Out of the Church Closet: Hope for the Evangelical Covenant Church and Sexual Minorities in the Local Congregation and Beyond

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry at Duke University’s Divinity School

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

The Evangelical Covenant Church, like so many Christian denominations, is embroiled in conflict over homosexuality and gay marriage. This small North American denomination cannot afford a split, not only due to its small size, but because doing so would fundamentally deny its very identity. Thankfully, it is the denomination’s shared identity that gives the church, and sexual minorities, hope for the future.

The ECC is a gathering of churches that covenant together for the sake of God’s mission in the world. It’s pietistic history and ethos values relational unity over doctrinal uniformity, making gracious space for theological diversity for the purpose of that mission. It’s affirmations and distinctives provide a strong DNA for the church to flourish in the midst of a rapidly changing culture.

Homosexuality and gay marriage are complex problems in the church. They challenge fundamental beliefs, values and identities, and they are inherently personal and emotional topics. In order to address this challenge, church leaders must learn new ways of leading.

This paper proposes that an adaptive leadership framework provides the tools necessary for the Evangelical Covenant Church to faithfully and fully take on the challenge without compromising its commitment to Christ and the authority of the Bible. It offers practical resources to assist local congregations in discussing the topic. And, it suggests ways that denominational leadership can support the work of the local congregation.
For the children of Grace Evangelical Covenant Church, Chicago, especially Ben.
That you may find the Covenant a place of vibrant faith.
I did.
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Introduction

Grant me, O Lord, to trust in you with all my heart; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

-The Prayer Appointed for the Week, Divine Hours; morning office 9/10/17

Fear abounds in my local Evangelical Covenant Church as the debate about a faithful, biblical Christian response to the LGB+ community¹ and marriage equality continues. Good and faithful people disagree, causing beloved communities to divide. It seems as if biblical and theological arguments bring us to an impasse.

How does a pastor faithfully lead and minister to a congregation of people with opposing views on this issue? Is there any hope for a local church to remain biblically rooted, Holy Spirit led, missonally relevant, and united amidst this crisis? This thesis seeks to answer this question by providing a way forward for all who live in this tension and desire to be faithful.

To be sure, this topic is complex and multifaceted. It challenges some of our deepest held beliefs and continues to change with new insights gleaned from communal reflection, ongoing biblical and theological discernment, and increasing numbers of

¹ The American Psychological Association’s Dictionary of Psychology defines homosexuality as “sexual attraction or activity between members of the same sex.” The term can refer to homosexual orientation in both men and women (gay men and lesbians). Synonyms include both same-sex sexual orientation or activity. Beyond homosexual orientation or acts, other terms arise to nuance this topic, including bi-sexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, or asexual. For this paper, I will use Mark A. Yarhouse et al.’s language of “sexual minorities” and “LGB+” to indicate that 1) individuals with same-sex attraction and/or activity are the numeric minority, and that 2) sexual minorities have and experience a broad diversity of sexual attraction/activity.
congregants who know and respect sexual minorities. For these reasons, it is difficult for church leaders to figure out how best to lead a congregation through this conflict.

At its core, I propose that the heightened tension of human sexuality in the local congregation and in the denomination is the result of a misdiagnosed problem. I will argue that an adaptive leadership model provides a process that will move local congregations, and the Evangelical Covenant Church in North America as a whole, forward into God’s future together.

Context: The Evangelical Covenant Church

“I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts.”
(Psalm 119:63)

The Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC or “Covenant”) is a small North American denomination with more than 800 member-churches that has a large global presence. Rooted in Swedish Lutheranism and the Pietist revival in Europe, and known as “Mission Friends,” the ECC developed in the late 1800s as people immigrated to the United States.

Growing out of the Great Reformation of the 1500s and from historical Lutheranism, the ECC believes that humans are saved from sin by God's grace alone, through faith alone, on the basis of Scripture alone. At its core, the ECC roots and unites itself in the salvific work of Jesus Christ as testified to in the historical witness of the Holy Bible. The Covenant centers itself in the life and work of Christ, with a high value of the priesthood of all believers and the Scriptures.
The ECC’s pietistic-revival roots are essential to understanding the ethos of the denomination. As explained by Christopher Gehrz and Mark Pattie III in *The Pietist Option*, pietism’s nuanced expression of Reformation Christianity is rooted in relationship, unity, transformation, and hope.  

Biblical faith, throughout the biblical witness, is rooted in relationship, first and foremost with God. God’s triune nature indicates relationship within the Godhead. God dwells in the garden with Adam and Eve, makes promises to Abraham and his descendants, and guides the Hebrew people through the wilderness. Jesus is Immanuel – God with us. God gives believers an indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, God's own glory replaces the light of the sun in Revelation, a vision of God’s people living in direct relation to God’s full presence. According to Gehrz and Pattie, "Pietists know God not through propositions (what we believe about the idea of God) but through prepositions (how we relate to the person of God)." We live in Christ our life, on Christ our foundation, under Christ our Lord, for Christ our love.  

Because relationships are essential to our biblical faith, unity is vitally crucial to our fellowship. God's relationship with his people manifests itself in relationships within the community of God's people. Jesus considers this mutuality essential to the mission of the church. In his prayer for all believers, Jesus prays "that all of them may 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… (and) that you have loved them even as you have loved

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2 Both are members of the Evangelical Covenant Church. Gehrz serves as a professor at Bethel University (MN), and Pattie is a local church pastor.
me” (John 17:21-23). For Pietists, our unity in our relationship with God is stronger than our division over ideas about God so that we might reflect the mysterious and dynamic oneness of the Triune God’s love for creation in Christ.

When the central relationship of an individual's life is with his creator, redeemer, and sustainer, the individual is changed from the inside out, impacting his relationship not only with the Divine One but with himself and with others. Again, Gehrz and Pattie describe the impact of this change as one "so radical we can only start to describe it with the New Testament's most audacious metaphors: new birth (John 3:7) and new life (Romans 6:4)." What follows is that transformed individuals transform communities. It is in God's relational power to change individuals that Pietist put their hope for a better world. This transformation leads to another essential aspect of pietism: mission.

Many misconstrue Pietism as a movement that is self-righteous or holier-than-thou. While it is true that the pietistic devotion to a relationship with God can devolve into a me-and-Jesus mentality, God's relationship with humankind exists for his mission to renew creation (Psalm 104:30). Therefore, pietistic devotion manifests itself in love to others.

The beginning of what grew into the Evangelical Covenant Church was known as "Mission Friends." Essentially, early Covenanter's were saying, "Let's be friends on the mission together with God." Those Swedish-Lutheran, pietistic-revivalist “friend-groups” has grown into a multi-ethnic mosaic of local congregations in North America, one as different as the next, covenanting together as the Evangelical Covenant Church. As

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4 Gehrz and Pattie, 7.
currently stated in its constitution and bylaws, the ECC “exists to make known the good news of saving faith in Jesus Christ, to encourage a Christlike life among its congregations and their members, and to carry out Christ’s redeeming work of love, mercy, and justice in the world.”

It is in this way that the ECC shares its purpose with other evangelical, reformation, and apostolic churches. In addition to its history, there are a few markers that distinguish the ECC from other evangelical churches.

The Evangelical Covenant Church is evangelical, but not exclusive. The Covenant firmly believes in the salvific work of Jesus Christ, not just for its unique “brand” of Christianity, but for all people who receive it. It does not claim that its understanding or expression of the gospel is the only or complete gospel. Instead, it values broad theological understandings and religious interpretations of the Christian faith.

The ECC is biblical, but not doctrinaire. The church has a high view of the Scriptures, but it does not seek to deduce from the rich and varied nature of God’s word a systematic set of beliefs. Covenanters are a people connected by a centering set, rather than a bounded set, of six core beliefs. The Covenant Affirmations define this centering set. Together, the ECC affirms

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6 When I use the term “evangelical,” I am not speaking only of the American conservative church movement or about a voting block or only of my denomination. “Euaggelion” (in Greek) means good news. Evangelical loosely translates as “of good news.” In the Christian tradition, the “Good News” specifically pertains to the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of God offered through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When I use the word “evangelical,” I am speaking of all who seek and share God's transforming love and saving grace through Jesus Christ.
• the Bible as the only authority in matters of faith, doctrine, and life;
• the necessity of the new birth;
• the church as a fellowship of believers;
• the commitment to the whole mission of the church;
• a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit; and
• the reality of freedom in Christ.

The Covenant Church is traditional, but not rigid. It values the historic expression of the Christian faith but makes ample space for emerging expressions in response to a living God. The ECC holds two sacraments instituted by Jesus Christ (baptism and Eucharist) but creates space for multiple practices of these sacraments. It appreciates ancient spiritual practices, celebrates a broad hymnody, and welcomes emerging responses to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Evangelical Covenant Church is congregational, but not independent. The highest human authority in the ECC is the gathered church. Its congregational polity is democratic and stewarded by clergy and laity elected to particular posts by the membership of the church. Congregational polity expresses itself at every level of its governance, from local to national. Local congregations regularly gather to discern and decide the movements of the congregation. Each local group sends representatives to both regional and denominational Annual Meetings to do the same.

Unlike more hierarchical models, the ECC functions as a grassroots movement. Its polity is bottom up, not top down. The President of the ECC is not the head of the Covenant denomination nor is the local pastor the head of the church. Instead, the authority of the church resides with the priesthood of all believers, both laity and clergy.
The local pastor and church leaders exist to carry out the will of the local congregation. The President and Executive Ministers of the denomination serve to carry out and support the decisions of the local church gathered. Both locally and denominationally, local congregations covenant together in purpose and mission, as stated above.\textsuperscript{7}

The ECC has a history of remaining united when other communions have divided. Two historic decisions illustrate this fact. From its earliest days, the Evangelical Covenant Church took the unique position of affirming the sacrament of baptism for both believers and infants. While other denominations in the Believer Church tradition insist that baptism is reserved for adults upon confession of faith, the ECC (and its Swedish forefathers like P.P. Waldenstrom) affirmed the practice of paedobaptism based in the biblical witness of household baptisms and the historical evidence that the early church fathers practiced infant baptism.

The ECC decided to affirm both modes of baptism equally. Infant baptism emphasizes God’s work in the sacrament, that salvation in Christ is given once for all. Believer (adult) baptism emphasizes the individual’s reception of the gift of salvation. What is essential to the Covenant identity is that doctrinal differences do not divide the church but rather illustrate that good and faithful people differ on their interpretation of the Bible. As expressed by Karl A. Olsson,

\textit{a sine qua non} of Covenant comity is the willingness of both parties to live and let live so long as basic fidelity to the Scriptures is maintained. This is not an easy achievement, and precious ground can be lost to bigots of either persuasion if we forget that ceaseless vigilance is the price the Covenant pays for its freedom.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{7}Covenant Distinctives Brochure, available at https://covchurch.org/resources/covenant-distinctives/.
The willingness to “live and let live so long as basic fidelity to the Scriptures is maintained” was also illustrated within the ECC in the 1970s. In 1976, the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church voted to ordain women, basing the decision in biblical witness and evidence of giftings. This decision was not unanimous, and in 1981 a challenge to rescind the resolution was brought to the meeting. This challenge was defeated.

While women clergy has been a stated value of the denomination, the Covenant’s congregational polity is unable to guarantee women pastoral positions in ECC congregations. Local congregations still exist that will not call a woman into pastoral ministry. These past decisions illustrate that the Covenant can remain united in Christ even in theological disagreement. A majority position may be stated, but a minority opinion may exist.

Introduction to the ECC and Human Sexuality: A brief yet complicated history

In 1996, the Commission on Christian Action presented a resolution on human sexuality that was adopted by the delegates to the 111th Covenant Annual Meeting. In short, the decision declared that “heterosexual marriage, faithfulness within marriage, abstinence outside of marriage—these constitute the Christian standard.” In the tradition of the Covenant and as stated on the denomination’s website, these resolutions are not binding. With the Covenant's long-standing emphasis on freedom in Christ as one of our core affirmations, individual churches and church members are free not to abide by resolutions. However, they still carry significant weight. For one, if adopted by
delegates they represent the majority opinion of the Annual Meeting, the highest decision-making body in our denomination.9

Currently, all subsequent statements, papers, and guidelines on human sexuality have come out of the 1996 declaration.

In 2004, the non-binding declaration became, for all intents and purposes, binding, when the 119th Covenant Annual Meeting established the 1996 resolution as the basis for policy, practices, and guidelines for churches and clergy. Thus, binding policies, practices, and guidelines for churches and clergy are rooted in a non-binding resolution.

Currently, the denomination is disciplining local congregations and pastors because they disagree with the denomination's majority, but non-binding, position.10

It is important to note that the ECC's position on sexuality seeks to love and disciple all people in the name of Christ Jesus, desiring to love all with the sacrificial love of Christ and bring good news to a broken and hurting world. However, for a growing number, the denomination's stance on marriage and sexuality is causing more brokenness and hurt than wholeness and healing, as witnessed by local, regional, and national church meetings and online social media debates.

Most recently, at the ECC’s Annual Meeting in June 2018, a motion from the floor requested the addition of this topic to the agenda to create a plan whereby Covenanters could talk with and listen to each other around human sexuality. It did not

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seek to change the denominational position. It asked to open it up for discussion. The
motion was voted down by two-thirds of the delegates. The topic did not make it onto the
agenda.\textsuperscript{11} Sexuality was discussed, but only in circles of like-minded groups in the
lobbies and hallways, creating echo chambers threatening to push our communion further
apart.

Now, denominational leaders find themselves in the middle of a growing conflict.
They are fielding emotional reactions, thoughtful reflections, and theological questions.
As required, they are upholding past decisions of the ECC’s Annual Meeting and seeking
to do their best to educate the church about the stated position. The Board of Ordered
Ministry, responsible for the care and discipline of Covenant clergy, is embroiled in the
tension. Currently, at the recommendation of the Covenant Ministerium, the Board has
commissioned one of its members to explore ways forward together.\textsuperscript{12}

The denomination’s Make and Deepen Disciples initiative is creating a
formational resource called “Embrace.” Embrace is “a suite of human sexuality
discipleship resource and experiences which are in harmony with the adopted position of
the Evangelical Covenant Church.”\textsuperscript{13} As of this writing, “Embrace” does not include
dissenting opinions. Meanwhile, local church leaders are left to negotiate this growing
divide within their congregations.

\textsuperscript{12} I hope that this paper can be a helpful resource for the ECC.
\textsuperscript{13} “Embrace,” Evangelical Covenant Church: Make and Deepen Disciples, accessed January 23, 2019,
https://covchurch.org/embrace/.
My congregation is one example. Grace Evangelical Covenant is a small neighborhood congregation, situated in Chicago’s urban environment. Only 7 miles from the denomination’s offices and 2 miles from its university and theological seminary, Grace connects deeply with the Evangelical Covenant Church. In this small, neighborhood congregation,¹⁴ congregant perspectives on human sexuality, the Bible, and the church's mission in relation to the two vary greatly.

As I listened and shared the ECC’s position with congregants, I heard a variety of opinions, including sadness, disappointment, fear, and anger from people of all perspectives. Currently, I estimate that 25% strongly support the denomination's position, while another 25% strongly disagree with the denomination's position. The remaining 50% of the congregation is uncertain.

However, as time passes and the church intentionally builds relationship to those outside it (a practice essential to mission and evangelism), the number of congregants at Grace who disagree with the ECC’s majority opinion is growing. Is a crisis looming for my small congregation and for the larger Evangelical Covenant Church? Should we pretend that this conflict does not exist or merely hope that it will "go away"? Alternatively, should we divide, creating yet another branch of the one, catholic church?

Urgency

To be sure, there are many important questions for the Evangelical Covenant Church to discern and discuss today. Racial injustice, immigrant and refugee rights, sexual harassment, poverty, healthcare, and economic disparities are a few of the issues

¹⁴ 2019 membership is 84.
pressing on the church. Given these challenges, one might ask why a paper on local congregations, human sexuality, and leadership is a worthy enterprise.

Drawing on information from four national and two state-level population-based surveys, UCLA’s Williams Institute suggests that there are more than 8 million adults in the US who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual.\(^{15}\) This data does not include the nearly 700,000 transgender individuals in the US. In total, the study suggests that approximately 9 million Americans – roughly the population of New Jersey – identify as LGB+.\(^ {16}\)

In a March 2018 webinar, evangelical scholar Dr. Preston Sprinkle, author of *People to be Loved: Why Homosexuality is Not Just an Issue* drew out the implications of these numbers. Sprinkle reminded his audience that while only 3.5-4% of the US adult population identify as LGB+, they are not an isolated group. LGB+ concerns are concerns for family members, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. "We are easily talking about 25% or more of the population that deeply care about and are impacted by this discussion."\(^ {17}\)

A recent Facebook exchange by two respected and faithful ECC clergy highlights the tension. The scripture referred to is Psalm 119:63 "I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts." It expresses a central commitment to the Evangelical Covenant Church and originated in F. M. Johnson's sermon at the 1885 organizational meeting of the denomination in Chicago.

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\(^{15}\) Sexual minorities comprise 3.5% of the adult population.


Post A: The verse says I am a companion of all them that fear thee, not I am a companion of all them that agree with me.

Post B: and the verse continues, “of those who keep your precepts.” I know I forget that from time to time and forget to keep them from time to time as well.

A: I’m not really sure of your point.
B: oh, you’ve wondered that before, I know. I like what you said and believe that to be true. But for me, the verse really gets nailed down when you finish it, that’s all. A weakness I have is thinking that people are on the same track as I am, and this was the case… like, certainly, what (you) wrote is good, but… then the second part really completes the verse.

A: I get that, but many people are also going to disagree about what it means to obey God’s commandments. And if we can only be companions of the completely obedient, we are in real trouble!
B: again, agree. You note that I didn’t imply total obedience or perfection and noted my own shortcomings. But people can fear God and not even try to be obedient. But you have to try. 18

While these posts never directly mention sexuality, one can see the fault lines that determine debates around such topics within the ECC.

As with slavery in the 19th century and women’s rights in the 20th, the question of sexuality has the potential to divide the Christian church in our current context. A quick glance at national religious headlines highlights this concern. Consider these headlines regarding various denominations: “Sexuality, race, and gender: 3 explosive insights about America’s 100 largest churches”; 19 “Mennonite Church coming apart over sexuality issues”; 20 “Will the Methodists Split Over Homosexuality?”; 21 “An Episcopal

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bishop in upstate New York says the church has been ‘hijacked by the Gay Rights Agenda’ in a directive barring same-sex marriages in his diocese.”

