

WISDOM LAB

Following Jesus in a Sexular Age



A better conversation about sexuality and the biblical story

Outdated and repressive? Life-giving and fulfilling?

How should we understand and live out biblical teaching about sexuality and marriage today?

As religion's influence in Western society wanes, fewer and fewer people are drawing meaning from God's word and authority. So, what's stepped into this ideological vacuum? Where can we turn for meaning and purpose?

Often, the answer is sex. The unfettered pursuit of sexual 'freedom' is increasingly seen as a social good. Our culture and day-to-day contexts are no longer just post-Christian and secular, but *sexular*. If you're having the kind of sex you want to have and fighting for others' right to do the same, you must be a fulfilled and enlightened person – or so the accepted narrative goes.

In that narrative, traditional interpretations of sexuality and marriage have gone from good to bad to dangerous, and many people – in the church as much as anywhere – have questions. However, constructive conversation around this divisive issue is often found lacking.

As disciples, we need wisdom for the way forward. In the midst of such contentious discussions, we need to have a better conversation – one where the outcome isn't just a solution to a problem, but an attractive and faithful vision for what sexuality could be when lived out in the light of God's purposes. So, we've gathered a diverse group of Christians to contribute towards this Wisdom Lab to have that conversation.

THE SPEAKERS



Christine Woolgar

Writer, *Light in Grey Places* and *Faith in Grey Places*

Christine Woolgar is an accountant, a blogger on hope, sexuality, and consent at [Light in Grey Places](#), and, more recently, theology student. She has particular interest in how sex positivity can intersect with a reverent regard for Scripture, and used to volunteer for a leading domestic abuse charity. Christine also runs a sister-site for devotional content at [Faith in Grey Places](#).



Revd Ed Shaw

Ministry Director, *Living Out*, and Pastor, Emmanuel City Centre

Ed Shaw is the pastor of Emmanuel City Centre in Bristol and leads the team behind [livingout.org](#), longing to see Christians living out their sexuality and identity in ways that enable all to flourish in Christ-like faithfulness. Ed is also the author of *The Plausibility Problem* and *Purposeful Sexuality*. He loves his family and friends, church and city, gin and tonic, music and books.



Revd Steve Elmes

Lead Minister, Bookham Baptist Church

Steve Elmes is the Lead Minister of Bookham Baptist Church in Surrey, committed to growing fruitful followers of Jesus. Over the last ten years, Steve has been involved in helping local churches in the South East get into conversation about sexuality and discipleship. He is the author of *Sexuality, Faith and the Art of Conversation* and *A Beautiful Endeavour*.



Dr Dave Benson

Culture & Discipleship Director, LICC

Dave is a leading thinker and researcher on the role of faith in 21st-Century Western culture. Formerly a lecturer at Malyon Theological College, he now heads up our work for Culture & Discipleship. In his own words, his mission is 'to cultivate disciples with wisdom for the way of Christ in a post-Christendom culture'. He enjoys hiking, running with his wife Nikki, drumming, and photography.

HOW TO USE THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE

Use this guide with a group by watching the recorded video of LICC's 'Wisdom Lab: Following Jesus in a Sexular Age' event, and pausing when prompted to discuss and reflect.

Each Wisdom Lab follows LICC's process of cultural engagement, guiding us to be wise peacemakers, and to start better conversations in our everyday lives.

The original event took place over one evening, but take as long as you need to cover the material in this guide. You might want to dedicate one session to the *listen* and *imagine* sections, and another to *create* and *communicate*.

Find the video online at

licc.org.uk/wisdom-lab-sexular-age

LEADER'S RESOURCES

If you are leading the discussion, you might want to prepare yourself by reading these articles beforehand.

The *Following Jesus in a Sexular Age* articles were written by the speakers to go into more depth on the Wisdom Lab topic.

