

GENERAL COUNCIL

SECTION 2

IMPLEMENTATION TASK GROUP

1. The Implementation Task Group was formed by the General Council in response to the 2018 General Assembly resolution: ‘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 remit approved by the General Council was to put together ‘a resource to be used at Kirk Session level, with a clear pastoral tone.’ Subsequently the General Council agreed that the remit be broadened to include training on a general approach to ‘a credible profession of faith’ as well as lifestyle issues.
2. Two sub-groups were formed – one to work on a resource on ‘a credible profession of faith’ and the other to work on updating the 2007 pastoral guidelines on homosexuality.
3. To inform the work, the task group organised a presbytery consultation day held in January 2019, to which approximately 200 were invited of whom approximately 150 were directly from presbyteries. Approximately 190 attended on the day. Papers were presented on PCI’s position re “the question of homosexuality”, “credible profession” and “pastoral guidelines”, with each presentation followed by round table discussion. This feedback in turn was forwarded to the task group and was used to inform the group’s discussions and further shape the resources.
4. Two draft resources for kirk sessions were presented at the March 2020 meeting of the General Council and adopted as part of the General Council’s report to the Standing Commission of the 2020 General Assembly. These draft resources were (a) ‘Credible profession of faith and admission to the sacraments: a framework for discussion for kirk sessions’ and (b) ‘Guidelines for pastoral care of same-sex attracted people and their families’. The Standing Commission resolved that they be sent in booklet form to presbyteries for discussion and comment, with responses due by 31 January 2021, a date subsequently extended to 14 May 2021 due to Covid-19 restrictions, to ensure sufficient time was available for discussion.
5. The task group is pleased to report that all 19 presbyteries responded to the booklet. Some sought input from kirk sessions within their bounds, some asked for individual written anonymous comments from ministers and representative elders, some held ‘single agenda’ meetings and some appointed task groups to draft reports for their consideration. It is clear from the responses received that whatever method was used there was serious engagement with the materials.

6. It was suggested by some that while the genesis of both resources was in one General Assembly resolution and, while it was useful at the draft stage to have both in one booklet, each should be published separately when approved, since the ‘credible profession’ resource addresses the general subject of admission to the sacraments rather than a particular issue. The task group agrees with this and a recommendation is appended (recommendation 2).
7. **Credible profession of faith and admission to the sacraments: a framework for discussion for kirk sessions.** There was general approval of the resource’s approach, content and tone. Sixteen presbyteries expressed supportive views, e.g., ‘a good help in facilitating discussion’, ‘excellent, clear, concise, useful’, ‘well presented, bible based, great framework for discussion’, ‘generally worthwhile and helpful’, ‘combination of clarity and sensitivity, winsome pastoral tone’, ‘thoughtful, engaging’, ‘helpful discussion questions’, ‘warmly and clearly communicates the teaching of our church’, ‘a very good paper’, ‘carefully unpacks the issues’. Two presbyteries forwarded responses from kirk sessions and individual presbytery members without comment – these responses were fairly evenly divided between approval and criticism. One presbytery, plus one individual in another presbytery, requested that it be re-written, with the former expressing ‘alarm’ at the use of the word ‘credible’ – a view which appears to overlook the remit of the task group.
8. Some common themes emerged: the issue of how to accept special needs young people and adults into membership, the use of Matthew 13 and 18 in sections 3.3 and 3.4, and the reference in section 5.4 to services of thanksgiving/dedication.
 - 8.1 It is important to acknowledge and address how to accept special needs young people and adults into membership if they are not able to accept and articulate their faith in the same way as others, and the task group firmly believes this work should be done. However, it does not believe that it is the appropriate group to do it as it lacks specialism in this area. A recommendation is appended that another task group be appointed to address this subject (recommendation 3).
 - 8.2 While there was general appreciation of the use of both Matthew 13 and 18, a few queried the interpretation of Matthew 18 and one presbytery queried the interpretation of Matthew 13. In response, some minor changes and footnotes have been added to sections 3.3 and 3.4 to clarify the teaching in these sections. In addition, some changes have been made to section 3.1 to emphasise the positive and inclusive aim of the whole process and its pastoral nature. With regard to the expository nature of sections 3.3 and 3.4, one presbytery expressed a concern that ‘many of our elders are not readers’ and that a video resource might be useful. The task group had considered this and believed it could be useful, but decided not to proceed at the draft stage. It now recommends that, once the resource is approved by the General Assembly, a video be produced of the material in sections 3.3 and 3.4 (recommendation 4).

- 8.3 With regard to services of thanksgiving/dedication, it was noted that the current wording in the resource reflects the wording of the Book of Public Worship and therefore is consistent with what the General Assembly has already approved.
9. There were three requests for additional theological material, i.e., ‘a thoroughly scriptural picture of the church in New Testament theology’, ‘more guidance on what actually constitutes a credible profession’ and ‘a theological explanation about what credible faith is and how it functions within the covenant of grace.’ While the task group is sympathetic to such requests, it believes there is sufficient theological material already within the resource. Moreover, the purpose of the document is to be a training resource for use within kirk sessions and, as such, needs to be kept reasonably straightforward. It was decided, therefore, not to include further resources, apart from the one referenced at 8.2.
10. **Guidelines for pastoral care of same-sex attracted people and their families.** As with the ‘credible profession’ resource, there was substantial approval in terms of its approach, content and tone, e.g., ‘sensitively written’, ‘excellent resource’, ‘very helpful’, ‘genuine and useful’, ‘strikes a difficult balance between biblical teaching and sensitive pastoral care’, ‘a very good start’, ‘more strengths than weaknesses’, ‘well balanced, sensitive, empathetic, compassionate and a genuine expression of truth and love’, ‘very balanced and excellent overview’, ‘helpful resource’. This is not to say that positivity was universal, e.g., there was a comment that it is arrogant to define LGBT+ people as being in need of pastoral care without recognising they are well placed to offer it. However, a large majority of the comments were constructive even when improvements were requested.
11. Numerous helpful suggestions have been adopted, some to aid flow and clarity, and some to improve language and content. Among these are the following:
- The term ‘guidelines’ has been changed to ‘guidance’ because ‘guidelines’ carries a technical meaning within PCI.
 - A note has been added on the contents page to clarify that the stories in the document are illustrative.
 - A paragraph has been moved from section 3 into the last paragraph of section 2 as it relates more to background than to mental health: i.e., paragraph beginning ‘In relation to how some people are treated within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland...’
 - A possible ambiguity in the wording ‘non-celibate same-sex relationships are not consistent with the Word of God’ (last paragraph of section 4) has been removed by changing the wording to ‘sexual relationships between members of the same sex are not consistent with the Word of God’.
 - ‘Aggression’ (section 2) has been changed to ‘disagreement’, ‘juggernaut’ (section 3) to ‘pressure’, ‘force’ (section 7.5) to ‘insist’, ‘acceptance’ (section 8) to ‘welcome’.

12. In other places additions or subtractions have been made in response to comments.
 - Section 6, penultimate paragraph: a new sentence has been added after ‘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’; i.e., ‘Other aspects of our perceived identities are not unimportant but for the Christian they are all subservient to our primary identity in Christ’.
 - Section 6, last paragraph: a new sentence has been added after ‘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’; i.e., ‘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’; a footnote has also been added referencing Vaughan Roberts’ book ‘True Friendship’.
 - Section 7.1, last paragraph: a new sentence has been added before ‘The accepted danger of brief guidance is that it cannot cover every eventuality, nor should it try to’; i.e., ‘We acknowledge that there are many pastoral scenarios related to this area, for example, where a husband leaves his wife and children having “come out”’.
 - Section 7.5, penultimate paragraph: a new paragraph has been added before the paragraph beginning ‘Certain principles must be taken on board’; i.e., ‘It is likely that in some instances it may be the family rather than the actual person who seek 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.’
 - Section 7.5, last paragraph: a new paragraph has been added after the existing last paragraph; i.e., ‘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.’
 - Section 8g, the examples have been removed as they appeared to cause some unnecessary distraction.
13. Some responses expressed a concern about how the resource would be perceived by a wider audience. While this is a valid concern, the resource needs to do what it sets out to do, which is to focus on equipping people to provide good congregational pastoral care, and not try to be all things to all people.

14. There were also various requests for additional materials, mostly about engaging with current culture, but all of these are beyond the remit of the task group.
15. The task group has reflected further on the issues of support for pastoral carers and referring on and recommends that a joint task group be formed to assist ministers and youth workers/leaders in the outworking of the pastoral guidance resource (recommendation 5).
16. The task group commends to the church the resource ‘Credible profession of faith and admission to the sacraments: a framework for discussion for kirk sessions’ (appendix A) and the resource ‘Guidance for pastoral care of same-sex attracted people and their families’ (Appendix B), with the prayer that they assist kirk sessions to deal with these important areas with wisdom, sensitivity and grace.

