



Let's  
talk about ...  
**Same-Sex  
Relationships**

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This Facilitator Resource is one of a set of resources developed by International Headquarters to enable The Salvation Army family to talk about sexuality and relationships. A facilitator hosts each conversation and has access to the following resources:

- **Conversation Guide:** This guide will help facilitate the conversation. The questions aim to help the conversation flow. The group facilitator may decide to omit some questions. The goal is not to give 'correct' answers but rather to have a genuine conversation, being open to the Holy Spirit's leading. The facilitator can decide whether to give a copy to all participants.
- **Facilitator Resource:** This is what you have in your hand! These are not the answers to the questions. The resource aims to help the facilitator inform and inspire the conversations.

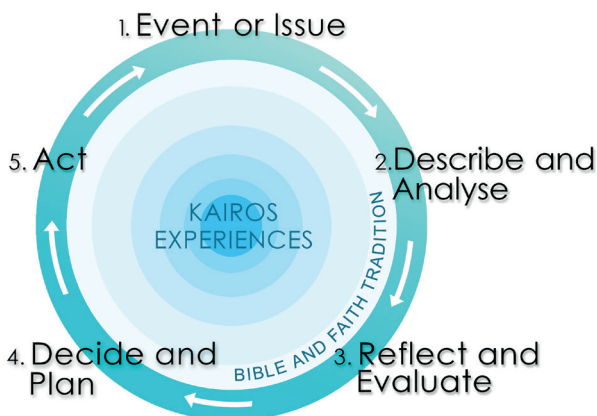
**Before the Conversation**

1. **Invite:** People need to be invited to attend the conversation. No one should be forced to participate. When people are invited, they need to be informed as to the nature of the conversation and the confidentiality and respectful behaviour that is expected. Facilitators are asked to make sure every participant has read the Information Sheet. This will help people prepare for the conversation.
2. **Prepare:** Facilitators should have studied this Facilitator Resource before facilitating the conversation on Married Life.
3. **Anticipate the risks:** Talking about human sexuality is personal. Some people hold strong opinions and many have had experiences which

have affected them deeply. Consider the risks and prepare as much as possible. Confidentiality must be respected.

**What happens at a conversation?**

A group of people (ideally 10-12 people) meet together for between 90 and 120 minutes conversation using the Faith-Based Facilitation (FBF) process. Anyone not familiar with FBF can download the book, *Building Deeper Relationships* from [www.salvationarmy.org/fbf](http://www.salvationarmy.org/fbf). It is available in seven languages. During the conversation, the facilitator decides which questions to use from the Conversation Guide. Not all the questions have to be used. It is recommended the facilitator asks one of the group to be the recorder and make notes of the discussion. If there is a flip chart available, the recorder can use that to note down the main points of the discussion. Although the notes are confidential and not for use outside the conversation, it will help the discussion to be able to refer back to the discussion notes. Each conversation should begin and end in a time of prayer.



## Facilitator Resource

This Facilitator Resource does not aim to answer the questions. Rather it provides the facilitator with key information from the Bible, our faith tradition and scientific facts from reputable sources. It includes all the questions in the Conversation Guide and provides background information to inform the conversation as the group work through the FBF process. Not everything can be covered in the Facilitator Resource. If you don't know the answer to a question from a participant, it is fine to say, 'I don't know' and to encourage them to further explore the topic themselves or with other members of the group.

### Preparing for the conversation on same-sex relationships

Talking about 'same-sex relationships'<sup>7</sup> is one of the most challenging topics. Facilitators can expect a wide range of opinions to be expressed. It is essential that facilitators prepare well for this conversation. This document is longer than facilitator resources developed for other sexuality-related issues. It was decided to include more information to equip the facilitator to help their group discuss this complex matter.

Prayer is essential before, during and after the conversation. The facilitator's task might be difficult but the Lord will be present (Matthew 18:20) and he is more than able to equip us to do what he calls us to do (Ephesians 3:16-21). The promises of God in the Bible give us great confidence.

As you facilitate the conversation, the following points are important to remember:

1. This discussion focuses on gay and lesbian same-sex relationships. Other important topics such as transgender and bisexuality are not included in this conversation.
2. Salvationists hold a range of views about same-sex relationships. Some Salvationists believe homosexual activities are unnatural,

sinful and risk the eternal future of people. Other Salvationists see no difference between homosexual love and heterosexual love and believe gay and lesbian people should be able to fully participate in all aspects of Salvation Army life. Yet other Salvationists hold views somewhere between these positions.

3. It is important to hear and value the experience of people who identify as gay or lesbian and hear from their family members. If they are willing to share their experience in the group they must be treated with great respect. It is not our place to judge others (John 8:7).
4. The international mission of The Salvation Army is 'to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in his name without discrimination'. The Salvation Army is called by God to build relationships and serve with all kinds of people. Today some gay and lesbian people feel they have the influence and respect that they deserve, but many others still feel they are marginalised and continue to have tough experiences in life. The purpose of the conversation is to listen to and learn from each other – we must ensure the conversations are helpful to everyone who attends.

### Anticipating a question!

Of the 10 conversation topics IHQ has developed resources for, the greatest concern has been to ensure the conversation about same-sex relationships is handled well. Some Salvationists are concerned that the conversations are a way of introducing change. Others are hoping that the conversations will result in major changes. Facilitators should anticipate the question: 'Is this exercise a way of introducing change to the Army?'

