

Open Hearts Resource F

Workshop: Case Studies



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How to Use These Case Studies

Each case study includes:

- A short story
- Key issues to notice
- Questions for discussion

You may:

- Read them individually or in groups
- Focus on one or two at a time
- Invite participants to reflect on similar real-life situations

Opening Note for Facilitators

You may notice that many of these case studies share common themes:

- Feeling unseen or unheard
- Fear of judgment or rejection
- The difference between welcome and true inclusion

Encourage participants to:

- Listen deeply
- Reflect honestly
- Consider concrete actions their community can take

Case Study 1: Family Conflict and Fear of Rejection

The Story

Melissa, age 67, has attended the same church her whole life. Her adult son Kevin came out as gay four years ago and is now in a relationship with another man.

Melissa's husband reacted strongly. He:

- Refused to allow Kevin in their home
- Told Melissa not to have contact with him

Melissa continues to speak with Kevin secretly by phone but has not seen him in years. She has told no one in her church about the situation. She fears that:

- Her son will be judged or rejected
- She herself may also be rejected

Meanwhile, people in the congregation continue to ask about Kevin.

Key Issues

- Family conflict and control
 - Fear of judgment within the church
 - Hidden relationships and isolation
 - Pastoral care needs (for both Melissa and Kevin)
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Questions for Discussion

- What might Melissa need from her church community?
- What could a minister or lay leader do if they knew?
- How can a congregation create space where people feel safe sharing?
- What messages (spoken or unspoken) might be increasing Melissa's fear?

Case Study 2: Faith and Internal Conflict

The Story

Angela grew up in a church where homosexuality was often described as sinful.

As a young person:

- She was deeply involved in church life
- She felt close to God
- She even dreamed of becoming a minister

While at university, Angela came out as a lesbian. Because of what she had been taught, she believes she cannot be both Christian and gay.

As a result:

- She has left the church
- She avoids spiritual questions
- She feels deep loss and disconnection from God

Key Issues

- Internalized beliefs and shame
- Loss of faith community
- Spiritual grief
- Harm caused by theology

Questions for Discussion

- What messages shaped Angela's beliefs?
- How might the church repair harm like this?
- What could help someone like Angela reconnect with faith?
- What responsibility does the church have for past teaching?

Case Study 3: Hospitality vs. True Welcome

The Story

Ana is a refugee who has been attending a church for four years.

Each Sunday:

- She is warmly greeted
- She is treated like a newcomer

However:

- No one remembers her
- She is not invited into deeper participation
- Language barriers prevent her from volunteering

She leaves each week feeling:

- Invisible
- Isolated
- Discouraged

Key Issues

- Surface-level welcome vs. true inclusion
- Language and accessibility barriers
- Loneliness and belonging
- Missed opportunities for leadership

Questions for Discussion

- What is the difference between “being friendly” and “being inclusive”?
- What practical steps could the church take?
- Who is responsible for noticing and including Ana?

Case Study 4: Youth, Bullying, and Mental Health

The Story

Will (15) has not come out publicly but is perceived as gay.

He experiences:

- Homophobic language from teammates
- Bullying at school and in the community

His friend Kathy knows he is struggling. Recently, Will has:

- Become withdrawn
- Spoken about wanting to “end it all”

Kathy wants to help but doesn't know how.

Key Issues

- Bullying and homophobia
 - Youth mental health and suicide risk
 - Silence and fear
 - Lack of adult support
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Questions for Discussion

- What are the warning signs in this story?
- What should Kathy do?
- What role should the church play in situations like this?
- How can churches create safer environments for youth?

Case Study 5: Hidden Identity in the Pew

The Story

Robert is married to a woman and identifies as bisexual.

In church, he hears comments such as:

- "Those people are all pedophiles"
- "God hates queers"

These comments:

- Are made openly
- Go unchallenged

Robert feels hurt, isolated, and unseen.

Key Issues

- Harmful language
 - Invisible identities
 - Silence and complicity
 - Emotional and spiritual harm
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Questions for Discussion

- What impact do these comments have?
- Why might people stay silent?
- How can harmful speech be addressed in a healthy way?

Case Study 6: Racism, Identity, and Belonging

The Story

Hazel is a third-generation Canadian. When she says she is Canadian, people often respond, "But where are you really from?"