H A DUNLOP, Convener

IMPLEMENTATION TASK GROUP

APPENDIX A

Credible profession of faith and admission to the sacraments **A framework for discussion for kirk sessions**

1. The congregation as a community in which faith can be explored, experienced and expressed
 - 1.1. One of the joys of church life is accompanying individuals on a journey to exploring, experiencing and expressing faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord.
 - 1.2. Two particular moments in which this happens are when baptism is requested and people are coming into full communicant membership for the first time. Of course, these are but two moments in an ongoing culture of congregational life which creates an environment in which we are all constantly seeking to encourage one another in the challenge of living God’s way in every area of our lives.
 - 1.3. There is a particular role and responsibility for ministers and ruling elders to guide and shepherd the flock and to do so in a way that is loving. This role extends to conversations about admission to the sacraments.
 - 1.4. As in all areas of the life of the congregation, *‘ruling elders as members of Kirk Session... work together with the minister in the oversight and government of the congregation, for the upbuilding of God’s people in spiritual fruitfulness and holy concord, and for the extension of Christ’s kingdom among all people’* (The Code, paragraph 30, section 1).

For discussion

How do we as a kirk session take responsibility together for admitting to the sacraments? What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of how you do that?

2. Guiding and preparing others in exploring what it means to come into full church membership

- 2.1 Kirk sessions helping others explore and seek to understand what it means to come into full church membership and to express a credible profession of faith has been a long standing practice in PCI.

The Code describes how, *‘a minister shall encourage baptism of the children of all such as may make a credible profession of faith’*, and that, *‘a minister shall not decide on admission or refusal of a person to baptism without the authority of the Kirk Session’* (*The Code*, paragraph 83, sections 1&2).

Similarly, *‘the Kirk Session shall admit to the Lord’s Supper only those who have been baptised, who make a profession of faith in the Lord, and whose character is consistent with such a profession.’* *‘Persons proposing to take communion for the first time shall be carefully instructed by the minister. When the Kirk Session has satisfied itself as to their knowledge, soundness in the faith and Christian experience, their names shall be entered on the roll of communicants and be read to the congregation’* (*The Code*, paragraph 40, sections 1&2).

- 2.2 The precise details of how this happens will vary from congregation to congregation and depend on the particular circumstances and personality of those involved. However, it is important that conversations do take place and instruction is provided and that this is approached in an open, encouraging, positive tone. As this happens, a space is opened up for growing personal understanding of what is involved in knowing God as our heavenly Father, trusting Christ as Saviour and Lord, along with the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit to guide us into truth and empower us to live by it. If conducted well, real life implications of following Christ as Lord will surface in this conversation. Some will be general, but others may be very particular. Whatever time and care is taken by minister and kirk session is worth the effort, and occasionally awkwardness, if the whole congregation is to share the joy of those publically professing faith and coming to enjoy the privileges of full membership.

For discussion

What challenges do we as a kirk session face in helping others explore and express a credible profession of faith?

What might be the long-term benefits to our congregation of a kirk session adopting this approach?

3. Asking for too much? Looking for too little?

- 3.1 Helping others explore the nature of a credible profession of faith involves sensitively listening and encouraging reflection. The aim of this pastoral process is always inclusive – to enable a person to make a public profession of faith, depending on the grace of God. It is possible for our approach to ask for too much, such as proof of inner spiritual rebirth. We might also expect one who is making a profession to have attained a maturity of faith that is unrealistic. Similarly we might unwittingly look for a particular shape and language in the articulation of someone's story in how and when they came to faith. Equally, however, it is possible to be looking for too little. We shy away from our pastoral responsibility as elders if we fail to recognise that some professions might not be credible, when an area of their life seems openly and obviously at odds with the fruit of true faith in Christ and commitment to follow him as Lord.
- 3.2 The balance we strike in this task is crucial if we are not to needlessly discourage some, or carelessly encourage others, in entering into the privileges and duties of full church membership. The following material from Dr Martyn C. Cowan, Lecturer in Historical Theology at Union Theological College, helps us to consider where we might be imbalanced in our approach to credible profession of faith. It is based on two key passages of Scripture, Jesus' Parable of the Weeds in Matthew 13:24-30 and his teaching in Matthew 18:15-20.
- 3.3 Asking for too much (Read: Matthew 13:24-30)

No one can see into the heart of another individual, and so elders should not attempt to distinguish those who are truly inwardly regenerate from those who are merely outwardly nominal. A Session can only make its decision on the basis of what it can see – it should seek neither a 'mere profession' nor an 'accredited profession', but instead a 'credible profession'.

In practice, this means that when Kirk Sessions are judging a profession of faith they must avoid the twin errors of what we will call 'indifference and rigorism'. With rigorism the bar is set too high and with indifference the bar is set too low. There is rich Scriptural testimony warning us about either of those errors.

We begin with the danger of rigorism. Here one significant passage to turn to is our Lord's parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13. There, Jesus describes himself as the kingly-farmer who is planting seeds that grow up as Christian believers – the sons of the kingdom (v. 38); these plants are the righteous who have God as their Father (v. 43). The boundaries of the field are vast – Christ's kingdom is growing around the whole world (v. 38).¹ Now while the master's servants were sleeping, an intruder came at night and sowed weeds in the field of wheat before

1 This line of interpretation which understands the phrase 'the field is the world' (v.38) as speaking of the church spread throughout the world follows the tradition of Augustine, Calvin, and the Westminster Assembly (WCF 25.5).

slipping off into the darkness. According to Jesus, these weeds represent the children of the evil one [v.38].

Eventually the servants saw the problem with these weeds and spoke to the master about it [v.27]. The wise farmer knew right away that this is the work of a malicious enemy, who was hell-bent on trying to destroy the kingdom [v.28].

One of the main reasons behind the servants' confusion was that the weed in question was not just any kind of weed. These were not dandelions or thorns; this particular weed was called darnel. Darnel was the bane of wheat farmers because to begin with it is almost indistinguishable from wheat; in colour and height it looked just like the real thing. It is only with time that the differences start to emerge. It is only when it develops a seed head that you realise that Darnel is actually counterfeit wheat.

According to Jesus' parable not everything that looks like wheat is wheat. This parable is teaching us that in the visible church, growing right in amongst the good wheat, there will always be weeds. It is exactly what Jesus said in Matthew 7:21: 'Not everyone who says to me "Lord, Lord", shall enter the kingdom of heaven'.

That is what the Reformed tradition means when it says that the church will remain a 'mixed multitude' until the end of the age.² True and false believers grow up in the church, side-by-side. Just like darnel and wheat, sometimes it is very difficult to tell them apart.

In the parable, the master's servants had not yet understood the implication of this. Some of them were quick to volunteer to go and deal with the weeds. They said 'we'll physically uproot them' (v. 28). Now, you can't fault them for their zeal. There is no indifference here; they want to try to put everything right immediately. Their goal was good, but their method wasn't the master's. With great wisdom Jesus says 'no, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them' [v.29]. Our master says that we are to wait patiently until the harvest at the judgment. We must avoid the danger of rigorism. Jesus says let them exist side-by-side, as a mixed multitude, because I will not lose even one weak stalk of grain.

You see, at this stage of history, the servants cannot always distinguish between the weeds and the wheat. That means that overzealous servants who try to uproot all weeds might, inadvertently, damage the genuine crop. The danger of rigorism is that some of the wheat would needlessly be uprooted.

3.4 Looking for too little (Read: Matthew 18:1-20)

Let us now consider this second danger, indifference. With this approach, the bar is set too low: any profession is assumed to be adequate for admission to baptism or to the Lord's Table. One of the most significant passages that warns us against indifference is Matthew 18:15-20. This is

2 For this theme in Matthew's gospel see 7:15-20; 13:47-48; 22:11-13; 24:45-51; 25:1-3.

found in a chapter which draws together a collection of Jesus' teaching on the church. In these verses, Jesus uses the language of 'binding' and 'loosing' in order to explain to the leaders of the church that they have been given 'the keys of the kingdom' which can lock and unlock (v.18). There should be no room for indifference because Christ himself has granted the leaders of his church the authority to open the door and close it on his behalf (cf. Matt. 16:19).³ As servants of the King they undertake incredibly significant work, opening the door to church membership and then into the full privileges and duties of communicant membership.

As he teaches this, our Lord lays out a process for dealing with public sin. That process can eventually reach a point where the church is told about the sin (v.17). The Reformed church has understood this to mean the matter being brought to the elders in the courts of the church. There the elders decide the matter upon good and sufficient evidence. Jesus grants the church the power to discipline those who are unrepentant. In our Lord's words, those who refuse to listen to the church are to 'be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector'.

There are several things to note about the passage which speaks of the exercise of 'the keys of the kingdom'.⁴ First, Jesus deals with church discipline in a discourse which calls us to a life of humility in which 'the little ones' are the 'greatest in the kingdom of heaven'. Therefore, following Jesus' method is not incompatible with humility [vv.1-4]. Secondly, the context in which these instructions are given is one in which Jesus warns us about our perennial temptation to treat sin as something relatively inconsequential [18:7-9]. Thirdly, we read about this process of discipline in a passage in which we are told that the Father has sent his Son to seek out those who wander away, and that restoration results in great joy [18:10-14]. We could summarise the first half of this chapter as teaching that the Church is a community divinely devised to counter our tendencies to go astray, excusing our behaviour, and not caring for those who are prone to stumble. Fourthly, having outlined a process that can, in some circumstances, result in excommunication, Jesus gives an incredible promise to his disciples. When they, or their successors, are faithfully engaged in this work as a court of the church their decisions reflect what God has already determined. Remember, the immediate context here is a matter of discipline [18:18-19]. Jesus Christ stands behind the elders that he has ordained both when they are opening and closing the door. How can this possibly be? Because Christ, by his Spirit, will be present amongst the elders whenever they are gathered together in the name, constituted to do his work, according to his word [18:20]. The King and head of the Church says, 'There I am among them'. Note, this is a promise which, in its specific context, applies to situations in which the church is making those difficult decisions. Lastly, these 'hard

3 Of course, churches can err and so there is the right of appeal to a higher court of the church.

4 WCF 30.2,4.

sayings' on church discipline are immediately followed by powerful words about the church being a community of grace that forgives others as Christ as forgiven us. If an individual refuses to listen 'to the church' they are to be treated as a 'Gentile or a tax collector' – the very people to whom the gracious call of the gospel goes out (9:9-11; 11:19). When our brother or sister repents, we are to be willing to forgive seventy-seven times over [18:21-35].

