

# **Honest Love**

Pastoral Care for People who are Gay  
and Same-Sex-Attracted

Essays by Scottish Baptist Ministers

2023

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## Preface

This short book has arisen from the desire of the writers to practise Christ-like pastoral care and nurture congregations characterised by generous love. We recognise there is a special challenge for us as ministers and congregations who hold a traditional biblical understanding of human sexuality to extend this love and pastoral care to people who identify as gay or same-sex attracted. We ourselves are seeking to face this challenge with honesty and compassion and we know that many of our colleagues are doing the same.

The chapters that follow have arisen from our own experiences, prayer and reflection. We offer them in the hope that they will help the wider community of ministers, especially in our Scottish Baptist churches, to reflect thoughtfully, serve faithfully and love generously.

### *The Contributors*

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# Introduction

## Loving Our Neighbours

**Martin Hodson**

**General Director, Baptist Union of Scotland**

Jesus said, 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Luke 10.27). This is not a controversial requirement amongst followers of Jesus. It is a command that was at the heart of the Mosaic covenant (Leviticus 19.18). For Jesus it is the second of a pair of commands by which he answers the question, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' (Luke 10.25). The apostle Paul says 'the entire law is fulfilled in obeying this one command' (Galatians 5.14) and James memorably describes this as 'the royal law' (James 2.8). It is a command that plainly arises from the nature of God as it is revealed in Jesus; his 'new command' is this: '*As I have loved you*, so you must love one another' (John 13.34). In fact love is the fundamental way in which our lives reflect the glory of God's character: 'We love because he first loved us' (1 John 4.19). For Christians the supreme definition of love is found in God's saving work through Jesus:

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

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Love is not *controversial* for followers of Jesus but it can be *complicated*. In Luke's Gospel the command to love our neighbour gives rise to the Parable of the Good Samaritan which illustrates the costly complexity of Christ-like love. It transgresses the social norms of the day; it reaches out to people whom others are quick to condemn; it risks being accused of endorsing all the (mistaken Samaritan) beliefs of the beloved; it is vulnerable to ambush; and it requires a seemingly reckless, open-ended commitment to compassion and support. Loving our neighbour is a complex holy act, always performed by broken people in a broken world.

### *Loving our Gay/ Same Sex Attracted Neighbours*

The purpose of this project is to consider what it might mean for Scottish Baptist churches to love our same sex attracted neighbours. There are many people in and around our churches who live with same sex attraction. Some openly describe themselves as gay or lesbian and some identify with the LGBT+ community. Others struggle more privately with their desires. Just as among straight people, there are those who are on the point of leaving their church because they do not feel supported and there are those who love their church because of the compassion and honesty of friends who are helping them pursue Christian discipleship. There are people who are exploring faith but are uncertain whether their sexuality will exclude

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them from God's love or from being accepted by the church. And there are people who have found in Christ the greatest love of all and are rejoicing in the freedom they have discovered to submit the whole of their lives, including their sexuality, to God.

All these people are our neighbours and the way of Jesus is to love them. That is not controversial but it can be complicated by the clash between biblical values and the current widespread attitude in western societies towards human sexuality. If we were to follow the widespread social expectation that we should affirm, even celebrate, lesbian and gay partnerships, the matter would be less complicated. We would be left asking, 'Why is this even an issue?' However, if we hold a traditional Christian understanding of human sexuality then we remain under Jesus' command to love our same sex attracted neighbours and need to discover ways of doing this sincerely without affirming same sex partnerships or marriages.

### *The Baptist Union of Scotland and Human Sexuality*

The Assembly of the Baptist Union of Scotland has affirmed the European Baptist Federation *Resolution on Marriage* (see Appendix 1). This urges all Baptists:

to model, value and teach that marriage is the creational and biblical setting of any sexual relationship between a man and a woman, as

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expressed in Genesis 2:24: 'Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.'

This represents the commitment to traditional biblical teaching on human sexuality which is characteristic of our churches.

A large number of Scottish Baptist churches are members of the Evangelical Alliance (EA) and since 1997 the Baptist Union itself has been a member. This, amongst many other things, indicates our resonance with the approach of the EA report *Biblical and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality* (see Appendix 2) which re-affirms a traditional understanding of marriage, whilst giving extensive space to exploring possible pastoral responses to people struggling in this area.

We embrace the traditional biblical understanding of marriage with a recognition of the supremacy of the love of God, the brokenness in which we all participate, and our responsibility to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with all people, whatever their way of life. This remains our settled position as a network of churches. Although there are some people in our churches who are not content with this, there is no desire generally across our churches to move away from this position.

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### *A Position Statement Is Not Enough*

It can be tempting to think that as long as we have a statement of our convictions about the nature of marriage and sexuality we have ‘resolved’ the complexity. Once we have searched the scriptures and reached a conclusion about the Christian ethics involved, we may feel the job is done. However, this is no more than the beginning.

An account of the theological and ethical basis from which we begin is of course vital, but alone it is a cold and blunt implement. It can act as a fence we erect around our church communities; it can serve as a signifier to other churches of our convictions in this contested area; it can bring reassurance of biblical fidelity to our own members. But it does not fulfil the royal law to love our neighbour.

This is not to say that a faith statement is not a good start for neighbour love; an honest and clear expression of our core convictions is always a gift to others. Hiding or obfuscating our position is rarely a kindness. But faith without works is dead, or as the Apostle Paul puts it, ‘the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love’ (Galatians 5.6).

So the real challenge for us is this: *what does it look like for churches that are committed to a traditional Christian understanding of marriage and sexuality to love our gay/ same sex attracted neighbours?* What love-extinguishing fears do Christian pastors and local congregations need to recognise in ourselves? How do we embody and express the gospel of



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Christ to people who may begin with a suspicion that we are not really *for* them? How do we cultivate thoroughly welcoming church communities? And how do we guide people in a costly journey of discipleship and holiness that contrasts starkly with the spirit of the age?

### *Some Challenges and Opportunities We Face*

As a group of accredited ministers from Scottish Baptist churches, we have met over several months to pray, talk and think about these questions. We have listened together to people who experience same sex attraction and we have reflected on our own experience as disciples, pastors and church leaders. Through this process we have identified a number of areas that seem to us important and these are reflected in the following chapters.

1. Influences. What has influenced us as ministers within our Scottish Baptist family as we approach this subject?
2. Telling a better story. How can we articulate the biblical message in a manner that reflects the beauty of God's plan for human relationships in creation and salvation?
3. Listening Well. Can we help people who are uncertain if they are welcome in the church to be heard by people who are aware of their own brokenness?

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4. Church culture. How can churches be a positive environment for people who have chosen to pursue a single life rather than enter a same sex relationship?
5. Serving, contributing and waiting. We welcome people to join us for worship regardless of their beliefs or lifestyle, but what happens when someone in (or seeking) a same sex relationship seeks to be more involved in the church?
6. The Hope of Transformation. Above all we have the hope of the transforming power of God. This is a hope based on the promise of the coming kingdom of God, nurtured in the community of God's people and rooted in the grace of God we experience through the cross and resurrection of Jesus.
7. Blessing. We end with a prayer, which we asked some gay/SSA believers in one of our churches to write. It recognises that in all this we are dependent on the holy generosity of God who did not spare his own Son and whose Spirit performs his good work in us, through us and around us.

### *Our Modest Ambition*

Our hope is that these reflections will help us to be pastors and churches that love our neighbours who are gay/same sex attracted. We are not trying to add to the literature on

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the theology of human sexuality or join in an argument about the boundaries of sin and righteousness. We simply want to help congregations who embrace a traditional biblical understanding of marriage to overflow with the love of Christ.

We are keenly aware that this is a small contribution to a vast subject. Its distinctive feature is that it is from Scottish Baptist pastors and for Scottish Baptist pastors; we trust that for some this will be of genuine value. We are not seeking to be prescriptive but to be friends and co-workers who dare to share something of our limited understanding for the benefit of others. Some may disagree with us and many will doubtless have ideas that improve on what we are suggesting. Nevertheless we hope to contribute at least a small measure of wisdom to help Scottish Baptist churches on this path of generous and daring holiness.

### *A Note on Language*

We are writing about how churches and pastors can demonstrate Christ-like love to people who experience same sex attraction and we recognise it is an act of kindness to describe people in a way that is respectful and meaningful to them. We appreciate a breadth of terminology is used to describe people's sexual identities and people may find some terms preferable to others. In our writing we have generally chosen to use the term 'gay/same-sex-attracted' (often abbreviated to gay/SSA).

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We have done this for clarity and simplicity but we are humbly aware that some people may be uncomfortable with these generalising phrases and would prefer other ways of being described.

### *The Contributors*

It has been a privilege to work on this project with a group of colleagues who are deeply committed to following the way of Jesus and working out their vocation as pastoral leaders in Scottish Baptist churches. They are drawn from fellowships of different sizes in a variety of locations, with a breadth of theological emphases and a considerable range of ministry experience, and this is honestly reflected in the contributions they make. Nevertheless they have all come to this task with a generosity of spirit, a humility of heart and an eager desire to cultivate church communities marked by grace and truth.

