

PART 3: PASTORAL GUIDELINES REGARDING SAME-SEX ATTRACTION, SAME-SEX PRACTICE AND SAME-SEX-MARRIAGE.

1. Preamble.

During the study committee's discussion on the development of a pastoral response to same-sex marriage, it became clear that we also needed to address pastoral responses to those who are same-sex attracted as well as to those who are practising homosexuals. We have also included pastoral guidelines on the communication of our denominational position on marriage and homosexuality.

2. Pastoral Guidelines regarding same-sex attraction.

2.1. Introduction.

As was made clear in the section on the biblical foundations of the denomination's position on homosexual relations and same-sex marriage, God created people as male and female, and sexual relations are to be between a man and woman in the context of marriage, a life-long committed relationship, where a husband and wife become one-flesh (Gen 2:18,21-25).¹ However, sin has marred all that was good in God's original creation. Sin did not just drive a wedge between humanity and God, but also between people, including men and women. In addition the consequences of sin have affected the created order – examples include pain in child-bearing (Gen 3:16), and the cursing of the ground, so that it produces thorns and thistles (Gen 3:17).

The impact of the Fall on the world and on people's lives is both devastating and wide-reaching. Brokenness is manifested not only in genetic problems such as birth defects, but also in people who abuse and manipulate others. As this brokenness is the result of the Fall, we are – in a sense – the victims of sin.

The fall however also results in personal sin: thoughts, words, and actions that are contrary to God's will, for which we are held responsible. We believe that '[Sin] is a corruption of all nature - an inherited depravity which even infects small infants in their mother's womb, and the root which produces in man every sort of sin' (Belgic Confession, Art. 15). The truth is that we are sinners living in a sinful world.

We believe that same-sex attraction,² however arising, is ultimately a result of the brokenness caused by the Fall.³

Furthermore, to be attracted to someone of the same sex is not necessarily sinful. We don't consider a man being attracted to a woman, or vice versa, sinful. Someone who experiences same-sex attraction is not committing a sin. It's what we do with that attraction that either honours God or dishonours Him. For example, if a married man is attracted to a single

¹ Except where otherwise indicated, all scripture references are from the ESV and are used with permission.

² In this document the phrase same-sex attraction refers to the predominant (rather than episodic) erotic and emotional attraction to someone of the same sex.

³ The committee recognises that a number of factors such as family circumstances or personal experiences have been suggested as possible contributors to same-sex attraction. The members of this committee do not regard themselves as appropriately qualified to express an opinion on this and this paper accordingly does not address the debate about the origins or causes of same-sex attraction.

woman, he is not free to pursue that relationship. Similarly, if someone is attracted to a person of the same gender, they are not free to pursue a sexual relationship with that person.

While same-sex attraction in itself may not be sin, it is obviously a temptation to sin. Such temptation must be resisted like any other temptation, for sin is the giving in to temptation whether in our actions or our thoughts. The Bible teaches that ‘each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin...’ (Jam 1:14-15a). When attraction becomes a sinful desire it leads to further sin. Jesus said that ‘everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart’ (Mt 5:28). This is true for anyone looking at another person with lustful intent – whether the other person is of the same or of a different sex.

The Good News of the Gospel is the same for the person who is same-sex attracted as it is for anyone else. Through faith in Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled with God, and are granted the blessed abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. With His guiding grace and strength we have the means to resist temptation and live holy lives. Like all of God’s people, those who are same-sex attracted must trust that ‘God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it’ (1 Cor 10:13). Moreover, like all of God’s people, those who are same-sex attracted can take comfort in the assurance that ‘If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness’ (1 Jn 1:9).

2.2. Pastoral issues facing those with same-sex attraction.

When it comes to providing pastoral care to those who wrestle with same-sex attraction, there are many issues that need to be thought through. These guidelines deal with nine issues: Shame, community, identity, temptation and sin, celibacy, healing, local church ministry, pastoral care to families, and justice and grace.

2.2.1. Shame.

Shame may often be an appropriate response to disobedience. The Prophet Daniel prays, ‘To us, O Lord, belongs open shame... because we have sinned against you’ (Dan 9:8). In fact, God uses shame to remind us of our guilt, and call us to repentance. The Psalmist asks God to, ‘Fill the faces [of his enemies] with shame, that they may seek your name, O Lord’ (Ps 83:16) and the apostle Paul talks about ‘godly grief... that leads to salvation’ (2 Cor 7:10).

However, those who experience same-sex attraction often experience shame, because they see themselves as being different from other people, and they hide their struggles for fear that they would lose people’s respect, be judged negatively, and be ridiculed and rejected. Such shame leads to loneliness and a feeling of isolation, that they don’t belong. Keeping this part of themselves hidden often produces a sense of falseness. They may feel shame simply for experiencing same-sex attraction, and this shame isolates them from genuine community, even within the family of God, the church. It can affect their sense of self, including their sense of being a new self in Christ. It can lead to depression and suicidal thoughts and erodes their sense of wellbeing and their sense of love and grace.

People who experience the shame of same-sex attraction need the very community that they fear. They have a deep spiritual need for intimate personal relationships in which they are loved and valued by others, even in the brokenness of their sexuality. They need to be reminded that God's love and grace extends to them just like it extends to all those who repent of their sins and look to Jesus in faith. As the Bible reminds us, 'since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching' (Heb 10:19,22,24-25 NIV).

2.2.2. Community.

The Good News is that in Jesus Christ, God gathers his people into a new community and gives them a new identity. The apostle Peter says, 'you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy' (1 Pet 2:9-10). The apostle Paul writes, 'if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation' (2 Cor 5:17). Neither who we are, nor what we have done excludes us from this new community. Together we have been forgiven and accepted by God, and our shame taken away.

As churches, we must create an accepting and forgiving community of the unashamed. As God's people, we all have certain things in common with each other:

1. We are all sinners and we are all broken and weak.
2. On the cross Jesus bore the shame and guilt of our sin.
3. In Jesus we have been reconciled with God. The apostle Paul writes, 'some of you [practiced homosexuality and many other sins], but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God' (1 Cor 6:11). Through faith in Jesus Christ our sins have been washed away, and we have been declared holy and right in God's eyes.

How do these three truths affect the way we function as the Church?

1. We no longer define people by their sin, but by their standing in Jesus Christ. Although we were once 'sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers, or swindlers' (1 Cor 6:9-10), we are now forgiven, and holy in Christ Jesus. As Paul says elsewhere, 'There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1).
2. We are free to acknowledge our struggles with one another. The apostle James encourages us to 'confess your sins to one another' (Jam 5:16a). Even though we have been forgiven, we all still struggle with sin and are called to encourage one another to confess our sin and to live holy and righteous lives.

