

GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF THE CONFERENCE 2003 DOCUMENT ON THE ISSUE OF SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

At the 2003 Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), DEWCOM (the Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee of the MCSA) presented a document entitled "Christians and same-sex relationships: a discussion guide for the Methodist people of Southern Africa." Conference referred this document to circuits and districts for discussion, and mandated DEWCOM to receive the responses and develop a formal position paper on the subject for presentation to and consideration by Conference 2005.

Conference also requested DEWCOM to prepare some guidelines as to the use of the document, and to provide a summarised version of the substantive issues contained therein. What follows are the requested guidelines, comprising:

- A. The nature and purpose of the discussion guide.
- B. Six key principles that should inform the manner in which we engage the issue of same-sex relationships to enable the debate and dialogue on this issue to be constructive and creative.
- C. Suggestions as to specific strategies for using the discussion guide in districts, circuits and societies.

A. THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THE DISCUSSION GUIDE

A few critical points about the nature and purpose of the discussion guide need to be made:

1. The discussion guide does **not** represent a formal policy position of the MCSA.
2. The primary intention of the discussion guide is to act as a catalyst for honest and frank discussion within the MCSA around the important issue of same-sex relationships.
3. Therefore the discussion guide should be viewed not as the final word on this matter, but rather as an entry-point into this debate for our church.
4. A careful distinction needs to be made between the substantive content of the discussion guide (Sections 1 to 4) which seeks to offer a balanced treatment of the resources of Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience; and the concluding recommendations that are offered by DEWCOM in Section 5. Differing concluding recommendations from those made by DEWCOM will undoubtedly be articulated in the course of the debate, and presented as alternative options for the MCSA's practice in this matter, which DEWCOM will carefully consider when preparing the formal position paper for Conference 2005. Conference is, of course, free to adopt, amend or abandon any or all of these recommendations.
5. DEWCOM's purpose in boldly presenting the concluding recommendations that it has is twofold:
 1. Offering what is intended to be a clear and unambiguous position on this matter will hopefully provide a helpful point of reference when the difficult questions relating to the church's actual practice with respect to this issue are considered.
 2. The recommendations seek to express quite clearly what all the practical implications are for us as a church, if we arrive at the position of wanting to affirm and celebrate the presence of homosexual people within our church.
6. The discussion guide has taken as its departure point the Conference-endorsed conviction that as a church we are required to be a community of love rather than rejection.

B. SIX KEY PRINCIPLES FOR CONSTRUCTIVE DEBATE

1. Seek the truth of Christ in the spirit of Christ.

As we seek to discern the heart and mind of God in this complex issue of same-sex relationships, we will seek to exhibit the character of Christ as we do so. **How** we engage this issue is just as important as **what** conclusions are drawn. The characteristics of Christ - such as humility, servanthood, compassion, respect, honesty, speaking the truth in love, long-suffering, forgiveness and trust in God - these need to characterise us as we enter this debate.

As God's people engaging this issue, we will seek the truth of Christ in the spirit of Christ.

2. Seek to move beyond 'corners of conviction'.

Very few people come to this debate 'neutral'. Many people have strong, and often entrenched convictions regarding the issue of same-sex relationships that they feel compelled to defend, often in emotionally charged ways. Any debate then easily degenerates from authentic dialogue to 'serial monologues' in which each 'corner of conviction' attempts to crush the other. Sadly, this has been the experience of many churches around the world who have entered this debate, causing deep hurt and rifts of division. Moving beyond our 'corners of conviction' requires:

- an awareness of the emotionally charged nature of this debate, and of the polarising effects that emotive responses can have;
- the humility to acknowledge that we do not have a monopoly on the truth, and that before the mystery of God, our knowledge and insight remain partial and imperfect;
- the courage to consider carefully opinions that differ from our own;
- an openness to being influenced by those opinions, if necessary.

As God's people engaging this issue, we will seek to move beyond our 'corners of conviction'.

3. Seek first to understand, and then to be understood.¹

This principle expresses the conviction that a primary task in effective communication and dialogue is for us to understand as fully as possible the position of those with whom we interact. The *assumption* that we understand should not be confused with *actually* understanding - something which only those with whom we engage can confirm. Thereafter, presenting one's own position as clearly and honestly as possible is a responsibility that this debate requires of all who enter it.

As God's people engaging this issue, we will seek first to understand, and then to be understood.

4. Seek to see the human face of this issue

The issue of same-sex relationships is not merely an academic-theological matter. It involves real people with real feelings and real struggles - on all sides of the debate. Seeing the human face of this issue can help to guard against hurtful insensitivity, prejudicial generalisations, stereotyping and vilification.

As God's people engaging this issue, we will seek to see the human face of this issue.

5. Seek to become well-informed

The complexities of the issue of same-sex relationships do not allow for simplistic pronouncements and vague generalities. Accordingly, there is a need for all of us to become as well-informed as possible of these complexities, so as to avoid any distortion or prejudice that is born of ignorance.

As God's people engaging this issue, we will seek to become well informed.

¹ This phrase has been borrowed from Stephen Covey, who articulates this principle in his book *The seven habits of highly effective people: powerful lessons in personal change*.

6. Seek to celebrate the gift of diversity

Arriving at one unanimous conclusion on the issue of same-sex relationships is not a realistic expectation. This *will* be a matter where diverse positions will be sincerely held by people of Christian integrity. While this could represent a threat to our Christian unity, it could also represent an opportunity to celebrate the gift of diversity that is amongst us, if we so choose. *As God's people engaging this issue, we will seek to celebrate the gift of diversity.*

C. SUGGESTIONS AS TO SPECIFIC STRATEGIES FOR USING THE DISCUSSION GUIDE IN DISTRICTS, CIRCUITS AND SOCIETIES

As far as possible, everyone who engages this debate should be encouraged and enabled to read the discussion document first, so as to enter the debate with at least a basic knowledge of some of the key issues involved. The discussion document can then truly serve as a common point of departure, to which further information and insights will undoubtedly be added.

It needs to be stressed that what follows are merely *suggestions* as to how the discussion guide might be meaningfully used within districts / circuits/ societies. Specific points within each of the strategies can, of course, be amended or even omitted, depending on the circumstances of the particular. The intention here is to point to the sorts of elements that may be helpful in trying to engage people in this issue of same-sex relationships.

Strategy 1 - Empowering Ministers

Empowering and enabling ministers to use the discussion guide meaningfully and responsibly is a critical need. Bishops, District Executives and Circuit Superintendents should give particular attention to this need. Here are some suggestions that may be helpful in this regard.

1. Bishops should consider appointing one or two competent presenters to lead the ministers through the discussion guide, at an appropriate gathering such as a District Retreat or District Seminar.
2. Such presenters could move around the district visiting different Staff Meetings.
3. Circuit or Regional Staff Meetings represent an ideal opportunity for ministers to share among themselves different strategies and processes they can use to help their people engage this issue meaningfully.
4. Section 5.6 (on pp.26-27) of the discussion guide, that deals with what the church *can* and *cannot* responsibly teach about homosexuality, would make a very interesting discussion point amongst ministers especially.
5. Talking about sex and sexuality is something that many ministers find difficult to do. As ministers struggle to find appropriate and helpful ways to talk about sex, the following points should be borne in mind:
 - a Sex is God's idea. It's part of God's good creation and is a gift to be cherished, honoured and celebrated.
 - b Everybody (from the age of adolescence up) is interested in sex. This is not a subject that people find dull and boring. So ministers should be encouraged - when they talk about sex the chances are that they won't have to fight for people's attention.
 - c When talking about sex, using language that is clear, accurate and direct is most helpful. Euphemisms, colloquialisms and 'coded speech' can lead to confusion. For example, if it's necessary to speak about genitalia, it is more helpful to speak about a penis or a vagina than to refer to these genitals by other colloquial names.
 - d The sense of awkwardness about speaking clearly and directly about sex does diminish with practice. Furthermore, it is possible to choose not to be embarrassed by talking

- about sex. Embarrassment in the speaker leads to embarrassment in the listener. Relaxed confidence in the speaker leads to a relaxed confidence in the listener.
- e When talking about sex, it is best when the different perspectives of men and women can be heard together.
 - f When talking about sex, it is essential to remember that sex is not merely a physical or biological act, but includes emotional and spiritual dimensions as well. Sex is about relationships.
 - g It is no longer an option for ministers whether or not to talk about sex. Faithfulness to the gospel and compassion for their people compels ministers to address this integral part of human life and experience in life-giving ways. In our context of HIV/AIDS, rape, sexual violence, promiscuity and sexual brokenness of many kinds, the need to talk about sex is all the greater. The shroud of silence over these things only increases their destructive potential.
 - h In this matter, as in all others, the transforming grace of God is freely available to those who choose to co-operate with God and who desire to be used by God. Remaining rigidly entrenched in old positions - by refusing even to talk about sex, for example - is to deny the reality of God's grace in one's life.

Strategy 2 - Workshop

1. Advertise a workshop where the issue of same-sex relationships will be discussed, and ask people to put their names down to attend.
2. Get copies of the discussion guide to every participant well before the workshop, as well as sections A ('The nature and purpose of the discussion guide') and B ('Six key principles for constructive debate') of these guidelines.
3. Request every participant to read the discussion guide before the workshop, and to write down their responses to each of the following questions:
 - a What are your overall impressions of the discussion guide?
 - b What parts of the discussion guide did you find particularly helpful?
 - c What do you agree with and disagree with in the discussion guide?
 - d What questions do you have that are needing further clarification or exploration?
 - e What are you hoping the workshop will achieve?
4. Participants must bring these written responses with them to the workshop.
5. Ask three or four participants to be prepared to share their written notes at the workshop.
6. Open the workshop with a time of worship and prayer.
7. At the start of the workshop, ask participants to brainstorm the principles for how they would like the debate to be handled. For example:
 - We will listen honestly to one another.
 - We will be open to changing our minds.
 - We will be respectful of other opinions.
 - We will try not to let our emotions make us act in ways which hurt others.
 - We will not call people's Christian commitment and integrity into question.
 - We will honour anyone's request for a time-out to be taken, in which the discussion will be halted for a moment in order for people to be quiet or for the group to pray.
 Agree to these principles, and put them up somewhere where they can be seen throughout the discussion.
8. Alternatively, read through the six key principles listed in section B. above. Ask the group to commit to observing them, and display them clearly for everyone to see.
9. Break into smaller groups, if necessary, and allow participants the opportunity to share their written responses to the questions in point 3 above.
10. In a plenary group, allow the three or four participants whom you asked, to share their

- responses to the discussion guide.
11. Allow time for a few other participants, who so choose, to share their responses with the plenary group.
 12. If possible, invite a gay or lesbian person, and/or a parent or sibling of a gay or lesbian person to share something of their experience with the group.
 13. Capture the questions that people are needing to explore or gain clarity on. Display them prominently.
 14. Pick a few of the most pressing questions and invite discussion around them. Include this question, "What does it mean for the church to be a community of love rather than rejection?"
 15. Break into smaller groups, if necessary, to allow more people the opportunity to contribute.
 16. Conclude the workshop by discussing the question: "What is needed for us to take this process forward?" Some possible responses might be:
 - a The need for other reference material to be found, read and discussed.
 - b The need for a further meeting or meetings to be held where the issue can be discussed further.
 - c The need for the perspectives and experiences of gay and lesbian Christians to be heard.
 17. As a group, decide on a specific course of action for taking the process forward.
 18. Make whatever commitments are necessary for honouring the course of action that you have decided upon.
 19. Close the workshop with a time of worship and prayer.

Strategy 3 - Small group course

A seven week process of engaging the discussion guide within a small group, such as a class meeting or fellowship group.

1. **Week 1** - Do the bible-study in the discussion guide on p.28 entitled 'Grace-Healed Eyes'

Preparation for week 2 - group members to read section 1 of the discussion guide on Scripture.

2. **Week 2** - Discuss the following questions, based on the section on Scripture:
 - a Which of the three approaches to Scripture most closely describes your approach to reading and interpreting Scripture?
 - b What do you regard as the strengths and weaknesses (if any) of each of the approaches?
 - c What bible stories come to mind that reveal the biblical theology of inclusion, or the dignity and sacred worth of all people?
 - d How do you understand the role of the Holy Spirit in revealing to us the truth of God?
 - e How can the bible be used responsibly within this heated debate?

Preparation for week 3 - group members to read section 2 on Reason.

3. **Week 3** - Discuss the following questions, based on the section of Reason.
 - a What do you understand as the difference between sexual orientation and sexual behaviour?
 - b What do you think are the origins of a homosexual orientation?
 - c Do you think that a person's sexual orientation can or should be changed?
 - d What place do you think insights from the natural and social sciences should have within a Christian discussion of sexual orientation and practice?

Preparation for week 4 - group members to read section 3 on Tradition

4. **Week 4** - Discuss the following questions, based on the section on Tradition.
 - a What do you understand to have been the position of the historical church on the issue of same-sex relationships?
 - b On p.17 there are a number of assertions about the people called Methodists from the World Methodist Council's statement of belief of the Wesleyan essentials of Christian faith. What are the implications of these assertions for the church's attitude towards and treatment of homosexual people?
 - c How do you respond to the section on pp.18-19 on the church's journeys from exclusion to inclusion? What lessons might the church learn from its own history?

Preparation for week 5 - group members to read section 4 on Experience, and to attempt to have a conversation with a homosexual person, asking him/her about his/her experience as a gay/lesbian person.

5. **Week 5** - Discuss the following questions, based on the section on Experience:
 - a How did the stories of homosexual people in the discussion document make you feel?
 - b What insights did you gain through your conversation with a homosexual person?
 - c What do you think it must be like to be a homosexual? What do you think would be your areas of greatest need, struggle and concern?
 - d What practical measures can be taken within your church that can make your church more compassionate towards homosexual people?
6. **Week 6** - Do the bible-study in the discussion guide on p.30 entitled, 'Grace means love and inclusion.'
7. **Week 7** - Share with one another whatever insights may have emerged for you over this seven week course. Discuss the following questions:
 - a Have any of your attitudes towards homosexuality changed? If so, how?
 - b In what ways, if any, are you wanting to think, speak or act differently for having done this course?
 - c What would the next step be for you in becoming better informed with respect to the complexities of this issue
 - d How would you like to see your church relating to homosexual people?
 - e What does it mean for the church to be a community of love rather than rejection?

