

GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE

CHRISTIANITY IN CRISIS:  
A CALL TO DIALOGUE OF DIVISIVE ISSUES  
IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

SENIOR THESIS SEMINAR  
REL399

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

BY  
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1. The first part of the document is a letter from the President of the United States to the Congress, dated January 3, 1862.

2. The second part is a report from the Secretary of the Treasury, dated January 3, 1862.

3. The third part is a report from the Secretary of the Interior, dated January 3, 1862.

4. The fourth part is a report from the Secretary of the Navy, dated January 3, 1862.

5. The fifth part is a report from the Secretary of the War, dated January 3, 1862.

6. The sixth part is a report from the Secretary of the State, dated January 3, 1862.

## INTRODUCTION

Christianity, as a religion, has existed for hundreds of years. Throughout that time, different ways of believing in a Christian conception of God have been established through varying religious beliefs and practices of Christians and their denominations and sects. Today hundreds of Christian denominations exist throughout the world.<sup>1</sup> Each of these denominations is composed of multiple synods, congregations, and individual members, each of which differs slightly from the others in their belief systems and practices.<sup>2</sup>

This range of Christian beliefs exists in many ways, including the ways Christians worship, view communion, interpret the Bible, and align themselves with other religious practices and beliefs.<sup>3</sup> For one reason or another, usually due to issues related to differences of opinion on these large-scale doctrinal topics, Christian denominations have been splitting apart from one another for hundreds of years. Today, this trend is continuing, though in new ways and over new issues.

Many Christians are aware, to different degrees, of the range of beliefs which exist within Christianity today. While these differences in belief can account for many of the denominational divisions which exist in Christianity today, new divisions are occurring among previously united

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<sup>1</sup> As I use the term "Christian," I am referring to people who identify themselves as such through their religious and denominational affiliations. In addition, though many of the things I will be discussing apply to Christians throughout the world, my statements are aimed specifically towards Christians and Christianity within the United States of America.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout my writing, I will collectively refer to these various levels of Christian organization as "faith communities."

<sup>3</sup> Other Christian practices and beliefs may include items such as the authority of religious leaders, the role of sin in people's lives, meanings of grace, and ways humans and God communicate.

denominations, synods, and congregations. These new divisions do not directly relate to overriding doctrinal issues, as past denominational divisions oftentimes did. Instead, today's polarizing issues within Christianity apply to issues related to individuals and how they should live their personal lives.

There are three of these personal issues that Christians seem to currently be disagreeing over most strongly. These issues revolve around the topics of abortion, family structure, and homosexuality.<sup>4</sup> Christian views on these divisive issues tend to be nearly as varied as the viewpoints which exist in the public sphere. Instead of supporting their views with primarily societal defenses, Christians often incorporate religious defenses into their arguments as well, citing biblical teachings and "Christian morals" to defend their positions.<sup>5</sup> In promoting their position on these issues, some Christians, especially those towards the extremes of the debate, tend to follow general American trends in displaying their support. They frequently promote their position through confrontational means, oftentimes in the form of debates, rallies, propaganda, and personal attacks, all of which vary in their reliability, especially in the ways that one side represents another.

With all of this division and confrontation, it can be difficult for people to understand the reasoning behind the polar positions. In addition, many mid-spectrum positions are lost in the confrontations between people on the extremes of an issue. As people are bombarded with

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<sup>4</sup> While abortion and homosexuality may be relatively clear-cut examples of division in the Christian church, issues over family structure, though prevalent, are not as well defined. Issues related to family structure include families who challenge traditional family structures by having two working parents, stay at home fathers, divorced parents or households which are headed by single parents. Additionally, I will be using the term "homosexual" to refer to people who are identified as gay men or lesbians due to their sexual orientation. While I recognize this term is disliked by some gay men and lesbians, as it originally was the official medical diagnosis for people with same-sex attractions, I believe using the term "homosexual" instead of "gay men and lesbians" as I refer to people with same-sex attractions is useful and appropriate for the purposes of this writing.

<sup>5</sup> I place the term "Christian morals" in quotations because this phrase may incorporate different morals for different Christians. Additionally, different Christians may apply the same morals differently in a given situation.

opposing positions on these issues, they tend to become frustrated with the people presenting the positions and the issues as a whole. Many Christians who are not currently involved in one of these debates often do their best to steer clear of the confrontation these debates produce and avoid the issues entirely.

These issues cannot be ignored in our personal lives, however, nor should they be ignored in our faith communities. Issues related to abortion, family structure, and homosexuality arise in people's lives on a regular basis. Most Christians probably know a friend, co-worker, or family member who has had an abortion, identifies as homosexual, or is living in a non-traditional family structure. As a result of these interactions, Christians often seek out resources which can offer them Christian perspectives in these areas, but have difficulty finding information that is not skewed to represent a position on either pole of the debate. In the end, Christians oftentimes will choose one of two ends to their search. They may choose to align their views with one of the publicly promoted poles of the debate, often without a complete understanding of the organization and viewpoint which they are supporting. If they do not choose to align themselves with a particular pole, they often choose to not to address the issue further, and set it aside without having gained a realistic view of Christian perspectives on it.

While many people recognize these issues and the strains they are causing within the Christian church, Christians tend to be at a loss for ways to proactively combat these divisions. Current debate forums tend to be unproductive, as they often lead to bitter confrontations, and people tend to gain little information from being involved. Debates often serve to encourage attacks between debate participants and tend to make people defensive. In addition, debates often occur between people on the poles of the issue and do not invite more moderate positions into the debate forum.

While many Christians have chosen to ignore these issues and not deal with them in their faith communities, I feel Christian faith communities have some duty to find ways for their members to more effectively address these issues. These issues cannot be escaped in people's personal lives and are continually having an impact on Christian faith communities. While current argumentative tactics have not proven to be generally useful in addressing these issues, I still believe some type of communication over these divisive issues needs to be happening within Christian faith communities. If these issues are not addressed, they threaten to continue straining the religious fabric Christians share.

In order to more productively address these issues within Christian faith communities, I would like to suggest that Christians shift their means of communication from debate forums towards forums which encourage dialogue between Christians, as a way of addressing these issues. While this forum may not be the only practical solution to the issue of division in the church, I believe it may be an effective way to work through these divisive issues, instead of allowing them to continue dividing and polarizing Christian faith communities.

Leonard Swidler outlines dialogue well, as he defines it as "a two-way communication between persons who hold significantly differing views on a subject with the purpose of learning more truth about the subject from the other."<sup>6</sup> While this type of dialogue is currently occurring on a limited basis within the Christian church, usually in specialized denominational task forces and councils, I believe dialogue needs to be occurring on all levels of Christian interactions,

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<sup>6</sup> Leonard Swidler, "A Dialogue on Dialogue," *Death or Dialogue?: From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue*, Leonard Swidler et al., eds., (London: SCM Press, 1990), 57. Although this chapter is written to specifically address dialogue between Christians and people of other religions, I believe Swidler's statement is true for intra-religious dialogue as well. It is unclear from Swidler's discussion as to the degree to which views must differ to "significantly differ" from one another. Essentially, he seems to be indicating a necessity for the people engaged in the dialogue to have opinions which differ from one another. True dialogue cannot occur between people who agree with one another, as they merely affirm one another's beliefs, which is not the purpose of dialogue. The purpose of dialogue is to encourage respectful listening and learning between people whose opinions differ. I agree with this sentiment.

ranging from the congregational level to inter-denominational levels. Through this type of interaction, Christians can hopefully gain a more valid and complete understanding of the range of Christian views which exist in relationship to these divisive issues, especially within their own faith communities. With this new, and more complete, understanding of one another, Christians can break down misconceptions and stereotypes and can be better equipped to evaluate positions in relation to one another and deal with divisive issues as a whole. Additionally, through dialogue, individuals are not required to set aside their differences, but are instead provided with an opportunity to discuss their differences without being expected to reach a common consensus with one another. Through dialogue, Christians can work to mend some of the strained relationships which are caused by differences over these issues, as well as come to understand the depth and consequences of different viewpoints. Before Christians are able to fairly evaluate dialogue as a means for dealing with divisive issues within the Christian church, however, they must have a fuller understanding of the divisions which surround these issues.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### DIVISION IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

To find division and disagreement among Christians, one could look at any point in the history of Christianity and find prominent examples. Traditionally, especially focusing on Christianity in America, most disagreements between Christians have occurred along denominational boundaries. Beginning in the middle part of the twentieth century, however, there began to be an increase in tolerance among Christians towards Christians of other denominations.<sup>1</sup> This trend has continued into our Christian sphere today. As James Davidson Hunter indicates in his book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, in the past thirty years, "people were becoming less concerned about denominational identity and loyalty... according to Gallup surveys conducted from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, the overwhelming majority of Protestants had mutually positive feelings toward those belonging to the major denominations."<sup>2</sup> As Hunter goes on to elaborate, "as denominational affiliation has weakened so too have the effects of denominational identity upon the way people actually view the world."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> At the same time, tolerance between Christians and other religions in America increased as well. See James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (United States of America: BasicBooks, 1991), Chapter 3, for a discussion of this topic.

<sup>2</sup> Hunter, 87.

<sup>3</sup> Hunter, 87.



Although religiously-oriented Americans have developed an increased tolerance towards people of other faiths and Christians in particular have become less concerned with denominational affiliations, religious conflict in America is not coming to a close; it is merely occurring along "new and in many ways unfamiliar lines."<sup>4</sup> Today, groups of Christians from different denominations are uniting with one another to work for similar goals. As Hunter describes, "'while denominations have become *less* important for the religious life of the republic, para-church organizations... have become *more* important."<sup>5</sup>

These para-church organizations are forming as Christians put aside their doctrinal differences, and cooperate with people from other denominations to work for common goals in the "broader realm of public morality."<sup>6</sup> This shift has resulted in the new Christian phenomenon of alliances involving members of different denominations which focus on controversial issues in the church as well as American society. As Hunter states, "Traditional religio-cultural divisions are superseded—replaced by the overriding differences taking form out of orthodox and progressive moral commitments."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hunter, 41.

<sup>5</sup> Hunter, 89. When using the term "para-church organizations", Hunter is referring to religiously affiliated organizations which do not claim ties to specific denominations, but whose membership stretches across denominations. I will continue to employ this term throughout this paper, namely to refer to organizations which are composed of Christians from different denominations who work together for a common political position, especially those which work for political positions on the poles of the divisive issues I am highlighting here.

<sup>6</sup> Hunter, 47. A more explicit description of this phenomenon can be found in this section of Hunter's book as well. Hunter's sentiments are echoed by Tom Sine as he notes "most of the views and values currently dividing American Christians are rooted not in our faith or Scripture but in secular culture and politics." Tom Sine, *Cease Fire: Searching for Sanity in America's Culture Wars* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Hunter, 47. Here, Hunter seems to use the terms "orthodox" and "progressive" to describe particular moral views. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using them differently. I will employ the terms "orthodox" and "progressive" when I refer to general theological convictions of groups of people, namely in regards to their overall place on the Christian spectrum. I will employ the terms "conservative" and "liberal" to refer to stances people take in relationship to specific moral and ethical issues. Although there is often a strong correlation between adhering to orthodox Christianity and having a conservative view on a specific issue (and vice versa with

## Experiencing Division Today

Since these divisions over moral visions often take place on a political level and include heavy involvement by people who use Christian platforms to support their position, it becomes increasingly apparent that the things which are at stake in these conflicts involve a struggle to define ourselves not only as Americans, but as Christians within that society. As Hunter describes in his discussion of conflict in America, "at stake is how we as Americans will order our lives together."<sup>8</sup> This sentiment can be applied within the Christian realm as well. As conflicts arise within Christianity, Christians struggle to uphold the morals and beliefs which they believe are essential to their understanding of Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Before we can discuss ways to order our lives together, however, we must understand the roots of our conflicts.<sup>10</sup>

Many Christians, in trying to sort out complicated issues in society (and in Christianity), will turn to the Bible for guidance. Christians have different conceptions of the Bible and how it should be read, however. On the far orthodox end of the Christian spectrum are people who

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progressive Christians who hold liberal views), there is not always a direct correlation between these categories of people. This can be especially relevant when Christians who adhere to one end of the "orthodox/progressive" spectrum have a moderate view on a specific issue, or when people who hold a view on one end of the "conservative/liberal" spectrum align themselves with a moderate Christian faith which is not particularly orthodox or progressive. For further discussion of this, see John B. Cobb, Jr., *Becoming a Thinking Christian* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), especially Chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> Hunter, 34.