3. We are called to pray for one another that we might find wholeness and healing. Again the apostle James writes, ‘pray for one another, that you may be healed’ (Jam 5:16b).
4. We are called to treat each other not only with justice, but also with mercy and grace.

The gospel is that Jesus not only came to reconcile us with God, but also with each other (Eph 2:14-16). As churches, we need to be communities of grace, where each member treats others as more significant than themselves (Phil 2:4), and where the first will be last, and the last first (Mt 19:30). The cry for acceptance by people who experience same-sex attraction is often a cry for community.

Being a community as a church also means being a community of trust. If people who are struggling do not have the confidence that whatever is shared will remain in confidence, there will be no willingness or incentive to share their burden. Confidentiality is crucial in this trust relationship.

2.2.3. Identity.

We often act as if how we label or identify ourselves, defines us. Our identity tells us where we fit into the world, how we are to live, and to some extent what our purpose or meaning is. People who experience same-sex attraction often identify themselves in terms of that aspect of their personality, and so often do others. While same-sex attraction is an aspect of someone’s life that can be pervasive, this tendency to reduce a person to some aspect of his or her person is dehumanizing and unbiblical. When a person who struggles with same-sex attraction defines themselves as ‘homosexual’ as secular cultural does, it may mean the uncritical acceptance of one’s desires and attractions and allowing those desires to shape their behaviour. ‘Coming out,’ may concretize their sexual identity while in fact it is still being formed.

The message of the gospel is that when we have been born again in Christ Jesus, who we are is no longer defined by our gender, our nationality, our sexuality or by the moral struggles we may face. Our identity is found in Jesus Christ and in Him alone. It’s essential for the church to help people with same-sex attraction identify themselves in terms of their relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ, rather than in terms of their sexuality. A person’s sexual identity is not their deepest or most defining identity. One’s core identity must not be hostage to one’s sexual identity or sexual orientation.

This change of identity is what the Bible calls ‘becoming a new person in Christ’ (e.g. 2 Cor 5:17). This becoming is not an instantaneous one-time event, but a process that will only reach completion when Jesus returns. The ministry of the church is to encourage God’s people to grow into their new identity in Christ Jesus, in how they think, in how they respond, and in how they behave. The Church calls God’s people, those who are same-sex attracted as well, to live in light of their new identity in Christ Jesus.

2.2.4. Temptation and sin.

God has created people as sexual beings, and nearly all human beings experience sexual temptations at various times in their lives, with varying degrees of intensity. Temptation

is the urge to do what is wrong in God's eyes. Sometimes temptations can be incredibly strong and persistent, and may seem irresistible and even right in our eyes, but if they are contrary to God's will, they are temptations to sin. However, temptation is not sin. The Bible teaches that Jesus '...in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin' (Heb 4:15; Mt 4:1-11).

As churches, we must be clear that temptation becomes sin only when we give some form of assent to it, whether in our thoughts, or by our actions. For temptation to give birth to sin (Jam 1:13-15), a person must in some way say 'yes' to the temptation, even if only in our inner being. It is possible to sin in our hearts, even if our sinful desires don't turn into outward actions (see Mt 5:22,28). The Bible speaks about 'falling' into sin, or 'yielding' to temptation, or 'intentionally' or 'deliberately' sinning. Whatever the degree of wilfulness, sin needs both forgiveness and cleansing.

But how can churches encourage people who struggle with temptation, whether sexual or otherwise? Scripture teaches us that a tempted person needs both strength to resist and a way of escape. The apostle Paul encourages us to 'be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might, and to put on the whole armor of God, that we may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.' (Eph 6:10-11). While we are weak, God is strong. The apostle John reminds us that 'he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world' (1 Jn 4:4). If we struggle in our power we lose, but if we rest in God's power we can stand firm.

We should also encourage God's people to pray that they might be delivered from temptation. Jesus taught us to pray, 'lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil' (Mt 6:13). We should also pray for each other. The apostle James reminds us that, 'The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective' (Jam 5:16c). We should not face our struggles alone, we need other Christians, and we need their prayers.

As with those who struggle with other sins, we ought to encourage those who are struggling emotionally and physically with the realities of temptation and sin. This should be done without suggesting by our tone or words that the person has not really turned to God and therefore does not deserve help. Scripture does tell us that God will not let us be tempted beyond our ability (1 Cor 10:13) but this needs to be communicated with sensitivity and empathy.

2.2.5. Celibacy.

In our society the idea of celibacy is often seen as both undesirable and unattainable, but the apostle Paul actually recommends singleness as a desirable state for followers of Jesus. He says, 'to the unmarried... I say that it is good for them to remain single' (1 Cor 7:8). He gives three reasons why it is good to remain single. Firstly, being married in times of great trials is very difficult, and he would spare Jesus' followers from that (1 Cor 7:28). Secondly, marriage belongs to this present world which is passing away (1 Cor 7:31 cf. Mt 22:30). Thirdly, single people can give their undivided attention to pleasing the Lord (1 Cor 7:32), whereas married people's interests are divided between God and their spouse (1 Cor 7:33-35). While it is good to marry, it is also good to remain single.

But what are single people to do about their sexuality? What should young people between the ages of 12 and 13,⁴ or between the ages of 28 and 30,⁵ do when ‘they burn with passion’ (1 Cor 7:9)? This is an important question for every single adult person, whether they are same-sex attracted, heterosexual, widowed or divorced, because we all often struggle with our sexual drives.

In Jesus’ teaching about marriage and divorce, his disciples respond, ‘it is better not to marry’ (Mt 19:10). To this Jesus replied, ‘Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it’ (Mt 19:11-12). Jesus doesn’t explain who are those ‘who are able to receive’ his teaching, or who are ‘those to whom it is given,’ or if renouncing marriage (making oneself a eunuch) for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is possible for everyone.

However, the apostle Paul, when speaking of married people forgoing sexual relations to devote themselves to prayer, states they should do so for a limited time ‘so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control’ (1 Cor 7:5). He adds, ‘I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another’ (1 Cor 7:7). Paul identifies the gift necessary for celibacy as self-control. Often the church talks about some people who have the gift of celibacy that allows them to forego sexual relations. But what of those who do not have such a gift? What if marriage is not possible or permissible for them?

Rather than speaking of the gift of celibacy, Paul speaks of the gift of being able to control one’s sexual desires. And Paul encourages us to ‘earnestly desire the spiritual gifts’ (1 Cor 14:1). We may seek them and pray for them. Like the apostle James encourages us to pray for wisdom (Jam 1:5), so we may pray for self-control. Self-control is a gift that we can ask the Spirit to give.

