

GRACIOUS FAMILY DIALOGUE

6 WEEK SMALL GROUP GUIDE

A journey of discipleship as we consider LGBTQ and our church

Small Group Covenant

As a small group, we commit to the following values as we journey together:

- **Study the Word:** Scripture actively renews and transforms us by the work of the Holy Spirit. We reflect and respond attentively to the text.
- **Pay attention to God:** God is continually at work communicating to us through scripture, prayer, and one another.
- **Listen to one another:** Bearing with one another around difficult topics can be challenging! We agree to utilize our RESPECT Guidelines during our meetings:

R = take RESPONSIBILITY for what you say and feel without blaming others

E = use EMPATHETIC listening

S = be SENSITIVE to differences in communication styles

P = PONDER what you hear and feel before you speak

E = EXAMINE your own assumptions and perceptions

C = keep CONFIDENTIALITY

T = TRUST ambiguity because we are *not* here to debate who is right or wrong

(from The Bush Was Blazing but Not Consumed by Eric H. F. Law)

- **Mutual Invitation:** We will invite one another to share perspective and insight as we discuss the content of these pages. We commit to actively listening to one another, seeking understanding.

We will meet the following dates:

From _____am/pm to _____am/pm

We agree to help create a welcoming, safe atmosphere for fellowship by:

...maintaining confidentiality

...speaking respectfully of others

...providing advice or accountability only if invited to do so, and then gently.

Name _____ Date _____

Introduction

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
John 13:34-35

We are a church actively seeking to love God, love others, and help others love God in Bellingham, Whatcom County, and beyond. We are an intergenerational church that welcomes everyone, preaches the Word of God, loves Jesus, seeks the Holy Spirit, and desires to provide transformational ministry starting from birth through life’s end. In this season of our Church life together, we are discussing the relationship of LGBTQ and our church and what it means to ‘love God, love others, and help others love God.’ We do not fear exploring this, as we believe salvation is by Jesus Christ alone. To stand in unity about this is a first step. We are also reminded by Christ’s life and ministry that all people are beloved children of God, and look for God’s direction on how to live that out.

Through our Gracious Family Dialogues this year, we are journeying together in discipleship. Throughout this conversation, many have asked - ‘where will this take us?’ and ‘what are our goals’? Our church family commitment is to follow where the Holy Spirit leads. We are trying our best to be faithful to Christ, listening to him, and listening well to one another. It can be unsettling to not have a goal in mind other than dialogue and conversation, but it is what our church feels called to at this moment in time.

The small group time at our large dialogue gatherings have been the most beloved time, garnering the most positive feedback. Meeting face to face as the people of God to discern what God’s will is for our church and in our world today is not easy, but it is good! We really wanted to give time and space for our church family to meet together in small groups to enter into the conversation beyond our long Saturdays. So let’s get started!

A Note About Paul’s Letter to the Romans

The book of Romans is an important book for our church in this season of our community life. The Roman church was facing the challenge of doing ministry together despite some long-standing deep divisions. All Jewish people had been kicked out of Rome, including the Jewish Christians. The Gentile Christians remained and kept the Roman churches going. After 5 years the exile ends, and Jewish people were allowed back into Rome. The Jewish Christians came home to a church that had been led by Gentile Christians for 5 years. This became a crisis. Each of these communities had different issues,

interpretations, and traditions that they championed, supported, and were appalled by. It became an enormous challenge to stay together as one body. Does that sound familiar in our country or our church right now?

Paul lays out his most thoughtful letter to these brother and sisters to bring them back to the essentials of faith so that they can live out their mission faithfully as well as help him with his. He carefully proclaims the gospel of Jesus in the first 8 chapters, ending with the glorious truth that there is nothing we can do to make God love us any more or any less than He does right now. He takes 3 chapters to talk about his hopes for the salvation of our Jewish brothers and sisters. Then he spends the rest of the letter on the challenging work of being community when we disagree.

These are challenging verses to read and yet they ring so loudly right now. Paul begins and ends with the importance of God's genuine love and our response to that love. He then lays out the hard path of love marked by sacrifice and humility, one that does not hate or judge. Paul calls a deeply divided church back to the central work of glorifying Jesus, for our time is short. This is a love and sacrifice that looks very different than what was seen in the culture of the time. Paul gives us a faithful way to live out unity in the midst of real differences. The question for us today is whether we are willing to accept one another just as Christ has accepted us. It also invites us to navigate together what that ought to look like as we live out faith in our church community today. Let us bear with one another in order to bring praise to God!

