

## Article

# The Why and How of Congregational Discernment in LGBTQ+ Inclusion: Models in the Literature

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**Abstract:** Through the years, people of faith and their congregations have encountered social issues without easy answers. From racism, women's rights, and poverty to the current divisions over abortion and human sexuality, the church has wrestled with difficult subjects impacting policy and practice. In the United States of America (USA/US), the question of LGBTQ+ inclusion in churches is an increasingly frequent conversation, point of decision, and sometimes point of division in congregations. As these challenging social issues in a politically polarized USA culture impact the church, there is also a focus in the literature on methods for civil conversation. This article reports on models for conversations that provide guidance for congregations engaging in difficult conversations including that of LGBTQ+ inclusion. In this article, congregations and others are provided with resources and models for discernment. Models covered include those developed by individual Christian leaders, those developed in congregational processes, and those developed for public and educational discourse.

**Keywords:** congregations; denominations; discernment; LGBTQ+; inclusion; models



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## 1. Introduction

In the United States of America, many LGBTQ+ Christians write about growing up in the church and their experiences of community and worship (Chu 2013; Lee 2018; Robertson 2017; Vines 2014). Shared values and the experience of collaborative response in the community can be threatened when gay Christians come out (Baldock 2014; Cantorna 2019; Robertson 2017). Consequently, in the USA and other countries, many gay Christians have hidden in the church in confusion, in celibacy, in fear, and in mixed-orientation marriages, risking rejection when they came out while the church risked internal disagreement and painful conversations (Cole and Harris 2017). This is particularly true in USA churches with a traditionalist approach, i.e., those whose policies and practices include the position that same-sex attraction and/or behavior is sin and contrary to the Biblical texts (Gushee 2017). This approach is described most commonly in evangelical and conservative Christian churches in the USA (Baldock 2014; de Jong 2020).

Christian denominations and congregations differ in policy and practice with respect to LGBTQ+ membership, leadership, and sacrament inclusion. This is true in the USA and in some international faith traditions including for example Catholicism across countries and including the United Methodist Church in the USA and across the African continent. In Canada, several European countries, New Zealand, and Austria, LGBTQ+ persons have experienced change (Bird 2018; Rise 2019; Dickey Young 2010; Zwissler 2019) while LGBTQ+ persons in many countries in Africa continue to experience significant marginalization and exclusion, including in congregations (Dreier et al. 2019). As more LGBTQ+ Christians are open about their sexual orientation and/or sexual identity, the questions of church membership and leadership as well as of marriage for same-sex couples, adoption, missionary service, etc., are increasingly the focus of policy and practice discussions and decisions in congregations and denominations (Collins 2018; Gaede 1998; McConkey 2018; Polaski et al. 2013). These discernment discussions are challenging and churches and

their leaders may seek guidance for the conversations. This systematic review addresses conversation and model processes for discernment and decisions about controversial topics, particularly that of LGBTQ+ inclusion.

While in the United States, and perhaps well beyond, polarization and incivility grow more intense in general and particularly challenging between Christians who disagree about LGBTQ+ inclusion, scholars and authors have responded with a plethora of works devoted to civil conversations and methods for civil engagement. Authors from a number of faith traditions have written and described their own discernment processes or those of their congregations. Several groups such as the Kettering Institute and Essential Partners have developed and promoted models for conversation and engagement that center on respectful listening and skills for hearing other perspectives for understanding. Our findings include an array of models, processes, and conversation variables intended to promote civility and problem solving in organizations and in congregations. We have addressed these models with attention to particular potential for application in congregations engaging in discernment processes.

## 2. Results

The early Christian church was born in Judaism but developed across the known world. The church has confronted controversial topics such as who is welcome, and who is not, since the earliest days of Christianity. For example, the record of disagreement in the New Testament about the inclusion of Gentiles was largely between leaders of the early church. Even so, the impact of the local culture and the impact on local believers is clear in the Christian scriptures; notably as Paul and Peter experienced dreams and the guidance of the Holy Spirit leading them to decisions of inclusion of Gentiles (Acts 13: 44; Acts 10: 9–22). Christian Bible scriptural citations may be similarly understood in most translations.

### 2.1. Early Issues of Dispute

Who was eligible to be a leader in the new movement? The 11 remaining disciples participated in an early election of a twelfth disciple to replace Judas (Acts 1:21). Questions continued. Could Saul/Paul be trusted after his conversion (Acts 9)? Barnabas was critical to Paul's acceptance by the disciples whose lives he had once threatened (Acts 9). What roles could women fill in the early church? From announcing the resurrection and funding and supplying the movement to being instructed to "keep silent in the church", women were both instrumental and excluded (Clark 1998). Paul's nod to the gods of Athens (Acts 17) and Peter's response to the Roman centurion's desire to know Christ (Acts 10) were the subject of disagreement and controversy. Phillip's decision to baptize the Egyptian eunuch (Acts 8) must have created quite a stir, though we do not read about a congregational conversation and process about the implications of his decision for local church membership.

