

Guidance for pastoral care of same-sex attracted people and their families

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Introduction

This Guidance is aimed at kirk sessions and those who provide pastoral care within PCI congregations. It is not meant to be exhaustive but to offer some practical help in a sensitive area. Updated from the 2007 Guidelines they are also part of the outworking of Resolution 22 of the General Council Report 2018 which stated, "That appropriate training be offered to Kirk Sessions on the theology and practice of the Church's understanding of 'a credible profession of faith' and the pastoral guidelines on homosexuality."

The stories included in the document are simply for illustrative purposes and should be read as such. They are not meant to be detailed case studies and do not answer every question that may be asked of them.

1. Tracy's story

Tracy lives in London. She knew she was gay from the age of 12 and came to terms with that through her teens. In her twenties she lived with her girlfriend, "just another gay person in London". It wasn't an issue for her.

She really hated Christians and couldn't stand their homophobia. But when she first went to church, she was surprised at how wonderfully friendly everybody was. They didn't do all the things she expected, like patronise her or have heavy discussions with her about her views on the Bible. They weren't self-righteous or anything like that but asked about her, taking a real interest in getting to know her.

On later visits they remembered her name and details that she had told them and were obviously pleased that she was there. Through time Tracy became a Christian and now, for her, walking into church is like coming home. It's like arriving into a family home and being greeted by her family, only there are a lot more of them. She finds it wonderful.

Tracy has some close friends in the congregation who have two little boys that are very special to her. She sees the family almost every week, reads the Bible with Mum, plays with the boys. If she is feeling down, she goes to them. They include her in family events and trips. It is a very precious part of her life to be part of that family. And she feels very much part of the family. It has been a wonderful gift to her.

Her relationship with Jesus has grown and now she sees Him as the one fixed and solid point in her life that doesn't change. She can depend totally on Him. She is conscious that everything in life can be taken away from us, but Jesus can't. She says that she is definitely more content now she is a Christian.

Surely this is the kind of experience Christians would want anyone to have on coming to church whether they are same-sex attracted or not. But often it is not!

2. Background to the updated guidance

The Pastoral Guidelines on Homosexuality were passed by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland in 2007 in response to the recognition of homophobic attitudes¹ within the church and the need to approach matters of human sexuality with a greater degree of pastoral understanding and care.

The current context is very different from 2007.

Same-sex marriage is now legal both in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland. The Presbyterian Church exists in both jurisdictions and must take account of both contexts.

On a more personal level, there is much more openness to talk about matters of human sexuality in society and church. For a significant number of people in our churches same-sex attraction has come close to home with a son, daughter, niece, uncle etc. coming out and the family having to come to terms with that. This can be traumatic for the individual, for the family and for the local congregation. What to say? What not to say? What to do? What not to do?

Public and private disagreement with those who take a contrary view to much of wider society has greatly increased.

“One of the joys of church life is accompanying individuals on a journey to exploring, experiencing and expressing faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.”² As a church we recognise that some PCI congregations may have offered people the kind of love and care that Tracy experienced even before she became a Christian. However, this has not been true across the board. There is evidence from the stories of people who have spoken about their same-sex attraction that they have found their churches to be places of fear, hurt and rejection instead of places of pastoral understanding and care.

In relation to how some people have been treated within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland the 2007 Guidelines stated, *“Within our church there is the need for both repentance and greater understanding. This calls for education, careful listening and discussion.”* When we as a church treat people badly it is right to say sorry. We are sorry for the times when we have demonstrated a lack of understanding, caused hurt, ostracised, verbally abused or robbed individuals and families of hope. While we cannot apologise for holding a Biblical position on these matters we should apologise for the times when we have not followed the example of the Lord Jesus in the way we have treated others.

This resource is to help ministers, elders and others providing pastoral care to be better equipped to show such pastoral care and this up-dated guidance is one step in that ongoing process.

1 'The victimisation or diminishment of human beings whose affections happen to be ordered towards people of the same sex.' Andrew Godard, Fulcrum 2006

2 Credible Profession of Faith and Admission to the Sacraments. PCI 2021 1:1

3. The need for pastoral guidance

It is clear that people of all ages who are same-sex attracted are often very reluctant to tell others because of fear, prejudice etc. Keeping their feelings hidden out of fear can have a significant impact on their mental health. The following is one person's story but his experience is not uncommon. It highlights some of the issues faced and contrasts with Tracy's story.

