

Study Five

Where Do We Go From Here?

A. Introduction

We stand at a crucial point in the history of our church. The internal conflict over the issue of homosexuality is very deep. There are large numbers of hurting people who will be significantly affected by what the church says on these matters. This calls for cool heads and warm hearts.

In a brief, but incisive article “Homosexuality and the Church,” Timothy Lull gives advice to our divided community.

Lull congratulates the progressives among us for their courage to speak a word of hope for the many who suffer. He cautions the progressives to remember that not all change is for the better. What is needed is not condescending language but humility of spirit.

Lull congratulates the conservatives among us for their caution and even their stubborn tenacity in their endeavour to honour the tradition of the church. He cautions them to think of the church not as a dead monument but as a living movement.

Lull urges the great majority, those who are not eager to study and discuss such issues, to live faithfully and creatively as all of us seek the authentic gifts of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

It was not the purpose of our sessions to propose a formal course of action, nor even to develop a consensus on the matter before us. These issues are just too complex for that. But no doubt each one of us has moved somewhat from their original position. Some of us may have come to a greater appreciation of gays and lesbians in their struggles. Others may have become more confused about the whole thing.

What Do You Think?

At this point it may be helpful to reflect on the road we have travelled together. One approach would be to share with each other what has happened to you personally in the course of our studies. What has impressed you? What has caused you anguish?

What resolutions, if any, have you made with regard to your own way of relating to friends and strangers who may be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered?

What options are open to the church at this time?

What struggles lie ahead as we come to terms with a movement that is not likely to go away?

B. Point and Counterpoint

We have encountered a bewildering variety of opinions competing for attention. On the one hand, there are strong voices clamoring for full acceptance of homosexual relationships. On the other hand, there is an equally persistent plea to deny such recognition. While it is not likely that we can come up with solutions that satisfy everyone, we can at least hope to be able to reach something better than what we have had.

1. Rejection of violence

It should not need to be said that violence against anyone, including gays and lesbians, cannot be condoned. Yet, we know that violence against queers is more common than we care to admit. People suspected of being gays or lesbians are more likely to be attacked on the way home from school or from a night out with friends. A mother of a gay son knows what it is to worry whether or not the young man will be safe. Her fears are often justified.

There was a time when gays were persecuted openly and executed publicly, often by burning (hence the abusive term “faggot”). Today no respectable theologian or church body any longer resorts to this sort of extreme. However our careless use of inflammatory language can have unfortunate consequences.

The shocking story of Matthew Shephard serves as a reminder that among the North American populace, the threat of violence follows gays like an ominous shadow. Although leading anti-gay activists do not advocate violence, one may wonder to what extent our rhetoric

is responsible for inciting or at least for tolerating such violence. A literal fundamentalist interpretation and application of certain biblical passages such as are found in the Levitical Holiness Code (see Study Two) can easily lead to atrocities.

What Do You Think?

How can we reduce the threat of violence toward gays?

Reformed theologian Greg Bahnsen affirms unequivocally, “What God commands is always to be obeyed and what God forbids is always to be rejected.” Would you agree with this statement? What, if any, difficulties can you foresee in trying to implement this rule?

Jesus warned that the days will come when those who persecute his disciples will think that they are doing God a service (John 16:2). Is there a lesson in these words? If so, for whom?

2. Eucharistic hospitality

J. F. Harvey, writing with ecclesiastical approval, advises Roman Catholic priests to request persons who are not prepared to leave an active gay relationship, to absent themselves from the Lord’s Table. This amounts to an inducement to opt for voluntary excommunication.

Lutherans will no doubt oppose the use of the sacrament as a weapon to enforce morality. We practise open communion. We cannot speak for all Lutherans everywhere, but in most of our ELCIC congregations the pastor announces that all baptized Christians are welcome to partake of the sacrament. Those who are hungry and thirsty are invited to come and eat and drink, freely, without money and without price. That is the gospel of Jesus Christ, as we understand it.

What Do You Think?

What does it mean to be worthy to receive the sacrament?

Presumably there are gays and lesbians in many congregations. They participate in the worship service, join in the confession of sins, hear the absolution, and receive the Lord’s Supper. Is it appropriate to say that they are still sinners in ways in which the rest of us are not?

3. The biblical norm

Many are concerned that the increasing acceptance of gay relationships may become a threat to the traditional norm regarding sex and the family. Some popular preachers warn that family values will be compromised if it becomes respectable to be gay.

