

Guide to Creating and Sustaining The Marin Foundation's Living in the Tension Gatherings ©

Created by The Marin Foundation: 1st Edition 2010

Purpose for Living in the Tension Gatherings:

In 1963 Martin Luther King Jr. was locked up in a jail in Birmingham, Alabama. In a letter to confront the white clergymen that had him locked up MLK reflected on his life's work to that point and said:

"I must confess that I am not afraid of the word tension. I have earnestly opposed violent tension my whole life, but there is a type of constructive, non-violent tension which is necessary for growth."

The broader Christian community has been running from that constructive tension for too long when it comes to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. The problem is that in today's culture there is no such thing as 'constructive tension.' All tension is projected as bad tension; a tension that is too political and therefore too divisive to know what it means to engage in ways that tangibly bring redemption and reconciliation. Unfortunately, our culture is focused so heavily on assimilation that it has forgotten what progress looks like.

Yet if we are able to understand the significance of constructive tension, settling ourselves in the middle of places that others just run from, the growth that MLK was talking about will always come. But it will only come retrospectively after much time has been spent immersed in the tension-filled areas that we are, and culture is, most uneasy about. Those tension-filled areas are uncomfortable, challenging, confusing, overbearing, uneasy, oft-criticized, oft-rebuked and don't always come with a simple answer—if an answer is ever involved. And it's worth every minute for the Kingdom we so boldly claim ourselves to be a part of.

Those who believe in the Movement of Jesus need to start making conscious commitments to counterculturally live in different ways than what our culture currently deems as an acceptable medium of engagement. Such decisions must become a reality no matter what anyone else's outcome might be. As Chris Heuertz, author of *Friendship at the Margins*, says,

"The outcome to any relationship is secondary to the fidelity of the faithfulness in that relationship."

A new example must be set for the rest of our society to see a new vision of what bold reconciliation looks like between LGBTs, liberals and the conservative world. So many have been working off of a paradigm of reconciliation based on a mainstream worldview of strength in numbers that either forces 'the other' to conform or be ostracized. But

reconciliation based on a love of God giving us the strength to relentlessly pursue those that are thought to be most unlike ourselves will ultimately connect humanity on new levels of faith, relationship, action and sustainable impact.

The point of committing to experience this type of reconciliation is to then turn around and affect other individual spheres of influence to faithfully live in the same manner. A bridge cannot be built from only one side, and a Movement cannot continue if only lived in one area.

Mission Statement of Living in the Tension Gatherings:

That non-Christian LGBTs, gay Christians, celibates, ex-gays, liberal and conservative straight Christians and straight non-Christians all willfully enter into a place of constructive tension, intentionally forming a community that peacefully and productively takes on the most divisive topics within the culture war that is faith and sexuality.

Why Living in the Tension Gatherings are Needed:

Culture wants to resolve conflict. Living in the Tension Gatherings want to use each of the different communities' filtration systems to elevate the conversation through the tension. Get past the stereotypes. Practice what it means to listen to and dignify your political or theological enemy. Actively learn to live and love in real-time. Seek reconciliation not based on a change of belief system but rather living out your current beliefs differently.

Living in the Tension Gatherings are intentional spaces created to shift our paradigms away from *the* pervasively dominant success or failure model of life and faith to one that turns hearts, souls and minds onto what it means to establish Kingdom. The following is the slogan for Living in the Tension Gatherings:

Commit. Stay. Reconcile. Grow.

Ground Rules for Living in the Tension Gatherings:

Participants must know that the goal of these gatherings is not for people to convince others that they are right and 'the other' is wrong, but rather work off of a worldview enhancement model. Living in the Tension Gatherings build a community where individuals can feel safe to not only share their experiences and beliefs with 'the other' but also learn to excel in constructive tension with those they disagree with. The point is not a debate that ends up turning into a competition. It's an active engagement in learning what relationship with 'the other' tangibly looks like.

The group should seek to validate everyone's stories and experiences regardless if people see other's conclusions as right or wrong. Dignifying another person's humanity and validating their stories as a legitimate part of their journey does not mean that they're affirming or agreeing with everything another believes or states.

Structure of Living in the Tension Gatherings:

Each gathering should have a new individual(s) who facilitate that specific gathering. The facilitators should rotate each gathering. Their role is four-fold:

Come up with a chart or a list of 2-5 talking points or questions for the group so the conversation stays on a relative path surrounding the topic.