Language Primer:

Because of the larger conversation taking place around this topic in our world today, we will use terms that have been used in many texts/podcasts/resources. Hopefully this offers some continuity in your further research and conversations.

LGBTQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer

Non-affirming ('Traditional' or 'Welcoming, but not affirming' or SideB): Holding the claim that a Christ centered covenantal marriage is between a man and a woman. This means 'non-affirming of same-sex marriages'.

Affirming ('Progressive' or 'Open and affirming' or SideA):

Holding the claim that a Christ centered covenantal marriage is blessed by God for either a heterosexual or homosexual couple. This means 'affirming of same-sex marriages'.

Mutual Invitation

We practice mutual invitation in our small group spaces, and it has proven to be a wonderful way to respectfully listen to one another and deepen our conversations. Mutual invitation is set up like this:

A leader or designated person shares first (reflect on the reading or question(s) at hand). After that person has spoken, he or she then invites another to share. Try not to invite the person next to you so that we won't move into the habit of going around in a circle. After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share. If you are not ready to share, say "I pass for now" and we will invite you to share later on. If you don't want to say anything at all, simply say "pass" and proceed to invite another to share. We will do this until everyone has been invited. We invite you to listen and not to respond to someone's sharing immediately. There will be time to respond and to ask clarifying questions after everyone has shared.

Try and note how long you have for the process - 'we have ___ minutes for this process; there are ___ people in the group; that means each person has about ___ minutes to share, which will leave us a little time to ask clarification questions at the end of the invitation process.'

Pathway - Track of your choice (you can do as much as you'd like!)

Our resources listed here are meant to start our conversation. The stories and perspectives are conversation starters and not prescriptive for everyone who identifies as LGBTQ, and we ask that as we engage with the content we all practice critical thinking and seek greater understanding. We are not sharing these to 'make you think a certain way' but to value what each has to share.

This booklet works best if you read ahead each week, even though it is fashioned to be read together on the day you meet. Especially for those who need time to think about their answers!

Our Prayer

Our prayer throughout this time is this:

"Given our diversity of positions on the relationship of LGBTQ and our church, Lord God, what do you have to say to us about being united in Christ, providing a sanctuary (safe place) for all people, and learning to love each other across our differences with the same abundant love you continually give to us?"

(Prayer inspired by a sister church - Bethany Presbyterian Church in Seattle - as they took a similar journey in 2016-2017)

Track Options:

Focus	Washed & Waiting	Torn	Variety
Sin & Grace	Intro - Prelude (pg. 1-50)	CH. 1-5	Google: center for faith episode 4 (or https://centerforfaith.com/podcast/episode-4-gospel-first-sexuality-later) Youtube search: Tony & Peggy Campolo Gay Debate
Real Life, Real God	A Story Shaped Life (Pg. 51-79)	CH. 6-11	1: "Dear Church: I'm Gay" video (https://vimeo.com/thecenterforfaith/dearchurch) 2: Same Sex Marriage and the Bible—Mark Achtemeier: https://vimeo.com/111423700
Non-Affirming	The Beautiful Incision (Pg. 83-93)	CH. 12	1: Restitutio Podcast: Wesley Hill Episode 154: Spiritual Friendship 2: NY Times Article: Debating Bible Verses on Homosexuality
Affirming	The End of Loneliness (Pg. 95-120)	CH. 13	Christian Transhumanist Podcast: Episode 40 - Justin Lee: Gay, Geek & Christian Extra Credit—Google: Timothy Keller's review of Ken Wilson, Redeemer; Ken Wilson's response
Disputable?	Thou Art Lightning and Love (Pg. 123-130)	CH. 14	1: Preston Sprinkle: Affirming or non-affirming, is this a primary issue? Starting at 13:05 (12min!) 2: Google: Third Way in a Nutshell by Ken Wilson
A Faithful Way Forward	The Divine Accolade (Pg. 131-153)	CH. 15	1: Julie Rodgers on Church policies and LGBT Christians: http://www.julierodgers.com/church-policies-about-lgbt-christians/ 2: Read and engage with Living Out's Church Audit: http://www.livingout.org/UserFiles/File/Living_Out_ChurchAudit.pdf

FPC has limited copies of Torn and Washed and Waiting. If you would like to borrow, please ask Becca! If you have a copy to share, please let her know that too!