Bob's story

I was brought up in a strong, loving, Christian home and was very actively involved in a lively, evangelical Presbyterian church. I became a Christian when I was young and was well taught and have a real love for the Bible. I was very committed to the youth work in my church and tried to live for Christ and witness for Him inside and outside the Church.

During my teens I began to realise that I was different. I found myself attracted to boys rather than girls. I didn't choose it to be so, it just was. I resisted it, prayed against it. I understood well the Bibles' teaching on homosexuality and wrestled to overcome my feelings and pretended to be like 'the lads'. Eventually in my late teens I confided in a Christian friend. He continued to talk to and pray for me over a number of years.

Knowing and respecting the church's teaching I practiced celibacy but felt alone, fearful and overwhelmed. The pressure of keeping it to myself, the feelings of shame, the guilt of feeling that I was living a lie and the fear of how the news would affect my parents and my church life eventually took its toll on my mental health. I had to take various medicines for depression and on one occasion came very close to committing suicide.

People in the church would crack jokes about 'Gays' and I just wanted to crawl into a hole. How could I open up to them when my struggles were joked about? I respect my minister and his teaching, but when homosexuality was mentioned in church the Biblical position of calling practising homosexuality sin was outlined without ever a word of compassion or understanding for people like me who were struggling so hard and hadn't chosen to feel the way I did.

One of my greatest struggles was that I had always been brought up to respect and to tell the truth. Yet here I was living and telling lies to protect my family and myself. Eventually I felt I had no other option but to tell my parents about my struggles. They were devastated and so were my friends at church. It is devastating when all who made you and shaped and directed your life turn on you.

I am not bitter, I still love my family and respect my church but when I really needed someone to listen to me without judgement, there was no one. I would love to be straight. It would cause so much less pain but for the sake of my own sanity I have eventually had to accept that I am gay. I am both a Christian who loves God and His word, but I am also gay.

Mental Health matters

Bob's story is not unique! Many in similar circumstances struggle with their mental health, including depression requiring medical help, engaging in substance abuse, self-harming, having suicidal thoughts and attempting suicide. Sadly, for some it not just an attempt. It is estimated that 1 in 4 of the population will suffer from mental health issues at some time in their lives.³ For same-sex attracted people in Ireland North and South this proportion rises to 2 out of 3.⁴

Families, schools, places of work, churches, sports clubs etc. can all be difficult places for same-sex attracted people of all ages.

As a Church we want to be aware of the impact words and actions can have on a persons' mental wellbeing and to practice appropriate sensitivity.

The church ought to be a place in which people feel they are safe, heard, loved, cared for, valued, and are helped to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. In addition, where there are mental health struggles professional help may be required. The church should not be hesitant to refer on for appropriate medical care while continuing to be pastorally supportive.

Family tensions

Coming out can also raise tensions and struggles within families.

'A bereavement' is a common description used by parents on hearing that their son or daughter is same-sex attracted. There is also a loss of face, and of friends. 'My son lost friends and so did I'. There can be a loss of place and respect within the church. Also, there is the shattering of hopes and dreams. 'I may never have a grandchild'.

It raises difficult questions for families.

- What happens when they come to stay? Can we have them to stay?
- How do we approach this with the grandparents?
- How can I show the same unconditional love to my child when I cannot agree with their lifestyle?
- Should we go to the wedding?

Some parents come to terms with the issue by accepting and endorsing the lifestyle of their son or daughter. The content of this document will suggest this does not have to be the way forward. Others feel they cannot do this and constantly live with the tension of wanting to show unconditional love to their son or daughter while not endorsing their lifestyle. This is extremely difficult, as it can be perceived as rejection.

3 Mental Health First Aid Manual, Northern Ireland. Published by The Public Health Agency, 2008, p71.

4 *Through Our Minds – Exploring the Emotional Health and Wellbeing of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender people in Northern Ireland*, by Malachai O'Hara, Published by The Rainbow Project, 2013. *Supporting LGBT Lives: A Study of the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) People*, 2009. The study was carried out by the Children's Research Centre in Trinity College Dublin and the School of Education at University College Dublin, commissioned by the BeLonG to Youth Service and the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN).

One mother's experience.