Provide a 5-7 minute introduction to the topic. This introduction should include three parts:

Social, political and theological history of the topic;

Current cultural trends surrounding the topic; and

Practical applications to how the specific topic applies or has directly affected the facilitator's life:

It is important to note that the best use of this introductory space is exemplified when the facilitator(s) shares very personal experiences and stories related to the topic. Preferably the facilitator would identify with/to the gathering's topic. To set a proper tone for the gathering, the more real and raw the transparency, the better.

Keep everyone in the gathering engaged:

It is important that people know the point of attending these gatherings is transparent and active participation. It is ok if someone just listens rather than participates. However, more than one gathering of such passivity is not advantageous to the sustainability of the group. Truthfulness, transparency and personal engagement is paramount. Participants must know they will be intentionally called on and collectively pushed to always keep it real; especially if they are consistently not engaging.

Ensure that individuals and their comments are treated with respect and things do not get hostile:

This doesn't mean that every conversation will be pleasant, as a main purpose is to learn what it means to bring stereotypes, perceptions, baggage, questions and pure honesty to each gathering. There is plenty of potential that much of the aforementioned list can quickly lead to escalated feelings and reactions. Regardless of the opposing worldviews there is never space for name calling, yelling, fear, bullying or one sub-group within the gathering instilling dominance over all of the others.

The gatherings usually last up to an hour and a half. Immediate post-gathering discussions and/or social outings are strongly encouraged to continue unfinished dialogue.

Locations for the Living in the Tension Gatherings:

A healthy balance of various locations is important to getting the participants, from every shade of faith and sexuality in the group, out of their comfort zones. The Marin Foundation has previously rotated locations from: conservative churches, LGBT bars/clubs, liberal churches, community centers (LGBT and government run), book stores (from Barnes & Noble to lesbian feminist independent stores), museums, HIV/AIDS clinics, parks, straight bars/clubs, basements, classrooms, offices, government buildings and theaters. The usual rotation, though, is in-between conservative churches and LGBT bars/clubs.

Frequency of the Living in the Tension Gatherings:

One of the most significant means to sustaining the Living in the Tension Gatherings is to schedule dates, times and locations well in advance. The further out you are able to lock in the gatherings the better the turnout will be. We usually plan six months worth of gatherings six months to one year in advance. There is no substitute for consistency. It doesn't matter if one person shows up or two-hundred and fifty, the point is not the numbers but rather the impact. And it's hard to have an impact with erratic gatherings. Like clockwork, whether weekly, bi-weekly or monthly (we would not suggest spacing the gatherings out longer than once a month), participants can integrate these pre-scheduled gatherings into their normal routine with plenty of time to plan ahead.

Getting People Involved in the Living in the Tension Gatherings:

Street Credibility. Don't expect everyone, especially if you don't have an existing relationship with them, to want to be a part of something like this. 'No' is a legitimate word. But The Marin Foundation has learned over the years that most people from either community are willing to put aside their fears (not skepticisms) and give you one shot to prove to them that you are who you say you are. Start consistently involving yourself with 'the other' community, whichever one that might be, and get this thing rolling. If you don't know where to find any straight, LGBT or faith based people in your local community, Google is a wonderful tool!

Example Topics for Living in the Tension Gatherings:

The following are a list of topics that have been sorted alphabetically which The Marin Foundation has used over the last couple of years. We have included a brief summary of each topic and a small list of sample questions/thoughts so you can start thinking around the big idea of each gathering and how you can engage your group in the most transparent ways possible:

Activism:

There are old paradigms of engagement that are dwindling in effectiveness of influencing national policy (e.g. large group gatherings/marches/protests). How is this new generation changing the old 'acceptable medium of engagement' and where is activism heading? What does it look like to instill a new medium of engagement in our own lives as well as broader culture?

Bullying:

There has been a string of LGBT teenage suicides recently. Who in your group has been bullied (whether LGBT or not), how did they respond, what are the effects and what can we do about it?

Celibacy:

Though very countercultural to the mainstream, it is a means of commitment to a traditional orthodox view of Scripture for those with a same-sex attraction. What is it like to be 'alone' for a lifetime not being able to engage in what many Christians believe that God made humans as sexual beings?

Change:

What is it? Is it behavior modification or something else? Is it mandatory for Christians? What about partnered gay Christians? What if people never "change"? Has anyone ever gone through reparative therapy and what was the experience, and the outcome?

Conflict:

How are we to handle conflict? Is it different coming from Christians vs. non-Christians? What does it look like to bring reconciliation in such divisive conflicts and accusations?

