

# The Church and Homosexuality

## Lancaster Conference of the Mennonite Church

*Adopted by Conference Leadership Assembly  
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## The Church and Homosexuality

### Summary

**We believe** that sexuality is a good gift from God. Sexuality (*sexual desire and awareness*) has biological, emotional, social and spiritual dimensions.

**We believe** that regardless of origins of sexual desire, we have choices to make in how we will manage or express that sexual desire. Unlike the animal world, we need not be controlled by our biology; we have the capacity and responsibility to choose our responses to our impulses.

**We believe** that the Bible teaches that either celibacy or a lifelong marriage between one man and one woman is God's design for humanity. The Bible is clear that nurturing the lust for or participating in homosexual, premarital, or extramarital sexual behavior is sin.

**We believe** that Christ offers cleansing from sin and a relationship with Himself to anyone who cries out to Him for mercy. When first turning to Christ, the penitent one may be unaware of the full nature of her/his unrighteousness. As that person trusts Christ and His Word and is open to the teaching of the Christian community and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the person will grow in Christ-likeness and holiness of life. According to I Corinthians 6:9-11, those who were adulterers and homosexual offenders are among those, "*washed, sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*"

**We believe** that the Christian community is called to be a place of refuge, a safe place, where the sinner finds healing relationships of love while learning the ways of God. As a safe place, the church's stance is that we all stand in need of forgiveness and cleansing, that there is not hierarchy of sins and that we all need the prayers and caring support of one another. Further, to create a safe place,

the church must clearly state the Word and will of God and offer support and pastoral guidance in bringing all aspects of life, including our sexuality, into conformity to the will of God.

## The Church and Homosexuality

### Overview

The faithful Christian church, based upon the teachings of the Scriptures, has consistently defined homosexual behavior as sin and has called people away from it.

By way of contrast, many outside the church who advocate for gay and lesbian causes as well as heterosexual freedom indicate that sexual desire is a need that must be acted upon if one is to be emotionally healthy. They seek to be liberated from any cultural or religious constraint which hinders the expression of desire. Those who advocate this position challenge elements central to Christian faith: the nature of humankind, the nature of sin, the extent and purpose of salvation, the interpretation of Scripture and the nature of the church.

In this current climate we believe that the faithful Christian church is called by God to assert its Biblical position that sexuality is God's good gift, that sexually chaste relationships are both possible and desirable, and that sexual passion is designed to be expressed only between a man and a woman in the context of a life-time marriage. The church must also reach out in love and compassion with a message of forgiveness and enabling grace to those who sin sexually, be it in premarital, extramarital or homosexual activity or the lust for such activity. Those involved in sexual sin may be our brothers and sisters, our sons and our daughters. They need the church's help to know and follow God's plan for bringing their sexuality under the Lordship of Christ. The church must also be clear in its teaching that God is calling us to repent and turn away not only from sexual sin, but from all unrighteousness including gossip, greed and a judgmental spirit.

In the case of marriage, Christ calls the church to assert that a life-long union between one man and one woman is God's plan. Even when humans fail to live up to this Scriptural ideal for marriage, God calls the church to promote that ideal while at the same time relating redemptively to those who fail. In a similar way, the faithful church, while relating compassionately to all those who experience homosexual lust and behavior, must continue to make clear God's call to sexual purity.

In light of the overview, the Lancaster Conference of the Mennonite Church teaches the following:

## Biblical and Theological Considerations

1. The Scriptures teach that sexuality is a good gift from God. Within Christian marriage, sexual union is a celebration of the marriage covenant and participation in the creativity of God. When our human sexuality is used this way in Christian marriage, it expresses God's will (*Mark 10:3-9*). Sexual activities outside of the marriage union of one man and one woman are condemned in Scripture whether they are premarital, extramarital, or homosexual (*Ex. 20:14; Lev. 18:22; 20:10-16; Rom. 1:18-32; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal. 5:16-21; Col. 3:5, 6; 1 Tim. 1:9-10; Rev. 21:8*).

Romans 1:18-32 identifies several sins, including a clear statement that homosexual behavior is sin (*vs. 26-27*). This sin, like others in the passage, is an expression of rejecting God as creator and is evidence one is outside the righteousness of God. The answer to this sin, as well as others, is found in God's great work of redemption in Christ.