<sup>9</sup> I should note here that most conflicts, including the ones I describe here, are at their roots, a struggle for power within their organizations (here Christian faith communities). As many people likely recognize, the people who represent the positions of already-established official policies generally have the power in debates, while those people who do not represent the already-established policies do not. As disagreements continue, people are not only confronting the issues at hand, but the power that comes with having one's position as part of the official stance of the community. While I will not go into further discussion of this issue here, it is important to keep in mind as the depth of these conflicts is recognized.

<sup>10</sup> I recognize that today's intra-Christian divisions cannot be solely blamed on the divisive issues I will be discussing herein. I am focusing on these issues, and the effects they are currently having within Christianity, however, as I believe the effect they are having on intra-Christian relationships is significant and that Christians can work through these issues in more productive ways than they currently do.

believe the Bible is the infallible, direct word of God, which should be interpreted and believed as literally as possible. This view is represented by the Southern Baptist Convention in their "Baptist Faith and Message," where they state,

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy.<sup>11</sup>

Southern Baptists, and others who hold views similar to the one I outlined above, believe Christians should strive to live their lives according to the standards which they find explicitly stated in the Bible.

On the far progressive end of the Christian spectrum are people who believe the Bible is an important book in the Christian church, but that its messages are fallible, especially due to human influences in its passage between people and translations throughout the years. In addition, they believe that, over time, new insights into biblical interpretations can be found, as the Bible is examined in relationship to modern times. One example of a progressive Christian church is the United Church of Christ. Related to biblical interpretation, the UCC,

Assumes the primacy of the Bible as a source for understanding the Good News and as a foundation for all statements of faith. It recognizes that the Bible, though written in specific historical times and places, still speaks to us in our present condition. It declares that the study of the scriptures is not limited by past interpretations, but it is pursued with the expectation of new insights and God's help for living today.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>The Baptist Faith and Message Study Committee, "Baptist Faith and Message," Adrian Rogers, Chairman, [Southern Baptist Convention Website] (n.p.: Southern Baptist Convention, 14 June 2000) s.v. "The Scriptures;" available from [http://sbc.net/default.asp?url=bfam\\_2000.html](http://sbc.net/default.asp?url=bfam_2000.html); Internet; accessed 16 March 2001.

<sup>12</sup>United Church of Christ, "What is the United Church of Christ?: What We Believe," [United Church of Christ Website]; available from <http://www.ucc.org/aboutus/whatis.htm>; Internet; accessed 18 March 2001.

In addition, the UCC affirms a diversity of opinions regarding Biblical interpretation, affirming “that Christians [do] not always have to agree to live together in communion.”<sup>13</sup> As can be seen from these statements, the UCC is one example of a liberal Christian denomination which does not hold biblical teachings as unmovable but believes biblical interpretations can change over time through new insights. Between these conservative and liberal poles of biblical interpretation many other Christian views on how the Bible can be most responsibly interpreted, and the ways in which it is able to connect Christians with God, exist.

In addition to basing their religious convictions on biblical interpretation, Christians turn to other sources to consider how they should respond to various situations. Examples of these include denominational policies and personal experiences and morals. Personal experiences and morals can sometimes come into conflict with people’s avowed religious beliefs.<sup>14</sup> For example, as I discussed a moment ago, orthodox Christians generally believe the Bible is infallible, and its commandments should be explicitly followed. When confronted with specific Bible passages, however, they may take a step back, inserting their personal morals, and choose not to take a biblical directive literally.<sup>15</sup> Personal convictions also come into play on the progressive end of the spectrum. While progressive Christians may believe the Bible is fallible due to human

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<sup>13</sup> United Church of Christ, “About Us,” [United Church of Christ Website]; available from <http://www.ucc.org/aboutus/index.shtml>; Internet; accessed 18 March 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Cobb, Jr., *Becoming a Thinking Christian* is a good resource for a further discussion of the differences between “real beliefs” and “avowed beliefs.” For specific examples of this dichotomy in action, see pages 35-40.

<sup>15</sup> For example, in Lev. 20:10, the Bible states that a man who commits adultery should be put to death, as should the adulteress with whom he had relations. Many orthodox Christians, while upholding the sinfulness of adultery, may also be reluctant to have either the adulterer or the adulteress killed for their actions.

influences, they will uphold specific biblical mores as indisputable commandments for Christians to follow.<sup>16</sup>

Between the extremes on any spectrum of Christian beliefs and doctrines, there are many middle positions regarding the most appropriate ways to interpret the Bible and live a Christian life. In addition, there is a vast spectrum of opinions regarding appropriate Christian responses to modern day divisive situations, oftentimes formed in relation to an individual's orthodox or progressive Christian ties. Although there is not a direct correlation for every person, as a general rule, the more orthodox or progressive a person is in their Christian religious views, the more conservative or liberal their position will be on a divisive issue in the church, or in society at large.

This range of Christian beliefs and doctrines brings people to divisive issues from very different moral positions. When recognizing these different positions, it is important to remember that these positions stem from deeply held belief systems which are built "around our most fundamental and cherished assumptions about how to order our own lives—our own lives and our lives together in this society."<sup>17</sup> Although some people's beliefs may seem ludicrous to other people, the reality is that many people come to their beliefs through a lifetime of teaching, thought, and experience, and are prepared to ardently defend them.

As differences in belief systems become apparent in different views on controversial issues, it is important to question, as Hunter does, "What if these events are not just flashes of political madness but reveal the honest concerns of different communities engaged in a deeply

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<sup>16</sup> Although these mores may differ between progressive Christians, examples may include beliefs that murder is wrong (Deut. 5:17), incest should not be committed (Lev. 18:6-18), and God is present in difficult times in our lives (Psa. 23).

<sup>17</sup> Hunter, 43. Although Hunter's book is meant to encompass all Americans, it deals specifically with Christian Americans. Though this particular statement indicates the importance of people in their roles as Americans, I think it fairly translates into the Christian realm.

rooted cultural conflict?"<sup>18</sup> If they are honest concerns and differences, which I believe they are, the time has come to discuss these issues within the Christian realm. We do not need to come to agreement on controversial issues, as our different bases of Christian understanding will likely preclude that. In the process of learning one another's positions, however, Christians can gain a better awareness of one another's understanding of Christianity and positions on different issues. I will come back to this discussion later in this paper.

### Christian Divisions in the Political Sphere

Many polarizing issues in the Christian church are also polarizing issues in American society. Prominent examples of these types of issues include disagreements over the death penalty, abortion, homosexuality, education, and family structure. These issues are especially unique, as they touch on some of the most fundamental institutions of our American culture. These issues deal with such rights as religious freedom and free speech, as well as social institutions, such as marriage, the legal system, and the school system.

As I have said, different ways of believing in Christianity lead Christians to different views on these social issues. Often the same extreme orthodox and progressive Christians I discussed above represent the polarized views on controversial issues that are most prominently seen in the public sphere.<sup>19</sup> For example, "the politically correct left would include groups like

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<sup>18</sup> Hunter, 32.

<sup>19</sup> The following lists are not meant to be exclusive, but are included to provide examples of national organizations which typically have significant Christian support from Christians on the poles of the spectrum. In addition, some of the organizations, especially the liberal ones, are not directly correlated with members of the Christian church, but have significant support and participation by many Christians, who speak out, on behalf of the organization, as Christians.

the ACLU, Planned Parenthood, NOW and ACT UP.”<sup>20</sup> In comparison, “the p.c. right includes groups like the Christian Coalition, Operation Rescue, Concerned Women for America, the Family Research Council, and the American Center for Law and Justice.”<sup>21</sup>

As debates around these issues become more heated, and the stakes become higher for the people involved, membership and activism in these organizations increases. In addition, new organizations are formed as new issues are brought to the forefront. Often people are deliberately “joining forces on behalf of a particular issue or event” in forming these organizations.<sup>22</sup> The members of these organizations recognize that they can better promote their own interests with the support of other people with the same interest if they work together for their common goal. In other cases, the “explicit aim” of the formation of an organization is to “oppose coalitions on the other side.”<sup>23</sup> This happens most readily by either the combining of efforts of smaller, already existing organizations, or by the establishment of a completely new organization in direct response to the presence of an organization on the opposite pole of an issue.

Sometimes confrontations between these activist groups are violent and attacking. Extremists on both ends of the spectrum have been known not only to campaign for their respective positions, but to also sometimes participate in violent means, ranging from verbal abuse to physical fights to murder, to defend and represent their position on controversial issues. For example, according to the National Abortion Federation, a professional association of

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<sup>20</sup> Sine, 21. For Sine, the term “the politically correct left” reflects the same group of people I refer to as liberals.

<sup>21</sup> Sine, 26. For Sine, the term “the p.c. right” reflects the same group of people I refer to as conservatives.

<sup>22</sup> Hunter, 98.

<sup>23</sup> Hunter, 100.

abortion providers, between 1990 and 2000, there were more than one thousand and seven hundred reported acts of violence against abortion providers.<sup>24</sup> Although most often publicized in conflicts over abortion, this occurs between people who support opposing positions on other issues as well.<sup>25</sup>

While these types of violent actions are relatively rare, they are happening between Christians in our society. It is important to note, however, that most para-church religious organizations vehemently reproach these types of acts of violence. The vast majority of para-church organizations seek to promote their conservative or liberal ideology on a specific issue through non-violent means. They rely more strongly on propaganda, slogans, protests and rallies to promote their ideological viewpoints. In addition, many para-church organizations tend to focus a significant amount of their energy towards the political arena, promoting their viewpoint in relationship to laws and other political measures which affect their cause.

As I discussed above, the formation of these para-church alliances brings people from different denominations together, working for a common goal. Although this may seem positive in some ways, especially on a political front, within Christianity these organizations are also serving to divide denominations along orthodox and progressive lines. Oftentimes, membership in these organizations leads to weakening of denominational ties of many Christians, and a simultaneous strengthening of orthodox or progressive views among the involved members of

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<sup>24</sup> It is unknown if these acts were committed by religiously-affiliated people, but considering the significant number of Christians who campaign against abortion, it is likely that some of these incidents were perpetrated by Christian activists. Violent acts include, but are not limited to, murders, attempted murders, bombings, vandalism, death threats, kidnappings, and stalking. National Abortion Federation, *NAF Violence and Disruption Statistics*. (n.p., 2000).

<sup>25</sup> Other examples include hate crimes against people based on their race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or affiliations with specific organizations (such as the government). Although most organizations do not claim to advocate violence against the people they are in conflict with, people who are perpetrators of hate crimes and members of these types of Christian organizations often point to the viewpoints of these groups to defend their actions.



these organizations. These organizations tend to represent either conservative or liberal views on issues, but because of their deliberate organization around claims of Christian backing, their membership tends to come from the most orthodox or progressive members of Christian faith communities.<sup>26</sup>

Association with these political para-church alliances is contributing to weakened denominational and religious cohesion. As Hunter discusses, "the expansion of these special agenda structures... when coupled with the weakening of denominational ties, this expansion has actually encouraged the deepening of century-old intrafaith divisions."<sup>27</sup> As Hunter cites (and I agree with), this is because most, if not all, of these organizations encourage polarized action on a given issue. By polarizing Christians on divisive issues, strain is placed on the relationships of people within Christian faith communities.

### Conflict Within Christian Faith Communities

Within every level of Christian faith communities conflict is increasing. Some individuals are pulling for a return to more orthodox religious views while others are pulling for more progressive religious views. Additionally, many Christians are pulling for increased support for conservative social issues while other Christians are pulling for increased support for liberal social issues. In addition, a significant portion of Christians do not feel significant changes need to be made within their religion, nor do they feel their religious lives need to be represented in the public political sphere.

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<sup>26</sup> As an interesting side note, Hunter claims that, as a general rule, especially within Protestant denominations, "progressive interests are generally pursued by the denominational leadership and culturally conservative interests are generally promoted by local ministers and the laity." Examples of this type of split are described in subsequent pages of Hunter's book. Hunter, 91.

<sup>27</sup> Hunter, 90.

In addition to the groups of Christians who locate themselves on the poles of debates in the Christian church and the group of Christians who do not feel debates over divisive issues are relevant to their Christian faith, there is one other significant category of Christians. This category is comprised of Christians who have an opinion on a given issue, but it is an opinion that is not well represented by para-church political organizations. Christians who cannot be categorized into the poles of conservative or liberal, but lie somewhere in between these ends adhere to these middle opinions. Oftentimes these Christians do not have their opinion heard in the public sphere. It is important to recognize this significant portion of Christians, as these people have few, if any, outlets by which to discuss and advocate their positions. Consequently, many people tend to neglect recognizing the beliefs of these Christians. It is essential that this middle is recognized and represented as divisive issues in Christianity are discussed.