We are all grateful to many gay/same-sex-attracted people whose stories have informed and challenged our thinking. Some came to speak to the group directly or allow their stories to be told to the whole group; others have been friends, congregation-members or fellow-disciples whom we have known, loved and served in ministry over the years. Above all, these are the people whose experience has continually reminded us that even if we claimed to ‘understand all mysteries and possess all knowledge’ but had not love, we would be nothing.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Influences**

**Brian More**

**Minister, Newton Mearns Baptist Church**

Like the Apostle Peter, I grew up by the sea with my fisherman father and uncles and worked with them catching fish. Within a short time after following Jesus I found myself not just in the church but preaching the Good News and leading others in learning about Jesus. For all there was to talk about, I rarely, if ever, remember anything ever being spoken about which related remotely to same-sex attraction. For me and in retrospect the 1980s and 90s seemed to force the issue underground among Christians in our communities. Churches were on the whole defensive and some judgmental and in no way safe or attractive places for people who were same-sex attracted.

My first pastorate in Airdrie (1996-2006) was a mirror of the Moray Coast's reticence and reluctance to engage in the 1970-80s. Scottish Baptist Church culture around homosexuality and same sex attraction seemed taboo and Bible texts cited were always negative toward the issues and in ways I regret - regret in the sense that, 'people aren't

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issues'. People are infinitely and wonderfully more than their sexual preferences and orientation.

My present pastorate (Newton Mearns) is a suburban culturally diverse church where most kinds of person are present across all age ranges. In the last seventeen years of pastoral ministry on the Southside of Glasgow the cultural and attitudinal shifts towards same-sex attraction have an immediate index in a worried generation of Baptist parents and grandparents. A nervous sense of angst pervades among some who have children or grandchildren who identify as gay/SSA or indeed are presently in a same sex relationship. I'm inundated with stories where issues haven't been handled well because people weren't cared for lovingly or graciously. Retrospect invites something richer, better and more Jesus-like going forward.

The enthusiasm with which I think Baptist Christians are well placed to think clearly on contemporary issues has been my experience and inspired in part by my work in the European Baptist Federation (2000 - 2014). For a majority of that time I chaired the Resolutions Committee and saw first-hand how Baptists' thought and led on contemporary issues and the Bible's call to discipleship. Observing hundreds of Baptist leaders being communally activist, biblically literate and Holy Spirit contemplative over expansive European, Middle Eastern and North African settings allowed me to encounter first-hand how scripture informs a truly distinctive apologetic that seeks to honour

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Jesus Christ. Watching and participating with leaders from so many differing countries and contexts submit to God and his word in multiple situations and complex cultural scenarios (9/11 and Muslim relations, Serbian and Croat genocide, Beslan massacre, Ethnic boarder tensions in Turkey, Same Sex Marriage) convinced me then, as now, that scripture is the sufficient source of inspiration and insight for the church in the world. God's word spoken, by the Holy Spirit still speaks.

The same conviction returned with resonance as I represented the Baptist Union at the Scottish Government consultation on ending conversion practices in November 2022. As I write (Feb 2023), the First Minister of Scotland is live on radio resisting answering the question "what is a woman"? The woefulness of the present Scottish cultural debate about gender as well a sexuality seems far from any recognisable or workable equality and rights, but, it underscores urgently for us the need to be and do better. Importantly, the hostility around these discussions raises for us the pressing need in this resource for disciples of Jesus Christ to recover a better way to be for believers' who are gay/same-sex attracted.

In 2023 the angst of that generation of parents and grandparents mentioned above makes it necessary to develop a kinder way of thinking about how our churches become a better, safer place for Christians who are gay/same-sex attracted. But it's not just them I'm thinking

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about. I'm thinking of people who have been wrongly rejected, misunderstood or intentionally made to feel unwelcome in our churches. I'm thinking also of Baptist leaders who have unquestioningly or unwittingly inherited prejudice and who have baptised a lazy-worldliness of thought into practices which flourish in ignorance and fear. And probably most importantly, being a father of two teenagers returns my wife and I daily to the 'feel' of a Scottish setting that increasing feels, looks and sounds 'pre-Christian' which presents with great opportunity for a 'better way' to emerge.

### *The challenges we share*

It's my hope that by talking together we can get beyond the roundabout or cul-de-sac that excuses any helpful and redemptive thinking in this discussion. That position is neither helpful nor hopeful. The Scottish communities in which our churches are situated need disciple-leaders who will mirror the winsome beauty and welcome of Jesus Christ to all people. But more than that is the hope that we can be reminded that the Risen Christ is asking us to meet fully the sexually broken and fragmented communities where we gather for worship - for Baptist people to be confident that our message is an invitation to become one with God through Jesus Christ and an invite to an eternal and accepting relationship with God whose love and mercy is greater than every human desire we may ever know or feel.



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My greatest hope for leaders willing to engage is that we accept the painful lessons of the past which may be avoided and the hard work of thinking as an incentive to be and do better and serve the Baptist community in Scotland on these issues. No one should fear the discussion who can travel in their hearts and imaginations to the city boundaries of ancient Corinth or Ephesus. The issues are the same: people need Christ and Christ is moving towards people through his church. It's worth reminding ourselves also that as the Gospel arrives in Ethiopia (Africa) it does so in the inquisitive heart of the newly baptised Eunuch, from a sexual minority (Acts 8:26-32). God's grace seems indiscriminately inclusive as it crosses sexual identity barriers and international borders!

Therefore, to be good, humble, teachable and godly in the discussion of same-sex attraction ought not to be outside the desire of any Scottish Baptist leader. We may well be best placed and led-by-the-Spirit to become a companion to the same-sex attracted person who sits next to us this Sunday at Communion.

Being humble and teachable at the outset of considering how to help-support leaders make Scottish Baptist churches a better place for people who are same-sex attracted is a good and godly thing.

*Good*, remembering that Jesus Christ was/is attractive to people of every kind of experience and identity.

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*Humble*, in recognising that the issues related to sexuality, if we're honest, often unearth prejudice and fear quickly polarising increasing amounts of Christians in our churches.

*Teachable*, in the desire we have to be as radically inclusive and exclusive as Jesus is in his call to follow him and walk in the way of repentance and faith as God's appointed way to know peace within ourselves and peace with God. We have much to learn from how safe people felt in the presence of Jesus. In seeing him at work in the Gospels, do our words and actions mirror his?

*Godly*, in gladly accepting the infinite cost Jesus paid for our salvation which is the source and wellspring of all human flourishing and wholeness for believers'.

Being Baptist relieves us of the cultural and political temptations of feeling that we have to be anything other than gracious and biblically faithful. Such gracious faithfulness is costly. None so more than when we recall that the first be-heading in the New Testament was that of John, 'The Baptist.' Baptists' love truth because we love the One who is the truth, Jesus Christ. From him we know that all life changing love is by nature inconvenient and countercultural.

### *The call of the single, celibate Carpenter of Nazareth*

Being biblical always precedes being culturally relevant on matters of sexual morality. This is a faith commitment for Baptist people because the scriptures always lead us to Christ. He makes himself and his grace attractive and compelling *in* us then *through* us to others. Thinking graciously and biblically about same-sex attraction places us inside the surprising story of God's transforming-compelling grace at work in the Gospel. In this we learn and receive insight by the Holy Spirit from those first century confessional New Testament communities who began to 'work out our salvation' (Phil 2:12). This being true, the New Testament context becomes an interpretive gift to this discussion in our present day not least because of the present moral and ethical complexities around the present debates about human sexuality. The dilemmas for a new community of 'the saved' is founded on Christ who as God is radically inclusive and whose message of love has profoundly shown itself in the resurrection to be greater than suffering and death. The redemptive theology and orthodoxy of the New Testament is always the recovery and ownership of 'ancient paths' for every generation of Christian leader. We have no desire for a 'third way,' rather, we are committed to discovering a better way to be faithful and true to Jesus Christ whatever the cultural headwinds.

How Scottish Baptist leaders lead and shape communities around the country will invariably be as diverse as they need

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to be. That said, the Bible's teaching, like the presence of the North Star in the northern sky remains a welcome but immovable point of reference for which we feel great gratitude to God. How we extol the Risen Christ's call to follow him *must* be distinct from our culture's enthronement of sex and sexuality as an ultimate and unquestionable right. Baptist leaders must bear witness to the winsomeness and beauty of Nazareth's bachelor, single and celibate Carpenter as an experienced guide to the wise and teachable among us.

