

holding the tension wisely

tensions and wisdom from the irish peace centre's 'human rights and religious ethics working conference', corrymeela centre, ballycastle, co. antrim, june 1-2, 2011.

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introduction.

From June 1-2 of 2011, the Irish Peace Centres held a working conference at the Corrymeela Centre in Ballycastle, Co. Antrim. The conference, “Religious Ethics and Human Rights working conference”, brought faith leaders, faith practitioners and Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender (LGBT) advocates together for discussion.

It was understood, from the starting point, that there was a disagreement in the room. It was not merely that there were two sides, rather there were many sides. The conference’s aim was not to bring consensus. Instead, the aim was to bring people together to discuss LGBT lives and stories and to listen wisely to both the external and internal tensions that occur when a roomful of people attempt to speak with each other, in a tone of respect, in an atmosphere of disagreement.

The format was simple - there were times when a speaker addressed the room, and times when people discussed at their table-groups. Time was given to the following question at each table following a presentation: **What tension do you experience when listening to the other person’s perspective/story/opinion?**

Once each table had time to consider this question, we then considered whether there was any **wisdom** that could guide us as we held these tensions in a shared space.

What is sometimes called “the issue”, other times called “a debate” or “the gay question” is referred to in this paper as LGBT lives and stories. As a first principle, the conference held the dignity of first-person narrative. If we are to disagree, let us at least disagree well, without reverting to tired predictabilities, and unrepresentative stereotypes. Let us disagree in face-to-face conversation with a person who represents the lived-reality of the topic of our disagreement. We must be open to being surprised through a human engagement with someone with whose life, story, or assumed opinion we do not expect to find connection.

By bringing people from various opinions, walks of life and professions together for a residential experience where we both ate and talked together, we aimed to change the tone of a private discussion, hoping that a model could be discovered which would add to the other worthwhile initiatives on our island for raising the tone of public discourse when it comes to religious, ethical and policy-based discussions of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender lives and stories.

I have taken quotes and comments from participants, and while I have made every effort to be representative, this text is written as my own reflection on the conference. Each point of wisdom articulated is an attempt to put forward an invitation to people from a variety of perspectives. Two supplementary appendices are included in this paper, both outlining a way of speaking, engaging and listening to divergent voices in this important conversation. A report “LGBT communities’ experience of Faith and Church in Northern Ireland” was commissioned by IPC as part of our projects for 2011. This report is written by Dr. Claire Mitchell and Dr. Gail McConnell and is available from the Irish Peace Centres. Depending on availability of funding, a further report “Clergy experiences of LGBT people in Northern Ireland” will follow.

My sincere thanks go to my colleagues at the Irish Peace Centres, particularly the Cooperation Ireland Team, and Wilhelm Verwoerd and the Glenree team. Thanks too, to the Corrymeela staff Susan McEwen, Matt Scrimgeour and Paul Hutchinson as well as the always helpful volunteers. Seán Mullan, Fran Porter, Andy Hill, Claire Mitchell and Gail McConnell each gave presentations - heartfelt thanks to all of them for their time and dedication. This conference arose from a year of projects engaging on similar conversations, co-facilitated with Phil Rankin, whose dedication, humour, insight and time have made him a trusted co-facilitator and friend. Finally, and most importantly, sincere thanks go to all the conference participants, whose tensions and wisdom this paper aims to honour.

The June conference started with a short reflection on the Irish phrase for “I trust you” from the Dingle Peninsula: *mo sheasamh ort, lá na choise tinne* - ‘you are the place of my standing, on the day when my feet are sore’. It is my sincere hope that this paper can contribute to the further building of this kind of trust across painful and divisive tensions.

Pádraig Ó Tuama
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November 7, 2011.

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- Intentions.
- Names.
- From ‘speaking about’ to ‘engaging with’.
- Fear.
- Belonging.
- Human Stories.
- Beliefs and Believing.
- Progressing the conversation.