The biblical norm for sexual unions is most clearly expressed in the creation accounts in Genesis. These two texts are often understood as a mandate which declares the union of a man and a woman to be the only acceptable expression of God’s will for human sexual relationships. The fact that Jesus himself pointed to that account, when he spoke about divorce, is often seen as confirmation of that point.

As we have seen in Study Two, there is general agreement that such a one man–one woman relationship exists not just for purposes of procreation and the perpetuation of the human race (Genesis 1:28 “be fruitful and multiply”). Rather, the focus is on companionship and complementarity. The two persons are made for one another; they are fitting, appropriate partners. A man “leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife” (Genesis 2:24) so that the two can become “one flesh.” One might say that ideally, the two are to become one soul and one spirit, one mind and one body. They are intended to share their life together and to find joy in losing themselves in each other’s intimate company.

We do not need to fear that men and women will cease to be attracted toward one another. Queers are in the minority. Heterosexual relationships far outnumber any alternative relational pattern. Gays do not expect that their homosexual relationships will become the social norm. Gays want a place in the sun, not the whole beach.

Donald Faris expresses the fear that a homosexual lobby is out to infiltrate and conquer society. The very title of his unabashedly polemical book—*Trojan Horse: The Homosexual Ideology and the Christian Church*—conveys that theme with flamboyant rhetoric. But even Faris stops short of claiming that heterosexual relationships are in danger of passing into oblivion.

The retention of the man/woman relational pattern as the norm for the human family is not on the negotiating table. However the question is what exceptions to that norm can be tolerated. “Can we recognize the normative character of heterosexual relationships and also recognize that the person who discovers he or she is homosexually

oriented will expect, appropriately, to relate to others as a gay person?" asks Jersild.

What Do You Think?

How would you define family?

When you think of the biblical and societal norms for the family, do you visualize a rigid pattern into which all must fit, or do you think of a rather more flexible range of relational models?

4. Sin

There is considerable disagreement on what, if anything, is to be regarded as sinful in the context of homosexuality. As we have seen in Study One, there are those who see nothing wrong with either the homosexual orientation or homosexual behaviour. Others argue that both orientation and behaviour can and must be modified, while still others welcome persons of homosexual orientation but ask them to desist from homosexual behaviour.

Timothy Lull reminds us that, at least since Luther, our ethical tradition has urged us to ask not just what is sin but also why something is sinful. We are not called upon to obey arbitrary commandments. "It will not be persuasive just to assert that 'everyone knows it's wrong.' One should try to spell out more coherently what it is about homosexuality that makes it sinful," he writes.

Some consider homosexual sex irresponsible and sinful because it allows for the enjoyment of sex while eliminating its natural consequence, pregnancy. To be consistent, people who hold this view should also reject the use of contraceptive methods such as vasectomy and tubal ligation.

Commenting on Romans 1:18–32, Richard Hays emphasizes that "we all stand without excuse before God's judgment. Self-righteous judgment of homosexuality is just as sinful as is the homosexual behaviour itself." Yet Hays contends that there is something different about the sinfulness of homosexuality, since the Scriptures without exception condemn homosexuality, whereas on other ethical issues one finds "internal tension and counterposed witness" ("Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies," *Sojourners*, July 1991.)

However in terms of emphasis, Hays observes that

homosexuality is "a minor concern, in contrast, for example, to economic justice." It follows that "any ethic that intends to be biblical will get the accents in the right place." Hays makes an important point. "Homosexual acts are not ... specially reprehensible sins; they are no worse than any of the other manifestations of human unrighteousness" (as listed in Romans 1:29–31). They are "no worse than covetousness or gossip or disrespect for parents."

This is an important reminder to non-gays. However gays will likely not be convinced that they have been vindicated by this reminder. They would say something like, "I repent of homosexuality in the same way that you repent of heterosexuality." To this the straight community will likely answer, "But heterosexuality is not something one needs to repent of." To which the gays will respond, "Then, neither is homosexuality."

The *Social Statement on Sex, Marriage and the Family* (1970) of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) maintains that "persons who engage in homosexual behaviour are sinners only as are all other persons—alienated from God and their neighbour." Many take issue with the word "only" in that sentence. The LCA statement seems to say that gay and straight persons stand on equal footing before God.

According to a Quaker statement on the topic, homosexuality itself is no more sinful than is heterosexuality. What is sinful is not homosexuality as such, but exploitation of the other person. Such exploitation is equally sinful in the case of heterosexual relationships.

