

Diversity and direction

Deputy Study Report on

'Homosexuality in the Church'

For the Synod of Deventer 2023



Nederlandse
**Gereformeerde
Kerken**

Hoopvol onderweg
in Gods wereld

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Introduction

Assignment

"What does the church of Christ have to offer lesbian sisters and gay brothers in its midst? This was the question that the General Synod of Meppel (2017) presented to the Deputies for the Study on 'Homosexuality in the Church'.¹ The question was accompanied by several sub-questions that the Synod of Goes (2020) had formulated as follows:

- ◆ Provide a scripturally based view of existing sexual diversity.
- ◆ Provide a scripturally based appreciation of possible sexual relationships.
- ◆ Describe how the Christian congregation can provide safety for men and women who are unable to follow the path indicated by Genesis 2: 24.
- ◆ Describe how the Christian congregation can offer support to those who choose a celibate lifestyle based on texts such as Matthew 19: 12 and 1 Corinthians 7: 37.
- ◆ Describe how a church council can act in the event that committed members enter into a sexual relationship that, in the judgment of the church council, does not conform to the scriptural norm.
- ◆ Include in the reflection the decisions that have previously been generated and the statements that have previously been made by the general synods of the GKV, the national assemblies of the NGK, the general synods of the CGK and related churches abroad.

Appointed Deputies

Initially, the deputies appointed for this study were Wytze Bijleveld (NGK), Els van Dijk (CGK), Maarten van Loon (GKV), Jan Mudde (NGK),

¹ See the NGK website: <https://ngk.nl/commissies/homoseksualiteit-in-de-church>.

and Wolter Rose (GKv). The non-GKv members participated in a personal capacity at the request of the General Synod. Ellemieke Tempelaar-van den Geest (GKv) was also appointed at the end of 2018.

In 2020, the deputies were re-appointed by the Synod of Goes and expanded to include a chairman (Henk Schaafsma, GKv). He received his letter of appointment in the month that corona broke out. Also, Wytze Bijleveld and Jan Mudde were appointed as deputies by the Zoetermeer National Assembly. Meanwhile, Els van Dijk had had to withdraw for personal reasons. In the course of 2020, also at the request of the General Synod, Martin den Heijer (CGK) and Christel Steenhart-van Twillert (CGK) joined in a personal capacity. Thus, the deputy committee found its final composition.

Unfortunately, Wolter Rose was unable to participate as a deputy for three months in 2023 due to illness. The final year Theanne Boer was involved as our editor. She kept the overview and supervised the writing process.

Topicality and sensitivity

Our search for answers to the question posed by the Synod of Meppel began in February 2018. We were aware that this question is perennially both topical and sensitive. Almost continually, the topic of LGBTQ is in the news. The Dutch Railways (NS) no longer address their clients as 'Dear Ladies and Gentlemen', but as 'Dear Travelers'.

A soccer game is ended prematurely because of anti-gay chants. The House of Representatives is working on a bill to ban conversion therapy. Homosexual politicians receive ongoing hate messages tying in with their sexual orientation. British author J.K. Rowling receives hate messages because she would have made transphobic statements. In some countries, such as Russia and Uganda, LGBTQ is seen as 'Western propaganda' and there is a powerful trend to ban or even punish LGBTQ and openness around LGBTQ. We could go on filling a whole page with similar examples. The issue also continues to attract attention within the global and Dutch churches. The *Christian Reformed Church of North America*, a church affiliated with us, recently said that the church's teaching 'against sexual immorality, including homosexual sex' has always

had a confessional status.² Moreover, there sometimes seems to be a culture clash not only in our society, but also in the churches - an exponent of this is the well-known Nashville Declaration. Books on the subject appear continually, such as those by Ad de Bruijne and by René Erwich and Almatine Leene, published last year from within the circle of the Dutch Reformed Churches (NGK).³ Finally, when the theme is discussed on Christian websites or platforms, it usually generates a great deal of attention, in both positive and negative terms.

Principles

In the midst of all these positions, emotions, and developments, we as Dutch Reformed Churches have to find our way. As deputies, we have always kept three general principles in mind: it is about Christ, it is about people, and it is about forming the church community of Christ together.

- ◆ Above all, we want to keep our Lord, Jesus Christ in mind. We are not called to please people, we do not want to be tossed about by cultural and social developments - however much these affect or influence us -, we are called to be here for Him, because we are His. 'For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.' (Romans 14:7-8, this and later Bible quotes have been taken from the NIV, unless otherwise stated—translator's note).
- ◆ With LGBTQ, we are not talking about an issue, but about people. People who are precious like everyone else, because they were created and loved by God, because Christ came for them too as savior and liberator, because the Spirit wants to renew them, too. People who have suffered and too often still suffer prejudice and condemnation.

² 'We conclude, then, that the church's teaching against sexual immorality, including homosexual sex, already has confessional status. According to our confessions, the church may never approve or even tolerate any form of sexual immorality, including pornography, polyamory, premarital sex, extra-marital sex, adultery, or homosexual sex.' (CRC 2021), 146.

³ De Bruijne (2022), Erwich/Leene (2022).

Even within the church of Christ - we acknowledge this with shame.

- ◆ Together we are the community of Christ, and what does this entail? We 'are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light' (1 Peter 2:9). We are the body of Christ, a temple of the Holy Spirit. What do these big, lofty words mean for our dealings with LGBTQ people? What do they mean when we have differences of opinion and yet we come together to agree on a vision, a practice of being a church community?

Diversity

Within the former GKV, the topic of 'church & homosexuality' is on the national agenda for the first time.⁴ But it has occupied the churches for much longer. Recent decades have produced a stream of publications with a variety of views and positions. Some of that diversity is also represented in our deputy committee. That diversity has not been 'resolved' in recent years, as this report will show. Although we share the same starting points, the outcomes differ. This also has to do with everyone's own life story. Our starting point for discussion and study was very diverse. It was necessary to share that story with each other. By listening to each other, we were also able to give a place to the contexts with which we came to the deputy study. That is why those stories have also been given a place in this report. So that everyone can read from which perspective we participated in this deputation.⁵

Methodology

During our meetings we often discussed the studies and contributions submitted by members of our deputy committee. We read and discussed books and articles on the subject.⁶ In doing so, we always determined our own position. We also listened to and discussed with Dr. Mark

⁴ The former Dutch Reformed Churches did pay extensive attention to it at a national level, see NGK (2015).

⁵ See Chapter 11.

⁶ Sprinkle's book *Geliefden (Beloved)* (2015) served as a frame of reference.

Yarhouse⁷ and Dr. Al Wolters⁸ (contributor to the CRC report). We also had discussions with Dr. Ad de Bruijne on several occasions and attended the study day in connection with his important book *Verbonden voor het leven (Connected for Life)* - even though we were not able to fully think through his insights in our report.⁹ From time to time we also worked in groups of theologians and experts in the field of counseling and practical guidance.

Our approach is perhaps best characterized as a practical-theoretical approach. We look for well-founded and usable action perspectives, based on theoretical and practical knowledge,.

Report

For ourselves, we formulated some criteria that our report should meet. The report

- ◆ should answer the questions put to us. These must be approached and considered from multiple perspectives.
- ◆ should not be a report about LGBTQ people, without LGBTQ people. Their voices and input must have a place in our report. Therefore, we interviewed congregation members who are differently-oriented and provide their experiences.
- ◆ should be theoretically sound, but need not be a scientific study and, in addition, should contain practical advice that can be used within the church of Christ.
- ◆ should be as concise as possible while doing justice to the many nuances that exist. Partly for this reason, we have asked six people from our churches who have been intensively involved with the topic of homosexuality to explain their vision in letter form. In these letters they respond to a concrete - albeit fictitious - case study that is close to the practice of the church congregation. These six writers

⁷ <https://www.wheaton.edu/academics/faculty/mark-yarhouse>.

⁸ <https://www.redeemer.ca/academics/research/wolters-centre/about>.

⁹ Two members of our deputy committee, namely Martin den Heijer and Wolter Rose contributed to this study day in a personal capacity.

represent, in our opinion, the spectrum of persuasions within our churches.

- ◆ should serve the churches so that they can use our findings to formulate policies and make choices. In this sense, it is not without obligation. For the salvation of people with a homosexual orientation and for the congregation as a whole, it is necessary that choices be made.

Set up

Our report begins with a letter from a pastor named Philemon. He sends it to his colleagues, presenting them with a concrete situation and asking them to respond to it. He receives six responses. The report is then divided into three parts: one part 'Outlines', one part 'Background Information', and one part 'Practice'.

In the first part, Chapter 1 pays attention to the context in which we live and in which the questions surrounding homosexuality - unlike in the past - are both inevitable and urgently coming to the churches.

Chapter 2 addresses what should be understood by homosexuality: how do we define it?

Chapter 3 deals with Bible texts that relate to marriage, sexuality and same-sex relationships.

Chapter 4 offers a global overview of the positions taken within the church on homosexuality and same-sex relationships.¹⁰

For this we use three lenses (creation, brokenness, and diversity) through which homo sexuality is viewed.

Chapter 5 presents the discussion as we conducted it within our deputy committee and indicate the conclusions arrived at.

Chapter 6 leads to a series of proposals and advice that we present to the churches.

¹⁰ In our report, we take the phrase 'same-sex relationships' to mean relationships in love and fidelity between two people of the same sex in which sexual intercourse also has or can have a place.

Chapter 7 presents a statement by Wolter Rose explaining why he does not want to take responsibility for Chapter 6.

This first part of our report also includes the interviews we conducted with homosexual church members. In this way we emphasize that their personal stories are an essential part of our report.

In the second part of our report, some specific topics are explored by deputy members.

Chapter 8 briefly reviews developments in scientific research on homosexuality.

Chapter 9 discusses the biological aspects of sex, gender, and sexual orientation.

Chapter 10 addresses the issue of whether sexual orientation is at the core of one's identity, or a thread in one's identity formation.

Our personal reflections have also been given a place in this section of the report (Chapter 11).

The third part of our report contains a *toolkit*, part of which will be published online. After all, our report aims not only to discuss the topic theoretically, but also to offer practical tools that can help local congregations find a way in dealing with a topic on which opinions are often divided.

The letters LGB

Letter series such as LGBT, LGBTI, and nowadays LGBTQIA+ express the diversity of people who do not feel at home with the traditional division into men and women, or the heterosexual picture. Because this report only deals with the homosexual orientation in all its varieties - and not, for example, with transgender people - we have chosen to use the acronym LGB. This could very well have been LGS, where the 's' stands for 'spectrum'. After all, not every person with a homosexual orientation is exclusively attracted to their own sex. Because LGS is not a common abbreviation, we use LGB unless the context calls for something else. You can read more about definitions and terminology in Chapter 2.

Diversity and direction

The report in front of us can be seen as the report of a search by a number of personally involved Christians, each with their own expertise.

During our search there was room for diversity within our deputy committee, the openness to speak out, to exchange heart-to-heart deep convictions and personal experiences, to question each other. Ideally, this openness exists in every Christian faith community. It is an openness that we grant each other as brothers and sisters at whatever place on the spectrum of sexual orientations.

During our search, we also looked intensely for direction, for direction in the Bible and before God - and with the help of science, personal experiences of interested sisters and brothers, visions of other churches and experts. The direction we found was and is not the same for everyone. What one person sees as a viable or designated path is leading astray for another. So sometimes our search brought struggle, pain, and difficulty, but again and again we sought and found the bonding in Christ.

In the end, our search led us to offer the present report in a united, though not unanimous, spirit. In it we make no proposals to arrive at statements that should be kept firm and concise for the coming decades. Our recommendations, we realize, are not the end point of the quest that we as the Dutch Reformed Churches, together with the whole of Christ's Church, are on. They have something of a snapshot, albeit not an insignificant one.

May our report be a blessing to our homosexual brothers and sisters and our churches. And may the Synod and our churches - together on the journey - continue our search in wisdom and under the guidance of the Spirit.

Wytze Bijleveld, Martin den Heijer, Maarten van Loon, Jan Mudde, Wolter Rose, Henk Schaafsma, Christel Steenhart-van Twillert, Ellemieke Tempelaar-van den Geest

Six letters to Philemon

In Paul's letter to Philemon, the apostle asks his fellow worker Philemon for a favor. He sends Onesimus to him. Onesimus is no longer a slave, but a beloved brother and he could be of good service to Philemon.

The letter below is written in the same vein and contains a similar case. Is the lesbian couple, who will soon present themselves in the congregation, welcome? What can the congregation do for them and vice versa? Six pastors respond.

Dear Pastor,

I am writing to you with a difficult issue for me. Anna (28 years old) and Myriam (30 years old) are a lesbian couple from my community. They have known each other for about two years now and have been living together for six months. They have no wedding plans yet, nor have I heard them talk about children, but that might be a wish of theirs.

Anna comes from a Christian home. She is religious and publicly confessed her faith at a fairly young age. A solid crisis of faith followed not much later when she faced the fact that she is a lesbian. She desperately wondered if God knows her and loves her including her sexuality. Or in spite of her sexuality. A process of thinking, talking, and praying followed, under my pastoral guidance. Now she especially notices that God's faithfulness and love for her have become more beautiful and powerful. She enjoys dedicating herself to the Alpha course and has become such a valuable team member of the Alpha group in recent years that she now leads it.

Anna met Myriam without actually searching for a life partner. The confusion from the time of her crisis of faith came back with the big question: a relationship or not? Myriam soon proved serious in her attention and love for her. She appeared interested in her faith and church attendance and also wanted to attend the Alpha Course. God found her there and she found God. Their friendship gained depth as a result. And again the question came up: a relationship or not? Was this an answer from God? Anna

decided to enter into a love affair with Myriam. Not long after, they started living together. Anna took these steps after a time of prayer and reflection.

Anna and Myriam are now moving to your town of residence, and they will surely come to your church as well, in their search for a congregation where they might feel at home. Myriam is eager to publicly confess her faith; she is convinced of God's existence, of His saving love. Her trust in the Lord impresses me and makes me happy and grateful.

I know that in your congregation there is no consensus on this yet and opinions are divided. So there is still a way to go. But do you yourself think there should be room in your congregation for this couple and especially room for Myriam to confess her faith? And why or why not? How would you like the congregation to respond to Anna and Myriam's arrival?

What vision do you personally have for their life with the Lord but also regarding their place in your congregation? Suppose Anna and Myriam become members of your congregation and at some point have the desire to get married, what role might you play in that process?

I hope you can give me clarity on this, obviously as honestly as possible. I have Anna and Myriam's best interests at heart and am glad they both know the Lord. I hope they will find a safe church nest. Hence my letter. I am looking forward to your reply!

Warm regards, Philemon

Dear Philemon,

Thanks for your question about my attitude towards approaching a lesbian couple. It speaks for them that it is noticeable that they are both convinced of wanting to live with Christ.

You ask several questions at once. I start with a point in the questions that triggers me. You write that there is no consensus 'yet' in the congregation I serve. Opinions are divided. You seem to assume that there should be consensus on this issue. And furthermore, you seem to expect that the emergence

of it is only a matter of time. I find that premise risky and incorrect. In my opinion, the questions surrounding homosexuality are largely new and cannot be decided with unequivocal certainty from the Bible. There is something to be said for almost each of the views within current Christianity. Before Christ's coming I do not expect complete unanimity on this point in the world church. Therefore, room for each approach in the church must be guaranteed. Also, the various approaches should remain in dialogue with each other. The suggestion that we are moving toward a forthcoming consensus always unintentionally pushes some positions and marginalizes them. In the past you were considered incorrect if you accepted gay relationships, now the same judgment threatens those who consider only a celibate route legitimate. I realize that enduring difference on this point is painful.

But it is precisely such pain that characterizes Christian mutual tolerance. This does not mean that you tolerate different opinions and practices that do not affect you much, but rather those that weigh heavily on you. As long as you know the other person in Christ, you belong together in the one body and therefore you belong to each other. Not to subsequently avoid each other, but to work together where you can and to speak openly - if necessary to warn - about the painful issue.

Should Anna and Myriam report here, they may know that I am committed to a congregation where that is the case. I am already in conversation with the congregation about this and will be having that conversation with even more emphasis in light of their arrival. If they are willing to recognize that this is currently the reality of the church, I will work to ensure that they too are a full and complete part of it. As this point of divergence is not at the heart of believing and Christian living, I see no obstacle to Myriam's public profession of faith.

They must realize, however, that this process is still ongoing. The church and the Christian experience cannot simply be organized. It will take time to embrace this style together. Their very presence will help with that. Our congregation also has celibate gays. It is only right when such a conversation involves the directly interested parties and their diverse choices in practice.

At the same time, I can imagine that they may find this too complicated and - perhaps also in light of their life's journey - may find it difficult to participate. Conversely, some church members will find it difficult to accept their choices. This is understandable if you believe that homosexuality is a serious matter and that the Bible unequivocally shows the way. This can cause distress of

conscience for some and for others the feeling that they are not really allowed to be there. It is understandable and justifiable when people leave our congregation for that reason or when a couple like Anna and Myriam find it too unsafe. Inevitably, two or perhaps even three types of congregations then arise.

Congregations where divergent views and practices work together. Congregations where gay relationships are generally accepted. And congregations that draw the line at traditional visions. This reality is also painful, but even in this case, congregations can accept and serve one another as long as they are each committed to Christ and trust and recognize this in one another.

Personally, I am positive about two Christian lesbians living together. Only over the last two centuries have we come to realize how deeply a homosexual orientation can be intertwined with one's person. This relatively new realization calls for a new understanding of homosexuality in light of God's revelation. Viewed from the creation of man as man and woman, homosexuality is primarily a brokenness. But in light of the coming new world, it also and even primarily becomes an equal opportunity to follow Christ. I seek a new meaning for homosexual identity analogous to the biblical change in perspective around unmarried people and eunuchs. In my view, partially new forms should also fit this partially new phenomenon. Here I am thinking of an intensive covenant of partnership. Just as marriage sacramentally anticipates the unity between Christ and the church, and the unmarried state anticipates the fulfillment that each Christian personally finds in Christ, so a partnership covenant between homosexuals can be a signal of the new interconnectedness in Christ. For this, being male or female is no longer relevant.

Such a partnership covenant is clearest when it includes intense mutual love and fidelity but not sexual lust and unification. After all, these are originally connected with being male and female and will disappear in the new world. At the same time, a sexual dimension does constitute a full possibility in a partnership covenant. After all, the homosexual orientation itself is, analogous to the heterosexual orientation, inevitably also sexual in character. The unity between two homosexuals can be seen as derived from the unity between man and woman, just as the mutual unity within the church is derived from the unity between the church and Christ. In that manner, a sexual dimension in a gay relationship can fit within the great story of God's revelation.

I do distinguish marriage between a man and a woman from a covenant between gays. After all, the former refers to Christ and the church, the latter to mutual unity in Christ Therefore, I am not in favor of a marriage blessing for gay couples. I advocate a new church ceremony that expresses the proper meaning of a gay relationship. In this there is room for specific public promises and a specific blessing. If Anna and Miry785qam ever ask me to do this, I will gladly cooperate. But I will not honor any request for a traditional marriage confirmation.

Ad de Bruijne

Dear Philemon,

Thank you for your mail, I appreciate it that you have contacted me. It shows me that Anna and Myriam are close to your heart and that you wish them a happy and welcoming new church community. I hope that we can be just that for them; in any case, I gladly cast myself as trailblazer. Your questions got me thinking about where my congregation is now and where it might be moving.

First of all, while I was reading your letter, a feeling of shame came over me. Someone pointed out to me that the book *Homofilie (Homophilia)*, with which the well-known ethicist Jochem Douma definitively threw open the discussion about gay sexuality in our churches in 1973, celebrates its fiftieth anniversary this year. That means that we as a congregation have avoided the discussion for at least fifty years. I wonder how many people over the past decades have shied away from *us* as a result. And now Anna and Myriam are the victims of this, because it is only now that they are at our doorstep that we are forced to reflect. In that light, I don't blame them when they seek it two blocks away, at the PKN congregation 'De Open Deur' (*The Open Door*), where this conversation has been conducted since the 1980s and where they are openly and visibly inclusive toward LGBTQ persons. Whatever Anna and Myriam will choose; there is clearly work for us to do. I'm happy to give you my opinion on where that may go as far as I'm concerned.

My starting point is Anna and Myriam. What matters most is what they like and where they feel welcome. Of course, I would love to talk to them about that sometime (Genesis 24:57). In any case, as a church community, we would like to be a place where people can flourish.

I am especially curious about the gifts and talents of Anna and Myriam. It would be nice if those gifts and talents matched a persistent vacancy on our church council. We should probably then have a discussion about homosexuality and ordained ministry, but given the great difficulty we invariably have in finding elders and deacons, that honestly feels like a somewhat hypocritical discussion. Our own people don't want to do it, and then these ladies would have to comply with all kinds of demands first? Therefore, what would greatly help our congregation is if the report on *Ministry and Homosexuality* released in the Dutch Reformed Church in 2015 were pulled out of the drawer again, stripped of dust, and approved of by the next synod. That would save us a lot of congregational evenings and allow us to talk about

other things.

I would also like to point out that Anna and Myriam do not have to be missionary super-Christians who run Alphas and live an exemplary life of faith in order to feel at home with us. I would like to avoid any appearance that they would have to 'compensate' for their lesbianism by proving to be exemplary and showing extraordinary devotion. They are also welcome to be lesbian and doubting or searching, or grumpy and down.

Should Anna and Myriam want a church blessing on a future marriage or registered partnership, I am not sure how people in the congregation will feel about it. Last year, after a theme year on 'the sob and the smile', we decided together that we want to be an Ezra 3 congregation. This is a community where people show strong interests in each other's ups and downs, where honesty is paramount. All sides of life may be seen and given a place: celebration and mourning, young and old, new beginnings and approaching endings. Thus, a whole new sound can emerge, where rejoicing and weeping are indistinguishable: a new kind of community that gathers around the foundations: the love of God (Ezra 3:10-13). If I continue to reason from that decision, it logically includes celebrating love together, being happy for the other person who dares to make a commitment to another person and asks God's blessing over it. It would require some creativity, because we would have to revise our marriage forms. As far as I am concerned, this is an opportunity to put those forms through a rinse anyway, because even heterosexual couples often experience them as old-fashioned and not so emancipated. We can then also look at other denominations that have already made such adjustments, so we don't have to reinvent the wheel.