**“ there is a risk in raising these conversations...
there are nuances to learn.”**

1. Intentions.

Even before a conversation about LGBT lives and stories begins, there can be felt-tension about the perceived intention of another. There is tension when a conversation is experienced as being coercive. There can be tension when one person perceives that another's engagement may cloak a particular agenda.

Intentions can sometimes be judged incorrectly. Where one individual may be seeking to understand, their intention may be judged as destructive. This requires a deep and caring communication - speaking and listening, speaking and listening.

Language is more than words. Even the most carefully chosen words cannot mask a hurtful intention.

The wisdom that emerged for us was the following:

In a conversation such as this, it is inevitable that each person will bring their own agenda or criteria for 'success'. What can be destructive is the knowing withholding or cloaking of intentions.

If we are to have an intention that implicitly requires action on behalf of another - we must be willing to name this intention truthfully.

In many situations, where conversations about LGBT lives and stories are happening for the first time, care must be taken to make the space safe for all, with attention given to who is benefitted from safety, and who defines safety.

“...between disagreeing with people and loving people I disagree with - the tension of love is not comfortable...”

2. Names.

A conference like this inevitably means that conversation will centre on groups, or perceived groups. Even at this beginning point, there was tension. Words like “people who choose the homosexual lifestyle” or “homophobes” or “fundamentalists” or “homosexuals” brought tension that, unaddressed, could render further conversation ineffectual.

At our conference, we frequently found tension arising with the language used. It can be difficult - knowing how exactly what language to use. The words we use for ourselves and about others have changed. As soon as one person says “the church teaches that...” it is almost inevitable that somebody who considers themselves a part of the church will seek to bring clarity - either broadening or particularising the statement.

LGBT people often don't want to be spoken of under the heading of “the gay issue” or the “gay question” or “gay controversy”. People who are cautious about LGBT lives and stories may not be glad with the term “conservative”. Some people wanted to be called “Orthodox Christians”, but others found this problematic because it seemed to automatically render them heterodox.

In order to speak wisely, we started by stating that deliberately offensive and insulting phrases should be avoided. However, even when aiming to avoid deliberately offensive language, we still can experience, or cause, tension. There is no quick solution - the only way to navigate a way through the tension of language is to use language to learn.

The wisdom that emerged for us is twofold.

- Firstly, we must find out a group's name for themselves, and use this with all the respect we would expect for our own name for ourselves.
- Secondly, a person or group must be defined for who they are, not for who they are not.

“...some of the viewpoints were extremely difficult to hear - part of me is amazed I am still here...”

3. From 'speaking about' to 'engaging with'.

A real tension arises because people who are cautious about LGBT people's lives understand that their beliefs would ultimately improve society. Similarly, people who are welcoming of LGBT lives and relationships understand that their beliefs would ultimately improve society. So, the question is how do we express opinions of what we think is good for another person or for society?

It is hurtful for any group to hear that their life, or relationship, or very existence demeans civic society. No matter how careful we are about this, it is clear that messages "about" another's beliefs, relationships, lives or stories will be difficult to hear, because one group will usually hear this as a demand that a relationship, a moral practice, or a sense of personhood, must change.

Many LGBT people expressed dislike of the "Hate the Sin, Love the Sinner" - saying that the "love" of the sinner and was not felt as either love or welcome. Similarly, some people at the conference objected to the term "sexual brokenness" being used to speak of LGBT people. We heard from people of faith who are cautious about LGBT lives who don't want their caution immediately associated with 'homophobia' or 'hate speech'. They found this language sloppy, and as a catch-all term that was used for automatic silencing.

A number of points of wisdom emerged:

It is wise to move from speaking "about" the other to a real engagement with the other. Real relationships with someone who represents another viewpoint, or life, will enable a dignified understanding of each other.

When we are speaking about how our viewpoint is the best one for society, it is wise to examine this from the point of view of someone whose life will be directly affected by application of this perspective.

It is wise to be careful about saying "we all believe this"- within every group, there is bound to be a spectrum of opinion.