When divisive issues arise in a faith community, this middle portion of Christians often arises in opposition to either a conservative or liberal pole which is present in the community. Rarely do the conservative and liberal poles belong to the same faith community, therefore conflicts specifically between these two poles do not often occur among people who regularly worship together. Instead, when conflict arises within a faith community, a divide generally occurs between people in the middle of the spectrum and those who represent either a liberal or conservative pole. These conflicts frequently take the form of debates and oftentimes result in a disgruntled factions within the faith community, members leaving the community, or in more severe cases, an official split within the community.

By using dialogue to discuss these issues, the church can bring opposing positions into a more respectful and educational means of communication. This communication will hopefully lead to less divisive outcomes of conflict, or outcomes which provide the opposing individuals

with a valid understanding of their disagreement and one another's positions. Before I begin discussing dialogue, however, I wish to highlight the issue of homosexuality within the church, to use as an example of a prominent divisive issue in American society and Christianity today. Differing Christian opinions on the issue of homosexuality demonstrate the expanse of Christian views on divisive issues such as this and can provide a tangible example to which one can apply the principals of dialogue I will elaborate on later.

## CHAPTER TWO

### HOMOSEXUALITY: A CASE STUDY

As I have discussed, divisiveness within the Christian church occurs over many issues. I wish to take a few pages here to highlight the issue of homosexuality as it is contested in within the Christian church. The spectrum of views held by Christians regarding the homosexuality debate provides a meaningful case study of an issue which is dividing Christians today. While these views reflect societal views on the topic of homosexuality, Christians who hold them find religious backing for their beliefs as well.

As I outline different views on homosexuality in the sections below, I recognize that some readers may not find the views I insert into the categories of conservative, liberal and moderate to apply in the same ways they would categorize them. For the most part, I tried to sort beliefs across the spectrum in relationship to one another. The categories are not meant to reflect the number of Christians in each category, but the degree to which I perceive different justifications falling in relationship to the positions on the extreme poles of the issue of homosexuality within the Christian church.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, I will be presenting the poles of the spectrum first, and then looking at views which fall in between these poles. I hope this will provide the reader with a better understanding of the degree to which Christians differ on the issue of homosexuality, the different ways they arrive at their positions, and wide array of positions which find themselves in the middle of the spectrum.

### **Conservative Christian Viewpoints**

Oftentimes, Christianity is seen as being in opposition to homosexuality, likely due to the high visibility of anti-gay Christian organizations in the public sphere. Picketers, generally organized by anti-gay Christian activists such as Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church, are oftentimes in attendance at high-profile gay-related events, such as Matthew Shepard's funeral and Gay Pride Celebrations.<sup>2</sup> In addition, many anti-gay political organizations advocate their positions as representing Christian views. A prime example of this is the Christian Coalition, which regularly campaigns against homosexuality, among other divisive societal issues.

Many conservative Christians believe the Bible to be the inerrant word of God and point to specific Bible passages to uphold their positions on homosexuality. Commonly cited passages include the creation story and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Conservative Christians believe the creation story demonstrates to Christians God's ideal complimentary formation of men and women as partners on earth. Not only are men and women seen to be compliments for one another for procreative purposes, but each are expected to fulfill complimentary duties within the relationship as well. Homosexual relationships violate this complimentary relationship of male and female, and are therefore seen to confuse and violate God's plan for the roles men and women are expected to fulfill in a relationship.

As far as the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, conservative Christians read the occurrences there to describe same-sex sexual relationships. They believe the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were punished by God because of same-sex activity which was occurring in these cities.

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<sup>2</sup> For information on Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church, I recommend visiting their website. This website provides updates of upcoming picketing events, as well as justification for the far orthodox stance they take on issues of homosexuality. Westboro Baptist Church, "God Hates Fags" (n.p.: 2001); available from [www.godhatesfags.com](http://www.godhatesfags.com); Internet; accessed 28 April 2001.

Conservative Christians believe this story explicitly shows the degree to which God abhors same-sex relationships, and therefore use this passage to show the sinfulness of homosexuality today.

Other specific verses which are often cited by conservative Christians include Lev. 18:22, Lev. 20:13, Rom. 1:18-32, I Cor. 6:9, and I Tim. 1:10. The Leviticus verses, which are part of the Hebrew Purity Code, and the New Testament verses, from the Pauline letters, all make explicit references to same-sex relationships as abominations or sins in the eyes of God. When same-sex relationships are listed in these passages, they are often listed among other sexual prohibitions or are used as examples of singleness. Conservative Christians often cite these verses to show God's disapproval of homosexual orientation and activity. As George Paul Mocko, Bishop Emeritus of the Delaware Synod, ELCA, cites, "The view in our Scriptures is that the purpose of our sexuality achieves its fullest expression in a heterosexual, monogamous, lifelong relationship of commitment and love. Anything other than that is less than that."<sup>3</sup>

Conservative Christians therefore believe that homosexual orientation and practices for which people do not repent go against God's will, and will bring God's wrath upon homosexuals, as well as those who support them. Therefore, homosexuality is seen as contributing to social discord and the destruction of family values. As Jerry Falwell states, "history proves that homosexuality reaches a pandemic level in societies in crisis or in a state of collapse. The sin of homosexuality is so grievous, so abominable in the sight of God, that he destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of this terrible sin."<sup>4</sup> Conservative Christians believe that God's wrath will come upon homosexuals, and those who accept them,

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<sup>3</sup> George Paul Mocko, "No," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40:1 (Spring 2001), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Falwell, *Listen America!* (New York: Doubleday, 1980; Bantam Books, 1981), 157.

and therefore, it is a Christian duty to help people recognize and repent for the sin of homosexuality.

Conservative Christians also worry about the affect homosexuality is having upon family structure and children in American society. This is reflected in Jerry Falwell's book, as he states, "homosexuality is Satan's diabolical attack upon the family, God's order in Creation."<sup>5</sup> This attack upon God's order can be separated into three areas. Firstly, since homosexuals cannot procreate on their own, they violate God's desire for humans to continually produce future generations. In addition, God has provided marriage as a recognition of the sacredness of male-female relationships and the ability they have within that relationship to produce offspring. Since homosexual relationships are not blessed in the Bible, they cannot provide family structures which are blessed by God. Finally, conservative Christians believe men and women have specified roles they are intended to fulfill within family structures. Homosexual relationships confuse this ideal, as they do not allow men and women to fulfill these gender roles. Not only are gender roles within the relationship confused in comparison to one another, but this confusion also serves to confuse the gender roles of the individuals in the relationship. These three items do not allow homosexuals to enact relationships in the ways conservative Christians find in the Bible, in which male-female relationships (in which each partner fulfills a specified role) are upheld as the ideal.

Since homosexuality is viewed as sinful, conservative Christians are concerned about the impact homosexuality could have on children. Conservative Christians worry that if children are raised in a society which condones or even tolerates homosexuality, children will believe that homosexuality is acceptable, and begin to lead homosexual lives. Falwell warns the American

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<sup>5</sup> Falwell, 159.

public, "it is innocent children and young people who are victimized and who becomes addicts to sexual perversion."<sup>6</sup> He goes on to warn parents to protect their children, since "homosexuals cannot reproduce themselves, so they must recruit."<sup>7</sup> These conservative Christian views indicate a concern that homosexuality is in opposition to God, and that homosexuals are working to entice innocent children in this type of sinful lifestyle.

Jerry Falwell and conservative Christians who share views similar to his are concerned about the effects they believe homosexual activity and relationships have on society. Conservative Christians believe homosexuality is against God's will for humans in this world and that its practice will bring about continued destruction and decay of American society. They are concerned about the ways homosexuality affects individuals, impressionable children, and family structure.

In response to homosexuality, conservative Christians hold an array of different stances. Some conservative Christians believe that homosexuals should be encouraged towards ex-gay therapy as a means of changing their sexual orientation to that of heterosexual.<sup>8</sup> Other conservative Christians believe that a homosexual orientation is unchangeable, but should be repressed. These conservative Christians tend to view repentance for a homosexual orientation as an appropriate response for the homosexual and advocate celibacy as the best means of living a sexually sin-free lifestyle. Conservative Christians have a concern for the wellbeing of

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<sup>6</sup> Falwell, 158. In the context of this quotation, it is evident that Falwell is referring specifically to homosexual activity when he uses the phrase "sexual perversion."

<sup>7</sup> Falwell, 160.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus International is arguably the largest and most well-known ex-gay ministry organization. Exodus International has five branches which oversee their ministries throughout the world, including one which serves North America. Exodus International, North America (n.p., Updated Daily); available from <http://www.exodusnorthamerica.org>; Internet; accessed 16 March 2001. The success of ex-gay ministries is highly contested.



homosexuals. They believe homosexuals need to be treated with love, and that Christians should show them the grievousness of their sin and help them to repent for it. While many conservative Christians treat homosexuals respectfully, they also fear for their future, and will encourage them to change or repress their homosexual feelings in order to live a less sinful life.

These conservative Christian views tend to be represented in the American public sphere through organizations such as Focus on the Family, the Christian Coalition, and the American Family Association. People who adhere to them have serious concerns about the sinfulness of homosexuality and the affect it has on Christians. Therefore, these people oftentimes belong to organizations which actively oppose homosexuality, and will work to prevent the acceptance of homosexuality in the public and Christian spheres.

### **Liberal Christian Viewpoints**

Liberal Christians hold vastly different views on homosexuality than do conservative Christians. Liberal Christians interpret the Bible differently and tend to have polar opposite positions from those held by conservative Christians. They believe that homosexual orientation and relationships are just as natural and God-given as heterosexual orientation and relationships, and seek to affirm homosexuality within the Christian church. In addition, they view homosexuals as a persecuted minority in society, and believe that the church should be an open and welcoming environment for homosexuals.

Liberal Christians tend to see the Bible as the inspired word of God but with definite historical influences related to the context in which it was written as well as its translations throughout time. For this reason, the Bible is not viewed as infallible, and liberal Christians believe it should not be read literally. Biblical passages often cited by conservative Christians

are either deemed irrelevant in society today or are believed to have other meanings. I will go more in depth in describing liberal views on reading these passages, as they do not take them literally or find reasoning they believe is sufficient to disregard the passages.

Liberal Christians consider the Sodom and Gomorrah story to be a story about either rape or inhospitality, but not one which was written to condemn homosexuality.<sup>9</sup> Even if God did bring wrath upon the cities because a sexual encounter occurred between men, liberal Christians understand this encounter to be one of rape which was intended to demasculinize the victim. Liberal Christians do not believe this type of male-male rape can be fairly applied to same-sex mutual relationships today. As far as the creation story, liberal Christians affirm God's formation of Adam and Eve as complimentary partners, but point out their procreative purpose in life. Since relationships today are designed to serve purposes outside of procreation, many liberal Christians believe relationships should not be judged solely on their ability to procreate but on the overall quality of the relationship.<sup>10</sup>

The Hebrew Purity Code passages in Leviticus are considered by many liberal Christians to be irrelevant, as other parts of the Hebrew Purity Code are disregarded by many Christians today. As indicated by Ken Sehested, "other 'abominations' before God include eating pork, misusing incense, and having intercourse during menstruation."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore,

Wearing garments made of two different materials is also prohibited, as are sowing a field with two kinds of seed, cutting one's hair where it meets the temple of a human

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<sup>9</sup> Ken Sehested, "Biblical Fidelity and Sexual Orientation: Why the First Matters, Why the Second Doesn't," in *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*, Walter Wink, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 54-55.

<sup>10</sup> Liberal Christians further this argument by referring to heterosexual couples who, by choice or circumstance, are unable to procreate, but whose relationship is still considered legitimate.

<sup>11</sup> Sehested, 57.

face—among a host of other commands, commands that the church has never declared normative.<sup>12</sup>

Since these practices are not condemned by the church today, even though they are also part of the Hebrew Purity Code, liberal Christians believe the passages from Leviticus can also be disregarded as reflective of the time, and not indicative of God's position on the issue of homosexuality.

As far as the New Testament passages which describe sexual relationships between two people of the same sex, liberal Christians once again point out the differences between these acts and the types of mutually empowering same-sex relationships they advocate in today's society.<sup>13</sup> Instead of seeing them in reference to today's homosexual relationships, many liberal Christians interpret these passages as examples of God's directives concerning the evils of idolatry, pederasty, and prostitution in the temple, which they cite as common practices in the time the Bible was written.<sup>14</sup> They do not find these passages, therefore, to pertain to committed same-sex relationships today, or to a homosexual affectional orientation.

As a whole, many Biblical passages that conservative Christians relate to homosexuality, liberal Christians read differently. Beyond the reasons I have discussed above, there are reasons liberal Christians do not believe these passages pertain to homosexuality. For example, they believe these passages do not indicate an understanding of the possibility of a long-term meaningful relationship occurring between two consenting people of the same gender. Liberal Christians claim that, at the time the Bible was written, there was likely no understanding of homosexual orientation, so it could not have been condemned or condoned in the Bible. Since

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<sup>12</sup> Sehested, 56.