She told how her son had attempted suicide several times before he eventually 'came out'. There followed a grieving process before she came to terms with it, but still needs support. She found that she lost friends within the church and felt she had no one within the Presbyterian Church she could turn to for understanding and help. Only through external information and a support group independent of PCI was she able to find help. She found pulpit ministry difficult as it either only condemned same sex relationships or referred to people with same sex attractions in a negative light with little compassion or understanding for the struggle they go through. She has since found support in a different church.

The experience of other parents.

Their adult daughter got engaged to a woman and told them she was getting married, knowing that they could not endorse this decision because they held firmly to a Biblical understanding of marriage. It caused tensions but the father backed off a bit to let things cool down. Both parents reassured their daughter that they loved her and respected her partner who came to their house, staying in a separate room. Their daughter didn't query this as it also held for her siblings in heterosexual relationships. The parents wrestled with whether to go to the wedding or not. In the end they wanted to preserve the relationship long-term and to reassure their daughter of their love, so decided to go on the understanding that they would take no active part in the wedding. They told a number of people in the church but not many, feeling that it wasn't their job to 'broadcast' their daughter's life. Those they told were generally sympathetic and sought to understand what it would be like to be in their shoes.

Many from evangelical churches today are turning away from a Biblical understanding of marriage and sexuality because of the pressure of popular opinion. Others feel they have to change in order to be pastorally sensitive and supportive. Still others, because they have become convinced of a revisionist position. Faced with grandchildren or children who are dearly loved and are so loving; who love the Lord but also experience same-sex attraction, a number have adopted a revisionist point of view. In the face of human experience, it is Biblical understanding that seems to be giving way. The idea that sex is for marriage and marriage is between a man and a woman is perceived as no longer plausible. Yet God's word remains clear and unchanging.

It is important for Christian parents to love their children and be there for them even when they cannot endorse all their decisions in life. This is not just a same-sex matter. Many parents whose children are heterosexual can find themselves struggling to affirm their child's choice of partner or other choices in life.

Part of the cost of parenthood is to love and let go. Part of the cost of following Jesus is to love and not let go of His truth, yet to keep on loving.

4. Biblical foundations

As a church, certain core beliefs are foundational to our understanding of the world and ourselves including our sexuality and the expression of it. These are foundational in guiding how we treat people in general.

4.1 Firstly, based on the early chapters of Genesis we believe that we were created by God in His image as the height of His creation. The Psalmist describes us as *'fearfully and wonderfully made'* (Psalm 139:14). God entered into a covenant relationship with us in a way that He didn't with any other part of His creation and part of the intimacy of God's relationship with human beings is reflected in the marital union between a man and a woman.

In God's creation design, the covenant He made with human beings could only be fulfilled as they would become fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue (or govern) it (Genesis 1). Child-bearing was part of God's perfect original design and covenant in the one-man, one-woman relationship He created.

4.2 Secondly, we believe that we are all fallen beings, through the fall of the first man and woman Adam and Eve. Since then, every one of us is broken or fallen in our total humanity which includes our sexuality. As Prof Stephen Williams writes, *"...we encounter in our own sexuality something unstable or fragile, unruly or disorienting, a cause for perplexity or anxiety."*⁵

This is so for those with heterosexual or homosexual attractions, so no-one can feel smug or superior nor victimise or diminish another simply on the basis of our common fallen sexuality.

However, it does raise significant questions about our sexual desires and how we act upon them. 'How could something that feels so good be wrong?' is not a point of guidance from God's Word, nor is it appropriate to say, 'Follow your heart,' given that both Jeremiah and Hosea tell us that 'the heart is deceitful' (Jeremiah 17:9; Hosea 10:2) and Jesus Himself told us that 'out of the heart come evil thoughts – murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander'. (Matthew 15:19)

Our fallenness means that all of us suffer, in one way or another, from disordered love and desires, or to put it another way, love and desires that are not ordered according to God's perfect blueprint.

Sexuality is part of that perfect creation. We are sexual beings and we can express that sexuality in appropriate ways according to God's design whether we are married or single. The Lord Jesus Christ was the only perfect and utterly fulfilled human being who ever lived and yet He remained single. So, we reject the message so powerfully promoted by contemporary society that to be a fulfilled human being and to have fulfilled relationships they must involve sex.

5 Prof Stephen Williams, *The Question of Homosexuality*, PCl, 2013

God's word has a high view of singleness and hence celibacy and speaks of how the single person is free from many concerns and better placed to 'give themselves' freely and fully to the Lord. (1 Corinthians 7:28-35)

The Song of Solomon (2:7; 3:5; 8:4) speaks against arousing or awakening sexual feelings until the appropriate time and context. This is a guide for those who are both homosexually and heterosexually attracted on how to honour God, their bodies and the bodies of others. Therefore, in the contexts when sex is excluded on Biblical grounds, we need to be careful not to awaken or arouse those feelings.

