

Pastoral and Missional Dimensions of Ministry with LGBT+ Persons

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Introduction & purpose

The purpose of this paper is to resource churches, pastors and congregations in their consideration of how to create and maintain a culture that is welcoming and inclusive of all people regardless of their faith, ethnicity or gender, whilst upholding a traditional Christian ethic on sexuality and marriage. The need for such a resource has been highlighted in recent years as our Association of churches has clarified and confirmed the requirement for affiliated churches and accredited/recognised pastors to support the Association's position on marriage.

This paper is directed toward a ministry stance on sexuality and marriage that is described as “accepting, but not affirming”. That is, whilst sexual activity outside of a traditional understanding of marriage may not necessarily exclude a person from a Christian community, it would not be affirmed, but would instead be addressed pastorally. In contrast, an “affirming” position would consider same-sex relationships, including same-sex marriage, not as sinful, but as a reflection of the diversity of God’s good creation and would affirm such relationships as being compatible with God’s intention, provided they were characterised by love, faithfulness and commitment.

This paper is not a justification of the Association’s position on sexuality and marriage, nor a justification of why churches should be welcoming and inclusive. It starts with a conviction that both faithful obedience to God’s purposes and grace-filled inclusion of all people are central to the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:14). Further, it assumes that as followers of Jesus Christ we must reflect that. Jesus embodied both truth and grace perfectly throughout his life. The calling upon us is to seek to follow and imitate him.

Note: *This paper was commissioned by Assembly Council and is commended as a pastoral resource for churches of the NSW & ACT Baptist Association. It is not a position paper of the Assembly Council or of the NSW & ACT Baptist Association.*

The Different Lived Experiences Within our Baptist Churches

Our churches are complex relational networks of people who gather in the name of Jesus Christ, bringing with them a variety of lived experiences. Their differing lived experiences may include matters of sexuality, marriage and gender identity. These lived experiences shape both the beliefs and the emotional responses to any discussion of same-sex relationships.

It is likely that most of our churches will include among its attendees one or more of the following persons:

- Those who experience unwanted same-sex attraction. This experience will vary greatly between individuals. Some will be coming to terms with it as a new experience, perhaps ashamed and embarrassed by their feelings. Others may have lived with their same-sex attraction for many years and be surrounded by family and friends who understand their journey. Some may be single whilst others may enter into or remain in a heterosexual marriage. Some will share their experience whilst others will seek to keep it hidden. Some may even persist within a church community despite sensing disappointment and judgment from others.
- Those who are parents, other family or close friends of someone who is same-sex attracted or identifies as LGBT+. Again, some may have shared this with people they trust whilst others may choose to protect the privacy of their loved one. Some may have found their church to be caring and supportive. Others, especially parents, may feel disapproval from Christians who regard “being gay” as a consequence of poor parenting. They may experience internal disapproval, and/or fear that holding on to a traditional view of marriage may make it impossible for them to retain relational connection with their child.
- Those who experience same-sex attraction or identify as LGBT+ and have decided that this should not restrict them to a life of singleness and celibacy. They may be open to same-sex relationships, including same-sex marriage.

Anticipating Different Perspectives on Same-sex Relationships Within our Baptist Churches

Complexity and conflict within our churches is not limited to the topic of same-sex relationships. However, it is a topic that is profoundly personal for many because it is so connected with the matter of our identity. For some, their passion comes from their unswerving conviction that God’s creation of man and woman is a foundational issue and therefore a determinative indicator of faithfulness to scripture. For others, their passion comes from the desire to fight for matters of kindness, compassion and justice, a fight that the church historically has been reluctant to step into, or worse, a fight in which it has chosen too often to take the side of the powerful over the vulnerable.

The challenge to our Association of churches is to bring those competing passions together by creating and maintaining a culture within our churches and our denomination that is welcoming, compassionate, inclusive and just toward all people regardless of their faith, ethnicity or gender, whilst upholding a traditional Christian ethic on sexuality and marriage.

Rev. Dr. Nigel Wright, Principal of Spurgeon’s College, describes 4 perspectives among those attending Baptist Churches:

- a. The Rejecting-Punitive Position. This holds that sexualised same-sex relationships are dangerous to society and that homosexual acts should be condemned and punished as such. Those who experience same-sex attraction have no alternative but to reject it.

