

PRONOUNCEMENT

Homosexuality



A GUIDING DOCUMENT ON PASTORAL MINISTRY TO HOMOSEXUALS AND THEIR FAMILIES By Paul Lapoorta

1. INTRODUCTION

Homosexuality is a very complexed issue. In the light of this any ministry to homosexuals or their families is not an easy task. This However is a challenge that the church should not shy away from because it is a reality that confronts the church on a regular basis.

This paper is an attempt to put something forward that can assist homosexuals and their families. What is written in this paper is by no means an exhaustive study of the subject. It is but one approach of dealing with the subject of pastoral ministry to the families of homosexuals in the local church setting.

In dealing with the subject of pastoral ministry to the families of homosexuals an inclusive approach is needed. With an inclusive approach the role of the faith community, the local church with regard to ministry to the families is also put under the spotlight.

This paper looks at the biblical foundation of all ministries, the faith community's (local church's) approach to homosexuality, responses of families when homosexuality is disclosed or discovered and pastoral ministry to the families.

As this paper is dealing with pastoral ministry it is important to start with the bible and see how ministry is viewed accordingly

The biblical foundation of all ministries

All ministries have their origin from God. God is the one who determines what ministry a disciple of Christ is endowed with. This is what a disciple's function in the Body of Christ will be (1 Cor. 12:7, 18). No disciple can choose what type of ministry he or she wants to be functional in. The various ministries are gifts to the church (Eph. 4:11-12). These gifts are to be in the service of God to the church and the world. Jesus Christ the minister (Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Pastor and Teacher) par excellence is a very good example of this when he was on earth. Jesus came to the world as a minister of the father. That was to do the will of the God the father (Jn 8: 18, 29).

Jesus and his ministry on earth to the world is grounded in the love of God (Jn 3:16-17) and the incarnation (Jn. 1:14). The love of God is the foundation of the ministry of Christ. It is for this very reason that all ministries in the body of Christ have their foundation in the love of God. The love of God is unconditional. Ministry in the body of Christ should also be unconditional without respecter of person. Regardless to who ministry is rendered it should be because of love and unconditional. The bible states that God loved us while we were yet sinners (Rom. 5:8).

God's Word the bible speaks of a diverse of ministries (1 Cor. 12:1-31). These different ministries exist for three purposes. The first is ministry towards God (Acts 13:1-2). This takes place in worship, prayers and personal relationship with God (Jn 4:24). The second is to build up the community of believers (1 Pet. 4:10) and the third is ministry to the unsaved world (Mt 28:19). All three areas of ministry have as focus and purpose to bring honour, glory and praise to the Triune God. No one person has all the ministries operating through him or her. The diverse ministries are complimentary and interdependent in their operation (1 Cor. 12:12-31). Then there is also the distinction between the ordained and non-ordained ministry. This is the priesthood of all believers (1 Pt. 2:9).

The diverse ministries taking place through the ordained and non-ordained ministries is all Christ's ministry. These ministries are to the father on behalf of the world (Rom 12:6-8). One of the purposes of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is to continue Christ's ministry, through the community of the believers the church (Acts 1:8).

A description of the biblical task of the ordained pastor shows that the following areas are mainly covered by the ordained pastoral ministry. Shepherding the flock, equipping the saints for their ministry work, leadership and administration in the congregation, preaching and teaching and evangelism/missions (Eph. 4:11-12).

When speaking of the pastoral ministry in particular to individuals or family's certain objectives come to the fore. These objectives are that behaviour change, healing, empowerment, nurturing and wholeness in Christ Jesus should be achieved. A holistic approach is needed and should focus on a person's interaction with others with whom he or she has interdependent relationships.

Ministering to believers in the pastoral ministry deals with the tension between faith question and life questions. God's word must be made relevant in the life situations of people. The word of God (Jn 1:1-2, Jn 17:1, Hb. 2:12) and the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:16-17, Jn. 16:8-11, Rom 8:26-27) play a vital role in the ministry.