What Do You Think?

Is there a mandatory connection between the enjoyment of sex and the bearing of children?

All of us confess without reservation that we are "by nature sinful and unclean," and we regularly ask for forgiveness of sins, both "known and unknown." What is gained by labelling homosexuality as sin? Do we want to say that gay people are more sinful than straight people?

Are we in a deadlock? Can we agree that all of us, gay and straight alike, need to repent of our sins in matters of sexuality, since we all idolize sex and use it in selfish and hurtful ways?

5. Welcome

A goodly number of churches have gone on record to say that they welcome gays and lesbians. What does such an invitation mean?

At the 2000 graduation ceremonies at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon, Bishop G.W. (Lee) Luetkehoelter invited the congregation to think of a person who has been invited to a friend's home for dinner. As the food is passed around, the host dumps a big dollop of broccoli on our friend's plate with the words "it is good for you!" Several more times during the evening, the host makes such decisions for the "good" of this invited guest. Is our friend welcome in this house? On whose terms? Does the invited guest feel welcome?

In Batchelor's *Homosexuality and Ethics*, Muehl puts it this way, "[Homosexuals] have as much place in the pews as all the rest of us sinners. And as long as they recognize it as a problem and are prepared to seek help in dealing with it, there should be no arbitrary limits placed upon their full participation as leaders in the Christian fellowship."

Since that statement requires gays to see their identity as a "problem," they will find it difficult to feel welcome under these terms.

What Do You Think?

After many years of clinical and pastoral experience, Harold Haas raised some agonizing questions. What would you say to a young member of your congregation who has been baptized, confirmed, and has had the benefit of a fine Christian upbringing, but now must face the fact that he is gay? Would you tell such a friend that he is perverse or immoral or sick? Would you tell him that he must remain sexually unfulfilled for life?

How would you answer these questions?

C. Current Issues

1. Celibacy

If homosexual behaviour is unacceptable, and if it is true that homosexual orientation is not a matter of personal choice, then we face a problem. What shall we say to a male who cannot help feeling attracted to

men the way most men feel attracted to women? If he cannot change his orientation, and if he is not allowed to act on his homosexual impulses, then the only alternative open to him is to remain celibate.

Celibacy is an honourable option, of course. Evidently Jesus remained celibate. So did Paul who counselled others in Corinth to remain celibate, too, if they could, and not to create families and raise children (1 Corinthians 7:25–28).

However Paul knew that celibacy is possible only for those who have that special gift (1 Corinthians 7:7). Thus celibacy was not a requirement for Paul. Accordingly, Lutherans have consistently rejected the Roman Catholic stipulation that their clergy be celibate.

At the Seventh Biennial Convention of the ELCIC in Regina in 1999, delegates were reminded that in 1989, the Second Biennial Convention, meeting in Saskatoon, received the Declaration of the Bishops that states that "A self-declared and practicing homosexual person is not to be approved for ordination and, if already ordained, is not to be recommended for call."

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) document *Vision and Expectations* contains a clergy celibacy clause for gay and lesbian persons of the ELCA which says, "Those who are homosexual in their self-understanding are expected to abstain from homosexual sexual relationships."

Potential candidates for the ordained ministry frequently point out the inconsistency that results when a church welcomes gay and lesbian people but rejects their gifts of leadership in the ordained ministry.

Richard Hays and J. F. Harvey do not see this as a problem. They contend that gays can find happiness and blessing in a celibate life. Speaking about celibate clergy, Hays observes, "... there are numerous homosexual Christians—like my friend Gary and some of my ablest students at Yale—whose lives show signs of the presence of God, whose work in the ministry is genuine and effective."

If a straight person's ministry is not jeopardized by marriage and sex, it seems appropriate to ask why the same does not hold in the case of a homosexual person's ministry. Would the ministry of gays be less genuine and effective if they did not have to sacrifice their sexuality in order to be allowed to exercise that ministry? In his celibate homosexual friend Gary, Hays saw "a symbol of

God's power made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Would that symbol have been diminished if Gary had been permitted to live out his sexuality?

All of us are required to exercise self control in sexual matters. To different people this means different things. Restraint comes to a straight male in the form of saying "Not now, not with this woman!" For a homosexual who is allowed to live in a committed relationship with another male, restraint will come in the form "Not now, not with this man!" However if homosexual behaviour is forbidden, then restraint for a gay male would come in the form "not ever, not with any person!" That means that such a gay male would be required to kill his sexual feelings while a straight male would only be asked to channel his sexual urges in the context of a committed relationship.