Now, although we have the joy of the Holy Spirit and the transforming grace of God, we must continue to struggle to live faithfully. The redemption of our bodies from this struggle remains a future hope (*Romans 8:18-24*). Therefore, just as heterosexuals who are single can now live a life of holiness in celibacy (even though they experience heterosexual desire), so also persons with homosexual desire can live a life of holiness in celibacy.

No one is given the freedom to practice sexual sin whether that sin be heterosexual or homosexual. All members of the Christian community are one body in Christ. It is important for the Christian community to provide encouragement, support, and counsel to all of its members to live out their human sexuality in the holiness and righteousness of God.

2. God's first and highest call to humankind is to a relationship with Himself. One disciple of Christ may be called to celibacy and another to marriage. However, Christ calls all of us to freedom from a pre-occupation with the lusts of the flesh. That Jesus never married is a clear indication that sexual union is not a necessary condition for human fulfillment.

3. Those who attempt to support homosexual practice from the Bible use approaches to the Bible that do not support the understandings historically held by the Christian church. Many theologians who support homosexual practice reinterpret the Scripture in a variety of ways. For example:

a. They reinterpret Romans 1 as only condemning homosexual practice in the context of idol worship. They miss the obvious fact that Paul is condemning, among other things, the idolizing of sex itself.

b. They emphasize that Jesus did not speak against homosexuality. But neither did He speak against rape or child molestation. Yet Christians believe these practices go against Biblical principles.

c. They teach that homosexual genital behavior may now be understood as a good gift. In so doing they agree with Satan's suggestion in the Garden of Eden that God has in fact held back some good gifts from humankind.

## Homosexual Desire and Morality

1. The causes of homosexuality are multiple. Contributing factors may include conscious choice, unconscious motivation, psychological trauma in childhood, biological factors and spiritual factors. Whatever the predispositions or desires one has, God calls us to manage them to His glory. Where a person has difficulty doing this, the church should provide additional pastoral and community resources to help the person toward wholeness and holiness.

2. Homosexual attraction, referred to as homosexual orientation, is often experienced as an inherent part of one's earliest sexual awareness. Same-sex attraction or orientation is a kind of brokenness that affects persons through no necessary fault of their own. However, the experience of one's sexual attraction as inherent or as a given does not rule out ethical and moral responsibility for management of the attraction. Although homosexual attraction or orientation is not a sin in itself, all persons are called to moral responsibility in the way in which they manage their sexual desire. They are called to avoid and renounce the use of pornography and all other nurturing of lustful fantasies, thoughts and behaviors which predispose to premarital, extramarital or homosexual genital activity.

3. Homosexual behavior and lust are primarily moral problems. Persons dealing with same-sex attraction may or may not experience difficulty in being able to "love and work" (a definition of emotional health). The church teaches against homosexual behavior so as to be faithful to God and not because the church sees homosexuality as a psychiatric illness.

## God's Call to the Person with Same-Sex Attraction

Although God's dealings differ from person to person, God calls His children to righteous behavior. Persons with homosexual desires are called by God to the following:

1. To grow into the likeness of Christ through spiritual disciplines, the development of loving relationships with brothers and sisters in the church, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

2. To acknowledge that although sexuality is a gift from God, homosexual or heterosexual temptation is not a gift from God, for "God cannot be tempted by evil" (James 1:13). However, no sin need separate a person from God's grace.

3. To seek deliverance from sexual preoccupation. Upon accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord, a person with same-sex attraction does not usually experience immediate deliverance from homosexual temptation. As the person submits to the lordship of Christ, however, the temptations will lose their control over his or her life.

Some experience their continued homosexual desire as a "thorn in the flesh." They discover that as they turn to Christ they find grace and experience personal and spiritual growth through their struggle to manage their sexual desire in a God-honoring way.

4. To be open to the possibility of developing heterosexual interest through Christian caring, therapy, and/or self-help groups. This transformation may or may not occur. If the change does not occur, it does not place the person in a spiritually inferior position.

## The Church's Responsibility to the Person with Same-Sex Attractions

God is the architect and builder of our righteousness (*Hebrews 11:10*). He gives us His plan for living as well as the ability to carry it out.

Following are principles to guide the church in cooperating with God in building His righteousness into our lives.