Current Social Issues:

There are always a number of these in our everyday news. Pick a current social issue and run with it. Some examples are: the Anti-Homosexual Bill in Uganda, Gay Adaption legislation, Don't Ask Don't Tell, etc.

Day of Silence:

This day occurs on April 15th every year when LGBT students and their friends don't speak all day in school to bring light to the general oppression of LGBT youth. Commit to not speaking at all that day and at the gathering talk about silence, death, reflection, oppression and finding your voice.

Deconstruction of Cultural Labels, Socially Constructed Boxes and the Influence those Labels Yield:

Self explanatory.

Elevating the Conversation:

It is too easy to get caught up in a continual cycle of fighting about the same social, political, theological and scientific issues. What does it mean to elevate such divisiveness to broader principles that elongate the conversation and build bridges through commitment?

Engaging in Sex:

What is sex? Who defines it? Who has had it? Who hasn't? What influence or pressure does it yield over you? How does it (or not) define you, your relationships and your future?

Fidelity:

Friendship evangelism betrays the friendship because there is a preconceived 'perceived outcome' already in place. What does it mean to have someone's back no matter what? How have such experiences influenced worldviews, culture wars and this group? When have you stood with someone and taken heat for them when it wasn't even your place to do so?

Forgiveness:

There are a lot of people to hate in this world for a whole lot of reasons—personally and corporately. Is it important to forgive? What does that look like and what is the process to forgive? Is it easy or hard? Is it a single act or a lifestyle and what examples has this happened in your life?

Free Will:

What does free will have to do with making choices about faith, sex and life? Is free will an excuse or is it a driving force to make things better? How does free will play into 'change' or the decisions to be partnered or celibate? Which is justified?

Gay Marriage:

How do you see a resolution to this fight? What would your suggestions be for the future outcome our country adopts? Also, though many Christians look at this as a singular moral issue, there are two other components that involve the broader debate of the Church and State:

Human Rights: Do two LGBT consenting American adults deserve the same rights as two straight consenting American adults?

Legal: Do two LGBT consenting American adults deserve the same tax, insurance, benefits and legal breaks as two straight consenting American adults?

Guilt and Regret:

In life or sexually or through relationships, what does guilt or regret look like in your own life and what are you supposed to do about it?

Handling Critics:

There will always be critics. How are we supposed to handle/respond/ignore them? What does it look like and what examples are from your own life? What is the difference between a critique, criticism or a hater? Does the Bible say anything about this topic?

HIV/AIDS:

Every day there are 7,000 new HIV infections around the world. How has this impacted your life and what are you doing about it? What about the perception and stigma of LGBT people with HIV/AIDS, especially in a church context?

Hooking Up:

Yes, even good Christians hook up. Is there a 'too far'? Are there take-backs? What, if anything, separates sexuality from hooking up?

I'm Sorry:

There is power in those words. What times have you said I'm Sorry that have impacted you and others more than either of you ever thought?

Intersex:

Ever wonder what it is like to not know what bathroom to walk into? What about the faith journey of someone who from birth is genetically male and female? Watch this interview and then discuss (<http://www.loveisanoorientation.com/2010/video-of-living-in-the-tension-event-intersex/>)

Language, Words, Biases and Stereotypes that Tear us down:

Hear stories and the emotional, spiritual and mental impact it has had. How do you break these ingrained walls down to build the wounded back up?

Love is an Orientation:

Throughout Andrew Marin's book, Love is an Orientation, there are 11 chapters, including the Conclusion. Within those 11 chapters there are a total of 78 subheadings looking into a variety of issues surrounding faith, sexuality and bridge building. Each of those subheadings can be used as a starting point for a new Living in the Tension Gathering, using Andrew's thoughts as a baseline to agree/disagree/discuss around.

Love your enemies:

There is no more of a countercultural command by Jesus than this one. Though many people cognitively understand the concept of loving one's enemies, what does it actually look like and how has it (if it has at all?) played out in your life?

Movies:

Watch the following movies during different gatherings and then discuss them: MILK (gay rights), I Do Exist (ex-gay), Stonewall Uprising (LGBT history), Paris is Burning (transgender).

National Coming Out Day:

This day occurs October 11th every year. It's time to hear the stories one by one and live in the emotion of it all. For those who are not LGBT or have not come out, it's important to confess something that no one else knows about you.

Normal/Normalcy:

What is normal? Who is normal? What defines normalcy in today's culture in all areas of your life and broader society?

Perceptions that Influence your Reality?