A further point to note is that the pastoral ministry in its ministry to people in any need should be open to an inter disciplinary approach. Medici (not sangomas), psychologist and social workers are not the enemies of the pastoral ministry. Insights from these disciplines can and should be used in the pastoral ministry. This should be done where these disciplines are not in contradiction with the word of God and the Christian faith.

One of the areas of the pastoral ministry is pastoral care and counselling. Pastoral care is a broad ministry in the local church (Jn. 21:15-17). Pastoral care is a ministry that is shared by the pastor and the laity. It is a ministry that people need through their whole life. For this reason, pastoral care should take place in different ministry functions like worship, preaching, teaching, evangelism outreaches. Pastoral counselling on the other hand is a part of pastoral care. Pastoral counselling is the process where a variety of healing and growth methods are used to help people handle personal problems and crises.

It is important to note that according to the Chief shepherd (Jn. 10:11-15) Pastoral care to people in trouble or with problems should take preference over those that are not experiencing problems or difficulties. Regardless what the trouble of problem may be (Lk. 15:1-7).

Ministries are manifested in and through the believing community hence a look at the approach of the believing communities to homosexuality should also be touched on.

The faith community's (local church's) approach to homosexuality

There are quite a number of bible passages that refer to the faith community as the body of Christ. This is an emphasis on the inter dependence of the body. As the human body the body of Christ consists of many parts (members) who all have a role to play towards the wellbeing of the body. Healthy functioning of the human body requires that every part contributes positively as far as its function is concerned. The same is applicable to the body of Christ.

Current responses from believers in Christ towards homosexuality is in no way helping their families. Let's make it clear from the outset that the writer of this paper agrees with the stance of the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa (AFM of SA) towards homosexual behaviour (DEL pronouncement). This however does not mean the Church has no role to play in pastoral ministry to the families of homosexuals. The focus here is solely on the families and not on the homosexual. The reason being those involve in homosexual activities don't see their lifestyle as wrong or sinful. They want to be accepted the way they are. They don't see any need for repentance from homosexual behaviour.

Having said the above there is much the faith community the local church can do to help the families. The hurting family members needs the support of the believing community. The bible is clear on this point that we should bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2).

Firstly a change in attitude should take place concerning the view that homosexuality is one of the greatest sins that can be committed (Mt 7:1-2). Homosexual behaviour is a sin just like any other sin (Gal 5:19-20, 1 Cor 6:9-10, Eph. 5:5). Some time ago the church/ believing community had the same attitude towards divorce. Divorcees were treated as outcasts. The affected families suffered the same fate. To a certain extend the attitude towards divorce has greatly changed. This change of attitude does not mean divorce is no longer a sinful act. Today those involved in or who went through a divorce are seen as people who need pastoral help and ministry. The same attitude should be adopted towards homosexuals and their families. This of course is where homosexuals admit that they need help and ministry to repent.

Secondly when a member of a family has disclosed that he or she is homosexual the believing community should deal with the matter in the same way they would when a disclosure is made about any other crisis in the life of a person. In such cases no condemnation, rejection, marginalizing is taking place. Instead people show love, support, understanding compassion, and caring. The bible is very clear about the fact that believers in Christ should love, support and care for one another in difficult times. (Jn. 13:34-35, 1 Cor. 13:4-7, Gal. 6:2).

Thirdly is the preaching and teaching from the pulpit and the way it is done. To always hear that homosexuals are going to hell if they don't repent is not doing their families any good. All unrepented sinners are going to end up in hell not only a certain group of people. At this point the writer of this paper does not want to be misunderstood in terms of what should be preached and taught and what not. Let it be clear that the gospel in its totality should be preached and taught. The emphasis here is how it is done. A Good example is the case where a woman was caught in adultery. The response of the Lord Jesus is important in this regard. (Jn. 8:3-11). The biblical truth should be proclaimed with compassion.

Fourthly something should be done in local churches to be more accommodative to homosexuals who have repented and accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. This is happening without problems to other types of unsaved people who have repented. Former drug addicts, prostitutes and alcoholics are examples. These people are accepted into the believing community without looking down on them or making them feel unwelcome (2 Cor 5:17).

In these cases, we thank and praise God for what he has done in their lives. We embrace them and encourage them to be faithful to the One who has done such a great work in their lives.

