

# Welcome to **WALKING ALONGSIDE**

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**LGBTQ+ Discernment**



Baylor University®

DIANA R. GARLAND SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK  
Center for Church and Community Impact



## *Come. Walk alongside us on the journey.*

*Dust whirled up at each step as the two men trudged heavily along the path. The sun was making its descent, and they still had a long way to go. They barely noticed. Their minds were full of what they had experienced during the last few days. Occasionally, one would say, “And could you believe what you heard this morning?” And then the other, after several more steps, “I just don’t understand. What was any of this about?”*

*They had just lost a great friend, perhaps the greatest friend they had ever had. He had seemed so full of promise and possibility. Each had imagined himself going through the rest of his life with this man by his side. A future they thought comfortably in their possession had suddenly evaporated when their friend died. No, when he was killed. Cruelly, publicly. Treated as a joke! It was humiliating, confusing, unbelievable.*

*Yes, “unbelievable” was the word. Because just that morning, one of their friends who had gone to the gravesite to mourn came running back to the larger group to tell them the body was gone! No one could believe it. Others ran to see for themselves. Many others stayed behind speculating: grave robbers? a political ploy? What could any of this mean? So distracted were they by their thoughts that it took a moment for them to notice that another person was walking alongside them on their journey. They did not recognize him or know who he was.*



How often in our lives do we stumble along confused, scared, worried, unsure of anything – even our next step – never realizing that we do not walk alone. That in step with us, walking alongside, is our Saviour and our Lord. As he did on the road to Emmaus that Cleopas and his friend traveled, Jesus asks us, “Why are you so sad? What has happened?”

The real question Jesus asks us is, “Do you not know that I am here?” If we do, how then can the circumstances of life so overwhelm us? We are not alone; we never will be again. Once we understand that Jesus is our constant companion, there awakens in us a peace and assurance we have never experienced. Cleopas and his friend say that Jesus’ explanation of the scriptures “burned within their hearts,” as though falling newly upon their ears and spirits. Being in the presence of Jesus, the Risen Lord, transforms us, and in our response of gratitude, we become servants willing to give ourselves away in God’s service.

This is how we love one another. In gratitude to God, we long to reach out and bring another into this holy fellowship.

The one who walks beside us on this journey of life may not be one we recognize or know. He or she may be very different from us. But look into the eyes of this one in our midst. Look deeply enough, and you may see yourself. Look more deeply, and you will see Christ.

## ► INTRODUCTION TO WALKING ALONGSIDE

“It’s such a caring congregation.” • “They’re so ready to help one another in times of need.” •  
“I’ve never felt so welcomed and cared for.”

These are the comments all church leaders hope to hear from new members or visitors, and certainly, this kind of care for one another is a primary component of what church means to most people.

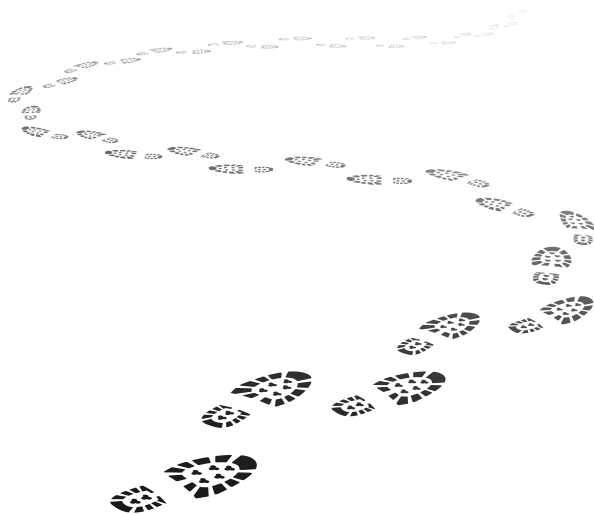
As Christians we are familiar with the Greatest Commandment found in Matthew 22:37 to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” Too many of us spend a lifetime focusing on this commandment but forgetting that Jesus had more to say: “And the second [commandment] is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt. 22:39; NIV).