Much has changed over the centuries since those early days of disagreement and discernment. The early Christian church has grown into a dominant religion in many countries and includes a plethora of denominations with varying policy positions on membership requirements, baptism practices, leadership criteria, sacrament inclusion, and policy development (Gushee 2017; Richards 2020; Shelley 2013). Without formal structure, the early church relied on spoken and written word from the disciples and early church leaders. Processes over local decisions were informal and varied significantly by community (Richards 2020; Shelley 2013).

### 2.2. Denominations, Congregations, and Complexity

Today, the complexity of church governance and decision making varies both by denomination and congregation (Kirkpatrick 2008; Martin 1993; McConkey 2018; Richards 2020; Rogers 2009). Complex questions such as those over LGBTQ+ persons in the church can generate strong opinions, positions, and disagreement (Collins 2018; Gaede 1998; McConkey 2018; Polaski et al. 2013; Rogers 2009). Determining policy and practice requires navigating those differences. In the USA, denominations and congregations have engaged

in a variety of approaches, some ignoring the questions and many in disagreement, even resulting in division. “As recently as the mid-1960s, there were no openly gay clergy in the United States” (Rogers 2009, p. 138). Since then, the Metropolitan Community Church, the Unitarian Universalist Association, and the United Church of Christ have all taken positions of openness and affirmation for LGBTQ+ members and leadership and for marriage equality (Rogers 2009). In 2000, The Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists and the American Baptists Concerned became welcoming and affirming in their congregations. For other denominations the days of disagreement and of discernment continue. For example, factions of the United Methodist Church (UMC) disagree today about the same points of difference present in the 1960s culminating recently in a proposal for a denominational split over marriage equality and LGBTQ+ clergy ordination (Anderson 2020). This disagreement has global implications for the denomination. The Episcopal Church has elected an openly gay bishop even as they engage with the Archbishop of Canterbury’s request to no longer consecrate new gay bishops (Rogers 2009). The Evangelical Lutheran Church officially does not ordain gay priests or bless marriage between same-sex partners while some of their churches have embraced both (p. 141). Rogers (2009) stated further: “Every denomination is working through this process in its own time and in its own ways. Furthermore, each denomination will write its own story in a way that reflects the particular tradition and theology of that denomination” (p. 137).

Even when denominational decisions and policy apply to local congregations, it is not always rigorously applied. While the UMC has had what they describe as a traditional approach and policy in the *Book of Discipline*, some congregations made their own decisions about ordaining gay ministers and about marriage equality (McConkey 2018). On the other hand, some denominations break ties with congregations that deviate from the denomination’s decision. For example, while a Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) position statement is to respect the autonomy of the local church, the decision to be welcoming and affirming of LGBTQ+ people can result in disaffiliation for the congregation (Harris et al. 2020). Finally, some denominational decisions (examples include Presbyterian and Episcopalian) included the option for local congregations to make their own determinations about LGBTQ+ inclusion, ordination, and marriage equality. In all three situations, while denominations made large system policy decisions, individual congregations continued to wrestle with their own positions around these issues. Discernment processes occurred in individual churches and congregations with formal and informal process and discussions. These discussions were initiated and driven by clergy and lay leadership and/or they were the result of precipitating events in the church and in the culture, events that shine light on areas of disagreement and pain.

### 2.3. Discernment and Models

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. Discernment includes much positive potential. Richards (2020) makes the case that historically the unity of the early church did not last through the first generation of the church but that “splintering reveals profound truths about Jesus’s intent and priorities” (p. 6). In fact, the author finds strength in differences to encourage thinking about personal beliefs and providing access to the gospel through “varied interpretations and inevitable schisms” (p. 6). These explorations of history and of discernment of beliefs and practices provide the opportunity to be challenged in our beliefs and achieve a mature faith even as we gain a more mature understanding (p. 9). As Father Martin (1993) said: “With every encounter, I have learned something new” (p. 1).

The field of discernment and civil conversation is a growing area of study and practice. This article examines processes and practices engaged in by individuals, groups, and churches, including strengths, limitations, and lessons learned. We review processes recommended by Christian scholars based on their own individual discernment processes. We examine models available in the literature that worked in churches and those that were

less effective. We focus on several detailed models for process with their strengths and limitations and recommend possible models for congregations deciding to engage in a discernment process. This conceptual research was the beginning of a research project designed to explore best practices by 21 congregations across multiple denominations.

The question is no longer whether denominations and congregations will discuss the question of LGBTQ+ inclusion, but rather whether the inevitable conversations will be formal or informal and how they will be conducted. An additional question is that of the goal(s) of the conversations and/or formal processes. Goals could include determining church policy about inclusion specific to membership or leadership. They could include policy with respect to marriage equality conducted by the ministerial staff and whether those can occur in or on church property. These goals might include whether the church will have a formal or official policy statement or website statement. These goals may well be informed by concerns about the impact of decisions on the church and its membership.