Strategy 4 - Circuit Quarterly Meeting

It needs to be said that the usual constraints of time within a Circuit Quarterly Meeting makes the CQM a less than ideal place for the discussing and debating of this issue. Furthermore, if there is any pressure of a formal decision needing to be made regarding this issue, that will significantly inhibit people's openness to ideas other than their own. CQM's would therefore be well-advised to attempt to follow elements of the workshop strategy outlined above.

Where this is not possible, CQM's could appoint two or three people (preferably representing differing perspectives) to present summarised versions of the discussion guide (or parts thereof). Thereafter, allow time for open conversation, bearing in mind the six key principles for constructive debate, outlined in section B. above. CQM's may want to engage this process over two or more meetings.

A Circuit Task Team could be established that could help to facilitate the discussion within the circuit at the level of societies, organisations, mission groups or other circuit meetings such as the Local Preacher's meeting.

Strategy 5 - Utilising other resources

1. Refer to the Appendixes at the back of the discussion guide.
2. Appendix A entitled 'Summary of Sections 1 - 4' offers a summary version of the substantive content of the four sections of the discussion guide dealing with Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience.
3. Appendix B entitled 'Four ethical views on same-sex relationships' is a table of the positions, biblical/moral bases, and some of the pro's and con's of four ethical views on same-sex relationships. Use the document as the basis for a group discussion. Invite people to add to the lists of pro's and con's for each of the ethical views.
4. Appendix C entitled 'Is homosexual behaviour always sinful?' deals with the two broad responses to the critical question of homosexual practice and the theological motivations underpinning these responses. Invite people to offer their own definitions of homosexual behaviour, and to critique the theological motivations offered for each of the respective positions.
5. Appendix D entitled 'Further resources' is a short list of books, websites and organisations that represent diverse positions on the issue of same-sex relationships.

The Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa presents to Conference the document entitled, '*Christians and Same-sex Relationships: a Discussion Guide for the Methodist People of Southern Africa,*' and requests Conference to:

1. refer it to circuits and districts for discussion, and
2. mandate DEWCOM to receive the responses and develop a formal position paper for presentation to and consideration by Conference 2005.

Written submissions can be sent to:

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CHRISTIANS AND SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

SUMMARY STATEMENT OF THE DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR THE METHODIST PEOPLE OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

At the 2001 Triennial Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) held in Port Elizabeth, the Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee (DEWCOM) was mandated to continue the work it had begun on questions relating to Christians and same-sex relationships. Conference endorsed the foundational conviction that as a church "we are required to be a community of love rather than rejection." It is in this spirit that the committee has endeavoured to carry out its mandate.

Certain observations should be made at the outset:

- 1 Christian tradition, in the main, has been negatively disposed to same-sex relationships, and often strongly condemnatory, resulting in those of same-sex orientation feeling excluded from the life of the church and even the Christian faith.
- 2 The testimonies of these painful experiences of exclusion have given the church pause to consider whether its attitudes and practices towards homosexual people have been consistent with the message of Christ, and whether its use of Scripture in this matter has been faithful to the biblical witness as a whole.
- 3 Attitudes within society towards homosexual orientation and practice have shifted significantly in recent years, evidenced in the following:
 - 3.1 There is a growing understanding in the social sciences of homosexuality as a psycho-sexual orientation, and not merely a form of behaviour, which is not chosen but discovered. Accordingly, the social sciences no longer classify homosexual orientation as an illness or a disorder.
 - 3.2 The new South African Constitution protects the rights of people of same-sex orientation, and recent court decisions have established the rights of same-sex couples in matters such as shared medical aid policies, immigration, inheritance and the adoption of children.
 - 3.3 Previously a criminal offence, same-sex practice has increasingly been decriminalized in many countries of the world.

Of course, the church should in no way feel constrained to follow the shifting attitudes of society. Indeed, out of faithfulness to the Gospel the church is often called to challenge the attitudes and practices that are regarded as normative within secular culture. Nevertheless, the shifting attitudes within

society regarding the issue of same-sex relationships undoubtedly contribute to the urgency of the debate and the importance for the church to discern the truth of God in this matter as it seeks to be faithful to the Gospel.

- 4 The MCSA is not alone in facing the challenges of this issue. Other denominations have already made extensive studies into the question and have been on a long and often painful journey of discovery of what faithfulness to the Gospel means for Christians responding to the issue of same-sex relationships. One thing is clear - this is no longer a question we can avoid.

On the basis of the agreed conviction of the 2001 Conference, and having studied the Scriptures as well as insights derived from the other elements of our traditional Wesleyan discerning process, viz. Reason, Tradition and Experience, DEWCOM proposes the following considerations for the Methodist people:

Accepting that "we are required to be a community of love rather than rejection,":

- 4.1 The MCSA affirms the dignity and sacred worth of all people, irrespective of their sexual orientation, and commits itself to dealing with homosexual people in particular with deep compassion and care, recognising that such people have frequently been the victims of discrimination and abuse.
- 4.2 The MCSA repents of any attitudes or actions of the church that may have resulted in the stigmatisation of homosexual people and in their alienation from the mainstream of church life, and humbly seeks their forgiveness wherever this may have happened.
- 4.3 The MCSA acknowledges the prevalence of sexual brokenness in people of all sexual orientations and seeks to be a place of loving, non-judgemental acceptance where healing and transformation in this aspect of people's lives can be known and where God's good gift of sexuality in all its rich diversity can be celebrated.
- 4.4 The MCSA welcomes into its membership all people, irrespective of their sexual orientation. As in all other cases, membership is on the basis of repentance of sins and confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour (*Laws & Discipline*, para. 3.2), and so there should be no exclusion of people on the basis of their sexual orientation.
- 4.5 The sexual expression and practice expected of members should be that envisioned in the Conference statement: "Methodists believe that sex means being faithful, loving, loyal, caring - in a marriage relationship with one other. Sex is about relationships." (*2003 Yearbook*, p94). Promiscuity, whether heterosexual or homosexual, can never receive the

blessing or endorsement of the church.

- 4.6 While marriage - by definition a covenantal relationship between a man and a woman - is not possible for same-sex couples, the church should make it possible for life-long affirming same-sex relationships to be placed in the context of the church's blessing. The requirements of such covenantal relationships of same-sex couples should be the same as those for married couples - permanence, faithfulness, truth, trust, long-suffering, forgiveness, mutual companionship, helpfulness and care.
- 4.7 The MCSA affirms that the lay offices of the church should not be closed to those of same sex orientation, including those in relationships which are in keeping with the requirements expressed in points 4.5 and 4.6 above. As in all other cases, leadership is on the basis of a confirmed call from God to serve in the particular capacity of the office in question. This would include those who seek to become Local Preachers.
- 4.8 The MCSA affirms that those of same-sex orientation, including those in relationships which are in keeping with the requirements expressed in points 4.5 and 4.6 above, should not be excluded from the ordained ministries of the MCSA.

The key recognition in the above recommendations is that same-sex orientation is not in itself a sin and not in itself contradictory of Christian faith and life.

Finally, DEWCOM is aware that this is a highly sensitive and potentially divisive issue. The above considerations are proposed in the spirit of Christian mission, love and pastoral care, and in the conviction that the church cannot be characterised by judgement and exclusion if it is to be the church of Jesus Christ.

CHRISTIANS AND SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

A DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR THE METHODIST PEOPLE OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

We are living in a cultural context in which long-established social norms with respect to sexual behaviour are increasingly being questioned and challenged. This shifting social scene affords the Church the opportunity to re-examine its position on these issues, or to formulate a position where none has been expressly articulated. Such a process of re-examination will enable the Church either to re-assert its traditional stance with fresh conviction, or to reformulate those positions that are shown to be the time-bound products of a previous milieu. While such a process is undoubtedly demanding, disturbing and potentially divisive for the community of faith, it can nevertheless enable the Church to know and speak its mind on these issues with clarity and conviction. As such, the Church should embrace the opportunity to engage in such a process as a gift.

The issue of same-sex relationships has come to the fore as one of these burning issues facing the Church of today. Recognising this, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) has committed itself to the process of examining this issue. The 2001 Triennial Conference of the MCSA, in mandating this process, adopted as its departure point in this matter the ecclesiological principle that as a church “**...we are required to be a community of love rather than of rejection.**” The conviction undergirding this ecclesiological principle is that we can only be such a community of love through our faithful obedience to Christ and our openness to the searing truth of God.

Clearly, a fundamental theological question which needs to be addressed is whether homosexual behaviour is always a sin.

Sin has traditionally been defined as a state of alienation from God - a state which is expressed in thoughts, words or deeds that are contrary to the law of God, and which destroys life-giving relationship with God, others, the world and ourselves. Sin is part of our universal human condition and insinuates itself into every aspect of our individual and corporate lives, as well as our institutions and structures. Jesus came to save us, and all the world, from our sin. As Scripture puts it: ‘Christ died for our sins’ (1 Corinthians 15:3).

The question whether homosexuality is a sin is therefore in essence asking whether homosexuality:

- is itself indicative of a fundamental estrangement from God;
- is a violation of God’s law;
- is fundamentally damaging of the homosexual’s relationships with God, others, the world and self; and
- requires the redemptive work of Christ.

In addressing these questions the distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual practice is often made. Here ‘homosexual practice’ is understood as genital sexual activity with another person of the same sex. Since few people any longer hold the view that homosexual orientation is, in itself sinful, the critical question which needs to be addressed theologically, is whether homosexual practice constitutes sin.

How do we answer the question of whether homosexual practice is sinful? How can we discern the truth of God in this matter of same-sex relationships? What are the main resources that can enable

us to exercise such discernment? John Wesley's famous 'quadrilateral' of Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience represent the main resources that need to be enlisted in this process of examination and discernment.

It needs to be noted that of these four resources, Scripture is primary. "Methodists affirm the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the primary rule of faith and practice and the centre for theological reflection.... Methodists acknowledge that scriptural reflection is influenced by the processes of reason, tradition and experience, while aware that Scripture is the primary source and criterion of Christian doctrine." (2003 Yearbook, p176).

What follows is a treatment of each of these resources, starting with the primary resource of Scripture. Concluding recommendations for the MCSA's life and practice with respect to this issue of same-sex relationships will then be offered.

The intention of this document is to act as a catalyst for honest and frank discussion around this important issue within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

A NOTE ON THE USE OF LANGUAGE

In a sensitive debate like this it is important to become aware of the language that is used. Language that is in any way derogatory, demeaning or offensive is unacceptable. One difficulty, however, is that the language that has been used to describe sexual orientation and practice has not remained static, and preferred usages have changed. For example, the term 'gay' was once regarded as derogatory, and was used in a generic sense to refer to all homosexual people - men as well as women. The term 'gay' is now the preferred adjective to describe homosexual men, while 'lesbian' is used as both an adjective and a noun to describe homosexual women.

It needs to be noted that within the gay and lesbian community, the term 'homosexual' itself is decreasingly used. Acknowledging this, this document still uses the term 'homosexual' as a generic adjective for gay and lesbian people. No offense is intended by this usage, which is retained simply for ease of reference.

In addition, there are others who describe themselves as bisexual - meaning that they are attracted emotionally and physically, to a greater or lesser extent, to people of either sex. One of the inadequacies of this document is its failure to deal with this dimension of human sexuality. The hope, nevertheless, is that bisexual people would still feel included in the substance of the paper.

'Transgendered', 'transsexual' and 'intersexual' would be further descriptors to refer to differing sexual identities. (For a definition of these terms see p.11, para. 2.2 (d).) Such people can be either heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual in orientation. The acronym LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, [transsexual] and intersexual) is increasingly being used as an adjective to describe the sexual orientation of these people, and the collective community of which they feel a part.

The intention has been to use language that is helpful, respectful and accurate in describing some of the complexities of human sexuality. Where that intention has failed, the authors ask for understanding and forgiveness.

SECTION 1 - SCRIPTURE

What does the Bible say about homosexuality? What guidance does the Bible offer regarding the issue of same-sex relationships? How does the Bible inform our understanding of God's view on these matters? These are critical questions as the guidance of Scripture is sought for this complex issue. **The answers to these questions will be influenced to a significant degree by the way in which the Bible is read and interpreted. Differing approaches to Scripture will yield different answers.**

1.1. FIRST APPROACH

One approach is to focus upon what is explicitly stated in Scripture about homosexuality, and to accept those references as conveying the biblical position on the matter. Within such an approach the following eight passages commonly emerge: Genesis 19:1-29; Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20:13; Deuteronomy 23:17-18; Judges 19 - 21; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10.

Of these eight passages, the relevance of five of them to the modern debate on homosexuality is disputed, but three seem clear in their unequivocal condemnation of homosexual behaviour. They are as follows:

Leviticus 18:22 You (masculine) shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

Leviticus 20:13 If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.

Romans 1:26-27 For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

Whether the other five disputed passages are considered or not, according to this approach the weight of these three passages leads to the conclusion that the Bible is clear and unequivocal in its condemnation of homosexual behaviour. This conclusion is commonly generalised to include homosexual orientation as well, even though the question of sexual orientation is not addressed in these passages as such. **Many people accept these conclusions as fairly representing the biblical position on homosexuality.**

There are others, however, who claim that this way of reading the Bible is inadequate, and that the conclusions that are reached as a result do not fairly represent the biblical witness. The following objections are cited:

(a) This approach to Scripture fails to recognise the historical and cultural distance between our times and biblical times, and assumes that the biblical writers' conclusions about sexuality are directly translatable into our modern context.

It is argued that it is highly questionable that many of the issues around sexuality that are currently being debated were even in the minds of the biblical writers. There are some significant matters of

fact that must be taken into account when considering the differing understandings of sexuality between biblical times and today.