The same should be done to homosexuals who have become disciples of Christ Jesus (Rom 12:10, Rom 15:7).

Fifthly there should be an in depth look at what are the causes of homosexuality. Very little is known to ordinary people as to why some people are homosexual. A better understanding of the phenomenon of homosexuality can greatly help in dealing with this issue in the lives of people. The only thing known to ordinary people is that homosexuality is sin. There is no reference in the bible about homosexual orientation. Although there is no biblical footage for homosexual orientation, homosexual orientation is a reality. The only statements found in the bible is about homosexual behaviour (Lev. 18:22, Rom. 1:26-27).

The sixth point is that biblical teaching about Christian sexuality should be given to the believing community in the local church. For too long there have been a shy away from teaching and talk about Christian sexuality. The reason for this is that the local churches are of the view that to talk and teach about sexuality is the responsibility of parents at home. It is time that the local church should take hands with parents in dealing with the teaching of biblical Christian sexuality.

Lastly the pastor and local leadership of an assembly should not force or put pressure on those who have come out and made a disclosure to repent or threaten them with expulsion. Nor should they encourage them to find another place of worship. This type of action would do more harm than any good to both the homosexual and his/her family. The local leadership should act with love, compassion and understanding as the Lord Jesus did (Jn. 8:3-11).

When homosexuality is disclosed or discovered certain responses by the affected family are evident.

Some responses of families when homosexuality is disclosed or discovered.

Families respond in different ways on hearing or discovering that their child is gay/lesbian. Not all responses listed are equally experienced by all families. There is also no order in which these responses are experienced. The first is shock. Shock goes along with many other emotional behaviours like numbness, stress related symptoms, devastated, shame and disappointment. People respond to shocking news in different ways.

Following the state of shock is denial. Denial is a common response in a time of crisis, any awkward or difficult situation (Lk. 22:57). The reason for denial is that what most families know of homosexuality does not fit their child. Never in the life of their child has any homosexual orientation/behaviour been shown. Coupled with the experiencing of denial is the view that this will disappear and come to an end because it is only a phase that their child is going through. No person can really be helped until he or she acknowledges that a problem exists.

When denial is later pushed aside a next response is to try to get answers why their child is gay/lesbian. Two types of answers usually surface. It is either that their child has chosen a gay/lesbian lifestyle or that they as parents unknowingly contributed to the type of sexuality that their child is embracing. Parents then ask themselves the question is it our fault? Parents should not blame themselves for the sexual orientation or lifestyle of their child.

Guilt may also surface as a response. One way to deal with guilt is by sharing it with unconditional accepting loving people. Another point in dealing with guilt is to receive forgiveness and also to forgive others (Mt. 6:12).

Another kind of response is to try to fix the problem. Here the first way is to encourage change through repentance. The second is through psychological therapy. Acceptance is another response. This response follows when parents realised that repentance is not something that can be forced on someone, it must be freely entered into by a person who is convince about the need for repentance. Acceptance is also the route followed when psychological therapy has yielded no positive results.

Some parent's response is so overwhelming that they would from the start go the extreme way. This is to tell the child to immediately stop the homosexual orientation or lifestyle or leave the house and find a place to stay somewhere else. In most of these cases where this is the response it would mainly come from the father. It is important for parents to realize and note that what is happening in the life of their child is as much a crisis for their child as it is for them as parents. From a parent's side they should show love because he or she is still their child. When a disclosure or discovering have been made the whole family (siblings) are affected. All brothers and sisters should show love towards the person who have made the disclosure. Don't reject or break contact with the person. This will only drive the child deeper in the problem of homosexuality.

Sharing a disclosure or discovering that a child is homosexual with extended family members is another painful thought and experience. The affected family fear that their child would be rejected by the extended family. At this point it is important to note that people can only help and support if they know about a problem. They can only help carrying the burden if they are aware of the burden.

There are quite a number of literature available that can be consulted on how to deal with some of the responses of families stated above. This in itself requires in depth discussions and writing.

We will now look in what way the family of homosexuals can be ministered to from a pastoral point of view.