The notion of a credible profession of faith is the Reformed tradition's way of seeking to avoid these opposite dangers of either rigorism or indifference. It is an approach that endeavours to hold together all that Jesus says to us about who we are to regard as members of his church. It recognises that for the church of this age, spread across the world, wheat and weeds will grow together. It also submits to Jesus' teaching about the need for discipline. Not any and every profession is to be judged as credible. In this calling we are not left alone. The Lord of the church has given us his word. When elders are gathered together in his name to make hard and difficult decisions he is there amongst them.

For discussion

In journeying with others towards exploring and expressing a credible profession of faith, does your process tend towards an 'asking for too much' or 'looking for too little' approach? How might you need to adjust what you do and how you do it to better reflect the teaching of Scripture and the church?

4. **What is involved in accompanying others on their journey towards exploring and professing faith?**
 - 4.1 There are three key areas involved in accompanying those seeking baptism or admission to full communicant membership to explore and profess their faith:
 - Their understanding of the basics of Christian faith relating to the profession of faith they will be making and the promises they will be taking
 - Their general consistency of life with that profession of faith
 - In exceptional cases, addressing any particular issues in which an area of their life seems openly and obviously at odds with Christian belief, lifestyle or values.
 - 4.2 The process of admission to the sacraments is something which sits within the wider ongoing means of discipleship which happen both before and after any conversation. As this specific conversation happens, it is not an all or nothing moment, but takes place as part of the ongoing ministry of the Word and community of God's people.
 - 4.3 Once the conversation opens, it is wise and respectful always to leave space for people to decide that proceeding is not for them at this moment.

- 4.4 There is no need to rush. Take time in allowing discussion of the three areas above. Explore each fully.
- 4.5 If 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 a resolution allowing the profession of a credible faith. Be sensitive to individual circumstances, while at all times observing and respecting the teaching of Scripture and the standards and policies of the Church.⁵ Allow time for due consideration and ensure clarity in all that is said and done. All this should be approached with a pastoral heart, and obviously with respect for the principle of confidentiality.
- 4.6 Acknowledge that your kirk session will not always get the decision right, as only God knows the heart of another individual. However, take confidence that when elders are gathered together in his name to make hard and difficult decisions he is there among you.

For discussion

What can we as a kirk session learn from the guidance offered in the section above?

5. Further suggestions for consideration

- 5.1 Having worked through the material so far, it may be that you are challenged as a kirk session about the need to change something you do, or the way that you do it. The following suggestions are offered for the consideration of congregations arising from the practice of others and the teaching of the church.
- 5.2 Rather than the conversation about admission to the sacraments and recommendation of candidates being undertaken by the whole kirk session or the minister alone, why not involve a small group of members of Session in this work who can then report back to the whole kirk session?

5 The Code: The book of Constitution and Government of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland paragraph 104

(1) The General Assembly is the supreme court of the Church, representing in one body the whole Church, including all subordinate courts and particular congregations, and acting as its supreme legislative, administrative and judicial authority, in dealing with all matters brought before it.

(2) As such authority, the Assembly exercises the powers stated by this Code; and, in particular, it may – (a) deliberate upon and superintend matters which concern the whole Church in its doctrine, worship, witness, discipline and government, and declare the mind of the Church thereupon; (b) issue such directions and take such other action as it may find conducive to the welfare of the Church and the fulfilment of the Church's duties or the well-being of the community; and (c) deal with any matter, whether within or concerning the Church, which may arise and for which no other provision has been made.

(3) Decisions of the Assembly are final and binding upon the whole Church, but a member of the Assembly who dissents from a decision may require a statement of the fact of his dissent to be recorded in the minutes, although he shall not thereby free himself from obligation loyally to implement the decision so long as it stands unaltered.

- 5.3 Sometimes it may not be possible for parents to have their children baptised, because, on exploration of what is involved, they are unable to make a credible profession of faith. This need not be treated as the end of the matter. Guidelines approved by the General Assembly in 1974 addressing the area of Sacramental Discipline in the Baptism of Infants, encourage minister and kirk session to, ‘watch over all such cases so that [these children] might come to baptism as soon as profession of faith may properly be made by themselves if not by their parents.’ Could you keep a record of those families where children have not been baptised and find ways of prayerfully and pro-actively seeking to exercise particular pastorally sensitive evangelism in such situations?
- 5.4 The possibility of a Service of Thanksgiving (Dedication) for a Child where parents are not able to make baptismal vows is mentioned in the revised Statement on Baptismal Discipline following the 1973 debate in the Assembly, though the greatest forethought and care is urged. (‘Report of Doctrine Committee’, Reports to the General Assembly, 1974, pp.18, 22.) An outline for such a service is offered in the PCI Book of Public Worship page 24 which can be found on the PCI website www.presbyterianireland.org/Resources/Sacraments/Book-of-Public-Worship.aspx.

6. Suggested Prayer

Lord of the Church,

We give you thanks for your Fatherly love which tends and guides us in the life of our congregation;

We give you thanks for your redeeming love which offers salvation and life in Christ – reaching wide to embrace any, and all, who in sincerity and faith put their trust in him and acknowledge him as Lord of their lives.

We give you thanks for the Holy Spirit who opens to us the loving wisdom of the Word and helps us to walk in its grace and truth.

We thank you for your Church into which we are called, invited and find full expression of Christian faith and community.

We thank you for the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper in which we are reminded of your love and renewed in our walk with you.

We thank you for our calling as elders and our role as kirk session in the leadership of this congregation.

Help us, we pray, as we seek to accompany others in exploring and expressing a credible profession of faith as part of their journey of discipleship and church membership.

Help us to be wise, welcoming, warm and winsome in this task.

Help us to find balance in avoiding the twin pitfalls of asking for too much, or looking for too little.

Help us to help others to understand the Christian faith and embrace the Christian life, so that they, and we as a whole congregation, might share the joy of professing our faith in Christ together and so encourage one another.

Help us to be careful and prayerful in these aspects of our congregational life, to find fresh confidence in you as the one who is always among us as we gather as a kirk session to seek your will and further your work.

Lord of the Church,
hear our prayer,
for we ask it in Jesus' name.
Amen

IMPLEMENTATION TASK GROUP APPENDIX B

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

Contents

1. Tracy's story	2
2. Background to the updated guidelines	3
3. The need for pastoral guidance	5
4. Biblical foundations	9
5. Dispelling myths	13
6. Clarity in conversation	14
7. Pastoral care	15
i) Introduction	15
ii) The need for care in the use of language	16
iii) The importance of confidentiality	17
iv) Pastoral wisdom in a first conversation	17
v) Long term pastoral care	18
8. The Church being the Church	20
9. Resource List	23

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

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

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.

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 Bible's 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

3 Mental Health First Aid Manual, N. 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 N 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).

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 person's 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.

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.

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 1:14-15).

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 come 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, *“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.”*⁷

6 General Assembly Reports 2016: General Council Report Page 41 Para.19

7 Prof Stephen Williams, *The Question of Homosexuality*, 2013

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.

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

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

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 person's 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 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

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

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 and 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.

- (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 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!

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.

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 are 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.

HUMAN IDENTITY TASK GROUP

1. In the autumn of 2017, the General Council established the Human Identity Task Group as a means of seeking a Biblical and pastoral response to the complex and often difficult issues facing PCI members, families, ministers, congregations and wider society in respect of gender identity. The group consisted of a wide cross-section of people from theological, psychiatric, mental health, educational, youth work and public policy backgrounds.
2. From the outset, the task group was conscious of the urgent need to resource our denomination in order to help it navigate this publicly contested, highly nuanced and rapidly developing debate around gender identity. These issues are important but in congregational life what matters most is that those who struggle, and those close to them, receive good pastoral care that is full of God's love and truth. The group's focus therefore quickly became the production of pastoral guidelines.
3. In the meantime, while this publication was being produced, the task group sought and was given General Council approval to produce a customised version of Vaughan Roberts' short book on Transgenderism from the Talking Points series with a PCI introduction. 3000 copies of this book were printed and distributed to every minister and congregation at the 2019 General Assembly.
4. Draft "A Biblical Framework and Pastoral Care Guidelines for people who struggle with gender identity, and their families" was brought to the March 2020 meeting of the General Council and adopted as part of the General Council's report to the Standing Commission of the 2020 General Assembly. The Standing Commission resolved that they be sent in booklet form to presbyteries for discussion and comment, with responses due by 31 January 2021, a date subsequently extended to 14 May 2021 due to Covid-19 restrictions, to ensure sufficient time was available for discussion.
5. The task group is pleased to report that 18 of the 19 presbyteries responded to the booklet. Some sought input from kirk sessions within their bounds, some asked for individual written anonymous comments from ministers and representative elders, some held 'single agenda' meetings and some appointed task groups to draft reports for their consideration. It is clear from the responses received that whatever method was used there was serious engagement with the materials.
6. There was general approval of the resource's approach, content and tone: 'pastoral sensitivity commended', 'good, careful and balanced', 'helpful and timely', 'general content and tone to be commended' are some of the phrases presbyteries used.
7. On the other hand, a number of presbyteries took a critical view on the overall approach of the guidelines, however, this is contrary to the positive appraisal of a majority of presbyteries.
8. A significant number of presbyteries requested that the Biblical background section should be expanded. As this resource is meant to offer both a Biblical foundation and pastoral guidelines, these concerns are valid and are reflected in the greatly extended section on the Biblical foundation in

the revised guidelines. Several presbyteries mentioned the importance of preaching on this issue and that more clarity is needed on church discipline. Some presbyteries would even have liked a more critical analysis of the current cultural debate surrounding gender identity. The task group felt that these desires fell outside its remit.