It is wise to reflect on privilege. For people who feel that tangible demands are being made to their relationships or lives, it is important for them hear that those whose opinions do not affect their daily reality of their lives can acknowledge the privilege of holding an opinion which does not demand change. To acknowledge these privileges does not necessarily mean that this privilege needs to be undone, but it is a wise thing to acknowledge it.

...it is wise to examine our viewpoint from the stance of someone whose life will be directly impacted by our perspective...

4. Fear.

To speak of LGBT lives and stories means that on a broad level, we are all speaking about things that are important: human relationships; the body; values held dear; family; intimacy. When groups of people speak together about LGBT lives and stories fear can often be a tension.

Primarily, we acknowledged that sex and sexuality can be difficult to discuss.

People can feel frightened of change, or the unknown.

People can be frightened of tension, or difficult-to-answer ethical questions.

People can feel frightened when they encounter a spectrum of belief in a grouping whose opinion they had initially understood to be fixed.

People can be frightened of coercion or pressure to conform.

People can be frightened of the 'slippery slope'.

People can be frightened that if cautious views of LGBT lives and stories are put across that questions about "fault" and by relation "cure", may occur.

A number of points of wisdom emerged:

The wisdom emerging from this was that it is good to find ways to acknowledge fears in the presence of people who may represent those fears. By doing this, we may discover that our fears are shared, thus creating a connection. It is also possible that in articulating a fear in the presence of someone who represents that fear, that we may discover our fear to be groundless.

This will not necessarily make difficult conversations easy, but by speaking of tension, we may discover more careful ways of speaking about such difficult topics. Patience and careful listening are needed in this kind of exchange.

“...there is wisdom in talking and wisdom in listening...”

5. Belonging.

One of the points of tension that arose in our discussions can be discussed under the title “belonging”. Many LGBT people belong to faith communities in Northern Ireland - this may be widely, or selectively or sparingly known.

There are a variety of ways of understanding the conditions to LGBT people’s place in faith communities:

- a/ You are unconditionally welcome.
- b/ You are welcome under certain conditions.
- c/ You are absolutely not welcome.

Some conference participants experienced tension because they wish all churches would advocate viewpoint *a* (above). They desired churches to extend a full and unconditional welcome to all people, including those who have, or wish to have, a same-sex partner.

Others (point *b* above) noted that there are conditions of membership of most human groupings - whether the church, or a club, and so a certain conditionality was proposed by some. Many churches that fit in with this point may have very different conditions - everything from ‘You are welcome, even with your partner, just don’t be too obvious’ to ‘you are welcome but our reading of the scriptures means we expect you to be celibate’.

Others who also fall into viewpoint *b* (above) would advocate that counselling may bring about a change in desire for a same-sex-partner to a partner of the other sex. The articulation of this point of view was the cause of considerable tension at our conference. Some saw that ‘orientation change’, when presented carefully and with freedom, is sometimes appropriate. Others found this to be intolerable.

It was generally agreed among all the gathered participants that *c* (above) was not a response to be pursued.

Therefore, the tension is - if there are conditions of belonging and full participation for LGBT people in a faith community, what are they, how are they decided, and how clear are they? Furthermore, there is tension about the word ‘change’. While some would desire LGBT people to seek change, others would desire the viewpoint of the church to change.

The wisdom that emerged from this is:

Human belonging is a deep need in us. In order for an authentic sense of belonging to be established and trustable, the truth about any conditions must be clear.

For some people (perhaps many people) the integrity of a specific condition is directly related to the capacity to examine that condition in an trustable way.

When we speak of ‘change’, we are speaking of something that is precious to people - whether their identity as LGBT, or their religious belief. It is difficult to hear a perceived ‘outsider’ demand change. If we are to speak of change, we must speak very carefully.

“...human belonging is a deep need in us...”

6. Human Stories.

It has already been stated that it is important that a group can recognise themselves in the words used to speak of them. This is not only about the specifics of words, but also about the overall tone of the stories told about them.