- b. The Rejecting-non-Punitive Position. This holds that sexualised same-sex relationships are contrary to God's good creation but that same-sex attraction is a "flaw" rather than a sin. Those who experience same-sex attraction should be treated with compassion and dignity. They, along with all Christians, should be encouraged to live a God-honouring life with respect to their sexual activity. This position accords with the Association's position that marriage is the union of one man and one woman and is the only context for sexual activity.
- c. Qualified Acceptance. This position accepts the traditional view of marriage and sexuality, however qualifies this with the acceptance that same-sex relationships (including marriage) should not be precluded for some people. Same-sex relationships, including same-sex marriage, are not the "ideal", but a "concession" based on grace and compassion for people who experience same-sex attraction and do not wish to remain single.
- d. Affirmation. This position makes no distinction between heterosexual and same-sex relationships, looking instead to the Christian values of love, faithfulness and permanence in both.

We should anticipate that within our churches are people whose views are not consistent with the Association's position on sexuality and marriage. The National Church Life Survey asked church attendees to respond to the statement "Sexual activity between 2 adults of the same sex is always wrong". 53% either "strongly agreed" or "agreed". This is consistent with figures from the Public Religion Research Institute (US) that 38% of "white evangelicals" support same-sex marriage. Whilst 94% of our November 2022 Assembly indicated support for a traditional view of marriage, it is unlikely that this figure reflects the broader congregations of Baptists in NSW and the ACT.

We should also anticipate that newcomers to our church may not hold consistent views on marriage and sexuality. Without making a traditional view of sexuality and marriage the defining mark of our churches, leaders should have clarity as to how and when newcomers will become aware of the church's position. It is painful for all involved when clarity comes at the point, perhaps a year or 2 after arrival, when deep bonds of friendship and connection have been formed. In seeking to be welcoming and inclusive, we must avoid the perception that the church employs a "bait and switch" strategy.

Our response to differing perspectives on sexuality and marriage in our churches requires clarity, wisdom, integrity and compassion. It is no easy task to be faithful to the entirety of scripture and doing so in such a way that allows people to see the love that God has for them and the purpose that he has for their lives.

10 practices for creating an inclusive and welcoming culture for people who are same-sex attracted or who identify as LGBT+, and their families or close friends.

Same-sex attracted persons and those who identify as LGBT+ often describe their experience of church as one of shame and loneliness. Their families may share these feelings. Shame is the pain of believing that “I am flawed” and that as a consequence, I am unworthy of being loved and unworthy of belonging to a community. With this comes an intense loneliness and sense of isolation. What follows are practices that we can build into our church communities to foster a culture of inclusiveness and welcome, for everyone.

1. In written, online and in-service communications, make it clear and repeat it often that the gathered church is open to all people, regardless of their background. Develop a language of welcome and inclusion, inviting people to come and belong and explore. Reinforce that the church is not “us and them”, but a place where all can find a place to belong.
2. When teaching on sexuality, be consistent and clear. Avoid the selective use of passages. When referring to passages on homosexuality, put them in their context and in the broader biblical call to abstain from behaviours that are contrary to God’s purpose for us. Sexual ethics is part of this, but it is not the entirety. Speak also against the more “acceptable” sins that rarely trouble the soul, such as greed, lying, gossip or the neglect of the widow, the orphan and the refugee among us.
3. When teaching on homosexuality, do not confuse same-sex attraction with same-sex behaviour, nor condemn same-sex behaviour as worse than other sexual sins. Be consistent in holding Christians to a consistent sexual ethic regardless of their sexual orientation. Avoid non-biblical or unhelpful teaching about same-sex attraction, such as that it is an illness, a sign of an evil spirit, or that it is result of a weak father or a dominating mother. Such teaching merely amplifies the shame, isolation and anxiety experienced by same-sex attracted persons, their families and their friends.
4. When teaching on marriage, be clear in speaking about its God-given purpose and design but refrain from using language that emphasises the place of marriage to the detriment of those who are single. Avoid suggesting that those who are single are not “complete”. Both Jesus and Paul affirm singleness, both in their words and in their chosen life position. Affirm the place of friendship and the value of deep relationships outside of marriage, not only in words but in the ministry and culture of the church.
5. When teaching on either marriage or sexuality, do so with graciousness and sensitivity. It is almost certain that within your congregation are people who carry deep hurt or a sense of failure in those areas and who carry the additional scars inflicted by condemning and callous language.
6. Avoid careless or demeaning language directed toward people who identify as LGBT+. Avoid joking or the use of labels such as ‘gay’, to carry negative connotations. In a broader sense, speak respectfully about people and about other churches with whom you may disagree.
7. Provide same-sex attracted people the opportunities for membership, ministry and leadership together with the same processes of accountability as you would anyone else.
8. Avoid gender-stereotyping. Language, including sermon illustrations, that assume or imply that masculinity looks a certain way (eg, muscular, bold, sport-loving, leader) and femininity looks a different way (eg. nurturing, quiet, creative, follower) can bring

