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Acknowledgements

The General Assembly Special Committee on Sexual Orientation thanks many people for their help in the preparation of this study guide. A full list of resources will appear in our final report. Immense thanks go to the many contributors - whose names cannot be given for reasons of confidentiality - for the great variety of stories and wisdom that make up Part 3, Listening to God's People. These stories have been crucial to the study, and it is largely from them that the committee has learned what questions needed to be asked of the scholars and specialists who have supported our work.

'An Opening Story' in Part 1 comes from a book review by Leith Fisher, published in the Iona Community's *Coracle*, in July 1999, and is used again here with our thanks.

Where the Bible is quoted, we have used the New International Version, published by Zondervan Publishing House, and made available electronically through the web site of the International Bible Society at: www.gospelcom.net.

Participants are encouraged to use the Bible translations of their choice, and to enrich the study experience by comparing the texts.

Note

This study guide was prepared by members of the General Assembly Special Committee on Sexual Orientation of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, with further refinement and approval of the whole document by the full committee at its meeting in November 2002.

This document is available for downloading free of charge from the website of the Presbyterian Church in Canada at: www.presbyterian.ca/documents

Listening...

Understanding Human Sexuality

Part 1: Listening to the questions

Guidelines

We are here to listen and learn together. A few simple rules will help.

- Every opinion offered by the participants must be heard and respected. Nobody will be asked or expected to justify or defend an opinion.
- Each session should be opened and closed with prayer by the leader or another participant.
- Each session is designed to take 1-1.5 hours, so the length of the discussion segments should be planned to meet this target.

Purpose of this study

Its purpose is:

1. To encourage discussion, questioning, and continued discussion;
2. To provide an awareness of current church doctrine;
3. To explore the teachings of the Bible on human sexuality;
4. To help to develop an informed understanding of human sexuality;
5. To keep the church lively and enquiring.

Its purpose is **not** to be:

1. A position paper – it does not aim to set one position against another;
2. A restatement of the Church's doctrine;
3. The last word on the topic!

An opening story *(read to the group by the leader or another participant) ...*

A young man was training to be a rabbi. He was a very earnest young man who studied hard and sat long and seriously at the feet of his elders. He pondered deeply on the mystery of God and the world and he felt he would be ready to be a teacher when he could give the answer to the question: What is the meaning of life? One day he heard that a famous and learned old rabbi was going to be visiting nearby, so he sought him out and said to him, "Rabbi, I am studying earnestly the ways of God and the world so that I may also be a teacher. I have a question to ask you for I feel I cannot be a teacher until I know its answer to tell to others, and I know you can tell me the answer. My question is: What is the meaning of life?" The old rabbi thought for a minute or two and then set upon his young inquirer with great vigour, furiously boxing him about the ears. "Young man, why do you come for an answer when you have such a good question? Questions unite; answers divide."

Think about that last sentence. It suggests that people of all shades of opinion and understanding can work peaceably side by side to study a question. The aim is that the discussion and discernment process should not force an answer before its time.

Some may feel called to share their convictions openly, while being prepared to listen to responses different from their own.

We need our church leaders, not to provide us with all the answers, but to equip us and to guide us to ask better questions. We can then continue to study the Bible, which can remain a fresh, open book to be studied for all time.

Discuss: *"Questions unite; answers divide"*. What does this mean to you? Which of the approaches stated above helps you to read and use the Bible?

*And what does the Lord require of you,
but to act justly and to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

Micah 6:8

What is the position of The Presbyterian Church in Canada on this topic today?

1. The church opposes any attitude of hatred or discrimination directed at homosexual people.
2. The church believes its task is to lead all people to the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.
3. The church has accepted the biblical norm of the union of male and female.
4. The church has called for chastity [*understood to mean celibacy in this context*] outside the bond of marriage.

Discuss:

How do these statements affect your understanding of the position of the church in general, and The Presbyterian Church in Canada in particular?