- Pray for the humility to recognize that there is no hierarchy of persons in the kingdom, some inherently more righteous or unrighteous because of the nature of their sins. If we take satisfaction that we are free of homosexual sin, and are therefore spiritually superior to a brother or sister dealing with homosexual sin, we have exhibited spiritual pride. If we take satisfaction that we are more loving in our responses to homosexuals than other "judgmental persons," we have exhibited spiritual pride. Thus, we have all come under the condemnation of God (*Romans 2:1*). We are all unrighteous and need a Savior to cleanse us and to lead us into His right way of living and being.

- Make the church a safe place, a city of refuge. Lay down the unrighteous weapons of gossip, criticism and even analysis. Extend Christ's love to the person. Address their sin at the Spirit-directed time. Do not focus only on their sin; focus on Christ. Trust the Holy Spirit to bring conviction of sin, of righteousness and of judgment. Know that the Spirit will show you when to speak a word of direction or clarification to the person. Remember, it is God's kindness that leads us to repentance (*Romans 2:4*).

The church is called to love persons even when their behavior has been sinful and has contributed to their difficulties in life. Therefore, for example, the church is called to teach and demonstrate love for the AIDS sufferer. Efforts to deny basic civil rights to homosexuals are contrary to the Spirit of Christ.

- Do not apologize for moral and ethical guideposts. The church should clearly teach that Christians are called to a life of obedience to God's will, and not to a life controlled by fleshly inclinations.

Homosexual partnerships are not the moral equivalent of a heterosexual marriage. Christians should therefore flee homosexual behavior both with anonymous partners and with "covenantal" partners. The church should not encourage or support same-sex covenantal partnerships. Because the Bible is authoritative in the life of the Christian community and clearly condemns homosexual activity, the church is precluded from giving explicit or implicit approval to homosexual practices by offering church membership to those who persist in justifying their homosexual behavior. It, likewise, precludes ordaining or assigning a leadership position to those who engage in and/or justify homosexual acts. Congregations who justify homosexual acts preclude themselves from continued fellowship with other congregations in Lancaster Mennonite Conference.

- Do not fear persons dealing with homosexuality. Rather, include these persons among your circle of friends. Seek to give and receive from persons dealing with homosexuality as real people.
- Help the person dealing with homosexuality understand that his or her identity is in being a child of God, not in being gay or lesbian. The concept of sexual identity is a social invention of the last 100 years. Giving someone the label "homosexual" helps create the reality of homosexuality. Those who are uncertain about their sexual leanings now conclude they are homosexual. They then begin to interpret all their experiences through that grid of understanding. This leads to the false conclusion that the most defining aspect of life is sexual orientation. By contrast, those who take their identity as children of God assess their sexual feelings and experiences as a reality to be dealt with, but not as a defining reality that

even God cannot change.

- Teach children from the beginning that their identity is in Christ, not in their behaviors, either good or bad. Make a safe place for children to talk to their elders regarding their concerns and questions about their developing sexuality. Protect children from those who would urge them toward homosexual practice.
- Encourage and focus on covenantal intimacy with Jesus Christ. God is calling us all into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. We covenant to love and follow Him wherever He leads. We do not know where this faith journey will lead. But as He builds His righteousness in us, we begin to see where we next need to repent and be changed into His likeness. We learn that to grow up in Christ, we must respect the Bible, the Holy Spirit and the discerning Christian community of brothers and sisters.
- Encourage openness and walking in the light with hopes and fears and failures. This openness should not be with explicit details of a sexual encounter, but in candor about the nature of the struggle. Knowing that others know all about me, including my sexual sins, and yet love and accept me is a healing reality. Deal directly with such issues as resentment and bitterness that hinder relationships in the body of Christ.
- Recognize that the person dealing with any sexual sin may benefit from assistance in various areas including: help to forgive a parent or family member who has mistreated or abused them, deliverance from Satanic oppression or bondage, or healing of memories. Some may benefit from individual psychotherapy to deal in a focused way with emotional and spiritual issues. For other persons, medications may prove helpful in dealing with depression and other mood instabilities. Some need help to identify patterns of behavior and thinking which predisposed them to sexual sin. Many need help to devise practical ways for "fleeing temptation."
- Know that some dealing with homosexuality will become free of persistent homosexual desire. Others will continue with this particular temptation to sin but will learn to rely on Christ's enabling grace and the support of the Christian community to remain free of sexual sin. Be encouraged that Christ is building His church, and He is doing it out of people including those who were sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, homosexual offenders, thieves, greedy, drunkards, slanderers, and swindlers but who now have been washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of Christ. (See *1 Cor. 6:9-11*)