However, self-control is not only a gift, it is also a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). Paul lists self-control, along with love, joy, peace, and gentleness, among the things that are produced by the Holy Spirit in those who belong to Jesus. As we ‘walk by the Spirit’ (Gal 5:16), and as we are ‘led by the Spirit’ (Gal 5:18), the Spirit will help us to no longer ‘gratify the desires of the flesh,’ such as ‘sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,’ but will instead enable us to be self-controlled.

Finally, Scripture teaches us that even though self-control is both a fruit of the Spirit and a gift of the Spirit, it is also commanded of us. Paul says that God’s grace trains us ‘to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives’ (Tit 2:11-12). The apostle Peter tells us to ‘be self-controlled’ (1 Pet 1:13 NIV), and that to our knowledge we should add ‘self-control’ (2 Pet 1:6). Whether people have the gift of celibacy or not, does not mean that they are excused from exercising control over their sexual desires.

As churches how can we encourage people to learn self-control?

⁴ The age of sexual maturity.

⁵ The median age of women and men respectively when they marry for the first time in Australia (ABS, 2015).

1. We should encourage people to desire it, seek it, and pray for it, alone and with others.
2. We should encourage people to believe that God gives us what we ask in Jesus' name.
3. We should encourage people to trust in God's power to overcome our inherent human sinfulness.
4. We should encourage people to practice self-control, in every aspect of their lives, not just in the area of their sexuality.
5. We must teach people to flee temptations like pornography, certain situations, and even certain people.
6. We should teach people to be honest about their temptations with other people. Hiding our temptations, or keeping them secret gives them power that can be broken only by allowing others to bear our burdens with us (Gal 6:2).
7. We should encourage people to be accountable to fellow Christians, with whom they can meet regularly for support, prayer, and encouragement.

2.2.6. Healing.

The power of the Gospel is not only seen in the restoration of our broken relationship with God, and with each other, but also in the healing of our broken lives, whether physically, mentally, or emotionally. Jesus came to proclaim the kingdom of God, and he did so, not just through teaching and preaching, but by healing the sick, cleansing lepers, and casting out demons (Mt 4:23-24). Jesus commanded his disciples to not only preach the gospel, but to also heal people (Lk 9:1-6; 10:8-9). In the early church, the proclamation of the gospel and healing went hand in hand (Act 3:8-12; 4:29-30 etc.). Among the gifts of the Spirit given to the church was the gift of healing (1 Cor 12:9). And James commissions the church to a ministry that pairs the forgiveness of sins, prayer and healing (Jam 5:13-16). God hears and answers the prayers of his people for healing, and God's people can attest to His grace working powerfully in their lives.

However, God does not promise to heal us of every ailment, or from all the brokenness that we experience in this life. God did not give relief from Paul's 'thorn in the flesh,' but instead reminded Paul that His grace was sufficient for him (2 Cor 12:7-9). Sometimes we may have to wait for healing, and sometimes we may have to wait until Christ returns to 'wipe away every tear from our eyes... and make all things new' (Rev 21:4-5).

Sometimes healing comes as a direct answer to prayer, but it also comes through medicine, doctors, and counselling. This is true with sexual brokenness as well. We need to turn to God for healing, but he often answers our prayers through the ministry of others. The church needs to communicate our hope in God for healing, that He would protect people with same-sex attractions from temptation, grow their self-control, cultivate a supportive Christian community, provide on-going strength in the struggle, even develop an attraction for the opposite sex, and even enable them to marry and have

a family. It should, however, be acknowledged that these last two may well not occur and should not be assumed. The church should encourage those with same-sex attraction to seek whatever healing God in his grace may provide for them. They should seek healing personally through prayer, but also through the ministries of the church, as well as specialized ministries in the wider Christian community.

2.2.7. Local church ministry.

While referrals to specialized ministries or counsellors can be of great help to people wrestling with same-sex attraction, they are rarely successful without the compassionate support of local churches. How can churches best support those who struggle with same-sex attraction?

Firstly, the church must remember that it's not the law that changes people's lives and makes them acceptable before God, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The ministry of the church to same-sex attracted people must be gospel-centred, pointing people to Jesus and his death on the cross for their sins. Only faith in Jesus can redeem people from their sins and make them whole.

Christian ministry begins with compassion. As Jesus was moved by the brokenness he saw in people's lives, so too we must be moved by those who struggle with same-sex attraction. Compassion is what we feel when we are in touch with the pain of others, even though their situation may be very different from anything we have experienced. Only when we know our own brokenness, our own temptations and weaknesses, can we begin to identify with the brokenness, temptations and weakness of others and feel compassion for them. That compassion is the motivational power for ministry.

Compassionate ministry seeks to incorporate those with same-sex attractions into the life of the church, satisfying their need for community, for intimacy, for oneness with others, and their need to be loved and valued by others. Churches need to break down the silence and the walls of separation, which convey judgment, alienation, exclusion, and the loss of hope that those with same-sex attraction often experience.

Finally, churches must pray for all those who struggle with sexual temptations, whether same-sex or otherwise. We must bear one another's burdens, support one another in the Christian life, encourage each other to live in holy obedience, hold out the hope of the gospel to one another, and seek healing from all our impairments. We must remember Jesus' words, 'as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me' (Mt 25:40).

So how can the local church create a hospitable and inclusive environment for those with same-sex attractions?

a) Creating a hospitable climate.

1. Use language that describes the church community as God's family. The church is more than just a collection of different families, rather it is God's family, and we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, who all belong to each other, and are called to love each other.

2. Model and encourage friendships with people of the same gender as well as the opposite gender. As Paul encourages Timothy to ‘encourage [older men] as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity’ (1 Tim 5:1-2).
3. Provide an environment for confession of sin and accountability with other Christians, whether with a mentor or an accountability partner, in small groups, and in public worship.

b) Creating an inclusive environment.

1. In congregational prayers include the needs of single Christians and their relational needs, as well as those of married people and families. For example, leaders could include prayer for faithfulness and commitment in friendships and love and forgiveness towards housemates.
2. During liturgical confession refer to specific sins, including sexual sins and homosexual practice. Use Scripture and prayers that refer to the fact that Christians too are tempted by, and struggle with, a variety of sins. Use language that demonstrates that every kind of sin displeases God. Remind people that no sin is beyond God’s forgiveness and that God’s power can break the power and cycles of sin in people’s lives. Confront not just sins of behaviour, but also sins of attitude and thought. Don’t just confess the dramatic sins that people experience, but also the mundane sins that we often overlook.
3. In preaching talk about the variety of ways that sin affects our lives, including the impact of sexual sin. Call God’s people to repentance, but also to the hope and peace found in the gospel. If possible give examples of people who have been freed from the power of sin, including homosexual sin.
4. Encourage small groups to be open to various people i.e. singles and couples, old and young, rather than groups that cater for only one demographic i.e. couples, singles, or age specific.

c) Helpful ministries.