At one point, it was mentioned that while there *used* to be persecution of LGBT people, today's society is one where LGBT lives are accepted, and perhaps even considered trendy. The response to this from LGBT people in the room was such that they didn't recognise this, because while violence is less than it used to be, violence of action and attitude is nonetheless both contemporary and life-affecting.

Similarly, when stories of aggressive religious voices that stigmatise LGBT people were told, people of faith in the room did not recognise themselves, or even their own caution, in these stories.

One of the dangers of speaking about LGBT lives and stories in the public realm, is to reduce human stories to a debate, an issue, a question or a controversy.

Personal stories always transform and open up new possibilities. Some were uncomfortable with placing the onus of responsibility on LGBT people to share their stories. From another point of view, others felt tension with such a high valuing of personal story, because of an understanding that sees policies based personal stories as subjective and rationalist.

Wise questions that emerged from these tensions were:

Do I have a personal relationship with anybody whose tangible lifestyle or circumstances would be affected by widespread adoption of my viewpoint? How realistic have I been in understanding what demands my viewpoint ask of another?

Am I telling a story in which a person other than me can recognise themselves or their group? How do I go about checking this?

Can someone hear the internal nuance of my group's viewpoints when their experience of us has been difficult, or violent, or painful? Where does the responsibility lie? Is it their responsibility to change? Or my responsibility to engage differently?

It can be immensely difficult, to listen to stories that contradict your way of thinking. However, it is wise to listen to such stories, and learn from them. They may be particular, but there may be wide-reaching wisdom inherent in those stories.

“...our views are affecting people who feel vulnerable...”

7. Beliefs and Believing.

For every person of faith who feels strongly about LGBT lives and stories, whether they wish for more LGBT couples in their church or not, a statement of belief can be a source of tension.

A statement of belief draws a line. And a line may bring both clarity of opinion and also human separation - how do we manage the painful consequences of stating a belief? Do we know what the line looks like from the other side of it?

Statements of belief that were articulated at our conference brought about tension, not just from people outside that system of belief, but also, regularly, from people who share a religious tradition but whose reading of text was different.

So, the tension is how to engage with someone whose beliefs are very different to your own?

When we spoke about engaging divergent beliefs, somebody asked: How do Christians interpret scripture in a new sociological environment? Somebody else asked, in light of requests to change traditional reading: Who is speaking - God or the tempter? If we change our minds, is it progress? Or pressure?

This quote shows the depth of feeling about engaging with beliefs. There was initial broad acceptance of respect as a basic groundrule. However, tension emerged when someone questioned whether one should always speak with respect? Can one ask a respectful question about a statement of belief that is felt to be disrespectful?

The wisdom that emerged from this is:

We cannot pretend that conversations about belief will be painless.

It's wise to assume that there are those within our own tradition whose readings are different to our own. Difference does not just lie outside our own borders.

It is wise to present our understanding in ways that are not ambiguous. Stating that 'I am on the fence' can often be a mask for stating that you are uncomfortable with the consequences of your deeply-held belief. This is not being on the fence, rather, it is being uncomfortable with the lived reality of your belief.

If we are to speak our beliefs, it seems natural that we wish to be believed. It is wise, if we wish to be believed, to believe others when they tell us the truth of their own lives, even if that is an uncomfortable experience. If we find ourselves refusing to believe somebody else, tension will be inevitable.

“...people who have acknowledged their homosexuality do not have the luxury of semi-conscious spirituality...”

8. Progressing the conversation.

Our final point of tension is simply stated, but the exploration of it is not so simple. The tension is this: How can we progress this conversation? So many of the divergent voices at our conference each had a different starting point, and a different end point in view.

The wisdom that emerged from this is:

Recognising that great learning can come from a diverse group of people who disagree with each other, but who are nonetheless committed to mutually engaging conversation.

Relationships can flourish even where beliefs are not shared. Timing - choosing a good time to have these conversations, where stories can be heard, and people have the spaciousness to both speak and listen. Similarly, fruitful conversations will establish a tone that is not exclusively adversarial, but allows room both for the unexpected and the unpredictable.