If this question is asked, facilitators can confirm that some change should be expected. Salvation Army leaders would not have spent as much time on this issue in recent years if nothing is going to change. The following changes are anticipated:

<sup>7</sup>In this document, the term 'same-sex relationships' is used to refer to intimate sexual same-sex relationships. Close non-sexual friendships between people of the same sex are not included in this definition.

- First, members of The Salvation Army family are being encouraged to talk about human sexuality. This is a change. For many years there has been silence. The active encouragement by the Army's leaders of conversations about human sexuality is a change for the better.
- Second, it will be expected that better informed Salvationists will be better equipped to serve God's mission in the 21st century. By talking, discussing, teaching, preaching and praying about these issues, it is anticipated that people will have a better appreciation of how we can be more like Jesus in terms of human sexuality.
- Third, it is hoped that Salvationists and other people who participate in the conversations will live more holy, Christlike lives as a result of listening and talking to other people. It is anticipated that, in the power of the Holy Spirit, people will appreciate the value of single people; people who are married will enjoy healthy relationships with their spouses; people will find ways to resist temptations and avoid divorce, pornography and partner abuse.
- Fourth, if there has been any impression that The Salvation Army encourages homophobic attitudes or actions, this needs to change. The official positions of The Salvation Army have for decades clearly stated The Salvation Army

serves people without discrimination. People who come to us for assistance are served according to their need and our capacity to help – regardless of race, gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation. The Salvation Army embraces employees of many different faiths and orientations. We adhere to all relevant employment laws, providing employee benefits accordingly. Everyone is welcome to worship at The Salvation Army – the gospel of Jesus is for everyone. In some countries, it may be seen as a change that The Salvation Army opposes the bullying and victimisation of people because of their gender identity or same-sex behaviour.

There also needs to be clarity about what is not changing. The Salvation Army has consistently affirmed the New Testament standard of marriage, that is, the voluntary and loving union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. This was restated in the 2018 edition of the *Salvation Army Ceremonies* book. This understanding of marriage is not changing but we also need to recognise that this is not the definition of marriage being used in many parts of the world. Therefore, there is a need to talk about what we mean by marriage and how we can engage with people who use a different definition of marriage. The way the New Testament standard of marriage is promoted will vary depending on the local situation and culture.



## STEP ONE / What is the Issue?

### Conversation Guide Questions

- How is the term 'same-sex relationships' defined?
- What do people in our community think about same-sex relationships? Why do they hold these views?

### What is this conversation on same-sex relationships covering?

A discussion on same-sex relationships is likely to raise many issues – far more than can be covered in two hours.

Being sexually attracted to other people is something almost everyone experiences – at least at some time in their lives. Most men are attracted to women and most women are attracted to men. This is often described as being heterosexual. In the Church and in the population at large the majority of people are heterosexual; and in the Church as well as the population at large a minority are not. One of the most controversial issues faced by the Church today is how Christians should think and behave towards people who do not identify as heterosexual.

There are many words used to describe a range of different sexual identities and to define people's sexual feelings and experiences. Defining terms is important but not easy. Words acceptable a few years ago can now cause great offence.

For example, the word 'homosexual' (attracted to someone of the same gender) is increasingly seen as out-of-date. The term LGBTQIA+<sup>2</sup> (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and others) is now being used as a more inclusive term as it includes a greater range of sexual orientations and identities. This conversation will concentrate on same-sex relationships (gay and lesbian, romantic and sexual relationships). It does not

cover bisexuality, gender fluidity or transgender.<sup>3</sup> There are many same-sex relationships that are not romantic or sexual. These are not covered in this conversation.

### Definitions

The following definitions<sup>4</sup> may be helpful in the conversation:

- **Sexual orientation:** A person's preferences or attraction patterns concerning the sex(es) or gender(s) to which the person is sexually attracted. Gender: The attitudes, feelings and behaviours that a given culture associates with a person's biological sex.
- **Lesbian:** A female who is sexually or romantically attracted to other females.
- **Gay:** A male who is sexually or romantically attracted to a male. (Gay is sometimes used to refer to both men and women. However, in this Guide it is only used in reference to men attracted to men. Gay and/or lesbian is used rather than 'homosexual'.)
- **Bisexual:** A person sexually or romantically attracted to both male and female.
- **Transgender:** An umbrella term for the many ways in which people might experience and/or present and live out their gender identities differently from people whose sense of gender identity is congruent<sup>5</sup> with one's biological sex.
- **Queer:** Originally derogatory, and still frequently so, this term is an umbrella term that individuals may use to describe a sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression that does not conform to dominant

<sup>2</sup>The choice of words used to describe people with non-heterosexual identities is controversial. The list is contested and fluid

<sup>3</sup>A Participant Guide and Facilitator Resource is available on Transgender People <sup>4</sup>These definitions are informed or copied by two sources: Gushee, David and Stassen, Glen, *Kingdom Ethics, Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, USA, second edition, 2016, 449-475; and Yarhouse, Mark A, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria – Navigating Transgender Issues In A Changing Culture*, IVP Academic, 2015, 17, 20-21 <sup>5</sup>The term 'congruent' is used a number of times. Congruent means 'in agreement or in harmony'. 'Incongruent' or 'a lack of congruence' means 'incompatible or discordant'.

societal norms. some people use the shorthand of LGBTQ where the Q stands for these persons and those considered questioning.