Often understaffed and overwhelmed by the needs of our current members, most churches do well just to make the hospital visits and the casseroles for those whom we know. Our “neighbors,” though, are all around us, not just in our pews. The Walking Alongside curriculum is designed to help you individually and as a church think about these questions:

- Who is my neighbor?
- What is my responsibility toward my neighbor?
- What is my church’s responsibility?
- How have others responded and what does that teach us?
- What do scriptures tell me about my neighbor and what my response should be?
- How does that affect me? What can I do?
- What can my church do?

One thing is clear throughout these studies: Caring for community is not optional. It is part of God’s plan for how we serve and provide in community, but also for how we become more Christlike. Being obedient to the second commandment helps us mature in the first. We care for others out of gratitude and love for the Creator of us all – and in so doing, we all travel a bit farther along the path toward our Lord and Savior.

Join us on the journey.



Do all the good you can,  
in all the means you can,  
in all the ways you can,  
in all the places you can,  
at all the times you can,  
to all the people you can,  
as long as you ever can.

– John Wesley

To further inform your study and to build upon it, additional resources, links to existing community ministry projects, other teaching materials, congregational and community assessment tools, and much more are available at our website <https://socialwork.web.baylor.edu/C3I>



## ► WALKING ALONGSIDE: LGBTQ+ INCLUSION DISCERNMENT GUIDE

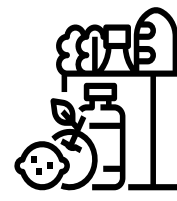
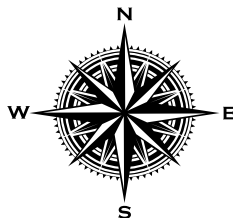
**Welcome!** In 2018, the Center for Church and Community Impact (C<sup>3</sup>I) was generously gifted a congregational discernment research grant (CD grant) from the Eula Mae Baugh Foundation. The research study examined the processes of discernment congregations nationwide are engaging in to determine their stance on LGBTQ+ inclusion. The term discernment is used to suggest processes that clarify values and practices based on God's leadership.

The C<sup>3</sup>I aimed to discover the decision and discernment processes of congregations, identify resources available to congregations, and create a guide to provide future congregations with possible practices for these difficult conversations. The goal was understanding, not advocating for a particular process or decision. The C<sup>3</sup>I worked with congregations who decided not to have the conversation and with congregations who had the conversation and made different decisions.

The findings resulted in numerous journal articles being strategically published in open-access journals for easy access by mental health professionals as well as clergy. These articles can be accessed on our website.

In addition, the C<sup>3</sup>I created the following Walking Alongside: LGBTQ+ Inclusion Discernment materials for congregations desiring to walk through a process of discernment related to decisions to be more inclusive in their practices and policies specific to LGBTQ+ persons. The materials include:

- Stepping Stone
- Pre-Assessment
- Pathway
- Backpack
- Food for the Journey



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Thank you for your interest in the work of the Center for Church and Community Impact (C<sup>3</sup>I), which we believe has the potential to transform both individuals in our congregations and in our communities. We are deeply indebted to the Eula Mae & John Baugh Foundation for their commitment to creating inclusive and caring congregations that impact communities



