



A GUIDE FOR CONVERSATIONS ABOUT HUMAN SEXUALITY  
CREATED IN THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD

## INTRODUCTION

General Synod 2007 requested Faith, Worship and Ministry to develop a process to engage dioceses and parishes of the Anglican Church of Canada in a study of the Christian perspective on human sexuality through the lens of scripture, reason, tradition and current scientific understanding. The hope is that a broader study of human sexuality would provide the opportunity to step away from the hotly debated issues surrounding homosexuality and the place of gay and lesbian people within the life of the church. Instead it invites us to enter a process of listening, dialogue and learning about human sexuality, something that is innately part of us all, straight or gay, young or old, urban or rural – all people and all cultures.

We are all sexual beings – body, mind and soul. As Christians we are called to live in ways that embody a faithful Christian life. In doing this we are impelled to consider:

*So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1.27)*

What does it mean to be created in the image of God?

This foundational question invites rich and often controversial discussions about what it means to be faithful, sexual, gendered beings in ways that embody our love of God, self and neighbour.

The subject of sexuality is complex. There are social, biological and personal dimensions to human sexuality and gender. There are elements of sexuality that are intensely personal, taboo, or simply difficult to talk about openly. At the same time, other aspects of sexuality are very public and even commodified, widely available for emulation, imitation and purchase. Over the past 50 years the ground has been shifting both in church and in the world around us in some significant ways that have been seen as both liberating and dangerous. As Christians discerning what it means to be sexual beings in the world today we need to look through the lens of the gospel and engage our traditions and past teachings from the perspective of present, contemporary life. The purpose of this guide is to offer an opportunity to look at images of human sexuality in scripture, in creation stories, scientific understandings of sexuality, and the church's teaching and practice.

The greatest challenge in creating a resource like this is sorting through and selecting from the materials available. Sexuality and Gender Studies are commonplace areas of academic study on university curricula internationally and there is a vast amount of material being generated as scholars and scientists learn more about the nature and expression of our sexuality.

The primary concern in this guide is to provide materials and a process that would be most helpful to the church. To discern this, a series of focus groups and conversations were held around the country in places as diverse as urban Ontario and the Arctic. This study has been designed based on what we heard.



# BASIC SESSION TEMPLATE

## **Beginning**

This is a time of gathering where participants are welcomed, a prayer for the group and its discussion is offered, and the session topic and process is introduced.

For the first session there needs to be a time of introductions, group building and norm setting as follows:

## **Introductions**

Does everybody know everyone else? If not, you will need to take some time for basic introductions.

## **Group Building**

People need time to get to know each other a bit, and hear why they chose to participate in this study. You can do this by asking a question like:

- Why did you choose to attend this study?
- What one thing are you hoping to learn from this study?

## **Prayer**

The facilitator/discussion leader offers a prayer for the group and its discussion asking for God's presence in the participants' thoughts, words and in their listening. If the group doesn't know each other well, it is more comfortable to pray together after introductions and group building.

## ***Setting group norms: (First session activity)***

It will be important to create a comfortable and safe space for the group's conversation. In setting norms, you are asking participants to name what they think they will need from others in order to feel able to fully participate in the discussions.

In preparation for the first session, choose a model of group norms from the resource list provided.

- Post the list on flip chart paper and introduce the norms to the participants.
- Ask if they have any questions, additions or amendments to offer in order to make this list work for them. Work with the group to get their agreement to make any changes necessary to the list.
- Once the norms are set, ask the group to agree that these will be the guidelines for their discussion. Make sure that you have the agreement of all to abide by the norms and that you, as their facilitator, or any member of the group can remind people of their agreement to follow the norms should it become necessary.

- Take a moment at the opening of all sessions in your study programme to review these norms before beginning any discussion.

## Middle

This is the time for content. This resource provides a series of topic-based discussion components from which to choose. Each component includes an introduction to the session and identifies readings and questions for discussion.

You might want to ask participants to prepare for their discussions by doing some of the reading at home prior to the session. Other readings are easily done during the group time.

When facilitating discussion, it is helpful to ask the group to discuss some of the questions in pairs before sharing with the whole group. This works well when the question is of a particularly sensitive nature, or when it asks people to share their own stories.

## Ending

This is the opportunity to wrap up the session and help people make the transition out of the group and its discussion. Take time for prayer, reflection and the identification of what's been learned, or what was of value to people in the session.

- *Thank* participants for their contributions to the discussion.
- *Summarize* the discussion briefly. Name the highlights. Don't try to draw things to a tidy conclusion or consensus if one is not present. Rather, name those things that people seemed to agree on and where they differed. In your summary *affirm what you can*. For example:
  - The openness and honesty of people's contributions
  - The respectfulness of the listening and discussion
  - The willingness of the group to share their thoughts and experiences
  - The care and concern shown in their listening

In your summary *name the struggles*. If the discussion, in all or in part, was challenging acknowledge that it was. Don't pretend it was easy and don't ignore that it was difficult.

