

Pastoral Care In A Diverse Church

Part 4 of the Keynote Address by Emeritus Professor Pat Noller at the 2015 ACC National Conference

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Principles for Counselling Gays

The Irish Presbyterians in 2006 set up a list of principles for counseling gays and I am going to move on to talk about them now. They argue that confidentiality is paramount. It is never appropriate to pass on to someone else what has been told to you in confidence, without that person's permission. Only with his or her permission may it be appropriate to pass information on to a professional to whom you are referring the gay person.

The second point they make is that quick prayers and "Bible verse sticking plasters" should be avoided. Working with people, whatever their issue takes time, patience and commitment. Many people have been hurt, often permanently, by glib one-line answers that deal with their issue at a very superficial level, and do not hear or acknowledge their pain.

It is also important for the pastoral carer to be aware of his or her own sexual brokenness, and the issues it causes for them. Self-righteousness is the last thing that is needed in this situation. It is also necessary to avoid stereotypes and accept the person as they are. Every person's experience is different.

In addition, these Irish Presbyterians argue that we should be careful that the person is not ostracised by us or anyone else. Even the lost sheep needs to be welcomed into the fold and needs to feel safe there.

Pastoral carers must also be prepared to refer the person to a professional, preferably a Christian professional if one is available, if specialised counselling is needed. Sometimes it may be difficult to acknowledge that a person needs more specialised help than we can provide, but in the best interests of the person we should refer them on.

The next principle enunciated by these Irish Presbyterians is to encourage a person to set personal boundaries and to be accountable to you or a mentor. This suggestion presumes that the person has reached a stage where they are wanting to change their behaviour and to live in line with God's Word. It may take several (or more) sessions to reach that point, but they may be prepared to take a first small step such as avoiding situations where they are tempted to indulge in homosexual fantasies or behaviour.

It is also important to make clear that our failures are not final. We can make a new start. A few years ago there was a lot of work done with alcoholics on relapse prevention. The problem was that alcoholics tended to believe that if they relapsed (i.e., had one drink) then they would very quickly spiral into full-blown alcoholic behaviour. The point of the relapse prevention focus was to encourage them to immediately start again with their program of abstinence and to try to stick to it each time they relapsed.

The final point this group focused on was that counsellors or pastoral carers must also be prepared to acknowledge that the same principles apply to heterosexual sin. We may struggle at times but failures are not final and we can start again with the forgiveness of God.

Opening a conversation

Switzer presents an interesting example of how one might start a conversation with someone gay (or really anyone) who comes seeking help.

DS: What is it that has led you to come to see me?

Client: I'm gay

DS: It sounds as though your being gay has something to do with your being here. Can you clarify that for me, please?

(Alternative inappropriate response might be "You poor thing!" "That's terrible" "Being gay is a sin, you know" "Let me show you what the Bible says".)

DS: But what is the reason you've come here to tell me that?

Client: My mother wanted me to talk with a minister about it.

DS: But now that you're here, what's important for you to talk about?

By taking this patient approach, the carer/counsellor finds out a lot about what is happening for this young man and for his family.

Switzer also presents goals for an initial interview. It is important to find out what they want from the interview as happened in the conversation we just discussed. Otherwise, we are likely to be relying on preconceived notions.

You may also need to help him or her identify other undisclosed needs apart from, in this case, wanting acceptance from parents.

He also suggests that the carer assist the person to understand himself more clearly. What does he want? How long has he felt like that? Why does he want that? How important are God and the church to him or her? The carer needs also to help him or her make responsible decisions about his or her behaviour. And keep in mind that by modelling the love of God to them, they may become more aware of their need for God's grace.

What do gay members need to hear?

They need to hear that they are still loved by God and that his love has not changed. They need to know that you appreciate that it has taken courage for them to tell you about their struggles and that you appreciate the trust that they have placed in you. They also need to know that you are willing to listen to their struggles and that you want to understand what they have been going through.

What would Jesus want to say to the gay community?

Of course Jesus can only speak to the gay community through his followers – people like us. In an article on the Church Leaders website and attributed to Newspring Church, “Five things Jesus says to the Gay community”, the following points are made:

- 1) First, I LOVE YOU. I have to admit that it took me a while to come to the point of realising that Jesus loves gays just as he loves other sinners, like Zacchaeus or the woman at the well, a message that is often drowned out by the noise of rebuke and censure.
- 2) Second, Jesus would say that he understands rejection, having been rejected and then crucified. What’s more, the crowd who loved him on Palm Sunday may have been, at least in part, the same crowd that shouted “Crucify him” less than a week later.
- 3) Third, Jesus would say that he understood temptation. After all, as I noted earlier, Scripture tells us that he was tempted in all points like we are – but without sin. Many years ago I saw a program on TV that depicted the temptations of Christ. It was different from any version that I had seen before, because it showed Jesus in a brown robe actually struggling with the temptations. I think I had always imagined Jesus in a white robe virtually flicking the temptations off. As I thought about that story, I realised that if Jesus “was really tempted in all points as we are”, then he almost certainly would have struggled.
- 4) Fourth, according to this article, Jesus would say, “I want more for you” and point to the divine plan of marriage between a man and a woman. The reason that God clearly defined marriage and sex is because he wants the best for us. On the other hand, as I’ve said before, heterosexual marriage is unlikely to be the answer for a gay person.
- 5) Fifth, Jesus would assure them of his loving presence. The fact that we are going against his will does not mean that he deserts us, or gay people. Jesus can wait for people to come to him. As he said, “Come to me those of you who are bowed down with the heavy load of sin and worry that you are carrying, and I will give you rest.” He will wait patiently, drawing you to himself.

Finally I want to finish with a passage from Ephesians 4 that reminds us of how we should treat one another as Christians and even more so, how we, as pastoral carers should treat those in our care. One of my granddaughters asked me what my paper for this conference was about. I told her the title and she asked, “But what are you going to say?” I told her that I thought I would say that it doesn’t matter how diverse the church might be, if people need pastoral care they should receive it in a way that is in keeping with the great love of God.

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one spirit, just as you were also called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of us all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4: 2-6)

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