

Disagreeing in love: A congregation discusses same-sex marriage

by [Lee Hull Moses](#) in the [September 19, 2012](#) issue



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I knew I had to talk to him. My letter was already printed in the newsletter that would arrive in mailboxes later that week, and it was all set to go up on the church website. There was no going back from it now: I was taking a stand against North Carolina's proposed amendment to ban same-sex marriage and civil unions. I knew I needed to tell this longtime elder of our congregation about the stance I was taking, and I knew he wasn't going to like it.

I went to see him. I did this mostly out of respect for him. I like him, and I'm pretty sure he likes me. I know he respects my leadership, and I'm grateful for his many years of service to the church. I didn't want him to be blindsided; I thought maybe paying a call would soften the blow. And maybe I was also testing the waters—to see if we truly could disagree and still like each other.

We sat in his living room and visited for a while. We talked about his volunteer work; we talked about his grandchildren. Then I told him about my letter. "I wanted you to

know,” I said, “because I don’t think we’re going to agree on this.”

He looked at me for a long minute. Then he said, “No, I don’t agree with you.” He told me why, and I didn’t argue. He thanked me for telling him.

In the ramp-up to North Carolina’s election in May—at which voters ended up approving the gay marriage ban—some churches passed resolutions and hung banners in their yards. Others held rallies and used the church bus to take people to the polls. Still others didn’t talk about it at all.

Our congregation doesn’t usually talk about political issues either. The folks here care deeply about each other, do good work in the community and enjoy being together. But we cringe at controversial subjects—I think because we don’t want to disagree with people we like so much. Most people here are not inclined toward rabble-rousing, and in general neither am I. This is one reason the congregation and I are a good fit.

So it was somewhat out of character for me to speak up so publicly about same-sex marriage. But the situation felt different. An amendment to the state constitution is a big deal—it’s not easily overturned—and it didn’t seem like many people were paying much attention. (When I mentioned it to another church leader, he said, “What amendment?”) It’s our responsibility to be at least marginally informed about the things we are asked to vote on. And religion was such a part of the conversation around this particular issue that it seemed imperative that our church have a voice in the dialogue.

I was also inspired by other faith leaders in my community who came together to fight the amendment. Many of them gave enormous time and energy, doing incredibly courageous things (far more courageous than my newsletter epistle, despite the many “You’re so brave!” comments I got after it was published). For many of these folks, the amendment had real-life consequences. One friend pastors a church with a number of gay and lesbian couples who were—and *are*, since the amendment passed—facing tough questions for their families.

For many people in our congregation, the consequences were more abstract. But I also knew that quite likely there were families in our congregation who have gay sons or daughters, cousins, sisters, parents, friends. It felt wrong, pastorally, not to say anything at all.

So I spoke my mind. I wanted to start the conversation instead of tiptoeing around the subject. And I didn't want people to have to guess about my position. I wanted to be able to be honest about how I felt—and by this example, to give others permission to do the same.

I had attended one forum on the amendment at a neighboring church, at which the speakers were clearly opposed to the amendment and assumed that everybody else was too. I'd invited our congregation to come along, but only one person did. Afterward, I was glad: it was not the kind of event where differing viewpoints would have been welcome. That wasn't going to work for us—listening to an opinionated outside expert was only going to drive people farther into their corners. We needed to have a conversation with just us.

My letter came out a month or so before the vote. I had modest goals. I didn't expect the congregation to take a public stance or get involved in the campaign against the amendment. I simply wanted to raise awareness, encourage conversation about a social issue and recognize that we could disagree and still worship together, that I could still be their pastor. I wrote about my opposition to the amendment—how it felt mean-spirited and unnecessary, how I wished the legislature would spend time on education and job creation instead of developing amendments that don't help anybody. I acknowledged that we wouldn't all agree, that it's hard to talk about difficult things with people we care about.

And I invited people to an evening conversation on the topic. About a dozen took me up on this. We started with the ground rules I almost always use at the beginning of a small group or class: if you hear your voice too much, make some space for somebody else to talk; if you don't hear your voice, speak up—we want to hear from you. I laid out my hope for the evening: that through our conversation, we would come to understand each other, rather than to sway others to our particular point of view. We set an end time, so that we all knew what to expect (and maybe so that we'd know, even if all our questions didn't get resolved, that we'd have a way out).

We made a list of things we wanted to discuss. We talked about the amendment itself and the various claims that advocacy groups were making about who it would or would not harm. We discussed how hard it is to find unbiased information; everybody seems to have an agenda. The consensus was that if the amendment really would have the implications for child custody cases and domestic violence situations that so many said it would, then we wanted no part of it.

Then the conversation shifted. It was an awkwardly worded question that initiated the shift, but the subtext was something like this: Isn't this really about homosexuality? And doesn't the Bible say that's wrong? One woman quoted Leviticus and made a "love the sinner, hate the sin" sort of argument. In one grace-filled moment, a man thanked her for sharing, recognizing the courage it took to voice an opinion in a room full of people who probably wouldn't agree. The woman then asked him how he reconciled his different understanding with those scriptures that seem so clear to her. The two of them talked to each other for a minute, while the rest of us listened in.

Nobody yelled. Everybody was respectful. We even laughed. There were layers that we dipped our toes into but didn't dive in: What do those scriptures really mean? What does the Bible say about sexuality in general? How has our Christian tradition affected—for better or worse—how we treat our bodies, how we understand ourselves as creatures of a Creator God? We generated more questions than we could answer by the time our time ran out.

A few weeks later, we all went to the polls. The amendment passed, but that hasn't been the end of the conversation. Two people who were there that night have had a continuing e-mail dialogue ever since. Others have told me they appreciated the opportunity simply to talk about it, the recognition that such topics don't have to be taboo. I think this was helped by the fact that I made my own opinion public: people could see—I hope—that we could disagree and still love one another.

The experience opened up the possibility of continuing the conversation. There is particular interest in having some conversations about sexuality and the church in general, and we're looking into a study series on that topic this fall. Our church is still not likely to make a public statement on same-sex marriage or any other hot-button issue—much to the frustration of some people and the relief of others. That's just not who we are. But I'm convinced that this approach was the right thing for our congregation.

I do wonder, however, whether such careful conversations are enough. For someone who has been hurt by the church's silence—or outright hostility—on questions of sexuality, agreeing to disagree is likely not a very satisfying outcome. Are listening and understanding an end in themselves, or are they a first step toward something else? That's a question I'm still considering.

What's more, not everyone chose to participate in the conversation. The elder I talked to ahead of time didn't come that night. I wish he had, but I'm not surprised that he didn't. He knew where I stood, and there probably wasn't much more to be said. It is imperfect, this living together as church.

But a few weeks later I found myself standing next to him at the communion table. I broke the bread and held up the cup, and he said the prayer. Then we shared the feast with the people of God.