

## An Invitation to be Affirming

The debate in The Church of Scotland, and in other denominations, is obviously an issue of huge significance for its members who identify, either publicly or privately, as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered (lgbt.) It should not be imagined that when we talk about lgbt people we are talking about people outside the church. Within the membership of the Kirk there are lgbt people, their families and friends.

The manner in which lgbt people are talked about has an effect on them and on those who support them; they may feel for, example, that their security and sense of belonging within the community of faith is under threat. In addition it is for good reason that many lgbt people do not belong to any church – they sense that they will not be welcome if they did come near its doors.

**In these times, therefore, it is vital to identify congregations where lgbt people will be openly welcomed and affirmed. Affirmation Scotland extends an invitation to any congregation to make this step and declare itself to be welcoming of lgbt people. A number of Church of Scotland congregations have already done this and on their websites and church literature there is a statement to this effect. Members of Affirmation Scotland have supported a number of congregations in their process of discussion and decision on this matter.**

Affirmation Scotland receives occasional enquiries from lgbt people asking if we can recommend a church where they would be welcome. We want to be able to respond in the affirmative.

It is one thing to say, “All people are welcome, regardless of ....” However, most people do not appreciate being placed in a “regardless” category. The challenge is to welcome and affirm diversity. There may come a day when the church takes such diversity for granted, but until then there is a need to be specific in naming the ways in which people have been excluded over the years. The following statement is used by one church in Scotland which has made the commitment towards the inclusion and affirmation of all people. It is included in all church publicity, and is an example of what can be done to ensure that the church’s commitment is clear to all.

We seek to affirm the dignity of all people.  
We welcome into the life of our community of faith people of every age, gender,  
race, country of origin, ethnic heritage, sexual orientation,  
mental or physical abilities or condition, education,  
marital or economic status, cultural, or religious background.  
**ALL PEOPLE  
ARE WELCOMED  
AND AFFIRMED**  
at the Lord’s Table and at ours.

Making a commitment like this is not to be taken lightly. It will require careful thought and discussion within Kirk Session and congregation. It is possible that there will be strong reactions to the idea. There will, however, be people in the congregation, perhaps members, who identify as LGBT or who have LGBT members of their family; who will welcome this subject being discussed. There may also be others, perhaps refugees or people with disabilities, who will feel that their place within the life of the congregation has been affirmed and that they truly belong.

It is one thing to make such a declaration; it is another to be open to the possible changes in congregational life it may suggest. The Group Discussion material in this Resource Pack aims to assist in this process. Affirmation Scotland is willing to provide support for churches who are ready to begin this journey.

For example, one congregation followed this process: first the question of being an Affirming Congregation was discussed by the Kirk Session. It was decided that the congregation would be asked to vote on the matter. Information for the congregation was prepared to take away and read and on three Sundays voting slips were issued at Morning Worship. They were asked to vote for (a) I wish our congregation to be Affirming, or (b) I do not wish this or (c) I have no feelings either way. Of the around 300 votes cast, 197 said yes, 2 said no and 100 said they had no strong views either way. Much more importantly, the roof of the church did not fall in and no-one walked out!

Any congregation wanting to engage in this process will find their own way of doing it. What is important is that there is clear leadership from minister and session that this is a significant matter to discuss – and hopefully to act on.

For those congregations interested in the process of becoming a community where all are welcome and there are no barriers, Affirmation Scotland would be happy to meet with the minister, the Kirk Session or any other group to discuss how this can be made a reality. We would also wish, eventually, to publicise your commitment on the Affirmation Scotland website so that those who have traditionally felt excluded and marginalised from the faith community can be assured of a welcome.



# **Becoming an Affirming Congregation**

## **Next Steps, Resources and Group Exercises**

Affirmation Scotland invites congregations to engage in a process of becoming an Affirming Congregation. Publicly declaring this commitment is an important first step – some congregations have done it. Next steps are to put this commitment into practice.

### **Goals for Affirming Congregations**

(Developed by Affirmation Scotland, working with Stonewall Scotland<sup>1</sup>)

- We do not make assumptions about the sexual orientation or gender identity of members of our congregation.
- We respond to the individual needs and lives of members of our congregation.
- We do not do or say anything that violates the dignity and rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender members of our congregation.
- We appreciate that families come in a multitude of different forms and pledge to value and support all families equally.
- We create an environment where members of our congregation can be out if they wish to be.
- We ensure lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people feel welcome, safe and valued in our congregation.
- We offer a safe space where everyone in the congregation can respectfully discuss and understand one another on difficult issues.