- (i) The primary purpose of sexual activity in biblical times was procreation. It stands to reason therefore that in such a context any sexual activity that specifically precluded procreation (such as homosexual intercourse, or to a lesser degree intercourse during menstruation) would be shunned. Our current human experience is very different, where the primary focus of sexual activity is not procreation but the sharing of intimacy and the expression of love.
- (ii) It should further be noted that the very term 'homosexual' is a modern one, the word itself only being coined in 1869. Our understanding of the complex reality which the term seeks to describe continues to grow, with advances continually being made in our knowledge of psychology, biology, sociology and anthropology. The cognitive categories are now available to distinguish between sexual behaviour and sexual orientation; or between consensual, loving homosexual relations and 'forced' sexual perversions. All of this represents a body of knowledge and understanding that simply was not accessible to biblical writers.

These historical and cultural differences between biblical times and ours suggest that it cannot simply be assumed that the biblical references condemning homosexual behaviour can be directly applied to our modern context.

(b) This approach to Scripture is fraught with inconsistencies when it comes to the acceptance of biblically sanctioned sexual mores, and the application of biblically sanctioned punishments for sexual deviance. There are a whole host of Scriptural injunctions governing sexual behaviour that are no longer accepted as normative today. A few examples would be the following:

- (i) The levirate marriage. (Deut 25:5-10; cf. Mark 12:18-27). When a married man in Israel died childless, his eldest brother was obliged to take his widow as his wife. If he also died without fathering an heir for the dead man, the next brother was expected to marry the widow, and, if necessary, the next, and so on until an heir was born.
- (ii) The punishment for adultery was death by stoning for both the man and the woman (Deut 22:22).
- (iii) Sexual intercourse during the seven day menstrual period was expressly forbidden, on pain of being cut off from the community (Lev 18:19, 29).

None of these clearly articulated regulations governing sexual conduct are observed today. If these biblical injunctions are freely disregarded, it is inconsistent to appeal to proof texts as the basis for condemning homosexuality. Furthermore, if a literal reading of these proof texts is assumed as the basis for the condemnation of homosexuality, it must be realised that Christians are then bound to advocate the execution of practising homosexuals, as a literal reading of Scripture requires that people engaging in homosexual behaviour must be put to death. These seemingly arbitrary inconsistencies when it comes to the acceptance of biblically sanctioned sexual mores and the punishments for deviance call into question the adequacy of this way of reading and interpreting Scripture.

1.2. SECOND APPROACH

Another approach to the reading and interpretation of Scripture is to subject any particular biblical passage to the wider witness of Scripture as a whole. Within such an approach, no isolated text is allowed to hold an independent authority that is untempered by the witness of Scripture as a whole. This principle of ‘using Scripture to interpret scripture’ is deeply rooted in our Wesleyan heritage, and is an important safeguard against the danger of assuming that everything biblical is necessarily Christian. Jesus himself debunked this myth when he highlighted the inadequacies of many biblical teachings, and the need for their radical reinterpretation. (“You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” - Matthew 5:38-39).

Thus, any proof-text on homosexuality needs to be read and understood within the wider context of the Bible as a whole. There are broad themes that recur throughout Scripture, which speak about what God is like, the attitude that God has towards the peoples of the world, and the kind of life that God expects from us. They are the vehicles that bring the unified message of the Bible near to us. These broad, recurring themes clearly carry far greater weight in terms of their revelatory value than single, isolated texts.

(a) A biblical theology of inclusion.

One such theme that recurs throughout the Bible is that inclusion, not exclusion, characterises the nature of God’s mission of love to the world. From Abram, who was blessed so that all the peoples on earth might know the blessing of God also (Gen 12:2-3); to Israel whose very identity was understood as being God’s servant people who would be a light for the Gentiles making known God’s salvation to the ends of the earth (Is 42:6; 49:6); to Jesus, who repeatedly scandalised the religious establishment through his acceptance of marginalised and outcast members of society (Mt 8:1-3; Mk 2:13-17; Lk 15:1-2; Jn 4:1-42); to the early Church, whose very mandate was to transcend the divisions that caused separation and exclusion (Gal 3:28; Eph 2:11-22; Col 3:11). The biblical witness concerning the including, embracing nature of God’s love is thoroughgoing and consistent. Isolated texts that suggest that the exclusion of a particular group is biblically sanctioned need to be critiqued by this broader biblical witness.

(b) The intrinsic dignity and sacred worth of all people, and the denunciation of all discrimination, oppression and injustice.

Another key theme that recurs throughout the Bible is of the intrinsic dignity and sacred worth of all people as made in the image of God, irrespective of their differences of race, language, culture and station in life. Consequently, all forms of discrimination, oppression and injustice, especially when directed against marginalised and minority groups, are consistently denounced throughout much of the Bible as being contrary to the will and purposes of God. If the Church is to be faithful to the biblical witness, this is an important theme that must shape its life and practice.

In seeking to apprehend the overarching revelation of Scripture, it is important to recognise that there are parts of the Bible, such as the gospels, that represent a fuller picture of the nature of God than other parts of the Bible, such as some of the Old Testament legal codes. This recognition is consistent with the idea of the progressive revelation of Scripture, which has as its revelatory climax the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ. It is the Christ-event that provides the lens through which all of the Bible should be read and interpreted, for it is the Christ-event that brings all of Scripture into clear and sharp focus. Therefore, any conclusions that are drawn from Scripture need to be consistent with what we know to be true about the nature and character of Christ.

This approach to the reading and interpretation of Scripture has the great merit of guarding against any isolated text claiming an authority which may not be its right, insofar as it contradicts the biblical witness in general, and particularly the revelation that we find in Jesus.

1.3. THIRD APPROACH

A third approach to the reading and interpretation of Scripture is to see the Bible as a living document in the life of the Church, which is enlivened by the activity of the Holy Spirit, who comes to interpret the words of Scripture and so lead the Church into all truth. Sometimes this enlivening work of the Holy Spirit includes challenging entrenched assumptions and traditional interpretations, thus leading us to new and fuller understandings of the biblical witness and the truth of God.

The attitude of openness to the unfolding, illuminating truth that the Holy Spirit brings has been a key characteristic of the Church's identity as a Spirit-empowered and Spirit-directed community. Jesus himself testified to this ongoing activity of the Spirit in interpreting the revelation contained in his own life, ministry and passion. Jesus said:

“I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.” (John 16:12-14)

The revelation of Christ's life was complete. But the full ramifications of that life continue to unfold as the Church grows in its capacity to understand and receive the revelation of God that Christ brought near. The ongoing activity of the Spirit has been to guide the Church into all truth through decisive moments of growth in which the Church has matured into fuller and richer understandings of the revelation of Christ.

A great deal of 'orthodox' theology can be said to be based on this premise of the ongoing activity of the Spirit guiding the Church into all truth. The Trinitarian formula and the Creeds, for instance, can hardly be said to be literally 'biblical', yet they are accorded a status sometimes rivalling the authority of Scripture.

Watershed moments in the life of the Church

Accordingly, within the experience of the Church there have been a number of watershed moments when entrenched assumptions and traditional interpretations of Scripture have been challenged by the work of the Holy Spirit. The following would be some examples:

(a) The Gentiles

In the experience of the early Church itself, which is part of the biblical record, there was a watershed moment in the life of the early Christian community as it struggled to move from a parochial to a universal mission. The story in Acts 10 - 15 is the narrative of that struggle.

The Apostle Peter has a vision, of animals descending from heaven on a sheet. He is instructed to eat them; but they are unclean and doing so would be an "abomination" according to the received scriptural tradition. His refusal to comply with the instruction earns him a stern rebuke: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

This vision helps to prepare Peter to follow the Spirit's prompting to commit an abomination - to associate with Cornelius, a profane, unclean Gentile who by definition was a religious pervert. Upon

arriving at Cornelius' house Peter says: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean." Peter then proceeds to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles gathered there, the Holy Spirit comes upon all who hear the message, and so Peter orders that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.

Upon his return to Jerusalem Peter is called by the circumcised believers to account for his actions. His defence was that he had acted solely in obedience to the direction of the Spirit, and concluded his testimony by saying, "Who was I to think that I could oppose God?" The circumcised believers accepted Peter's testimony and rejoiced that God had given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.

Resistance to this shifting position arises with a report in Acts 15 that certain Jewish Christians from Judea were insisting on the strict adherence to the fundamentals of the faith as taught by Moses: namely, circumcision for Gentile converts and, by implication, accountability to the law of Moses. They were insisting on the literal authority of the scriptural tradition. This issue came to a head at the Jerusalem Council. Ken Sehested writes:

Missionary stories of revival breaking out among the (religiously perverted) Gentiles are told with jubilation. But some of the fundamentalists are upset that these converts are not being required to believe that [Scripture] is literally true. The missionaries have gone soft on the 'law of Moses.' The more conservative leaders argue that you either believe all of [Scripture] or none of it. Either it's authoritative or it's not. And the [Scriptures] (the 'law of Moses') command circumcision - the texts are plain, their meaning is indisputable.

Finally, Peter stood up and said, in effect: "I know what the [Scriptures] say. What I'm telling you is that I've seen indisputable evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of these Gentiles. God has cleansed their hearts by faith and has made no distinction between them and us."

Peter was onto something important. His was a precedent-setting theological argument: clear evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit ... overrules any particular regulation. The regulations, in other words, are in service to the Spirit, not the other way around.¹

(b) Slavery and Women

Two other examples of the unfolding, illuminating truth of the Spirit challenging the Church's entrenched assumptions and traditional interpretations of the biblical witness, would be the issues of slavery and the role of women.

It is widely accepted as a matter of record that there is no explicit and unequivocal condemnation of slavery in the Bible. Indeed, the Bible even appears to condone the institution of slavery. Yet, the Christian Church today could speak with virtually one voice in dismissing slavery as being opposed to the will of God. This, in spite of the contrary impression offered in Scripture.

¹Sehested, K. (1999). *Biblical Fidelity and Sexual Orientation: Why the First Matters, Why the Second Doesn't*. In W. Wink *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*, p.59. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Similarly with the role of women in the church, biblical passages exist that clearly prohibit women from speaking in church (1 Corinthians 14:34-35) or having authority over men (1 Timothy 2:11-12). Yet, in many churches today, and the MCSA in particular, the leadership offered by women is seen as an essential aspect of the Church's obedience and faithfulness to its calling.

(c) Remarriage after divorce

It is not the stated position of the MCSA to denounce unequivocally remarriage after divorce, and many Methodist ministers conduct marriages of divorcees. This in spite of the clear teaching of Jesus that any divorcee who marries someone else commits adultery (Mark 10:11-12). Is our church, in this practice, allowing and even encouraging the sin of adultery? To this question our church would say an emphatic, 'No!'

This practice of permitting the remarriage of divorcees has arisen as recently as the 1970's out of much prayerful consideration of the Scriptures and tradition, in the light of painful pastoral experience and need, with the recognition that the forgiving, healing, renewing grace of God flows in many ways. When the remarriage of a divorced person is clearly a sign and a channel of God's grace in their life, to deny their remarriage out of 'fidelity to Scripture' would in fact be in disobedience to the Spirit.

All of these examples point to the ongoing activity of the Spirit, guiding the Church into new and fuller understandings of the biblical witness. In some instances, where particular biblical texts exhibit an oppressively time-bound quality, the activity of the Spirit will prompt the Church to accept that the specific content of those texts is at odds with the message of Scripture as a whole.

1.4. CONCLUSION

As the guidance of Scripture is sought within this complex issue, it is imperative to recognise that the way in which the Bible is approached will influence to a significant degree the Scriptural guidance that is gained. The first approach outlined above, which focuses on a literal reading of what is explicitly stated in Scripture about homosexuality, leads to the conclusion that the Bible is clear and unequivocal in its condemnation of homosexual behaviour. This definite conclusion is commonly generalised to include the relatively recent concept of homosexual orientation.

However, such an approach to the reading of Scripture is fraught with inadequacies and contradictions. Many would therefore contend that its conclusions do not fairly and faithfully represent the biblical witness, and as such are a distortion of the biblical revelation.

The second and third approaches discussed above guard against such distortions of the biblical revelation, by considering the broader witness of the Bible as a whole, as well as the ongoing witness of the Spirit whose task is to 'guide us into all truth'. These approaches are deeply rooted in our Wesleyan tradition.

The conclusions which the second and third approaches yield with respect to the issue of same-sex relationships would include the following:

1. The assumption that the Bible condemns unequivocally every expression of the modern-day experience of homosexuality is without adequate foundation.
2. Any dehumanisation, rejection, oppression or injustice experienced by a homosexual person is contrary to the loving intentions of God.
3. The attitude of the church towards homosexual people should be patterned upon the ministry

of Christ, who welcomed the outcasts and touched the untouchables.

4. The ongoing witness of the Spirit can free the church from the shackles of oppressively time-bound understandings and interpretations of the Scriptures.
5. The Spirit helps the church to engage rigorously with the Scriptures in order that the Living Word of God might be heard and known in every age.

SECTION 2 - REASON

Reason is a second resource that can offer key insights into the issue of same-sex relationships.

2.1. TWO KEY INFLUENCES ON MORAL-THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT

In engaging the resource of reason, it is important to consider two major influences on moral-theological thought.

(a) Natural Law

First, as noted above in the section on Scripture, the general view of sexuality in biblical times gave pre-eminence to the procreative purpose of sex. This purpose was given philosophical grounding by the Stoics with their concept of the Natural Law of the cosmos. The Stoic school of philosophy had its origins in the third century before Christ, but was influential for at least as many centuries after Christ. The Natural Law was further developed by Christian scholars in the Middle Ages, reaching a high point in the teaching of Thomas Aquinas. This way of thinking dominated the moral thought of the Church right up to what may be called “the scientific age”.