9. Some presbyteries commented on the fact that the pastoral scenarios were overly optimistic and it would be good to include a situation where there was a less positive outcome. The point was made that there is a lack of specific guidance on pastoral care for parents – therefore a change in the title or adding this guidance is required. The title also needs to make clear that this resource is primarily for people who provide pastoral care and not for those receiving it. These comments have been taken on board and are reflected in the revised title ‘A Biblical Framework and Guidance for Pastoral Care of People who Struggle with Gender Identity.’ A number of other minor changes and edits were also made in response to various Presbytery comments.
10. The task group commends to the church “A Biblical Framework and Guidance for Pastoral Care of People who Struggle with Gender Identity” (Appendix A) with the prayer that they will guide and assist all of us to show the love of God with sensitivity, wisdom, truth and grace.

DANIEL KANE, Convener

HUMAN IDENTITY TASK GROUP APPENDIX A

A biblical framework and guidance for pastoral care of people who struggle with gender identity.

Contents

Introduction	4
Biblical background and foundation	6
The Contemporary Context	10
The need for pastoral guidance	14
Pastoral care: one to one	16
Pastoral care: as a church family	20
Scenario 1	23
Scenario 2	25
Scenario 3	27
Glossary of terms	29
Further resources	31

Bible references are from the NIV and ESV versions.

Introduction

Who is this resource for?

This resource is for kirk sessions and anyone in a congregation who provides pastoral care to people who struggle with their gender identity and/or their families and others close to them. This includes ministers, deaconesses, pastoral workers, youth workers/leaders and elders who may be involved in providing one to one pastoral care. It also extends to the whole church family as they seek to be a caring fellowship. This resource is intended to help equip those who provide pastoral care rather than to be given to those in need of pastoral care.

What do we mean by ‘people who struggle with gender identity’?

People who struggle with their gender identity can experience discomfort or even distress due to a sense of ‘mismatch’ between their gender identity and their biological sex (the term used for someone medically diagnosed with this sense of distress is ‘gender dysphoria’ – see the glossary for more detail). This is related to the term ‘transgender’ which refers to people who have adopted a gender identity which is not the same as their biological sex. Not everyone who struggles with their gender identity identifies as transgender. There are many different experiences and many different responses. People do not choose this struggle and pursuing a particular path, for example, name change, wearing different clothing or hormone treatment, can be driven by an attempt to relieve intense and often intolerable gender dysphoria. The distress and suffering of the person are exemplified by the fact that this condition can lead to depression, anxiety and self-harm. Others who identify as transgender are comfortable with the changes they have made or are intending to make and do not feel a need for pastoral care. However, especially amongst young people, bullying can be a problem for those who make outward changes and are perceived to be different.¹

What is this guidance intended to do?

Because of the many different experiences of people who struggle with their gender identity, from the outset, as in all pastoral care, the first response should be to listen to the person to understand. This guidance provides a basic understanding and practical ways to give pastoral support as well as Christian discipleship in this area in the longer term for those who profess faith in Christ. There is also guidance on providing pastoral care to family, and especially parents, of people who struggle with gender identity and also in the case where a family member has identified as transgender and this has led to family tensions.

Because pastoral care is not simply a one to one encounter but something the whole church family should be involved with, this guidance provides practical help in how best to provide care, support and discipleship from the pulpit and in the fellowship of the church family.

To ensure this guidance is easy and relatively quick to read, more detailed reading is referenced in the ‘Further resources’ guide. There is also a glossary of the terms which people providing pastoral care may encounter in this area.

This guidance is produced with significant input from expert practitioners in the areas of pastoral care, psychology and education. It should be noted that legislation and medical approaches are subject to changes and the guidance is as accurate as possible as of June 2021.

1 ‘Evidence base’ article on the NHS Gender Identity Development Service website: <https://gids.nhs.uk/evidence-base> (accessed 11/02/2020). The article also states that, contrary to statements by some transgender groups, suicide is extremely rare. Therefore, statements about the danger of suicide should not be used to pressure anyone into adopting a particular view or pursuing a particular path but an awareness of possible mental health problems is paramount.

Biblical background and foundation

Introduction

Pastoral care must always be carried out with compassion for those who struggle, whilst also grounded in the light of God's truth. It is only in accepting and believing God's truth that we can also receive his grace through Jesus Christ and be transformed by the Holy Spirit. The Bible reveals our creator God's plan for humanity and speaks clearly to beliefs that are at odds with his created reality.

At the heart of the transgender experience is an internal sense that one's gender is at odds with one's birth sex. Attempts to deal with that incongruence have meant that some people have given a preference to their internal sense of gender as representing their true self over against the reality of their body. The reality of the body is set aside in favour of the desires and feelings of the internal self.

A biblical theology of the body, however, argues that one's body cannot be ignored but is crucial in determining our identity. Whilst the Bible does not speak directly to the issue of transgenderism as it is understood today, the biblical theology of the body is relevant to the current discussion, and an understanding of the biblical data can direct the church in developing its response to transgenderism. Regardless of the shifting cultural understanding of gender, the biblical witness to the sanctity of the human body must be affirmed.

Creation

The creation of the man and the woman in Genesis 1:26,27 as the bearers of God's image, is the climax of God's creative activity. Humans are created in the "image of God" as male and female. Part of what it means to be made in the "image of God" is the role that humanity is given over creation as representatives of the authority of God. If humanity is meant to represent God over the earth, then human beings must fill the earth. Hence, God's first command to humanity is to be fruitful and multiply. Creation as male and female makes human fruitfulness possible and enables men and women to fulfil their calling. God's creation of humanity as male and female is, at least, because God intends for humans to reproduce. So the bodily aspect of maleness and femaleness is critical. This is true even though the Bible affirms celibacy as well as marriage because affirming celibacy does not change God's fundamental design of male and female. In addition, some couples are unable to have children but this is a symptom of life in a fallen world.

The biblical data (Genesis 2:7; 3:19) show that from the beginning there is a material aspect to the human constitution. The scriptural way of expressing this truth is not that man or woman has a body, but that man or woman is body.² Scripture does not represent the soul or spirit of human

2 John Murray, *The Nature of Man in Collected Writings*, Volume 2 (Edinburgh; Banner of Truth Trust, 1977) 14.

beings as created first and then put into a body. The opposite is the case: “The Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” (Gen 2:7). The bodily is not an appendage. In its creation, the body is intrinsically good. Our physicality, including our physical gender, is not to be demeaned nor neglected, for we are human beings whose experience of this world is as embodied creatures.

It can also be affirmed that God’s intention for humanity to be female and male may be related to the description of human incompleteness apart from a sexually-differentiated other. Genesis 2:18–25 describes the initial relationship between woman and man with God’s recognition that “it is not good for the man to be alone.” The creation of woman from man leads man to recognize himself as male just as he recognizes her as female. Man as male remains incomplete without his biologically sexual other, without whom neither she nor he could be known, or know themselves, as female and male.

So Genesis 1 and 2 state that God makes the man and God makes the woman. For this reason, we conclude that the Bible teaches “binary gender”; it teaches that there are two sexes. This creational design of God in Genesis is affirmed by Jesus Christ in Matthew 19:3-6:

“And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

Jesus says that God made humanity either male or female. He reinforces this twice in his quotation of Genesis 2:24; there is “father” and “mother” in view, and “man” and “his wife”. In two short, but striking verses, Christ gives three separate, but connected, arguments for the reality of the two sexes, manhood and womanhood.

To the saints in ancient Corinth, a city that was rife with sexual confusion and idolatry, the Apostle Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 11 of important principles that should guide Christians living in that city. He says that Christians, whose identities are based on their bodies, should present themselves as a man or a woman. This section of Scripture contains some of Paul’s more complex expressions and phrases, but the central idea is clear – the sexes need to honour God’s design of their bodies by presenting themselves as a man or a woman.

“Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, but if a woman has long hair it is her glory?” (1 Cor 11:14-15)

In a city where some people (temple prostitutes among them) took on different “gender expressions”, the church of Jesus Christ was called to be different. Men and women were to honour God by looking different from one another. This teaching echoes the expressed will of God for his old covenant people in Deuteronomy 22:5. God desires that men present themselves as men, just as women must present themselves as women.

Incarnation

The doctrine of the Incarnation gives great honour to the human body. That the Word of God would become flesh and dwell among humanity (John 1:14) shows that the human body as created by God can embody the presence of God. Jesus was born, lived, and died a fully human life as God in the flesh, yet without sin. His resurrection was a bodily resurrection as a human being, the firstfruits of all those whom God will raise (1 Corinthians 15:20–23). The bodily ascension of Jesus indicates that the Incarnation endures forever as the Son retains full, and now glorified, humanity. Jesus forever remains the God-man.