In this process, each congregation starts from a unique place and faces different challenges. The activities provided below are designed to help all people explore the steps they can take, as individuals and as groups, to meet the goals above. These activities encourage people to grow more comfortable addressing difficult issues, to reflect upon specific situations, to identify and dismantle barriers that exclude lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, and to intentionally include and affirm people.

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**When holding a meeting to discuss these issues it is important to establish some ground rules. For example:**

- **everyone speaks and listens with courtesy**
- **remember that in the group there may be lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, or their loved ones (don't assume they are only 'out there')**
- **everyone speaks openly, trusting that what they say will not be held against them or repeated afterwards (maintain confidentiality)**
- **everyone speaks responsibly for herself or himself (don't react to what others say)**
- **the leader / chairperson has the right to request any person speaking to stop, and this is to be respected**
- **everyone is responsible for observing the ground rules**
- **... and anything else the group may agree upon**

**It is crucial that the leader / chairperson has planned how to use this material and is committed to the goals and content of the meeting.**

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AFFIRMATION SCOTLAND RESOURCE PACK 3.B.1

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<sup>1</sup> Stonewall Scotland campaigns for equality and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. [www.stonewallscotland.org.uk](http://www.stonewallscotland.org.uk)

## Some Additional Resources

There is a plethora of material available to assist reflection, learning and discussion on matters of human sexuality. Listed below are a few websites, books and other documents which may be of use and / or interest.

### 1. Websites

**a. Affirmation Scotland – [www.AffirmationScotland.org.uk](http://www.AffirmationScotland.org.uk)**

The Affirmation Scotland website contains articles, sermons and information about the organisation. You can also access information on the 'Biblical Self-Defence Course' which is an excellent programme to help groups interact with the Biblical material from an inclusive and affirming standpoint.

**b. One Kirk – [www.onekirk.org](http://www.onekirk.org).**

One Kirk works for an inclusive, affirming and progressive Church of Scotland. It contains a number of very helpful papers on sexuality and the Kirk's debate on the issue.

**c. Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement – [www.lgcm.org.uk](http://www.lgcm.org.uk)**

The UK organisation for lesbian and gay Christians; largely Anglican in nature but the site has a useful on-line store for books. There is an LGCM Caucus for Reformed Churches members.

**d. The Inclusive Church Network - [www.inclusivechurch2.net](http://www.inclusivechurch2.net)**

A network within The Anglican Communion which aims to celebrate and maintain its traditional inclusivity and diversity.

**e. More Light Presbyterians – [www.mlp.org](http://www.mlp.org)**

Seeks the full participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of faith in the life, ministry and witness of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and supports 'More Light' congregations – that is, congregations affirming and welcoming of LGBT people.

**f. Out In Scripture - [www.hrc.org/scripture](http://www.hrc.org/scripture)**

Out in Scripture is a devotional resource to consider a life of faith and putting that faith into action. It is also especially helpful for preachers preparing sermons based on the Revised Common Lectionary.

### 2. Church Reports

**a.** Report to The General Assembly of 2007 – “A challenge to unity: same-sex relationships as an issue in theology and human sexuality.”

**b.** Report to The General Assembly of 1998 – The Interpretation of Scripture (Panel on Doctrine)

**c.** Reports to The General Assembly of 1994 – Human Sexuality (Working Group of The Board of Social Responsibility) and Theology of Marriage (Panel on Doctrine)

It is to be noted that the above reports all paint a picture of The Church of Scotland as a broad church, where there is a diversity of viewpoints, and where mature debate and respect for differing views must take place. Other denominations have also issued reports on sexuality, for example The Methodist Church and The United Reformed Church.

### 3. Books and Study Material

**a.** Sexuality: Readings, Prayers and other liturgical resources – available from Wild Goose Publications, The Iona Community

**b.** Sexuality: Bible Studies, by Graeme Brown – available from Wild Goose Publications, The Iona Community

**c.** Biblical Self-Defence Course: A programme for groups offered by Affirmation Scotland which gives an inclusive and affirming view of the Bible.

**d.** In The Eye of The Storm, by Gene Robinson – perhaps the most famous Episcopal Bishop talks about his life, faith and being gay. (Canterbury Press 2008))

**e.** Face to Face – Gay and Lesbian Clergy on Holiness and Life Together, by Jeffrey Heskins (SCM Press 2005)

**f.** Coming In – gays and lesbians reclaiming the spiritual journey, by Urs Mattman (Wild Goose Publications 2006)



## Group Exercise 1: Being Different

Read the article and examples below and discuss.