- **Intersex:** A term to describe conditions in which a person is born with sex characteristics or anatomy that does not allow clear identification as male or female.

While it is important to understand the words being used in this conversation, it is wrong to simplistically attach labels to people – in particular the commonly used terms of ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’. ‘The binary model of two fixed and

enduring categories of human sexual desire – for the same sex (homosexual) and for the opposite sex (heterosexual) – is flawed both theologically and in relation to the scientific and psychological evidence concerning human sexuality.<sup>6</sup>

#### ► **Facilitator Tip**

It is important to start by making sure everyone in the group understands what this conversation is about – and what cannot be covered in this discussion. You may need to be gentle but firm to keep the conversation on track. Bring people back to the question if they go off track.

## STEP TWO Describe and Analyse

### Conversation Guide Questions

- In some parts of the world, attitudes to same-sex relationships have changed significantly in recent years. Why do you think this has happened?
- Most medical and scientific bodies have concluded that people do not choose their sexual orientation. What difference do you think this makes to how same-sex relationships are viewed?
- In your experience, how do gay and lesbian people view the Church?

### What does the law say?

The Salvation Army works in more than 130 countries around the world. In recent years, some parts of the world have become more accepting of same-sex relationships. Changes in attitudes have led to changes to the law in some countries. In more than 20 countries where The Salvation Army works, gay and lesbian people are able to

have a state-authorised marriage with all the same legal rights and privileges as legally married heterosexual couples. However, in more than 70 countries<sup>7</sup>, homosexual acts are illegal and may lead to imprisonment. In about five countries homosexuality is a crime punishable by death.

### What can scientific research teach us?

The following statements are generally accepted within the scientific community and can be backed up by credible research.<sup>8,9</sup> Some people, however, do not accept these scientific findings, perhaps on the basis of past accepted norms, cultural traditions or religious beliefs.

- **Not everyone in the world is heterosexual.** In every society a relatively small proportion of the population are attracted to people of the same sex. Homosexuality is still illegal in more than 70 countries<sup>10</sup> so it is unsurprising that in these societies few people are willing to publicly admit to being gay or lesbian.

<sup>6</sup>Hill, Wesley, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, USA, 2010, and *Biblical and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality*, edited by Goddard, Andrew and Horrocks, Don, Evangelical Alliance, London, 2012, 20

<sup>7</sup>[http://ilga.org/downloads/02\\_ILGA\\_State\\_Sponsored\\_Homophobia\\_2016\\_ENG\\_WEB\\_150516.pdf](http://ilga.org/downloads/02_ILGA_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_2016_ENG_WEB_150516.pdf) <sup>8</sup>American Psychological

Association, <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/> <sup>9</sup>UK Royal College of Psychiatrists, [https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/PS02\\_2014.pdf](https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/PS02_2014.pdf)

<sup>10</sup>Ibid<sup>7</sup>

- **Being gay or lesbian is not a mental disorder.** For most of the first half of the 20th century, the medical profession considered homosexuality to be a mental disorder. This view is no longer accepted.
- **Sexual orientation is not a choice.**<sup>11</sup> The general conclusion drawn by researchers is that sexual orientation is still not well understood but is probably determined by a combination of genetic, hormonal and environmental influences. Most scientists conclude that people who are sexually attracted to the same sex do not choose their sexual orientation any more than people who are sexually attracted to members of the opposite sex choose their orientation.
- **Sexual behaviour, in contrast to sexual orientation, is a choice.** There is no scientific research which supports the view that gay and lesbian people have different responsibilities than people who are heterosexual concerning the expression of their sexuality in intimate relationships. It is possible for homosexual people and heterosexual people and people who have other sexual orientations to live a celibate life, be sexually promiscuous, or live in dedicated, loving, monogamous relationships.
- **You cannot change your sexual orientation at will.** While this may still be controversial in some places, since 2009 both the American Psychological Association<sup>12</sup> and the UK Royal College of Psychiatrists<sup>13</sup> warned against sexual orientation change efforts as harmful. The 'ex-gay' movement – Christians who believe God can 'cure' people of their gay or lesbian orientation – has been undermined in recent years both by the scientists and by the testimony of Christians who wanted to but failed to change their sexual orientation.<sup>14</sup>

The Salvation Army held this position for years. An International Headquarters Positional Statement on Homosexuality from 1990 (since archived) states: 'The Army regards the origins of a homosexual orientation as a mystery and does not regard a homosexual disposition as blameworthy in itself or rectifiable at will.'<sup>15</sup>

Having noted this majority view, there are Christians who testify to the power of God changing their lives dramatically. For example, Rosaria Butterfield (<http://rosariabutterfield.com>) whose testimony should be heard and respected.

