

## Pastoral Care In A Diverse Church #2

*Part 2 of the Keynote Address by Emeritus Professor Pat Noller at the 2015 ACC National Conference*

Published in ACCatalyst Volume 9, Number 5 2016 pg 22-23

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Developing a pastorally sensitive relationship is not always easy. For example, we may need to deal with our own discomfort and anger toward the person we are talking with. We may see their issue as trivial or self-inflicted, for example. Recently I went with my minister to take communion to a woman I had avoided for a long time. I realised how wrong I had been when she expressed such pleasure at seeing me and really wanted to talk about my late husband. I suspect that my own self-righteousness had created a barrier between us.

Whatever our struggles, we need to respond to any problem with love and compassion, just as God does. We need to acknowledge others' pain and the difficult situation they are in and respond appropriately. Developing trust is another important task, because if you are not trusted, people will not open up to you about their concerns.

In the article 'How to talk to your gay friends' in the August 2015 issue of Eternity, David Sandifer makes some suggestions concerning how to talk to gay friends with sensitivity, and these ideas would also apply to pastoral carers speaking with gay people or with anyone for that matter. The first point he emphasises is the importance of listening. He argues that we should spend more time listening than talking and I have no doubt that you only earn the right to be listened to if you first listen to the other person and particularly to their pain. As Sandifer points out,

*"Most people can accept disagreement, even on a topic they feel passionately about, if they believe they've generally been listened to".*

In Frontier News (August 2015), I noticed a statement that "If talking is silver, listening is gold". James 1 also makes a similar point, suggesting that we should be quick to listen and slow to speak.

The second point Sandifer makes is that, although it can be tempting to water down the Christian approach to sex, it is important to remember that that same message about God's design for marriage is part of the Good News of the Gospel. It is also intended as a blessing for individuals and for the society as a whole. In other words, we do not need to apologise for the Christian position on sex and marriage, although that position may often be denigrated and seen as narrow and inappropriate in today's world and completely out of touch with the current situation.

The third point Sandifer makes in this short article is that although we currently find ourselves in a situation where we are focusing on the issue of marriage, we really want to point people to Jesus Christ and his saving grace. Sandifer suggests that we should bring the conversation around to the brokenness that we all share in this area, and to the love and grace that are available to each one of us through Christ.

## **Being culturally conversant**

In focusing on the issue of being culturally conversant, Kevin de Young (in What does the Bible really teach about homosexuality?) is mainly concerned that we are clear about what we are talking about, using terms that are familiar to those we are addressing. We need to be quick to listen and slow to speak, always speaking the truth in love and showing true grace that is humble, gentle and caring.

## **What pastoral care does not involve**

I also want to talk about what pastoral care does not involve. We should avoid judging or condemning the other person. As Joel Osteen has said (June 2014 Facebook post),

*“Your job isn’t to judge. Your job isn’t to figure out if someone DESERVES something. Your job is to LIFT the fallen, to RESTORE the broken and to HEAL the hurting.”*

Our job, in the strength and power of the Holy Spirit is to elevate rather than dominate others.

I recognise that those who hold a different point of view from us can be extremely sensitive (such as some responses when Hedley Fihaki and Lulu Senituli put forward Proposal 61 at the latest Assembly, asking for the Assembly to publicly state the UCA’s 1997 position on marriage). But I still cannot understand the strength of the negative reaction of the Assembly members. At such times we need to remember that it’s God’s work that we are doing and have courage.

It’s also not our job to punish or threaten another person. We need to leave them in God’s hands. I think Eugene Peterson puts it beautifully when he says in The Gift:

*“Pastoral care involves holding in one hand the person with love and care and affirmation, and holding in the other hand the Word of God and bringing the two together.”*

## **What is meant by diversity in the Uniting Church?**

I found several comments about what diversity meant to the founding fathers of the Uniting Church.

1. Being careful not to develop a terminology suggesting distinctive doctrines. I find myself asking distinctive from what? The Scriptures? The Founding denominations that already had some distinctive doctrines? It’s a bit like the cereal package that tells you that it has 20% less sugar – 20% less than what?
2. The only identity we need to focus on is that of “the church, catholic, reformed and evangelical”. We seem to have moved away from reformed and evangelical.
3. Being so inclusive as to be subversive of any impulse to denominationalise Christian fellowship (Davis McCaughey). Is there no limit to our inclusiveness? And

here we seem to be talking about being inclusive, not of people but of doctrine. I suspect, however, that our inclusiveness has gone way beyond what our founding churches would have been happy with.

In the Basis of Union, I also found three very different references to diversity.

1. An emphasis on the Pauline concept of diverse gifts among members that can be used for the building up of the whole, a widely accepted concept across the church.
2. An admonition specifically addressed to lay preachers that they should adhere to the Basis of Union, with such adherence allowing for “differences of opinion in matters that do not enter into the substance of the faith”. Of course, the crucial issue then and now concerns which differences of opinion do or do not enter into the substance of the faith. I guess I would expect that sex and marriage would be included here, especially given the focus in the creation story (Genesis 1: 27) on marriage being a symbol of the image of God as both male and female. The hierarchy of the Uniting Church, however, has tended to assume that these issues do not enter into the substance of the faith.
3. The third point concerned the working of congregations and suggested that there should be a diversity of agencies for the better ordering of its life – education, administration and finance. That is only common sense.

I also discovered that the 9th Assembly in 2000 set up a Uniting Church Charter to operate in this “Community of Difference”. (This would be post the Sexuality Report but before the Homosexual Leadership issue that would have been dealt with at the following (2003) Assembly.) Were they getting ready for the coming controversy and training people not to object, a strategy that obviously failed when it came to those who founded the ACC in 2006?

The 8 principles outlined in the charter:

1. Respect personhood of others and their full membership in Christ.
2. Practise strenuous tolerance in the Spirit of Christ. I’m not sure what strenuous tolerance is?
3. Listen to the person first and then seek to understand his or her doctrinal position.
4. Carefully respect views and sensitivities of those with whom we are in disagreement.
5. Avoid all inflammatory or demeaning words and never resort to vilification or harassment. I’m afraid that some of the words used against Hedley and Lulu, such as judgmental and hateful would be included in my list of demeaning words!!!
6. Avoid comparisons, especial y those that contrast your own ‘best case’ with other’s ‘worst case’.
7. Be open to mutual conversion to the ‘more excellent way’ of Christ.

8. Let uniting be the expression of our process, direction, and Godly hope as a 'pilgrim people'. Many of these principles are based on basic principles of communication that are taught around the western world. What puzzles me is the way that they are used by members of the Assembly in a discriminatory way. Or maybe the way that they are not used at all!!