Session 1: Sin & Grace

Opening Prayer: *God we pray for your Spirit to guide our hearts and our minds as we study your word and listen to one another. Help us to better understand what it means to be your people. Amen.*

Reflect: *What does it mean to be the church? (The person whose last name is nearest the end of the alphabet is invited to share first!)*

Read together:

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." Romans 1:16-17

We are Christians. We are resurrection people who celebrate God's purpose in Christ's life, death and resurrection. We aren't starting this dialogue as people only taking stock of culture and trends, but we understand our desire to witness to the world about God's love and faithfulness through Christ. We understand that we are unified in our brokenness as well as unified in our need for a savior.

Sin ultimately is what separates us from God. We see examples of how sin permeates our world throughout the arc of Scripture in the Old and New Testaments, and we can see its effects in our everyday lives. We claim Christ's salvation for our lives and for our world because we recognize a clear dissonance between what ought to be and what is. We also know that the Holy Spirit is the one who convicts us of sin in our own lives.

The Christian walk is then one that seeks God's guidance in recognizing our brokenness and agreeing with God on a way forward. It is letting God put to death what needs to die so that resurrection can happen so new life can occur. A real challenge we wrestle with is then the balance of bringing our own sin under Christ's power, and trying to work out the redemptive work of Christ in the sin and brokenness we see in our world. Each are called "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). What happens when we center our lives in this way, and yet disagree with our brothers and sisters of faith on what sin is? Where are we called to unify our focus?

Read Romans 3:21-26 together.

It is easy to be caught up in the conversation of sin, our own sin and the sinfulness we see in others, and not bring it all under the bigger story of

God's mercy and redemption through Christ. God is always working in our lives and the lives of those who will let Him - to bring about restoration and holiness. The point is Christ did the work, and the Holy Spirit continues to do the work in each of us. We are not perfect, we cannot be perfect, but God has a way forward for us to live into fullness of life through Christ. Timothy Keller writes this:

"The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope." —Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*

Consider in your own life what you have needed to take to heart in your own journey of faith, so that God's work is able to take place in you and through you.

Questions for dialogue: Engage with as many as you like—take a moment to read them aloud, and then the last person to share from the 'reflect' time invites someone to share whatever they would like:

- How have I experienced God's mercy in my faith journey?
- How does experiencing God's transformative kindness to me influence my approach to others?
- Conviction in my heart around my brokenness and God's grace is a gift of the Holy Spirit. What is my invitation for walking with others in their journey of understanding humanity's brokenness and the free gift of God's grace— For the LGBTQ community as much as anyone else?
- What does it mean to point to Christ? What do I and others need to hear first?
- Is your response to 'what does it mean to be church' different than before? If so, how?

Closing Prayer:

Holy God, may we always be attentive to what your Spirit has for us in our own hearts. May we draw closer to you so that we may know how to be your church and help others know your goodness. Amen.

Application:

Have a faith conversation this week with someone who trusts you about why they do or do not believe in God - open ended, just to listen (or share if they ask you the same question!)

Session 2: Real Life, Real God

Opening Prayer: *Holy God, help us to open our hearts and minds to the truth and grace found in your Word. Help us to pay attention to you stirring in us to be the people you have called us to be. Illuminate our time today by the wisdom of your Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Reflect: What does idolatry look like? (the person whose birthday is coming up next is invited to share first!)

Read together Romans 1:18-25

In his letter to the Roman Christian Church, Paul is parsing out a stark reality of the toll that idolatry takes. In this passage, he points out the temptation and ability we all have to “exchange the truth about God for a lie”. One would argue idolatry takes many shapes these days - some you already discussed in your reflection time above.

As we enter into this letter with a focus around LGBTQ persons who identify first as Christians, let us consider the following question. If individuals are seeking God wholeheartedly, will God reveal Himself or will they only find themselves worshipping a lie?

The Holy Spirit is a powerful person of the Trinity whom we know as our guide in Christian faith. We take heart that throughout Scripture, God promises if we earnestly seek Him, he will not hide his face from us.

In Jeremiah 29:13, we hear the prophet claim this truth from God for his people:

“¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

In John 13:34-35, Jesus reassures his disciples and us that once he is taken up into heaven, the Holy Spirit will come and be their (OUR!) guide here on earth to help us discern God’s will:

“²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

Scripture tells many stories of individuals who have taken a wrong turn, and face the consequences. If they are striving to be faithful people, God meets

them there and they have a renewed sense of what it means to follow God (for example Moses, David, the younger son in the parable Jesus tells, the apostle Paul to name a few). What is the invitation for me in this season of our church and my faith journey to trust that it is God who turns people's hearts and minds? What do I know about God's character as I approach the question of LGBTQ and our church, and his love for a fellow Christian who understands themselves as LGBTQ?

