

## **Pastoral Response to the LGBTQ community – Saturday workshop May 13/17 - Glen Nyhus**

Intro – Speaking to a group like PSALT who maintain a traditional understanding of sexual ethics, I want to reiterate something Dr Haas said in his talk this morning – that he is deeply committed to 2 things:

1. Christians need to build positive relationships with people who experience same sex attraction
2. Same sex practice is contrary to the moral will of God.

Dr Haas said something very challenging – that both things have to be maintained if we are to be faithful to the will of God.

Along with that challenge I'd like to remind us that this is not simply a "theological issue", it is a very personal issue – we are talking about real people, with real needs and hurts, who have a real longing to know and follow Jesus.

So why was I asked to come speak on this topic? I am involved with a group called Journey Canada – we run discipleship and prayer support groups with the goal of helping people experience Jesus in their relational, sexual and identity issues. It started about 30 years ago in the US. Andy Cominsky had become a Christian and came out of the gay community and he formed a support group for himself and others in his church who had been active in the gay community. Then other people in the church who weren't struggling with homosexuality but with heterosexual brokenness heard about what they were doing and asked if they could join. The third wave were people who weren't struggling with sexual or relational brokenness but more around issues of identity, self-worth, and/or shame and they asked to join. We've been in Canada for approx 25 years now, used to be called Living Waters but 3-4 years ago changed our name to Journey Canada.

We have 3 main "offerings":

1. Journey Discipleship Course – approx 20 week program, currently offered in 15 cities across Canada
2. "Pastoral Approaches Seminars" for pastors and ministry leaders on topics like pornography and same sex attraction
3. Summer Intensive week – this year two locations – Calgary and Crieff Hills (outside of Guelph) – this is where we do training for people leading our ministry but also we offer it to pastors and ministry leaders because there are not a lot of safe places for leaders to process their "stuff" that comes up for them in ministry.

For more info on any of these in your area you can visit our website – [www.journeycanada.org](http://www.journeycanada.org)

Darrell Clark got in touch with me since I'm a "local" – I volunteer with Journey – coordinating a program in Cambridge and I'm also on the national board.

So let me tell you a bit about myself and what I bring to this discussion. My wife and I moved from BC to Toronto in '86 to attend Ontario Theological Seminary (now called Tyndale). I graduated from OTS with an M.Div, and came on staff at Danforth Baptist in Toronto to head up

our church's goal of starting multiple neighborhood congregations throughout Toronto. After 10 years I resigned. Our new church plant was stuck at about 60 people our goal had been to start new congregations that would grow to the place of being able to start new congregations as well. That was a real crisis of faith for me – I had thought God had called me into this – and it ended up not working – so did I just make that up? Was God playing with me? Did God exist? Etc. It also was a personal crisis – I was left with this incredible sense of failure – I didn't have what it took.

A couple of years after that I went to a Journey Canada summer intensive week. I was thinking at some point I may go back into pastoral ministry and so I should know a bit more about "those people" who had sexual problems. So it was safe to go – I wasn't going for me, I was going to learn how I could help "others" 😊

Two things struck me:

1. There were people there whose stories were quite tragic, what they had experienced and what they continued to struggle with – they were quite "broken people" – but what struck me was that they also had experienced God's grace in a way that was much more profound and deeper than I had ever experienced – and it made me want more of that for myself.
2. God began a process of unpacking things in my own life – for instance, although I could give a good theology about God's grace, I actually lived very much by performance – as long as I was performing well I felt ok – with myself, with others, with God; another area God began to show me was how much I needed other people's approval – I was a classic people pleaser.

So I got involved with Journey and continue to be because I needed to be in an environment that would challenge me in those deep areas of idolatry – false places I go to for life, significance, security.

Okay – so enough of a preamble. I just thought it would be helpful to know a little bit about me since I'm an "outsider" here at a Presbyterian gathering.

I've organized my thoughts for the workshop around:

1. General Principles that come to play
2. Looking specifically at 3 groups/types of people within the LGBTQ community
3. Some ideas for helping our congregations generally

General Principles: (I doubt I will be saying anything new here but I think these things are good to remind ourselves)

1. Orientation is not a sin. I have never yet met a person who has chosen to be same sex attracted. So people do not chose this, and can't "unchoose" it As I heard from someone "none of us get to choose what our temptations will be"

2. Level playing field – all of us have sinned, all of us have fallen short of God’s standard. There is no hierarchy of sin (although we often create one). Yes some sin hurts more people but sin is sin and all of us are in the same position. Rom 1 certainly speaks about homosexuality but Paul’s purpose in Rom 1-3 is to show that all of us are sinners in need of a savior.