What is in question here is nothing less than the place of sexuality in human life, says Timothy Lull. Is genital sexual expression "an optional or essential part of human nature?" If it is an essential part of human life, then the advice to remain celibate may be cruel.

Paul Jersild wonders, "Can the church in good conscience say to its gay members that the only religiously and morally acceptable life is one of sexual abstinence?" Jersild's own opinion is that to force abstinence on anyone, including gay people, is to deny these people the right and freedom to be who they are. It is a rejection of the whole person.

Richard Hays takes the opposite view. In his opinion "sexual gratification is not a sacred right, and celibacy is not a fate worse than death." He points to New Testament passages (Matthew 19:10-12; 1 Corinthians 7) which "clearly commend the celibate life as a way of faithfulness." One might reply to Hays that these passages do commend celibacy, but they do not require it. Paul, himself a celibate, knows that celibacy is only for those to whom it is given. The others, those who "burn" (not with lust, as in Romans 1:27, but with love, as in 1 Corinthians 7:9) should marry.

In support of Hays, one can point out that heterosexuals, too, must learn to cope when they cannot find a partner to marry or when they lose their spouse. Those are the hard realities of life. Must we not say to homosexuals that, while we can give them our sympathy, they must simply learn to bear their plight?

In *Ordinary Saints*, Lutheran theologian Robert Benne calls upon Christians of heterosexual orientation to

practise sexual abstinence, "sublimating their sexual energies into other pursuits." He considers such abstinence to be a "heroic" response. Such sacrifice, claims Benne, has always been honoured by the church.

Others object to this kind of advice. Homosexuality is not one of those handicaps about which nothing can be done, they assert. Why should only heterosexuals be permitted to fall in love with each other, to share their life with each other in a responsible way, and to "find joy in each other," as our marriage service puts it so beautifully? Does the gospel of Jesus Christ demand that homosexuals suffer loneliness and deprivation?

What Do You Think?

If it is not justifiable to require celibacy of a heterosexual person, can it be justifiable to require it of a homosexual person? If so, on what grounds?

Do we practise a double standard? Does a gay lay person get pastoral counsel and advice, whereas clergy are subjected to required celibacy? If so, is that appropriate?

2. Same-gender unions

Inevitably the question arises whether homosexuals should have the privilege of getting married and of having their same-sex unions recognized as fully as heterosexual marriages are. It is argued that such an arrangement would be beneficial not only for gays and lesbians, but for society as a whole. This would "help bring to the gay community a stability that until now has not been possible," says Paul Jersild.

This suggestion commends itself as a rather pragmatic solution. The alternative is not good. By forbidding open relationships, society forces gays and lesbians to resort to furtive and covert behaviour, in which promiscuity and exploitation thrive. Jersild suggests that "by establishing social structures that expect and encourage responsible, monogamous relations between two homosexual persons society could create a more healthy sexual environment."

During the spring of 2000, several ELCA synods passed resolutions to allow the recognition and blessing of same-gender unions. Some see these resolutions as a call to continue the process of deliberation to discern where

the Spirit of God may be leading the church. That the resolutions sometimes passed with a narrow majority indicates that there is still considerable disagreement among those who with equal fervor and devotion study the scriptures and seek the will of the Lord.

By same-gender unions these synods understand committed relationships characterized by love, faithfulness, monogamy, respect, and mutual upbuilding. When recognition and blessing of such unions is advocated, it is sometimes spelled out that this would happen only after counselling with their pastor.

What does a marriage ceremony for heterosexual couples really do? Most pastors can tell stories about performing wedding services for people whose union had little chance of succeeding because people sometimes get married for entirely the wrong reasons. What was the function of the church wedding in those instances? Did it fix the difficulties or approve the union? Or did it serve as an assurance that God and the assembled Christian community could be called upon for support if and when the going got tough?

Why should the same provisions not apply for queer couples? Two people, aware of taking a major step in their lives, appeal to God and to the assembled community to be their source of strength and comfort as the two partners express their commitment to act responsibly along the way.

What Do You Think?

What are the issues in considering the blessing of same-sex unions?

Could the liturgy for a marriage apply to same-sex unions? Why or why not?

D. Facing Reality With Confidence

1. Living with diversity

Whatever we do, gays and lesbians, as well as bi-sexuals and trans-gendered people are part of the social fabric in Canada and throughout the world. They will become more visible. Provincial governments are beginning to turn to the courts to determine the constitutional and civil rights of such minorities. Privately or publicly, we will all have to decide how we will relate to this group of

people who are not out there, but right here, beside us in our pews.