### What can personal experience teach us?

The personal experience of people who identify as gay or lesbian is one of the main reasons questions are being asked about the traditional teaching of the Church on sexuality – or choosing to ignore it altogether. 'In 1993, 22 percent of Americans reported having a close friend or family member who was gay or lesbian. In 2013, that number had risen to 65 percent.'<sup>16</sup> There is much to learn from the experience of Christians who identify as gay and lesbian and are in committed relationships. The testimonies from family members of gay and lesbian Christians are also important. All are valuable ways to discern the working of God in the world today.

Some gay Christians are convinced that the Bible teaches that same-sex physical relationships are wrong and that they are called to live a celibate life. This is not an easy choice. Wesley Hill, a gay Christian, writes:

'So much of my life as a homosexual Christian ... has simply been learning how to wait, to be patient, to endure, to bear up under an unwelcome burden for the long haul... washed and waiting. This is my life – my identity as one who is forgiven and spiritually cleansed and my struggle as one who perseveres with a frustrating thorn in the flesh, looking forward to what God has promised to do.'<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup>[www.rcpsych.ac.uk/workinpsychiatry/specialinterestgroups/gaylesbian/submissiontothecofe/psychiatryandlgbpeople.aspx#therapy](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/workinpsychiatry/specialinterestgroups/gaylesbian/submissiontothecofe/psychiatryandlgbpeople.aspx#therapy) <sup>12</sup>[www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2009/08/therapeutic.aspx](http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2009/08/therapeutic.aspx) <sup>13</sup>Ibid<sup>9</sup> <sup>14</sup>[www.cnn.com/2013/06/20/us/exodus-international-shutdown/](http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/20/us/exodus-international-shutdown/) <sup>15</sup>International Headquarters Positional Statement, Homosexuality, 1990. Retrieved from archived database <sup>16</sup>Gushee, David, *Changing our Mind*, Read the Spirit Books, 2014, Canton, MI, USA <sup>17</sup>Hill, Wesley, 2010, 50, quoted in *Biblical and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality*, Evangelical Alliance, 2012, 18

## Same-sex relationships and the Church

Some gay and lesbian people have found themselves welcome in church, but for many gay and lesbian people church is not a safe place. People who specialise in ministry to the homosexual community wrote more than 20 years ago: 'If ever there was a first place a homosexual should be able to turn to for help, it is the Church. In fact, it is often the last.'<sup>18</sup>

Reflecting on the experience of growing up in The Salvation Army, one person, who wanted to remain anonymous, said:

'The religious beliefs I had instilled in me regarding homosexuality caused me severe psychological, emotional and spiritual damage. I became aware that people have the ability to hide the face of God from those he loves. If God is love then I have to believe that he would not condone or encourage his followers to create or maintain a social climate or construct that results in this kind of damage to a person.'

Homophobic<sup>19</sup> attitudes have often caused hurt and isolation in gay and lesbian people within the Church. There is much for Christians to confess in how non-heterosexual people have been treated in the past. A lesbian Christian within The Salvation Army, who wanted to remain anonymous, offers the following advice about relating to lesbian and gay people: 'You aren't dealing with an addiction; you are dealing with an identity. So don't be surprised if you tell them that homosexuality is wrong to get a strong response. You are, in effect, telling them that there is something wrong with who they are.' While Christians have differing, even opposing, viewpoints on the issue of homosexuality, it is also a fact that gay and lesbian Christians come to understand the relationship between their sexual

orientation and their Christian faith in different ways. Geis shares the testimony of an ex-gay man: 'I was a homosexual, but I don't believe God made me that way. The church did not have to say it was wrong. I knew it inside. When I met Jesus I knew I could change. I never had feelings other than homosexual until I became a Christian. That was ten years ago. I continue to try to become more like Christ every day. Ten years ago God gave me a wife and three children. I am living by grace day after day. My church accepts me, holds me accountable. People are there for me.'<sup>20</sup>

### ► Facilitator Tip

- It is important the facilitator understands the law in their country. Ask your territorial headquarters if you need advice.
- Make sure the conversation does not move into 'decide and plan' mode. Keep the conversation focused on describing and analysing the issues.
- It may be helpful to explain some of the conclusions from the scientific research to the group, as the discussion touches on these issues. Don't presume everyone knows or accepts the scientific research. Allow people to disagree gracefully.
- It may help the discussion if it is possible to hear from a person who identifies as gay or lesbian. If this is not possible, reading the above paragraph may help the group to have a richer conversation.



<sup>18</sup>Geis, Sally, and Messer, Donald, *Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality*, 1994, Abingdon Press, 45

<sup>19</sup>'Dislike of or prejudice against homosexual people', <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/homophobia> <sup>20</sup>Ibid18, 37



## STEP THREE Reflect and Evaluate

### Conversation Guide Questions

- There are many opinions in the Church regarding same-sex relationships. How can Christians who sincerely seek to understand the Bible come to such different conclusions?
- In light of biblical teaching, should Christians differentiate between promiscuous sexual activity and lifelong, monogamous same-sex relationships?
- Jesus commanded his disciples to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:39). How do Christians who are not gay or lesbian obey this commandment in their relationships with gay and lesbian people?

It is important to remember that there may be very differing views within your group which are all biblically based. As the conversation moves into Step Three, it is likely you will discuss these different interpretations. Therefore the following section helps explain how Salvationists can come to such different conclusions when reading the Bible.