# *Stepping Stones* **WALKING ALONGSIDE**

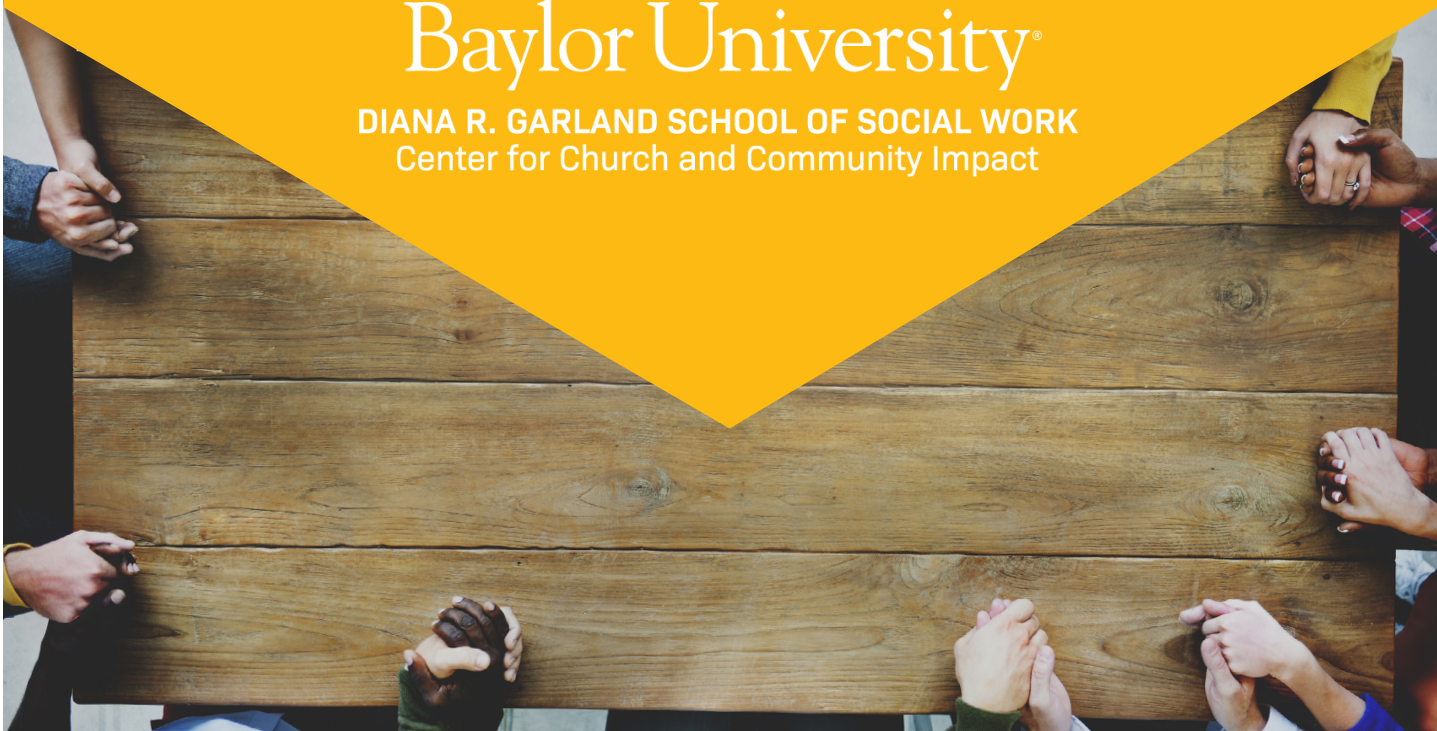
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# Stepping Stones Introduction

The question of inclusion is not new to the Christian Church-- inclusion has been an ongoing question from the beginning. Historically, the church and her leaders have responded to these questions with examination of Scripture and of the impacts of policy on members, leadership, and participation. The differences found in conversation about these questions has led to splits and new denominations. In the past 40-50 years, the question of LGBTQ+ inclusion has become acknowledged and often contentious.

## ► WHAT IS AN LGBTQ+ DISCERNMENT PROCESS?

More and more, churches are engaging in a discernment process to discuss and seek best responses for their congregation. The term discernment is used to suggest processes that clarify positions but that do not necessarily result in disagreement, divisions, and conflict or negative outcomes. Overwhelmingly, participants in these processes reported the importance of having an intentional process in which everyone's voice is heard. Our hope is this guide will help you develop an appropriate process for your church.



## ► WHY IS THERE A NEED?

There is a community of LGBTQ+ Christians who grew up in the church, found themselves rooted in their faith, and found their faith and community threatened when they came out. There is deep pain and loss when a space and people who were so formational to your development have no interest in even hearing your story. The ambiguity of a congregation on this topic is harmful. Clarity on how LGBTQ+ persons are welcomed into a space allows them to create appropriate expectations and decide whether or not this is a community they want to be a part of.

## ► SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROCESS

Participants from 21 congregations who have engaged in a discernment process about LGBTQ+ inclusion in their congregations, identified these as significant results of this process:

- **Growth and identity.** Participants found that the clarification of values and relationship with those whose values were consistent with their own, created growth in themselves and their congregations. A greater sense of identity was found after this process.
- **Social justice.** Participants identified by honoring their commitment to social justice and affirming the gospel message there is unity found in the Spirit of God.
- **Clarity.** For many, the ultimate gain of the process was a clarification of values of the congregation and a new opportunity to commit to these values both individually and communally.
- **Safe space.** Throughout the process, participants found that their congregation was a safe space to have difficult conversations, ask tough questions, and even disagree while continuing to respect and love one another.