Listening - it is not enough that different perspectives agree to share the same space as each other and be quiet while a viewpoint different to theirs is articulated. What will really move it forward is if, in a tone of curiosity and understanding, people can hear what it is like for their viewpoint to be heard by the people whose lives are directly affected by such a viewpoint.

It is wise to have a deep discussion in a respectful atmosphere where individuals who disagree about LGBT lives and stories can speak about *why* their viewpoint is important to them to maintain. This may help people in their understanding of another perspective, as well as clarify what may hitherto only have been assumed.

If a group's hope is to to "love the sinner and hate the sin", exactly what kind of loving engagement can the sinner expect? From another point of view, if "equality" is the aim, how is equality extended to people and viewpoints that are different?

It is wise to keep in mind people whose lives are negatively and tangibly affected by the topics being discussed.

Speaking the truth - any such discussion will be difficult, and will be hampered by concealed agendas. Using the word 'respect' is not enough - it is wise for people engaging on this discussion to discuss what respect will look like in a tangible way - what may be perceived as respectful for one party to a conversation may be perceived entirely differently by someone else.

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conclusion.

It would seem pertinent to end this paper with a few points of simple wisdom.

The wise reflection is simple - the conversation about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people's lives and stories and visibility of these lives and stories within societal and faith structures will continue.

Furthermore, it is wise to recognise that insult, whether from, or of, one group or another, does little to raise the tone of either public or private discourse. While few groups admit to having insult as an intention, many groups acknowledge feeling insulted in these conversations. It is wise to learn to listen to where another perceives insult, even if insult was not an intention, and to adapt accordingly.

The final piece of wisdom, then, is that we must engage carefully, indeed very carefully, with each other.

The Irish Peace Centres are glad and honoured to offer this paper as a contribution to the ongoing conversation in civil and religious society about LGBT lives and stories. The methodology behind much of this paper can be found embedded in John Paul Lederach's magnificent work "The Moral Imagination" (OUP, 2005).

If the Irish Peace Centres can be of assistance to a group, congregation or organisation who are aiming to explore these, or other, difficult conversations, please do not hesitate to make contact through the details below.

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Appendix:

A Lived Theology of Listening.

Pádraig Ó Tuama.

Last week, an old friend wrote to me and said “I hear on the grapevine that you might be a homosexual. Can I ask you to help me learn how to support gay people without endorsing the gay lifestyle?”. I wrote back, and we have begun an enjoyable exchange. At some point I will say to him that I don’t really like being called ‘a homosexual’. I will ask him what he means about those words ‘endorse’ and ‘lifestyle’. We will struggle to find words to speak well with each other, but, importantly, our friendship will grow as we learn to speak with and understand each other better.

This news this year about C of I clergyman Dean Tom Gordon and his civil partnership demonstrates our need for a deep and engaging listening process. While he spoke positively about the support he received from parishoners and clerical colleagues, the aftermath has been more varied. There have been calls for the bishop who appointed Dean Gordon to resign. The Primate of All Ireland has appealed for a calm discussion. A release from four organisations (C of I Evangelical Fellowship, Evangelical fellowship of Irish clergy, New Wine Ireland and Reform Ireland) acknowledges that questions about the intimate, and indeed very intimate, life of Tom Gordon and his partner may seem intrusive and further acknowledges that ‘sexual sin is not the only digression from God’s design’. The statement further notes that “...homosexual activity is not the only way God’s gift of sex is debased.”