(For further study of these statements, see the 1994 Report on Human Sexuality. This document is available from the church offices in Toronto and through the church documents area of the www.presbyterian.ca website)

What is the mandate of the Special Committee on Sexual Orientation?

The questions come from the mandate of the Special Committee on Sexual Orientation, which was set up by the General Assembly in 1997 and instructed to:

1. Clarify the limits of the roles of homosexual people within the Church, and
2. to investigate and explore the scientific, psychological, medical, pastoral, theological and biblical understanding of sexual orientation.

This study is an important step in that work.

Terms and definitions:

- **Sexual orientation:** The dominant sexual attraction of an individual, generally classified as heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. It is considered to be an individual's place in a spectrum ranging from exclusive homosexuality to exclusive heterosexuality. All people have a place in this spectrum.
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- **Heterosexual:** A person whose primary sexual attraction is to persons of the opposite sex.
- **Homosexual:** A person whose primary attraction is to persons of the same sex. Research consistently indicates that between 5 and 10% of the population have a homosexual orientation.
- **Bisexual:** A person who is sexually attracted to both men and women, though not necessarily at the same time or in the same way.
- **Lesbian/gay:** These are the terms used in current common speech to describe female and male homosexual people.

Note: Discussions of homosexuality frequently lead to questions about pedophilia, (sexual attraction to children) and the special committee therefore investigated the topic. Independent scientific material submitted to the committee provided evidence that the occurrence of pedophiles among homosexual people is roughly the same as among heterosexual people. Thus, we can make no valid connection between homosexuality and pedophilia.

Some notes from the committee:

The committee reported part way through its work that,

“In our discussions we have achieved unanimous or substantial agreement on some points (in no particular order). For example:

1. We are all sinners.
 2. There are many models of interpretation of Scripture.
 3. Jesus’ commandment regarding love is central to our faith.
 4. Presbyterians are uncomfortable discussing sexuality.
 5. Many people fear homosexuals but do not know why.
 6. Sexual orientation is not sexual behaviour.
 7. There are lesbian and gay people holding positions of responsibility in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.
 8. People of homosexual orientation are able to have all the privileges of church membership.
 9. The Presbyterian Church in Canada still needs to examine the issues around ordination.
 10. The church is called to a ministry of reconciliation.
 11. Sexual expression is a fundamental human need.
 12. Homosexual orientation is not a sin.”
-

Discuss:

These points arose while the committee sat as a study group discussing its members' understanding of homosexuality. Do the same points raise questions for you? Are there others that your group could add?

Closing (*read together by the group*):

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Matthew 5:1-12

Listening...

Understanding Human Sexuality

Part 2: Listening to the Bible

Guidelines

- It is important to understand the contexts in which we find the biblical texts that are of interest in this study. It is easy for texts to be misused when taken out of context, so don't restrict your reading to the verses in isolation.
- As each text is studied, the group should ask if the original purpose of the text is clear. It may be helpful to compare different Bible translations, either as a group or individually, before discussing what they mean. In some cases, we may have to agree that we don't know, and in some we shall perhaps disagree.
- Everyone is encouraged to read all these passages before the group meets.

Living Faith, Chapter 5: The Bible

Living Faith is one of our three subordinate standards; the documents that guide our belief as members of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, but which come below the authority of the Bible. Here is part of what it says about the Bible.

- 5.1** *The Bible has been given to us
by the inspiration of God
to be the rule of faith and life.
It is the standard of all doctrine
by which we must test any word that comes to us
from church, world, or inner experience.
We subject to its judgment
all we believe and do.
Through the Scriptures
the church is bound only to Jesus Christ its King and Head.
He is the living Word of God
to whom the written word bears witness.*

- 5.4 *The Bible is to be understood in the light of the revelation of God's work in Christ. The writing of the Bible was conditioned by the language, thought, and setting of its time. The Bible must be read in its historical context. We interpret Scripture as we compare passages, seeing the two Testaments in light of each other, and listening to commentators past and present. Relying on the Holy Spirit, we seek the application of God's word for our time.*

Discuss:

- What questions does 'Living Faith' raise in your understanding of the authority of the Bible? Does it provide the answers that you need?
- The Bible speaks clearly and enduringly on the subject of sexual abuse and crime.