4.3 Thirdly, we believe that Jesus Christ came to redeem the world and ultimately to renew the whole of creation in new heavens and earth. On the cross Christ freed us from both the penalty and the power of sin. The Apostle Paul was able to write to the Romans that '...sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.' (Romans 6:14) This is a promise and a calling. Those who are united to Christ Jesus by faith are no longer under the power or control of sin because they are now under grace. Those who are united to Christ need not be controlled by sexual desires, be they legitimate or otherwise.

Of course, believers have not yet been freed from the presence of sin and so are subject to all kinds of temptations. Some are tempted in one way and some in another. James describes the process of such temptation: '...each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death...' (James 1v14-15)

But the cross and resurrection of Christ, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in every believer leads them towards a life lived in obedience to God. Believers are enabled then to resist temptation in areas which God has ruled out-of-bounds in order that they may live holy lives. This is so of sexuality whatever a believer's attractions. By God's grace our failures can be forgiven and we can resist the temptations of our own sinful natures and those that come from our adversary the devil. In other words, we can resist temptations that come to us both internally and externally. This is the spiritual struggle all believers face but with God's help we can live in obedience to God's word.

Having taken the penalty and broken the power of our sin on the cross Jesus rose again to give the offer of hope, new life and a redeemed future to all who repent of their sin and turn from it to believe and follow Him. Those who follow Christ have a living hope that one day all these struggles will be over, and He will make us new, pure and holy in every aspect of our being. Until that day He is continually transforming us through the power of His Spirit to live satisfied, joyful and obedient lives according to His truth.

4.4 Fourthly, there will be no human marriage in heaven because the perfect relationship towards which it points will have come to be. That is, the union of Christ the Groom with His Bride, the Church. Not even the best of human relationships comes close to that one. All we have here, even sexual fulfilment, is just a shadow of what we will have in eternity.

4.5 In summary, we are created and dearly loved by God. But because of the Fall our attractions and desires are disordered. He accepts us as we are when we repent and come to faith in Christ, but He does not leave us as we are. Becoming a Christian is to enter into a life of obedience to Christ Jesus and His word, the Bible, and into a lifestyle which is a fruit of true faith in Christ and commitment to follow Him as Lord. But it is also a relationship of love with God that no other human relationship can come close to and which will be perfected in heaven.

While a person's sexuality is a very important part of their lives, it does not define who they are. Biblically, we as a church maintain that a person is defined in the first instance in terms of their relationship to God - creation in relation to Creator.

These are the core beliefs which undergird the position of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland that sexual relationships between members of the same sex are not consistent with the word of God, but they also emphasise the Church's position that love and hope is extended to all of us in Jesus Christ, irrespective of our sexuality.

5. Dispelling myths

Despite much greater understanding in society there is still the need in some churches to dispel myths about same-sex attraction.

It is widely accepted that children are no more at risk from a person who is same sex attracted than from a person who is heterosexual. Homosexuality is not paedophilia.

Nor is a same-sex attracted person any more a sexual predator than someone with heterosexual desires. In fact, we often show our double standards by looking on 'boys chasing the girls' in a lustful way as a natural thing. Whereas a girl who does the same is looked on as 'cheap' and a person with same sex attractions as perverted.

Not everyone who experiences same-sex attraction is a gay activist. Many will never be seen at a Pride event or making a public statement but wish, simply, to get on with ordinary, everyday life. As Tracy said in our opening story, she was 'just another gay person in London.'

Nor is everyone who is attracted to members of the same sex actively involved in a relationship. Some follow biblical guidance and choose the difficult path of life long celibacy.

Such myths can be hurtful, humiliating, degrading and condemning to those who experience same-sex attraction. They are also characteristic of the stereotyping and the lack of understanding that fuels homophobic attitudes.

From a different angle, it is a myth to say that if I do not accept your sexuality then I do not accept you as a person. That is simply not true to life as we know it. Many people will have friends with whom they do not agree on certain important points. We also have friends that have made life choices that we would not endorse, yet they are still our friends.

6. Clarity in conversation

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland maintains that in God's plan sexual intimacy is part of the two-into-one intimacy shared in the marriage relationship and only to be exercised in that relationship.