Therefore we humbly accept the realities for our discussions, to mention three;

- How we *speak* and *teach* about Christian discipleship and Christian convictions about marriage between a man and woman invites a humble candour and grace when engaging issues of same-sex attraction.
- Being *aware* and *cognisant* that nowhere in either Old or New Testament is same-sex-genital-sexual-activity celebrated as good or holy. This has implications for how we understand and practice any biblically faithful definition of repentance and how this relates to choices believer's make about sexual practices and sexual identities.
- Accepting as orthodox and therefore helpful for this discussion, the Biblical description of sexual abstinence, celibacy and celibate living as a life-giving and an

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acceptable sexual identity is at one with the Biblical and Apostolic witness of scripture.

Being biblically faithful and compassionate should place nothing or no-one above the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The challenge for us all is one of where ultimate authority lies in these issues. Our willingness or otherwise to submit to what the scriptures say is for me *the* defining issue. I'm convinced that receiving by faith the ethical and moral imperatives of the Bible can define and instruct how we think compassionately about same-sex attraction and celebrate sexual experience, singleness and celibacy as expressions of God's many rich gifts.

This is a lively and hopeful resource for leaders which recognises the costly and sacrificial call of Christian discipleship. Our response should be faithful to Christ and the biblical witness. In all this we should anticipate the transforming and healing power of God's Holy Spirit for all who look to God in repentance and submit to God's call to life and flourishing in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

## Chapter 2

# Telling a Better Story

Stuart Keir

Minister, Central Baptist Church, Dundee

*How can we articulate the biblical message in a manner that reflects the beauty of God's plan for human relationships in creation and salvation? The narrative of our age tends to brand Christianity as oppressive or excluding, yet we have a message of freedom and belonging. We have a narrative about identity that is rooted in Christ.*

*Introduction: "Christianity means you can't!"*

I still remember the comment, delivered by some of my friends, in response to me sharing with them the news that I had become a Christian. Almost 40 years have now passed and I remember not only the comment but also the sting that came with it. Perhaps in part because even as a young man and a "new" Christian I knew that following Jesus would bring challenges- including in the area of my own sexual desires- and part of me feared that I would miss out.

We are a network of churches that holds to a historical and orthodox view of the Bible's teaching on marriage and human sexuality. As a group we are writing from the conviction that this position is not only Biblical (and so true)

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but also beautiful (and so good). However, we also understand that this is not a view that is universally accepted in contemporary culture. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that it is a view that is increasingly challenged, seen by many as needlessly restrictive, even oppressive, another example of “*Christianity means you can’t!*”

What are we to say in response to this? How are we to understand our culture and the narrative around human sexuality that it has in large part embraced while also having confidence in our message- that we have not only a different but a better story to tell.

### *The Secular Story*

Before we consider our culture’s understanding of sexuality it will be worth noting in brief something of the vast societal changes that have taken place in recent years.

Questions of purpose, fulfilment and identity- what could be said to constitute “the good life” are ones which have faced countless generations. Indeed, asking such questions is part of what it means to be human. In the past society has tended to look to external sources for the answer to these- family, ethnic group, nationality, faith background etc.

However, in the Western world at least, while these factors still exist they are no longer regarded as certainties. Western culture has experienced what Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor calls a “massive subjective turn”. Linked to this has

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been the rise of what the Christian psychiatrist Glynn Harrison calls “the narrative of radical individualism”

We no longer have an agreed story of who we are and how we should live. Instead we are encouraged to look inside and find/or create our own truth, to discover our own authentic self and to then to grow into and live out the best version of that.

Autonomy and liberty have become the hallmarks of contemporary western societies as individuals pursue personal fulfilment.

### *The Secular Story and Human Sexuality*

Few would deny that we live in a cultural context in which human sexuality and our capacity for sexual experience is celebrated. This is something that can readily be seen in the songs, images and stories that surround us.

Two common themes can be observed flowing from that—those of fulfilment and identity.

### *Fulfilment and Identity*

A fulfilled life is a sexually active life. Sexual desires and experiences are therefore to be embraced as a means of bringing pleasure and fulfilment with the only restrictions being around issues of consent or where clear harm would be done. Outside of this we should deny ourselves nothing or no one that might serve the goal of sexual fulfilment.



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However powerful the motivation of sex as a means to pleasure may be though, increasingly it has come to represent more than this in contemporary culture. It has also become an identity marker.

Our autonomous, individualistic society encourages us not only to embrace our sexual desires and experiences but to allow them to define us and also to be an essential part of how we present ourselves to others.

So, if you desire sex with someone of the same sex you are gay or lesbian and this becomes a key defining aspect of your identity. Similarly, if you enjoy sex with someone of the opposite sex you are “straight”

The subject of your affections becomes what defines you as a person. Along with this comes the demand for others not only to accept but also to affirm and celebrate your identity.

However, if sex is seen primarily in terms of fulfilment or identity then the pressures that accompany this can be immense.

The pressure to engage in sexual activity and to define your sexuality particularly amongst young people is significant. At the same time the contemporary rise in issues relating to body image, mental health, anxiety, gender dysphoria and pornography addiction must be a cause of concern for all. While we should avoid drawing neat lines of cause and effect it would be unwise to dismiss any connection between these

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disturbing trends and the focus in contemporary culture on sexual activity and identity politics.

Of course, in critiquing the worldview of the secular story and some of the worrying trends that we see accompanying it, we should not be blind to the ills of the past. In addressing issues around human sexuality we should acknowledge that the church has not always spoken well or positively about God's good gift of sex. Equally the marginalisation of sexual minority groups should be condemned. There should be no desire to go backwards in these areas.

Is there a better way forward? Is there a better story to tell? It is our firm conviction that the answer to this is "Yes!" and that it is to be found in the Better Story that the Bible teaches.

*The Better Story:* The first thing that we should say in relation to this is that sex and human sexuality are celebrated in the Bible as something good- as part of God's good gift humanity.

Not only does the Bible talk about sex, it offers a vision for sexual intimacy unlike anything else. It is because of the high view of sex that the Bible offers that marriage is given as the protective framework in which this is to be enjoyed.

The Bible begins (in Genesis 2:24) and ends (in Revelation 21:2) with a picture of marriage and repeatedly marriage and sex within marriage are celebrated in the pages in between.

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In the words of the marriage service, marriage is given "...so that husband and wife may comfort and help each other, living faithfully together in need and in plenty, in sorrow and in joy. It is given that with delight and tenderness they may know each other in love, and through the joy of their bodily union may strengthen the union of their hearts and lives. It is given so that the stability it imparts to their relationship may be a source of strength to others and the foundation of a secure family life."

So, we should say that sex and the expression of sexuality within marriage are things that the Bible celebrates as being both beautiful and purposeful in this life- we are not against sex!

But neither do we see sexual activity, or indeed marriage, as being essential to living a fulfilled and happy life. Singleness is celebrated in scripture and should be supported in our churches (1 Corinthians 7:26-35).

More importantly still, if we are to ask the question, as surely we must in a discussion on human sexuality, "what does the Bible teach that sexuality is for?" then we discover that it serves as a pointer to something even more mysterious and beautiful than our experience of it here.

Firstly, it speaks to the human desire for fulfilment but tells us that the fulfilment we crave is not to be found in the amount of sexual activity we enjoy here on earth but in a relationship with God.

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The picture of marriage, and sexual intercourse within marriage, a man and woman joining themselves together in bodily union, in sexual difference, speaks to us of the spiritual union between God and his people, between Christ and the church- something that no Christian is excluded from and a marriage that every Christian will one day enter into the fulness of. It speaks to of us of the intimacy of God's love and of the passion that Christ has for his church.

Marriage on earth serves as a trailer for what we will enjoy in heaven (Ephesians 5:31-32) and as such, on a fundamental level, it points away from itself, away from human love and to Christ's love for the church.

The Church is described in many ways in scripture. As a body, as a building, as a family, but surely one of the most precious ways is when the Church is described as a bride.

Jesus is our bridegroom and we look forward one day to the consummation of a wonderfully joyful, intense, intimate relationship with him, one that that is pictured for us here on earth in terms of a marriage union.

Even the most intimate sexual experiences we may enjoy here on earth are but pointers to the wonder of the eternal union that we will enjoy with God, in Christ for all eternity. And even if we do not experience such moments of physical pleasure and intimacy here we will in no way be excluded from the spiritual realities they point to if we are united to Christ.

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Similarly, the Christian view of marriage and human sexuality and the greater spiritual union it points to also addresses issues of identity. We need not be defined by the subject of our affections but by the fact that God has in Christ made us the subject of his affections. We do not have to construct an identity for ourselves based on our experiences or desires.

Instead for the Christian the fundamental thing that defines me is that I am “in Christ” united to him through faith (Galatians 2:20, II Corinthians 5:17). This is of course true not only for our experience of human sexuality but for any of the other things that we may be tempted to look to define us - cultural or economic background, gender, education or income level, physical or mental health etc

Union with Christ offers us a wonderful hope and security. It bids us come as we are (Matthew 11:28-30) and assures us we are loved not on the basis of our efforts but through the radical grace of God.