There are numerous “difficult conversation” examples and models available in the literature, ranging from the abstract to the very concrete. Gaede (1998) edited work provided seven congregational cases studies across five denominations, detailing how each handled discernment conversations and decisions. While each of these congregations made the decision to embrace LGBTQ+ Christians as members and leaders, the editor’s focus is on processes that congregations used to reach those decisions. Polaski et al. (2013) included the stories of 14 Baptist congregation stories across the United States to address major variables in discernment processes. While the 14 congregations made the decision to be open, welcoming, or affirming, the precipitating events for the conversations differed widely. Factors included LGBTQ+ members and family members, Supreme Court decision regarding marriage equality, calling of an LGBTQ+ pastor, and racial or other social justice issues (Fishburn 2003). The decision for inclusion often impacted the church’s denominational affiliation, membership in the church, and sometimes church finances, three factors that are often inextricably linked. There is less literature about specific denominational or congregational discernment processes resulting in the decision to remain “traditionalist” though the splits in denominations provide evidence that many congregations did arrive at those decisions with or without a formal process.

The beginning of change is found in the willingness to engage despite anxiety about disagreement. The challenges of civil conversation are increasingly seen in the national political polarization in the United States over any number of controversial topics including politics, abortion, sexual orientation and identity, climate change, racism, sexism, nationalism, and a host of other “isms”. Even before the 2019–2020 coronavirus pandemic, some families wondered how to manage holiday dinner conversations with the potential for explosive disagreements. Social media forums have begun to consider how to rein in the incivility with standards for truth and decorum. Congregations and denominations and other religiously affiliated organizations have considered and sometimes engaged in church policy discussions related to controversial topics. That has provided fertile ground for the development of formal and informal approaches to discernment.

There are models developed for educational settings, for public civic forum settings, and for religiously affiliated settings. Many of these models do not have a religious focus. Stone et al. (1999) wrote the New York Times Business Bestseller, *Difficult Conversations*, as part of the Harvard Negotiation Project with a goal to reduce stress and increase successful problem solving. In 2012, Patterson et al. (2012) addressed high-stakes conversations with skills and guidance for challenging business and personal conversations in *Crucial Conversations*. Three years later in 2014, (Muehlhoff 2014) wrote and published a more personal, relational model, *I Beg to Differ*, with a spiritual emphasis; Rosenberg (2015) *Nonviolent Communication* is a model to find common ground in times of disagreement. These business and interpersonal communication guides are in addition to the models developed specifically for educational and congregational settings. Models available in each of these categories identify similarities and differences for congregations to consider for their own discernment processes. Notably, in the proposed models from authors and

congregations based on their own processes, there is a built-in bias toward the outcome of the process. In those developed for public and educational forums, there is an assumption of no bias in the model while recognizing that the steps of the model could be biased by the facilitator.

The models discussed here are representative of those available in the literature. There are more approaches and models available than can be covered in one conceptual article. However, the value of this sampling is the capturing of possibilities and the common ingredients that highlight many of the models.

### 2.3.1. Individual Processes Adapted to Group Settings

Several authors developed models for conversation based on their own personal journeys about LGBTQ+ inclusion, often based on their experience with congregations and persons of faith. Their models are presented in books that take the processes and lessons learned as their beliefs and understandings about LGBTQ+ persons changed and broadened them to possible processes for congregations and organizations. In some cases, the authors identify as Christian and LGBTQ+, while in other cases, the authors identify as Christian and as cisgender and heteronormative. Following are several examples of group models that were developed from personal processes.

David Gushee describes himself as a US Christian evangelical whose journey to LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church runs counter to his lifetime experience in what he describes as traditionalist, conservative, evangelical churches and ministry. Gushee's book, *Still Christian: Following Jesus out of American Evangelicalism* (2017) describes the author's autobiographical journal from what he describes as a traditional belief system, which included viewing same-sex behavior as sin. The author describes the move to an altered understanding of the range of sexual orientation and identity experienced by persons of faith, new understandings of scripture, and broadened knowledge of the impact of exclusion of LGBTQ+ persons on the faith experience of many millennial Christians. Gushee developed *Changing our Mind* out of blog posts exploring the question of LGBTQ+ inclusion (p. xiii). [Gushee \(2017\)](#) blogs included elements for a model developed by Robert Cornwall in a study guide at the end of Gushee's book and made it available for congregations congruent with Gushee's journey from traditionalist to affirming. Cornwall's model is based on Gushee's book(s) and Cornwall's response to his brother's coming out, and his own change in perspective. The study guide ([Cornwall 2017](#)) includes five weeks of curriculum and discussions based on Gushee's book, *Changing Our Mind*. Each week, participants read and discuss 3–4 chapters in a process that calls churches to adopt a fully affirming position. The first week covers Gushee's experience, the current situation of the church, optional responses of the church, and a framing of the issue for discussion. Week two is an examination of the church including common ground, gay Christian presence, and response options available to the church ranging from no discussion through normative reconsideration. Week three includes examining scripture including traditionalist perspectives, Old Testament and New Testament scriptures, and differences in language interpretation. Week four covers the core questions of gender, sexual orientation, Christian identity, marriage, and transformational views. Week five is an exploration of the way forward including Gushee's change from opponent to ally. Key points in this discernment process include the use of Gushee's discernment experience as a model, a focus on scripture, and intentional change.

