

SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY: A PASTORAL STATEMENT FROM THE COLLEGE OF BISHOPS

January 2021

Preamble

The Bishops of the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) offer this pastoral statement to the Church after prayer, study, careful listening to disparate voices, and a collaborative process involving contributions from across the Province. As a result of this process, we have become even more acutely aware of the power we all need to live faithfully in Jesus Christ as He redeems the whole of our identity, including our sexuality.

The College of Bishops asked for the formation of this statement in January of 2020 after we heard reports of varied application among ACNA leaders regarding the use of language about sexual identity, especially within provincial events. We recognize there are a multiplicity of realities in our current national, political, and global circumstances into which an episcopal voice could be presented. In the midst of this tragic pandemic, we desire to continue to minister the Gospel into all aspects of our common life that have been distorted by sin such as racism, persecution, injustice, and violence, while also speaking to this specific issue of identity and sexuality. We hope this circumspect statement will speak pastorally to the issue of sexuality and the use of language within our provincial church.

Our foundation is the Scriptural truth that God made us male and female in His image—a profound unity with distinction (Genesis 1:27). God established marriage between male and female to fill the earth through procreation (Genesis 1:28). Jesus and the Apostle Paul taught that marriage is the model of God’s relation to humanity, the Church. It is a sacramental type of union by which humans work out their salvation with, and in, God’s grace. It requires a lifetime of commitment joined, blessed, and sustained by God between one man and one woman for the purposes of raising children and bearing the image of Christ’s relationship with the Church (Matthew 19:1-12, Ephesians 5:21-33). Yet, Jesus and Paul also extol, and themselves exemplify, the model of virginity for life and spirituality (2 Corinthians 11:1-2). They establish Christian celibacy as a normal, while less common, vocation of abstinent singleness for the sake of the kingdom (Matthew 19:1-12, 1 Corinthians 7:1-40).

Furthermore, we equally affirm, following Paul, that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). We say, with Augustine, that this Fall has affected our lives in destructive ways that have disordered our affections. While same-sex attraction is one manifest type of disordered affection, there are many other types of disordered affections. Indeed, we recognize that same-sex sexual relationships have been an oft-targeted sin while other sinful manifestations of our common fallen nature, such as pornography, adultery, divorce, greed, and disregard for the poor have sometimes been tragically discounted or even ignored.

Yet, even though humanity has fallen into sin, we rejoice in the Good News that Jesus has died and is risen from the dead. We declare that in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, we know the fullness of the human person (John 1:1, 14). God nailed every disordered sin to the cross on which He died. Paul even describes redeemed people, who were once idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, and so forth, as

spiritually “chaste virgins” through the cleansing blood of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:1-2). By Jesus’ resurrection and life, He accomplished victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil. He then sent the Holy Spirit to give power to overcome any sin.

As we write, we are aware of many who are Christians with same-sex attraction within our own Province in North America. We have heard some of you describe the experience of praying that these attractions would be lifted from you in one form or another, and yet you continue to live with this profound reality. We have heard some of you describe feeling as though you do not belong among progressive Christians who support same-sex marriage, but also feel alienated from your fellow orthodox Christians because of these attractions. We acknowledge that you have, on some occasions, felt ignored by fellow followers of Jesus to the point of feeling invisible. Many of you, in the midst of these heartbreaking experiences, are, together with all Christians, fighting the good fight to become more like Jesus. Please hear this: we love you, respect you, and pray that this statement will encourage you.

We know that, according to some careful research, an individual’s attractions may move over time along a spectrum from same-sex attraction to other-sex attraction, or vice versa, in a minority of cases.

Therefore, a common cultural perception that some types of sexual attractions are always innate and permanent can, we believe, lead to unnecessary confusion and pain for some, especially children and teenagers.

As bishops, we highly value the ordained ministers of the Province who have been given, through the laying on of hands, a charge to pastor the flock with tenderness, teach with scriptural clarity, and seek out the lost. As fellow pastors we know how overwhelming this can be. We understand that the call to be both pastoral and orthodox with regard to many issues, including sexuality, is deeply challenging.

Purpose

In this pastoral statement, we seek to address the need we perceive for greater clarity regarding pastoral ministry to those who self-identify as Christians and who are same-sex attracted, especially those within our greater ACNA flock. We understand that there are other matters of grave importance within the larger context of human sexuality (such as gender dysphoria and bisexuality), but these matters are beyond the scope of this statement.