<sup>13</sup> The passages I am referring to are the same New Testament ones I highlighted in the earlier section on conservative Christian viewpoints. These include Rom. 1:18-32, I Cor. 6:9 and I Tim. 1:10.

homosexuality as it is known today was not understood in biblical times, there was also not language to describe it, so biblical authors could not have written about it.

Instead of focusing their response to homosexuality on the Bible passages I outlined above, liberal Christians often focus their response to homosexuality in relation to biblical imperatives which direct Christians to love and care for people, including the outcasts of society. Liberal Christians point out Jesus' care for the outcasts of society, and believe they are called to treat homosexuals with the same care Jesus demonstrated towards the outcasts of his time.

Walter Wink describes this position as he says,

God sides with the powerless. God liberates the oppressed. God suffers with the suffering and groans toward the reconciliation of all things. Therefore Jesus went out of his way to declare forgiven, and to reintegrate into society in all details, those who were identified as 'sinners' by virtue of the accidents of birth, or biology, or economic desperation. In the light of that supernal compassion... the gospel's imperative to love, care for, and be identified with their sufferings is unmistakably clear.<sup>15</sup>

Liberal Christians believe the church should be an open and welcoming place for people of all sexual orientations, not a place that shuns people on the basis of their sexual orientation.

In addition, liberal Christians believe that homosexuals should be encouraged to pursue meaningful relationships with a same-sex partner, just as heterosexuals are encouraged to do so with a partner of the opposite sex. They believe that homosexual people should be held to the same relationship standards as heterosexual people: condemning irresponsible sexual practices and encouraging the pursuit of meaningful long-term relationships. This view is shared by Richard Rohr, who says, "I think God would ask of the homosexual relationship exactly what God asks of the heterosexual relationship: truth, faithfulness, long-suffering, and the continuing

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<sup>14</sup> Sehested, 56.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Wink, "Homosexuality and the Bible," *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*, Walter Wink, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 47.

forgiveness of the other.”<sup>16</sup> This view is echoed by James Martin-Schramm, as he claims “it is not the institution [marriage] itself that makes sex good but rather the quality of the relationship between the partners. This is true for both heterosexual and gay or lesbian relationships.”<sup>17</sup>

Oftentimes, liberal Christian congregations will affirm homosexuals in their faith communities by openly inviting them to participate in the community and by offering services which are sensitive to their needs. Liberal congregations are affirming of homosexuality in their sermons and worship liturgy and sensitive to the needs of homosexual members in church Bible studies, congregational activities, newsletters, and worship services. In these congregations, homosexuals and their families are granted full inclusion and acceptance in the life of the congregational community.

Some liberal Christians also work to combat the messages set forth by conservative Christian groups as well as to combat heterosexism and homophobia in American society. Liberal Christians feel their religious faith calls for them to participate in these groups in order to reach out to the oppressed and help reduce oppression where they can. As Tom Sine points out, oftentimes these groups will not form under Christian titles, but, in an effort to be more inclusive, unite with people outside of Christianity to promote their views on a national political level.<sup>18</sup> One example of a group of liberal Christians which was organized to combat the messages of conservative Christians is the Interfaith Alliance. In addition, many organizations have been formed within denominations to work for increased acceptance of homosexuality within their denomination. The types of acceptance they are promoting may not rely on the

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Rohr, OFM, “Where the Gospel Leads Us,” *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*, Walter Wink, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 85.

<sup>17</sup> James Martin-Schramm, “Yes,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40:1 (Spring 2001), 12.

<sup>18</sup> Sine, 44.

liberal views I have outlined here, but are often on the liberal end of the spectrum within their own denomination.

Liberal Christians believe that a homosexual orientation is natural and should be affirmed, not denied. In addition, homosexuals are as varied as heterosexuals in their lifestyle, and should be encouraged in a Christian lifestyle without regard for their sexual orientation. Instead of criticizing people for acting on their homosexual attractions, liberal Christians believe homosexuals should be held to the same standards as heterosexual Christians. "Promiscuity, exploitation and self-destructive behavior should be condemned, whereas long-term commitments should be encouraged, regardless of the sexual orientation of the partners in the relationship."<sup>19</sup>

### **Moderate Christian Viewpoints**

As can be seen from this discussion of the conservative and liberal ends of the Christian spectrum of responses to homosexuality, different Christian opinions can be dramatically different from one another in response to the issues raised by homosexuality. These poles of the spectrum represent many Christians, but a significant number of Christians hold more moderate views than are represented by either of these poles, often taking portions of both conservative and liberal views in forming their positions.<sup>20</sup> Frequently, moderate Christians will agree with things I have already specified in my discussion of conservative and liberal viewpoints, but

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<sup>19</sup> Wink, 69.

<sup>20</sup> By the term "moderate," which I will employ throughout this section, I am referring to mid-spectrum Christians. This term is not being used to describe these people as mild in their viewpoints, but merely to indicate their position in the middle portion of the spectrum of Christian views on homosexuality.

oftentimes to a less extreme degree. Instead of repeating these areas of overlap, I am using this section to highlight those portions of mid-spectrum views which I have not yet discussed.

As I have already shown, within Christianity, different views on homosexuality often reflect differences in the ways people read and interpret the Bible. Moderate Christians may align their views on biblical interpretation with either the conservative or liberal poles, or may have a middle ground between these areas. Most Christians who are moderate on the issue of homosexuality view the Bible as the inspired word of God, but believe the Bible also must be considered in some degree of relationship to the time period in which it was written. Generally, they allow that the Bible closely reflects the will of God, but it is open to some degree of interpretation due to other influences.<sup>21</sup>

Some Christians, especially in the moderate portion of the spectrum of Christian beliefs on homosexuality, evaluate the sinfulness of homosexuality in relationship to other sins. They believe that, while same-sex activity is denounced in the Bible, many other things are as well. Since all people are sinners, they see no reason to elevate homosexuality above other sins in its degree of sinfulness.<sup>22</sup> They believe that the sinfulness of homosexuality should be focused on to the same degree as other sins, and treated similarly in the Christian church. Since all Christians are sinners, all should be held to the same standards and be encouraged towards sin-free living in every aspect of their lives.

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<sup>21</sup> A useful presentation of Bible passages which are often discussed in homosexuality debates has been outlined by Thomas E. Schmidt. Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow?: Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1995). Though I would describe Schmidt's overall position on homosexuality as lying somewhere between conservative and moderate, I think he does a good job of outlining discussion of the support and challenges which surround the use of different biblical passages in debating homosexuality in the Christian church.

<sup>22</sup> People who hold this moderate view often believe that celibacy is the best option for homosexuals. Just as they would not expect the Christian church to advocate any other sin, people in this moderate position follow that the Christian church should not condone homosexuality, nor should it hold it higher than any other sin.

Many moderate Christians believe that, regardless of the sinfulness of homosexuality, Christians are called to love one another, and to treat homosexuals with the same respect, dignity, and compassion as they are called to treat other people. Regardless of differences in opinion as to the sinfulness of homosexuality, most moderate Christians believe it is their responsibility to show God's love to homosexuals. The demonstration of this love manifests itself differently throughout the Christian spectrum, however. On the conservative end of the moderate portion of the spectrum are people who follow the aphorism, "love the sinner, but hate the sin." This can be enacted by befriending homosexuals and acknowledging their relationships, but not by affirming or condoning their homosexuality. More liberal moderate Christians feel that the sin is not as important a factor in their response to homosexuality as is the loving of the homosexual. People who believe love should be the focus of the Christian response to homosexuals tend to follow liberal Christian views which point to Jesus' outreach to the outcasts of society. They believe they are called to treat homosexuals in a similar manner.

People in the moderate portion of the spectrum generally believe, to varying degrees, that homosexuals should be included in Christian faith communities as well. The degree to which homosexuals are accepted within a faith community varies along the spectrum. The more conservative moderates invite homosexuals into their worship spaces, just as they welcome any other sinner, but prefer that homosexual church members do not make their orientation known. As one moves towards more liberal positions on the spectrum, homosexuals are welcome to bring their partners and children to church and are increasingly affirmed in their relationships.



### **Key Christian Debates Related to Homosexuality**

There are a few key debates related to homosexuality which are currently the most heated within the Christian church, especially among moderate and liberal Christian denominations. I have touched on them briefly in my discussion of the spectrum of Christian beliefs, but wish to specifically highlight them here, as these are currently the most controversial topics in the area of homosexuality in the church. These two conflicts occur over questions as to whether or not committed partnerships between same-sex couples should be recognized by Christian faith communities and whether or not homosexual clergy should be ordained, and if so, if their ordination should carry a stipulation of celibacy.

#### **Blessing Same Sex Partnerships**

Concerning the issue of recognizing same-sex partnerships, conservative Christians are generally opposed to the affirmation of these partnerships by the Christian Church. Firstly, this would be an affirmation that same-sex partnerships are appropriate and valid displays of affectional orientation. Since conservative Christians do not believe a homosexual orientation is a valid affectional orientation, it follows that they do not find homosexual relationships to be appropriate types of affectional partnerships and are consequently opposed to the blessing of same-sex partnerships by Christian faith communities. As Gilbert Meilaender states, expressing his views regarding whether or not the ELCA should bless same-sex relationships, “what we cannot bless—when we claim to speak on God’s behalf—is what is wrong.”<sup>23</sup> In addition, many conservative Christians maintain that marriage provides people with a structure in which to raise a family. They do not believe homosexual partners can adequately provide this type of structure

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<sup>23</sup> Gilbert Meilaender, “Nein,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40:1 (Spring 2001), 26.

and question the ability of homosexual partners to be appropriate parents, should they choose to raise a child. Finally, many conservative Christians believe that there is a certain sanctity to marriage which would be violated by extending the ceremony to same-sex couples.

Liberal Christians, on the other hand, believe the church should recognize same-sex partnerships, and bless them just as heterosexual partnerships are blessed. They claim that homosexual relationships are as valid as heterosexual relationships. Therefore, homosexuals deserve just as much recognition in their relationships as heterosexuals are currently given, and should be accorded equal legal and religious status. Peter Rogness demonstrates this liberal Christian belief as he states,

If this is the beginning assumption, that homosexual orientation is a given for certain people, than one must consider seeing the God-given gift of sexual intimacy as belonging in a loving, faithful, committed relationship – just as it is a gift as part of the marriage bond. Thus it follows that the church as a community would offer its support and blessing.<sup>24</sup>

Beyond marriage's function of recognizing committed partnerships between two people, it also provides people with many benefits, to which liberal Christians believe homosexual couples should also have access.<sup>25</sup> Since liberal Christians believe homosexuals relationships should be accorded the same status and rights as heterosexual relationships, they are generally in favor of the Christian church blessing homosexual relationships, and according them equal status to marriage, both in its religious and social functions.

Christians in the moderate portion of the spectrum tend to adhere to a belief which encompasses portions of both the liberal and conservative poles of the spectrum. On one hand,

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Rogness, "Yes, Maybe," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40:1 (Spring 2001), 22.

<sup>25</sup> These benefits include, but are not limited to, hospital visitation rights, the filing of joint tax returns, the ability to adopt, and family insurance coverage. Currently, some of these rights are extended to homosexual couples by some organizations, but these policies vary greatly between companies, cities, and states.

they generally believe that homosexual people should have the same legal rights as heterosexuals, especially regarding nondiscrimination and harassment policies. They may vary more in their position regarding domestic partnership benefits such as family insurance coverage.<sup>26</sup> Like conservative Christians, however, moderate Christians tend to be concerned for the sanctity of marriage and the ability of homosexual couples to be parents. While they may be willing to extend similar partnership benefits to homosexual couples, they are tentative to equate homosexual partnerships to marriages. The more liberal moderate Christians tend to believe homosexuals should be entitled to similar legal benefits of marriage, but that the union should not be recognized as a full marriage, but as a comparable union such as a "holy union" or "legally recognized domestic partnership." Overall, moderate Christians do not tend to agree on the role the church should play in recognizing or affirming these domestic partnerships.

### Ordination of Homosexual Clergy

In the area of ordination of homosexual clergy, there tends to be more gray area than in the marriage controversy. Not only is there a division as to whether or not homosexuals can be effective church leaders, there are also varying stipulations that congregations place on clergy who wish to be ordained. Additionally, while many Christian churches wish to grant homosexuals varying degrees of inclusion in their faith communities, they become more tentative when homosexuals wish to be leaders in their congregations.