This last quote can be read in at least two ways. If you’re coming from the point of view that same-sex relationships are outside of the bounds of orthodox Christian practice, then you may read this line as a an assertion that those making the statement are not wishing to throw stones, and are aware that it is not only LGBT ‘sexual practice’ that needs to be discussed. However, if you are coming from the point of view that monogamous, faithful and lifelong same-sex relationships should be blessed by the Christian churches, then this last statement may pivot on the word ‘debased’. It must be understood that for many people, this statement will be will be read as saying that “you are debased”. Some, who have a more conservative reading may assert “We aren’t saying that gay *people* are debased, just gay sexual *practice*”. And, in response, LGBT people may say “These distinctions of person and practice only work for you - you don’t make distinctions between your married

practice and your person. You must listen to us, and you must believe that we are telling you the truth.”

So - how do we speak together? At one level it seems like the “gay debate” always ends up in this place - where one side is saying “We aren’t being homophobic, but we are expressing our caution and concern” and another side is saying “You haven’t listened to us, the people who have to live with our lives and loves being commented on as issues and debates”.

Recently, I met a woman, a moderately conservative Christian, who said ‘I would hate to have my relationship with my husband questioned the way I question your relationship with your partner’. She was a fascinating woman, and she demonstrated that she wasn’t just listening to my experience, but she was also listening to her own arguments, and thinking about how those arguments would affect her.

We must listen, not only to ‘arguments’ and opinions, but also to the reality of how those opinions affect the lives of real people in real situations. We must be willing to find out what the impact of our moral theories are in the lives of the ones about whom we are theorising. This isn’t about relativism. The best virtues must have a rich connection between ideas and actions.

There are notable examples of people who will sit and listen. I met a man earlier on this year who said to me ‘What’s it like for you when you hear me say that I am welcoming of you, but not affirming of you?’ It was a great question, and the man, demonstrated deep listening. He did not rush into argument; rather, he asked, and then he listened. Following an Irish Peace Centres conference exploring these conversations, a participant wrote “I am unable to stereotype Evangelical Christians anymore”. The participant had listened.

Why aren’t there more stories about this kind of listening? Unfortunately, one of the difficulties lies in the idea that to engage is to endorse. I met a woman last year who said that she was afraid to speak about her faith with her gay friends, because she was worried that by telling them she was religious would mean that they would trust her less. I met another church leader who said that while he’d love to have ongoing discussions with LGBT people, he was worried that he’d be labelled as a ‘dodgy liberal’ by his congregation, colleagues and denominational leaders simply for exploring a question in a human way.

And so, because listening is labeled as dodgy, old and tired arguments are rehearsed over and over. Those arguments are not only old - they are destructive. It is not good to make regular assertions that LGBT people are a threat. It must be understood that words about a group have a direct impact on the treatment of that same group.

It is not sufficient to merely talk about each other in abstractions. We must talk *with* each other. There is nothing wrong with meeting someone who you might label an 'enemy'. Indeed, if you come from a Christian viewpoint, it is not an option - it is a requirement. "Love your enemies" are the words of the Galilean. It got him killed - and no wonder - it was radical then and it is radical now. Let us meet each other. Let us listen. Let us not think that agreeing to disagree is the highest form of engagement - let us say what we have to say to each other, and stay in the same room to listen to what it's like to hear. Whether your hope is a tolerant inclusive society, or a society built upon a faithful living of religious morals, the outcome is the same in both - we must talk, and we must listen, we must cease insulting each other, and we must make careful ways forward in understanding. Anything else is not good enough. Anything else is impoverishing.

What is your favourite hymn?

Reflections on a report about people's experience of Faith and Church.

Pádraig Ó Tuama.

You could track my life by how I answered the question “What is your favourite hymn?”

When I was 15, it probably was ‘Faithful One’. It wasn’t long written, and to me it seemed like a rich and beautiful honouring of the timelessness of God. When I was 18, and over-earnest, I possibly sang ‘Purify My Heart’ more times than was previously known to humankind. In my 20s, there was a particular hymn, written in French, that spoke of the warmth and limitlessness of God’s love that moved me every time I sang it. These days, I’d probably say that it’s anything sung to the tune of *Finlandia*, or else “I heard the voice of Jesus say”.