There are number of very negative perceptions about the LGBT community (e.g. they were abused, raped, party all the time, will get infected with HIV or STDS, etc) as well as a number of very negative perceptions about Christians (anti-gay, judgmental, hypocritical, etc). What do these mean to your life and how have they influenced you, your own perception of your community and others, and how you treat 'the other' based on what you think they think about you?

Personal Journeys from all Shades of Faith and Sexuality:

Bring in guests to share their experiences about faith and sexuality (also from different ethnicities and genders if possible) and then have an open Q&A. Example speakers would be:

- Non-Christian LGBT person
- Gay Christian
- Bisexual person (believer/non-believer)
- Transgender person (believer/non-believer)
- Partnered/Married LGBTs (with/without kids and believer/non)
- Celibate person with a same-sex attraction
- Ex-Gay person
- Liberal straight Christian (lay person and pastor)
- Conservative straight Christian (lay person and pastor)
- Non-Christian straight person
- Local Politician
- University Administrator
- CEO or HR person from a for-profit business

Power Structures:

There are certain cultural hierarchies that give power and access, influence power and access or take away power and access from others. How do those structures influence your life/sexuality/faith and how can you subvert them to make an individual and cultural impact?

Pride Parade:

Traditionally held the last weekend in June every year to commemorate the Stonewall Riots—what historians call the first ever public ‘outing’ of the LGBT community. Speak about the social and political history of the LGBT movement, where it is now and where it is going.

Prop 8:

How does faith influence politics and is that right or wrong? Who actually ‘won’ the recent Prop 8 vote—not necessarily by votes but by impact?

Race and Ethnic Relations Surrounding Sexuality:

Different ethnicities treat (homo)sexuality in a variety of ways. What have your experiences been and what is a way forward?

Reconciliation:

There is a difference between Cultural Reconciliation (you believe what I believe then we’ll be reconciled) vs. Actual Reconciliation (relentlessly pursuing those people most unlike ourselves connecting on a human to human level with our differences (from a Christian perspective the reason is because that is what our Savior modeled for us)). What are the theological, social, political and scientific means we can live an actual reconciliation out?

Research:

Myth or fact? Research today is used as a political tool to wield power. Some research says LGBT are born that way; other research says they’re not. What do you believe about that and a number of other differing statistics; and how can we move forward through the clear opposition?

Role Play:

Role play scenes and stereotypes of the common back-and-forth arguments between the LGBT community and conservatives. Yell. Get upset. Keep it real. Practice applications of real time responses and elevating the conversation in the heat of the moment.

Service in the Community:

Instead of always talking or watching, it is important to get out in your community as a group and serve together. The Marin Foundation tries to plan a few community service projects a year to be and work together as one body making a tangible difference.

Separation between Church and State:

What does this separation look like and how does it actually play out in our church and mainstream cultures? What are its ramifications for theological and political issues.

Sexual Identity:

Why do we identify how we do? What is basis of identity? What defines us—actions, sex, faith, politics? Are any of those intertwined or more important than the others?

Sexual orientation:

What is sexual orientation, whether gay or straight? Does it matter? What does the Bible say about sexual orientation? How does sexual orientation define/influence your life, thoughts, faith and sexuality?

Scripture about Homosexuality:

There are six main passages in the Bible that reference same-sex sexual behavior. People can argue all day about the Greek, Hebrew and historical cultural contexts surrounding each passage. Go through each of the passages presenting both the “pro-gay” theological argument and the conservative theological argument as well. Listen to and learn from each, not as a tool for changing convictions, but as one that sees ‘the other’ theology as a legitimate expression of where that belief system is coming from. Discuss...

Sin:

What is it? How is it defined? It is the most politically incorrect word in our society. How does faith and sexuality encompass this? What are the overarching principles surrounding a doctrine of sin? How can each of you relate to sin, faith and sexuality?

Shame:

There is an immense amount of shame and disconnect being in the closet. Whether LGBT or not, what are you ashamed about (if anything). Let it out. What was it like before? How has it stuck with you and shaped you?

Solidarity:

What does it mean to stand with someone oppressed—faith or sexually?

Trust:

Where does it come from, how does one earn it and what happens when it is lost?

Validation vs. Affirmation:

There is a difference between these two constructs. What is it and how can you implement this difference in practical applications that foster actual reconciliation?

Yes/No:

22 of 25 times recorded in Scripture, Jesus did not answer yes/no to the yes/no questions asked of him—whether asked by his enemies (15 times) or his friends (10 times). For more in-depth analysis, reference pages 103-105 and 178-185 in Andrew’s book, Love is an Orientation.