Conservative Christians, not surprisingly, do not favor the ordination of homosexual clergy. They believe that, since homosexuals are sinners, they cannot be appropriate leaders in

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<sup>26</sup> "Domestic partnership" is a term often used to refer to committed same-sex relationships. It is generally considered to be synonymous to marriage for heterosexual couples. Domestic partnership benefits are legal benefits granted to homosexual couples in domestic partnerships the same way they are granted to married heterosexual couples.

the church, and even question if they should be allowed to remain within the church as members. Conservative Christians place homosexuals in the same category as other unrepentant sinners, and therefore do not feel they can, in good conscience, allow homosexuals to be clergy members. Even if homosexuals commit to celibacy, conservative Christians believe their sinful orientation still prevents them from suitably fulfilling leadership roles, and will not ordain homosexuals.

On the liberal end of the spectrum are people who believe that the Christian church should allow homosexuals to be ordained clergy. They believe that a person's sexual orientation does not play a factor in their ability to effectively minister to a congregation. Many point to the number of homosexual clergy who are already serving in congregations, and whose congregations support their religious leadership. In some denominations, such as the ELCA, some clergy are choosing not to take action against homosexual pastors, and allowing them to continue their ministry with congregational support.<sup>27</sup> Liberal churches who take this position often wish to hold homosexual clergy to the same standards as heterosexual clergy, equating participation in a committed partnership with marriage.

Christians in the moderate portion of the spectrum tend to believe that homosexuals may be appropriate clergy if and only if they remain completely celibate. Homosexuals who are in relationships with partners, regardless of their level of commitment to one another, are not considered appropriate clergy in many mid-spectrum Christian churches. This requirement of celibacy follows the view that homosexuals cannot control their sexual orientation, nor should

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<sup>27</sup> For further discussion of the current representation of homosexual clergy in the ELCA, as well as various actions taken against these clergy, see Anita C. Hill, "Yes," in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40:1 (Spring 2001), 13-16. As she cites there, ELCA response has relied primarily on the actions bishops choose to take in response to homosexual clergy. Sometimes clergy are removed from the clergy roster. Other times, especially when clergy have significant support within their congregation, the congregation may be put on probation or removed from the denominational roster. More recently, some bishops have elected to ignore the presence of homosexual clergy in their churches by either completely ignoring the situation or deeming the pastoral position "open," but not actively encouraging the congregation in a call process.

they be asked to change it, but can choose whether or not they wish to pursue relationships with people of the same-sex.<sup>28</sup> As with same-sex partnerships, there is a great deal of conflict among moderate Christians as to the ability of homosexuals to serve as ordained clergy within the Christian church. A great deal of this difference arises over the question as to whether or not homosexuals must remain celibate to fulfill a role as a leader or clergy member.

Christians are continually grappling with the issues raised by the blessing of same-sex partnerships and the ordination of homosexual clergy in their faith communities today. A great deal of conflict and discussion is occurring in denominations across the spectrum over these topics. Most of this discussion is occurring on national levels of denominational councils and task forces, as they make decisions regarding official church policies on these issues. Many of these councils go through arduous and difficult processes as they continually work through the policy questions which are raised by people within their denomination who have differing views on how their denomination should be appropriately responding to the issues surrounding homosexuality.

### Summary

Homosexuality, as I have outlined it here, is only one example of a divisive issue within the Christian church today. As can be seen from this discussion, the views on "appropriate Christian responses" to the issues raised by homosexuality are extremely varied along the spectrum of Christianity. The same spectrum of opinions can be shown on abortion or family structure as well. The conflicts raised by questions over abortion, family structure, and homosexuality will continue to arise in Christian congregations in the future. The question

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<sup>28</sup> This stipulation of celibacy is currently being called into question in many mid-line Christian denominations. This is currently especially evident in the PC(USA), as well as the ELCA, though to a slightly

becomes how Christians will work through these issues, and whether these issues will continue to divide Christians or whether they can be used to bring Christians together.

## CHAPTER THREE

### DIALOGUE

As I have alluded to up to this point, I believe divisive issues such as homosexuality need to be addressed through dialogue on all organizational levels of the Christian church in America.<sup>1</sup> As I discussed earlier, Christians are losing their connections with their Christian faith communities, and divisions between Christians are becoming deeper each day. If Christians do not bring their conflicts into dialogue, I fear they risk the future of intra-Christian relationships in America. If Christians can begin to dialogue over these issues, perhaps changes can take place within Christianity, as formerly strained relationships are renewed through dialogue and newfound understandings. Just as dialogue between Christians and non-Christians has been advocated in creating mutual understandings between these people, I feel the same type of dialogue can bring Christians into a forum through which they can become reconnected with one another as new understandings develop.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> While this entire section will go in-depth in explaining dialogue, I wish to remind the reader of the description I used earlier to describe the type of dialogue I am advocating. Dialogue, as defined by Leonard Swidler is "a two-way communication between persons who hold significantly differing views on a subject with the purpose of learning more truth about the subject from the other." Swidler, 57. My call for this type of dialogue on all levels of Christian faith communities is echoed by Leonard Swidler as well, as he says, "dialogue should involve every level of the religious, ideological communities, all the way down to the 'persons in the pews.' Only thus will the religious ideological communities learn from each other and come to understand each other as they truly are." Swidler, 60. The other contributors to this book agree with this sentiment as they indicate that they collectively agree that "dialogue needs to occur.. on all levels." Swidler et al., "Consensus Statements," *Death or Dialogue?: From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue*, Swidler et al., eds., (London: SCM Press, 1990), 146. Although the discussion in this book is specifically directed at inter-religious dialogue, many of the things which are discussed are also applicable to the intra-religious dialogue which I am encouraging within the Christian church.

<sup>2</sup> Swidler et al. encourage inter-religious dialogue in their book, as do other Christians, including Reuel L. Howe. Reuel L. Howe, *The Miracle of Dialogue*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1964).

## Concerns Related to Dialogue

Before I begin discussing the potential benefits of dialogue, I feel it is important to recognize that some Christians are tentative to engage in dialogue with other Christians. Some Christians question why differences should be discussed, and instead advocate setting individual differences aside and working together as Christians in areas of mutual agreement. Many Christian organizations follow this example, focusing on areas of commonality and expecting their members to put aside differences for the sake of unity.<sup>3</sup> As Christians choose not to address these issues in their faith communities, they don't disappear, they simply continue to fester under the surface. Although I recognize that many Christians can generally work together by putting their differences aside, consistently ignoring differences can also serve to strain Christian relationships by not permitting people to address their differences. Although some people may feel that Christian faith communities do not need to discuss divisive issues because they are not relevant to the overall goals of the Christian church, I believe these issues are extremely relevant. These divisive issues are the source of a notable tension within the Christian church. If they are not addressed, I worry that they will continue straining relationships until the bonds between Christians are strained beyond repair.

Of course, some Christians may be concerned about dialogue for other reasons. They may be concerned they will be asked to give up some of their Christian beliefs in order to work together with other Christians. A person's beliefs are not something they are willing to compromise for the sake of dialogue or Christian unity. I agree with people who have this concern, yet I find it to be unfounded in the type of dialogue I am encouraging. Just as inter-

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of these types of organizations range from those which serve disadvantaged people, such as Habitat for Humanity, the Salvation Army or CROP to organizations which work towards Christian unity, including the World Council of Churches or the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in Collegeville, MN.



religious dialogue does not require that people from different religions give up portions of their religion in dialogue, compromising one's Christian beliefs is not necessary for intra-Christian dialogue. I am not advocating Christian dialogue over divisive issues in order that Christians achieve consensus on these issues, but instead am encouraging dialogue which enables participants to come to a better mutual understanding of one another.

One final concern some Christians may have regarding intra-Christian dialogue is that it may serve to further divide Christians faith communities. I admit that I share this concern. Considering the pervasiveness of these issues in our American society, however, I believe they are bound to continue arising among Christians, whether they are brought out in dialogue or in unexpected conflicts. Even when they are not being addressed on the surface of Christian faith communities, these issues are consistently affecting the personal lives of members of faith communities. At least when these issues are raised through dialogue, community members have a chance to reasonably address one another and learn from one another. Without dialogue, I think faith communities have a higher risk of dividing over these issues, since when they do arise, they will likely occur in a more emotionally charged setting, impeding calm and rational discussion. If communities do engage in dialogue and find there are irreconcilable differences between themselves, at least they were able to reasonably address one another and will perhaps be able to maintain some degree of positive relationship with one another even if they are not able to continue co-existing in the same faith community.

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While I am in no way trying to imply that these organizations serve negative purposes, I do think they reflect a general trend in Christianity which encourages Christians to set conflicts aside to work for a common good.

## Reasons for Dialogue

While I recognize the concerns some Christians have with dialoguing over divisive issues within Christianity, I feel this is an important step for the Christian church to take for its own sake, as well as the sake of its members. Through dialogue, Christians can come to a new level of conversation with one another and work for mutual understanding and engagement in these issues. This new level of conversation can work to replace the argumentative and attacking means which currently frame most interactions of people who differ in opinion on these divisive issues. Through dialogue, people who disagree on divisive issues can constructively discuss their differences instead of relying on slogans, propaganda, and mud-slinging debates to build up themselves or tear down others. As Reuel L. Howe writes, "the responsibility of the Church is to speak dialogically with each generation and thus meet the needs of men. And the Church's own need for renewal is met through such dialogue."<sup>4</sup> Even if dialogue is not able to lead to complete renewal of the Christian church, I believe it has many benefits which can work towards positively reforming currently strained intra-Christian relationships.

I believe dialogue needs to occur between Christians insofar as they value education and understanding over ignorance. I think this classification can safely be applied to most Christians in America.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Christian faith communities are generally organized with a focus on educating the congregation, often made evident in clerical homilies, Bible studies, and faith retreats. These types of forums seem to indicate a Christian affinity towards the pursuit of

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<sup>4</sup> Howe, 14.

<sup>5</sup> I recognize, however, that this assumption likely does not apply to all Christians in the same way. Although most, if not all, Christian faith communities work to educate their members in some form, some may not advocate that their members participate in individual discernment through dialogue, as I am advocating. Instead they may place greater value on authoritative leadership as the appropriate source for education concerning matters related to Christianity. I recognize that I am likely leaving these people behind as I advocate dialogue within the Christian church.

religious knowledge within their faith communities. By using dialogue over divisive issues as a means of educating one another, Christians involved in discussion can learn from one another and benefit from the results of these types of informative exchanges.

First, and foremost, education through dialogue can help bring people towards a valid understanding of one another. Dialogue provides a forum in which people are able to fairly and reasonably represent their views to one another, as well as able to address questions and concerns from the people with whom they are engaged in dialogue.<sup>6</sup> As this type of education takes place, stereotypes and misconceptions which people have about one another (and the positions they represent) can be broken down and replaced with the accurate information presented in a dialogue. People are consequently more appropriately prepared to fairly evaluate and consider one another's positions. As people leave a dialogue, they may remain divided on the issue they have been discussing, but have benefited from the dialogue to the degree to which they have gained a more realistic understanding of the spectrum of Christian positions which exist regarding the issue being discussed.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to achieving a more realistic understanding of the Christian positions with which people disagree, dialogue can also help Christians come to a more realistic understanding of the position with which they choose to align themselves. By engaging in dialogue and having their own position questioned they become increasingly aware of their own beliefs and are able

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<sup>6</sup> When dialogue occurs, it may be useful to shape dialogue over a divisive issue around a common dialogue focus. For example, though Christian views on many of these divisive issues differ greatly from one another, many of the arguments people across the spectrum use in defending their position seem to stem from a concern for the well-being of people. If this shared concern can be highlighted, and conversation can be focused around this topic, the conversation can have a defined direction, which may help people to more productively discuss the issue. While this focus may be helpful in some situations, it is not necessary for every dialogue forum. Effective dialogue can also take place without participants discussing over a shared quality, but merely working to mutually educate one another.

<sup>7</sup> This process, of education through dialogue, is well articulated by Iris Young, as she writes, "By communicating to one another their differing perspectives on the social world in which they dwell together, they

to understand them in relationship to the beliefs of others. Through a dialogue, Christians are better equipped to responsibly choose the position with which they will align themselves and are able to understand that position in relationship with other Christian positions.

As they learn of other positions, Christians may also reconsider their use and defense of a given position as the only "Christian" position on an issue. Through a dialogue, they become aware of the vast spectrum of beliefs which exist on a given divisive issue, and may be more aware when using the term "Christian" to refer to beliefs related to that issue. Although I recognize people will probably continue to defend their views as Christian, they will hopefully do so with and understanding that their view is not the only Christian view which exists on the topic. As they recognize this, I hope they will become inclined to use the term "Christian" more responsibly and with an increased awareness of the degree to which their employment of the term "Christian" represents or misrepresents the views of other Christians.