Questions for dialogue: Engage with as many as you like—take a moment to read them aloud, and then the last person to share from the 'reflect' time invites someone to share whatever they would like:

- What are the challenges and blessings in it being the Holy Spirit's action which convicts our hearts to action?
- From the outside resources: what do you notice about those stories? What do you wonder about?
- What does it mean to trust God in someone else's story as I trust him with my own?
- What is the good that God is working in each story shared today?
- What do the Christians I know who understand themselves to be LGBTQ have to say about all of this?

Closing Prayer: *Holy God, help us build a better understanding of who You are. Shape our hearts by the work of Your Spirit, and helps us to trust You are doing the same for anyone who puts their trust in You. Guide us forward step by step. Amen.*

Application: Spend at least one 10 minute space of time in the next week asking the Holy Spirit, 'What do you have for me today?' - See what happens! Our lives of discipleship are often the act of listening for God, responding in our lives, and debriefing with our brothers and sisters in Christ only to bring us back to listening again.

Session 3: Non-Affirming

Opening Prayer: *God of redemption, open our eyes and ears to the working of your Spirit as we read your word today, and as we listen to one another. Convict our hearts to know your will a little better today and every day. Help us trust you, and guide our meditations and our conversation. Amen.*

Reflect: *As simply as possible, what does it mean to be a Christian? (The tallest person in the group is invited to share first!)*

OK friends, we're diving into the nitty gritty. Let's take a moment to take in 3 deep breaths as we know the people gathered with us are our brothers and sisters in Christ, and that our participation in this dialogue is out of great love for God and for our church family (FPC and the church universal!). I mean it! IN.... Out... In... Out... In... Out.

Done? Ok, have someone read Romans 1:26-32 aloud, keeping in mind what we discussed last week regarding Paul's large focus in his letter around idolatry – the major cause of our destructive behaviors.

Take a moment to quietly reflect on what you notice and wonder about this passage, as it relates to people who claim Christ. Practice mutual invitation to share one thing you notice (start with the last person who shared).

We defined 'non-affirming' in the beginning of this booklet - for our purposes it is "Holding the claim that a Christ centered covenantal marriage is between a man and a woman. This means 'non-affirming of same-sex marriages.'" Texts in Scripture which condemn homosexual practices (like this Roman's passage) may be used as textual support, as well as overarching understandings of the intent of human creation and union in the Bible.

At our last Gracious Family Dialogue in November, Doug and Becca attempted to address the Biblical texts that specifically address this, and by no means had enough time to carefully engage the full detail of scholarship and cultural history related to each passage. You've been exploring external resources (books, videos, podcasts, etc.) to help build your information, but many of you have also done your own research, prayer, and thinking on this topic. There are more resources listed at the back of this booklet. But we want to pay close attention to our understanding of Scripture - the passages that address homosexual activity, the cultural reality of the time those passages were written, and the messages about God and relationship that we receive in the whole arc of Scripture.

It creates a barrage of questions in our hearts and minds as we study: What is Christian marriage? What is God's hope for every individual? Is homosexual attraction a result of Adam & Eve's sin in the garden? Certainly you can add some of your own to this list.

If you are non-affirming, would you please share from any of the following (keeping in mind there may be someone who identifies as LGBTQ in your group):

- How have Scripture and God shaped your convictions?
- How culture and our world have affected your convictions?
- How Christians who understand themselves to be LGBTQ have shaped your convictions?
- What do you believe you *are* affirming about someone who is LGBTQ?
- Questions that arise in you when you think about this topic and our church?

If you are affirming, what is the good in the position of non-affirming?

If there is no one in your group who is non-affirming, what do you understand about the non-affirming argument, and why does it make a great deal of sense to people?

Further questions for dialogue:

Engage with as many as you like—take a moment to read them aloud, and then the last person to share from the last sharing time invites someone to share whatever they would like.

- What might real challenges be for LGBTQ people holding this perspective?
- What are we inviting LGBTQ people into in order to be a vibrant part of the faith community?
- What is the message we give to our fellow congregants as well as visitors when we set protocol around a 'non-affirming' claim?
- Have you had this conversation with someone who understands themselves to be LGBTQ and Christian? If so, what did you learn from the conversation? If not, why not?
- What resonated with you in the external resources this week? What challenged you?