What is now known as the ‘Gay Rights Movement’ began in 1969 with the riots at Stonewall Inn. At the time, homosexual acts were criminalized between two consenting adults in a private home. In a clash with police, gay men began fighting for their dignity and human rights. This incident brought the gay and lesbian community into the national spotlight. However, because of biblical texts condemning homosexuality, and the church’s long-standing interpretation of those texts, a majority of churches in North America remained at a distance.

During the next fifty years, as more sexual minorities felt safe enough to express their sexuality, individual Christians slowly discovered that they had brothers- and sisters-in-Christ and sons- and daughters-of-the-church who were LGB+. The question of homosexuality slowly moved into the local church. What once was an ‘issue’ that the church stood against has become a beloved person with whom Christians worship. On June 28, 2015, when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down state bans on same-sex marriage, legalizing it in all fifty states, the conflict in the church exploded.

The ECC is not immune to this challenge. In 2015, the Washington Post published an article about the denomination removing funding from a church plant in  

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Portland, Oregon because of the church’s stance on LGBTQ inclusion. National news media covered the removal of an ECC pastor and the denominational university’s chaplain in 2018 when her ordination was suspended for officiating a same-sex union. That same year, a retired ECC pastor’s ordination was suspended because he officiated his gay son’s wedding. The same happened to a third pastor because his local congregation discerned, and he supported, an open and inclusive position. The questions of the ECC’s relationship to the LGB+ community are at the forefront for denominational leaders, local pastors, and church members. Currently, we are at an impasse, but is there a way to move forward together? I believe there is. In light of the ECC’s reformation heritage, pietistic ethos, congregational polity, and history of maintaining unity, I think that the ECC is uniquely positioned to address the current tensions over the topic of human sexuality.

Scope

Works on sexuality and marriage begin in the Bible, appear in the early church fathers and continue throughout each century; however, research and writing on these topics have exploded in the last 50 years. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, the

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26 Taylor Swaak, “University Pastor Officiated Gay Wedding—Now She Might Lose Her Job,” Newsweek, January 19, 2018.https://www.newsweek.com/north-park-pastor-suspended-officiating-gay-marriage-785457. After some time, the pastor’s credentials were reinstated, though she was not reinstated to her position on campus. Subsequently, she has resigned her credentials.

27 Letter of Suspension and Congregational Response as made available at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bOARhKdhNVBzGUgiCKPeGBuESkVpax/view?fbclid=IwAR2BxRyXRwTduIL-ud4zi9dFE2xLILh9r8J81CM1k78SA8fdNdfTjpI2J8I.
sexual revolution of the 1960s ignited this conversation. The gay pride movement of the 1970s, the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, the skyrocketing divorce-rate in the 1990s, the gaining independence of women in the new millennia, and recently the legalization of gay marriage has fueled ongoing discernment and conversation in the Christian community.

The literature on human sexuality and Christianity easily overwhelms physical and virtual bookshelves. Scholars, pastoral professionals, and lay people alike have examined this broad topic from a variety of angles. Within the traditional Christian disciplines, the guilds of biblical studies, biblical interpretation, theology, ethics, and pastoral arts have all entered the conversation. Resources from evangelical traditions are available, but less prolific. In my research, I have not uncovered any pastoral leadership resources that guide local church leaders on how to have a faithful biblical study, open theological discussion, and honest, ethical discernment on human sexuality especially within the context of congregational polity.

In what follows, I will explore the conflict surrounding human sexuality within the context of the Evangelical Covenant Church. Then, I will employ the adaptive leadership model to propose a practical way forward for the local church and quite possibly the denomination. While my work is specific to the ECC context, I believe this resource might assist other Christian communities by offering insights for local congregations to read scripture together and prayerfully discern a way forward for the church and sexual minorities that will be full of grace and truth.
A Diagnosis: An Adaptive Challenge

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

(Philippians 2:12b-13)

Borrowing from Harvard

Cross-disciplinary studies can help local pastors lead the church. They can never replace the work of Jesus or the sacred Scriptures; but, added to them, other disciplines can widen our lens, provide a different set of questions, and help us discover a new way forward. Ronald Heifetz's work on an adaptive leadership framework is one such tool.

Ronald Heifetz founded the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, and he co-developed the adaptive leadership framework. His research focuses on building the adaptive capacity of organizations and societies as change happens.¹ Organizations have a choice: to either adapt or die.

According to Heifetz, two types of or problems exist: adaptive challenges and technical challenges. Technical challenges may be complex and controversial, but an organization has the resources available to make a good decision, even if some disagree with the outcome. For example, changing a church's governance model may be multifaceted, complex, and controversial, but there are resources readily available that can help the leader guide the process, like the governance models of other churches, denominational resources, or leadership and governance books.

With adaptive challenges, leaders do not have tools or know-how readily available to solve a problem. Adaptive problems are grounded “in the complexity of values, belief, and loyalties.” They and stir up intense emotions and “have human complexity because the problems themselves cannot be abstracted from the people who are part of the problem scenario itself.” Instead, adaptive challenges require people, and the system, to change.

Because adaptive challenges are also laden with emotion, leaders cannot merely use their authority to solve the problem. When they do so, they are unintentionally creating distance from their constituents and are viewed as uncaring or out of touch. According to Heifetz et al.,

Authorities cannot solve adaptive challenges by issuing a directive or bringing together a group of experts, because solutions to adaptive problems lie in the new attitudes, competencies, and coordination of the people with the problem itself. Because the problem lies in people, the solution lies in them, too.

With adaptive problems, the responsibility of the leader is not to decide for the organization (something they can and should do with a technical challenge). With these emotional, value-laden, relationally-driven challenges, the work of the leader becomes mobilizing the community to do the hard work of problem-solving themselves.

The adaptive process, as proposed by Heifetz et al., provides an effective way forward on adaptive challenges. This framework acknowledges the problem in all its complexities. It honors the past while seeking to live faithfully into the future. It creates a

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3 Heifetz, et al., 73.
safe space for people to do the transformational work that is required. It guides the people through the challenge together. It trusts that a solution will be discovered.

Adaptive leadership guides organizations during changing times. It provides tools for leaders to mobilize their people. It values the complexity of the people gathered, and it offers ways the leader can stay healthy in the mess of it. The goal of adaptive leadership is not merely organizational survival. It seeks to see the whole system, and those within it, thrive.

Human Sexuality as an Adaptive Challenge

According to Ron Heifetz et al., the first step to determining how to solve a problem is diagnosing if it is a technical or adaptive challenge. Heifetz characterizes adaptive challenges in four ways:

1) Leaders do not have the tools to solve the problem.
2) The problems cannot be abstracted from the people.
3) The challenge is deeply rooted in values, beliefs, and loyalties.
4) The challenge stirs up intense emotions.

I propose that the Evangelical Covenant Church's leaders and scholars are misdiagnosing the debate on sexual minorities and gay marriage as a technical problem, when in fact, it is an adaptive challenge requiring a group process and a completely different set of leadership tools. In applying the above characteristics to the question of sexual minorities and gay marriage in the church, an adaptive challenge clearly emerges. Consider the following.
1. Leaders do not have the tools.

The ever-changing and emerging areas of study on sexuality and gender are breaking new ground and making discoveries never before considered by the church. The scope not only includes research in biology, psychology, and sociology, but the disciplines of biblical exegesis, hermeneutic principles, moral ethics, and more. Such cross-discipline complexities present new questions that require new thinking and work. Doing so requires extensive time and intention.

Consider the work of cultural anthropologist Jenell Williams Paris whose research suggests that our understanding of heterosexuality and homosexuality are social constructions that have developed in the last 100 years. According to Paris, “Sex is a gift from God, but we don’t receive it straight from heaven. It is always mediated by culture.”

Paris’ book, *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex Is Too Important to Define Who We Are*, unpacks the social construction of heterosexuality and homosexuality in western culture. She explores the Kinsey Scale, first published in 1948 that accounted for research findings that showed people do not fit into exclusive heterosexual or homosexual categories. Paris also learns from other ancient and contemporary cultures that do not define sexuality as binary but understand it on a continuum. One such contemporary example is the Bugis people of Indonesia.

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5 Paris, 15.
This small people group have five gender categories. Paris notes for Burgis, “It would be unthinkable to be gay or lesbian … Sexuality (simply) provides confirmation of gender identity (a calabai who desires women, for instance, may be suspected of being a fake).”

Due to the multilayer complexities of this topic, many pastors and church leaders are rightly hesitant to approach it. They are concerned with the deep and delicate nature of the topic. They are worried they may say something wrong, uncertain of how to begin talking about heteronormative sex, let alone sexual minorities.

2. Problems cannot be abstracted from the people.

As introduced above, LGB+ issues involve real people – congregants and friends and family members of congregants, people who are beloved and created in God's image. Some are part of the church, seeking after Christ and manifesting the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Others are wrestling with faith and sexuality. Still others have dismissed Christianity all together. The relationships that exist between the church and LGB+ people are central to this adaptive challenge.

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Figure 1

This small people group have five gender categories. Paris notes for Burgis, “It would be unthinkable to be gay or lesbian … Sexuality (simply) provides confirmation of gender identity (a calabai who desires women, for instance, may be suspected of being a fake).”

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Paris, 27.
In an incarnational faith like Christianity, lived experience is an important tool in discernment. When LGB+ Christians proclaim Jesus as Lord and when those with same-sex partners manifest the fruits of the Spirit in their lives, the church rightly returns to scripture with its witness of God’s activity informing (and even challenging) its reading of scripture and understanding of theology. The church’s understanding of this topic cannot be separated from the lived reality of sexual minorities. Nor can it be separate from the church as a whole.

Many (if not most) church leaders in the ECC are heteronormative and therefore not necessarily challenged to rethink dominant sexual norms. There is a privilege of heterosexuality that is at work in leadership that is informing the decisions of the church and communicating truths about God. It is only through engaging the broader wisdom of the whole church (including sexual minorities and their advocates) that the denomination will be able to engage this challenge faithfully and fully.

3. The challenge is grounded in values, beliefs, and loyalties.

Questions around the church’s relationship to sexual minorities are forcing the church to re-examine our understandings of the Christian faith. One of the reasons that churches shy away from addressing human sexuality is because it raises critical questions about our Christology, theology, and ecclesiology. But as Mark Wingfield, associate pastor at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, asks in an article on this topic, “Is our faith
so fragile that to admit we have been wrong in one area necessarily pulls a string that
undoes all the rest of our faith? Is our faith really a house of cards?”
No.

James V. Brownson, in Bible Gender Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate
on Same-Sex Relationships puts it this way. “The church’s experience with gay and
lesbian people is raising questions that have never been asked before and confronting
people with dilemmas they have never faced before.” While these dilemmas may be new
to us, Brownson points to the early church’s challenge of welcoming Gentiles into the
mostly Jewish church to remind us that our faith, from its very beginning, was willing to
wrestle with such profound questions. This has been true of the church at different points
throughout the centuries. For example, Galileo's discovery of a sun-centered cosmos, the
19th century's debate over slavery, and the 20th century's conflict over women’s
leadership in the church caused the church to reread ancient texts with new eyes.

In her book, The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why, Phyllis Tickle proposed that every 500 years the Christian church goes through a
"rummage sale." Faith systems must determine what of their doctrine and practices they
are going to keep and what they are going to discard. Tickle examines the significant
shifts in the historic Christian faith (thus discovering the 500-year periods) and argues

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8 Brownson, 11.
9 A resource to consider this challenge is available in Appendix 3.
10 Brownson, 10.
that we are currently in such a season. It is not a coincidence that 2017 marked the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.\footnote{Phyllis Tickle, \textit{The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why} (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012).}

Tickle's work helps us gain perspective and name the reality in which we live. The current cultural context in North America is rapidly changing. Such changes are causing the church to reexamine its faith. For example, advancements in transportation and information have connected the world in new ways causing the church to consider more fully its relationship to other religions. The recent development of social media is causing the church to consider once again the role of embodiment, and continued social scientific research impacts our understanding of human relationships.

Concerning human sexuality, scholars, leaders, and local church members alike are reflecting upon how our sexuality is related to our discipleship. The church will not discover an answer to this relationship next week or next year. Tickle offers that these periods of reformation often last a century.\footnote{North Park University awarded Phyllis Tickle an honorary doctorate in 2009. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phyllis_Tickle.}

To be clear, revisiting Scripture with a fresh set of questions (reflecting ever-changing, socially-constructed cultures) does not challenge our foundational belief in the Triune God. The Evangelical Covenant Church continues to confirm its core affirmations. Rather, the ongoing task of the church is to apply its foundational values, beliefs and loyalties to a new set of circumstances and questions. This practice has been part of the church's work since its beginning. It is part of the church’s work today.
For the church to continue in faithfulness to a God who continues to create, it must continue to be recreated. For the church to continue in faithfulness to the redemption offered through Jesus Christ, the church must continue to be redeemed. For the church to remain faithful to the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit, it must humbly respond to her presence. Otherwise, the church will reject the God it serves. The implication is that the living church will die. And, God, in creativity, love and power, will move his mission of redemption forward through other means.

4. **The challenge stirs up intense emotions.**

Because this topic is highly complex, inherently personal, and deeply rooted, questions of sexuality and gender cause deep feelings for most everyone in the church. I have witnessed this in my own ministry.

In the last two years, I have stood before the church with a young woman when she courageously shared her testimony of same-sex attraction. I have sat with another as she first revealed her long-time questions of sexual identity to her parents. I have walked with members who wrestled with an adult child marrying a same-sex partner. I have preached a six-week sermon series on sexual tensions that caused three attendees to leave the church and prompted a phone call by a denominational leader encouraging me to remove the sermon series from our website. I made more than a few church leaders very uncomfortable while receiving words of gratitude from others for tackling the topic. Individuals on both sides of the debate have threatened to leave our congregation if we take a stand one way or another.
Mothers and fathers weep with worry for the future of their LGB+ children. Colleagues argue vehemently over traditional and progressive perspectives. Students are fearful of how Christian parents, friends, and mentors will react to their same-sex orientation. Sexual minorities experience deep shame in the church, often keeping them from worshiping with their faith communities.

In light of these complexities, it is no wonder that church leaders are overwhelmed by the idea of exploring the topic of sexuality at church. This challenge has called on every gift and resource I have as a local pastor, and some I do not. At times, it has caused me to rush to easy answers. At other times, it has lulled me into silence. But if the question of human sexuality in the church is an adaptive challenge, as I argue, then the adaptive process provides a way forward. It is to this process that we now turn.
The Adaptive Process: Key Characteristics and Understandings

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
(Isaiah 43:19)

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”  
(Revelation 21:5)

In the midst of what could be considered a new reformation, the chasm between 
the traditional and progressive fronts in the Evangelical Covenant Church continues to 
grow wider as the church divides along the fault line of human sexuality. Our 
communion could continue down this path, with some holding tightly to the traditional 
perspective claiming that “Scriptures are clear” or that the ECC has “already made its 
decision on homosexuality,” while others with the revisionist perspective are forced to 
agree with the traditional perspective, remain silent, or move toward severing ties with 
their beloved community.¹ Alternatively, we can be open to another possibility that God 
has yet to reveal.

Even though the questions surrounding sexual minorities and the church are 
massively complex and a profoundly delicate challenge, the ECC is uniquely situated to 
move forward on this topic together. In addition to our congregational polity and ethos of

¹ There are multiple reasons the ECC should avoid a split. 1) Theologically, God is one. 2) Biblically, unity 
is foundational to the fundamental witness of the church. 3) Historically, the denomination has found ways 
to maintain unity in the midst of diversity. 4) Practically, the small size of the ECC would not be able to 
sustain a split.
unity in essentials and charity in non-essentials, the denomination has a history of maintaining unity where other communions have divided.

The reason the ECC, like other denominations, is struggling to see a way forward together is because it is misdiagnosing the conflict as a technical challenge instead of an adaptive one. Division seems like the only faithful way forward for godly people on both sides of this issue. However, time and time again in Scripture, God makes a way when it seems his people have come to an impasse. If the conflict of human sexuality in the ECC is an adaptive problem, as I have argued, then the adaptive process provides a way forward. According to Heifetz, “The purpose (of the adaptive process) is to make progress on a tough collective challenge.”

Key Characteristics

In Christian Social Innovation: Renewing Wesleyan Witness, L. Gregory Jones argues that adaptation is essential to the church's ministry and mission. He writes, "We need to recover this witness not so we might be relevant, but rather as an intrinsic part of our witness to the God whom we believe is making all things new by the power of the Holy Spirit." The way forward is not "by focusing on how to be relevant" but "by rediscovering and renewing our mission and purpose."

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2 Heifetz, et al., 29.
Adaptive Process is Traditional and Progressive

The adaptive process is an effective way to navigate adaptive challenges because it does not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Instead, it seeks to distinguish between what to preserve from what to expend. "Successful adaptations,” according to Heifetz, “are both conservative and progressive.” They honor the past while seeking to live faithfully into the future.

It is important to note that religions throughout centuries have been about adaptive work. Theologians, teachers, and pastors seek to be faithful to religious practices while breathing new life and meaning into them. Christianity itself is a successful adaptation. Rooted in Judaism, Jesus honored the heart of his heritage while at the same time transforming it.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), contra to the Jewish teaching of his day that believed that hardship was the result of God’s divine punishment (see John 9), Jesus claims that the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and the persecuted are blessed. Jesus takes a traditional understanding and upends it, providing hope for the downtrodden.

Jesus states, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’ (Exodus 20:13); and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment” (Matthew 5:21-22). “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’ (Exodus 20:14). But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has

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4 Heifetz, et al., 15.
already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27-28). “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor (Leviticus 19:18) and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:44-45). Jesus takes familiar teachings and transforms them, revealing God's loving intent for his creation.

The disciples follow suit. Peter, a faithful Jew, is led through a dream to break God’s law and eat unclean food with Gentiles. When he shares the gospel of Jesus Christ with these Gentiles, he witnesses the presence of the Holy Spirit in them, making a dramatic conclusion that is a reversal of his long-standing, scripturally rooted belief. He concludes, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:17-18).