shame and gender confusion to those who do not fit the 'stereotype', especially for young people.

9. When teaching on discipleship, be consistent and clear that each one of us is called to a radical, self-sacrificing following of Jesus. For same-sex attracted Christians in our Baptist churches, to be consistent with our stated position requires them to remain single and celibate. Therefore, do not minimise or trivialise the unique cost and grief to them and to their family. Their decision to remain both single and celibate carries a significant letting go of previously held hopes and dreams.
10. Respect people's privacy. Avoid using a person's experience of same-sex attraction as either a model of how to live it well or as a warning against doing it poorly. If someone wishes to share their same-sex attraction experience to encourage their church, ensure that they are pastorally supported leading up to and after they have shared.

The above practices can serve as an encouragement for those experiencing unwanted same-sex attraction to follow Christ faithfully. Instead of shame and loneliness, it increases the likelihood that they will find church to be a place of spiritual encouragement and connection, walking alongside friends who are each seeking to live God-honouring lives. These practices make it safer, more plausible and sustainable for same-sex attracted Christians to live according to the biblical sexual ethic we are calling them to.

These practices should also help our churches to present a gracious witness to our communities. Churches with community-oriented ministries such as Playtime, pre-schools, schools, welfare and support services should seek to be respectful and sensitive towards all people, including where their beliefs and behaviour are contrary to the church. We want to create an environment for same-sex attracted persons and those who identify as LGBT+ to be open about their experience, find significant and supportive friendships and feel welcome to explore faith in Jesus. This is an opportunity for us to be counter-cultural in our life and witness. Our wider culture "cancels" those it disagrees with. We seek to love, respect and listen to all people, even where there is significant disagreement. This may go some way in negating the perception that the church's position on sexuality and marriage is antiquated, unjust or unloving.

Conclusion

In all of the above we recognise that people's individual journeys will be unique, and that ministry in the midst of the intricacy of people's sexuality is complex at times. We are called to follow Jesus' example in providing acceptance and inclusion to all people and also calling all people, including ourselves, to continually submit our lives to God without reservation. May we seek in God's strength to live out our understanding of his call on this area of our discipleship and support those around us to do so as well.

Appendix 1 - Resources that seek to equip “accepting but not affirming” churches.

NSW and ACT Baptists are not unique in seeking to uphold a traditional view of marriage and at the same time seeking to remain inclusive and welcoming to all people. Resources are available for churches and pastors specifically for this.

Websites of Specialist Organisations Supporting Churches, Pastors and Christians:

- **Living Faith** <https://www.livingfaith.online/>
Living Faith is associated with the Sydney Anglican diocese but supported by a broader spectrum of churches that are seeking to disciple and welcome people who experience same-sex attraction (SSA) or identify as LGBTQ+. They provide support, connection and encouragement for individuals and families as well as resources for churches and pastors.
- **Living Out** <https://www.livingout.org/>
Living out is a UK-based ministry which has an extensive range of resources for individuals, pastors, and church leaders, including those working with young people. It provides resources for discipling people who experience same-sex attraction, resources on marriage and resources for being a biblically inclusive church. Their “10-statement Audit” is a helpful resource for church leaders.
- **The Centre for Faith, Sexuality and Gender** <https://www.centerforfaith.com/>
This is a US-based ministry that seeks to encourage churches to grapple with holding on to both grace and truth. It also has extensive resources and addresses specific questions around ministry to and inclusion of people who experience same-sex attraction, identify as LGBTQ+ or are in same-sex relationships. There is a linked podcast (“Theology in the Raw”) which includes discussion on sexuality and gender as part of a broader range of topics.
- **Posture Shift** <https://postureshift.com>
Posture Shift is also a US-based ministry, seeking to empower and equip faith communities and families to create safe and welcoming places for LGBTQ+ people. They not only offer resources for pastors but focus on encouraging and supporting family and friends of LGBTQ+ people.