Below are some examples of ministries that have proved helpful for people struggling with same-sex attraction.

1. Prayer partners, both formal and informal.
2. Biblical teaching on homosexuality, forgiveness, and God’s power to enable believers to resist sin.
3. Teaching and training in spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, corporate worship, and service.
4. A setting where it was known that other church attenders also experienced same-sex desires i.e. a support group.

2.2.8. Pastoral care to families.

The reality of same-sex attraction and same-sex practice has an impact not only on individuals but also on their families, whether parents, or siblings, or even their spouse and children. When families are confronted with the reality of a loved one's homosexuality they often respond with shock, denial, anger, shame, blame, grief, and depression. The journey may be long, lonely and difficult if it is not shared.

Pastors are often the first port of call in not only teaching the congregation how to respond to brokenness in their lives and in the lives of their family, but also in modelling how to love people while not condoning their sin. Pastors should not only encourage an understanding of the issues surrounding same-sex attraction, but also model compassion for those very same people. As pastoral care practitioners, it is crucial to distinguish between beliefs and behaviours with which we disagree, and the very real human beings who believe and behave in those ways.⁶

Advice to Pastors:

1. Be available to parents and families who ask for your pastoral help, guidance and prayer.
2. Welcome homosexual persons into the faith community. Seek out those on the margins. Avoid stereotyping and condemnations. Strive first to listen. Do not presume that all homosexual persons are sexually active.
3. Learn about homosexuality and study the churches position on homosexuality so that your preaching, teaching and counselling will be informed and effective.
4. Talk about homosexual issues from the pulpit in an honest and open way, and let people know that it's not a taboo topic, and that they can approach you to talk through those issues.
5. Maintain a list of Christian agencies, or counsellors to whom you can refer homosexual persons or their parents and family members when they ask for specialized assistance.
6. Help to establish or promote support groups for parents and family members.

Advice to Parents:

1. Admit and confess the areas where you may have let your child down as a parent, because no parent is perfect. However, do not blame yourselves for your child's homosexual orientation.
2. Do everything possible to continue demonstrating love for your child. However, that does not mean accepting every attitude or behaviour, and may in fact mean challenging certain aspects of their lives.

⁶ See Richard J. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992

3. Urge your child to stay connected to the faith community. If they have left the church, urge them to return and be reconciled to the community.
4. Recommend that your child find a spiritual mentor who can pray for them and encourage them to live a life that honours God.
5. Seek help for yourself, whether a support group or counselling, to help you gain understanding, acceptance and peace. Other people have travelled the same road as you, and may be able to share effective ways of handling delicate family situations including how to tell family members and friends, how to explain homosexuality to younger children, how to relate to your child's friends in a Christian way etc.
6. Reach out to other parents who may be struggling with their child's homosexuality.
7. Remember that you can't change your child, only yourself. You are responsible for your own beliefs and actions, not those of your adult children.
8. Trust completely in God, who is more powerful, more compassionate, and more forgiving than we ever could be.

Families need not only the support of their pastor, but also of the church community. This is done best in the context of a support group, which may be a group with which they already have a long term relationship, or a specific group formed to help them through this particular challenge in their family. **Confidentiality is absolutely essential as the family share their burdens with others, and must not be broken.**

Those involved in pastorally caring for the families of those who struggle with same-sex attraction, whether the pastor or a small group, need to be aware that their support may be required over a long period of time. When the church faithfully walks with families over many years it demonstrates the unconditional love of God who 'is patient, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance' (2 Pet 3:9).

2.2.9. Justice and grace.

The Bible is clear that God is holy and just. Since God is holy he cannot abide sin, and because God is holy, we cannot excuse or minimize sin. Given God's just nature he cannot let sin go unpunished, it must be dealt with. However, the Bible also teaches that God is loving and gracious and does not leave us to our fate. Given that God is gracious, he doesn't treat us as our sins deserve, in fact he sent his own Son, Jesus Christ, to pay the penalty our sins deserve, by dying on the cross in our place. On the cross we see God's justice, as our sin is punished, but we also see God's grace, as he takes our punishment upon himself.

God calls us to reflect his justice and his grace in our lives, particularly in how we treat other people. According to the Prophet Micah God's requirements are, 'to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God' (Mic 6:8). And Jesus tells us that we are not to 'neglect justice and the love of God' (Lk 11:42). But how do we 'do justice and love kindness,' when it comes to homosexuality?

We often fall short in our desire for justice when we seek simple and quick answers to difficult and emotional issues. This tendency often results in unjust and unloving responses. We must remember the advice of the apostle James, who tells us to ‘be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God’ (Jam 1:19-20). Again, the apostle James says ‘Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!’ (Jam 2:12-13 NIV). May we work for justice, but may we do so with much grace.

2.3. Pastoral guidelines.

To help churches deal pastorally with those who are same-sex attracted we suggest the following guidelines:

- 1) Same-sex attraction is one manifestation of sexual brokenness in a sinful world. Like all who struggle with the burden of temptation, including sexual temptation, those who are same-sex attracted are urged to seek the newness of life which God’s grace can give.
- 2) Those who are same-sex attracted are not to be denied acceptance in the wider community or discriminated against on the grounds of their sexual orientation. As their brothers and sisters in Christ, the church is called to help carry the burden of those believers who experience the temptation of same-sex attraction, just as we are called to do for all other believers when they experience any other form of temptation. In particular Christians, who with the help of the Spirit and the Word are seeking to live godly lives, should whole-heartedly be embraced and assured that they have every right to full participation in the church.
- 3) Those who are same-sex attracted must be warned that to give in to the temptation to lust after someone of the same-sex, or to engage in homosexual behaviour is a sin.
- 4) Those who are same-sex attracted must be encouraged to find their hope in God’s grace as revealed in Jesus and His death on the cross for our sins. When they give in to temptation they must be admonished and encouraged not to be defeated by sin, but to repent and experience the cleansing that God gives. They are to be tenderly encouraged to seek God’s strength through prayer, through the Scriptures, and through the support of God’s people, to withstand temptation and to live a holy life.
- 5) Given the holistic nature of pastoral care, pastors and churches are strongly encouraged to not jump to conclusions when dealing with believers who are same-sex attracted but to sensitively and graciously engage with them, seeking to better understand their personal journeys to their current situation.
- 6) Like any member who, by the grace of Christ, is fighting a propensity to a certain sin, those who struggle with same-sex attraction need the sensitive support and encouragement of the church. While they should not be seen as unqualified for service and ministry in the church because of past struggles, the church must also in these cases always be sensitive not to place anyone in a position of likely temptation.