I can also imagine questions about the sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. The former is especially relevant with regard to Myriam, I understand. Our pastor recently preached a wonderful sermon on the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch by the evangelist Philip (Acts 8:26-40). Here we see how someone who was a stranger from Philip's perspective and who also had an ambiguous gender identity is baptized without reservation. It must have had a tremendous impact on both the Ethiopian and Philip. The former must have been almost shocked at how easily it happened, how little resistance there was after he simply asked, 'what can stand in the way of my being baptized?' And Philip had to set aside his ideas about the other, about his uncleanness and strangeness. 'This is how baptism is meant to be', our pastor said. Baptism transforms both the person who is baptized and the community in which baptism takes place. Both surrender to God, 'Our limited ideas about the other, about ourselves, about

boundaries and demarcation: we give them to You, who are limitless and can wash them away.' That message of radical inclusion made a big impression on us, I noticed over coffee after the service. It touched on a deeply felt desire for openness and a love that bridges differences. I hope that Myriam's baptism, should she have that desire, will transform us to that end.

I also see that moment of radical inclusion in how we usually celebrate The Lord's Supper. For about two years now, our pastor has invariably uttered the following phrase at supper 'When you take Jesus into your mouth, you also have to grit your teeth'.¹¹ The first few times we let this pass over us a bit, but she was asked more and more questions about it, and finally during a service she explained it in more detail. According to her, the celebration of The Lord's Supper is an invitation to courage. It is a moment of taking courage. The courage to participate, to really be part of the kingdom that Jesus had in mind. Even the difficult choices that come with that, the discomfort that comes with actually siding with the underlying party and appealing to power. To really associate with those who are different, to have meals together, even when this is scary and exciting, when others may think something about it. Jesus has given us many examples of courageous meals.¹² As a congregation, we have often lacked courage. We have, as I said, often avoided difficult discussions. I sincerely hope that Anna and Myriam can forgive us for that and still want to celebrate The Lord's Supper with us.

You know, Philemon, in the end, I'm especially curious about what Anna and Myriam have learned from their particular experiences about God and about how we read the Bible. I would love to hear more

¹¹ This sentence is based on the poem 'Desert Triptych' by Sophia Stid, published in *Pleiades: Literature in Context*, vol. 41 no. 1, 2020, 149-152.

¹² For a perspective on the sacrament as a meal in which all meals from the gospels echo, see: Hiemstra, Y. (2022). *Omstreden maaltijd: Debatten over de kerkelijk-liturgische maaltijd in de Nederlandse vrijzinnigheid* (Contested meal: Debates on the church-liturgical meal in Dutch liberality.) Uitgeverij Verloren.

about what we can learn and how we can grow from this as a congregation. What sides of God have we not yet discovered because we have always taken certain standards for granted? I suspect that their experiences can show us surprising sides of our faith.

One last point that I would like to share is that I feel a strong need in myself and others to take a more honest and thorough look at the church's guilt toward LGBTQ persons. I would like to see our churches begin a process of repentance, aimed at a public apology and ultimately an attempt at reconciliation with those who ultimately did not endure in the church, with those who are still there but who have become victims of our inertia and lack of courage, and with allies who stuck their necks out and had to pay the price. I hope then for a careful process, in consultation with those affected.

I know that Reformed people can sometimes have a tendency, once they have decided on something like this, to roll up their sleeves and make it 'a quick fix'. But such a path to confession of guilt and reconciliation is not about simply ticking off subsequent steps in a brief process, after which you can carry on as if nothing has happened. There has to be room for old pain and plain anger. It doesn't have to be a fun or pleasant discussion. We have to dare to do that with each other. And: repentance and reconciliation affect you in an essential way, they change you deeply. I myself long very much for that process and for the public moment when the church says, 'This was not right, we have done damage'. But I long even more for the renewal in theology, being church, and practical ways of believing that it will bring. I hope it will lead to bold, open communities of faith that no longer need trailblazers, because no one will be left out.

With warmest regards,

Mariecke van den Berg

Dear Philemon,

Thanks for your loving letter about Anna and Myriam. These two women have found God and each other. They feel so welcome and safe in 'your' church community that they could be fully involved. I can only rejoice when I read of their relationship in love and fidelity. This, in my opinion, goes back to a very fundamental layer in the creation story, 'It is not good for the man to be alone...' And their joy with each other echoes the joy with which the husband in Genesis 2 greets his wife: 'This is she!' Should they wish to receive a blessing over their relationship, I would like to be heartily involved, should the church council give me the green light to do so.

I know, many fellow Christians are incredibly hurt that I say it in this way, and see it as a serious error. I understand that because the Bible - the Word of God - seems so perfectly clear about it. Marriage between man and woman is God's original model for a total relationship (that, I believe, includes being 'one flesh', 'one body'), the standard for it. And the Bible's negative assessment of same-sex sex seems to confirm that it is diametrically opposed to how God intended it 'in the beginning'.

Before I explain how I have nevertheless come to such heartfelt acceptance of gays and gay relationships, Philemon, I want to emphasize that Genesis 1 and 2 are still for me the referential framework for my view of sex and relationships. Therefore, even though I know I am now disappointing gay people, I cannot put an is-equal-to sign between a marriage of a man and woman and a gay union.

The latter may be there in this fractured existence, no less than the former, and the love that blossoms open within such a relationship I rate no less highly than that between husband and wife. Yet for me, a homosexual union remains something different from a marriage, particularly because sex between homosexuals - people who are fertile of themselves - by definition excludes procreation. In light of God's saying in Genesis 1 - be fruitful, become numerous! - I cannot but interpret that as a form of the brokenness - the brokenness in which every human being shares in every respect. Nevertheless, I see same-sex unions as a blessed possibility to which we, as the church of Christ, may and even must give room. I have been propagating this view within our congregation for some time and although not everyone agrees with me, the union in Christ is no less.

That I can accept gay couples has grown through meeting gay people, studying the Bible data and - most of all - in meeting the LORD and how I come to know Him from His Word.

Gay people, to me, are exactly like straight people, except for that one point. They also and no less have the desire for someone with whom all of life can be shared, the highs and lows, body and soul. It is one of the most basic and justified human desires. Where people love and remain faithful to each other, they grow and flourish. Even the man who gets to walk with God every day in paradise becomes more human, thanks to the one with whom he gets to be one. The only difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals is that homosexuals' desire is for their own sex and heterosexuals' desire is for the opposite sex.

From my firm impression, people with this heart's desire are not on the minds of the Bible writers. Take what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6 about the malakoi (the 'sissies') and the arsenokoitai (the 'men-layers'). He speaks of them exclusively as men who engage in a particular sexual praxis, assuming the division of roles as it was known in his day: passive and active. Significantly, he also writes of them, 'Some of you once were' - because they no longer engage in same-sex sex. We think and speak fundamentally differently about homosexuality. Even a gay Christian who lives celibate can say of himself, 'I am gay'.

Neither do we sense anywhere that Paul knew what gay people felt or what could vex them. This is striking because Paul was a very sensitive pastor. This is evident in, for example, 1 Corinthians 7, where he deals extensively with the question of whether it is right for a person to be married or not. He feels exactly what his readers are struggling with. The same when he writes about whether or not to eat sacrificial meat and keep certain days (Romans 14-15; 1 Corinthians 8). But when he writes in Romans 1 about same-sex passions and in 1 Corinthians 6 about the malakoi and the arsenokoitai, then you don't notice any of this pastoral concern at all.

My conclusion that homosexuals were not on the mind of Bible writers implies that reflection on homosexuality requires its own considerations. The most fundamental one is: how do we come to know God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the Bible? Decisive then is that we come to know the LORD as a merciful and even accommodating God who cares for vulnerable people and those who suffer from the brokenness of existence. This runs like a thread through the Bible.

It begins as early as Genesis 3:21, where God, quite contrary to His original intentions, makes clothing from animal skins for man - out of grace and mercy. There are countless other examples of this, even one that is entirely in the realm of the abominations of Leviticus 18 and 20! In Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21 we find an absolute prohibition against sex with a sister-in-law. Note that the prohibition does not address adultery, but rather a situation that may occur after a brother has died or sent his wife away. Even then, Leviticus 20:21 precludes a widow's marriage to her brother-in-law; it is an outrage. The punishment for it (childlessness) is not unlike capital punishment. But entirely different things come to pass if the deceased brother has not begotten a son with his wife. Then suddenly a man must marry his sister-in-law (Deuteronomy 25:5-10), otherwise he is not worth a fig! In other words, when life, when the future is at stake, the LORD God definitely makes changes in His law. In the Bible, this is not just incidental, but structural. I learn from this that behind the creation we must always go back to the Creator and behind the law to the Lawgiver.

To me, all of this has great significance for our dealings with gay brothers and sisters. Before the face of this God, there may, has to be room for gay unions in the church of Christ. After all, lives are at stake!

In short, as far as I am concerned, Anna and Myriam are welcome in our congregation, at the Lord's Supper, and to contribute their gifts. And although they are the first homosexual couple that our congregation will welcome, knowing the congregation, I suspect that they will accept Anna and Myriam wholeheartedly when they get to know them personally.

On one point, however, Philemon, I want to keep a guard up. And that is where it concerns the filling of ministries. In general, I am in favor of gays also being able to serve in ministries. But our congregation has a gay brother who, after much pain and struggle, has chosen celibacy because he believes that a gay love relationship is incompatible with following Jesus Christ. I admire his choice. Especially since this choice within our society (and sometimes within the church) is not understood, even vulnerable. I know that he will be in a conflict of conscience if someone who lives together as a gay person is given ministerial responsibility over him. Now, whether and how we find a way through that, the future will tell, but it is for me of great, even congregational importance, that for him, too, our congregation remains a spiritual home.

Thanks again for your letter. Although I would have preferred it if Anna and Myriam had written it themselves 😊, I appreciate your pastoral care and confidence. And it gave me a chance to justify why, as far as I am concerned, they are most welcome in our church community.

Joined in Christ,

Jan Mudde

Dear Philemon,

Thank you for your letter. I find it nice to read how you were able to help Anna and very special that Myriam came to faith through the Alpha Course. Also good to read how they are seeking God together and that Myriam is eager to make confession of her faith shortly.

Their moving houses is an exciting step and I hope they will soon be able to find a spiritual home in their new town of residence.

I personally feel that there is room for Myriam and Anna and certainly for confession of faith. I think this because everyone is welcome in the church of Christ and because I believe that a relationship between two people of the same sex is not wrong: after all, it is based on love and fidelity? The Bible indicates that love is a wonderful gift from God that it is revealed precisely in sharing. We are instructed to enter into relationships in this life because it is not good for anyone to be alone (Genesis 2:18). As humans, we all know various relationships. Friendships, collegial, family and a marriage relationships, and so on. We were created to enter into relationships and to show God's love and faithfulness in them as well. Those two words are important to me: love and faithfulness. People who are homosexual have not chosen this themselves and also desire an intimate relationship. If this is within the framework of love and faithfulness, then I think that is permissible. Within the framework of fidelity, love may be celebrated! For me this is also true within the framework of the core value of

justice. How much injustice has already been done and is being done to gay people? Therefore, justice should be an important topic of discussion in this context.

I understand that it raises questions for people (for example, it is extremely difficult just to understand what it is like to be homosexual if you yourself are not, but also to be open to another point of view if you have not learned this), but at the same time I do not see any Biblical reasons to forbid it. Homosexuality is part of the diversity of creation. Of course, relationships, gender, and sexuality are broken but that applies to all relationships. We should not discriminate in this way. And of course the Bible warns against promiscuous relationships for heterosexuals and homosexuals. Then there is neither fidelity nor real love but only sexual gratification. This is to be strictly disapproved of.

We cannot simply apply the frameworks in which the Bible condemns sexual acts between men to homosexual relationships today. Then we are not doing justice to the Bible or to homosexual people. When Romans 1 speaks of 'natural' and 'unnatural' intercourse, we cannot apply it to people who are 'naturally' homosexual. They do not desire something 'unnatural'. Moreover, 'natural' in Roman and Greek thought had to do with men who were 'active' and women who were 'passive' (Erwich and Leene 2022,166). Sexual acts between two persons of the same sex thus automatically become misplaced expressions of a gender hierarchy.

In addition, we must be careful to avoid some holiness laws from Leviticus 18 and 20, for example, to be applied in our time and not others (such as food laws).

Status and gender in the Bible functioned as the dominant social structure in which the interactions of bodies had their place (Erwich and Leene 2022,159). There was often no equality. This was true of many a relationship. I am thankful that the Holy Spirit has led us through the centuries in such a way that we have begun to apply the biblical principle of equality more and more, for example on the basis of Genesis 1:26 and 27 which states that everyone is created in God's image. But there is still a way to go.

It is important to engage with people who have difficulty with homosexual relationships but I hope this does not prevent Myriam and Anna from joining. Indeed, I hope that they will experience that they are welcome with us and I would love to talk

to them to hear what they need to experience safety and if they would engage in conversation with people who have questions. I believe that meeting and open discussion is the only way forward, with an open Bible, good books, and personal stories. This takes time and requires openness. And then let's talk about our shared faith, and sexuality and gender, and not just about homosexuality.

I do want to add a note about cohabitation and marriage. Couples living together has become an increasingly normal practice. We as a pastoral council are also still discussing this because we want to encourage couples to get married. I would like to do the same with Myriam and Anna. What possibilities there are when it comes to the blessing I cannot say right now, but I would like to look for a possibility because by doing so you promise each other fidelity in public. And that faithfulness is an important Biblical command for everyone. I would love to start the conversation with Anna and Myriam about what possibilities there are when it comes to getting married but first let me meet them and get to know them. That seems like the first and most important step right now. Thanks again for all you have done for them so far.

Warm greetings of blessing, Almatine Leene

Dear Philemon,

Thank you for your letter. Anna and Myriam: what a story! Two women who each found their way to the church of Christ through their own pathway. I would love to meet them one day. My brief response to your questions would be: In the church of Christ everyone is welcome. And in the church of Christ, everyone is greeted with the confronting grace of the call, 'Repent and believe the Gospel'.

You ask me 'What is your own opinion...? What vision do you personally have...?',. You present me with a salvo of ethical questions. Could it perhaps be a little less moralistic? It gives me chills. The Christian life is not a do-it-yourself project. We cannot often enough say this to each other. The question that precedes questions about opinions and views on moral issues is: what does the Gospel teach us about who Christ is?

From the year of his birth, the Jesus of the Gospels has evoked widely divergent reactions: resistance is the rule, recognition the exception. He is called by God to fulfill the age-old promise of the coming Messiah. And he does: unlike David and his sons, he is not someone with strengths and weaknesses, but a good king in

every respect. And then, while he is innocent, he is executed by hanging on a cross. It seems an absolute low: a crucified Christ.

End of story? Surely not! On the third day he rose from the dead. It is proof that this Jesus Christ is the Son of God. God is eternally happy in love. The low point turns out to be a high point. His mission is accomplished: 'He will free his people from their sins': he is the Savior of the world.

Jesus, Christ, Son of God, Savior — as early as the first century AD, Christians use the Greek word Ichthus (I-Ch-ThU-S) as an abbreviation for these four names. A contemporary angrily remarks, 'They worship him as a God!' That worship was precisely what God had in mind: that 'in the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven, on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess, "Jesus Christ is Lord".'

I cannot help but join people who worship him: Christ is overwhelming, irresistible. When he speaks, I know: this is the voice of the good shepherd.

Dear Brother Philemon, from that listening posture, I answer your questions about Anna and Myriam. When Christ says something about marriage and sexual relations, I don't want to miss a word. The first thing that strikes me is that Christ is uncomfortably strict, even more so than Moses. This is a confrontational message for everyone. As if to be taken for granted, he goes back to the original intentions of the Creator: 'Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female?"'

From Christ I learn that sex difference plays an indispensable role in assessing the moral status of sexual acts. Imagine you are homosexual! 'Those are harsh words, who can listen to them?' — a response with which one can identify, during another moment of Christ's teaching. Let's not hide it away in the fine print, even Christ makes no secret of it: there is no Christian faith without tears. What is true for Christ is also true for a Christian: the way of Christ does not go around suffering. Christ makes this clear with an image: someone taking a cross on his shoulders and walking with it. Everyone understands how that will end: in the place where people are executed.

'To whom should we go, Lord? You speak words that give eternal life', someone responds, at the moment when Christ asks, 'Do you also want to leave?' If you are homosexual or lesbian, are there also words that give eternal life? There is no promise that every suffering on this side of death will be resolved. There is, however, a promise that suffering will take on a new dimension. Like Christ, we may say Abba, Father, to God. Together with Christ, we are heirs. Even if you cannot answer the question, 'Why?', one thing you do know: the suffering that affects me is somehow not meaningless. And suffering is not the last word: we share in his suffering, in order also to share in his glory.

The second thing that stands out is that Christ puts being unmarried on a shared first place alongside marriage. You do not sin, you are not a second-class citizen of the kingdom of God, if you go through life alone. That is a thought-provoking message, for everyone, and an encouragement if you are gay.

As a pastor, I like walking a long way with a couple on their way to a Christian marriage: a man and a woman, a covenant for life. In a marriage of a man and a man, or a woman and a woman, I see no role for myself. I recognize that in a same-sex marriage or partnership with a sexual dimension there are also good sides to be pointed out. That does not mean that the church of Christ has the freedom or authority to bless such forms of unions with a sexual dimension. It would mean distancing ourselves from the teaching of Christ. We should not want to do that. Then we are no longer a safe church.

Living in a sexual relationship other than Christian marriage is what is traditionally referred to in the church of Christ as 'living in sin' — to be distinguished from 'falling (back) into sin'. A life in sin is not unforgivable. God gladly forgives! Asking for forgiveness is not separate from repentance and an intention to change course. This is what we engage in conversation about as pastors and/or elder(s) — following the example of our Lord, who said, 'Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last' and, 'Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent.' I will support the practice of the church council of my congregation. The Lord's Supper is the meal where the congregation celebrates that the body of its Lord was broken and His blood shed, as atonement for our sins. Those who unrepentantly sustain a life in sin are not to be admitted — at least temporarily, that is the intention! We will pray for wisdom, and work, church council and congregation, to embed this drastic measure in love, mercy, and patience. Fortunately, there are examples that the goal, repentance and conversion, is being realized! Can Myriam publicly confess her faith? It is too early to answer that question. I would like to get to know her (and Anna). As with any Confession candidate, I am going to have conversations with Myriam about Christ and the Gospel. I am looking forward to that. I look forward to the moment when we sing together:

*Lord, teach me to accept Your will as a child
who blindly and silently trusts You, finds peace.
When I lack the will to go Your way,
speak through your Word and Spirit to my heart and life.*

*Lord show me your plan; make known by your Spirit
how I can serve you, and where you are sending me.
When I don't know the way, give up hope,
Show me that Christ has walked all my way.*

Dear Philemon, I must stop. I greet you, Anna and Myriam, and your congregation with this ancient Christian prayer of blessing:

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep,

equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Wolter Rose

Dear Philemon,

1. How good to hear that these young women have come to know God (better). First of all, I want to thank you for your confidence in me. As you probably know, I believe that it is not God's intention that people enter into a homosexual relationship. Unfortunately, for some colleagues this also means that you have nothing to offer pastorally. Let me therefore state right at the beginning of this letter: Anna and Myriam are very welcome in our congregation. In recent years I have really worked hard to educate the congregation in this way, because it was not self-evident before (unfortunately for some it still is not).

2. Let me briefly explain what I mean. I believe that the Bible is a reliable guide, especially in an area as essential to our humanity as relationships and sexuality. The reasoning with which people today make the Bible say something different from what the church of all times (and still the worldwide majority today) has read and reads in it does not convince me. The classical view of Scripture assumes its authority, its necessity, its clarity and its sufficiency - and that is still what I also believe and what gives me the courage to preach on Sundays. It is a word not just of men but truly God's Word, or as Paul puts it in 2 Timothy 3: 'useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work'.

Therefore, I believe that the texts that deal with sexuality and relationships are not meant to box people's ears with, but to point the way to a life in which people flourish and that is pleasing to God. Monogamous marriage between husband and wife is the only legitimate place for sexual intimacy. Marriage should be in honor with all, that is the starting point.

3. The question is how do people come to that understanding? That is not so easy in our time. Unfortunately, even in our churches there is now a very different sound, where it is not what God says, but what I feel is the deciding factor. That may seem like an attractive option, but in the end we are going to pay a high price for it as a society. Just think of all those children who grow up without both father and mother and all the consequences that demonstrably result (suicidality, alcohol and drug abuse, school dropout,

juvenile delinquency, etc. that are demonstrably higher). And in my belief, it doesn't do you any good as a person either, if you follow your own feelings in this matter instead of what God says. Do we still believe that it is possible to gain the whole world and suffer damage to your soul? At a time when social pressure is massively one-sided and there is so much confusion in the churches, it is almost a miracle if someone with homosexual feelings chooses a celibate life after all. Why should you, when you also hear in the church that God does not ask that of you at all?

Fortunately, I know people who did make that choice (often referred to as the royal way, although some people no longer allow you to call it that). That includes people who only experienced peace after giving up a homosexual relationship because Christ was given a greater place in their lives.

But that can be quite a process. Often we apparently have to go through our own experiences and only gradually come to understand what God really asks of us and also what His acceptance and grace enables us to do.

4. Now to Anna and Myriam. If I so clearly believe and also express that God's Word is normative in this, how do I still come to warmly welcome them into the church? Well, because I believe that sanctification is not at the beginning, but is a consequence of acceptance by God and an ever deeper awareness of His love. It is 'the goodness of God that leads to repentance', (Romans 2:4). I rejoice when people who have been lost or misled in every way come into the circle of light of God's Word and begin to listen to the voice of the Good Lord. In my conviction, a welcome also includes participation in the Lord's Supper, because we do not enter as proof of being well-behaved, but come as beggars for bread. How many sins am I not (yet) aware of, for which it is also true that Christ died for them?

If Myriam gets to the point where she wants to profess her faith in the midst of our church community, there will probably have been more conversations. What would count for me, more than whether she has the 'right point of view' about everything, is whether she really accepts Jesus as Savior from her sins and as Lord over her life. And then I would trust that in that way He Himself will make things clear to her.

5. Regarding Anna, I am saddened to hear that the discovery of her lesbian preference has led to doubt (even despair I understand) whether God accepts her. There is something

gone wrong in the communication of the gospel. Surely we all have our shortcomings, I think. Would someone with a tendency to gamble or with a hot temper or with a physical defect also ask that question? Surely God loves us in spite of our deficiencies? But to put it this way again (it sounds like a cliché but is true), He accepts us as we are, but He does not leave us as we are. That does not necessarily mean that He changes a homosexual orientation into a heterosexual one (although that certainly cannot be excluded a priori, I know examples of that too). He can also bring someone to the acceptance: I am like this - and this is something God gives me to bear, just as another person has another challenge.