However, a present day question that has helped to bring about this and many other studies is, *"Does the Bible say anything about committed, loving, sexual relationships between two people of the same sex?"* The answer is not altogether clear, and we must try to formulate better questions that will lead us to where the Bible will give us a better understanding; one that will enable us to be both faithful to its teaching, and to relate to the culture in which we live.

- We must be cautious when hearing such statements as "Jesus said nothing on this topic". His teachings on many matters are not recorded, and therefore we should be careful not to make assumptions as to what he might, or might not, have said. It does mean that we have to study his recorded statements more carefully to discern how his teaching leads us towards the answers to these difficult questions. We must question our own questions, and cast the net of inquiry farther.

The Biblical texts

The texts presented in this section are those in which the Bible speaks about sexuality, and about God's love and grace. It is not an exhaustive list, but contains important references that are frequently quoted.

The Holiness Code and related texts

Many of the Old Testament texts that we shall consider are statements of the law developed under the Holiness Code, and knowledge of this will help to explain the origins of early laws that can be hard for us to understand in our own time.

Briefly, the Holiness Code of Old Testament times divided all things into two groups – the holy and the profane. The holy group included all that was clean, complete, whole and pure. There was no room for imperfection or loose ends. The profane group included the unclean (polluted), incomplete, mixed or confused.

As will be seen in Deuteronomy 23, this included people who were incomplete in some way, or were the offspring of irregular unions. It encompassed the incomplete in all things, together with things different from what was understood at that time to be perfect. It even included familiar human conditions that were considered to be temporarily imperfect.

God's power was believed to have created the holy, and it was important that the holy not come in contact with the profane and become contaminated. Therefore, only perfect animals could be offered for sacrifice. This priestly theology, as it was practised in Hebrew culture, was a fairly common phenomenon in other ancient cultures.

The Hebrew people ruled their lives according to the code as a fulfillment of their obligation to God.

- **The Old Testament and homosexuality**

Genesis	19:1-29
Judges	19:22 – 29; 20:1 –7
Deuteronomy	23:17-18
Leviticus	18:22
Leviticus	20:13

Genesis and Judges are different from the other texts, appearing to be two different versions of a multi-faceted story. Although these stories have nothing to do with homosexual love - quite the opposite, in fact - they are frequently used in discussions of homosexuality. It is therefore useful to understand that they concern perverse and violently abusive criminal behaviour, as unacceptable today as it was then.

The remaining passages set out some sections of the law as it was formulated in the earliest times.

It is important to read the full context of these passages. In particular, Deuteronomy 23 sets out a wide range of practices that seem harsh to our modern understanding of justice.

Discuss: What questions do the wording of these laws raise for us today?

- **The New Testament on homosexuality**

1 Corinthians	6: 9, 10
1 Timothy	1: 8-10
Romans	1: 18-32

These were written at a time when prostitution - sacred and commercial - and open sexual promiscuity, both heterosexual and homosexual, are said to have been commonplace and a mockery of the Old Testament laws.

Discuss:

What questions does this background raise in your understanding of the texts?
What are the similarities and differences between those times and ours?

- **The Bible on male-female relationships**

Genesis	1: 26-31
Genesis	2: 18-25
Matthew	19: 4-6
Ephesians	5: 21-33

The creation story of the Genesis text says that God made humanity - man and woman - in the image and likeness of the deity. Matthew and Ephesians are clear in their statements that the sexes are distinct and complementary parts of the creation.

Discuss: What questions arise for you from these statements?