- 7) Those with same-sex attraction, like all Christians, are called to discipleship and the use of their gifts in the building of God's kingdom. Their sexuality is subordinate to their obligation to live in wholehearted surrender to Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord.
- 8) Like anyone who struggles with temptations to sin, those who struggle with same-sex attraction should be lovingly encouraged to seek appropriate help or counselling. For some this may mean a lifelong trial of trust and commitment to finding hope and comfort in Jesus Christ in this area of their life.
- 9) Some Christians who struggle with same-sex attraction may desire to enter into biblical marriages and should be supported in that regard. Others may however, wish to remain single, and they should equally be supported and encouraged, keeping in mind that while God calls all to obedience, He does not call all to marriage.
- 10) The church should promote godly marriages and a healthy family life in which the relations between husband and wife as well as between parents and children are such that many of the causes that could contribute to a non-biblical sexuality are reduced to a minimum. Parents should be encouraged to seek Christian counselling when signs of any non-biblical sexuality are observed.

3. Pastoral guidelines regarding same-sex practice.

3.1. Introduction.

In the previous section, we dealt with how to pastorally care and support those who are attracted to people of the same gender. In this section, we will provide pastoral guidelines for those who have given in to temptation and have engaged in homosexual practice.

3.2. Calling people to repentance.

Homosexual sin is not the unforgiveable sin. Those who have committed homosexual sin are called to repentance just like anyone else who has committed any other sin is also called to repentance. Paul makes it clear that homosexual sin is no different to any other sin. He writes, ⁹...Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God' (1 Cor 6:9-11). Paul makes three things clear in this passage:

1. Those who refuse to repent of homosexual practice will not inherit the kingdom of God;
2. That there were people in the church who had been practising homosexuals; and
3. That by repenting and putting their faith in Jesus Christ, they were washed, sanctified and justified.

Jesus himself said, ³² 'I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.' (Lk 5:32). And ⁷ '...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance' (Lk 15:7). The Bible says, ⁹ 'If we

confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 Jn 1:9). The Good News is that there is forgiveness for those who confess their sin, who turn their backs on it, and turn towards God in faith and obedience.

3.3. Pastoral guidelines.

To help churches deal pastorally with those who have committed homosexual sin we suggest the following guidelines, which are also more broadly applicable:

- 1) Pastoral care begins with meeting the person and hearing their story. Making pastoral assumptions before meeting a person and hearing their story is not only poor pastoral care, it also violates an office bearer's subscription to the Heidelberg Catechism, which reminds us not to 'condemn anyone without a hearing' (Q&A 119).
- 2) Where someone has committed homosexual sin, whether lust or in actual practice, they should be called to repent, to confess that their thoughts or actions are sinful, to seek God's forgiveness through faith in Jesus' death on the cross, and humbly commit to live in obedience to God. Given the widespread acceptance of homosexual orientation and practice in our society, it should not be assumed that the need for repentance will be immediately seen. Care should be taken to clearly and patiently set out what the Bible teaches to show that repentance is actually called for. This may require an ongoing conversation.
- 3) Where someone has repented of homosexual sin, they should be reminded of the hope of the Gospel, that through faith in Jesus Christ they have been cleansed from all unrighteousness (1 Jn 1:9), and that their sins are no longer counted against them, but rather they have been made right with God (Rom 4:5-8).
- 4) Where someone has repented of homosexual sin, they should be encouraged to attend worship, partake of the Lord's Supper, and be involved in the ministry of the church. The apostle Paul writes, ²¹ 'Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work' (2 Tim 2:21).
- 5) Churches should encourage each member to be involved in calling their fellow brothers and sisters to repentance. Jesus says, ³ '...If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him' (Lk 17:3b). Calling people to repentance is not just the task of elders, but of all God's people. Paul encourages the church to admonish one another (Col 3:16). Jesus says, ¹⁵ 'If your brother sins, ⁷ go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother' (Mt 18:15). This is not to say that everyone should comment on everyone's sins, but that we encourage the people in our churches to form close relationships with people whom they trust and who can hold them accountable such as small groups, mentors and accountability partners.
- 6) Churches should provide on-going support for people who have committed homosexual sin, especially if they are same-sex-attracted (see pastoral guidelines regarding same-sex attraction).

⁷ The words 'against you,' are most likely not original – see the 1985 Synodical Report 6 on Discipline - Section III, p57.

3.4. Disciplining those who refuse to repent.

In some cases, those who have committed homosexual sin will not repent. The apostle Paul talks about ²¹...those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced' (2 Cor 12:21b). In such cases the church will need to implement formal church discipline. Such discipline should not be entered into lightly. It will often be the final stage of a long process where the individual has been encouraged to repent. For example: the elders should have visited with the particular individual on numerous occasions, before implementing discipline.

The purpose of discipline is to confront people with the seriousness of their sin. In Paul's second letter to the church in Thessalonica he writes, ¹⁴'If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed' (2 Thess 3:14). Elsewhere Paul says that, ¹⁰'...godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret...' (2 Cor 7:10). The point of causing 'shame,' or 'godly grief' is repentance and restoration. However, how we confront people with their sin matters. Paul goes on to say, ¹⁵'Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother' (2 Thess 3:15). We don't discipline people because they are our enemies, but because they are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The purpose of church discipline is not just to remove people from the fellowship of believers, but that in so doing ²⁶they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will' (2 Tim 2:26). The purpose of discipline is that people might come to their senses, that they might repent and escape the snare of the devil.

Our model for discipline should be the same as how God disciplines us. Hebrews says, ¹⁰'...[God] disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it' (Heb 12:10b-11). Just as God disciplines us for our good, that we may learn from it and produce the fruit of righteousness, so we discipline others for their good, that they too might learn from it and produce the fruit of righteousness.

The process of discipline may lead to excommunication. Jesus taught, ¹⁷'...if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector' (Mt 18:17b). The apostle Paul tells the church of Corinth, ¹¹'...not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality ...not even to eat with such a one' (1 Cor 5:11).

