we to make sense of all this?

Gender identity

We first need to think about sex and gender. It's often said that 'sex' has to do with biology, while 'gender' has to do with culture and experience – but it's impossible to draw a neat line between the two.

Biologically, sex involves chromosomes, hormones, genitals and other bodily characteristics. Yet, in a small proportion of people, these don't always align as 'all male' or 'all female' for a given individual. Some people are born with intersex traits (or 'Variations in Sex Characteristics') that can involve any of these aspects.

The word 'gender' can be used to refer to the ways society expects people identified as male or female to behave – a kind of stereotyping. It can also be used to describe a person's deeply rooted sense of themselves – that might itself have biological roots. This is typically called someone's 'gender identity'.

Language in this area is controversial. Someone whose sense of their own gender identity does not match the sex assigned at birth based on the appearance of genitals might describe themselves as 'transgender' or 'trans'. Someone for whom they do match might describe themselves as 'cisgender', or 'cis'. Some might not accept this way of talking about sex and gender, believing that biological sex cannot be separated from gender in this way.

There are lots of words used to describe different gender identities. 'Non-binary' is one of the broadest. It means that someone does not identify either as male or as female but might place themselves on a male-female continuum, or not on that continuum at all.

We don't know all the scientific reasons behind trans and non-binary identities yet, but research is beginning to suggest that gender identity may be affected by levels of hormones in the womb during key stages of pregnancy.

Trans people often experience gender dysphoria – a sometimes profound discomfort with their bodies or how they are seen. A trans person may transition socially by changing names or pronouns and dressing differently. The transition may be medical, involving hormone treatment and various surgical options. Not all trans people transition medically. Many who transition speak of finding their

true selves. There are also reports of some who speak about regretting their transition. Responding to gender dysphoria among children is an especially complex area where there is much to learn.

In 2004 the Gender Recognition Act enabled trans people to be legally recognised in their gender. In 2010, the Equality Act made it illegal to discriminate against people on the basis of sex or gender reassignment. Life can still be difficult for trans people, though. A significant proportion of trans people experience hate crimes. Many trans people experience discrimination in the workplace and in relation to healthcare.

The situation is complex. There are heated exchanges, for example, about how to protect from harm and treat equally both women born as women and trans women. The questions and strong opinions voiced show there is need for greater understanding in wider society as well as in the church.

Sexual orientation

A person's orientation is their tendency to feel sexual attraction to people of particular sexes or genders. The words homosexual, lesbian and gay are used when a person is predominantly attracted to people of the same sex; bisexual when attracted to both men and women and possibly other gender categories; and asexual when not sexually attracted to anyone. Some prefer not to use the language of 'orientation' or to describe it as a matter of identity, speaking instead about being 'same-sex attracted'.

Research shows that sexual orientation is influenced by genes and by other biological factors. There is a complex interplay between these and sociocultural influences that is not yet fully understood.

In Session 3 we will think about how sexual orientation relates to marriage and in Session 4 to same-sex sexual activity.

Identity in Christ

How does all this relate to our discussion of identity as followers of Christ? This is not a task that falls only on LGBTI+ people. It's a task for all of us. As Christians, we agree that our deepest identity is in Christ and that we all need to take sin and the need for transformation seriously. We agree that all humans are equally loved by God and we rejoice in our diversity. We may not agree, though, about human experiences in the areas of gender and sexuality. Are they part of the God-given diversity of humans created in God's image? Or are they marks of the brokenness of that created image which God is working to restore?



Discussion

Questions of gender and sexual orientation are complex and much is still unknown. It's easy to hurt and offend each other in our discussions, forgetting that God says to each of us: 'you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you' (Isaiah 43.4).

- How do you understand the connection between sexuality and identity? How does it affect your relationships?
- Matters of gender identity and transition attract a lot of controversy and media attention. How might you approach what you read and hear differently now?



Prayer and reflection

To finish, you may wish to pray this prayer together twice, first using this form:

**Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.**

Common Worship: Daily Prayer,
from St Patrick's Breastplate

And then extend the prayer to the Church, the body of Christ by replacing 'me' with 'us':

**Christ be with us, Christ within us,
Christ behind us, Christ before us,
Christ beside us, Christ to win us,
Christ to comfort and restore us.
Christ beneath us, Christ above us,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love us,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.**

Going further



Films to watch Alex & Jo • Luke • Philippa



Podcast 7 What's the conversation? Being human –
the story of our lives

Podcast 10 Seeking answers: How do we hear God?

Podcast 13 Seeking answers: How do we hear God in creation?



The LLF book Chapters 5, 6, 10, 13, 15, 17 and Scene 3

SESSION 3

Relationships

The aims of this session are

- to **understand** how friendship and marriage have their roots in the Bible and the Church
- to **explore** different views on friendship, civil partnerships and marriage in the Church and society today
- to **relate** compassionately and respectfully to people with different views on relationships and marriage.



An opening reading

Use this reading or some other way to gather together in God's presence.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,
but do not have love,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers,
and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,
but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give away all my possessions,
and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,
but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind;
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things,
hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.

1 Corinthians 13.1-8

Talking about respect and acknowledging prejudice

**'And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow
more and more with knowledge and full insight'**

Philippians 1.9

We notice if someone treats us with respect and fairness. We feel understood. We also notice when someone judges us out of prejudice – because they don't really know us or love us. One of the striking things about Jesus was his willingness to make friends with and show respect for people who were victims of prejudice.