### Why It's Really Alright to be Different

By Michael Hanlon

On the face of it, this is one of life's oddest and least logical prejudices. It is also, bizarrely and sadly, one of the most universal.

People who have this so-called "disadvantage" do not look different and are found in every society, race and ethnic group on the planet. They worship the same gods, eat the same food, speak the same languages and there is little real evidence that they think any differently to the other 90 per cent of the world's population.

There is only one way in which these people are 'different' and that is that they happen to favour their left hand over their right.

A new study casts fascinating light on the age-old stigma associated with being left-handed. Chris McManus, a scientist at University College London, claims that left-handedness has reached record levels.

He has analysed the handwriting of people throughout the past several hundred years and found that the proportion of southpaws seems to have increased from around three per cent in 1900 to nearer 11 per cent today. These findings confirm other studies, which suggest a "natural" frequency of left-handedness in most populations of between eight and 15 per cent. There is no suggestion that more left-handers are being born.

There is some fascinating evidence that the hand we choose to write with, or with which we perform the most delicate tasks, is rooted deep in our brains and genes even before we are born. A study of people down the ages shows that left-handed and right-handed people *are* different - subtly. And, being human nature, these differences (and the fact that left-handers are a small minority) have clearly made them targets of prejudice.

The concept of "leftness" is seen as being literally "sinister", "gauche" and "awkward". There is the phrase "two left hands" - meaning clumsy - and nicknames such as "gibble-fisted", "golly-handed" and "dolly-pawed". In most European languages, including English, "right" is used not only to signify direction but also a sense of what is "correct", "authority" and "justice". Right-handedness (dexterity) is a synonym for skilful and, in Irish Gaelic, the word "deas" means both "right side" and "nice". In German, "links" means "left" as well as "sly" and "devious". The Old English slang term "cack-handed" derives from the propensity to use one's left hand to clean oneself after defecation.

In his recent book on left-handedness - called *Right Hand, Left Hand* - Dr McManus points out that we still live in a world designed for right-handers. Everything from scissors to power tools and from keyboards to computer mice are built with right-handers in mind. This right-handed bias can be deadly. Several mill-workers have lost their arms attempting to use wood-cutting band-saws with the "wrong" hand. And the British Army's SA80 assault rifle, widely derided as probably the worst piece of ordnance ever to be put into service, cannot be fired from the left shoulder because red-hot cartridge cases will then be discharged into the soldier's face.

The science of left-handedness is not fully understood. But it is known that "handedness" is not a "learned" trait. Statistically, the identical twin of a left-handed person has a 76per cent chance of being left-handed themselves, which means that the cause must be mostly genetic.

There is clearly a degree of genetic "hard-wiring" as, even in the womb, babies can be seen in scans to favour one hand over the other, holding it closer to their mouth or licking it. It is possible that the "default" condition is to be right-handed, with the left side of the brain (which controls the right of the body) dominant in the foetus. Another theory is that increased exposure to testosterone in the womb suppresses the development of the left brain, creating a more "male" brain, with a higher likelihood of left-handedness (sinistrality being more common in males) as well as a greater likelihood of other "male brain" tendencies such as dyslexia and stuttering.

Some research suggests that as mothers' ages at childbirth increase (as is happening in Western society today), there will be more left-handed babies because older women are more likely to bear left-handers.

Perhaps if left-handedness was common, we would not need to remark upon it. But being in a minority, left-handers need to be "explained" and studied. The very existence of the prejudice, as strong as it has been, is interesting in itself. It suggests that, unlike skin colour, your hand preference is something far more than skin deep. And now, it seems, this is a difference which can finally be celebrated.

Published in the Daily Mail, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2007

### Examples of Prejudice Against Left-handed People

There are endless examples of how left-handed people have been prejudiced against. Here are a few examples of how the right is associated with all things good while the left is evil and inferior.

- In days gone by, the Catholic church believed left handers to be servants of the devil.
- Right up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, having a left handed wife was sufficient grounds for divorce in Japan.
- Until fairly recently, children in many countries around the world who showed signs of left handedness at school were rapped on the knuckles and made to write with their right hands. In Victorian times, children even had their left arms tied behind their backs so they couldn't use them.
- It's bad luck to pass a bottle of wine with your left hand.
- Throughout history, left handers have been treated with suspicion and hostility. For example, in medieval times, if a woman was left handed, she was accused of being a witch. And the penalty for that was death.
- About a century ago, children in some African tribes who showed signs of being left handed would have their hands pushed into a hole in the ground that was filled with boiling oil.
- The Maoris used to believe the right represented life and the left, death. For North American Indians, left also signified death and burial.
- The devil was believed to be left handed.
- A left-handed oath is a promise you don't intend to keep.