She experiences this:

- In daily life
- In subtle and repeated ways

At her church:

- She is the only visibly racialized person
- She feels different—and not in a positive way
- She struggles with a sense of not fully belonging

Even though she was born and raised in Canada, Hazel feels like she is never fully accepted.

Key Issues

- Racism and microaggressions
 - Identity and belonging
 - Isolation within a community
 - Lack of diversity
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Questions for Discussion

- What messages are being communicated to Hazel?
- How might this affect her sense of belonging in the church?
- What could the congregation do differently to be more inclusive?
- How can churches address racism beyond "being welcoming"?

Case Study 7: Being Seen and Supported as a Trans Person

The Story

Rosemary, a trans woman, has been part of her church for many years. She is active as:

- A lay worship leader
- Chair of the worship committee

She has recently begun sharing her identity more openly.

People respond kindly, but:

- Many know very little about trans experiences
- Some didn't even realize she is trans

During a hospital stay for gender-affirming surgery:

- She encounters a lack of understanding from spiritual care staff
- A visiting minister makes a hurtful comment

Afterward, Rosemary helps organize a workshop on trans inclusion. Despite strong promotion, very few people attend.

She feels:

- Hurt
- Angry
- Invisible

She wonders if the church ignores trans people because it "doesn't know we exist."

Key Issues

- Lack of awareness and education
- Invisible identities
- Harm caused by ignorance
- Burnout and frustration in leadership

Questions for Discussion

- Why might people not attend the workshop?
- What responsibility does the church have to learn?
- How can churches move from "kindness" to real understanding?
- What support does Rosemary need?

Case Study 8: "Welcome"—But Not Really

The Story

Lisa and Ann, a lesbian couple with two young children, are looking for a church home.

Lisa visits a nearby church.

After the service:

- The minister ignores her after she mentions her partner
- A choir member says, "We welcome everybody—we just don't make a big deal about it."

When Lisa shares this with Ann:

- Ann feels the church is not truly welcoming
- She questions whether to keep looking for a church at all

Key Issues

- Superficial welcome vs. genuine inclusion
- Leadership behaviour and impact
- Safety for families
- Loss of trust in church

Questions for Discussion

- What messages did Lisa receive from this church?
- What might "we don't make a big deal about it" really mean?
- How could this interaction have gone differently?
- What makes a church feel truly safe for families?

Case Study 9: Grief, Loss, and Missed Opportunities (Iridesce Project)

The Story

Susan, an Indigenous woman, attends a workshop about 2SLGBTQIA+ and Two-Spirit inclusion.

She does not speak until the very end.

Then she shares:

- This is her first time in a United Church
- Her Two-Spirit child recently died by suicide

She says:

"You would have loved and accepted my child."

She reads a poem she wrote, grieving deeply, and leaves in tears.

The next day, she returns for Sunday worship.

Key Issues

- Grief and trauma
- Suicide and loss
- Missed opportunities for inclusion
- Two-Spirit identity and belonging
- The impact of what churches do—or fail to do

Questions for Discussion

- What emotions does this story raise for you?
- What might Susan need from the church now?
- How could the church respond in a meaningful way?
- What responsibility do faith communities have in preventing this kind of loss?

Case Study 10: Youth, Vulnerability, and Safety (Iridesce Project)

The Story

Jude is a teenager in rural Canada who is questioning their gender.

At a national church youth gathering:

- They feel welcomed and affirmed

At their home congregation:

- They find it difficult to talk about their identity
- They feel older members are not interested in youth
- They experience the church as guarded and “perfect”

Jude says:

“I wish people at church were comfortable being vulnerable... then I could be too.”

They also:

- Fear harassment as a non-binary person
- Worry about their physical safety

Key Issues

- Youth isolation
- Lack of safe space for vulnerability
- Generational disconnect
- Gender identity and safety
- Fear and authenticity

Questions for Discussion

- What is missing for Jude in their home church?
- Why might vulnerability feel unsafe in this setting?
- How can churches better support youth exploring identity?
- What practical steps could increase safety and trust?

Note: Case Studies 9 and 10 are drawn from the Iridesce: The Living Apology Project (a partnership of Affirm United and The United Church of Canada) (<https://www.iridesce.ca/>)