This should cause us all to be in a posture of humility in interacting with anyone else

3. Related to #2 above – we need to acknowledge there is a tension between the radical exclusive claims of Christ and the radical inclusiveness of Christ. Jesus said “I have come for the sick” Good news! There is a God and He loves you right now, right where you are! While we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

So all are welcome, the church is not a “club” that only certain people are allowed to join. Following Jesus will challenge each one of us.

4. “Own or own stuff”
  - Each of us fear the unknown or those who are different from us – so acknowledge to ourself, ask Jesus for strength ...
  - We feel threatened/sense of loss with the swift change in our culture. We are no longer the dominant cultural voice. That represents a huge loss. It’s not necessarily a bad thing – throughout church history the church has always been most vibrant when it hasn’t been part of the cultural establishment – but it is still a loss and we may need to grieve and invite Jesus into those losses and ask for his grace in moving forward. If we don’t it will come out in our interactions.

I’ve been reflecting on Rev 5 for a couple of years now after reading “Discipleship on the Edge” by Darrell Johnson. You are probably familiar with the scene – John is weeping because no one is found worthy to unlock the scroll and elder tells him to stop weeping because there is someone who is worthy – the lion of the tribe of Judah has triumphed! And here is the dramatic shock – you expect to see this glorious, powerful, triumphant lion but instead John says he turned to the throne to look and “saw a lamb, looking as if it had been slain”

This brings us back to the posture of humility. Somehow in God’s Kingdom, God’s work is done through apparent weakness. The fears we feel, the loss of voice and influence on our culture do not cut us off from doing God’s work – in fact they may be the best preparation so we operate out of a servant mindset.

5. Respect – in all our interactions with people – and especially members of the LGBTQ community, they deserve our respect – they too have all been made in the image of God whether they know it or not.

OK with those General Principles shaping our interactions, I want to look at 3 different groups/types of people within the LGBTQ community.

1. Activists – either outside or inside the church. I’m referring to people here who are pushing their agenda – they are not coming to you seeking pastoral care/spiritual direction. What can I offer them?
  - a. Respect – Bruxy’s example from the debate saying his posture was that even though they disagreed, Bruxy saw him as a brother in Christ. It can be very challenging but we need to be careful to not vilify people who have a different view.
  - b. Agree with them regarding justice – stats show that the LGBTQ community has a much higher rate of depression, anxiety, suicide, as well as physical illness. We can be advocates for people even if we disagree.
  - c. Repent – the church has certainly not treated this community properly in the past, we can acknowledge that. Are there attitudes/actions we need to repent of personally?
  
2. New Christians/new people coming to our churches who are in same sex relationships/marriages. How do we deal with this?
  - a. The church is on mission, not a club – and mission is messy
  - b. Consistency – treat a gay couple the same as anyone else – how would you respond to a heterosexual couple who are living together but not married? I think most of us wouldn’t start the conversation there, we would want them to experience Jesus first, and be in relationship with them and somewhere along the way this will come up but it wouldn’t be the starting point.
  - c. Be clear about what your church believes – not in a heavy-handed way but more in sense of you are welcome here, this is what we are about. Bruxy’s talk Friday night went into this as well  
In context of Journey Discipleship Program, I always meet with people beforehand and explain that you don’t have to agree with us to take the program but want to let you know our view so you don’t feel tricked or coerced.
  
3. People inside your church who have same sex attraction.
  - a. Create a safe environment – is “process” ok or is your church culture that you need to have “arrived”?
    - i. Talk about your own brokenness (in appropriate ways), places you have failed/are learning
    - ii. Don’t tell stories where you are always the hero
  - b. When a person “comes out” to you – honor their courage. They may be the first person they have ever told. Stories are sacred – you are on holy ground
  - c. Reassure them – their issues don’t exclude them – level playing field, we are all in need of a savior, they are not “especially sinful”  
From my experience, everyone suffers from shame but people with same sex attraction have an extra layer of shame- be aware of that and consciously

counter that – by words and actions. Next time you see them in public make a point of saying hi and being inclusive.

