

THIS I KNOW

Study Leader's Guide

“This I Know” has been created to encourage small-group discussion on the issue of homosexuality and Christianity. The multi-week study is intended as a companion to *For the Bible Tells Me So*, the award-winning documentary that tells how five ordinary Christian families have coped with the realization of having a gay child.

Understandably, many Christians today shy away from this controversial topic. It has divided congregations and threatened to split apart denominations. Yet the issue also is an inescapable part of our lives. Few today can say they haven't been touched by someone who is gay or by someone who has a friend, family member, or colleague who is gay. Our elected leaders grapple with decisions on who has a right to marry, to serve in the military, to be protected against hate crimes. Our church leaders are faced with decisions about ordination, membership, and marriage, as well. Many in our midst are grieving because their friend or loved one has been rejected by the church.

For the people in the pews, not talking about this issue hasn't made it go away. But talking about it also can be frightening. Too much of public conversation turns into angry debate, drawing attention to differences rather than common ground. Often, talk pulls people apart.

This study, then, is meant to generate a safe and comfortable atmosphere for small groups to have constructive conversation. It takes courage to talk. It also takes guidance. The film and the curriculum provide a trustworthy source for information – but this study also requires a discussion leader who is committed to nurturing nonjudgmental dialogue. This study leader's guide is intended to help you accomplish that goal.

How to use this study

“This I Know” was designed to be used by small groups and Sunday school classes in two multi-week formats:

Seven weeks: The 97-minute film can be screened at a special time. (You also can use this screening as an opportunity to invite your entire congregation. A separate guide prepared by this study’s creators can be found at this Web address:

<http://www.northaven.org/leaderguide.html>

This will assist you in facilitating a 45-minute to one-hour discussion.) After the screening for the seven-week class, participants then meet weekly for one hour or more to discuss each of the study’s six lessons.

Nine weeks: The film can be viewed over three weeks, in approximately 30-minute segments – again with brief discussions following each screening. The group can then meet weekly to discuss each of the six lessons.

It’s recommended that the study be promoted several weeks in advance. You can rely on posters, flyers, postcards, newsletter stories, and pulpit announcements, but person-to-person invitations are the surest way to attract interest. People often shy away from the topic for many reasons, so acknowledging their possible hesitation is a logical starting point. Yes, you can agree that the issue has proven to be divisive, but the goal of the study is to encourage learning, listening, and dialogue – not create greater divides. You also can point out how pervasive this issue has proven to be in church and everyday life: It does affect everyone.

What the Bible says about homosexuality generates all kinds of important, but often unanswered, questions. If you pose these, 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?”

Once you engage people’s interest, you also can anticipate they will have even more questions of their own: What exactly does the study address? What is its purpose? Why should I be involved? Be prepared, patient, and thorough when you respond.

Preparing for your leadership role

To be fully prepared to lead this study, you are strongly urged to watch the film and read the entire curriculum beforehand. This will familiarize you with the content and put you in touch with your own reactions. This also will allow you to keep study participants on task each week. You may find some will want to raise questions that will be covered in subsequent lessons, so you’ll be able to ask them to wait until the appropriate week for discussion.

Your own openness and hospitality will set the tone for the study. You may find it helpful to pray and meditate as you prepare for the task ahead.

Your first meeting

To establish a friendly atmosphere immediately, you'll want to make sure to arrive early so participants can be warmly greeted and welcomed. An opening prayer should also emphasize hospitality, as well as gratitude for the people in attendance. You may also want to thank God for the opportunities the class is presenting and ask God for a spirit of openness – open minds and open hearts.

The film you're going to screen offers powerful images and stories, and it is almost certain to evoke emotions that quite possibly will prove upsetting to some. It is strongly recommended you introduce the film, reminding your group that there is no way to avoid the fact that the subject itself is provocative. However, you can note, this film does make an honest effort to explore the suffering and fear to be found on all sides of the issue. Indeed, the heart of the documentary lies in the stories of the families, and viewers should be encouraged to dwell on these, rather than reacting to views expressed by experts who also appear in the film.

Whether you screen the film in one sitting or over three weekly sessions, it is important at the start for you to communicate the expectations for class participation: attending regularly, respecting differences, listening attentively, staying focused on each week's topic, and maintaining confidentiality. The latter is especially important so participants feel they can safely share what they may consider private matters. If you feel it would be helpful, you may want to consider preparing a document listing these conditions and asking your group to sign it.

You will also want to prepare your group for the amount of reading involved in this study. Each lesson is between 3,500 and 4,200 words – about the length of an in-depth magazine article, but considerably longer than the typical small-group curriculum used at churches. It's important for participants to be reminded that this is a complex issue that requires thorough and thoughtful examination. Participants also should appreciate that among the study's contributors are some of the foremost Christian voices of our day.

Lessons One, Five, and Six can be considered inspirational and meditative. Lessons Two, Three, and Four are far more information-driven. Both approaches are necessary for fully exploring this issue, and participants should be prepared for the shifts in tone.

