

## Social Issues and Resources Panel

# Pastoral Guidelines – Homosexuality

General Assembly Resolution - 2006:

*“That the General Assembly recognising homophobic attitudes within our Church and society request the Social Issues Panel to prepare guidelines to help our Church to develop more sensitive and effective pastoral care.”*

Part of the fulfilment of this resolution required by the Assembly was direct contact with homosexual people.



## 1. Preamble

- 1.1 While a person's sexuality is a very important part of their lives, it does not define who they are. Biblically we as a church maintain that a person is defined in the first instance in terms of their relationship to God - creation in relation to Creator. To refer to a person as a homosexual, a lesbian or a heterosexual is therefore to narrow their identity to their sexuality alone. For this reason it seems better to refer to 'people' who have 'same sex attraction'.
- 1.2 It is clear from the study carried out by ShOut<sup>1</sup> (see below) that many people in churches who have same sex attraction are afraid to be open about it for fear of how they will be treated by those in their church, amongst others. There is no reason to assume Presbyterians are any different. Representatives of the Gay Helpline state that they have regular calls from people belonging to PCI who are unwilling to disclose their same sex attractions. Evidence of homophobic attitudes is therefore largely anecdotal.
- 1.3 The position of the General Assembly has been stated in other publications, mainly *'The Church and the Homosexual'* Report June 1979<sup>2</sup> with appended comment for consideration at Presbyteries. It is not the remit of this report to change that position but to suggest guidelines whereby our Church may *'develop more sensitive and effective pastoral care.'* Hence references regarding the nature of same sex attraction are made only with pastoral care in mind.

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1 Shout – "The needs of young people in Northern Ireland who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and or transgender". December 2003. A study commissioned by the Department of Education and carried out through Youthnet N Ireland. The sample covered 362 young people from rural and urban backgrounds across the communities.

2. 'In commending the Report to the Presbyteries for study and comment, the Assembly considered it desirable: "to draw the attention of all people to the fact that the Holy Scriptures clearly condemn homosexual practices, as they also condemn heterosexual immorality, but as clearly declare to those so involved, the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ with the promise of forgiveness and strength in response to repentance and faith'.

## 2. The need for pastoral guidelines (The experience of people with same sex attractions)

- 2.1 It is clear that people of all ages who have same sex attractions are very reluctant to tell others because of fear, prejudice etc. Keeping their feelings hidden out of fear has a significant impact on mental health.
- 2.2 In the ShOut study of 2003, 362 young people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual and or transgender were surveyed. Among others they identified the following negative responses.
- 126 (35%) had suffered physical abuse
  - 237 (65%) had suffered verbal abuse
  - 104 (29%) had attempted suicide
  - 95 (26%) engaged in self-harm
  - 124 (34%) abused alcohol

Comments from the study include –

‘I am out to everyone I know except my family. I don’t want to lose my parents. A fear of being disowned.’

‘A neighbour told my parents and they threw me out, they said I was disgusting.’

‘In church groups I helped for my Duke of Edinburgh Award. When they discovered my sexuality they asked me to leave as they didn’t feel it was appropriate to have someone like me working in such an environment ie religious setting with an influence over young children.’

- 2.3 The Panel met with a group of young adults with same sex attractions. The majority had a Presbyterian background or were still involved in Presbyterian churches. The following is a combination of several stories and typifies common experience.

**Bob’s story.** *I was brought up in a strong, loving, Christian home and was very actively involved in a lively, evangelical Presbyterian church. I became a Christian when I was young and was well taught and have*

*a real love for the Bible. I was very committed to the youth work in my church and tried to live for Christ and witness for Him inside and outside the Church. During my teens I began to realise that I was different. I found myself attracted to boys rather than girls. I didn't choose it to be so, it just was. I resisted it, prayed against it. I understood well the Bibles' teaching on homosexuality and wrestled to overcome my feelings and pretended to be like 'the lads'. Eventually in my late teens I confided in a Christian friend. He continued to talk to and pray for me over a number of years. Knowing and respecting the churches teaching I practiced celibacy but felt alone, fearful and overwhelmed. The pressure of keeping it to myself, the feelings of shame, the guilt of feeling that I was living a lie and the fear of how the news would affect my parents and my church life eventually took its toll on my mental health. I had to take various medicines for depression and on one occasion came very close to committing suicide.*