Prejudices can make us selective about who we befriend. But Jesus spent time with despised Samaritans and tax-collectors, and was compassionate, respectful and welcoming to them even when it made him unpopular with other people.

All of us are conditioned by our experience of life, both positively and negatively. Often without even realising it, we find ourselves making judgements about people with little or no evidence. Sometimes that means that there are people who are invisible to us. Sometimes it means that we consciously or subconsciously avoid certain people.

We often make these decisions purely on appearance: what people wear, what cars they drive or what hairstyles, skin colour or tattoos they have. Sometimes, we focus on certain convictions – about politics, theology, or diet or education – and put people in boxes. We assume that we know what they believe and how they behave. And we are often all too good at justifying our prejudices, to others and to ourselves.

Prejudices run deep. They cause major and persistent social, economic and racial injustices in our society. Prejudices also run deep when it comes to matters of sexuality, gender, relationships and marriage. That is why we need to pay critical attention to our own attitudes, noticing our inner responses to people who are different from us and whose ideas are different from our own.

We are all invited into God's kingdom by God's grace. There's no place for prejudice among the children of God. The way of the kingdom is to remember that every person is 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139.14). We're all of infinite value in God's sight, and should respect each other accordingly.

That means we will need to help each other when our prejudices become evident in the language we use or the attitudes we display. We will need to let go of our desire to want others to be like us. We will need to learn from each other how God is making us all more like Jesus. That means looking for the ways that God can shape us into Christ-like people through our encounters with people who are different from us and who hold different convictions from us.

It's all about relationships

Life is full of relationships. We are born into relationships and nurtured by them. We spend our lives in countless relationships. If you reflect on all the people you relate to in a 'normal' week, you will find a diverse list: family and friends, housemates, neighbours, child-minders, work colleagues, worshippers at church, your loyal Twitter follower who always 'likes' your tweets.

We see some people daily, others rarely. We meet some in person, others only on screens or down phone lines. Some relationships last a lifetime, others only for a season. Some arise from blood ties, others from mutual interests or common purpose.

Human relationships, together with our relationships with God and creation, are fundamental to us. They shape our identities. Good relationships help us flourish and grow. They give us insight into others and contribute to our self-understanding. They challenge and sharpen us. Bad relationships harm us. They can be disabling and destructive. They can destroy our trust of others, bring fear and anxiety, and leave us with pain.

So what makes for a good relationship? At its most fundamental, it is love. Our basic human calling is to live all our relationships in love. God, who is love, loved us and the whole creation into being. In response we are to love God and be loved by God, to love others and to let others love us, to love this creation of which we are part and to receive God's love through it. Love is how all relationships flourish.

Love is expressed differently in different relationships. Parent-child love is different from love between friends or the love of a married couple. Neighbour-love is different again. Ancient Greek had various words for love. The New Testament highlights *agape*, the generous and self-giving love seen in Jesus. It is expressed in commitment and faithfulness, in seeking the best for others, in not putting self-interest first. It refuses to exploit or oppress. It seeks justice for the marginalised and ill-treated. The more we experience this love in all our relationships, the more we will grow in maturity ourselves.

This biblical pattern of love is woven into all good relationships. One key relationship is friendship. Most of us have at least one good friend, perhaps many. Friendships vary – but all good friendship depends on mutuality and trust, creating a 'place' where people can open their hearts to each other.

The Bible shows us many intimate friendships, whether between people of a similar age and background (like David and Jonathan) or different ages and ethnicity (like Israelite Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth). Such friendships are powerful, significant relationships. They bring mutual commitment, blessing and enrichment: 'Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.' (Ruth 1.16–17).

Friendship is close to God's heart. In the Old Testament, Abraham is called God's friend (2 Chronicles 20.7). Jesus taught about friendship in parables. He gathered around himself friends who were very different from one another. He became the 'friend of tax-collectors and sinners' (Matthew 11.19). He showed the deepest form of love for his friends even though they – and we – constantly let him down: 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down his life for his friends' (John 15.13).

This is the kind of friendship that Jesus' followers are called to express in their personal relationships, to embody in the life of the Church, and to nurture in the wider community.



Discussion

- Find someone in your group who is a different age and talk about the two or three people who immediately spring to mind when thinking about friendship. What differences do you see? What similarities?
- In which of your friendships do you feel most 'at home' and able to share, most fully, the things that matter to you? Can you identify some of the reasons why?
- What has held you back from making close friendships? If you were to list the reasons in order of difficulty, what would be on your list?



Studying the Bible together

Matthew 19.1-12

¹When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. ²Large crowds followed him, and he cured them there.

³Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?' ⁴He answered, 'Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning "made them male and female", ⁵and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? ⁶So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' ⁷They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?' ⁸He said to them, 'It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but at the beginning it was not so. ⁹And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.'

¹⁰His disciples said to him, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.' ¹¹But he said to them, 'Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. ¹²For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.'

Among the many forms of human relationship, the Bible and Christian tradition show particular interest in marriage. This passage and the similar one in Mark 10 give the fullest accounts we have of Jesus' teaching on marriage. Both arise from him being asked a testing question. Jesus responds by quoting Genesis 1.27 and 2.24 to teach that it is God who joins husband and wife together, and to challenge the question's lax attitude ('for any cause') to divorce.

In Jesus' day, his fellow Jews disagreed about divorce and remarriage. Some rabbis were very strict, others more permissive, at least for men. One even allowed a husband to divorce his wife if she spoiled his meal. When the Pharisees appeal to the Law of Moses permitting and regulating divorce (from Deuteronomy 24), Jesus explains this as a concession due to sin. He reaffirms God's original purpose in creation – and effectively offers women protection against unscrupulous husbands.