All the experience of a human body, and all the differentiation a human body possesses in comparison with other human bodies, is clear in the life of Jesus. His body grew and matured with specific features that made Him identifiable to all who knew Him. He was born with an ancestry that marked Him as Jewish within Israel and the greater Roman world. He had physical characteristics that identified Him as male. He experienced all the limitations of a human body, including sleep, hunger, sweat, and pain. The Bible describes Jesus as a fully embodied human with all that goes with a body, from a genetic heritage to the everyday experiences of hunger and thirst.

Resurrection

After his resurrection Jesus was a body that was identifiable, still bearing the scars of the crucifixion. Jesus is no less incarnate as the Risen Lord. In Luke 24 and John 20 Jesus proves that his resurrection is not just the resuscitation of a corpse nor the apparition of a spirit. His body can be touched. He eats with his disciples. His scars prove that he is the same Jesus who was crucified (Luke 24:37–43; John 20:20–27). This suggests that with our resurrection bodies we will still be personally identifiable. There is a continuity between our bodies now and our resurrection bodies, though they will be made different by the resurrection power and life of God.

This is confirmed by Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 15. Some within the Corinthian church were denigrating the body to the point of denying the truth or necessity of the resurrection. He defends the doctrine of the resurrection in light of the resurrection of Jesus (15:1–11), which guarantees the future resurrection of humans (15:12–34). Paul describes the resurrection through comparison with the body's present expression. Resurrected bodies will be continuous with present bodies just as a plant is continuous with the seed from which it springs. The mortal bodies are perishable and weak, but the resurrected bodies will be imperishable and powerful. The difference between the natural and glorified bodies is a difference of mortality, not a difference of embodiment.

God, who created humans as whole beings (comprised of body and an immaterial nature), intends for life in the age to come to be as whole beings. Redemption is not complete until our bodies are raised to life. The Bible presents human beings as whole unities, as bodies of dust initially

enlivened by the breath of God (Genesis 2:7) who will one day become bodies of glory energised by the Spirit of God. It is the resurrection even more than creation that highlights the sanctity of the human body. The Apostles' Creed insists that our ultimate hope is "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." Paul observes that although we groan in body and spirit now, "we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved." (Romans 8:23,24)

Conclusion

The theology of the body as essential to our true self must be affirmed when dealing with gender incongruence. The desire of people who suffer gender dysphoria to find resolution by changing their body is a sign of the importance of the body to human identity.

In light of this biblical data, the ultimate aim in Christian discipleship is for each person to conform with the Lord Jesus Christ in every respect including coming to accept that the biological sex they were born with is a gift from God. Those providing pastoral care should have the same compassion Jesus had for people in this fallen world who were 'like sheep without a shepherd' (Mark 6:34). This can only be done by seeking God's grace in Jesus Christ and the wisdom to share his life transforming love and truth.

The Contemporary Context

This section of the resource aims to give a brief understanding of the current situation in society. This situation is evolving as can be seen in constant news stories on transgender. It is important to be aware that, in providing pastoral care, making reference to stories in the popular media can be unhelpful for the person concerned or their families. What matters most is their own story and how God's story of his gracious, transforming love can shape their lives. However, understanding how society has arrived at this point is useful, especially in contrasting it with biblical values. The reality is, because of societal changes in the last few years, what was previously a very rare pastoral concern is a more common concern today, especially amongst younger people.

A societal shift in thinking about gender identity

One of the most influential beliefs in society today is the rejection of 'given' identity in favour of 'self-identification'. The right to say – "I identify as" – is fast becoming one of the defining features of modern life. Identity is understood as fundamentally based on a person's freedom to choose his or her own meaning and form of life.

This is what has shaped the current debate around the nature and meaning of gender. The perception of gender (i.e. what is meant by male and female), previously determined by biological sex (i.e. physical characteristics such as sex organs, hormones and chromosomes), is now becoming more and

more reliant on the individual's perception of gender which may not correspond with their biological sex. Gender has become a contested term which now generally refers to the psychological, social and cultural aspects of being male or female. This has led to people identifying as 'transgender' which is to identify as the opposite gender to their biological sex. The term 'transgender' originated in the 1970s and medical procedures to change male or female characteristics were available shortly before then but the recent surge in the number of people identifying as transgender seems to be more to do with the rise of belief in self-identification. Recently, there has also been an increasing trend to claim that gender is fluid and not fixed.

The experience of those who have this struggle with the development of their gender identity is a hugely complex area calling for empathy and understanding as they are often confused, frightened and humiliated. Some people who were born male may not feel like a boy when they are older, or may prefer to dress in clothes or play with toys that other people say are "for girls". They may feel or say that they are a girl. In the same way, some children or young people who were born female might feel or say that they are a boy. Others might say that neither "boy" nor "girl" seems the right word for how they feel about themselves. Some adolescents who experience this difficulty in the development of their gender identity consider at some point having physical interventions such as puberty blockers. Young people who face these difficulties, and their families, can experience high levels of distress as their gender identity evolves. Puberty and the physical changes that it brings can be a distressing time for these young people.

Struggling with gender identity is not limited to younger people. Older people can experience this too, either as an ongoing struggle from when they were younger or something that happens later in life. This struggle used to be more evident in people who were older. Now, however, the focus has shifted to younger people.³ This raises particular concerns because of children and young people under the age of 18 making potentially life altering medical changes before they reach adulthood.⁴ More girls than boys identify as transgender.⁵ This is possibly out of a drive to not identify with gender stereotypes.

There is deepening concern that the dominant force of society's view on transgender identity in the mainstream media, social media, legislation, policies and teaching in schools has an adverse influence on how young people think. It is also becoming increasingly difficult to speak against this prevailing worldview, even in academic studies.⁶

3 NHS statistics illustrating the rise can be found here: <https://gids.nhs.uk/number-referrals> (accessed 11/02/2020)

4 Puberty blockers are a cause for concern: www.transgendertrend.com/puberty-blockers (accessed 11/02/2020)

5 NHS statistics show a trend of nearly three times as many girls as boys with gender dysphoria: <https://gids.nhs.uk/number-referrals> (accessed 11/02/2020)

6 See for example: www.theguardian.com/society/2018/oct/16/academics-are-being-harassed-over-their-research-into-transgender-issues (accessed 11/02/2020)

The current legal position in the UK and Ireland

Currently, in order to be legally recognised in the UK as the opposite sex, individuals must live as that sex for two years and be medically diagnosed with gender dysphoria. The UK government is currently considering changes to the Gender Recognition Act, which could include ‘self-declaration’. In the Republic of Ireland, ‘self-declaration’ without medical intervention or assessment by the state has been in law since 2015 for any person over 18. In the two years following this change in the law, 230 people in the Republic of Ireland had been granted gender recognition certificates.⁷

‘Self-declaration’ is especially problematic when it leads to people who are biologically male wanting rights to access spaces for females such as bathrooms. Currently in the UK, no such accommodation is required by law for those who identify as transgender. In the Republic of Ireland, ‘reasonable accommodation’ is required which could include, for example, unisex bathroom facilities. However, schools⁸ and other organisations often have their own policies which may allow biological males who identify as transgender access to bathrooms which were previously reserved for females.

The process of transition

The following is a description of the potential transition process for someone who experiences a struggle with their gender identity. The description of this overall process is given here to provide information and insight without endorsing each course of action. As well as support offered by family, friends and church, there are a number of different levels of professional support for individuals. The number and type of interventions will vary from person to person both according to the intensity of their distress and their individual preferences.

Psychological and social interventions

The first level of support, which should be offered to anyone struggling with their gender identity, is offering a space to talk about and explore the way that they are feeling and reflect upon how this may impact on their day to day life. This may be done simply within a family, involving a counsellor, mental health professional (when under 18) or through a dedicated gender identity service. Often these early conversations involve thinking about the impact on how they feel about themselves, how this impacts on their relationships with other people, their social world and how this may impact on their educational or work environment. For

7 Article in Irish Examiner: www.irishexaminer.com/ireland/230-gender-recognition-certificates-issued-since-2015-450636.html (accessed 21/02/2020)

8 The Education Authority in Northern Ireland issued guidelines in October 2019 (see the further resources section for more details). These guidelines are not statutory and schools may produce their own guidelines. As of the date of publication of this resource, no central guidelines have been produced for schools in the Republic of Ireland but schools may produce their own guidelines.

those who also identify as followers of Christ there will be the additional challenge of attempting to navigate how this impacts on their faith and relationships within their local faith community.

Psychological and social interventions will usually take the form of attempting to resolve the impact of gender dysphoria through offering support to the individual and their family. When an individual finds that such support alone does not reduce their distress sufficiently they may choose to begin to identify more openly with their preferred gender. This might include:

- Changing their name to either a gender neutral one or one of preferred gender
- Making other people in the family/school or work community aware of their new name
- Asking to wear gender neutral clothing in school or wearing gender neutral clothing at home or work
- Beginning to talk to people around them about their gender identity experiences
- Starting to live openly within their preferred gender and socialise in that way
- Beginning to think about medical interventions

Medical interventions

A small number of persons experiencing gender dysphoria – that is not resolving despite psychological and social interventions – may choose to explore medical interventions. Any individual considering this course of action should be carefully assessed and monitored by mental health and medical professionals over a significant period of time. This is in order for the professionals to make a judgement as to whether they think intervention is appropriate for the patient. Medical interventions are a staged process with time and space to reflect before reaching a decision around progressing onto the next stage.