As people become informed of Christian positions on a given issue, they are better equipped to handle situations which bring these issues to the forefront in their faith communities. Currently, when situations related to divisive issues arise, Christians often do not have an effective strategy for dealing with the conflict. For example, if an issue arises within a congregation as to whether or not the community should call a homosexual pastor, dialogue can help facilitate effective congregational communication related to the decision. Oftentimes, in these types of situations, dialogue can be beneficial for conflicts which have already arisen within a faith community or can prepare people to more adequately address conflicts when they arise in the future.

In addition to assisting people in dealing with divisive issues within their faith communities, dialogue can also benefit people when these issues arise in their own lives. Oftentimes, Christians do not choose to wrestle with opposing positions on divisive issues until the issue becomes pertinent in their personal lives and then are left scrambling, on their own, to discern what they believe. This may happen when a person learns someone close to them has had an abortion or when a family member comes out as being homosexual. If people have been involved in dialogue over these issues, they can be better equipped to deal with these potentially life-altering circumstances when they arise in their own lives. Amidst their circumstance, they are prepared with a base of information from which to support themselves. This new situation may serve to further affirm their position, or it may cause them to rethink their position. Either way, their previously established base of information can equip them to continue in their previous position or alter that position in light of their personal circumstance and the dialogue which has informed them of other Christian positions.

Outside of situations pertaining directly to the issue which shapes a dialogue, having engaged in dialogue can also bring Christians closer together and assist them in working together in common endeavors by strengthened relationships which were previously strained due to their differences. As Robert Putnam identifies, "there is a close correlation between social trust and associational membership."<sup>8</sup> As people dialogue, and Christian associational ties are re-strengthened through mutual education and understanding, Christians can reestablish a trust in one another and work for common goals together.

These common endeavors may be directly related to the issue over which the dialogue participants disagree. Through dialogue, Christians are able to understand the ways their

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<sup>8</sup> Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (January 1995): 73.

positions differ from one another and at the same time find areas in which they agree as well.

With this understanding, dialogue participants can work together in these areas of agreement.

For example, though the range of views on abortion is vast, many people within the spectrum of views do not believe violence is an appropriate way to champion a position on abortion.

Following dialogue, people from across the spectrum may be able to work together in opposition to people who use violence as a means of representing their position. As Christians achieve a valid understanding of one another's positions, they can find things to work on together in spite of their differences.

In addition, with a new associational trust and understanding, Christians can continue to work together on issues which are unrelated to the issue they have dialogued over. Although many of these types of coalitions already exist, dialogue can help to strengthen ties between people in these organizations and help them to work together more effectively. As dialogue has strengthened these ties, so to will it strengthen the common goals and enactment of the missions of these organizations. Having established valid understandings of one another, Christians can work together in these organizations, less burdened by the misconceptions which previously served to strain their relationships as Christians.

When Christians have become educated on these divisive issues they are not only able to come together with other Christians, but are able to represent their views in their personal lives and in their roles in American society. In this way, the Christian church will have assisted its members in learning about Christian perspectives on divisive issues, which then empowers them to represent their views in their personal lives. In these ways, the Christian church will have continued its mission to educate its members in issues related to their faith communities.

While I recognize that dialogue has the power to have destructive ends, dialogue can also be an extremely effective tool in bringing people who have conflicting viewpoints into productive conversation with one another, especially when dialogue is utilized in a well-planned and thoughtful manner. As I have outlined here, there are many potential positive and productive outcomes to dialogue over divisive issues within the Christian church. When dialogue is pursued in an appropriate manner, Christians are able to gain a realistic perspective of other people's viewpoints on divisive issues, as well as an enriched understanding of their own. In addition, they can be better equipped to deal with these issues as they arise within their faith communities and personal lives. Finally, with increased levels of mutual understanding, and an alleviation of misconceptions as a result of this understanding, Christians can be more willing and able to work together on a variety of shared endeavors. Through dialogue over divisive issues, Christians can begin repairing their strained relationships with one another.

### **Means of Dialogue**

Since dialogue must be used in a well-planned and thoughtful manner in order to be successful, I turn now to a discussion of dialogue, specifically related to its usage as a means for understanding and discussing divisive issues in the Christian church. Since, dialogue can be productive, unproductive, or even disastrous in furthering understanding between people with different ideas, I feel it is important to outline specific means of dialogue for the Christian church. Although I am advocating discussion of the divisive issues I have outlined to this point, the dialogue I am outlining can be used in relation to those issues or to other difficult issues which arise within the Christian church.

It is important to note from the beginning that each situation is different, and though the suggestions I make are generally universal, they must be tailored to each specific situation. For example, the grouping of people for which a dialogue is designed will determine some of the parameters which are set for the conversation. If dialogue is occurring within a congregation, different parameters will be set than if the dialogue is occurring between denominations. If the grouping is large, different specific means of communication are appropriate when compared with those which are useful among a small group of people. The following section should be read with a realization that different suggestions are more and less appropriate for different situations. In addition, these suggestions are not intended to be exhaustive parameters for dialogue, but instead are highlights of specific parameters which I believe are especially important for effective dialogue.

### Guidelines for Dialogue

To begin, there are some basic guidelines which should frame most, if not all, of the discussions which I am advocating. While these guidelines may apply differently in different situations, they are important for any dialogue forum. These guidelines, which I will expand on herein, consist of inclusiveness, respectfulness, a recognition of barriers, a willingness to change one's position, and an assumption of goodwill among dialogue participants. By following these five general guidelines, dialogue forums have a significantly improved chance of resulting in a successful and productive exchange.



## *Inclusion*

The guideline for inclusion covers a number of aspects I think are important for dialogue, namely the variety of positions presented in dialogue as well as the participants who are invited into dialogue. In order to be inclusive, dialogue should include opinions and representatives from a spectrum of perspectives. The range of perspectives may vary depending on the situation, but as a general rule, the more expansive the spectrum of positions represented, the more inclusive and appropriate is the conversation. It is important for the fringe (as well as intermediate) positions to be included in dialogue. These positions should reflect the expanse of positions appropriate to the conversation.<sup>9</sup>

When considering the people to include in conversation, as well as those to exclude, things can become more complex, and may vary greatly from situation to situation.<sup>10</sup> Essentially, even by setting up a dialogue within a given faith community, people outside of that faith community will automatically be excluded. As a general rule, inclusiveness related to dialogue participants is dependent on the dialogue and its purposes. If there is a specific situation at hand, the people involved in the situation and affected by it should be at the

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<sup>9</sup> It is appropriate to note that in different situations, different beliefs on a given issue may be included in the spectrum being discussed. For example, in a conversation about homosexuality within a congregation from the Southern Baptist Convention, dialogue may include a different range of beliefs than those included in a conversation within a UCC congregation. As a basic rule, I encourage the people having the conversation to include as many different views which are held by the people in the conversation, as possible. When people are aiming to become more informed of positions beyond these, it is also appropriate to invite people who hold these views into conversation as well.

<sup>10</sup> Granted, in every situation, there will always be people who are excluded, based on criteria such as their membership to another denomination or their non-membership in a specific congregation, based on the audience for which the dialogue is designed. For example, if a dialogue is organized within a singular congregation, and is designed to facilitate conversation within that congregation, the dialogue automatically excludes people who are not a part of the congregation. Once again, the people who initiate a dialogue and set its parameters will be excluding some individuals, though this is not necessarily a negative situation.

automatically invited into conversation.<sup>11</sup> This does not mean that a select few are invited to be part of dialogue, as representatives of the community at large, but that all individuals who are potentially affected by the process and/or outcome of the situation are invited to participate. By being inclusive in these areas of dialogue, a fuller representative spectrum of positions and participants can influence and guide conversation, instead of the dialogue being (intentionally or unintentionally) limited or skewed in a particular direction.

If the purpose of discussion is for people to have a better understanding of the positions within their faith community, then the people within the community should be the ones included in the dialogue. Once again, it is important that all people have the opportunity to participate in conversation, not just representative members. If the purpose of the dialogue is greater understanding of positions outside of the group (as well as those within the group) or general discussion, it may be appropriate to bring in Christians from outside the community to present other opinions. This seems especially appropriate if the community of Christians who wish to be more informed have a generally uniform position on a topic or if they are specifically working to understand positions outside of the ones within their realm.

### *Respect*

Once in conversation, people need to be respectful to the other people in the room. This includes attentively and responsively listening to the positions which are expressed. Respectful listening allows people to truthfully and fairly represent their positions to one another. To be respectful, people should be courteous in hearing one another's positions and should thoughtfully listen to and consider the positions of other people in the room. Although they do not need to

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<sup>11</sup> For example, if the issue of calling a homosexual pastor has arisen within a congregation, the entirety of the congregation should be invited to be a part of dialogue over the issue.

agree with other positions which are being presented, they do need to allow the people presenting them an opportunity to express their position. By being respectful while listening to the positions of others, the people who are engaged in dialogue can become more accurately informed, and are less likely to rush to inaccurate conclusions before the people expressing their position have had an opportunity to express the totality of their stance. In addition, through respectful listening, people are able to ask more informed questions of the portions of one another's positions which they need clarified.

Respectful questioning of one another's positions is appropriate for effective dialogue. In fact, asking questions can not only be helpful in discussion, but may be necessary for effective dialogue to take place. When people ask questions, they need to remember to continue to be respectful, however. Questions should reflect a desire to further understand a person's position, and reflect that the person asking the question has listened to the person who has been offering a position. People should be encouraged to ask questions to the degree that those questions help them to clarify or more fully understand another person's position (or their own).

Language is an important part of dialogue, and its careful usage should be considered as people engage in discussion. People should strive to be non-offensive in their speech, and to carefully choose the terms they employ in dialogue. It must be recognized, however, that people may not be aware that they are using offensive terminology, or may not know how to express their thoughts with completely non-offensive terminology. In these situations, the people who are offended may make corrections, but these corrections should be made in ways which seek to inform, not chastise the person who made the offense.

### *Recognition of Barriers*

Language is one example of a barrier to communication in dialogue. Barriers are things which, intentionally or unintentionally, interfere with conversation and make successful conversation more difficult. When engaging in dialogue, it is important to be aware of potential barriers which may arise during the conversation. Although I am touching on some of them here, there are other barriers to keep in mind while having dialogue. For example, the people in a conversation may be uninformed about differences in religious doctrines or beliefs held by other people in the room. Ignorance of this may lead to misunderstandings during the dialogue. In addition, people may have preconceived assumptions about other people in the room, and the positions they represent, which may interfere with offering one another a full and fair hearing during dialogue. Recognition of these barriers from the beginning can help people to recognize them as they arise, prevent some misunderstandings, and assist people in more effectively working through the issues that these barriers create.

### *Willingness to Change One's Position*

Another important quality for dialogue is a willingness to alter or change one's position.

Leonard Swidler expresses this well, as he states:

The general goal of dialogue can be said to be for each side to learn, and to change accordingly. Of course, if each side comes to the encounter primarily to learn from the other, than the other side must teach, and thus both learning and teaching occurs. However, we know that if each side comes to the encounter primarily to teach, both sides will tend to close up, and as a result neither teaching nor learning takes place.<sup>12</sup>

As Swidler explains earlier in this same section, and I agree with, dialogue can only occur when people are willing to listen to one another and consider one another's point of view. If they are

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<sup>12</sup> Swidler, 62. Although this statement was written to reflect guidelines for inter-religious dialogue, I believe it is applicable to intra-religious dialogue as well.

not willing to participate in this type of mutual openness, the dialogue "will not be a dialogue but some kind of attempt at one-way teaching or debate."<sup>13</sup> This is not useful in a discussion which is working to educate the participants about one another's beliefs, values, and concerns.

### *Assumption of Goodwill*

A final guideline, which can be especially difficult for people to remember during a dialogue, is an assumption of good will among the participants in a conversation. While people may work to be non-offensive in their questions, explanations, and discussions, inevitably, someone will say or do something that is offensive to other people in the dialogue. Dialogue participants should assume that the person who offended them did not do so intentionally.<sup>14</sup> It is appropriate to acknowledge offensives when they occur, but this should be done as a means of education, not as a means of chastising the person who made the offense. This will assist people in continuing dialogue when offenses do occur.

Although these guidelines are important to remember in dialogue, they should not cause people to worry to the extent that they are afraid to raise questions, or speak in opposition to one another. These guidelines are meant to encourage productive, non-attacking conversation. Attacking conversation is generally not beneficial when people are working to understand one another's positions, as it often sets up defensive barriers between people and impedes the conversation from sustaining an atmosphere which is conducive to mutual learning. The type of conversation that can be produced through the thoughtful and careful dialogue I have outlined

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<sup>13</sup> Swidler, 62.