Roughly stated, a Natural Law approach to human sexuality operates as follows. All things in the universe are created with a purpose. Human beings have the ability to discern the purpose of all things, and to treat all things according to their “true end” (nature/purpose). To treat anything contrary to its true end is “unnatural” and therefore morally wrong. The ability of humans to discern the true end of things is called reason or rationality, and it is our reasoning ability that distinguishes human beings from the animals. When we think rationally about our sexuality, we discern that its true end must be the procreation of our species. Therefore any sexual activity that does not in principle lead to procreation, is against nature and morally wrong. Clearly homosexuality must always be wrong in this way of thinking, and so must other activities such as masturbation, contraception and voluntary sterilization. There has long been a sense, however, that rigid Natural Law thinking about sexuality is inadequate. Even Thomas Aquinas tried to make a place for the emotional bonds and “mutual comfort” that accompany human sexuality. While the Roman Catholic Church still tries to adhere bravely to traditional Natural Law thinking in its official policies on human sexuality, these policies are increasingly at odds with life and thought in the modern world. The limitations of Natural Law emerged forcefully at the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, one of the major criticisms being the small place it gives to Scripture. While it would be wrong, and theologically dangerous, to claim that the modern must always take precedence over the traditional – in this case a long tradition which values reason above all other human characteristics – it would also be wrong to ignore the fact that Natural Law is now heavily criticised and no longer carries its old self-evident authority. Other ways of reasoning are now sought out and used, especially in discussions on contraception and homosexuality.

(b) The Scientific Age

Second, in the so-called scientific age, which covers approximately the past two centuries, a growing body of information has become available from the natural, social and human sciences. The cognitive categories are now available to speak meaningfully in terms of “human sexual orientation”, a concept previously unknown. Furthermore, with the flowering of research and knowledge into the complex arena of human sexuality, it is also now possible to speak intelligibly of different kinds of homosexual expression - as it is possible to speak of different kinds of heterosexual expression.

For the church to engage in the modern debate on homosexuality without critical reference to these

unfolding insights from the natural, social and human sciences, is to fall into the same trap that befell the sixteenth century church in its uncritical dismissal of the Copernican theory that the earth revolved around the sun. The perspectives offered by these sciences are by no means the only ones having relevance to this debate, but they certainly are perspectives that the church cannot ignore.

What follows is a brief treatment of progressive models of sexual orientation that have sought to describe the complex phenomenon of sexual orientation; theories as to the origins or cause of a particular sexual orientation; and a description of some of the varieties of homosexual expression.

2.2. MODELS OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION

The prevailing scientific view on sexual orientation has undergone significant development over the years. This is reflected in the various models of sexual orientation that have been suggested by the unfolding insights offered by the social and natural sciences. This trajectory in scientific thinking can be traced through the progressive models of sexual orientation that scientific thought has presented.

(a) Dichotomous model

The dichotomous model views people as either heterosexual or homosexual. This “either-or” representation of human sexuality, often a reflection of classical cultural understanding of sexuality, is largely rejected by modern researchers in that it does not accommodate the reality of bi-sexuality in individuals.

(b) Unidimensional Continuum Model

Kinsey researchers in 1948 and 1953 found that the sexual behaviour of respondents was not adequately represented by the dichotomous model. They concluded that most people are not exclusively heterosexual or homosexual and so they developed a Unidimensional Continuum Model of Sexual Orientation. Allied to this they developed a Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale in order to assess an individual’s position on the continuum. This assessment of sexual orientation was based on lifetime erotic attraction and sexual behaviour. This model and rating recognise that an individual’s sexual orientation may have both hetero- and homo-sexual elements.

(c) Multidimensional Model

The Multidimensional Model of Sexual Orientation has evolved out of the need to represent more accurately the diverse factors involved in the development of human sexuality. In this model researchers include assessments of how individuals experience their sexuality, how they identify themselves, and how they behaviourally express their sexual identity. In one version of the Multidimensional Model, seven scales of measurement are used: sexual behaviour, sexual fantasies, erotic attraction, emotional preference, social group preference, self-identification and lifestyle preference.

(d) LesBiGay/Transgender Affirmative Model

This model includes transgendered, transsexual and intersexual people. (‘Transgendered’ refers to people who identify with the opposite gender - such as transvestites or cross-dressers; ‘transsexual’ refers to people who have undergone medical procedures to alter sexual characteristics to those of the opposite sex; while ‘intersexual’ refers to what used to be called hermaphrodites - people having the sexual characteristics of both sexes.) This model incorporates the insights of the Multidimensional Model and also affirms variations in sexual diversity and identity, and differences in the way individuals experience and express gender.

2.3. THE ORIGINS OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION

One of the prevailing questions raised regarding homosexuality centres on its origin or 'cause'. Homosexual people are often irritated by the fact that heterosexual people are so concerned about finding the cause of homosexuality. The same question is rarely asked about heterosexuality, since it is assumed that this sexual orientation is normal and needs no explanation. Nevertheless, it remains an important question.

Despite the growing research on this topic, a concrete cause of homosexuality and knowledge on whether it is derived from 'nature' (a person's genetic inheritance) or 'nurture' (a person's social and environmental upbringing and development) is yet to be discovered. Most researchers agree that an interaction of biological, psychological, and social / cultural forces is involved in the development of one's sexual orientation. Any explanation that does not acknowledge the interaction of these components is inadequate.

Theories about a connection between homosexuality and poor parenting or abuse remain unsubstantiated. Many homosexual people come from loving, stable families and have no history of suffering abuse.

An overwhelming majority of homosexual people describe their homosexual orientation as something they did not choose, but rather discovered as an intrinsic part of who they are.

The American Psychiatric and Psychoanalytic Associations do not consider homosexuality to be an emotional or mental disorder. Both of these professional bodies question the efficacy and the ethics of therapies aimed at changing sexual orientation, and caution against the significant psychological damage that such interventions can cause.

Treatments attempting to cure homosexuality in the past included electroconvulsive shock therapy, surgical castration and hysterectomy, but these have now largely been abandoned.

2.4. VARIETIES OF HOMOSEXUAL EXPRESSION

Ruth Fuller² describes the following varieties of homosexual expression:

- (a) **Developmental homoerotic activity** in children and adolescents of both sexes before adulthood. This is a developmental view that children and adolescents are immature in their expressions of sexuality, and that accordingly a degree of heterosexual and homosexual experimentation is not uncommon as a person's sexual identity is being discovered.
- (b) **Pseudo-homosexuality**, in which the sexual activity with persons of the same sex reflects issues of dependence-independence and / or power-powerlessness rather than sexual desire, for example, two females whose focus is a mother-child relationship of nurture rather than one of sexual arousal for satisfaction.
- (c) **Situational homosexuality** in captive same-sex populations during the time of their isolation from persons of the opposite sex, for example prison populations.
- (d) **Enforced / exploitative homosexuality** - complementary sexual activities in which a less powerful individual is exploited by a more powerful individual.
- (e) **Variational homosexuality** - for example, prostitution

²In Geis, S.B & Messer, D.E. (eds.). (1994). *Caught in the crossfire: Helping Christians debate homosexuality*, pp.80-81. Nashville:Abingdon

- (f) **Bisexuality**, in which a homosexual person continues to have heterosexual relations.
- (g) **Ambisexuality**, a smaller group of persons who experience equal sexual pleasure and performance with either sex.
- (h) **Preferential homosexuality** - adults whose preference is for emotional and physical intimacy with persons of the same sex. There is an incorrect assumption that preferential homosexuality presents no diversity. The diversity includes people who are *celibate*, *nonmonogamous singles*, and *couples*.

2.5. CONCLUSION

Perhaps the greatest contribution that the resource of Reason offers to the church as it seeks to discern the truth of God in the matter of same-sex relationships, is the recognition it affords of the immense complexity of human sexuality. In particular, any facile pronouncements or simple solutions that are offered regarding the challenge of understanding homosexuality will certainly be inadequate, and ultimately misleading.

Developments in thinking within the natural and social sciences lead to the following conclusions:

1. The ways in which the complex reality of human sexuality is understood and described are constantly evolving.
2. While the exact process whereby a person's sexual orientation is formed is not known, the evidence suggests that a person's sexual orientation is in place relatively early in life.
3. Sexual orientation is something over which people have little choice. People do not choose to be heterosexual or homosexual, but rather discover themselves to be such.
4. Attempting to change a person's sexual orientation is highly questionable.
5. As with heterosexual practice, homosexual practice is not uniform and varieties of homosexual expression exist.

SECTION 3 - TRADITION

A third key resource for exercising discernment in the issue of same-sex relationships is tradition. This refers to the Church's position over the ages, as well as the wider witness of the contemporary Church. The cumulative wisdom of the church in every time and place represents a rich resource for discerning what is required of us in this time and place if we are to remain faithful to our heritage and obedient to our calling as the people of God.

Drawing from the rich resource of tradition is not to be confused with a rigid and uncritical adherence to the things of the past, that asserts that "the way things have been is the way they always shall be." Rather, the resource of tradition offers a wisdom that can inform and inspire a faithful and obedient response to the Spirit's prompting in this age. In some instances this will require a resolute maintenance of the *status quo*, in others it will require a courageous departure from the *status quo*. In other words, tradition is in service to the Spirit, not the other way around.

3.1. THE HISTORICAL CHURCH

It has been commonly assumed that for much of its two thousand year history, the Christian Church has been negatively disposed towards same-sex relationships. This is, in fact, a moot point. On the one hand there is documented evidence to suggest that in previous centuries a tolerant and accepting attitude towards same-sex couples pertained within the church.³ On the other hand, negative sentiments towards homosexuality clearly did exist, governed largely by the rationale of Natural Law (see discussion below). But generally, the record of the church's position on this matter is conspicuous by its absence. It would be more accurate to say that this is an issue concerning which the church, for much of its history, has remained largely silent.

It can be surmised that much of the church's thinking with regard to the issue of homosexuality was governed by Natural Law. (For a fuller treatment of Natural Law see the section above on Reason.) According to Natural Law, all things in the universe are created with a purpose, which can be rationally discerned by human beings without any reference to God's special revelation. Morality is understood as the correct functioning of things according to their created purpose, or true end, or nature. The created purpose / true end / nature of sexuality was rationally discerned to be procreation, and so any expression of sexuality that did not or could not end in procreation was regarded as immoral. Within such a schema, homosexuality was regarded as immoral because it could not end in procreation. Simply put, homosexuality was rationally discerned to be immoral because it was regarded to be 'unnatural'.

It has only been within the last 40 years or so that the issue of same-sex relationships has been thrust more and more to the fore of the church's agenda. This has more or less corresponded with the unfolding understanding of the distinction between homosexual behaviour and homosexual orientation that has emerged within human consciousness. Increasingly, this issue is one which the Contemporary Church is needing to engage.

³See Corbett, I.D. (1997). Homosexuality in the traditions of the church. In P. Germond & S. de Gruchy (eds.). *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa*, pp.162-172. Cape Town: David Philip.

3.2. THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

It is impossible to characterise a definite position of the Contemporary Church regarding the issue of homosexuality. Denominational positions range from the condemnation of homosexuality as a manifestation of a depraved nature and a perversion of divine standards; to a conditional acceptance of homosexual persons so long as they do not engage in homosexual behaviour; to a full acceptance of homosexuality as part of the diversity of God's good creation, which includes the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination of homosexuals in life-long, affirming same-sex relationships.

Within each of these diverse denominational positions there are individual congregations, clergy and lay people who hold divergent convictions of their own in this matter. Clearly, committed Christians have differing views on this issue that have the force of earnest and sincere conviction for them.

In a recent discussion document on human sexuality issued by the Church of the Province of Southern Africa, the following introductory comments were made:

Differing convictions about the nature and practice of homosexuality continue to threaten our unity. For this reason alone, we have an urgent responsibility to continue to address the matter together. There are other reasons as well why we need to face and handle this issue. There are many people hurting on both sides of the debate. For them it is no "mere debate". People are hurting because they continue to feel rejected, despised, misunderstood, demonised, and "unchurched", because of their orientation, and because of their convictions. For reasons of compassion and care for each other in the Body of Christ, we have no option but to engage and continue to seek better understanding. Other people are hurting because they believe that central Gospel demands are being compromised, and need to be protected, and defended, and witnessed to. They believe that somehow the Faith is at stake. Our zeal for the truth of the Gospel and the leading of the Spirit constrains us.

It is a point of fact that the way in which the issue of homosexuality has been handled has resulted in division and dissension in any number of denominations around the world, as people have sought to defend their own corners of conviction, whilst attacking those of the 'opposing camp'. Clearly, there is a responsibility that we all share to engage this issue in a way that differing convictions can be shared and heard as we seek to maintain the unity of the body.

However, the importance of maintaining the unity of the body cannot be at the expense of compromising the earnest quest for truth and being obedient to the dictates of God. This is where courage is needed to move beyond individual corners of conviction, in order to discern the fuller, wider conviction of God in this matter.

The stories of other denominations' engagement with this issue are a further voice for us to listen to with attention. Some of those stories are shared below.

3.3. WORLD METHODISM

(a) The British Methodist Church

At the annual Conference in 1993, following long debate at all levels of the Church's life on the basis of a detailed report, the British Methodist Church considered the issue of homosexuality. At the end of the debate, the Conference passed in the same session a series of resolutions. These:

- affirm the joy of sexuality as God's gift;
- declare that all practices of sexuality which are promiscuous, exploitative or demeaning in

- any way are unacceptable forms of behaviour and contradict God's purposes for us all;
- state that a person shall not be debarred from the church on the grounds of sexual orientation in itself;
- re-affirm the traditional teaching of the Church on sexuality, namely chastity for all outside marriage and fidelity within it;
- recognize, affirm and celebrate the participation and ministry of lesbians and gay men in the church.

The Conference has put before all church members (lay and ordained) the responsibility of examining their aspirations and practice in the light of these resolutions. There is no authoritative interpretation provided by the Conference of what the resolutions, taken together, add up to. There is no procedure for any group or individual to interrogate Methodist members about their adherence to these resolutions. Rather, the onus is on each member in his or her conscience to reflect on whether their behaviour fits within this cluster of resolutions.

The outcome is that, within the church, there is a diversity of interpretations and a range of understandings about intimate relationships. The Conference encourages Methodists to continue to discuss these differences in a spirit of openness and love. The shared ambition is to combat repression and discrimination, to work for justice and human rights and to give dignity and worth to people whatever their sexuality.