First gatherings are a particularly vulnerable time. Everyone will be participating for a different reason, and some in the group no doubt will feel isolated or fearful. You can normalize feelings by acknowledging everyone has fears regarding this issue. You also can offer the reminder that, as the weeks pass, participants will no doubt become more comfortable with one another as they establish a level of trust. You can remind them, as well, that there may be times when the discussion turns tense, but as long as mutual respect is maintained, tension can be a productive element of dialogue.

Film screening for the nine-week format

If you choose to screen the film over three weeks, the recommended segments are as follows:

Week One: 00:00 - 26:13 (minutes:seconds)

Introduction to topic and to families profiled (ending with Mary Lou Wallner)

Week Two: 26:14 - 1:00.03 (hour:minutes.seconds)

Coping with “coming out”; expert discussion on biblical interpretation; “Is It a Choice?” (ending with animated segment)

Week Three: 1:00.04 - 1:35 minutes (hour:minutes.seconds)

Impact of James Dobson’s Focus on Family; examination of gay self-hate; expert discussion on fear of homosexuals; what Christ’s teachings really tell us about homosexuality

Before each meeting, you will want to make sure the DVD is cued up to the correct number on the player’s counter. In the time remaining each week’s screening, the following questions can be asked to solicit general reaction:

Week One:

- How did you react to the opening scenes in the film?
- Which family do you most identify with?
- What are the ways you have received your education and training about the Bible? How familiar are you with the passages that address same-sex relations?

Week Two:

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

Week Three:

- What are the cultural influences that foster the belief that homosexuality is a problem or a sin?
- Accepting a gay family member has often been described as a journey. What are the stopping points along the way in the journeys depicted in the film? What are the destinations?
- How is the church portrayed as safe and loving? How is it portrayed as unsafe and inhospitable?

Study components

After the film has been screened over one or three get-togethers, each study session should consist of the following segments (time estimates are for a 50-minute class session; discussion times can expand for lengthier classes):

- **Greeting, opening prayer, introduction of theme (2-3 minutes):** The greeting conveys hospitality, and the prayer and introduction of the theme focus participants on their task. Following are the themes for each week:

Lesson One: Fear

Why do so many Christians shy away from this issue?

Lesson Two: Biblical Authority

How can we faithfully interpret Scripture?

Lesson Three: For the Bible Tells Me So

What do the scriptural texts say in the context of their day?

Lesson Four: Tradition

Two thousand years of Christian tradition uphold the belief that homosexuality is a sin, but what is the history that has created this tradition?

Lesson Five: Journey

What obstacles lie in the path on the long and difficult journey between fear and love?

Lesson Six: Jesus Loves Me, This I Know

How does a loving Christ call us to respond to the marginalized?

▪ **Screening of film excerpt** (5 to 7 minutes): An excerpt from the film introduces the theme of each week's lesson, and this component is important to focus participants' attention and to offer a review. (Before class, you will want to make sure the DVD is cued up to the correct number on the player's counter. For those with DVD players with no counters, film content is described below.)

Lesson One: 43:49 - 49:04 (minutes:seconds)

Begins with Gene Robinson's memory of telling his parents he's gay; ends with Rev. Mel White discussing stereotypes.

Lesson Two: 32:59 - 39:06 (minutes:seconds)

Begins with Right Rev. Richard Holloway, the first of several experts discussing biblical interpretation; ends with Poteats talking about why they can't accept their daughter's homosexuality.

Lesson Three: 18:43 - 24:29 (minutes:seconds)

Begins with Rev. Dr. Laurence Keene, the first of several experts discussing what the Bible says about homosexuality; ends with discussion on the context in which Bible was written.

Lesson Four: 1:11.19 - 1:16.00 (hour:minutes.seconds)

Entire segment features experts discussing why people fear homosexuals; photos and news reports of hate-crime victims highlighted.

Lesson Five: 1:00.03 - 1:06.20 (hour:minutes.seconds)

Begins with introduction to James Dobson's Focus on the Family; ends with examination of homosexuals' self-hate.

Lesson Six: 1:20.53-1:28.30 (hour:minutes.seconds)

Begins with experts discussing what the Bible and Christ's teachings really tell us about homosexuality; ends with Reitan's arrest at Focus on the Family headquarters.

- **Reaction to film excerpt** (5 minutes): Participants have an opportunity to make general comments on what they have just viewed.

- **Questions for review** (15 minutes): Participants divide into groups of three or four to review the contents of the lesson with the four questions provided in the study manual.

- **Questions for discussion** (15 minutes): Participants split into groups of two or three to address the main discussion question – the first of the three questions in the study manual – for about five minutes, then the entire group reconvenes for 10 minutes of continued discussion. If time permits, the second and third questions can also be addressed.

- **Closing comments, preview of next week’s theme and closing prayer** (3-4 minutes): To close the discussion, you can briefly summarize some of the points mentioned by the group and identify questions raised that are yet to be answered. You can then tell the class what to expect with the next week’s reading and end with a prayer.

Final thoughts

This study has been designed to move participants to respond to this issue, not out of fear, but out of love. It also has been designed for participants to reach their own conclusions.

Over the course of several weeks, they will be on a journey, and while some participants will cross paths, each will take a different route. No one is expected to arrive at the same destination, nor is it important that agreement be reached. But all should seek to feel the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit as they make their way.