

What Does It Mean to Be Welcoming? Navigating LGBT Questions in Your Church
Available August 14, 2018
\$16, 144 pages, paperback
978-0-8308-4144-8

“Written by a pastor for pastors, What Does It Mean to Be Welcoming? is a compelling guide for church leaders who are committed to navigating LGBT conversations in their communities with the sort of honesty and humility that ought to mark all Christian discourse. Unthoughtful, fear-driven polarization will likely continue over these issues, but Collins offers a richer vision of faithful Christian witness that we desperately need in our churches.”

-JR Rozko,
codirector at Missio Alliance

“All are welcome here.”

In the contemporary worship service at the church I serve, we frequently sing those words from Eddie Kirkland’s song “Here and Now.” Every time we sing them, I wonder what people are thinking: “Do people really believe that? Do people believe us when we say, ‘All are welcome?’”

Recently our contemporary worship leader told me that every time we sing “All are welcome here, as we are,” someone asks him afterward, “Is that really true?”

Do all people actually feel welcome in our place? After all, as a congregation we did issue a Traditionalist statement on sexuality. That statement does not, in any way, exclude people from worship, fellowship, or membership in our church based on sexual orientation or behavior. And it certainly does not state that anyone is unwelcome here. But because of our decision, some (regretfully) don’t feel welcomed.

So what does “welcoming” mean—really? That is what we are talking about in this book.

When church leaders debate the topic of homosexuality, we are not talking about whether same-sex attracted people are to be respected, or whether they should be allowed to live wherever they want, or whether they should be able to visit their partners in critical care units of hospitals, or whether their families should love and embrace them. Those are easy questions, and the obvious answer to all of them (for me, at least) is an enthusiastic Yes.

We are considering much more difficult questions. We are talking about what it means for a church to say they are “welcoming.”

We’re talking about whether that wonderful woman who is at church every Sunday, who brings snacks every week to youth night, and who we know is in a same-sex relationship should be asked to teach the senior high school girls Sunday school class next year.

We are talking about what the minister should do when the chairman of the church board asks that minister to perform the wedding ceremony for the chairman’s lesbian daughter and her partner.

We are talking about what we should tell the teens in our student ministries about same-sex intimacy, or if we should say anything at all.

We are talking about whether your church or denomination should ordain that young man who grew up in your church, is the best young preacher you’ve ever heard, and identifies as gay.



BOOK EXCERPT



Travis Collins has ministered as an international missionary and pastor for three decades. He is senior pastor at First Baptist Church in Huntsville, Alabama, and is the author of several books, including *From the Steeple to the Street* and *Fresh Expressions of Church*. Collins holds a PhD in Christian mission and is a member of the Fresh Expressions US team. He and his wife, Keri, have three grown children and a growing number of grandchildren.

We're talking about whether you should leave your church, or whether your church should leave your denomination, over this. We might even be talking about whether your church should get kicked out of your denominational family over this.

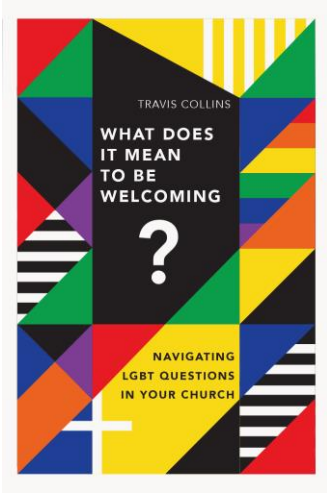
We're also talking about whether these are even going to be questions twenty years from now. . . .

This has been a very personal journey over a number of years. I have found myself at odds with close friends. I have felt the hurt of Christians who have been maligned, and I have been maligned personally. I have experienced just about every emotion imaginable along the way. I have been angered, offended, wounded, affirmed, conflicted, confused, encouraged, and afraid. I stand where I stand firmly, but I stand here humbly and compassionately — with a few arrows in my hide from both sides of this emotional debate.

My heart, in the broadest sense, is in this.

I write this as the pastor of a big tent church that recently wrestled with, and issued a position statement on, the topic of human sexuality. I write this as a close friend of many church leaders whose churches and denominations are in tough conversations surrounding sexuality. I've been living with this topic for a long time, and if this book is of help to church leaders, it would be my honor.

-Adapted from the introduction



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In this practical resource, readers will gain insight into relevant biblical passages and hear from interpreters on both sides of the debate. They will consider the implications of their convictions for ministry practice, relationships, church policy, and more. They will hear testimonies from gay friends and family members about their experiences in the church. Collins calls readers to both grace and truth, with humility.

Discussion Questions for Your Church

1. What are your personal biases in approaching this topic? What prejudices, even discomfort, will you have to set aside in order to consider this topic honestly? If you are discussing this book in a group of people in which there is a high level of trust, have each person answer these questions openly. And be careful not to condemn people for being honest about their preconceptions.
2. What have you assumed about the “cause(s)” of homosexuality? Why do you believe you have made those assumptions? Could your assumptions have been wrong?
3. Are there varying opinions on the topic of homosexuality within your congregation? Or would you say there is widespread agreement on the topic? No matter your answer, what would you say are the strengths and weaknesses of your congregation when it comes to discussing this topic?
4. Go to Philippians 4 and read the story of Euodia and Syntyche. What can you learn from their dispute and Paul’s counsel to them about your disagreements with fellow Christians?
5. Do you know someone who has an opinion about this topic that is very different from yours? Would you be willing to ask that person to articulate the reasoning behind their position without defending your own? In other words, would you be willing to listen purely for the sake of learning, and not offer your opinion?
6. The book says, “So, let’s take ‘judge not’ seriously, but let’s not take it further than it was intended. The Bible gives us a balance.” How do you understand the phrase “judge not” as it applies to Christians and morals? Based on what you read here, how would you describe the Bible’s balance when it comes to “judging”?
7. What are some of the unfair labels that you have heard given to people in the debate over the topic of same-sex relationships?