"Since the beginning of creation God, in His gracious purpose, provided marriage as the accepted way in which a man and a woman may come together as husband and wife. This is the only basis on which marriage can take place within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland."⁶

As Prof Stephen Williams writes,⁷ *"The Bible's concern is with the positive flourishing of human beings, whether it is in the area of sex or any other area. Boundaries within which the Christian tradition has celebrated sexual activity – marriage and marital fidelity – are meant to enhance, not to destroy, true freedom."*

Yet it is important for us to recognise that the desires for love (in all its aspects), intimacy, companionship etc. that move heterosexual couples towards marriage are the same desires that motivate those attracted to members of the same sex.

When a church states that it cannot agree with same-sex sexual relationships it is most often taken as rejection of the person because of their perceived identity – i.e. 'I am gay! However, as a church, we believe our identity should be defined primarily in terms of our humanity before God and not in terms of sexual desires. Other aspects of our perceived identities are not unimportant but for the Christian they are all subservient to our primary identity in Christ. It would be helpful in conversation if we focused more on the whole person and did not make sexuality the focus of our understanding.

The 'rights' dominated culture surrounding 'gay' issues sends a message to the church that it is not acceptance as people that is being sought but rather endorsement of a way of life. The problem for many within the church is that while they would want to accept people in the name of Jesus Christ there appears to be little middle ground. Recognising the problem of loneliness and the need for intimate, fulfilling but non-sexualised friendships the church has much to do in fostering such communities.⁸ It is undoubtedly true that our congregations need to be more like the church Tracy experienced than that of Bob.

6 General Assembly Reports 2016: General Council Report, page 41, par.19 .

7 Prof Stephen Williams, *The Question of Homosexuality* (2013).

8 There is much to be learned from the short book, *True Friendship*, by Vaughan Roberts, mentioned under Resources.

7. Pastoral care

7.1 Introduction

This is not the place to discuss a full definition of pastoral care in a congregational context. At least in the congregational context pastoral care involves holding the word of God in one hand and care for the person in the other and bringing the two together.

It is acknowledged at the outset of this section that the contexts in which pastoral care will be sought are many and varied. For example, not everyone who is same sex attracted struggles with it. They may not see any need for pastoral care for themselves but their family members may benefit from pastoral care. Others do struggle with same sex attraction and will seek pastoral care. Some people who are same sex attracted will, out of Biblical conviction, decide to live a celibate life but they too can benefit from the pastoral care and the support of their congregations. On the other hand, there are those who are comfortable with same sex relationships and feel (or see) no need for pastoral care.

There are broader questions here as to 'what constitutes a same-sex sexual relationship.' An arbitrary list of what is and what is not appropriate is unhelpful. Sexual desire in itself is God-given as we see in the Song of Solomon. But how sexual desires are to be acted upon is also subject to God's Word as the section on Biblical Background brings out. We know that sinful desires begin in the mind before they are given action, so part of the challenge of discipleship is to make our thoughts subject to God's Word, in order that we might act in ways that are biblically appropriate.

We acknowledge that there are many pastoral scenarios related to this area. For example, when a husband leaves his wife and children having 'come out'.

The accepted danger of brief guidelines is that they cannot cover every eventuality, nor should they try to. This guidance focuses mainly on those who struggle with their same-sex attractions.

It should also be noted that many of the issues raised concerning same sex relationships are similar to those faced by the church in relation to heterosexual relationships outside of a faithful married relationship.

7.2 The need for care in the use of language

Pastoral care is inseparable from preaching of the word of God. A consistent approach is needed both in pulpit ministry and in one-to-one conversation. Compassion begins in the pulpit and works out from there. Unbalanced condemnation from the pulpit closes the door to compassionate care outside the pulpit and may have an adverse impact on a persons' mental wellbeing.

We need to avoid unhelpful words or statements, such as ‘Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve’; ‘Love the sinner, hate the sin’. Such derogatory colloquialisms tend to lock the door to effective pastoral care before it is even open.

It is important for the person’s family both to hear and be shown compassionate understanding of the feelings and struggles involved as well as the biblical issues.