Excommunicating a person, and not associating with them, may sound extreme, but the purpose is their salvation, not their destruction. Paul writes, ⁵'you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord' (1 Cor 5:5). Again the purpose of discipline, even excommunication, is repentance and salvation.

The purpose of discipline is not to punish a person, but to encourage them to return to the Lord. The apostle Paul reminds us that as brothers in Christ we are to speak the truth to one another in love (Eph 4:15). Our goal in disciplining those who refuse to repent of homosexual sin, as it is with those who refuse to repent of other sins, is that they would

change their mind, seek the Lord's forgiveness, and recommit their lives to faithful obedience to Jesus Christ.

4. Pastoral guidelines regarding same-sex marriage.

4.1. Introduction.

The Church has in the past ministered in a social and legal context that agreed with the theological understanding of marriage as a covenantal relationship between a man and a woman. While the law has not yet changed to allow marriage between two people irrespective of gender, our churches will face many practical and pastoral challenges which we have not had to address in the past. In anticipation of legal changes, it will be both helpful and prudent to consider appropriate responses now. To this end, the following pastoral guidelines are presented.

These guidelines seek to help churches face these new challenges in a way that is consistent with God's Word, and in a way that seeks to honour Him. It is important for the church to offer pastoral guidelines to help churches and congregation members engage with our society without imposing a rigid framework for negotiating the wide variety of relationships and situations which people may experience. These guidelines deal with same-sex weddings, the impact of same-sex marriage on church life, and how churches can move forward in a positive way.

4.2. Same-sex weddings.

4.2.1. Attending a same-sex wedding.

It's likely that many of our congregation members will be invited to attend a same-sex wedding, whether from a family member, a friend, a neighbour, or a work colleague. Attendance at such an event may be seen as condoning a relationship that we believe is unbiblical. However, people may attend such events in respect of friendship or family ties while not condoning same-sex marriage. A decision to attend means different things to different people, and is a matter of conscience. The apostle Paul talks about how our conscience ought not to be bound (1 Cor 8:1-13 regarding eating food offered to idols, see also 1 Cor 10:25-30). We would urge sessions to encourage congregation members to consider the implications of attending a same-sex ceremony.

With respect to the presence of a pastor or other church leader, it should be taken into consideration that their presence carries both personal and symbolic meaning. There may be rarer situations where something such as a family connection or giving appropriate honour to a deceased may require attendance. While attendance at such an event does not necessarily mean approval of the relationship, it may nevertheless give that appearance. It would accordingly be wise for a pastor or elder to consult with his session regarding attending a same-sex marriage.

Outside of the circumstances described above, it would be unwise for anyone whose official role could be interpreted as representing a church view, to attend any function honouring same-sex relationships.

4.2.2. Officiating a same-sex wedding.

Our denominational view is that marriage is a covenantal relationship between a man and a woman. A minister of the CRCA can accordingly not officiate at a same-sex marriage. Legally, ministers of the CRCA are only able to solemnise marriages according to the rites of the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia, which state ‘In [marriage] a man and a woman covenant to live together in a life-long relationship of love, fidelity, companionship, and devotion to each other. Right at the beginning of history, God declared... “A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. (Gen 2:24)” (Form for the Solemnisation of Marriage, Book of Forms, p279)’ If a pastor were to solemnise a same-sex wedding, he would be open to church inquiry and discipline, according to established church polity (see Church Order Part IV, Section C).

4.2.3. Hosting a same-sex wedding.

Allowing the use of church facilities for purposes other than church-related activities could bring anti-discrimination laws into play. Churches making their premises available in this way may for instance be requested to make them available for same-sex weddings. It is accordingly crucial that those churches who do wish to make their facilities available for purposes other than church-related activities, put safeguards into place. Safeguards such as the following two may go a long way towards protecting the church:

1. Consider limiting the use of facilities to congregational members; and
2. To prevent any misunderstanding, clearly state the church’s wedding policy according to the CRCA’s view of marriage.

While the decision on how and when church facilities may be used is one which falls wholly in the discretion of the local session, all sessions should be encouraged to realise that a same-sex marriage being performed in a church carries with it the tone or semblance of being approved by God.

4.2.4. Playing a role in a same-sex wedding.

As noted above, it is likely that our congregation members will be invited to attend a same-sex wedding at some point, but what if they aren’t just invited to attend, but are invited to play a role in that wedding? This has specific implications for individual church members, Christian business owners, as well as pastors and church leaders.

4.2.4.1. Congregation Members.

Congregation members may be asked to play particular roles in a same-sex wedding, for example being a part of the wedding party, giving a speech, being involved in the music or liturgy, being asked to pray or even being asked to stand as a sign of approval. Again, this is a discretionary matter in which a person’s own conscience before God should guide their decision. In this regard congregation members should be encouraged to carefully think through what their involvement might say about their stance on same-sex marriage. It is possible to show that you love someone but at the same time not be silent about their choices.

4.2.4.2. Business owners.

Congregation members who own businesses may also be asked to provide services for same-sex weddings, for example, as a photographer, or to make the wedding cake, or provide flowers. Whether a business owner provides a service for a same-sex wedding is a matter of individual conscience and we should be wary of being judgemental without knowing the full circumstances. As Christians we must always be aware of how our actions are interpreted. It is also the church's responsibility to stand with those who act from their convictions and face personal consequences.

4.2.4.3. Pastors and church leaders.

Pastors and church leaders may also be asked to play a role in same-sex weddings, such as reading Scripture, or prayer, or walking a child down the aisle. The involvement of church leaders will most likely be scrutinized closely, and church leaders should exercise caution and discretion in their public roles. It would be wise to discuss these specific situations with their local session before proceeding. The same caution should be taken as outlined in 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 above.

4.3. Same-sex marriages and the church community.

The previous point deals with the churches involvement with same-sex weddings, but this point will look at same-sex marriage as it affects the Church community.

4.3.1. Attendance.

How should churches respond when a same-sex couple starts attending your church (whether they are married or not)? Just as Jesus welcomed people from all walks of life, even (or especially) those who were ostracized and condemned by the rest of society, so too we as his followers should welcome everyone into our fellowships. We are called to enter into relationships with people as Jesus does, without preconditions. Being welcoming to same-sex couples means being hospitable, it means treating them with dignity. Welcoming same-sex couples into our churches means respecting what Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, may be doing in their lives. It means that we don't place any obstacles in the way of them hearing the gospel. It means extending to others the same grace that we have received.

Being welcoming and hospitable and invitational doesn't mean that we conceal or obscure the denominational position on same-sex marriage, rather it means that we wait for the appropriate opportunities to communicate our understanding of marriage. This may happen naturally through the normal teaching ministry of the church, through sermons, or marriage seminars, or small-group ministry; or if the same-sex couple specifically inquires about the church's position.