I believe the Lord Himself will make things clear when someone really wants to live with Him. You yourself are responsible for your choices, another person cannot be accountable for them, and every person stands before God by himself in the end. As a community, we certainly want to be around people and prevent anyone from being lonely or desperate in this struggle. Fortunately, I also see that in our church community, although more could always be done. The congregation has the calling to be a true community of love, in which Christ is formed (Galatians 4:19) and where we accept and help each other in the struggle against sin.

6. But if someone now comes to the conviction that God does approve of a homosexual relationship and then asks for a church marriage? Then with my own responsibility as a minister of the gospel, I will still maintain that we as a church cannot bless what God does not bless. In my opinion, we would then be selling stones for bread.

What I see around me as a result is a further erosion of scriptural authority and Christian morality in other issues. What defense does a church have that disregards the express commandment of the Bible here, not to also allow other issues (cohabitation, multiple partners in succession or at the same time, surrogate pregnancy, donor insemination, etc.)? From your letter I almost get the impression that you accept those consequences, when you talk, for example, about a desire for children in such a relationship. I hope I see that wrong, though these are all things that are currently being defended in the Christian yard.

It has been said: why make this particular subject into a shibboleth? Why don't we worry more about issues like poverty and equitable relations between people and peoples, or consumerism and exploitation of nature? I can

assure you that these 'big' issues are also on the agenda with us (with me at least), and are addressed in preaching. And the moment voices were raised to not only tolerate but even bless other sins, I would turn away from that too.

7. Would I share all these reflections that I am boldly writing to you now, even directly with them when they come forward? I don't think so; I would begin by patiently and interestedly asking about their story. I don't think I would wait too long before indicating in general terms what we believe in our church about the authority of God's Word for faith and life. Then, when they themselves come up with questions about their situation, of course I want to be able to say clearly what God's Word says about it.

I do realize that you have gone a long way with Anna and a little shorter with Myriam, and that my picture is probably incomplete. The curious thing about pastoring is that you are dealing with real people and the concrete situation rarely resembles the general rule. But you were concerned, I think, with my basic attitude.

Let me summarize it again in this statement: I assume maximum acceptance of man and also uncompromising and unambiguous acceptance of God's Word, even when for some concrete cases it may require a little exploring. I hope this gives you a clearer picture of how we try to obey God in our congregation and that it gives you enough confidence to refer Anna and Mirjam to us.

With warmest regards, Dick Westerkamp

PART 1 – OUTLINES

1 The wider context

As followers of Jesus Christ, we live in multiple stories, each of which leaves its mark on us.

Above all, we live in the great story of God's Word, the plan of salvation revealed in the Bible, which bears witness to the way in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are redeeming and renewing this world. It is a story in which God's splendor in Christ becomes visible and in which all of us who behold the Lord's splendor with our faces uncovered will be changed by the Spirit of the Lord more and more to the splendor of that image (2 Corinthians 3:18). The church of Christ longs to be attuned to this all-important story by the Spirit, as an instrument is attuned to a tuning fork.

At the same time, the followers of Jesus do not appear to be instruments in a timeless, Platonic sense. Such instruments do not exist in our God-created reality. A medieval trumpet sounds different from a modern one, and the sitar from India produces a very different sound than a country guitar from Nashville. We are human beings of flesh and blood and connected with every fiber, as much to the great story of God's revelation in Christ as to our own small life story, the dynamic story of our own society and the even larger story of a humanity that faces ever new developments, questions, and challenges.

Why do we begin our report with this more general consideration? Because all sorts of developments in our Western culture and society precede the question of what the Church of Christ has to offer to lesbian sisters and gay brothers in its midst. As followers of Jesus, we are closely tied to our time and culture, and this will resonate in our response no matter what.

1.1 Historical perspective

Several centuries ago the Netherlands, more precisely the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, carried a strong

Calvinist stamp.¹³ The Reformed Church was the state church and this included the regents. The *voc* and *wic* sailed the seas of the world. Today's Indonesia and Surinam were our colonies, and the slave trade helped accumulate our wealth. Sometimes very cruel corporal punishment was used to keep the slaves under control. The right to vote and stand for election did not yet exist, nor did compulsory education for children. Girls could get primary education, if their parents wanted and could pay for it, but further education was out of the question for them. In the schools, discipline among children was enforced with the help of the stick and the scourge. Pulling eels and geese were still popular forms of entertainment. Lesbian sisters and gay brothers did not yet exist. However, there were people who were guilty of sodomy.¹⁴ They could be sentenced to death for this and this was often the verdict and the last time it was executed in the Netherlands was in 1803.

Over the past centuries more emancipation processes have taken place in Western society: those of slaves, workers, women, LGBTQ people. The emancipation of children has also been distinguished. All these emancipation processes are based on the conviction that all people are equal and should have both equal rights and equal opportunities.¹⁵ Reformed Christians were also largely included in these processes and shaped by them. Certainly for most Dutch Reformed people, they have become deeply estranged from much of what our (Reformed) fathers defended until relatively recently and with the Bible in hand.

For example, we are now deeply ashamed of the slave trade and colonialism and we find racial discrimination an abomination. Parents today find it unthinkable to withhold their daughter a college education, just 'because she's going to get married

¹³ For convenience' sake, we focus only on our own Dutch roots, well aware that developments in the Netherlands are also placed in a much wider context.

¹⁴ The word sodomy was used in the past (and sometimes still in other societies) for any form of sex that was considered unnatural. So not only for anal sex (including between man and woman), but also for masturbation and bestialities.

¹⁵ In the past, these notions were unilaterally traced to the Enlightenment, the time when society was emerging from the dominance of church and clerics. Nowadays, thinkers such as Charles Taylor, Tom Holland, and Larry Siedentop argue that these very notions can be traced back to the Bible and to what it says about the relationship between God and man, people among themselves and the relationship between the collective and the individual.

anyway’- which did happen well into the 20th century. Violence against homosexuals is also considered ‘absolutely reprehensible’ by those who believe that homosexual relationships are contrary to God's Word.¹⁶

To avoid misunderstanding: with this enumeration, we do not mean to elevate ourselves morally above our fathers. Every age has its own dark sides, and generations after us will see other dark sides. What matters to us is that we are aware that, as followers of Jesus Christ, we live in multiple stories, each of which leaves its mark on us.

For this reason, asking the question ‘what the church of Christ has to offer lesbian sisters and gay brothers in its midst’ is inextricably linked to some long-standing and profound developments that have taken place in our (Western) culture and society. It is inconceivable that this question could well have been asked this way a hundred years ago. If only because feelings for the other sex were often still unmentionable, since they were considered to be the worst imaginable sins, even a *crimen nefandum*.¹⁷ Speaking of ‘lesbian sisters and gay brothers’ was also unthinkable a hundred years ago, because, as we shall see later, these designations show a view of homosexuality that is of relatively recent date. Not only that, they demonstrate a fundamentally different attitude toward those who have a homosexual orientation than our fathers had toward ‘sodomites’ - whether we want to give space to homosexual unions or not.¹⁸

1.2 Relevance

Is it relevant to churches that the questions of the Synod of Meppel (2017) are closely intertwined with developments in the society and culture in which we live as Dutch Christians?

¹⁶ So too is the position of the SGP: ‘Gebruik van geweld tegen homoseksuelen is absoluut verwerpelijk.’ (Use of force against homosexuals is absolutely reprehensible). <https://sgp.nl/standpunten/homohuwelijk>.

¹⁷ *Crimen nefandum* is a Latin legal term that literally means the ‘unmentionable crime’. Until the twentieth century, the term was used to refer to unnatural sexual intercourse. That sin was too bad for words and therefore should not be mentioned by name.

¹⁸ See Mudde (2015), 128-136.

Not in the sense that this immediately answers the questions. That all sorts of developments have taken place in our culture which are also grasped, experienced, and often gratefully welcomed by the church of Christ is an established fact; how the church of Christ should relate to specific developments and how they should be judged in the light of the revelation of God is not clear from the outset.¹⁹ Some of these developments can only be regarded as an abomination by the church of Christ and should be approached in a prophetic-critical way. Consider, for example, the availability of the NIP test, with the result that embryos diagnosed with Down syndrome will be aborted more frequently.

What is clear is that we are in a truly different situation from that of our fathers when faced with what they called 'the grievous sin of sodomy'. If we want to do justice to the specific questions posed by the Synod, we can only do so by being aware of the wider context in which they stand, and we cannot do so without understanding our times and the forces at work in them and weighing them in the choices we make. Key words on the path of this reflection are: credibility, caution, trust, and prayer.

1.2.1 Credibility

Many studies on Bible, church, and homosexuality deal with 'homosexuality per se'. The reflection on the topic of 'homosexuality', or 'the way the LORD shows our homosexual brothers and sisters', is not thought of in conjunction with how Christians relate to countless other (and ever new) questions and issues that have arisen in our society. This has all sorts of undesirable and, especially for our homosexual brothers and sisters themselves, harmful consequences. The topic of 'homosexuality' receives disproportionate attention in church and theological reflection. It has become a shibboleth, the simplest yardstick against which someone's fidelity to the Bible is measured. The Synod's own answer to the question it posed is considered by some Christians to be at to the level of

¹⁹ Webb, for example, is keenly aware of our cultural context and its power. He sees the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of women as fruit of the gospel, but continues to view same-sex relationships as incompatible with the Bible. See Webb (2001).

a *status confessionis*: with this, the church of Christ stands or falls.

Therefore, a reflection on the topic of 'homosexuality' should not stand alone, but should take place in conjunction with the way Christians relate to countless other questions of society. This prevents the answer to the question posed by the Synod from being arbitrary or, worse, a double standard. This is also how we as churches have agreed with one another: 'It is important to be credible in the application of Biblical instructions in our time. Not in the sense of credibility for the forum of today's culture: the gospel is and remains a folly and an exasperation, and living from the Word of God we can end up diametrically opposed to the culture (whichever it may be). But in the sense of personal or church credibility: showing integrity, honesty, and non-selectivity in the application of Scripture'.²⁰

1.2.2 Caution

The above outline teaches us also to be cautious when it comes to censoring or condemning social or scientific developments. The church has not always observed this caution. The abolition of slavery, the emancipation of women, the use of contraceptives and the like were initially condemned by the fathers with an appeal to God's Word. The same goes for the transition from the geocentric to the heliocentric worldview in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and for the evolutionary theory of Darwin and others. And it is partly for this reason that nowadays it is rightly said: 'It is better to listen longer'.

The lesson of history is also that as followers of Jesus we should not want to be too eagerly prophetic-critical, let alone form a 'counter-culture'. The latter is possible at most very partially and also extremely inconsistently. On top of that, God's Word does not take issue with 'culture', but with our old nature, the sinful nature of man. God's Word is not against culture in general, nor against 'the Western culture' in particular, but against 'sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft;

²⁰ See the *Notitie van deputaten kerkelijke eenheid Gkv en Commissie voor Contact en Samenspreking met andere kerken NGK over hermeneutische uitgangspunten*. (Note of Deputies on Church Unity Gkv and Commission on Contact and Conversation with Other Churches NGK on hermeneutical starting points.) See Gkv (2012), 452-.

hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like' (Galatians 5:19-21). When these become entrenched in the structure of a culture, the church of Christ will have to turn against them prophetically. She herself reaches out to all that reflects the character of God, the fruit of the Spirit: 'love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Galatians 5:22- 23). And everything in the culture in which something of this is visible will encourage and seek to strengthen the church of Christ.

There is another reason for caution in judgment and discernment. What is experienced as normal, desirable, or good in one culture (or context) is not always normal, desirable, or good in another culture (or context). What is written in the Bible about, for example, corporal punishment and death, the position of slaves and women, casting lots and the holy kiss, we do not apply directly in our culture, partly for this reason. Whether and in what sense this also applies to the biblical provisions concerning same-sex sex, further study will have to show, but either way, caution is in order.

The caution we advocate also justifies taking the time to reflect on the questions surrounding the emancipation of LGBTQ people, however much we sense that LGBTQ people - and not only they - sometimes wonder, disappointed, bewildered or embarrassed, why precisely their sexual orientation causes so much controversy. As the church of Christ, we stand in a certain tradition and want to stand in it, and therefore we cannot but take the time to account for the choices we feel we have to make in light of that tradition, however they will turn out.

1.2.3 Trust

If there is any book that can help us find a Godly way in our culture, it is the Bible. Both the Old and New Testaments are stamped by and intertwined with a culture that differs in essential ways from our own. With His people, the LORD moves through time, and He really does. He does not lift His people out of time, He does not go His way with us in a cultureless and contextless vacuum, but He seeks man where he is and helps His people find a way in all concreteness that leads to His honor and to His

purpose. This may give us confidence that the Bible, i.e. God's Word and Spirit, will help us as the church of Christ to find the way the LORD wants to go with us in ever-changing circumstances.

Again, we refer here to the note on hermeneutical principles already cited: 'We are grateful to God that the Bible is a thick book and describes many different situations. Thus the Bible has something to say to man in every situation. What is important is that God has moved on in salvation history: those who live after Christ's ascension live salvation-historically in a different situation than those who lived before Christ in the kingdom of Israel. (...) The changed salvation-historical context means that today we receive and understand the Old Testament and Biblical instructions only in Christ. Christ fulfills the sacrificial service, his kingship transcends the national boundaries of the state of Israel, and his teaching reveals the spiritual depth of the Torah. Our union with Christ thus shapes how we apply (the instructions in) the Bible.' And: 'The cultural gap between our late modern, post-Christian society and ancient Israelite or early Christian society creates distance between us and the Word of God. This gap means that direct application of concrete biblical instructions in our time is far from always possible or raises major questions. In our search for understanding, we are gratefully led by the Spirit, who can bridge the cultural gap and leads us into the truth.'²¹

1.2.4 Prayer

Finally, the close intertwining of the questions before us with the culture in which we live requires prayer. The Bible invites us as Christians to be context-sensitive and culture-sensitive.

Developments in culture have their own logic and this must first be known and done justice to, if we are to take a prophetic or didactic position in and against our culture. This requires prayer, a prayer that our love continues to grow 'in knowledge and depth of insight so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God' (Philippians 1:9- 10).

²¹ GKv (2012), 449.

'God's love makes you step out in faith'

The story of Bram and his congregation

When Bram came out of the closet, he went to all the healing services and conferences. Ideally, he wanted to be straight. He searched the Bible but got no answers. He prayed to God, 'I don't know what You think, but I do have to live. Take it away from me, please. I lay it before You in an open hand. I have no answers; I surrender to Your love and trust that You will guide me. And if my feelings go against Your will, then take me away now, and I will be safe.'

After the divorce from his wife, Bram didn't go to church for five years. But then he was eager to join a church again. He missed it and started looking for a suitable congregation. He was single at the time but could not guarantee that he would stay without a partner. He wanted to know how this was viewed in the church of his choice. How did they relate to this issue? He didn't want to be a member for a year and then still have to find somewhere else.

Bram wrote a letter asking, 'What is your stand in this? Am I welcome? After all, he had had enough disappointing discussions. The conversation got underway. Bram was very impressed that the church community took his question so seriously and wanted to discuss it with him. The community had clearly chosen a way of thinking in which openness and listening to each other occupy an important place. A year of thinking and talking followed. It was a good process. There was openness and concerns were also shared. Everything was allowed on the table. There were sometimes fierce moments but that could be expected. It touches your heart. Nothing nasty stuck and that is very precious, even though someone was very vehement during the discussion.

Relationship without sex

Bram met his current partner Erik. He now lives with him. After a year, Bram chose to continue the relationship without sex. A step in faith. Bram wanted to let nothing stand between him and God and always put his life in the open hand of God. He wanted to trust that God's love would lead him on the right paths. This was and still is accompanied by small steps, probing, without clear

boundaries. It is constantly contemplating and being in conversation with God.

In his conversation with the deputies, Bram explained that he has gradually learned to have a good sense, like a sixth sense, of whether he has someone in front of him with whom he can have an honest conversation or whether someone wants to force their truth on him. Bram has experienced the latter, hammering home the truth, as extremely painful. It's not thinking differently that hurts, but not listening and always wanting to force that opinion on you and rubbing it in.

Love Me

Bram says, 'When you are cautiously trying to engage in that vulnerable process, it is painful when a brother or sister in your church or perhaps the pastor from the pulpit keeps telling you what is or is not right. Even if that's consistent with what you discover for yourself, it's not the right approach. I think the church needs to learn to be full of love and trust God. God is not waiting for someone who simply follows the law. Follow the other person in their process. Give it time and walk with the other person. God's love makes you take steps in faith. God writes his laws into our hearts and from there you start doing his will. The moving of God's loving Father heart is the starting point for our dealings with each other. We could let go more and trust God to work in our hearts. When I see God's loving eyes, my heart can change and I want nothing more than to live for Him. Someone said to me that no LGBTQ person would inherit the kingdom. Then I prayed, 'Lord if that is Your opinion then I want to learn it from Yourself'. The answer was, 'Love Me with all your heart'.

If you want to keep people with God, you will have to show more of God. Do you trust God to allow Him to do in you what He wants? That is a process. Is there room for that process? Do we dare to leave room for the work of God? It did me so much good when an elder asked forgiveness for all the mistakes church leaders made in this process. My elder called me a hero of faith. He said, 'You let go of everything and trust God in your own situation. What a great example for others who have other struggles'.

I believe in love and fidelity because that is how God is. I understand that marriage is not possible between two people of the same sex in the church. But I would love it if the church said, 'We're going to make a moment when you can promise

each other that love and fidelity’.

I am aware that I am a role model for others. Role models are important in the church. I want to be there for people and offer to engage in conversation with those who want it.

Tips from Bram

- ◆ Pay attention to young people. They have much less trouble with being LGBTQ. They are mostly concerned with discovering their (sexual) identity. This is another challenge for the church. Give them a taste of the love and open arms of Jesus.
- ◆ Dare to let go of your frameworks and trust in God's ways for each person. Give time to the process to grow in it. Walk with each other.
- ◆ It's actually about recognition. You don't feel taken seriously when people come up with their opinions without hearing your story. It is fine to differ in your views. But speak and listen from God's loving heart.
- ◆ Provide safety in your community. That should be a place where people can go with their stories. Too few LGBTQ people are known in the church. Think about why that is.
- ◆ As a church, communicate clearly how you will handle it. For example, use Wijdekerk (wijdekerk.nl) [~wide open church]. Make sure there is someone, besides a regular confidential officer, who is available for questions regarding LGBTQ. It exists and it is present, so do something with it as a congregation.
- ◆ As a straight person, ask the question, ‘How are you experiencing this?’ Because you don't know what someone is going through. It's so good to be allowed to share that.

The discussion in Bram's congregation

Several years back, the church council felt the need to discuss homosexuality. Not because of a concrete situation,

but from the understanding that sooner or later this would come up. The pastor and an elder share, 'An important starting point was that it was not primarily about theological positions but about staying close to the heart. We wanted to have a conversation with interested parties, people with a homosexual orientation, and with the congregation. We wanted to listen in a safe setting in the form of *graceful dialogue*.

To have this conversation, we opted for a two-day retreat with overnight stay with a group of just over ten people, drawn from the council and some staff members. We did not want to start with positions, because we knew them. But we wanted to question each other: how do you arrive at this point of view? How is your biography around this topic? Where do you come from? Each had fifteen minutes to share this without being interrupted. It was deeply moving. There were tears: "My father was a pastor and homosexual." "I treated someone too harshly and they later committed suicide."

After this intensive meeting we felt: we still think differently but we understand each other so much better now, it doesn't get in the way, there is no sting anymore. There is a deep understanding for each other. I do understand the other person, I understand where he or she is coming from'.

From discussion to policy

After such an intensive discussion, eventually something had to be put on paper. The church council had to start making policy on questions like the following. Are people who are living together in a homosexual relationship allowed to become members of the council? Can they teach catechism? Can they take The Lord's Supper? At some point, people want clarity on that.

Writing such a memo is an intensive process, one elder says, 'I found it tough to do. I talked to people who have a lesbian daughter. People who insist on the authority of the Bible. I spent nights lying awake. Finally a piece came out that people said, "I've been heard. I don't agree, but I can live with it. I hear that my point of view is included"'. We kept looking for biography, for narrative, for heart and listening.

And that's really different from having an opinion.

At the same time, we as elders also have our theological responsibility. What does the Bible say and how do we deal with it? Personally, I would not bless a homosexual relationship. I have a lot of love for people. But I cannot say this on behalf of God. That gives theological short-circuiting.

It clashes with the line in the Bible about marriage. Marriage as a deep metaphor for the relationship between God and the church. I can't redefine that to love in general. I found that tough. To be honest, I also felt quite lonely. Who knows what this cost me? Who understands this?'

Discussion in the congregation

The council experienced that it helps if you ask each other: 'Why do you think this way and how did you become who you are?' We knew that we had to do this in the congregation as well, because otherwise it could lead to a schism. The unity in the congregation was important, and that made it a bit tense. Then we also conducted the discussion in the congregation, again using the method that everyone was given a fixed speaking time and could not be interrupted. It was important to us that the church community knew in advance that such a process would take a few years.

Later we conducted a survey in the congregation. Some people had a very firm opinion, but others didn't know it very well either. There were also some tough discussions, but in general there was more understanding.

Broadly supported policy

Ultimately, this long process led to a broadly supported policy. 'I think the focus has shifted from homosexuals as an isolated group, to "we all live under the grace of Jesus." As a congregation, we want to be open to people who have a homosexual orientation, we want to bring them to Jesus as well. We want to encourage each other to go to the cross together.

If you have a homosexual orientation and you are not living in relationship you may participate fully. If you live in a homosexual relationship, the ministries are not open. There is no broad support for that now. We don't want to bless the relationship, but we want to give you a blessing. The argument for that is an ecclesiological one: we don't want to contribute to division.'

'The word "sin" doesn't appear in the entire document,' the elder explains. 'I don't want me as a straight person to say, "You are living in sin." That really goes too far for me. Regarding the sacrament, we said, "I'm not asking that you be sure of everything, but that you go to Jesus with your unbelief." The sacrament is precisely for sinners. You are not going to put a fence around that. You do ask that people take their

life with God seriously and share it with Him. God knows the heart and we all fall short on something.

Unity of the congregation

Looking back on the process, what was difficult or complicated?