So although Jesus in Matthew's gospel allows divorce, he gives only limited grounds for it, and he says that remarriage may make the husband an adulterer (an accusation usually focused on women in Jesus' time). The strictness of this teaching shocks his disciples. In response, Jesus refers to the different circumstances in which people find themselves identified as eunuchs, and shockingly uses that term for those who choose not to marry for the sake of the Kingdom of God.



Reflection

- Jesus and the Pharisees both appeal to the Scriptures – how should we use what the Bible says in our discussions about marriage?
- How does this passage with its focus on divorce and remarriage and eunuchs have a bearing on our discussions about relationships more generally?

Marriage

'God is love, and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them' (1 John 4.16). These words, highlighting love's centrality in all relationships, are used at the beginning of the marriage service. Marriage is a distinctive pattern of loving relationship. The Church of England's canons describe it as 'a union permanent and lifelong, for better for worse, till death them do part, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side' (Canon B30).

Although the Church's understanding of marriage has varied over the centuries, Augustine, who lived in the fifth century, has been particularly influential. He highlighted three aspects of its goodness: *faithfulness*, *children*, and *sacrament*. They have appeared, in various forms, in the Church's marriage service, and they still feature today.

Faithfulness is the mutual sharing of life in love. It is expressed in the vows 'to love and to cherish' and 'to forsake all others' until death, whatever life brings.

The bodies of men and women have characteristics that, when brought together in sexual union, have the potential to conceive children. God provides marriage so that *children* can receive the secure love, protection, and nurture they need from parents and the families that grow around them. Children are not born to all marriages and this is often the cause of great sadness. All marriages, though, are called to be fruitful in bringing life to others. The Church also teaches that God's gifts of sexual desire and expression find their proper place and freest space in marriage.

The idea of *sacrament* comes from Ephesians 5.32 where marriage is described as 'a great mystery', mirroring the love of Christ for the church. Like a sacrament, marriage is a visible sign of an invisible truth.

Marriage features throughout the Bible, in various forms. Old Testament marriages were patriarchal, and some were polygamous. They were often based not on romantic love, but on social or political or economic factors. There would often have been no vows, no blessing, and, at times, no consent.

Marriage is, however, often used as a picture of God's covenant with Israel. In the New Testament, Paul relates the union between husband and wife to that between Christ and the Church. Just as Christ loves the Church and gave himself for us, so spouses are called to love one another in mutual self-giving. The Book of Revelation describes a vision in which Christ and God's people come together as bridegroom and bride (Revelation 19.9, 21.9). It is a vision of the gathering of all God's people into a perfect union with one another and with God.

Many biblical stories portray marriages that were far from ideal – but this did not prevent God's grace being at work. God is present even in our imperfect marriages, in the ordinary, physical, and sometimes messy conditions of our lives. Even this imperfect experience gives us a glimpse of the relationship Christ has with the Church. Marriage is not just a human institution. It is a sign and means of God's love for the world.

In Britain fewer people are marrying, and those who do, tend to marry later. Cohabitation before, or instead of, marriage is commonplace. Marriage is still seen, however, to hold out a promise of security, intimacy, and mutual care, legally protected and culturally valued.

Same-sex couples have been able to enter civil partnerships since 2005 and legally to marry since 2014. Heterosexual civil partnerships were introduced in 2019.

The Church of England continues to marry opposite-sex couples and to recognise civil heterosexual marriages. Committed cohabiting relationships, civil partnerships (same-sex or opposite-sex), and same-sex marriages are not regarded as marriage in the church's teaching. The church aspires to welcome and provide pastoral support to all, whatever their relationships, but does not have approved services to celebrate any relationship other than marriage according to the church's teaching.

Many Anglicans support this view on the basis that marriage in the Bible is always a union of a man and a woman and that same-sex sexual relationships are never commended.

Many Anglicans point out that Christ-like, self-giving love can be seen in other committed relationships, both opposite-sex and same-sex, and argue that there are different ways to interpret the Bible. A refusal to recognise this, especially in relation to gay and lesbian couples, is often experienced as deeply hurtful. Many believe that the Church of England should affirm faithful, committed same-sex relationships – whether as marriages, or in some other way.

One of the major questions we must now consider together is whether the church's pastoral practice or teaching in relation to marriage should change, and if so how. That will be a focus of session 5.



Discussion

- What in the account of Christian teaching about marriage provoked the strongest reaction in you?
- How should the church respond to cohabiting, civil partnered and same-sex married couples?



Prayer and reflection

Thank God for the loyalty of friends and pray that as the people of God we might be known for the quality of our friendships across human divisions.

You may wish to finish by praying for each other and for the church using Paul's prayer to the Philippians or in some other way:

And this is my prayer:
that your love may overflow more and more
with knowledge and full insight
to help you to determine what is best,
so that on the day of Christ
you may be pure and blameless,
having produced the harvest of righteousness
that comes through Jesus Christ
for the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1.9-11

Going further



Films to watch Laura & Stephen • Julie & Alice • Andrew



Podcast 2 What's the conversation? Life, friendship, marriage... and listening

Podcast 9 What's the conversation? Ways of human loving



The LLF book Chapters 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 16 and Scenes 1, 2

SESSION 4

Sex

The aims of this session are

- to **understand** the Bible's vision for the purpose of sexual relations
- to **explore** the relationships between our bodies, intimacy and sex
- to **learn** from each other's insights, experiences and beliefs.