It is to be hoped that the church could provide some leadership in this matter. What sort of leadership might that be if the church cannot even achieve consensus within its own ranks?

Democratic secular government is built on the conviction that a country is better off when there is an effective loyal opposition in parliament. People are better served when the minority position is valued and taken seriously. When brothers and sisters honestly express their disagreement and work together for the good of the church and the world in spite of their differences of convictions, can we see this as a sign of health in the church, too?

Paul celebrated the diversity of the members of the body. Hands and eyes and feet and ears need each other for the healthy functioning of the whole. Can this concept of diversity be extended to cover a healthy diversity of convictions? Is it possible for people of opposing convictions to not only co-exist, but to love one another as Christ loves them all? What would such a church look like? Let us brainstorm.

Could a church such as the ELCIC recognize that there is considerable division in this church regarding matters such as homosexual behaviour, and yet affirm that in this church people of divergent persuasions are accorded equal dignity, realizing that we all fall short of the glory of God? Can we say that in this church, sinners of every persuasion are not only welcome, but are regarded as an integral part of the whole?

Living with diversity may become a present necessity rather than a future possibility. Lutheran churches in Europe, notably the Lutheran Church of Denmark and the Lutheran Church of the Netherlands, recognize and bless same gender relationships.

Closer to home, as of June 2000, 17 synods in the ELCA had declared themselves as Reconciling in Christ (RIC) synods. At least two ELCA synods support same-gender union blessings, but do not require their pastors to perform them. Some ELCA synods requested their church to develop a rite of blessing for committed relationships and even to allow gay and lesbian clergy to live in committed same-gender relationships, despite the fact that the ELCA does not allow the ordination of sexually active gay and lesbian candidates.

What Do You Think?

Diversity is here. How can we best live with it, and how much of it can we tolerate?

2. Learning from experience

Timothy Lull laments that our Lutheran church seems to be out of practice in dealing with thorny theological and ethical problems. He says we need the ability to live with freedom and order, unity and diversity, and the skill to make decisions about deeply divisive issues without splitting the church.

There may be something in our not too distant past that can give us a clue about how such issues can be handled. Perhaps in 2001, we are at a point with the subject of homosexuality where we were with the subject of the ordination of women not so long ago.

In our church at that time, there were considerable differences of opinion regarding the ministry of women. Conflicting theological and biblical mandates were brought forward to support opposing positions. Some read the biblical passages in one way, others in a diametrically opposite way. Some quoted Luther and the Confessions in support of the ordination of women. Others quoted the same sources as grounds for rejecting the ordination of women. Some focused on some texts, others on others.

At the Saskatoon Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (ELCC) in June 1976, the matter came to a head when the question was asked, "If we vote for the ordination of women, does that mean that every congregation must be willing to accept a woman as their pastor?" The answer given was a clear "No." While the church would authorize the ordination of women, it was explained that each congregation calls its own pastor. Church authority and congregational autonomy can co-exist.

This willingness to live with a reconciled diversity enabled the church to take a bold step forward. With a comfortable majority, the church convention decided to ordain women without forcing individual congregations into a straight-jacket.

Subsequent experience of the gifts which many women pastors have brought to the ministry of the

church has led most of us to conclude that the Holy Spirit has indeed guided our church to embark on a new venture. The Holy Spirit has blessed that work. Our church is blessed with effective female pastors. Yet congregational autonomy is upheld. Congregations which have theological reservations are not obliged to call such a pastor.

Of course, there are people in the church who are unhappy with the fact that women are not always equally welcome everywhere. There is even some serious question whether the rejection of qualified individuals on the basis of gender does not constitute discrimination and injustice. Diversity can be uncomfortable, even when it is a reconciled diversity. We live in uneasy tension with those differences, but we do live, and we are committed to one church, one ELCIC.

Can a church with that experience now risk welcoming lay people and pastors who promise to live in a monogamous committed same-gender relationship, and to pattern their life and ministry on the Christ who gave himself for us all (cf. Philippians 2:1-5)? And can such a church allow each congregation to follow their own conscience in such matters?

It needs to be noted that Richard Hays and others object to the suggested parallel between the women's ordination question and the toleration of homosexuality in the church. They argue that the ordination of women is not explicitly prohibited whereas homosexual behaviour is.

What Do You Think?