Closing Prayer: *Holy God, we trust you that you are good and just. Help us always to better understand what it means to be your people, and be witnesses to your good news. Amen.*

Application: Spend some time this week imagining your life as a Christian LGBTQ individual who feels convicted to live life under a non-affirming belief. How might your life look different? What would you hope for from your Church family?

Session 4: Affirming

Opening Prayer: *Holy God as we enter your word and seek your guidance, bless our conversation and direct our hearts toward your truth and grace. Amen.*

Reflect: *What is reconciliation? (the person who was born the furthest away goes first!)*

Take a moment to read Romans 8 aloud with your group. Yes the whole thing, it is that good.

Paul often teaches about the reconciliation at work through Christ. Not just to cover our sins but to offer the fullness of life only God can give. Take a moment to share in your group what came up in your minds and hearts as you read Romans 8 in the midst of our dialogue around our church and LGBTQ.

Last week we focused our time around the 'non-affirming' position. This week, we give space to listen and engage with the affirming position. Affirming for our purposes being, "Holding the claim that a Christ-centered covenantal marriage is blessed by God for either a heterosexual or homosexual couple. This means 'affirming of same-sex marriages'."

If you are affirming, would you please share from any of the following:

- How have Scripture and God shaped your convictions?
- How culture and our world has affected your convictions?
- How Christians who understand themselves to be LGBTQ have shaped your convictions?
- Questions that arise in you when you think about this topic and our church?

If you are non-affirming, what is the good in the position of affirming?

If there is no one in your group who is affirming, what do you understand about the affirming argument and why it makes the most sense to people?

Further questions for dialogue:

- What does it look like for non-affirming and affirming Christians to worship together? The challenges, as well as benefits?
- What good can you see God working in the midst of the tension around this topic? What does healing look like for the church?
- What resonated with you in the external resources this week? What challenged you?

Closing Prayer: *Holy God, we know that your love is beyond our comprehension. We know that your Spirit is actively at work helping us to love you better, and in response to your love, we are learning how to love one another better. Love isn't easy, but your love is always good. Help us to center ourselves on YOUR love. Amen.*

Application: Spend some time this week imagining your life as a Christian LGBTQ individual who feels supported by God to live life under an affirming belief. How might your life look different? What would you hope for from your Church family?

Session 5: Is This 'Disputable'?

Opening Prayer: *Holy God, help us find unity in you. Guide our hearts and minds as we discern your text and what it means to be your people together – not all the same, but of a single-mind.*

Reflect: *What is the difference between unity and uniformity? (the person with the longest first name goes first!)*

Division is everywhere. It is wonderful and terrible that we can resonate with the early church that was fighting against itself around what it meant to be the church. Wonderful that we know we are not alone, terrible because unity always seems to be such a struggle. In Paul's letter to the Roman church, he was trying to help believers understand what unity around Christ looked like despite how practice had come to put people at odds.

Take a moment to read Romans 14:1-12 (the NIV translation will have the term 'disputable')

Paul was helping the church with a few areas where practice had gotten in the way of unity in Christ. Oh how we wish (or don't wish!) there was a clearer playbook where we could look up all of our 'do' and 'do not' ways of being Christian! It probably wouldn't solve anything, since we'd be leaning on the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law. And moreover, the Holy Spirit's guidance!

So how do we discern what is disputable and what is essential? Unity for unity's sake can lead to a dead end, but unity around the living reality of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection has compelled the church universal from his resurrection to this day.

So what do we unite around? We are a Presbyterian Church. Whether you know it or not, we have a Book of Order that helps govern our church, and a Book of Confessions (by 'confess' we mean telling what our faith is about) that illuminates what the church has believed since its beginning until now. There's some convicting stuff in there, refined from great theological debates as well as a need to respond to humanity's mistreatment of one another. But it begins with the Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed - Creeds that come from the ancient church and resonate in our very hearts today (sometimes you are invited to stand and read these on a Sunday!). Here is the Apostles Creed:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord;*

*who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell;
the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic* Church;
the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.*

**catholic here meaning 'universal'*

The Nicene Creed is a bit lengthier, quite similar, but begins with a 'we believe' rather than 'I believe'. Both creeds came after debate and theological dialogue in the ancient church, but both join us with Christians around the world in its proclamation. Each stands to proclaim recognition of what is at the core of Christianity - our triune God saves the world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Salvation (help, healing, wholeness) is in Christ alone.