(b) The United Methodist Church

The United Methodist Church's Social Principles statement on human sexuality contains the following paragraph on homosexual persons:

Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the Church in their struggles for human fulfilment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn their lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.

At the General Conference in 2000, delegates voted 628-337 to retain the statement that, while homosexuals are persons of sacred worth, the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.

The normative sexual standard set forth by the UMC for ordained ministers, and candidates for ordination, is "...the practice of fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness." As such, the UMC does not exclude homosexually-oriented people from the ordained ministry, but only people who openly acknowledge practising that orientation.

Within the UMC there are a number of 'Reconciling Congregations' that have affiliated themselves to the Reconciling Ministries Network - a national grassroots organisation that exists to enable full participation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the life of the United Methodist Church, both in policy and practice. This network consists of approximately 200 United Methodist congregations and 25 campus ministries.

(c) The World Methodist Council

Although the WMC has not expressed formally a policy on the issue of homosexuality, in its statement of belief of the Wesleyan essentials of Christian faith, the following assertions are made about the people called Methodists (2003 Yearbook, p175ff):

- Methodists believe that we ‘are the friends of all and the enemies of none’.
- We seek to understand and respond to the contexts and situations in which we live, so that our witness will have integrity.
- As followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who came to serve rather than be served, we go into the world as people of God in Christ Jesus, to serve all people, regardless of their economic and social status, race, gender, age, physical and mental ability, sexuality, religious or cultural origin.
- Recalling the story of the Samaritan (Luke 10:25ff), we express and claim compassion for all people and accept the call in Christ to ‘suffer with’ the least of these in humility and love.
- Having experienced the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a liberating power from all oppression, we stand in solidarity with all people who seek freedom, peace and justice.
- Knowing that the love we share in Christ is stronger than our conflicts, broader than our opinions and deeper than the wounds we inflict on one another, we commit ourselves to participation in our congregations, denominations and the whole Christian family for the purpose of nurture, outreach and witness.

(d) The Methodist Church of Southern Africa

One recent development within our own church is worthy of mention.

The Cape of Good Hope District, at its Synod in May 2003, approved the formation of a group called ESTTeam (Exclusion and Sexuality Task Team) whose purpose is to help guide congregations from an exclusive to an inclusive stance with respect to gay and lesbian people. ESTTeam’s objectives include the formation of a support group for homosexual clergy, the gathering of a library of material that individuals and congregations can access, offering workshops for groups that want to engage with the theology and ethic being developed by ESTTeam, as well as facilitating encounters with gay and lesbian Christians for people who are interested in hearing the stories of their experience of faith.

3.4. OTHER DENOMINATIONS

(a) The Church of the Province of Southern Africa

At its Provincial Synod in September 2002, the CPSA passed a resolution entitled ‘Gay and Lesbian Members of the CPSA’. Two of the key paragraphs of the resolution read thus:

This Synod:

1. Acknowledges and give thanks to God for the role played by gay and lesbian members of the CPSA;
2. Encourages the welcoming and affirmation of all members regardless of their sexual orientation, in all the churches of the CPSA

The resolution also requested the establishment of Diocesan task groups to “resolve relevant practical pastoral issues,” and “...to forward to the Provincial Executive Officer their decisions; with a view to achieving Provincial consensus on policy, where appropriate.”

The CPSA has also issued an apology to gay and lesbian people for the cruel rejection that they have suffered in the past at the hands of the church.

(b) The Dutch Reformed Church

At its General Synod in October 2002, the DRC appointed a study commission on homosexuality to report to the next General Synod in 2006.

(c) The Church of England and Anglican Communion

The Church of England, together with much of the global Anglican Communion, has consistently upheld the standard of faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and sexual abstinence for those who are not called to marriage. Accordingly, homosexual orientation in and of itself is not seen as a barrier to ordination, but the clear position of the church is that such people commit themselves to remain chaste.

Interestingly, the recently installed Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has admitted to ordaining a practising homosexual priest. An openly gay priest and former gay rights activist, Canon Jeffrey John has been appointed as the new bishop of Reading, amidst much controversy and opposition. In the Episcopal Church of the United States, the diocese of New Hampshire has just elected Rev V. Gene Robinson, an openly gay priest in a same-sex relationship, as their new bishop. This election is still subject to confirmation in July 2003 by the church’s national General Convention.

3.5. THE CHURCH’S JOURNEYS FROM EXCLUSION TO INCLUSION

When the story of the Church is considered from the perspective of its attitudes towards particular groupings of people, a remarkable pattern emerges. Initial attitudes of rejection and exclusion towards marginalised groupings almost always give way, in time, to attitudes of acceptance and inclusion. Here are some examples:

The Early Church’s attitude towards the **Gentiles** has already been discussed in this document (cf. pp 6-7). Initially, it was thought that Gentiles who were not circumcised adherents of Judaism were excluded from the community of believers. Through Peter’s vision, the testimony of Paul and Barnabas and the witness of the Holy Spirit, this understanding changed and Gentiles were soon fully incorporated into the Church.

With the church’s expansion into Ireland from about the fourth century, there was strong resistance from the church in Rome to the incorporation of any Celtic practices and influences into the church’s life. This position, in time, resulted in the exclusion of the **Celtic church** from the Catholic church (under the authority of the pope in Rome). By the eighth century this rift had been healed with the contribution of Celtic spirituality to the Catholic church being recognised. One example would be how the Celtic monastic practice of private confession spread to the whole church and ousted public penance as the norm. This pattern of initial rejection and gradual acceptance of indigenous life and practice has been repeated many times in the church’s colonial and missional history.

Within the medieval church, people who were **mentally handicapped** were barred from receiving

Holy Communion. Today, the church holds a different view. The writings of people like Jean Vanier and Henri Nouwen have expressed poignantly the remarkable capacity for faith of mentally handicapped people.

The burgeoning **scientific community of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries** was vehemently opposed and excluded by the Roman Catholic Church for challenging its traditional understandings of the structure of the universe. When Galileo Galilei provided empirical proof of the heliocentric theory of Copernicus - that the earth revolved around the sun - he was forced by the Inquisition to retract his view under threat of torture and excommunication. In time, the church came to accept and endorse these views as normative, and welcomed the proponents thereof.

Following the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church held the view that **Protestants** were excluded from the saving grace of God for it considered all outside its fold unredeemed. This position was expressed often in violent ways, with the persecution of the French Huguenots in the latter part of the seventeenth century being a notable example. It was not until as recently as the second Vatican Council in the early 1960's that the Roman Catholic Church came to acknowledge that Protestants were included in redemption and were in fact part of the universal Church of God.

The European discovery and subsequent colonisation of America from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries resulted in the systematic murder of tens of thousands of **American Indians**. Viewed as the enemy, sharing the gospel with these Indians was far from the minds of the early North American Christians. It was only after the Great Awakening in the eighteenth century that this attitude began to change and the first organised attempts to evangelise the American Indians began.

Within apartheid South Africa the Dutch Reformed Church developed a biblical justification for 'separate development', which apart from its obvious social and political consequences, effectively meant the exclusion of **black people** from their white churches. Within our own church there was a time when there were separate 'European' and 'African' ministerial sessions of synod. It was only in 1958 that Conference declared its conviction that the will of God was for the Methodist Church to be one and undivided.

For much of the church's history, **women** were excluded from ordination. Today, the appropriateness and value of the contribution of women to the ordained ministry is affirmed and celebrated by many denominations around the world. Within the MCSA, our first woman minister was ordained in 1957, and our first woman bishop was inducted in 1999.

3.6 CONCLUSION

When the witness of the Church concerning the issue of homosexuality is considered, three significant points emerge:

1. While some evidence exists of both positive and negative attitudes towards same-sex relationships in the historical church, for the most part homosexuality has been a non-issue for the church throughout much of its history. Until recently the church has never been required to engage this issue seriously, and undoubtedly has been spurred to do so by the new understandings of sexual orientation that are part of an unfolding human consciousness of sexuality.
2. Those churches with which the MCSA shares the most in common in terms of tradition,

doctrine and ministry, which have expressed formal positions regarding the issue of same-sex relationships, demonstrate a remarkable similarity in the conclusions they draw, namely:

- no-one should be excluded from the church or from ordination on the grounds of their sexual orientation
- the standard of faithfulness in marriage, and celibacy (or abstinence) for those not married is maintained as the normative position of the church

3. The story of the church is littered with examples of the church moving from attitudes and practices of exclusion and rejection, to attitudes and practices of inclusion and acceptance in its dealings with marginalised groupings. The signs of change, such as the appointment of a gay bishop in the Church of England, suggest that the church is already in the midst of another journey from exclusion to inclusion. Whether this journey is in obedience to the will of God, or in disobedience to that will, is the question with which the church continues to struggle.

SECTION 4 - EXPERIENCE

The experiences of homosexual people and those who are or have been involved within a homosexual lifestyle are many and varied, and cannot adequately be represented in a document of this nature. Furthermore, the distinctive features of diverse experiences cannot be collapsed into summarised generalities. However, one key commonality that has emerged again and again from the stories of gay and lesbian people is that their homosexual orientation was not chosen but discovered. Indeed, many such people speak of their attempts to deny, or ignore, or change their homosexual orientation before coming to accept it as part of who they are. Any suggestion, therefore, that a homosexual orientation is wilfully chosen is inconsistent with the weight of experience of homosexual people.

It should further be noted that there are people who describe their sexual orientation as having changed from homosexual to heterosexual. They commonly speak of this change in terms of healing and liberation. It should also be noted that there are others who speak of their sexual healing and liberation in terms of their acceptance and embrace of their homosexual orientation.

The vicissitudes of personal experience are such that in and of itself no single experience, however valid, can be regarded as definitively authoritative in an issue such as this. Nevertheless, the experiences of homosexual people represent a key perspective within this debate that must be given voice. What follows are five summarised accounts of the stories of homosexual people - all of whom are deeply involved in the life of our church as clergy or laity..

4.1.

It was a battle within me that kept me from candidating for the ministry, even though my call was clear. The struggle was how to reconcile my sexual attraction to the same sex and live a Christian lifestyle. I have been through the whole gamut of prayer, having hands laid on me to 'exorcise the deviancy', as well as seeking counselling and reading numerous books to try and discover the path to being a 'normal' person. My sexual orientation resulted in me building numerous façades around myself to hide my feelings of inferiority, insecurity and self-hatred. In short, my Christian faith resulted in an intense captivity rather than bringing liberation.

It wasn't until I realised that I was God's beloved, His special and unique creation and that the call was according to God's specification and not that of society, that I began accepting myself. In accepting myself I could not deny a large part of who I am. In accepting myself I also had to accept God's standards and moral agenda for living a godly lifestyle. I discovered I was able to offer a unique and creative ministry for God.

Yet, being unable to express my sexuality freely was a great struggle, especially since I did not feel called to a celibate life. Unfortunately, there were casual encounters of quick lustful satisfaction, but I knew this was not God's desire for me. It was no more than satisfying selfish gratification and using others for my own purposes. This continued to tear at my soul until I met that one person who became more than a friend..

As our relationship deepened there was no longer the urge to venture into the dark side. I had someone I could love and be loved by. My ministry began to take on a new perspective and I was no longer plagued by guilt-ridden and shameful feelings. We have made a commitment to each other equal to that of a marriage contract and are faithful accordingly to each other. We both serve our

Lord together in our relationship and seek His will and standards in our lives. My partner and I continually have to deal with the normal pressures of ministry, exacerbated by having to live a secret life, as well as the usual personal conflicts. But we love each other and hope to live out our earthly days together. I believe God will direct our future as I am passionate about my ministry. There are still many questions and uncertainties, but I thank God that I don't have to deal with them alone.

4.2.

I am a white male, an ordained minister, married with children. I also believe that I am gay. The Church I attended when I was growing up considered being gay a horrendous sin and the topic was simply never discussed. Even though I had certain feelings, I could never discover my real sexuality. If I did I would be considered an outcast, certainly not worthy of any position in the Church. So I opted to keep quiet.

I married young and soon settled down to family life and had the joy of the birth of my children. I was a happy family man. I loved my wife and children very much. But my gay feelings did not escape me. I found that the only comfort I had was to fantasize about homosexual encounters. I often wished that they could be real, but then I felt guilty because I loved my wife and would not do anything to hurt her.

After years of struggling with the issue and still even struggling with the idea that I may be gay, I had a once-off sexual encounter with another man. I realised that I enjoyed the experience, but I don't know whether I could do it again as I felt so guilty afterwards. As a married man, it was wrong and I don't think my actions can be condoned.

In many ways I think that I got married too young and given my life over, I would have tried to get in touch with my feelings earlier. I think the Church made it difficult for me to make an informed decision. Perhaps if the Church stopped demonising homosexuality it would be easier for people to make proper choices. Am I sorry that I got married? No! I love my wife and children dearly. For me, I must hold back on my feelings for the sake of my family.

Not that the feelings ever really go away, but perhaps now that I am beginning to accept myself, at least I can start to live with them. I have decided that for me I will always have this secret.

4.3.

I am a young woman, I am a minister, I am very happily married, and I have children. Some would say I have everything, and sometimes that is exactly how I feel. My life is so full and so blessed! And yet on some days I feel this aching hole inside of me, this place of emptiness. It happens when I see two women who live together and share their lives with one another. And a part of me aches. You see I am lesbian. But what makes me lesbian?

For some people it's all about sex. They say, "You are lesbian if you have sex with another woman." Well, how do women have sex with each other? Is kissing and touching sex? Do we regard our children as having sex when at age 14 they begin to kiss and touch another? No! The fact is I have never had sex with another woman, but that does not make me "straight". For myself, it is about orientation. I find myself deeply attracted at a very physical level to some women. Women are beautiful, women's bodies are incredible – here I am sure many of you straight men would agree with me. And so from a fairly young age, I would find myself in a movie falling in love with the woman, hardly glancing at her male counterpart.

But I had boyfriends, had straight sex, did all the things a young teenage girl was meant to do – because that’s what I believed to be normal, and deep down we all want to be normal. I married, thankfully a wonderful man who is like a best friend – but none of this changed who I am. I am still attracted to women, I yearn at times to share my life with another woman, and sometimes I ache. Not because I am unhappy, but because there is a part of me that cannot be filled.