But it also presents us with a powerful challenge. In the words of Bonhoeffer we are invited not only to come as we are but to “come and die” (Luke 9:23)

Both of these calls are biblical (Matthew 11:28-30; Luke 9:23) and both are part of what it means to be a Christian and a faithful disciple of the Lord Jesus.

Union with Christ means I am in him, therefore all that he has accomplished through his life and work, culminating in

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his death upon the cross, he has accomplished for me as my federal head. I can therefore come as I am, without cleaning myself up first, indeed there is no other way to come. We are all equal under the cross. We are all broken by the effects of sin (sexually and otherwise) and equally we are all breakers of God's law. We all are equally under God's judgment and equally in need of God's grace in Christ. Therefore all should know that they are equally welcome to come.

Union with Christ also however means Christ is in me. That the Christian is indwelt by the Spirit of Christ (Galatians 4:6), the Spirit of holiness (1 Corinthians 6:9), who enables us to grow up into the likeness of Christ, that is into the likeness of the perfectly obedient son.

There is a moral and ethical dimension to living out the Christian life, at times this will call for self-sacrifice and denial. We do the church a great disservice if we point people to the moral and ethical demands of following Christ this without pointing them at the same time to the one in whom they are given the power to grow and be transformed.

This of course speaks to more than our experience of human sexuality, but it does not speak to less than this.

If being "in Christ" becomes the fundamental identity marker of the Christian- as opposed to being defined by our experience of sexuality- then becoming part of the body of Christ ought also to be seen as part of the better story we have to tell.

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The church is good news! It is God's re-configured family, a local community that acts as a foretaste of the new creation. God's family ought to be marked by love and joy, by diversity. It ought to be a place where deep, intimate, fulfilling non-erotic friendships can be enjoyed in our life in Christ. It is a place where can be encouraged to grow in Christlikeness as we join hands with others and enter into relationship with them. We need each other and no one who is part of the body should ever feel lonely or excluded or that they have nothing to give- or receive (Ephesians 4:11-16). God's people are God's gift to us for our growth, comfort and encouragement as we speak. There is nothing better on earth than the local church when she is acting biblically.

Through our union with Christ and our participation in the life of his body on earth something of the joy of the life to come is *present now* through the eschatological Spirit. In our worship, in our fellowship, in our daily walk with Christ there is an intimacy and beauty that eclipses all sexual pleasure *now*. It is the uniquely satisfying 'living water' offered to a woman whose focus thus far seemed to have been on human sexual relationships.

The *Secular Story* often portrays sex and sexuality as a means in itself - a recreational activity that we can use to give ourselves pleasure or a marker that we can use to define ourselves.

The *Better Story* that we have to tell, while acknowledging the gift and beauty of sexual intimacy presents the physical

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union of sex within marriage as a picture of the greater spiritual union with God that men and women are invited into in Christ. This is the path to true joy and lasting fulfilment.

It also offers us a new identity, one that we do not have to construct for ourselves but rather is graciously conferred on us by God.

It welcomes us too into a new family where all who are in Christ have a place and ought to find comfort, encouragement and support.

It is a foretaste of heaven where deep joy and lasting satisfaction are to be found.

Making sexuality all about ourselves runs the very real risk of allowing it to destroy us. Realising that sexuality is ultimately all about God by contrast can bring us to the one who is able to give us life in all of its fullness (John 10:10)

### *Telling the Better Story*

How do we tell this better story in our churches? I offer a number of suggestions below, conscious that contexts will vary. I am writing as a pastor and part of a larger staff team in a city centre church with a large gathered congregation that contains many students and young workers for whom discussions around human sexuality are pressing and important. We also within our church family have a number of individuals who are openly same sex attracted while



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seeking to live celibate lives. The context of the reader may well be different but still I hope the below suggestions will prove helpful and transferable.

*Teach the Bible well:* The issue of same sex attraction, or more specifically, same sex practice, is addressed only rarely in the Bible. That should not be taken to imply that it is unimportant but it should inform the balance of our preaching. While we should not avoid passages that speak directly to these issues, and should recognise that the Bible never speaks in an affirming way of same sex practice, the better story of fulfilment and identity in Christ, the church as a body in which every believer should find encouragement and support and the hope of glory are spoken of again and again and will serve to raise our gaze.

Our settled approach is to consecutively expound books of the Bible on Sunday and provide opportunity through the week in a network of small groups to discuss and follow up.

*Avoid a siege mentality:* In preaching we have learned to avoid using issues around gender and sexuality as “go to” examples of a hostile culture- an “us and them” approach. In most churches, certainly in our within our church, there will be some who struggle painfully with issues around sexuality. Our experience has taught us that they- and we as a church body- can be helped greatly by acknowledging that the struggle is “in here”

*Make it easy to talk about sexuality and sexual struggles:*

Not every Sunday sermon can- or should- speak directly about sexuality but we have found that we can create contexts where those conversations can take place. Some things that we have found helpful include- as a staff team working through the teaching material for church leaders that is produced by the *Center for Faith, Sexuality and Gender*; Holding a day conference for our members with the *Living Out* team to address issues around sexuality directly; Creating space in the teaching programme for our student and youth ministries to speak about such issues; Offering 1:1 opportunities to talk with individuals about sexual struggles including but not limited to struggles over same sex attraction (for eg I would regularly meet with young men who are struggling with pornography use for a shared programme of reading, discussion and prayer).

*Honour singleness:* Those for who marriage is not a realistic prospect need to be affirmed in their calling to singleness. While acknowledging that there is much more that we could do we seek to find ways to honour singleness publicly in the church and to take care not to unintentionally denigrate it.

*Work hard to stress that church is family:* Alongside referring to the church as a bride and as body, the church is repeatedly referred to as the “household of God” – see 1 Timothy 3:15. It is the family of God and Christians are to be family to one another. We have found our home based

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small groups and the ministry of hospitality to be key contexts for fostering this sense of belonging.

*Speak biblically, not culturally, about masculinity and femininity:* Churches within our network will differ on how they understand the bible's teaching on the roles that men and women should exercise within the church and home. All should however be careful not to hold up generalised cultural norms of what a man or a woman ought to be like. One of the factors that can lie behind same-sex attraction is actually fear of the same gender, a feeling of not quite belonging as a male or a female. When the church reinforces superficial cultural stereotypes- eg all guys like sport, all women like crafts- it can worsen this sense of isolation, of not quite measuring up. In taking marriage classes- in our context we do this a lot- my wife and I are careful to explain that while we ourselves hold to complementarian positions and in some ways fit gender stereotypes, in other ways we don't- and that's ok.

*Offer friendship:* I am privileged to have a number of same-sex attracted friends. At times we need to speak about their struggles with sexuality. But we have found that we need to be careful not to make this the main or only thing that we speak about. It may not be their only area of struggle- that would be unusual for any of us- so we try to avoid reinforcing the idea that "this" is who they are. Instead we talk about Jesus- the joys and general challenges of following

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him- and about life in general allowing space to laugh as well as lament.

*Provide good pastoral support:* This may be formal through some sort of support group or 1:1 mentoring or discipleship scheme, equally in our experience it could be informal, perhaps meeting up over a coffee. It does not need to be structured but it does need to be visible so that people who struggle with same-sex attraction, or more generally in areas of sexuality know that there are those within the church would be glad to walk with them and encourage them as they seek to faithfully follow the Lord Jesus.

*Position and Posture:* We have found it a helpful thing as a church to openly and publicly define our position on marriage and sexuality. As a church we have adopted the evangelical alliance statement on marriage and human sexuality and this is available for all to see on our web-site. Alongside that though we see the need to model a posture, both from the pulpit and in person that leans in towards others in love and in humility seeks to offer the Better Story that we believe in.

## Chapter 3

# Listening Well

Lisa Holmes

### Deeper Church Lead, Baptist Union of Scotland

*Can we help people who have felt rejected by the church because of their sexuality, or who are uncertain if they are welcome in the church, to be heard by people who are aware of their own brokenness, ready to own the failures of the church and at ease with biblical teaching? How can we respond well to people who 'come out' or who confide in us about their same sex attraction?*

A number of years ago I was invited to be part of a leadership programme called 'Common Purpose' that included leaders from the private, public and charity sectors. During the early sessions I began speaking with a fellow participant. As we were getting to know each other she told me about growing up in a charismatic, evangelical church, about being involved in evangelism and youth leadership and being part of the worship band, about her commitment to Jesus and to his church. Her story sounded remarkably like my own. That was until she talked about her realisation that she was gay and the consequences of 'coming out'. She had even got married and they had a child who was severely disabled and eventually she ended up divorced. It wasn't until this point that she pursued her

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same sex attraction and became married to someone who had selflessly cared for both her and her disabled child.

I realised that it was in this encounter that I had really listened, I had chosen to properly hear her and her story perhaps because I identified so much with her earlier years. I gave her time to explore not just what had happened but the tensions and difficulties, the loss and sacrifice or pursuing a path that meant she was no longer able to be in a church community, and the sense of her own identity with the journey she had taken. I recognise that this story raises many questions but for me the key starting point was listening first.