Similarly, Justin Lee describes himself as a US conservative evangelical with lifelong roots in the evangelical faith tradition. [Lee \(2012\)](#) wrote about his struggle as a gay Christian in a conservative evangelical faith tradition in his book, *Torn*. Later, [Lee \(2018\)](#) published *Talking Across the Divide*. In this book, he discusses his response to the polarization in the country and the need for effective communication of competing ideas. The author acknowledges the motivation that came from his own journey of discernment and exploration of scripture. He identifies the tools to deal with disagreement as fight, avoid, or compromise and recommends developing a fourth which is that of strategic dialogue (p. 25). Lee believes that strategic dialogue means "breaking through those barriers to create pathways of

understanding" (p. 29). Strategic dialogue requires action, skill, and intentionality. Steps include: (1) preparation of self, the audience, and the space; (2) dialogue including listening, storytelling, and repetition; and (3) making an ask, reflection, evaluation, and then repeating the process as needed (p. 225). Additional strategies discussed by Lee include researching the issue comprehensively, knowing the participants/audience, building understanding, and acknowledging the goal of change (pp. 39–42). Skills essential to the process include reducing distractions, establishing guidelines for respect and civility, acknowledging disagreement, and using dialogue for understanding. This begins with respecting what others believe and want and listening to hear rather than to develop arguments.

Similarly to the Gushee model development, Rogers, a US Presbyterian minister, wrote and published *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality* (Rogers 2009) where he articulates his own journey from evangelical Methodist traditionalist to Presbyterian and eventually affirming Presbyterian. The final section of the book is a Study Guide (Maxwell 2009) for congregational or individual discernment based on Rogers' experience and recommendations.

Rogers stated: "I have had a change of mind and heart" (p. 15) and lists the variables that contributed to this change: (1) the Bible and "its central message for our lives;" (2) church history of scriptures and the Holy Spirit impacting change in positions about ordination/leadership of African Americans, women, and divorced and remarried people; (3) interpreting scripture through "the lens of the redeeming life and ministry of Jesus Christ"; (4) biblical interpretation "continuity through history to best practices today"; and (5) coming to know LGBTQ+ persons and having "my Christian life enriched by their profound witness to the gospel" (p. 15). Rogers looks at the scriptures that discuss homosexuality, addressing both context and language development and meaning. The author reviews other paradigm shifts in the church including race, gender, and divorce/remarriage. There is a significant emphasis on the meaning and purpose of marriage and how that has changed across cultures and history. Rogers focuses as well on scripture that illustrates that all are one in Christ Jesus.

Maxwell (2009) study guide in Rogers (2009) book provides a model of congregational discernment that includes seven chapters for eight sessions. While Maxwell does not disclose his own faith affiliations, he describes the model that Rogers developed in his work with Presbyterian Church USA. Maxwell begins with general guidelines pertinent to each session including the importance of reading the book, agreeing to disagree with civility, clarifying the complexity of language (recommending person first language and avoiding over generalizations), listening carefully, questioning intentionally, and opening and closing sessions with prayer. Sessions are designed to be an hour and include an opening, key ideas and questions, an activity, and closing prayer. Each chapter/session includes a guide to the session elements with scripts. The sessions are titled: (1) "Prefaces and studying homosexuality for the first time"; (2) "A pattern of misusing the Bible to justify oppression"; (3) "A breakthrough in understanding the word of God; (4) Interpreting the Bible in times of controversy"; (5) "What the Bible does and doesn't say about homosexuality"; (6) "Real people and real marriage"; (7) "Recommendations for the Presbyterian Church (USA)"; and (8) "All are one in Christ Jesus."

### 2.3.2. Additional Individual Models and Processes for Churches

Several authors describe their own journeys for changing their perspectives without reporting them as an intentional process to guide congregations or organizations (Otto 2014; Wagner 2019). In some cases, these are written to congregations. In other cases, they are written as reports on a congregation's discernment process as a guide for other congregations.