In Acts 15, the Apostles face a fundamental challenge. Must Gentile believers be circumcised to be saved in Jesus? All Jewish men, and therefore the original disciples of Jesus, were circumcised as a sign of God's covenant through Moses. Circumcision was in accord with the law of Moses. Could the Gentile Christians, in effect, remain Gentiles or did they need to become "among the circumcised," essentially becoming Jewish (and under the law of Moses) before they were genuinely saved in Christ?
Peter argues against circumcision based on the evidence that God has given the Gentiles the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, just as He had given the Apostles. According to Peter, circumcision is not required either before or after one had been cleansed of sin through faith in Jesus because God has given the Gentile believers the seal of the new covenant in Christ, which is the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:8-10). After hearing testimony of God’s presence with Gentiles from Paul and Barnabas, James agrees with Peter’s assessment of “not troubling the Gentiles who are turning to God” but simply ask them to “abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (Acts 15:20).

The need for adaptation did not only occur in the founding church. Throughout church history, God's faithful have returned to Scripture to guide them in their current contexts. In brief, the Great Schism of 1054 was rooted in differences between the church in the East (Constantinople) and West (Rome) regarding Trinitarian theology, clerical celibacy (sex), and political, geographical, and lingual differences (culture). The Great Reformation of the 1500s came about because of clerical abuse in the Roman Catholic Church (including indulgences, i.e., selling forgiveness) and disconnection of the church from the populace, highlighted by the church’s instance that the Bible, and therefore mass, remain in Latin instead of being translated into local languages. The causes of these great conflicts in Christ's church sound eerily similar to the conflicts of sex, clergy abuse, and culturally-appropriate communication the church faces today.

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5 It would be a benefit to the whole church for someone to undertake a study the presence of the Holy Spirit’s gifts in sexual minorities who name Jesus as Lord.
6 For more on adaptive challenges and the bible as traditioned innovation, visit https://www.faithandleadership.com/category/principles-practice-topics/traditioned-innovation.
Moreover, as noted above, the ECC did the same with the challenge of its theology and practice of baptism and women in ministry. Today’s church is asking similar questions, this time concerning sexual minorities. Might it be time for the Christian Church to make another successful adaptation?

The Spirit’s leading is deeply rooted in its past, not disconnected from it. Throughout its history, the church and its theology have continued to adapt, survive, and even thrive. The adaptive process is a helpful way forward because it holds together the past and the future, engaging both the traditionalists and the progressives.

Adaptive Process is Bottom Up, Not Top Down

An adaptive diagnosis tells us that institutional leadership is the wrong place to address this challenge. According to Heifetz et al.,

authorities cannot solve adaptive challenges by issuing a directive or bringing together a group of experts, because solutions to adaptive problems lie in the new attitudes, competencies, and coordination of the people with the problem itself. Because the problem lies in people, the solution lies in them, too. Those in authority must mobilize people to do this hard work rather than try to solve the problem for them.7

What is more, when authorities try to solve adaptive problems for others, they only create distance between themselves and the rest of the church. They appear out of touch, dismissive, and uncaring of the people whom they are called to serve. In trying to stamp out conflict, they unintentionally fan the flame of divisiveness between those who agree with their solutions and those who do not.

7 Heifetz, 73.
In order for the Covenant denomination to move forward with an adaptive challenge, the local church must do the majority of the work. This is where the conflict resides and is most acutely felt. It is also the place where its potential solution resides.

In the 2018 Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church, a motion came from the floor to re-open discussion around the denomination's statement on sexuality and was defeated two-thirds to one-third. If the 2018 Annual Meeting is a reflection of our whole communion⁸, the majority of local congregations still support the ECC’s current position of heterosexual marriage and celibacy in singleness while one-third of Covenant congregations disagree (nearly 300 congregations, or at least 74,332 of the estimated 223,000 worship attendees on any given weekend).⁹ These numbers indicate that while the majority still holds, there are a large number of local churches in conflict around the church’s relationship with sexual minorities.

Two comments from members of my congregation illustrate this point. In the spring of 2018, a congregant in his late 50s approached me after worship bringing up the topic. “I’d have real problems being part of this church if it was pro-gay marriage,” he said. A few months later, a different congregant, a woman in her early 60s said something very different. “I love this church,” she boldly proclaimed, “but I can’t give money or support to a denomination that discriminates against gay people.”

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⁸ Many would argue that the 2018 Annual Meeting trended more conservative than the denomination as a whole in light of the following factors: 1) the location of the meeting in the Minneapolis, MN is in the heart of a conservative stronghold in the ECC, 2) larger churches within the denomination trend more conservative and have more votes in the meeting, and 3) larger churches can afford the cost to attend the meeting.

As these two quotes demonstrate, a denomination can determine a stance or position on sexuality (either a traditional or progressive one), but this does not solve the problem at a local level. Good and faithful people participating in a local church who disagree with one another or with the official position are left with a difficult decision - remain quiet, live with the tension of being a vocal dissident, or leave the congregation. I received the following email which supports this point:

We have always enjoyed our time spent at Grace. It was our first church as a married couple. The people at Grace were always warm, welcoming, and loving to us. But at this time, we choose to withdraw our membership … We are a bit disappointed in the Covenant as a whole when processing Gay Marriage within the denomination. We are pro-Gay Marriage, and we want our kiddos growing up knowing this belief.10

This young couple is representative of others who find themselves theologically misaligned with a church they enjoyed and a congregation in which they were loved because of the way the denomination “as a whole” is processing (or not processing) questions surrounding sexuality.

Denominations are important, but not essential to faith and identity development of most congregants. The church at its best is locally committed and contextually nuanced. Institutions can have positions and policies, but when those statements damper authentic, Spirit-led communities, congregants do not find the safe community they seek to explore faith and life.

Yarhouse's et al. longitudinal study on sexual minorities on Christian college campuses reveals a different, but supportive claim that adaptive process must begin at the local level. In their study, Yarhouse et al. discovered that most sexual-minority students

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10 Email from congregants, received October 11, 2018.
are not asking for institutions to change positions on human sexuality. However, they are asking for real relationships in the local church where they can explore their sexuality in light of their faith. But sadly, churches were seen as offering the least amount of support to sexual-minority Christians. ¹¹ As Jenell Paris puts it, “The chasm between heterosexual and homosexual may be impassable, but the space between one Christian and another can be bridged.”¹² It is in the sacred space of relationships that Christians discover unity and a way forward together.

It is important to recognize that denominations have two essential roles to play in adaptive challenges. First, a denomination and its leaders are best equipped to train, deploy, and support adaptive leaders to mobilize adaptive processes in local congregations. Second, institutional leaders and systems are also equipped to gather local pastors and church leaders to bring possibilities and solutions discovered in the local congregation forward for the benefit of the whole church. Denominational leaders cannot, however, seek to solve this challenge themselves.

Adaptive Leadership Engages Dissident Voices

Proverbs 27:17 states, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."

Solutions to the adaptive problem of human sexuality for the church reside within the church itself. The Evangelical Covenant Church in North America is not monolithic but racially, ethnically, theologically, and culturally diverse. For the ECC to find a way

¹¹ Yarhouse, et al., 231, 275.
¹² Paris, 54.
forward for the whole church, it must engage multiple perspectives, including minority and dissident voices.

Heifetz describes dissident voices as “canaries in the coal mine.” While they may frustrate leaders and groups, dissident voices alert organizations to future problems. Wise leaders protect and engage dissident voices because they ask the hard questions organizations are often unable or unwilling to raise. While many may want to ignore the minority opinion or neglect dissent, genuine engagement will cause organizations to think in new and creative ways that will serve their shared future.

Again, the Evangelical Covenant Church is nicely suited for the adaptive process as the denomination has a history of engagement with dissenting voices. The previously mentioned conflicts regarding baptismal position and women in ministry are just two examples. Others include the 1963 report on Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom (and the conflict which precipitated the paper) and the 2006 resolution on “Christian Discipleship in the Midst of War.” As recently as 2018, the “Covenant Quarterly” highlights the history of dissent in the denomination, draws out implications for current areas of conflict including homosexuality, and continues a conversation on what defines faithful dissent. According to this most recent treatment, “a diversity of viewpoints

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13 Heifetz, 145.


16 Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom, “Covenant Freedom: Freedom for All or Free-for-all?” Covenant Quarterly 75:3–4 (2017): 34–54, and Brian Bantum, Steve Bilynksyj, Scott Erickson, Klyne Snodgrass,
within the communion creates potential avenues for renewal.”  

A resources is provided in Appendix 2 to consider the role of dissident voices in the ECC.

Adaptive Process is Non-Linear

Margaret Wheatley, in her book *Leadership and the New Science*, examines recent learnings in physics and chemistry and applies them to leadership. She writes, “I believe that our present ways of organizing are outmoded and that the longer we remain entrenched in our old ways, the further we move from those wonderful breakthroughs that the world of science calls ‘elegant.’”  

The “wonderful breakthroughs” Wheatly refers to are the development of new sciences like quantum and chaos theory. The old ways of organizing (and handling change), Wheatly argues, are based in old science.

For example, first published in 1687, Sir Isaac Newton’s laws of motion state that a body at rest will stay at rest and a body in motion will continue to move in a straight line at a constant speed unless acted upon by an external force. In short, Newton's law describes change. Change occurs when an object is acted on by an external force. Indeed, this is true, but life is not that linear, predictable or straightforward. Newton’s laws are an example of old science.

The new sciences acknowledge life's complex dynamics. For example, chaos theory acknowledges that many systems are exerting a variety of influences on an object

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17 Clifton-Soderstrom, 38.
at any one time. The human body is a prime example. The nervous system, digestive system, circulatory system, and endocrine system function as particular systems, yet all exert influence on one another. For example, the nervous system often impacts the digestive system, and our endocrine system impacts our nervous system. One small change in one system can have a significant impact on a whole host of other systems.

This is analogous to what denominational systems in North America are currently experiencing. Applied to the purposes of this paper and using Newton’s lens, the ECC’s position was put in motion by the authority of the 111th Annual Meeting and will continue in that direction until another force (internal or external, intentional or unintentional) exerts its influence on the position. However, the reality of multiple interconnected systems reveals a truth that is much more complex and dynamic.

Multiple systems impact the ECC’s position on human sexuality: the justice system, relational systems, scholarly systems, administrative systems, economic systems, generational systems, ethnic systems, more than 800 local congregational systems, and countless family systems. A judicial ruling, a pastor’s lesbian daughter, a congregant’s wedding, and a scholar’s discovery are all exerting forces on the system of the Evangelical Covenant Church at this very moment. It is chaotic and uncertain, but according to Wheatley, it does not have to be crippling or destructive.

Institutions naturally resist change in an effort toward self-preservation. Without self-preservation and with constant chaos, the institution would not exist. However, according to Wheatley, “the things we fear most in organizations—disruptions, confusion, chaos—need not be interpreted as signs that we are about to be destroyed.
Instead, these conditions are necessary to awaken creativity.”19 The disruptions, confusion, and chaos around the church's conflict on homosexuality may, if we allow them, create a new future.

If one acknowledges that multiple forces exert influence in a system, and Newton's theory of linear change, while true, is not complete, then how does one think of change in complex systems? Wheatley points to geometry and a consistent shape that exists in the complexity of chaos. It is known as the golden spiral, and it has been present in nature from the beginning. Some refer to it as God's signature in all of his creation.

A golden spiral is self-referential. It takes one shape (formula or idea) and refers back to itself over and over again and over again, creating a self-organizing system.20 This pattern is observed everywhere in nature such as a sunflower’s face, a nautilus shell, DNA, and the shape of the galaxy, the Milky Way. In the golden spiral, change in the external environment (external systems) creates disequilibrium in the spiral's system, thus causing the spiral to change. However, the spiral’s change is always self-referent. It remains consistent with itself, even though it adapts to its surroundings. From its smallest expression to its largest iteration, a golden spiral has a clear sense of identity. It does not conform to its world, but it self-organizes to maintain its identity in the midst of changing surrounding conditions. By being consistent in oneself and responsive to the environment, the system achieves independence from the environment.21 According to Wheatley, “A living system produces itself; it will change in order to preserve that

19 Wheatley, loc. 552 of 3782.
21 Wheatley, 83-87.
self.” At the level of its smallest expression, small shifts emerge that, if good, begin to transform the whole system. In this way, the system creates its own way forward rather than importing one from outside the system.

Such shifts are how living systems not only survive but flourish. They are *adaptive* and resilient rather than rigid and stable. They know who they are, and they live it out, adapting to the changes in the environment as needed. For our purposes, the ECC is a living system, resilient and dynamic. If its core commitment remains strong, it will not only survive, but it will also thrive at this moment.

A local Covenant congregation, or a smaller representative group within the congregation, is where small shifts can emerge that will then impact the whole system. When congregants begin to engage adaptive challenges together, like the one sexuality is presenting, with respect, humility, and mutuality, they model an authentic, relationally-committed life together. Such unity of spirit in the midst of the diversity of thought is a powerful witness in the face of a polarizing topic and an otherwise divided society.

The adaptive process is chaotic, and change comes incrementally. Both of these aspects can be very frustrating at times. For those who seek to maintain the traditional teachings of the church, the adaptive process will seem far too organic and risky. For many sexual minorities and advocates, the incremental change of the adaptive process

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22 Wheatley, loc. 506 of 3782.
23 A fern is such a system. Ferns flourish in moisture-rich environments, repeating on itself the same structure throughout all levels of its system. However, when the environment is arid and hot, the fern is no longer able to produce new fawns. Eventually, old fawns die off. In cold weather environments, the fern will eventually lay dormant for a season. However, they remain ferns having adapted to the changing environment and surviving into a new season. The key is that they remain ferns, even though they change and adapt.
will take too long. However, when intentionally maintained, with its focus on our shared *telos*, it will produce a solution that is distinctly Covenant.

Key Understandings

Because adaptive problems are so complex, leading an adaptive process is challenging. It requires wisdom and expertise. In the following section, we will explore some essential understandings that are helpful for a successful adaptive process. We will discuss expertise in the next chapter on helpful adaptive tools.

Understanding the Role of the Leader

In an adaptive process, the leader facilitates a process, fostering an ethos and nourishing an adaptive environment. This type of leadership takes time, space and intention. It is hard and often personal work.

Five years ago, I became a member of the “SS,” which for obvious reasons, was quickly renamed the “SSS.” My husband and I regularly gathered with two other couples to discuss Scriptures and sexuality over a glass of scotch. The group was composed of another pastor, his musician wife, a realtor, and her MD husband. We were all from different congregations (two-thirds of us attended Covenant churches) and deeply committed to Christ and his church. We were all middle-aged and white, but we each had vastly different opinions on sexuality and gay marriage. Between us existed a safe space where we could talk without fear, sharing our questions, challenging one another’s

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24 The Schutzstaffel “SS” was a major paramilitary organization under Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party most responsible for the genocide of 5.5 to 6 million Jews.
perspectives and forming our thinking. We shared articles and prayed together. We developed friendships.

The SSS was the first place where I felt the freedom to talk about sexuality. The group gave one another permission to ask questions, and it helped me to formulate language around my thinking. Without this small Christian community, I would have never been able to start an adaptive process on this topic in my church.

The adaptive process begins within the adaptive leader. One of the best ways to lead an adaptive process is through modeling an adaptive spirit and guiding others to do the same. If a leader wants his congregants to enter into the adaptive process, he must be willing to enter into it as well.

It is also wise to remember that a transformative leader is not, nor needs to be, an expert on human sexuality, denominational polity and history, or biblical studies. There are authorities on these topics. Knowing how to access the expertise of others and resource a local congregation from them is crucial. At the end of this work, I share some of the resources I have found helpful on the topics addressed in this work. It is not exhaustive, but I hope it provides the local church leader a good resource list with which to start.

The purpose of an adaptive process is to make progress on a challenging problem. It does not exist for the leader to push her agenda forward, but rather it is for the leader to guide a process in which collective wisdom discovers a way forward together. Adaptive leaders will make mistakes in guiding an adaptive process (I did and will!) because there is no clear handbook for such a process (that why they are adaptive challenges and not technical ones). However, in humility, the leader must return faithfully to the topic, self-
correcting along the way. It is ok to take a break from the topic for a season if the conflict is too polarizing or if there is another pressing issue that needs to be addressed. But adaptive leaders must return to the adaptive process again and again.

Tension and fear are palpable in adaptive problems. The stress on a system and the people in that system cause stress for the leader. An adaptive leader must be able to self-differentiate. In *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, author Edwin H. Friedman describes a self-differential leader as one “who has clarity about his or her own life goals, and, therefore, someone who is less likely to become lost in the anxious emotional processes swirling about.” Remember that by very definition adaptive challenges are value-, emotionally-, and relationally-laden. An adaptive challenge about sex only heightens this tension.

It is easy to get caught up in the emotional reality of others, especially when those others are people for whom a pastor is called to care. So, an adaptive leader must be able to see herself at once both inside and outside of the system; someone who is “separate while still remaining connected.”25 I highly advise processing through the topic at hand with a trusted group, or at least on one’s own, before leading an adaptive process on the topic. This will help the leader self-differentiate from the process she is leading.

Because of the traditional and progressive nature of the adaptive process, an adaptive leader must be able to discern what tradition to preserve and what needs to be to change. According to L. Gregory Jones, “we need to conserve wisdom even as we explore risk-taking mission and service” (The key here is that the church needs to be

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taking risks in mission and service, not playing it safe all of the time!). Adaptive leaders need to sense when to push and when to pull back. They need to listen deeply and speak slowly; they need to have thick skin and a soft heart; they must get comfortable being uncomfortable. In short, adaptive leaders need to be good pastoral leaders.

Understanding the Local Congregation: A Case Study

Not only must an adaptive leader understand himself, but he must also understand his local congregation. This is the main area of which a leader must become an expert. Local context and history, both of individuals and of the congregation, are invaluable to adaptive leaders. Key questions to consider are: How has the church handled conflict in the past? What is this local congregation’s relationship within itself, with its pastors and leaders, and with the broader community? What are the personal stories that will come to bear on the adaptive challenge? These questions and others are so important that a pastor in his first one- to three years in a church should not tackle an adaptive challenge.