So when it comes to listening to people and specifically those who are gay/SSA, are there uniquely important approaches? I think perhaps there are, although many of the ordinary skills of pastoral listening would be employed as well.

It may be obvious but is probably worth noting that the majority of people who sense or know that they are gay/SSA (especially if they have some church association) have already decided that they will NOT be welcome in the church and that they will be judged or condemned. Choosing to have any conversation with a leader within the church requires huge bravery and courage. We need to recognise the privilege of being included in such a significant engagement. Even saying 'thank you so much for sharing this with me and trusting me with your story' can be very important. It is also good to remember that whilst this may be a conversation stating 'this is who I am

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after many months or even years of consideration', it may also be a much more uncertain exploratory conversation which allows someone to express their thoughts and feelings and process them externally. We are always wise to make sure that we listen rather than jump to any conclusions before or during the interaction.

The alternative may be someone who has recently come to know Jesus and felt incredibly welcomed, loved and valued and then enters into a conversation that they are unaware might have the level of complexity that will almost inevitably ensue. It will, of course, in the ongoing process of discipleship be important to engage well with the Bible on many challenging issues and there is little hope of sharing with trust and honesty about these things if we have not begun by listening well.

### *So how might we listen well?*

At the *foundation* of all our listening is that the person we are with is a person who is made in the image of God with immense dignity and value and unconditionally loved by God. Alongside that is our recognition that we are all broken people, imperfect and sinful. We all are constantly in the process of our discipleship, being conformed to the image of Jesus, and therefore we enter any conversation with humility and grace, aware of the grace that has been offered to us.

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We need to come with a *willingness to be self aware* - aware of our theological convictions, aware of any prejudices we might have developed, aware of own fears and anxieties around something we are unfamiliar with or even fearful of, aware of jumping to conclusions or worrying about an issue that may never arise (what happens if they want to stand as a deacon?!). That's called catastrophising and rarely helps in any situation. It can be helpful to begin by asking ourselves a series of questions before we are actually dealing with another person.

### Pause

- How do I feel about gay/SSA people?
- What about my feelings would help or hinder the openness of the conversation?
- Is there anything that I am afraid of?
- How would my theological understanding stand alongside the listening conversation?

We need to understand that *the role of listening is not the role of fixing*. Especially as those entrusted with pastoral leadership there can be a strong temptation to feel that our job is to confront and 'fix the problem'. This can do more harm than good. It is essential that a person who has come to share something so profound and vulnerable knows with confidence that they will be heard properly. We should be particularly mindful of the power dynamic in the pastoral relationship here and make sure that we are very open in the way we offer any wisdom or advice around next steps



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or discipleship approaches. The person should feel comfortable enough to say 'no' or 'I'm not sure or 'maybe we could speak about this again when I've had more time,' without sensing they have disappointed us.

### Mel's Story

Mel came to talk through her feelings and thoughts that she was gay/SSA and was considering entering into a relationship with another woman who had previously been a friend. The conversation revolved around her childhood, her previous marriage to an abusive partner, her own sense of self-esteem and new experience as a follower of Jesus. In this instance she decided that these were not feelings she wished to act on and I think in due time with further conversations recognised that they were feelings more associated with other emotional vulnerabilities and needs. I think if she had not experienced genuine listening in a safe environment where she could explore all that was going on then this story may have taken a different path.

It is essential that we are able to *demonstrate Jesus' love* to people. As pastoral leaders we deal daily with situations that we might not like, are not consistent with being disciples of Jesus and which demonstrate the brokenness of the world we live in. It is the love of Jesus that enables people to be honest, vulnerable and own their need of him, his forgiveness and transformation in any and every area of their character and behaviour. It is likely that the person

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will be in need of some words of reassurance that they are still loved by God.

Listening requires us to ask *open questions* where we genuinely also listen to the answer. It can be so easy to hold a caricature, stereotype or a media driven image in our mind of someone who is gay/SSA. When we feel uncomfortable with something or want it to change or simply go away then it can be challenging to ask open questions without judgement or condemnation.

### Pause

*Open questions* begin with Who, What, When, When and How. They tend to develop conversations and encourage a more detailed response. This means that there are many possible answers and will permit the speaker to give you a full response. Here are some examples:

- Would you like to/ be willing to say more about that?
- Can you tell me a little about how you felt?
- How do you think you came to this conclusion?
- Is there anything you would like me to help you with here?
- Who have you already spoken to about this? Is there anyone you feel is going to be very difficult to talk to?

It may go without saying but perhaps in this type of conversation it is especially important to pay attention to the person's *body language*. What are they communicating to

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you by the way they sit, what they are doing with their arms or where they are looking? What is the level of their voice (very quiet and uncertain, harsh and aggressive, sounding disconnected)? Are they speaking quickly or slowly? In this significant moment it is really valuable to pay careful attention to everything that is going by listening to the whole person.

As a pastor you will be very aware of the value of prayerful listening. We are those who believe that the Lord is with us. This turns every conversation into a spiritual encounter. As we listen, let's engage in that double listening - listening to the person and to the Holy Spirit. He may prompt us with an incisive question, with a gentle word or even an appropriate touch. I have known people who after a particularly difficult conversation mention that the most important moment has been a hand on the shoulder or a hand reaching out to their hand reminding them that they are seen and valued despite what they might be sharing.

As with all pastoral listening, *resist telling your own story or the story of someone else like them*. There may be an appropriate moment to do this but initially at least it is very important that the person doesn't feel 'categorised' or that you have already decided how their story will work out. We need to listen to THEM, their unique story and questions, tensions, hopes and fears.

I think particularly in this area we need to act with caution in terms of offering what we perceive is *wise advice*. Again asking questions first can really help here. Would you like me to recommend any reading material/ Christian

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perspective websites/ someone else you might like to talk to/ any next steps?

It is always good to offer to pray with someone - especially praying that they will know the wisdom, comfort and presence of God with them. It is never our aim to pray them into any specific behaviour choice.

### *Creating room for ongoing conversations and discipleship*

As with any pastoral conversation, how we continue to engage with someone will depend upon where they are in terms of their own discipleship journey. Clearly there is a place here for enabling someone to engage with scripture and a biblical approach to the concerns, issues or reality of what they have shared with us. Questions may, of course arise naturally from them to us about our understanding of scripture or may come from reading or websites that they investigate. There is also a discipleship role for us in asking them, “What do you think the Bible says about this area of your life?” or maybe “What aspect of your discipleship do you feel the Lord wants to address right now?” “How might I best pray for you as you work this through?”

Over the next months or years we will need to seek to maintain an *open door approach* - no listening is concluded in one conversation. In fact, often the first one is the easiest. We need to demonstrate a willingness to keep on listening whether it is engaging with the same content or struggles or moving on to more challenging topics, for example if the person chooses to pursue a direction that you find difficult or asks questions around church involvement that are

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challenging to navigate. We need to keep on listening, keep the communications open as far as it depends on us.

And please remember too that this is a *confidential conversation* unless you have expressly asked permission to share it with anyone else, such as your spouse, elders or deacons.

### *Listening to family members of those with SSA people*

It is perhaps more often within our churches that we need to create a safe space for people to talk about gay/SSA people within their families. I remember the first time I addressed this topic within a Sunday sermon (speaking from 1 John about grace and truth); what surprised me most of all was the number of people who wanted to come and speak about a brother, a cousin, a child or grandchild. They had not felt able to name this because of the stigma, shame, assumed judgement that might be made on them as a result of another family member's choices.

E, a long standing deacon and stalwart of the church, made an appointment to speak with me. She wanted to tell me that she had recently discovered her daughter was SSA and was going to be getting married. C and S were married and within a relatively short time through IVF C gave birth to twin girls. Only about 18 months later S was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She underwent a number of rounds of treatment but eventually she died leaving C as a single parent with 2 young girls. Listening to her story was so important and continuing to ask after her daughter and the

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family became increasingly valued. Reminding myself to focus on the people concerned rather than the ‘situation’ was significant.

### Pause

- How might we create a culture where it’s okay to share the situations within your family without judgment?
- How might you decide to uphold complex family situations in prayer within the church gathering (in a way that you would do in more straightforward situations) ?
- How do you listen to family members as they process choices and situations which they might disagree with or find uncomfortable?

## Chapter 4

# Church Culture

Thomas Dean

Minister, Stenhouse Baptist Church

*It can seem that church culture is optimised for pairing people off and always has couples at its heart. How can churches be a positive environment for people who have chosen to pursue a single life rather than enter a same sex relationship?*

### *Culture*

If we are to become places of inclusive welcome for our SSA brothers and sisters, we need to examine the culture of our churches, face our preoccupation with the nuclear family and reflect more deeply about our discipleship.

A fellow church leader recently shared with me their strategy for reaching out in a new neighbourhood; launching a parenting course, starting some kids groups and then following up with a marriage course.