### What does the Bible teach?

It would be helpful if there were a simple answer to the question: 'What does the Bible teach?' There is not. However, Salvationists can turn to *The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine (HOD)* for direction:

'Certain factors must be taken into account [when reading the Bible]:

- a. The cultures, ways of thinking, and assumptions of the biblical world need to be understood if the texts are to be properly interpreted.
- b. Different kinds of literature will require different methods of interpretation.

- c. Each text must be interpreted in the light of other texts and in the context of the overall witness of Scripture.<sup>21</sup> ... Each passage must be understood as part of the whole. To regard any text as absolute without reference to the whole context of Scripture is to open oneself to distortion and even heresy'.<sup>22</sup>

There will often be more than one interpretation of the Bible given the different factors that should be taken into account. It should not be a surprise that faithful, mature Christians can reach different conclusions. As Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: 'For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12 *English Standard Version*). What do we already know 'in part' as to how we should live faithfully in terms of 21st-century human sexuality? In the parts we do not know, can we walk gently and humbly together with each other and God?

Salvationists decide on issues of faith and practice in accordance with the 'divine rule' as revealed in the Bible. Scripture has a place of priority for Salvationists. *The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine* explains:

'The Bible, then, is the major authority for the Christian. However, the Bible itself teaches that there are three pillars which provide a secure foundation for Christian faith and practice. These three are: the teaching of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17), the direct illumination of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:29; 9:10-19; 13:1-3; 16:6-8) and the consensus of the Christian community (Acts 15:1-29; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22). The Bible is not safely read without reference to the general understanding of the Christian community throughout history, any more than it is understood without the help of the Spirit. Each of these three

<sup>21</sup> HOD, 2010, 18 <sup>22</sup> Ibid, 20

foundational sources requires the authentication of the other two to ensure that gospel truth is maintained'.<sup>23</sup>

The Bible is the foundational source for Salvationists but should be read recognising the power of the Spirit to illuminate. Salvationists should therefore be open to greater illumination from the Spirit, openness to the experience of mature believers and, perhaps, changes in perspectives. *The Handbook of Doctrine* emphasises the importance of personal experience:

'For Salvationists, belief and action have always been intertwined. Our faith and practice are rooted in the Bible, personal experience and the Christian heritage. Salvation Army doctrine is part of that heritage, and it too is built upon the foundation of the biblical text as interpreted by the people of God'.<sup>24</sup>

The volume of material on the topic of human sexuality is vast and a primary focus area is required. The Salvation Army is part of the Protestant evangelical tradition. Within this tradition there are two interpretations of the Bible regarding same-sex relationships. The majority have a 'traditional' reading while an increasing minority have a 'revisionist' interpretation.<sup>25</sup> 'Traditional' evangelical Christians believe that same-sex relationships are always wrong. An increasing number of 'revisionist' 21st-century Bible-believing Christians interpret the Scriptures as accepting lifelong, monogamous same-sex relationships.<sup>26</sup> Many are, however, careful not to use the term 'marriage'.

### **The big picture – God's work of saving the world**

Rather than only focusing on specific verses of Scripture, it is important to remember the big themes of the Bible that teach us how we should

treat people. Theologians sometimes use a narrative theological framework considering sexual orientation in light of creation, fall and redemption.

### **Creation – What ideal did God create?**

The Bible is the key resource to understand God's plan in the creation of the world. The starting point is Genesis chapters 1 and 2. First, central to God's creation is bringing together a male and a female for reproduction (Genesis 1). Therefore, since biblical times, people have believed that any form of sexual activity that does not have the possibility of procreation is a problem.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, men who have sex with men and women who have sex with women are engaging in an act which cannot lead to procreation and are therefore behaving against God's created order. Concerns are not only about procreation. Gordon Wenham, the British evangelical biblical scholar argues: 'It seems most likely that Israel's repudiation of homosexual intercourse arises out of its doctrine of creation ... To allow the legitimacy of homosexual acts would frustrate the divine purpose and deny the perfection of God's provision of two sexes to support and complement one another'.<sup>28</sup>

Richard Hays agrees with Wenham:

'From Genesis 1 onward, Scripture affirms repeatedly that God has made man and woman for one another and that our sexual desires rightly find fulfilment within heterosexual marriage. (See, for instance, Mark 10:2-9; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8; 1 Corinthians 7:1-9; Ephesians 5:21-33; Hebrews 13:4.)'<sup>29</sup>

Second, God is a relationship (Father, Son and Spirit) and has created humans for relationships. We are not meant to be individuals living alone. Does this mean lifelong gay relationships are part of God's plan? A traditional reading of the biblical witness argues lifelong same-sex relationships

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 6-7 <sup>24</sup>Ibid, xvii <sup>25</sup>The use of the terms 'traditionalist' and 'revisionist' are not intended to signal a value judgement. They have been chosen simply to signal to Salvationists that there are at least two ways of interpreting the biblical teaching on same-sex relationships <sup>26</sup>For example, Achtemeier, Mark, (2015), *The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage – An Evangelical's Change of Heart*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY; Ibid<sup>16</sup>; and Song, Robert, *Covenant And Calling – Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships*, London, SCM Press, 2014 <sup>27</sup>[http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_25071968\\_humanae-vitae.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html) <sup>28</sup>Wenham, Gordon, 'The Old Testament Attitude to Homosexuality', *Expository Times* 102, 1991, 359-363 <sup>29</sup>Hays, Richard, *The Moral Vision of The New Testament – A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, HarperOne, New York, USA, 1996, 390

cannot be drawn from the scriptural account of God's creative purposes. There is no doubt that in creation God created humanity with the capacity to enjoy more from relationships than just reproduction. Alan Verhey, former Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke Divinity School, argues:

'The story of our creation as male and female still suggests, I think, that the Christian vision of good sex is the "one flesh" union of a man and a woman that gestures and nurtures the covenant made in vows, carried out in fidelity and hospitable to children.'<sup>30</sup>

### **Fall**

A 'traditional' reading of the Bible concludes that every part of humanity is affected by the fall – heterosexuals as well as LGBTQI+ individuals. The apostle Paul, drawing on Genesis, declared that all of humanity has sinned and falls short of God's ideal in creation. Despite a huge amount of biblical scholarship, the four key Old Testament texts (Genesis 19:1-14, Leviticus 18:22; 20:13 and Deuteronomy 23:17-18) that refer to homosexual activity in its male form, 'are unequivocal in their condemnation of it'.<sup>31</sup> It is an 'abomination' before God, and its seriousness as an offence is shown by the fact that in Leviticus 20:13 it is punishable by death.

The references in Leviticus and Deuteronomy also need to be seen in light of the New Testament – there are many Old Testament prohibitions (mainly dietary restriction and circumcision) that have been ignored by Christians since the Early Church. Traditionalists also make the point that homosexual behaviour is not one of the major themes of the Bible. There are perhaps half a dozen reference to it in all Scripture. Richard Hays, a traditionalist, notes:

'In terms of emphasis, it is a minor concern – in contrast, for example, to economic injustice. The paucity of texts addressing the issue is a significant fact for New Testament ethics. What the Bible does say should be heeded carefully,

but any ethic that intends to be biblical will seek to get the accents right, not overemphasising peripheral issues. Would that the passion presently being expended in the church over the question of homosexuality were devoted instead urging the wealthy to share with the poor!'<sup>32</sup>

The first Christians and subsequent generations of Christians (until a few years ago) have consistently interpreted the New Testament texts as condemning all homosexual acts. In 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, homosexuals are included in lists of people who do things that are unacceptable to God.

The most important reference to same-sex behaviour is Romans chapter 1 because this is the only passage in the New Testament that explains the condemnation of homosexual behaviour in an explicitly theological context.<sup>33</sup> In the letter to the Romans, Paul builds on the Old Testament argument that people engaging in same-sex relationships are rebelling against God's created order. Not only lesbian and gay people. Paul believes everyone is in rebellion because we all have turned away from God (Romans 3:9-18). Paul uses the example of homosexual behaviour to illustrate the rebellion of all creation. Paul is not specifically teaching against homosexual behaviour – his first readers would not have needed convincing of the unnaturalness of homosexuality.<sup>34</sup> Paul singles out homosexual intercourse for specific attention because it is a graphic illustration of how human fallenness distorts God's created order. Paul is not saying homosexual sins are worse than any other – no worse in principle than envy, gossip or disrespect for parents.<sup>35</sup>

### **Redemption**

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus offers new life for all.

There are two main reasons why 'traditional' readings of the Bible's teaching on homosexuality are such an important redemption issue:

<sup>30</sup>Verhey, Alan, *Remembering Jesus – Christian Community, Scripture and the Moral Life*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, USA, 2002, 238 <sup>31</sup>A working party of the House of Bishops (Church of England), *Some Issues in Human Sexuality – A Guide to the Debate*, Church House Publishing, 2003, 129 <sup>32</sup>Ibid<sup>29</sup>, 381 <sup>33</sup>Ibid<sup>29</sup>, 383 <sup>34</sup>Ibid<sup>29</sup>, 386 <sup>35</sup>Ibid<sup>29</sup>, 388

1. It is a test of the Church's willingness to be faithful to the will of God as this has been revealed in the Bible. Any attempt to compromise this principle would be a rejection of the authority of God in favour of modern secular standards of behaviour. In response, 'revisionists' raise questions about how we read and understand the Bible. Have we done the hard work of understanding what God is saying through the Bible to the 21st-century Church?
2. Even more importantly, it is a matter that involves salvation. We must take seriously Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 6.9-10 that sexual immorality in its homosexual form is one of the types of behaviour that prevents people from entering the Kingdom of God. 'Revisionists' counter that Paul and his society had no knowledge of the faithful, monogamous homosexual couples who follow Christ in the 21st century.

Revisionist readers of the Bible have suggested three reasons why lifelong, committed, monogamous same-sex relationships may be acceptable within God's plan of redemption.