'That everyone clung to positions. The split in the national committee also manifested itself in the congregation. That created tension. I myself am different. I mainly listened and wanted to connect, always looking for motives and biography. To a limit that I could justify theologically. How sure are we now of how God thinks? In that respect, I am holding back.

We have a human view. Be careful to judge. But it could have been a schism and that caused quite some tension.'

'My advice for everyone is try to be mindful of what your words are working out. When people compulsively ask, "I want my relationship to be blessed," I ask, "Is that especially serving yourself? Do you realize what that works out? Are you mindful of the unity of the church?" Paul has most trouble with people who put the unity of the congregation at risk.

Another thing that is always a trap is this: you don't agree with me so you reject me. That's very immature. Don't make yourself so big. Try to think theocentrically: God is a mystery, we don't understand everything, but we seek His will. You do that and I do that. That transcends everything. Otherwise you only get human views.'

'In retrospect, I think: we started with homosexuality as a case study. Homosexuality as a problem we have to relate to. But it is much more: the congregation has a problem because there is no safe environment to discuss it. It was silenced. That was the problem we had to deal with.'

2 Homosexuality: definition and terminology

What is homosexuality? What does science say? The answer to that question goes beyond what fits into a short chapter at the beginning of a Study Report. Chapter Eight, 'Homosexualities from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century', in the Background section of this report, discusses ten developments in scientific research over the past 155 years. It is a concise overview that can help answer the question, 'What is homosexuality?'

The ten developments in scientific research are briefly summarized here.

2.1 Developments in scientific research

Today there is overwhelming agreement on one point, after more than a hundred years:

1. You are not mentally ill, if you are homosexual.

There is almost universal agreement on five points:

2. With sexual orientations, there is not just a two-way division (heterosexual or homosexual), but a spectrum with several positions between the two extremes heterosexual and homosexual: for example, a homosexual attraction to the same sex is more often non-exclusive (e.g., 'slightly more' attracted, or 'predominantly' attracted to the same sex) than exclusive ('only' attracted to the same sex);
3. In sexual orientation, three dimensions are often distinguished: (i) attraction (to which sex[es] a person is attracted), (ii) behavior (with persons of which sex[es] a person has sex), and (iii) self-identification (whether a person calls themselves homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, or other); for some persons, these dimensions correspond completely to the three dimensions of attraction,

behavior, and self-identification, for other individuals there is an incomplete correspondence to these three dimensions;

4. for some, sexuality is fluid (then there is change in attraction, behavior and/or identity over time or within different social contexts), but not for everyone;
5. there are differences between female and male homosexuality;
6. lesbian women are not necessarily masculine, and homosexual men are not necessarily feminine.

Finally, there are four points that remain unclear:

7. Does sexual orientation involve attraction to the opposite or equal *sex*, or to the opposite or equal *gender*?
8. Is bisexuality one of the intermediate categories on the spectrum of sexual orientations, or is it a residual category in a dichotomy of exclusive heterosexuality and exclusive homosexuality?
9. Does the development of a homosexual orientation involve a single factor: biology/genes, or does it involve a combination of factors: biology/genes and postnatal environmental factors? (See also Chapter 9 'Biological Aspects' on the important role biological factors play in the development of a homosexual orientation)
10. Is sexual orientation the core of a person's identity, or is it the core for some and a thread in their identity formation for others? (see also Chapter 10 'Identity Development')

This summary gives a good idea of what is called 'sexual diversity'. Sedgwick notes that when it comes to "homosexuality as we know it today" or [...] "gay sexuality as we *understand* it today" there is an 'unreasonable coexistence of different

models', a space of '[overlapping, contradictory](#) and incompatible definitional forces'. As early as 1920, Grossmann wrote that we can speak '[only of homosexualities](#)' (plural).

Something of the sometimes confusing diversity can be made visible by giving the floor to two gay men, first Laurens Buijs (1982), then Cornald Maas (1962).

Laurens Buijs

My homosexuality is the most central part of my identity. I sensed from an early age that I was different. That has fundamentally influenced the course of my life and set in motion processes that are still not finished. This is difficult at times, but it is also a source of pride and inspiration. I enjoy noticing that my masculine and feminine sides are becoming better friends with each other.

Cornald Maas

[Interviewer: 'Cornald Maas, *gay* - is that good, or is that not good when I say that?']

It's a *fait accompli* that I'm *gay*. So yes, that's what I am. I don't consider it a merit. And I don't consider it my identity either. [Interviewer: Have you always known?] No - I think: yes, maybe I could have known earlier, but yes, a different time, without social media, and a different environment, Brabant, Catholic - I had no idea. It was a vague realization, in retrospect you think: how is it possible that I never quite saw it? Anyway, I was also happy for a long time with a girlfriend. And that was genuine happiness, so in that sense ... it's all possible, things are difficult to categorize.

What is said in these two examples has (possible) common ground with developments in scientific research mentioned at the beginning of this chapter as #2, #3, #4, #6, #8 and #10. Perhaps what is said raises questions, e.g., about sexual attraction, about self-identification, and about sexual identity, at this time in the lives of those involved and in the past (the concepts are explained in the Appendix). Answers are not always easy. What the ten

topics of developments in scientific research make clear, becomes concrete in these examples: homosexuality is a complex phenomenon.

2.2 Definitions

A definition aims to do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon of homosexuality. Such a definition should primarily be descriptive, and preferably not overly prescriptive. This makes some definitions less suitable than others. A definition from the angle of sexual behavior, for example, carries the risk that certain people will be excluded, for example someone who is not sexually active.

The deputies propose the following two definitions, first a definition of homosexuality in the sense of a sexual orientation, then a definition of same-sex sexual behavior.

A sexual orientation: attraction and self-identification

1. *Homosexuality refers to those positions on the spectrum of sexual orientations where there is a pattern of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction to persons of the same sex, an attraction that may be predominant (the degree of which varies from person to person) or exclusive in nature. As a rule, homosexuality also includes a self-identification that expresses this attraction.*

Same-sex sexual behavior

2. *Same-sex sexual behavior refers to sexual behavior of same-sex partners, regardless of sexual attraction or self-identification.*

Sexual behavior is a dimension that is closely related to a sexual orientation, yet must be distinguished from it. Sexual behavior has been called one of the 'potential correlates' of a sexual orientation.

Sometimes, based on nothing more than sexual behavior of two same-sex partners, a homosexual attraction or self-identification is almost naturally concluded of one or both partners.

To avoid such a premature conclusion about someone's sexual orientation, it is preferable not to use the adjective 'homosexual' when referring to sexual behavior, but 'same-sex'.

2.3 Terminology

What words or phrases do you use to refer to persons who are homosexual in the sense of the definition proposed above? Often the word homosexuals/gays is used - but that refers only to male homosexuality. Abbreviations are also used, such as 'LG persons', or 'LGB people', for lesbian, gay and bisexual people. To make explicit that it is not only about persons with an exclusive homosexual orientation, there is much to be said for adding the letter s, for lesbian or gay on one of the positions on the spectrum of sexual orientations as defined above. That might be going too far. In that case, the expression LG is preferable, as long as it is not forgotten that the expression reflects a broader reality than just exclusive same-sex attraction.

LG

lesbians or gays with a predominant or exclusive attraction to persons of the same sex

When also talking about bisexual persons, the abbreviation LGB can be used.

In some situations, it may be useful to explicitly distinguish the LG of the spectrum model of sexual orientations from the LG of the dichotomous model of sexual orientation, or the lesbian or gay person with an exclusive sexual orientation. In that case, the abbreviation LGE can be used:

LGE

lesbian or gay with an exclusive attraction to persons of the same sex

To make it explicit that it is not just about persons with an exclusively homosexual orientation, there is a strong case for adding the letter s. The abbreviation LGS then stands for lesbian or gay at one of the positions on the spectrum of sexual orientations

as defined above. Because this abbreviation is not (yet) common, we have chosen not to use it in this report. We mainly use the abbreviation LGB and do not add other letters, such as T or Q or I, because our deputies have not studied questions about transgender, queer, or intersexuality.

2.4 Figures

When figures relating to sexual orientations are mentioned in publications or in the media, they may differ from one another. In part, this is related to which dimension is considered decisive for a sexual orientation: attraction, behavior, or self-identification (see point 3). For example, percentages for same-sex sexual behavior are higher than percentages for gay sexual attraction. In an appendix to the Social and Cultural Planning Office's (SCP) LGBT Monitor 2022, the figures below are given for the dimension of sexual attraction (the dimension that determines sexual orientation in the this study's definition of sexual orientation).

	total	men	wo men
sexual attraction			
to same sex only	1.8	1.5	2.0
mainly to same sex	0.8	1.1	0.5
equally to same sex and opposite sex	2.2	0.7	3.6
mainly to the opposite sex	7.3	5.6	8.9

	total	men	women
only to opposite sex	79.5	87.7	71.5
I do not know	0.2	0.2	0.2
no answer	8.3	3.1	13.3
LGB based on values mentioned above	4.7	3.3	6.1
LGB based on missing values	5.6	3.6	7.8
mainly heterosexuals based on missing values	8.4	6.0	11.1

- (a) Sexual orientation by sex, 18 years and older
 ~ source: Huijnk, Damen, and Van Kampen (2022), 19.

The figures clearly show the differences in terms of sexual orientation between men and women, for example in terms of a bisexual orientation ('as much same sex as opposite sex').

What is described above in a nutshell is further elaborated in Chapter 8, 'Homosexualities from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century', in the Background section of this report.

2.5 Abbreviations and Glossary

attraction	→ 'sexual attraction'
biological sex	Whether someone is a human being of the male sex, or of the female sex, determined by the ability to produce small gametes (sperm) or large gametes (eggs)

bi(sexual)	(someone) characterized by a (→) sexual orientation to both the opposite and the same sex
female	→ 'biological sex'
feminine	→ 'gender'
gender	the self-experience and/or social role, ranging from masculine to feminine, which generally arises from one's (→) biological sex and is expressed in accordance with and/or by rejection of elements from the dominant cultural tradition
heterosexuality	→ 'sexual orientation'
hetero(sexual)	(someone) characterized by a (→) sexual orientation to the opposite sex
homosexual/gay	(someone/man) characterized by a (→) sexual same-sex orientation
homosexuality	→ 'sexual orientation'
lesbian	(a woman) characterized by a (→) sexual orientation to the same sex
LG	lesbian(s) or gay(s) with mainly or exclusively a (→) sexual attraction to persons of the same sex
LGB person(s).	lesbian(s) or gay(s) with mainly or exclusively a (→) sexual attraction to persons of the same sex, and persons with a sexual attraction to both the same and opposite sex and (→ bisexual)

LGE	lesbian(s) or gay(s) with an exclusive sexual attraction to persons of the same sex
male	→ 'biological sex'
masculine	→ 'gender'
pansexual	An alternative to a (→) sexual orientation, used to indicate that for someone it is not the attraction to persons of a particular sex that is important, but the attraction to the person themselves, regardless of their sex
queer	an alternative to a (→) sexual (i) as a refusal to identify as (→) heterosexual, (→) gay, (→) bisexual; (ii) as a protest against any dichotomy in terms of sex, sexual orientation, gender, etc.
self-identification	Whether a person refers to themselves as (→) hetero(sexual), (→) homo(sexual), (→) bi(sexual), or other, e.g. (→) pansexual or (→) queer, (does not always correspond to one's sexual orientation)
sex	→ 'biological sex'
sexual attraction	attraction to the opposite (→) sex, the same sex, or both sexes, distinguished in aspects such as emotional, romantic and/or sexual (in the sense of orientation toward sexual behavior)
sexual behavior	Whether a person has sex with a partner of the opposite (→) sex, the same sex, or with partners of both sexes (does not always correspond to one's sexual orientation)
sexual diversity	The different ways in which persons experience and express their (→) sexual attraction, (→) self-identification and/or (→) sexual identity and (→) sexual behavior

sexual identity	The way in which a person (→) gives their sexual orientation a place in the perception of identity, for example as a thread in their identity, or as the core of their identity
sexual orientation	one of the positions on a spectrum, a position involving a pattern of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction to (i) persons of the opposite sex (heterosexual orientation), (ii) persons of the same sex (homosexual orientation), in both cases an attraction that may be predominant (the extent of which differs from person to person) or exclusive in nature, or (iii) persons of both the opposite and the same sex (bisexual orientation) - generally including a (→) self-identification that expresses this attraction
sexuality	a word used for (i) indicating sex or sex difference; (ii) (→) sexual orientation; (iii) sex life; or (iv) bureaucratic categorization of (deviant) sexual behavior, intended for the regulation of that behavior

'Don't judge, leave that to God'

The story of Erik and his parents

Erik was seventeen years old when, after a period of dejection, he shared with his parents that he was attracted to boys. He was having a hard time. Why did this have to happen to him? He dreamed of a future with a family. But that dream was falling apart. Also for his parents, 'Dad, you'll never be a granddad if it depends on me'.

How then does this affect you as parents? Raised in a relatively orthodox Christian congregation, it comes as a shock to you. As a human being, you are often a bit like a herd animal. You sometimes read about it but you don't really think about it. You have grown up with the idea that homosexuality is not allowed. You know about the often made distinction between having gay feelings and homosexual practice. But what good does this do when your child comes to you like this?

One feeling prevails: the deep bond with your child and your determination to find the way with him step by step. You feel his longing for a buddy and you would also grant him that wholeheartedly. Even if you have to get used to it yourself.

You start reading about it. You discover that Bible texts about gay sexuality are in the context of orgies. But you also know: God made man and woman, and it says so for a reason. It remains a struggle. The conviction grows: respect people's choices. Don't judge, leave it to God.

His parents think and pray with him as their son gradually comes out of the closet. In the circle of family and relatives, in the youth club. Reactions vary. On the one hand, there is a lot of understanding. But it also feels like being stigmatized. Everyone has their own thoughts about it. And some people are remarkably candid about it. 'You can be it, all right, as long as you don't practice it.' And even if you don't have a partner at that time, it still gives you great sadness. Grief at not being allowed to belong, because there is always that condition.

Standing out in the cold

Erik's youth group in the congregation is the age group that is expected to make a profession of faith. For Erik and his parents, it is very important to know the position of the congregation and the church council. Can he confess only if he promises not to enter into a relationship? Discussions follow with the elder, the pastor,

and the chairman of the church council. These are very different conversations. Some respond invitingly and empathetically. Others are cold and judgmental. They seem to be very knowledgeable and know all the Bible texts by heart. But they seem to hide behind them. Erik feels left out in the cold and so do his parents. While they look for pastoral involvement and warmth, the tone is too rational. They say they are moved, but their words come across as harsh. And in the end they arrive at one position. The church council adheres to the classical Reformed view that a homosexual relationship is not permitted, and anyone who professes their faith declares that they adhere to this.

As a consequence, this family decided to find another congregation. A congregation that is more open to people of diverse orientations. 'It hurts to leave behind more than twenty years of shared church life. But we have also experienced that God leads all things and we trust that He will give us a warm place in the new congregation. Of course we understand that a congregation needs time to change direction, but it is especially the tone that gave us the final push'.

3 Bible and 'homosexuality'

If you look in the Bible for sections that deal directly with what today is called homosexuality in the sense of a sexual orientation,²² you will not find it. There are texts in the Bible that we associate with homosexuality because they refer to sexual intercourse between people of the same sex. But as we will see, there are no instances of romantic attraction or falling in love between people of the same sex.²³

As deputies, therefore, we want to warn in advance against narrowing our scope. Whether and how the texts dealing with same-sex sex apply to homosexuality remains to be seen. We mention this explicitly here because sometimes people use an is-equal-to sign: no sex between members of the same sex therefore also means no relationship, no intimate friendships, no living together. This is unfair reasoning.

Further, biblical reflection on homosexuality consists of more than just careful study of the texts dealing with same-sex sex. These texts will need to be interpreted in the larger context of biblical teaching and within this also in the wider framework of biblical discourse about sexuality, relationships, and sex.

This chapter briefly outlines the larger Biblical picture and from there it zooms in on some specific texts. It is impossible and unnecessary to give an exhaustive treatise on these texts. Books have already been written on this subject at home and abroad and numerous reports have been produced for synods. We have gratefully made use of some of these.²⁴

For the record, we state here in advance that no conclusions will be drawn in this chapter regarding the permissibility of same-sex relationships today. We only collect the material that will be elaborated upon in various ways in the chapters below.

²² For a definition of this, see Chapter 2.

²³ As note 22. We do occasionally encounter kindred souls for two people of the same sex, such as Ruth and Naomi and David and Jonathan. The passages in question give no reason to think of romantic attraction or falling in love.

²⁴ Such as the study reports of the CGK, NGK and the CRC (Christian Reformed Churches). See CGK (2013), NGK (2015) and CRC (2022).

3.1 The larger framework

3.1.1 Genesis 1 and 2: male and female

Genesis 1 tells us about the brilliant design of heaven and earth in which everything has its proper place. Finally, man is created by God in His own image, to which is added in the same breath, 'male and female He created men' (Genesis 1:27). Being male and female thus refers to being created in the image of God. At the same time, these words seem intended as a prelude to God's immediately following command to mankind to be fruitful and become numerous.

In Genesis 2, another aspect of being human comes to the fore. First, man is alone. And that is not good, says God. On the contrary, man is meant to be a being who lives in connection with others. Even better: a special other. A life partner. God allows man himself to discover that he longs for someone next to him, for a 'buddy' as we would say today. And God then fulfills the desire created by Himself by giving man a woman. One equal to him and at the same time an 'opposite' person, complementing and helping him. The man is complemented by the woman and vice versa. The aspect of procreation, unlike Genesis 1, remains unmentioned here. In Genesis 2, the emphasis is on the total relationship.

This cooperation and complementarity is also the basis for the life unity in which one is attached to one another in all respects: marriage as expressed in Genesis 2:24: 'That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh'. It is a concluding and descriptive sentence of something we see happening in life. Even in a fallen world, people do that. Not so much because they submit to a divine command but because they naturally follow the innate desire to share life with a special other.

The entirety of Biblical teaching confirms what you can already suspect based on Genesis 1 and 2: this unique life unity of one man and one woman is meant to be lifelong, exclusive, and in complete devotion to each other. In short: the unity of man and woman in love and fidelity is the most honored and safe place for sexual intimacy and childbirth.

3.1.2 Genesis 3: disruption of the good

With the Fall as described in Genesis 3, brokenness makes its appearance in all areas of life. The good becomes corrupted in every way. Whereas the final sentence of Genesis 2 stated that the man and his woman were not ashamed of being naked, after the Fall it becomes clear that in a fallen world one cannot simply expose oneself, even within marriage (cf. 3:7 and 21). After the Fall, much sin and brokenness also is manifest in the areas of sexuality, relationships, and sex. Many places in the Bible point this out and call for proper relationships. In our belief, not because relational and sexual sins are worse than other sins, but rather because this is such a vulnerable and tender area.

So much has been spoiled by the Fall. In every corner of our existence, brokenness asserts itself. In general this needs no explanation. It is more difficult to point out exactly where this brokenness becomes manifest. Examples are the hardships of pregnancy and the curse on the earth (Genesis 3:16) as well as the fact that shame makes its appearance and man and woman have something to hide from each other. By extension, one can think of unwanted childlessness and difficult marriages. But does the brokenness of existence also become manifest in an intersex condition, gender dysphoria, or bisexual and homosexual feelings? For as such they do not serve an extremely fundamental and vital function of sexuality, namely reproduction. Sometimes homosexuality is characterized on these grounds as a 'painful enigma'. When this results in the conclusion that same-sex relationships are not permissible on the basis of the Bible, there is another painful enigma, namely the question of why, in people with a same-sex orientation, the innate desire not to remain alone but to have a partner for life has remained intact.

Today, however, the question whether an LGB orientation is a manifestation of brokenness is not simply answered in the affirmative. De Bruijne, for example, notes that, given the variation throughout creation that emerges from Genesis 1-2, it is conceivable, that in homosexual orientation and identity 'a further variation within the framework of being male

or female comes to us'.²⁵ In that case, it cannot simply be 'claimed' that homosexual feelings are the result of the Fall and belong to the brokenness of life.

3.1.3 Genesis 1, 2, and 3: multiple perspectives?

Things become even more complex if one assumes, as De Bruijne does, that Genesis 1-3 do not offer a chronological description and that there has not been an ideal state,²⁶ but rather that the schema creation-fall-salvation implies a 'structural typification' of 'everything that exists and happens'.²⁷ Increasingly and partly on the basis of evolutionary theory, Christians have doubts as to whether there has been such an ideal state. If there was not, it becomes more difficult to locate 'certain phenomena entirely on the side of a good creation and other phenomena entirely in the realm of human rebellion and brokenness.'²⁸ In the next chapter De Bruijne uses precisely this point in his argumentation. Therefore, we only mention it here without taking position.

In addition, we would like to mention three perspectives on relationships and sexuality from Genesis 1 and 2 in conjunction with Song of Songs. From Genesis 1 emerges the perspective of procreation. In Genesis 2, procreation is not mentioned and the life unity is emphasized. From Song of Songs, the perspective of enjoying sexuality emerges. Thus, from Scripture, with regard to marriage between a man and a woman, the perspectives of procreation (reproduction), relationship, and recreation emerge, and in each reflects God's wisdom and goodness. The first perspective, procreation, is by definition absent in a same-sex relationship, while the other two perspectives are possible. This plays a role in some of the views we describe in the next chapter, although different terms are used.

²⁵ De Bruijne (2022), 245.

²⁶ In theology, this is called the 'status integritatis' which typifies the supposed condition before the Fall: among other things, without brokenness and death.

²⁷ De Bruijne (2022), 239.

²⁸ Ibid.

3.1.4 Psalm 139

We conclude this section with some thoughts based on Psalm 139. This psalm invites us in verse 14 to say along with the poet, ‘I praise You for the awesome miracle of my existence’. It is a deep knowledge reaching into the depths of your soul that you are a miracle of God. These are words that ring out after the Fall. Words that deal with life here and now, in which we are not in an ideal state and in my life there is a mix of the beautiful, the less beautiful, and the ugly; in which there are painful enigmas on various levels. And yet may we sing along with the psalm that I have been woven by God in such a unique way in the mother's womb, that I praise Him for the awesome miracle of my existence.

3.2 The Old Testament

In the Old Testament, we find two prohibitions only in the book of Leviticus. In the rest of the Old Testament, same-sex sex is only discussed in a narrative context. Below we discuss the relevant sections.