<sup>14</sup> Some types of offensive speech are obviously meant to be such, but many times, offensive words and actions are not intended as such. Since each person comes into a dialogue with a different background, as well as a different understanding of the issues involved, it is easy for people to say things which are offensive, and not realize they have been offensive.

here can more fully lead Christians towards an improved understanding and discussion of the divisive issues in the Christian church.

### Forums for Dialogue

The guidelines I have outlined above should provide appropriate parameters for discussion of difficult issues within the Christian church. Now, I wish to turn to specific recommendations of forums for engaging in dialogue. Here, it is especially important for people to remember to tailor these suggestions to the specific needs of the group which is engaging in dialogue. Some suggestions may be more or less useful, depending on the faith community.

There are a number of means by which dialogue between people can occur. One effective means for dialogue can be a meeting time which is organized to discuss a divisive issue. Meetings provide a chance for people to meet face-to-face, ask questions, and direct conversation in ways which are meaningful for understanding. Another possibility for dialogue is a publication which includes a variety of positions and can be circulated among a large grouping of individuals. Publications allow people who are geographically separated to share thoughts with one another and provide a forum for education when people are not able to meet with one another. A third dialogue option is a website, or other Internet forum, through which people can become more informed. Websites provide people with an opportunity to participate in dialogue anonymously and to do so when issues are especially relevant to their lives or when they are able to take time to become informed. I will discuss these suggestions more in depth in the following pages.

## Face-to-Face Meetings

When dialogue takes place in the form of face-to-face meetings, participants are able to meet one another and learn from their personal interactions with one another. Through these meetings, they can become actively engaged in learning about one another's positions and can question one another as uncertainties in understanding arise. When dialogue is occurring on a local level, meetings should bring people together to a common meeting ground. If dialogue is occurring with a congregation, a logical common meeting ground is the worship space which they share. If dialogue is occurring between faith communities, a neutral place for discussion should be sought.<sup>15</sup>

On this type of local level, it may be appropriate to have numerous meetings, as one dialogue time may not allow people sufficient time to fully discuss the issue, and may exclude some people who want to be involved in the conversation, but are unable to attend a specified meeting.<sup>16</sup> In addition, having multiple times for dialogue provides participants with an opportunity to reflect on the conversation between meetings, which allows them to return with questions which have arisen outside of the meeting time. I suggest having a schedule of meeting times, each perhaps discussing a different angle on the topic at hand. The people involved in the

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<sup>15</sup> A neutral place for dialogue between faith communities is one which is equally accessible to the dialogue participants. For example, if a dialogue is occurring between two congregations, the site should geographically be located between the congregations, not significantly closer to one of the congregation's worship space. In addition, a site for dialogue should be neutral in its comfort level for the participants involved. For example, if a dialogue is occurring over the issue of abortion, an abortion clinic would not be an appropriate neutral place for dialogue. Some suggestions for neutral places to hold face-to-face dialogue within a local region include the following: churches which are not involved in the dialogue, civic centers, universities, community buildings, or other public meeting places.

<sup>16</sup> This guideline is also recommended by the ELCA in their "Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations" as they state, "Because time is needed to cultivate relationships and build mutual understanding, planners of such dialogues should anticipate the need for a series of sessions." Although this guideline was designed to specifically address Lutheran-Jewish dialogue, I believe it is also appropriate in intra-Christian dialogue as well. Evangelical Lutheran Church of America Church Council, "Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations," [Evangelical Lutheran Church of America Website] (n.p.: ELCA, 16 Nov 1998); available from <http://www.elca.org/ea/Interfaith/jewish/guidelines.html>; Internet; accessed 25 April 2001.

discussion should determine the number and length of the meetings, paying specific attention to the circumstances which initiated the dialogue and the goals of the dialogue.<sup>17</sup>

When a dialogical meeting is sought between people who are geographically separated from one another, it may be more useful to have a conference, or similar event, which lasts for an extended period of time, during which people can come together to discuss the divisive issue at hand. Conferences may last for a period of time ranging from a few days to a week. Within this type of forum, I think it is important to have different means of discussion, ranging from small group discussions, outside speakers, panels, and other modes of group communication. These types of forums will likely bring together people who do not know one another, therefore necessitating some accommodations to facilitate discussion between strangers, which may differ from facilitation accommodations which would occur between people who are familiar with one another.<sup>18</sup>

In any type of meeting, the group size of the participants must be taken into account. I recommend breaking people into small groups, as I think this provides people with a better forum in which to discuss and express their opinions. When people are grappling with difficult issues, I think it is particularly beneficial for them to be able to verbally articulate their positions, and be able to receive feedback from other people in the group. In addition, it allows them to question one another, and respond to one another's questions in a mutual exchange of

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<sup>17</sup> I will discuss circumstances which lead to dialogue shortly.

<sup>18</sup> These accommodations may include portions of the conference which aim at introducing people to one another. In addition, strangers may be more or less willing to participate in dialogue activities due to the anonymity of the other people in the dialogue. Finally, people who come from different denominational traditions, or different areas of the country may have social, religious, and geographical barriers which can influence dialogue differently than when dialogue occurs between people of similar geographical, denominational, and/or congregational affiliations.



information.<sup>19</sup> Although there may be some concern that small groups prevent people from hearing the full range of positions present in the room, there are ways to allow people to hear a range of positions. A practical way to facilitate discussions which allow for small and large group conversations is to alternate between these two types of conversation. A question can be presented to small groups, and the small groups can be allotted time to discuss the topic among themselves. After a set period of time, small groups can be brought back to the large group, and highlights from small group discussion can be shared with the larger audience. This allows people to participate in intimate small group discussions and in a large group forum, allowing for benefits from each type of situation.<sup>20</sup>

There are some difficulties which can arise in the planning and implementation of face-to-face meetings. It can be difficult to find common times for dialogue participants to meet, and because of the times which are chose, some participants will inevitably be left out of discussion. Additionally, when meetings occur in the form of conferences, they take a great deal of time, preparation, and money which can impede participation and the willingness of individuals to organize them. Also, with any type of group meeting, it can be easy for some individuals to dominate conversation while others feel they never had an opportunity to express their position. Additionally, meetings tend to cater to individuals who are articulate and who can think well

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<sup>19</sup> When possible, I recommend people who have different positions are put in discussion groups together. As I noted before, the purpose of dialogue is to bring people who have different opinions into discussion with one another. By organizing groups so they represent a spectrum of opinions, people are able to engage in discussion with people who have opinions which are different from theirs. This increases people's learning of other positions and is also helpful as people question one another. If people in a small group all agree with each other, they have not benefited a great deal from participating in the dialogue.

<sup>20</sup> This type of dialogue forum was used during the Safe Zone Dessert and Discussion forum at Gustavus Adolphus College on March 1, 2001. Coordinators and participants felt it was effective in allowing people to express their opinions within a small group, but also allowing them to hear important parts of discussion which were occurring throughout the larger group.

under pressure and when they are put on the spot. Some individuals who are not as skilled in these areas may poorly represent themselves or feel left behind as dialogue is pursued.

## **Publications**

Another possibility for a dialogue forum which could be useful for any size group and any type of community is a publication which is circulated throughout the polity. Although publications do not provide the face-to-face discussion which can occur in meetings, they can provide a useful medium for ongoing conversations to occur. In addition, they can provide an opportunity to connect people who are geographically separated, or who cannot make time in their schedules for regular meetings. Furthermore, publications can be a helpful way to keep people, who have previously met together, in continued contact after a set of meetings or a conference or between such events.<sup>21</sup> Finally, publications can serve to educate and inform individuals who are not willing and/or able to participate in face-to-face dialogues, but who wish to gain a better understanding of the Christian perspectives on an issue.

Publications should be published on a regular basis so as to remain up to date on the issue and provide a consistent flow of information to their readers. They should include a variety of perspectives, considering similar parameters to the ones which I have already outlined. Although contents may vary, publications may include such things as editorials, articles from people within the publication's readership, articles from people outside the readership, and recent news on the issue. In addition, it may be helpful to have resources within the publication where people

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<sup>21</sup> Publications could also be used in the opposite manner, to educate people prior to their engagement in a face-to-face dialogue with one another.

an be referred if they are dealing with specific situations related to the topic, and are seeking a support system or other organization to join.<sup>22</sup>

Difficult issues with publications can arise over the facilitation of their production. It may be difficult to obtain financial means for publication, as well as find people to facilitate their production. This may be especially difficult when publications are designed for a community which is not unified by a specific building or organization.<sup>23</sup> In addition, it can be difficult for publications to remain unbiased in the submissions which are included in each issue. Bias can result from two sources. Firstly, the editor(s) may bring their own biases into putting the publication together by selecting articles which articulate their own views well, or selecting articles which poorly articulate the views with which they disagree.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, limited submissions from certain areas within the spectrum, and/or excessive submissions from other areas may lead to imbalances in representation of opinions in a publication.

One way to alleviate or lessen the issue of limited submissions is to limit the number of published submissions that represent different views in the spectrum. In addition, specific questions can be addressed in each issue, and articles written in response to the question, which represent views across the spectrum, can be submitted. Editors can then sift through the submissions and pick ones which effectively articulate different positions related to the question

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<sup>22</sup> For example, if the publication responds to the issue of homosexuality, helpful resources may include Christian support groups for parents of homosexuals. These types of referrals may not be pertinent to every topic, but they may be particularly helpful in others. It is important to remember to offer referrals for people across the spectrum when including this type of information in a publication.

<sup>23</sup> For example, it may be easier for a congregation or denomination's office to facilitate the production of a publication about a divisive issue within the congregation or denomination. If the publication is intended for dialogue between groups, however, finding an appropriate source to publish the newsletter can be more difficult.

<sup>24</sup> The opposite problem may also occur, with editor(s) being overly concerned with expressing bias in the newsletter, and therefore overcompensating by including more articles which disagree with their position.

at hand.<sup>25</sup> A helpful example of this is *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*. In this journal, people representing a spectrum of opinions on a specific issue are invited to submit responses to questions on a given topic.<sup>26</sup> These submissions are then published together, providing readers with a spectrum of opinions on the issue at hand. Each issue of *Dialog* has a different focus, which is broken up into specific questions within the publication. By providing a spectrum of opinions related to a divisive issue, people are able to see different perspectives, and can compare them accordingly.

### Internet Websites

A third option for an effective dialogue forum is an Internet website. Although websites do not allow for face-to-face interactions, nor are they easy to monitor for their validity, they do provide some positive features which are not available in face-to-face meetings or newsletters. Websites allow their visitors to remain completely anonymous, and people are free to visit web sites as the need for information arises in their own life. In addition, people who visit websites can peruse the information at their leisure and revisit submissions as often as they desire.

Anonymity can be a useful benefit for people who are dealing with divisive issues in their own faith community or personal life. A person can visit a website, peruse the information at their own pace and not have to face other people to explain why they are visiting, or have anyone know they ever visited the site. People can become more educated on the variety of views which

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<sup>25</sup> Once again, a concern can be raised here, related to the intentional or unintentional censoring of the material included in the newsletter, resulting in unequal representations of different positions on the issue. I advocate including as many responses as are possible, cutting some responses only when it becomes necessary because of space constraints or concerns of over-representing one position, or under-representing another.

<sup>26</sup> *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* is a publication which invites people affiliated with ELCA and LCMS denominations to offer their perspective on a given topic. The editorial council of the journal has a membership of 40 people, all of whom are affiliated with educational institutions. The journal is published in March, June, September, and December by Blackwell Publishers.

exist on a divisive issue without anyone else knowing they are interested in the topic. In addition, websites are available to people at all times, and can be visited by people as issues arise in their faith community or personal lives. People are able to read articles that are helpful and informative to them in their situation, and can choose when to read articles.<sup>27</sup> Websites can be especially useful when a divisive issue comes to the forefront in a person's personal life and they wish to become more aware of Christian perspectives on the issue, without drawing attention to their situation by inquiring of friends or clergy.

As with any website, there are issues which can arise in its presentation, accuracy of information, and upkeep. In addition, it may be difficult for communication to occur on a website. People may not be able to refer questions to the people in charge of the site or ask questions of the information presented on the site.<sup>28</sup> Websites can also easily be designed to present one-way monologues which are not particularly conducive to dialogue. In addition, as was the case with newsletters, it may be difficult to find people to keep the website running and effective, as well as people who will work to ensure responsible and equal representation of different views on the website.

Thoughtful initial planning and commitment of the people forming the website can alleviate some of these issues. Communication and dialogue on the site can more easily occur through a number of means. Firstly, having a forum on the site where people are able to respond

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<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, this benefit is also a potential drawback, as people who visit the website are also free to access the site only read articles with which they agree, and choose not to read submissions which represent views with which they disagree. If they choose to do this, they will not become educated regarding the spectrum of Christian beliefs, but will instead receive only one viewpoint in their reading. This likely cannot be avoided. I hope most site visitors, who wish to use the site for educational purposes will not only visit portions of the website which agree with their position, but will venture to read articles which represent positions which differ from their own as well.