- **The Bible on God's love and grace:**

Romans	3: 22-23
Galatians	3: 28-29
Ephesians	2: 8-10

These passages are strong and reassuring to all of us. But in Romans, what does

Paul mean by “apart from the law”? What questions might this raise concerning the holiness code laid down in Leviticus?

See also:

Romans 6: 1,3, 12-15

In Galatians, all distinctions among humanity seem to be no longer relevant.

Discuss: Does this question the other passages that clearly delineate the roles of women and men?

Ephesians seems to be the ultimate reassurance of God’s love and grace for all, especially in the words that reiterate Genesis: “*For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*”.

Discuss: What questions does this raise? Are there exclusions from this assurance?

Closing (*vs 1 – 9 may be read by the leader, and verse 10 together by the group, or in unison. Note that in the traditional language of this version, ‘Fear of the Lord’ means awe, or reverence of God*).

Psalm 111

¹ Praise the Lord.

I will extol the Lord with all my heart
in the council of the upright and in the assembly.

² Great are the works of the Lord ;
they are pondered by all who delight in them.

³ Glorious and majestic are his deeds,
and his righteousness endures forever.

⁴ He has caused his wonders to be remembered;
the Lord is gracious and compassionate.

⁵ He provides food for those who fear him;
he remembers his covenant forever.

⁶ He has shown his people the power of his works,
giving them the lands of other nations.

⁷ The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.

⁸ They are steadfast for ever and ever,
done in faithfulness and uprightness.

⁹ He provided redemption for his people;
he ordained his covenant forever-

holy and awesome is his name.

¹⁰ The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all who follow his precepts have good understanding.
To him belongs eternal praise.

Listening...

Understanding Human Sexuality

Part 3: Listening to God's people

Guidelines

The committee asked for stories of personal experience in the church from homosexual people (and their families) and from heterosexual people. We received many stories and also several lectures and warnings. Some writers took the opportunity to share personal and often painful stories while others prepared careful accounts of what they believe and why.

In this section of the study guide you will find a variety of offerings: paragraphs, sentences and ideas gleaned from the submissions that the committee received. Below is a suggested format to listen to these stories from God's people.

It is important that the group should not be drawn into a discussion that might come close to the private lives of the participants. The leader must ensure that this doesn't happen. People may offer their own stories if they wish, but should not be asked to do so.

For private reflection:

- Read each section carefully and with an open mind.
- Do any of the stories reflect your own feelings?
- Are there any to which you cannot relate at all?

For the study group:

- If possible, try to determine the position or viewpoint that each writer holds.
- Discuss questions that you would like to ask each writer.
- In the closing prayer you may wish to pray for the writers of the stories, and for all who are struggling with issues of sexual orientation. Remember that these are true stories from real people.

Opening

Psalm 63: 1- 8

A psalm of David, when he was in the Desert of Judah.

¹ *O God, you are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you,
my body longs for you,
in a dry and weary land
where there is no water.*

² *I have seen you in the sanctuary
and beheld your power and your glory.*

³ *Because your love is better than life,
my lips will glorify you.*

⁴ *I will praise you as long as I live,
and in your name I will lift up my hands.*

⁵ *My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise you.*

⁶ *On my bed I remember you;
I think of you through the watches of the night.*

⁷ *Because you are my help,
I sing in the shadow of your wings.*

⁸ *My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.*

The Stories

NOTE that some details have been changed to avoid the risk of identification.

1. " I believe that since psychologists and other 'experts' are divided as to the cause of homosexuality and have even done 'flip-flops' in their pronouncements, until there is more clarification of the issue, the church should not bow to political correctness and other pressures and it should maintain its stand on the authority of scripture."