3.2.1 Genesis 19

In the story in Genesis 19, the men of Sodom demand sexual intercourse with Lot's male guests. Later Jewish writings that strongly condemn same-sex sexual intercourse often refer to this Bible chapter.²⁹ They do not receive support for this from the Old Testament. Nowhere is Sodom explicitly associated with same-sex sexual intercourse (cf. Isaiah 1:10-17; 3:9; Jeremiah 23:14, Lamentations 4:6). Moreover, Ezekiel gives a very different reason for the wiping out of Sodom and Gomorrah (16:49-50): ‘[They] were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.’

²⁹ Van Loon (2012), 16, 48, 51.

Two texts in the New Testament refer to the sin of Sodom (2 Peter 2:6-10 and Jude 7), but do not specify exactly what is meant by it. Similarly, Jesus only mentions Sodom in a general sense (Matthew 10:5-15) without naming what the sin was specifically.

Often, violation of the guest right is seen as the 'actual' sin in Genesis 19. This thought seems plausible to us, partly in view of the fact that Lot more or less invokes it (19:8) and the fact that hospitality was held in high esteem in the Ancient Near East and, of course, also the safety and protection of one's guests.

With regard to Genesis 19, we conclude that we can derive little or nothing from it with regard to whether or not same-sex sexual intercourse is permissible in general. After all, the story is about intended rape and that in itself is completely unacceptable.

What is striking in this story is that Lot is willing to offer two daughters to the men of Sodom. In this way he does go very far in protecting his guests. Perhaps, in addition to violating the right of the guest, it is also a factor that in those days 'being taken' as a man was the greatest humiliation that could be inflicted on you.³⁰ With this we touch on something that will be discussed in more detail, namely a major difference with our time regarding the role and experience of sex and sexuality.

3.2.2 Judges 19

In Judges 19 we encounter a gruesome story. As in Genesis 19, the intended rape of men by men also plays a role here. In this case, it is the men of Gibeah who demand that a Levite, who has found shelter for the night with his concubine in the house of one of their fellow townsmen, come outside so that they can have homosexual intercourse with him. This is refused, but eventually the Levite's concubine is sent outside. She is raped throughout the night, after which she dies the next morning. An important difference with the story in Genesis 19 is that the perpetrators in this case are Jewish men. This also argues against a claim of Jewish writers of antiquity that same-sex sexual intercourse never occurred in Israel.³¹

³⁰ See, among others, Nissinen (1998), 70, 71.

3.2.3 Leviticus 18 and 20

The book of Leviticus, has two very similar texts in quick succession, both of which clearly prohibit same-sex sexual intercourse. The prohibitions are as follows:

‘Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.’ (Leviticus 18:22).

‘If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.’ (Leviticus 20:13).

In both verses, the wording is general. Nothing is said that could make you think of a specific form of same-sex behavior. Whereas in 18:22 one might still think that for one of the two, for example a captive or co-captive, it could be involuntary sex, 20:13 cuts that thought short. After all, both must be put to death.

Also notable is that it is said to be a detestable act. The Hebrew word used for this is a serious disqualification and has a strong emotional value: it denotes something repugnant that is reprehensible in the eyes of God or people.³² It may involve what is abhorrent in both a cultic and moral sense. This should become clear from the context. Now in Leviticus 18-20 we are dealing with the second main form of defilement: moral uncleanness. Such uncleanness involves violation of divine laws, referred to in Leviticus as ‘laws’ or ‘decrees’. This also includes ‘the entire social organization of Israel’, as is clear from Leviticus 18: it goes from illicit sexual intercourse within the sphere of the family, through the extended family or clan to Israelite society as a whole.³³ Also the punishment (death sentence)

³¹ Van Loon (2012), 48-57.

³² Mudde (2015), 46.

³³ Mohrmann (2004), 58, 68-76; Nihan (2013), 330, 342.

makes it clear that it is not about physical or ritual but moral uncleanness.³⁴

Temple prostitution?

It is often said that Leviticus 18 and 22 could be about temple prostitution. In this connection, reference is often made to the *qadeshim* (literally, 'holy men') in Deuteronomy 23:17. It will be meant euphemistically, but what practices were they engaged in? They occur in a number of other places in the Old Testament,³⁵ but in Deuteronomy 23, after the prohibition of 'holy women' and 'holy men' in verse 18, they are spoken of in the same breath as bringing harlot wages and dog money into the house of the Lord. It does not seem illogical to think of temple prostitution here and to interpret the provisions in Leviticus 18 and 20 as a warning to the Israelites not to adopt this from surrounding nations.

Whereas in the past it was generally assumed that temple prostitution occurred in the ancient Near East, this is now doubted by many scholars.³⁶ In that case, therefore, the idea that the prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and 20 refer to cultic prostitution becomes thin air. However, there are also authoritative scholars who believe that temple prostitution did occur in the ancient Near East.³⁷

For our report, it is not necessary to take a stand in this, considering we previously concluded that the prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and 20 are general and that they involve moral uncleanness.

I am YHWH

The prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and 20 are part of a larger whole that is introduced in 18:1-5 with the words 'I am YHWH' twice. This is the only time these words form the beginning of a series of provisions, all other times they form the conclusion of a separate commandment or series.³⁸ First there is the relationship to

³⁴ Nihan (2013), 339-45; building on and correcting Klawans (1998), 393-95; Klawans (2000), 26-27; cf. Barton (2014), 194-200.

³⁵ The relevant Bible texts are: Deuteronomy 23:17-18; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7; Job 36:14.

³⁶ Sprinkle (2015), 56-60; Day (2014). DeGrado (2018), 16, 19, 21, 23, 25-26.

³⁷ See, e.g., Stol (2016).

³⁸ Rose (2020), 150.

YHWH, the deliverer of his people from Egypt, only then the commandments.³⁹ Rose calls the words 'I am YHWH', which are used several times in Leviticus 18-20, the liberation banner or the gospel banner.⁴⁰

3.2.4 Other texts from the Old Testament

The act of Cham against his father Noah is sometimes explained as an incestuous rape (Genesis 9) of a father by his son.⁴¹ However, this interpretation is controversial and seems very far-fetched to us.⁴² Furthermore, the friendship between David and Jonathan (see e.g. 1 Samuel 18:1,3 and 2 Samuel 1:23) is seen by some as a homosexual relationship in love and fidelity. From this it could then be deduced that the Old Testament does not necessarily disapprove of homosexual relationships in love and fidelity and thus the prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and 20 would not apply to all situations. However, most authors agree that there is far too much reading between the lines in the description of the friendship between David and Jonathan. We concur with this view.

3.3 The New Testament

The New Testament remains relatively silent on the subject of same-sex sex. Jesus does not touch on the matter, or at least not directly, although Matthew 19 does offer starting points and insights relevant to our reflection. Peter and Jude refer briefly to the sin of Sodom in their letters,⁴³ but, as noted earlier, do so in a very general way. Moreover, according to Ezekiel, the sin of Sodom consisted at its core of selfishness, as we saw above. Therefore, we will leave these texts aside. Finally, three passages from Paul's letters are the only texts in the New Testament in which same-sex sex is explicitly mentioned. This occurs briefly in two so-called sin lists in 1 Corinthians 6:9, in 1 Timothy 1:10, and more extensively in Romans 1:26-27.

³⁹ Ibid., 148.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 150.

⁴¹ Gagnon (2001), 63-71; Nissinen (1998), 52-53.

⁴² Mudde (2015), 336-339.

⁴³ 2 Peter 2:6-10 and Jude 7.

3.3.1 Matthew 19: 3-12

Nowhere in the gospels do we read statements by Jesus about same-sex sex or relationships. One should not conclude from this that He apparently did not think it was important to say anything about it. Rather that there was no concrete reason to talk about this topic or because He did not find it necessary to correct the prevailing views among the Jews on this issue. Indeed, as will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, they were unanimous in strongly disapproving of same-sex sex: it goes 'against nature'.

What is striking in Matthew 19 is that Jesus, in his answer to the question of whether a man may send his wife away, goes back to the beginning. He invokes Genesis 2: one man and one woman, no longer two but together one. To make His point, this could have sufficed. However, Jesus also, and indeed first, quotes Genesis 1: 'Have you not read that the creator made man male and female at the beginning?' Some take these words as an endorsement of the exclusivity of the order of creation and thus an implicit rejection of same-sex relationships.⁴⁴ However, there are other explanations for quoting both Genesis 1:27 and 2:24.⁴⁵

After the disciples' dismayed reaction to Jesus' words ('then you had better not marry'), Jesus' teaching takes a surprising turn in that He distinguishes three groups of eunuchs.⁴⁶ The third group is new: men who made themselves eunuchs because of the kingdom of heaven. Now in Jesus' day being unmarried was an exception. Eunuchs, however, were usually unmarried. Being a eunuch was not a voluntary state; it happened to you. At least that is true of the first two groups Jesus mentions. However, the third group that Jesus adds are indeed voluntarily eunuchs. Voluntarily they remain unmarried and therefore childless. Certainly the latter was a great sacrifice in those days: your name would not live on.

⁴⁴ For example: Rose (2023).

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Nielsen (1973), 136.

⁴⁶ 1. Men born as eunuchs, for example with mutilated genitalia. 2. Men who were 'made a eunuch' by humans. Literally castrated. 3. Men who made 'themselves a eunuch' because of the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus breaks this open. It is an option to deliberately not marry 'with a view to the kingdom of heaven'. One can then think of those who dedicate their lives to the proclamation of the gospel, including Jesus himself. Jesus' words are addressed to all his followers, but that his words are an encouragement to gay people who want to live celibately for the sake of God's Word should be obvious.

3.3.2 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10

In 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1, we encounter two so-called sin lists containing the words *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*.

'Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor *malakoi* nor *arsenokoitai* nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Corinthians 6: 9-10).

'We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for *arsenokoitai*, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine' (1 Timothy 1: 9-10).

We intentionally left the words *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* untranslated. They are often translated interpretively. For example, the NIV renders these words with one word 'men having sex with men' and 'those practicing homosexuality' and adds a footnote saying that the first 'translate two Greek words that refer to passive and active participants in homosexual acts'. The NABRE makes a different choice and translates with 'boy prostitutes' and 'sodomites'. Reason enough to wonder what these words mean and what kind of persons or acts we should think of.

arsenokoitai and *malakoi*

To our knowledge, the word *arsenokoitai* (plural of *arsenokoites*) does not appear in earlier writings. After Paul, we encounter it a number of times in Jewish and Christian writings. It may well have been forged by Paul himself on the basis of the Greek translation

of Leviticus 18 and 20 as it was in use in Paul's time.⁴⁷ In that translation, the words *arsen* (male) and *koiten* (bed) occur in both texts, in Leviticus 20 even immediately after each other. It is then only a small step to coin the word *arsenokoites* from here.⁴⁸ The meaning of this word would then be 'a man who has sex with another man' and plays the active role in it.⁴⁹

The word *malakos* (plural: *malakoi*) is a common Greek word meaning soft.⁵⁰ It is also used in Paul's day to describe effeminate men with it. So a *malakos* is not necessarily a man who has sex with another man, but a man who played the passive role in same-sex sexual intercourse would be called a *malakos* without question.⁵¹

Thus, the most obvious way to conceive the word pair *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* in 1 Corinthians 6 is as men fulfilling the active and passive roles, respectively, during same-sex sex. Following this, it seems logical to conceive *arsenokoitai* in 1 Timothy 1 in the same way as in 1 Corinthians 6.^{52,53}

3.3.3 Romans 1

Much thought and writing has gone into the interpretation of Romans 1. It is impractical to discuss it all here. Therefore, we briefly sketch the broad outline of the first chapters of the letter to the Romans. After all, that is the context of passage 1:26-27, which has our special attention.

⁴⁷ About 200 years before Christ, the Old Testament was translated into Greek. This translation is known as the Septuagint.

⁴⁸ Whether this was done first by Paul or whether the word was already in circulation is really irrelevant. D.F. Wright hypothesizes that the term had been in circulation before. See Wright (1984).

⁴⁹ Sprinkle (2015), 127-148; Sanders (2016), 366.

⁵⁰ It also occurs in that sense in the New Testament, see Matthew 11:8 and Luke 7:25 where it talks about 'soft clothes'.

⁵¹ Sprinkle (2015), 131; Sanders (2016), 366.

⁵² Cook (2019); Hollenback (2017).

⁵³ It used to be suggested that both texts were about pederasty. If Paul had wanted to say that, there were words available for that in the Greek of his day. However, he uses more general words so that these texts cannot be limited to pederasty. See: Sprinkle (2015), 143-144.

In the first chapters, Paul works step-by-step toward his final conclusion in 3:21-26: everyone has sinned and needs Christ. Section 1:18-3:20 serves to make this plausible by demonstrating the sinfulness of all mankind in 1:18-32. Whatever practices Paul has in mind exactly, it is clear that they are condemnable not only in his own eyes but also in those of his readers. Paul's Jewish readers, in particular, will be deeply outraged, with Paul's example of same-sex sex only serving as a further catalyst.⁵⁴ But then in 2:1 the trap slams shut: all these things you yourselves are doing.

In Romans 1:18-32, then, Paul is not engaged in a discourse on sexual ethics, but gives telling examples of sins that evoke God's wrath that would affect everyone without Jesus' intervention. With this in mind, in what follows we give some reflections on verses 26 and 27: 'Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men.'

Para physin

It is quite understandable that these verses are seen by many as a key text in a biblical ethical reflection on same-sex sexual intercourse. It is not only the most expansive text but also the only place in the Bible where a reason seems to be given for prohibiting sex between two people of the same sex: it is against nature. In Greek it says *para physin*. In Latin writings of the time, we also encounter the expression: *contra naturam*. In the Stoa, an influential philosophical school, there was a lot of reasoning from nature. Something that is *para physin* or *contra naturam* according to the Stoa goes against the 'plan' of nature and is therefore morally wrong. This can involve all sorts of very different things. One of them is same-sex sexual intercourse.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ The Letter of Aristeas and The Oracle Books of the Sibyls even suggest that same-sex sex did not occur among Jews. Incidentally, in his retelling in *Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus adapts the history in Judges 19 for this purpose. See: Van Loon (2012), 48-57.

⁵⁵ Van Loon (2012), 38-39.

Jewish contemporaries of Paul explicitly say that same-sex sexual intercourse is wrong because it goes against nature, that is, the order created by God. A boundary set by the creator is crossed.

Even though Paul, unlike his Jewish contemporaries, does not say it explicitly, it seems very likely that the term *para physin* is morally laden. This is further reinforced by the fact that in Romans 1:18-32 we find many allusions to the creation story of Genesis 1 and 2.⁵⁶ It will not be a coincidence that in verses 26 and 27 Paul speaks of 'females' and 'males' rather than women and men. Thus, at the word level there is a correspondence with Genesis 1:26 where it says that God created people 'male and female'.⁵⁷

Biological sex as a criterion?

Whereas Hays argues that Paul's appeal to the order of creation hardly makes an original contribution to his time's thinking about same-sex sex,⁵⁸ Cantarella and Harper point out that Paul does make an innovative contribution on one specific point. In the Greco-Roman world, the biological sex of sexual partners was not decisive in assessing the moral status of sexual intercourse. But according to Paul, this is precisely an indispensable criterion: a man can and should have sexual intercourse only with a woman and vice versa. According to Cantarella, this lays the foundation for a new sexual ethic that Christian writers would repeat in the centuries that followed, consistently and without exception or hesitation.⁵⁹

What practices?

What practices that are 'against nature' does Paul have in mind? In other words, what exactly was the practice in his day when it came to same-sex sex and relationships? More specifically: were there also what we today call (same-sex) relationships in love

⁵⁶ Van Loon (2012), 69-71.

⁵⁷ This is underscored by the fact that the use of the adjectives female and male (instead of the nouns women and men) is relatively infrequent. In the New Testament it happens about 5x, but in the plural you only encounter them in Romans 1:25, 27.

⁵⁸ Hays (1996), 387.

⁵⁹ Cantarella (1992), 193.

and fidelity? And if so, can we assume or rule out that Paul knew about it? The importance of those questions is obvious.

Various interpreters believe that Paul is giving a general description of the history of mankind in Romans 1:18- 32. After all, it is full of mistaking (or exchanging) gods who are not gods for the true God. And so in the course of history in all sorts of places and in all sorts of times, the natural sexual intercourse has also been exchanged for the unnatural.⁶⁰

Other interpreters argue that Paul is thinking specifically of what was happening in Rome at that time, especially in higher circles where opposite-sex intercourse with the domestic partner was increasingly and openly exchanged for same-sex adventures.⁶¹ For this, Paul starts with women having sex with women. This was considered highly objectionable, but we can assume that it was increasingly prevalent in the first century in the wake of women's emancipation.⁶² If church members in Rome could have known about this kind of practice,⁶³ that might help explain why Paul comes up in this very letter with this particular example of sin at which God's wrath is directed.

Incidentally, one need not exclude the other. Concrete practices in Rome in Paul's day may have occurred in all sorts of variations throughout history. Nor is it necessary to lump Paul's examples of sinful behavior in this passage under one heading. General and specific examples can mix just fine.

Whatever one's view on this, it does not answer the question of whether or not long-term relationships between people of the same sex occurred in secret in Pauls' time. The sources from that time give a one-sided picture anyway: they were written by the cultural elite with their obvious likes and dislikes. The perspective of the vast majority of the population therefore remains unknown. However, we have to make do with the available source material. On how this material should be interpreted at

⁶⁰ See, for example: Hays (1996), 385.

⁶¹ Van Loon (2012), 75-78.

⁶² Cantarella (1992), 165.

⁶³ This is not obvious; after all, the sources of the time were written by the cultural elite.

this point is no scientific consensus and the debate continues.⁶⁴

Temple prostitution?

It is sometimes argued that Paul has temple prostitution in mind in Romans 1:26-27, also referred to by some as *reli-sex*, on the grounds that the preceding verses deal with idolatry. Yet this reasoning backfires. After all, after 1:26-27 it goes on to talk about sinful behavior to which God has delivered people because of idol worship. Paul then mentions things like envy, murder, quarreling, deceit, wickedness and more. These things are obviously wrong in their entirety and not just if you do them in a temple or in the context of idol worship. Therefore, it would be unjust to limit Paul's words about same-sex sexual intercourse to *reli-sex*.⁶⁵ Without textual markers, it would be arbitrary to limit the sins mentioned in 1:26-27 to the cultic domain and not include those in 1:29-31.⁶⁶ Moreover, the concrete practices described above, especially in higher circles in Rome in Paul's day, have nothing to do with *reli-sex*. Also, given Paul's argument, it is illogical to think exclusively of *reli-sex*. Logically, Paul considers them both within and outside of the cultic framework as against nature.⁶⁷

3.4 Conclusions

The main conclusion of this chapter is that we only find texts in the Bible that disapprove of same-sex sex. There is some discussion about the views of the Bible writers, but the texts themselves are speaking in general terms.

As it is important, we repeat what we wrote at the beginning of this chapter: the Bible texts deal only with same-sex sexual intercourse. Nowhere do they speak about attraction,

⁶⁴ At the time of writing, the debate between Sprinkle and Vines provides good insight into the state of affairs, see Vines (2022) and Sprinkle (2022).

⁶⁵ Retrieved from: Rose (2010), 66-67.

⁶⁶ Du Toit (2003), 102.

⁶⁷ Retrieved from: Du Toit (2003), 102. The author further substantiates this using Plato, the Greek moralists, and Musonius Rufus (a contemporary of Paul) who all condemned homosexual practices both within and outside the cultic sphere.

falling in love, intimacy, or kindred soul relationship between two people of the same sex.

With the key biblical data in mind, it is now time to look at some views of same-sex sex and relationships in the next chapter.

'My life with God is more important than a relationship'

The story of André and his pastor

André grew up in a family with eight sisters and a brother. He has known from quite early on that he is different: playing with dolls, with girls. The teacher says, 'You should also play with boys!' and so he does. Feelings of falling in love with boys are sporadic. As an 18-year-old, he gives words to it. He tells his parents, 'I think I'm gay.' His father thinks it is 'nonsense'. A few times André has a girlfriend. He marries a woman. He did tell her that he sometimes thought he was gay. After about ten years, his need to be himself becomes too strong, 'I don't want to pretend to be other than I am'. Depression and therapy follow. In the relationship there are tensions. Even the therapist responds with 'nonsense' when André indicates that he thinks he is gay. Later he confided in a sister who works in health care. She does give recognition and confirmation.

So how do you proceed in a marriage when neither of you is a real talker? André wants to seek help, but his wife does not. The marriage ends in divorce, partly due to his homosexuality, partly due to a lack of emotional basis for their relationship. A painful process in which both, although unaware, experience fears and struggles. André still struggles with feelings of sadness and rejection. The 'nonsense' of his father - even though André understands his parents. The therapist's 'nonsense' remains incomprehensible. The divorce for which he would be responsible. Pain upon pain upon pain.

New mourning

Life goes on and André does voluntary work. With gay feelings. With good counseling at Different (a Christian LG organization), but a Biblical message in which there is no room for a homosexual relationship. André agrees. But then he befriends a man and after a few years they start a partner relationship. André actually wants to explore how such a relationship would suit him. It turns out to be an intense experience. So intense that he doesn't know if he wants it at that time. Does this partner relationship interfere with his relationship with God? After a short period of time, André decides to end the relationship. André would like to remain

friends, but the friend goes in search of a new love. That means the end of this friendship and the beginning of new mourning.

André grew up thinking that a love relationship with a man is against Biblical teaching. The organization Different has the same point of view. Therefore, it is deeply ingrained in his conviction. André reads a lot: what does God say about this? His conviction after reading remains about the same. His desire for a relationship is there. He lives with the loneliness, the longing for someone, on the one hand, and the realization that a life without a relationship is okay with God, on the other. He has good male and female friends with whom he can share his life. He continues to feel a tension within himself: the desire for a relationship with a man and at the same time the personal conviction that a relationship with God is not compatible with the fulfillment of that desire.

Lost contact

In his contacts with his pastor, André finds it hard to talk about a relationship with a man. He feels the pastor's shyness and is afraid of a new rejection himself.

He ended his relationship with a man a few years ago, because life with God was more important than the relationship with the man in question. It was a sacrifice to step back, a great sacrifice. That sounds pretty intense. André did it for God, not for the church. André would have preferred a friendship, a relation without sex, but that was no longer an option.

The children of André and his ex-wife grew up in a family where there was little room for feelings and for talking about them. The children still keep their distance. 'Talk about your thoughts and feelings with your own friends. If you have a friend, that's okay, but we're not interested.' André even lost contact with one of the children. The atmosphere in the family, the coming-out, the divorce, it all plays a role. At the time of the divorce, the children were between 15 and 25 years old. There is an open relationship with a number of grandchildren, with an openness to talk about homosexuality.

