



Baptist Churches  
of NSW & ACT

# **PUBLIC ISSUES PAPER**

## **Pastoral and Missional Response to Same-Sex Oriented Persons**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the past thirty years there has been a dramatic shift in the way homosexuality and bisexuality are framed within Australian society. Homosexual orientation and homosexual acts were widely regarded as perversions, same-sex attraction was considered a mental disorder that required treatment, and homosexual acts were a criminal offence. Today, within our culture there is widespread acceptance of sexual diversity; same-sex attraction is widely considered a natural and normal part of this diversity; gay, lesbian, and bisexual acts no longer receive criminal sanction; same-sex relationships are protected by the law; and similar to other western countries, it is likely that same-sex marriage will eventually be legally recognised in Australia.

This has presented a substantial challenge for our churches. We find ourselves affirming marriage between a man and a woman as the appropriate context for sexual intimacy in a culture that is increasingly opposed to this ethic. We are seeking to understand how we can uphold this ethic and at the same time support fellow Christians who are gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, or transgender (GLBT) oriented while seeking to follow Jesus and express love and grace to those who are in GLBT relationships. We also recognise that our attitudes and actions have all too often been hurtful towards GLBT oriented people.

This paper is intended to provide guidance on how we might respond pastorally and missionally to GLBT people in light of these cultural shifts and challenges while remaining true to our commitment to the authority of Scripture.

## **SEXUAL ETHICS**

Human sexuality is a multi dimensional reality that includes gender identity, biological sex, sexual orientation, sexual identity, and sexual behaviour. Christian faith recognises that our sexuality is given shape in ways that reflect both the God-given ordering of creation and the disordering of creation that is the consequence of humankind's fall. This gives human sexuality a complexity that demands careful theological, ethical, and pastoral consideration.

Given the complexity, it is no surprise that there are significant differences amongst Christians on how to think theologically about sexuality, on the ethics of sexual behavior and on how to respond pastorally to the reality of diverse sexualities. As a movement we have only begun to engage with these issues and need to ensure we create space for further reflection and dialogue.

**Nonetheless, as a collective of churches we have endorsed a sexual ethic in which sexual intimacy is a gift of God for the relationship of a husband and wife, that such intimacy is to be exercised with love, grace, and fidelity, and that those not in a husband-wife relationship are called to celibacy.**

It is widely held, though not uncontested, by Bible scholars that while Scripture calls for sexual behaviour in line with the ethic we have just summarised, it does not infer that people must have a particular sexual orientation. The causes of sexual orientation are currently unclear, but the experience of most people is that their orientation is a part of their physiological and psychological make up and is not the subject of choice.

Given this, and the fact that Scripture is concerned with sexual behaviour rather than sexual orientation, a person's sexual orientation is neither shameful nor sinful. Some Christians will have a homosexual or bisexual orientation, and that orientation is of no consequence for their standing before God.

Churches then, should be places where heterosexually oriented, homosexually oriented, and bisexually oriented followers of Jesus are encouraged to lead lives of sexual fidelity and surrounded with gracious and loving support as they do so.

### **BUILDING GRACEFUL CHURCH COMMUNITIES**

According to Jesus, love is to be the hallmark of our communities (Matthew 22:36-40; John 13:35) and he exemplified this in his ministry. On the one hand, he set out God's high and holy calling on our lives (eg Matthew 5-7); yet on the other hand he welcomed into his circle human beings who consistently failed to meet that calling. Developing this theme, the New Testament letters encourage followers of Christ to live out the calling of God and meet each other with love expressed in welcome, kindness, forgiveness, bearing of one another's burdens, generosity, and grace (eg Galatians 5:22-6:5; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; Colossians 3:12-17). In view of this

1. We will encourage members of our churches to be open and honest about their sexual orientation. We will not lead gay, lesbian, and bisexually oriented people to believe that their orientation is shameful, nor that God demands their orientation be changed, but will accept and embrace each other whatever our orientations may be. It is our ambition that our churches be places where heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, as well as people of other marginalised or minority groups, come together as a worshipping community, and where all are able to grace our communities with the gifts God has given to them;
2. We will encourage all within our churches who are married to practice fidelity, and to treat their partner with tenderness, kindness, and intimacy in life in general and in their sexual relationship.
3. We will encourage those who are not married to practice celibacy, and to build wholesome, tender, kind, and intimate friendships;
4. We will remember the many challenges to godly sexual relationships that exist in our culture, including promiscuity, adultery, and pornography, and will actively promote a culture in which godliness is upheld and is supportive of one another as we strive to resist temptation and cultivate godliness.
5. We will open our hearts, our homes, and our lives to one another. We recognise that while singleness and celibacy are the preferred choice of some, for many single Christians there is a deep longing for a partner with whom life can be shared and emotional and physical intimacy enjoyed, and that the journey they take following Jesus is a particularly difficult one. We will seek to build communities where those who are single find deep and satisfying relationships;

6. We will exercise grace, love and understanding when people fall short of God's call upon their lives or, having searched the Scriptures, come to different conclusions about God's call on their life. With God's help we will make our churches places of welcome, healing, and the opportunity to move towards God's call.

