

Steps to Recovery

Support for Community Champions

Open Table Network Research and Case for Support 2021

Report prepared by Civil Society Consulting (CIC)
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Image: Mark Loudon



Civil Society Consulting Community Interest Company

Civil Society Consulting CIC is an independent not-for-profit Community Interest Company (CIC). Founded at the height of the then Government's 'austerity' agenda over 10 years ago, the CIC is committed to supporting smaller 'grassroots' community-based organisations and their social action projects. As a social enterprise we work to enable them to flourish and to tackle the problems that exist in the local communities they know and love and maximise their leverage of social impact.

We aim to enhance community cohesion by enabling and empowering Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) groups to leverage social impact in the communities they know and love. This includes nurturing individual skills and talents, as much of our support is delivered through expert training and mentoring to members of community groups and charities.

Our team have worked extensively with communities – a wide range of groups, ethnicities, and ages.

We have a particular focus on working in the most socially deprived and diverse neighbourhoods. Our recent work includes working with BAME-led organisations up and down the country to secure funding for emergency Covid-19 frontline work, producing a report on the impact of Covid-19 on the social sector in Barking & Dagenham, and engaging with new mums in South East London to provide NHS England and Mind UK with insights into perinatal mental health in Bromley and Southwark.

We are academically-inclined, and keep a focus on the bigger picture: the strive for socio-economic rights and equality; but at the same time, our track record of working 'hands-on' with local grassroots organisations means we're not afraid to get stuck in.

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Report Remit

The Civil Society Consulting (CIC) team was asked:

- To review and assess the work delivered by The Open Table Network nationally.
- To support the Open Table Network to secure development funding by conducting research with beneficiaries and building a robust case for support.
- Make recommendations based upon the evidence collated and analysed to support the development of the Open Table Network's work within the LGBTQIA+ and Christian community.

'Open Table has given a safe space to actually explore more fully what it is to belong to the Christian community, which can be a very homophobic community, and feel less isolated. I think it's really been very helpful in moving away from a deep sense of loneliness at times, to a sense of belonging and being accepted in a wider community.'

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1. Executive summary

This research and case for support was conducted at a key juncture in the life of the Open Table Network (OTN). As a growing network of communities in England and Wales, collaboration with community members, leaders and volunteers is key in the development of OTN.

In March 2021 OTN became an independent Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO number 1193868). This report has built upon this significant milestone for the organisation.

Over the next three to five years, OTN's ambition is to multiply their communities and equip their leaders and volunteers to run more effectively Open Table communities which welcome, affirm and empower the LBGTQIA+ community.

This research and case for support seeks to make a number of recommendations based upon the evidence and insight gained in the process of producing this report. There are five key areas where OTN truly adds significant value to local communities and to individual lives. The five key areas of impact are:

Improved well-being
Reduced social isolation
Safe spaces
Faith
Volunteering

This research report will be used to develop OTN's work over the coming years. There is a distinct feeling of excitement of new beginnings budding, including plans for a great big, vibrant, glorious celebration of all that has been achieved for the organisation.

'In Open Table I found a community of people, open, loving, genuine in a way that often you don't find in your regular faith community because people are vulnerable and have been through the hedge backwards... And yet they're still there. With God. I mean... Others have buckled under the weight over years, and suffered lots of abuse, and they found a space in Open Table, a warm, welcoming, safe, sacred space... This is genuine, this is hopeful, if only every church could be like this.'

2. Background of the Open Table Network & communities

OTN began because many churches and their congregations do not easily, kindly or honestly welcome LGBTQIA+ people, therefore, many LGBTQIA+ people have nowhere spiritually to belong.

OTN has become a network over time, beginning in June 2008 as a small group of LGBTQIA+ people at St Bride's Church, Liverpool, drawn together by their need to worship as themselves.

What happened next is common across all the OTN communities – they help one another, build community, reduce social isolation, improve members' well-being, alongside integrating their spiritual identity with their sexual and gender identities. OTN is an incredibly affirming organisation for those who have suffered an inner conflict.

Many LGBTQIA+ people have been excluded from mainstream Church life, or fear exclusion, from this central act of receiving hospitality that lies at the heart of the Christian faith. This is what the name Open Table means – they see it as a sign of their commitment to make sure everyone is always welcome.

Open Table communities typically meet monthly, creating a safe space for LGBTQIA+ people, who haven't been well served in mainstream churches, and for those who may be seeking to belong in an affirming community, perhaps for the first time.

The first Open Table community in Liverpool has grown to a gathering of fifty-plus each month, and their recognition across the country has grown too, both among LGBTQIA+ people and within the wider Christian community.

People across the country began to hear about the work, particularly since July 2015 when the Right Reverend Paul Bayes, Bishop of Liverpool, began to support OTN publicly. He has since walked with them at Pride in Liverpool [see photo below].

Bishop Paul is now a Patron of the Open Table Network, one of several notable Christians who identify as LGBTQIA+, or as allies, who advocate for the OTN, speaking about their work and supporting OTN to achieve public profile.

OTN now has 18 communities in the network, all working within their respectful, loving, safeguarding guidelines. OTN's supports each community to find their way forward and develop.



Image: Mark Loudon

TO WHAT EXTENT IS THE ORGANISATION LED BY PEOPLE WITH 'LIVED EXPERIENCE'?

Our research shows that two-thirds (64%) of local leaders and volunteers identified as LGBTQIA+. More than half (57%) of the board of trustees are from the LGBTQIA+ community, while others have experience of supporting members of their family and / or faith community around gender identity and sexual orientation.

The overall aim is to increase this proportion. A requirement for a community to join the Network is to involve LGBTQIA+ people thoroughly in the planning and leadership of activities, which in turn supports the diversity of OTN leadership nationally.

OTN has also asked several notable Christians who identify as LGBTQIA+, or as allies, to become Patrons, to be advocates for OTN, supporting the organisation in the public eye. Currently, OTN has seven Patrons, of whom five are also members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and two are allies:

- Reverend Doctor Barbara Glasson, former President of the British Methodist Conference.
- Right Reverend Cherry Vann, Bishop of Monmouth, Church in Wales
- Reverend John Bell, social justice activist, hymn-writer, Church of Scotland minister.
- Reverend Doctor John Bradbury, General Secretary, United Reformed Church.
- Pádraig Ó Tuama, Catholic poet, broadcaster, theologian and peace-maker.
- Right Reverend Paul Bayes, Church of England Bishop of Liverpool, Co-Chair of the Global Interfaith Commission on LGBT+ Lives.
- Reverend Doctor Rachel Mann, trans Anglican priest, writer, broadcaster.