# Annotated Bibliography

With this statement we present an annotated bibliography of books and articles which you may find useful in your further study of homosexuality. We have placed an asterisk beside those listings which would be of general interest and appropriate for a church library. All of the listings so marked support a position consistent with Biblical teaching that homosexual genital behavior is sin. The other listings vary in viewpoint; some are secular but make helpful points in the dialogue regarding homosexuality.

***A Call to Affirmation, Confession, and Covenant Regarding Human Sexuality*** is a statement which was adopted by the Mennonite Church General Assembly July 8, 1987.

**Browning, Don.** "Rethinking Homosexuality." Book review of Greenberg's *The Construction of Homosexuality*. *The Christian Century*. 1989; Oct. 11, 911-916. An excellent review of David Greenberg's book *The Construction of Homosexuality*. Articulates the philosophical significance of this book and highlights the importance of social labeling in the development of the concept of sexual identity.

**Carnes, Patrick.** *Don't Call It Love*. New York: Bantam, 1991. Carnes gives helpful insights from a secular perspective about the nature of sexual addiction and the approach to overcoming sexual addiction.

**Carnes, Patrick,** guest editor. *American Journal of Preventive Psychiatry and Neurology*. Issue on Medical Aspects of Sexual Addiction/ Compulsivity. 1990; 2 (3). A helpful discussion of the psychiatric issues in the discussion on sexual addictions.

**\*Comiskey, Andrew J.** *Pursuing Sexual Wholeness: How Jesus Heals the Homosexual*. Lake Mary, Florida: Creation House, 1989. As a leader in the Christian ex-gay movement, Comiskey presents an excellent discussion of the homosexual issue and how to equip people to minister to people dealing with homosexuality and with brokenness in general. Good for the church library.

**\*Comiskey, Andrew J.** *Pursuing Sexual Wholeness, Guide for Group or Individual Use*. Santa Monica, California: Desert Stream Ministries, 1988. A companion guidebook to the text cited above. Comiskey states that sixty-five per cent or more of those who complete the course based on this guidebook find freedom from homosexuality, and most find greater power to deal with their disordered desires.

**\*Consiglio, William.** *Homosexual No More*. Wheaton, Illinois: SP Publications, 1991. Dr. Consiglio draws on his counseling experience to provide practical

strategies for Christians desiring to overcome their homosexuality. An excellent resource for those desiring help and those desiring to help them.

**\*Davies, Bob, and Lori Rentzel.** *Coming Out of Sexuality: New Freedom for Men and Women.* Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993. A comprehensive book dealing from a Christian perspective with the full range of issues associated with homosexuality: origins, theology, paths to wholeness, answers to common pro-gay arguments, etc. Essential reading.

**\*First Things.** "The Homosexual Movement. A response by the Ramsey Colloquium." 1994: 41 (March), 15-20. A "must read."

**\*Frangipane, Francis.** *The Three Battlegrounds.* Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Advancing Church Publications, 1989. Not about homosexuality. This book is for all Christians. It explores the three arenas of spiritual warfare which the maturing Christian will face: the mind, the church, and the heavenly places. It provides a foundation of insight, wisdom and discernment on the nature of the battle and the keys to victory. A quotation from the book: "Victory begins with the name of Jesus on our lips. It is consummated by the nature of Jesus in our hearts."

**\*Guntheil, Thomas G., and Glen Gabbard.** "The Concept of Boundaries in Clinical Practice: Theoretical and Risk Management Dimensions." *American Journal of Psychiatry.* 1933; 150: 188-196. This article heightens the counselor's awareness of issues to consider in avoiding sexual misconduct. These areas include role, time, place and space, money, gifts, services and related matters, and physical contact. A helpful discussion of the issues.

**Hays, Richard B.** *The Moral Vision of the New Testament.* San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996. This writer provides a helpful balance of grace and truth in his discussion of homosexuality. His discussion of Romans 1 is particularly insightful.