2. "I would be remiss if I did not share with you some of the heart-break I experienced with my decision to leave the United Church. As a church secretary, I had had the privilege of working with many fine men and women in the ministry on a daily basis. I had been heavily involved with the women's groups and chairperson of the women's presbyterial. My husband and I had been active in the pastoral, financial and musical aspects of the church. It was the main focus of our lives and we loved the church and those in it. But God had said, "You will have no other gods before me..." neither the church nor the people. So we left..... "

3. "My wife and I have two sons, one of whom is living in a committed homosexual relationship. We watched David as he grew and progressed through his school becoming more aloof and at times quite testy, particularly towards his mother. One day while at university he telephoned and said, "You say that you know all about me, but do you really?" "Yes I do, I know that you are gay." After this conversation the relationship between Sam and his mother improved markedly. David became a much warmer and less testy person. I only became aware of his homosexuality when he became involved in a relationship and asked if he could introduce his partner to us. Since meeting David's partner, a warm, happy relationship has developed. We enjoy many happy family get-togethers, attend theatre together and have travelled extensively." (The writer then goes on to talk about his involvement in the Presbyterian Church, his attendance at Assembly in 1994, presbytery incidents and the fact that the Statement on Human Sexuality was produced in study form without the concluding paragraph which calls for further study).

He concludes with the following: "The result of all this is that my wife and I and our two sons left the PCC after many years as members, during which we had served in many capacities. Our sons have joined and attend the United Church of Canada; my wife and I no longer attend church."

4. "Be careful, fellow Presbyterians. This issue is the thin edge of the wedge driven by Satan to break up your church. I would strongly suggest that you leave the gays and lesbians to their own demise; continue to preach God's word and trust in Him... If the Presbyterian Church goes this route it will produce generations of people not knowing who God is, not knowing the Word of God, not knowing if Jesus is the son God or if there is a Heaven or a Hell."

5. "For me, the ancient references to homosexuality only give an indication of how long it has been part of the human experience and, since it was outside the norm, it was easier to condemn than to try to understand. I respectfully submit that this is where many still are."

6. "Our young neighbour married and, within a year, he had left his wife and his parents to live in the gay community in the city. There he contracted AIDS, cut off all communication with his parents, brother, and sisters, who wanted to be with him, and died alone.

Without exception, the stories of young people and others whom I have known who thought themselves to be gay have been stories of dysfunctional, distressed, exploited, pain-filled and pain-dealing lives. Whatever confusion and dynamics led them to believe that they were actually homosexual (I am convinced that some were not), also poorly equipped them to be leaders, and made them acutely insensitive to the consequences that their choices may have on other people."

7. "I started ministry with a strong conviction that practising gay people were committing sins through their sexual behaviour. The first such person I dealt with pastorally struggled with lesbianism. As a congregation we tried everything to accept and to help her. We prayed with her, arranged for her to stay with a family and offered her as much support as possible to leave a lesbian lifestyle behind. After several years of seeming "success" at "re-programming" this person's life to become a non-practising lesbian person and to explore dating men, our pastoral failure as a congregation, and my own as her minister, became clear when she committed suicide. Her inner struggle and her frequent failures to live up to our expectations had become too much for her. She felt that God had abandoned her and turned to suicide in despair.

This event shocked me as a minister to such a degree that I went back to the scriptures to try to understand what my pastoral duties were when people struggle with sexual orientation. This journey has been a long and painful one for me. I have had to question what I believed so firmly was right. I had to struggle with scripture passages that I thought were crystal clear only to discover that I have read my own preconceptions into them. I also had to struggle with the rising body of information from scientific research that points to sexual orientation being something on a continuum between exclusive heterosexuality and exclusive homosexuality.

Today, given the real questions to be raised on the scriptural references, the growing body of research in science, and my own pastoral experience, I have changed my mind.

I do not believe that we can simply and honestly describe a lesbian or homosexual relationship as sinful. I do believe that all Christians are called to express sexual love and intimacy in committed monogamous relationships and that this includes our lesbian and gay sisters and brothers.”