Whilst I applaud their heart for community, the danger is that they fail to make space for those not married or who don't have kids, as do many of us. As we reflect on our church cultures, isn't it difficult enough for gay/SSA people in evangelical spaces without us unconsciously squeezing them out of the few places of belonging that do

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exist?

Socrates claimed that ‘the unexamined life is not worth living’ and I wonder if the unexamined church is really a safe place for those who are gay/SSA to encounter Christ without the prospect of significant harm. If our ambition as leaders is to walk the long journey alongside people, we cannot afford to skip the important step of stopping and examining what sort of environments we are building around us.

Our church culture is not simply the words we preach or our statement of faith, it's our body language, the conversations on the fringes, our church diaries, the books we recommend and what we don't talk about as well as what we do... all of it adds up to and reveals who we really are. We are often so entrenched in our own subcultures that we have no grasp on what it might feel like to be a newcomer or on the fringes. Do all of our sermon analogies assume people are married, want to get married and have the same heteronormative outlook?

Why not take time to sensitively ask someone who is single what it's like to be part of your church? Where are we being clunky and unhelpful with our language? Where have we unfortunately (or even deliberately) mischaracterized the subject of sexuality as a ‘them and us’ issue? For example, when we paint everyone with different desires as ‘driving an agenda’ our language creates suspicion and the people we lead will feel the need to take a side. That's not Kingdom culture. How can we be clear around an



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orthodox posture towards sexuality without losing kindness, generosity and gentleness as we frame what is happening around us? We needn't be surprised that people feel unsafe in unexamined environments that are sloppy or

### Pause

- Imagine visiting your church as a single person. What do you see/hear/experience?
- What unhelpful words have been spoken in your church?

even malicious in the way we describe people whom God loves and Jesus died for.

### *Going Nuclear*

Anyone who's read the gospels a few times will have observed that Jesus did not share our Western obsession with the nuclear family. He provoked the crowd; *'Here are my mother and my brothers'*, he commissioned his best friend; *'Here is your mother'*, and challenged the disciples; *'Let the dead bury their own dead, you go and proclaim the kingdom of God'*.

It's a beautiful and powerful thing when churches follow Christ in doing family differently and a very clear marker of the Kingdom of God in that community. This is no less true for when we live alongside and honour those who are gay/SSA and have chosen the path of singleness.

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It doesn't often come with fanfare or a lot of attention. It's choosing to make extra space, not just at our tables but in the entire fabric of our lives. Maybe there is a small cost involved, swimming against the tide of a church life that is centred around married couples and young families requires intentionality and commitment. But like so much of the Jesus Way, we end up receiving far more than we could ever give out. This is the pattern of the Kingdom of Heaven, and while there are huge challenges for us as a family of churches in considering themes of sexuality, *we can be encouraged that these markers of the kingdom are springing up in more places than we realise.*

One of the biggest risks we take is unwittingly prohibiting people from even beginning the journey with Jesus because we're sleep-walking through matters of vital importance to them. As Christian leaders we can be guilty of placing burdens on gay/SSA people when we ask them to do things we simply do not ask heterosexual believers to do, attaching descriptors we would never attach to heterosexual believers even though we *all* come before God as sexually broken people. For example, honing in on someone who is gay/SSA's sexual activity in a way that we might not with a new heterosexual couple at church.

We need to tread carefully and compassionately. Jesus gave a firm rebuke to the religious leaders of the day for the double standards they placed those around them - *They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them* (Matt

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23). Have we done the heavy lifting of examining our church cultures?

Perhaps a better way of framing the leadership challenge is that there is an opportunity before us to create cultures that actually look, feel and smell like the kingdom of God. 'Kingdom Culture' can just be another meaningless cliché when our church cultures can look exactly like the middle-class secular culture that many of our Baptist churches inhabit. Maybe we shouldn't be surprised when many gay/SSA believers tell us that they receive a better welcome outside the church than inside. Not that we are in any way called to imitate the world. No, our calling is far higher, we are called to imitate Jesus Christ. Jesus, who called sinners to repentance, who got around the meal table with such a diverse set of people, who taught us all the *narrow way* to live and compassionately *lived it out alongside us*.

Honest examination should always lead to repentance. When is it time to acknowledge the harm we've done to brothers and sisters in Christ? Where do we need to apologise personally and where do we need to readjust our approach from only ever debating abstract ideologies to holding people's stories with gentleness and Godly fear? We will always struggle to tell 'a better story' for gay/SSA people if our churches are simultaneously communicating that there is no place for them.

### Pause

- What would it look like for your church to re-examine family life in light of Jesus' above words?
- What might repentance look like for your church in this context?

### *Who's discipling who?*

Every young person (under 35!) that engages with our church, Christian and not wants to know: What is our position? Where do we stand? I've logged on to social media to see Christian influencers encourage their followers to immediately leave any church that is not publicly 'fully affirming'. The point being, if we don't engage with these themes in our churches, it won't (and shouldn't) stop people considering them. It simply means they'll be tuning in to other voices and will effectively be disciplined by them instead. Due to our silence, they will then make assumptions about what we may or may not believe and how we may or may not respond. Sticking our heads in the sand will remove the opportunity we have to reflect upon the person of Jesus, the meaning of scripture and the grace of God. But any opportunity we have to reflect upon these should be considered as a significant opportunity for discipleship. There is another opportunity here, where in a community of disciples we make space to listen and understand, but also move forward together in

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sharing the beautiful gospel with one another again and again. It's time for all to model Christ-like holiness to one another and pray in God's new creation together with expectant hope. It's time for us all to begin to take hold of that vision of kingdom discipleship culture together.

There are various active campaigns running to encourage churches to be clear on their position when it comes to sex and sexuality. We might understandably feel reluctant to be shoehorned into a label or a position with no room for nuance, clarification or community. We all need to work out how we communicate with this generation in our context and not feel overly pressured to act in a certain way. However, this challenge for clarity mustn't always be seen as an antagonistic threat. Perhaps instead it's a call to wake up and walk through our biblical convictions with people in a new way. There are precious people whom God dearly loves who are hurting, who have no idea where they stand with us or indeed with God. As leaders, will we be the ones to lift a finger or are we happy to continue to place the burden on others to figure it out on their own? May Christ-like compassion lead us to creatively steward our communities towards cultures that make space for those who find themselves on the fringes.

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### Pause

- How does your church engage the theme of sexuality? Where are the opportunities for discipleship?
- What are the fears that you share about talking about sexuality? Who might benefit from greater clarity?
- Spend time praying for your church and all those connected.

## Chapter 5

# A long obedience - and a long loving – in the same direction

Andrew Rollinson

Retired Minister

*We welcome people to join us for worship regardless of their beliefs or lifestyle, but what happens when someone in (or seeking) a same sex relationship offers to join the welcome team or the worship band? And what if they seek baptism or church membership? And how might churches support people along a slow road of discipleship? Things are simpler if a person embraces celibate singleness (or, sadly, just leaves the church) but when they do neither, how do we walk together in a Christian congregation? This inevitably requires us to live with a degree of tension and consider what, if any, level of accommodation we might make.*

Eugene Peterson talks about discipleship as a ‘long obedience in the same direction.’ To welcome and care well for gay/same-sex attracted members of our congregation also requires a ‘long loving in the same direction.’ The initial welcome of gay/ same-sex attracted friends is relatively straightforward; it is the longer-term integration into the life of the church where careful and compassionate discernment is required. This section offers no prescriptive steps to take, rather a set of reflections and

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questions to aid such discernment. What is so important to emphasise that none of the below will be possible without fully taking on board all that has already been written. No congregation will respond well without the presence of a sensitive church ethos that celebrates that Jesus is good news *for all* and that demonstrates it is a truly safe place to explore such good news. Listening and loving are almost synonymous.

### Jan and Chloe

Jan and Chloe are two delightful, gregarious women in their early 30's. They have lived together as a happy lesbian (unmarried) couple for six years. Jan was befriended at work by a church member, attended an Alpha Course and has subsequently made a commitment to Christ. She has been attending church regularly since. Increasingly Chloe has joined her. They have both been made to feel very welcome and occasionally help in the crèche. Jan is a music teacher and has offered to join the worship group. She has also been enquiring about believer's baptism. The church leadership are aware that they have issues to face and conversations to host. Some in the church are becoming increasingly vocal as to why the leaders have not been more proactive in 'dealing with this pastoral issue'. One or two anonymous same-sex attracted single folk in the church are anxious to see how this all plays out. The young people are alert to the issues as well.