Tim Otto, the child of missionaries and a Christian gay man ministers in the Church of the Sojourners in the US. In the book, *Oriented to Faith* (Otto 2014), Otto describes his journey as a gay man to a position of inclusion of multiple scriptural positions on how the church responds to the issues of human sexuality. The goal of Otto's process recommendations is to address the question: "How is God working for the good?" (p. xvi). Each chapter begins

with a topic related to Otto's journey and topics pertinent to the discussion of human sexuality and the church and each chapter ends with questions for further discussion. Otto finds strength in different perspectives including traditionalism, affirmation, and especially the concept that all may be one. Otto's goal is for Christians who disagree to experience together the love of God for them and to love one another which the author describes as both commandment and opportunity.

Ken Wilson describes himself as an Evangelical US pastor of the Ann Arbor Vineyard Church. [Wilson \(2014\)](#) describes to and for the congregation, the pastor's personal discernment process. Similar to others who have moved from one perspective to another, Wilson charts the course with rationale and explanations for moving from traditionalist to an affirming position with respect to LGBTQ+ inclusion. Wilson identifies as an evangelical pastor who became more and more uncomfortable with his positions of exclusion; the author describes experiences with Christians who identify as LGBTQ+ as his motivation for exploring a different perspective. This included a new examination of the scripture which he found negative about same-sex relationships. Wilson examined the scripture clarifying the ultimate rule of love (p. 88) and came to a similar conclusion as Otto, deciding on inclusion as the path forward honoring God and God's people. Unlike other models such as [Gushee \(2017\)](#), [Lee \(2012, 2018\)](#), and [Rogers \(2009\)](#), Wilson's process has not been developed into a template or model for a congregation to follow.

#### 2.4. Educational Settings

[Aldredge \(2014\)](#) developed the model of sociodrama specifically for university classrooms of conservative Christians and LGBTQ+ persons to create community and dialog around their differing perspectives of sexual orientation and gender identity. Aldredge's classroom approach included theater of the oppressed and theater of empowerment through warm up activities, bridging activities, improvisation, activating material, enactments, and dialogue, all followed by group debriefing and knowledge integration. [Dessel et al. \(2014\)](#) developed a model for intergroup dialogue with the same audiences of conservative Christians and LGBTQ+ advocates to "engage students in both affective and cognitive learning about social identity conflict and social justice issues" (p. 316). Dessel's model is recommended for use with faculty as well as with students (p. 408). This approach includes co-facilitated face-to-face groups. The groups are two or more social identity groups for whom there is historical experience of conflict. The experience provides space both for cognitive processing and emotional responses and learning. The intent is to humanize those different from themselves and to promote relationship building that values dignity of the other. This is to produce change together to address social inequity while in the presence of multiple perspectives (p. 316).

The Kettering Institute developed a model of public deliberation, initially designed for educational settings with a goal of skill development for effective citizenship ([Shaffer et al. 2017](#)). This process begins with identifying a topic (wicked problem), framing options, considering trade-offs and consequences, hearing from everyone, and considering pros and cons of the options. The collaborative model is reflective and respectful with detailed ground rules and steps that lead to a process of listening and understanding salient options ([Shaffer 2014](#)).

Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) focuses on hearing and being heard rather than convincing and deciding. Described as a "technique used to break patterns of polarization in communities so that people may meet each other in new ways" ([DeTemple and Sarrouf 2017](#), p. 285), RSD is not a decision-making model. The authors discuss the importance of curiosity and structured speaking and listening. Essential Partners developed and marketed the model for sharing and listening to other's experiences, exploring each other's deeply held views, and examining the dialectic of one's perspectives, i.e., ways that participants might consider the values of other perspectives ([Stains 2016](#)).

The process is structured by using a topic, steps for the process, and a series of four questions that follow general guidelines. Topics most frequently address complex and

socially polarizing issues. The process includes instructions that each person has opportunity to reflect on each question and make notes for responses, and to respond for a set amount of time when it is their turn to speak. Participants then listen respectfully to each person's response to the posed question. There is no debate or point/counter point in the process. Questions are designed to express curiosity, elicit personal experiences and responses, and to help others express and understand perspectives. Each person and their experiences and stories are valued and respected.

### 2.5. Group Processes for Congregational Settings

As congregations confront the need for discernment, there are increasing narratives of congregational processes. These discussions are sometimes formal and sometimes informal, specifically developed for congregations, and often include the pastor or minister's own process and journey, combining staff leadership with congregational group leadership. Some include comprehensive elements of a model while others report on a brief series of sermons or conversations. Several of the more robust models are summarized here.

[Bloomquist \(1999\)](#), a Lutheran US pastor, developed a detailed conversation model for Lutheran churches to discuss challenging social issues including abortion, sexual orientation, racism, abuse, and others (p. 3). The author recommended the conversations be public, part of the public ministry, and deal with public issues with impact beyond the church. The model addresses respectful conversation including the faith perspective with a recommendation that churches follow the prescribed process from identifying the issue to creating and implementing a concrete plan and timeline. This follows the model of Jesus who addressed controversial issues and the model of the early church. Bloomquist's Lutheran model includes a group of leaders working within the structure of the church, led by the pastor, and inviting congregational meetings for discussion over controversial topics. The model includes ground rules, instructions for deep listening, i.e., listening for information, experiences, and feelings, and a process that leads to action.