Medical interventions initially involve hormonal interventions with the first step being hormonal suppression during puberty (for younger persons usually over 16 years of age). There is the option of egg or sperm storage before the hormones are suppressed. Following this, again when assessed by professionals as appropriate, there can be an option of progressing onto cross-sex hormones. During this stage there is the introduction of hormones of the preferred gender which can allow some desired secondary sex characteristics to develop (e.g. for those identifying as male they may experience denser hair growth and lose body fat around the hips, for those identifying as females they may experience some breast development). Introduction of cross sex hormones is an option regarded as ‘partially irreversible’.

Finally, for the minority of persons experiencing gender dysphoria, when hormonal interventions fail to sufficiently resolve the distress, there can be the option of surgery to produce a physical body that more closely

resembles the gender they identify with. This course of action would be regarded as “irreversible”. In Northern Ireland surgery cannot be performed through the NHS until over 18 years of age.

The need for pastoral guidance

Diversity and complexity in the experience of people with gender dysphoria

This is a complex pastoral issue which nearly always involves more people than the person who is experiencing a struggle with their gender identity. The following highlights some of the reasons why great wisdom and compassion are needed in providing pastoral care.

There are a wide range of experiences of people with this struggle. To give but some examples, some struggle but don't pursue a change in gender identity, some may simply change their name, others may change how they dress and some may have hormone treatment and surgery. Some may wish to change back after taking steps to change their identity but find it impossible to do so after life altering surgery. We should not make assumptions about what people intend to do if they share with us that they struggle with their gender identity or it becomes apparent because they have taken a step, or steps, to change their gender identity.

People of all ages who struggle with their gender identity may be very reluctant to tell others because of fear and prejudice. Keeping their feelings hidden out of fear can have a significant negative impact on their mental health. Those who have taken steps to change their gender identity from their biological sex may also face difficulties. The steps they take may not resolve the mental health problems they may have. They may experience rejection from others around them because of the changes they have made. Their choices may also cause people close to them to struggle to come to terms with what they are doing.

It is important to be aware that sexuality and gender identity are not the same. Therefore, we should avoid talking about someone's sexuality when we mean their gender identity. Someone who identifies as transgender may or may not identify as gay or lesbian. People who are born with disorders of sex development⁹ (a very rare occurrence) normally do not have the experience of gender dysphoria (see glossary and further reading).

The challenge for parents and others

For parents there can be a major struggle of disagreeing with what their teenage or grown up child is doing and their innate love for their child. Difficult questions are raised like:

9 Often labelled as 'intersex'

- Do we call them by their new name? Do we use their preferred pronouns?
- How can we show the same unconditional love for our child when we cannot agree with their lifestyle?
- How should we respond to relationships they form in their new gender identity?

Some parents come to terms with the issue by accepting and endorsing the choices of their child. Others feel they cannot do so and constantly live with the tension of wanting to show love to their child while not endorsing their choices. This is extremely difficult as it can be perceived as rejection. Keeping the lines of communication open is crucial even if the relationship becomes more distant.

It is important for 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 challenge faced by parents whose child identifies as transgender. Many parents whose children identify as gay or lesbian 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.

For the wider church family, there is a similar challenge of being welcoming while not affirming every choice a person makes. The need for 'whole church' pastoral care is especially apparent in the case of a person who has taken very obvious and public steps to change their gender identity. But it is also important for the church family to care for and support someone who struggles with their gender identity and hasn't taken such steps, even if only a few people know because of the need for confidentiality.

Although there may be some differences in approach and circumstances, parents, other family members and those close to someone who has either identified as transgender or who is struggling with their gender identity, would benefit from applying the principles in this pastoral guidance. It will hopefully also be a reassurance to them that this is the recommended approach those providing pastoral care will take if and when they are able to meet the person.

Pastoral care: one to one

Different scenarios

How pastoral care is provided one to one for someone struggling with their gender identity, or someone close to them, will relate to a number of factors:

- If the person is a younger child, teenager (under 18), young adult or older person. If the person receiving pastoral care is under 18, pastoral conversations or prayer should always happen in a place where the adult providing pastoral care is visible to other adults (anyone providing pastoral care in this context must adhere to

the Presbyterian Church in Ireland Taking Care child protection guidelines).

- If the person is receiving medical advice or not.
- If the person has publicly taken steps to change their gender identity or not – and the extent of the steps they have taken (these range from a name change, dressing differently, hormone treatment to surgery).

A first conversation

For a person wrestling with their gender identity but who has not taken any steps to change that identity, the decision to tell someone may have taken a long time. It is very likely they will have a fear of rejection and loss of love. It is therefore important that whoever they confide in, whether someone from the church, a family member or friend, understands that their first reactions have the potential to crush or bring hope. The person will pick up body language and attitude even more than words.

What the person does not need to hear:

- That they are imagining their feelings
- That they are sick
- That they are a disgrace

At this point they may not even need to hear what the Bible says about gender

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 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.

The importance of confidentiality

As in all pastoral care, keeping the pastoral conversation confidential is crucial. Even if the person has made a public change to their gender identity, what they share about their struggles is 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 this guidance.

In addition, it is wise for the person providing pastoral care to ask permission to share information with another appropriate person rather than carry the burden of pastoral care alone. This is especially the case in helping people who struggle with gender identity. It is unlikely the person providing pastoral care will have much experience or expertise in this area, even if they have read this guidance and the suggested resources.

Longer term pastoral care and discipleship

The longer term aim of pastoral care is helping people to discover what it means to live a life faithful to God and then to help them live that life. In providing pastoral care, we can be preoccupied with what is right and what is wrong but the starting place is relationship building. Not all pastoral conversations will go as we would like. Relationship building can take time, patience, love and support. The work of caring for and growing disciples is lifelong. We do not expect believers to transform overnight into faithful disciples but to grow steadily in submission and obedience to Christ as they repent of sin and seek to grow in holiness. This is so for everyone, whatever their struggles may be.

As stated in the section on biblical foundations, the ultimate aim in Christian discipleship is for each person to conform with the Lord Jesus Christ in every respect including coming to accept that the biological sex they were born with is a gift from God. It may take years for a person to come to this acceptance and their struggles may never completely subside. This is true of any struggle to live according to God's ways in Christian discipleship. Therefore, anyone providing pastoral care and spiritual guidance requires commitment and patience.

Clearly the starting point is faith in Christ and expectations of people who do not profess faith in Christ are different. That is not to say that the biblical application of who we are does not apply to everyone but someone who does not profess faith is less likely to accept biblical direction for their lives. It may be the case that someone chooses a transgender identity over faith in Christ. In that case the long term approach is to pray for them and use the opportunities relationship building provides to reveal Christ to them in words, action and attitude.

As this is a struggle for their sense of identity, it will help for the Christian who struggles with their gender identity to understand their identity in Christ. Because this is an identity issue, without attacking their perceived gender identity, it can be helpful for them to know their identity is first in Christ if they have trusted in him and this takes precedence over and transforms all other labels of identity. Every Christian should realise more fully their sense of security in who they are in Christ because they are accepted by God and loved so much by him that Christ died for them. This will help any Christian not to seek their ultimate sense of security or acceptance in other ways of identifying themselves and to change how they think about other aspects of identity in light of his Lordship.

Principles for longer term pastoral care and discipleship are:

- (a) A deeper knowledge and understanding of the person's struggles with their gender identity through listening to them, those close to them, reading this guidance and further reading. At a basic level this includes understanding the terminology used – see the glossary for further information.
- (b) That we recognise that we cannot make the person's choices for them, we can only encourage them along the path of discipleship.
- (c) The pastoral carer must be aware of his/her own struggles in this or other related areas.
- (d) Quick prayers and chapter and verse sticking plasters are to be avoided.
- (e) Discipleship growth for believers over time should be nurtured, especially a growing biblical awareness of identity in Christ.
- (f) It will be an encouragement to surround a person with love, family, ongoing pastoral care and also to help them keep to what they have committed to in Christian discipleship.
- (g) We recognise, preach and practise the fact that failures and setbacks are often part of the discipleship journey for us all but that with God, forgiveness is possible and we can continue relying on his grace and strength.
- (h) The person being given pastoral care should not be ostracised (see further guidance in the section on pastoral care as a church family).
- (i) Those who provide pastoral care should be aware of their own limitations and knowledge, especially in the area of mental health.

The relationship between medical care and pastoral care

Someone who struggles with their gender identity may already have contacted medical professionals. The advice from medical professionals may be in conflict with the longer term goal of Christian discipleship as described above. However, it is important to know that good practice medically is for the person to take the smallest steps possible to resolve the gender dysphoria with which they have been diagnosed. For example, that could be trying a name change for a period of time to see how that goes rather than the greater step of hormone treatment. Surgery is much further down the line.

Medical professionals should advise patients of the negative consequences of hormone treatment or surgery. It is important to be aware of this because someone who strongly desires to identify as a different gender may not be listening carefully to such advice. Exploring the implications with them could be helpful. Again, it is important to remember that ultimately it is their choice. All that good pastoral care can provide is to help them consider their choices well and to continue the pastoral relationship regardless of the choices made.