Books for digging deeper:

- Greg Johnson, “**Still Time to Care**”
- Ed Shaw, “**The Plausibility Problem**”
- Preston Sprinkle, “**People to be Loved**”
- Daniel Tuckwell, “**Born Loved This Way**”. This is a personal story growing up as a same-sex attracted person in one of our Baptist churches and what was (and was not) helpful for his discipleship.

Special mention also to Mark Yarhouse who has written a number books in this area with a strong theological and pastoral foundation.

Appendix 2 – Questions for discussion and Case Studies for church leaders

Discuss:

Consider the people connected with your church, either as leaders, employees, volunteers, members, Sunday worship attendees and attendees of various ministries. For each of these groups, what are your expectations of them when it comes to their position on sexuality and marriage?

Discuss:

So as to provide clarity to newcomers in your church (and avoid the “bait and switch” situation), at what point and in what context would your church speak into its position on sexuality and marriage?

Case study 1

Bree is 23 years old and has grown up in the church where she serves as a volunteer. She leads a team of 5 volunteers who regularly see 50 young people each Friday night, many from unchurched backgrounds. Tired of questions of “when will she find herself a boyfriend”, she speaks with her pastor about her same-sex attraction which she has lived with for almost a decade. She has been open with her parents and a few of her closest friends for some time about this and has been well supported by them. Some time later, a church elder becomes aware of Bree’s same-sex attraction and approaches the pastor with their concerns. Their daughter is in the small group Bree leads and the concern is “what if” Bree becomes physically attracted to one of the girls. They are also concerned that because Bree is much loved and respected by the girls that they may be influenced also to become “gay”. The pastor is asked to remove Bree from her role, or it will be escalated to a church meeting.

How should the pastor respond to these concerns?

At what point is Bree (and possibly her parents) made aware of these concerns?

Case study 2

Beverly is a long-standing member of your congregation. Her grandson Alastair is to be married to his boyfriend and she has been invited to the wedding. They have always been close and she has grieved the pain and conflict Alastair’s gay identity has caused within his family. Alastair’s father will not attend, but others in the family are attending. She asks you, as her pastor, what she should do. How do you respond?

Case study 3

Victor has been an accredited Baptist pastor for almost 40 years. He has served in his current church for just over 2 years and it has been a good fit for both him and the church. He has adult children, one of whom lives in the US and who married their same-sex partner over 10 years ago there. This child identifies as a Christian and they and their partner are members of a church in the US. On a visit to see their parents, they come to church and in conversation, mention to one of the deacons that they are married. At the next deacons meeting, the matter is raised and the question is asked of the pastor as to his position on same-sex marriage. The pastor says that whilst he holds to and will teach only a traditional Christian view of marriage, he does not regard it as a primary issue. It is his conviction that despite being in a same-sex relationship, that his adult child is a Christian. Further, that he had no qualms attending their wedding and praying a blessing over them. How should the diaconate respond?

Case Study 4

Jane and Rebecca have been in a same-sex relationship for over 10 years and have 2 children. They married a few years ago. In response to good reports from their neighbours, they sought to enrol their children in the local Christian school. In the interviews, they

expressed their desire that their children be brought up with Christian values. The Principal agreed for their enrolment to proceed. In time, their children became involved with the church connected with the school and the family began attending on Sundays. Jane and Rebecca make a profession of faith in Jesus and desire to be baptised. They understand that the Church does not agree with same-sex marriage and so they come to you, the pastor, and ask what they should do. How will you respond?