- [Following Jesus in a sexular age | Listening \(1/4\)](#)
- [Following Jesus in a sexular age | Imagining \(2/4\)](#)
- [Following Jesus in a sexular age | Creating \(3/4\)](#)
- [Following Jesus in a sexular age | Communicate – getting personal \(4/4\)](#)
- [Following Jesus in a sexular age | Communicate – prayerful preparation \(4/5\)](#)
- [Wise peacemakers | How to love your culture by triple listening](#)

INTRODUCING THE TOPIC

WATCH

Watch the [video](#) from the beginning to 00:07:12.

In this section, Dave explains what it means to live in a 'sexular' age.

Sexular: a portmanteau of 'sexual' and 'secular', referring to our culture's fixation on sexuality (identity, orientation, and action).

DISCUSSION QUESTION

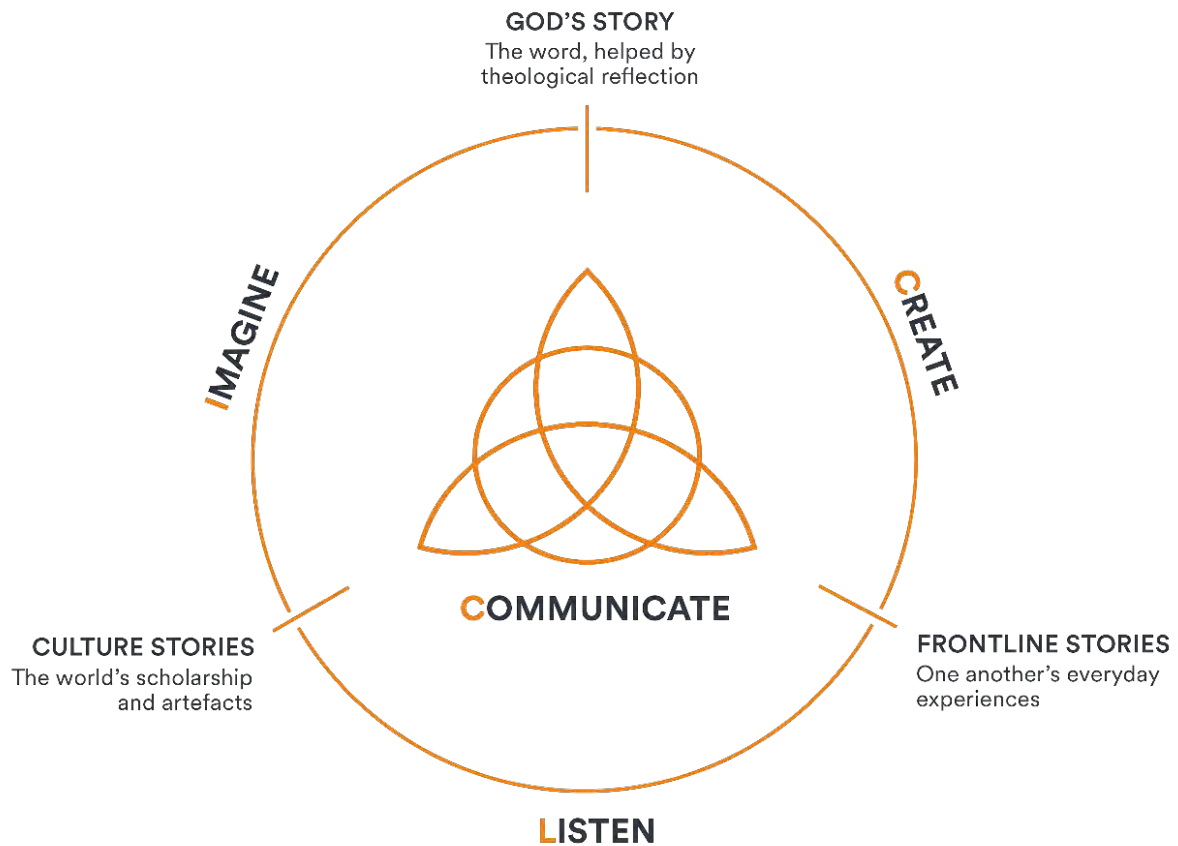
Q. What stood out most to you personally, and how does it relate to your own experience?