Once I felt more equipped to discuss sexuality in the Christian context (as shared above), I transferred what I learned to my local ministry context. I began small, creating safe space within the church’s staff to share perspectives and questions on sexuality, gender, and the Bible. Throughout six months, four team members gathered every other week for 1+ hours to share what we thought and to lovingly challenge each other. We acknowledged our denominational position but allowed for questioning and perspectives outside of that position. We wrestled with key Scriptures together and discussed how they

fit within the broader biblical narrative and the mission of the church. Initially, it was scary to be vulnerable with such a volatile topic. But we quickly discovered that honesty calls for honesty as iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 27:17).

This honest conversation and wrestling with trusted colleagues loosened all of our grips on our perspectives, opening us up to different theological, biblical and ethical possibilities. It moved water-cooler talk (or, in our case, microwave talk) into an intentional ministry space. It helped all of us begin to find words for our swirling thoughts. To be sure, we did not all agree, and we soon discovered that even our agreements had nuanced differences.

An essential component of this particular conversation was the mutual respect the team has for each other. This mutuality is what held us together in the midst of conflict and unresolved differences. After we argued it out, we would eat lunch together, literally remaining at the table together. While we were all in different ages and stages of our life of faith, the staff members involved were mature pietistic Christians valuing our relationship with God in Christ and one another in the Holy Spirit above our different propositions on sexuality.

If a local context does not have a staff team, ask a small group of wise, trusted church leaders to begin a conversation on the topic. If a particular group (staff or lay), does not have the mutual trust to enter into this process together, then the leader must begin building a healthy team before entering into this topic. If a team cannot handle technical challenges well, engaging in an adaptive challenge could be destructive to both the team members and the challenge.
Opening up conversation with the church’s staff prepared me for the next step in our adaptive process: getting buy-in from the church council (our lay leadership body) to address this topic with the congregation. When I first presented the church council with my sense of God’s leading me to address human sexuality at Grace, the answer was “not yet.” I was disappointed, but the wisdom of the council was good. There were a few reasons that the timing was premature, and I am grateful for their caution. We spent the next few council meetings processing how we may address this topic in our local congregation. Six months later, I launched an adaptive process at Grace by jumping off the high dive. I addressed human sexuality through a sermon series entitled “Sexual Tensions: Seeking biblically-faithful freedom in Christ.”

Beginning an adaptive process with a sermon series is not the best approach in all contexts. I know of other congregations who have addressed this topic in adult formation groups or through the organizational structures of the congregation. However, for my context, placing the topic front and center was essential.

Grace is a small urban church with an average of 80 people in worship on any given Sunday. For a small, neighborhood church, we have an unusually high number of people who serve in professional roles (professors, executives, managers) and who are well-educated. At current count, 30 members of our congregation work in professional ministry or para-church organizations. The congregation also stretches the political spectrum from conservative to liberal. It trends young, not because we are connecting

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27 Links to two other congregational processes are available in Appendix 12.
with millennials, but because we are a family church with approximately 1/3 of the
congregation under the age of 18.

Some congregants did not like that their teenagers were in the congregation while
the pastor was talking about sex. Others were uncomfortable addressing this topic from
the pulpit, preferring methods briefly listed above; but for Grace, placing the topic which
many consider “the” question for the church in our context today, front and center of the
congregation was important.\textsuperscript{28}

I thought it was important that we did not leave anyone out of the initial
engagement with the topic. Again, this is an adaptive challenge. So, I opened up this
topic for the whole congregation so as not to leave part of the church behind. I was
worried that if I tackled this topic in a small group or Bible study setting, we would end
up with more division in the church instead of less. Maintaining unity was and is very
important.\textsuperscript{29} Bringing the conversation on human sexuality out of the church’s closest
with an initial sermon series brought the topic to light so that our congregation had
permission to begin dialogue together in other venues in the church.

As the church engaged this topic, we did so in a variety of smaller settings. Eight
adults (from a variety of perspectives) took the initiative to meet and discuss
homosexuality and Christianity, then at a congregational meeting they stood together,
acknowledging that they (and we as the church) had done a poor job caring for gay,
lesbian and transgendered people, inviting others to join them in the journey of

\textsuperscript{28} More on this sermon series is available in the appendix.
\textsuperscript{29} Unity in the church is essential to the witness of the church in society.
repentance and care. A woman’s book club read Andrew Marin’s *Love is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community.* I hosted six monthly church-wide listening sessions that were open to the whole congregation.

When the Scriptures call for it, I continue to mention this topic in a sermon. I would have been more reluctant to mention this topic in the occasional sermon without first engaging in this conversation in an intentional and church-wide way. I do the same for other relevant topics with which the church should be engaged, like racism, immigration, and sexism.

This is not to suggest that the ways Grace began to address this adaptive challenge are the only or even the best way. What I am suggesting, however, is that leaders must engage the topic in ways that are appropriate to the local congregation and context. In the ECC, each local church is as different as the next.

Understanding Our Shared Identity: The Evangelical Covenant Church

As briefly explored above, the Evangelical Covenant Church has stated identity statements that help local congregations understand the larger fellowship to which they belong. ECC vision and mission statements, Covenant Affirmations and Distinctives, resources papers, and historical surveys will help local congregations understand the broader church of which they are part. One of the roles of the adaptive leader in the local

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30 Available in Appendix 5.
31 Andrew Marin. *Love is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community.* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).
32 Available in Appendix 7.
33 Appendix 4 provides case studies made available from the ECC’s Department of Ordered Ministry that present situations based in local Covenant congregations. Discussions on these case studies will help a local church begin thinking through this topic for itself.
church context is to educate the congregation on what it means to be a member congregation in the Evangelical Covenant Church.

Pastors who are licensed or ordained in the Evangelical Covenant Church have the benefit of being educated (either through North Park Theological Seminary or the external orientation program) on Covenant identity. Countless books, articles, and documents exist that flesh out this shared identity. Some are more helpful to the topic at hand than others.34

Members of local congregations come from a variety of theological and ecclesiological backgrounds. In the last week, I have had conversations with church members who have come from the Roman Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Church, the United Methodist Church, the Yahwist tradition, and non-denominational evangelical traditions (All in one week – in a church of 75!). It is essential that our conversations in the local congregation reflect the shared DNA of the ECC so that our local adaptive processes may benefit the whole communion.

Understanding Group Dynamics

Basic understanding of group dynamics is essential for leading a healthy and productive adaptive process. Such understanding enables the leader to gain perspective and stay healthy in this messy task. Again, the leader does not need to be an expert on these topics, and a thorough examination of group dynamics is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I will offer a few resources here that are helpful.

34 The bibliography lists other helpful resources for addressing the questions of sexual minorities in the ECC.
Bruce Tuckman’s *Developmental Sequence in Small Groups*\(^\text{35}\) provides a framework for understanding group dynamics. Tuckman’s four-fold sequence of forming, storming, norming, and performing helps define the relational dynamics in the group as it develops. As a group initially forms, members gather as independent, self-focused, and self-regulated individuals. During this phase, the individuals are oriented toward the shared task but have yet to relinquish power to the group as a whole. As conflict arises between the different individuals on the shared task, the group enters the storming phase. Here, differences of opinion and personality conflicts come to the surface. For some, this causes anxiety and fear. For others, it is exciting and energizing. The leader in this phase helps the group process through these differences and work toward tolerance of those differences.

It is important to note that in conflict avoidant cultures, which some would attribute to the ECC, groups may skip the storming phase altogether and risk not receiving the best thinking from its members. Other groups may stall in this phase, and risk destroying the work and the relationships within the group. During this phase, a good leader remains professional, acknowledges the tensions, values each’s contribution while also directing individuals toward healthy communication, and keeps the group focused on the task at hand.

Following the storming phase, a group enters into the norming phase. Having resolved or at least recognized personality clashes, competing values, and disagreements, the group develops a mutual understanding of one another and refocuses on the shared

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task. Conflict becomes healthier and more effective toward the end goal. At this point the team begins to perform together, making progress on their shared task. The group may circle back into other phases of Tuckman’s framework.

Edwin Friedman’s *Generation to Generation: Family Systems in the Church and Synagogue* provides another helpful tool in understanding group dynamics. Systems theory examines the family through its web of interconnected relationships. Friedman applies family system thinking to local congregations, acknowledging that most religious communities, especially smaller ones, function as families. Understanding a congregation as an emotional system, having the ability to name triangulating relationships, and being able to self-differentiate are all helpful tools for the adaptive process.

In addition, I have learned other techniques from leading a group through an adaptive process. First, it is essential to be clear with the team about the purpose of the adaptive process. The goal of the adaptive process is to make progress on an adaptive challenge. While specific items like policies and position statements may develop out of the adaptive process, these items are not the goal of the process. Naming this is important in setting realistic expectations for the group.

Whether in each sermon or each small group gathering at Grace, I emphasized that we were not out to create a policy or determine denominational localities. Our purpose at Grace was to take the conversation out of the closet and into the light of Christ's church. Out of this process, the congregation, at the initiative of some members, has acknowledged a collective failure in caring for sexual minorities, began to shift our

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posture toward the LGB+ community and is currently considering a welcome statement. If the day comes that the congregation confronts more difficult decisions related to sexual minorities, it will be more equipped to do so together in truth and grace.

Finally, because of the organic, non-linear nature of the adaptive process, it is impossible to pre-plan the whole process from beginning to end. The leader must commit to being in the process as it unfolds, continuing to study, learn, and adjust along the way. Having multiple resources on hand will assist in determining each next step as it comes. An adaptive leader’s job is not to have all the answers, but rather to create a space and process for a congregation to explore the questions. In so doing, I believe the church may find solutions that it does not yet know exist.

In my experience with discussing sexuality in my local congregation, I have found that people with conflicting opinions on the topic have a lot in common. Overall, church-goers desire to maintain faithfulness to God and God’s word while loving and serving God’s creation in Jesus’ name. There are faithful people on all sides of this topic. Remembering that truth, and modeling how to love one another in the midst of the struggle, is an excellent posture to take while leading adaptive change.

The adaptive framework provides a variety of tools that will help groups consider challenging topics. In what follows, I will share practical ones to use in an adaptive process on sexuality. This will include precursors to the adaptive process, adaptive tools, biblical resources, and paradigms on homosexuality.
Adaptive Tools for the Local Congregation

“Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”
(Matthew 17:20)

This section provides practical tools on a way forward for the Evangelical Covenant Church regarding the adaptive challenge of homosexuality. The order is logical. However, an adaptive process is not linear. Therefore, the tools presented here may be used in a variety of different ways as discerned by local leaders.

The sections below fall into four broad categories. First, “Precursors to the Adaptive Process” provides helpful relational considerations before even discussing sexuality. Second, “Adaptive Tools” explores two practical ways to process through adaptive challenges. Third, “Biblical Tools” offer three broad categories that biblical study groups should consider when taking on the adaptive challenge presented by LGB+ issues in the church. Fourth, and finally, “Tools on Sexuality” examines three different models to help group members understand various perspectives on the topic.

After considering the precursors to the process, adaptive leaders may choose to use the tools in sections 2-4 in a cyclical manner. Thus, one might use a tool first from the adaptive section, then the biblical section, followed by one from the sexuality section and then circle back through the sections 2-4 again as many times as it takes for the group to find true resolution. The following tools are not a silver bullet or a quick fix, but used contextually, wisely, and with intention, they will help a local church process through congregational tensions on human sexuality, and quite possibly discover a faithful way forward that God has yet to reveal.
Precursors to the Adaptive Process

Who’s at the Table?

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4)

In recent years, technology companies admit that filter bubbles are dividing people into more and more like-minded groups.¹ What initially was meant to help users find needed information, search engine algorithms are making it harder and harder for people with different ideas to come together and submit to one another for the common good. The church is not immune to the polarization that exists in the broader North American context.

The adaptive process functions to break participants out of the echo chambers that exist within like-minded communities. Therefore, in an adaptive process, individuals with a variety of opinions must be valued. Like-mindedness may make for easier discussions and quicker solutions, but it would defeat the purpose and effectiveness of the adaptive process.² Conflict avoidant people or groups may be wary of this process because of this point alone.

When people come together in the church to process the adaptive challenges presented by sexual minorities and gay marriage, it is important that they represent a diversity of thought and opinion. Within most congregations, leaders will find people

² See chapter 3 on the role of dissident voices in an adaptive process.
who represent both a traditional and a progressive perspective on sexuality and marriage. Notably, some minority groups may keep their divergent opinions private for fear of conflict or judgement.

The people who are at the table for the adaptive process need to be faithful, available, spirit-led and teachable. They can be people with strong convictions, but they must be thoughtful and even-tempered for the good of the group. To be sure, conversations will still get heated (and sometimes stuck) even when carefully chosen team members come to the table.

It is essential for participants in the adaptive process to have a personal stake in the challenge. Whether they are sexual minorities themselves, have friends or family members who identify as LGB+, or are deeply committed to the local congregation, people who enter into the conversation must be committed to one another, the congregation, and the common good.

When my congregation first waded into a discussion of human sexuality, I announced it as a “family” conversation. People who were not part of our congregation were welcome to attend, but they were asked to remain as observers to the conversation happening between people in regular communion with one another. In Grace’s first session, one couple attended who was not currently active in our congregation, though they had been in the past. One spoke but did not monopolize the conversation. Afterward, some congregants expressed discomfort with this couple’s presence. If people not currently invested in the congregation return for this particular process, it would be helpful to spend some time in the group hearing how each is connected to the congregation to ease relational concerns.
Sexual minorities, if at all possible, need to be at the table as active participants. However, it is not their role to educate the group on same-sex attraction. Every LGB+ has a unique story. If they want to offer up their perspective to the group, that is welcome, as it is for all other members of the group, but no one speaks for everyone.

It is important to remember that sexual minorities have often been wounded by others, including Christians. It is unjust to ask them to expose their deepest self and wounds to the group. This is not the place for intimate self-sharing. If someone needs to do that, help them find a healthy place to do so.

There are countless resources for Christians and non-Christians that help cisgender people understand non-binary attractions. See bibliography for a list of suggested autobiographies and resources and commit to reading these stories to understand the diverse perspectives and experiences of LGB+ individuals. Dividing these autobiographies among the participants in the adaptive process and inviting them to report back to the whole group could be a helpful and effective way to include a broader collection of stories.

While bringing a diversity of voices to the table is essential, there are some people who are not helpful to an adaptive process. Individuals who stubbornly hold their perspective with an active defiance or disregard for other’s experiences, thoughts, and feelings do not contribute to the work. They shut people and the process down. If such an individual wants to join the conversation, clearly explain the group expectations and honestly share your concerns about the challenges for this individual suggest other avenues for the individual to explore the topic.
Also, people who are timid and do not express themselves are not helpful, either. Individuals who are “quick to listen and slow to speak” (James 1:19) are valuable; persons who withdraw from the conversation are not. This type of silence can be interpreted by the group in a variety of incorrect ways, thus undermining the group’s process. Ground rules and expectations on behavior for groups in adaptive process are key to a good process. Consider the following.

The Value of a Relational Covenant and Ground Rules

Because the church has not been immune to the current divisive culture, leaders cannot assume that everyone will come to the table as mature, humble Christians. However, because of our common bond in Christ and the relational characteristics of a local congregation, the church can be a safe place for people of differing opinions to come together, walking hand-in-hand even when they do not see eye-to-eye.

In order to create a safe space for the adaptive process, it is important for the leader to establish a set of ground rules. Many ECC congregations adhere to a behavioral covenant (sometimes known as a relational covenant) that can be applied directly to conversations on human sexuality. A behavioral covenant is a written document that outlines how congregants relate to one another. According to Gil Rendle in Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences, behavioral covenants answer the question, “How will we behave (how will we live together), especially when we don’t understand each other and when we don’t agree?”

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Grace ECC’s relational covenant is based in the truth that the church is not our idea, but God’s idea and that God’s Spirit wants to guide us. It requires that “those who love God must love one another” (1 John 4:21). It calls us to (1) be inconvenienced for the sake of the Gospel, (2) discover what is best for our church as a whole, (3) build each other up and not tear each other down, (4) communicate clearly, completely and directly, both verbally and non-verbally, and (5) walk hand-in-hand even though we may not always see eye-to-eye. Together, we hold one another accountable to the relational grace on which our community (and, one could argue, the Christian faith) are found.

If a congregation desires to enter an adaptive process around sexuality, it is highly recommended to develop a behavioral covenant before beginning. Writing a behavioral covenant is not a difficult process. Rendle’s book is a good guide. The Covenant’s website has many helpful examples, or other congregations may share covenants that can be used as a model.  

Whatever a congregation’s process is, use it. Some leadership teams can write a behavioral covenant, or a pastor or leader may be tasked with writing a first draft. Some leadership teams appoint a committee to draft a covenant. However, it is essential that a behavioral covenant is vetted and accepted by the whole congregation. Otherwise, the covenant will not have the authority to guide the group’s relationships and behaviors.

Initially, some people may be hesitant to take the time to create a covenant, thinking it is not essential in a church community. But writing and accepting a behavioral covenant in a congregation is simply making explicit (and public) something that is

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implicit to a Christ-centered life together. It is a valuable resource when tensions within the congregation arise.\(^5\)

In addition to a relational covenant, I also establish different sets of ground rules for different contexts. For example, when our congregation participated in listening sessions that were prompted by a conflict in our denomination that was directly linked to some in our congregation, it was clearly stated and agreed upon that our time together was 1) not arguing the merits of particular people or specific situations, and 2) not a debate but a time to listen non-judgmentally to our brothers and sisters-in-Christ with views different than our own.

We committed to using “I” statements and speaking on our own behalf, not on behalf of any organizations, groups or institutions that we may represent. We committed to answering only the question on the table within a certain time limit, and we did not respond to each other’s comments. Rather, we only shared personal responses to the question at hand. This kept tensions from escalating and the conversation from being argumentative. We trusted that the Holy Spirit was in our midst. Ultimately, we recognized the broad perspectives held on the topic of sexuality in our small church.\(^6\)

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\(^5\) Grace ECC’s Relational Covenant is provided in Appendix 6.
\(^6\) Ground rules and listening sessions available in Appendix.
Adaptive Tools

Traditioned Innovation

L. Gregory Jones coined the term “traditioned innovation.” In short, traditioned innovation connects the best of the past with the ever-unfolding future. Rather than holding the past and the future in conflict, traditioned innovation holds them in tension, trusting that an ever-creative God is providing a new way into the future. This is a helpful concept when considering adaptive problems.

