



# DISCUSSION LEADER'S GUIDE

**T**hank you for your interest in leading a post-screening discussion of *For the Bible Tells Me So*.

This guide is intended to give you the tools you'll need to generate a constructive dialogue on the sensitive topic of Christianity and homosexuality. By relying on these suggestions, along with your own experience and intuition, you can help your audience not only to respond to the movie, but also to take its message into their own lives.

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## EVENT TIMELINE

- Welcome, film introduction, opening prayer
  - Movie screening (98 minutes)
  - Short break (5 minutes)
  - Post-screening discussion (45 minutes)
  - Closing prayer
  - Informal gathering over refreshments (optional)
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### What's the film about?

*For the Bible Tells Me So* introduces you to five ordinary Christian families and shows how these people of faith handle the realization of having a gay child or family member. Intermingled with these five stories, religious leaders and scholars explore how the Bible has been used and misused in response to homosexuality, as well as describe the impact that biblical misinterpretation has had on individuals and families. The film's intent is to offer healing, clarity, and understanding to anyone affected by this issue – in other words, everyone.

### How can I attract an audience to this event?

Many people shy away from this topic out of ignorance, indifference, or fear, so acknowledging these reactions is a logical starting point for attracting viewers to your screening. Yes, you might say in your invitation, the issue of homosexuality and the church has proven to be divisive and contentious, but the goal of the film is to bring people together, not create wider schisms. Some people may not think this is an issue that directly affects them, but you can point out that, whether they know it or not, almost everyone has a gay or lesbian family member, loved one, friend, co-worker, classmate – or fellow church member. Also in their midst are people grieving because their friend or loved one has been rejected by the church. Jesus Christ's inclusive ministry compels us to live out our call to community, which means accepting, recognizing, and understanding people who are different from us. This film experience not only offers an opportunity to heed this calling, but it also shows how the differences may not be as great as one might think.

What the Bible says about homosexuality is an issue that generates all sorts of important, but often unanswered, questions. When you pose them, either in publicity material or in person, you can anticipate people will recognize them as their own. For example, “Are you unsure homosexuality is a sin?” Or, “If you believe homosexuals are God’s children, too, do you want to know why the Bible says what it does?” Or, “If you believe homosexuality is a sin, do you wonder why so many churches keep struggling with this issue?”

To raise the profile of your event, you can rely on posters, flyers and postcards, newsletter stories, and pulpit announcements, but person-to-person invitations are the surest way to attract attendance. You might even want to think about recruiting a Sunday school class or ad hoc group either to extend personal invitations or to commit to bringing a friend or family member to the screening.

### **What is the goal of the discussion?**

When we see a movie that follows the lives of real people, we often relate to it personally – identifying how the film’s subjects and situations may or may not be like us and people we know. In this forum, however, the impulse by some viewers to offer a provocative reaction may inhibit the ability of the entire audience to reflect on the film itself. Inflammatory responses can increase people’s defenses and limit the effect an event has on them. The goal then is to create a safe and comfortable atmosphere so the movie can have a personal impact on each audience member.

As you help participants explore the film’s content, the aim is to create a space for discerning how God is calling them to actively live God’s love with regard to homosexuality. There is not one response, and no “right” answer. The hope is that participants will hear something new – perhaps just a random comment or the beginning of a feeling or idea – that will inform them about living in a new attitude of love.

In the film, each of the family members walks a unique journey, and by the end of the film each is in a unique place on that journey. As the leader of this discussion, you can help create a forum where viewers can also be on their own journeys without judgment.

### **How do I prepare for my role?**

To be fully prepared for your role, you are strongly urged to watch the movie before the public event. A preview will familiarize you with the content and put you in touch with your own reactions before leading the discussion. It is important that you begin the event with an attitude of openness, warmth, and hospitality, so before your audience arrives, you may find it helpful to spend a moment in prayer, meditation, or

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discernment, asking God to guide you and listening for God's peace, love, and grace. It is in God that we can explore issues of faith and love, and it is in God that we can be open to transformation of all kinds.

## How do I introduce the film?

You can assume the people who attend the screening have at least a general idea of the film's subject matter, so they will probably arrive with an array of sentiments – curiosity, anticipation, apprehension, excitement, perhaps even some fear. As they enter, you can welcome your guests, thank them for coming, and give each a copy of the handout (provided on the final page) so they can have something to read and begin to think about.

You could be placed in a situation where parents have brought their children to the screening. Because you have seen the film, you can determine for yourself an appropriate age for viewing. If you believe a child is too young to absorb what many would consider adult content, use your discretion – and perhaps have a plan in place to offer child care.

Once audience members have taken their seats and you've welcomed them again, you can tell them that you have already previewed the movie, and you can assure them that they have chosen to spend their time watching not only an important film, but also an entertaining and engaging one.

Some people may have been brought by friends or family members, so they may be unsure about why they are there. You can respond to their uncertainty by inviting all audience members simply to be open to the new experience and to anticipate discovering their own meaning as they watch the film. You will also want to prepare the group for what will follow the film: a short break and a 45-minute discussion of the film's content. Announcing the length of the discussion is important so audience members will know it isn't open-ended.

Finally, before you dim the lights, remind your guests to turn off their cell phones. You also may want to set the tone by offering a prayer, thanking God for the opportunities the event is presenting and asking God for a spirit of openness – open minds and open hearts.

