Suggestions for guiding difficult conversations regarding the Church’s ministry and LGBTQ People

How do we create opportunities for people with a variety of viewpoints about LGBTQ inclusion in the church to come together to share their stories and hear one another?

Here are guidelines that grow out of a recent conversational series we engaged at AMBS in an effort to form leaders who feel confident about bringing persons with different perspectives together in their communities to build trust and shared understanding.

The campus pastor first spoke privately with people representing differing perspectives to negotiate an approach and content for the conversations. She then announced the first conversation to the AMBS community, along with some expectations:

1) We expect to be enriched by exploring differences. This experience will help us be better leaders in the church, where many people find it difficult to talk about differences.

2) We expect to respect and be respected by others. We will aim to self-differentiate (‘I believe’) as well as stay connected. We will seek to understand and not inappropriately judge those who have different perspectives than our own.

3) We expect to experience community in this conversation. A facilitator will guide and monitor the conversation so that all participants feel they are heard and not shut down. We will observe moments of silent reflection so that introverts as well as extroverts feel their perspectives can be formulated and voiced.

In this first conversation, our focus will be to identify some of the specific areas where we have different views. We hope that future conversations can explore some of these areas more deeply.

There were three conversations this spring.

The first conversation can be summarized this way:

-We have different underlying assumptions about theology and the Bible that shape our views.

-The Wesleyan Quadrilateral (Scripture, tradition, experience, reason) and the Moral Pillars (Jonathan Haidt) might help us understand why we end up in different places.

-There are emotional hooks that make it hard for us to sympathize with those who disagree with us.
- There is a difference between having the conversation about abstract principles versus having it about real people.

- Can we be part of the same church (congregation, conference, denomination) with those who disagree on this issue?

- How does our ecclesiology, particularly our images/metaphors of the church, shape our answer to the previous question?

- There is a difference between unity and homogeneity.

- How do we enter this conversation with a divided congregation?

- Why are our battles over biblical interpretation and theology fought over the bodies of the marginalized, rather than other issues that affect everyone?

A second conversation was focused around this question: What are the biblical passages and/or themes that most shape your perspectives on gays and lesbians in the church?

Participants were invited to make a list of the texts that are most important to each. Each person was invited to think about the biblical themes that emerge from those texts. A further question asked: Is your viewpoint shaped by the themes of holiness? justice? unity? hospitality? purity? sin? salvation? submission? freedom? etc.

The second conversation can be summarized this way:

- We had an excellent second conversation focused on what biblical texts and themes shape your viewpoint on the church's ministry with gays and lesbians.

- Diverse views representing traditional voices and more progressive voices were expressed.

- Participants engaged each other and the biblical texts with deep respect.

- When each participant was asked to share what they most appreciated out of the conversation, every person said they were so grateful for a safe place to explore their differences about how we use the Bible (expressed in a variety of ways).

- Many of the participants acknowledged that they usually avoid difficult conversations like this because of their own emotional involvement, their fear of being judged, or their fear of losing relationships. Others had not had many opportunities to explore these different views in a Christian framework.

The third conversation of this series grew out of the second conversation: to explore more deeply how the Bible describes "love," in the sense of "What are loving responses
to gays and lesbians in the church?” Each person was asked to bring one biblical text about love or loving behavior which shapes their response, and to say a bit about how they understand the text and how it shapes their response.

The third conversation can be summarized in this way:

- There was a good spirit in the sharing and exploration of the biblical texts that were named.

- We found that it was difficult to stay with the specific “love” focus of the conversation, and we addressed issues such as the role of confessions of faith, how the church handles disagreements, and when/how groups with different views release one another.

- The hour and a half again passed quickly, and there was much appreciation for the chance to hear one another.

What did we learn from this series?

1. There are not enough opportunities for people of faith who genuinely disagree with each other on sexuality issues to share and listen to each other with the expectation that they can remain in community even if they don’t convince one another to change their perspectives.

2. Before having a conversation like this, it is important to find out what people with different perspectives want the focus to be. In our case, that meant that two of our conversations had a clear biblical focus.

3. It is very important to be careful that descriptions and labels do not give one group “ownership” of a particular perspective. There is more than one “biblical perspective.” There is more than one “inclusive perspective.”

4. It was important to have the expectations in place ahead of time and to review them at the beginning of each conversation, in order to create as much emotional safety for participants as possible.

5. We need each other’s viewpoints to help us examine and clarify our own.

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