

A Pastoral Care Resource for Pastors Ministering to LGBT¹ Individuals and their Families

Introduction

Pastors entering into any care-giving relationship, regardless of the circumstances, are accepting a sacred trust: the privilege of sharing an individual's personal story and private pain. Through expressions of love and respect for all of God's people, individually and collectively, pastors inspire confidence and trust. These integral components of pastoral care create a safe harbour for care seekers to share their innermost concerns, thus enabling spiritual health and growth.

This resource was developed at the request of pastors who were seeking materials to equip them for ministry to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals and their families.² It is a joint venture of Mennonite Church Canada Area Church Ministers and the Denominational Minister, who offer this guide as a humble beginning, knowing that it cannot address all issues that pastors may face. The authors have sought to be faithful and compassionate, while acknowledging that their journey toward Christlikeness in response to this need is ongoing.³

As pastors seek to understand, serve, and respond pastorally to the care seeker, they will need to educate themselves through a variety of resources. The hope is that through this experience, pastors will nurture their relationships with God and God's people, and develop deeper levels of understanding and faithfulness to Christ's ministry.

Pastors often struggle to determine how transparent they should be about their personal beliefs with individuals and congregations. Additionally, they may wonder how their personal beliefs shape the care they extend and the message they communicate. Careful attention to Scripture and prayer, as well as the spiritual and theological foundations of pastoral care will help pastors choose appropriate responses. Even in the midst of struggle, such responses will invite individuals, their families, and congregations to live wisely in God's light, rather than in the shadows of polarization.

One of the most important things a pastor can contribute to this process is a *non-anxious presence* that allows people to share life stories and experiences.

¹ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

² 1986, a Mennonite Church Canada Resolution on Human Sexuality recognized sexuality as a gift from God and stated our intention to "covenant with each other to take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other."

³ During the Mennonite Church Canada Fall Leadership Assembly in November of 2008, the General Board determined that at the heart of this resolution lies our ability to continue being the church as we respond to the different perspectives existing within. As members of the church, we may reflect on the same scripture differently, but we are all guided by the same Holy Spirit.

Principles of Pastoral Care

1. **Share the journey** – Be prepared to acknowledge the range of emotions that may be present in an individual seeking care, from depression, guilt, anger, fear, confusion, and grief, to joy, peace, a sense of healing, liberation, and clarity. Recognize your own journey, too.

While remembering the uniqueness our Creator has gifted to each of us, be aware of the capacity we all share to make stereotypical or general fixed assumptions about LGBT persons.

- a) Listen authentically and communicate a respectful attitude.
- b) Celebrate the individual's faith.
- c) Validate the experiences that are voiced by acknowledging and naming both the content and emotion of the individual's current reality. Be sure to identify clearly what the person hopes for at this particular time to avoid imposing another agenda. This creates a starting point for care.
- d) Explore fears together.
- e) Be alert for indication of possible self harm.
- f) Explore with the individual how scripture and particularly the good news of Jesus Christ can guide him/her in his/her current reality.
- g) Guide the individual to reflect and discern: where do I experience God's presence in my current reality? Where or how is God calling me to grow?
- h) Offer to pray together.
- i) Be hopeful and realistic.
- j) Clarify with the individual what you can and cannot do.

2. **Create care seeker support network** – Stereotypical assumptions about LGBT individuals can cause congregations to react in ways that leave care seekers or their families feeling a deep sense of rejection from the rest of their church family. As pastor, you are in a position to create an atmosphere of support that recognizes the worth of the person and provides care that guides those involved to seek the wisdom of God and greater wholeness in Christ.

- a) Establish the pastor's study as a safe place.
- b) Find ways of cultivating a care network within the congregation, such as a journey group.
- c) Rather than assuming that the person's role within the church must be curtailed, discover where the care seeker is currently engaged within the congregation and be prepared to discern together ways to remain engaged with the congregation.
- d) Help care seekers to connect with others who share similar experiences.
- e) Refer care seekers to relevant supportive resources outside of the congregation and the denomination.
- f) Note that at any given time, the care seeker and his/her family members may be at very different places in their journey, thus requiring different responses of care. Just as an LGBT individual is ready to reach out to a community, the rest of the family may be in full retreat – or vice versa.