Stephanie, a woman I know, loves the song “Be still for the Presence of the Lord”. Do you know the one? I haven’t played it in over 20 years but I can still remember the notation and the words. Stephanie hadn’t sung that song in over 20 years either. Here’s what she said about the first time she sang it after a long exile:

“I never thought I’d be a member of a church. I’m still in disbelief that I could be. It was like a homecoming, a spiritual experience to be accepted. I was very emotional the first time I came to the church - I felt fear, disbelief, acceptance. The first time I went (...) I couldn’t help it. I burst into tears. Tears just streamed. The hymn we sang was “Be Still for the Presence of the Lord” and just like that (clicks fingers). It was a spiritual moment for me and very powerful. It was a homecoming - coming in from the cold after many years. I could be here and not feel like a reject and a very bad person - an evil person.”

Stephanie is one of 23 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender (LGBT) people who took part in a project I recently oversaw, which was aimed at listening to, and reflecting on, the stories of LGBT people in Northern Ireland when it comes to Faith and Church. The research is part of the Irish Peace Centre’s Faith and Peace projects, which aim to work with people across religious, political, traditional, psychological and social divides to build relationships. By “build relationships”, I don’t mean assimilate. Of course not. I mean build relationships between people who are different in many ways. The interviews and writing were conducted by Drs Claire Mitchell and Gail McConnell, Belfast writers and researchers both.

‘Stephanie’ is not the real name of the person who loves “Be Still for the Presence of the Lord”. It is sad but true to say that many of the people who lent us their stories did not feel in a situation where they could put their own name in print. It is important for me to mention this - one person said that they would not be able to sleep until they knew that the tape of their interview had been destroyed. People were worried about being fired from their jobs, or receiving intimidation in their workplace. Others were worried about being judged, or being automatically demoted from places of volunteerism they hold within their church community.

At a recent conference bringing young theologians together, a number of people spoke about the difficulty they experience when they want to speak conservative, or cautious, or traditional views on homosexuality. “I want to be able to say that I disagree with homosexuality” one participant said, “without being labeled a homophobe”. I think that this participant is not alone.

I was present at the conference, and found myself in the position of wanting to take voiced concerns from the level of theory to the level of lived experience. When I told the participant that I am a gay man, who is theologically trained, our conversation changed somewhat. I assured him that while I do not know exactly what “judgement day” will mean, I certainly do know how I judge myself. I judge myself based on the quality of interaction and dignity I have in exchanges with people who disagree with me.

By naming myself as both a theologian and a gay man who loves faith, the tone of our conversation changed. The distance between opinion and lived-reality was changed. We exchanged names and contact details. We have stayed in touch, and have found ways to engage. My respect for him grows because of the way in which he engaged with me. He understood better what it means for me to be on the receiving end of his thoughts. And I understood better what it means for him to feel heard in articulating his disagreements. We must find ways to engage well with people who represent the “topics” or “debates” or “issues” that are present today.

This is the kind of dialogue we must hold forward as a model - where people are able to name their concerns and are able to listen, in a spirit of understanding, to people who represent the “topic” that is being discussed. Claire Mitchell and Gail McConnell have done a superb job of bringing voices to articulation, in a safe and careful way, in order for often silenced voices to be heard on their own terms.

One of the other participants in the report, Robin, a man in his 30s, speaks of how, at one point in his life, he felt like an adopted family member of his minister. He speaks of shared meals and shared faith. He was welcome around the table, he felt loved and accepted. At the time, Robin was attempting, through the careful counseling advocated by his church, to bring about a change in his sexual orientation. Robin’s experience was that this change was not going to happen for him and he began to believe that God could have a future for him that involved loving and living with a same-sex partner, while also continuing on as a man of faith. The sense of welcome and acceptance changed completely. Robin’s acceptance in his faith community was clearly dependent on the distinction drawn by some between *being a homosexual* and *being a practicing homosexual*. These cold and clinical terms left him feeling misunderstood, because Robin wanted a loving relationship - both with a partner, and also with his faith. The neglect of Churches to speak of same-sex couple’s *love* for each other is noted in different ways in the stories given to this report. Madeline, a Catholic in her 30s, imagines what this might look like were it to be applied to heterosexual couples:

Imagine if a heterosexual couple said ‘we’re together, we’re happy’ the response would be ‘that’s fantastic’. You’d never dream of saying to a heterosexual couple ‘I

don't care' or 'as long as you keep that to yourself'. The absence of hostility doesn't equal acceptance.