## **BUILDING A GRACEFUL DENOMINATION**

At the heart of our movement is a commitment to the Lordship of Christ and the responsibility of each believer and each church to seek the will of Christ in dialogue with others, but free from coercion to conform to anything other than what they understand to be the will of Christ. At the same time our movement of churches has affirmed the view of sexuality described above, we recognise that there are churches and individuals that do not share this view. While this creates discomfort and tension for us, as a movement committed to the liberty of conscience, we will respect these differences and will extend grace, love and welcome to each other

## **OUR WITNESS TO CHRIST**

In recent years the church's attitude to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people has become a significant factor in how those outside the church perceive us and their receptivity to the gospel. An investigation of Australian attitudes to Christianity found that

*One of the key blockers for Australians when it came to Christianity, was the church's stance on homosexuality, with 3 in 10 (29%) Australians expressing that this completely blocked them in engaging with Christianity. Overall, 7 in 10 (69%) indicated that the stance and teachings of homosexuality were a block to some extent to them exploring Christianity.<sup>1</sup>*

This mirrors a similar trend in the United States where US-based research organisation, the Barna Group recently found that for Americans

*the most common perception is that present-day Christianity is "anti-homosexual." Overall, 91% of young non-Christians and 80% of young churchgoers say this phrase describes Christianity. As the research probed this perception, non-Christians and Christians explained that beyond their recognition that Christians oppose homosexuality, they believe that Christians show excessive contempt and unloving attitudes towards gays and lesbians. One of the most frequent criticisms of young Christians was that they believe the church has made homosexuality a "bigger sin" than anything else. Moreover, they claim that the church has not helped them apply the biblical teaching on homosexuality to their friendships with gays and lesbians.<sup>2</sup>*

On the one hand, Christians have contributed to this opprobrium when our churches have been unwelcoming places rather than communities known for our love (John 13:35). For the sake of the gospel we need to challenge bigotry whenever it occurs in our churches, including bigotry towards gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, and consciously

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1. McCrindle Research, Australian Communities Report, p15

2. <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/teens-nextgen/94-a-new-generation-expresses-its-skepticism-and-frustration-with-christianity#.VLXNuKYWk3g>

work towards becoming places where gay, lesbian, and bisexual Christians report that they feel welcome.

On the other hand, for many Australians the ethic we have outlined in this paper is irredeemably unacceptable. The freedom to develop sexually intimate partnerships in a way that aligns with one's sexual orientation is held by many to be a fundamental right. Any ethic that teaches otherwise is considered oppressive, unjust, and unloving. In the face of this we must do more than simply articulate our ethic. Rather we need to develop a robust defence of celibacy as a valid and meaningful life pathway, and ensure we surround those who choose this pathway with grace, love and support.

[The Association has previously made a number of decisions that cover:

- Dealing with 'human sexuality, marriage and church leadership' for those applying for accreditation or are accredited. See Accreditation Guidelines.
- The affiliation of churches which may have a person in pastoral or other leadership engaged in ethical misconduct. See Constitution.
- One of the core values included in the Constitution on being relationally committed states, 'honouring marriage as an institution created by God as the foundation for a lifelong faithful union of a man and a woman'
- The Baptist Marriage Rites 'defines marriage as being between a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into life'. Baptist celebrants can only solemnize marriages that conform to this definition.]

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Consider the six suggested ways of building graceful church communities. Upon what passages of Scripture do you base your understanding?
2. How might your church provide a welcoming and safe place to those who find themselves to be same-sex oriented?
3. How might you support those who struggle with their particular sexual orientation or sexual identity?
4. What may the church do to promote and support strong tender intimate marriages amongst the congregational members?
5. In what ways might the church be supportive and inclusive of people who are single?
6. What might be the nature of our connectedness with those who may be living in GLBT relationships? How might we show love and grace while maintaining our own biblical and theological integrity?

# ADDENDUM

## SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Given the growing public support for same-sex marriage and the trends in other democracies, it is highly probable that legislation will eventually be passed in Australia that allows for same-sex marriage. What response should we make? The answer to this question will hinge on the answers we provide to another set of questions:

1. What is the role of the state? It is clear that we do not expect the government to assume responsibility for the governance of all areas of life. For example, though murder and adultery are both a violation of the will of God, and both inflict harm upon an innocent party, we expect the government to legislate around murder but not against adultery. Similarly, though we do not share the tenets of other religions, Baptists have long expected the government to recognise other religions and to protect the freedom of people to practice whichever faith they choose. Some Baptists argue that the state has a responsibility to protect the common good and that maintaining the definition of marriage as the union of a man and a woman serves the common good. Others believe the state's foundational responsibility is to protect the freedom of individuals to make their own choices and therefore that same-sex marriage should be recognised and protected by law.
2. What is the impact on Christian witness? As noted in the previous section, the church's strong opposition to same-sex marriage is blocking peoples willingness to consider Christian faith. Given the likelihood that same-sex marriage will be legally recognised in the future, should Christians who oppose same-sex marriage remain vocal in their opposition as an act of prophetic witness, or should we gracefully withdraw from the debate and fix our public attention on other matters?