INTRODUCING THE PROCESS WE’LL USE

WATCH

Watch the [video](#) from 00:08:45 to 00:10:43.

In this section, Dave lays out the framework for this discussion.



Being a wise peacemaker

Listen: What's going on and why?

Imagine: What should be going on?

Create: How will we respond?

Communicate: How to share the good news?

Your frontline

Anywhere you live and work, learn and play, shop and serve – especially the places where you spend time day-to-day with people who don't know Jesus.

THE TALKS

LISTEN | with Christine Woolgar

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Q. As you listen to everyday conversations about sex and sexuality, gender, marriage, and relationships, what words do you wish we better understood?

Right: Attendee answers from the event.



WATCH

Watch the [video](#) from 00:11:47 to 00:21:22.

In this section, Christine helps us listen to what's going on now in our culture and think about why it's going on.

Listening challenges

- Inadequate education
- Evolving language
- Societal change

What people really want

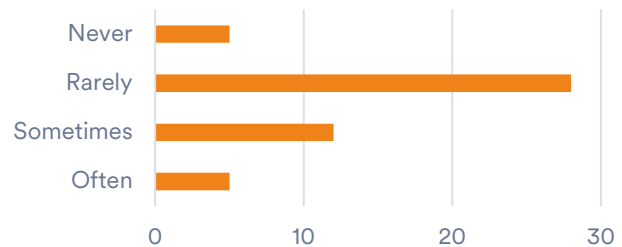
- FOR THEMSELVES: to be their full, **authentic** selves, **without being harmed or causing harm**
- FROM OTHERS: to have their desires affirmed and be trusted as a **reliable witness** on their identity and experience
- WAYS OF MAKING CHOICES: to find a **shame-free framework of life-choice and calling**, and consent

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Q. What does this issue look like on your frontline? How are 'image' and 'agency' expressed? And why is this so important nowadays?

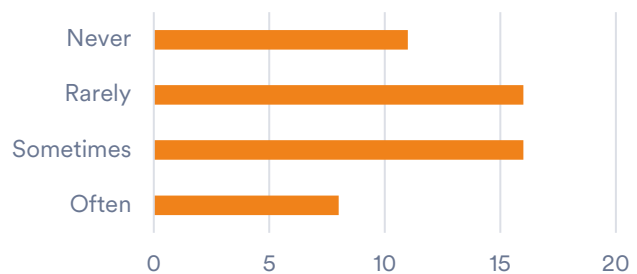
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Q. How often has your church community been in conversation about sexuality and faith?



Right: Attendee answers from the event.

Q. As you create healing on your frontlines, how often are you in conversation with those who identify with the Queer community?



Right: Attendee answers from the event.

WATCH

Watch the [video](#) from 00:32:44 to 00:44:20.

In this section, Steve explores how we can create healing action through conversation.

‘Conversational language... is often not noticed or, if noticed, not taken as seriously as its sister languages. Preaching has pulpit and sanctuary to dignify its authority. Teaching has lectern and classroom to spatially define its task. But a **conversation takes place informally, anytime and anywhere, with no one officially in charge.**’

– Eugene Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*

DISCUSSION QUESTION

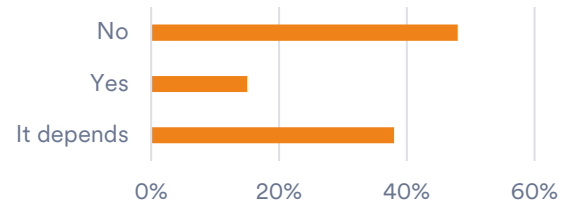
Q. How would Jesus have you respond on *your* frontline? How might you create healing conversations with your neighbours?

