

# LIFE ABUNDANT

## A Theological and Spiritual Framework for Christian Education

### INTRODUCTION

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus declares that he has come that all may have life and have it abundantly (10:10). Both the gospel writer and Jesus likely had images in mind of Eden, the paradise in which the Creator God had placed the first humans where they could enjoy the Creator's goodness. In that garden, God declared that the creation was unreservedly good (Gen. 1:10).

All people, without exception, are created to enjoy the goodness of God's creation. No one is excluded from the divine promise of abundant life – not for reasons of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, or gender.

Yet this vision of abundance has not yet become a reality for everyone. Indeed, all people fall short of that glorious abundance that God intends for God's creation (Romans 3:23). Human communities and the planet itself are broken by what Christian traditions refer to as sin. Turning away from anything that blocks the full flourishing of life and turning toward the abundance of God's blessing describes a lifelong posture Christians have called repentance. All of this is animated by the



Gospel hope of embracing the abundant life that Jesus came to offer, which takes many diverse and wonderful forms; this is what Christians mean by salvation.

The LIVING OUTFRONT curriculum project is rooted in this fundamental Christian framework marked by sin, repentance, and salvation. This traditional framework resonates deeply with the biblical witness and with many centuries of Christian history.

The Bible has, of course, been read and interpreted in diverse ways. At times, the Bible has been used to exclude particular groups of people – whether because of their race, ethnicity, sexuality, or gender – from God's promise of abundant life. LIVING OUTFRONT curricular programs offer a way for Christian faith communities to respect the unique role of the Bible in Christianity, including the spiritual authority of Scripture, while also embracing its liberating message for all people. The Bible is both inspired and inspiring, as it equips people for “every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16).

Retrieving and reclaiming the classic arc of Christian faith from sin through repentance and toward salvation provides a solid theological and spiritual framework for these curricular programs. More specifically, this framework can revitalize and strengthen the social justice ministries offered with and for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people.

Irenaeus, a second century Christian theologian, once observed that “the glory of God is the human person fully alive.” LIVING OUTFRONT programs are designed to inspire and to urge Christian faith communities to put that vision of abundant life “out front” of all else.

## 1. THE REALITY OF SIN

Biblical writers used a wide range of images to describe sin. Yet most of those writers shared this in common: sin is manifested in broken relationship. What Christians have called “The Ten Commandments,” for example, are not arbitrary rules but ways of being in relationship with God, with each other, and the wider world around us (Exodus 20:1-17).

The effects of sin are clearly evident today: deeply fractured communities divided by race and ethnicity; families ruptured by domestic violence and sexual abuse; nations torn apart by dictatorial regimes and genocidal wars; the most vulnerable among us left without resources in a dissolving social safety net; and ecological degradation that puts the future of life on this planet at risk.



Humans have travelled a long way from Eden, where, according to the biblical writer in Genesis, Adam and Eve flourished as they lived in harmony with each other, with their environment, and with their Creator. In stark contrast to the image of paradise, we live in an imperfect and, in many ways, a broken world. Wherever and whenever the dignity of any human being is denied or anyone’s potential for abundant life is curtailed – whether because of race, class, ability, sexuality, or gender – sin is present and active.

Biblical writers would agree with that view of sin as they wrote about it mostly with reference to economic injustice and social oppression (see Jeremiah 22:3 and Ezekiel 22:7, 29 as just a few among many examples). But they also wrote about individual sin, too. Jesus said that the greatest commandments are these: to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mt. 22:33-40). These “great” commandments offer a vision of love as the source of abundant life, which includes loving ourselves just as God loves and delights in us.

As many LGBT people have discovered, however, loving ourselves can be challenging when we are taught from an early age to be ashamed of who we are and who God has created us to be. That sense of shame can lead to self-loathing and isolation; it can also lead to sexually abusive and violent relationships.

Whatever prevents us from loving ourselves will likewise keep us from loving others, loving the planet, and loving God with our whole heart, mind, and strength. Recognizing those moments of “love prevented” urges all of us to the practice of repentance.