In our statement we desire to answer the pressing questions for our Church: What should our biblical and pastoral response be to those within our Church who self-identify as Christians with same-sex attraction? This raises two more related questions: What is the biblical vision for transformation with regard to same-sex attraction? What is the most helpful language to employ in describing the reality of same-sex attraction?

Same-Sex Relationships and Scripture

First, we affirm, along with a broad range of biblical scholars, many of whom do not share our convictions about sexuality or our commitment to the authority of Scripture, the incompatibility of same-sex sexual practice within the canonical witness of the whole of Scripture. As we seek to read Holy Scripture according to the Church’s historic interpretation, we discover this universal and uniform witness among the teachers of the Church throughout the ages that in same-sex sexual practice there is the exchanging of “the truth about God for a lie” and a serving of the “creature rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:25).

We in the ACNA have been clear about this perspective, which is articulated in the founding documents of our Province. We have been equally clear, including in the ACNA canons, that same-sex marriage cannot be made to conform to the scriptural teaching of marriage as a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman, binding both to self-giving love and exclusive fidelity. The covenantal union of man and woman in marriage signifies the communion between Christ, the heavenly bridegroom, and the Church, his holy bride (Ephesians 5:32).

Identity and Transformation

Second, while questions pertaining to human identity are ancient, a certain vividness around personal identity has been introduced into our current cultural conversation. Our society has collapsed into a sexual world view which attempts to redefine the image of God in humanity as predominantly one of sexual orientation and behavior. To the contrary, the early chapters of the Bible reveal that the Lord made humans to be primarily doxological creatures, designed to worship the one true God forever. Humanity's essential identity is found in communion with God and not in sexual activity. For this reason, even though God made humans with sexual capacity through the enjoyment of procreation in Biblical marriage, sexual activity is temporal and not eternal. Yet overall, we see this development of distorted worldview and culture as a God-given opportunity to share the Gospel truth that by God's grace we may become new persons in Christ.

The very core of salvation within the biblical framework is that our sins are forgiven and we are made one with Jesus. This salvation is deeply personal. All of us who are joined to Jesus are being transformed by him and are in the process of growing in the awareness of our sinful nature. This is true for all Christians. And yet, for Christians who are same-sex attracted, this transformation process can provoke a severe crisis of identity. Becket Cook is an artist who engaged in same-sex sexual relationships for ten years and then, more than a decade ago, became a believer in Jesus. He writes, "...homosexuality has become an identity, not just a sin... We, as the church, must strive to treat those who struggle with this sin with more care, and those in the LGBT community with more Christlike love."

The greatest way we can care for all people is to proclaim the truths revealed in scripture, without neglecting the great mercy and love scripture promises to all who believe. Scripture reveals that we are made male and female in God's image (Genesis 1:27); and that sexual expression belongs exclusively within the context of marriage. But they also promise that God the Father loved us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8). They promise that if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). This transformation happens over time as we share in the sufferings of Christ (Romans 8:17, 1 Peter 4:13). As the Book of Common Prayer states in the Collect for Monday of Holy Week, "Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the Cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace."

We cannot guarantee to Christians who are same-sex attracted, or to anyone, that their own desired future will occur if they follow Christ. We can promise that in Christ, there is a secured future of love, forgiveness, and power. And we must continue to teach all people that to follow and imitate Jesus is to live a life of full and glad surrender which daily requires us to take up our cross (Matthew 10:38).

As the people of God, we commit to praying for those who experience same-sex attraction, knowing that some will experience a change in their feelings, while others may experience a change in their will, and still others may face an ongoing struggle but with a change in their hope—that hope of the resurrection which empowers us now and promises a life eternal where our suffering will be ended. We

live by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that we may be transformed into the likeness of Christ from “one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Beyond prayer, we also commit to great care and sensitivity for those struggling with same-sex attraction. We are only beginning to understand the challenges, struggles, neglect for, and even mistreatment of, those trying to live for Christ with same-sex desires. To this end, we call upon the leaders within our Province, and especially our deacons and priests, to teach the Word of God regarding matters of human sexuality. We desire the churches of the Province to be places where those who experience same-sex attraction, especially our youth, know where they can go to share about this reality, be gently and clearly disciplined in God’s Word, and be taught the difference between the unsought experience of same-sex attraction and the sin of engaging in lust or bodily practices that stem from this experience. We strongly encourage robust catechesis on same-sex attraction, Christian marriage, and Christian celibacy.