A balanced proclamation of God’s Word is essential. When we consider 1 Corinthians 6, we might conclude that there are more idolaters, slanderers and greedy people in our congregations than *“men who practice homosexuality”*. 1 Corinthians 6:9 (ESV)

7.3 The importance of confidentiality

As in all pastoral care, keeping the pastoral conversation confidential is crucial. Even if the person has made their position public any struggles they might have are still personal to them. Confidentiality also applies to what is shared by those close to the person, for example, their parents. Keeping confidentiality is critically important to the integrity of the person providing pastoral care and for creating a trusting pastoral relationship.

However, as in all pastoral care, absolute confidentiality cannot be promised. If the person is at risk of harm, for example, because of associated mental health concerns, other appropriate people should be informed (those providing pastoral care in a congregation should be trained and informed about this process for any pastoral situation). For further information on mental health such as depression or suicide see the resources listed at the end of these guidelines.

In addition, it may be appropriate for the person providing pastoral care to ask permission to share information with another suitable person rather than carry the burden of pastoral care alone.

7.4 Pastoral wisdom in a first conversation

For a person wrestling with their sexuality to come out and tell someone may have taken months even years. They will probably have gone through a long period of mental auditioning, weighing up different friends, family members, acquaintances, before deciding whom to tell. Even then it takes a great deal of courage to ‘come out’. The fear of rejection, loss of love, even hatred may be almost palpable at the point of disclosure. From that moment there is no retreat. It is therefore important that a minister, elder, leader, family member understands that their first reactions have the potential to crush or bring hope. The person will hear body language and attitude even more than words.

What the person does not need to hear:

- That they are imagining it
- That they are sick
- That they are a disgrace
- At this point they may not even need to hear what the Bible says about sexuality

What it may be helpful to hear:

- That they are loved
- That God's love has not changed
- That they have displayed great courage in telling you
- That you appreciate the trust placed in you
- That you will seek to listen carefully and to understand what they have been going through

A useful principle to keep in mind is not to agree with anything you are not sure about.

7.5 Long term pastoral care

It is imperative to state that the role of pastoral care is not to insist a person with same sex attractions attends counselling. We recognise the danger of suggesting this person is sick and needs to be healed. All of us, in various ways are in need of the healing grace of Christ. There is evidence that while some people may discover a lessening in their same-sex attractions few people experience a full change.

It is also very important to state that heterosexuality is not a goal of the gospel. Nor does sexual attraction determine how we behave. Self-control is one element of the fruit of the Spirit. Sexual behaviour is certainly one area among many in which self-control is relevant to Christian discipleship.

While there are certain different approaches to pastoral understanding and care, the aim is helping people to discover what it means to live 'a lifestyle which is a fruit of true faith in Christ and commitment to follow Him as Lord' (see 4.5). This will take time, patience, love and support.

The work of caring for and growing disciples is lifelong. The Church of Jesus Christ does not expect believers to transform overnight into faithful disciples but to grow steadily in submission and obedience to Him. This is so for everyone, whatever their struggles may be.

"Helping others explore what it means to express a credible profession of faith involves sensitively listening and encouraging reflection."⁹

"In particular issues in which an area of lifestyle seems openly and obviously at odds with Christian belief, lifestyle or values, explore how these can be wisely brought to resolution allowing the expression of credible faith."¹⁰

There appears to be a small number of same-sex attracted people who have been able to marry an opposite sex partner and have a happy and fulfilled marriage.¹¹ However, anecdotally, the numbers appear to be small and in the light of this, getting married to

9 Credible Profession of Faith and Admission to the Sacraments. PCI 2021 3:1.

10 Credible Profession of Faith and Admission to the Sacraments. PCI 2021 4:5.

11 Rosaria Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, Crown & Covenant Publications, 2014.

someone of the opposite sex should not be presented as an easy 'solution' to someone who is same sex attracted because it could lead to greater problems and not less.

In some instances, it may be the family rather than the actual person that seeks pastoral care. It is important to journey with a family as they wrestle with the issues involved. Taking time to listen, to talk through with them the matters mentioned in this document and to pray for and with them can be immensely helpful as they think matters through and make choices that are likely to have long-term implications for family relationships.

Certain principles must be taken on board in all pastoral care and especially in this matter.

- a) Quick prayers and chapter and verse sticking plasters are rarely helpful.
- b) The pastoral carer must be aware and accepting of his/her own sexual brokenness.
- c) The person being cared for should not be ostracised. Churches must continue to love and act in a Christ-like way towards even those who behave in ways seen as inconsistent with God's word.
- d) It will be an encouragement to surround a person with love, family, ongoing pastoral care and also to help them to set and keep personal boundaries. This is just as helpful to those who are heterosexual.
- e) We recognise, preach and practise the fact that our failures are not final.