The promises I made to my partner, are vows I take very seriously. I love him, and I don’t want to throw away everything that is so beautiful for something, or someone, that may never be. I think it is about choices, and living out the choices we make with integrity. That is not to say that there is only one right choice, but we need to honour the choices and commitments we have made.

The hardest thing about being gay is the fact that one can never speak about it. I will never forget a poster during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that said, "The truth hurts – but silence kills." That is so true. It is not easy to speak out our truths, especially when they seem so different from everyone else, it is not easy to speak the truth when it will hurt partners or parents, or children. And yet I know that worse than all of this is the silence – because silence kills something inside of us. I long some day to be able to be honest with all of those around me. To have the freedom to say, "This is who I am – and it doesn’t mean I love you less!"

I pray, with all of my heart, that as a church we will one day find the courage to listen without judging, to listen with the intent to understand, that we will give people the space to be themselves, and to know themselves fully loved. I believe that this day will come.

4.4

I am a woman minister who has come from living the life of a lesbian. It has been a painful, struggle-some transition, but after nine years of total surrender and absolute dependence upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit and healing power of Jesus Christ, I am convinced that there is indeed another way out. I have found that being gay is not set in concrete or cast in iron and definitely not the only way of being. I have discovered that for me, there is a more excellent way, the way of the cross, a journey of taking up my cross daily and walking towards the destiny ordained by God. A life set apart, consecrated to Him, a life of abstinence and celibacy.

In making this statement I’m not saying that heterosexuality is the ultimate and only lifestyle. I’m only saying that my sexuality influenced my spirituality. My personal relationship with Jesus Christ was influenced by my sexual orientation and I had to therefore seek the truth for myself first.

God does not demand that a person be healed to be heterosexually oriented, or happy - God demands holiness. We are called to a life of abundance. At the beginning of living a life as a homosexual most of my time was spent hiding. Hiding from other people, from myself and even from God - all to no avail. Hiding was understandable since I am sensitive, so easily hurt, and there are so many people who could hurt me. I longed to be friends with someone who would listen and understand, but the more contact I had with others, the more I realised they couldn’t handle my problems. I reached out to friends only to be rejected because other people became afraid. But now, the grace of God holds me each day.

4.5

Lesbo, fairy, pansy, dyke – these are all common terms used by people towards gay or lesbian folk. The same people using these derogatory names are often Church going folk, and look upon

themselves as kind and considerate people who would be horrified if they were accused of being anything other than upstanding citizens. However, they appear to have a strong fear of anyone who is different from themselves.

These people either hit out simply because of the sexual difference, or because of strong religious beliefs. The sad thing is – they very often feel validated in their feelings. We, the gay community are ‘sick’ and ‘perverted beings’ and they, well they are simply holier than thou. The other sad thing is that the different churches are doing so very little to change the perception that we are NOT sick and perverted beings, having ‘abnormal’ sex all hours of the day. By their strong silence, and in some instances their open hostility towards the gay community, the churches are, in my humble opinion, guilty of the sin of judging. Does it not say in the Bible that we should not judge? Is it not God’s job to do that? And who made the rule that simply because I love and care for someone who is of the same gender as myself, that I am damned? I take strong exception to that. Guess what? God made me as I am, I know that to be the truth, and God, as I have come to learn over these past three years, loves me. He knows the hairs on my head, he died for me, and I know that the God that I pray to and have a relationship with wants me to be happy. He doesn’t want me to go through life all on my own, or worse living a lie, simply because homosexuality is viewed as a sin. The sad thing is, that for the most, we are very much like you – we hold down jobs, in some cases are highly trained, we have to go to work to pay off bonds on houses, we laugh, we joke, we have fun, but guess what --we have feelings too, and these can be trampled on and hurt by the uniformed.

I know of some young gay individuals of both genders that are going through, or have been through hell because of the idea that they are dirty and abnormal. It is so sad that to ‘fit in’ some of these young people will attempt to conform, and will either be lonely for the rest of their lives, have relationships that they hide from family and friends – and how, in all honesty can any relationship withstand that type of pressure? Or they will marry and possibly even have children in their desire to ‘fit in’. Many of them will leave the Church. How sad is that?

It is so important that a new understanding is reached. Sure there are gay individuals that are scum – that have no conscience and go from relationship to relationship being totally promiscuous. I have to pose the question however – are there not the exact same types of individuals that do exactly the same thing but are ‘straight?’ Just as there are caring people, totally committed to their partner in the straight community, so there are plenty of us who act and feel the same. Don’t condemn us for loving our partners, for being honest to ourselves, and for being the person that our dear Lord created.

SECTION 5 - CONCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the insights afforded by the Wesleyan quadrilateral of Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience, the Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee of the MCSA would wish to present to the Methodist people recommendations as to how we might best respond to the issue of same-sex relationships. The committee is aware that within the church as a whole the response to same-sex relationships is deeply divided. Nevertheless, the following recommendations are offered as a standard by which our church's practice in this matter can be measured. **These recommendations are based upon the key recognition that same-sex orientation is not in itself a sin and not in itself contradictory of Christian faith and life.**

5.1 PASTORAL ATTITUDE TOWARD HOMOSEXUAL PEOPLE

The MCSA commits itself to dealing with homosexual people with deep compassion and care, recognising that such people have frequently been the victims of discrimination and abuse, often at the hands of the church. The MCSA repents of any attitudes or actions of the church that may have resulted in the stigmatisation of homosexual people and in their alienation from the mainstream of church life, and humbly seeks their forgiveness wherever this may have happened. The MCSA acknowledges the prevalence of sexual brokenness in people of all sexual orientations and seeks to be a place where healing and transformation in this aspect of people's lives can be known and where God's good gift of sexuality in all its rich diversity can be celebrated.. The MCSA affirms the dignity and sacred worth of all people, irrespective of their sexual orientation.

5.2 CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

The MCSA welcomes into its membership all people, irrespective of their sexual orientation. As in all other cases, membership is on the basis of repentance of sins and confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour (*Laws & Discipline*, para. 3.2). There should be no discrimination among members due to sexual orientation. The sexual expression and practice expected of members should be that envisioned in the Conference statement: "Methodists believe that sex means being faithful, loving, caring - in a marriage relationship with one another. Sex is about relationships." (2003 Yearbook, p94). Promiscuity of any kind, whether heterosexual or homosexual, can never receive the blessing or endorsement of the church.

5.3 BLESSING OF SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

While marriage - by definition a covenant relationship between a man and a woman - is not possible for same-sex couples, the church should make it possible for life-long, affirming same-sex relationships to be placed in the context of the blessing of God and the church. The requirements of such covenantal relationships of same-sex couples should be the same as those for married couples - permanence, faithfulness, truth, trust, long-suffering, forgiveness, mutual companionship, helpfulness and care. "Against these there is no law!" (Gal 5:23).

5.4 CHURCH LEADERSHIP

The MCSA affirms that the lay offices of the church should not be closed to those of same-sex orientation, including those in relationships which are in keeping with the requirements expressed in points 5.2 and 5.3 above. As in all other cases, leadership is on the basis of a confirmed call from God to serve in the particular capacity of the office in question. This would include those who seek to become Local Preachers.

5.5 ORDAINED MINISTRY

It follows from point 5.4 above that those of same-sex orientation, including those in relationships which are in keeping with the requirements expressed in points 5.2 and 5.3 above, should not be excluded from the ordained ministries of the MCSA.

5.6 THE CHURCH'S TEACHING ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY

In addition to the above, DEWCOM offers the following recommendations as to what the church *can* and *cannot* teach responsibly about homosexuality.⁴

(a) Things the church *can* responsibly teach about homosexuality

- (i) Homosexuality is best considered in the context of a more general Christian understanding of human sexuality.
- (ii) Human sexuality is God's good gift. Our fundamental attitude toward this gift should be more one of gratitude than of apprehension.
- (iii) There are diverse, and contrary, understandings of what the Bible says about homosexuality which are sincerely held by people of Christian integrity.
- (iv) Sexual expression is most profoundly human when it takes place in the context of a caring and committed relationship of faithfulness and trust where each partner can be an expression of God's grace for the other.
- (v) There are substantial numbers of people of homosexual orientation within the church whose gifts and graces manifest the work of the Spirit among us.
- (vi) The specific causes of homosexual orientation remain unclear, although various scientific theories about this contribute to our overall understanding.
- (vii) The overwhelming majority of homosexual people describe their sexual orientation as something they have not chosen but have discovered as an integral part of who they are.
- (viii) The dignity and basic human rights of homosexual people should be protected by the church, and the general stigmatising of such people is inappropriate in a church which understands all its members to be wholly dependent upon God's compassion, mercy and grace.
- (ix) In the church's own dialogue on this as well as other controversial issues, people of conflicting viewpoints should respect one another, recognising that before the mystery of God, our knowledge and insight remain partial and imperfect.

⁴Based on the findings of the United Methodist Committee to Study Homosexuality that were authorised for publication by the 1992 General Conference of the United Methodist Church.

(b) Things the Church *cannot* responsibly teach about homosexuality

- (i) The church cannot teach that the Bible is indifferent to homosexual acts. Although there are only a few passages on the topic, in every one of those passages a negative judgement about homosexual practice is either stated or implied.
- (ii) The church cannot teach that all biblical references and allusions to sexual practices are binding today just because they are in the Bible. Specific references and allusions must be examined in the light of the wider biblical witness and their respective sociocultural contexts.
- (iii) The church cannot teach that certain sexual behaviours are morally acceptable just because they are practised by substantial numbers of people, nor just because the acts correspond to subjective inclinations. Not all expressions of sexuality can be affirmed by the church as moral or life enhancing. This applies to both heterosexual and homosexual practices.
- (iv) The church cannot teach that sexual orientation is fixed before birth, nor can it teach that it is fixed only after birth. The scientific evidence currently available is insufficient to allow a judgement either way.
- (v) The church cannot teach that sexual orientation, either heterosexual or homosexual, is deliberately chosen. It is clear that substantial numbers of persons have experienced their sexual orientation from early childhood.
- (vi) The church cannot affirm any sexual practice, heterosexual or homosexual, that is exploitative, casual, predatory or physically threatening.

SECTION 6 - BIBLE STUDIES

6.1 GRACE-HEALED EYES

For study in a small group

Study passage Acts 11:1-18

Background Comment

Peter was brought up in a good Jewish home and had drunk in with his mother's milk the idea that some things, people and foods were "clean" (kosher, fit, OK), and others were "unclean". If a Jew touched or ate anything "unclean" it made him or her "unclean" and there were various procedures that had to be followed in order to get clean again.

God's vision of a sheet coming down from heaven full of unclean reptiles and animals must have rocked Peter to the core. When God told him to take and eat he burst out, "Never Lord, I've never eaten unclean things!" "Do not call unclean what God has made clean!" said the voice. Almost immediately there were some gentile men at the door, people he regarded as unclean, begging him to go and pray with another "unclean" person, Cornelius. Peter saw the connection and the guidance of God immediately and when he went to Cornelius in obedience, God poured out his Spirit on this so-called "unclean" person. What had occurred in Peter was nothing less than a revolution of grace. From now on he would always see people differently, with God's eyes!

Peter should have known better though. Hadn't he followed Jesus for three years? Wasn't Jesus always mixing with and touching people who were "unclean", a leper, a woman with a bleeding problem, a Samaritan woman with serial husbands, tax-collectors, a woman who had a bad reputation? But even though Peter had seen this, his inner attitudes and prejudices had not yet changed. He needed new "eyes" to see differently. As Helmut Thielicke wrote,

"Jesus gained the power to love harlots, bullies and ruffians... he was able to do this only because he saw through the filth and crust of degradation, because his eye caught the divine original which is hidden in every way - in every person! ... First and foremost he gives us new eyes."

God wants to give us new eyes. To see people and circumstances with his eyes! To see, not in judgement and not with condemnation, but with grace and love and acceptance. Even things that may seem "unclean" to us. To see the divine potential in the other, not just the fault or the failure.

We might not be Jewish, but we too have subtle ways of labelling some people "unclean"; groups or people who are different from us and don't fit in with our culture, HIV/AIDS sufferers, the poor and the dirty and so on. We need grace healed eyes to see them differently. We need to see as God sees, with love and acceptance. Even if we think they are sinners, we should hate the sin and love the sinner.

There can be little doubt that many Christians regard homosexual persons as "unclean". Yet they

too are people made in God's image and whom God loves. Many homosexuals will tell you that they believe God has made them the way they are, genetically and hormonally, and that they did not choose to be the way they are. Nor can they change the way they are and how they feel.

God wants us to start seeing them differently, not as "unclean" but clean. We need to start looking at homosexual people with new eyes, see them as God sees them, and reach out to them as God wants to reach out to them, with love and acceptance.

Questions for discussion (Acts 11:1-18)

1. Can you think of ways in which we tend to label some people as 'unclean'? Why is this so? Can you give some examples?
2. In what ways do God's dealings with Peter in this reading speak to our situation?
3. What does it mean in practical terms to have 'grace-healed' eyes?
4. How do you see homosexual persons at the moment? What would it mean for you to see them through 'grace-healed' eyes?

6.2 GRACE MEANS LOVE AND INCLUSION

For study in a small group.

Study Passage **Luke 14:15-24**

Background Comment

Conference 2001 was divided over a paper which was presented on homosexuality and asked that more work be done on this issue, and for this to be presented to the 2003 Conference. Nevertheless there was almost unanimous acceptance by the 2001 Conference of the statement that **our policy on this issue should be characterised by a spirit of love [and acceptance], and not rejection.**

What does a policy of “love and acceptance” mean in practical terms? The Christian Church has a history of rejection and intolerance toward persons with a homosexual orientation.