[de Jong \(2020\)](#) proposed the "pluralistic moral perspective" to guide congregations in conservative Christian contexts in order to make space for multiple opposing worldviews without a legal resolution, i.e., without the need for one point of view to dominate or win. ([Rendle 1999](#)), a consultant to congregations and a US Methodist minister (1999) encourages church growth by valuing differences. "The vitality and the life source of our faith depends upon our differences as we seek new ways to be authentic and faithful" (p. xi). The author's approach to civil conversations in congregations is eclectic with respect to issues and specific to listening and respect. Finally, additional models have been developed specifically for congregations guided by the pastor or minister's own process and journey and combine staff leadership with congregational group leadership. Several of those are highlighted here as examples in the literature.

[Collins \(2018\)](#), a US Baptist pastor in the conservative tradition, writes from the perspective of a pastor having led the congregation through a discernment process. Similar to [Gushee \(2017\)](#), [Lee \(2012, 2018\)](#), and [Rogers \(2009\)](#), Collins leads the congregation to the position taken by the pastor and leadership. In this case, the pastor describes a position of inclusion without affirmation, i.e., that of welcoming, including the kind of judgment that supports legal rights while holding members of the Christian family accountable for scripture honoring behavior, maintaining support for traditional marriage, and requiring celibacy for LGBTQ+ members in order to be in leadership in the church. Collins defines this as a commitment to convictions for decisions consistent with God's word. Collins defines convictions as "those deeply held, firm, grounded, defensible beliefs that . . . shape our world view and thus determine the trajectory of our lives" (p. 49). Similar to others who experience a discernment process, Collins examines the scripture and reports his finding of the Bible's position of God's intent for sex to be limited to the covenant marriage between a man and a woman by using the word "unnatural" in reference to same-sex intimacy. This interpretation of scripture establishes for Collins clear support for the traditional position that "the Bible clearly and unequivocally describes same-sex intimacy as contrary



to the design of God" (Collins 2018, p. 67). This leads to Collins' recommendation that congregations engage in conversations at all levels in the church and develop a church position and statement. The process leads to congregation's decision of welcoming, which Collins explains is different than affirming.

The discernment process was designed with the goal to formulate and adopt a position statement. It is described thoroughly in Appendix A of Collins' book. The 26 weeks process began with the appointment and affirmation of a study team. Weeks three through eight were devoted to the reading list available to the study team and the congregation. Beginning in week nine, the congregation and study team reviewed the pastor's booklet of scriptural understandings and principles that later grew into Collins' publication. Weeks 12 and 13 were devoted to fasting and prayer; weeks 14–16 included listening sessions led by the pastor and/or the study team and an opportunity for congregants to engage the process through email and online. During weeks 16–19, the study team drafted a statement and presented a preliminary report to the Ministerial Staff and then the Legal Committee (p. 162). Once the study team presented its report to the Leadership Council in week 22, the Council was able to present the document to the deacons and then to the church. The congregation voted in week 26 on Sunday evening. Collins asserts that essential process elements include: "deliberate prayerful engagement; plentiful opportunities for input and reflection; inclusion of those in the minority, and leadership by skilled facilitators" (p. 163). The statement once affirmed and communicated asserts: "This is what a majority of our church members believe to be true" (p. 163).

Wingfield (2019), also a US Baptist pastor, writes instead from the background of a journalist and the perspective of a minister in a Baptist congregation engaging in discernment process toward LGBTQ+ inclusion. In the forward, David Gushee provides a strong endorsement for the discernment process along with cautions that any process includes the likelihood of disagreement. "It is fair to say that every generation or so a moral issue comes along in American (Protestant) Christianity on which schism seems to be inevitable. In the 1990s it was gender, in the 1960s it was race, in the 1930s it was pacifism, and perhaps the New Deal, and in the 1850s, of course, it was slavery" (p. xiv).

Wingfield begins by identifying three essential points about LBGT inclusion. Wingfield states that every church needs to address LGBTQ+ inclusion, which will include some disagreement, and that there are LGBTQ+ Christians in every church whether acknowledged or not. The author intends to encourage the conversation and offer resources and lessons learned. After a process of 18 months, Wingfield reports that those who agreed with the outcome felt the process was transparent and fair while those who disagreed with the decision tended to believe that a fair process would have resulted in a different decision. Notably, Wingfield reports that the church had studiously not addressed the issue, a point he realized when a number of teens who grew up in the church did not come out until they left for college or careers. Ostensibly, they did not know how they would be received in their home church.