**\*Joyner, Rick.** *There Were Two Trees in the Garden.* Charlotte, N.C.: Morning Star Publications, 1986. A "must-read" for all Christians struggling to understand the difference between flesh and spirit and committed to overcoming sin and glorifying the Lord with their lives. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life represent the fundamental conflict between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God.

**Martin, Enos, and Ruth Martin.** "Developmental and Ethical Issues in Homosexuality." *Journal of Psychology and Theology.* Spring, 1981; 9 (1) 58-68. An early review article on the issues from a Christian perspective.

**Moberly, Elizabeth R.** *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic.* James Clarke, Cambridge, England, 1983. Available in USA from Regeneration Books, telephone: 410-661-0284. Presents a helpful view that "the homosexual condition

involves legitimate developmental needs, the fulfillment of which has been blocked by an underlying ambivalence to members of the same sex."

**\*Payne, Leanne.** *The Broken Image: Restoring Personal Wholeness Through Healing Prayer.* Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1981. Refutes the myth "once a homosexual, always a homosexual." Shows how the healing power of Jesus Christ brings true sexual freedom."

**\*Payne, Leanne.** *The Healing of the Homosexual.* Westchester, Ill. Crossway Books, 1984. Explains how the "healing of memories and listening prayer make it possible to obtain Christ's forgiveness and to be released once and for all from the bondage of homosexuality." An important book.

**\*Schmidt, Thomas E.** *Straight and Narrow?* Downers Grove, Ill. InterVarsity Press, 1995. An excellent book about compassion and clarity in the continuing homosexuality debate. Written with both an evangelical Christian perspective and with profound empathy. Well written, persuasive and readable.

**Socarides, Charles W.** *Beyond Sexual Freedom.* New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1975. A detailed study and critique of current sexual practices by a secular psychoanalyst who is a leader in the scientific study of homosexuality. Socarides has been harshly resisted by gay activists. An important book for those desiring a non-Christian critique of the gay movement.

**Socarides, Charles W.** "The Erosion of Heterosexuality." *Good News.* September/October 1994, 19-21. A recent article critiquing the gay movement. Socarides states, "Homosexuality cannot create a society or keep one going for very long."

**\*Soards, Marion L.** *Scripture and Homosexuality.* Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995. A brief, well-written book which "advocates a heightened sense of both biblical authority and Christian compassion. An excellent discussion of how the church should respond to and deal with issues of homosexuality.

**"Summary Statements by General Board on Homosexuality"** is a list of statements adopted by the Mennonite Church General Board July 29, 1991.

**\*Whitehead, Brian.** *Craving for Love.* Tunbridge Wells, England: Monarch, 1993. An outstanding study of relationship addiction, homosexuality, and the God who heals.

## RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL HELP

**Day Seven Ministries** - A Lancaster Mennonite Conference associated Christian ministry to people who seek healing from sexual brokenness and bondage. An interdenominational board directs the ministry which includes support groups for persons dealing with the temptation to homosexual and heterosexual sin. For further information call 717-367-7117 or write Day Seven, P.O. Box 265, Elizabethtown, PA 17022.

**Exodus International** - Day Seven Ministries belongs to the Exodus International network of Christian ministries offering support to men and women seeking to overcome homosexuality. All ministries such as Day Seven which belong to Exodus subscribe to an evangelical doctrinal statement. The leaders of the support groups have been out of the homosexual lifestyle for at least two years and are under the spiritual oversight of a pastor. For a free introductory packet of literature on Exodus, including a complete list of referral ministries, contact Exodus International, P.O. Box 2121, San Rafael, Ca. 94912. Telephone: 415-454-1017.

**Homosexuals Anonymous** - P.O. Box 7881, Reading, PA 19603. Telephone: 610-376-1146.

**Regeneration Books** - Regeneration is a ministry similar to Day Seven located in Baltimore, Maryland. This ministry is directed by Alan P. Medinger. Regeneration, in addition to its support groups, offers a book ministry. For a free catalog of books on homosexuality and related issues, contact Regeneration Books, P.O. Box 9830, Baltimore, MD 21284 or phone 410-661-0284. Of course, many of these same books will be available through your local Christian bookstore as well.