André's pastor

Kees got to know André after his coming-out and divorce. He heard about the divorce in the council. The divorce itself was, as

usual, reported in the church council. In the case of André, advice had been sought from Professor Douma. The question was whether homosexuality was sufficient grounds for divorce. The council supported the divorce, but at the time did not think of developing a policy on homosexuality and relationships. That one occasion - more than 25 years ago - was not reason enough. Then there was the case of a son of a couple from the congregation who expressed his homosexual orientation and then left the congregation. This was followed by a case of a young woman who entered into a relationship with a woman and also left the congregation. Later, two women who may have had a partner relationship but were not asked about it. And now there is a married couple of which the wife acknowledges that she is a lesbian and goes public with it herself in the church bulletin. Kees coached André when he moved into his neighborhood; the conversation was mainly about homosexuality. Kees did not notice any condemnatory responses to André in the congregation, rather an atmosphere of compassion. The same is happening now with regard to the lesbian woman who brings her story out into the open. A while ago André gave a testimony in a church service in which he spoke about his homosexual orientation. Then, too, he was listened to in an atmosphere of acceptance. Although it must be said that it would probably have been received differently if André had been telling his story while he was living with a man.

Don't compromise

The council could be served by a broad and informative memorandum outlining a framework by which the council could make its own concrete considerations. Kees himself fell back on the distinction between being and doing. A gay couple that want to participate in the Lord's Supper would be difficult for him. You cannot simply say of such a couple that their relationship with God is not good. You will speak and listen carefully to those involved. Have endless patience with such a couple and still maintain the conviction that a homosexual relationship is not good in the eyes of God. The more concrete a case is, the more difficult a consideration becomes: after all, it concerns someone's soul. You don't want to judge, don't want to act harshly. You also don't want to compromise.

When asked if you can leave a decision to someone's own responsibility, Kees sticks to his line that you remain patient, as a pastor, as a church. Just as you remain patient in all kinds of skewed situations. Be patient with someone and also continue to bring in your own conviction.

But what if a lesbian couple in search of God enters the church? Then the same line applies, Kees believes. He would welcome them, share the gospel with them, the message of salvation, and also the instructions. He would hope that the couple would slowly learn to see for themselves what is right in God's eyes and act on that. He would timely discuss, though, that a homosexual relationship is not appropriate in the eyes of God. Not at the beginning, but also not at the end of their journey of discovery in the church. He thinks of Paul's instruction that a person can become an elder if he is the 'husband of one wife' - apparently there are men with more than one wife. In this way Paul points the congregation in a certain direction without ushering out the polygamous man with or without his wives. Give room to grow in faith and be clear about your point of view.

4 Different views

In the previous chapter, we discussed several passages from the Bible. The main conclusion was that nowhere in the Bible is there room for same-sex sexual intercourse. In this chapter we want to explore what views exist among Christians when it comes to same-sex sexual intercourse and same-sex relationships. It turns out that there is a range of different views.

The different views are often classified into two categories, referred to in the literature as accepting and non-accepting. As far as we are concerned, these are not happy terms. After all, what do you accept or not accept? In practice, these terms refer to relationships including or excluding sexual intercourse. However, this distinction is too crude and does not do justice to the possibility of living together in sexual abstinence, nor to a same-sex orientation as such. The term non-accepting unintentionally suggests that someone is not accepted as a person. Therefore, we avoid this term pair as much as possible.

4.1 Three lenses

In a publication by Yarhouse, we come across a nice way to categorize different approaches. He speaks about three different

lenses through which to look.⁶⁸ Each viewpoint provides valuable insights, and the trick is to bring them into a Biblical perspective, both ethically and pastorally. The first lens is the order of creation. God created man male and female and instituted marriage between man and woman. The second lens looks primarily from the Fall. Much after that is not as originally intended, but has become disrupted. This includes a focus on the same sex. The third lens is that of variation: God has provided variation in his creation; besides people with heterosexual orientations, there are also people with same-sex orientations. The lenses complement and reinforce each other.

These lenses provide insight and structure. Yet it is not quite possible to categorize each viewpoint under one of the lenses. This is also not entirely possible if we add a fourth lens, namely, re-creation. This lens could be seen as the counterpart of the first lens: instead of looking back to the beginning, through this lens we look forward to what is to come: God's new world to which we are moving. For a number of views, this line of vision plays an important role. In particular, this is the case in De Bruijne's approach, which has been published recently.⁶⁹ Erwich and Leene also seem to be on this line, but the authors want their book to stimulate thought processes on the issue and do not offer a definitive argumentation.⁷⁰

In the sections that follow, we describe a number of viewpoints. It is impractical to do so at length. For each point of view we try to present the main lines as well as possible. The interested reader can easily find their way to the underlying publications through the literature references. The purpose of this chapter is to present the important steps leading to the - very diverse - lines of thought. We conclude the chapter in an evaluative manner, but do not put forward one particular viewpoint.

4.1.1 The classical view: through the lens of the order of creation

Until recently, in our church tradition, the belief was prevalent that same-sex sexual intercourse is against the order of creation.

⁶⁸ Yarhouse (2015). The lenses are those of: *integrity, disability, and variety*.

⁶⁹ De Bruijne (2022).

⁷⁰ Erwich and Leene (2022).

In this belief, Romans 1 plays an important, if not a key role, for it mentions the terms natural and unnatural. Those terms relate to creation and God's obvious intent for it. Romans 1, in combination with 1 Corinthians 6, also provides a New Testament affirmation of the prohibitions of Leviticus 18 and 20.⁷¹

Thus, the classical view predominantly relies on the lens of creation order. At the same time, it often also looks through the lens of brokenness, only this does not lead to a different conclusion regarding same-sex sexual intercourse. The norm based on the order of creation remains, and in this broken state it is a struggle to meet this norm, says Hays, a representative of the classical view in which brokenness is emphasized. In his view, disciplined abstinence in the time between Christ's first and second advent is for some people the only viable alternative to deviant sexuality.⁷²

Within this view there are all kinds of variants when it comes to relationships and intimate friendships. A Biblical prohibition against same-sex intercourse does not automatically mean that two people of the same sex should not be allowed to live under the same roof and share their lives. In the GKv (former Reformed Church, liberated since 1944), however, there is a synod statement disapproving of the latter on the basis that this would represent too much of a temptation.⁷³

Some variants of this view see same-sex orientation as sinful in and of itself⁷⁴, although – we are happy to say – in our own tradition this is generally not the case. The latter was and is sometimes informally formulated as: 'you may be gay, but you may not act on it'. This formulation may be subject to criticism, but for the sake of mutual discussion and pastoral care it is desirable to make a clear distinction here. A homosexual identity does not consist primarily of a desire for sexual intercourse with someone of the same sex.

⁷¹ See more fully in: CGK (2013), 22; CRC (2021), 104.

⁷² Hays (1996), 393. We also encounter this notion with, for example, O'Donovan, cf.: O'Donovan (2009), 114. On the same line are Preston Sprinkle (Sprinkle (2019), our sister church the Dutch Christian Reformed Churches (CGK (2013)) and in our own circle Wolter Rose (Rose (2020), 183-246) - but there are more to mention.

⁷³ GKv (2009).

⁷⁴ See, e.g., Burk (2015).

Such desires and temptations can, of course, be present. Rose speaks of a reduction reflex here.⁷⁵ Sprinkle calls desires for sex with someone ‘a small part’ of one’s homosexual or heterosexual orientation. And he also argues that our modern concept of homosexual orientation does not fit seamlessly with the ‘sinful passion’ the Bible speaks of in Romans 1.⁷⁶ For the record, this does not alter the fact that for Sprinkle and others, Romans 1 in combination with other biblical data is decisive. The Holy Spirit caused the Bible writers to write down words that also apply outside the immediate context in which they speak. In other words, the ‘unnatural’ in Romans 1 is and remains normative in all situations.

Wolter Rose's vision: the Two Vocations Perspective

The Two Vocations Perspective¹ is set in the all-encompassing framework of God's gospel about his Son. That gospel is a message of salvation for a humanity that as a whole is in a downward spiral characterized by the ‘exchange’ of God's glory.

In that context, for some two thousand years the Christian Church everywhere in the world has shared the conviction that in after Christ there are two vocations to take into account with respect to that aspect of being a man or a woman that is directed towards sexual intercourse: (i) by living in chastity with one sexual partner, in the marriage of one man and one woman, or (ii) by living in chastity and abstinence, i.e. without a sexual partner. Each vocation has its own high degree of difficulty. Both vocations are embedded within life as family members (‘brothers and sisters’) within a Christian community of faith.

This Two Vocations Perspective goes back to the teaching of Christ and his apostles. It begins with a double turn that Christ makes in a contentious conversation about divorce (Matthew 19). The first turn is: back to the beginning of creation — even then already past history. Thus Christ gives the fact ‘that at the beginning the Creator “made them male and female?”’ a fundamental place in the ethical reflection on the two vocations.

The second turn is a total game-changer: Christ assigns life without a sexual partner (a life that may or may not have been consciously chosen) a shared first place alongside life with a sexual partner in the marriage of one man and one woman.

The Two Vocations Perspective infers from that double turn that same-sex sexual intercourse is incompatible with Christ's teaching. In doing so it follows

75 See Rose (2019). See also Vineyards (2019), 114-115.

76 Sprinkle (2019), 181.

77 This view is not to be found in this form in the literature but has been prepared by Rose himself for this report as a variant or alternative to the classical view described above.

the teaching of the apostle Paul in which that moral judgment is explicitly expressed. In a letter to Christians in the religiously and morally diverse metropolis of Rome, he uses the same words as Christ, taken from the story of the creation of man: 'females' and 'males'.

Paul adds another pair of words: 'natural' versus 'unnatural intercourse'. With this he makes a distinction between (i) sexual intercourse characterized by sex difference between the partners ('natural'), and (ii) sexual intercourse characterized by no sex difference between the partners ('unnatural/against nature'). This second manifestation is described by Paul as morally reprehensible (Romans 1:26-27).

The Two Vocations Perspective, like Paul, does not want to separate this moral rejection of same-sex sexual intercourse from the framework of the gospel of the Son of God outlined above, nor from the immediately following long list of other variants of sinful human behavior. There is no dichotomy between 'us' (the good guys) and 'them' (the bad guys): for humanity as a whole, 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'. And in salvation also there is no dichotomy. For those who believe the gospel, 'all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus' (Romans 3:24).

The vision of William Webb

We mention Webb's view here separately because he arrives at a non-accepting view along a completely different path.⁷⁸ Whereas most authors who reject same-sex relationships on the basis of the Bible suffice with exegesis directly followed by an application for today, Webb follows a very different procedure. In fact, he looks at whether there is a certain trend visible in the Bible, in the form of a liberating movement vis-à-vis the surrounding culture in which the biblical commandments and prohibitions were given. His assumption is that in the Bible itself limited steps are taken toward what he calls the 'ultimate ethics'. Therefore, the task of ethics is to continue the line already tentatively visible in the Bible - assuming there is one. This he calls the 'hermeneutics of liberating movement'. Along this line, he finds Biblical support for abolishing slavery and granting equal rights to women. With regard to same-sex sexual intercourse, Webb sees the liberating movement in the fact that God imposed on his people a total ban on same-sex sexual contact in a surrounding culture in which this was widely accepted. This does not change within the Bible. And so, according to Webb, the Bible clearly points in one direction and the Christian community must continue to condemn same-sex sexual intercourse and not allow it within the church, even if society as a whole thinks otherwise.

⁷⁸ See Webb (2001).

4.1.2 Through the lens of brokenness

Those who look through the lens of brokenness generally continue to see the creation order as directive and normative. However, the creation order often does not have the final say. After all, the Fall has radically affected our existence, even in the area of sexuality and relationships. We live in a broken world. And it is in this world that God reveals himself, deals with people, gives commandments and prohibitions and takes the brokenness into account.

Looking through the lens of brokenness, we see important views arising that accept same-sex sexual relationships. This is true, for example, of the viewpoints of Henk de Jong and Jan Mudde. We describe both views here also because they originated in the Dutch Reformed Churches (former-NGK), one of the forerunners of our current denomination.

Henk de Jong's view

According to De Jong, a process of individualization is underway that already began in biblical times, with slaves and women as examples. Biblical teaching, according to De Jong, is a continuous path and not a dead end, and from this he derives the boldness to detect a certain temporality in the biblical prohibitions regarding homosexuality.⁷⁹ These are not laws that are 'carved in stone', but 'written on wet chalk'.⁸⁰ Moreover, Romans 1 and other texts deal with 'filthy behavior' and therefore same-sex relationships in love and fidelity are beyond the scope of the biblical prohibitions.

Yet De Jong does not see a same-sex relationship as equal to a heterosexual relationship, but as 'deviant' and as a 'prosthesis'. Indeed, he sees a same-sex orientation as an impairment (because humanity would be doomed to extinction if everyone had such an orientation), just as there is so much brokenness with which humanity is afflicted. The relational structure of humanity as male and female is still normative as far as De Jong is concerned, with marriage as the basic structure.⁸¹ A same-sex relationship, according to him, lacks the necessary polarity and therefore cannot mirror the relationship between Christ and the church. He is therefore not in favor of same-sex marriage, but suggests sticking to a cohabitation contract.⁸² Nevertheless, De

Jong wants to create space for same-sex relationships in love and fidelity, because the power of sexual desire can easily lead to derailments:⁸³ in this fallen world, it can be a 'godsend' for someone with a same-sex orientation to have a partner. That can save him or her from a life in the gay scene.⁸⁴

Bert Loonstra's view

Like Mudde, Loonstra also argues that literal obedience is not God's intention with His commandments.⁸⁵ Ultimately these are about love. For, according to the Bible, love is the fulfillment of the law and thus the overarching principle. A concrete commandment stands alone and has no purpose if there is no clear relationship to the love commandment. The overarching principle of love must, therefore, determine the application of a concrete biblical commandment and not literal obedience.⁸⁶ For that reason, Loonstra can accept Paul's appeal to the order of creation in Romans 1 as decisive. According to him, we should look for the line of the gospel: 'For homosexual Christians, the point is that their way of life is compatible with the rule of the gospel that the apostle himself sets before us: does it build up in faith and in love, is it useful for the well-being of people, and don't they get captured by wrong desires?' (after 1 Corinthians 6:12 and 10:13).⁸⁷

⁷⁹ De Bruijne (2009), 230.

⁸⁰ De Jong (2010), 34-35.

⁸¹ De Bruijne (2009), 235.

⁸² De Jong (2010), 32-33.

⁸³ De Bruijne (2009), 236.

⁸⁴ Bouma (2009), 20.

⁸⁵ Loonstra (2000), 97.

⁸⁶ Loonstra (2000), 105-109.

The view of Jan Mudde and the former NGK

In Jan Mudde's view, largely similar to what is expressed in a report by the former NGK,⁸⁸ brokenness also plays a role. He characterizes a homosexual relationship as a 'shelter in a broken existence',⁸⁹ though it can be just as much blessed as a marriage. But God's character and the words of law and justice are more central to his view than creation and its brokenness.

Listening to Scripture, it has become increasingly plausible to Mudde that 'Moses and Paul did not recognize the homosexual with an enduring and deeply rooted homosexual orientation'.⁹⁰ In his view, the Biblical data ignore the issues, questions, and desires of Christians with a homosexual orientation. Therefore, other fundamental Biblical notions must be involved in addition to these data.⁹¹

For Mudde, the most fundamental notion is the character of God. When human life is at stake and when there is suffering in the brokenness of existence, 'God demonstrates to be holy by being abundantly merciful and accommodating'.⁹² Mudde substantiates this with various examples from the Bible.⁹³ According to him, these show 'that the LORD is more than his creation and is willing, out of mercy and when justice and salvation of man so require, to be lenient about (the) order of creation'.⁹⁴

⁸⁷ Loonstra (2005), 44.

⁸⁸ NGK (2013).

⁸⁹ NGK (2013), 79.

⁹⁰ Mudde (2019), 27.

⁹¹ Mudde (2019), 30.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Mudde (2019), 30; expanded in: Mudde (2015), 168-174.

⁹⁴ Mudde (2015), 318.

According to Mudde, the church of Christ must therefore ask itself in what way it can do justice to homosexual community members and what justice can mean for them. The starting point is that the human longing for someone to share our life with is one of the most basic and justified human desires (Genesis 2:18-25). 'Thanks in part to the fellow human being who loves and remains faithful to us in a most personal way, a person comes to grow and flourish.'⁹⁵ 'As (i) there is a real, multiple need in the life of a homosexual person, (ii) love and fidelity need not be done less justice in a homosexual relationship than in a heterosexual relationship, and (iii) homosexual brothers and sisters can flourish and come into their own in a relationship,' Mudde believes that there is room for such relationships within the church of Christ.⁹⁶ This way, the church of Jesus Christ puts into practice mercy, justice, and righteousness.

4.1.3 Through the lens of diversity

Viewed through the lens of diversity, a homosexual orientation is an enriching minority variant. Although Genesis 1 does speak dualistically in word pairs such as light and dark, male and female, earth and sea etc., there are all sorts of intermediate forms that do not fit these general classifications, such as dawn and sunset. By analogy, all variants within the spectrum of gender and human sexuality are not explicitly mentioned in Genesis 1, but are indeed part of God's good creation. Thus, these are not an impoverishment or degradation of God's good creation, not a consequence of the Fall or a sign of brokenness but rather an enrichment.⁹⁷

This is of obvious significance for both the self-image of homosexuals and the way they are viewed: 'Left-handed people are not broken, and they don't have to be to be repaired.'

⁹⁵ Mudde (2015), 319

⁹⁶ Mudde (2015), 322.

⁹⁷ See De Bruijne (2022), 244-246; Erwich/Leene (2022), chap. 4 §11 (5): 'From a gender spectrum where there is mobility or fluidity and where gender identity becomes visible in a diversity of sexual expressions, you get a different perspective. This conviction is reinforced by our understanding of, among other things, Genesis 1:26-27, in which we see God's creation of 'man and woman' not as a binary and polar given, but as a continuum within which there is room for diversity.'

Gay people are not broken and do not need to be repaired.⁹⁸

It is also (and sometimes more so) argued from theological viewpoints other than that of creation that LGB are gender variations. For example, Samuel Wells, among others, looks at sex and sexual relations from the particular perspective of consummation. And below De Bruijne starts from the point of view of recreation and concludes that homosexuality is a full-fledged variant on the way to the kingdom. Erwich and Leene mention theologians who think more in a Trinitarian or Christological perspective.⁹⁹

Those who view LGB as a variant generally view same-sex sexual relationships as equivalent to opposite-sex sexual relationships. But nevertheless, there are substantial differences. Some make no distinction between a marriage of a man and a woman and that of two men or two women.¹⁰⁰ In contrast, others may speak

⁹⁸ This says Philip, one of the fictive characters in Zeyl (2022), Dialogue 2. The same Philip says elsewhere, 'When I came across the inclusive interpretation of the Genesis rendering of God's design a few years ago, it really entered my soul, so to speak, I cried tears of relief, tears of joy. I was no mistake! God had plans for people like me from the beginning of creation! A huge burden fell off my shoulders. Can you imagine? I am good the way I am! There was no mistake when I was made!' Also, Dialogue 4. Cf. Erwich/Leene (2022), chap. 6 §10: 'Sometimes people with an intersex condition are told that their condition is a consequence of the Fall or indirectly a consequence of sin, but certainly not of God's good creation. This, as stated, has everything to do with the rather dominant binary thinking: there are two genders, male and female, and that's the way it was willed by God. (...) The exciting question to be asked is whether an intersex condition can be part of God's good creation. For believers with this condition, this question may turn into the question of the meaning of Psalm 139:13-16 for their lives.'

⁹⁹ Erwich/Leene (2022), chap. 6 §10: 'From Trinitarian thinking, transgenders and people with an intersex condition are included in the same transformative work of God in Christ and through the Spirit. (...) chronologically Adam may be the first man, ... ontologically Christ is the first. The male and female receive their final destination in this. We believe that this thinking is significant because it prevents (and more than that) intersex and transgender persons from being stigmatized as having a serious psychological imbalance, while what is actually at issue, namely gender diversity, is not taken seriously.'

¹⁰⁰ See the Open Letter from pastors and church workers in *Trouw* 30 November 2018, following the PKN Synod's decision to maintain the distinction between marriage of men and women and other relationship commitments. 'However, by the decision as it has now been taken, the impression could be

firmly against the institution of marriage as such and to gay marriage.¹⁰¹ Still others continue to make a distinction between marriage of a man and a woman and same-sex partnerships - even if they argue for the rightness and desirability of the latter. Some advocate making room within the church for polyamorous relationships.¹⁰² Others see no room for this on grounds derived from the Bible.¹⁰³

that the PKN as a whole continues to distinguish between homosexuals and heterosexuals, between marriage of a man and a woman and that of two men or two women. This impression is false. Many within the PKN regret this decision, because we stand for an open church in which everyone is welcome, in which no distinction is made between different forms of relationships. We are a church in which love may be celebrated fully, multicolored, in which people may feel distinctly blessed with each other.'

¹⁰¹ Jellema (1977), 88: 'such marriage is, as an attempt at conformism, a betrayal of the entirely distinct possibilities given with the union between two men or two women. The man/man or woman/woman relationship cannot be equated psychologically nor functionally with a man/woman relationship'.

¹⁰² Wielie Elhorst, *Trouw* August 2, 2016: '(...) institutionalized romantic marriage is in my view nothing more than a legacy from the bourgeois culture of the nineteenth century. It excludes people. It has nothing to do with the church and our Reformation tradition.' And, 'I would like the church to lead the way in understanding that love is broader than the love between two people'. Also, 'In the conversation about opening up marriage that arose in the 1990s, I thought: can't we get rid of that whole institution right away? That marriage that has been so exclusive for centuries, surely we, lesbians and gays, shouldn't have any use for it at all?' see ["Het huwelijk kon mij gestolen worden" - Wing.nl](#) (Accessed October 25, 2023).