Philip Yancey, in his wonderful book, “What’s So Amazing About Grace” (p166-168) tells how he once witnessed a gay-rights march in Washington DC. About 300,000 people marched. Most marched simply as homosexuals, but several groups of homosexual marchers held banners claiming to belong to Christian groupings and denominations. There was also a small group of Christian counter-demonstrators who held placards and shouted insults and abuse at the marchers. Some of the Christian gays turned to face them and sang “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Yancey says that one of the deep ironies of this scene was that the so-called “normal” Christian group were spewing out hate and damnation, while the “homosexual” Christian group sang of Jesus’ love.

Yancey says that many homosexual people he had spoken to told stories of rejection, hatred and persecution by Christians and churches. One gay Christian leader said, “We get such hatred and rejection from the church that there’s no reason to bother with church at all unless you believe the gospel is true”. On another occasion a gay Christian told him, “I still believe. I would love to go to church, but whenever I’ve tried someone spreads a rumour about me and suddenly everyone withdraws.” Then he added a chilling remark, “As a gay man, I’ve found it easier to get sex on the streets than to get a hug in church!”.

Obviously this may not be true of all churches. There are a few that have an open and accepting policy towards gay and lesbian people. However, rejection certainly has been the experience of many gay and lesbian people in many Christian communities. How does your church rate in this regard?

Questions for discussion

5. What does our study passage teach us about love and inclusion? You may like to look at Gal 3:26-29 as well.
6. “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so”. How do you think God feels about homosexual persons?
7. What does “a spirit of love and acceptance” rather than rejection mean in practical terms?

8. What can we **do** to show love and acceptance to homosexual persons? (What would Jesus do?)
- personally?
 - as a study/cell/class/home group?
 - as a church?

Conference 2003 requested a summarised version of the substantive elements of the discussion guide on same-sex relationships. What follows is a summary of sections 1 to 4 of the discussion guide, that deal with Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience. The page numbers in parentheses next to each heading are those of the discussion guide itself, and are offered for ease of cross-reference.

SECTION 1 - SCRIPTURE (pp.3-9)

Different approaches to the way in which Scripture is read and interpreted will yield different conclusions about the guidance the Bible offers the issue of same-sex relationships.

1.1. First Approach (pp.3-4)

One approach is to focus upon what is explicitly stated in Scripture about homosexuality, and to accept those references as conveying the biblical position on the matter. Within such an approach, eight passages commonly emerge which lead to the conclusion that the Bible is clear and unequivocal in its condemnation of homosexual behaviour. This conclusion is commonly generalised to include homosexual orientation as well. Many people accept these conclusions as fairly representing the biblical position on homosexuality.

Others claim that this way of reading the Bible is inadequate, and that the conclusions that are reached as a result do not fairly represent the biblical witness. The following objections are cited:

- a) This approach to Scripture fails to recognise the historical and cultural distance between our times and biblical times, and assumes that the biblical writers' conclusions about sexuality are directly translatable into our modern context.
- b) This approach to Scripture is inconsistent when it comes to the acceptance and application of biblical regulations governing sexual behaviour.

1.2. Second Approach (p.5)

Another approach to the reading and interpretation of Scripture is to subject any particular biblical passage to the wider witness of Scripture as a whole. Within such an approach, no isolated text is allowed to hold an independent authority that is untempered by the witness of Scripture as a whole. This principle of 'using Scripture to interpret scripture' is deeply rooted in our Wesleyan heritage, and is an important safeguard against the danger of assuming that everything biblical is necessarily Christian.

Thus, any proof-text on homosexuality needs to be read and understood within the wider context of the Bible as a whole. There are broad themes that recur throughout Scripture, which speak about what God is like, the attitude that God has towards the peoples of the world, and the kind of life that God expects from us. They are the vehicles that bring the unified message of the Bible near to us. These broad, recurring themes clearly carry far greater weight in terms of their revelatory value than single, isolated texts.

One such theme that recurs throughout the Bible is that **inclusion, not exclusion, characterises the nature of God's mission of love to the world**. The biblical witness concerning the including, embracing nature of God's love is thoroughgoing and consistent. Isolated texts that suggest that the exclusion of a particular group is biblically sanctioned need to be critiqued by this broader biblical witness.

Another key theme that recurs throughout the Bible is of **the intrinsic dignity and sacred worth of all people as made in the image of God**, irrespective of their differences of race, language, culture and station in life. Consequently, all forms of discrimination, oppression and injustice, especially when directed against marginalised and minority groups, are consistently denounced throughout much of the Bible as being contrary to the will and purposes of God.

This approach to the reading and interpretation of Scripture has the great merit of guarding against any isolated text claiming an authority which may not be its right, insofar as it contradicts the biblical witness in general, and particularly the revelation that we find in Jesus.

1.3. Third Approach (pp.6-8)

A third approach to the reading and interpretation of Scripture is to see the Bible as a living document in the life of the Church, which is enlivened by the activity of the Holy Spirit, who comes to interpret the words of Scripture and so lead the Church into all truth. Sometimes this enlivening work of the Holy Spirit includes challenging entrenched assumptions and traditional interpretations, thus leading us to new and fuller understandings of the biblical witness and the truth of God.

The attitude of openness to the unfolding, illuminating truth that the Holy Spirit brings has been a key characteristic of the Church's identity as a Spirit-empowered and Spirit-directed community.

The revelation of Christ's life was complete. But the full ramifications of that life continue to unfold as the Church grows in its capacity to understand and receive the revelation of God that Christ brought near. The ongoing activity of the Spirit has been to guide the Church into all truth through decisive moments of growth in which the Church has matured into fuller and richer understandings of the revelation of Christ.

Some examples of watershed moments in the life of the Church where the work of the Holy Spirit has challenged entrenched assumptions and traditional interpretations of Scripture include the acceptance of Gentiles, and the Church's attitudes towards slavery, women and the remarrying of divorcees.

1.4. Conclusion (pp.8-9)

The way in which the Bible is approached influences to a significant degree the Scriptural guidance that is gained. The first approach outlined above focuses on a literal reading of what is stated in Scripture about homosexuality, and leads to the conclusion that the Bible is clear and unequivocal of its condemnation of homosexual behaviour.

The conclusions which the second and third approaches yield with respect to the issue of same-sex relationships would include the following:

1. The assumption that the Bible condemns unequivocally every expression of the modern-day experience of homosexuality is without adequate foundation.
2. Any dehumanisation, rejection, oppression or injustice experienced by a homosexual person is contrary to the loving intentions of God.
3. The attitude of the church towards homosexual people should be patterned upon the ministry of Christ, who welcomed the outcasts and touched the untouchables.
4. The ongoing witness of the Spirit can free the church from the shackles of oppressively time-bound understandings and interpretations of the Scriptures.
5. The Spirit helps the church to engage rigorously with the Scriptures in order that the

Living Word of God might be heard and known in every age.

SECTION 2 - REASON (pp.10-13)

2.1. Two key influences on moral-theological thought (pp.10-11)

Natural Law and the so-called Scientific Age represent two key influences that have shaped moral theological thought from the Middle Ages to modern times. A 'Natural Law' approach to human sexuality asserts that the natural end of sexuality is procreation, and therefore any sexual activity that cannot lead to procreation is against nature and is therefore morally wrong. Clearly homosexuality must always be morally wrong in this way of thinking, and so must other activities such as masturbation, contraception and voluntary sterilisation.

Within the so-called Scientific Age, a growing body of information about sexuality has become available from the natural, social and human sciences. The cognitive categories are now available to speak meaningfully in terms of "human sexual orientation", a concept previously unknown. Furthermore, with the flowering of research and knowledge into the complex arena of human sexuality, it is also now possible to speak intelligibly of different kinds of homosexual expression - as it is possible to speak of different kinds of heterosexual expression.

2.2. Models of sexual orientation (p.11)

The prevailing scientific view on sexual orientation has undergone significant development over the years. This is reflected in the progressive models of sexual orientation that have unfolded within scientific thought.

The **dichotomous model** presented people as either homosexual or heterosexual. The **unidimensional continuum model** presented people as falling somewhere along a single continuum between heterosexuality and homosexuality. The **multidimensional model** recognised that sexual orientation had diverse dimensions to it, in terms of how individuals experience, understand and express their sexual identity. The **LesBiGay/Transgender Affirmative Model** included transgendered, transsexual and intersexual people.

2.3. The origins of sexual orientation (p.12)

a concrete cause of homosexuality and knowledge on whether it is derived from 'nature' (a person's genetic inheritance) or 'nurture' (a person's social and environmental upbringing and development) is yet to be discovered. Most researchers agree that an interaction of biological, psychological, and social / cultural forces is involved in the development of one's sexual orientation. Any explanation that does not acknowledge the interaction of these components is inadequate.

Theories about a connection between homosexuality and poor parenting or abuse remain unsubstantiated. Many homosexual people come from loving, stable families and have no history of suffering abuse. An overwhelming majority of homosexual people describe their homosexual orientation as something they did not choose, but rather discovered as an intrinsic part of who they are.

2.4. Varieties of homosexual expression (p.12)

Homosexuality, like heterosexuality, has a variety of expressions.

2.5. Conclusion (p.13)

The resource of Reason offers to the Church the key insight of the immense complexity of human sexuality. Consequently, any facile pronouncements or simplistic solutions that are offered regarding the challenge of understanding homosexuality will certainly be inadequate, and

ultimately misleading.

Developments in thinking within the natural and social sciences lead to the following conclusions:

1. The ways in which the complex reality of human sexuality is understood and described are constantly evolving.
2. While the exact process whereby a person's sexual orientation is formed is not known, the evidence suggests that a person's sexual orientation is in place relatively early in life.
3. Sexual orientation is something over which people have little choice. People do not choose to be heterosexual or homosexual, but rather discover themselves to be such.
4. Attempting to change a person's sexual orientation is highly questionable.
5. As with heterosexual practice, homosexual practice is not uniform and varieties of homosexual expression exist.

SECTION 3 - TRADITION (p.14-20)

3.1. The Historical Church (p.14)

It has been commonly assumed that for much of its two thousand year history, the Christian Church has been negatively disposed towards same-sex relationships. This is, in fact, a moot point. On the one hand there is documented evidence to suggest that in previous centuries a tolerant and accepting attitude towards same-sex couples pertained within the church. On the other hand, negative sentiments towards homosexuality clearly did exist, governed largely by the rationale of Natural Law. But generally, the record of the church's position on this matter is conspicuous by its absence. It would be more accurate to say that this is an issue concerning which the church, for much of its history, has remained largely silent.

3.2. The Contemporary Church (p.15)

It is impossible to characterise a definite position of the Contemporary Church regarding the issue of homosexuality. Denominational positions range from the condemnation of homosexuality as a manifestation of a depraved nature and a perversion of divine standards; to a conditional acceptance of homosexual persons so long as they do not engage in homosexual behaviour; to a full acceptance of homosexuality as part of the diversity of God's good creation, which includes the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination of homosexuals in life-long, affirming same-sex relationships.

Within each of these diverse denominational positions there are individual congregations, clergy and lay people who hold divergent convictions of their own in this matter. Clearly, committed Christians have differing views on this issue that have the force of earnest and sincere conviction for them.

3.3. World Methodism (pp.15-17)

The **British Methodist Church** has stated that a person shall not be debarred from the church on the grounds of sexual orientation itself; has re-affirmed the traditional teaching of the Church on sexuality, namely chastity for all outside marriage and fidelity within it; and recognise, affirm and celebrate the participation and ministry of lesbians and gay men in the church.

The **United Methodist Church** maintains the following position regarding homosexual people: Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the Church in their struggles for human fulfilment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. Although we do not

condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn their lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.

The **World Methodist Council** has not expressed formally a policy on the issue of homosexuality, while within the **MCSA** one interesting development has been the formation of a mission group in the Cape of Good Hope District called ESTTeam (Exclusion and Sexuality Task Team).

3.4. Other Denominations (pp.17-18)

The positions of various other denominations on this issue are presented in the discussion guide.

3.5. The Church's journeys from exclusion to inclusion (pp.18-19)

When the story of the Church is considered from the perspective of its attitudes towards particular groupings of people, a remarkable pattern emerges. Initial attitudes of rejection and exclusion towards marginalised groupings almost always give way, in time, to attitudes of acceptance and inclusion.

3.6. Conclusion (pp.19-20)

When the witness of the Church concerning the issue of homosexuality is considered, three significant points emerge:

1. While some evidence exists of both positive and negative attitudes towards same-sex relationships in the historical church, for the most part homosexuality has been a non-issue for the church throughout much of its history. Until recently the church has never been required to engage this issue seriously, and undoubtedly has been spurred to do so by the new understandings of sexual orientation that are part of an unfolding human consciousness of sexuality.
2. Those churches with which the MCSA shares the most in common in terms of tradition, doctrine and ministry, which have expressed formal positions regarding the issue of same-sex relationships, demonstrate a remarkable similarity in the conclusions they draw, namely:
 - no-one should be excluded from the church or from ordination on the grounds of their sexual orientation
 - the standard of faithfulness in marriage, and celibacy (or abstinence) for those not married is maintained as the normative position of the church
3. The story of the church is littered with examples of the church moving from attitudes and practices of exclusion and rejection, to attitudes and practices of inclusion and acceptance in its dealings with marginalised groupings. The signs of change, such as the appointment of a gay bishop in the Church of England, suggest that the church is already in the midst of another journey from exclusion to inclusion. Whether this journey is in obedience to the will of God, or in disobedience to that will, is the question with which the church continues to struggle.

SECTION 4 - EXPERIENCE (pp.21-24)

The experiences of homosexual people and those who are or have been involved within a homosexual lifestyle are many and varied, and cannot adequately be represented in a document of this nature. Furthermore, the distinctive features of diverse experiences cannot be collapsed into summarised generalities. However, one key commonality that has emerged again and again

from the stories of gay and lesbian people is that their homosexual orientation was not chosen but discovered. Indeed, many such people speak of their attempts to deny, or ignore, or change their homosexual orientation before coming to accept it as part of who they are. Any suggestion, therefore, that a homosexual orientation is wilfully chosen is inconsistent with the weight of experience of homosexual people.

It should further be noted that there are people who describe their sexual orientation as having changed from homosexual to heterosexual. They commonly speak of this change in terms of healing and liberation. It should also be noted that there are others who speak of their sexual healing and liberation in terms of their acceptance and embrace of their homosexual orientation.

