

LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Conversation Starters

Invited to answer the question, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus answered, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:36–40). Christians respond to these commands in the confident hope that by God’s grace alone we are set free to worship God and love our neighbor. – ELCA Social Statement: Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust

It is with this Scriptural grounding of love, that we offer this resource. We recognize that people are across the spectrum in their understanding and experience with the LGBTQIA+ community. These questions are not meant to be answered by experts or to shame anyone for their life experiences. Instead, they are meant to support honest conversations and foster understanding between family members and faith communities. These conversation starters are meant to happen in small groups of people – no more than 3 or 4 – they could be in your living room with family members or in break out groups (or break out rooms in Zoom!) if part of a larger gathering.

Process: You can spend 15-20 minutes going through each section with the same small group OR you can change it up and be with different people for each conversation. If using these conversations as part of a larger gathering, invite people to share insights between conversations. **Remember:** No one should share another person’s story without permission and no one should be forced to share anything they are not comfortable sharing.

SITTING 1: Sexual Orientation

- What are your first memories about sexual orientation as a child? (for example, when did you first realize that there were people who are romantically, emotionally and/or sexually attracted to persons of the same sex? When did you first hear the word “gay,” “queer” “lesbian” etc.)?
- What were the subtle and overt messages you were taught about people who were not heterosexual?
- As a child was there anyone in your family, or closely related to you, who publicly identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual? What was your relationship like with them?
- What questions do you still have when it comes to sexual orientation? Or where do you still struggle with things related to those who are not heterosexual?

SITTING 2: Gender Identity

- What are your first memories about gender and gender identity? (for example, what were you taught about who should play with what kind of toys, what kind of clothes one should wear, etc.)?
- Who was the first openly transgender, genderqueer or gender-fluid person you met? What was your relationship like with them? If you don’t know anyone who is trans+, why do you think that is?
- Discuss how your language and understanding about gender has changed over the years, especially with regard to the trans+ community and through cross-cultural experiences. Where do you struggle?
- How does our language in worship and ministry contribute to (or work against) an expansive sense of gender?

SITTING 3: Mistakes/Failures/Learnings

- Looking back on your life – at church, at work, in your family – what would you do differently in order to better equip yourself and others to affirm and include the queer community?
- What have you learned from queer friends/queer members of your faith community?
- What are things we need to do as a congregation or synod to reconcile with the LGBTQIA community?

Guidelines for Conversation

1. Be fully present, extending and presuming welcome.

Set aside the usual distractions of things undone from yesterday and things to do tomorrow. Welcome others into this story space and presume you are welcome as well.

2. Listen generously.

Listen intently to what is said, listen to the feelings beneath the words. As Quaker Douglas Steere writes, “To listen another’s soul into life, into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest gift we can offer to another.”

3. We come as equals.

We don’t have the same gifts, limits, or experiences, but no person’s gifts, limits or experiences are more or less important than another’s.

4. It is never “share or die.”

You will be invited to share stories. The invitation is exactly that. You will determine the extent to which you want to participate.

5. Respect confidences.

Your story is your story. Someone else’s story is their story. Do not share another’s story without their permission, they have entrusted you with a gift of being vulnerable, open and honest. Violating that trust may not only damage your relationship but make it harder for both of you to be in trusting relationships.

6. No fixing.

We are not here to set someone else straight, right a wrong, or provide therapy. We are here to witness God’s presence and movement in the sacred stories we share.

7. Suspend judgement.

Set aside your judgments. By creating a space between judgements and reactions, we can listen to another person, and to ourselves, more fully.

8. Turn to wonder.

If you find yourself becoming judgmental or cynical, try turning to wonder: “I wonder why she shared that story or made those choices?” “I wonder what my reaction teaches me?” “I wonder what he’s feeling right now?”

Adapted from the Forum for Theological Exploration and the Center for Courage and Renewal.