COMMUNICATE | with Dave Benson

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

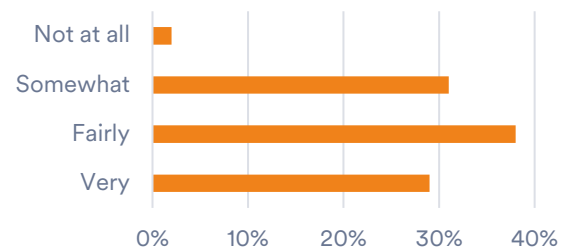
Q. If invited by friends on your frontline to their same-sex wedding, would you go?

Right: Attendee answers from the event.



Q. If asked why you said yes/no, how confident are you to communicate your response as a gospel witness?

Right: Attendee answers from event.



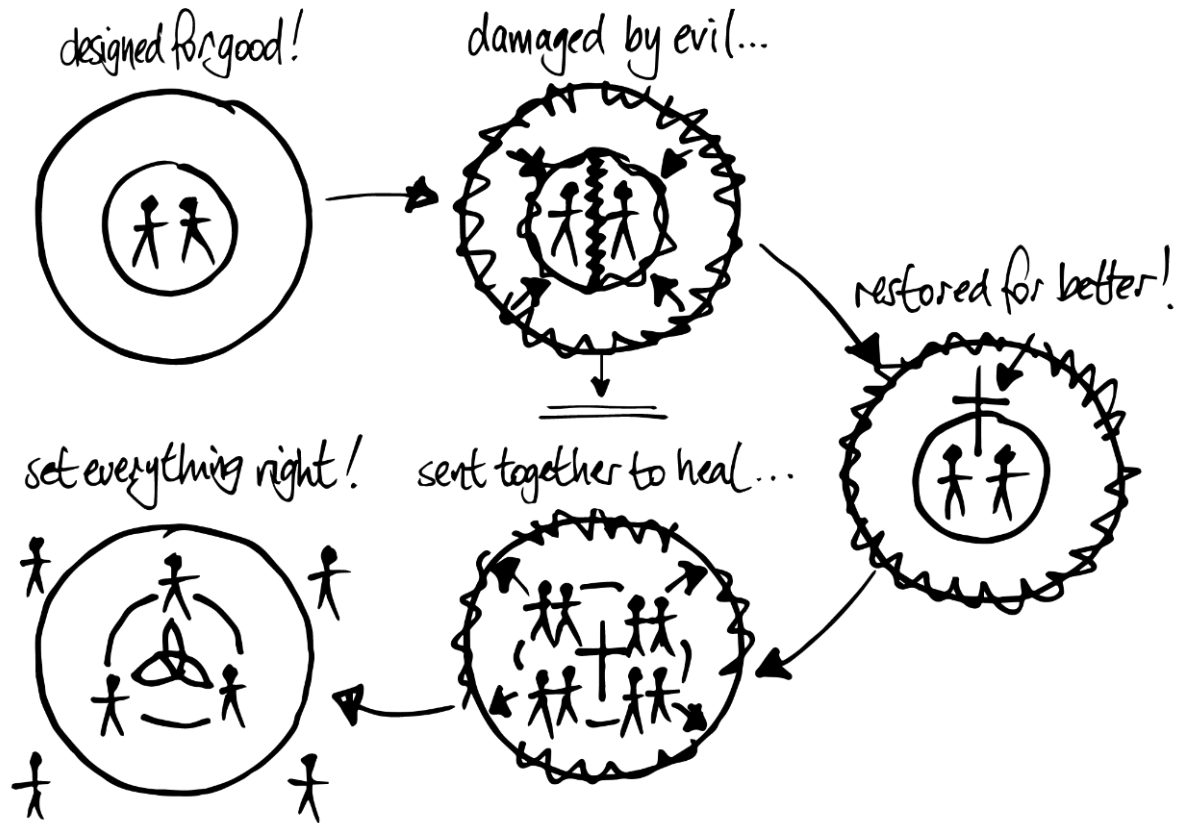
WATCH

Watch the [video](#) from 00:44:23 to 00:54:53.

In this section, Dave explores how we can communicate the gospel as good news.