Sustainability of the Living in the Tension Gatherings:

The unique sustainability of Living in the Tension Gatherings is that you can never run out of things that bring tension—social, political, scientific or theological—whether on a national scale or in your local community. The Marin Foundation has been convening

these Living in the Tension Gatherings for just over six years running with no end in site. What will always bring people back is that you provide for them an intentional space where you keep it more real and raw than anything they have ever experienced—and that means you take the lead and be more transparent than anyone else, providing the safe place to journey and explore things together that they could get no where else in our culture today.

Blog Post from a First Time Visitor to a Living in the Tension Gathering:

By Nicole Wick: To see the full blog post visit here:

<http://www.nicolewick.com/2010/07/a-small-group-first-for-me-anyway/>

Nicole drove to Chicago with a her husband and a friend from Michigan one evening to be a part of The Marin Foundation's Living in the Tension Gathering. That week we were talking about What Personally Impacts Our Faith and Sexuality. Below are Nicole's words describing that night:

“Last week I spent some time in Boystown with my friend Andrew Marin and new friends Nathan and Kevin from The Marin Foundation. Wednesday night, I was invited to join them for a gathering that they call Living in the Tension and figured it would make a great blog post to close out my June series on LGBT Pride month.

I've been trying to write this post ever since.

It's been nine days since we were with our friends in Chicago, and I still have no words. Nine days. Longer than it took to create the universe for heaven's sake. I think that the reason I've come home wordless is because the gathering was NOTHING like I had expected. It was so much more.

I've been hanging out in church circles for many, many years, and I often think I have things figured out. When I envision gatherings that could be defined as “fellowship with believers” or a meeting to connect for spiritual development, I have preconceived expectations. I expect a Bible study or at the very least a DVD curriculum. I expect that there will be a “leader” who has prepared a lesson. I expect some sort of “worship experience” (whatever that means) that may or may not include flashing lights and a slide show. Basically, I expect it to fit my churchy script.

This was different. There wasn't an agenda, there wasn't a workbook full of fill-in-the-blank verses or fruit of the Spirit acrostics. There wasn't a program. ***The “program” puts authenticity at risk.*** And I think that programmed authenticity is the reason that many of us are so skeptical of the word “authentic” anymore. It's hard to put into words what it was like to sit and talk with a room full of people who, despite differences, are hungry for God. And the differences were striking. Different races. Different genders. Different orientations. Straight couples. Same-sex couples. Celibate gay Christians. Those with conservative theology. Those with more liberal theology. And those who were unsure about any of it. (Cont on next page...)

What was amazing was that the conversation wasn't focused on the differences. *The conversation was focused on Jesus and how we all struggle to experience Him more.*

I have some conservative friends who subscribe to the “love the sinner hate the sin” philosophy and are at best hesitant about what the Marin Foundation does. I have other friends who are gay Christians and disagree with them because they don't take a strong stand rejecting the conservative idea that same-sex attraction equals sin. I wish that all of those friends had been with us that night.

In that tiny room in a hot church basement, I saw something that I have never seen in a church small group before. People were being honest and vulnerable with each other as they stripped away pretense and shared about their true struggles. I saw people inviting God into all of their dark places, places that have typically been top secret in other small groups I've been in. They talked about things that we typically consider impolite church conversation. People shared about sexuality, violence, prejudice, hiding their true identities in the Church, being asked to leave the Church, being burned by the Church, and being marginalized by Christians.

There were also stories of hope and faith. Stories of self-discovery and embracing the process. There were stories of confession and reconciliation that were equal parts tragic and joyful. It was the kind of true, raw discussion about God, life, and spirituality that I've never experienced in other, more programmed Christian gatherings. And I think that was what was so startling to me.

I went expecting to see what I have defined as ministry. Instead I saw the Church.”

Follow-Up to this Guide:

The Marin Foundation team hopes this guide gives you a solid starting point and sets you on the right path to building and sustaining Living in the Tension Gatherings in your own local community. When you work to build a bridge you make yourself vulnerable to get walked on by both sides. That, however, is part of the countercultural boldness that comes with living in the tension of the most divisive topic in our culture today.

If your university, church, organization or group would like The Marin Foundation to give an in-person one day seminar to extrapolate on this guide, focusing on more of the intricacies and applications regarding the dynamics of building and sustaining Living in the Tension Gatherings, please contact us at speaking@themarinfoundation.org.

Much love.

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