8. “I hope that one day before too very long we will no longer be wasting our time on such meaningless issues as who is sleeping with whom and will be free to move on to address the really significant tasks of clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, bringing justice to the poor, and encouraging people to conduct themselves with integrity in their personal relationships. It will always be my opinion that being in committed relationships with integrity is more important than who one's partner is. How can we hope to overcome the issues of promiscuity and infidelity, which I believe are soul destroying behaviours, if we won't let people be open and honest about with whom they are partnered?”

9. “I don't recall when it was that I first heard about homosexuality, but for many years I believed, like many others, that a person “chose” to be homosexual. Even my nurse's training in the early 1960's affirmed this belief, which was one of the mistaken beliefs in the field of psychiatry. By the early 1970's, with two young boys about to start school, I was alarmed to learn that a teacher in a nearby school was reportedly homosexual. I commented, “Would you want one of them to teach your son?”

My neighbour pointed out that a person's sexual orientation didn't matter, but that it was his teaching ability that mattered.

From ignorance and fear I had judged this man whom I didn't even know, judged him as if he were some kind of a criminal who would prey on the children. I was embarrassed at my own attitude, and it was probably at that point that my interest in basic human rights began.... I believe that Jesus taught us, by his actions and his words, to love one another. That is the most important thing that I get from his teachings. We are all equal in God's eyes, regardless of skin colour, religion, ethnic background, language spoken, financial assets, or gender. God does not care about these things. It is the way that we live our lives - that we do not lie, cheat or steal, commit adultery, or kill another human being - that we love our neighbour, and help those who need our help, love and support.....”

10. “My gay cousin became a social worker and spent his life trying to help others. It came as no surprise, though, when he contracted the AIDS virus. I don't remember

how long it was before he became deathly ill, but it seemed like overnight. He wanted desperately to reach his father. I discovered that his father was aware that his son wanted to see him but was not willing to accommodate his wishes. He believed that his son was a sinner destined for hell and if he went to see him would indirectly be giving him, and everyone else, affirmation that his lifestyle was acceptable. My uncle even garnered support for his stand from his minister and some parishioners. I believe that my cousin had no choice in the matter. He was born as a homosexual. He spent a good portion of his life denying it and fighting it, but in the end succumbed to what was to be his way in life. However, I also believe that homosexuality is a lifestyle contrary to God's plan for humankind. In the beginning, God created man and woman. He did not make provision for other types of relationships and, had our world remained as perfect as it was when originally created, homosexuality would not exist. ...Active homosexuality is sin. That being said, being a homosexual is not more sinful than being heterosexual. All of us must fight against our sinful nature and all of us will have things to answer for when we meet our Lord. Homosexuals should be welcome in our congregations and join with the rest of us in our battle against sin."

11. "There is a large group in our church who want to avoid the whole issue of homosexuality because they see it as a threat to the survival of the PCC as an institution. They want to preserve the institution at all costs. If the preservation of our church depends on treating some people in it with hatred or indifference, is that institution worth preserving? And, if the will of the majority is to continue this hatred or indifference indefinitely, maybe the institution is already dead!"

12. "I have had numerous gays as patients. I have given much thought and prayer and have come up with the only Christian solution which is a treatment plan.... The gays must be offered treatment for their sexual practices. They wouldn't be forced to accept it; they would have a choice to take it or not. To accept it they must believe in Christian principles, and in the power of prayer....The details of the psychiatrist giving the gay the hypnotic suggestion of being a Christian and not a gay can be given when other details of the treatment are given."

13. "A heterosexual friend once 'ranted' at me that I should stay in the PCC, be out, and fight for change instead of running away. I can see her point, and I agree to a degree. However, it is easy to say that when you are not the one marginalized. It is a whole different ball of wax being the one coming out, inviting comment and censure, loss of relationships, and even gay-bashing, not to mention potential loss of job, etc. I also considered that if I wanted to deny my sexuality and become a minister, I could not be

out now! And then I considered that I could not do that, regardless. Denying my sexuality would be like denying part of myself; therefore, part of God's creation. I don't feel called to do that!"