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### *Coming to terms with messy church*

As was said in the introduction, loving our neighbours is uncontroversial - but often complex. The Christian life has been viewed as a marathon race (Hebrews 12:1). But it is not like that of an elite sporting event at Hampden Park where tensions run high and competition is everything. Our calling is more like the all-comers Great North Run where everyone runs at their own pace. There is joy as people overtake one another, help for the dehydrated, laughter with the strange array of so-called sport's wear and support for the decidedly unfit. It is messy - but the diversity is a delight. Such is the vision for the Body of Christ. There is a great need for the church leaders, through teaching and tone-setting, to help a congregation first of all to *relax*. We are all broken, struggling, spiritually dehydrated and morally unfit people called by God to share a journey where what matters of first importance is our love for Christ and his Word. Jan and Chloe and the gay/same-sex attracted singles in the congregation need to feel their different sexualities are not, by any means, the first focus of attention. There is need for 'pastoral space'. Pastoral claustrophobia leads to spiritual suffocation. There is need for permission for young and old, married

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and single, gay and straight to have open and honest conversations about human sexuality.

### Pause

How, as a church leader, would you help members of the congregation who immediately want 'the pastoral issue to be dealt with' to become less pressing?

### *Nurturing safe and trusting relationships*

Having said the above, clearly there *are* important issues to be faced - and faced honestly. Jan's and Chloe's lifestyle is not compatible with a biblical vision of discipleship. The 'narrow gate' to life (Matthew 7:13-14) has to be approached. We owe it to other gay/same-sex attracted members of the church to hear this too. Integrity is everything.

But this journey to and through the narrow gate needs, above all, faithful accompaniment. A small group of mature Christian friends need to give themselves to true friendship and hospitality to Jan and Chloe – and others. We have no right to even begin to challenge a lifestyle which will have costly consequences unless we as a church are willing to offer costly companionship. It could take the form of a small home group but may well be better with one or two offering, on behalf of the leadership, to

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help them on a journey of discipleship. These companions may well need to ‘protect’ Jan and Chloe from the misplaced zeal of self-appointed ‘sound-church underwriters’. They will need to take Jan and Chloe’s sexual orientation with great seriousness. They will need to model to Jan and Chloe humility and transparency about their own struggles. ‘Learning to struggle well with others in the presence of God’ (Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting*) is the aspiration. This will mean, above all, a constant stressing that following Jesus is not about adhering to a set of rules but the joy of a dynamic relationship with the one Lover and Lord who matters.

### Pause

- In your church who could you see as such companions – and why would you suggest them?
- Jan and Chloe need deep and intimate Christian friends. What would that look like in your setting?

### *Intentional integration*

Particular support must never be at the expense of genuine inclusivity. The classic nuclear family has been radically relativised by Jesus, ‘Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother’ (Mark 3: 33-35). Jan and Chloe must begin to *experience* the family of God as the best earthly family of all. And that is some challenge for us!

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They need to taste the new wine of the Kingdom by sharing, where appropriate, in the life of the church - a depth of fellowship, a modelling of loyalty, examples of self-less living and above all a desire for God life in worship better than any other desire. Only such will begin to erode the many fears, negativities and painful baggage most gay/same-sex attracted people (often legitimately) bring to the church.

Here, finally, surfaces a key tension underlying the whole of this issue. How *practically* can we be genuinely and warmly inclusive and yet not confuse Jan and Chloe as to the clear convictions of this community of faith that homo-erotic behaviour is not God's will? Churches will clearly differ over their approach at this point. If it is deemed Jan can help in the crèche but not the worship group on what basis would such a decision be made? What is important is that a church leadership considers these scenarios ahead of time. Carefully prescribed written policies, however, rarely serve well with such a vast array of possible pastoral scenarios.

### Pause

Would you agree or not that the concern not to *confuse* Jan and Chloe is more important missionally than any danger of church '*compromise*'?

### *The place of the Lord's Supper*

One area of integration that requires careful reflection is the appropriateness or not of encouraging Jan to participate in communion. Again, there will be different approaches to this as has been the case over the centuries in Baptist church life. Discussing this as leaders (and Jan when appropriate) ahead of time is important. The Lord's Supper is primarily a communion with the crucified and risen Lord but also a communion with all in the body of Christ. As such it marks our corporate identity as those in Christ. For this reason some will want to encourage Jan to participate as a believer, to strengthen her awareness of her fundamental identity in Christ. All other identity markers are de-centred by this powerful act. The meal is also transformative through the Spirit's presence among his people. It draws us closer to Christ and thus has the potential to give Jan clearer insight into the journey before her. Others may be more uncertain, concerned with the Pauline invitation to 'examine ourselves', with the public nature of Jan's moral stance, with Zwingli's emphasis that the supper is 'an oath of allegiance' over which Jan hasn't finally come to terms.

### *Barriers or bridges*

The day comes when Jan specifically requests believer's baptism. She wants to share her baptismal day with Chloe who has now given her life to Christ. Here there are

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theological as well as pastoral matters that need careful attention.

Believers' baptism has, over the years, be accented in two slightly different ways and this will make a difference to any response. For some, baptism is clearly and simply the biblical sign of Christian *initiation*. It is the celebration of God's undeserved and unconditional grace through Christ. Though heart repentance is essential, signs of moral transformation are to be looked for primarily *after* baptism. Otherwise the sheer wonder of God's enabling grace and power will be lost. Baptism is the birthday party of the justified sinner (gay or straight), not a staging post on the road of sanctification. This seems to have been the pattern of the earliest believers (Acts 2:38). For others (as with our Anabaptist forefathers) believers' baptism is all the above but is also *the mark of Christian discipleship and the entry point for church membership*. There must therefore be moral signs of true repentance for baptism to have integrity, they would argue. Though the earliest believers were indeed baptised on confession of faith they were, it is observed, already well immersed in Judaism, with its shaping beliefs and morals that carry over to Christian ethics.

Having said that, there is a growing consensus that in *our deeply secular age* 'becoming a Christian is a complex and radical affair' which is 'at once corporate, cognitive, moral, experiential, operational and disciplinary.' (William Abraham – *The Logic of Evangelism*). Baptism is both God's gift *and* God's call.

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This being the case, a request for baptism is, we suggest, a God-given window for Jan and Chloe to look through and clearly face their choices. Our prayer is that it will become a bridge not a barrier. There will never be such a moment (which, crucially, *they* have initiated) where permission is given to speak of the incompatibility of their lifestyle with the teaching of Jesus. Great pastoral wisdom and sensitivity will be needed at this point. So much is at stake. So much has to be clarified - though if good open friendships have been established all this should not come as a surprise. The invitation of Jesus is to find true life in all its fullness not restriction. The call is not to renounce a sexual orientation but to break from their present sexual behaviour. (There is need for assurance that the same conversation will be with heterosexuals being promiscuous or faithfully co-habiting.) The promise of life in Christ is to discover an identity that far outshines all other identity markers.

### Pause

- What accent would you put on the meaning of believers' baptism?
- What lies behind our reluctance to have open and transparent conversations about human sexuality?

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### *Pastoral support for single people*

To put it bluntly, no church has the right to call for such costly decision-making without demonstrating cross-shaped discipleship across the piece. To gay/same-sex attracted Christians who choose to live celibate lives out of obedience to Christ, (particularly if after a sexual relationship) we owe sacrificial and long-term support. Such choices should not only be honoured but encouraged by the equal sacrifice of all in the church family. Married couples and heterosexual singles need to be seen to live their lives with costly faithfulness, to have open homes, to give time and space to the friendship of others and to be honest about the struggles, loneliness and disappointments of their calling. It is often particularly hard for single people to move location when a local church has been their family; and this is even more the case with SSA/gay young people who leave home. Christian households who commit to continue to be family in such cases can be a great help. The church must have the humility to be open to *learning from* Jan and Chloe through the journey they are on.

#### **Pause**

- In ways can we as leaders be seen to be truly credible as we advocate costly, cross-shaped choices for others?
- What might the church learn about following Jesus from Jan and Chloe?



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### *When things become even more complex*

A same-sex couple arrive at church and begin to get involved. They are married and have an adopted disabled child. Here is a family unit that needs nurture and protection. Any encouragement for them to part is deeply problematic. It has parallels with the mission challenge in Africa and elsewhere where a husband has come to faith with a polygamous family. The 'sending away' of a second and third wife would have catastrophic consequences. The family arrangement is therefore often 'accommodated' i.e. room is lovingly made for them whilst certain limitations are put in place to indicate that this is not the Christian norm. Could this be the most Christ-like option for the same-sex family unit?

### *Not 'failure' or 'success' but pastoral faithfulness.*

Jan and Chloe are just two 'for instance' characters. We are all very different – with unique sexual histories, desires, struggles and joys. The journey of accompaniment will, for sure, demand Spirit-led improvisation. Communal discernment will come into its own. Some from the LGBTQ community who (bravely) try our church will almost immediately withdraw if they detect we are not affirming of their stance. Some will withdraw later, maybe hurt by something that has been said. Jan and Chloe may decide not to be baptised and start worshipping elsewhere.

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This whole issue is awash with potential pain for all concerned. For us there will be pain as gay/same-sex folk we have invested in walk away. The quality of our welcome and accompaniment will always be open to improvement and this is the aim of this resource. But outcomes will never be under our control. God alone knows. Discipleship is indeed a very long walk of obedience and loving in the same direction. It is the direction of being faithful to Christ and to every gay/same-sex person we have the privilege of walking alongside.