An opening reading

Use this prayer or some other way to gather together in God's presence.

Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you;
you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.

Often you weep over our sins and our pride,
tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgement.

You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds,
in sickness you nurse us, and with pure milk you feed us.

Jesus, by your dying we are born to new life;
by your anguish and labour we come forth in joy.
Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness;
through your gentleness we find comfort in fear.

Your warmth gives life to the dead,
your touch makes sinners righteous.

Lord Jesus, in your mercy heal us;
in your love and tenderness remake us.

In your compassion bring grace and forgiveness,
for the beauty of heaven may your love prepare us.

Common Worship: Daily Prayer
Anselm (1109)

Talking about openness and speaking into silence

**‘Therefore encourage one another and build up each other,
as indeed you are doing.’**

1 Thessalonians 5.11

In this course we are wanting to open up a conversation about sexuality and relationships that has often been missing from our churches. We are sexual beings, whether we are in a sexual relationship or not, and so questions about these things affect our lives and wellbeing. Where there is an openness to hear one another’s stories and to share our own, the church can be an affirming and healing place. Where some subjects are closed down and people are silenced, the church community can be repressive and even dangerous.

Sex is such an intimate part of our humanity that it can be hard to talk about, even with our partner or our closest friends. There can be a proper and understandable reticence to speak but staying silent out of fear or shame when we experience problems can rob us of the joy and healing that God wants for us. Enforcing silence on others can also be a way of oppressing people when sex is abused.

Inappropriate silence allows all sorts of wrong ideas to take root. We live in a society where sexual performance can too easily be idolised and boasted of, when, in fact, the realities of everyday lives and relationships tell a different story. That lack of openness can also suggest to some of us that our stories and experiences have no place in the Church.

Everyone is loved by God, though everyone is imperfect – sinful – in all manner of different ways. We read in the Bible that one of the consequences of human sin is an instinct to hide from God. But Jesus calls the church to be a place where people can be themselves without fear. This means giving people space, permission and opportunities to speak, if they want to, about sexuality and gender identity. It means creating spaces where people can be heard without interruption and without being responded to hastily. It means allowing people to overturn the assumptions that others have made about them. To refuse such listening can be an abuse of power, a silencing that’s oppressive and destructive for the life of the community as well as for the individuals concerned.

In this session we will be talking about sex and sexual relationships. We won’t be asking each other to say anything about ourselves that we are not comfortable sharing. We need to honour each other’s privacy and vulnerability in this area and not make assumptions about each other. It’s also important that no one feels they are somehow alone. We are called to relate deeply and openly with one another, sharing what is on our hearts as well as in our minds.

Sex and bodies

Many in our society assume that sex is necessary to happiness. Sexual activity is seen as vital for everyone's personal flourishing. It's seen as less connected to having children, and more to happiness and fulfilment. Adults are generally assumed to be sexually active – even if there are many for whom that's not true. Those who are not can feel uncomfortably invisible or may even be treated as failures or as repressed.

Although most people think that married people should only have sex with their partner, few now see sex before marriage as wrong. In recent decades people in Britain are having sex with more partners and starting earlier in life, though there is also evidence that people are having less sex overall.

One distinctive feature of sex today is the ease with which images of it – most of them unrealistic fantasies – are available to us. We can watch reality TV shows in which people's quests for sexual intimacy are packaged for our entertainment. We, and our children, can access pornography 24-7 on our phones and computers easily and privately. The commodification of sex – when sexual activity involves one person fulfilling their desires at the expense of another – is deeply damaging. Sexual harassment and domestic abuse violate dignity, freedom and consent. The evils of sex-trafficking and the sexual abuse of children are prevalent.

The idea that sex is necessary for intimacy can also be damaging. Intimacy can enrich our life as human beings, helping us to feel loved and secure. But intimacy doesn't have to involve sex. Intimacy grows through shared experiences of joy, grief and the routines of life. This intimacy is what sustains a rich and lasting friendship that goes beyond gender and sexual attraction.

The Bible tells us that bodies matter. They are created by God. They enable us to form relationships that fulfil our longings for intimacy, desiring and being desired. And sexual desire can be part of that. The erotic poetry of the Song of Solomon vividly celebrates two people enjoying each other's bodies. They experience what the marriage service describes as 'the delight and tenderness of sexual union'. But the Bible – telling the stories of people like Dinah (Genesis 34), David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11) or Tamar (2 Samuel 13) – also shows us that sex, especially when combined with power, can be abusive and damaging. That's one reason why the Old Testament has so many laws about bodily matters, about violence towards the body, and about sexual behaviour.

The dignity and value of the body comes into even clearer focus in the New Testament. The invisible God becomes human, in the full bodily reality of Jesus. Jesus worked, ate and drank, got tired, wept, was hurt and tortured, and died. His resurrected body, whilst transformed, is still recognisably physical. He even bears the scars of his earthly body.

Paul speaks about the importance of bodies. In 1 Corinthians he reminds us that every time we celebrate Holy Communion we participate in Christ's body and blood (1 Corinthians 10.16). We, the Church, are Christ's body on earth. Our bodies are described as 'members of Christ' and 'a temple of the Holy Spirit' (6.15,19). These are remarkable bodily images of intimacy with God and with each other. All this means that our bodies matter. 'You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore glorify God in your body' (1 Corinthians 6.19-20).

Jesus therefore warns us about sexual immorality. He stresses that sexual sins come from our heart (Matthew 15.19) – and that's why his standards are so high. 'You have heard that it was said, "Do not commit adultery." But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart' (Matthew 5.27-8).