### Discuss

- **How do you feel about what you've just read?**
- **Is anyone in the group left-handed? What has been their experience?**
- **Does it seem reasonable to you for people to be discriminated against for being left-handed?**
- **What do you see as the key differences between being left-handed and being gay?**



## Group Exercise 2: Voices from the Margins

All of the statements below are from real people, known to Affirmation Scotland. Their details have been changed to respect their privacy.

Form a circle and invite each person, in turn, to read aloud one of the following statements. After reading the statement take a moment to imagine, *'How would I feel in this person's situation?'* Share briefly with the group your reflections.

The next person in the circle is asked to listen carefully to the statement and to the former person's reflections, and then to imagine, *'How would I respond to this person?'* Share briefly with the group. Then continue with the next statement.

1

I would like some information and advice to support me on my current spiritual journey. For a year or so I have been attending a fairly liberal church. However it is quite small with lots of families and so I feel a bit isolated as a gay person. I am open about my sexual orientation – I'm in my 50s, and have been out for 20 years, and I have a supportive partner. I am new to the religious journey and find it very challenging. The minister is open-minded, but not everyone in the congregation is comfortable to be around, especially in small groups. I feel I give to my church but need more support to be able to continue giving.

2

I am a gay teenager and have started to think about how I feel about church. I know that something needs to change. I would find it hard to leave the church as it has been a part of my family for generations and really I would feel lost without it. I have had more happy moments than sad moments if you know what I mean. Sometimes I think I just need a shake or something.

I know that God loves everybody including me even though at times I do things wrong. I just want to say sometimes it is my own fault. Maybe if I tried harder to like the opposite sex, but I know that is wrong. The first person I should love is myself and that is quite hard. I tried writing a list of what I like about myself and I didn't even make a mark on the page. I could not think of one thing, but people seem to like me so there must be something good about me. I wish I could see it.

3

I am a young gay person seeking my way to God. I am sick and tired of blaming myself for being a gay. I want to be an active (actually I am) gay and active Christian. I would like to ask you what is the attitude of the Church towards gay people like me? I would be very grateful for your response and help.

4

This will be our second Christmas since our grown child came out to us as gay, and although some progress has been made I feel more could be achieved with extra support. I would like to know how to help my spouse who is really struggling and fears for our child's safety. Myself, I'm more okay with it and able to move through this process.

5

My partner and I have been together for 18 years. Over the last 4 years our faith has really developed through the Alpha Course and regular church attendance, so much so that we both joined the church 2 years ago. However at the moment we are in a quandary and wonder if you can help us. We are members of what we thought was a forward-thinking church. We both love the services and the minister is a great preacher who really makes you think on a Sunday morning. But we have discovered that a number of members including the minister are against gay people serving in ministry. While we have never come out and said we are a couple, ever since we made our public profession of faith we have not hidden the fact that we live together. We love the church but find ourselves heading fast for the closet or leaving altogether. How do we summon up the courage to speak to our minister? What pastoral care can the church provide for a committed Christian gay couple like us?

6

Our son was at university when he told us he was gay. He said he had always felt different but was too scared to tell anyone. Only then did we realise the torment he had gone through in his teenage years. I think he felt suicidal at times. We have always told him that we love him – he is still our son and nothing will change that. I find it very hard to listen to people in the Church describe people like my son as perverts and quote the Bible to support their views. How might I counter these arguments, if I have the courage to speak out?

7

Why should I as a gay person believe in God when the Church says that God doesn't believe in me?

### **Group Exercise 3: Voices from the Church**

**For each member provide a copy of the four testimonies from the Resource papers.**

**Divide into groups and assign each group one of the testimonies to read aloud. After hearing the testimony take turns reflecting on the following questions and sharing briefly with the group:**

- Can you recall a time when you were excluded, or fearful to tell others something about yourself?  
What did it feel like?  
How would you have liked to have been treated?
- How does reading these testimonies make you feel - about the person telling their story and about the Church?
- How do you imagine you would feel if you were the person in the testimony?