3. Context and evidence of need

Many LGBTQIA+ people are isolated and marginalised at the best of times. They can suffer from poor self-esteem, depression and anxiety. Whereas some people can turn to faith groups for support during difficult times, LGBTQIA+ people often cannot. Places of worship are not guaranteed places of welcome for LGBTQIA+ people. **59% of LGBT+ young people interested in joining a religious organisation have stopped or reduced their involvement owing to their sexuality or gender identity (Youth Chances, METRO 2016).**

OTN is a partnership of welcoming and affirming communities where LGBTQIA+ people of faith may gather and feel affirmed in the support of that community, and in mutual support. There is huge value in the security of these sound and supportive communities, which welcome everyone - of any faith background - who recognises that all people have equal worth.

OTN currently supports 18 communities across England and Wales hosted by local churches from five different Christian traditions, which offer regular LGBTQIA+ inclusive gatherings where everyone can belong, especially those who have been excluded because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. These are all people who have **experienced prejudice and exclusion at home, in the workplace, local community**, but especially in faith communities; in other words: people wishing to explore their religious beliefs and identities with nowhere to turn.

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, things have become even more serious. All people of faith miss their gatherings, but members of the LGBTQIA+ community tell us they miss them even more deeply, owing to the huge emotional and spiritual support that OTN gatherings offer them individually and collectively.

OTN groups offer safe spaces to all. To OTN 'safe' means: affirming, honest, empathic, unconditionally loving environments where LGBTQIA+ people of faith can explore personal and spiritual growth through developing relationships with others who understand the unique barriers they face.

'I would say that about 50% of my direct pastoral work comes from Open Table. I have been really very deeply shocked about how many people have had such dreadfully hurtful experiences, and have been to varying degrees quite damaged by really awful religion. Extremely sad. But glad that some find a space and community here to help in recuperation and restoration.'

Members of OTN communities are **significantly more likely to experience poor mental health, which research has shown relates explicitly to discriminatory pastoral practices** of local churches, and the Church's substantial contribution to negative attitudes in society (*In the Name of Love*, Oasis Foundation 2017).

A third of lesbian, gay and bi people of faith (32 per cent) aren't open with anyone in their faith community about their sexual orientation. One in four trans people of faith (25 per cent) aren't open about who they are in their faith community. **Only two in five LGBT+ people of faith think their faith community is welcoming of lesbian, gay and bi people.** Just one in four think their faith community is welcoming of trans people. (LGBTQIA+ in Britain – Home & Communities, Stonewall 2017).

'LGBQ+ Christians surveyed rated their mental and emotional health and well-being as significantly lower than their heterosexual peers, especially those who had undergone "conversion therapy" in an attempt to alter their sexual orientation' (*National Faith & Sexuality Survey*, Ozanne Foundation 2018).

OTN supports people across England and Wales who experience disadvantage because they are living with discrimination around one or more of the protected characteristics as defined by the Equality Act 2010. These include: biological sex (female, intersex and male), disability (people with disabilities experience barriers to LGBTQIA+ community support), gender reassignment (trans & non-binary), marriage and civil partnership, race (LGBTQIA+ people in BAME communities may require additional support), religion and belief (different Christian traditions), sexual orientation (bisexual, lesbian, gay, asexual, pansexual).

In an average month in 2019, OTN communities had contact with **321 individuals**, supported by 106 volunteers doing both practical and pastoral work. However, with the onset of Covid-19 in March 2020, OTN has been reaching far more people, including two new communities, starting in November 2020 and April 2021.

Between October 2020 and March 2021 OTN averaged **4,845 contacts** a month. 451 of these were locally across 18 communities (of whom 85 were new contacts), supported by 84 volunteers (of whom 39 were new), plus 4394 contacts via the Network's online outreach). Providing additional resources through OTN's website, social media and YouTube channel is driving this trend nationally.

'I think we could share our national successes as far as we can in terms of geography. If somebody could visit and talk about the story and bring the identity of the network... we might be able to share resources in terms of people who might be willing to consider visiting different parts of the country to talk to different groups.'

4. Methodology

As part of the research and developing this case for support, Civil Society conducted a range of stakeholder engagement and insight gaining work. The methodology adopted was thoroughly thought through to ensure it was delivered with the most inclusive approach possible.

Everyone connected with OTN communities was invited to participate in the process. We purposely designed an inclusive consultation process that engaged all the stakeholders connected with OTN. Insight gaining activity included:

Community members' online surveys

We received a total number of 38 responses from members of OTN communities to our online survey request. The surveys included a range of questions on well-being and social connectedness since joining an Open Table community.

Community members' focus groups

We conducted two 45-minute structured focus groups with 14 members representing a cross section of OTN's communities across the country.

Community members' one-to-one interviews

We conducted four one-to-one interviews for people unable to join a focus group.

Network leaders and volunteers' online surveys

We conducted an online survey for OTN's existing leaders and volunteers, receiving a total number of 22 responses from community leaders and volunteers to the online survey request. The surveys included a range of questions on well-being and social connectedness for the leaders and volunteers who support OTN groups.

Network leaders and volunteers' focus groups

We conducted two 45-minute structured focus groups with 11 of OTN's local leaders and volunteers from a cross section of communities across the country.

Feedback and direct engagement of partners

We engaged with partner organisations to obtain a viewpoint and insight with a more broad focus beyond OTN's established community. This engagement consisted of six organisations with which OTN has a connection, who gladly contributed to this process with constructive feedback.

'During the pandemic the services that the national group have put out have been really well received and really helpful. The quality of the services has been outstanding, and I wonder if some of that beyond the pandemic is something we can hold on to. There still might be a role for the network to put some services together as well. And maybe elements of those services could be used in local groups as well, the video sermon and so on. I have a feeling we're going to move to a more blended model post-pandemic.'

5. Stakeholder feedback and insight

5.1 Community members online surveys

Headlines

- 84%** of respondents identified as LGBTQIA+, 14% as allies, 3% didn't respond.
- 56%** said being LGBTQIA+ is a barrier to belonging in a faith community.
- 15%** said being in a faith community is a barrier to belonging in the LGBTQIA+ community.
- 92%** said being in an OTN community increased their sense of belonging.
- 87%** feel less isolated and more socially connected through joining one of OTN's communities.
- 89%** said OTN communities provide a safe space for them.
- 97%** said being part of an OTN community contributed to an improvement in their lives.
- 78%** said there is a need for a Christian LGBTQIA+ organisation to bridge the gap between the Christian community and the LGBTQIA+ community.
- 66%** want more OTN communities to reach isolated LGBTQIA+ people.
- 58%** want more online content and service delivery.
- 53%** want LGBTQIA+ awareness training for faith communities.
- 47%** want good practice and resources to support LGBTQIA+ people in faith communities.
- 45%** value partnership with other LGBT+ faith organisations.