¹⁰³ De Bruijne (2022), 312: 'When the eros-love within an LG partner also includes sexual dimensions, the church must make demands on it analogous to the requirements for a marriage relationship. Both the nature of sexuality, in which one person entrusts themselves vulnerably to another, and its biblical meaning, by which sexuality marks union and unity, make it necessary that such LG relationships also be characterized by love and (in principle lifelong) fidelity'. Also, 328: 'Polyamorous experiments do not fit with a lifestyle of people who find themselves placed in the "penultimate times" and orient themselves toward the "end of times". They ignore the created structures in which sexuality is embedded. And they overestimate their own newness of life, so that evil through sexual experimentation revives their old man. Moreover, they ignore what the Bible reveals about the life of the future. The mutual love of eros will then, on the contrary, no longer bear a sexual character.'

Ad de Bruijne's view

De Bruijne's primary concern is to interpret homosexuality in the light of the Bible. The question of whether believers can accept same-sex relationships comes second for him, although he eventually, cautiously, arrives at an accepting view.

De Bruijne considers homosexuality as we know it in the modern age to be a new phenomenon in important respects. This is evident simply from the fact that we are talking about same-sex orientation as forming an important aspect of a person's identity. In earlier times, and certainly in Biblical times, it was never thought or spoken of in this way. According to De Bruijne, this is therefore a modern Western concept. According to him, Bible texts such as Romans 1 cannot be applied one-to-one to contemporary homosexual orientation and identity because they were not yet part of the frame of reference of the Bible writers.¹⁰⁴

To arrive at the interpretation of what homosexuality is, De Bruijne says we must look to the larger biblical lines and frameworks about love, eros, and sexuality.¹⁰⁵ According to him, nowhere does the Bible explicitly say what homosexuality, as we know it today, is. The characterization of brokenness does not come from the Bible. Therefore, he himself does not approach sexual minority identity primarily as brokenness. According to him, from a scientific point of view there is something to be said for homosexuality as a natural variation of being male and female, although he notes that the mutual orientation of man and woman is so emphatically expressed in the biblical account of creation that a same-sex orientation seems difficult to fit in. De Bruijne continues to regard the duality of male and female as a basic anthropological and theological fact of human existence.

According to de Bruijne, phenomena cannot be classified in one category, but the categories of creation, fall and re-creation are mixed together in everything. For example, de Bruijne states, 'Homosexuality is no more a "brokenness" than heterosexuality, while in both, in addition, God's good creation and his incipient re-creation are also present.'¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ De Bruijne (2022), 269, 272.

¹⁰⁵ De Bruijne (2022), 272-273.

¹⁰⁶ De Bruijne (2022), 457-458.

Ultimately, De Bruijne looks primarily through the lens of re-creation, the future of God's kingdom. This makes the sexual dimension less important for the distinction between man and woman. There will be a new, transformed, bodily reality. In God's new world, it is about the common bond of all people with Christ. In the New Testament, de Bruijne already sees the contours of it emerging, including in the revaluation of the eunuch's broken existence and the unexpected appreciation of remaining unmarried. Thus one could assign a new meaning to this sexual minority identity on the way to the kingdom. Marriage between a man and a woman is a creation reality that points forward to the unity between Christ and his church. Remaining unmarried is 'a kingdom reality, which already anticipates the transformed existence of later. I interpret the homosexual identity as something peculiar in between. It stands with the unmarried clearly under the omen of the future.'¹⁰⁷

Homosexual identity thus stands - in De Bruijne's words - 'in between the times'. He sees it as a challenge for Christian ethics to find forms to be followed that do justice to its own character. Thus he arrives at a plea for a partnership covenant. Unlike in the views of De Jong and Mudde, he does not see such a covenant as an emergency band-aid or as an expression of pastoral leniency and indulgence, but as a fully-fledged structure on the way to the kingdom which, in its own way, also points forward to it.¹⁰⁸ On the one hand, he can imagine that within such a covenant there is room for profound love, while the partners refrain from its sexual expression and make a vow to that end.¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, sexuality can, in De Bruijne's opinion, also have a place, analogous to a marriage between a man and a woman.

That De Bruijne gives room for this, albeit cautiously, can be traced back to his view of revelation and the doctrine of inspiration. Non-accepting views generally assume that the Holy Spirit also included all later times and contexts via Paul's words. De Bruijne's view, however, is that God in his revelation adapts to the time and context of that revelation and that there are

¹⁰⁷ De Bruijne (2022), 458.

¹⁰⁸ De Bruijne (2022), 459.

¹⁰⁹ De Bruijne (2022), 460.

moments ‘when we cannot help but conclude that God has not seen fit to correct interpretive limitations (...)’.¹¹⁰ The way the Bible shows us the way for such passages is therefore, according to De Bruijne, more indirect and includes our own reflection.¹¹¹

4.2 The three lenses: ethical and pastoral notions

Various views, classified according to the lenses through which they (mainly) look, have been reviewed in the foregoing. No doubt we could have discussed more and mentioned a diversity of variants and their representatives, but the views described give, in our opinion, a good outline.

What ethical and pastoral approaches do all these different views lead to? In this section, we do not want to explore that for each view described, but we use the aforementioned three lenses and see how they work out for ethics and pastoral care.

4.2.1 Through the lens of the order of creation

Those who take their starting point in the order of creation regard this order as a moral order, which is not returned to anywhere in Scripture, rather confirmed (Rose) or offered an opening for exceptions (Webb). What God has put into creation has the force of a commandment, and for the sake of God and for their own good, people have to conform to it.¹¹² The order God has put in place means that marriage between a man and a woman is the only legitimate context of sexual intercourse.¹¹³ Same-sex sexual

¹¹⁰ De Bruijne (2022), 269.

¹¹¹ *id.*

¹¹² CGK (2103), 45: ‘The order that God has given ... has its own value. Covenant, love and freedom are not unlimited spaces. They are limited by commandments that go back to God’s intention for creation. These commandments protect humanity. They are comparable to boundary posts. They indicate the space in which being human in relation to God comes into its own. Beyond that, man and society suffer damage. This also applies to God’s commandment regarding sexuality and sexual relationships.’

¹¹³ CRC (2021), 147: ‘Marriage between one man and one woman is the only appropriate place for sex. Anything that deviates from that teaching is contrary to Scripture. Thus premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, the use of pornography, and homosexual sex, all fall under the heading of sexual

intercourse is, therefore, against God's will and thus sin, even if it takes place within a relationship of love and fidelity.¹¹⁴

In practice, however, there are considerable differences in interpretation. While some see same-sex sex as the height of wickedness based in the Bible, others emphasize that we are all equally bad sinners.¹¹⁵ Still others believe that same-sex sex is indeed a sin, but within the Bible it is actually a peripheral issue.¹¹⁶

Some see homosexuality as something that happens to someone, a sign of brokenness.¹¹⁷ In that case, this leads to a compassionate attitude, with an eye for the distress in which Christian homosexuals have to live and the (spiritual) struggles they have to go through.¹¹⁸ Others see the desire for a same-sex partner as an expression of one's sinful nature, or even as a choice. One can choose to adopt a homosexual identity or not.¹¹⁹ In that case, there is something morally reprehensible in the mere act of labeling oneself as gay. After all, a person need not have sinful (homosexual) desires: grace

immorality and are therefore morally impermissible. To teach that any of these behaviors is permissible undermines the teaching and authority of Scripture. Whenever the church teaches that a form of behavior forbidden in Scripture is morally permissible, it is guilty of false teaching'. Similarly, CGK (2013), 59: 'Careful reading of Scripture yielded this conclusion: homosexuality is a consequence of the Fall and an aspect of the brokenness of creation. The only design, provided by the Lord, of an all-encompassing relationship in love and faithfulness between two people is that of marriage between a man and a woman. We cannot - even if from sympathy we wish we could accommodate our brothers and sisters in their deep desire - see a homosexual relationship as a responsible alternative.'

¹¹⁴ CGK (2013): 'sexual intercourse between people of the same sex and relationships in which that intercourse takes shape are not in accordance with the Word of God and must therefore be called sin.'

¹¹⁵ Advocate of the first line is e.g. Gagnon. The CGK report advocates the second line.

¹¹⁶ Hays (1996), 381.

¹¹⁷ CGK (2013), 22, 76.

¹¹⁸ This attitude characterizes the report of the CGK. The pastoral part of it is preceded by lines of poetry by Willem de Mérode:

Is there any need, which can hurt more
than this:
Being in love's pleasure court as a lonely
and a fearful man?

¹¹⁹ Article 7 of the *Nashville Statement* denies that adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception is in accordance with God's holy intentions:

[Nashville Statement – CBMW](#), accessed 25 October 2023.

of God in Christ makes it possible for a follower of Jesus Christ to kill those desires and to live in a manner worthy of the LORD.¹²⁰

Despite these differences, same-sex sexual intercourse is considered a sin in all cases, and for people with a same-sex orientation there is no other way than a celibate form of life (or possibly marriage to someone of the opposite sex). Those who live together homosexually must be admonished and, if they persist, placed under discipline.¹²¹ Those who live in a same-sex relationship cannot be admitted to public profession of faith, Holy Baptism and the celebration of The Lord's Supper and cannot hold a church office.¹²²

Viewed through this lens, ethics centers primarily on the commandments and holiness of God. The moral notions that follow from this are obedience,¹²³ purity and chastity,¹²⁴ repentance,¹²⁵ self-control and perseverance, struggle and willingness to bear the cross for the sake of Christ.¹²⁶

But LGB people also appeal to the church of Christ. The attitude of the Christian congregation toward people with

¹²⁰ Ibid., article 12:

'WE AFFIRM that the grace of God in Christ gives both merciful pardon and transforming power, and that this pardon and power enable a follower of Jesus to put to death sinful desires and to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.

WE DENY that the grace of God in Christ is insufficient to forgive all sexual sins and to give power for holiness to every believer who feels drawn into sexual sin.

¹²¹ See, e.g., CGK (2013), 55; CRC (2021), 146.

¹²² CGK (2013), 89; See also Sprinkle (2015), 189-193, in all caution and with some beats.

¹²³ A characteristic quote from the CGK report (2013), 61: 'Security is only real security when it is enclosed by holiness. Recognition of God's holiness takes shape in respect for His law and obedience to His commandments. Love does guard against legalism and Pharisaism but does not exclude obedience. On the contrary. Those who know God's love will want to test themselves in the light of his commandments. That is part of the life of children of God. The Lord Jesus confirms this when He speaks of following: whoever wants to follow Him becomes obedient (John 14, 15 and 21)'. Ibid., 55: 'a homosexual relationship conflicts with what God teaches us in His Word, and thus with His honor and the holiness of the church.'

¹²⁴ CRC (2021), 130: 'In the area of sex and singleness the most important virtue is that of chastity. Cf. CGK (2013), 23.

¹²⁵ CGK (2013), 82.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 70-72.

a same-sex orientation should be one of empathy, love, willingness to bear their burdens and offer warmth in order, in part, to be able to sustain the path of celibate life. This attitude has often been lacking in the past and, unfortunately, also in the present. At length and very concretely, the CRC admits this: Christians have failed in their calling to love, show empathy, and bear one another's burdens and have instead, out of fear, discomfort, or complacency, through ridicule, contempt, or harsh condemnation, driven many out of the church. There is also hypocrisy in that other sins were (and are!) mostly not disciplined out of fear, discomfort, or complacency. Confession of guilt about all this is appropriate according to the CRC.¹²⁷ The CGK report is also in this line: 'All in all, there is reason to confess guilt about so many past and present pastoral failures before the Lord as well as before our brothers and sisters.'¹²⁸

The above notions color and give direction to pastoral care and congregational life. This should testify to the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ and his patience with sinners. Homosexuals should feel safe in the church of Christ. They may be there, just like any other human being, and they should, regardless of their sexual orientation, feel accepted, respected and fully included in the community of the church.¹²⁹

In addition, the CRC in particular strongly advocates the involvement of celibate church members who feel drawn to their own sex in the leadership of the congregation as pastor, elder, or deacon.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ CRC (2021), 8-10, 95.

¹²⁸ CGK (2013), 62; see also: Sprinkle, 97-98 and further Bridget Eileen's columns, as described in Van Loon and Van Gent (2019).

¹²⁹ CGK (2013), 77. CRC (2012), 116: 'In practical terms, congregations should seek to build intimacy among believers. This can take place in small groups who come together for prayer, worship, food, recreation, and mutual support. Such groups should consist of singles, couples, and families, including people of a broad range of ages. It might also come in the form of friendships in which two or more persons are committed to helping each other navigate the challenges and joys of life.'

¹³⁰ CRC (2021), 116-117.

4.2.2 Through the lens of brokenness

Even those who look at homosexuality through the lens of brokenness assume an enduring significance of the order of creation. God placed good and beneficial structures in creation that have lasting significance for the path of people in the post-Fall world.¹³¹ Thus, the sex difference in Genesis and the design for male and female in Genesis 2 testify to a wisdom for which God is honored and praised.¹³²

The good creation, however, has been ruined by the Fall. Every second and every cell share in the brokenness. Man must adjust to this reality and within this reality they will have to find their way. This provides a partially different perspective on the path that LGB people can take compared to the view through the lens of the creation order. From the point of view of brokenness, we go back behind the creation order and the prohibitions to how the LORD makes Himself known in the Bible and how He Himself helps people on their way through their broken existence.¹³³ Then we

¹³¹ Den Hertog (2019): 'And as we seek the works of the Creator, we do well to be mindful of his leading our lives through these structures.'

¹³² Van der Dussen (2003), 12-13, in an older lecture he delivered for the Theological Study Guidance of the Dutch Reformed Churches, draws attention to the anatomy of man and woman, noting, 'Human anatomy alone indicates, in my view, that sexual intercourse between people of the same sex is not intended'. And since same-sex sex does not serve procreation, he asks the question, 'does not this also show that homosexuality was not intended by the Creator?'

¹³³ Den Hertog (2019): 'Biblical speaking of "creation" implies that the Creator-stays with us in the fall. And not to set a standard for us and urge us to keep to it, but by actively asserting himself as Creator in the broken situation after the fall, saving, cleansing, pointing in the right direction and preserving against evil'. And: 'To speak of a "creation order" as an unchanging structure, cast in concrete, so to speak, assumes a separation between God as Creator and God as Redeemer. This "schism" in our image of God means that talk of "creation" becomes primarily moral in nature and God is seen as demanding. His righteousness and his mercy then do not kiss each other, as Psalm 85 sings, but rather they are rivals. An image of God stamped by this has done much damage; this is because it does not do justice to how the Bible speaks of the unity of God's justice and mercy in Christ'. Cf. Mudde (2015), 258, 'Creation is not an autonomous unit within Scripture. The LORD is more than his creation and prioritizes the salvation of his creatures, if necessary as a result of the brokenness of creation, over maintaining the created

get to know a God who out of mercy meets people in their vulnerability, who does not impose unbearable burdens on people and wants to do justice.¹³⁴

Those who look through this lens often see room for same-sex relationships in love and fidelity. Celibacy can be a vocation and can be lived as such, but it is not an obligation for people with a same-sex orientation.¹³⁵ After all, a relationship responds to a person's deepest needs and desires, laid in them by God Himself. It makes someone more human, brings them to growth and flourishing, and breaks through being alone in a way for which there is no alternative.¹³⁶ This is not to say that there is an equivalence between a same-sex relationship and marriage

order.' (Cf. 176, 178) Also: Zeyl (2022), dialogue 4 'So, taking God's entire revelation into account, not just the Bible, I have concluded that the "crucial question" I just posed is not only appropriate, but actually inevitable. And to answer this question we cannot appeal to any series of biblical texts; we need to look at this as a broader ethical issue: *Given what we know about God from Scripture, how would God expect us to treat those among us who suffer from impairments of various sorts-including this impairment in particular?*'

¹³⁴ Mudde (2019), 30-32; Zeyl, dialogue 4: "By prohibiting gay people to form monogamous relationships that involve sexual expression, we impose an intolerable burden on many if not most of them.'

¹³⁵ Thielicke (1968), 802-803. See also recently Wells (2018): 'Celibacy is a vocation, as is marriage; to suggest that all LGB people are called to remain unmarried is to misconstrue the word "calling"; that would be like suggesting that all men are called to become fathers or that all women are called to become priests. Vocation, by definition, involves a role to which some are called and others are not. Something to which everyone is called is not a calling, that is a command or a commandment. (Chap. 2/ LGB identity).

¹³⁶ Den Hertog (2019): 'So we cannot turn away from the questions that are embodied by brothers and sisters with homosexual orientation by referring to an immutable creation structure: "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." It is also cheap, with no real regard for how intertwined sexual orientation is with all of being human. Do the signers of the Nashville Declaration realize that, as Jesus sharply formulated it in Matthew 23, they are imposing burdens on people without lifting a finger to carry them themselves? And it is not just the other person's burden, it is our common burden, and the apostle calls us to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:1). Then there is no other way than to listen to him and her who sincerely feel attracted to the other of the same sex, not only sexually, but as a "helper opposite you," a person who wants to be your companion through life in love, in whom you can feel valued, recognized, accepted and loved in your deepest being.

between a man and a woman.¹³⁷ A homosexual covenant has a different status since it is not directly traceable to the institution of marriage between a man and a woman and, moreover, does not serve procreation. A same-sex covenant remains a particular form of accommodation, varying in the degree to which it is seen as a compromise or a concession depending on who is looking through the lens of brokenness.

This lens involves an ethic in which God's character (i.e. virtues) and wisdom are central. Important moral notions include compassion and empathy, mercy and justice, love and fidelity.

In this approach, the congregation supports both gays and lesbians who wish to live celibately and those who live together in a homosexual relationship. The role the congregation plays is similar to the role Elisha plays toward the Syrian Naaman, who, because of his position, cannot avoid kneeling before the gods of his people. 'Go in peace,' Elisha says.¹³⁸ By doing so, he does not leave Naaman to himself but helps him find a way through the complex situation in which he finds himself. He takes the burden of a burdened conscience and the feeling of guilt off of him.¹³⁹ In this way, the church also becomes a training ground

¹³⁷ For an overview, see Mudde (2015), 326-328. See also De Bruijne (2022), 386-387: 'At the same time, in the approach I have taken, it is important that the church continues to uphold the difference between a marriage covenant in the Biblical sense and an LG partnership. In the former, a unique unity is established, which differs from the union in the latter. Therefore, sexuality is fully at home in marriage, while in an LG partnership it can only come into its own in a more derivative sense. If the church wants to do justice to the Bible, in my opinion, it cannot but continue to make this distinction.'

¹³⁸ Van Gelderen, C., an able exegete from an earlier generation, belongs in the response of Elisha embarrassment. He paraphrases it thus, 'Dear man, if thou pleadedst on the forgiving clemency of Yahveh, I will hope for the best. More I cannot say, go in peace. I declare the consultation ended.' (*The Books of Kings*, third volume, 2 Kings 5-17, (1947), Kok: Kampen, 36). However, the expression has a much more positive purport, see Ex. 4:18, Re. 18:6, 1 Sam. 1:17. In it may be heard, 'You have my blessing.'

¹³⁹ In this context, reference is also sometimes made to the particular responsibility and even authority that Christ has given to His church, 'whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven' (Matt. 16:19 and 18:18) and John 20:21ff: 'Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.'

for learning to accept that which is different and inherently foreign.¹⁴⁰

4.2.3 Through the lens of diversity

Those who look through the lens of diversity are not primarily making moral demands on LGB people (i.e. no different than on heterosexuals), but on the community of the church.¹⁴¹ Samuel Wells argues that variation in life forms and life arrangements need not alarm the church, but rather be a source of wonder and joy.¹⁴² It requires a congregation to be an 'inclusive' community that positively includes people.¹⁴³ The congregation must be a community in which everyone is equally welcome regardless of their sexual orientation and the nature of their life covenant, and which takes into account, in terms of language and choice of words, that there are more sexual orientations than just heterosexual ones.

Those who look at homosexuality through the lens of diversity often also express a deep opposition to anything that tends toward discrimination and exclusion. They experience it as painful, denigrating, or disqualifying when same-sex sexual relationships are characterized as sinful or unequal.¹⁴⁴ They point to what the problematization of LGB does to people.

¹⁴⁰ 'The church, however, is not a successful company of people who form a harmonious community out of their own perfection. Harmony or peace in the church proves itself primarily where Christians prove imperfect and bump up against brokenness, weakness, and evil, both in themselves and in others.' De Bruijne (2022), 394.

¹⁴¹ Samuel Wells (2018), Chap. 2/LGB Identity: 'At this point in my argument, it should be clear that questions about sexuality are almost impossible to answer without the whole church developing a new vision of itself and its calling.'

¹⁴² Ibid., 'Variation in forms of life and organization of life need not alarm the church. Rather, it can be a source of wonder and joy. Preserving and encouraging this variation requires a parish to understand and conduct itself as an inclusive community: a community that positively includes people.'

¹⁴³ Wells, w.c.; Working Association of Catholic Gay Pastors, 11.

¹⁴⁴ See, e.g., Van den Berg (2021). Her inaugural address ties in with an excerpt from the NGK's Report on Ministry & Homosexuality (2015): 'Marriage is at home in God's good creation; a homosexual covenant is a shelter in broken existence'. She writes: 'But above all, there is something denigrating about it, that shelter. It doesn't feel very generous. From the comfortable vantage point of those who may feel naturally at home in "God's original creation", as an LGB person, you just barely get a cabin.' (6). And: 'The first half of the sentence exudes the muscle-bound architecture that builds a shelter

If a homosexual covenant is an emergency solution, or a show of mild accommodation, it can also lead to a conflict of conscience for those involved.¹⁴⁵ Moral judgments about homosexuality can be detrimental to the mental health of LGB people and even lead to an increased risk of suicide.¹⁴⁶

Within the perspective of those who see LGB as a minority variety, they often seek the uniqueness of it within the spectrum of human sexuality and relationship formation.

One line of thought could be that the LGBTQ community has something of a (moral) vanguard that questions and undermines the prevailing certainties and patterns of living. There is something subversive about it.¹⁴⁷ That explains the aggression, fear, and uncertainty with which societies can react to homosexuality.¹⁴⁸ In the 1970s, C.O. Jellema wrote about the social function of otherness, the ethical value of the choice for the homosexual form of existence. He sees this in the confrontation with and necessary correction of 'the prevailing image of "the" man and "the" woman and their role patterns, with marital morality and the marriage pattern, with the self-evidentness of parenthood and the family structure, with authority relations and authority beliefs, with religious truths; in

when words like "original" and "belonging" seek a place to live.' (10).

¹⁴⁵ De Bruijne (2021), 334: 'Every time you have sexual intercourse, you are then doing something that even according to your own deepest conviction is not allowed but thanks to God's mildness you allow yourself to do it anyway.'