The church used the same process as had been used in previous discernment conversations and decisions about women in leadership and about baptism requirements for membership. It took five months to name the process and develop criteria for members of the study team who would lead the process. The final study team included age diversity (17–76), gender diversity, and marital status and parental status diversity. The group did not include anyone who openly identified as LGBTQ+. The senior pastor and author were non-voting members of the group and provided resourcing for theological discussions and for note taking.

The study team began assembling and reading a bibliography and over the 18 months provided resources for the congregation to read, "offered a series of congregational information sessions, offered a series of congregational roundtable discussions, and offered a series of small-group meetings between deacons and the senior pastor" (p. 47). The book includes a summary of roundtable conversation topics. The list suggests a strong balance of perspectives and opportunity for multiple points of view. Informational sessions included

discussion of scripture, subject experts on medicine, human development, and genetics. The church had more experience with LGB persons and subsequently experienced the narratives of transgender Christians as well. Wingfield identifies the discussion around marriage the most challenging and divisive subject and the one over which they could not achieve agreement.

The process was followed by the decision. At the completion of the reading, information groups, and roundtable discussion groups, the study team prepared a report for the congregation including four viewpoints/perspectives for consideration by the church body. The vote was simplified to a decision about membership and whether there would be one class of membership that included leadership, church sacraments, etc. or restrictions on membership for some persons. The majority of the church members voted for one class of membership. Some members and families who voted otherwise made the decision to leave the church. Wingfield discusses the pain of those leavings and in some cases broken relationships as well as discussing the joy experienced as new members joined the church. The book includes several appendices as references clarifying the process and common questions, scripture, and expertise areas including, for example, genetics and adolescent sexuality, among others.

### 2.6. Multi-Church Process Models

Several books have been written addressing multiple church process stories. As mentioned before, [Gaede \(1998\)](#) gathered the stories of seven congregations and their processes. The congregations were from six denominations and seven states. The processes were distinct with discussion of overlapping areas including the challenges of the conversations, rules for managing those discussions, and the need for both challenge and comfort. [Polaski et al. \(2013\)](#) edited a compilation of resource materials for Bible study and theological understanding as well as seven personal stories, five family stories, and fifteen Baptist church process and decision stories. The processes varied in leadership, length, and events but all ended with decisions for affirmation of LGBTQ+ inclusion. The book ends with a bibliography of resources and a study guide geared toward ten sessions using the sections of the book for reading and discussion. The stated goal of the process is to work toward “greater inclusion and justice for LGBTQ+ people in the community” (p. 344). Notably, in the proposed models from authors and congregations based on their own processes, there is a built-in bias toward the outcome of the process. In those developed for public and educational forums, there is an assumption of no bias in the model while recognizing that the steps of the model could be biased by the facilitator.

## 3. Discussion

This conceptual article connects the history of the early Christian church in controversial social issues to current church issues around inclusion in Christian congregations and denominations in the USA. Other countries have addressed the issues of LGBTQ+ leadership in congregations to various degrees from inclusion to complete rejection ([Bird 2018](#); [Dreier et al. 2019](#); [Rise 2019](#); [Dickey Young 2010](#); [Zwissler 2019](#)). In this article, the authors limit their discussion to congregations and denominations in the USA; they include a variety of approaches used by individuals, congregations, and other organizations to engage in deliberate discernment conversations around challenging and often divisive topics. In some cases, the process is to determine the church’s position on inclusion. In many cases, the process is to move the congregation to a confirmed traditional or conservative position of sexuality and/or gender identity. In other cases, the process leads the congregation to an expressed position of affirmation or reconciling. In many USA denomination or congregational discussions, the question of LGBTQ+ inclusion often is driven by the heart of the understanding of scripture. Does US cultural context and the context of language and translation matter to the interpretation of scripture? If the scriptural understanding is that sexual orientation and/or identity difference is sin, what does that mean for church membership and leadership of LGBTQ+ persons? When several scriptures seem

to conflict at least in application, how shall people of faith prioritize them? What is the role of gatekeeping in the church? How do the answers to these questions inform the response of denominations to the decisions of congregations and vice versa? What is the role of social work in USA congregations in managing these questions through policy and practice? What is the role of social workers in congregations providing services to LGBTQ+ persons who fear rejection in response to coming out? Further, what is the role of social workers in congregations with families that are divided or fractured in the wake of a family member's disclosure around their sexuality? Perhaps most salient, what difference might a discernment process and decision make for the church in policy, in practice, in denominational affiliation, in finances, and in programming?

Several models are proposed by authors who have completed their own personal discernment processes; an example is Gushee's book, in which the author's experience and bias in that process and outcome drives the model for the congregation. On the other hand, those models developed for public/educational settings, have a presumed lack of bias. While the source of bias may be different, the presence of bias seems consistent across groups.