- d. “scripts” taken from Mark Yarhouse Homosexuality and the Christian Mark talks about “scripts” as way we understand/make sense of our experience and that there is a very compelling “gay script” and that as Christians we need to provide a “Christian script”

“Gay script” pg 49

-same-sex attractions signal a naturally occurring or “intended by God” distinction between homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality.

-same-sex attractions are the way you know who you “really are” as a person (emphasis is on discovery)

-same-sex attractions are at the core of who you are as a person

-same-sex behavior is an extension of that core

-self-actualization (behavior that matches who you “really are) of your sexual identity is crucial for your fulfillment.

Mark’s suggestion of alternative “Identity in Christ” script – pg 51

- same-sex attraction does not signal a categorical distinction among types of people, but is one of many human experiences that are “not the way it’s supposed to be”

- same-sex attractions may be part of your experience, but they are not defining element of your identity

-you can choose to integrate your experiences of attraction to the same sex into a gay identity

-on the other hand, you can choose to center your identity around other aspects of your experience, including your biological sex, gender identity, and so on

-The most compelling aspect of personhood for the Christian is one’s identity in Christ, a central and defining aspect of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. (emphasis is on discovery)

Note that this exercise of scripts/where we find our identity is not unique to same sex attraction. In my life, I found that I found my identity in “performance” and in “pleasing people”. I too need to be challenged to find my identity in Christ.

- e. Be careful about language – “Christ can change us” what do we really mean? Do we have the same expectations for everyone?

From my experience people often hear this that God will take away my homosexuality and make me heterosexual. But heterosexual is not the goal – I see a lot of broken heterosexuality! Jesus is the goal. Also, if we set up a false expectation, people then tend to throw God out if He “doesn’t come thru” That is even more tragic!

Where I am at right now, my belief is that areas of vulnerability/temptation will always continue to be areas of vulnerability in our lives – but the crippling power

they have in our lives and the power they have to define us can be broken/changed – however they will continue to be areas where we are vulnerable.

This is not necessarily bad. I remember being shocked at my first Journey Intensive week. The speaker said “One of the benefits of sexual addiction ...” I remember looking up from taking notes thinking “how can there be a benefit to sexual addiction?” but he went on - “One of the benefits of sexual addiction is that it makes you desperately dependent on God” and I was convicted. I realized that was one of my problems – my brokenness of performance and people pleasing was culturally accepted, even rewarded within the church. I didn’t have to face the fact that I was desperately dependant on God – I could muddle through, and I did – and my experience of God stayed at that same level.

The story of the “prodigal son” haunts me. Actually, what haunts me is the older brother. We are all familiar with the story. When the son returns home, the Father is overjoyed and throws a big party for him. When the “responsible”, “good” older brother comes home from working in the fields he refuses to go in to the party. The Father comes out and pleads with him and the older brother says “All these years I have been **slaving for you** and never once have you thrown a party for me”. The younger “prodigal” son is the one who actually has the better relationship with the Father. He knows the father’s love for him. The older son has missed it – he sees that he has been “slaving” to his Father – he’s done all the right things but has missed the Father’s heart. Somehow, being in touch with our “brokenness” is more important to God than our “performance”

So before we have a time for questions, let me finish with a few thoughts on how we can help our congregations

1. Teach on Sexuality – Dr. Radner mentioned this as well and I realize it is easy for me to say this – I’m no longer pasturing and in my 10 years of being a pastor I don’t think I taught on this either. I think we all tend to shy away from this topic because of negative stereotypes of previous generations of pastors. I suggest you not focus on homosexuality but within a larger context of biblical view of sexuality. If we as the church are not teaching on it then the only input our people are getting on sexuality is from our culture
2. Singleness – Karla mentioned this in one of the panel discussions and so did Bruxy – we’ve held up marriage as the ideal – so where do singles fit in other than they are “waiting to get married”. We need to think this through more and elevate singleness as a high calling – surprising it isn’t since several main characters in the New Testament were single – Jesus, John the Baptist, Paul etc.

I often hear people who struggle with pornography say they thought it would go away when they got married as if marriage will solve our problems.

3. Prophetic voice/symbol – I feel that in one way the gay community is a gift to the church. A gay person choosing to be celibate as obedience to Christ is a powerful statement of challenging our culture's idolatry of sexuality. The same is true for heterosexual person choosing to be celibate.  
Not only is that a powerful statement to our culture – it is a powerful prophetic statement to the rest of us followers of Jesus – their following Jesus is costing them something – what is my following Jesus costing me?