#### **The biblical texts are addressing a different issue**

Professor Dan Via, of Duke University, published a dialogue with a traditionalist theologian, Professor Robert Gagnon, in *Homosexuality and the Bible* in 2003. Via argues the biblical texts are not relevant today. Via writes:

'Professor Gagnon and I are in substantial agreement that the biblical texts that deal specifically with homosexual practice condemn it unconditionally. However, on the question of what the church might or should make of this we diverge sharply ... his accumulation of biblical texts condemning homosexual practice is irrelevant to my argument since I agree that Scripture gives

no explicit approval to same-sex intercourse. I maintain, however, the absolute prohibition can be overridden regardless of how many times it is stated, for there are good reasons to override it ... There are three factors that, in concert, are powerful enough to override and disqualify the Bible's absolute condemnation of same-sex intercourse: a) the biblical understanding of creation and redemption and of the bodily-sexual definition of human existence along with the Bible's belief that acts must be understood and evaluated in the light of character; b) the reality of destiny created by homosexual orientation; c) the experience of gay Christians.'<sup>36</sup>

#### **The biblical texts need to be read in light of 21st-century experience**

David Gushee, a well-respected evangelical theologian, also calls for a revision of traditional teaching but uses a different argument. In the past decade, Gushee has revised his views on same-sex relationships. In his book, *Changing Our Mind*, Gushee writes:

'I am asking whether the Church should change our mind and our practices in relation to Christian LGBT people and their relationships – not because we are under pressure from a hostile culture to do so, but because within the terms of our faith we might now conclude that this is one of those cases in 2,000 years of Christian history where we have gotten some things wrong.'<sup>37</sup>

Gushee does not ignore the Bible. He argues: 'Having reviewed the relevant texts carefully, I now believe that what has been viewed as unassailable biblical evidence for the moral marginalization of LGBT people or those in same-sex relationships is not so indisputable after all. It mainly depends on whether we can think differently about how to relate our Christian account of God's design in creation with the existence of a small minority of gay and lesbian neighbours,

<sup>36</sup>Via, Dan, and Gagnon, Robert, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, USA, 2003, 93-95

<sup>37</sup>Ibid<sup>16</sup>, 16-17

some of whom are devout followers of Christ. Certainly, I believe such a conversation should not be impossible; the matter should not be beyond dialogue and study.<sup>38</sup>

Gushee is arguing that the experience of lesbian and gay Christians needs to be heard. Having heard their experience, Gushee's reading of the Bible has been transformed – as it was for Peter and the early disciples.

### **Revisionists are not redefining marriage**

Gushee and Robert Song<sup>39</sup> are careful to not use the word 'marriage'. Gushee and Song accept that the Christian concept of marriage as a gift from God since creation cannot be simply redefined by 21st-century society – even if governments pass legislation redefining the state's definition of marriage. These evangelical 'revisionists' are proposing a radical idea, a new category of relationship for same-sex Christian couples based on the longstanding Christian practice of making covenant.

### **Some biblical texts that specifically mention same-sex behaviour**

It is likely that during your discussion someone will quote a specific Bible verse about homosexuality. While all parts of Scripture are important, it is wrong to read one or two verses out of the broader context of God's plan to save the world. This guide cannot cover every verse. A few examples are included to show how mature, faithful Christians can reach different conclusions even when they read the same verses. Two ways to read the Bible are set out in the verses below – a 'traditional' interpretation and a 'revisionist' interpretation

- **Example 1:** Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13  
18:22 (ESV): 'You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.' 20:13 (ESV): 'If a man lies with a male as with a

woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.'

**Traditionalist Interpretation:** The verses are clearly about male-male intercourse and teach that it is always a sin. The verses do not refer to cult prostitutes. The fact that a serious penalty faces both indicates that the Bible is teaching that even consensual intercourse between two men is wrong. Homosexual acts are included with other serious sexual offences - adultery, incest and bestiality. Although some aspects of the Holiness Code are no longer applicable in light of the New Testament, prohibitions against adultery, incest, bestiality and homosexuality still exist.

**Revisionist Interpretation:** Leviticus chapters 17-26 are part of the Holiness Code of the Jewish nation. They are concerned with separating Israel from the nations around them. They are for a specific time and no longer apply to us today. The laws are concerned with purity rather than sin. The Hebrew Holiness Code includes other instructions that are not applicable today. For example: 'You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material' (Leviticus 19:19 *ESV*). In this instance, Leviticus is teaching against coercive same-sex intercourse – we know this because of the harshness of the penalty. It probably refers to cult prostitutes. Long-term monogamous, same-sex relationships as we know of today were not known in Old Testament times. This Old Testament law is not timeless. It cannot be applied today. Twenty-first century gender, sexuality and sexual ethics are foreign to the theological and ethical concerns of Leviticus.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid<sup>16</sup>, 101    <sup>39</sup>Ibid<sup>26</sup>, Song, Robert

- **Example 2:** Romans 1:26-27 (*New Revised Standard Version*)  
‘For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error’.

**Traditionalist Interpretation:** Romans 1:26-27 echoes the words of Genesis 1:26-27. Instead of recognising their dominion over animals, humans worshipped idols. Instead of acknowledging that God created male and female, some people engage in same-sex acts and ignore the complementarity of male and females. Same-sex intercourse is against the way God created the world. We do not question that incest, paedophilia and bestiality are contrary to nature. Why are we trying to make a difference with homosexuality? The reference to lesbian practice undermines the supposition that Paul was only concerned with exploitative forms of homosexual practice. In Romans 1:27 Paul describes mutual gratification and

declares that God’s judgement will fall on both parties. This indicates he was not thinking of a relationship that involved being forced into sex acts. It is impossible to argue that the rest of the list of unrighteousness in this context is not sin – wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, gossip, slander etc.