One of the implied variables in several models is that of the importance of engaging the wisdom, knowledge, and history of the congregation, including the culture and identity of the congregation or organization. These models are largely based in the USA where cultural differences are regional and may be consistent across denominations in a region. This has been the experience of the authors who, while functioning currently in the role of researchers, have previously also engaged with congregations and organizations as consultants for change processes. The experience of the authors has validated this critical construct of valuing the expertise of the client, in this case the congregation or organization and the recognition that in most cases there is the perception of winners and losers at the conclusion. The possibility of process that results in capacity to embrace differences in understandings, space to live with others in the presence of different interpretations of scripture, and skills to negotiate differences within denominations makes models that facilitate these ends essential. This is likely true across religions in the USA. In the polarized society of 2020 USA, where the church and Christianity have become a political battleground, can discernment processes that find common ground and peaceful solutions make a difference?

### *3.1. Strengths and Limitations*

One of the strengths of this work is the gathering of numerous models from individual, congregational, and organizational examples with examination of the process variables. Finding those elements that show up across models and are identified as strengths will enable a group seeking either an established model or the opportunity to develop their own best practice model to have a solid starting place.

The models examined originate in individual processes, in group processes, and in newly established tested processes. Further, they represent a variety of denominational groups, church structures, and model processes. They include formal and informal processes, and in most cases, they have a leadership structure for the discernment process, and a formal decision-making process. The church planning to enter a discernment process has a smorgasbord of options and several authors' experiences and evaluation and recommendations available to them.

#### **Limitations**

There are several significant limitations to the article. The article is written in the context of LGBTQ+ inclusion in denominations and congregations in the USA. It does not address the work that has been done in other countries and on other continents including those who have made significant change and those for whom the conversation is not yet an accepted or acceptable topic. Further, while this article covers a plethora of models, it is written in the context of Christian denominations and churches. To varying degrees,

the question of LGBTQ+ inclusion is a question in other faith traditions as well including Judaism and Islam. Exploring the history, organizational structures, and faith tenants would be an important next step to examining the applicability of these discernment models and processes in those faith traditions. Exploring the processes and outcomes in other countries and their religious structures would likely provide insight for possible models and processes in the USA as well.

When identifying models for conceptual work, the risk is always leaving out a substantive, unique model which might be just the model for which the reader is looking or have a critical element for successful discernment. Further, while research intentionally springs from the well of diversity of thought, scientific inquiry, and unbiased reporting of findings, many of these models were written after processes were created and were initiated by leaders with clear ends in mind who have distinct methods for making recommendations into policy. Others were written to generalize personal processes to group processes that may or may not be a good fit for the congregation.

In many cases, the leadership of the church initiated and guided a process toward a desired outcome. That did not make the process inconsequential but did shift the purpose of the process from decision making to decision affirmation and relationship preserving. In those cases, the perception of those who “lost” was that the decision was a foregone conclusion and that may well have been accurate. Even in those cases, the wish for unity and clarity of purpose remained a wish and a goal.

The plethora of models available with a multitude of variables across the models is both a strength and a weakness. There is opportunity here to assess what has worked in congregations more currently engaged in discernment of the timely question of LGBTQ+ inclusion for the church and for society.

#### **4. Materials and Methods**

This research is part of a larger study examining the processes of congregational discernment specifically around inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons in Christian congregations and denominations in the USA. This is the first of a series of articles exploring both the current issue, the challenges and developing conversations, and the lessons learned and processes available to both congregations and denominations. In this article, our materials were the literature examining the context of the history of discord and disagreement in Christianity, particularly around membership and inclusion, the need for and focus on civil conversations in society at a time of polarization and discord, and evolving discernment methods. The research team of three faculty, one staff, and 11 students reviewed books, articles, websites, and current news literature across generations annotating more than 68 peer-reviewed articles, 12 non-peer-reviewed articles and dissertations, 42 books, and 27 media sources including news articles, podcasts, and other media sources. Understanding the importance of history as well as resources provides the background and context for the research that we report on that includes 97 interviews with ministers, leaders, and congregants in 21 congregations across 3 Christian denominations. The methodology for the research is in the forthcoming article: *Congregational Discernment: Process Lessons from 21 Congregations*.

#### **5. Conclusions**

Differences in understandings about scripture, social issues, and church policy and practice have been part of the Christian community experience from the beginning of Christianity and increasingly the source of disagreement in the United States and other countries. Scholars identify these differences as key to the development of multiple factions or denominations (Richards 2020; Shelley 2013; Tisby 2019). The past 50 years in American Christian culture and congregational life have included increasing focus on the experience of LGBTQ+ persons who identify as Christian and their families and their congregations and denominations. This review of models in the literature is a starting place for congre-

gations who are increasingly focused on answering the questions of LGBTQ+ inclusion, leadership, and participation in church sacraments including marriage.

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