- *Evaluate the session briefly*. Ask participants to review the session by doing one of the following:
  - Invite each participant to share one thing they found easiest about the discussion and one thing that challenged them.
  - Invite people to share what went well; what was disappointing; and what they would like to do differently next time.
  - Ask people to share one thing they learned during this session
  - Invite participants to share one thing that surprised them during the session.

*Closing prayer*



# IMAGES OF HUMAN SEXUALITY IN SCRIPTURE

## **Beginning**

*Welcome members to the group.*

*Opening prayer*

### **Introduction to this session**

Sex and sexuality were created by God. While scripture contains that which reveals God's will for human nature, its messages about sexuality, sexual identity and gender are not straightforward. They range from texts teaching us about our basic human identity as male and female created in the image of God, to the beautifully sensuous images of sexual love as a divine gift in the Song of Solomon. They also include texts and images such as incest, polygamy and the marriage of women to their rapists, that when interpreted simply at face value we would find morally repugnant.

The Bible has much to say about sexual love, desire, morality and behaviour. This session offers the opportunity to explore some of these. Consideration is also given to our concepts and understandings of human sexuality, sexual identity, psychosexual development, and cultural worldviews, some of which did not develop until recent history. This makes the reading of scripture for insight on issues of sex and sexuality very difficult. As Christians we can surrender neither the reality of our modern context nor our commitment to the scriptures as the witness to who we are within God's redeeming and creative purposes, and the starting point for our reflections on who we are called to be.

*Remind people of their norms.*

## **Middle**

### **Looking at scripture's messages to us about our sexuality**

Discuss the following questions in groups of 2 or 3 people that you are not related to.

- Do you have particular passages or stories that you are drawn to when thinking about sexuality? What are they and why do they speak to you?

*Share your responses with the larger group.*

### **Summary questions:**

- When looking to scripture we expect two different things. We look to learn about God's intentions for our sexuality: What does it mean to be sexual beings created in the image of God? We also look for guidance for the moral life — what's right and good versus that which is wrong and sinful.

- Looking at the passages and stories we have chosen, which ones are about God’s intention for our sexuality?
- Which ones are about the rules and cautions for leading a moral Christian life?
- When looking at our lists – are there other passages from scripture that we want to include? What would they be?
- In what ways does scripture inform our personal understandings of God’s will for human sexuality? For sexual morality?
- How does the influence of scripture compare with other sources and authorities such as our families, our culture, science and psychology, and the church’s traditional teachings?

### **Looking at images and teachings in scripture**

*Readings (choose a number of readings from list below):*

- Genesis 1: 4b–25
- Genesis 3: 1–19
- 2 Samuel 11: 3–5
- 2 Samuel 13:1-17
- Song of Solomon 5: 1–5
- Matthew 1:10-25
- Galatians 5:13–27
- Ephesians 5
- Corinthians 1 6:15–20

*Further (possibly preparatory) readings:*

Rowan Williams “The Body’s Grace”

Eric Beresford “The History and Theology of Sexuality”

*In small groups – each with its own passage, or set of passages:*

Read the passage aloud twice either as a group or ask one member to read. As a group, retell the passage in your own words. Try not to look at the text if you have copies in front of you.

- What does the passage(s) say to us about sex, sexuality and about the ways we are supposed to relate to each other as sexual beings?

*Share responses with the larger group.*

Questions for the whole group to reflect on:

- What are some of the images of sexuality found in these readings?
- In what ways are these passages about:
  - sexual desire and delight?
  - sexual ethics?
  - procreation?
  - power?
  - respect and honour of our bodies?
  - intimacy?
  - faithfulness?
  - human relationships and community?
  - our relationship with God?
- In what ways are these passages about something other or more than sex?

**Ending** (see the Basic Programme Outline)



# HUMAN SEXUALITY IN CREATION STORIES

## **Beginning**

*Welcome members to the group.*

*Opening prayer*

### **Introduction to this session**

Genesis 1:26–28a reminds us that God created sex and sexuality. The stories of creation from many other traditions relate human sexuality to God’s original work of creation as well as being a continuing blessing upon us from generation to generation. In many such stories, sexuality is shown to fulfill the function of procreation. In others it fulfills the need for order and stability in community. And in others it provides comfort and companionship. In some traditions, the original act of sexuality is shown to have introduced the burden of broken relationships between God and us and among one another.

In this session we reflect on creation narratives from different traditions. We will listen for patterns or rhythms that may emerge and take note of any common or diverging values that may shape people’s attitudes about sex.

*Remind people of their norms.*

## **Middle**

Discuss the following questions in groups of 2 or 3 people that you are not related to.

- What creation story or stories other than those found in the Bible have you heard of?
- What are the main features of your story (or stories) and how do they compare with the biblical story?
- Share your responses with the larger group.

### **Summary question:**

- What are some of the ways in which themes of sexuality are incorporated into the stories of creation?