It is also very important to be aware of any associated mental health problems. People providing pastoral care should encourage someone who is struggling with their mental health to see their GP. Mental health awareness should be part of the training for anyone involved in delivering pastoral care (further resources are listed at the end of this guidance). While there is a long term goal in Christian discipleship, people providing pastoral care should be especially sensitive to any mental health difficulties and not expect or push for change too soon.

There is also the situation where someone comes to faith after having had extensive medical intervention and wishes to identify with their biological sex.

Pastoral care for people who de-transition from a transgender identity

As more people transition to identify as transgender, a number have also had regrets about making physical changes whether through hormone therapy or surgery and wish to 'de-transition'. Not everyone has such regrets but those who do need pastoral care. Some changes may be difficult or even impossible to remedy and this can create challenges. For anyone who seeks to follow Jesus, their primary need is to know that, whatever struggles they have been through, their identity is foremost in Christ.

Pastoral care: as a church family

The church has a crucial responsibility to create an environment of love, understanding, acceptance, patience, forgiveness, openness, truth, discipline and grace for everyone including those who struggle with their gender identity. The church fellowship should be like a good, loving parent making the church a safer, welcoming place.

Preaching and pastoral care

Pastoral care is inseparable from the preaching of the Word of God. Often in preaching there is a temptation to forcefully engage in the 'culture war' against the trend to unquestioningly affirm transgender identity. However, the possibility that there are people listening who struggle with their gender identity or who know someone close to them experiencing such struggles must be considered. When the biblical position is presented in contrast to differing views, it should be done with a compassionate tone towards those who struggle.

It is also important to be factually accurate from the pulpit and to understand how language is used in this area (see the glossary for further information). This is not necessarily to affirm all the language used in this area but misunderstanding it or unintentionally misusing it will only further alienate people who may disagree with the biblical position.

Those who preach must remember that compassion begins in the pulpit and works out from there. Unbalanced condemnation from the pulpit closes the door to compassionate care outside the pulpit. Those who struggle with their gender identity, like those who experience same-sex attraction, should not be made to feel that they are being singled out. There are many different temptations and trials which people face in seeking to follow God faithfully.

Practical guidance for being a caring fellowship

Every Christian is called to love other Christians and their neighbour, but those in leadership and those who have a particular responsibility for pastoral care and in youth work can lead by example. Doing this includes:

- (a) Promoting an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance of them as a person rather than fear and rejection.
- (b) Actively promoting church family fellowship and the inclusion of those who struggle with their gender identity. Living as the church in community with mutual love and responsibility for one another.
- (c) Encouraging open-door hospitality for everyone including practical arrangements.¹⁰
- (d) Being wise and sensitive in the use of names and pronouns. At an initial stage, to establish a relationship, it may be better to simply address someone who has identified as a different gender to their biological sex by their preferred name and pronouns. As the relationship develops, it would be helpful to have a conversation about this so that the person understands that your use of their preferred name and pronouns is out of courtesy rather than an affirmation of their changed sense of identity. Whatever approach is taken should take into account Christian conscience regarding speaking the truth in love with a strong sense of empathy for the struggles someone has with their gender identity.
- (e) As discipleship often happens best in small groups, actively encourage small group/home group involvement that includes openness and accountability for all. To this end, those in leadership should actively help youth and adult groups to be informed and compassionate

¹⁰ The use of toilets is an obvious area of concern. Providing a sign such as 'Toilet access for all' on a disabled toilet without obscuring the disabled toilet sign is a possible solution. In the UK, there is currently no legal obligation to allow people who identify as female but who are biologically male to use toilets designated for use by females (or vice versa). In the Republic of Ireland, steps that are reasonably practical should be taken to accommodate transgender people. Similar principles could be adopted for residential with young people where there is a concern over shared accommodation and wash facilities with private accommodation and bathroom being provided. It is best to discuss this with the people concerned first – especially the person with gender identity struggles and their parents if they are under 18. In providing consent forms for under 18's, it is useful to include a section where parents can mention concerns related to gender identity (or other concerns which are important for the leaders to know). Keeping the section general using wording such as 'Please provide any information that may be helpful for our leaders to know regarding your child' avoids creating undue attention to what is a relatively rare concern.

whilst still upholding the church's biblical position on this issue.

- (f) Explore the possibility of support groups (possibly linking several churches) both for those who struggle with their gender identity and their families.
- (g) Provide resources in the form of books, links to websites etc. to help individuals and their families and the congregation to be better informed about the issues involved.
- (h) If a minister, elders or others involved in pastoral care feel out of their depth especially in the area of mental health, don't opt for doing nothing. Actively seek out those who can provide care and help and refer on.
- (i) 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.¹¹ 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 admitted to membership or restored to fellowship if church discipline was deemed necessary for someone who was already a member.
- (j) Be mindful that both adult and youth activities, particularly social events, should be truly inclusive. For example, it would be important to have quieter, smaller group activities as well as loud, large group games and sports. Be mindful of all personality types and areas of interest and promote a culture of interest and acceptance of all. It would also be important to be mindful of how difficult body image can be for anyone struggling with gender identity difficulties and be sensitive to this in any planned activities.

Scenario 1

The following is a fictional, illustrative scenario for pastoral care which presents a 'best case' story. As you read it, consider how the outcomes could have been less positive if best practice in pastoral care were not observed. In providing pastoral care, we rarely get it 100% right all the time and the best response when we do not is to say sorry and work on rebuilding the pastoral relationship. Bear in mind also, that even when best practice is followed, there are many factors outside the control of those who provide pastoral care.

11 Credible Profession of Faith and Admission to the Sacraments. Presbyterian Church in Ireland 2020. Section 4.

A young person (aged 16) in the youth fellowship you lead speaks to you privately and says that she wants no longer to be referred to as Gill but as John. She wants you to inform the group of this change. It doesn't take you entirely by surprise because you've noticed the way Gill dresses is ambiguous in terms of gender identity. Gill hasn't been part of youth fellowship for long. She was brought along by a friend who attends but has expressed a desire to follow Christ. Her parents do not attend church. As someone who provides pastoral care and discipleship for these young people how do you respond?

Initially, you realise the best thing you can do is listen. There is time to do this and you're in a public space where you can both be seen but not heard. You ask Gill if she can help you understand what brought about her decision to change her name. She tells you that she's felt for a long time that she is 'in the wrong body'. She's suffered from depression for which she has received some counselling. She believes her depression is related to her struggle with who she is meant to be and that she is meant to be a boy. Her parents have told her they love her no matter what. They've no problems with her name change as long as it makes her happy.

Having listened for a while and asked a few questions to help you understand better, you tell her it's important for her to know that God loves her and understands the struggles she is experiencing. You express to her that you are so pleased she is coming to the youth fellowship because of her interest in knowing God and the friendships she has there. You ask if she has made this known in school and she replies to say not yet. At this point, you say it would be good to chat more because it's a big step to take. You affirm Gill by telling her it's great that she has told you this and arrange a time to chat again soon. You ask her if you can speak to the minister about what she has shared with you so that you can know best how to support her, especially in her struggles with depression. She agrees and you breathe an inward sigh of relief that it's not all on your shoulders.

You meet with the minister who encourages you to keep meeting Gill but tells you to keep in touch and not to get out of your depth. You read the guidance and, thankfully, you see you've done okay so far by following general pastoral care principles you knew about already. But you realise that in this specific case there is going to be a challenge because, while you want to support and help Gill, biblically, you can't affirm her desire to change her gender identity.

Soon after, you meet Gill again. You ask her how she is and she says she feels fine at the moment. She asks if you have thought about her name change and telling the youth fellowship. You say it's not that you don't want to respect her wishes but it's important to take time to think these things through from the perspective of the Bible. You ask if she would be willing to do that. She looks a bit perplexed and says she didn't expect this. You're worried for a moment she's going to walk out on you but then you ask her if she wants to include her friend from youth fellowship too. She says yes and so begins a much prayed over process of meeting from time to time over a year or so to chat, study the Bible and pray.

In those conversations, you say that God wants us to know that, if we have trusted in him, we are loved and accepted because of Jesus and whatever we wish for or desire should be out of this place of safety and assurance. You also take time to explain from Genesis chapter one that, as a Christian, you believe God made people male and female and that a desire to change gender is at odds with what God has created.

During this time, eventually, Gill comes to a place where she accepts the biblical position. She now sees her identity centred on being in Christ and the assurance of being in that place with God has brought great peace to her. She is happy for the youth fellowship to engage with this biblical teaching too and specifically to share with them about her own journey. You're worried about how the youth fellowship will react, but you're pleasantly surprised at how accepting they are of Gill in her struggles. You're amazed that in Gill sharing what she does, how many other members of the youth fellowship open up about different struggles they have too. You tell Gill that this is down to God at work in her and her courage and conviction in following Christ.

Scenario 2

The following is a fictional, illustrative scenario for a caring church fellowship care which presents a 'best case' story. As you read it, consider how the outcomes could have been less positive if the congregational culture was different. Consider also how people in the congregation might respond pastorally if the response of the person who identifies as transgender had been different.

Jamie is 25 and was born biologically male but has identified as female since late teenage years. Jamie prefers to be referred to as she/her.¹² Jamie has never been to church except for weddings and funerals. Jamie views church as 'transphobic' based on perceptions from the media but has a friend, Clare, at work who keeps asking Jamie to come and see church. Finally Jamie agrees to go.