## ► COMPONENTS OF THE PROCESS

Each church will combine these components in their own way to create the best process for their congregation. There is no correct way to put them together. Consider what has worked for your congregation in other processes and what your congregation is ready for.

- **Assessment.** Determine the readiness and trust of your congregation.
  - **Listening.** Ensuring that there is space and opportunity for every person to have their voice heard.
  - **Deliberation.** Create space for round table discussions, story sharing, discussion groups, and time to ask questions.
  - **Care.** As you move through the process, there will be need for additional pastoral care. Consider adding an additional liturgy in the week, a moment of silence and reflection about the process in your weekly service, a weekly prayer time, or support groups.
  - **Study.** Examine sources of information including Scripture, books, speakers, stories, and sermons from a variety of sources and perspectives.
    - *Lived Experiences of LGBTQ+:* Read books, listen to stories, bring in speakers, and hear from the LGBTQ+ voices in your congregation if they are comfortable.
    - *Congregational Experiences:* Allow space for congregation members to communicate why this process is important to them.
    - *Sacred Texts:* As a congregation, read, hear teaching, and discuss the different readings of Scripture. Sermon series, Bible studies, and book studies and book studies are helpful ways to do this.
    - *Hard Conversations:* Seek to understand how to have difficult conversations. What makes this conversation different than any other? How do we respect and walk through this process when we might disagree?
- Suggestions for all of these materials are provided in the Backpack.*
- **Post-Process.** Determine how the decision will be shared with the congregation. For many, this means the leaders of the process will craft a statement to be read and shared. There might need to be care for those who feel that they must leave the congregation and for those who remain but are affected by the loss. For some, the decision will feel like a celebration and for others it will feel like grief, hold space for all reactions.

## ► STEPPING OUT IN FAITH

The C3I desires to support congregations in discerning best practices and process elements to utilize as they engage in difficult conversations regarding their inclusionary practices.

- Do you have congregants asking for clarity surrounding membership and leadership opportunities of LGBTQ+ persons in your church?
- Are your congregants challenging the church body to encourage more inclusive policies?
- Have your LGBTQ+ youth brought concerns to you due to lack of full affirmation and acceptance?

If your answer is yes to one or more questions below, your congregation may be ready to begin a process of discernment.

### **Here are some first steps to consider before your congregation engages in the conversation:**

- Complete the assessment to understand the readiness and trust of your congregation to have this conversation. The assessment should also help you understand the different perspectives and experiences within your congregation. The information gleaned from the assessment should help inform the process elements that give you the most promise for effective outcomes.
- Determine who will be leading and curating this process for your congregation. Will it be led by the pastoral staff, a leadership body, or a committee created for this specific purpose?



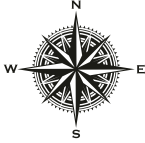
- The importance of preparation is a common theme heard from those who have done this before. Be prepared to answer the questions that will come about why you are engaging with this process. Be prepared to continually assess the process you are engaging with and evaluate if the congregation is not ready to move on.
- The leaders should develop a process that makes sense for your congregation. The process should be holistic and help the congregation listen, respect, and love one another as they walk together on this journey.
- There is real potential for loss and pain no matter how well the process goes and no matter what decision is made. There might be loss of congregants, denominational loss, and financial loss.

## ► BACKPACK



There is a Backpack of additional resources for an LGBTQ+ Inclusion Discernment Process. Included are published articles, websites, books, videos, podcasts, and stories for your congregation to consider.

## ► PATHWAYS



The purpose of the Pathway is to help you curate the process your congregation will walk through. Each phase provides different options for you to consider as you think about how to guide your congregation in this conversation.

## ► FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY



Resources for shepherding your congregation through the process like liturgies, scripture resources, prayers, and reflections.

## References

Harris, H., Yancey, G., Cole, C., Cressy, V., Smith, N., Herridge, M., Ziegler, M., West, B., & Wills, L. (2021). Addressing LGBTQ+ inclusion: Challenges, faith, and resilience in the church and her people. *Social Work & Christianity*, 48(1), 75–105. <https://doi.org/10.34043/swc.v48i1.177>

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