According to Jones, traditioned innovation is “crucial in times of instability, in wilderness circumstances, in contexts where we often feel overwhelmed by all the new things that surround us already—times like the present.” Jones continues, “Change is happening so fast and furious that it feels disorienting.” Jones identifies two basic reactions to this type of chaos.

The first is nostalgia. Nostalgia sees the past through rose-colored glasses, forgetting the difficulties of yesterday. People become fearful and anxious to change, responding “externally by furthering social brokenness or internally through depression that furthers personal brokenness.” The second is amnesia. Amnesia quickly forgets the past and seeks change for change’s sake. It “respond(s) to the disruption around us by focusing on being disruptive forces ourselves.” It contributes to the instability and chaos, pushing those who are nostalgic to double down on tradition. Both nostalgia and

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7 “Faith & Leadership,” Leadership Education at Duke Divinity, offers a helpful online resource on traditioned innovation. To learn more visit: https://www.faithandleadership.com/category/principles-practice-topics/traditioned-innovation.
10 Jones, Loc. 750.
amnesia contribute to the complexity and tensions of adaptive challenges instead of aiding in their solutions.

Traditioned innovation, rather, grounds an organization in its ultimate purpose while reaching out to its changing environment. Not severing its ties to the past, but also not allowing the past to control its future, traditioned innovation invites an organization to change in its present circumstances in order to grow towards its hoped-for future.

Traditioned innovation, as described by Jones, begins with the end. It requires the church to be rooted in the past while “keeping the long view” toward God’s intended future. For the ECC this means remaining rooted in its historic catholic, reformation, pietistic identity while being radically open to its future.

The ECC’s vision is defined on its website as “cultivating communities of worship committed to: prayer, preaching, and study of the word; the celebration of the sacraments; and fellowship across gender, race, age, culture, and class” and “equipping loving, giving, growing Christians to reach out with the good news of Jesus Christ - evangelizing the lost, ministering to those in need, and seeking justice for the oppressed.” Its identity statement and biblical mission states, “We are united by Christ in a holy covenant of churches empowered by the Holy Spirit to obey the great commandments and the great commission: to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to go into all the world and make disciples.” ¹¹ Both statements are clear about the identity and work of the church, but neither do an adequate job painting a picture of the hoped-for future. This may be intentional at the

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denominational level, with leaders understanding the contextual nuance to God’s kingdom come.

However, before the local church can begin a process to innovate, it needs to recapture together a shared biblical vision toward which it is working. Thankfully, the Bible provides beautiful descriptions of the hoped-for end toward which it works. This end can be stated many ways. Early in the adaptive process, a leader should invite his/her congregation to study biblical teachings and revelations on God’s kingdom. The group could be invited to imagine what “kingdom come, thy will be done” looks like in the local context. In so doing, a holy vision unfolds out of which comes a shared mission.

I offer that the church works toward one end which is the full acknowledgement of the glorious reign of God’s loving truth and goodness in all of creation (Micah 4:1-3, Luke 17:20-21, Revelation 21).\(^\text{12}\) To borrow a phrase from Julian of Norwich, it is then that “all manner of things will be well.” The church, therefore, exists to bear witness to God’s reign as historically witnessed in and through the Hebrew people, as manifest most fully in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and as continuing through the work of the Holy Spirit in the priesthood of all believers.

Applying this broad vision and mission to the topic of sexuality, traditioned innovation asks: how might the church’s historic affirmation of heterosexual marriage and celibacy in singleness aid or inhibit its ultimate goal of the full acknowledgement of God’s glorious reign? What are the implications of God’s loving truth and goodness for LGB+ persons and their advocates? What can today’s leaders learn from church leaders

\(^{12}\) ECC theologians and biblical scholars need to do work on eschatology for the church. A shared understanding of a biblically-based telos would greatly benefit the denomination during this season.
in the past who guided change in uncertain times? How does the church adapt old systems and understandings in order to stay true to its calling in its context?

    Traditional innovation seeks to keep the past, present, and future faithfully united. With a shared understanding of both the past and the future toward which the church moves, it can better determine a faithful response to a challenge in the present without being co-opted by nostalgia or amnesia. As stated by Jones, “We are called to bear witness to God through traditioned innovation; our activity and creativity are never pure invention or innovation but rather responsive to God, the gift of creation, and the givenness of reality.”

Addressing Wicked Problems

    As an adaptive challenge, sexual minorities and gay marriage is a “wicked problem” for the Evangelical Covenant Church. According to Jennifer Riel, co-author of Creating Great Choices: A Leader’s Guide to Integrative Thinking, “The term ‘wicked’ came to be applied to these problems in part because it really does convey this sense of just how daunting it can be…you are as much designing your process to solve the problem as you are solving it, and that’s what makes it so tricky and pernicious.” As an adaptive challenge, a wicked problem is highly complex because it requires the work of multiple disciplines or institutions in an ever-unfolding process.

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13 Jones, Kindle Loc. 787.
Roger Martin, former dean of the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management and named 2017 #1 management thinker by Thinkers50, interviewed more than 50 top business leaders. He discovered that they all shared a unique ability. Highly effective leaders were able to hold on to two opposing ideas at once, creatively resolving the tension between the two by taking components of each idea and putting them together to create a new, superior idea. He refers to this ability as integrative, or opposable, thinking.

According to Rotman School’s I-Think (integrative thinking) website, “In recognizing that our ideas only tell a part of the story, Integrative Thinking forces us to consider how other people interpret the same situations — especially when those other people have a different and opposing point of view.” Integrative thinking takes the shared knowledge and wisdom of a group and creates a new way forward together (see Figure 2).

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17 “What is Integrative Thinking?” Rotman School of Management I-Think website available at http://www.rotmanithink.ca/what-is-integrative-thinking; The page includes a brief and helpful video explaining integrative thinking.
18 Adapted from Riel and Martin, Creating Great Choices, loc. 257 of 3374.
Riel and Martin offer a process that fosters integrative thinking to address wicked problems. Like any adaptive process, this one is not as linear as it first may seem. First, a group must briefly define the problem and clearly identify the most extreme alternative answers. Riel and Martin suggest that while many options may lay between the extremes, identifying the most polarizing alternatives together will include the possibilities in between the two. The two alternative models must be described separately and fully enough that an outside observer can read and understand each option. This helps focus the group on the task at hand.

Second, a group examines the two alternatives more closely, defining the points of tension, assumptions, and cause-and-effect forces that may be at work in the two models. This stage helps the group examine the similarities and differences within the two options, and it helps determine what is most valued of the two
choices. Often this stage causes the team to go back and refine the question they are seeking to answer, thus clarifying and improving the team’s ultimate solution.

The third stage of opposable thinking begins to integrate the two alternative solutions into multiple new, and potentially superior, answers. For example, might the most valued aspects of each model be united in a new model? Does a more intense version of one model generate one of the key benefits of the other? Might the group break apart a problem in order to apply the different models to each part?

Finally, the group assesses the multiple new possibilities based on feasibility and outcomes. Some of the possibilities may be discarded immediately. Others ought to be tested on a group of key investors and refined according to their feedback. This final step does not guarantee that the new model is failproof, but it does increase confidence in the new model being employed.

Integrative thinking, according to Martin, is a skill all leaders can hone. To develop integrative thinking, leaders can 1) refuse to settle for an either-or choice and welcome complexity that illumines new possibilities, 2) make connections (or disconnections) where once others thought there were none (or some), 3) work organically on multiple aspects of the problem at once, rather than breaking down problems into pieces or steps, and 4) determine to keep working on the problem again and again until true resolution is achieved, refusing to settle for the “least bad” choice.19

Integrative thinking does not give up. The process is resilient, bringing people with opposing points of view together again and again, ultimately discovering a new way forward on a wickedly complex problem. To use a Covenant-ism, integrative thinking continues to work until a true resolution emerges; and, the church ends up being truly “Better Together.”

Using integrative thinking for the question of sexuality in the local ECC congregation, a group might state the problem as “the division in the congregation on sexual minorities and marriage.” The question to be answered could be, “How might our congregation address different perspectives on faithful sexuality while maintaining unity?” The two polarizing options could be broadly defined as the traditional and progressive perspectives, though these would need to be fleshed out by the group.

Integrative thinking illumines possibilities beyond oppositional statements like pro- or anti-gay marriage and heterosexual marriage or celibacy. It can open up new connections by asking questions like, “what similarities/differences exist between heterosexual and same-sex marriages and what are the theological and ethical implications?” Its interdisciplinary process connects the Bible, theology, ethics, and ecclesiology toward a real solution.

Riel and Martin offer a variety of helpful templates to employ in an integrative thinking process. These resources alone are worth the price of the book, and the examples they share throughout help adaptive leaders in the local congregation understand the process they provide for adaptive challenges. However,
for convenience, some basic templates based in Riel and Martin’s work are offered in Appendix 9.

Biblical Tools for the Adaptive Process

In joining a Covenant church, pastors ask potential new members three questions: “Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior and promise to follow him as Lord? Do you accept the Holy Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, as the word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct? Do you intend to live as faithful followers of Christ and members of the church and denomination?” Together, these three questions define the core identity markers that create the Evangelical Covenant Church – Christ, Scriptures, Community. While the ECC does not required adherence to any written creed (though it values the Apostle’s and Nicene Creeds), its history, ecclesiology and practice of theology are essential to its identity.

Ultimately, the ECC looks to Holy Scriptures to reveal the lordship of Jesus and the implications of his Lordship for his constituents (and the cosmos). In light of this, it is essential for local congregations to wrestle together with their understanding of Scripture, not simply with passages that address homosexuality, but also with the whole witness of scripture, especially as it finds its apex in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
The ECC has an extremely helpful resource in a paper called “The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible.” It is available on the resources page of the denomination’s website along with a small group curriculum on approaches to read the Bible. For space, I will offer a brief consideration of the ECC, the bible and LGB+ issues here.

The ECC and the Bible

The Covenant holds that “the Holy Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, are the word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.” The church must hold this statement together, not skipping the first half of the affirmation (the word of God) to go straight to the second half (the only perfect rule…). In so doing, it misses the heart of the scriptures as the word on God, communicating about God and God’s mysterious self-revelation. It jumps right to the “rules” of orthodoxy and orthopraxy running the risk making rules that do not align with God, the Right One.

The Holy Scriptures are central to the life and faith of the Evangelical Covenant Church. From Genesis to Revelation, Covenanters search the Bible for God’s truth. This is true for faithful Christians on the topic of sexuality, and the same book is leading to some very different conclusions.


One of the challenges in approaching scriptures is that people (individuals and communities) bring their own perspectives, understandings, and realities to the text. If they are not careful, they can read their own presuppositions into the sacred texts, claiming it as God’s truth. The reality is that the Bible is not about sex or marriage. The Bible is about God. The Holy Scriptures reveal truths about a Holy God as experienced and understood throughout centuries by human beings. God, in mercy and grace, reveals Godself through creation, Spirit (presence) and most fully in God’s Son (incarnation). The bible testifies to these revelations.

Once people discover God in the text, then and only then can they begin to discover truths about human beings. It is not to say that the Bible does not teach about humanity, ethics, relationships, sex, and marriage. It does. It only teaches about these things in light what it reveals about God. To approach the text without first asking what is revealed about the Divine One leads to a mis-prioritization and possibly a misappropriation of the scriptures.

The Bible is God’s Story

Like all narratives, the Bible has main characters and secondary characters, themes and topics. It has plots and subplots, a beginning and an end. There is movement in a story. It goes somewhere. As mentioned, God is the main character of the Old and New Testaments. Adam, Israel, David, Esther, Mary, and the disciples as important as they are, play supporting roles, helping the reader understand the characteristics and actions of God.

In addition, the bible has some distinct and essential movements. From chaos to order (Genesis 1-2), from individuals to a people (Genesis 12, Exodus 19), from a people
to all nations (Genesis 12:3, Matthew 28:18-20). Another way to picture it is that humanity starts in a garden with one, then two, and ends in a city with multitudes “that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne” (Revelation 7:9).

![Diagram of Kingdom Fulfillment](image)

**Figure 3**

The End is the Beginning

As mentioned above, the scriptures sketch beautiful images that help us envision the fullness of God’s kingdom come, the hope toward which we live. The Prophet Isaiah describes it as peace among all creation.

They will beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore…

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them (Isaiah 2:4; 11:6).
Jesus uses the parables to teach on the Kingdom of Heaven, which he declares has come near in his presence. He describes it as a prince’s wedding reception which, when the invited guests do not come, is open to the throngs of people hanging out on the street corners, “the bad as well as the good” (Matthew 22:10).

Because Jesus inaugurated God’s kingdom on earth, the Kingdom of God, as Gayraud S. Wilmore in Last Things First puts it, “is hidden within and beneath this sorry mess that we now see all around us.” Again, from Wilmore, the Kingdom of God “is not some kind of never-never land in a fairy tale that we imagine to be opposite the fleshly, material stuff of life… the Kingdom is messed up in the real world as a partial and unfulfilled potential of its being. It is visible in the sense of being a constituent of that which we see and not something out of sight.”

John’s revelation describes the Kingdom of God as a holy city that shines with God’s glory, needing no sun or moon. “Its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal” (Revelation 21:11). It is a place where God dwells with his people, wiping away every tear from their eye. A place where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain, because God declares, “I am making everything new!” (Revelation 21:3-5). As Christians wrestle with the Scripture’s implications for today, they need to keep the Biblical metanarrative and telos in view as Christians do not simply make decisions “out of” scripture but “towards” its revealed end.

The Bible and Sex

“The bible is clear on homosexuality and on marriage.”

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God invites his creation to co-create with him. “Be fruitful and multiply,” God declares to the creation that he has deemed “good” (Genesis 1:28, 31). Because God invites human beings to participate in creation, sex is both important and sacred. The majority of the bible, however, does not praise and celebrate sex, but it warns against sexual immorality.

Challenging religious leaders on ritualistic practices, Jesus includes sexual immorality, adultery, and lewdness along with theft, murder, greed, malice, deceit, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly as evil thoughts that come out of a person’s heart (Mark 7:21-23). He also says, “anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). Jesus raises the stakes on faithfulness when it comes to sexual desire.

The Apostle Paul picks up on Jesus’ teaching. “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body” (1 Corinthians 6:18). Scriptures warn against sexual immorality because sex is easily abused. Tamar tricks her father-in-law into sex in Genesis 38:11-30; 2 Samuel 11-12 reports two accounts of rape in King David’s household. Sex can be used as an assault against God’s creation, an act to dominate and control. Therefore, the church places sex in the safety of the marriage covenant.

The Bible and Marriage

It is hard to come by a consistent Biblical understanding of marriage. As mentioned above, God created man and woman in God’s own image, and together man
and woman “become one flesh” to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 2:24, 1:28). At times, biblical marriage was a means of tribal peacemaking for safety and security (Genesis 20) and of national alliances for political and economic gain (1 Samuel 18). Consider for a moment that Jacob was married to Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29:21-30); David was married to Michal and Bathsheba and Ahinoam and Abigail and Maachah and Haggith and Abital and Eglah (1 Samuel 18:27; 1 Chronicles 3:1-9); and Solomon had 700 wives (1 Kings 11:3). Yet, God still works and moves through the individuals involved in what today’s Christian would describe as non-traditional, maybe even sinful, marriages.

In the Gospels, Jesus affirms Genesis’ narrative for marriage (Genesis 1:27, 2:24) and elevates the sacredness of sexual unity (“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mark 10:11-12).). He also teaches that marriage does not exist in the “age to come” and “in the resurrection” (Luke 20:34).23

The apostle Paul provides the largest discourse on marriage in his first letter to the Corinthians. In order to keep people from sexual immorality, Paul presents marriage as a tool for sexual faithfulness, recognizing the power of sexual drive to be manipulated by Satan. Moreover, Paul wishes that all were single as he is single, but he recognizes that each is given a different gift. Paul continues emphasizing the importance of sexual faithfulness and highlights the power marriage has to make an unbelieving spouse holy (1 Corinthians 7:1-16).

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23 This is an important consideration for the telos of the church and should be explored further in connection to the church’s response to sexual minorities.
The Bible and Homosexuality

There are six key biblical texts that address homosexuality in the bible and hundreds of scholarly books that unpack them. The creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 have been mentioned above and are foundational in Christianity’s theologies of sex and marriage. In the first creation account, God creates man and woman in God’s own image and blesses them to “be fruitful and multiply.” In the second creation narrative, God creates man and woman to be one another’s companions and helpmates (2:18). This narrative includes more implied sexual and marital language: “Man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (2:24).

The first scripture that refers to same sex acts is Genesis 19 (Sodom and Gomorrah). When the men of Sodom desire “to know” the heavenly strangers at Lot’s house, they want to gang rape the visitors in order to overpower and humiliate them. Horrifyingly, Lot offers his daughters to the angry mob. The mob refuses. In the Levitical law, same-sex acts are labeled an “abomination,” something that causes disgust or hatred (Leviticus 18:22) and provides a punishment of death for such an act (Leviticus 20:13).

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul addresses same-sex acts in three places. In Romans 1:26-27, Paul condemns idol worshippers whose “women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and... men (who gave) up natural intercourse with women, (being) consumed with passion for one another.” Paul refers to such acts as “shameful.” In his first letter to the Corinthians he includes “fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites” in a list with “thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers” as those who will not inherit God’s kingdom (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). And, in his first letter to Timothy, Paul writes that the law is for “the lawless and disobedient, for the godless
and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers…” (1 Timothy 1:9-10).

A plain reading of these scriptures presents a clear case against homosexual acts, but even the slightest scholarly exploration begins to raise some important questions. It is when these texts are explored in light of historical context and the biblical metanarrative that challenges quickly arise. Is the truth proclaimed in the bible’s creation narrative a historical narrative (based in events of the past) or a metaphorical narrative (a story that communicates deep truth)?

The majority of conservative and liberal scholars today agree that Genesis 19 is not about homosexuality specifically, but about power and control over foreigners and a lack of hospitality to “the other.” How does removing this key text from the argument against homosexuality impact the church’s understanding? If “sodomites” is better defined as a lack of hospitality, how does this change the interpretation of 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy? How does the Levitical law relate to the new covenant in Jesus’ blood? What does it mean that Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17)? Are Paul’s letters descriptive/normal (of a certain time/place) or prescriptive/normative (for all time)?