How does Open Table improve their members' well-being?

The average rating members gave their well-being before joining an OTN community was 5.7 out of 10. After joining, the average rating was 8 out of 10, a 40% improvement. Comparing their well-being before joining an Open Table community to after joining, respondents cited as the reasons for the improvement in their well-being:

- The friendliness and being around like-minded people
- Opportunity to form a wider circle of friends
- Being accepted, without apology
- Sharing faith with like-minded people in a safe space
- A place of spiritual safety and nurture to support me as I grow.
- The sense of belonging and being accepted
- Joining the OTN community online during lockdown has made me feel connected. It's one of few regular times I'm in contact with people away from work.
- Being able to have my faith and sexuality co-exist has made me complete. I no longer have to hide who I am.

'I feel so much less isolated since joining OTN'

'I'm dealing with people who have experienced homophobia and spiritual abuse, and are actually in trauma.'

'When people do take on a role in the future, it maybe it's a good idea to assess their training needs, they may need to be supported in different ways to the previous incumbent.'

Why members told us they joined an Open Table community:

Members shared with us what attracted them to joining an Open Table community. The reasons are varied, with 81% stating that OTN removed personal barriers preventing them from belonging to either a faith community or the LGBTQIA+ community, and 47% stating that OTN's Vision, Mission and Values aligned with their own values. Other key items of feedback were:

- OTN helped to integrate spirituality and sexuality / gender identity (84%)
- Explicit welcome for LGBTQIA+ people (76%)
- Wanted to be part of an LGBTQIA+ affirming community (74%)
- Welcoming and non-judgemental (68%)
- Being able to be myself (66%)
- Inclusive worship and liturgy (60%)
- Wanted to be part of support, affirmation and change for LGBTQIA+ people (58%)
- A sense of belonging and community (53%)
- Open Communion (50%)
- Welcoming people from different Christian traditions in community together (47%)

What members value most about being part of the OTN community:

There was an enormous level of feedback from members on the value that OTN offers, including:

- Being part of an LGBTQIA+ Christian community
- Being able to be myself, and having a safe sacred space to worship as me.
- True inclusion where you are fully warmly welcomed and accepted as you are within a community of faith, to share communion and faith in a place you feel safe and really cared for where love dwells and is truly felt.
- Being part of a Christian community who care about each other, and being able to go to church knowing I don't have to worry about the real level of acceptance or inclusion I'll find.
- A sense of belonging / of enabling me to be me and grow in my faith and spirituality.
- Not being alone.
- A way to be myself within the church and to realise I am not alone.
- Being able to be myself in church, integrating spirituality with sexuality.
- Meeting other gay Christians.
- Providing safe space for those seeking to reconcile faith with sexuality / gender identity.
- I didn't know how to integrate my spirituality and my sexuality without feeling guilty, now I can see that I am who God created me to be.
- Being in a specifically, explicitly LGBTQIA+ faith community means I can bring my authentic whole self to my worship, and be fully met by others doing the same.
- I value most the opportunity to worship God with LGBTQIA+ sisters and brothers, listen to their stories and share my own in a safe environment.
- Being able to talk to people who share my experience as a Christian and LGBTQIA+ person.
- My 'gay epiphany' occurred in 2019 and I fairly quickly felt I needed to belong to a worshipping community where this could be explicit, so that the sense of belonging would be a genuine reflection of a validation of me as an LGBTQIA+ Christian.

'It's lovely to be in a room with other Open Table leaders. And the wonderful thing about discovering Zoom is that we can do this a lot more often, so it doesn't actually have to be what is also a physical meeting and I think that's really good.'

'It's just one of the greatest things I think I've ever been part of. I've loved it.'

If the Open Table Network weren't here:

OTN works with a strengths-based approach, however asked OTN members what would happen if OTN didn't exist. They responded:

- I wouldn't feel there was anywhere I could go as LGBTQIA+ organisations do not always understand faith/church/spirituality.
- Honestly I don't know as LGBTQIA+ affirming churches aren't easy to find - would have an issue with me being asexual or trans, with food intolerance and disability.
- I probably wouldn't be involved in a church.
- Not sure... Open Table Network is unique.
- For support with the development of my faith journey, I'm not sure.
- I wouldn't go anywhere. I would still be me but feel more marginalised within the church.
- I would end up keeping my faith and queerness in separate communities.
- Covid has challenged my sense of what it means to be part of a Christian community, and I have developed a small sense of isolation as a result - compounded by my fairly fresh awareness of my sexual identity. I think if I belong anywhere it's as part of Open Table.

Members responded very positively to the opportunity to comment on the importance of OTN. Comments included:

'Open Table means everything to me, it has truly saved me.'

'It has been very valuable to participate in online events during this very difficult Covid-19 year.'

'Thank you for your bravery, commitment and work to create hope that one day support groups within the church will not be needed. The day every church is 'open table', as God's house is. God bless you all.'

'It made a huge difference during lockdown as I have shielded a lot of 2020!'

'The process of accepting who we are is often painful and uncomfortable. Open Table's leaders provided a safe space to explore and discover.'

'Thank you for all your vision, tenacity and commitment in successfully growing the OTN, with its huge potential to support, affirm and witness the spiritual journeys of those in our diverse community.'

'OTN's work is appreciated very much by the LGBTQIA+ community. As a result, I know a few people who have begun to believe that the church actually might love them after all. You can't put a price on that. I feel that a potential strength of OTN is to bringing LGBTQIA+ people to faith as you give a message which is totally different to the ministry of the wider church.'

'I am so glad that OTN existed when I came out and for personal support I received. I think personal support (pastoral work) should be an ongoing feature of OT ministry across its networks. It may be that individuals might well appreciate Spiritual Direction from LGBTQIA+ affirming individuals.'

'Thank you for the work you are doing in ensuring everyone feels they belong and is very precious. We have come a long way in our understanding in the last five years and know God's love is so much bigger than we can understand and that God's love is for everyone.'

5.2 OTN leaders and volunteers online surveys

OTN leaders and volunteers stated:

- 64%** identified as LGBTQIA+, 32% as allies and 4% said 'don't know'.
- 90%** said being LGBTQIA+ is a barrier to belonging in a faith community for some or many members.
- 50%** said being a member of a faith community is a barrier to belonging in the LGBTQIA+ community for some or many members.
- 86%** said their members feel less isolated and more socially connected since joining their community.
- 91%** said being part of their community improved their members' well-being.
- 76%** said they think there is a need for an LGBTQIA+ organisation to bridge the gap between the Christian community and the LGBTQIA+ community
- 66%** felt a little, or not at all equipped and trained to host a local community.
- 57%** want good practice and resources for supporting LGBTQIA+ people in our communities.