Identity and Language

Third, as part of our renewed commitment of pastoral care, we believe it is important to lovingly give counsel about the use and misuse of labels, designations, and language regarding same-sex desire. Specifically, a debate is currently unfolding among Biblically orthodox Christians as to the most appropriate language to describe a follower of Jesus who experiences same-sex attraction. Some argue for the term of “gay Christian.” Others prefer to use the phrase “same-sex attracted.” Still others employ both terms interchangeably depending upon the context. At the same time, we recognize that within these particular circles of Christians, all agree that same-sex practice and marriage are contrary to the Scriptures. At first glance, this debate can appear to be much ado about nothing. A newcomer to the conversation might, understandably, question whether this is simply an arcane or unnecessarily divisive argument. But for us who live under the authority of God’s Word written, we hold that our words do matter deeply. This seems especially important when words describe how we understand ourselves and our identity in relationship with Jesus. Indeed, while significant disagreement exists about the use of language, everyone engaged in this debate is concerned to employ language that is consistent with their convictions.

Among those who advocate for the term gay Christian (it should be noted that there is diversity of theological opinion here), some argue that the word “gay” is a more contemporary synonym for same-sex attracted. Others posit that “gay” is used as a descriptor rather than a definer. Still others who employ the term use it primarily in missional contexts and try carefully to define its usage.

Going deeper, some employ a very nuanced argument that while gay lust is sinful, gay attraction in itself need not be lustful but can represent an aesthetic appreciation of beauty and a desire for chaste friendship.

Many within this community using the term gay Christian argue that the phrase “same-sex attraction” is unknown among the larger LGBT community and, therefore, lacks needed mission engagement. Others note the association of the term same-sex attraction with reparative or conversion therapy—a therapeutic method that many have found distressing or even traumatizing.

Conversely, those who employ the language of same-sex attraction are concerned that using the adjective “gay” to modify the noun “Christian,” “obscures the disordered nature of same-sex desire.” They note that no matter how many nuances and caveats are employed, the term obfuscates our core

biblical identity: that it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us (Galatians 2:20). They also argue that when someone in the general culture identifies themselves as gay, there is an implicit acceptance of same-sex behavior. They would suggest that most non-Christians would therefore assume that people who label themselves as gay Christians would correspondingly accept same-sex sexual expression, including same-sex marriage.

We, therefore, believe it is our responsibility to provide direction and speak clearly as the Church navigates these crucial and important matters. We point out three problems we see biblically and historically with using such designations as “gay Christian,” and, for that matter, “same-sex attracted believer.”

One, there is the confusion caused by lack of definition and common understanding of designations such as “gay Christian,” and “same-sex attracted believer.” An associated issue follows: who would ultimately determine the definition that the rest of Christianity would use? The plain sense of such designations is simply a reference to those of the same sex with a particular sexual desire of being attracted to each other. The additional complication with these phrases is that the LGBT community at large does not distinguish living the lifestyle of a gay person from someone only having same-sex attraction. Certain Christian groups seem to be the only ones attempting to nuance gay behavior from same-sex attraction. The Christian community, however, is left without a commonly understood meaning. Confusion, misunderstanding, and misperception have resulted. This is the problem with using non-biblical and non-historical language in defining Christians and their groups.

Two, beyond the challenges of common understanding of the terms, in the Bible and in the history of Christianity, we do not find the people of God defining themselves or forming relationships and communities according to sexual desire and attractions. Instead, relationships and communities are defined in terms of commonly shared beliefs, prayer, commitments, and service.

It is true that Christians have historically entered into communities with others. These communities throughout the history of Christianity are most commonly known as monastic. Yet the power of the monastic movements, originating in the time of the Roman Empire and continuing to the present, is the non-attractional basis for them. Most of them did form with same-sex communities, but they did not ever call themselves any name associated with sexual desire. Furthermore, not all in those communities had the same natural sexual attractions. Even though celibate, their original purposes had nothing to do with sexual inclination and attraction. Instead, they identified themselves around prayer, a particular rule of life, commonly shared commitments, service, and work for God and for others. Their celibate lives were focused in same-sex communities together to foster worship, devotion, witness, work, and charity. Specific vows were required to guard these pure commitments of life and service together: chastity, poverty, and obedience. If anything, the monastics demonstrate the wisdom of forming a community rooted not in attraction. The vows offset attractional lifestyles oriented to money, sex, and power with poverty, chastity, and obedience in order to shape a person into a pure servant of God and not one driven by natural desires.