The vicissitudes of personal experience are such that in and of itself no single experience, however valid, can be regarded as definitively authoritative in an issue such as this. Nevertheless, the experiences of homosexual people represent a key perspective within this debate that must be given voice. The discussion guide includes five summarised accounts of the stories of homosexual people within the life of our church.

APPENDIX B - FOUR ETHICAL VIEWS ON SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

| | REJECTING-PUNITIVE | REJECTING-NON-PUNITIVE | QUALIFIED ACCEPTANCE | FULL ACCEPTANCE |
|---|--|---|---|---|
| ETHICAL VIEW | Both homosexual orientation and genital expression are rejected. There is a punitive attitude towards gay men and lesbians. | Homosexual acts are condemned as unnatural and against God's intention. Distinction is made between acts and orientation. The homosexual person is treated with compassion in a non-punitive way as one in need of the church's ministry. | God's heterosexual intent is affirmed. If the homosexual person can change orientation s/he is morally obliged to do so. Those who cannot should be celibate. If this is impossible then genital relations must be relational, adult and monogamous. Homosexuality is seen as a distortion, but is not condemned. | Homosexual acts are evaluated on the same basis as heterosexual acts. Same-sex relationships can fully express God's central, unitive purpose for marriage. All sexual acts should be evaluated by their relational qualities. |
| BIBLICAL / MORAL BASIS | Heterosexual, monogamous marriage is the only legitimate place for sexual intercourse in the Bible. Homosexual people cannot be part of God's kingdom, and therefore can have no place in the church. | Heterosexual, monogamous marriage is the only legitimate place for sexual intercourse in the Bible. The Bible condemns only homosexual acts. Therefore, celibate homosexual people can play a full role in the life of the church. | Homosexual orientation is a result of our fallen human nature, and is not a part of God's creative intention. God allows same-sex relationships out of mercy and compassion towards those with a homosexual orientation. | Homosexual orientation is one aspect of the spectrum of human sexuality and is part of God's creative intention. Statements on homosexuality in the Bible do not refer to the faithful relationships between two people of homosexual orientation which we are considering today. |
| PRO'S (Depending on one's point of view, some of these pro's could be regarded as con's.) | Affirms as Biblical that sexual intercourse must be heterosexual. | Affirms as Biblical that sexual intercourse must be heterosexual. Has a compassionate approach to the needs of the homosexual person for healing. | Affirms as Biblical that sexual intercourse must be heterosexual. Has a compassionate approach to the needs of the homosexual person for healing and intimacy. | Affirms as Biblical that both heterosexual and homosexual relationships can be legitimate. Affirms and celebrates the needs of the homosexual person for unconditional acceptance and intimacy. Does not discriminate between heterosexual and homosexual people. |
| CON'S (Depending on one's point of view, some of these con's could be regarded as pro's.) | Shows little or no compassion for the needs of homosexual people. Punishes what the individual is not responsible for. Assumes as biblical an attitude that is inconsistent with the attitude of Christ. | Denies even the possibility of sexual intimacy for the homosexual person. | Argues from silence on God's permitting same-sex unions under certain circumstances. Makes sexual orientation the deciding factor for moral decisions. | Applies a complex approach to interpreting the biblical teaching on the purpose of sexual intercourse. Argues from silence on homosexual acts being part of God's creative intention, and on the biblical writers' possible views towards those with homosexual orientation. Applies no moral qualifications to the attitude of unconditional acceptance and inclusiveness. |

APPENDIX C **IS HOMOSEXUAL BEHAVIOUR** **ALWAYS SINFUL?**

For many people the key question upon which much of the debate on same-sex relationships hinges, is whether or not homosexual behaviour is always sinful.

1 **HOMOSEXUAL BEHAVIOUR DEFINED**

What constitutes homosexual behaviour and how should it be defined?

Some would define it as ‘genital sexual activity between two people of the same sex’. But what about non-genital sexual activity, such as french-kissing, for example? Would that be included in homosexual behaviour?

Some would therefore define homosexual behaviour as ‘all sexual activity between two people of the same sex’. But what about individual sexual activity of a homosexual nature - for example, homosexual fantasies or masturbation that is homosexually focussed? Would that be included in homosexual behaviour?

Some would therefore define homosexual behaviour as ‘any sexual activity that arises out of a sense of attraction to one’s own sex.’ But what about a gay married man who has heterosexual intercourse with his wife whilst fantasising about another man? Would that sexual act be described as homosexual behaviour?

Clearly, the difficulties of definitions are immense. But when considering the question whether homosexual behaviour is always sinful, it is imperative to know what is meant by ‘homosexual behaviour’. For the purposes of this paper, ‘homosexual behaviour’ is understood to mean any sexual activity between two people of the same sex.

2. **SIN DEFINED**

Sin has traditionally been defined as a state of alienation from God - a state which is expressed in thoughts, words or deeds that are contrary to the law of God, and which destroys life-giving relationship with God, others, the world and ourselves. Sin is part of our universal human condition and insinuates itself into every aspect of our individual and corporate lives, as well as our institutions and structures. Jesus came to save us, and all the world, from our sin. As Scripture puts it: ‘Christ died for our sins’ (1 Corinthians 15:3).

The question whether homosexual behaviour is always sinful is therefore in essence asking whether such behaviour:

- is always indicative of a fundamental estrangement from God;
- is always a violation of God’s law;
- is always damaging of the homosexual’s relationships with God, others, the world and self;
- always requires the redemptive work of Christ.

Within the Church there are two broad responses to this question.

“Yes, homosexual behaviour is always sinful!” and,

“No, homosexual behaviour is not always sinful!”

3 **HOMOSEXUAL BEHAVIOUR IS ALWAYS SINFUL**

The first broad response to the question is to assert that homosexual behaviour is *inherently* sinful, and therefore there can be no instances when homosexual behaviour is not sinful.

The theological motivations for this response would include the following:

3.1 **Biblical prohibitions**

The explicit biblical prohibitions of male homosexual practice are clear.

“You (masculine) shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” (Leviticus 18:22).

“If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.” (Leviticus 20:13)

These prohibitions can be extended to include female homosexual practice as well, on the basis of Romans 1:26-27, which reads, “For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion

for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.”

3.2 A Theology of Creation

The original order and intention of creation is clear. Men and women were created together and for each other, as complementary entities.

“God created them male and female...” (Genesis 1:27).

“The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’ Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.” (Genesis 2:18 & 22).

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24; cf. Matthew 19:4-6).

Human physiology - in the design of the sexual organs and the mechanics of reproduction - signifies that sexual intercourse between male and female represents the normative design of creation. Homosexual practice is in stark contradiction of this stated order of God’s creation, is consequently a departure from God’s intention for human sexual expression, and therefore is always sinful

3.3 A Theology of Marriage

A further theological rationale for asserting that homosexual behaviour is always sinful arises out of a theology of marriage, that recognises marriage as the only legitimate context for (genital) sexual activity.

“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Matthew 19:5-6; cf. Genesis 1:27 & 2:24)

Marriage - a covenantal relationship between one man and one woman - is the exclusive context ordained by God wherein sexual union can know God’s blessing. Outside of marriage all other (genital) sexual activity, including pre-marital sex and homosexual practice, is sinful. Fidelity within marriage and celibacy outside of it are the only two God-honouring expressions of sexuality that such a theology of marriage will permit.

4 HOMOSEXUAL BEHAVIOUR IS NOT ALWAYS SINFUL

The second broad response to the question is to assert that homosexual behaviour is not *inherently* sinful, and therefore there can be instances when homosexual behaviour is not sinful. Indeed, sexual activity within a life-long, affirming same-sex relationship is legitimate and appropriate, and can know the blessing of God. The theological motivations for this response would include the following:

4.1 A Theology of Creation

Creation is an exuberant spectacle of rich and abundant diversity and almost infinite variety. Creation is the holding together of a vast array of differing life-forms, each one an original conception of God who made them all, and celebrates their distinctiveness. Creation is a revelation of the being and nature of God.

“Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.” (Romans 1:20).

Humankind was made in the image and likeness of this infinite God (Genesis 1:26-27), and so humanity reflects this infinitude. The primary categories of male and female do not prescribe the end of humanity’s diversity, but rather mark the beginning, for within each of these primary categories there is almost infinite variety. Such a theology of creation makes space for different expressions of what it means to be human, and different ways to be in authentic relationship. The primary point of Genesis 1:26-27 is that relationship lies at the very heart of both God’s and humanity’s identity. It is primarily a text about relationship, not gender.

Homosexual practice, within the context of a faithful, monogamous, permanent, committed relationship can be one such expression of the rich variety of what it means to be human. The boundaries of what all is included in the good order of creation are not determined by human understanding, but by God, for creation is God’s doing.. As the LORD said to Job, “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand.” (Job 38:4)

4.2 A Theology of Covenantal Relationship

The theology of creation described above that makes space for different expressions of what it means to be human is not a theology of permissiveness - where anything goes. Clearly there are sinful expressions of relationship and sexuality that are illegitimate and unacceptable, such as promiscuity or any predatory sexual activity.

A theology of covenantal relationship seeks to describe the kind of relationship where sexual activity can legitimately occur. It would affirm marriage as the principal, but not the only example of a covenantal relationship. Marriage is not the exclusive context where sexual activity can legitimately occur, but is descriptive of the kind of relationship for which sexual intercourse was intended, and the kind of commitment that is necessary for sexual intercourse to be appropriate.

Some of the characteristics of such a relationship would be a life-long commitment of love, faithfulness, respect, truth, trust, long-suffering, mutual companionship, helpfulness and care, where both partners celebrate the gift of each other and can be a channel for the life-giving grace of God to flow into each other's lives.

Where same-sex couples have made the life-long commitment to such a relationship, the sharing of sexual intimacy is legitimate and appropriate and can know the blessing of God.

4.3 A Theology of Personhood

A theology of personhood affirms that all people have been created for wholeness, and that the intention of God is that our full personhood be acknowledged in ways that are life-giving and, where appropriate, to be expressed accordingly.

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10)

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1)

The recognition of the reality of a homosexual orientation in an individual raises the pointed question as to whether the possibility should exist for that sexual orientation to be expressed relationally with another person, with legitimacy. A theology of personhood affirms that such a possibility should exist, for it seems highly improbable that every person with a homosexual orientation would have the gift of celibacy.

In speaking about the gift of celibacy, Paul acknowledges that it is not a gift for everyone. He writes, "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind" (1 Corinthians 7:7). In Genesis 2:18 the Lord God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone" suggesting that relational partnership is indeed the norm.

If the possibility exists that a homosexual orientation could be expressed relationally with legitimacy (i.e. within a covenantal relationship as described above), then it follows that sexual expression within such a relationship is not sinful. Rather, such sexual activity is a grace-filled celebration of the rich diversity of God's good gift of sexuality and God's loving intention that everyone should live lives that are whole, full and free.

5. CONCLUSION

Is homosexual behaviour always sinful? For many people this is a key question upon which much of the debate on same-sex relationships hinges. How they answer this question will significantly influence their attitude towards homosexual people, and will determine which side of the debate they will stand.

The two broad responses to this question both claim a biblical foundation, but appeal to differing theological motivations, understandings and interpretations. Both positions find endorsement by people of sincere Christian commitment and integrity.

The question whether homosexual behaviour is always sinful remains a vexed question in the life of the Church today.

APPENDIX D - FURTHER RESOURCES

Books

Geis, S.B & Messer, D.E. (eds.). (1994). *Caught in the crossfire: Helping Christians debate homosexuality*. Nashville: Abingdon.

Germond, P. & de Gruchy, S. (eds.). (1997). *Aliens in the household of God: Homosexuality and Christian faith in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.

Moberly, E.R. (1983). *Homosexuality: A new Christian ethic*. Cambridge: James Clark & Co.

Satinover, J. (1996). *Homosexuality and the politics of truth*. New York: Baker.

Wink, W. (ed.). (1999). *Homosexuality and Christian faith: Questions of conscience for the churches*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Helpful Websites

<http://www.kinseyinstitute.org>

The Kinsey Institute for research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction, offering extensive links to other web-based resources

<http://www.apa.org/pubinfo/answers.html>

Website of the American Psychological Association providing answers to questions about sexual orientation and homosexuality.

Organisations

1. Exodus International

Exodus International is a worldwide interdenominational Christian organization called to encourage, strengthen, unify and equip Christians to minister the transforming power of the Lord Jesus Christ to those affected by homosexuality.

<http://www.exodusinternational.org> or <http://www.exodusnorthamerica.com>

2. Love in Action SA

Love in Action SA is a referral ministry of Exodus International, and is dedicated to the purpose of supporting those in their pursuit of sexual healing.

Contact person: Rev Olivia le Roux

Address: PO Box 30392, Wonderboom Poort, 0033

Telephone: 072-4766723

e-mail: olivialeroux@mailbox.co.za

3. Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM)

IAM directs most of its efforts towards changing the attitudes of the churches towards gay and lesbian Christians - to assist them to include all people, regardless of race, gender and sexual orientation - through programmes which:

- STIMULATE DIALOGUE dialogue between the gay and lesbian community and the churches; and
- SUPPORT gay and lesbian Christians seeking to reconcile their sexuality with their faith and support 'gay-friendly' clergy in their ministry to the gay community.

Contact person: Pieter Oberholzer
Address: PO Box 108, Kalk Bay, 7990
Telephone: 021-7865900 / 082-5577060
e-mail: pieter-fanie@iafrica.com

4. Exclusion and Sexuality Task Team (ESTTeam)

ESTTeam is a mission group within the Cape of Good Hope District of the MCSA whose purpose is to help guide congregations from an exclusive to an inclusive stance with respect to gay and lesbian people. ESTTeam's objectives include the formation of a support group for homosexual clergy, the gathering of a library of material that individuals and congregations can access, offering workshops for groups that want to engage with the theology and ethic being developed by ESTTeam, as well as facilitating encounters with gay and lesbian Christians for people who are interested in hearing the stories of their experience of faith.

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