- 3. Support for the pastor** – To avoid feelings of isolation and to help clarify the pastor's role when engaged in LGBT pastoral care, it is crucial for pastors to have suitable support and assistance. Outside consultation should be sought early in the care-giving relationship.
- a) Contact the Area Church Minister or a trusted colleague for contacts and advice.
 - b) Establish support and seek professional consultation from outside the congregation and denomination.
 - c) With the care seeker's permission, inform the appropriate leadership group within the congregation of the care-giving relationship and review/clarify with them the approach you have been taking.
 - d) Identify the difference between pastoral care and counselling.⁴
 - e) Know when to refer the care seeker to a counsellor.
 - f) Bring your pastoral care concerns to the appropriate members of your own personal support system.
 - g) Consider seeing a spiritual director to guide your spiritual well-being in this process.
 - h) Consider establishing a relationship with a trusted counsellor to seek advice regarding your personal process and wisdom for managing the larger process.

Pastoral Preparation

1. Dynamics of the pastoral care relationship

- a) Allow the individual to identify his/her pastoral care need rather than assume you know the reason.
- b) LGBT individuals may expect you, as a pastor, to be fearful of them or have negative attitudes towards them, and therefore may be quick to notice signs in your behaviour to confirm this.
- c) Remember that God created each person and that each one of us lives with a measure of God's wholeness in the midst of brokenness.
- d) Be informed and cautious about the terms you use, being sensitive to the reality of fluctuating terminology in popular culture and realizing terms do not always have the same connotations for everyone.
- e) An attitude of respect for LGBT individuals and their reality can provide a safe place to explore the fears and pains of those who struggle with their orientation when it conflicts with their religious belief system.
- f) An attitude of respect can also free the individual to explore the abilities he/she has to face the current reality.

⁴ See pp 3-4 *The Way of Wisdom in Pastoral Counseling*, by Daniel S. Schipani (Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2003), for definitions.

2. Resources

- a) Search for and prepare a list of available resources that you can recommend including books, web pages, videos, spiritual directors, counsellors, etc.
- b) Become familiar with other church denominations in regards to LGBT issues so that you can offer the support of referral, even if you cannot offer what the individual feels he/she needs.

3. Pastoral self awareness

- a) Monitor your attitudes, responses, and emotional and spiritual well-being.
- b) Know your beliefs and be able to articulate them for yourself and for others, but do not impose them. Clarify your role in the congregation—caring for the individual in the context of caring for the whole congregation. This could mean that you may not be able to do or say publicly what the person receiving pastoral care would like you to do or say.
- c) Be clear on all of the boundary issues in your pastoral care relationship. Remember that a person who is struggling with issues of sexual identity is in a vulnerable space. Be aware of the messages you give, and use the same protocol for solid boundary maintenance as you would in any other pastoral care situation.

Resources

The following titles offer a sample from the range of resources available. While they reflect a variety of positions, Mennonite Church Canada views these resources as helpful tools for discernment regarding this issue. To borrow or, in some cases, purchase these items, follow the links below or contact the MC Canada Resource Centre.

Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment, by Willard Swartley. (Herald Press, 2003).
www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1037

Listening to the Spirit: A Handbook for Discernment: "What is the Gospel Message to Our Church as We Relate to Gay and Lesbian Christians?" by William O. Paulsell. (Chalice Press, 2001). www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1044

Reasoning Together: A Conversation on Homosexuality, by Ted Grimsrud and Mark Thiessen Nation. (Herald Press, 2008). www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1038

Sexuality: God's Gift, edited by Anne Krabill Hershberger. (Herald Press, 1999).
www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1039

Stumbling toward a Genuine Conversation on Homosexuality, edited by Michael King. (Cascadia Publishing House, 2007). www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1040

The Moral Vision of the New Testament, by Richard B. Hayes. (Harperone, 1996).
www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1041

The Way of Wisdom in Pastoral Counseling, by Daniel S. Schipani. (Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2003). www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1042

To Continue the Dialogue, edited by C. Norman Krause. *Living Issues Discussion Series Volume 1*. (Pandora Press, 2001). www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1010

For additional LGBT resources, see www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1043

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