Pastoral ministry to the families of homosexuals

Pastoral ministry to the families of homosexuals are not a quick fix exercise. In the light of the complexity of the issue, much time is needed in dealing with it. Neither is it a one size fits all approach that should be followed although the name of the problem may be the same.

To start this section of pastoral ministry to the family of homosexuals, it is important to begin by touching on the grace, mercy and power of the Triune God. The grace, mercy (Ps.103:8, Heb. 4:16, 2 Pt. 5:10) and power of God is very important when it comes to ministry. This is applicable to all ministries. Nothing can be successfully achieved without the grace, mercy and power of God in the lives of his disciples and those to whom they are ministering.

God's word is very clear on how God's grace (2 Cor 12:9, Heb. 4:16, 2 Pt. 1:2) and power (Rom. 1:20, 1 Cor. 6:14, 2 Cor. 13:4, Eph. 3:20) work and how it can change any situation. In 2 Cor 12:7-10 in which the well-known verse "My grace is sufficient for you" is recorded shows that in circumstances of weakness God's grace is there to support, uphold his children and carry them through in difficult times. As for God's power his word states that he is able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20).

The word of God is the main content of the pastoral conversion in pastoral care and counselling. It can be in the form of proclamation, teaching, encouraging, edifying, consoling, confronting, and reprimanding. Faith plays an important role in accepting and acting on the word of God (Mk 11:24, Heb. 11:1-6). There is a very close relationship between faith and the word of God (Rom 10:17).

Another important component of pastoral care and counselling is prayer. God's word is very clear on what can be achieved through prayer (James 5:16-18). Prayer changes things. It is important to open the session in prayer by asking God's leading and guidance over the care and counselling session. At the end of each session a prayer should also be done to ask God's assistance in achieving what was discussed and advised to pay attention to.

In the light of the responses of the family when homosexuality is disclosed or discovered, the circumstances and situation of the families should be considered a crisis. A crisis is associated with an event taking place in the life of someone that cause interruptions in his or her life to function normally. Characteristics of a crisis is anxiety, anger, hopelessness, self-blame, guilt, sense of personal failure. Along with this is the lack to see clearly or understand the problem and to deal with it. Crisis experiences in life have a great emotional impact on the person experiencing it. Crisis experiences are listed under three categories. They are developmental crisis (adolescence, marriage, aging, and death), situational crisis is serious frustration that are caused by external events, and intrapsychic conflict. These are personality aspects of a person causing difficulties to effectively deal with stressful issues.

There are a number of components that have a bearing on the pastoral ministry to be effective. These components are God's word (the Bible), the leading and working of the Holy Spirit, the personhood of the pastor, pastoral care and counselling techniques and goal setting.

The first thing to do when hearing of homosexual disclosure or discovery in a certain family of the congregation, is to pay a house visit to that family. In an instance where this disclosure or discovery is in the household of the local pastor he or she should contact the nearest colleague to pay a house visit. The purpose of pastoral visits is to show interest and concern in the lives of congregants. It is also to determine needs and assisting with problems. Relationships are also strengthened by pastoral visits. A final point of pastoral house visitation is the ministering of prayer and scripture reading.

Follow up visits in pastoral care and counselling is very important. One house visitation in the beginning of the pastoral care process is not enough. One should not wait too long to do follow up pastoral visits.

As already mentioned God's word (Jn. 17:17, Hb.4:12), the leading and working of the Holy Spirit (Jn.16:13, Acts 8:29, 13:2) is the most important components for success in pastoral care and counselling. The pastor's dependency on God's word and the Holy Spirit in the helping process should be acknowledged and given preference.

In all pastoral care and counselling with people, the role of the pastor is very important. Here the personhood of the pastor is of great importance. No pastor can be effective in pastoral care and counselling by just been trained in all the techniques and theories related to care and counselling. The pastor self should be seen that he or she is a person who models growth and purpose in life. He or she should model good relationships. The pastor's life must be seen as one showing personal fulfilment as well as meaning. No pastor can lead a counselee to a higher level of functioning then the one the pastor has achieved. If this is the case he or she will contribute a lot to the pastoral care and counselling process of people in need.