As a final important note under this section, we highlight the lives of those who experience same-sex attraction yet live fulfilling and satisfying celibate lives in obedience to God's word and commitment to the Lordship of Christ Jesus. This can be an extremely challenging and difficult journey and there is much to be learned from those who have walked such a path with grace, obedience and resilience.

8. The Church being the Church

The church has a crucial responsibility to create an environment of love, understanding, welcome, patience, forgiveness, openness, truth, discipline and grace for people who experience same-sex attraction and their families. People are naturally drawn to where they are loved.

It is also crucial that we admit and regret our failures and inadequacies, especially the occasions when we have handled pastoral care badly and caused hurt and fear. Also, the past failure of our silence and lack of biblical guidance given on matters of sexual ethics.

Those with pastoral responsibility might:

- a) Address sympathetically in services and teaching the struggles involved for individuals and their families.
- b) Actively promote an atmosphere of understanding and welcome rather than fear and rejection.
- c) Provide books, links to websites etc. to help individuals with same-sex attractions and their families and the congregation to be informed about the issues involved.
- d) Actively promote church family intimacy and the inclusion of those with same-sex attractions, as in Tracy's story. Do we really know what it is to live as the church in community with mutual love and responsibility for one another?
- e) Accompany those seeking baptism or admission to full communicant membership on their journey of exploring and professing faith, especially in the exceptional cases in which an area of their life seems openly and obviously at odds with Christian beliefs lifestyle or values.¹² Should such a situation arise it is perhaps even more important for church members to actively show family love and care. Church members should not undermine decisions made by the leadership but could actively keep the door open with a person that they might be restored to fellowship.
- f) Encourage the kind of open-door hospitality enjoyed by Tracy. This is equally the case for all singles. Surely this is the way we would want a member of our own family to be supported and loved.
- g) Use inclusive language and be sensitive towards those who are single.
- h) As discipleship often happens best in small groups, we might actively encourage small group / cell group involvement that includes openness and accountability for all.
- i) Encourage the kind of spiritual friendship enjoyed by David & Jonathan in which brother leans upon brother or sister upon sister in common commitment to the Lord.¹³ As with friendships between a male and a female, wisdom and caution are necessary if there are feelings of attraction. A small, mixed group of supportive friends may help to provide a more-healthy relational dynamic than just individuals.

¹² Credible Profession of Faith and Admission to the Sacraments. PCI 2021 Sections 4 & 5

¹³ Our understanding of 2 Samuel 1v26 is the historical one i.e. that it speaks of a depth of filial 'spiritual friendship,' and not, as some suggest today, that David and Jonathan were in a same-sex relationship.

- j) In any congregation wisdom is required when offering one-to-one care to people of the opposite sex. Similar wisdom may be required with individuals who are same-sex attracted. In such situations, male- to- female or female-to-male might be more appropriate, or a greater age differential.
- k) Actively help our Youth and Adult Groups to be informed and compassionate whilst still upholding the church's biblical position on this issue.
- l) Make use of the key congregational resource of families and appropriate friendships to provide the kind community and family support Tracy received.
- m) Especially for younger people, provide individual mentoring and nurturing from older, pastorally sensitive leaders outside their immediate family.
- n) Journey with those who are experiencing mental health issues and encourage the seeking of professional help when required. (A list of resources on mental health and wellbeing can be found on the PCI website at <http://www.presbyterianireland.org/Resources/Pastoral-Care-training-mental-health-awareness.aspx>)
- o) Explore the possibility of support groups (possibly linking several churches) both for those with same-sex attractions and their families.¹⁴
- p) If a minister, group of elders or congregation feel out of their depth, don't opt for doing nothing. Actively seek out those who can provide care and help and refer on.

In summary, we should -

- Encourage a better identity, centred on Christ and not our sexuality.
- Pass on the truth and stand firm on the word God has revealed to us.
- Honour both marriage and singleness instead of making marriage superior.
- Be clear in our teaching, publicly and privately on the real cost of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Were we to do these better as a church perhaps our pastoral care of all would improve!

¹⁴ True Freedom Trust, among others, has established some of these on a clearly biblical footing and they have worked successfully. See Resources.

9. Resource List

The following suggested resources are broadly within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland's position on same sex attraction.