4.3.1.1. Ministry.

Local sessions may face the question as to how same-sex couples may serve in ministry roles. Decisions of this nature rightly belong to the discernment of the local church, but it needs to be remembered that ministry of any kind in the church is about service to the Lord and that the public dishonour of our Lord must be avoided.

Like anyone living in openly unrepentant sin, those who continue in same-sex relationships cannot serve in any form of ministry. This is not about rejecting them but about setting the limits which declare that public service in the name of Christ (whatever form that service takes) must uphold and proclaim the honour of the One whom we serve.

4.3.1.2. Children.

How should churches pastorally care for the children of same-sex couples? Jesus himself said, 'Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.' (Mt 19:14). When we welcome all people into our fellowship it also includes welcoming children, regardless of the relationship status of their parents. Churches should encourage children of same-sex couples to be involved in the church's programs, and the church should be active in teaching these children the Good News of God's love for them in Christ Jesus. The church should not hide its views regarding marriage and appropriate sexual relations, but it shouldn't necessarily emphasize them in a way that causes public awkwardness or shame, especially for children. The church should take special care not to be disruptive or dismissive of family relationships or to undercut parental authority or legitimacy. If children of same-sex parents are of age to profess their faith, their request for baptism and membership should be decided on their personal views, not those of their parents.

4.3.2. Membership.

Inviting people into a relationship with Jesus Christ, and welcoming them into the life of the church inevitably moves to people accepting Jesus as their Saviour and becoming communicant members of Christ's body, the Church. In one sense, people become a part of the Church informally, as God's people invest in one another's lives, as they struggle together with their brokenness and as they function as God's family in this broken world. In another sense, people become a part of the Church formally when they agree to the rights and responsibilities of belonging to the church. These formal rules of membership are based on biblical principles, cultural practice and pragmatic wisdom, and they exist so that the life of the church can flourish.

Below are addressed specific scenarios addressing the challenge of welcoming same-sex couples into the life of the church, while wrestling with the issue of formal membership.

4.3.2.1. Membership transfers.

How should churches handle a membership transfer from a sister church of someone who they find is in a same-sex marriage or relationship. Even though such transfers are meant to come with 'certificates of membership attesting [to] their soundness in doctrine and life' (Church Order, Art. 62b) such certificates may not always reflect reality.⁸ Churches may be reluctant to accept a membership transfer in a difficult pastoral situation, one that may shift quickly from discipling to discipline, but

⁸ See for instance Decision Book, Membership, Synod 1957, Article 20, 'asking for accurate information about ecclesiastical life of migrating members because of bad experiences with them in many churches... since not all certificates appear to agree with reality.'

sometimes the receiving church is in a better position than the sending church to pastorally care for such members.

Rather than just refusing membership, it would be pastorally astute for the pastor, or an elder to have a conversation with the person seeking a transfer, which includes the potential implications of their same-sex relationship. There should also be communication between the sending and receiving church, as to whether the church currently holding their membership is aware of their same-sex relationship and how they have responded to it. Ideally there should also be an agreement between the churches how to move forward in terms of who should hold the membership and provide pastoral care, discipling and discipline.

It's likely, that after the initial conversation about the implications of transferring formal membership, some persons will withdraw their request. They may leave the church, go elsewhere, or live with the tension of attending, but not being a member. Regardless of their decision, the hope is that there is a depth of relationship with that person that will motivate a desire to continue the discipleship journey.

4.3.2.2. Requesting membership.

When a same-sex couple or an individual in a same-sex marriage has been attending church and requests membership, the response seems straight forward. Such a request is an opportunity for conversation regarding our position on same-sex marriage and relationships. The temptation for some church leaders will be to treat this as the end of the conversation, with the conclusion that membership is out of the question. However, there should be patience in explaining our position, and Bible references should be used to point people towards God's will, not as weapons to condemn. Defensiveness or aggression should be avoided.

To become a member, one must indicate the willingness to abide by the teachings of the church, as well as the church's admonition and discipline. Someone who is engaged in sin and refuses to repent and commit to resisting sin cannot become a member. A person or couple in a same-sex relationship cannot be accepted as members. Most membership requests will end in the couple or individual leaving the church abruptly, or slowly disengaging from the church community. Others may continue attending but not become members. However, if a couple or individual agree to accept our position on same-sex relationships and bring their lives into conformity, no obstacle prevents their acceptance as members. While conformity in this sense firstly means the cessation of same-sex sexual relations, it also raises the issue of the dissolution of the couple's same-sex civil marriage. Churches are encouraged to compassionately and tenderly work through the implications of this, especially where children are involved.

4.3.2.3. Children and baptism.

May the church baptize the infants and young children of a same-sex married couple? While the Church Order states that baptism is for 'the children of believers' (Church Order, Art. 61a), it is presumed that at least one of their parents is a member of the church. The membership in good standing of at least one parent is necessary

for pledging the covenantal promises of God to raise the child to know God's love for them in Christ.

4.3.2.4. The Lord's Supper.

Participation in the Lord's Supper is one of the principal acts of belonging within a congregation. It is one of the church's fundamental expressions of oneness in Christ and it is only with great reluctance that access to the sacraments as means of God's grace should be forbidden.

While some churches often use the two questions in the form for 'the preparation for the Lord's Supper' to moderate participation,⁹ making participation the attendee's responsibility, it is our understanding that only those who profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and are members in good standing of a church may participate in the Lord's Supper. If any person is not able to affirm both of these, they should not be invited to observe the Lord's Supper, with an explanation of the reason why.

4.3.3. Discipling.

The purpose of discipling, in the words of Jesus is, 'teaching [people] to observe all that I have commanded you' (Mt 28:20). Discipling is the process whereby God's people are encouraged to walk in God's ways so that their lives might be to God's glory. In the situation where a member of a congregation, or even two members, are considering same-sex marriage, discipleship means opening up God's word with them, and reflecting together on God's will for marriage, and for their lives. Churches must be cautious in making the issue about obedience, and not take the time to reflect on people's relationship with God, and what Jesus may be doing in their hearts through the Holy Spirit. Churches should show patience and allow discipling to run its course.

The process of discipling begins with honest discussion and listening with a view to understand people's experiences. In most cases, a person's decision to enter into a same-sex marriage is not made casually or lightly, but follows years of questioning, introspection, and prayer. The church should not rush into condemning their views, but take the time to discuss their questions and help them think through the issues and the churches teaching on sex and marriage, and take the time to pray for and about the people involved.