**Ask one person from each group to report back to the plenary:**

- (a) a brief summary of the testimony
- (b) two or three key points that the group learned from the testimony



## Group Exercise 4: Barriers and Solutions

For a congregation to change and become more inclusive, it's helpful to identify ways in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people may be ignored or excluded. Here are some examples of barriers and possible solutions. Take turns reading aloud each barrier and discussing the possible solution. Are there other solutions? Which ones relate more to groups or the whole congregation, and which ones relate more to individuals?

Barriers	Possible Solutions
A man who has recently started attending your church refers to his partner, and you ask, "What is her name? "	You could ask, "What is your partner's name?"
The word 'gay' is being used as a term of abuse by young people in the congregation.	At a preventative level, engage the young people in a discussion about prejudice and about challenging stereotypes. At that time you hear the abuse, challenge the young person in the same way you would if you heard them using a term to define a particular race as an insult. Make it clear that it is not an insult to say that someone is gay, but to use the term as an insult is hurtful to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.
A family in your congregation consists of two women and a child, and they are asked which of them is the child's 'real' mum.	Accept that both women are the parents of the child and treat them accordingly.
Your congregation helps to fund or uses materials from an organisation which explicitly discriminates against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.	A first step may be to contact the organisation to connect with them on the issue. If this is not satisfactory, you may decide to withdraw your support from the organisation.
Issues of race, gender and income equality are addressed from the pulpit or in prayers, without also addressing issues on sexual orientation.	Ensuring that sexual orientation is addressed explicitly in prayers and in sermons.

For each member provide a copy of the Goals for Affirming Congregations listed above.

- Divide into groups and identify barriers which currently exist in the congregation.
- Use the list of goals for reference and inspiration.
- Identify possible solutions.
- Is there more than one? If there seems to be no solution, why?

Ask one person from each group to report back to the plenary.

- What solutions are similar and can be merged together?
- Who or what group is responsible for taking forward each solution?
- How and when will each solution be put into practice?

<b>Barriers</b>	<b>Solutions</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>



## **Additional Group Exercises**

### **5 Naming Names**

Ask the group to name as many famous people as they can who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (for example, Elton John).

As names are mentioned, be aware as a group of when people react with 'no, she's not' or 'how do you know that?' (If the latter is said, it might be good to find out how the person naming the name does know.)

Discuss if the sexual orientation or gender identity of any of the people has caused them harm (or success) in their careers. How has this arisen?

### **6 Change But Not Decay**

Make a list of changes in church life that have taken place in the lifetimes of those present (for example, King James Version of the Bible giving way to modern English translations).

From the list, select two or three that are each quite different from the others. For each one:

- Identify the cause or causes of the change.
- What roles did the Bible, tradition, reason, and human experience play in the change taking place?
- What were the reactions to the change?
- What is the current situation in relation to the change that took place?

### **7 Substances Of The Faith**

Invite each person to write down, on their own, what they consider to be their core statement of Christian belief (for example, Jesus is Lord).

Together as a group, make a list of these statements, drawing attention to where they are the same or different. As people read out their statements, the others in the group are asked to listen carefully and be aware of their own reactions to what they hear.

For each member provide a copy of the resource paper, 'Thinking Theologically about Same-Sex Relationships,' and ask them to read it.

- What do you think and feel about the diversity of theological statements?
- What are healthy ways for the church to live with diversity of belief?

## 8 Statements of Affirmation

The following statements were produced by three Church of Scotland congregations, agreed by their Kirk Sessions, and appear on church publicity material.

1

*Love one another, as I have loved you (John 15:12)*

We welcome into the life and worship of our congregation all people whatever their ethnic origin, gender, background, age, sexual orientation, mental or physical ability.

We affirm our diversity and the dignity of each person.

*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Romans 15:7)*

2

We seek to affirm the dignity of all people.

We welcome into the life of our church, people of every race, gender, age, sexual orientation, mental or physical ability.

*Let us build a house where love can dwell.*

*All are welcome in this place.*

3

At St. Inclusive we seek to affirm the dignity of all people.

We welcome into the life of our community of faith people of every age, gender, race, country of origin, ethnic heritage, sexual orientation, mental or physical abilities or condition, education, marital or economic status, cultural, or religious background.

**ALL PEOPLE ARE WELCOMED AND AFFIRMED**

at the Lord's Table and at ours.

- What do you like about each?  
Are there particular phrases that are especially challenging or inviting?  
Is there anything missing?
- What do you see as the connection, if any, between a congregation publicly declaring such a statement and the mission of the church?
- Now have a go at writing your own!