These are only a few questions surrounding the texts. It is essential when considering the church, homosexuality, and gay marriage that the church wrestle with these scriptures. A full examination of these texts is beyond the scope of this work. The bibliography presents resources for further biblical study, including both the traditional
and progressive view. When focusing on the key texts on homosexuality, the bible seems simple; but scholarly reading and reading the key texts in light of the whole biblical witness and movement takes what is “clear” and makes it complex.

The New Testament and Incarnational Inclusion

The Incarnation is at the heart of the Christian Faith (John 1). God chooses not to stand outside of the human situation, but in Christ and in the gift of the Holy Spirit, God enters into it. Incarnation is the most radical kind of inclusion in that God freely empties himself into our humanity, becomes a human being, lives in community, and is revealed within that context, welcoming humanity into his very real presence (Philippians 1:1-11).

Jesus calls his followers to embrace a radically inclusive life when he tells them to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (Matthew 5:13-14). Salt is mixed into food and light breaks forth in darkness. Neither work by remaining outside of that which they are called to activate and illumine, yet neither become that which they activate or illumine. There is an inherent “in” and “with” in Jesus’s ministry. In fact, in Jesus, holiness is merciful, and mercy is holy.

Other scriptures demonstrate this radical inclusiveness of Christ as expressed through the work of the Holy Spirit in the early church. In Acts 10:1-45, Peter is led by the Holy Spirit to break kosher laws and fully welcome Cornelius and his Gentile family. In Acts 15: 1-20, the Holy Spirit’s presence in Gentiles leads the early church to no longer require circumcision for God’s people.

25 An argument could be made that this is true in the Old Testament as God manifests himself in ways that are relationally present with Israel.
Many Christians are wondering if the Holy Spirit’s presence in LGB+ Christians might be calling the church to something similar today. In considering the church’s response to sexual minorities, it must not only examine six texts on homosexuality, but must also consider them in light of the broader biblical mandate. Biblical studies on the scriptures mentioned above are included in Appendix 7.

Tools on Sexuality

Determining Different Lenses on LGB+

Mark Yarhouse, professor of psychology and director of the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity at Regent University, offers a helpful framework for having discussions on the bible and sexuality. His framework offers three “lenses” through which Christians view sexuality.26

The first is the integrity lens. The integrity lens views maleness and femaleness as stamped in one’s body. Male/female differences are intended by God from creation. This lays the foundation for morally permissive sex that exists in the context of covenant marriage. This lens understands the second creation account (Genesis 2:22-24) as describing a complementary relationship between men and women that, when joined to one another, form an integrated sexual whole. Homosex, therefore, threatens to dishonor God’s created order and is inherently immoral.

The second perspective is what Yarhouse terms as the disability lens. The disability lens emphasizes the fall’s impact on creation (Genesis 3) and points to variations on sexuality as unintended realities of the brokenness of creation. Those who

26 Yarhouse, 20.
depend on this lens see sexual minorities as created in God’s image, but their sexuality as stained or broken by sin. This view does not see same-sex attraction as the result of a moral choice, but rather a condition or state with which one must contend. Therefore, individuals with same-sex attraction are treated with compassion and care as they seek to live faithfully within this condition.

The last lens in Yarhouse’s framework is the diversity lens. The diversity lens views sexual difference as part of God’s endless creativity to be celebrated, honored, and valued. This lens is an extension of the biblical trajectory from a man and a woman in a garden to all nations in a city. It is a continued out-working of being one in Christ, neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Galatians 3:28). This lens is gaining in popularity in the church.

All three lens can be defended with scripture. All three can be defended theologically. Discussing these lenses and helping different people within the church define their perspectives helps Christians understand how one another can have such varied understandings of the same Bible and the same topic.

Determining One’s Stance: Four Quadrants on Sexuality

Two Covenant colleagues created a tool to help their congregations begin to understand the different views of sexuality within the church. Rev. Doug Bixby created a four corners framework that moves the discussion on LGB+ sexuality in the church away from a polarizing either/or approach.27

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27 Doug Bixby’s approach was presented at the 2015 Covenant Ministerium Annual Meeting, Detroit, Michigan. His model is available on the Covenant Ministerium’s Facebook Group available at https://www.facebook.com/groups/4615505700/search/?query=Doug%20bixby&epa=SEARCH_BOX. Doug is currently the senior pastor of the Evangelical Covenant Church in Attleboro, MA. He has published three books on conflict and Christian community.
The first corner of Bixby’s model could be considered the Westborough Baptist Church approach. Their motto is “God hates fags,” and “gays are going to hell.” Gay people are villainized as evil and completely excluded from these churches. Gay marriages are protested, not accepted.

According to Bixby, Corner 2 is the most traditional evangelical approach. It is encapsulated in the phrase “hate the sin and love the sinner.” Celibate sexual minorities are welcomed into a Corner 2 churches, but not into church leadership (and for some not welcome into membership). Gay marriage is not recognized as a faithful, Christian practice. Gay marriages may be tolerated to some extent in today’s society at large, but not in the church.

Corner 3 is referred to as “open and discerning” or “level playing field.” Corner 3 Christians acknowledge the complexity of the issues around sexual orientation, feel remorse about the way gay, lesbian, and transgendered people are treated by the church, repent in this regard and seek to treat gay and lesbian people as any other member of the local congregation. A key theological understanding in this model is that all people sin and fall short of God’s glory (Romans 3:23). Corner 3 churches welcome sexual minorities (celibate or married) as they welcome all people, as sinners. There are two exceptions or limits to this welcome. Based in the ECC’s position of heterosexual marriage and celibacy in singleness, 1) LGB+ peoples’ pastors are not allowed to participate in any way in their marriage ceremony, and 2) a LGB+ married person may not be ordained in the Evangelical Covenant Church (and thus not serve an ECC congregation).
Corner 4 is known as the “open and affirming” corner. Christians in this quadrant celebrate the diversity of sexual orientation as a God-given gift. They believe people are born either gay or straight, and that gay marriage should be celebrated and blessed by the church in the same way that heterosexual marriages are celebrated.

While Bixby describes his framework as corners, I believe they are better conceived as falling along a continuum, with Corner (or Position) 1 being on the far left of the spectrum, and continuing to the right sequentially, ending with Corner (or Position) 4. Using a continuum would still communicate Bixby’s intent that there are more than two possibilities for a Christian response to sexual minorities.

Andy Sebanc starts with Bixby’s model, but seeks to create a two-dimensional model (this idea may lay behind Bixby’s four corner approach). First, Sebanc identifies two dimensions that impact an individual’s understanding of LGB+ people: the bible and relationships. He acknowledges that these two dimensions are highly interrelated, but he seeks to view them independently from one another for the purpose of his model. Then, instead of allowing people to self-select a quadrant, he seeks to elucidate why someone falls into a particular quadrant through a series of questions. Sebanc provides a basic tool that assesses a person’s biblical and relational understanding of sexuality, then plots that person on a 2x2 grid based in the assessment.

Sebanc provides a series of questions that determine a person’s biblical understanding of sexuality and plots that on a spectrum. The spectrum seeks to determine a person’s understanding of the general witness of scripture on this topic.

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28 Andy Sebanc is senior pastor of Green Timbers Covenant Church in Surrey, BC.
For example, on a scale of 1-10 (1 being not at all and 10 being completely), does the bible define same-sex orientation as sinful? A score of 1 would indicate that the person does not believe that the bible defines same-sex orientation as sinful; a score of 10 would indicate that a person absolutely teaches that sexual orientation is sinful.

After assessing an individual’s biblical perspective, Sebanc seeks to understand a person’s relational perspective toward sexual minorities. Using the same spectrum, participants would consider their willingness to relate to an LGB+ individual. On this dimension, Sebanc measures an individual’s willingness to engage and include sexual minorities in his/her life and church.

With these two perspectives discerned, Sebanc then plots an individual’s position on a 2x2 grid with the X-axis representing the relational dimension and the Y-axis representing the scriptural dimension. In this way, people can understand their (and others') position in relation to scriptures and the LGB+ community. This grid produces four quadrants.
Quadrant I represents a low relational commitment and high commitment to the traditional view of scripture. Sebanc describes this quadrant as judging. At its most extreme, it includes congregations like Westborough Baptist. More moderately, the high commitment on the traditional view of scripture causes relational anxiety for individuals in this quadrant, thus they exclude or highly limit the participation of sexual minorities in the church.

Quadrant II represents a low view of scriptural authority and a low commitment to relationship. This is a laissez faire form of approaching LGB+ in which Christians ignore the tension that exists in the church. “Let people be themselves, just don’t wave it in my face” is a common refrain for those in this quadrant.

Quadrant III in the model Sebanc calls the blessing quadrant. People with this view believe that scriptures do not clearly rule out same-sex relationships and have a high commitment to relational connections to sexual minorities. Most here would advocate for the full inclusion of LGB+ people, including God’s blessing on gay marriage.

Finally, Quadrant IV maintains that the Scriptures present a traditional ethic of celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in heterosexual marriage, while also maintaining a high commitment to relationship with sexual minorities. Those in this quadrant, like those in Bixby’s Corner 3, affirm that all people live in the fallen reality of sin. Those in the extreme of this position include the blessing of same sex marriages not because the church believes that scripture affirms it but because of the scripturally-driven
commitment to operating out of God’s love and a desire to see everyone thrive. Sebanc calls this quadrant “engaging.

Sebanc’s model has a lot of wisdom, but it is still in its development stage. His questions that assess a person’s location on the grid need refinement and clarification. In addition, Sebanc acknowledges that Quadrant I’s title “judging” is unhelpful and may raise questions about the neutrality of this model. Finally, Sebanc’s framework needs to be used by test-groups before it can be used widely. Both his model and a modified version of Bixby’s model are included in Appendix 10. No framework is perfect, but different models may help a local congregation discuss the differences and similarities that exist between one another. In fact, applying Riel and Martin’s integrative thinking process to these two frameworks may help the church discover better models.29

Using the above resources, local congregations will begin to discuss the challenging topic of human sexuality in light of the Bible and in the context of the Evangelical Covenant Church. A leader’s responsibility is to create a safe space and process where congregants can be vulnerable with one another. Congregants must develop the skills to engage faithfully in hard conversations, listening deeply and sharing respectfully. Then, faithful Christians can study Scriptures, bear witness to the work of the Holy Spirit, follow Christ, and move forward together in mission. The adaptive process and skills not only enable the church to address human sexuality but can also help address other deep challenges facing our congregations and our society.

29 It would be fascinating for someone to take the different models presented, and using integrative thinking, discover a model that may be even more helpful to the local church.
Conclusion

As the church seeks to be faithful to the Gospel in the midst of adaptive challenges, we are reminded that following Jesus, and being a faithful church, is a journey of discovery… It is because we are a pilgrim people attentive to where God is leading us that we can discover new things, that we can discern where the Spirit of God is doing new things in new ways.

-Juan Martínez, Associate Dean and Professor of Hispanic Studies and Pastoral Leadership, Fuller Theological Seminary

The Evangelical Covenant Church, like many other North American denominations, is caught in a conflict that threatens to tear the small denomination apart. When it comes to homosexuality and gay marriage, brothers- and sisters-in-Christ study the same Scriptures and arrive at very different conclusions. This conflict plays out in denominational meetings, the pews of local congregations, and the court of public opinion and is damaging the witness and mission of Christ’s church.

Depending largely on the work of Ronald Heifetz in adaptive leadership, I have argued that the challenge of homosexuality and gay marriage is an adaptive problem. In adaptive challenges, 1) leaders don not have the tools to solve the problem, 2) the problems cannot be abstracted from the people, 3) the challenge is deeply rooted in values, beliefs and loyalties, and 4) the challenge stirs up intense emotions. I have also offered key characteristics and understandings of an adaptive framework. An adaptive

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process is highly relational. It is rooted in the past while postured toward the future. It includes broad and differing perspectives. And, it is intentional but non-linear.

An adaptive challenge requires an entirely different set of leadership skills and tools than technical challenges require. Leaders function as facilitators providing a contextually-appropriate process for a group to discuss an inherently complex and volatile topic in a safe and constructive manner. With the exception of understanding their local context, adaptive leaders do not have to be experts on multiple topics, but they must be able to access resources on and engage with multiple disciplines including Biblical studies, theology, ethics, and sociology.

To aid the local church leader, I have provided an overview of two helpful adaptive tools along with biblical resources and sexuality paradigms that will help guide an adaptive process on human sexuality. The appendices are full of resources that are ready to use. I provide these resources because I believe the Evangelical Covenant Church is uniquely suited to engage the adaptive challenge of homosexuality and gay marriage.

First, the ECC’s history, rooted in Judaism and an outgrowing of the Reformation and its Pietistic movement, reminds us that the church is always adapting, always reforming and always renewing. The church is a living organism known as the body of Christ. It has survived significant change in the past and can do so again.

Second, the forefathers of the ECC valued unity to such an extent that they included “covenant”² in the name of the new collection of churches. A covenant commitment has been expressed throughout the ECC as the denomination has remained

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² Covenant, a relational commitment rooted in the relational commitment between God and his people.
united in relationships, while differing over doctrine. In fact, the covenant is a non-creedal, non-doctrinal church for this reason.\(^3\) The Covenant’s ethos of unity in essentials, freedom in non-essentials, and charity in all things provides a culture where faithful people can walk hand-in-hand even when they do not see eye-to-eye.

Third, the ECC’s congregational polity provides structure to an otherwise organic adaptive process. Relationships between believers at the local congregational level are the necessary place to wrestle through wicked problems, though congregants may need to hone skills in healthy public discourse, especially in light of the current polarizing culture. The initial role of conference and denominational leaders will be to train local leaders to facilitate adaptive processes on the topic of human sexuality for their local congregation. Only later, after local congregations are well along the way in the adaptive process should regional and national leaders consider the impact of these local processes denomination-wide. By entrusting the local church with these difficult conversations, the denomination is affirming its value of the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5).

Fourth, the ECC’s high value of Scripture keeps it rooted in the history of God’s revelation while anticipating the on-going transformative work of God’s word and Spirit. Covenanters believe that the essential content of the Bible is the good news of Jesus Christ. “To read it properly… is to find it an altar where one meets the living God and receives personally the reality of redemption.”\(^4\) The two defining questions of early Covenant communities, “where is it written?” and “How goes your walk in Christ?”.

\(^3\) The ECC values the two historic creeds: The Apostle’s Creed and the Nicene Creed.
continue to characterize the ECC as people who carefully examine scriptures and seek to follow the resurrected Christ each day.

Fifth, the Evangelical Covenant Church maintains a strong missional commitment. It believes in the fundamental truth that God is at work redeeming creation. From Adam and Eve and the Hebrew people to Jesus Christ and his church, God has chosen to work in and through people to bring about the restoration of his handiwork. Covenanters witness this truth not only in the ancient witness of Scripture but also in the contemporary witness the church. Because God continues to work, the ECC continues to participate in that work both locally and internationally.5

Sixth, and finally, the ECC is comprised of people with deep and abiding faith in the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20). Covenanters understand faith as a verb, not a noun.6 Christianity is not an idea to which believers ascend, but a person disciples follow.

For the ECC to lean into its faith, ethos, polity and history and live faithfully into the adaptive challenge presented by homosexuality and gay marriage, denominational, conference and local church leaders must modify how it is currently addressing this topic. To move forward together, the Covenant must

* Recapture a shared vision of God’s kingdom come.

5 The Evangelical Covenant Church is a North American church comprised of member churches in Canada and the United States of America. While it has a large global presence, with deep connections to the Evangelical Covenant Church in places like Sudan and Ecuador, it is not a global denomination, which would further complicate an adaptive process on sexuality.

6 This is rightly connected to Gehrz and Pattie’s “God of prepositions, not propositions.”
• Intentionally make space and time for the adaptive process, including welcoming dissenting voices into the conversation at all levels.

• Train and equip local clergy in adaptive leadership.

• Resource local leaders with adaptive tools on sexuality as presented in this paper, without continuing to emphasize the stated position of the ECC.7

• Develop Bixby’s or Sebanc’s models, or discover others, for use in the church.

• Trust the Spirit of God to work in and through his creation and his church.

• Live humbly and graciously toward one another.

Adaptive challenges are complex by definition, and the processes to address such challenges are messy. The church, its leaders, and its members, will make mistakes and take missteps along the way. In so doing, the church will rest in its greatest truth: salvation is a gift of God; it does not rest on human performance, but it is unmerited, unearned favor that God offers to all through the atoning work of Christ.

No matter where one aligns, it is essential to the unity and mission of the Evangelical Covenant Church that it take the conversation on homosexuality and gay marriage out of the closet. Christians must gather at tables with open hearts and minds, to share stories, study Scriptures, and search the will of God as guided by the Holy Spirit. This, by definition, is the church.

To God be all glory.

7 Continuing to highlight the stated, majority opinion of the denomination stops the adaptive process before it starts. This does not assume that the denomination must change or do away with the current position but continuing to put forth the position at every opportunity stifles work the Spirit may do in and through it. If the ECC believes that its position is aligned with God’s will, then God’s will, and therefore the position, will prevail.
Appendices

Appendix 1: We are an Evangelical Covenant Church.

Preparation: Explore the Evangelical Covenant Church’s website, giving special attention to the “Who we are” page at https://covchurch.org/who-we-are/.

Watch the following videos together:

A Great Ambition (16 minutes) available online at http://covchurch.tv/great-ambition/  
Discuss: What are key characteristics of the Mission Friends that continue in your congregation today? What may be missing? How might the church today need to recapture the spirit of early Covenanters?

Exploring Covenant Affirmations (15 minutes) available online at https://covchurch.org/resources/exploring-covenant-affirmations/  
Discuss: What are the core affirmations of the Evangelical Covenant Church? How is the ECC distinct from other denominations? How does our shared identity impact how we handle adaptive challenges?

Together, read the 1996 Resolution on Human Sexuality.

Discuss: How does the resolution reflect the identity of the ECC? How might it challenge it?

Appendix 2: Discourse on Covenant Freedom

Preparation: Read “Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom” presented to the 1963 Annual Meeting, 2 "Covenant Freedom: Freedom for All or Free-for-all?” by Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom, 3 and “Responses to Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, Covenant Freedom: Freedom for All or Free-for-all?” by Brian Bantum, Steve Bilynskyj, Scott Erickson, Klyne Snodgrass, and Mark Safstrom. 4

Questions for Discussion

The 1963 report on “Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom” says that “the Bible is for us a meeting place with God.” 5 How may this understanding of the Bible inform how Christians address adaptive challenges?