Yet Jesus combined these high standards with a willingness to cross boundaries. He enraged the religious leaders by those he ate with and was called a 'friend of sinners' (Luke 7.34). When a woman caught committing adultery was brought before him, Jesus responded, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her' (John 8.7). Her accusers faded away. Alone with her, Jesus said 'Neither do I condemn you' and 'Go and sin no more' (John 8.11).

For Paul, sexual immorality is a serious matter: 'whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body' (1 Corinthians 6.18). Sexual intimacy connects us with another person in a profound way. It joins us, making us 'one flesh'. Bodies brought together in this way can produce new life, children are conceived. And when this place of deepest intimacy and vulnerability is misused, it leaves very deep scars and can lead to very great loss.



Discussion

- What aspects of sexual behaviour and attitudes in our culture do you find worrying? Liberating?
- What form does intimacy take in your life – with friends, with God?



Studying the Bible together

1 Corinthians 6.12-20 [New International Version]

¹² 'I have the right to do anything,' you say—but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything'—but I will not be mastered by anything.

¹³ You say, 'Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.' The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴ By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. ¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are parts of Christ himself? Shall I then take the parts of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, 'The two will become one flesh.' ¹⁷ But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. ¹⁹ Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore, honour God with your bodies.

Like today, sex was a hot topic in Corinth and in much of the Greek world of Paul's time. For an elite male, sex was widely available – including at home with slaves, on the street corners and near temples.

In this sexual hothouse, some new Christians in Corinth responded by saying it didn't matter what you did with your body – only your spirit matters. Paul's Jewish background would have taught him that the body is good and given by God. As a Christian, he emphasised that our bodies do matter because they are members of Christ. They have great value and a future resurrection (1 Corinthians 6.14 and see chapter 15).

Some appealed to the notion of freedom, but being led by one's appetite is not necessarily being free. Like Jesus, Paul was not afraid to urge a lifestyle for Christians that differed in some ways from the surrounding culture. He saw God's gift of sex as sacred and significant. That makes a difference for how it's used.

The heart of Paul's teaching here is that because of what Christ has done for us, we belong to God. We are not slaves to what we were or to our old compulsions. God's lifegiving Spirit dwells in each of us, and we are physical, living shrines of his presence (1 Corinthians 6.19). Rather than being simply disposable flesh, our bodies have great dignity and a wonderful destiny and so we are called to 'honour God with our body' (1 Corinthians 6.20).



Reflection

- What similarities, if any, do you see between Christians today and the Christians in Corinth?
- What difference does it make to you that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?

Sex and relationships

We have seen that relationships are central to our lives and our society. There have been major changes in people's attitudes to relationships and sexual activity over recent decades. We have seen how deeply we are affected by sexual activity and the patterns of sexual attraction that we experience.

For two millennia, the Church has taught that sex is one of God's good gifts to be expressed only within marriage as part of the ordering of love in creation, and for the flourishing of individuals and society. It has called for sexual abstinence of all who are not married and, following Jesus (Matthew 19) and Paul (1 Corinthians 7), commended celibacy as a sign of the new creation. One challenge this teaching faces today is how the church responds to the many committed but unmarried heterosexual couples who live together and have a sexual relationship.

For most of their history, Christian churches have also maintained that the Bible does not allow same-sex sexual activity. Many Christians all over the world, including Anglicans, remain committed to this understanding. Although once shared by Western society more widely, this area of the Church's teaching, together with other aspects of what it says about sex, is now widely viewed as mistaken and by some as oppressive, even immoral. There are disagreements within the church about whether this teaching and the church's response to same-sex couples in sexually active, lifelong committed relationships should be changed. What does the Bible have to say to help us?

The Bible speaks only about marriage between men and women, and takes for granted the connection between sex and procreation. It calls for unmarried people to remain celibate.

In addition, a number of Old and New Testament texts have been seen as particularly relevant to the question of same-sex sexual relationships. They are the Sodom story (Genesis 19), two laws in Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13, two lists of sins in Paul's letters (1 Corinthians 6.9-11; 1 Timothy 1.8-11) and more detailed teaching in Romans 1. All of these texts are negative about the sexual behaviour they describe. They have traditionally been seen as providing a consistent biblical witness against same-sex sexual activity. This has been understood as rooted in God's good purposes in creation and applicable in all cultures. While committed to being radically welcoming, many Anglicans around the world believe that to move away from teaching this would be a departure from Scripture.

For some decades, however, increasing numbers of Christians, including Anglicans, have offered alternative readings of Scripture. Do these texts only condemn abusive or predatory relationships, not faithful, committed same-sex relationships? Whatever their original meaning, can we still apply them today?

Do they not arise from pre-scientific and outdated understandings of human sexuality and very different cultures (with, for example, no biblical words directly equivalent to 'homosexual' or 'same-sex')? Does the fundamental biblical message of love not override these prohibitions and call for affirmation of loving, committed same-sex relationships?

The ongoing scholarly discussions between those who come to different conclusions about these questions highlight deep disagreements about how to interpret the Bible, and the relationship between its cultural settings and ours. This reminds us that understanding how the Bible speaks today is a complex task. As we listen for the voice of God, we need to attend to the Bible and its world, and also to the community of its interpreters in the Church throughout time and space, to science, to history, to the world in which we live, and to the role played by our own motivations and desires.