14. "Fear takes hold when love of others is lost. Fear, particularly of the unknown, can lead to anger that is easily fed by uninformed opinions. Misinformed anger can lead to hate. Decisions or statements made in fear and anger are divisive and destructive. Statements and decisions made purely in love, although sometimes divisive, make God's people strong. There is an enormous amount of confusion in our congregations simply because for so many the issue and the actual people concerned are unknown, even though those people may sit in the next pew, afraid to be exposed to fear and anger. So much of the fear is the fear of being divided as a congregation, as a church. Yet this same fear will inexorably lead either to our division or to a strangulated end if it controls us or our decision-making. It's a vicious circle."

15. Lots of ministers are overweight or obese, and gluttony is considered a sin by Paul. We don't refuse them ordination or take away their ministerial rights, nor do we impose sanctions on them, because they are obese. Obesity would seem to me to be a sin easier to control than one's sexuality (note sexuality, not sexual desire or activity!)."

Closing

Colossians 3: 11-17

¹¹Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

¹²Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

¹⁵Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Listening...

Understanding Human Sexuality

Part 4: Listening to more voices

Guidelines

We've listened to the Bible and to the voices of our own church. In this section we hear the voices of people both inside and outside our church, some of whom are well known to us, and some who are specialists in the fields that we have been studying.

Use these statements as a basis for reflection and to stimulate discussion in the study group and in your conversations afterwards

Opening

John 8: 2-11

² At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³ The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ In the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

⁷ But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

¹¹ "No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

More Voices

1. “I think the Bible teaches that homosexuality is a sin, but the Bible also teaches that pride is a sin, jealousy is a sin, and hate is a sin and so I don’t think that homosexuality should be chosen as the overwhelming sin as we are doing today.”
Billy Graham, American evangelist, on ABC TV’s show, 20/20, May 1997

This statement seems to be quite provocative. What questions does this raise for you in our understanding of homosexuality and sin?

Is he right? Have we chosen it to be the overwhelming sin?

2. “We make them [homosexuals] doubt that they are the children of God, and this must be nearly the ultimate blasphemy. We blame them for something that is becoming increasingly clear they can do little about.”
Archbishop Desmond Tutu, quoted in his foreword to We were baptised, too by Marilyn Bennett Alexander and James Preston.

The archbishop appears to reject the notion of choice in sexual orientation. How does this relate to Billy Graham’s affirmation of the biblical position that homosexuality is sin, in the previous quotation?

What does this say to those who believe that the scientific evidence indicates that sexual orientation is genetic or not a matter of choice? Does this affect our acceptance of the Bible’s teachings? Is there a way to accept both positions?

- 3a. “There is strong evidence that the causation of sexual orientation is multifactorial. There is definitely a genetic component. The studies of environmental factors (including intrauterine) show mixed results.”
Dr. J.R.M. Smith, Nine Circles Community Health Centre, University of Manitoba (A Winnipeg physician with 20 years experience providing treatment to gays and lesbians throughout Manitoba). January, 2001.
- 3b. “While we don’t yet understand all of the mechanisms, there is, in my judgment and that of anyone else I know in my field, quite compelling evidence of there being a biological basis to sexual orientation, though like any behaviour, there will be environmental and cultural factors which will to some degree shape the particulars (including the timing) of its expression and suppression.”

Prof. Richard Barham, Human Development & Family Relations, University of Guelph, February, 2001.

As people of faith, what weight should we give to these findings by psychologists and physicians?

4. “There is still no evidence that sexual orientation is reversible. Psychologists generally do not approve of conversion therapy. The psychological perspective of therapy is to accept and empower individuals, not to encourage them to deny one’s sense of self. Organized religion has been an impetus to the creation of conversion therapy. Some of this therapy utilizes shock and other treatments which are no longer considered acceptable.”