Read together the last sentence on p. 23 and the following 4 paragraphs on p. 24 of the report on “Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom.” How does this perspective on Christian freedom rooted in Biblical authority influence the church’s relationship to sexual minorities?

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Referring to the early Covenanters, the report notes that “their interest in doctrine was practical and devotional rather than intellectualistic… through such discussion they found their own understanding of the faith corrected, deepened, and made relevant to the problems of their day” and invites Covenanters to “enter into the stream of present theological discussion and exercise our freedom creatively and helpfully with respect to the issues which now confront the Christian church.” How might your church (including you) continue to embrace theological discussion, exercising freedom creatively and helpfully with respect to homosexuality? What might need to be learned? What might need to change?

How have you experienced the principle of common life before common doctrine in your congregation?

How does the report on Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom inform the ECC’s way forward on the topics of homosexuality and gay marriage?

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Adaptive challenges are nothing new for the Christian church. In fact, Christianity began as an adaptive challenge for first century Jews in Israel. Welcoming Gentiles into the community of faith was one such challenge. As the church wrestles with adaptive challenges today, what can it learn from how the early church handled an adaptive challenge in Acts 10-11:26 and 15:1-31?

What was required for inclusion into the early church?

The early church leaders did not require Gentile believers to “be circumcised or required to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). They did, however, ask them to “abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood” (Acts 15:20). What are the implications of these restrictions for the church today?

How might we apply the same principles the apostles and early church leaders applied to the adaptive challenge of their day to the challenge presented by sexual minorities and gay marriage?
Appendix 4: Case Studies

Develop Leaders (Department of Ordered Ministry) has graciously provided the following case studies that are based in Covenant communities. Read the case studies then discuss the questions. If you have a large group, you may want to divide into small groups, with each thinking through a different scenario. Then, the small groups report back to the whole.

Case Study #1

You are the church chairwoman of an urban congregation of 150. The congregation has long Covenant roots with many historic families. You have learned from your pastor that the parents of James, a regular attender of the youth group and grandson of the church, approached him with an issue. After years of therapy and extensive consultation with medical doctors, James has decided he will become Jamie and attend youth group as a young woman. He intends to grow longer hair and wear dresses to youth group. Obviously, this will provoke much conversation and concern within the larger congregation.

1. How do you expect the church will respond to this turn of events in the life of the congregation?
2. What resources will you need?
3. What process will you use to work with your council and the congregation?
4. How will you continue to walk with this family through their journey?

Case Study #2

You are serving a suburban church of approximately 250. A daughter of the church in her mid-30’s who has recently moved back to the community with her same sex partner has been attending the church. The couple has decided to adopt and have come to you as an advocate and for a letter of recommendation for the process. Both of them confess Christ and with the child to be raised in the church.

1. How do you process this with your church leaders?
2. Should it go to the congregation?
3. Should you write the letter of recommendation?
4. What’s next?

Case Study #3

In your church of 400, a young man who has been worshipping with you for several years and has participated regularly by reading Scripture on Sunday mornings has come to you stating that he and his partner would like to join the church. He is well-known and well-

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8 Some pastoral roles have been changed to lay leader roles for use in local congregations.
liked by the congregation but very few people are aware of his sexual orientation. You have read the pastoral guidelines for Covenant ministers which do not allow for participation at same sex unions, but given Covenant polity, you understand the local church must discern the decision about membership.

1. How do you lead your church leaders through this decision-making process?

2. What resources are available to assist you in this?

3. What are the potential ramifications of any decision you and the church make about this request?

Case Study #4

A veteran Covenant pastor has served in several churches throughout his ministry career, thriving in each setting. His children are out of college now and he and his wife have entered into a new season of relishing their ministry together and enjoying their first new grandchild. Pastor Harry, grateful for his Covenant colleagues and support from them throughout the years, has confided in you that his older child has been struggling with his sexual orientation in recent years. In fact, the son has told his dad that he believes God has made him this way and now he desires to move forward, embarking on a relationship with another male. Pastor Harry is distraught, knowing where this could lead yet mindful of the guidelines for a Covenant pastor to not perform same sex unions, given the denomination’s stance on human sexuality. However, he wants nothing more than to support his son, express his love to him (as well as communicate the love of God) and be present for him in all transitions in life. He knows he will be asked to participate in some way should this relationship lead to a union.

1. How do you counsel Pastor Harry as a friend and a colleague in ministry?

2. Who else might be involved in the discernment about what Pastor Harry does next?

3. What are the intended and unintended consequences of Pastor Harry’s decision, whatever he decides?

Case Study #5

Pastor Jones is serving a well-established, traditional church. He and his family are well-liked by his congregation although he does not always share their more conservative views which he often finds exclusive rather than inclusive. The Jones’ college-age daughter has just told her parents that she is struggling with gender identity and that she wants to live as a male and explore surgical alternatives and hormone therapy. After much personal struggle, Pastor Jones and his wife choose to support their daughter; however, Pastor Jones realizes that his church will certainly not offer support and he is unsure of the support he would get from the denomination. He realizes that his choice could cause conflicts within the congregation and doesn’t want that to happen, so he is
struggling with whether to simply resign from his call and seek another or to resign his
ordination altogether.
1. To whom should Pastor Jones go for guidance?
2. Is Pastor Jones obligated to discuss his dilemma with his church leadership?
3. Should Pastor Jones seek another call in the ECC and if so, will he need to
disclose his family business?
4. Can Pastor Jones serve on his ECC credential in a non-ECC setting that will allow
him to fully support his daughter?

Case Study #6
You are the youth pastor of the ABC Covenant Church. Several parents arrange to meet
together with you to discuss the upcoming youth retreat at the regional Covenant
campgrounds. When you finally sit down with them, they appear uncomfortable and
nervous. One parent, obviously taking the role as spokesperson for the group, tells you
that they are all very concerned about sending their teens to camp for a week. They have
heard that the campground has hired youth counselors who may be gay – or at the very
least support the exploration of sexual identity. They tell you that they are concerned for
the physical and emotional safety of their teens.

1. How do you remain a non-anxious presence in this meeting?
2. What resources would you use to help these parents?
3. How do you address their concerns from a Biblical perspective?

Case Study #7
You are a council member of a 100-member church. The church chair is the most
committed lay leader, financial contributor and possibly the most trusted person in the
congregation. He has been divorced for 20 years. You have become a close friend of his
in the last 3 years. He recently confided to you that his marriage ended because of an
affair he had with another man and that that affair lasted for 5 years. He has remained
single and chaste for the last fifteen years. He tells you that his adult children, who
attend the church, were recently told by him and his ex-wife why the marriage ended.
The children have told a few other people in the church and he has heard of some
concerns being raised about his appropriateness to continue as church chair. He is asking
for your advice as a friend and fellow church leader.

1. Should he continue in a leadership position in the church?
2. Do you need to have a meeting with his children to extend pastoral care?
3. Do you need to meet with other church leaders to forestall gossip?
4. Who would you trust to resource you in the pastoral situation?

Case Study #8
You are the youth pastor at a large suburban church that has over 700 in attendance each
Sunday. A regular attendee in your youth group, 14 years old, who is well-liked and
capable of serving and leading other young people, asks to meet with you privately. In
this meeting he tells you that he believes that he is gay and that he has struggled with a same-sex attraction since his earliest childhood memories. He has never dated or acted out sexually with anyone. His parents are infrequent attenders of the church and he says that he has not told them about his sexual orientation. He feels lonely and isolated and like he’s faking it all the time. He wants to come out to the youth group.

1. What would a healthy pastoral care strategy for this young man involve?
2. Should he be referred for therapeutic services?
3. What, if any, obligations do you have to his parents?
4. Can he be allowed to come out to the youth group without informing his parents first?
5. Do you need to inform the Senior Pastor, other staff members or church leadership?

Case Study #9
You lead Christian Formation in a struggling inner-city church of 50 members, 30 attendees. You have been attempting recruit a Sunday school teacher for the elementary age children. No one has come forward for over a year. Finally, a single, middle-aged gentleman in the congregation (a member) has volunteered. It is a well-known fact that he is homosexual. He did date and had been active in the homosexual community prior to coming to the church five years ago. Now, he does not date and he leads a completely chaste life. You and the council approve him to teach because of his commitment to chastity and his overall Christian maturity. A small but vocal group in the church, who is aware of his sexual orientation, does not want him to teach, but none of them are willing to teach in his place.

1. Do you allow the gentleman to teach over and against the concerns of a few?
2. Do you ask him not to teach but find other places for him to serve?
3. Is he qualified for other leadership positions in the church?
4. If he is allowed to teach, what type of disclosure would be appropriate for the parents of the elementary aged children.
5. If this person were heterosexual but had had inappropriate relationships outside of marriage but is now leading an appropriate Christian lifestyle, would he be approved to teach?
Appendix 5: “Congregational Statement to love and serve LGBT Individuals”

Grace Evangelical Covenant Church 2016 Annual Meeting, January 24, 2016

Background: After a church-wide study and sermon series on “Forgive Us: Confessions of a Compromised Faith,” eight members of Grace Evangelical Covenant Church met regularly to continue discussing how the Christian faith has been compromised in connection to the LGBTQ community. At the 2016 Annual Meeting of the congregation, they stood and presented the following statement to the church.

We have a variety of viewpoints about the theology of same-sex sexual activity: some of us think the Bible is quite clear it is a sin; some think it is pretty clear that it is not a sin, others of us have not reached a clear understanding of what the Bible says about this matter. While we do not agree on some details, we do agree on this:

We believe our congregation can, and should, do more to welcome and love those with same-sex attraction, or people who identify themselves in the LGBTQ community. We have met together, read the Bible and many other books, prayed and shared our thoughts and our feelings on this issue. We plan to continue doing so and want to invite anyone who shares this interest to contact any of us and, if desired, to join us in this prayerful and respectful journey. What does it mean to love people with same-sex attraction? Surely it involves a lot of listening, a lot of humility before God. We at Grace have a lot to give. We think of ourselves as a welcoming community.

Covenant President Gary Walter said in a February 2015 letter to Covenanter:

"As the church, our sentiment is not to fight a culture war but to love people. We believe it is possible to hold to our biblical view while acknowledging the humanity of all individuals, ministering to needs with pastoral sensitivity and graciousness. There are manifold examples of Covenant churches doing just that. I would hope it would be true of every congregation as we navigate forward."

That is the spirit in which we wish to move forward. If the Lord leads you to do so, please join us. Thank you.
Appendix 6: Relational Covenant, Grace Evangelical Covenant Church

Recognizing that the church is not our idea but God’s idea, that His Spirit wants to guide us, and that “those who love God must love one another” (1 John 4:21):

1. We will be inconvenienced for the sake of the Gospel (Philippians 2:5-11).

2. We will discover what is best for our church as a whole (Philippians 2:3-6).
   • As a body, we will be in prayer and submission to the Holy Spirit (I Thessalonians 5:16-19).
   • We will accept disagreement, conflict and evaluation as normal and natural (Philippians 4:2-3).
   • We will seek mutual respect and understanding among all people in the church (Acts 15), acknowledging and honoring the role and responsibility of lay leaders and church staff (I Thessalonians 5:12).

3. We will build each other up and not tear each other down (I Thessalonians 5:11).
   • We will believe the best of each other and give each other the benefit of the doubt (Philippians 4:8-10).
   • We will make positive investments in each other’s lives (Colossians 3:15-16).

4. We will communicate clearly, completely and directly, both verbally and non-verbally (Ephesians 4:14-16).
   • We will provide our perspective with clarity and humility (Colossians 3:12-14).
   • We will listen wholly to one another (Proverbs 18:13).

5. We will walk hand-in-hand even though we may not always see eye-to-eye (Colossians 3:14-15).

*Upon congregational acceptance, each person in the congregation is authorized to remind each other of our commitment to abide by this covenant whenever we find ourselves in an interaction that does not represent the relational grace to which we have agreed.

A behavioral covenant is a written document developed by leaders, agreed to and owned by (the congregation), and practiced on a daily basis as a spiritual discipline. The covenant answers the question, “How will we behave (how will we live together), especially when we don’t understand each other and when we don’t agree?”

• Gil Rendle, Behavioral Covenants in Congregations
Appendix 7: Listening Sessions and Ground Rules from Grace ECC

With a relational covenant as a foundation, my church hosted five listening sessions on human sexuality. These sessions were precipitated by a conflict between a denominational institution and staff member on the topic of human sexuality that had recently become public. Though there was a specific event that prompted the church leaders and me to host these sessions, we decided right away that we must not argue the merits of either the institutions or the staff members case. Rather, we acknowledged the event, lamented the situation, prayed for all involved and took on the foundational conflict manifest by this particular situation: the church’s response to and relationship with the LGB+ community in general and gay marriage in particular.

For that first session, more than 30 people showed up. We intentional met in our shared sacred space, the sanctuary, and set up chairs in a circle facing one another. This was a Christian community coming together to address a challenging topic. The setting reminded us of who we were, God’s people together.

During these evening sessions, we created intentional, nonjudgmental, safe space where people could speak their hearts, minds and questions with regard to sexuality. We acknowledged our denominational position and acknowledged that not everyone in our congregation agreed with it.

The key scripture for the first session was from James 1:19-20. “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.” (NIV) We spent 20-minutes discussing each of the following questions

- How does this tension surrounding human sexuality in our institution make me feel/think? Why?
- When I heard one of my sisters/brothers-in-Christ share it created a conflict within me. What was that conflict?
- What am I noticing of God in the diversity of voices here?
- What am I hopeful will emerge out of this tension?

We practiced 2 minutes of intentional silence after each question for people to clarify their thoughts/feelings. Congregants had 60 seconds to share his/her thought. Between each speaker, we observed an additional 30 seconds of silence. Again, we did not respond to each other’s responses, but rather to the question raised.

The tension was palpable when we began. We agreed to assume the best of everyone and trust that God would be working in our own heart and mind, not only the heart and mind of our neighbor! There was nervous laughter and indirect eye contact at first, but as we progressed, we began listening to one another. Our body language communicated an openness and respect toward one another.

As the pastor, I facilitated these one-and-a-half hour gatherings, calling on those who raised their hand to speak. Because the group was large, I asked people to choose 2-3 of their responses, holding the others so all may be heard.

9 Leaders may choose to repeat sessions; the ground rules apply to all subsequent sessions.
We held a second session that was modified only slightly from above. We began by debriefing the first session which allowed for those who attended to share their reflections and those who did not attend to hear what happened. Then we entered into the same process. This group was smaller with about 15 in attendance.

In subsequent sessions, we listened through prayer and listened through scripture. Jesus said, “Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete” (John 16:23-24). We began our third session with a simple question: What do I want to ask God, in Jesus’ name, about non-normative sexuality?

Participants had 15 minutes to silently consider their questions for God. Then, we prayed as Jesus taught us. Using the Lord’s Prayer as a framework, we prayed through each stanza with 5 minutes of intentional silence in between. At the end of our time together we reflected on how the Spirit shifted within and among us, asking “what did you hear? sense? feel? know? wonder?”

Our last two listening sessions were focused on scripture. As discussed above, I believe we must read the 6-7 key texts on homosexuality in light of the broader scriptural witness. Because of this, I had gathered more than 17 texts, from Genesis to Revelation for the group to explore, including the key texts. Even with two sessions (3 hours total), we did not have enough time to give even these limited texts their due.

As our sessions continued, our group continued to get smaller. The final session welcomed 7 participants. Some had attended all 5 sessions. Others only came to the final one. We decided together as a group to end our listening sessions at this point, though we all knew there was more work to be done.

By the time we got to this phase of our process, we understood that as a congregation, we had a variety of opinions on and relationships with sexual minorities, scripture and the church. We had more questions than answers. And, we knew we were on a journey together.

As a congregation, we need to return again to listening to scripture. What is required is a series of bible studies on these 17+ texts that I plan to develop at a later date. I imagine setting a key scripture on homosexuality with other texts that cause dissonance for both traditional and progressive thinkers.
Session #1: Listening to One Another

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. -James 1:19-20

Agenda

- Welcome and Opening Remarks
- Process and Instructions
  - This is not a debate, but a listening session.
  - We will not debate the facts of the pending/current case.
  - We are not going to respond or react to one another’s thoughts/feelings.
  - We are going to listen to ourselves and each other deeply.
  - We will spend time discussing the questions printed on the back.
    - We will spend 20 minutes on each question.
    - There will be 2 minutes of silence after each question for people to clarify their thoughts/feelings (space is available on the back of this page and pens are available).
    - Congregants will have 60 seconds to share his/her thought.
    - We will observe 30 seconds of silence between each speaker.
  - Please share how you originally responded. Do not respond to other people's responses.
  - Use “I” statements.
  - Listen with your eyes and body language by looking at the person speaking.
  - Turn off your cell phone and other devices.
  - We will assume the best of everyone in the room.
  - We will trust that God will be working in our hearts and minds.
  - Pastor Mandy will moderate, calling on those who raise their hand to speak. (If the group is large, I will ask people to choose 2-3 of their responses, holding the others so all may be heard.).
- Questions to Consider
  1. How does the tension surrounding human sexuality in the ECC/NPU make me feel/think? Why?
  2. When I heard one of my sisters/brothers-in-Christ share ________________, it created a reaction within me. Why?
  3. What am I noticing of God in the diversity of voices here?
  4. What am I hopeful will emerge out of the tension surrounding human sexuality and the church?
- Closing Prayer
Session #2: Listening for God

Jesus said, “Very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away (to the Father). Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you... Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

–John 16:7-14, 23-24

What do I want to ask God, in Jesus’ name, about non-normative sexuality? Use 5-10 minutes of silence to write your questions here.

Pray the Lord’s Prayer phrase by phrase, with the main question you have for God about non-normative sexuality in mind. What might God be saying to you through prayer? You may write your thoughts on the paper.

Jesus said, “When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. 9 This, then, is how you should pray:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,

10 your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
11 Give us today our daily bread.
12 And forgive us our debts,
   as we also have forgiven our debtors.

13 And lead us not into temptation,
   but deliver us from the evil one.

(Yours is the Kingdom,
   and the power
   and the glory forever.)

What did you hear? sense? feel? know? wonder?

Take 5-10 minutes to gather anything new God may have revealed to you. Share them with the group.