Three, there is also the concern we have with adding more adjectives to describe different sorts of Christians. Weighing the biblical testimony, we certainly cannot in good conscience encourage more such modifiers without biblical or historical precedent. Designations such as “gay Christian,” or “same-sex attracted Christian” are simply not what the spirit of the New Testament offers as a way of defining a Christian or his/her community. We are not ultimately “gay Christians” or “same-sex attracted

Christians;” we are Christians. We are men and women whose lives are hidden in Christ (Colossians 3:3). Our journey of transformation is a pilgrimage in which we count all things rubbish for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:8). This is why the only name commended in Scripture to take over our identity is “Christ-in-one,” (Christian).

We appreciate that for some these designations have missional uses, especially when engaging unbelievers and new believers. Still, we do not believe it wise nor commendable to adopt categorically the language of “gay Christian,” or “same-sex attracted Christian” as the default description for those who experience same-sex attraction within the ACNA. At the same time, we seek to respect those within our ACNA family who may disagree with our conclusions and yet remain true to the biblical witness regarding Christian marriage. As bishops, we are not seeking to win a debate. Instead, we desire to proceed cautiously and build the greatest degree of unity possible among biblically faithful Christians.

No doubt the issue of the use of language to describe our identity in Jesus is urgently pressing in our current cultural milieu. Identity has become a kind of idolatry wherein one is taught to choose, nurture, and proclaim a certain type of personhood. This then becomes a sacred position that cannot be questioned.

Amid the resulting personal destruction of such an idolatry comes the great gift of the Gospel. Jesus has saved us from making our own identity; he has given us his identity. As bishops, we recognize the urgency to bolster this life-giving proclamation and to bring biblical clarity wherever this may become confused. To insist on the adjective “gay,” with all of its cultural attachments, is problematic to the point that we cannot affirm its usage in relation to the word “Christian.”

We also recognize that neither of the identifying phrases is ideal, and we know that the language of same-sex attraction carries potential grief for some. Nevertheless, the theological and pastoral misgivings we share with regard to the terms “gay Christian” and “same-sex attraction” are significant. This language skews how scripture identifies Christians in the direction of orientation or attraction, whereas the Bible places identity in Christ, faith in Him, godly commitments and communities, and in service. We are concerned that the result in this subtle shift from identification in Christ by modifying our Christian identity with personal orientations and attractions has the potential for leading youth in the wrong directions at a time when above all we need the clarity of definition in Christ alone. We are attentive to the potential trajectory of this language wherein future generations may not employ it with the same orthodox convictions that some brothers and sisters do now. Defining adjectives have a way of taking over the words they modify! As bishops, we have a responsibility to serve both the church of today and the generations to come. We recognize that we all need language to help us describe and confess “the devices and desires of our own hearts” as our Book of Common Prayer states. As we said in the beginning of this pastoral statement, we are very aware of believers who experience profound same-sex attraction. We understand that our youth and adults need language to share about their experience. As reflected in this statement, we commend the usage of “Christians who experience same-sex attraction.”

Conclusion

In summary, we recommend this statement to be used as a guide for those in teaching or counseling ministries. We request that Provincial publications, teaching events, and seminars employ the recommended language and the biblical arguments that support this recommendation. Upholding our

commitment to subsidiarity, we defer to diocesan bishops to discern these matters within their own diocesan communities and ministries.

As spiritual fathers we want to communicate our love for the many within the Church who live with same-sex attraction. We understand that not everyone will agree with our conclusions. We pray that many will recognize our commitment to biblical orthodoxy and our loving pastoral concern for the people of God. Additionally, we write with great love for all the clergy and people of the Province as we seek together to proclaim the good news of God in Christ.

In all these matters, we call for empathy. We also call for a commitment to depend on the Holy Spirit to reorder all of our disordered affections, especially through the application of scripture in our lives.

We, as your Bishops, pray that the Church will be strengthened by the Lord Jesus as we seek to serve Him together and love others in His Name. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you always. Amen.