Does the church's experience with the ordination of women provide a model for dealing with homosexuality? Why or why not?

3. Maintaining the unity in love

How can we deal in love with this potentially divisive matter? Responsible church leaders of the stature of Timothy Lull and Wolfhart Pannenberg have warned that the threat of schism looms ominously over the church. Pannenberg writes, "Whoever pressures the church to alter the normativeness of its teaching with regard to homosexuality must be aware that that person promotes schism in the church" ("Maßstäbe zur kirchlichen Urteilsbildung über Sexualität").

While these words must be taken with utmost seriousness, there is another side to be considered. What do we say about those Christians—many of the youth of the church—who are leaving the church because they do not find in it the affirmation that they are accepted on the same basis as all the other Christians are, as sinners who have been forgiven for Christ's sake? These are people who have received the promised Holy Spirit in their baptism and who are eager to share their gifts with the church which has nurtured them.

What Do You Think?

Are we caught between the threat of one schism and the reality of another?

How can we live up to Paul's ideal to be all things to all people for Christ's sake?

4. Pastoral care

Theology is inseparable from pastoral care. Christian people are encouraged to stand up for what they believe, but they also know that they are fallible human beings and that even their most dearly held convictions may become the cause of injury to a neighbour, and thus may not be in accord with God's will.

With this in mind, Christians not only act boldly, they also pray humbly for forgiveness in case their theological convictions may lead them to wrong their neighbour either willfully or inadvertently. Such a neighbour may be a gay or lesbian person as yet unknown to you, or a member of this study group who adamantly champions an opinion in conflict with yours.

Every pastor knows that ministry does not give one the luxury of dealing with things as they should be. One has to work with what is. It is fine to tell people that premarital sex is immoral. But every pastor has to deal regularly with couples who come to be married after years of sharing the same address. Timothy Lull writes "Here the gap between church teaching (or silence) and behavioral reality is staggering."

Theologians need to do a reality check now and again. An impeccable theological argument or a faultless exegetical piece of work may lead us to conclusions which drive people into despair.

What about divorce, sexual abuse (even by clergy!)

domestic violence, and all the rest? Having to deal with such issues in society can make your head swim. "No wonder many pastors feel a tension between the firm ethic that they preach and teach and the more flexible pastoral care that they provide in this realm," writes Lull.

Robert Benne, who has called for "heroic" abstinence on the part of queers, acknowledges "It would be naive to argue that this can be the church's only response." Rather, the church must face the reality that some Christians of homosexual orientation will almost inevitably engage in same-gender sexual relations. As a sort of concession to that reality, Benne suggests that the church "discretely support those who try to maintain the bonds of fidelity."

Many will be unhappy with this suggestion. To some it will seem like a two-faced approach, appearing to uphold high standards on the one hand while caving in to cultural pressure on the other. Gays are asked to act in heroic fashion and abstain from sexual relations—if they can. But if they cannot, then the next best thing, namely a committed relationship, will be acceptable.

But is not this precisely how Paul discharged his ministerial role? On the one hand, he encouraged his parishioners to refrain from marriage, but if this proved impossible for any one of them, Paul would encourage such a one to marry. And did not Jesus do the same in relation to the divorce question? God's intention is that there be no divorce. Yet for those who encounter marriage breakdown, there is a message of grace and there are provisions for a new and more faithful relationship to flourish.

Over the course of its history the church has learned to live with human imperfection. Says Benne, "The church accepts many less-than-ideal arrangements among its members—divorced clergy—for example." Maybe now the time has come to give pastoral support to those gays and lesbians who are willing to commit themselves to a loving and monogamous life style. Benne thinks that it should be possible in this way to uphold both the normative tradition of the church and the dignity of gays and lesbians who enter a covenantal same-gender relationship.

This option, both Benne and Jersild agree, would be preferable by far over what is presently in place. A bond of same-gender fidelity "is certainly a lesser evil than the promiscuity practised by part of the homosexual community," writes Benne.

Given the fragile nature of humanity and the pervasiveness of sin, the choice in pastoral ministry is rarely between what is right and what is wrong. Usually it is a matter of deciding what is the lesser evil and the greater good.

So here we are, ministers of the gospel, trying to bring healing. Whatever we do as a church in relation to queer and straight, conservative and progressive, offender and victim, our response must come from a pastoral heart.

What Do You Think?

On the basis of what you have learned in these studies, what are the possible pastoral responses that can be made to those who are seeking pastoral care because of homosexuality?