## How do I lead the discussion?

After the screening, allow a brief break – about five minutes – for viewers to use the restroom, get a drink of water, or gracefully depart. If the break is much longer, participants are more likely to get caught up in their own unmoderated discussions and have more difficulty shifting gears to the content of the upcoming group activity. Once the audience has reassembled, move right into the discussion time, again acknowledging the time frame established.

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To begin the discussion, you can offer an introduction encapsulating what they have just seen and setting the parameters for the discussion. For example: “We just witnessed five families dealing with homosexuality in a personal way. We saw how they dealt with relationships, with sexuality, and with the church. Each experience was unique, and most likely, each of us resonated with the film at different points and in different ways. Right now we have an opportunity to talk about what we saw, and hear others’ reflections and observations. The discussion will be structured around the topics listed on the handout.”

The discussion questions provided (on Page 6) have been designed to encourage viewers to draw connections between themselves and the film’s subjects, diminishing the possibility of heated or careless comments.

Each audience, of course, is unique, so even as you are establishing a structure for the discussion, you will probably find value in maintaining a spirit of flexibility.

During the discussion, you could encounter some participants who want to “dump” their emotions, provoke disagreement, or inappropriately veer from the question at hand. If that occurs, gently but firmly steer the conversation back to the framework of the questions. For example, you may ask, “How did you see that portrayed in the film?” Or, “I can appreciate the point you’re raising, but right now we’re looking at ...” Or, “We don’t need to reach agreement. One of the reasons we’re here tonight is to better understand our differences.” Other participants will feel more comfortable sharing if they can trust you to keep the discussion on track and not allow a debate or air-clearing.

If an audience member expresses frustration with the limitations of the discussion, you may want to extend an invitation to continue informal one-on-one conversation after the discussion; providing coffee and refreshments is another extension of hospitality.

A closing prayer can help set a tone of graciousness and gratitude as you send the group forth.

*This guide has been created by a panel that includes United Methodist clergy, educators, and communicators.*

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## MORE IDEAS FOR ENGAGING YOUR AUDIENCE

Not everyone in your audience will feel comfortable speaking in a group, so you’ll want to offer other ways to respond and react to the film and its topic. One idea is to pass out blank filecards to your guests as they enter. Ask them to jot down, in a few words, how they feel about homosexuality, especially in relation to God and the Bible. (You can specifically ask them *not* to write their names on the cards.)

Depending on the audience makeup, you can try different approaches with the cards. For instance, you or another volunteer can gather the cards and re-write the responses on a whiteboard or poster paper for the entire group to see. Once audience members have taken their seats and you’ve welcomed them again, you can affirm their emotions by asking them to silently reflect on the display of responses and consider these the starting point for the gathering. Later, at the close of your discussion, you can ask for volunteers to share how their original impressions may have changed because of this experience.

Or you can ask your audience to write on the cards and keep them during the screening. Afterward, you may simply want to suggest that they privately consider what they wrote and whether their impressions have since changed. Ask, as well, if some want to share with the group any changes they experienced. At the close, you can encourage participants to keep the cards, so they can continue to reflect and pray over what they wrote.

Or at the close, you also could gather the cards in a basket and offer a final prayer over them, seeking grace and blessing for each person’s journey.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions are centered on three basic themes: family, sexuality, and religious faith. (The themes are outlined briefly on the discussion guide handout each viewer will receive.)

The number and variety of questions are intended to offer flexibility, allowing you to choose according to the needs of your group and the flow of discussion. You will not be able to raise every one of these questions within the time frame suggested, so you may pick and choose as you see fit. However, it is recommended that you select at least one question from each of the three groups.

As a guide, questions in **boldface** represent a well-rounded selection of questions that can probably be covered within a 45-minute time frame. The final question, which seeks the most personal reflection, is strongly encouraged as a useful way to close discussion.

## FAMILY

**Learning a family member is a homosexual stirred up different emotions in the film: guilt, shame, anger, fear, grief, love. What are the different ways these families respond to these emotions?**

What anxieties do the family members experience as they confront the realization of a homosexual child or spouse?

What anxieties do the gay and lesbian individuals experience in their relationships with their families?

**Which family members speak to your emotions? Whom do you identify with in the film?**

## SEXUALITY

According to the film, what are the various influences that have established how sexuality and homosexuality have come to be understood?

What are the different perspectives of sexuality and sexual orientation represented in the film?

**Some families in the film struggle with seeing gay people only through the lens of their sexual orientation. How do the families reconcile that struggle?**

Accepting a gay family member has often been described as a journey. What are the stopping points along the journeys that are depicted in the film? What are the destinations?

## FAITH

How is the church portrayed as safe and loving?

How is the church portrayed as unsafe and inhospitable?

What are the different ways God is portrayed in the film?

**What are the different reasons the film's subjects believe homosexuality is a problem or a sin? And what are the influences that foster these beliefs?**

How do the families find peace in their hearts over this issue? How do they find peace in their faith?

**How has the film helped you come to a different understanding of homosexuality and faith?**

# 'FOR THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO' SCREENING GUIDE

After we watch this film together, we will engage in a discussion about the families featured in it. This worksheet is designed to help you reflect as you experience these families and their communities. Space has been provided if you wish to take notes or pose questions.

**As you watch *For the Bible Tells Me So*, pay particular attention to ...**

... the different ways the families cope with learning that a family member is homosexual.

... the emotions that the family members express.

... the ways each family member deals with issues of sexuality.

... the church and faith experiences of all the family members.