Websites/organisations:

The True Freedom Trust: www.truefreedomtrust.co.uk

A UK based evangelical organisation. Their website has a number of helpful resources for individuals dealing with gay/lesbian issues personally. There is also a number of helpful articles for Christian parents with children who identify as gay or who struggle with same sex attraction. They are available to call on +44 (0)151 653 0773 – personal support can also be requested via their website.

Living Out: www.livingout.org

A website resource for church leaders and individuals either struggling with same-sex attraction personally or wanting to encourage those who do. It features video stories of people talking about their experiences. The resources and videos are for equipping elders and others providing pastoral care.

Rosaria Butterfield's website: www.rosariabutterfield.com

Rosaria Butterfield is the author of *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert* (see below for more details). Her website includes a study guide based on this book, various articles and a helpful frequently asked question page.

Spiritual Friendship: www.spiritualfriendship.org

A website edited by Wes Hill and Ron Belgau which provides a blog providing "Musings on God, Sexuality and Friendship".

Talk by Rev Professor Stephen Williams

The text of a talk by Rev Prof Stephen Williams on the subject of same sex attraction can be found here: www.presbyterianireland.org/Resources/Social-Issues/The-Question-of-Homosexuality.aspx

Books

A short introductory book with practical application

Is God anti-gay? And other questions about homosexuality, the Bible and same-sex attraction by Sam Allberry (The Good Book Company, 2013).

A short, easy to read book on what the Bible says on same sex attraction with practical advice on pastoral care in the church and sharing Christ with gay friends.

A book on reaching out to gay people

Walking with Gay Friends: A journey of informed compassion by Alex Tylee (IVP, 2007)

This book gives helpful advice on how to reach out with Christ's love to gay friends and also covers the practicalities of discipleship after conversion. The author has travelled that path herself.

A book on the value of friendship

True Friendship by Vaughn Roberts (10Publishing, 2013)

The author is a Christian who has chosen to be celibate because of struggles with same sex attraction. He has written this short, helpful book on the biblical approach to friendship.

A book on mental health

Mindful of the Light by Dr Stephen Critchlow (Instant Apostle 2016)

Because two out of three people who identify as gay experience mental health problems, anyone providing pastoral care should have some knowledge of mental health basics. This book, while not mentioning same sex attraction, helpfully covers common mental health problems from a pastoral Christian perspective. Further information on mental health can be found in the extensive resource list here: www.presbyterianireland.org/Resources/Congregational-Life/Mental-Health-Resources-List.aspx

Books with an autobiographical emphasis teaching from personal experience

Satisfaction Guaranteed: A future and a Hope for Same-Sex Attracted Christians by Jonathan Berry and Rob Wood (IVP, 2016).

The authors share what they have learned from their journeys as Christians who have struggled with same sex attraction.

The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith by Rosario Butterfield (Crown and Covenant, 2012)

A biographical account of the author's conversion to Christ and move out of a lesbian lifestyle. Further resources from the author are available in the website listed above.

Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality by Wes Hill (Zondervan, 2010)

This book describes the transforming grace of Jesus Christ and addresses issues such as overcoming loneliness for the same sex attracted Christian drawing from the author's own experience.

Books providing further biblical understanding

A better story: God, sex and human flourishing by Glynn Harrison (IVP, 2016)

This book makes the case that traditional Christian teaching on sex, marriage and human relationships is good news for today.

The plausibility problem by Ed Shaw (IVP, 2015).

This book helps us see how the Bible's teaching on same sex attraction seems unreasonable because of missteps in understanding, for example, 'your identity is your sexuality', 'celibacy is bad for you' and 'if you're born gay, it can't be bad to be gay'. The author is a Christian who has struggled with same sex attraction and has chosen to be celibate.

What does the Bible really teach about homosexuality by Kevin DeYoung (IVP 2015)

This book addresses the 'revisionist' position which is advocated by Christians who affirm same sex relationships with a revised interpretation of Scripture. The author provides a biblical case for the traditional view of marriage and effectively counters the common revisionist arguments.

People to be loved: Why homosexuality is not just an issue by Preston Sprinkle (Zondervan 2015)

This book explains the biblical position on same sex attraction while emphasising the grace and love of God for people who identify as gay.

Mere Sexuality by Todd Wilson (Zondervan 2017)

This book provides a foundational biblical understanding of sexuality with application for people who are same sex attracted. It includes teaching on understanding marriage and the importance of creating a strong friendship culture.



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