*People in the church would crack jokes about 'Gays' and I just wanted to crawl into a hole. How could I open up to them when my struggles were joked about? I respect my minister and his teaching, but when homosexuality was mentioned in church the Biblical position of calling practising homosexuality sin was outlined without ever a word of compassion or understanding for people like me who were struggling so hard and hadn't chosen to feel the way I did.*

*One of my greatest struggles was that I had always been brought up to respect and to tell the truth. Yet here I was living and telling lies to protect my family and myself. Eventually I felt I had no other option but to tell my parents about my struggles. They were devastated and so were my friends at church. It is devastating when all who made you and shaped and directed your life turn on you. I am not bitter, I still love my family and respect my church but when I really needed someone to listen to me without judgement, there was no one. I would love to be straight. It would cause so much less pain but for the sake of my own sanity I have eventually had to accept that I am gay. I am both a Christian who loves God and His word but I am also gay.*

## The fears and struggles of parents, wives and husbands, wider family

- 2.4 'A bereavement' is a common description used by parents on hearing that their son or daughter has same sex attractions. There is also a loss of face, and of friends. *'My son lost friends and so did I.'* There can be a loss of place and respect within the church. Also there is the shattering of hopes and dreams. *'I may never have a grandchild.'*
- 2.5 It also raises difficult questions.
- How could I ever welcome a same sex partner into the home?
  - What if they want to share the same bedroom?
  - How do we approach this with the grandparents?
  - How can I continue to show the same unconditional love to my child when I cannot agree with their lifestyle?
- 2.6 Some parents come to terms with the issue by accepting and endorsing the lifestyle of their son or daughter. Others feel they cannot do so and constantly live with the tension of wanting to show unconditional love to the son or daughter while not endorsing a particular lifestyle. This is extremely difficult, as it is perceived as rejection.
- 2.7 One mother's experience.
- She told how her son had attempted suicide several times before he eventually 'came out'. There followed a grieving process before she came to terms with it, but still needs support. She found that she lost friends within the church and felt she had no one within the Presbyterian Church she could turn to for understanding and help. Only through external information and a support group independent of PCI was she able to find help. She found pulpit ministry difficult as it either only condemned same sex relationships or referred to people with same sex attractions in a negative light with little compassion or understanding for the struggle they go through. She has since found support in a different congregation.*

- 2.8 If this is the general experience of people in our Presbyterian Church then it is evident that here has been a lack of understanding, compassion and grace. People with same sex attractions have found that they have not been treated with the same compassion as those who have presented other pastoral needs, including those sexual in nature.

*‘We drive them away from our churches, especially evangelical churches, where they assume that they will be condemned. We distort their view of God by implying that He shares our hate of gay people. Our passing remarks and sweeping generalisations in favour of ‘a hard line against gays’ force many silent sufferers into the misery of secret loneliness...Homophobia is out. Fear, disgust, hostility and self-righteousness are not Christian reactions. If they dominate my reactions to gay people I am not yet fit to help or counsel them; I need help and counsel myself.’<sup>3</sup>*

- 2.9 This being the case there is a need to call such attitudes sinful and for there to be repentance on our part as a church.

### 3. Towards a definition of ‘homophobia’

- 3.1 Homophobia is usually defined as ‘an irrational fear and prejudice towards homosexual people and the issue of homosexuality’.

- 3.2 **Andrew Goddard**, in Fulcrum May 2006 defines homophobia as – ‘the victimisation or diminishment of human beings whose affections happen to be ordered towards people of the same sex.’ He comments that this definition is not based on ‘rights’ but on attitudes or behaviour ‘that represent a denial of the humanity of certain people because of their imagined or actual sexual attractions, orientation, relationships or identity.’

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3. Pierson L, ‘No Gay Areas? Pastoral Care of Homosexual Christians. Grove Booklets, Cambridge, 1997 pgs 8, 15.

- 3.3 The Panel believes this to be a more helpful definition for the reason stated and also because it moves away from defining a person in terms of perceived sexuality. In addition it allows us to state that taking the particular Biblical position we do, as a Church, on same sex practices is not in and of itself homophobia.
- 3.4 It is possible therefore for evangelical Christians to hold that the factors involved in why a person has same-sex attractions may often be too complex to untangle and that there was no choice made on the part of the person to feel the way they do.<sup>4</sup> We are all fallen human beings and for each one the fall has affected our sexuality as it has all aspects of our being.
- 3.5 However, as with all areas of sexual attraction, what we do about it as individuals is a matter of choice for which we are morally responsible. This is the sentiment behind the Assembly's comment on the Report of 1979.

When we condemn homosexual practice in isolation or single it out as somehow worse than other sexual practices outside of heterosexual marriage then we demonstrate homophobic attitudes.

#### **4. The need to dispel myths**

- 'Are our children safe?'
- 'It might be infectious'
- 'They will lead our other young people astray!'
- 'They are the cause of AIDS/HIV!'
- 'It's all about sex, sex, sex!'

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4. Despite all attempts in the media to push the idea that same sex attraction is purely genetic the jury is still out and may remain so. While there are studies that point towards biological factors there are other studies that lean strongly towards the nurture side of the debate. The 'Gay Rights' activist Matthew Parris has accepted that the evidence is inconclusive. (The Times, 5 August 2006) Gender Development involves a variety of factors of which biological make-up is but one. It also includes family relationships, the surrounding culture and a person's unique reaction to the other factors involved. Irrespective of this the issue for evangelical Christians is what a person does about their sexual feelings. It is no more Biblically acceptable to engage in heterosexual intercourse outside of marriage than same sex intercourse. Marriage being defined as part of God's order for creation from before the Fall and between one man and one woman.

There is a great need to dispel such myths about same sex attractions. Children are no more at risk and possibly less so from a person with same sex attractions than from one with heterosexual attractions. Homosexuality is NOT paedophilia! Nor is a person with same sex attractions anymore a sexual predator than someone with heterosexual desires. In fact we often show our double standards by looking on 'chasing the girls' as a natural thing even when it is downright lustful. Whereas a girl who does the same is looked on as 'cheap' and a person with same sex attractions as perverted!

Such myths are very hurtful, humiliating, degrading and condemning to those with same sex attractions. They are also characteristic of the lack of understanding that fuels homophobic attitudes.

## **5. The need for clarity of understanding in dialogue**

5.1 In our sex crazed society there are all kinds of abuses of the gift of sexual intimacy which God gave to us as part of our human identity. We are sexual beings! However, abuse of the gift, both heterosexual and homosexual does not deny the goodness of the gift.

5.2 As a church we maintain that in God's plan sexual intimacy is part of the two-into-one intimacy shared in the marriage relationship and only to be exercised in that relationship.

5.3 It is important to understand that while there are also abuses of sexual practices within the LGBT community<sup>5</sup> this does not mean that all people with same sex attractions engage in them.

The abuse does not negate the principle. There needs to be the recognition within the church that the desires for love (in all its aspects), intimacy, companionship etc that move heterosexual couples towards marriage are the same desires that motivate those with same sex attractions.

5.4 When a church states that it cannot agree with practising same sex relationships it is most often taken as rejection of the person because

of their perceived identity – ie ‘I am a homosexual!’ However, as a church, we believe our identity should be defined primarily in terms of our humanity before God and not in terms of sexual orientation. It would be helpful in dialogue if we focused more on the whole person before God and did not make sexuality the focus of our understanding.

- 5.5 Exploring this point of perceived identity would also promote greater understanding of those within the Presbyterian Church who wish to exercise genuine pastoral care yet maintain Biblical integrity regarding marriage as being solely between a man and a woman and sexual practice as being for that relationship alone.
- 5.6 There is the need for the Church to understand that a consistent approach is needed. Compassion begins in the pulpit and works out from there. Condemnation from the pulpit closes the door to compassionate care outside the pulpit. Pastoral care is built on proclamation.
- 5.7 The ‘rights’ dominated culture so aggressively surrounding ‘gay’ issues sends a message to the church that it is not acceptance as people that is being sought but rather endorsement of a way of life. The problem for many within the church is that while they would want to accept people in the name of Jesus Christ they cannot, in all integrity of conscience, endorse a way of life that they see as contrary to God’s Word.

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5. LGBT = Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender. This is not a particularly helpful abbreviation as, at least some, identifying as homosexual or lesbian have major issues regarding bi-sexuality. The question also has to be asked if there really is such a thing as a definable LGBT ‘community’. If we take the current trend towards identifying any likeminded group as a community then there are several ‘communities’ within the LGBT spectrum. In this sense it could be argued that the term ‘LGBT community’ does not help those who seek to be balanced and gracious in approach and wish to disassociate themselves from the excesses and aggressiveness of some.

## **6. The aim of pastoral care.**

This is not the place to discuss a definition of pastoral care, but at least it involves the process of holding in one hand the person with love and care and affirmation, and holding in the other hand the Word of God, then bringing the two together. (Eugene Peterson – The Gift)

## **7. The need for temperate language and balance in pulpit ministry**

7.1 Unhelpful words/statements – eg ‘Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve’; ‘Love the sinner, hate the sin’, sodomy, unnatural, abnormal or any of the more derogatory colloquialisms. All of these lock the door to effective pastoral care before it is even open.

7.2 It is important for the person’s family to hear some compassionate understanding of the feelings and struggles involved as well as the Biblical issues.

7.3 A balanced proclamation of God’s Word is essential. E.g. Sexual temptation and desire is not sin; all sexual sin falls short of God’s mark and can be forgiven. When we consider the *1 Cor 6* passage we might consider that perhaps there may be more idolaters, slanderers and greedy people in our congregations than “homosexual offenders”.  
*1 Cor 6 v9 (NIV)*

## **8. The need for pastoral wisdom in ‘first contact’**

8.1 For a person struggling with their sexuality to tell someone may have taken months even years. They will probably have gone through a long period of mental auditioning, weighing up different friends, family members, acquaintances, before deciding whom to tell. Even then it takes a great deal of courage to ‘come out’. The fear of rejection, loss of love, even hatred may be almost palpable at the point of disclosure. From that moment there is no retreat. It is therefore important that a minister, elder, leader, family member

understands that their first reactions have the potential to crush or bring hope. The person will hear body language and attitude even more than words.

8.2 What they do not need to hear at that moment:

- That they are imagining it
- That they are sick
- That they are a disgrace or a pervert
- That they are demon possessed

*At this point* they do not even need to hear what the Bible says about homosexuality

8.3 What they do need to hear at that moment:

- That they are still loved no matter what
- That God's love has not changed
- That they have displayed great courage in telling you
- That you appreciate the trust placed in you
- That you will seek to listen and to understand what they have been going through

## **9. The need for long term care and possibly counselling**

9.1 It is imperative to state that the role of pastoral care is NOT to force a person with same sex attractions into counselling let alone suggest demonic activity. We recognise the danger of suggesting this person is sick and needs to be healed. All of us, in various ways are in need of the healing grace of Christ.

9.2 It is sufficiently documented that there are those who have moved from the position of having same sex attractions to being heterosexual. For some this has come about through careful, professional counselling. For others it has come about by regeneration through faith in Jesus Christ. For still others a combination of both! This is entirely possible for some whose sexual identity has been part and parcel of a confused personal identity. Some may claim that such people were never truly homosexual or lesbian in the first place.

That may be so and it is important to note that for many, even should they wish to undergo counselling their same sex attractions may not change.

- 9.3 Many teenagers experience same sex attractions. For most these do not linger but are part of their sexual development. For others their sexual development can be arrested by various factors in their upbringing including close family relationships and family breakdown. In our culture, that includes the promotion of alternative sexualities, this can result in some young people being confused about their sexuality. They may need help to understand and work through deeper-seated insecurities, issues of forgiveness, gender acceptance and self-acceptance before they can come to terms with their sexual identity.
- 9.4 Certain principles must be taken on board in all pastoral care and especially in this matter.
- (i) Confidentiality is paramount.
  - (ii) Quick prayers and chapter and verse sticking plasters are to be avoided.
  - (iii) The pastoral carer must be aware and accepting of his/her own sexual brokenness.
  - (iv) The person being cared for should not be ostracised. Churches must continue to live with those who act and behave in ways seen as inconsistent with God's word – all in Christ are parts of one body, e.g. because a person has same sex attractions does not make him/her a bad musician or administrator!
  - (v) When counselling help is sought, trained, skilled helpers should carry it out and the pastoral carer must be willing to refer on.
  - (vi) When counselling is not sought it may be an encouragement to help the person to set personal boundaries and to be accountable. This is just as helpful with those who are heterosexual. Secular society is seeking to develop various mentoring schemes. Jesus saw the need for such mentoring with the 12 a long time ago but we have much room for improvement in the church, for youth and adults alike.<sup>6</sup>

(vii) That we recognise, preach and practise the fact that our failures are not final.

## **10. The need for the Church to be the Church**

The church has a crucial responsibility to create an environment of love, understanding, acceptance, patience, forgiveness, openness and grace.

Those with pastoral responsibility might –

- 10.1 Recognise sympathetically in services and teaching the struggles involved for individuals and their families.
- 10.2 Actively promote an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance rather than fear and rejection.
- 10.3 Provide books, tapes etc. to help individuals with same-sex attractions and their families and the congregation to be informed about the issues involved.
- 10.4 Actively promote church family intimacy and the inclusion of those with same-sex attractions.
- 10.5 Actively encourage small group / cell group involvement.
- 10.6 Actively help our Youth Groups to be informed, compassionate and caring.
- 10.7 Explore the possibility of support groups (possibly linking several churches) both for those with same-sex attractions and their families.

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6. As stated, the position of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is that sexual practice is only for heterosexual marriage. As a church therefore our aim ought to be to help ALL unmarried people to cope with sexual pressures. We realise this raises issues regarding celibacy. While this is an area of debate in relation to the 'hope of marriage', essentially ongoing sexual pressures still need to be controlled.

10.8 Make use of the key church resources of families and appropriate friendships with older leaders to mentor and nurture young people outside their immediate family.

10.9 Acknowledge a person's right to a private life.

10.10 Our wider church might also create a PCI 'Safe Space' for those who need to talk about their sexuality.

- Such a safe space could be phoned or visited and should preserve confidentiality.
- This place / space should stop short of being a counselling centre as the very nature of the struggle for many is that they do not feel they need counselling but do need to talk in confidence about how they feel. Some may later seek counselling help and others may not. But such a 'safe space' would be a tangible step in alleviating the cost in terms of mental health for a significant number of people within our church and would send a strong message of compassion and care to the wider community.
- In this way a 'safe space' would provide a safety valve for Presbyterian people who feel they cannot talk to their family, minister, elders, youth worker etc.
- Those staffing such a 'safe space' should receive appropriate training, particularly in understanding the issues involved and in Christian listening skills.

## **11. The need for change**

Within our church there is the need for both repentance and greater understanding. This calls for education, careful listening and discussion.

11.2 Likewise there is the need for those who have same sex attractions to grasp that it is not easy for those who wish to be genuinely caring yet maintain Biblical integrity without giving the impression that in doing so they are rejecting the person.

11.3 In every way it is easier to stand at the side of the road, or in the pulpit, or 'on air' and shout condemnation. But it does not win hearts or minds. And it certainly does not show the pastoral care of Jesus Christ. It may be uncomfortable for some, but it is better to sit down and talk – but listen first.

## **Recommendations**

That the General Assembly -

1. Adopt the guidelines and advocate their use and practice within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.
2. Strongly state that attitudes and approaches within our congregations which, 'victimise or diminish human beings whose affections happen to be ordered towards people of the same sex' are unacceptable.
3. Encourage repentance for the occasions when persons with same sex attractions have been treated in ways severely lacking in grace within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and that the Assembly encourage an attitude of grace and mercy to be actively shown to all who struggle with different aspects of their sexuality.
4. Continue to encourage our congregations to 'Create an environment of love, acceptance, patience, forgiveness and grace.'
5. That the Board of Social Witness investigates the possibility of creating 'a safe space' for people struggling with their sexuality and that funding be sought to create such a safe space.
6. That the Board of Social Witness and the Board of Youth and Children's Ministry update the 'Loving in the Real World' resource to include more instructive material on the area of same-sex attraction.
7. Encourage the possibility of the establishment of parents' support group/s to help parents who are struggling with the issues surrounding young people who have 'come out'.