## Looking at stories of creation from different parts of the world

*Review the following stories of creation:*

- A First-Nations Canadian Creation Story
- An African Creation Story
- A Chinese Creation Story
- A South Pacific Creation Story

*Further (preparatory) readings:*

Marie-Louise Von Franz, *Creation Myths*

Virginia Hamilton, *In the Beginning: Creation Stories from Around the World*

Creation and Other Stories, *First People's Theology Journal*, Vol.2, No.1, Sept. 2001

*In small groups — each with one or more of the creation stories*

- Read the stories aloud twice either as a group or ask one member to read.
- As a group, retell the stories in your own words. Try not to look at the text if you have copies in front of you.
- What do the stories say to us about sex, sexuality and creation?
- How do these stories compare with the biblical stories?

*Share responses with the larger group.*

Questions for the whole group to reflect on:

- What are some of the images of sexuality found in these stories?
- What do the stories tell us about the values of the communities from which they come?
- In what ways do the stories make reference to:
  - sexual ethics?
  - procreation?
  - power?
  - intimacy?
  - faithfulness?
  - human relationships and community?
  - our relationship with God?
- In what ways are the stories about something other or more than sex?

**Ending** (see the Basic Programme Outline)



# HUMAN SEXUALITY AND CURRENT SCIENCE

## **Beginning**

*Welcome members to the group.*

*Opening prayer*

## **Introduction to this session**

According to the Windsor Report 2004, scripture is the channel through which the supreme authority of the triune God is exercised (WR section B paragraphs 53–54). However, within Anglicanism, there is also a long tradition that welcomes developments in scientific knowledge and recognizes science as providing support to the cause of revealed religion.

In this session we reflect on some lessons about human sexuality that science (in the broadest sense of this term) may provide us. Our intention is not to disregard the authority of scripture in favour of scientific knowledge. It is rather to acknowledge the variety of factors and the complexity of their interactions that must be taken into account when attempting to understand human sexuality. Science's unique approach to problems adds another dimension in appreciating God's creation.

UNDER CONSTRUCTION





# THE CHURCH'S TEACHING AND PRACTICE

## Beginning

*Welcome members to the group.*

*Opening prayer*

### Introduction to this session

Christians have traditionally looked to the scriptures and to the church's teachings as important and authoritative sources for understanding human sexuality. The church is seen as having a voice within the dialogue about sexual morality.

This session will provide an opportunity to take a look at the church's beliefs and attitudes regarding human sexuality and how these have changed. We will do this by looking at a rite that speaks directly to the church's purpose for human sexuality, the marriage ceremony. We will then talk about our own experiences of the church's messages and actions regarding sexuality and sexual morality.

*Remind people of their norms.*

## Middle

### Looking at our experiences of church teachings and practices about human sexuality

#### *Discussion A: For groups where members are of diverse ages*

Organize participants into small groups by the decade they were born. Discuss the following questions in groups with your generational group.

- What messages are you hearing from the church about sex?
- How are these messages shared or taught?
- Have these messages and teachings changed since you were young? In what ways?
- In what ways have the church's teaching and practices been helpful to you? In what ways have they been challenging or difficult?

*Share your responses with the larger group.*

#### *Discussion B: For groups where members are of similar age*

Discuss the following questions in groups of 2 or 3 people that you are not related to.

- What are some of the earliest messages you remember hearing from the church about sex?
- How were these messages shared or taught?

- Have these messages and teachings changed since you were young? In what ways?
- In what ways have the church's teaching and practices been helpful to you? In what ways have they been challenging or difficult?

*Share your responses with the larger group.*

**Summary questions:**

- From our perspectives and experiences, what are the church's major teachings about sex? How were these teachings communicated?

**Looking at church practices through history**

*Readings:*

Marriage Rites: 1549 (first English Prayer Book)  
1662,  
BCP;  
BAS

*Further (preparatory) readings:*

Jamie Howison "Changing Attitudes: A Look at Our Marriage Liturgies 1662 to the Book of Alternative Services"

An amended version of John McNab's writing in the Proceedings of the National Consultation on Marriage 1987: from "Changes in Prayer Book understandings of marriage" to page 17 the end of the second last paragraph.

Eric Beresford "The History and Theology of Sexuality"

Rene Jamieson "Anglican History and Tradition"

*In small groups:*

Divide into groups each with a different liturgy. Answer the following questions for the marriage rite your group has.

- What words or phrases jumped out at you?
- What do you hear the church saying – or implying – about human relationships, sexuality, and sexual practice in this rite? (e.g. in marriages, in relationships outside of marriage, in relationships other than marriage)
- What do you find easy to read? What is difficult for you to hear? Why?

*Share responses with the larger group.*

Questions for the whole group to reflect on:

- What messages about human relationships, sexuality, and sexual practice have stayed constant throughout the years?
- What has changed? Why do you think these changes have been made?
- What are the gifts of our church's teachings regarding sex and human sexuality? How do we best express and share these within the church and with others in society?

**Ending** (see the Basic Programme Outline)