

Why do we need this guidance?

The aim of this guidance is to help groups to have as good and deep a learning experience as possible. Learning well will require us to be honest and to behave in ways that build trust, rejecting any form of harmful behaviour or hostility. It will require all of us to look out for every person in the group, to make sure everyone, without exception, feels honoured, respected and loved.

Although questions of identity, sexuality and relationships are deeply personal for everyone, the conversations are likely to be especially challenging for people who describe themselves as LGBTI+ or same-sex attracted, and this needs to be borne in mind by everyone involved. This guidance describes behaviours and situations of potential pain and harm and suggests ways of responding that mitigate the harm and help everyone to take up the challenge of participating in authentic dialogue and learning that leads us all deeper into Christ.

What do we mean by a brave space?

When people meet in groups to engage with the Living in Love and Faith resources, they will come to the discussions with a variety of values, lived experiences and personal circumstances. Creating a brave space is about cultivating the *desire* to understand each other's perspectives better, and so to be open, enquiring and gracious in our attitudes to learning about the perspectives and lived experiences of others. For genuine dialogue and learning to take place, individuals need to feel safe enough to ask questions of each other and of the resources, and to share personal convictions and life stories.

This involves taking risks, however, as we encounter new and different ways of seeing things and as we make ourselves vulnerable to others. That is why participating in these conversations will at times be uncomfortable and will take courage. It won't be easy to listen to claims that any one of us – regardless of the nature of our convictions or lived experiences – may find upsetting and offensive. Creating brave spaces is about growing as disciples of Christ through our learning together, knowing that he accompanies us in our efforts to hear, to understand and to love one another. It is about seeking to be inspired by the Holy Spirit so that we may be led more deeply together into the mind of Christ.

How can groups prepare for learning together well?

Before gathering, group leaders should circulate the 'Commitments' (found in the LLF Course). At its first meeting, group leaders should facilitate a conversation about these, helping participants to understand and own the implications for their engagement together. It will be important to draw participants' attention to the fact that a person's *intention* in making a remark may have an *impact* on someone that they had not expected or do not understand. When dealt with well, this can lead to really significant learning for the whole group, as well as for the individuals concerned. However, it is also a reminder for everyone to speak as kindly and carefully as they can when describing their own convictions, experiences and understandings, so as to minimise the painful, offensive or harmful impact of our words.

What if...

Here we describe some examples of unhelpful behaviour that will hinder the group’s learning together. Each behaviour is followed by suggestions about how to respond in a way that mitigates the harm. The purpose of this is to help individuals and groups to understand the (often unintended) impact of certain behaviours and so to avoid them, and to suggest examples of more helpful behaviours.

At the beginning of each session, groups should be reminded of the Commitments, the importance of confidentiality – see (A) on page 7 – and the details of pastoral support that is available to any member of the group. If the meeting is online it is recommended to turn the chat function off. Its use is liable to be distracting and could be abused. This means that group members will need to be able to contact the leader independently. The chat function must always be disabled if children or young people are attending.

| The behaviour and its potential impact | Suggestions for responding well |
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| <p>1. The LLF materials and/or discussions trigger painful memories, causing pain for the person concerned.</p> | <p>The group leader should encourage participants to refer to the course material before each session so that they are alert to anything which may be a potential trigger for them. During the session, the theme of each video should be outlined before it is played.</p> <p>Group leaders should be present throughout the meeting and should be alert to participants’ responses and body language for any signs of being uncomfortable, disturbed or distressed.</p> <p>In an online situation, participants are invited to be in video mode throughout the meeting. Group leaders should use ‘gallery view’ to see all participants at all times. Nevertheless, all participants should be free to control their camera and mute functionalities.</p> <p>Group leaders may invite anyone showing signs of upset or distress, or the whole group, to take time out. If the person concerned takes time out, an appropriately experienced and empathetic person should be offered to accompany them. In an online situation a breakout room may be used to achieve this. Should there be a disclosure of abuse at this point please follow the safeguarding process at the end of this document.</p> <p>Group leaders should offer to connect the person concerned with a person who can exercise appropriate pastoral care. This may be someone experienced in pastoral care in the parish, or one of the diocese’s LGBTI+ /LLF chaplains, or the Church of England’s support service Safe Spaces https://www.safespacesenglandandwales.org.uk/.</p> |

2. A member of the group personalises their convictions by stating that the beliefs, identity, sexuality or relationships of another member of the group are ‘wrong’ / ‘sinful’ / ‘untrue’, rather than framing their comments as their own understanding.

For example, it is inappropriate for someone to say to a partnered/married sexually active gay person ‘your lifestyle is sinful/wrong’, whereas it is acceptable to say ‘my reading of Scripture leads me to believe that same-sex sexual relationships are sinful/wrong’.

Similarly, it would not be appropriate for a person to say to a celibate same-sex attracted person that they are ‘wrong’ and ‘repressing God-given instincts’, but it would be acceptable to say ‘my reading of Scripture leads me believe same-sex attraction is God-given and should not be repressed’.