Although these disagreements are profound and can seem intractable, we shouldn't lose sight of how much remains shared. We agree that God gives us the Bible to tell us the good news of God's saving love and to call everyone into holy ways of living. We agree about the importance of intimate relationships including friendship, the goodness of marriage, the gift and calling of celibacy, and the costly universal call to discipline and self-denial in our sexual lives. We agree that these have a part to play in the abundant life to which God calls us. We agree that, as God draws us into that life, our desires are purified and reordered – as we learn to love ourselves, our neighbours, and God as we should.

Living in love and faith, we are God's beloved people, made in God's image. Seeking to be faithful to the rich foundations of Scripture we are called to discern together the patterns of costly discipleship in relation to sex, and in all our relationships.



Discussion

- Are there aspects of sex and relationships about which there is unhelpful silence in your church community? How might it be possible to speak into this?
- What questions from those who don't share your view about sexual relationships do you find most challenging?
- How, in practice, does your church show the radical welcome of Jesus, while upholding Christian convictions about sexual relationships?



Prayer and reflection

I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.

Song of Solomon 6.3

These simple and expressive words describe love as a relationship of mutual self-giving, trust and delight. Though they come from a poem about sexual love between a man and a woman, Christians throughout history have often taken them also to be words about the relationship between God and God's people.

In a time of silent prayer – or in some other way – allow God to speak these words of intimacy and love for you and for your church community.

Closing prayer:

Most holy God,
when we come to you fearing that truth condemns us,
show us that truth is one with love
in your Word made flesh,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Common Worship: Prayer after Psalm 85

Going further



Films to watch Rachel & Seth • Stephanie & Debbie • Anton



Podcast 4 What's the conversation? Society – no simple narrative

Podcast 9 What's the conversation? Ways of human loving

Podcast 11 Seeking answers: How do we hear God in the Bible?



The LLF book Chapters 5, 6, 9, 10, 12, 13 and Scene 2

SESSION 5

Life Together

The aims of this session are

- to **reflect** on what it means to be Christ's people in the light of both the Bible and the realities of diversity and difference
- to **explore** ways of approaching disagreements in the church about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage
- to **listen together** for God's call to the Church today



An opening reading

Use this psalm or some other way to gather together in God's presence.

**Behold how good and pleasant it is
to dwell together in unity.
It is like the precious oil upon the head,
running down upon the beard,
Even on Aaron's beard,
running down upon the collar of his clothing.
It is like the dew of Hermon
running down upon the hills of Zion.
For there the Lord has promised his blessing:
even life for evermore.**

Psalm 133 (Common Worship)

Talking about integrity and admitting hypocrisy

**'You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.'**

Psalms 51.6 (NRSV)

In this session we will be exploring what it means for us, disciples of Jesus in the Church of England, to live together with truthfulness and integrity in the midst of our differences, disagreements and diversity.

The starting place for our discussions is the truth that 'while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5.8). We remain fallible, weak and broken, all equally in need of God's grace, knowing ourselves to be held in the love of Christ. Despite our disagreements about human sexuality, identity and relationships, and despite our failures and misunderstandings, we are called to love one another as Christ loved us. We are called to live in love and faith.

We are also called to be honest about our failings, to be truthful in our 'inward being'. Portraying ourselves as being better than we really are is a common bad habit. We are all hypocritical in some area of life. We say one thing and we do another. And so when it comes to matters relating to identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage, our problem is not just that we disagree among ourselves. It is that our actions – as a church and as individuals – do not always match up to what we say we believe.

The world is quick to pick up on the church's failure to act in line with its principles and beliefs. Hypocrisy makes for 'good' headlines.

It is not difficult to see why that is so. Lying is at the heart of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy weaves a web of fantasy, rather than telling the story as it truly is. It erodes trust and openness. Our relationships are gradually reduced to a game of hide and seek as we pretend to be people we are not. No wonder Jesus said, 'the truth will make you free' (John 8.32).

Hypocrisy can be a barrier to honest conversation and fruitful learning together, while truthfulness and integrity enable the work of the Spirit among us to flourish. It may be, therefore, that in our learning together we need to examine ourselves and admit and confess the hypocrisy that affects our life together. As we do so, we pray that as the Spirit moves within us we will learn from one another – and discover more of the challenge to holy living and the reach of God's mercy and kindness.

A community called by God

During the COVID-19 lockdown we learned afresh that 'church' is not primarily a building. It's a community of people who belong to Jesus Christ. It's a community of people called to express God's lavish love to the world, the love embodied in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It's a community which calls us into a way of life that reflects God's distinctive character, God's holiness. This holy life is a life of 'genuine mutual love' in which all the members of the community 'love one another deeply from the heart' (1 Peter 1.22) in obedience and joy: 'If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love' (John 15.10). It's not a community of perfect people but of people who are being transformed into the likeness of Christ in every aspect of our lives. And because no one lives up to this calling, it's a community where we can admit our sinfulness, repent and receive forgiveness.

And so the Church is called to be a community where everyone is welcome, and where no one is made to feel excluded simply because of who they are. It's a community called to follow Jesus' example by welcoming the poor, the marginalised, the excluded, and the despised.

This way of living may bring this community into conflict with the world around it. We are not called to separate ourselves from the world, but to communicate through our lives and our life together the beauty and strength of God's transforming love. And we are called to recognise that the Church often fails to live this distinctive life. All kinds of unholy, unmerciful, unloving life can be found in what it says and does. So the Church itself always relies on God's mercy, forgiveness, and transforming help.