OTN's community leaders and volunteers told us about the difference their community makes for their members:

- They have a church which they feel genuinely welcomes them, as opposed to one which welcomes them conditionally.
- It provides a regular form of public worship where there are simply no sexuality issues.
- We offer well-being, dignity and personal integration, and support for LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers as the need here is significant
- Safe place where gifts can be used, and a sense of belonging.
- Regular connection with other LGBTQIA+ Christians and their allies, safe space to worship together and enjoy fellowship.
- It offers a safe haven for people to explore their faith. In some cases, this makes membership of conservative churches more tolerable for some members. Other members have rediscovered a faith they had previously lost. It's also hugely valuable for clergy and church workers who attend.
- OTN provides friendship and a safe space to be themselves where they feel loved and valued for exactly who they are.
- OTN offers members a wider social network, deepening faith experience, greater acceptance by a church.
- OTN allows an inclusive gospel to speak truth to vulnerable and isolated individuals for whom the church historically seemed happy to ignore.
- OTN offers a space where sexuality can be discussed / approached in a church setting in a way that potentially offers healing to those hurt by the way it has been discussed in a church setting elsewhere / in the past.
- In particular I start to see people begin to flourish as they begin to accept themselves and find people who have lived similar experiences.

We asked leaders and volunteers what had attracted them to support their Open Table community. Their responses reflected that their support for others started with support for themselves:

- Help to integrate my spirituality and my sexuality / gender identity (77%)
- Wanted to be part of support, affirmation and change for LGBTQIA+ people (77%)
- Wanted to create an explicit welcome for LGBTQIA+ people (73%)
- Wanted to be part of an LGBTQIA+ affirming community (59%)
- Inclusive worship and liturgy (59%)
- A sense of belonging and community (50%)
- Open Communion (50%)
- Wanted to provide support for LGBTQIA+ people in ministry (50%)
- Identified there was a need for an Open Table community in their locality (46%)
- Wanted to create a non-judgemental safe community (46%)

OTN's leaders and volunteers told us what they value most about being part of an Open Table community. Their responses demonstrated the value of OTN's work in local communities:

- The chance to meet such a clear need in the wider community, and to offer a vision of how to do things differently.
- The root of my sense of calling to ministry is to be alongside people and reflect in some way that each and every person is infinitely precious to God and loved beyond all measure by God. Being part of offering a safe and inclusive space where everyone is valued and everyone is welcomed to the table is one of the most important things I am involved with. I am learning so much and the services we have had are some of the most authentic and moving services I have ever been involved with.
- 'Belonging' came before the specific act of supporting. What I value most is the potential of creating a space where LGBTQIA+ people can have their faith affirmed.
- Seeing people make connections in community and, through queer-affirming liturgy, make / deepen connections with God / the divine.
- It helps to make our welcome of LGBTQIA+ community very explicit.
- I have always believed that our Christian God is for everybody equally without exception and I despair when anybody is excluded
- Walking with LGBTQIA+ Christians as they develop their own personal relationship with Christ is the greatest gift of grace to behold.
- Accessibility for everyone.
- The need to be there to support people from a Roman Catholic faith background and give support to all denominations and none.
- A safe place to be close to Christ no matter who you are, non-judgmental.
- Having a sense of belonging to a community of affirmative, inclusive Christians
- Being able to be ourselves.

OTN's community leaders and volunteers gave their insights into what their OTN community needs to sustain itself and grow:

- The leadership / wider church developing a coherent vision for OT would be positive.
- A greater integration perhaps within the diocese.
- Visibility and formal church recognition.
- Expanding the leadership skill base so that the current leader(s) have support in their task of facilitation.
- More leaders and more time.
- Becoming a more group-led grassroots community which takes creative ownership of leading itself rather than being managed by one person which our OTN is currently.
- Creative leadership, good publicity, active participation encouraged, a gentle and undemanding warm welcome.

'One would hope that the network is supporting a mutuality among its leaders, because we're all on a learning curve, we haven't been here before, and the ability to build relationships with leaders across the OTN of trust, and to know who you go to for this resource or for that wisdom or whatever. That's going to be vital.'

'I very much appreciate Open Table and am so grateful there is such a thing! My own needs just now are to 'belong' to a smaller group of LGBTQIA+ Christians, to meet online for study and fellowship, and I would love such a group (or groups) to develop within our Open Table community.'

OTN's leaders and volunteers told us how OTN might respond better to the needs of LGBTQIA+ Christians in general, and OTN communities in particular:

Leaders and volunteers told us that they wanted:

- Online resources to promote and increase engagement with our communities.
- More peer support for leaders and volunteers.
- Greater ability to provide support for minorities in the LGBTQIA+ community e.g. BAME, disability, mental distress, refugees/asylum seekers.
- Greater partnership working with other LGBTQIA+ faith organisations.

We asked OTN's community leaders and volunteers if OTN is uniquely placed to lead this kind of support for LGBTQIA+ Christians. They told us:

- By not being a campaigning organisation, but just offering that safe space, we are unique in what we do. People feel safe at OTN - they are not asked to put themselves out there in ways that might make them feel vulnerable.
- It is unique because it is an active worshipping network of communities.
- OTN is among organisations best placed to lead (I would also include Inclusive Church, One Body One Faith, Ozanne Foundation).
- Yes definitely, we feel very supported as you have the experience of starting an Open Table community and have faced many of the issues we are facing.
- What makes OTN distinctive for me is that it is not a denomination - it's ecumenical so it's possible to be part of another church as well as part of OTN. It can therefore be hospitable to people who are at an early stage of exploring faith as well as people who are familiar with church structures.
- Perhaps not uniquely, in that there are others, but very strongly placed because OTN feels very grassroots-led and very responsive and authentic.

If their OTN community didn't exist, we asked OTN leaders and volunteers where would their members gain support?

- I'm not sure.
- Some would just walk from their faith.
- They'd probably look for a hospitable church tradition locally - maybe simply an individual supportive visible church leader.
- Secular LGBTQIA+ organisations and inclusive churches if they can find one.
- We are an inclusive church so they would find support in church but OTN has become an important part of who we are as a church.
- Some of our members have other worship communities, some do not and are amazingly grateful for OTN, there is no alternative in an Anglican setting that I am aware of.
- I honestly don't know.
- Chaplains have been a route of support for our members but, put bluntly, some of our members would leave the Church. If it were not for access to an inclusive worship community like Open Table, they don't feel they have support.

I'm honoured to be a part of the OT network, I've seen first-hand the difference it can make to people's lives. OT brings the light of Christ to those who need it the most. To witness this is a privilege beyond measure.

'I'm far less anxious about my own identity. The sheer joy of having fellowship, the sense that here are a group of people who have found a safe place. I think I'm just overwhelmed by that sense of belonging, inclusion, seeing people relax, singing, having fun.'

5.3 Focus group summary

Focus groups were exceptionally well attended by members, leaders and volunteers. The groups had a real spirit of openness and inclusion. Participants shared their feelings and experiences, and were consistently positive about the work of OTN.

Participants were very clear that OTN had impacted their well-being in a very positive way, also stating that OTN had supported them to feel more socially connected and less isolated. The other key theme identified was belonging, and how OTN enables their members to feel they finally belong in a community.

Members prioritised the following activities:

- Training in LGBTQIA awareness for faith communities (43%)
- Online worship services (36%)
- Sharing good practice for LGBTQIA+ affirming ministry (36%)
- Create more Open Table communities to reach more isolated people (29%)
- Retreats for LGBTQIA+ Christians (21%)
- Support for minorities within the LGBTQIA+ community (21%)
- Share resources for life transitions: baptism, renaming, relationship blessings, funerals (14%)
- Advice, guidance and signposting (7%)
- Partnership with other LGBT+ faith organisations (7%)

Polls:

On a scale of one to 10, how would you rate the support of OTN?

Group 1: 25% scored 7, 25% scored 9, 50% scored 10.
Group 2: 13% scored 7, 13% scored 8, 38% scored 9, 38% scored 10.

On a scale of one to 10, do you feel that OTN is meeting an unmet need for the LGBTQIA+ community?

Group 1: 25% scored 7, 25% scored 9, 50% scored 10.
Group 2: 100% scored 10.

Leaders & volunteers prioritised the following activities:

- Sharing good practice for LGBTQIA+ affirming ministry (55%)
- Peer support (45%)
- Retreats for LGBTQIA+ Christians (18%)
- Sharing resources for life transitions and baptism, renaming and relationships (9%)
- Support for minorities (9%)
- Advice, guidance & signposting (9%)
- Share inclusive spirituality and theology resources (9%)
- Share inclusive worship resources (9%)

Polls:

On a scale of one to 10, how would you rate the support of OTN?

Group 1: 33% score 4, 33% scored 8, 33% scored 9.
Group 2: 14% scored 7, 43% scored 8, 29% scored 9, 14% scored 10.

On a scale of one to 10, do you feel that OTN is meeting an unmet need for the LGBT+ community?

Group 1: 33% scored 4, 33% scored 8, 33% scored 9.
Group 2: 14% scored 7, 29% scored 8, 57% scored 10.

There were a huge number of comments, including:

'We're a minority within the church, the global church and we are a minority within the LGBTQIA+ community by virtue of our faith.'

'The church I came to is in my street and it's got a big sign outside that says 'welcome home'. And they used to say welcome, but it was a welcome with conditions, that you did what they wanted you to do, you believed what they wanted you to believe, whereas when you come to Open Table and somebody says welcome, they mean welcome.'

'When I came out a few years ago, I needed a safe space where I could be myself, as I figured out my faith journey alongside my queer journey.'

'In OTN I have finally found a church that didn't despise me or my very presence. I could actually go to church without that nagging doubt of feeling that somebody there was talking about me, gossiping about me saying something nasty about me or openly sniping at me or ignoring me.'

'I think that the LGBTQIA+ community has always had an issue with belonging somewhere, when you feel cast out, and potentially on your own, without being able to belong somewhere, it's fairly difficult. Open Table gives its members a place to belong and be part of something that historically we've never had.'

'OTN was really good for my mental health, but super fun because I've been part of it.'

'I've heard it said that coming out as a Christian is harder or can be harder than coming out as gay. And I found that I seem to have a lot of shame and embarrassment around exploring Christianity. But I needed to do that to really be my whole authentic self. Open Table allowed me that safe space, having come to terms with and lived an openly gay life. I could then also explore the spiritual Christianity that was missing in that space. And I don't think I could have explored that anywhere else.'

'As much as Open Table is a wonderful thing, wouldn't it be good if we didn't actually need it, if you could go into any church and it be like Open Table, but it's not. And that sharing I think is something that can try and make other places more comfortable.'

'Within the Open Table Network, there's a real solidarity there, based on compassion for each other and love, but that needs to go out beyond Open Table. We need solidarity with everybody, for our benefit, and for their benefit as well.'

'I'm an ordained priest in the Church of England and as I was training, I was told I wasn't allowed to preach or lead in the church I was training in, and so I had to move. And at that time Open Table was the place where my ministry was affirmed and I was listened to. And I really did feel like that place saved me at the time and enabled me to carry out my calling.'

6. Individual case studies

Zoey, trans asexual woman (she/her), age 35

'I've been coming to Open Table since the end of 2015. I was attracted by the warm, welcoming community that's found within it and the whole inclusion of everyone that you could just see and feel around in the space when I entered within it. At a time I was feeling lost and alone, at the point in being excluded from a place of faith, which was making me lose my faith and self-belief, Open Table was shared with me.

'It renewed my faith and my emotional well-being as well as my relationship with others around me, which I struggled with as I was never given the chance to before.

'I could just truly express myself and share my faith without having to hide or hold back. I feel truly welcome and accepted at Open Table, and look forward to going to be a part of it, and the wholesome inner feeling you feel there from the care and connection that's there, as I feel that I can share openly with everyone and listen in supporting each other through our journeys. There were parts of the LGBTQIA+ community that I didn't realise that were there, like, I didn't realize that I was asexual until I started talking to all the members in Open Table and I thought, that sounds like me.

'So then, I discovered another part of my identity, which then gave me more self-confidence, and I thought, I'm not broken in this respect because there's other people like me. I've spoken to others in Open Table who have come along and been so blown away by how welcoming it was, because they'd be within their other community and their other community wasn't including them because, well, they can't do this or they can't do that. Like they can't give a reading or they were not treating him as wholly as they were, as human beings.

'They were pushing them down in the way that they were being treated. So, when they came along to Open Table, they were completely blown away by how inclusive we were and how catering to their needs we were. And how inclusive and welcoming we were, and we were serving gluten-free food. Or we were saying that, "yes, you can do this" and "yes, we'd like to hear your view about this" as that's what Open Table is at its heart.'

Zach, asexual non-binary (they/them), age 21

'I've been involved with Open Table since the early part of 2018. It was shortly after my family moved here from Australia. My dad found it, and knew that I at the time identified as gay. He thought Open Table is something I would be interested in".

'I literally turned up one evening, and it was very good. What made me want to come back and to get more involved was the fact that it was a community that was mine. As a clergy kid you go to whatever church your parent works at. That's been my experience, my whole life. I haven't had a home church before, but Open Table from the very first felt like home, like a place that I wanted to go to and people that I wanted to be with. It's given me a space to explore things. It has definitely helped me to explore elements of my faith and my gender and my sexuality without having to be specific.

'It's a place where I can experiment, and it allows me to grow, and is happy for growing to be a messy process. You don't have to conform to any particular narrative or any particular way of being, you just turn up and you are you, and it doesn't matter if you don't actually know who that is at the time, you will be welcomed anyway, which I think has really helped. I had no way of expressing my queerness before, I didn't have a queer community. I'm not the kind of person who finds things like that easily.

'Something has to be exactly right for me to really connect with it. Finding Open Table made it real that there are other people out there who are queer Christians. So, just suddenly stepping in and realising, this is actually a thing. These are my people. This is something I belong to. That was amazing. I'd also just moved halfway around the world to a city I'd never visited before, so I literally had no social connections at all.

'I became exponentially more connected from having found a community, having come from just absolutely nothing. It was great to locate myself within a space and a community and

within a geography as well, having a place to go to. I've grown up in faith communities, and I had very little idea of what most of that acronym [LGBTQIA+] was before I came to Open Table. I didn't know asexuality existed at all, which explains some of why I was so puzzled growing up, but I think if people are more aware of things in general, then it's easier to step towards it in the specifics. If you know what something is, if you meet someone who identifies with that, you have a rough idea of what it means.'

Gail, lesbian woman (she/her), age 51

'I'd been part of several fundamentalist evangelical Churches for many years. They gave me the clear message that it was wrong to be what I was because it was sinful. I made the mistake of confiding in a pastor's wife about my sexuality. I was instantly taken off the church's worship team, which had meant a lot to me. I was told I was created perfect, but that I had "become flawed". I was encouraged to go to another church to undertake their "reparative therapy" programme. My church began to make it very difficult for me to belong, and gradually pushed me out. I can't put into words how much that hurt. I was broken. I felt a deep shame about being me.

'Then I found Open Table. I was very hurt and very bruised. In terms of my self-esteem, my confidence, my self-image, I was at a point of really hating who I was, and Open Table gradually brought me to the point where I can stand and look at myself in a mirror and say, you know what? I actually like you. That's the point that I never thought I would get to before Open Table. I could walk into Open Table without having to justify or explain who I was, and to be accepted. There was lots of love there, lots of warmth and it felt like a very safe, sacred space.

'I've been in big churches, I've been in big communities where there've been lots of people, and I felt lonely and isolated because I've not felt a part of that community. Prior to Open Table, I didn't have that network at all. I didn't even have any friends who I could connect with. I didn't ever feel enough about myself to be able to tell them about me. Being in Open Table has given me the confidence to do that. I deeply thank Open Table for helping me to be FREE to be ME.

'I now sing in the worship group at church, as ME. This is incredibly different to my past experience of church: being allowed to sing in a worship group only by hiding my true identity. I lead Open Table services locally and have become an elder in the church which hosts the community. I've never been in a church where I would ever have been allowed to do any of that, because I was given the very clear message that who I am was wrong. I stayed in those kinds of churches for too long, they ground me down and I believed that. So I just kept quiet and I stayed single for many years because of that. From the age of 20 until just five years ago I was single, because of how the church made me feel. And without Open Table, I am convinced I would still be single.

'Open Table means everything to me, it has truly saved me.'

Matt, bisexual man (he/him), age 29

'I was brought up as a Jehovah's Witness, I found the religion tough and strict. I knew I was bisexual because I had an encounter with a male but I also liked females. The Jehovah's Witnesses taught me to believe that being gay or bisexual was bad, and was a sin to God; and that those who are gay or bisexual should be punished. This made me feel small and low to a point where I thought everyone was against me because of the feelings I have towards the same sex. I felt ashamed of myself because I had the feeling that I had let my family and friends down. It also felt like my dad didn't understand the meaning of gay and bisexual or of being who I wanted to be. When I told my dad, he disowned me, kicking me out of the family home.

'At the time I was in a relationship with Danielle, and she kindly said to me I could move in. I knew if I had stayed any longer at my dad's there would be trouble. When I moved out, he put an injunction against me, I couldn't believe what was happening. I wanted to be alone but meeting Danielle, who now is my wife, has shown me that it's ok to be gay or bisexual, and that it isn't a sin, and not to be scared because God will love me no matter what.

'It wasn't until I looked up churches that would accept my sexual orientation that I came across Open Table. At first I was a bit shy and scared because I didn't know how they would react to me, due to my past experiences. But once I started to talk to people, it made me come out of my shell and I now don't feel embarrassed or ashamed to be bisexual.

'Open Table has given me my life back, to be able to fulfill my dreams and to accomplish my goals in life. Meeting people from different backgrounds has made me feel part of a huge family, full of love, care and hopefulness. The people that attend the church are lovely and they accept you for who you are and they don't judge. I thank all the people in Open Table for helping me get back on my feet and gain control of my life that nearly slipped through my fingers.

'Without the love and support from the people at Open Table, and my new family, I wouldn't be standing here today. Open Table is definitely my comfort place, and a place where I feel very safe. It gives me a huge power to a point where I don't care what people say about me because I know that I can always confide in God and that He will always let me follow him and love him and He will always love me.'

7. Testimonials from partners

OTN encourages its communities to promote their commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion by registering with their partner organisations: Inclusive Church, OneBodyOneFaith and the Open Church Network, which maintain directories of inclusive churches. Since April 2020, to offer mutual support and reach isolated people, OTN has also worked in partnership with Diverse Church, House of Rainbow, OneBodyOneFaith, Quest and Two:23 Network. They are also working with Inclusive Church, Modern Church, OneBodyOneFaith, Progressive Christianity Network Britain, Student Christian Movement and Women And The Church to challenge inequality, pursue justice, and provide teaching and resources. Here are some testimonials from some of OTN's partners:

Revd Mark Rowland, Treasurer, Dignity & Worth: dignityandworth.org.uk

'I've certainly been glad for the contact and relationship I've had with Open Table and look forward to building on that. I think **the distinctive contribution of OTN is about local gatherings of LGBTQIA+ Christians and allies.**

While there are many LGBTQIA+ Christian organisations, Open Table is one of the few I can think of that is focussed on local gatherings and the opportunity for worship, fellowship etc. that brings. I think that's a really key contribution and **I signpost setting up or partnering in an Open Table as an option when local churches ask me about what they could do to be more LGBTQIA+ inclusive.**

LGBTQIA+ Christians can find themselves on the edge of both the Church and LGBTQIA+ communities and so a true place of belonging is really important. It seems to me that the key thing to develop OTN's work here is simply more Open Table communities - in an ideal world there would be one in easy reach in every part of the country.

I think the **Open Table Network makes a unique and incredibly valuable contribution to the LGBTQIA+ Christian community in Britain** unlike that made by any other organisation. Their network of local communities provides much needed support and solidarity and creates contexts where LGBTQIA+ Christians can fully express both their faith and their sexuality, gender and gender identity without the need to self-censor or to be afraid of others' reactions.'

Dr Sjay Patterson-Craven, Secondary PGCE RE Course Leader, Edge Hill University: edgehill.ac.uk/education/about/staff/sjay-patterson-craven

'OTN has contributed to the delivery of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) on the PGCE Secondary Religious Education course at Edge Hill for the past three years. The OTN Coordinator's contributions both from his work within the LGBTQIA+ Christian community and his professional experience as an educator means that he is uniquely positioned at the intersection of RE subject and professional knowledge.

Trainee teachers benefit not only from his theological discussions and the subsequent development of their RE subject knowledge, but also in terms of their **developing awareness of the nature of inclusivity** and what this looks like in the Secondary context. I would highly recommend to all ITE practitioners that they make use of the expertise available from the OTN to broaden and diversify not only their curriculum and practice, but to encourage their beginner teachers to do likewise.'

Chris Brook, Treasurer, Gathering Voices: gatheringvoices.info

'The growth, positive word-of-mouth and increased profile of OTN over many years, when other similar organisations are declining, speak of themselves of **OTN's importance in supporting the LGBTQIA+ community.**'

Ruth Wilde, National Coordinator, Inclusive Church: inclusive-church.org

'I think the distinctive contribution of OTN is the inclusive worship, and the way you work with churches which already exist rather than planting new ones, to make safe and inclusive worship spaces for LGBTQIA+ people. **I think OTN has a very important role to play**, as inclusive worship is important for LGBTQIA+ Christians. We have also valued the friendship and partnership with you over recent years.'

Luke Dowding, Executive Director, OneBodyOneFaith: onebodyonefaith.org.uk

OTN is '**A network of grassroots communities across the country willing to engage collaboratively and contextually.** It is of deep encouragement to know that LGBTQIA+ people are supported locally and authentically. My experience of visiting Open Table Liverpool demonstrated a loving and open community, seeking to know God and one another fully. I think there is a growing need for many organisations to review how engagement is authentically continued online, and in the future in a hybrid context.'

Gerard Swan, Chair, Quest: questlgbti.uk

OTN 'has a faith-specific neutrality which places it slap bang in the middle of the various Christian faith groups: Catholic, CofE, Baptist etc. For this reason I believe it is able to offer a welcome to all since it doesn't subscribe to a particular subset of Christianity and the associated values.

By positioning itself explicitly for the LGBTQIA+ community, the transition from rejecting or non-negotiable values faith groups to Open Table Network spaces must be a much easier leap than moving into 'welcoming' but still mainstream denominationally affiliated spaces open to a change in management (minister) and therefore welcome.

Many 'welcoming' spaces have a long way to go before they become affirming. I think its role is vital and its growth in such a short time is testament to this. Clearly there is an unmet need. People have a hunger to commune and worship in a space where their focus can be fully on the experience of meeting God in a loving community. Too often this is not the case with a large part of our focus being on filtering who we are in order that we are acceptable within the space.

If the community doesn't accept us then how can God be free to meet us through them. It is noticeable that the demographic of OTN is younger – this is not the case for organisations such as ours. OTN is something I promote when I speak to individuals or groups. I don't see OTN as an either / or option in relation to what we do. It might be by individual choice but folk can choose both.'

8. Quotes from OTN community members

'I just thought it was just so wonderful to be in a community who accepted people just as they are completely.'

'I think when you go through a period of uncertainty, it's lovely to know that you are welcomed to a place where you can just be yourself and don't have to have it all worked out at that point.'

'Yes, it's good for me because I can come along and feel that I'm accepted for who I am. But as I get involved in conversations with other people who are exploring who they are, or they've had an experience, it's somewhere where I can very happily point them to.'

'It's the ability to be somewhere I can be totally me, somewhere people will maybe understand a little bit more about my perspective on things, and why things have changed, because of my personal circumstances and the way that I was in a straight marriage, maybe that people won't be able to understand that, but there will be people in Open Table that will, and who've maybe gone through a similar experience or are going through a similar experience. So that gives me some form of identity that I can latch onto there.'

'There's still a stigma attached and a lot of people have very low self-esteem because of their sexuality. They've got a sense that they are bad people, they're evil, that they're being punished, they're not loved for who they are. They feel a failure because they can't be who other people expect them to be. I find a lot of people find that very difficult to accept, especially if they've come from church families.'

'I've had a few conversations with people and we've spoken about their self-esteem, and their parents rejected them when they came out, and things like that. And I listen to their story and I think, this is a church family. And so, I sometimes say to people, "Did you have a church upbringing?" And they say, "Yeah, can you tell?" So I say, "What you're experiencing is very, very common. Don't put yourself down because of that. I'm part of that church community and as part of that church community, I want to say to you, you're lovely. You're fine. You're valuable for exactly who you are. Celebrate who you are, everybody's unique."

'We all seem to be working towards the same things, so supporting each other in the different ways that we work is important. It's important that we keep contact with each other, because I don't want to say we're the only ones doing this work, but we're the ones who are centrally doing this work. That type of organization is very specific so we should get together to make our voices louder'.

'People might well join in the online services before they actually end up going into a church somewhere, especially if they've got the ability to turn their video camera off so that they can actually be there without being seen, when they listen to what's actually being said, they don't feel threatened by it.'

'I'm glad I went because my eyes were opened to a community of Christians didn't have two heads or forked tails or horns on their head. I was sufficiently gobsmacked to want to go back and find out more, coming from an evangelical perspective, I knew all the texts, which said that LGBTQIA+ will be sinful. It fascinated me - I got behind the bar to serve the tea and to wash up afterwards, got to know quite a few people and thought, these guys have got something to teach you. Shut up, listen and watch.'

9. Quotes from OTN leaders and volunteers

'Just being able to connect with other Open Table leaders, hear what other people are doing, good ideas from others. Maybe having a bank of liturgical resources so that we can borrow something that someone else has already put together rather than doing it from scratch ourselves. And just to talk and listen and reflect.'

'We've got the resource of the monthly service from the national network. It gives us a hook to attach ourselves to, we've found.'

'From the national standpoint, I think it's really important that there's a kind of framework. So not that it's prescriptive, but just that there's some general guidelines, principles, some kind of structure, so that then you get the different local expressions of that. But to me, the really key thing is that.'

We're probably still at the stage where maybe people would be more likely to hear about Open Table nationally than they might hear about their own local Open Table. So, I would want something so that if somebody enquires about Open Table, you're able to signpost them to wherever the local one is. It's going to be something like what other Open Tables are like, that they all at least are part of the same structure and framework.'

'I was struck by the massive sense of belonging, the sense of love, the sense of support and the fellowship which was so apparent at Open Table. I saw in that a model, which I thought could be transferred to other faith groups within the country.'

'Our church is an inclusive church, the church is an open, welcoming and affirming church. I still felt that, particularly for people who weren't already coming to church, that to have a service which was absolutely guaranteed to be a safe space was a very important thing.'

'Our parish is completely affirming, probably about 20% of the PCC is LGBTQIA+. When I came here, I wondered about why we should have it. But, for me, it provides a very different context for the people that do come to our parish to be more embodied and vocal about the things that they experience.'

'We are increasingly becoming a home for charismatic, evangelical refugees. And, we deal quite a lot with LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers.'

10. Presentation of findings

For clarity, we have grouped the findings into five key themes, all of which highlighted in the stakeholder engagement process. OTN is working in a minority area engaging a large number of people across 18 different communities, however these themes recognise areas of significant commonality for OTN members and leaders.

Impact on well-being

We wanted to explore further the impact on well-being as part of this research, to underpin the work of OTN nationally and the communities around the country. The findings have been very clear, with members giving their well-being before joining an OTN community an average rating of 5.7 out of 10. After joining a OTN, the average rating was 8 out of 10, **a 40% improvement.**

'OTN was really good for my mental health, but super fun because I've been part of it.'

Furthermore, 91% of the leaders and volunteers engaged in the consultation stated that being part of an OTN community improved their members' well-being through their own experience of talking to community members.

In the focus groups, members fed back that OTN had contributed to an improvement in their well-being. Members cited the sense of belonging as one of the major contributing factors for improvement in their well-being.

Impact on reducing social isolation

The potential impact on reducing social isolation was another area that we gained further insight on as part of the stakeholder consultation. We asked members and leaders if their involvement with OTN had reduced social isolation for them, 87% responded that they felt less isolated and more socially connected as a result of joining one of OTN's communities.

The finding from the stakeholder engagement is that there is a strong sense of belonging and social connectedness created when individuals join an OTN community, with 92% stating that being a part of OTN increased their sense of belonging. The average rating among members of the support from OTN was 9 out of 10.

Impact of offering a safe space

The focal point of OTN is to offer a safe space for members of the LGBTQIA+ community to explore or understand their faith, gender identity and sexuality. This notion was tested in the online survey and stakeholder engagement sessions.

The findings on the importance of a safe space are clearly apparent, with 89% of respondents stating that OTN communities provided a safe space for them. Within the focus groups, participants shared their personal experiences of attending mainstream church communities and the detrimental impact that this had on them over a long period. In contrast their experiences of attending OTN were substantially more positive.

Participants shared that, for the majority, OTN provided the safe, welcoming environment that they had been lacking, evidenced within the surveys as 97% stated that being part of OTN had improved their lives.

Impact on faith

Our research has shown that OTN communities have an impact on the faith of individual members, highlighting the need to meet the needs of people's physical, mental and spiritual well-being.

Community members and leaders strongly expressed a preference for this trend to continue, with 78% stating a Christian LGBTQIA+ organisation is required to bridge the gap between the Christian community and the LGBTQIA+ community. In addition, 97% of members and 84% of leaders participating in focus groups stated that OTN was meeting an unmet need for the LGBTQIA+ community, through offering an opportunity to explore faith.

Furthermore, 66% wanted to see more OTN communities to reach isolated LGBTQIA+ people in the future. Leaders and volunteers were clear that they wanted more training and peer-led support to navigate supporting OTN members to further explore their faith with an LGBTQIA+ affirming approach. 57% of leaders and volunteers stated that they wanted more examples of good practice, shared learning and resources for supporting LGBTQIA+ individuals in OTN communities, while 53% of OTN members wanted to see OTN offer more LGBTQIA+ awareness training for faith communities.

Impact on volunteering

One of the key headlines highlighted through this research is the significant number of hours committed to volunteering through the work of OTN. Of the 22 responses received in our leaders survey, 50% stated they completed 1-2 hours a week with a further 5% stating they dedicated 10 hours a week or more to volunteering for OTN and their communities.

The value of volunteering and delivery of social action with and for marginalised communities is a real asset to the work of OTN, demonstrating a significant contribution in terms of hours of volunteering across the organisation. Through this consultation it was clear that OTN's volunteers wanted to be better equipped to lead their communities and provide more informed pastoral support.

11. Recommendations based on the evidence

1.	Look for significant funding to increase capacity of the OTN over the next three to five years.
2.	Diversify income streams so that OTN can become a sustainable and independent organisation.
3.	Create a Director role to increase capacity and support OTN to chart the formative years as a newly established Charity.
4.	Maintain online delivery of services and resources to enable engagement in areas without OTN communities in their locality.
5.	Develop and promote a training programme for faith communities and organisations on delivering affirming good practice.
6.	Maintain growth and generate additional communities to reach more isolated LGBTQIA+ people.
7.	Provide more support in more geographic locations to enable more safe affirming communities to be created and equipped.
8.	Develop a leadership training programme and peer support opportunities to equip community leaders and volunteers.
9.	Develop a regional advocacy role to provide more local support.
10.	Develop further support and opportunities for LGBTQIA+ people in other minority communities where coming out is highly complex.
11.	Develop retreats for OTN communities to spend more time together and deepen their sense of belonging.

12. Conclusion

The value of OTN is significant for creating safe spaces for members of the LGBTQIA+ community to reduce isolation and build a greater sense of community connectedness. The OTN approach is proven to be impactful and successful at replication. The feedback from members demonstrates the enormous benefit offered that enables members finally to feel safe and understand their faith alongside their gender identity and / or sexual orientation in a welcoming, affirming space.

Recognising the intersection that OTN operates within, the work is uniquely valuable to both the LGBTQIA+ community and the faith community. There is more work to be done to provide safe spaces for the LGBTQIA+ community, and there is a clear need for an organisation such as OTN with both expertise and capacity to develop training, alongside offering direct support to new and established OTN communities.