Although both statements in each case may be painful to hear, the first statement is deeply hurtful and risks contributing to a deterioration of mental health for the person concerned. This is particularly important given the excess burden of mental ill health experienced by LGBTI+ people – as a result of discrimination or derision – including depression, anxiety, substance misuse, self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide.¹

3. A member of the group persists in receiving discussions about views that are different from their own as personally directed towards themselves, even when they are not personalised and are respectfully and carefully explained.

This behaviour closes down discussion and the group’s attempts to understand each other better.

At the time of such a contribution, the leader should remind the group about the potentially harmful impact of expressing a conviction in the form of personally directed criticism in this way. If appropriate, the group leader may decide that the group should take time out or even draw the group’s meeting to a close after having ensured everyone was offered support.

Support also needs to be offered to the person affected, as described above. Should they choose not to return to the group the learning from what has happened should be addressed. A conversation with the person making the statement should be sought to help them understand why expressing a view in such a way causes harm. A reconciliation between the two people concerned may need to be negotiated or a shared desire not to reconcile be respected.

In the event of a refusal to admit the inappropriateness of such an intervention, the person’s continuing participation in the group should be questioned. In an online situation this might perhaps take place in a breakout room during the meeting.

It will be important for the leader to acknowledge that, although the matters being discussed are deeply personal to everyone, they will have a deeper impact on some people in the group than others. It will be helpful to reiterate that the purpose of the group’s discussions is to understand each other better and that disagreeing is a part of life and is not an act of judgment on any individual. If the person persists in disabling the group in this way, it may be necessary to have a separate conversation with them about whether it is helpful for them to continue to participate.

¹ See the Living in Love and Faith book, page 116.

4. A member of the group mentions their sexuality or some other aspect of their identity or relationships previously unknown to the group.

This puts the person concerned in a vulnerable position and may make others in the group uncomfortable.

The leader (and other members) of the group should thank the individual for entrusting the group with the disclosure. It may be appropriate to invite the person to say more or to reassure the person that they are a child of God, loved and welcomed by the group just as much as they were before they made their disclosure.

The points made in (5) below regarding power dynamics also apply here. It would be helpful to speak to the person after the session to signpost them to appropriate pastoral support. See (B) on page 7.

5. A member of the group responds to what is described above (4) by declaring that what they have revealed requires church discipline – for example, being required to relinquish a role or not participate in aspects of church life. This is another example of personalising a conviction.

This may be very painful for the person concerned, who may feel rejected and angry, no longer wishing to participate.

Making judgements in such a context creates power dynamics that silence individuals and creates a culture of fear that blocks any attempt to learn and listen to God together.

The purpose of the group is to learn together – from the resources and from each other as disciples of Jesus Christ. It is not the place or the time to exercise judgement or church discipline in relation to a member of the group.

Group leaders should explain this again to the group and reaffirm respect and love for the person concerned. That person should not be expected to explain why the comment was hurtful.

It may be necessary to call time out and to meet with the individuals concerned separately. It should be made clear that repeated behaviour of this sort would result in the person being asked to withdraw from the group. The person affected should be followed up with pastoral support.

6. A member of the group responds to a person's identity or sexuality by

- making assumptions or applying stereotypes based on the person's sexual orientation and/or gender identity;
- using language that is intentionally hostile, hurtful or offensive, including refusing to use someone's correct name or pronouns;
- demanding repentance or insisting on prayer for healing for their sexuality or identity, that has not been asked for by the person concerned and is imposed without explicit consent.

Such actions are deemed homo/transphobic/biphobic.*

The group should be reminded regularly about the deeply personal and sensitive nature of the matters being discussed, and therefore the need for grace, sensitivity and self-awareness in their responses to the lived experiences of others.

When an incident of this kind occurs which is related to the identity or sexuality of a group member, it is vital for the leader (and/or other members of the group) to explain why such a contribution is unacceptable and hurtful, and therefore why it could be described as 'homophobic', 'transphobic' or 'biphobic'. See (C) on page 7.

The group leader will need to discern whether to ask the individual(s) concerned, or the whole group, to take time out. In any case, the individuals concerned (both the person making the comments and the one to whom they referred) should be invited to meet with the group leader, ideally separately and then together with further pastoral support from, for example, an LGBTI+/LLF chaplain.

7. A member of the group accuses another member of homophobia, transphobia, bigotry, 'hate speech', abuse or a transgression of safeguarding protocols, or intimidates them by their words or actions, when someone – in a tone of genuine and respectful sharing or enquiry –

- expresses their view that 'my reading of the Bible is that same-sex activity and/or gender transition are wrong'
- states that their understanding of Scripture is that marriage is intended to be between a man and a woman, including stating that this is the current position of the Church of England
- asks non-personal questions about sexuality and identity
- unintentionally uses words to describe sexuality or identity that others prefer not to use or even find offensive.

