

A Pastoral Response to the Homosexuality in the Church

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The following was written as part of my theological studies and in response to the pain and suffering I have seen in my journey with the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender) community.

All the stories told are taken from current literature, however I hope to continue and expand my research in 2011, with new examples and real life stories, taken from people that I have met.

If you or somebody you know would like to tell your story, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

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Introduction

Every book I have read about homosexuality and Christianity starts off with a statement about how the debate is tearing the church apart. After debating the issue for years, we are no closer to a resolution and it seems that homosexuality is becoming *more* divisive in the world wide church. Positions have polarized with the church community and the LGBT community in a face-off over who claims the correct Biblical interpretation and theology.¹ But even within the church, denominations and congregations are being divided to the point of schism, and the unity of the Body of Christ is in disarray.

In the middle of the conflict are men and women, young people and old, who are genuinely wrestling with big questions about their sexuality and spirituality. Young people struggling with their sexual identity are scared to raise their questions in the church environment for fear of isolation and ridicule. These same young people summon up enough courage to “come out” to their parents, who in turn wonder what they have done wrong, hiding their struggles and questions from wider family and community. Slowly gay and lesbian people drift from the church, and the cycle of loneliness continues.

Our churches have argued the issue on biblical, theological and moral grounds for years, and agreement seems elusive. But as the battles rage, real people are being forgotten, left bruised and hurting, and wondering where they fit. While not tackling the more specific issues of the debate like gay marriage and the ordination of practicing homosexuals, it is the purpose of this paper to bring another approach to the issue that is based on our equality before God, the work of the Spirit in our lives, and the unity that the Spirit produces in our church communities.

This alternative approach requires journeying with the real people stuck in the middle of the debate, listening to their questions and seeking answers together. It is a pastoral response that has its grounding in scripture and in my experience of ministry over the last twenty years.

¹ LGBT is an inclusive label used to refer to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender community. In some literature, the order is altered slightly or Intersex and Queer (IQ) are added on the end.

Recently I was speaking at a conference on sexuality and spirituality, taking a workshop on the topic of making the church a safe place to talk about sexuality.² A group of about twenty explored a variety of areas within church life and practice, in particular how we could make “sexual discipleship” a normal and every day part of life in the church. At the end of the workshop, a quiet and unassuming young adult male gingerly made his way up to me. We exchanged some small talk and then he asked a question: “I’m gay, and I’d really like to get engaged to my partner and spend my life with him. But I’m not sure if it’s a sin or not. What should I do?”

I could see that this young man was genuine. His faith was real and his desire to live a life pleasing to God was something to admire. But he was also torn between the teaching he had heard (even at the conference), his own experience of life and what God wanted for him. And he simply didn’t know where to turn to ask his questions.

My response could have been drawn from the traditional, conservative church that said all homosexuality is an abomination in the eyes of God and even the thought of committing yourself to another man puts you in danger of the fires of hell. I could have also responded from the liberal end of the scale, dismissing his concerns and offering to perform a ceremony the next weekend. I believe neither would have been helpful. The questions that this young man was asking were not about his sexuality, but about God’s will for his life and allowing that to inform his choices. Thus, my response was not one that highlighted any one side of the homosexual debate, nor one that tried to convince him of one path in preference to the other, but a pastoral response that hopefully continued a journey of questioning and discovery taken within the community of God.

Homosexuality is often discussed at the academic and theological levels, with opposing sides trying to persuade the audience of the acceptability of the same sex orientation or of the need to conform to the traditional model of heterosexual orientation. However, for those who find themselves in the position of questioning their sexuality, the academic arguments rarely give any

² Sex. God. Life. Conference. *Making Church a Safe Place to Talk About Sexuality*. (19th March 2010. Syndal Baptist Church)

comfort and often cause more confusion than anything else. The pastoral response to homosexuality that I wish to explore draws on our understanding of human sexuality and focuses on the people and personalities for whom this is a life and sometimes death issue. Hearing the stories and indentifying with the struggles can, in turn, help the community of faith shape and expand its theology of sexuality and contribute to the unity of the body of Christ.

Pastoral care begins with the life and practice of Jesus. With those on the fringe of his society, Jesus was welcoming and compassionate, touching the untouchable, loving the unlovable and creating a community that saw all people as equals before God. His life included teaching on scripture and the condemnation of religious leaders who had twisted scripture to protect the institutional religion. But never did Jesus isolate those with a genuine response to his care and his teaching on the Kingdom of God.

Pastoral care in the church must reflect the care of Jesus by opposing rules that drain life, and instead, create a life giving community where burdens are carried together. Switzer says that pastoral care:

...[P]roclaims the word through faithful servanthood. In this service it reveals something of the quality of life in the kingdom. This does not mean that, at appropriate times, pastoral care does not proclaim the content of faith, share the scriptures or teach an ethical perspective...[I]t has its own set of procedures designed to produce the unique relationship in which a person in need might experience the love of God, see the servanthood of Jesus through God's present servants, and possibly respond and grow in faith. The procedures and relationships of pastoral care distinguish it from acts of worship, preaching and teaching, even though all are united in one goal.³

All people in the church are called to care for others. Love is a hallmark of the Christian faith and when it is lived authentically, love is what Christian people become known and appreciated for. Pastors, priests and ministers within the church are recognized as having the extra responsibility for caring for the church as a corporate body, in addition to caring for individuals and families that make

³ Switzer, D.K. "Now Who's Coming to Dinner? Pastoral Care for Family and Friends of Gay and Lesbian People" *Word and World* (Volume XIV, Number 3, Summer 1994) 259

up the congregations. The pastoral care provided by the pastor is, “The relationship of concern and service between the minister of religion and the people he or she serves within the context and with the motivation of religious faith.”⁴ Hansen paints a personal, powerful, image of the pastoral carer when he describes his calling to the pastorate:

Here’s what the pastoral ministry is for me: Everyday, as I go about my tasks as a pastor, I am a follower of Jesus. I am, therefore, a parable of him to those I encounter. The parable of Jesus works the power and presence of Jesus in their lives.⁵

Pastoral care is a reflection of the love and care Jesus showed for people. The leaders and members of the church, as Hansen describes, are thus “Parables of Jesus”, being the flesh and blood that care for the sick, feed the hungry and clothe the naked. A pastoral response to homosexuality in the church will therefore will be motivated by the love that is characteristic of the Christian faith and serve to model the life and teaching of Jesus in a way that those who are recipients of that care are invited to embrace faith for themselves. A pastoral response cares for LGBT people in a way that meets their basic needs and shows God and God’s people as accepting and loving.

The story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-11 models this pastoral approach. There is a recognition of sin in the woman’s past, but there is no condemnation of her by Jesus. There is also recognition of sin in the lives of the crowd demanding the woman’s life be taken and neither were they condemned by Jesus. While we don’t know what happened to the crowd after they left, we do know that Jesus returned the woman’s dignity, showed her the compassion of the Kingdom and sent her away to live a new life.

A pastoral response to homosexuality will take the lessons learnt from the life of Jesus, and the love that is the basis of the Christian faith and live them out amongst people of the LGBT community. It will recognize the value of the debates, but it will also acknowledge that the endless arguments have left many feeling confused and unsure about who they are and where they stand

⁴ Kundtz, D.J. & Schlager B.S, *Ministry Among God’s Queer Folk* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007) 4

⁵ Hansen, D. *The Art of Pastoring: Ministry Without All the Answers* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 28

with God. It will build bridges between the church community and the LGBT community that have their foundation in the grace and love of God, by encouraging hospitality and mutual support. It will seek to listen to the real stories of real people, apologizing for the inadequate and at times appalling treatment of the past and try to discern a way forward together.

Real Stories

I'm convinced that in every church there is somebody who has questioned their sexuality. It is my guess that even now, most churches contain people that *are* questioning their sexuality, but struggle in private. It is an issue that touches all of us at one level or another through family, friends and work colleagues, so it is important that an appropriate pastoral response be articulated for the church.

But if there is any doubt, just a handful of stories can illustrate how badly the church has dealt pastorally with people questioning their sexual orientation.

Anthony Venn-Brown

Twice voted one of Australia's 25 most influential gay and lesbians, Venn-Brown's history is one of questioning his sexual identity, marriage, a secret and promiscuous sexual life style and Christian ministry. As a young man he had a strong desire to serve God as a church planter and an evangelist, becoming well known around Australia for his tireless work. He was the founder of Youth Alive in New South Wales which has since grown to become a national youth ministry movement.⁶

At the same time, Venn-Brown struggled with his sexual identity, being attracted sexually to men. In his book *A Life of Unlearning* he describes the repeating cycle of struggle with homosexual temptation, secretive homosexual encounters with men, overwhelming guilt, and a desire to be cleansed and freed from the "sin" of homosexuality that was entangling his life.⁷

⁶ <http://www.samesame.com.au/25/AnthonyVennBrown> (Accessed 23rd June 2010)

⁷ Venn-Brown, A. *A Life of Unlearning: A Journey to Find the Truth*. (Sydney: New Holland Publishers, 2007)

Venn-Brown went through counseling and reparative therapy, to try and “cure” him of his homosexuality, with little success. He was married and had two children, thinking that this would help overcome his homosexual desires. His church leaders, who were aware of his orientation at the time, supported the marriage and it seemed that Venn-Brown became one of the success stories of ex-gay therapy.

However, his desire for male love and companionship was still strong and he struggled daily with the temptations that were presented to him. Eventually, he yielded and found himself having a homosexual affair whilst married and involved in an international public ministry.

To his credit, Venn-Brown confessed his adultery to his wife and church leaders, and immediately resigned from ministry. He submitted himself to whatever his church leadership requested and went through further counseling. Again, there was nothing that suggested his sexual orientation had changed.

In his book, Venn-Brown freely admits that much of what he did was deceptive and wrong. He hurt his family, friends and church deeply, and the wounds last until this day. Yet, it was his treatment by the church, when everything was out in the open, that caused the most pain. Isolated and alone, no form of care was offered to Venn-Brown and his wife as they tried to work out the way forward. His denomination wiped him from their books and distanced themselves from anything to do with him. Friends disappeared, support was removed and the silence caused more pain than the harsh words they had received to their faces. Venn-Brown separated from his wife, eventually divorcing and for several years lived the life of a promiscuous gay man on the streets of Sydney.

The story has a positive ending in that Venn-Brown rediscovered God and found that his sexuality and faith could be reconciled. He now works at supporting LGBT people who, like him, have discovered that their sexuality is not compatible with the teaching or practice of their church communities and have found themselves isolated and alone with no one to turn to.

Senator Bob Brown

A well known figure in Australian politics, Bob Brown is Leader of the Australian Greens and fights for good stewardship of the environment as political decisions are made. As a church-going teenager, he felt that his sexual orientation was an abomination to God. He prayed against his feelings but as nothing changed his shame grew and he stopped going to church. Whilst at university he sought the help of a cold-hearted psychiatrist – the first person he ever told about his orientation. The psychiatrist asked if there was any parental abuse in his past (which there wasn't) and then insisted on a series of expensive testosterone injections to make him “more of a man”.

After months of injections, Brown felt no different and then made his way to see a Sydney psychiatrist who was testing a new “aversion therapy”. What amounted to electric shock treatment at the slightest sign of interest in photographs of males, was also unsuccessful. Brown was left in a state of despair and began to plan his own death. He became seriously ill through the anxiety of the situation, but once he was well enough he decided to move to London to escape the pain of his life in Australia. It was here that he saw another psychiatrist who said quite plainly, “Instead of fighting it, why don't you make a good thing of it. It's part of who you are. Accept yourself.”⁸

Brown now lives in a committed relationship with his partner, standing up for the rights of the environment as well as LGBT people. When interviewed recently about whether he believed any form of religion, he described himself as a lapsed Presbyterian, with his office adding, “His religion was 'believing the fate of the Earth is in our hands'”.⁹

Everyday People

The two stories told so far raise many complex issues, but what is clear is both the fear of the church and the abandonment by the church in a time of great need. Sadly, this story is repeated many times in the lives of ordinary people who will never get the chance to speak publicly about

⁸ Shale, E. (ed) *Inside Out: An Australian Collection of Coming Out Stories* (Melbourne: Bookman Press, 1999)
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⁹ <http://www.smh.com.au/national/pollies-in-the-nogod-squad-20100313-q547.html> viewed on 14/5/2010

their struggles or gain the sympathy of the wider community. They must engage in the struggle on their own, often without the support of family and friends.

There are numerous books and articles that contain stories of ordinary people struggling with their sexuality. John is a man of thirty seven who was raised in a Christian family, was involved in ministry with his church and was elected as the president of the student body in his college. He was successful and well liked in nearly all areas of his life. As a teen he realized he was gay and prayed every day for twenty two years, "Lord, when I wake up in the morning, please make me straight like everybody else." John's church had taught that homosexuals would never be allowed to enter the Kingdom of God, so he hid his struggles from church, friends and family and suffered secretly for years. Like many in his position, he concluded that because his prayers weren't answered either God didn't exist or God had already condemned him.¹⁰

Charles was a youth pastor of a church that also taught the condemnation of homosexual people and when he "came out" he left the church, but continued trying to reconcile his sexuality with his faith. His relationship with his parents became strained when they found out and they denied he was gay, even after meeting Charles' partner. His parents, former missionaries and now pastors, offered to pay for a prostitute for Charles so he could, "Try being straight."¹¹

Sister Hilda is a chaplain at Fairfield hospital and cares primarily for those dying from AIDS. In her work she has had to face up to many things that have challenged her own faith, particularly about the issue of homosexuality. But in the eyes of the people she cares for, she sees the hurt and pain caused by isolation of dying alone. Over the years she has observed that when somebody is married and very sick, people rally around them both and they can get support. There is love and compassion, understanding in the work place and help from a local church if this is part of their life. There is companionship. When it comes to gay couples though, she says, "Gay couples often feel

¹⁰ Marin, A. *Love is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009) 25-26

¹¹ Venn-Brown, *A Life of Unlearning*, 381

that they can't tell people. They go to work and cannot tell people at work. They go to the hospital and then go home to an empty house. They haven't got backup care; they don't get those extra bits of compassionate care. And where is the church then?"¹²

The stories can be found everywhere. In my own ministry there have been countless people who have contacted me or been referred to me because they had heard through the grapevine that I was a pastor that would talk to gay people. Their own churches found them too difficult to handle and no doubt, sent them to me in the hope that I could somehow "fix" them. A former colleague, Erin Shale, was so distressed by the treatment many of her students were receiving because of their sexuality, that she compiled a book of "coming out" stories to reassure them that they were ok. Time and time again, the church comes across as loveless, judgmental and hypocritical in its dealing with people that are gay or lesbian.¹³

The Church's Response

The response of the church to homosexuality has been based on good intentions, but carried out in ways which have wounded people deeply. The folk from the now infamous Westboro Baptist Church are an extreme example. Founded by Fred Phelps in 1955, Westboro Baptist has proudly gained a reputation of being a homosexual hating church. Their website loudly declares that their purpose is to be the mouth of God and speak against the, "Fag lifestyle of soul-damning, nation-destroying filth." The approach Westboro takes to spreading their message of hate consists of picketing the funerals of gay and lesbian people, disrupting the grief of the occasion with chants and banners declaring, "God hates fags". Similarly, the funerals of soldiers killed in the current wars in

¹² Cadwallader, A. (ed) *AIDS: The Church as Enemy and Friend* (Victoria: Collins Dove, 1992) 79

¹³ Shale, E. (ed) *Inside Out: An Australian Collection of Coming Out Stories* (Melbourne: Bookman Press, 1999). As she began writing her book, Erin could find no financial support for her project. Believing so much in the importance of these stories, she travelled extensively at her own expense to conduct the interviews and used her own money to publish and distribute the book.

Afghanistan and Iraq are also picketed as they perceive these men and women as having died defending the “fag loving” nation that is the United States of America.¹⁴

Fortunately, the Christian church as a whole distances itself from the extreme stance of groups like Westboro. However, there has still been an underlying assumption that homosexuality is a choice and that those who identify as gay or lesbian need to change to be fully accepted into God’s kingdom. Programs commonly known as “Ex-Gay Ministries” have been established around the world with the aim of curing people of their homosexuality and helping them to live their lives as healthy and balanced heterosexual people. The assumption behind ex-gay ministries is that a same sex orientation is not part of God’s design and thus needs to be changed for a person to be fully accepted by God. A second assumption is that a homosexual orientation *can* be changed.

Exodus International is perhaps the most well known ex-gay ministry, and acts as the overseeing body of the Exodus Global Alliance. The approach of Exodus is to facilitate change in a homosexual person’s life through prayer and education. They deny that homosexuality is a valid sexual orientation and proudly proclaim on their website that they have been serving men and women *affected* by homosexuality for over thirty years.^{15 16}

There has been criticism of Exodus’ approach and that of the Global Alliance. Firstly, the evidence from scientific research increasingly points to the validity of the same sex orientation. Orientation is now more commonly understood as a continuum, as first proposed by Alfred Kinsey in 1948 (from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual), and is not something an individual chooses or can change.¹⁷ The American Psychological Association, as quoted by Kundtz and Schlager, says that, “Changing one’s sexual orientation is not simply a matter of changing one’s sexual behavior. It would require altering one’s emotional, romantic and sexual feelings and restructuring

¹⁴ <http://www.godhatesfags.com> (Accessed on 27th June 2010)

¹⁵ <http://www.exodusinternational.org> (Accessed 19th July 2010)

¹⁶ Using the word “Affected” suggests that homosexuality is a disease or condition that can be changed. It is a common expression used in ex-gay programs.

¹⁷ Crooks, R. & Baur, K. *Our Sexuality: Eleventh Edition* (California: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2008) 250

one's self-concept and social identity."¹⁸ A person may be taught to "act" heterosexual, but a successful total inner conversion from "gay to straight" is very rare. A recent study into the success of Exodus reported that only, "Fifteen percent of participants reported *considerable* resolution of homosexual orientation issues and *substantial* conversion to heterosexual attraction" (emphasis mine). A further twenty three percent had chosen chastity after the Exodus program, reporting little homosexual attraction, but also little heterosexual attraction.¹⁹ In my own ministry, those that have been through ex-gay ministries time and again speak of the frustration of failed attempts to become "straight" and the pressure they were put under to pretend that they were heterosexual at the conclusion of the program. While I have also met a handful of people that live as heterosexuals after ex-gay ministry, often now married with children, private conversations still reveal their internal struggles.

Secondly, the "results" of ministries like Exodus International have been reported to cause more harm than good to people trying to discover more about their orientation. Some of the more harmful results of ex-gay therapy have been listed as guilt and anxiety, depression and self-destructive behavior. There is also the significant investment of time and money that perhaps could be better used on counseling that helps reconcile life, faith and sexuality.²⁰ Interestingly, the damaging results of ex-gay ministries has given rise to a new field of ministry known as "Ex-ex-gay ministries", designed to help those damaged by unsuccessful attempts to change their orientation to find healing and peace. Some former leaders have also admitted that the work of Exodus has been harmful to many people and issued an apology for their approach, for spreading broken truths and calling for genuine reconciliation between the church and the LGBT community.²¹

¹⁸ Kundtz, D.J. & Schlager B.S, *Ministry Among God's Queer Folk* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007) 127

¹⁹ Jones, S.L. & Yarhouse, M.A. *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007) 369

²⁰ Kundtz, D.J. & Schlager B.S, *Ministry Among God's Queer Folk*, 128

²¹ <http://www.beyondexgay.com/article/apology> (Accessed 19th July 2010)

The approach of organizations like Exodus and the general response to homosexuality by the church, seem to be based on the fear of two things rather than a Biblical based mandate to change a person's orientation. Firstly, there is the fear of what a fixed homosexual orientation might mean to our concepts of Biblical authority and the place of scientific evidence. If a traditional view of homosexuality is held and scientific evidence seems to contradict what the Bible "says", people of faith are forced to either choose between science and faith or live with a head-in-the-sand approach. The second fear is an uninformed and prejudiced fear of gay people themselves. The "gay lifestyle" that people like Westboro Baptist continue to attack represents only a small proportion of LGBT people. The promiscuous sexual exploits and the flaunting of sexuality at Mardi Gras marches, both repeatedly highlighted by the media, paint a picture that makes heterosexual families recoil in disgust. A story that has become "cult classic" amongst the LGBT community in Australia is called *Holding the Man* by Timothy Conigrave and reinforces the stereotype the heterosexual community fears.²² The book is an account of Conigrave's life as a gay man, growing up in Melbourne and then going on to become well known in theatrical circles in Sydney. It describes graphically the promiscuous life that he led, his multiple sexual partners, as well as the life-long relationship he had with another man. Both Conigrave and his life partner contracted AIDS and died of the disease, but not before Conigrave had donated blood and unknowingly infected another person through a blood transfusion. While the story vividly details the difficulties of growing up and living as a gay man, it also reinforces all of the fears that the heterosexual, conservative church community have about LGBT people. Conigrave has become stereotypical gay man that plays to our fears and stands in contrast to the Biblical call to sexual purity. The fact that Conigrave represents only a small portion of the LGBT community has been lost, and instead, replaced with theological debate and Biblical arguments. In the midst of all the words, real people who need to be cared for go unheard and forgotten.

²² Conigrave, T. *Holding the Man* (Camberwell: Penguin Books, 1995)

The Biblical Arguments

In December 1997, The Baptist Union of Victoria accepted a recommendation that stated, “Applications for ordination from persons involved in homosexual practice will be declined.” As part of their research, the task force surveyed the churches within the Union, and found that 90% said their response was based on scripture. Seven passages in particular were cited as reasons that the denomination shouldn’t ordain practicing homosexuals, with 34% of the responding churches using them as a basis for not allowing a gay or lesbian person in the door on a Sunday morning for worship.²³

Any Christian response to homosexuality must draw its basis from the Bible. The Christian canon has been set in place for centuries, and millions of people have copies of the same “Word of God”, in multiple forms. Yet the interpretation of these scriptures is diverse, and sometimes contradictory. When it comes to homosexuality, different interpretations are passionately held and often divisive. In the Baptist Union document, and in the Christian world at large, a handful of passages that span both Testaments form the core of the debate, with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah featuring prominently.

Genesis 19

In the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot entertains two angels. While they are in his home the men of the city converge on Lot’s house demanding that the visitors be released so the crowd so they could have sex with them (Gen 19:5). By the end of the chapter Lot and his family have been spared, but the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah completely destroyed by God.

The questions of *why* God destroyed the cities is the basis for much of the disagreement in the homosexual debate. However, in terms of our current understanding of sexual orientation and homosexuality, the story does little to move towards a resolution. In the culture of the time the rape

²³ Simpson, L (Chair). *Report to Executive Council and the Assembly from the Homosexuality and Ordination Task Force*. (Melbourne: Baptist Union of Victoria, December 1997)

of a defeated enemy was seen as the ultimate humiliation. Women held no social standing and it was considered offensive for males to take on the role of women. Being penetrated sexually by a man was the place of a woman, and so to be raped by a conquering army was the worst expression of humiliation and degradation.²⁴

Those that argue for acceptance of monogamous, life-long homosexual relationships point out that the sexual conduct of the men of Sodom and Gomorrah is abhorrent and should never be condoned. Neither should we condone Lot's actions of offering his daughters to the crowd to satisfy their sexual appetites. But the greater sin in the story, described by the prophet Ezekiel, is one of inhospitality directed toward the angels.

As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, your sister Sodom and her daughters never did what you and your daughters have done. Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy (Ezekiel 16:48-49).

Helminiak says that, "The point is abuse and assault. To use this [Genesis] text to condemn homosexuality is to misuse this text."²⁵ Gagnon acknowledges that the Sodom and Gomorrah story isn't particularly helpful in the understanding of modern homosexuality, but as an opponent to "homosex" in any fashion he believes that the *form* of inhospitality must be taken into account as well. The fact that men wanted to have sex with the strangers points towards male to male sexual relationships being an integral part of the inhospitality and thus offensive in the eyes of God.²⁶

Leviticus 18 & 20

Next to the Sodom and Gomorrah story, the Levitical laws regarding sexual practice are the most often used Biblical passages to condemn homosexual practice. Gagnon writes:

There is nothing wrong with men seeking validation of their sexual identity from other males. Yet, when this becomes sexualized, such that one perceives union

²⁴ Rogers, J. *Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*. (Louisville: WJK Press, 2009) 67

²⁵ Helminiak, D.A. *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*. (New Mexico: Alamo Square Press, 2000) 47

²⁶ Gagnon, R.A.J. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) 78

with a sexual same as self-completion, then something distorted has happened: a denial of the integrity of the sexual self.²⁷

There is no “wobble room” in these passages according to Gagnon nor should we see these laws as being abolished in the life and work of Jesus. When taken into account with the New Testament teaching on sexuality these laws remain firm. Rogers, on the other hand, argues that when taken in their cultural context two things were being addressed. Things that were described as an “abomination” were those that made an Israelite ritually unclean. Mixing with and emulating the Canaanites around them, and in particular the Canaanite ritual sexual practices, made the Hebrew people unclean and was thus to be avoided. Male superiority was also at stake in the Levitical laws, and to take on the passive (woman’s) role in the homosexual practice disrupted the social order. While conservative people argue that homosexuality threatens the very fabric of our society there is no evidence that loving homosexual relationships are disruptive to our social structures in the same way that Canaanite practice was to Hebrew culture. To Rogers these passages simply don’t carry the same weight today.²⁸

Romans 1

The New Testament texts describe the ways the early church wrestled with trying to live out the infant Christian faith in a world that was hostile to the Kingdom of God. In many ways, despite the 2000 year gap, the letters and narratives of the New Testament speak directly into our modern lives. However, there are still the peculiarities from Greek, Roman and Jewish culture that we need to appreciate before translating Biblical meaning directly to our time.

Paul’s first chapter of the letter to the Romans contains a number of verses that speak of homosexual practice. Paul describes those who have acted contrary to nature as being given over to shameful lust, being of depraved minds and punished accordingly (Romans 1:26-28). Moo makes no distinction between homosexuality of 2000 years ago to the homosexuality of today, and says:

²⁷ Via, D.O. & Gagnon, R.A.J. *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 65

²⁸ Rogers, J. *Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality*, 69

It is clear that Paul depicts homosexual activity as a violation of God's created order, another indication of the departure from true knowledge and worship of God...God would not allow his created order to be so violated without there being a just punishment.²⁹

However, the background against which Paul writes is quite different from ours in terms of our understanding of sexuality. Pederasty was common and refers to the practice of older men taking on adolescent boys in a type of "coaching" relationship to teach them all aspects of being male. A sexual relationship was an expected and normal part of the arrangement, in addition to being married to a woman. When the adolescent became older, it was assumed he would enter into an arrangement with a younger male and the cycle would continue. Despite it being an abusive sexual relationship, this was not paedophilia as is understood today. It was an accepted expression of sexuality in Greek culture, but an expression which Paul taught had no place in the Christian church. Those that had practiced these abusive forms of sexual conduct in the past were to cease and those that had been the "passive participant" were not to be exploited any longer. All were to be treated with dignity and respect in the new community of God's people. However, the questions remain as to whether Paul's teaching in Romans allows for committed, mutual, loving homosexual relationships.³⁰

Nobody has suggested that we return to the practice of pederasty – it is universally accepted as a form of abuse and would only make worse the pain that many struggle with after being violated as children. One modern expression of homosexuality, however, is between committed, consenting adults. We see gay and lesbian couples that have been together for twenty years or more that display all the love and respect that heterosexual couples do. It is "natural" for those that have discovered an unchangeable, same-sex orientation inherent within themselves, thus falling into a different category to the homosexuality addressed by Paul.

²⁹ Moo, D. *NICNT The Epistle to the Romans*. (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1996) 115-117

³⁰ Dyer, K. "A Consistent Biblical Approach to (Homo)sexuality" in Edgar B. & Preece, G. (Eds) *Whose Homosexuality? Which Authority? Homosexual Practice, Marriage, Ordination and the Church*. (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2006) 12-13

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

The Greek word *arsenokoites* appears in this passage and has been the subject of debate regarding its translation into English. It has been variously translated as “homosexuals” (NLT), “practicing homosexuals” (TNIV), “effeminate” (KJV), and “male prostitutes and sodomites” (NRSV) – each carrying with it connotations gathered from our own time.

How *arsenokoites* is translated has a large influence on how we read the Corinthians passage. Helminiak concludes that given the sexual promiscuity of Corinth, Paul is talking about some form of abusive sexual relationship and not to homosexual relationships between equals.³¹ Gagnon takes an opposing view, and believes that when taken with the wider interpretations of sexuality in scripture, this passage does not allow for homosexual practice today. He says, “Paul made no attempt to regulate positive forms of same sex intercourse because, quite simply, there were none.”³²

Clearly there is division at the scholarly level, and a simple web search on Amazon will reveal literally hundreds of books that will help a reader justify whatever position they wish to take on homosexuality. But even in this brief discussion it is clear that the Bible *does* condemn several forms of homosexual practice that were present in Biblical times. All of them were abusive or seen as ritually unclean, but none address the faithful homosexual relationships that have emerged after the recognition of sexual orientation and are common place in our society. The academic and Biblical debates now focus on trying to prove or disprove the changeability of one’s sexual orientation and arguing whether or not *all* homosexual practice is displeasing to God.

In general, most traditional Christian authors will only condemn the practice of homosexual intercourse (homosex) leaving them in the awkward position of having to make a judgment on exactly what is and isn’t acceptable in a LGBT person’s entire life. For instance, if it is only sexual intercourse that is a sin, it must be quite alright for a homosexual couple to live together, to adopt

³¹ Helminiak, D.A. *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, 113

³² Via, D.O. & Gagnon, R.A.J. *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*, 86

children, to hold positions of authority in the church and to be married *as long as they don't have sex*. Obviously, policing this stance is more than awkward, but it is the logical conclusion from the arguments put forward. The reality of church life is that no other relationship is put under the microscope in such a fashion and doing so to LGBT people unjustly isolates them from the church. Our sexuality and its expression are an inseparable part of our lives and only those given the gift of celibacy should ever attempt to live in that state. Although it's a popular catch cry in ministry, to the LGBT community it is not possible to "Love the sinner and hate the sin" because that mindset identifies an integral part of a person's life as sinful.

For the heterosexual person, it is one's own experience, prejudice and fear that sways the belief and attitude toward homosexuality. For the LGBT person, it is one's willingness to deal with the consequences of "coming out" that will determine how they live. But can this state of confusion and division be a reflection of how God would have us live, or is there a larger truth that we have ignored as we've delved into the intricacies of a few passages of scripture? Can we reconcile how we feel about homosexual practice, how we interpret the Bible and the call to care and love in the same way God does as demonstrated by Jesus?

A Larger Biblical Truth

A pastoral response to homosexuality still needs to be grounded in the Bible, but there is little to be gained in trying to argue from within the texts mentioned above. There is simply too much disagreement, all based on good scholarship, for everyday people to make any sense that will help deal in a positive, pastoral way to those they encounter with a same sex orientation. However, taking a step back and recognizing some larger Biblical truths should help the church identify more fully with the LGBT community and begin a journey together with them.

Truth one: We are all sinners

It doesn't take a Biblical scholar to know that our world is not as it should be. Crime rates are astronomical, we are under threat from a changing climate, family breakdown is rampant and we

still see images of war, poverty and famine on our televisions and in our newspapers every day. The world is not how it was created to be and groans under the weight of humanity and its brokenness (Rom 8:22).

Being an integral part of a broken world means that we are a broken people. Paul clearly states that every person is a sinner and fails to live up to the potential that was built into us at creation (Rom 3:23). This is the reason that Christ died, the most amazing display of love and grace that God could show and that the world has ever seen. If any of us were perfect, then there would have been no need for the cross. But we're not perfect. Most of us, in those moments of quiet honesty, whisper the words, "Christ came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst" (1 Tim 1:16).

The question that inevitably is asked of me when talking about homosexuality to groups of people is, "Do you think homosexuality is a sin?" I choose not to answer that question as it's never asked to gain a greater understanding of the LGBT community. Instead I rephrase the question to ask, "Do you think homosexuals are sinners?" Of course I do, in just the same way I am and every other heterosexual person is. This puts us on a level playing field and like the crowd who wanted to execute the woman caught in adultery, makes us drop our stones and walk away to think about those areas of our life that fall well short of God's standard.

With Jesus, we began to see glimpses of the Kingdom of God break into our world, but we still live in the time of "Now and not yet." We see the Kingdom, but we don't see it fully. The image is blurry, but one day it will become clear (1 Cor 13:12). So we live with the inner desire for things to be how they were always meant to be and the outward compromise that is a necessary evil in a fallen world. We hold the sanctity of life as a precious gift, but hold the hands of our teenage girls as they sit at the abortion clinic in tears after terminating an unwanted pregnancy. We hold the sanctity of marriage as a precious gift, but grieve with friends and family as marriages fall to pieces after illicit affairs, betrayal or the painful ordinariness of growing apart. We lift the idea of the equality of all people high, but find ourselves forced into lifestyles that unwittingly oppress people and villages on

all sides of the planet. Our children are abused by those who have the responsibility to care for them. We spend millions on wars and conflict, but don't have enough money to improve our hospitals. Churches build bigger buildings and have the homeless sleeping in their gardens. Rich people race million dollar cars around circuits in exotic locations, while women have to walk for hours to fill their containers with water. Half the world is starving while the other half is on a diet. No matter where we look or what we are involved in, there is no escaping that we are all immersed in the brokenness of a world corrupted by sin, homosexual and heterosexual alike. We can and should strive for perfection (Matt 5:48), but have very little ground to stand on when it comes to pointing out the faults of others (Matt 7:1-6).

Truth two: We are all being Sanctified

Fortunately, God does not leave us alone in the midst of our wounds and brokenness. The incarnation of Christ not only demonstrates God's commitment to walk this journey with us, but to save us from pain and lead us to the place where we will see the Kingdom in all its fullness. Until then, we've been left with the Spirit of God to work in us and change us into the people that God wants us to be - the people we were meant to be in the first place. Sanctification is the theological term given to the work of the Spirit in a believer's life:

Sanctification is the continuing work of the believer, making him or her actually holy. By "holy" here is meant "bearing an actual likeness to God." Sanctification is a process by which one's moral condition is brought into conformity with one's legal status before God. It is a continuation of what was begun in regeneration, when a newness of life was conferred upon and instilled within the believer. In particular, sanctification is the Holy Spirit's applying to the life of the believer the work done by Jesus Christ.³³

Scripture emphasizes that sanctification is a work of God (1 Thess 5:23, Eph 5:26, Titus 2:14, Heb 13:20-21), but also points out the responsibility of people of faith to work at deepening their faith and practice (Phil 2:12-13). It suggests a continual movement forward, out of our current position, into a new one that reflects the character of God. Trinitarian theology suggests that

³³ Erickson, M.J. *Christian Theology (2nd Edition)* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998) 980

sanctification moves us into a state of perfect community with each other and with God, a state that reflects the perfect relationship between the three persons of the Godhead. Whenever new understandings of God are revealed to us through the reading of Scripture, participation in the life of the church, or just through life itself, we are drawn closer to God and reflect his being a little bit more. This is the sanctification of the Spirit at work in our lives. Whenever the Church works through difficult decisions, resolves conflict, or reconciles itself to brothers and sisters in the community, the Spirit is producing sanctification in the life of the Church.

With our tendency to want to discover and know things, rather than let them “be”, the temptation for the Church is to try and work out how the Spirit works in us and what things it needs to change. We have a picture of what a disciple should look like and what “fruit” we expect to see. Pastors, priests and ministers are even assessed on how well they are performing in corporate style reviews, with their performance compared to a list of expected competencies and results. If all the boxes are ticked, then you are performing at the right level and can keep your job! But as the prophet Isaiah writes:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”. (Is 55:8-9)

With our tendency to want to know, comes the tendency to want to box and categorize the way God works. This displays a lack of faith and trust in God as we try to make sure God acts in the way we think God should. But God has never acted in predictable ways and this is often displayed in the sanctification of a believer’s life. While we are all being made holy, God is so vast and so infinite in nature that we can all resemble God and still be totally different. We cannot predict what God is going to do or why. What is required is the faith that God will hold to the promise of working in the lives of those that open themselves to the Spirit. If that work is a change in sexual orientation, then the church should rejoice in what happens. If the work is *not* a change in sexual orientation but something else, the church should still rejoice, confident in the knowledge that God knows best.

Truth three: We are called to unity

In John 17 Jesus prays for the unity of all believers that reflects the unity of the Son with the Father. The Psalmist describes unity as good, pleasant, precious and a place of blessing (Psalm 133), while the early church in the New Testament wrestled with how to exist in unity with believers from different cultures and traditions (e.g. Acts 15). At the same time, Paul teaches that there is a great diversity in the body of Christ with each part having a unique purpose and role (1 Cor 12).

As happens in many conflicts in the Church, the list of things that the opposing factions have in common is far greater than the list of things they disagree on. LGBT people of faith hold to many conservative theological viewpoints and are often horrified by the promiscuity and militant views that have become stereotypical of the LGBT community. At a meeting of LGBT Christians recently one girl bemoaned how so few in the church would accept her, but how even fewer in the gay community could understand her desire to live a sexually pure, godly life and keep herself for her eventual life partner. Another person shared the story of a gay man who had recently died of AIDS having acquired the disease through a contaminated blood transfusion. On his death bed, the man grieved how most people thought of him as sexually promiscuous even though he was dying a virgin. He'd not had sex with a man or woman and was perhaps the most sexually pure person most people in the room had known.

There is no reason why the traditional church should continue to exclude and isolate the LGBT faith community from its fellowship, given the call to unity in scripture and the common beliefs we share. But there are also additional reasons that the journey should be taken together, based on the differences between the two groups. History is written by the "winners" and there is no doubt that the traditional church has used its muscle against the minority LGBT community. As a result, from that place of oppression, gay Christians have been given a unique insight into the life and work of Jesus. For instance, in discussions with a lesbian woman recently, she shared how in the traditional church, when we read a story of Jesus reaching out to somebody on the fringe, the traditional mindset is to identify with Jesus and reach out to those on the margins in our community.

When a gay person reads the same story, they identify with the person on the fringe, having experienced the same sort of ridicule and prejudice at the hands of religious people. They have a very real sense of what it's like to experience the hand of God reach into their world and embrace them firmly. Grace and forgiveness is all the more real and they carry a perspective on the gospel that the traditional church needs to rehear and relearn, realizing that God uses the despised to speak into the lives of those that are not (1 Cor 1:28).³⁴

As already stated, a pastoral response to homosexuality must be biblically based, but also must be based on things that are widely acknowledged to be true. The three truths summarized above are not the basis for any worldwide debate, nor are they dividing whole denominations or causing local congregations to implode. They do, however, state clearly our position as sinners, all of us, before God; the sanctifying work of the Spirit in the lives of all believers; and the call to unity in the body of Christ. There is no basis in these truths for the isolation or persecution of people based on their sexuality. There is strong basis for walking together, learning from each other, despite our minimal differences. And there is a firm platform for engaging in a new discussion *with* the LGBT community to discern where God is leading the church. It is the purpose of the next section to explore in more detail *what* a pastoral response could look like based on these larger biblical truths.

A Pastoral Response to Homosexuality

The pastoral response that I am proposing in this paper takes into account pastoral care as a parable of Jesus, plus the biblical truths that we are all sinners, in the process of being sanctified by the Holy Spirit and called to unity in Christ. It acknowledges the difficulties the body of Christ is encountering with the interpretation of a small number of passages, but seeks a way forward on these issues *with* the LGBT community. In light of the history of persecution of LGBT people that has been condoned by the Church, I will assume the burden of making the first moves lies *with* the

³⁴ As has been the case with feminist and liberation theologians.

Church. Being “Parables of Jesus” means that we must be involved in “incarnational mission” that sees us leave our place of comfort and be *with* those whom we are trying to reach and care for.

A pastoral response to the LGBT community, in some ways, will be no different to any other people group. However, there are unique needs and challenges that are quite foreign to heterosexual people, but which gay people must face all the time. The process of self-awareness leading to coming out, and then exploring and accepting one’s orientation can be a very lonely, traumatic and confusing time for a LGBT person and a time where “travelling companions” are desperately needed. Family members of LGBT people also face their own “coming out” and must wrestle with their feelings and responses to the news that the orientation of someone they love is different. LGBT people from ethnic and religious minorities, as well as the disabled, face enormous obstacles. The elderly are barred from moving into aged care with their life-long, same-sex partners because their status as a couple is legally unrecognized. Of course, those living with HIV/AIDS are treated as the “unclean” of our time. People in all of these situations, both inside and outside the Church, need to be loved and cared for by more than just the LGBT community. All of them need to be free from the oppression and anxiety that has been unfairly placed on them. The love of God, communicated by those from the faith community that care for LGBT people, needs to be told and displayed without fear. This is a pastoral response to homosexuality.

“Sin” and the Pastoral Response

For heterosexual people, there is never any thought of ever having to declare one’s sexuality, nor is there any pressure to hide it. Yet homosexual people are faced with both of these from the moment they suspect their sexuality might be different from what is considered by the majority to be “normal”. In churches where homosexuality is taught to be an abomination in the eyes of God, the fear of expressing a homosexual orientation is overwhelming and often results in the person leaving the church forever.

However, a pastoral response to the LGBT community recognizes that we are all sinners, and rather than automatically signing a gay person up to a reparative therapy program, will walk with them through the journey of self discovery and the process of discerning a way forward.

In his well read work on pastoral care, Clinebell suggests that there are five functions of pastoral care. One is *healing* which aims to restore a person to wholeness and lead them beyond the present circumstances they find themselves in. Another is *sustaining* which helps a person endure and transcend the present circumstance. Both of these functions are important for a gay to person deal with the inner conflicts and move towards a life of peace and wholeness as they begin the coming out process.³⁵

Contrary to what a heterosexual person might think, “coming out” for a gay person involves a number of stages that can span years. It is not a single moment in time that divides life into pre- and post-gay. Kundtz and Schlager identify 5 stages of coming out:

- a) *Pre-Coming Out* is the time when an individual wrestles with the internal tension brought about when a different sexual orientation is suspected.
- b) *Coming Out* is the period when a person begins to tell others of their sexual orientation. It is a difficult and unpredictable time, and one in which strong support networks are vital.
- c) *Exploration* is the stage where a person now asks, “What does this mean?” types of questions.
- d) *First Relationships* are a natural progression from the exploration stage when an individual starts to form friendships and relationship as a gay person.
- e) *Integration* is the final point of resolution when the individual if a healthy, fully functioning member of society and comfortably identified as gay.³⁶

³⁵ Clinebell, H. *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth*. (Nashville: Abington Press, 1984) 42

³⁶ Kundtz, D.J. & Schlager B.S, *Ministry Among God’s Queer Folk*, 140-157

The pastoral functions of healing and sustaining are vital at this point of a gay person's life. An LGBT person needs to be reassured that, as they explore their newly discovered orientation, God has not abandoned them, nor has God's church. Bad decisions at each stage of the coming out process can easily be made that cause deep wounds that last a lifetime. Rather than isolate a person and force them to take the journey on their own, the faith community should draw around the person, offering compassionate guidance towards healthy decisions, healing and wholeness.

A pastoral response to the coming out stage will also mean the faith community will act as a mediator when conflict arises. Families and parents often find it difficult to understand why their loved one is gay, and they blame themselves for doing something wrong. This can lead to a brewing anger directed at the LGBT community. The person who has come out can respond with disappointment at the response, which can also lead to anger directed back to the friends and family who are labeled as "homophobes." Families divide and fracture and the pain is magnified. Crooks and Baur encouraged people coming out to rely heavily on patience and allow time for their new identity to sink in. A gay person may have had years to wrestle with their orientation and forget that for their friends and family the news is unexpected and raw. Anger needs to be controlled for the sake of sustaining family relationships.³⁷

In the church, the coming out of somebody loved and respected can be a very awkward time for everybody. The heterosexual people don't know what to say and the gay person feels like everybody is looking. It is important for pastoral leaders at this stage to openly demonstrate their care, love and acceptance of the gay person to give others a lead on how to act. This is being a parable of Jesus both for the gay person and the heterosexual people that are not sure what to do. Whether the faith community makes a public statement or not about the person's sexuality is up to the church, but it should be approached with the utmost care. Perhaps a better approach, for LGBT

³⁷ Crooks, R. & Baur, K. *Our Sexuality: Eleventh Edition* (California: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2008) 266-271

young people at least, would be to develop a “rite of passage” that includes a coming out ceremony that affirms both ones sexuality and faith. Testimonies of gay people at their baptism should also be encouraged so the faith community can see and hear how God has been at work in their lives.

Unfortunately, the reality of our world means that the coming out stage of many gay people doesn't happen when they are young and single. Due to the way homosexuality was viewed in years gone by, gay people were pressured into keeping their sexual orientation a secret and would masquerade as a heterosexual person for reasons of self-preservation. This often included getting married and raising a family. I have encountered numerous stories where one partner in a marriage has suppressed a same sex orientation to the point of despair. Rather than talk openly about their struggles, they have hidden their sexuality but sought release and fulfillment through homosexual affairs and secret sexual encounters. When this is discovered and admitted, the marriage falls apart, the family disintegrates, and all involved describe living in a fog in which nothing seems clear. The situation is extremely difficult and there are no easy answers. Vows have been broken and people betrayed. This needs to be the first point of concern for those involved in the pastoral care. Whilst an extended discussion of this scenario is beyond the scope of this paper, it does reinforce the need to properly care for those younger people of the LGBT community in a way that does not force them down a path that sets them up for enormous pain in the future. A pastoral approach, in the first instance, will move towards wholeness and sustain a gay person through the coming out phase into a healthy life.

Encouraging a young LGBT person to live life as a healthy, gay person is not something the church has traditionally done nor have parents expected. Thus a pastoral response requires that we travel together with the friends and family of the gay person. Parents in particular find the event very traumatic and go through similar coming out stages. In my twenty years of youth ministry experience, I came to realize that the best response from parents was to love their gay child just as they would their heterosexual child. Parents should talk openly about their feelings and discoveries, become as informed as possible, stand up for their children when there is prejudice, and welcome

their gay friends. This does not require that the parents agree with or accept all of their child's choices, but it does reinforce the young person's self esteem and self-worth. Most importantly it helps avoid the spiral into depression and suicide of so many gay, young people.

For LGBT people of faith, the coming out stages must also include questions that relate to God and how faith is expressed in their lives. Discipleship that includes being true to one's sexuality while at the same time being expressed within a God-directed life should be the concern of the church and offered in a way that is caring, sensitive and validates their worth as a human being.

“Sanctification” and the Pastoral Response

Clinebell's functions of pastoral care also include *guiding* and *nurturing* which help a care-seeker navigate the array of life choices before them and reach their God given potential.³⁸ In the church setting we call this “discipleship” which exposes a person to teaching and experiences that allow room for critical thinking and formation to happen. In the midst of this the Spirit of God acts to make us holy, or sanctifies us.

A pastoral response to homosexuality in the church will not just assist a person and their family in the stages of coming out, but will also help chart a course for discovering and living out what it means to be a LGBT person of faith. Sadly, there has been little work done in this area as the traditional response has been to either suppress or try and change a same sex orientation rather than seeking a more robust, healthy faith. A full exploration of LGBT discipleship is beyond the scope of this paper, but I would emphasize that sanctification is a work of God's Spirit, and what that work looks like is up to God. What is the best for the faith development of a LGBT person is a matter for prayer and discernment together *with* the individual.

In my experience, the most common alternatives that are before a LGBT person of faith are:

³⁸ Clinebell, H. *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth*,

- a) Ignore the same sex orientation and try to live as a heterosexual, fulfilling roles in the home, work and church just like any other heterosexual person. While this is not a recommended course of action, it still is chosen at times. Usually this happens when a person is still in the very early stages of coming out and should still be respected and honoured.
- b) Try and change the sexual orientation through ex-gay programs. While there is still a lot of debate about the success and well being of participants in these programs, care givers should still respect the decision of a person to try and change. If a LGBT person is married and wants to honour those vows, the skills an ex-gay program teaches may help them live a faithful married life
- c) Come out and live as a celibate person. As mentioned previously, this is a decision that should never be taken lightly as celibacy is a difficult road to travel. Should this path be chosen, lots of support will be necessary. Their orientation should not be ignored, but at the same time, accountability and support lovingly offered by the church community.
- d) Come out and live a sexually moral lifestyle. Heterosexual people might find it unexpected, but Christian LGBT people generally do want to honour God with their bodies and express their sexuality in Godly ways. This means waiting for someone who they think they can spend the rest of their life with. It also means the church needs to rethink its position on blessing same sex relationships so it can fully support a couple in a same sex union in their desire to pursue a life of holiness.

Discipleship is not a process by which we all transformed into clones of the perfect Christian. Instead, it involves becoming the person that God has designed us to be, within the limits that are set from living in a broken world. Smedes says that we have the responsibility of helping the LGBT person to, "Make the best life they can within the limits of what an errant nature gives them."³⁹

³⁹ Smedes, L.B. "Exploring the Morality of Homosexuality" in Wink, W. (ed) *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999) 81

Complaining about a sexually immoral lifestyle without allowing the opportunity for lifelong commitments to be recognized is perhaps the most hypocritical view in the traditional church's stance on homosexuality. Even if a church doesn't agree to the idea of gay marriage in theory, there is the obligation to help people live as morally as possible. Life-long, committed, monogamous relationships are surely the best option available for most LGBT people of faith.

Discipleship and sanctification are about far more than sexuality. They involve all areas of our lives and so a pastoral response will avoid making sexuality the main issue of every teaching opportunity or proclamation of the Word. The Spiritual Disciplines that form the daily rhythm and practice of Christian life need to be taught and practiced in a LGBT person's life just as much as in a heterosexual person's life. We all need to learn to pray. We all need to worship. We all need to study the scriptures and meditate on the messages the Spirit whispers to us. We all need to fast in response to critical times in life. We all need times of silence and solitude. We all need to serve the body and the wider community, be good neighbours, participate in the sacraments and become parables of Jesus ourselves. These things should be the focus of our life together as the body of Christ and the expression of our sexualities should be woven into them in a natural and unassuming way.

For this to happen, it will mean opening all areas of ministry in the life of a congregation to LGBT people. This doesn't mean starting specific groups and ministries that LGBT people can go to, but allowing them to serve as youth group leaders, small group participants, band members and the like, with the same requirements and expectations as heterosexual members.

Unfortunately, many gay people feel the prejudice and persecution they receive gives the license to live however they want and still demand that their lifestyles be recognized and affirmed by the church. Equally unfortunate is the fact that many heterosexual people simply assume that all gay people are sexually promiscuous and are not capable of living moral lives. Both of these extremes are unhelpful, but they do point to the need of developing a sexual ethic, or a form of sexual discipleship, that equips the LGBT community to live God honouring lives as whole people.

Setting standards for life is difficult, and living up to them is harder - for both heterosexual and homosexual people. It is only with the mutual support and love of others that we can achieve any success and allow room for sanctification, the work of the Spirit, to take place. Hence the need for unity in a pastoral response to homosexuality in the church.

“Unity” and the Pastoral Response

The apostle Paul’s letter to the Roman Christians encourages them to weep and laugh with those that are experiencing the bad and the good parts of life (Rom 12:15). In his letter to the Corinthian Christians, he says that if one part of the body of Christ suffers, then all parts suffer (1 Cor 12:26). Identifying with those that are poor, hungry, oppressed, marginalized or suffering in anyway has been a hallmark of many of the great people and movements of faith. What those that are suffering think of those helping is irrelevant, as is their religious convictions. What is important is that those that follow Jesus, the Christian Church, identify with those that are suffering in a way that shares the burden and offers hope of a better life. German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, states it this way:

The fellowship of Christ’s sufferings reaches beyond the community of Christ and its martyrs, for these sufferings are end time sufferings, which take possession of the whole creation. But who are the victims of “the sufferings of this present time?” (Phil). They are the weak, the poor and the sick. In the struggle for power which is the trademark of “this world”, the weak suffer most, the oppressed are sacrificed first of all, the children are the first to die.⁴⁰

The church must not begin to protest only when the state interferes with the church itself. It must already protest as soon as state power becomes lawless, unjust and inhumane.⁴¹

There are many that fall into the category of “poor” on our planet, and perhaps even more that could be called “oppressed”. The LGBT community may be relatively wealthy in the Western context but nevertheless they are still oppressed because of their sexuality. Relationships are not recognized, which makes partners intelligible for government benefits freely available to other

⁴⁰ Moltmann, J. *The Way of Jesus Christ* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1993) 157

⁴¹ Moltmann, J. *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 201

couples. Churches bar LGBT people from participating in church life. Workplaces fire LGBT with no reason, and families isolate their gay members. School becomes intolerable, church, work and home become places to fear, and there seems little in the way of refuge.

In our time and culture, the LGBT community are an oppressed group of people. Regardless of what the church thinks about their sexuality and its expression, and regardless of what LGBT people think about the church, the body of Christ has a Biblical mandate to stand with them in the face of persecution. Even in the recent Australian federal election, it was the “Christian” political parties that were speaking the loudest against gay rights.⁴² Prominent church leaders blame the push by some in government for LGBT rights as the influence of Satan.⁴³ Television evangelists go as far as to blame the LGBT community for terrorist attacks and natural disasters.⁴⁴ All of these things do nothing but promote the oppression of gay people and push them further to the margins.

A pastoral response to the oppression of homosexual people is to stand with them, shoulder to shoulder, in the face of opposition. It gives voice to the need for equal rights and recognition that gay people are not out to make the world homosexual, but just want to be recognized for who they are. They are not perverts or child molesters, and they pose no threat to heterosexual marriage in the slightest. This message needs to be told clearly, and the church should be the one to say it.

In association with the mandate to stand up for the rights of the oppressed, is the call for unity. In John 17, Jesus prays that all those that follow him will share the bond of unity that the Father and Son enjoy (John 17:21). With the exclusion of LGBT from many mainstream churches and the division of entire denominations over the ordination of gay and lesbian ministers, “Gay Churches” or “Affirming Churches” have begun appearing around the world. The Metropolitan Community Church was founded by Troy Perry in 1968 as a place where LGBT people of faith could

⁴² <http://www.smh.com.au/technology/technology-news/family-first-candidates-gay-twitter-slur-20100808-11q7p.html> (Accessed August 12th 2010)

⁴³ <http://www.news.com.au/national/evil-spells-are-being-cast-on-parliament/story-e6frfkvr-1225785775088> (Accessed August 12th 2010)

⁴⁴ <http://www.snopes.com/rumors/falwell.asp> (Accessed August 12th 2010)

come and worship.⁴⁵ The MCC movement has now spread worldwide, but receives little recognition from other Christian traditions. The work the MCC does has given birth to many remarkable ministries, but in my own work with the LGBT people of Melbourne many have expressed that they don't want to be part of a "Gay Church" or a church that makes such a big deal of sexuality. They want to be part of a church where God is the big deal.

Returning to the thoughts of Moltmann, he says on unity:

The unity of the gathered congregation is visible and experienced in the fellowship of people who are themselves different. It is no way a fortuitous result of the proclamation and the administration of the sacraments, but is, in association with these, itself a sign of hope.⁴⁶

If the assembled church is the confessing church, then it will represent the unity in Christ and the Spirit that makes all things new in the midst of the conflicts of its social and political situation.⁴⁷

According to Moltmann then, not only should the church stand up *for* the LGBT community against its oppression, but it should also stand *with* the LGBT community in its worship of God. Because we are all sinners and because we are all being changed by the spirit, we *can* stand with our brothers and sisters of same sex orientation in unity. However, the wedge that has been driven between the LGBT community and the church is deep and wide.

Clinebell's final function of pastoral care is that of *reconciling*, which seeks to reconcile relationships between human beings and between people and God.⁴⁸ According to Paul, it is a ministry given to us by God (2 Cor 5:18), and thus is part of the active mission of the church. Reconciling the church community and the LGBT community together is needed so both groups can move forward. Taking a pastoral approach will mean the church takes the first steps in a practical act of reconciliation with the ultimate goal of unity.

⁴⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Troy_Perry (Accessed August 12th 2010)

⁴⁶ Moltmann, J. *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1993) 342

⁴⁷ Moltmann, J. *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 345

⁴⁸ Clinebell, H. *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth* 42.

A Way Forward

In Acts 15, when the early church was wrestling with the place of the Gentiles in God's Kingdom, they came to realize that God was doing a new and unexpected thing. God's Kingdom stretched far beyond the boundaries that they had once thought firm and now included a people once regarded as defiled. These new Christians were not required to keep the law or observe the feasts or festivals that were important to the Jews. Instead, they were to live lives as faithful Gentile Christians and to abstain only from those things that prevented table fellowship with Jewish Christians.⁴⁹ Eating together at the same table was an important part of building the unity of the newly established church.

In our time, God is doing a work amongst the LGBT community that the traditional church has never expected. A deep, spiritual longing is giving voice to our oppressed gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, demanding that we rethink what we have believed, taught and practiced with respect to the LGBT community and faith. Like the early church, the table has been set for us to sit down, eat together and hear the stories of what God has been doing amongst the LGBT people so that we can work out a way to practice our faith together. The theological arguments and Biblical debates should not stop, but they should only continue within the context of a pastoral response. We are *all* sinners and none sits in judgment over another. If one thinks the practice or belief of another is in error, then we need to come to the table to discuss it and seek a resolution. We are *all* being sanctified by the Spirit of God, but we can't dictate what that work of the Spirit might be or how long it will take. Again, the table is the place we can tell the stories of what God is doing and encourage each other to stay strong and faithful in the journey of life. We are *all* called to unity in the body of Christ and the table is a physical expression of that. Despite our differences, we can eat together and discuss the way forward in unity regardless of what we don't agree on.

⁴⁹ Bruce, F.F. *NICNT The Book of Acts (Revised)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1988) 295

There is still much to work through in the debate about homosexuality in the church. I have mentioned the issue of gay marriage in this paper but there is much discussion still to be had about when and how gay partnerships could be recognized and blessed. Questions abound about the ethics of letting gay couples adopt and raise children. The place of LGBT community in church leadership will likely cause more division before it does unity. Caring for those that suffer from HIV/AIDS, the lepers of our time, requires the church to respond quickly and recognize it as more than a "gay man's disease."

It is my hope that as the Church, we can put aside our prejudice and fear and approach the debate pastorally, working through the issues gathered around the table and remembering that we are all sinners, we're all being changed, and that we are called to walk the path of life in unity.

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