It is easy (and often good) to be passionate about what God stirs up in our hearts. The question becomes, what is worth splitting our church family over? Or rather, what is it most important to be in unity about? It seems it would mean submitting the things we take seriously and feel passionately about *beneath* our agreed-upon essential beliefs. Take some time in your group to discuss your understanding of what is 'essential' to faith, and therefore what is indisputable.

Further questions for dialogue:

- What do you want to be essential, but is really disputable (and it's maddening)?
- Does the topic of same-sex marriage fall into essential or disputable for you, and why?
- How does unity around the Apostle's Creed worry and/or excite you?
- How do you feel about worshipping with people you agree with on essentials, but may very much disagree with in other theological areas?

Closing Prayer: *Lord God, you know us better than we know ourselves. You are good, merciful, and just. Guide our hearts and minds this week as we continue to think about what it means to be faithful people. Amen.*

Application: Find someone of a different generation to talk about this question. Go young, and go old - we are an intergenerational church and we need to be having this conversation seeking understanding of how God has been at work in individual's understanding of the Gospel.

Session 6: A Faithful Way Forward

Opening Prayer: *Holy Spirit, Holy God, faithful Christ. We ask that you would center our hearts and our minds on what you have for us today. Guide our conversation, help us to listen for your wisdom and direction. Help us to love with your great love. Amen.*

Reflect: *What has settled into you during these 6 weeks together? (the person with the most interesting middle name starts!)*

It is our last week together. Today we want to keep it simple, but also invite you to share what you have learned with our larger FPC family.

Read Romans 14:13-15:6.

Spend some time reflecting on this passage, as well as the external resources you engaged with this week (and throughout these six weeks). Do so by mutual invitation, starting with the person who lives furthest away. Invite them to share what resonates greatly either from the Scripture or from the experience of external materials.

We have prayed, read Scripture, heard stories, listened to one another, and God is by no means finished with us. We want to imagine what it looks like for our church to move forward from this dialogue - knowing that after starting this conversation in our church we cannot go back to who we were, but we have great trepidation of the divisive nature of topics such as this. Spend some time as a group sharing what God has been doing in your life and in our church as a result of this dialogue and study.

We ask that you would spend the rest of your gathering time (or however long it takes) creating a statement reflecting on how you understand a faithful way forward for our church. Please keep it succinct, namely engaging these areas:

- What we have learned through this year-long dialogue
- What we hope for as we listen for God's direction
- What we understand to be essential to the Christian faith - what is core and central to the Christian story.

Email the paragraph (short please!) to Becca at beccan@fpcbellingham.org - we hope to put these statements up at our last gathering on April 27th for everyone to reflect on as we seek God's guidance in whatever comes next.

Further questions for dialogue:

- The word 'evangelism' comes with a lot of baggage, but still means 'good news' - what have we learned from this season of our church and what it means to share the 'good news' of the gospel with the world around us?
- How does the discussion pertaining to LGBTQ individuals and our church hinder/help our understanding of God's purpose for our lives of glorifying Him?
- How do you understand God's call on your life in relation to this discussion? In sharing the good news to those around you?

Closing Prayer: *Thank you God, for stirring in our hearts all these weeks. Thank you that no matter the situation, you meet us and help us. Thank you that you do not hide your face from us, but that you welcome our seeking and our questions. Help our church in this season, to honor and bless your name, and to live in the world as you would have us live. Amen.*

Application: Talk with others in our church (or beyond!) about this experience and what you learned. Compare notes with others who participated in groups, and share with those who were unable to.

Our Group's Statement:

Further Reading:

The Bible! But really, considering the entire arc of scripture is important. To get a easy-access view, try reading the whole Jesus Storybook Bible, and consider God's big story. For other commentary, try:

- *Oriented to Faith* by Tim Otto
- *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* By Kevin DeYoung
- *Letter to My Congregation* by Ken Wilson
- *Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union with Christ* by Rosaria Butterfield
- *Changing Our Mind* by David Gushee
- *People to Be Loved* by Preston Sprinkle
- *God and the Gay Christian* by Matthew Vines
- *Scripture, Ethics and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships* by Karen R. Keen
- *Sexuality in the New Testament: Understanding the Key Texts* by William Loader

Websites to explore:

www.livingout.org

www.believeoutloud.com

<https://spiritualfriendship.org/>

www.reformationproject.org

<https://covnetpres.org/>

<http://orientedtofaith.com/>

More space for notes:

