

TOWARDS TRUTH, TRUST AND CARE

A Pastoral Response to Homosexual Seventh-day Adventists in the British Union

By David Neal

‘The strongest argument in favour of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian’

(Ellen White, Ministry of Healing, p. 470)

Ministry Experience

Given the times in which we live, those engaged in pastoral ministry are called upon with increasing frequency to minister to members (and their extended families) with homosexual orientation. Such times in my ministry have included:

- Supporting a male adult who was discovered to be engaged in ‘at risk’ homosexual activity.
- Ministering to parents of a son/daughter with homosexual/lesbian orientation.
- The faithful life-long bachelor ‘struggling’ with same sex attraction.

While my ministry to homosexuals and lesbians has been infrequent, it’s clear that with changing attitudes and new laws protecting the rights of homosexuals, ministry need in this area will no doubt increase. The following reflection occurs in the context of what I believe to be a vacuum of training and support for pastors within the British Union Conference. Sure, the matter is considered in the safety of the Newbold classroom, but is probably perceived as far too sensitive to be considered in the wider church (even among the ministerial team). For a community of faith with a traditional, and ever growing fundamentalist leaning, the predictable response is; “Homosexuality is sin, repent, go and sin no more”, - end of matter.

Why this paper?

The primary reason is to invite church leaders to take the lead in reviewing ‘ministry practise’ towards homosexual members and worshippers. Without question the church family can do, and must do better in this area. This paper is not intended to be a scholarly work, and was first written prior to the publication of ‘Homosexuality, Marriage, and the Church’, by Andrews University Press in 2012, where the reader will find an excellent and comprehensive consideration of this matter. The musings in these pages are not in any way intended to be the final answer, but more of a very necessary conversation starter. The result would be that further consideration will be given to developing policy for pastoral care and practice. I approach this issue without claiming any expertise in the area of understanding homosexuality.

While it is more necessary than ever before to affirm the traditional biblical position, there is a growing need to work through the implications for pastoral care, participation, and inclusion of homosexuals in the life and work of the church. While the church stands firm to what it believes, the world is changing. Mr. & Mrs. Smith we trust will always worship with us. But the time has arrived when Mr. & Mr. Jones also wish to join us for worship and fellowship. Pastoral care in this respect is not only the responsibility of the ministry, but the entire membership. How do we receive our new friends? Our understanding of scripture will inevitably determine our attitude, actions and care.

The second reason is to give a considered response to the leadership of the European branch of Kinship (a voice of Seventh-day Adventist homosexuals seeking support from church leadership) and their conversation a few years ago with British Union Field Leaders. In 2008 the organisation widely distributed “Christianity and Homosexuality – Some Seventh-day Adventist Perspectives”. While there is a wide difference of understanding (based on a progressive, theologically liberal understanding of scripture), the level of conversation we aim between us is that of fellow pilgrims and mutual trust.

As part of this process in understanding each other, further conversation and trust building with Kinship is necessary. While a few informal conversations have taken place over the years, it's fair to say that there's not yet been a meeting of minds. Kinship's engagement with the church on the whole, has been in terms of discrimination and injustice. They believe that if they can convince the church that the bible approves of homosexuality, the church will behave differently. The church leadership on the other hand, perceives that along with the wider gay movement, Kinship wants nothing less than total acceptance of their lifestyle (idealised in monogamous same-sex marriage). So far the conversation from Kinship's perspective has only lead to disappointment and frustration.

Regrettable as this impasse is, could further engagement with Kinship focus on working towards 'best practise' pastoral care for homosexuals? While the dominant conversation in the church currently seeks to resolve the matter of ordination without regard to gender, it could be beneficial to quietly continue the conversation with Kinship, **specifically and exclusively** in the area of pastoral care. With same-sex marriage continuing to be the hot button agenda item in both religious and secular society, a proactive solution by the church, rather than usual reactive response could result in progress. Whatever outcome transpires, members of the homosexual community will probably continue to regard their oppressed journey as one of social justice, and one that continues to rumble without resolution. From their perspective, will a day ever come when their dream for total 'inclusion and acceptance' within the UK & Eire Adventist community be realised? While most unlikely, that should not prevent us from providing a pastoral care which is second to none.

The third reason is for the sake of members and ministers. The majority of our members hold to a fundamentalist view of scripture, and base their reasoning about this matter on a 'proof text' - 'literal reading' of scripture. The key words they take to heart that jump off the pages of their bible and apply are 'sodomy', 'abomination', and 'sinful lusts' - all to which 'God gave them up'. Combine this with an understanding of 'Present Truth', to 'call sin by its proper name', and that is exactly what the pastoral care approach becomes. The voice of 'unconditional love' and 'redemption' from scripture, are only faintly heard.

Making the assumption that our ministerial team will take a more mature approach to pastoral care in this area, life then becomes a challenge for the pastor, perceived by his members to be giving weak leadership. The problem is compounded with the reality that younger pastors studied and entered ministry in the 'Post Modern' era. It should not be a surprise that quite a few question the validity of traditional biblical teaching in this area. The prevailing culture of their time is of diversity and inclusivity. They are less concerned with the objective truth of a matter, but more of its relevance. That value will radically affect their approach to pastoral care and inclusiveness of homosexuals, leading to a serious disconnect with their members.

Why is the conversation so heated?

We need to consider for a moment why the discussion of homosexual relationships always simmers just below boiling point, ready to explode at any time, both in the Christian community and secular society. In the USA the conversation continues to be the major 'culture war' issue, with each group shouting at each other from either side of the battlefield. As one argument is made, a counter-argument is hurled back with greater force and angst. In the USA legislation for same-sex marriage is a priority agenda item for the political left. In Europe it is a priority agenda item for the both the left and right.

The Christian community feels in particular that it has a sacred responsibility to guard the teachings of Scripture, and speak with the authority derived from it. Secular homosexuals challenge such authority, and instead see hypocrisy and bigotry. In the church the homosexual community sees the same with greater force and disappointment, but maintain a hope that the church will take 'another look' at scripture, and one day grant the affirmation they seek.

Why is the conversation so personal?

We must confess that both the historic and current attitude of many Christians (including some in our own faith community) is bigoted leaving a legacy of mistrust, suspicion and anger. In wider society, homosexuals continue to be discriminated against. They are highly vulnerable people and often experience feelings of prejudice and persecution. With human sexuality regarded as a core part of our personality, to deny orientation and feelings is perceived as obnoxious. The voice of the homosexual is loud and clear:

- "Your traditional biblical teaching about sexuality is homophobic".
- "Your 'love the sinner & hate the sin' position is nothing more than a shallow cover for prejudice towards homosexuals.
- "It is my basic human right to determine my sexual orientation".
- "People should not be defined by their sexuality".
- "We believe that same-sex marriage is a basic human right".
- "You are denying our love".
- "You don't understand the effect that your words have".
- "You think that our love is not as good as yours".
- "There's nothing Christian about hate".
- "Your Christian attitude is offensive".
- "Why would I want to be part of an anti-homosexual organisation, I wouldn't join a racist one".
- "Why should I attend your church if all you are going to do is send me to hell"?

The Causes of Homosexuality

The nature / nurture discussion continues with the pendulum swinging back and forth. Who is trusted as an authority may determine the willingness to trust the conclusion. Simon Burton in his Jubilee Centre Paper on the causes of Homosexuality seeks to give an overview of current scientific thought. He asks the question, "What exactly does science tell us about the causes of homosexuality?" He comes up with what could be reasonably regarded as a balanced conclusion.

The paper reviews Neurohormonal Theories, Genetics, and the Psychology of Orientation and Re-Orientation. The review is detailed and technical. As a result of his review Burton warns;

“The evidence is complex, and often admits of various interpretations. This in itself should warn us way from an overly simplistic or reductionist view’... To start with, it seems highly likely that a biological disposition to homosexuality does exist. Perhaps... this is mediated through childhood temperaments such as lack of aggression and heightened sensitivity. However the triggering or activation of such a disposition seems to be determined by developmental and familial experiences, particularly rooted in the parent-child relationship. Reinforcement of such experiences may then lead to gender detachment coupled with a longing for affirmation. In puberty it is easy to see how a yearning for same-sex affirmation could then become eroticised and give rise to same-sex desire. Subsequent sexual experience and initiation into the gay subculture will only lead to an entrenching of homosexual identity. From here the path divides further. Some will remain homosexual to the day of their death never dreaming or even desiring change. Others however will choose to retrace all of their steps, however painful and gradual a process this may be, and hope eventually to emerge on a different path. The fact that it is largely motivation that separates these two groups, is a salutary reminder that choice should never be left out of the equation of human sexuality.”

(Simon Burton, Cambridge Papers, “The Causes of Homosexuality: What Science Tells Us”, The Jubilee Centre, 2006)

Is it possible to change the nature of the conversation?

The response of Kinship to a 2012 Messenger article encouraging members to respond and give a voice to same-sex marriage proposals in Scotland (or in England for that matter) is a case in point. The author(s) made an honest attempt to outline a shared feeling among conservative Christians, that UK society no longer lives by moral absolutes, and that ethical issues in our time seem to be subject to relativism. In particular it was articulated that the ‘homosexual agenda’ is far too dominant in media and culture. Concern was expressed for the impact this would have on our children. The Kinship community found the article offensive, with national church leaders receiving a riposte from a former Kinship leader. Within days the published article and the riposte, found its way onto the pages of Spectrum Magazine.

It will be a surprise to no one - that a defence of the traditional Scriptural position on this matter by any church leader in these times will always be open to criticism. Combine that with an expression of concern about the media agenda and that of wider society, and there is double trouble! Preach a traditional ‘proof text’ sermon ‘calling sin by its proper name’ with megaphone rhetoric, and the day has arrived when the preacher may be accused of a ‘hate crime’. We need to regretfully admit that some ministerial colleagues are not slow to operate in this mode. While it is more than appropriate to explain that homosexual practise is unbiblical - and consequently sinful in the eyes of God, tenor and tone in the preaching of it, are as important as the truth itself.

Other colleagues (and I trust the majority) are quick to provide ‘listening ear’, empathise, counsel and provide prayerful encouragement, as is the calling of a minister. If it is perceived that we have been lacking (individually or corporately) in this area, we confess, repent of such and will work vigorously to do better in future.

The core issue at the heart of the conversation is about how we care, and are seen to care, without compromise. I readily admit that in 'holding fast' to the authentic biblical position, this in and of itself may be seen as uncaring and discriminatory. It is the risk leaders take.

If we are tempted to give up...

"The better way is to listen before we speak, to seek to enter into the other person's world of thought and feeling, to struggle to grasp what their objections to the gospel may be, and to share with them the good news of Jesus Christ in such a way that speaks to their need. This humble, searching, challenging activity is rightly called 'contextualisation'. But it is essential to add that to contextualize the gospel is not in any way to manipulate it. Authentic evangelism necessitates 'double listening'. For Christian witnesses stand between the Word and the world, with the consequent obligation to listen to both. We listen to the Word in order to discover ever more of the riches of Christ. And we listen to the world in order to discern which of Christ's riches are needed most and how to present them in their best light."

(John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, p.110)

These principles are surely relevant to the challenge we face in the conversation we have with Kinship and homosexuals. Is it not the case that we must stay faithful to the Word without compromise, and work skilfully to determine how the gospel can meet their need? Based on these values, is it possible for our pastoral care to primarily focus on their future 'In Christ'?

Biblical Authority

For the purpose of this paper I do not intend to examine the specific passages of scripture that refer (or at least appear to refer) to the homosexual question negatively. They are well documented, and their arguments are well rehearsed. I use John Stott as a source of study with deliberate intent, for it is fair to say he has an authority as a conservative evangelical without exception. Further, he writes in a UK context, free of American cultural war baggage. He also has a personal authority in these matters, not only as a clergyman and bible scholar, but as someone who's made the calling to follow Christ as a single person.

After searching for a Scriptural view regarding homosexuality and taking into consideration the objections to it by the homosexual community, Stott remains convinced that;

"The Christian rejection of homosexual practises does not rest on a "few isolated and obscure proof texts" (as is sometimes said), whose traditional explanation (it is further claimed) can be overthrown... For the negative prohibitions of homosexual practises in Scripture make sense only in the light of its positive teaching in Genesis 1 and 2 about human sexuality and heterosexual marriage."

(John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, p.343)

The order of creation argument is familiar, and can be summarised as follows:

- God made provision for human companionship (Genesis 2:18)
- God gives divine provision to meet this human need (Genesis 2:20)
- The resulting institution is marriage (Genesis 2:23-24)

“Even the inattentive reader will be struck by the three references to “flesh: this is... flesh of my flesh...they will become one flesh”. We may be certain that this is deliberate, not accidental. It teaches that heterosexual intercourse in marriage is more than a union; it is a kind of reunion. It is not the union of alien persons who do not belong to each other and cannot appropriately become one flesh. On the contrary, it is the union of two persons who originally were one, were then separated from each other, and now in the sexual encounter of marriage come together again... Heterosexual intercourse is much more than a union of bodies; it is a blending of complementary personalities through which, in the midst of prevailing alienation, the rich created oneness of human being is experienced again. And the complementarity of male and female sexual organs is only a symbol at the physical level of a much deeper spiritual complementarity.

(John Stott, Issues Facing Christians Today, p.346)

Christ is on record as endorsing the order of creation view and with it the sanctity of marriage (Mark 10:4-9). All our understanding about the order of creation is pointless unless it is recognised that this is to use Austin Farrar’s phrase, ‘the body of doctrine which he took over and transformed’. Ellen White echoes the thought;

“In order to be rightly understood and appreciated, every truth in the word of God, from Genesis to Revelation must be studied in the light that streams from the cross of Calvary.”

(Ellen White, Gospel Workers, p. 315)

Stott goes on to demonstrate that scripture condemns every sexual relationship outside of marriage;

“And scripture envisages no other kind of marriage or sexual intercourse, for God provided no alternative. Christians should not therefore single out homosexual intercourse for special condemnation. The fact is that every kind of sexual relationship and activity which deviates from God’s revealed intention is ipso facto displeasing to him and under his judgement. This includes

- *Polygamy and polyandry (which infringes the “one man – one woman principle”)*
- *Clandestine unions (since these have involved no decisive public leaving of parents)*
- *Casual encounters and temporary liaisons*
- *Adultery and many divorces (which are incompatible with “cleaving” and with Jesus’ prohibition, “let man not separate”)*
- *Homosexual partnerships (which violate the statement that “a man” shall be joined to “his wife”).*

In sum, the only “one flesh” experience which God intends and Scripture contemplates is the sexual union of a man with his wife, whom he recognises as “flesh of his flesh”.

(John Stott, Issues Facing Christians Today, p. 346)

The Adventist Message & Mission

The mission and message of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Revelation 14:7 reminds us to give God true and authentic worship by respecting creation. It is not unreasonable to therefore conclude

that homosexual relationships are incompatible with true worship, and creation respect, because they challenge the very order of God's created plan for human relationships.

Revelation 14:7 also announces a judgement time. The very reason for the existence of our faith community is to prepare people for the soon coming Christ. The everlasting gospel not only promises pardon, but also about power. We have no right to dilute the truth of this reality.

Revelation 14:8 highlights that the values of Babylon have no future. If you follow 'the ways of the world' and its values, you will be lost. If lost people matter to God, however difficult it is, 'truth telling' is a duty we have to fulfil (whether it is accepted or not).

Our very mission and message provides every reason to give focus to the biblical position regarding the order of creation, one we would regard as unshakable. If we are going to continue the conversation with Kinship and homosexuals truth telling has to be a part of the story.

The Cultural Context / Conflict

That the world has changed in attitude over the last 50 years is without question. Raising the matter is not to moan about such a reality, but to illustrate the change in attitudes both in church and society. Living in Northern Ireland and working throughout the island of Ireland helps give a particularly focused view on this. The world on this island is in many ways still on catch up when compared with the wider UK. Northern Ireland is the bible belt of the UK and the majority population in the Republic of Ireland remain to a large extent under the influence of Roman Catholicism.

In Northern Ireland 30 years ago Ian Paisley literally shouted (not an exaggeration) hell-fire and brimstone outside a conference pushing to legalise homosexuality in the Province. Fast forward 30 years to August 2012 with the relatively young Mayor of Belfast (a member of the political party Paisley founded) attending a Gay Pride convention in the city. 25,000 people attended the event, "with a small group of protestors opposed to Pride, stationed at the front of City Hall". (Belfast Telegraph 06/08/12)

Attitudes within our own faith community have also changed significantly by generation. Perhaps one of the clearest within Adventism is between Colin and Russell Standish (self appointed guardians of the preservation of truth), and father and nephew of James Standish (current editor of South Pacific Record).

Recorded in their book 'Half a Century of Apostasy' (published in 2006), the Standish brothers catalogue numerous errors the church made over a period of fifty years. The list is uncompromising and brutal. No one remains unscathed, from GC president to the member in the pew. Chapters 49-52 amongst other things, scold the General Conference leadership and the representatives it sent to a Kinship meeting in 1980. The Loma-Linda University Book store gets the wrap for selling a range of books discussing gay issues, and an Andrews University professor is condemned for encouraging students to 'come out of the closet', and find support in a Christian community such as Kinship (rather than join a secular homosexual community). No doubt about it, on close examination some of the judgement calls made by the institutions and professor could be reasonably questioned. But the attitude of the writers is clear in the comment they make.

"Next, someone will surely countenance the practise of bestiality in our beloved church. It seems that no abomination is too vile to be excluded from God's Church."

(Russell R. Standish, Half a Century of Apostasy, p. 101).

Contrast the attitude with that of James, son and nephew:

"If there is one thing we cannot overdo as Adventists, it's love and acceptance. Yes, we have standards of sexual behaviour and those should not change. But it can be a tough tightrope to walk between principle and compassion. Compassion unhitched from principle can result in condoning behaviour at odds with the Bible. Principle divorced from compassion, on the other hand, is not only unredemptive but can crush a vulnerable soul. And when it comes to issues as complex, personal and pervasively defining as our sexual nature, this is even more so. If there is one community on earth that should be a safe, supportive, unconditionally loving place for all adolescents it is our churches, our schools and our homes. As a Christian, I want to be the kind of guy, the kind of dad, the kind of friend, that no matter what, I'm giving the love, support and kindness that encourages everyone I know to "hold on, hold on . . ." In this painful and often confusingly sinful world, there is love, there is comfort and there is always, always hope."

(James Standish, South Pacific Record, Editorial, June 2012)

Beautifully stated, and should be placed in the church bulletin every week and on every notice church notice board (both literal and electronic), until the message gets through!

Attitudes of some have clearly changed and continue to change. Some we have to admit hold resistantly to bigoted views not worthy of the name Christian. It's not difficult to understand the reaction of Adventist parents who worked hard to bring up their child in the name of the Lord, only to discover that their son/daughter has chosen a homosexual/lesbian lifestyle. If ringing in their ears is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, it's understandable why they are less than likely to respond with a 'Praise the Lord' to his/her revelation!

It's more than encouraging in some places to see less bigoted attitudes and behaviour on the part of Christians. On the other hand, the 'total acceptance' of every code of behaviour without question is troubling, particularly as the 'moral compass' is one without any reference to biblical teaching. Increasingly in the UK, a number of Christian denominations claim a reference to biblical teaching, usually based on a liberal interpretation of scripture – providing an 'inclusive church environment'. Who cannot but warm to the idea, but what does it mean? Does inclusivity eventually welcome Mr. & Mrs. Smith? Is it possible for the church to remain true to scripture and at the same time be 'inclusive'?

From Rejection to Acceptance

Christopher Townsend in his 1994 Cambridge Paper, 'Homosexuality: finding the way of truth and love' considers the change in attitude of the church towards homosexual behaviour over the last fifty years. He outlines four approaches, with an explanation of what each approach means in practise.

“Four approaches now represent the wider spectrum of views and attitudes within Christian circles to homosexual behaviour and orientation: ‘rejecting-punative’, ‘rejecting-compassionate’, ‘qualified acceptance’, and ‘full acceptance’.

*A ‘**rejecting-punative**’ stance rejects homosexual behaviour and orientation as incompatible with Christianity and, often buttressed by cultural stereotypes, is hostile towards people who are homosexual.*

*A ‘**rejecting-compassionate**’ approach regards homosexual behaviour as contrary to God’s creative intent and never permissible for Christians. However, actions and orientation are distinguished and the church is to welcome into the community of forgiven sinners all who will follow Christ – irrespective of sexual orientation.”*

*The position ‘**qualified acceptance**’ amounts to saying: the homosexual person is rarely, if ever, responsible for his sexual orientation; the prospects of developing a heterosexual orientation are minimal; celibacy is not always possible; stable homosexual unions may offer the prospect of human fulfilment and are obviously better than homosexual promiscuity. Homosexuality is never ideal because God’s intention in creation is heterosexuality; attempts to develop heterosexual desires must be made, but, occasionally and reluctantly, one may accept homosexual partnership as the only way for some people to achieve a measure of humanity in their lives.*

*‘**Full acceptance**’ stresses the ‘unitive purpose’ of sexuality as central in God’s sight and regards the ‘procreative purpose’ as, by comparison, incidental. Same-sex relationships can fully express the central purpose for sexuality, so homophile attraction may be affirmed. All sexual acts should be evaluated by their relational qualities: what matters is whether or not a particular relationship or action will enhance human fulfilment, faithfulness between persons, genuine intimacy and mutuality. The gender of the persons concerned is immaterial.*

The view reached by Christians on the morality of homosexual behaviour impinges directly on church life, pastoral care and evangelism...”

(Simon Burton, Cambridge Papers, “Homosexuality: finding the way of truth and love”, The Jubilee Centre, Vol 3, No. 2, 2004)

It won’t be difficult for us to agree that the ‘rejecting-compassionate’ approach is one which we must pursue, particularly as I have suggested in all but name that most of our members tend to take a ‘rejecting-punative’ approach. Some Adventist Churches in the USA, such as San-Francisco Central and Glendale City take a ‘qualified acceptance’ position. This is also the case for a small minority of the Adventist community in The Netherlands.

What would the ‘rejecting-compassionate’ approach mean for Pastoral Care & Inclusion?

For whatever reason, there are many followers of Christ who fail to understand the true nature of the gospel. If we take a high view of the gospel, with its call to holiness, it can lead to the charge of discrimination towards homosexuals.

“God does indeed accept us “just as we are”, and we do not have to make ourselves good first, indeed we cannot. But his “acceptance” means that he fully and freely forgives all who

repent and believe, not that he condones our continuance in sin. Again, it is true that we must accept one another, but only as fellow-penitents and fellow pilgrims, not as fellow sinners who are resolved to persist in our sinning. No acceptance, either by God or by the church, is promised to us if we harden our hearts against God's Word and will. Only judgement."

(John Stott, Issues Facing Christians Today, p.343)

So while we maintain the position of 'rejecting homosexual practise', we have to overcome any lack of trust generated by ensuring that the strongest argument for the gospel is a loving and loveable Christian. From the perspective of pastoral care, the way we relate to homosexuals who accept biblical teaching, and practices celibacy, must be no different than towards a non-repentant homosexual, searching for validation. While the counsel provided will differ, both deserve dignity and respect, and be given the invitation to experience the full love of the Christ of the gospels. We must not fall into the danger of 'loving' one and 'tolerating' the other. Even for those who seek validation, as people created in God's image, they deserve all the dignity and respect we can give.

From the conclusion of Burton's review (above), and given the lack of substantive evidence that over the last 50 years that homosexuals may be 'cured' of homosexual feelings/orientation, **we should encourage a pastoral package that focuses on 'care' rather than 'cure'**. This will cause unease with many, but honesty and integrity demands that we ensure care of the individual, even if they do not experience 'reorientation'.

Pastoral Care with Excellence

If a member or worshipper shares with a pastor that he/she is homosexual, perhaps the following pastoral care package could be provided. It is based on a series of 10 sessions with the minister.

- An initial meeting with the pastor where the only activity of the pastor is to 'listen'.
- A second meeting for the individual to 'ask questions'
- A third meeting to consider the type of care package required
- Meeting 4 -10 to be determined by the nature of the package.

The very nature of pastoral care recognises that the individual has felt needs that require support. The minister is not a 'therapeutic counsellor', but someone called by God to give appropriate counsel in the context of God's Word. Some care matters the homosexual faces may include some or all of the following:

- 'Orientation' healing.
- Support and care overcoming sexual drive and temptation.
- Understanding 'The mystery of the Gospel' (may not have yet met Christ)
- Dealing with anger he/she has with God.
- Dealing with anger towards the church.
- A 'listening ear' over many sessions to deal with build up of anger and frustration as a result of being on the receiving end of bigotry and prejudice.
- Facing an acute sense of loneliness as a result of 'coming out' (rejection by friends and family, work colleagues, students, and even in some cases church members).

- Total comfort 'with the skin he/she lives in'.
- Issues over identity. 'Who am I'? Am I only to have an identity based on my sexual orientation?

Whatever the issues raised, the pastoral care provided should provide nothing less than what Ellen White describes as 'a revelation of Christ':

"The world needs today what it needed nineteen hundred years ago--a revelation of Christ. A great work of reform is demanded, and it is only through the grace of Christ that the work of restoration, physical, mental, and spiritual, can be accomplished.

Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, "Follow Me."

There is need of coming close to the people by personal effort. If less time were given to sermonising, and more time were spent in personal ministry, greater results would be seen. The poor are to be relieved, the sick cared for, the sorrowing and the bereaved comforted, the ignorant instructed, the inexperienced counselled. We are to weep with those that weep, and rejoice with those that rejoice. Accompanied by the power of persuasion, the power of prayer, the power of the love of God, this work will not, cannot, be without fruit."

(Ellen White, Ministry of Healing, p.149)

We only have 'insider's in our church!

The matter of 'inclusion' into the life of the local church is perhaps a more significant challenge. Perhaps the first thing to consider is the matter of openly declaring sexual orientation. This is not difficult to reason because sexual identity is a deeply personal matter, although we must admit that trend to disclose seems the trend of the era. Obviously by virtue of marriage the majority of the population already declare their sexuality.

"I do not think there is any need to encourage homosexual people to disclose their sexual orientation to everybody; this is neither necessary nor helpful. But they do need at least one confidante to whom they can unburden themselves, who will not despise or reject them, but will support them with friendship and prayer; probably some professional, private and confidential pastoral counsel; possibly in addition the support of a professionally supervised therapy group..."

(John Stott, Issues Facing Christians Today, p.343)

As I consider Stott's counsel over and over again, it comes across as simplistic and naïve when contrasted with the nature of our times. The aggressive agenda of the homosexual community would debunk this value as oppressive.

Regardless of the agenda of today's gay agenda, from a Christian perspective, this is more than appropriate counsel for the life-long celibate homosexual. From the perspective of the church community, we have no right to hold a person responsible for their sexual 'orientation' whether as a result of nature or nurture. Further, it is frankly none of our business to meddle into their private

lives as to the cause of their condition, unless invited to do so with the aim of providing appropriate pastoral care. For such persons inclusion in church life should be total and full without question. This includes all areas of leadership (pastoral and lay) in the church without exception. I wonder however, if Christian homosexuals will take on Stott's counsel, given the secular pressure they face to 'come out' and be transparent about their sexuality.

Practicing homosexuals (whether they have disclosed or not) should not be permitted to hold a church office or leadership position of any sort. While we are sympathetic to the principle of 'belonging before believing', the church is not obliged to 'accept' or 'include' into leadership positions, those who openly and consistently reject the teachings of the Word of God. This will lead to homosexuals to experience further feelings of alienation and rejection as a result of this policy – which is understandable. But to ensure that we do not discriminate, we need to be consistent in disciplining where appropriate, members who commit heterosexual offenses. Perhaps the following summary explains the core of the 'rejecting-compassionate' approach.

1. There are no standards expected of the visitor for fellowship (come as you are, – we warmly welcome you, whoever you are without exception)
2. There are biblical standards for membership
3. There are higher standards expected for leadership

Some examples of inclusion...

- An unconditional invitation to 'Worship'
- An invitation to participate in the communion service without question
- Full membership of Sabbath School classes whose comments are always welcome however 'unorthodox' they may be. Teaching a Sabbath School class is not possible.
- An unconditional welcome into the social life of the church
- An invitation to participate in the 'outreach' life of the church ('outreach as distinct from evangelistic')

An issue arises regarding homosexuals and their influence on the faith development of children. This centres on our concern as parents over the influence and role-model our children recognise as appropriate moral conduct. The day will come when Mr. & Mr. Jones or Ms. & Ms. Smith worship in our church. I put the issue in the form of a question and giving it some context may help alleviate the concern. Should we be any more or less concerned about Mr. & Mr. Jones than we are about a divorced people who remarry and model new families?

We promise all the opportunity to 'belong' according to the invitation given above. But this will mean that our sons and daughters will experience models of relationships that we will not want them to follow. Should we be over-concerned about this? Is it possible that the next generation may be proud of a church that is truly 'inclusive' as the gospel demands? Is it possible that by the time our children are aware of such matters, we will truly be a church that is not divided on the basis of 'insiders' & outsiders'.

Conclusion

As I shared at the beginning of this paper, the intent is to open a conversation relating to how we can best provide a pastoral care package for homosexual worshippers. As we do this, we are committed to a 'creation view' of scripture affirming the traditional mode of relationships ordained by God. With regret, the 'proof-text' method of understanding on this matter seems to have reinforced perceptions of bigotry by the homosexual community. We have focussed more on describing acts of 'abomination' than a emphasising the Grace of God, 'that loves, and stoops, and cares and rescues'. We recognise that in holding to the traditional view, we possibly reinforce the picture that the church continues to be a bigoted organisation. The only godly response is to demonstrate through word and deed the extent of God's love, and our care, for homosexuals in our community of faith. Until science informs us differently, we should consider adjusting our pastoral care approach from demanding 'cure', and focus instead on 'care'. Again, we run the danger that this could be miss-understood and be seen as patronising, but is the risk we take. We need to be prescriptive in determining matters of inclusion and exclusion and be bold about both, taking a consistent stand on all matters relating to sexual ethics.

We should not be naïve that we will be able to change hearts and minds quickly, nor even reach a quick consensus on this matter. However, leaders are called to guide and demonstrate best practise, including the education of both ministers and members. We do not need to be reminded that calls for same-sex marriage in all parts of the UK and Ireland are high on the agenda at present, both in church and secular society. From our perspective, to be proactive rather than reactive on the matter may be more helpful than otherwise.

Appendix 1

Ethical Relativism- John Stott

"All around us moral standards are slipping. This is certainly so in the West. People are confused as to whether there are any absolutes left. Relativism has permeated culture and is seeping into the church.

There is no sphere in which this relativism is more obvious than that of sexual ethics and the sexual revolution which has taken place since the 1960s. It used to be universally accepted (at least wherever Judeo-Christian ethics were taken seriously) that marriage is a monogamous, heterosexual, loving and lifelong union, and the only God-given context for sexual intimacy. But now, even in some churches, co-habitation without marriage is widely practised, dispensing with that commitment which is essential to authenticate marriage, while same-sex partnerships are promoted as a legitimate alternative to heterosexual marriage.

Over against these trends Jesus Christ calls his disciples to obedience and to conform to his standards. It is sometimes claimed that Jesus did not speak about these things. But he did. He quoted both Genesis 1:27 ('At the beginning the Creator "made them male and female" ') and Genesis 2:24 ('A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become as one flesh') as giving the biblical definition of marriage. And after quoting these Scriptures Jesus gave them his own personal endorsement, saying 'what God has joined together, let no-one separate' (Matthew 19:4-6).

This viewpoint is critically evaluated by the distinguished American moral and social philosopher Abraham Edel (1908-2007), whose first major book was entitled Ethical Judgement, and subtitled 'the use of science in ethics'. 'Morality is ultimately arbitrary,' he wrote, and went on with a piece of popular doggerel:

*It all depends on where you are,
It all depends on who you are,
It all depends on what you feel,
It all depends on how you feel.
It all depends on how you're raised,
It all depends on what is praised,
What's right today is wrong tomorrow,
Joy in France, in England sorrow.
It all depends on point of view,
Australia or Timbuctoo,
In Rome do as the Romans do.
If tastes just happen to agree
Then you have morality.
But where there are conflicting trends,
It all depends, it all depends...*

But the radical Christian disciples must disagree. To be sure, we are not to be completely rigid in our ethical decision-making, but seek sensitively to apply biblical principles in each situation. Fundamental to Christian behaviour is the lordship of Jesus Christ. 'Jesus is Lord' remains the basis of our life.

So the fundamental question before the church is who is Lord? Is the church the lord of Jesus Christ, so that it has liberty to edit and manipulate, accepting what it likes and rejecting what it dislikes? Or is Jesus Christ our Teacher and our Lord, so that we believe and obey his teaching?

He still says to us, 'Why do you call me, "Lord, Lord," and do not do what I say?' (Luke 6:46). To confess Jesus as Lord but not obey him is to build our lives on a foundation of sand. Again, 'Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me,' he said in the upper room (John 14:21).

Here then are two cultures and two value systems, two standards and two lifestyles. On the one side there is the fashion of the world around us; on the other side is the revealed, good and pleasing will of God.

Radical disciples will have little difficulty in making their choice.

(John Stott, The Radical Disciple p.23-25)

Appendix 2

The Church of Ireland gets a lecture from The Irish Times

Thu, 17/05/2012

The Irish Times is fond of lecturing the Churches, especially the Catholic Church. The reason it likes to do this is because it imagines itself to be a sort of Magisterium, surveying the course of Irish history

and declaring who is on the 'right' side of history and who is on the 'wrong' side. It does not like rival Magisteriums. It also likes to give history a push so that it gets to its final destination, when justice will finally reign, that bit quicker.

The Catholic Church, needless to say, is almost invariably found to be on the wrong side of history, but The Irish Times is generally much fonder of the Church of Ireland because The Irish Times believes that Church to be much more 'progressive' than the Catholic Church. However, today The Irish Times has found reason to chastise the Church of Ireland because at its General Synod last weekend the Church of Ireland did something terrible in the eyes of The Irish Times, namely it reaffirmed its belief in traditional marriage.

In an editorial entitled 'A Welcoming Church', The Irish Times accused the Church of Ireland of putting 'law' before 'grace' in reaffirming the traditional definition of marriage. It accused the Synod of damaging "the openness, acceptance and dialogue the Church of Ireland was moving towards after a conference [on homosexuality] in Co Cavan just two months ago." In other words the Church of Ireland is not rushing towards acceptance of same-sex marriage as fast as The Irish Times would like, and may never do so without splitting itself off from much of the rest of the Anglican Communion. To put it another way, the Church of Ireland is not abandoning one of its core teachings as quickly as The Irish Times would like. The leader writer concludes: "A chill wind may now be blowing through the Church of Ireland for those who want a more welcoming, open and tolerant church."

By this is meant, of course, a Church that has abandoned what it believes to be right and true. When Jesus spoke to the woman at the well, he was gentle and understanding, but he also told her to sin no more. That is, he gently and compassionately pointed her in the direction of the Truth. Self-evidently Jesus was not a relativist believing there is your truth and my truth and that you cannot affirm someone unless you affirm their truth. (A variation on 'I'm ok, you're ok' theology)

However, The Irish Times obviously believes the only way to be truly welcoming and open towards someone is to accept them on their own terms and to accept whatever it is they believe to be right and proper for them. This is not the Christian way, it is not the Christian understanding of compassion. Compassion, for Christians, is helping someone to do what is genuinely right, not what that person believes to be right. No truly Christian Church can change this understanding of compassion, no matter how much The Irish Times huffs and puff about it.

(The Irish Catholic, July 26th 2012)

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