There is a warm welcome before the service and Jamie enjoys the singing. Jamie even finds what the preacher has to say interesting and engaging. Clare notices that Jamie is relaxing and breathes a sigh of relief but as the service draws to a close, Clare is concerned about the social interaction afterwards. Normally Clare stays for tea and coffee but she's not sure about that today. While Jamie has made a lot of changes, Jamie's transgender identification is relatively obvious.

12 For the purpose of this scenario, female pronouns will be used. This is not to affirm Jamie's choices of gender identification, rather it is to provide an empathetic understanding of Jamie's experience. Longer term, it is to be hoped that someone like Jamie would come to faith and, as a disciple of Jesus, come to a biblical understanding of gender identity.

Clare needn't have worried. As soon as the service is over, an older lady called Joan from the congregation comes over and says to Jamie, "Have you come here with Clare? You're very welcome". Jamie explains that Clare is a friend from work and has been asking for ages for Jamie to come to church. In the conversation, Clare notices that Joan is careful to use Jamie's name and not female pronouns. Later, in a conversation between the two of them, Joan tells Clare that she was fairly sure Jamie was transgender and because of that, she avoided using pronouns. Joan said she was thankful she could avoid any awkwardness because Jamie's name could be male or female.

The next week at work, Jamie tells Clare how enjoyable and welcoming church was. Jamie didn't feel judged and might even try it again sometime. This happens, and Jamie comes to church several times. Clare decides to take the next step and invites Jamie to her home group. Again, Clare is a little apprehensive about this step but she has a chance to speak with the group first. She tells the group to be sensitive to Jamie and help Jamie feel at ease. It helps that it's not the first time they've had someone who isn't a Christian come to the group.

The experience goes well and Jamie returns a second and third time. Clare decides that before Jamie's involvement with church continues much further, she needs to have an indepth conversation with Jamie about what the Bible says about transgenderism. She doesn't want Jamie to be put in the difficult position of being a minority of one against opposing views should the subject arise, so she decides it's better to have the conversation one to one.

They meet for coffee and, in the conversation, Clare carefully explains that God's grace is for everyone who believes but it means changes – and for Jamie, the most obvious and significant change would be addressing Jamie's transgender identification. Clare tells Jamie she's not saying this to impose her views or force a change but she wants to be open and honest about Christian belief based on what the Bible says. Jamie thanks Clare for her openness. Jamie is happy to agree to disagree with Clare because of the value of their friendship. And, in an answer to Clare's prayers, Jamie also agrees to disagree with the church's position but to keep coming because it has been such a positive experience. Clare's continued prayer is that Jamie would come to faith in Christ through encountering him through his people.

Scenario 3

The following is a fictional, illustrative scenario for pastoral care which presents a 'best case' story. As you read it, consider how the outcomes could have been less positive if best practice in pastoral care was not observed. In providing pastoral care, we rarely get it 100% right all the time and the best response when we do not is to say sorry and work on rebuilding the pastoral relationship. Bear in mind also, that even when best practice is followed, there are many factors outside the control of those who provide pastoral care.

Following an evening service in the church focusing on 'suffering' you strike up a conversation with a middle aged woman named Jude who you do not know particularly well but have seen around the church at various events. She appears to be struggling but, despite some tentative questions from you, does not seem to want to talk anymore about it. You feel led to pray for Jude that an opportunity might come to try to get to know her a little better. In a few weeks' time you notice Jude sitting in church and decide to sit beside her. You learn that Jude previously attended another church for many years but, following the breakdown of her marriage, had left the church altogether for a short time before trying to find a church she could feel at home in. Jude and you appear to begin to relax in one another's company and you feel that over time a relationship is building.

One afternoon you get a phone call from someone within the church who has phoned to tell you that they have discovered Jude used to be a male before they 'came out' and their wife had subsequently ended the relationship. After prayer and reflection, you are able to recognise that this does not change your relationship with Jude and that, while you would like to be trusted with the journey she has been on in recent years, you have not been told first-hand about her history. You decide to not rush to do anything but again pray the opportunity will come up to speak to her about her life.

When you next see Jude in church you agree to meet for coffee and over coffee you gently explain that someone had passed on information about her past which (if it were true) must have been very difficult for her. You suggest that, if she wanted to, this was something you were happy to talk to her about. Jude looks really shocked, embarrassed and uncomfortable. She tells you that she thought this church may have been different from her last one but perhaps there was no place for her now that other people knew she had been born in a different body. You hasten to reassure Jude that the church cares about her and that she does have a place there, similar to everyone in the church family who all have their own sufferings and burdens to bear. You clarify that you are not intending to offer shame but to offer support.

Over time, through relationship with Jude, you become aware that she has legally changed her name and that she has had surgery to align her body to her identified gender. From what you learn this was a very difficult

path she felt she had no choice but to follow and lost her marriage and her home church in the process. As a result of all of this Jude has been battling a deep depression which is what led her back within the doors of the church. Jude would like to believe there is a God who can still love her, even if no one else can. You realise that Jude needs to experience God's love for her regardless of her gender identity and remind her that her identity in Christ surpasses any other identities she may have. You tell Jude that she is welcome in this church family and that you will continue to offer support and friendship to her, and that you are open to exploring further the impact her distress around her gender identity has had on her life. You reinforce that you are happy to be a fellow traveller on this journey, offering support along the way and engaging in Bible study together if this is something she would like to do.

You do not publicly share Jude's journey as this is a private matter and confidentiality is to be respected, but gain consent from Jude to share her struggle with the minister and some of the pastoral care team. You explain this would be done in the same way as you would when supporting any person with any pastoral care need within the church. In this way a number of people are aware of and praying that Jude comes to rediscover the love God has for her.

Glossary of terms

The following is a glossary of words used in the context of gender identity.¹³

Sex (biological sex) – The definition of a person as male or female based upon sex organs, reproductive capacity and chromosomes. Surgery (often called 'transitioning') or the use of hormones does not alter biological sex.

Gender identity – A person's perception of having a particular gender, which may or may not correspond with their birth sex.

Gender expression – How a person expresses or publicly presents their subjective sense of gender.

Sexual attraction/orientation – Relates to who a person is attracted to based on their sex/gender in relation to other persons.

Cisgender or Cis – A contested term used to describe someone whose subjective sense of gender identity is the same as the sex they were at birth. The opposite of transgender. (cis = on the side of.)

Gender – This is becoming a more contested term and historically was often used interchangeably with sex. Today it is generally used to refer to the psychological, social and cultural aspects of being male or female and includes gender identity and expression.

¹³ This glossary is an edited version of the glossary which appears in the resource from the Evangelical Alliance, Transformed (used with permission).

Gender dysphoria – The discomfort or distress a person experiences due to a sense of ‘mismatch’ or incongruence between their gender identity and their biological sex.

Gender fluidity – Used by people who do not experience their sense of gender as fixed to either male or female but fluctuate on a continuum between the two.

Gender Recognition Certificate – A document allowing a person legal recognition under a new gender.

Gender reassignment – Medical intervention beginning with puberty blockers if appropriate and cross-sex hormones. Surgery can include complete hysterectomy, bilateral mastectomy, chest reconstruction or augmentation, genital reconstruction and certain facial plastic reconstruction.

Genderqueer – An umbrella term for gender identities which are not exclusively male or female. Other terms include non-binary, pan gender and polygender. In relation to this, Queer theory, as advanced since the early 1990s, has emphasised the socially-constructed nature of both gender and sexual identities.

Intersex – Intersex conditions are diagnosed and treated distinct from transgender and the two should not be conflated. Intersex is a term that describes conditions in which a person is born with ambiguous sex characteristics or anatomy – gonadal, genital or more rarely chromosomal – that do not allow clear identification as male or female sex.

Non-binary – An umbrella term used by those who don’t identify as male or female.

Transgender – This is an umbrella term to describe people whose gender identity is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were at birth. It is often shortened to ‘trans’.

Further resources

The following resources are suggested for further reading.

Transformed: Understanding transgender in a changing culture

This online booklet from the Evangelical Alliance provides a brief biblical and pastoral introduction to understanding transgender in a changing culture. It is available to download here: www.eauk.org/resources/what-we-offer/reports/transformed-understanding-transgender-in-a-changing-culture

The Evangelical Alliance website also has two video stories highlighting the issues around pastoral care and people who identify as transgender.

Transgender by Vaughan Roberts (The Good Book Company, 2016)

A helpful short book (80 pages) explaining the complexities of the transgender questions from a biblical perspective with some brief pastoral advice in the last chapter.

God and the Transgender Debate by Andrew Walker (The Good Book Company, 2017)

A longer book than *Transgender* (176 pages) on what the Bible says on transgenderism including a pastoral response.

Love Thy Body by Nancy Pearcey (Baker Books, 2018)

A longer book (336 pages) on the practical theological importance of the body covering a number of related topics including transgenderism.

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 LGBT issues personally. They are available to call on +44 (0)151 653 0773 – personal support can also be requested via their website.

Education Authority guidelines

The Education Authority (Northern Ireland) has produced guidelines for schools which are available here: www.eani.org.uk/school-management/policies-and-guidance/supporting-transgender-young-people

The inclusion of this guidance document in this ‘further resources’ section is to provide information on what advice schools have been provided with. It was drawn up by a range of educational stakeholders, including the main churches. While not everyone may agree with everything contained within it, it represents the outcomes of much discussion and attempts to provide the consensual views of these stakeholders.

Resources on mental health

Some people who struggle with their gender identity may have associated mental health problems such as anxiety or depression. 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