What behaviour, what forms of relationship, what patterns of obedience and community life reflect God's character and love? When it comes to questions of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage we have different views about these things. That is not surprising because the Church reflects both the diversity and fallenness of God's creation. Our differences put a strain on the 'genuine mutual love' – the unity – to which the Church is called.

Sometimes, this strain is because we struggle to live well with those who are different from us. Sometimes it's because we're all sinful and behave badly. In this course we have reflected on how we act out of fear or prejudice; how we are hypocritical, saying one thing and doing another; how we misuse our power by silencing people; how, by failing to listen, we can be ignorant about others or not even notice them.

But sometimes, it's because we disagree sincerely about what God wants. We disagree about which patterns of life, which ways of being the Church, are good, and which are in some sense fractured or distorted. Often there's a complex

mixture of these and other factors. Diversity has theological limits – and so we find Christians unable to recognise each other as faithful Christians, or we find different beliefs or practices leading to separation between churches.

From its earliest days, the Church has pursued unity amidst its disagreements. In Acts 15, the leaders of the Church discern a way forward in the midst of sharp disagreement. In Romans 14–15 Paul teaches the ‘weak’ and the ‘strong’ a Christ-like way of living together despite their differences. In every situation, our prayer is to echo that of Jesus in John 17.21, ‘that they may all be one’.

The Church of England, too, has a long history, tested and tried over recent decades, of ‘making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (Ephesians 4.3). In grappling with differences about sexuality and marriage, the Church of England is, at least in part, facing questions about where the boundaries of acceptable diversity ought to be drawn. It has tried to maintain unity with diversity in various ways. Lay Anglicans can enter same-sex relationships, for example, but cannot have them blessed. Clergy can’t marry a same-sex partner, but they can enter a civil partnership as long as it is celibate.

Many have struggled with these compromises and with the church’s attempts to find a way forward. There’s been both sincere Christian disagreement and bad behaviour. Statements from bishops or other Christians encourage some but hurt and alienate others. The Pastoral Principles, the LLF resources, and this course are intended to help us find a better way of engaging with our differences.

Christians have known from the beginning that ‘to live in harmony with one another’ we rely on the goodness of God who desires that ‘together [we] may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Romans 15.5-6). So we can have great hope that in these discussions we ‘may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect’ (Romans 12.2).



Discussion

- In what ways do you see your local church being an expression of the ‘lavish love of God’ to the wider community?
- How have you and your local church experienced the tensions within the Church of England about identity, sexuality and marriage? Are there areas in your life together in your church community to be repented about, to rejoice in?



Studying the Bible together

Jesus prayed the following words in the Upper Room shortly before his betrayal and death. In their concluding appeal in the LLF book, the bishops write, 'If the work of the Spirit is to lead us to new vistas on our disagreements and new perspectives on our differences, it will be through enabling us to ascend the summit of Jesus' prayer in John 17'.

John 17

¹After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ²since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

⁶I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹²While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled.

¹³But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. ¹⁴I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

²⁰I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

²⁵'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'



Reflection

- Read John 17 aloud, slowly, asking God to highlight one word or phrase for you.
- Go round the group and let each who wishes share that word or phrase – without further comment.
- Sit in silence, reflecting and praying on what has been shared
- Re-read the passage aloud, asking God to shed light on how this speaks into our struggles with unity and diversity. Start from 'But now I am ...' (at the top of this page) if you are short of time.
- Go round and let each who wishes share briefly – without questioning others – what they believe God has shown them.

Disagreement and life together

We have seen how the Church is a community called to a way of life that reflects God's holiness in the mutual love we have for one another, and in our welcome of all. We have seen that belonging to this community involves accepting our need to be changed to be more like Jesus. It involves confession, repentance and forgiveness.

Our differences over identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage touch on all these aspects of our life together. They are differences about what it means to live a holy life. They are differences about the nature of our welcome and how that relates to the distinctiveness of the life that we are called to live as people of God. For some, they are about the interpretation of the Bible and of how we understand the Bible's authority. For some, they are about questions of justice and fairness.

Part of our difficulty is that we also disagree about the significance of our differences. They cause us to ask whether we can live as a church while disagreeing about these matters. And they ask that question in the light of Jesus' prayer in John 17 'that they may be one as we are one' (John 17.22).

It can help to think of three broad types of disagreement. In the first kind, some Christians warn others they're contradicting the good news of Jesus or the Bible's teaching. In the second, the differences are seen as less serious, but still sharp enough to make living and working together as one church difficult, perhaps impossible. In the third, Christians still view each other as wrong, but accept this as a diversity that can be held within a church's shared life.

Different Christians can place disagreements over identity, relationships and sex in any of these categories. To complicate things further, two Christians may agree about, say, same-sex marriage but then disagree about how serious their differences are with Christians holding other views. That can be true whether they agree or disagree with the possibility of same-sex couples entering into Christian marriage. Being aware of these different levels of disagreement can help us to hear and respond to one another better.

'The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church'. As we seek a way forward, we are called to pay attention to other churches locally and internationally. As members of Christ's one body, we cannot say 'I have no need of you' (1 Corinthians 12.21). Instead we need to be prepared to be challenged, questioned, encouraged, enlightened and surprised by other members of Christ's body.

When we consider the experiences of other Christian churches, we find three broad approaches to questions of sexuality and marriage. One approach maintains the Church's traditional teaching but stresses listening to and walking alongside individuals who live differently. The Church of England's current official approach is similar to this.

A second approach permits local churches to respond in different ways. For instance, some might bless or conduct same-sex marriages, while others might continue to view them as wrong. One question, however, is whether this is possible without changing church doctrine, liturgy or law. Can a church bless or marry a same-sex couple while teaching marriage is between one man and one woman?