From an interview with Dr. Janice Ristock, PhD (Community Psychology) Chair of Women’s Studies, University of Manitoba, January 2001

What questions does this raise regarding the influence of science and medicine on religion and vice versa?

Is it meaningful to attempt to bring about a change in behaviour if the person’s orientation remains unchanged?

5. “The point of inclusion is the belief that each of us is important, unique, sacred, in fact. We can only relate to others and begin to include them in our lives and our society if we have this primary belief. That means that we bring each other to birth as we respect and love one another and as our value is revealed to us through the love of others. We close up if we are seen as having no value. Justice means more than just following the law, not hurting people; it also means respecting and valuing each individual.”

Jean Vanier, the founder of L’Arche Communities, from his book, Becoming Human,

Reflect on this quotation.

6. “Our society has responded to questions raised by an increasing acceptance of the spectrum of sexuality on the basis of human rights legislation. Contemporary examples are such issues as same sex benefits, adoption and marriage. Does the church follow these cycles of cultural change, and should it?”

A question posed at a meeting of the Special Committee on Sexual Orientation

Without necessarily addressing the specific examples mentioned, discuss the general question of the church’s response to cultural change.

7. “Those who urge the church to change the norm of its teaching on this matter must know that they are promoting schism. If a church were to let itself be pushed to the point where it ceased to treat homosexual activity as a departure from the biblical norm, and recognized homosexual unions as a personal partnership of love equivalent to marriage, such a church would stand no longer on biblical ground but against the unequivocal witness of scripture. A church that took this step would cease to be the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.”

Wolfhart Pannenberg – professor of systematic theology at the University of Munich, in an essay, "Revelation and Homosexual Experience", (trans. Markus Bockmuehl).

8. “I wish those who are so passionate on a subject about which Jesus said nothing would display at least as much passion about subjects on which he said a great deal – things like feeding the poor and hungry and working for justice for the marginalized and downtrodden.”

Rev John Congram – former Editor of the 'Presbyterian Record', June 2001.

9. “Most Protestants do not want to be forced into becoming sectarians, hostile to culture, unable to perform marriages as a civil act, opposed to justice for women or minorities, or angry about the secular or pagan character of everything around them. Instead, they do want to live in, participate in, have a voice in and shape things toward a more just and loving society. They simply do not believe that the present movement to make gay coupling equal to heterosexual marriage is likely to do that, or that it is how God wants people to live.”

Max Stackhouse – from The Prophetic Stand of the Ecumenical Churches on Homosexuality

The writer appears to be speaking on behalf of all Protestants, among whom we traditionally include ourselves. Whether or not we agree with all that he says, his statement raises a question for us: Who speaks to the world on our behalf? How should our voices be heard when contentious topics are raised?

- 10a. “*Can homosexuals be members of the Christian church?* This is rather like asking, ‘Can envious persons be members of the church?’ (cf Rom. 1:29) or ‘Can alcoholics be members of the church?’ De facto, of course, they are. Unless we think that the church is a community of sinless perfection, we must acknowledge that persons of homosexual orientation are welcome along with

other sinners in the company of those who trust in the God who justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). If they are not welcome, I will have to walk out the door with them, leaving in the sanctuary only those entitled to cast the first stone.”

- 10b.** “*Should the church sanction and bless homosexual unions?* No. The church should continue to teach -- as it always has done -- that there are two possible ways for God’s human sexual creatures to live well-ordered lives of faithful discipleship: heterosexual marriage and sexual abstinence.”
Both quotations from Richard B. Hays, in The Moral Vision of the New Testament.

Closing

1 John 4:15-19

¹⁵ *If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.* ¹⁶ *And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.*

¹⁷ *In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgement, because in this world we are like him.*

¹⁸ *There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*

¹⁹ *We love because he first loved us.*