A personal(ised) response

1. **LIFE**... when are you really switched on and what makes you **HAPPY**?
2. **PAIN**... what disappointments do you carry and where do you **HURT**?
3. **WISDOM**... where do you go for guidance and whose voice do you **HEAR**?
4. **SUPPORT**... where do you belong and to whom do you turn for **HELP**?
5. **PURPOSE**... what wounds in the world do you most want to **HEAL**?
6. **DESTINY**... what's your picture of the good life and for what do you **HOPE**?



'The Big Story.' Artwork by Deb Mostert (2011). Adapted from the 4-circle diagram found in *True Story* by James Choung. Copyright (c) 2008 by James Choung. Used by permission of InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, USA. ivpress.com. The 5th circle, 'Set everything right!' has been added to the original 4 circles.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

- Q. Why is the gospel truly good news for your neighbours in this sexular age?**
 What illustration or point stands out for you in each circle (see illustration above)?

THE Q&A

WATCH

Watch the [video](#) from 00:56:08 to 01:14:50.

In this section, our speakers answer many of the questions asked at the event.

Questions answered by the panel:

- Q. If sexuality is to help us feel God's love for us, what's the good news for asexual people? (00:56:08)
- Q. How can we start conversations in our churches and our frontlines about this often-awkward topic? (00:58:40)
- Q. How can we balance listening to the world but not unconditionally affirming everything it says? (01:00:20)
- Q. How do we navigate the difference between 'acceptance' and 'affirmation' when gender and sexuality seem so intrinsic to identity? (01:01:55)
- Q. I'm still not sure how to answer my LGBTQ+ friend when they ask me as a Christian what I think about their life choice. (01:04:14)
- Q. If we keep within our comfort zones nothing will change. So, how do we find common ground? What parameters do you set when stepping out of your comfort zone? (01:08:37)
- Q. How can we bring this topic out from under the rug and have healthy conversations about it in our churches? (01:10:39)

Other questions asked at the event:

- Q. What does Christine mean by 'agency'? And for Ed, why do people need 'advice'? And for Steve, is arriving at a destination or a conclusion important when having a conversation in the church?
- Q. How do you break down the presuppositions of yourself in order to have a healthy conversation about faith and sexuality?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Q. What question would you want to ask the panel?

Q. What's a next step you sense the Lord calling you to, to better love your LGBTQ+ neighbours on your particular frontline?

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES FROM THE SPEAKERS

From Christine Woolgar

- **PODCAST:** [The Second Circle Podcast](#), Series 4: 'Bad Sex' by Franki Cookney
- **ARTICLE:** '[To the Evangelical Couple Considering Sex Therapy](#)' by Christine Woolgar
- **BOOK:** [A Better Story: God, Sex and Human Flourishing](#) by Glynn Harrison

From Ed Shaw

- **BOOK:** [Purposeful Sexuality: A Short Christian Introduction](#) by Ed Shaw
- **ARTICLE:** '[Marriage as a Trailer](#)' by Ed Shaw

From Steve Elmes

- **BOOK:** [Sexuality, Faith & the Art of Conversation – Part One](#) by Steve Elmes
- **BOOK:** [A Beautiful Endeavour: Pursuing a Conversation About Same-Sex Attraction & Following Jesus](#) by Steve Elmes
- **BOOK:** [Love is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community](#) by Andrew Marin

From Dave Benson

- **ARTICLE:** '[Before You Talk or Write about Homosexuality](#)' by John Stackhouse
- **BOOK:** [Telling a Better Story: How to Talk About God in a Skeptical Age](#) by Joshua Chatraw

MORE FROM LICC



COMING SOON OPEN BOOK: DIVINE SEX

For more from LICC on sexuality, check out our small group guide for reading and applying lessons from Jonathan Grant's book, *Divine Sex*.

See all of LICC's Wisdom Labs at licc.org.uk/ourresources/wisdom-labs

Keep up with LICC's weekly commentary on culture, news, and trends.

Follow us @liccltd on    



Through research, teaching, writing, and consulting, The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity works to equip churches and empower individuals to serve God in their Monday to Saturday lives. licc.org.uk