So a third approach is to change the church's doctrine of marriage.

Our task is to listen to the voice of God as we seek a way forward for our life together as the Church of England. We need to keep on reading the Bible, listening to teaching, hearing stories, learning and discussing together. We need to remember that the Church is the body of Christ, that we are bearers of the Spirit of God and that the 'one who calls is faithful' (1 Thessalonians 5.24).

We may find ourselves feeling that 'we do not know what to do' (2 Chronicles 20.12). We need to fix our eyes on 'Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (Hebrews 12.2). As we heard in John 17, we are called to keep close to Christ: to be where he is, one with the Father and one with those who follow him, sanctified in the truth of God that Jesus brings, and ready always to follow him for ourselves.

Our quest for answers needs to be rooted in prayer. Prayer is the heartbeat of this process. Through prayer we exercise our faith that God 'is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen' (Ephesians 3.20-21).



Discussion

- Three types of disagreement were outlined on page 58. How helpful do you find this way of distinguishing types of disagreement? Can you think of examples of each type? How would you personally categorise our differences over identity, sex and marriage?
- As you consider what you have learned through the course and from each other, what new insight, difficulty or possibility will you take to God in prayer?



Prayer and reflection

Bring out some tea lights – enough for one for each person in the group. Read Ephesians 4.1-6.

Invite members of the group to share any final reflections as the course draws to a close.

Allow some time for silence and then invite each person to light a candle and to pray – out loud or silently – a prayer for their own church in the light of what you have heard God say during this course.

Here is a closing prayer you might wish to pray together:

Grant to your people, good Lord,
the spirit of unity,
that we may dwell together in your love,
and so bear to the world
the ointment of your healing and the dew of your blessing;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Common Worship: Prayer after Psalm 133 (adapted)

Going further



Films to watch Andrew & Gerhard • Graham • Mark & Esther



Podcast 6 What's the conversation? The church as a listening post

Podcast 8 What's the conversation? A story about being church

Podcast 12 Seeking answers: How do we hear God through the church?

Podcast 16 Seeking answers: Prayer



The LLF book Chapters 7, 11, 14, Scene 4 and the Appeal

What next?

In their Appeal to the church in the LLF Book, the bishops write:

Now, as we lead the Church of England into making whatever decisions are needful for our common life regarding matters of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage, we appeal to you to join us in [this] period of discernment.

The timetable for this discernment and decision-making process can be found at www.churchofengland.org/LLF.

So we need to hear about each other's learning. You might like to send in a blog, a recording or video of your group in conversation, or maybe a 'letter to the church'. There is also a questionnaire that you can complete. See the website for details.

Here are some questions to prompt you:

- What have you learned from the course – about God, yourself, each other, the church?
- How diverse was your group? What did you discover about each other's different perspectives?
- What aspects of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage felt particularly important to learn about?
- How has the course affected your own life and the life of your church community?
- What did you find hopeful, challenging?
- What did you hear God saying to the church?

In their 'Appeal' the bishops exhort us to walk with them

in a new stage of our common life in Christ so that, 'speaking the truth in love', godly discernment and right decisions can be made over contested matters of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage, for 'we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ' (Ephesians 4.15).



Notes for leading a group

Questions of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage are very personal and there are disagreements about them in the church today. People may bring painful experiences as well as fervently held convictions to the discussions.

If you are facilitating an LLF group then your task is to help the whole group to create a space for learning that is kind, gentle, honest, open and fruitful. It means building trust by showing love and respect for one another as each brings different stories, perspectives and insights. It also means stirring people up to want to get to know each other and the subject matter better. You may wish to revisit the Pastoral Principles for Living Well Together (summarised on page 7 and available in full digitally or as a set of cards via www.churchofengland.org/PAG). If someone has shared something that raises safeguarding concerns, please contact the diocesan safeguarding team.

When helping the group to discuss the questions in the course, consider these different ways of getting started:

- ask people to reflect quietly on their own before sharing their thoughts in pairs, and then widen out to the whole group
- tell the group you will go round the circle, inviting each one to respond with just a phrase or a sentence, before opening out to more discussion
- where appropriate, invite people to share their feelings before discussing their thoughts about a question – remembering that feelings don't need to be explained or justified
- ask members of the group to do some work at home between sessions: read the Bible reading, watch the films, listen to the podcasts, or read the relevant parts of the book.

If at all possible, lead the group together with someone else, so that you can both be alert to the needs and sensitivities of the participants. The commitments on the inside front cover will help to make it a good experience for everyone. Share these with the group and commit to them yourselves.

The five sessions all have a similar structure, and approximate timings are shown below for a meeting of 1½ hours. These will vary, depending on what the group chooses to do together, and what to do individually.

The recommended story films, for example, are 5 minutes long and some groups may wish to watch them together.

You may want to ask members of the group to read the text of the session before gathering, or it may be more appropriate for someone to read the texts out loud when you meet.

If you are not able to share these when you meet together, encourage members of the group to watch the story films, listen to the podcasts or read the relevant parts of the book that are listed in the 'going further' sections.

Alternatively, you might wish to watch the full video-guided version of the course together. This is accessible via www.churchofengland/LLF.

Welcome & An opening prayer/reading	10 minutes
Talking about ...	10 minutes
Teaching & Discussion (1)	20 minutes
Studying the Bible together	20 minutes
Teaching & Discussion (2)	20 minutes
Prayer and reflection	10 minutes

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