<sup>28</sup> Additionally, in this way, visitors may become passive viewers of a dialogue, instead of active participants. I find active participation in dialogue to be more useful in education, but the anonymity of a website may be beneficial to people who wish to participate in a dialogue as passive viewers.

to one another's writing can provide a useful means for discussion, although site administrators should monitor submissions to ensure they are respectful and helpful. In addition, having a forum by which people are able to submit articles for inclusion on the website can be a helpful way to involve site visitors. If the website administrators find they are not fully representing the spectrum of Christian beliefs, I would encourage them to invite people to submit articles which discuss positions which they do not believe are well-represented on the site.<sup>29</sup> If the website administrators are committed to making their site a forum for presentation of a spectrum of opinions, it can be a very effective tool in educating Christians who wish to remain anonymous in their understanding of divisive issues within the Christian church.<sup>30</sup>

### Considerations in Dialogue Forums

In face-to-face meetings, newsletters, or Internet forums, a facilitator should mediate dialogue. A facilitator should not be specifically involved in the dialogue as a participant, but should encourage effective, honest, and respectful communication between the dialogue participants instead. A facilitator should set up ground rules for dialogue, pose discussion questions and topics, as well as monitor discussion for respectfulness and appropriateness. In

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<sup>29</sup> I encourage websites to have a team of website administrators so a single individual does not have control of the information and responses on a website, as this may lead to some of the issues I highlighted in my discussion of newspaper editors. In addition, independent people, may maintain a website such as this in their spare time, which may limit the amount of time they can devote to its upkeep. By having a team of people, they can work together to keep the site running smoothly.

<sup>30</sup> An effective dialogue website which is currently in operation is the Bridges-Across the Divide website. This website is designed to be a forum through which a discussion of information related to issues of sexuality and gender variance can be discussed from Christian perspectives. The site is arranged by topic, and views representing a spectrum of Christian viewpoints are presented within each topic. As site administrators note, the B-A website hopes "to models ways of addressing the issues without resorting to extreme and emotionally charged rhetoric," which often does not provide useful or productive results. I highly recommend this website as an example of a useful Internet dialogue website. Bob Buehler and the Bridges-Across Working Group, "How We Agree," [Bridges Across the Divide Website] (n.p., August 1997); available from <http://www.bridges-across.org/ba/agree.htm>; Internet; accessed 28 March 2001.

face-to-face dialogues, an outside facilitator may be brought in, or a leader in the faith community may facilitate dialogue. In publication forums, such as newsletters or websites, a committee of people representing a spectrum of views on the topic may more effectively fulfill the role of facilitator. A facilitator should be responsible for leading any of these types of forums, and perhaps most importantly, conscientiously work to separate their views on the topic from their duties as a facilitator.

With any type of forum for discussion, it must be recognized that the people who have chosen to organize the dialogue will make most of the decisions concerning its implementation. These decisions include considerations such as the audience for whom the discussion is aimed, the purpose of the dialogue, how to engage in dialogue, and time constraints they choose to place on the dialogue. These decisions should be made with considerations regarding the specific situation and goals of the dialogue, as well as the audience for which it is intended.

#### Additional Dialogue Considerations

There are two portions of dialogue which I have not yet described in detail but are critical in forming parameters for conversation. The first of these is consideration of the types of situations which may inspire people to engage in dialogue over divisive issues. The second of these is a consideration of the goals or outcomes of the discussion. Since the situation which inspires a conversation often points towards specific types of goals or parameters, these considerations tend to be quite intertwined.

One type of situation that can initiate dialogue occurs when a specific event brings a divisive issue to the forefront of discussion for a group of Christians. For example, many instances have recently arisen in the Lutheran church, in which a congregation has chosen to call

a homosexual pastor against the policies of the denomination.<sup>31</sup> When congregations choose to call homosexual clergy who do not fall into the specific criteria set by their denominations, they risk being suspended or removed from affiliation with the denomination. Decisions such as these can have long-lasting effects on the people within a congregation and in the denomination which is affected. Dialogue can help facilitate discussion over these matters as well as help to alleviate tensions and misperceptions during the decision making process. By involving the congregation in dialogue, the church can help to inform the congregation not only of decisions which are being made, but reasoning behind different positions in relationship to the situation. Organized dialogue can inform the congregation of denominational policies, personal beliefs of people within the congregation, as well as consequences of actions they choose to take.

Just as dialogue within the congregation is important in these types of situations, the same situation may also spark dialogue elsewhere in Christian faith communities. For example, as other congregations in the denomination hear that the issue of ordaining a homosexual clergy member has arisen for a congregation, they may also begin to question denominational policies. Dialogue among these people is often neglected, as it is not seen as pertinent when the situation is not taking place within that particular congregation. This may present the congregation with a prime opportunity to discuss the issue, however, to help guide them if the issue ever arises in their own congregation, and in choosing how to respond to the congregation which has made the policy-violating decision.

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<sup>31</sup> The following three people have begun serving ELCA congregations in pastoral roles in the past year. All have been deemed as fully deserving of ordination in their pastoral abilities, but refuse to take the vow of celibacy which is required for the ordination of homosexuals in the ELCA. These people are not able to be ordained by the ELCA, but were nevertheless called by ELCA congregations to serve in pastoral roles. These are only a few examples of a wider trend which is currently occurring throughout the ELCA. Donna Simon, Abiding Peace Lutheran Church, Kansas City, MO, installed October 28, 2000. Craig Minich, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Oakland, CA, installed Feb 25, 2001. Anita Hill, St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church, installed April 28, 2001.



Individual situations such as these can also spark dialogue on larger organizational levels.

As a denominational governing body makes a decision regarding a specific divisive situation, it may cause them to bring their policies into question. The governing body will have to decide if they will remove the congregation from their denomination, put it on probation, or let the deviance slide. This not only brings the policy into question, but its enforcement as well. Especially in cases where multiple congregations within a denomination are considering violating the same denominational policy, the policy will likely be called into question.<sup>32</sup>

Just as conversations occurring in a congregation may spark dialogue elsewhere in a denomination, conversations on a denominational level may also serve to spark conversation on a congregational level. For example, if a denomination is considering changing its policy on the ordination of homosexuals, it may result in dialogue among members of congregations which are members of the denomination. Since the decisions made by the denominational governing body will affect the people of congregations, it is appropriate that they would be informed of the different positions, as well as the conversations which are occurring on the denominational level.<sup>33</sup> This way, members of congregations have an opportunity to understand reasoning behind changing (or not changing) church policy. As can be seen from these examples, a specific situation within a church can spark dialogue on larger scales, and dialogue on larger denominational levels can also spark dialogue on congregational levels.

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<sup>32</sup> This is currently occurring within the ELCA, as some bishops have recently called for increased dialogue on the topic of homosexuality within their synods and congregations. Dr. Herbert Chilstrom, interview by author, Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minn, 20 April 2001.

<sup>33</sup> A significant amount of dialogue related to the ordination of homosexual clergy has occurred on a denominational level within the PC(USA) in recent years. According to an article on the PCUSA website, the topic of "sexual-conduct standards for ordination" is expected to dominate conversation at their General Assembly this year. Jerry L. Van Marter, "Battle over PC(USA) ordination standards is expected to dominate General Assembly," [Presbyterian Church (USA) Website] (n.p.: Presbyterian News Service, 18 April 2001); available from <http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/01134.htm>; Internet; accessed 25 April 2001.

Even when a specific situation within the Christian church does not spark conversation, other factors may serve this purpose. As I discussed earlier, fierce political topics may also spark conversations within the church, on all organizational levels, as Christians try to grapple with their own views, and see them in relation to their religion. By engaging in the type of dialogue which I have outlined, people can see the varied opinions which exist on the political issue, and understand them in relationship to Christian beliefs. Just as specific intra-church situations may begin dialogue in the church, these types of extra-church influences may also spark conversation within the church.

Even when specific situations do not spark conversation, dialogue may be initiated to encourage people towards a common goal. Specifically, I am envisioning a conversation which aims at encouraging the existence of a more informed polity of Christians. With a common goal of better understanding one another's positions, Christians can learn from one another, providing them with a good base for understanding Christian thought on the divisive issue at hand. In this situation, they have not only helped to reduce stereotypes between Christians, but are better informed should these issues become relevant in their personal or congregational lives in the future. Having ongoing dialogue in the church can provide people with the resources to become more educated and make decisions during times when issues related to the topic arise in their own lives.

### Results of Dialogue

As I have mentioned from the beginning, the outcome of dialogue does not need to be a common unity. The desired outcome of dialogue depends on the situation at hand. Sometimes people will need to come to a final decision. For example, this occurs in cases where a

congregation must ultimately decide if they will call a homosexual pastor and risk being removed from the denomination, or if they will call a heterosexual pastor and have certainty in remaining within the denomination. Other times, when the goal of dialogue is educative, a unified decision is likely not necessary. In these cases, the degree to which dialogue participants are able to articulate one another's positions, and the degree to which misconceptions have been broken down, can indicate the success of dialogue.

Ultimately, dialogue may be productive, unproductive, or destructive as it is employed in addressing divisive issues within the Christian church. Although destructive or unproductive ends are possible, many of these ends can be averted if dialogue is pursued in a careful and thoughtful manner. If the Christian church can provide a safe forum for dialogue over divisive issues, its members can ultimately become more reliably educated concerning the spectrum of views on the issue. As a result of this education, they are able to evaluate Christian positions in relationship to one another and make informed decisions about how they will align themselves on the issue. In addition, education can prepare them to deal with circumstances related to these issues in their faith communities and personal lives as well as help dialogue participants to build a mutual understanding and trust with one another. The question ultimately becomes whether or not Christian faith communities are willing to risk the uncomfortable disagreement which dialogue will likely prompt for the sake of better educating one another of the spectrum of beliefs which exist on any divisive issue within the Christian church, and potentially reaping the benefits of such dialogue.

## CONCLUSION

The Christian church in America is at a critical point in its existence. As divisive issues continue to separate Christians on a daily basis, the Christian church appears to have two possible futures. In one future, the Christian church can continue to divide, becoming increasingly unstable with each division, and with less mutual support or attachment among its religious members. In a worst case scenario, this may lead to a virtual breakdown of the Christianity in America. The other option is for Christians to take proactive steps towards renewing the strained relationships between Christians. In this future, Christians are able to rebuild their relationships with one another and exist together within their common religious framework.

To bring about renewal of Christian relationships, it is important that Christians begin coming into dialogue with one another over the very issues which currently serve to divide their faith communities. By dialoguing, instead of debating, over issues such as abortion, family structure, and homosexuality, Christians are able to learn about one another's perspectives in an environment which fosters mutual learning. In this environment Christians are able to fully hear the parameters of one another's positions, question their positions accordingly, and leave the dialogue with an enriched understanding of the spectrum of positions which exist on the issue. This process of building mutually enriched understandings can bring Christians to a valid understanding of one another. With the breakdown of stereotypes and misunderstandings, Christians are able to more peacefully coexist within their common religious title.

While different ways of encouraging dialogue are useful in different situations, dialogue participants need remain respectful, inclusive, thoughtful, and be open to the possibility of changing their position. If they follow these guidelines, and plan their dialogue accordingly, dialogue forums have a high chance of succeeding in their pursuit of mutual education of their participants. Beneficial dialogue can take place in a variety of different forums. These can range from face-to-face meetings and conferences to publications to Internet websites. The common ties between these forums dictate that they be effectively facilitated by neutral mediators and present information which is appropriate to the target audience and representative of the spectrum of opinions which are relevant to conversation.

While I do not pretend that dialogue alone can mend every strained relationship within Christianity, it can serve as an effective tool to begin the process of mending these relationships. Through the dialogue process, people become better educated in views throughout the spectrum, and are empowered to make judgements based on valid information instead of misconceptions and stereotypes. In addition, with newly opened lines of communication, dialogue can foster newfound trust and positive relationships between communities, even in the face of their disagreement. While Christians will never agree on every aspect of religious life, nor will they likely come to a consensus on appropriate Christian responses to divisive issues (at least in the near future), it is important that Christians continue to work with each other to maintain communication, even across their differences.

The longer Christians wait to pursue dialogue and work to mend their relationships, the higher risk they run of reaching a point where their strained relationships are beyond a point of repair. There is a certain immediacy to the situation, and one which needs to be taken seriously. If Christians cannot even come into respectful dialogue with one another over controversial

issues, how can they expect to continue working for their common religious missions and continue to live in community with one another? These problems will continue to surface in Christian faith communities, and Christians need to find productive ways to deal with them, namely through dialogue.

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