Closing Prayer
Session #3: Listening through Scripture: God’s Kingdom Come

Preparation: Read the resource paper “The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible.” Available at https://covchurch.org/who-we-are/beliefs/resource-papers/ecc-and-bible/.

Read together:
- Micah 4:1-3
- Isaiah 2:4, 11:6
- Matthew 22:1-14, 23-40
- Luke 17:20-21
- Revelation 7:9-17
- Revelation 21:1-14, 22-27

Invite individuals to spend 10 minutes imagining what “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” is like. People may use a variety of methods of expression including art, list making, storytelling, etc.

Imagine together: How might this kingdom reality manifest itself if our local context?

Finally, gather these ideas into different categories together, then pray that God’s kingdom would come in your community. Ask the group if there is one idea they could participate in so that God’s kingdom becomes a fuller reality now.
Session #4: Listening through Scripture: Sex and Marriage


Divide into three (or more groups) so that each group has nearly the same amount to read.11 Each group reads the selected texts together, creating a list of what was learned on the topics of sex and marriage. Each group will then present their findings to the large group.

On Sex
- Genesis 1
- Genesis 38:11-30
- 2 Samuel 11, 12
- Mark 7:21-23
- Matthew 5:28

On Marriage
- Genesis 2
- Genesis 20
- Genesis 29:21-30
- 1 Samuel 18:27
- 1 Kings 11:3
- Matthew 22:23-40
- Mark 10:11-12
- Luke 20:34
- 1 Corinthians 6
- 1 Corinthians 7:1-16

How do these scriptures impact our understanding of sex and marriage in the biblical tradition? In the Christian tradition?

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11 For three equal groups, group #1 reads the OT texts on sex, group #2 reads the OT texts on marriage, and group #3 reads the NT texts on both sex and marriage.
Session #5: Listening through Scripture: Homosexuality


How do the following texts define homosexuality? How do they describe it? What are the surrounding contexts?

- Genesis 19
- Leviticus 18:22, 20:13
- Romans 1:26-27
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-10
- 1 Timothy 1:9-10

How does the Levitical law relate to the new covenant in Jesus’ blood? What does it mean that Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17)? Are Paul’s letters descriptive/normal (of a certain time/place) or prescriptive/normative (for all time)?

The majority of conservative and liberal scholars today agree that Genesis 19 is not about homosexuality specifically, but about power and control over foreigners and a lack of hospitality to “the other”. How does removing this key text from the argument against homosexuality impact the church’s understanding? If “sodomites” is better defined as a lack of hospitality, how does this change the interpretation of 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy?

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Session #6: Listening through Scripture: Incarnational Impact

Preparation: Review your notes from the previous 6 sessions, then read the following texts John 1, John 3:16-20, Philippians 2:1-11, Matthew 5:13-14, Acts 10, Acts 15. Write one paragraph on how spending 6 sessions listening to your fellow Christians, listening to God in prayer, listening to the Holy Scriptures has transformed your understanding of the church’s relationship to sexual minorities and response to gay marriage?

Share the one paragraph reflection with one another.

Discuss
- What does it mean to live out our faith in love for God and for neighbor?
- What walls have we built that God desires to be torn down for the sake of his kingdom?
- What implications to the incarnation of Christ as expressed in John 1 and Philippians 2 have on your life? The congregation’s life together?
- Where is the Spirit at work among us as we reach out to all people in our local context regardless of race, gender or sexual orientation?
- The cross of Jesus has “put to death all hostility” between us. What hostility still remains in you? In us? How can God in Christ break down that wall and set you free?
- What one action item do you sense God calling you to? Is there one action item God is calling us to do together?

Pray together that God in Christ would break down any walls of hostility that may remain within the group and from the group toward sexual minorities. Pray for God to reveal how he desires us to live out of faith in love for Him and for others. Give thanks to God for his love, his truth, and his patience.

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13 See Appendix 3: Adaptive Challenges in the Bible.
Appendix 8: Sample of questions to consider from adaptive thinking

How might the church’s historic affirmation of heterosexual marriage and celibacy in singleness aid or inhibit the church’s ultimate goal (telos)?

How might the biblical witness challenge both the traditional and the progressive views of marriage today?

Are there aspects of the traditional view of marriage that may need innovated for Christian’s continued faithfulness to the gospel?

Are there aspects of the progressive view of marriage that may need to be innovated for Christian’s continued faithfulness to the gospel?

What can today’s leaders learn from church leaders in the past who guided change in uncertain times?

How does the church adapt old systems and understandings in order to stay true to its calling in its context?

How might our congregation address different perspectives on faithful sexuality while maintaining unity?

What similarities/differences exist between heterosexual and same-sex marriages and what are the theological and ethical implications?

What is the most valued aspect of the traditional view? What is the most valued aspect of the progressive view? How might those two values come together to form one new view?
Appendix 9: Integrative Thinking Process: Getting Started

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the problem you are solving?</th>
<th>Impasse in the congregation on sexuality and marriage.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the opposing models?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Model 1: Traditional Model</td>
<td>Model 2: Progressive Model</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essential Components: How would you</td>
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<tr>
<td>describe each model using three bullet points, specifying the key choices that make them extreme and opposing?</td>
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Pro/Pro Charts – Identifying the benefits of each model for key players/constituents.

Model 1: Traditional

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Triune God</th>
<th>The Church</th>
<th>Sexual Minorities</th>
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What is this model really about?
Model 2: Progressive

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<tr>
<th>Triune God</th>
<th>The Church</th>
<th>Sexual Minorities</th>
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What is this model really about?

Use an arrow ⟷ to highlight the similarities between each model.
Use an X to note the differences between each model.
Use a ♥ to indicate what we value most in each model.
Consider the tensions, assumptions and causal relationships of each model? Is there overlap? Ways of solving? Ways of thinking differently? Ways of changing the cause/effect relationships?

Generate possibilities: How might a new model be built from the most valued aspects of each opposing model while throwing the rest of each model away? Is there a hidden gem in each model that can be used to apply to the problem? Under what conditions could a more intense model actually generate one vital benefit of the other? Can the problem be divided so that both models can apply to different parts of the problem?

Concretely define each possibility, more comprehensively articulating how it may work. Understand the logic of the possibilities under different conditions. Consider if any of the possibilities could be a winning solution. Then, design and test the possibility.
Appendix 10: Frameworks on Sexuality

Yarhouse’s Three Lenses: How do you see it?

The three following Lenses proposed by Yarhouse are positions supported by different scriptural texts and held by faithful Christians. Read the following descriptions. What’s your lens? What resonates with you the most about this lens? Why? Discuss with the group.

1) Integrity Lens
The integrity lens views sex of maleness and femaleness as stamped in one’s body. Male/female differences are intended by God from creation. This lays the foundation for morally permissive sex that exists in the context of covenant marriage. This lens understands the second creation account (Genesis 2:22-24) as describing a complementary relationship between men and women that when joined to one another form an integrated sexual whole. Homosex, therefore, threatens to dishonor God’s created order and is inherently immoral.

The second lens is what Yarhouse terms as the disability lens. The disability lens

2) Disability Lens
This lens emphasizes the Fall’s impact on creation (Genesis 3) and points to variations on sexuality as unintended realities of the brokenness of creation. Those who depend on this lens see a sexual minority as created in God’s image, but his/her sexuality as stained or broken by sin. This view does not see same-sex attraction as the result of a moral choice, but rather a condition or state with which one must contend. Therefore, individuals with same-sex attraction are treated with compassion and care as they seek to live faithfully within this condition.

3) Integrity Lens
The last lens in Yarhouse’s framework is the diversity lens. The diversity lens views sexual difference as part of God’s endless creativity to be celebrated, honored, and valued. This lens is an extension of the biblical trajectory from a man and a woman in a garden to all nations in a city. It is a continued out working of being one in Christ (neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Galatians 3:28). This lens is gaining in popularity in the church.

Homework: Using the scripture texts from Appendix 7 (sessions 3-6) find biblical support for all three lenses. Return and briefly discuss your discoveries at the next meeting.
Review the spectrum and indicate where you fall on it. Draw a basic spectrum on a chalkboard, whiteboard or flip chart. Invite each group member to come forward and mark their place on the spectrum with a brief explanation. After, decide together where the congregation is on the spectrum. (This tool could be used at the beginning and end of the adaptive process to assess personal and congregational change through the process).
Sebanc’s Spectrum and Quadrants

In general, what does the Bible say about homosexual practice/marriage?
-5 = I believe the bible is completely open to homosexual practices/marriage. (Completely Possible)
+5 = I believe the bible is completely closed to homosexual practices/marriage (i.e. anything other than celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in heterosexual marriage). (Completely impossible or not at all possible)

The level of scale indicates your level of commitment to your understanding of what the bible says about homosexual practices/marriage.

- Completely Possible
- Completely Impossible

- What does the Bible say as it addresses the idea of same sex relationships?
- What does the Bible mean as it addresses the idea of same sex relationships?
- Is it possible, from a biblical point of view, to bless a same sex marriage?
- How does the Jesus inclusion of sinners in his mission and the church’s flexibility around issues of law, tradition and ethnic matters affect this conversation?
- Is same sex orientation a sinful?
- Where does the view of the purpose of sex being procreational fit into our understanding of what the Bible says?
- Scripture’s view of marriage and the place of sex within it?
- What does scripture allow us to “affirm” in homosexuality?
- Can same sex marriage allow for people to enter more fully into living for God’s glory? Does heterosexual marriage do that?
- How strict was Jesus sexual ethic, especially since he does not seem to mention homosexuality?
- How do the Old Testament purity codes and their definition of appropriate sexual behavior impact a Christian’s life today?

Discover the average score and plot that on the Y-Axis (below).

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15 Sebanc’s spectrum to indicate an individual’s biblical and relational quotient needs refined. I include it here because I believe it has merits for further development.
In general, how committed are you to engage, love, relate and include sexual minorities?

- Does a Christian have to hold a traditional view on human sexuality to be welcome at the table? Can you fellowship with people who hold different views?
- If we are required to offer pastoral care to people regardless of gender, race, class, culture or sexual orientation, what does that mean for our ministry to people?
- Do you have close friends or family members that are LGBT and how does that affect your relationship with them?
- Should a practicing homosexual be allowed to be a member of the church? A leader?
- Is this a justice issue? How do we handle/define bullying?
- How does a traditional view of LGBT issues put LGBT people at risk in families, churches, society? And what do we do with that?
- Does love require us to affirm behavior? Can we be “welcoming but not affirming?”
- How comfortable are you with people in same sex marriages being involved in your church and your life?
- Would you expect those who are in same sex marriages or relationships to separate and/or divorce in order to be a part of the church?
- How does our “Freedom in Christ” affect our view of LGBT matters?
- Is this an issue that is central enough to divide the church whether you are for or against inclusion?
- How does “love the sinner, hate the sin” fit into your understanding of how God wants us to approach LGBT people?

Discover the average score and plot that on the X-Axis (below). Then plot your position on the graph.
**Quadrant I – Judging:** Low commitment to relationship/high commitment to the traditional view of scripture. This quadrant is the common view of the evangelical church. People maintain a high view of scripture with a belief that the clear witness of the bible is the traditional view against same sex relationships. The issue creates anxiety in relationship or at least includes people who do not welcome or include/limit the participation of LGBT people in the life of the church. On the left side of this quadrant you would encounter the Westborough Baptist type of church member and on the right end of this quadrant you would find people who might not be antagonistic, but simply are not willing to stretch themselves to offer care or welcome to the LGBT community.

**Quadrant II – Ignoring:** This quadrant is low on scriptural authority or voice in the conversation and low on commitment to relationship. It is a laissez faire form of approaching LGBT matters. There could be a general disdain for the other in this situation similar to those who are in the judging quadrant, but it comes from some other place than the witness and authority of scripture. “Let people be themselves, just don’t wave it in my face” is a common refrain for those in this quadrant. Anxiety around the issue might keep people from addressing it or offering love and welcome to others.

**Quadrant III – Blessing:** Believe that the witness of scripture does not clearly rule out same sex relationship and maintain a high commitment to relationships. This leads to a willingness to not only include, but to bless same sex relationships. I purposely do not use the word “low” view of scripture because many in this quadrant maintain a high view of scripture but do not believe that scripture (or God) condemns homosexuality. This group for the most part would be advocating for full inclusion of LGBT people into the church and willing to offer marriage as an option.
Quadrant IV – Engaging: This quadrant would maintain a view that scripture presents a traditional ethic of “celibacy in singleness and faithfulness within heterosexual marriage,” therefore considering anything other than this contrary to the will of God. However, those in this quadrant also maintain a high commitment to relationship and a reduction of anxiety around LGBT questions. It is from this place that the church can engage those with same sex orientation and offer the love and grace of God to everyone, seeking to live both grace and truth. Those in this quadrant seek to live with faithfulness to their belief that the scriptures maintain a clear witness to the traditional ethic and a clear mandate to remain in deep, loving relationships across differences. The church understands that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and we can operate with flexibility because we understand our own sinfulness and how God’s grace allows us to stand in and minister out of our own brokenness.

The high commitment to relationship allows for inclusion within the church community at different levels as it moves deeper into relationship because people are willing to be flexible and offer love to their LGBT friends, neighbors, co-workers and fellow Christians. This could possibly even include the blessing of same sex marriages on the far right of the scale not because the church believes that scripture affirms it but because of the scripturally driven commitment to operating out of God’s love and a desire to see everyone thrive.

Review the spectrum and indicate where you fall on it. Draw a basic Y- and Y-Axis on a chalkboard, whiteboard or flip chart. Invite each group member to come forward and mark their place on the graph with a brief explanation. After, decide together where the congregation is on the graph. (This tool could be used at the beginning and end of the adaptive process to assess personal and congregational change through the process).
Appendix 11: A Sermon Series on Sexuality

As mentioned above, I decided to throw wide open the door to sexuality in my congregation through a sermon series. After consultation with and the blessing of the church council, I launched a sermon series “Sexual Tensions” in the Spring of 2015. God certainly has a sense of humor, because for my first sermon on sex, my dad and mom were visiting. Nonetheless, I persisted.

My goal for this series was to bring God’s truth and grace into our understanding of human sexuality. We were/are not seeking to develop a churchwide policy or determine denominational loyalties. Rather, we were trusting God’s Word – written in the Holy Scriptures, embodied in Jesus Christ, and discerned through the Holy Spirit – was living and active judging the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts (Heb 4:12).

The key verse for the series was Philippians 2:12-13 — "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” My hope was that in bringing the conversation on sexuality front and center (literally and figuratively) of my congregation God would in fact fulfill HIS good purposes. Not mine. Not someone else’s. God’s.

I studied extensively for this series and I prayed constantly. I asked others to pray for me and my church. We prayed for God’s purposes, for unity, for humility, for courage. We prayed for individuals who may be personally impacted by this conversation and had spiritual directors and counselors listed in the bulletin for pastoral care.

Before launching into the series, we tried to over-communicate its purpose. We also gave the series a PG-13 rating and made parents of junior high and high school students aware of our topic (our younger children are in Sunday school during the sermon). Finally, our children’s ministry hosted a training on how to talk to your kids about sex.

I sought to educate my congregation on the two sides - traditional and progressive - of this tension. My hope was that our congregation would move toward one another. I wanted the traditional people to understand where the progressive folks were coming from, and the progressive people to understand the traditional perspective.

The seven-week sermon series was constructed as follows:

“The Book on Sex… and Other Things” emphasized that sex is both more important and less important than our culture’s (and even the current church’s) appropriation.

“Sex is Good” celebrated God’s creation of sex for procreation, intimacy and even as a way of understanding Christ’s union with the church.

“Sex and Sin” acknowledged that sex has been and is used against God’s good purposes to control, manipulate and harm people.

“Sex and Jesus” (Part 1&2) reminded us that in the Christian church, our primary identity is “in Christ” and explored Jesus’ life and teaching on the topic.

“Sex and Grace” called all people in the church to extend unmerited favor to one another regarding sex and sexuality.

For audio recordings of this sermon series along with resources recommended to Grace ECC, visit http://www.gracechurchchicago.org/sexual-tensions/.

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“Sex and the Church” exhorted the church to think more deeply and wholly about sex, trusting that God is at work making all things new.

Each Sunday, I clearly shared the ECC’s position. I reiterated my commitment to and love for our denomination. But I also shared that I had been asked to officiate at gay-friend’s wedding. I was honest about the conflict within me over this topic. I know and understand the church’s position, and yet I know LGB+ Christians with deep faith in Christ and evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in their lives and same-sex relationships. There is a tension over sexual faithfulness in the Christian tradition that resides deep within me.

During this series, a few courageous people shared testimonies. One woman expressed concern for the generational gap that existed with her young-adult children on sexuality. Another shared how the church responded to her when her baby was born out of wedlock. Two parents shared their struggles when their adult child revealed same-sex attraction and chose a same-sex spouse. Another woman shared her journey toward accepting a lesbian identity.

These individuals were thoughtful and brave. I am grateful for the gift they gave our church. And, I am grateful how our congregation received their stories, held their tears and stood in support.

There are some things in life that you just don’t want to do, but you know you must. For many of these folks, talking about sexuality publicly was one of those things. For me, it was preaching this sermon series. We all approached the topic with fear and trembling, but we approached it nonetheless less. I’m grateful that we did.

Finally, during the series (and still available today) I provided the congregation with some resources for personal study on our church website. Included there are links to denominational resources that apply to this topic and discussion, limited websites that I found balanced and fair, and a short list of books I believe help congregants wrestle with this topic (http://www.gracechurchchicago.org/faith-in-focus/).

Be careful, as a facilitator, to remain as neutral as possible. My hope was to challenge my congregants toward one another, for those with traditional views to understand the progressive views, and for those with progressive views to understand the traditionalists. On reflection, I revealed my personal views too much. But I do think those involved realized the topic was more complex than they realized, and that they all didn’t agree (and maybe didn’t have to) to be brothers- and sisters-in-Christ.

Appendix 12: Two Additional Congregational Processes

A Congregational Governance Approach at North Park Covenant Church is available at http://www.npcovenant.org/human-sexuality/.

An Adult Formation Approach at Resurrection Covenant Church is available at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1WqF9-aaSVVHCfclj2rx9bqJ--IM3q5JionC_GezlpYc/edit?usp=sharing.
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**Perspectives of Sexual Minority Christians**