Should the person or couple reject the teaching of the church, and continue in a sexual relationship, discipling leads to discipline. According to our Church Order, 'The purpose of admonition and discipline is to restore those who err to faithful obedience to God and full fellowship with the congregation, to maintain the holiness of the church, and thus to uphold God's honour' (Church Order, Art. 76). The Church Order (Art.77-79) gives specific guidelines on how formal discipline should occur, as does part 2 of these guidelines. The initiation of discipline is a discretionary matter, but it should always be seen as a last resort. Even though the Church and the Bible see discipline in a positive light (Heb 12:5-11), in our culture, and in our individual experience, it often has very negative connotations of punishment and condemnation.

⁹ Do I believe that my sins are forgiven only because my Lord sacrificed Himself for me on the cross? Is it my sincere desire to love God and my neighbour, and to serve them according to God's Word?

The truth however, is that the formal process of discipline leading to excommunication is rarely exercised in our churches today. One reason is that most people when faced with conflict in our churches leave and start attending elsewhere. Another reason is that many churches feel uncomfortable with conflict as well, and prefer people to leave of their own volition. The reality is that in teaching our position on sex and marriage, people will either repent, or leave. We need to be consistent in confronting sin in all its variety, or we run the risk of living out the stereotype the world has of Christians. We need to be careful that same-sex relations aren't the only category of sin that the church affirms its intention to discipline to the point of excommunication.

4.4. The church's ministry.

The two previous points both dealt with how the church should respond pastorally to the challenge of same-sex marriage. This final point looks at how we can respond positively to those challenges.

4.4.1. A positive view of marriage and family.

As a denomination, we are not only free to hold a traditional view of marriage, but we are also free to teach God's will for marriage and the family. The Church has a great opportunity to be God's voice in our world, and we should be open and intentional in proclaiming our views. Church leaders should think through how they will respond graciously and compassionately to same-sex issues. Sermons and the teaching ministry of the church should focus on the divine intentions and the blessings of marriage. The church should encourage strong marriages and healthy families, and equip its congregation members to be a positive influence in our society, not to be hostile or aggressive, but gentle and respectful (1 Pet 3:15).

4.4.2. The next generation.

The truth is that for young adults and our children same-sex relationships are becoming a familiar part of their lives. The world is telling them that these relationships are normal, and many young people in our church don't understand our position on same-sex marriage. We would encourage churches not to avoid discussion of same-sex marriage and homosexuality, but to intentionally and thoughtfully engage with their young people and the next generation on these issues. More than any other demographic in the church our young people will either support the world's view of marriage or God's.

4.4.3. Our language.

One of the dangers in singling out a specific sin and the biblical view of that sin is that we can talk about people who struggle with that sin as if they too are one-dimensional. We can see and talk about people who struggle with same-sex attraction, or who have fallen into homosexual sin, as if that now defines all they are. We must be careful that we do not pigeonhole people. When we talk to or about same-sex couples, we should remember that they are people just like us, they are image-bearers of God just like us and they are sinners just like us. Our language should make it clear that we don't agree with their sexual orientation, while at the same time making it clear that we value them, and that we desire they would find the joy and hope and peace that God holds out to them in the gospel. The apostle John writes, 'This is love: not that we loved God, but

that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another' (1 Jn 4:10-11 NIV). Do we practice the same self-sacrificing love for the lost that God showed us in Christ Jesus? That is our task.

5. Pastoral guidelines regarding same-sex marriage.

In the current cultural climate communicating our denominational position on marriage and homosexuality may be seen as bigoted and biased. While we cannot be silent about what the Bible teaches, we need to communicate our denominational position with great care and thought. We will consider three situations in which our denominational position will likely be communicated.

To individuals, especially same-sex orientated persons:

Many pastors will face a situation in which an individual or a couple enquires about the stance of the CRCA towards homosexuality and same-sex marriage. This can be a difficult conversation to navigate well. We would make the following suggestions:

1. Don't just give them the document to read, but find a time to go through our denominational position with them in an informal setting e.g. over lunch, or a cup of coffee.
2. Don't just visit with them once, but let them think over some of the issues raised and make an appointment to discuss any questions or issues they might have.
3. Offer to meet with them for prayer and Bible study.
4. Use Scripture texts appropriately. Don't merely use them to justify our position or to judge and condemn them, but use specific texts in the context of the overall message of Scripture: God's desire that people would repent of their sin and be reconciled with him through faith in Jesus Christ.
5. Encourage them to talk to other church members or other Christians who have walked a similar journey before them.
6. Encourage them to connect with a spiritual mentor who can support them in their spiritual journey.
7. Encourage them to focus on their personal relationship with Jesus Christ and to cultivate a vibrant spiritual life.
8. Entrust them to the Holy Spirit. Rather than trying to change them by using shame or fear, allow the Spirit to do His work in their hearts.

In church contexts

In many congregations, aversion to discussing same-sex attraction or same-sex marriage leads to unhealthy silence. We would make the following suggestions on how churches should communicate our denominational position to their members:

1. Do not assume that everyone in your congregation is heterosexual. Always speak as if people with same-sex attractions, or their families, are present.
2. Speak with respect and ask others to do the same.
3. Be humble. Acknowledge that the church and Christians have often contributed to the stigmatization of homosexual people.
4. Acknowledge that same-sex attraction is not always consciously chosen.
5. Acknowledge that God also loves those who wrestle with same-sex attraction.
6. Make clear that the gospel calls all people to chastity.
7. Take intentional steps as a congregation to enfold single members in the life of the church, and make clear that being single is good.
8. Create an environment where same-sex orientated persons can be honest about their struggles.
9. Encourage parents not to reject their gay children, but to maintain a relationship with them.
10. Consider proactive ways to reach out to people in the LGBTI community in both word and deed.

In the public arena

When speaking to people or institutions outside the CRCA care should be taken to represent our denominational position accurately and thoughtfully. The point of promoting a biblical perspective is to promote a sexuality that honours God. We would make the following suggestions:

1. Don't just state our position concerning homosexuality, but also state our position of healthy sexuality in the context of a committed marriage between a man and woman.
2. If possible share stories of Christians who struggle with same-sex attraction, or have been in same-sex relationships, who agree with our denominational position and seek to live in alignment with it.
3. Avoid derogative terms and phrases, such as 'the gay lifestyle,' or 'the gay agenda,' which often stereotype people and come across as defensive and homophobic.
4. Share the hope of the gospel. God doesn't love us because we're perfect, but because of our faith in Jesus and his death on the cross for our sins.