Madeline's appeal demonstrates something that can be valuable in approaching this conversation - Madeline is asking people to put themselves as the recipients of their own policies. This is a challenge for everybody, no matter what opinion or stance is taken. I met a conservative Evangelical woman recently who said to me "I would hate for my marriage to be commented upon in the same way I comment on your relationship". I was struck by the honesty of her reflection. I also met a gay man who said "I don't think the gay community has always made it easy for the churches to speak their minds". You may disagree with either, or both of these. It's possible that you like neither of those two statements - but what is important to notice is that each statement opens up, rather than closes down, a conversation.

A number of the participants in the report note that they do not recognise themselves in the words used for them by their detractors. Rose, whose voice is part of this report, is disturbed by the erotic projections that some people have of LGBT people's intimate lives. Rose says:

I would challenge their understanding of what love is. It's usually assumed it's about the sex act. But you don't think of a heterosexual couple like that - what they do in the bedroom. You think about them going on a holiday, going to the cinema.

And Conor says:

Gay people drive to the country, drink tea out of a flask and eat soggy tomato sandwiches too.

The report ends with a short section where the writers asked the participants if they would like to say something to, or ask something of, Church leaders. Alan says:

...if gay people are going to church, the church should clamp down on bullying by congregation members. Whether you believe God is accepting or rejecting, a gay person is a human being just like everybody else.

Rita, a member of the Jewish community says:

Would you prefer men to marry women they don't love? Or women to marry men who they can never be satisfied with, leading to a very unhappy existence and possibly to very unhappy children? That can't be acceptable in any faith.

And Robin, who was mentioned earlier says:

You made me choose God or gay. I didn't want to.

The report is an opportunity to listen. What is important to note is that the 23 participants each have their own relationship to their faith, they each have their own relationship to church structures, and they each have their own relationship to themselves. It is a report that ties together many distinct stories and offers an introduction into a lived-experience. There are some difficult stories, and there are some heartwarming stories. The stories are full of faith, full of love, and full of an invitation to engage. There are many more stories - in this report, and in each of our lives. I invite you to engage with this report with an open heart.

Sometimes, in order to open up a conversation, we have to ask unexpected questions. That question can be as simple as “What’s your favourite hymn?” The point of these questions is to move away from tired old stereotypes. It is far more conducive to Christian conversation to hear an individual speak about their love for one particular hymn than to engage in complicated debates about the words *to’evah* (תוֹעֵבָה) or *arsenokoitai* (ἀρσενοκοίτης). Those debates regularly relegate the loving encounter which is the mandate of all Christians to an often-neglected place.

The editors of Presbyterian Herald were kind enough to ask me to write an article introducing this piece of research for the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. It was with deep honour that I accepted this invitation, and it is with real respect that I offer my words, and more importantly, offer the words of the 23 people who took part in the research, to you. I offer these words in the spirit of friendship, in the spirit of dignity and in hope that we can speak well and meaningfully together. If the Faith and Peace project of the Irish Peace Centres can be of service to you as you seek to engage deeply in the words and reality of this conversation, please be in touch.

This article, originally published in the November 2011 edition of the Presbyterian Herald (presbyterianireland.org/herald) reflects on the report “LGBT communities’ experience of Faith and Church in Northern Ireland”, commissioned by the Irish Peace Centres, and written by Dr. Claire Mitchell and Dr. Gail McConnell. A free hard copy of the report can be obtained by contacting faith@cooperationireland.org Alternatively, the report can be downloaded from the Irish Peace Centre’s website. www.irishpeacecentres.org



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the
tension
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