## 2. THE CALL TO REPENTANCE

What do Christians mean by that “repentance that leads

to life” (Acts 11:18)? If sin describes a broken relationship, what would repentance mean in a world marked by fractured and divided relationships with ourselves, with each other, and with God’s creation?

In the Hebrew Bible, sin is most commonly described with the word *het*, which means “going astray,” especially straying from the path that leads to life. In Deuteronomy, Moses urges the Israelites to choose that life-giving path (30:19-20). Similarly, repentance is described with the term *teshuvah*, which means “return,” or coming back to the path of life.

New Testament writers use the Greek word *hamartia* when they refer to sin, which means “missing the mark,” or falling short of a target. The word we translate as “repentance” is the Greek term *metanoia*, which refers to “perceiving differently,” or changing one’s mind. When Paul preached among the Greeks in Athens, he urged them to “repentance,” to change their minds about the inanimate objects they were worshipping in their temples, and to embrace the living God, the one in whom everyone lives, and moves, and has being (Acts 17:28).

In both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, repentance thus marks a turn and a return, a directional change in relationship – with self, with others, and therefore with God – that enriches and deepens our life together. Rather than an isolated or single moment in time, repentance shapes a life-long practice of directing ourselves and our relationships toward that abundant life God intends for all.

The abundance of God’s life includes the goodness of human sexuality and the joy it offers in our families and intimate relationships. That divine goodness includes heterosexual couples, same-gender loving people, people who choose celibacy, multi-generational households, and those who embrace transgendered forms of living and relationship, to name just a few.

God’s good gift, however, is too often distorted in a world marred by sex trafficking, the commodification of human bodies, racial and ethnic stereotyping, domestic violence, economic oppression, and sexual addictions. Whenever and wherever the fullness of life is denied or rejected, in ourselves or to others, the Gospel calls us to repent and to hope for salvation.

### 3. THE HOPE OF SALVATION

Everyone longs to live life to the fullest and to be free of the burdens that hold us back from abundant life. In the midst of life’s difficulties, everyone seeks the “peace that passes all understanding” (Phil. 4:7). That peace, like a sail lifting a boat over the waves of a



storm-tossed sea, offers unimaginable comfort, even in the face of death. That peace assures us that the God who made us also waits for us with open arms to welcome us home. That peace surely marks what Christians call “salvation.”

Gospel writers portrayed salvation in diverse ways. Jesus offered salvation to all yet also addressed each person’s particular, individual needs. At times

salvation appears as healing from physical ailment; at others, as the forgiveness of sin. Sometimes it's both at the same time (Mt. 9:2-7). Luke described the saving work of Jesus by drawing from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Luke's Jesus says, to "bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18).

While God's loving faithfulness remains constant, it often takes time for us to see it clearly and to perceive how the saving work of Christ can transform us and our communities. Each person's family history, cultural background, and social situation will shape our perceptions of salvation a bit differently. For all of us, our understanding of salvation unfolds over time. As the Apostle Paul noted, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly – but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12).

LGBT people are multi-dimensional people just like everyone else. They experience joys and challenges; they have faults, miss the mark, and fall short of the glory God intends for all – just like everyone else. And just like everyone else, God loves and cherishes LGBT people for exactly who they are as they travel, just like everyone else, toward abundant life.

For some, that spiritual journey involves extra burdens placed on them by others. When LGBT people try to deny their same-gender attraction or try to conform to the gendered expectations of their communities, they live with burdens God did not intend. For them, salvation will entail the freedom to embrace fully their God-given lives.

As Christian people, we are called to help others embrace God's abundant life. For some of us, this will mean repenting of the harm we have done to LGBT people. For others, it will mean realizing the harm we have done to ourselves and how deeply we are loved and cherished by God. For everyone, it will mean the reconciliation of broken relationships, which the Apostle Paul described as the ministry of all Christians (2 Cor. 5:18).

That great work of reconciliation, that gift of abundant life, is nothing less than divine salvation in Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