Things that also touches on the personhood of the pastor that help in the pastoral care and counselling relationship are empathy, communication of empathy, respect, concreteness, and genuineness. Empathy means the pastor understands the situation and feelings as it is experienced by that person. In the pastoral care and counselling process for empathy to be effective it must be communicated verbally and nonverbally. This is translating one's understanding of the experiences and feelings of the counselee into a response showing that one shares his or her understanding. When empathy is effectively communicated the counselee will experience that he or she is understood and this will break down barriers and establish a relationship characterized by trust. Respect in all helping relationship is important. The communication of respect takes place by the pastor's commitment to the pastoral care and counselling process and the communication of empathy. Concreteness in pastoral care and counselling deals with being concrete about feelings, experiences, and language. Genuineness speaks about the correspondence between experience, the awareness of the experience, and the communication by the pastor of that awareness in the pastoral care and counselling process. Out of touch by the pastor with his or her own feelings or conflicts or a high level of defensive is a sign of lack of genuineness. When genuineness is present in and is shown by the pastor and is experience as such by the counselee it contributes a lot to the helping process in care and counselling.

Pastoral care and counselling techniques are skills to assist in making the helping process effective. Pastoral care and counselling situation are all unique. There are however certain techniques that can be applied in most care and counselling session.

These techniques are:

Attending – This require that the pastor should give undivided attention to the person he or she is helping. Attending is to indicate that you are present with the counselee. Eye contact, your posture and gestures should show that the pastor is paying attention. Nonverbal communication plays an important role in attending.

Telling the story- This is to allow the counselee to talk and share his or her problem, circumstances or situation. There are people who can converse easily while there are those who do not. Some people disclose easily what their problem is while others are reluctant in sharing their problem. The establishing of a good pastoral care and counselling relationship is one way of helping people to open up and tell their story. To tell the story and vent one's feelings is therapeutic (catharsis).

Listening – The pastor should put aside his or her own preoccupations in order to listen what the person in need is communicating. Active listening involves a few things. The one is to observe the nonverbal behaviour, second to listen and understand what is verbally communicated, third is listening to the context. Context is the total person in the social settings of life. Fourth is listening to unpleasant things. These are things that have to be challenged.

Responding – The following are actions of responding: Leading and directing the process of the conversation by asking brief questions. Reflecting is a way of letting the counselee know that the pastor is with him or her and that the pastor understands their feelings and thoughts. By summarizing the pastor is reflecting to evaluate what has been heard so far. Supporting and encouraging deals with helping counselees use their resources (Spiritual and psychological resources). Encouraging is to take any action that can help with the problem. Interpreting is to explain what the behaviour or problem means.

Questioning and probing – Questioning is to bring about useful information that can help in the counselling process. Questioning is important because counselees sometimes do not mention all relevant information. Avoid the trap to ask too many questions. A question that is asked must serve a purpose. Probing is not necessary questions. It can be statements to help the counselee to clarify unclear issues. Probing can also be an interjection to help focus the attention of the counselee.

Challenging or confronting – People in need should sometime be challenged in the helping process to face things that they would like to avoid. Confronting is to speak the truth in love.

Teaching – Pastoral care and counselling is a process where teaching spiritual and psychological information is shared by way of teaching.

Filtering – Sometimes counselee don't tell the full story by leaving out embarrassing information. Counselees sometimes tend to not see the full extent of their problem. For this reason, the pastor should work through the words of the counselee in order to find out what he or she is really asking or want.

Setting goals in pastoral care and counselling and the achievement thereof is very important. Goals that are realistic should be set. The basic goals of pastoral care and counselling are outlined under the heading biblical foundation of ministries. Depending on the situation or problem goals should be set for each pastoral care and counselling situation.

Conclusion

Our Lord Jesus Christ the Chief Shepherd ministered with great love, compassion and understanding to people with different kinds of needs. He expects the same from us who are His Body, the church.

May the Triune God Father Son and Holy Spirit grant us the grace to truly understand and apply his word when it speaks about the love that should be amongst his disciples.

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