**Revisionist Interpretation:** Paul is describing homosexual behaviour but the primary sin is idolatry (Romans 1:23-25) and unnatural lust is the consequence of this sin. Unnatural and sinful are not the same. Romans describes homosexuality as unnatural and Leviticus describes it as against the Hebrew purity code, but neither describe it as sinful and against God’s will. Paul was thinking of exploitative forms of homosexual behaviour such as pederasty and prostitution. He would have no idea of long-term, same-sex monogamous relationships. Paul would not have considered the modern concept of homosexual orientation. He may have been condemning homosexual acts by apparently heterosexual people whose actions contradicted their true nature. What is contrary to nature for a homosexual?

## STEP FOUR Decide and Plan – How Then Shall We Live?

### Conversation Guide Questions

- How can we maintain the integrity of the Bible’s teaching whilst we ensure that we preach and practice a gospel that offers dignity, hope and acceptance to every person?
- What can be done to address the causes of victimisation of people who identify as gay or lesbian in your community?
- What could be done to make your corps, centre or programme a welcoming place of grace for all people – irrespective of their sexuality?

The priority at this point in the conversation is to decide and plan what we need to do in light of the conversation. Some of the following questions/ ideas may help the discussion.

### How do we share the gospel with everyone?

The Bible records many occasions when Jesus intentionally challenged religious and cultural boundaries. Jesus went against societal norms to relate to a tax collector (Luke 19:1-10) and children (Mark 10:13-14), and there are three examples of Jesus building bridges to sexual sinners (Luke 7:36-50, John 4:1-26, John 7:53–8:11). Jesus did not allow people’s position in society to stop him

offering them an opportunity to be included in his Kingdom. Even on the Cross, moments before he died, he was showing the spirit of inclusion (Luke 23:42-43). Twenty-first century Christians must also remember Jesus had extremely harsh words for legalistic religious leaders and preferred the company of 'sinners' (Matthew 3:7-10 and 9:10-12). We do well to remember that all of 'the Twelve' were sinners – Judas and Peter and John and the rest – and yet Jesus made them his closest companions.

### **Are there standards of behaviour for all Christians irrespective of their sexual orientation?**

Being a disciple of Jesus has never meant we are free to act simply as we like. There are standards that remain for all time. Therefore, we can conclude that an inclusive Salvation Army would never endorse an unloving marriage, promiscuity, adultery, partner violence or pornography, irrespective of a person's sexual identity.

### **How do we stand up for people who have been victimised because of their sexual orientation?**

The 21st-century Salvation Army is called to stand together as 'One Army' against any victimisation, violence, criminalisation, bullying, name-calling, discrimination in employment or social services, against any person, because of their sexuality. Even though we may be concerned that their behaviour is not according to the way of life set forth by Jesus Christ, we are instructed by Jesus not to judge (Matthew 7:1-6, Luke 6:37-42). We are called to build relationships characterised by the fruit of the Spirit: 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Galatians 5:22). Taking a position against criminalisation and discrimination will be a challenge in some countries where homosexuality is illegal and where The Salvation Army has a significant presence.

### **How can we care for all people without discriminating?**

People within same-sex relationships, particularly within the Church, have experienced, among other things, family break-up, social exclusion, physical and psychological violence, and sometimes even death. At the same time, The Salvation Army in particular has been labelled as old-fashioned and discriminatory. It is also worth considering individuals who fall victim because of their theological beliefs. This can occur for those who hold a 'traditional' view, who are labelled as bigots by society or others in the Church and excluded from the community, as well as for those who are not themselves gay or lesbian but who don't see being gay as sinful. We should take care to understand each other and to respect that we can come to different conclusions while all being faithful followers of Scripture, The Salvation Army and, most importantly, Christ. Despite what we believe about various social issues, The Salvation Army always must be a safe and welcoming place for all people.

### **How do we stay faithful to the teaching in the Bible?**

This is probably the hardest question and exposes the differences between those who believe in a traditionalist reading of the Bible and those who accept a revisionist interpretation. Some will feel strongly that there can be no long-term acceptance of same-sex relationships because it is fundamentally in opposition to the teaching of the Bible. Others will feel just as strongly that the Church should be a welcoming place for all people because no one is perfect, and everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord and loves God and loves their neighbour is welcome. The tough reality is that the 21st-century Christian Church is split on this matter and the differences cannot be easily resolved.

## STEP FIVE **Act**

Once the conversation has concluded and the group has closed in prayer, encourage participants to further explore the issues discussed in their own time or with other members of the group.

### ► **Facilitator Tip**

It may be helpful to pray for anyone in the group who has been particularly affected by this discussion. Perhaps follow up with a pastoral visit or phone call in the following week.



All **participants** are encouraged to complete an online feedback form using the link [www.surveymonkey.com/r/letstalkconversations](http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/letstalkconversations)

All **facilitators** are encouraged to complete an online feedback form using the link [www.surveymonkey.com/r/letstalkconversationsfacilitators](http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/letstalkconversationsfacilitators)

All responses will be anonymous. You will only be asked to indicate your age range and your country of residence. Your comments will help other Salvationists around the world as we all listen, learn, discuss and discern together