Such contributions are not homophobic. The utmost care should be taken, therefore, not to use this term in this context: to use it in this way is a form of bullying.***.

The members of the group should be reminded about the diversity within the group and the different views that people bring to the learning together. The group should be reminded that this will, at times, be uncomfortable and challenging, but that its rewards of deeper understanding, mutual respect and love are great.

Similarly, if particular words, which others find unhelpful or offensive, are used, then this needs to be turned into a learning opportunity that will, hopefully, help the group to avoid language that causes offence and thereby inhibits trust and mutual respect.

In the event of an accusation of the kind described, it is vital for the leader (and/or other members of the group) to explain why such a contribution is unacceptable and hurtful, and therefore why it could be described as 'bullying'. See (D) on page 8.

The group leader will need to discern whether to ask the individual(s) concerned, or the whole group, to take time out. In any case, the individuals concerned (both the person making the comments and the one to whom they referred) should be invited to meet with the group leader, with further pastoral support from, for example, an LGBTI+/LLF chaplain.

8. One or more participants use social media to share their views about the group's discussions.

Other individuals in the group may feel betrayed. It harms and damages the building of trust necessary for good learning and relating together.

This behaviour signals a lack of compliance with the agreed confidentiality of the group as well as a lack of integrity and openness within the group on the part of the social media user.

A group or church leader should seek to meet with the person to help build an understanding of the destructiveness of such actions. It may be necessary to ask the person concerned to withdraw from the group, and they should be asked if they are willing to remove the post. If you experience any language or behaviour which you feel to be threatening, you should report it to the police.

Groups may need to be reminded that under no circumstances should recordings of a group's discussions be made.

9. Uninvited participants enter the online gathering.
This may make the group as a whole feel unsafe.

Details of the course may be advertised through a variety of media but the details of accessing the online platform will only be sent to those who plan to attend the course.

The waiting room option should be used so that the group leader can manage participants and lock the meeting once everyone is in.

The group leader should ensure screen sharing by participants is not enabled, and should be able to remove participants from the online platform.

10. Children or vulnerable adults who are not taking part see or hear inappropriate and frank discussions.
This could cause confusion, anxiety and even trauma for the individuals concerned.

Group participants are reminded not to allow children to be within earshot or able to watch the filmed material, if meeting physically, or to be in the background of the online meeting as the content could be confidential or of an adult nature. In the event that something is overheard by which a child or vulnerable adult is disturbed the participant should be signposted to appropriate support for that individual.

11. Disclosure of abuse by a person in the group.

One or more of the group leaders or members should have completed Foundation level safeguarding training as a minimum.

The group should be made aware of the importance of confidentiality during the first meeting – but will also be told that any safeguarding issue will be reported to the Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser. The group may need to be reminded of this should an incident arise.

See more details below regarding actions that need to be taken. See (E) on page 8.

A. Confidentiality

In our learning and meeting together we commit to keeping confidential anything personal that is shared, unless there is an immediate risk to the life of a child or vulnerable adult in which case the emergency services will be told. Any disclosures which could amount to a safeguarding issue will be dealt with in accordance with the House of Bishops Safeguarding guidance.

B. Pastoral support

Organisations which provide pastoral support for people who identify as LGBTI+ include:

Diverse Church. | . OneBodyOneFaith

Organisations which provide pastoral support for people who describe themselves as same-sex attracted include:

Living Out. | . True Freedom Trust

C. Homophobia

The Methodist Church offers the following definition of homophobia (which can also be applied as appropriate to biphobia and transphobia).

Taking into consideration our history, our context and our reading of Scripture:

Homophobia is any statement, policy or action which denies the image of God in another person due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation, which is treating someone in a discriminatory manner because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation.

Homophobic attitudes, words, and behaviours are inconsistent with the nature of Christian conduct and a violation of the worth and dignity of all people.

Homophobia can be experienced in a number of ways, including:

- a) physical violence or emotional or psychological abuse, including the threat of or incitement to such behaviour (which may also be deemed hate crimes in law)
- b) applying stereotypes and assumptions to people based on their sexual orientation
- c) using language that is hostile, hurtful or offensive in its intent
- d) abusive or coercive 'spiritual practices' (ie demanding or requiring repentance or participation in healing or other types of service).

D. Bullying

A definition of bullying is given on the website BullyingUK as 'repeated behaviour which is intended to hurt someone either emotionally or physically, and is often aimed at certain people because of their race, religion, gender or sexual orientation or any other aspect such as appearance or disability'.

E. Safeguarding

In case of a disclosure of abuse, which may be a safeguarding matter: safeguarding issues will be reported to the Diocesan Safeguarding Team in accordance with the House of Bishops Guidance within 24 hours of the concern arising. The process set out in 'Responding to Safeguarding Concerns or Allegations that relate to Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults' must be followed at all times. This can be found here: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/Responding%20to%20Safeguarding%20Concerns%20or%20Allegations%20that%20relate%20to%20Children%2C%20Young%20People%20and%20Vulnerable%20Adults.pdf>.