## **Chapter 6: A Postscript - Overflowing with Hope**

Our pastoral reflections began with ‘Telling a Better Story’. That ‘better story’ leads us to end with a joyful focus on the limitless grace of God for all. Pastoral challenges there certainly are, trite answers there certainly are not, but underlying all our contributions has been the passionate conviction that whatever a person’s painful past and present struggles God’s grace in Christ is more than sufficient. God, in Christ, offers transformation for all – starting with us - and witnessing that transformation, by the power of the Spirit, is exhilarating. This resource is not about ‘containing a problem’ but about the privilege of seeing every gay/SSA person who comes our way profoundly blessed by the overflowing hope of God’s love.

There are three notes of clarity around such transformation which we wish to celebrate - and with which we conclude.

First, the transformation God longs to bring is the same for everyone. It is a transformation from disorientated loves to a passionate, intoxicating love for Jesus Christ, the source and centre of creation itself. Rosaria Butterfield, a former practising lesbian and English and Queer Studies professor, puts it so well,

‘When the Lord entered my world, I experienced that gospel-ignited ‘expulsive power of a new affection’ (to quote the title of Thomas Chalmers’

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famous sermon). That new affection was not heterosexuality, but Jesus, my Jesus, my friend and saviour.'

For all of us, the overflowing hope is that God, by his Spirit, is in the business of taking our sinfulness and brokenness and slowly refashioning us into 'the likeness of Christ with ever-increasing glory' (2 Corinthians 3:18). We look ahead to the coming kingdom of God, to the day when Jesus appears and finally we *all* 'shall be like him' (1 John 3.2), to the day of the Lord Jesus Christ when he who began a good work *in each of us* will bring it to completion. At this renewal of all things, all our loves and all our devotion will finally be oriented to Christ alone.

Second, such transformation comes in the context of God's people. Our prayer is that whenever any gay/SSA friend encounters the local church the overriding impression left is of a community of very diverse people, all finding an extraordinary unity in a passionate love for and worship of Jesus Christ. We are all on a journey, all equally excited by the destination. We carry different emotional loads but the joy is both that of 'carrying each other's burdens' (Galatians 6:2) and of finding in Jesus 'a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light' (Matthew 11:30). Our life together, we believe, is meant to a genuine foretaste of the life to come where true freedom for all will be our eternal delight.

Finally, this transformation is all of God's initiative and goodness. Christ turns his face towards us before we ever turn our lives towards him. Our pastoral confidence is

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never in our skills but in God's grace and God's grace alone. We humbly believe that the non-affirming stance we and the Baptist Union of Scotland have taken, is not unloving or judgmental but part of God's way for true human flourishing. It is the good news and better story of putting the spotlight where it should be, not on our sexuality and our sexual struggles but upon our deepest human longing – to find true love. The embrace of Christ is what alone will satisfy. At the cross that embrace was seen and offered. That is what we need to offer. It will always result in overflowing hope.

## **Prayer of Blessing\***

You O Lord are good

You O Lord are kind

Draw us into your unity of love and purpose

Impart to us your touch of mercy and peace

Jesus, the goodness of God

Jesus, you are the kindness of God

Draw near to desiring minds and longing hearts

Be to us one who is closer than a brother

Holy Spirit, grant contentment amidst our desires

Holy Spirit, grow in us your fruit and make us flourish

Birth good desire, re-create Jesus in us

Make us self-less and wise in the service and  
fellowship of brothers and sisters

God, Father, Son and Spirit

Show us the service of your Kingdom in our journey  
through this world

Lead us in the way of loving freedom, always  
esteeming others

Guard our fragile hearts and desires, draw near in our  
anxious loneliness

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Lift our eyes and open our ears now to the joy of Jesus  
Christ

Make righteousness and truth our highest desire and  
delight

Gift all our days with the joy of your holy presence

And welcome us home to the forever embrace of your  
endless love

Amen

*\* written for this project by a small group of gay/SSA people  
from one Scottish Baptist church*

## Appendix 1

The European Baptist Federation *Resolution On Marriage (2010)* adopted by The Baptist Union of Scotland Assembly in 2011.

The European Baptist Federation Council:

**Rejoices** in the mutually loving and selfless relationship of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the demonstration of this through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

**Gives thanks** to God for creating man and woman in his image and seeks to follow the witness and teaching of scripture for any expression of human sexuality.

**Urges** Baptists to model, value and teach that marriage is the creational and biblical setting of any sexual relationship between a man and a woman, as expressed in Genesis 2:24:

‘Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.’

**Shares** in the brokenness of human relationships and acknowledges the pain and difficulties this brokenness causes for people in our churches and society.



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**Affirms** our responsibility to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in word and deed with all people irrespective of their way of life or convictions.

**Recognises** the need to encourage, support and pray for married people, offering pastoral and spiritual care for the strengthening of healthy and vibrant Christian communities in relationship with Jesus Christ and each other.

## Appendix 2

### Affirmations from the Evangelical Alliance Report Biblical and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality (2012)

We are conscious that different evangelicals might apply certain of these points in different ways, but we believe that, taken together, they reflect an authentic, mainstream evangelical response to homosexuality in general and sexually active same-sex partnerships in particular:

1. We recognise that all of us are sinners, and that the only true hope for sinful people – whatever our sexuality – is in Jesus Christ. Our earnest prayer is that his love, truth and grace would characterise evangelical responses to debates on homosexuality, both now and in future.
2. We affirm God's love and concern for all human beings, whatever their sexuality, and so repudiate all attitudes and actions which victimise or diminish people whose affections are directed towards people of the same sex. We are encouraged many Christians now recognise and deeply regret the hurt caused by past and present failures in their responses to those who experience same-sex attraction.
3. We affirm that marriage is an institution created by God in which one man and one woman enter into an exclusive relationship for life. Marriage is the only form of partnership approved by God for sexual relations and homoerotic sexual practice is incompatible with His will as revealed in Scripture. We do not accept that holding these

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theological and ethical views on biblical grounds is in itself homophobic.

4. We encourage evangelical congregations to be communities of grace in which those who experience same-sex attraction and seek to live faithfully in accordance with biblical teaching are welcomed and affirmed. Such Christians need churches which are safe spaces where they are able to share and explore their stories with fellow believers for mutual encouragement and support as we help each other grow together into maturity in Christ.

5. We oppose moves within certain churches to accept and/or endorse sexually active same-sex partnerships as a legitimate form of Christian relationship and to permit the ordination to ministry of those in such sexual relationships. We stand prayerfully with those in such churches who are seeking to resist these moves on biblical grounds.

6. We oppose church services of blessing for civil partnerships and other forms of gay and lesbian relationships as unbiblical and reject any redefinition of marriage to encompass same-sex relationships.

7. We commend and encourage all those who experience same-sex attraction and have committed themselves to chastity by refraining from homoerotic sexual practice. We believe they should be eligible for ordination and leadership within the church, recognising that they can bring invaluable insights and experience to the sphere of Christian pastoral ministry.

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8. We welcome and support the work of those individuals and organisations who responsibly seek to help Christians who experience same-sex attraction as in conflict with their commitment to live in accordance with biblical teaching. This help will involve counsel and pastoral support to live a chaste life and, as part of this process, some may seek and experience changes in the strength or direction of their same-sex attractions.

9. We believe both habitual homoerotic sexual activity without repentance and public promotion of such activity are inconsistent with faithful church membership. While processes of membership and discipline differ from one church context to another, we believe that either of these behaviours warrants consideration for church discipline.

10. We encourage evangelical congregations to welcome and accept sexually active lesbians and gay men. However, they should do so in the expectation that they, like all of us who are living outside God's purposes, will come in due course to see the need to be transformed and live in accordance with biblical revelation and orthodox church teaching. We urge gentleness, patience and ongoing pastoral care during this process and after a person renounces same-sex sexual relations.

## Appendix 3

### Some Resources We Have Found Helpful

As we seek to put into practice the love for our gay/SSA neighbours that we have been writing about in this booklet, here is a website and a few books that we have found helpful. We would commend these as a good starting point for further exploration.

*A Better Story: God, Sex and Human Flourishing*, Glynn Harrison (IVP 2017)

*A Change of Affection*, Becket Cook (Nelson Books 2019)

*A War of Loves*, David Bennet, (Zondervan, 2018)

*Heavy Burdens: Seven Ways LGBTQ Christians Experience Harm in the Church*, Bridget Eileen Rivera (Brazos 2021)

*Love is an Orientation*, Andrew Marin (IVP 2009)

*People to be Loved*, Preston Sprinkle (Zondervan 2016)

*Living Out* website: [livingout.org](http://livingout.org)

*The Plausibility Problem*, Ed Shaw IVP 2015)

*Washed and Waiting*, Wesley Hill (Zondervan 2017)