¹⁴⁶ Ruud Ganzevoort therefore wrote, 'The very first question should be what it means for people that they are the object of our ethical discussions. Ultimately, ethics is not about abstract themes, but about how concrete people can live and how they can be responsible to God and their own conscience. But if it is about concrete people, then it is all the more important to ask ourselves what our ethical discussions are for these concrete people.' Ganzevoort (2012), 48-49.

¹⁴⁷ See Wells, Samuel, Ben. Quash with Rebekah Eklund (2017), Part 3/chapter 10/Same-sex relationships/subversive. Van den Berg (2021), 13, envisions a theology of a shelter that 'reminds the house of its own abundance. Therein lies precisely its critical and subversive potential.'

¹⁴⁸ Van den Berg (2012), 16: 'The shelter is the place of the Other and therefore an unpredictable, potentially dangerous place. When you put people out of the house, when you put a comma between yourself and the Other, you also lose your view of that Other. Who knows what people will concoct in that shelter. The house may not be as strong as we thought if it feels threatened by a shabby shelter.'

order to make shifts and make change possible.’¹⁴⁹ There is something in this that resonates with what queer stands for today.

Samuel Wells’ view

Of particular note in this regard is the view of Samuel Wells.¹⁵⁰ He suggests that LGB identities should not be seen as a problem, but as a blessing to the church, a gift from God to the church. For several reasons, their sexual identity adds something to what the great adventure of God's kingdom is all about. LGB people even sit in the front seats of the bus. First because LGB people, due to their history of persecution, marginalization, and framing as scapegoats, are uniquely qualified to identify with people who seem to be closest to Jesus’ heart, Jesus' company, and Jesus' ministry.

Next, because LGB people cross out the assumption that human existence is all about progenerating. They are witnesses to God’s sustaining the church through baptism and his kingdom through grace. Thus, they are of inestimable significance for the Christian witness to the world.

Finally, LGB people are ahead of the majority of the population in exploring the longevity and sustainability of desire and tenderness that is neither receiving the approval of social support nor reinforced by the responsibility for offspring and parenting. Perhaps the question in our generation should not be: ‘Do LGB people have any right to marry?’ but rather, ‘Can the church begin to redefine marriage for a very different era without the wisdom and experience that LGB individuals can bring to it?’

Moral notions that are central when viewed through the lens of diversity are justice, freedom, love, and tolerance. The pastoral care has two sides. On the one hand, the congregation is a safety net for victims of discrimination and, on the other hand, also a place where prejudice is broken down and inclusiveness is worked on.

We also note that some who tend toward diversity in homosexuality continue to see something of brokenness at the same time. This already shone through in De Bruijne's typology of homosexuality as ‘something in between times’. For De Bruijne

¹⁴⁹ Jellema (1977), 85 and 87.

¹⁵⁰ Wells (2018), Chap. 2/LGB Identity.

uses eschatology as a basis for his tentative interpretation of homosexuality as diversity. He actually looks not so much through the lens of diversity as through that of recreation which, in his view, relativizes the meaning of the original creation and gives new meaning to what is broken in it.¹⁵¹

4.3 Brief evaluation

It has become clear that there is a whole palette of views on the issue of homosexuality. Roughly speaking, these can be divided into views that are and those that are not open to same-sex relationships. This palette of views is not only here on paper, but is also a reality within our churches and the various congregations have chosen their own course and all kinds of practices are being established.

4.3.1 Hermeneutics

This chapter has listed a number of views that show openness for same-sex (sexual) relationships and those that do not. So when it comes to the end result, they are diametrically opposed. The remarkable thing is that views that do see room for acceptance usually follow the same exegesis as those that do not. This was also evident in the previous chapter: on the exegesis of the relevant Scripture passages, we largely agree.

The main question seems to be: with these Scriptures and their exegeses in hand, can you still give room for same-sex sexual relations in certain cases on the basis of other, complementary considerations or not? The classical standpoint is clear on this: no, the texts in the Bible are too general for this; they are a categorical prohibition based on the order of creation and therefore there is no room for same-sex sexual relations, not even when we are dealing with different times and circumstances.

Views with openness make a hermeneutic movement that the classical view does not want to make: the prohibition is too emphatic and categorical. This is not to say that, according to adherents of the classical view, such hermeneutic movements should not be made in general. In their view, it is only in this case that it is not possible, while they sometimes do make similar

¹⁵¹ De Bruijne (2021), 248-258.

moves on other issues, such as 'women in ministry'. Webb's view illustrates this. In practice, among these kinds of hermeneutical movements are numerous smaller and larger ethical choices. On the whole, no one would deny the principle of God's adaptation to the human condition or claim that the Holy Spirit always lifted the Bible writers above their context. And so we can go on and on. In short, the issue here is not the general question of which hermeneutical principles are permissible, but rather whether we may apply them to our reflection on same-sex relationships. Then a relativizing note on the lenses that were used. Whether you plug in at creation, the law, or at a Christological-eschatological approach to sexuality (as Ad de Bruijne does): it turns out that the final word has not yet been said. The reality we live in, the culture we breathe, the compassion we feel, the experience we have and the wisdom we have been given inevitably play a role in the choices we make. In practice, therefore, we may have more in common than our hermeneutical presuppositions and concepts seem to suggest.¹⁵²

4.3.2 Room for differences

Some of Samuel Wells' thoughts, expressed in a sermon, tie in with this.¹⁵³ Wells distinguishes a number of viewpoints in a similar way to ours. Each, according to him, has a certain legitimacy. Indeed, 'I see that as something to be proud of, not ashamed of. I am proud of it. I believe that the existence of churches, where all of these four approaches are respected, is good news.'¹⁵⁴ Because of what we believe to be true thoughts, we quote broadly the conclusion of Wells' sermon as the conclusion of this review:

¹⁵² Herman van Wijngaarden, for example, recognizes himself in Wolter Rose's view and has made the choice to go through life without a partner. Nevertheless, he does not rule out the possibility of a homosexual relationship, albeit as an surrogate solution, 'I have sympathy for the idea of God's benevolence, which Rev. Jan Mudde in particular brought to the conversation on homosexuality.' Vineyards (2019), 112.

¹⁵³ Wells, 2008.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 196. We owe the translation to Rev. Mark Rietkerk, who also drew our attention to the sermon.

'We could go for polite tolerance, where everyone merges into their own community with the same views, without ever meeting anyone who thinks differently. But we come together, not because we see the Christian faith as something helpful, or comfortable. But because we believe it is TRUE. We don't offer the world a book full of answers, but a way to be in constant conversation with God and with each other. That way is one of encounter, of recognition of one's own sin, of shared joy. One that is always listening, seeking the truth, praying, seeking reconciliation. While thanking God in everything, breaking the bread, receiving the blessing and thus renewing his mission each time. It is the way of bread and wine, made possible by the truth and reconciliation we find in Jesus Christ. We receive that in the sacrament, and no community has a better starting point than the Christian community to confront these questions in a spirit of unity and peace.

Our gospel is that Christ has broken down the wall of enmity (Ephesians 2:14). If we cannot be in one room to talk about this with each other, we are radiating to the world that our gospel is fake. I don't know if we can look to the larger (national) church to solve this problem for us. We will have to somehow do it ourselves. And the way, by the power of the Spirit, we will come to what answer will be our gospel, the truth we have to offer the world today.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 196. In this context we would also like to refer to what Ad de Bruijne says about plurality regarding homosexuality within the church of Christ, 'Unjustified divisions among Christians can also serve a positive purpose under God's providence. It prevents an imposed unity in the church, which robs it of the space for valuable elements that can exist on either side of a dividing line. As in society, such plurality then establishes a balance in which the gospel can gradually do its own work.' And, 'My concern here is only to illustrate that the continued existence of plurality, painful in itself, can be an instrument of God's providence. Sometimes the church should not or not yet want to settle an issue precisely because the plurality of interests to be considered has not yet sufficiently come into its own and more time of maturation is needed. For this reason, it is not inconceivable that certain issues during this history will never and should never even be adequately settled.' De Bruijne (2022), 358.

'I choose a life as a single'

The story of Anna

'Sometimes I feel like God's darling' is the title of the interview with Anna. Her story makes this feeling clear. Yet it is also a story without a name or picture. A story about God's protection in a world that knows insecurity. The world called 'home', the world called 'church'.

Anna grew up in the 1950s in an unsafe family. A family that is loosely connected to the church. She receives no Christian upbringing and, as a child, prefers to remain invisible.

She begins training as a midwife and lives in dorms. In the second year she becomes ill and goes to a Christian care center. A man in that center tells her, 'There is Someone who loves you unconditionally', words that are repeated at various moments, resonate in her heart and change her life. Her family is not happy with her conversion. After some discussion, she is allowed to return home, but talking about faith is not possible.

After college, she comes to live at home and work for her father's business, because he is ill. In her church, she participates fully, joining Bible study, doing evangelism. After having sold the business, she trains as a nurse. At the hospital, she is a bold witness and prays with patients when they allow her to. This leads to her losing her job. She finds a job with a general practitioner and later in a Christian bookstore.

Lesbian relationship

In her younger years she had a boyfriend, a nice boy, but she didn't like making love or kissing at all. She broke up with him. Then she met a woman in her church with whom she instantly fell in love. At that point she discovers her lesbian orientation. Her female friend moves into her apartment and the friendship becomes a lesbian relationship. They probingly live their life together, hoping God will approve of their relationship while praying for forgiveness for things that might be wrong. Their relationship remains a secret. A few years later, the girlfriend gets a boyfriend whom she gets engaged to and also marries. This is the start of a terrible period of time. Anna thought she had found true love but has to accept that her friend is gone. She is angry, sad, and rebellious against God. Years later, things she recovers after a prophetic word calling her to choose the straight path.

She examines those words and decides to choose a life as a single person, without a husband because she does not want one and without a wife because that is not Biblical in her eyes.

Anna finds that God is helping her after her girlfriend left her. Good friends who suspected what was going on when her friend left, take her in to help her. The difficult time is marked mostly by good friendships, more so than by grief or loneliness. When she stays at the home of another married couple that are friends of hers, she tells them about her lesbian orientation. The next morning the wife brings her breakfast in bed, a sign of complete acceptance for Anna. At a maternity visit, another friend generously entrusts Anna with her newborn baby.

Calling

Her work in the Christian bookstore suits her. It feels like a calling that alleviates the lack of family, of children. God has provided and still provides her with all that is needed or good. Words that do her good, recovery from her mental struggles, recovery from a tumor. She never asks for a change in her sexual orientation. She accepts that as part of who she is. And where that orientation comes from remains an open question.

Talking about Jesus is something she enjoys doing. Her homosexuality remains her secret. In a pastoral meeting she did talk about her sexual orientation once. As a consequence, she was shunned as if she had leprosy. Homosexuality remains a taboo and Anna continues to live with the shame. She appreciates conversations with other believers who have a homosexual orientation. When she asked the pastoral worker about a small group of these people, it turned out that this small group stopped a few years ago. But, the pastoral worker said, the leaders of the congregation are looking for someone who can speak from experience and as a reliable witness about homosexuality and sexual diversity. Anna decided to accept the invitation and told her story in her large congregation. And now also in the book *Homo in de biblebelt (A Lesbian in the Bible Belt)*. Her story in which she talks about the difficulties encountered and a story in which she chooses a heterosexual relationship as a biblical starting point and the guideline for life. A story that emphasizes that the beginning of everything is our relationship with the Lord. Those who give their lives to God will see that He cares for them. A story calling on us to fight the good fight of faith and concluding, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished my run, I have kept the faith.'

Reprinted and edited with permission. Source: Christine Stam and Ineke de Jong, Homo in the biblebelt, Brevier Publishing 2022.

5 The conversation

In the previous chapters we outlined some of the leading views on homosexuality within theology and the church. These views also partially reflect the views of your deputies. We talked about them over the past few years and did not always agree, not even on points that we personally considered very relevant.

5.1 Agreement

Elsewhere in the report we return to the conversation and how it can be conducted within the congregation (see Part 3 Practice). This chapter is mainly about the conversation within our deputy committee: on which points we reached agreement and on which points we did not; which considerations played a role in this; where it took us. We conclude with the concrete choices we propose to the churches.

We are well aware that we, too, represent a limited selection from within our churches - and even more so within the global church. Furthermore, positions once adopted can change through time and experience. We very much hope that a certain calm will settle on the topic of homosexuality within our churches, but we are well aware that the last word on the subject has not yet been spoken.

5.1.1 Multiple affiliation

The foregoing may give the impression that we as deputies are deeply divided on the topic of homosexuality - just like the church of Christ. If you dig a little deeper, however, it turns out that there is a shared foundation: the deep unity in Jesus Christ our LORD and the desire to serve Him and live for Him. We know ourselves to be one in Him, one confessing church, one in faith, hope, and love.

Every meeting we read from the Bible together, believing that the Bible is God's Word, and we came together in prayer. We also had no doubt that each of us was sincerely seeking the honor of God and the salvation of gay people through their convictions.

Despite the differences of opinion regarding homosexuality, the unity in Christ persisted within our group of deputies, and each time it turned out that we live in the same coordinate system formed by the Bible. In this sense, we sometimes saw ourselves as a mini-congregation in which there were different views on many topics, but in which the members of the congregation still wanted to hold on to one another out of love for Christ and His congregation, and to find a way together.

We experience our unity in Christ no less with affiliated denominations (CGK, CRC), which, when it comes to homosexuality, ultimately made different choices than we as present deputies have made. For example, the CRC report begins with a detailed discussion of various aspects of human sexuality in Biblical light.¹⁵⁶ We can wholeheartedly agree with much of this. As well as with what it notes about the place of marriage and sexuality in creation, the degeneration of sexual morality in our society, the failure of the church and the opportunities for the church of Christ in these times.

We are called to deal with sex in such a way that the radiance of God's goodness and holiness shines over it as well, and that excludes all unrestrained sex.¹⁵⁷ As the apostle Paul puts it in 1 Thessalonians 4:2-8, 'For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.'

¹⁵⁶ CRC, p. 5-39.

¹⁵⁷ To put it in the terms used by Ad de Bruijne, among others: 'The nature of the sex seems to indicate that the most appropriate embedding for it can be found in an intense and in principle permanent eros-love between man and woman.' De Bruijne (2022), 116.

5.1.2 Homosexuality

Even when it comes to homosexuality, there is much on which there is agreement among us.

Thus, we agree that the Bible writes about same-sex sex exclusively in a condemnatory sense. Its prohibition is not limited to exploitative or cult-related forms of same-sex sex (if the latter occurred). It is clear from Romans 1 why the apostle Paul condemns sex between members of the same sex: it is against nature. And the intertextual connections between Romans 1 and Genesis 1 show that Paul means by this that same-sex sex is contrary to how God made and intended man.

Next, we also believe that homosexuality is a modern concept that we do not find as such in the Bible. Same-sex sex occurs in various forms in all cultures, but self-identification as a homosexual seems to be characteristic of modern times. This makes us wary of the anachronisms that all too easily give the impression that texts such as Leviticus 18 and 20 and Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6 would be about homosexuals.¹⁵⁸

Finally, we agree that a spectrum of different aspects can be distinguished within the sexual orientation of both homosexuals and heterosexuals, such as emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction. By labeling the desires of the homosexual exclusively as sexual desires, the problems of a homosexual are narrowed down and short-changed. This also makes it difficult for us to accept statements to the effect that an LGB person's desire for a love relationship can be traced to an oversexed society, or that the desire for a sexual relationship shows an over-estimation of the meaning of sexuality. The desires that an LGB person has can be traced back to the basic desires that the LORD God Himself has put in us human beings: the desire for security, a mate, intimacy, someone with whom you form a new learning unit.

We also agree that predisposition plays a considerable role in the development of sexual orientation. That means

¹⁵⁸ Even Bible translations (World English Bible, Contemporary English Version, Neues Leben) are sometimes guilty of this.

that we emphatically reject the view that a homosexual orientation is a direct manifestation of sin or wrong choices. For many gay people, the discovery of their orientation is a painful and sometimes disconcerting discovery.

5.1.3 Brokenness

This brings us to the point we refer to as 'brokenness'. It means that we want to fully accept people with a homosexual orientation while also acknowledging with them the difficulty that can accompany it. A difficulty, which we believe is related to the treatment within church and society, but also a difficulty that is intrinsic.¹⁵⁹ This means that gay people deserve the support and attention of the church community. After all, the thinking through of what God wants from us in this, and what we as deputies have been intensely engaged in, emerges from the experience of those who struggle with it. This calls for prayer, attention, respect and discernability. The same applies to the questions surrounding the forming of relationship and having children.

We realize that this is difficult to explain to people in our society. The dominant view in our culture is that every sexual orientation, every sexual or gender identity is of an equal order and is totally okay. What matters is being completely yourself and living according to your own design. With the notion of 'brokenness', we want to counter that.

We also want to call attention to the polarity of 'male and female'. Thanks to humanity's existence in the duality of male and female, the miracle of new life is possible. This is what the words Genesis 1:27 uses for 'male and female' (*zakar* and *neqebah*) refer to. Given the next text ('Be fruitful and become numerous...'), these can also be rendered as follows: '♂ and ♀ He created them'. We want to continue to uphold this fact of creation. Because of that miracle of new life, sexual intercourse between man and woman is more than a variant within the spectrum of human sexuality. At the same time, we recognize a broad range of variations in the real lives of people around us to whom we want to be respectfully close.

¹⁵⁹ Chabot, Splinter (2020); Florian Myer, Trouw, Sept. 23, 2023 ([Florian Myer: Mensen die iets te bevechten hebben, zijn vaak een stuk interessanter | Trouw](#)).

Talking about brokenness can easily cause misunderstandings. Therefore, we would like to make two more points. First, that every person shares in the brokenness of being. As Elly & Rikkert sang somewhat light-heartedly, 'We all have something, we are all weird and yet we are brothers and sisters.' So there are no people who are 'normal' and others who are not. There is no 'us' that can distance itself from 'them'. There is only the 'we' of people who all live in a world broken by sin and we all live by God's grace. And in this broken existence, together we will have to find our way while searching and sometimes stumbling, even within the church of Christ.

Another important point is that every human being, regardless of race, nationality, sex, orientation, or origin is image-bearer of God and precious in His sight. Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose again for all people. And everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord and wants to follow Him is a full member of the church of Christ. You do not have to conform to the customary male or female image to belong to Christ. Significant for this is Isaiah 56:3-5. There we hear what promise the LORD has for the God-fearing eunuch. In Christ there is neither gay nor straight, to use a variation on Galatians 3:28. Above all, let this be the good news we bear as churches of Christ.

5.1.4 Safety

In the discussion about sexual orientation and the church, the word 'safety' plays an important role.¹⁶⁰ Originally safety primarily had to do with the absence of the threat of physical harm. Gradually the word was used for threats of psychological harm; thus we speak of 'social safety'.

¹⁶⁰ See for example the IDAHO statement signed in 2011 by the Moderator of the former NGK: 'We are committed to defending the dignity of all human beings in every way possible. We call upon believers in our churches not to feed any form of violence against homosexuals. Churches, following the example of Christ, want to provide space for encounter. They want to be a safe place for everyone, including homosexuals.

We call on everyone in their own place in society to provide an environment where homosexuals feel safe and thus also contribute to a safe climate in our society.'

Churches pay attention to safety for good reasons.¹⁶¹ After all, the church is pre-eminently the place where vulnerable people come to seek protection under God's wings and where evil will not reach them (Psalm 91:4, 10). In the church, too, grace precedes judgment.

Although 'safe church' does not refer to sexual orientation, it is clear that people (and especially young people) can experience great insecurity, for example because of how the topic of homosexuality is raised (or hushed up) in sermons or conversations in the church. At the same time, we see that the concept of safety is gradually being expanded and that an appeal to safety can easily become a kind of mantra. This happens, for example, when in the discussion about the permissibility of homosexual relationships, an appeal to safety becomes too strong and makes an open discussion impossible.¹⁶²

Our report poses the question of how churches can deal with homosexuality and homosexual relationships, especially in relation to God's Word. We want to give open space to that process of reflection and not let it be dominated by an appeal for safety. Moreover, there are churches and organizations that reject homosexual relationships from a Christian perspective and at the same time pay a lot of attention to guidance and safety of persons with a homosexual orientation. Conversely, there are social organizations that say they have no problem with homosexual relationships, but where gays still often feel unsafe (e.g., in sports clubs).

The above does not alter the fact that 'safety' is important, also around homosexuality. We are unanimous that the church of Christ has to be a safe place for LGBTQ people.¹⁶³ This includes, among other things, that

- ◆ a congregation works at being an open and welcoming community for LGBTQ people

¹⁶¹ <https://www.veiligekerkerk.nl/>, this also involves the NGK and CGK through Reporting Point Sexual Abuse in Relationships, SMKR.

¹⁶² See also Herman van Wijngaarden, ND May 17, 2018 (<https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/569390/een-veilige-omgeving-voor-homo-s-in-een-christelijke-wereld-gaat-over-meer-dan-seks>); also: <https://hartvanhomos.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Herman-van-Wijngaarden-over-veilig-kader-in-dekerk.pdf>).

¹⁶³ We deliberately chose to use the abbreviation LGBTQ here, even though our report focuses on the first three letters of this: LGB.

- ◆ no derogatory or discriminatory comments about LGBTQ people are made
- ◆ there is openness to talk about LGBTQ
- ◆ the topic receives proper attention during youth-club and catechism meetings
- ◆ LGBTQ people experience space to express themselves as such
- ◆ LGBTQ people are involved in policy making (e.g., with regard to admission to the Lord's Supper and the fulfillment of ministries).
- ◆ a church community is careful and clear in its policies.

5.2 Differences

Despite agreement on fundamental and important points, and despite intensive discussions, some differences have remained among the deputies. These differences focus on the openness that may exist within the church of Christ for homosexual relationships (by this we mean lasting homosexual relationships grown out of love in which sexual intercourse also has a place).

5.2.1 No room for sexual intercourse

The absoluteness of the Bible's condemnation of same-sex sex and its anchoring in creation leads some of deputies to conclude that sexual intercourse between homosexuals is by definition contrary to God's will and therefore must be considered sin - even if it takes place in a relationship of love and fidelity. In light of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19 about divorce, marriage, and remaining unmarried for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, homosexual followers of Jesus are called to live in sexual abstinence, i.e. to choose celibacy.

Homosexuality itself, however, is not wrong or sinful.¹⁶⁴ Therefore, there may be room for homosexual friendships and

¹⁶⁴ Compare also the CRC report, 158: 'In other words, there is no sin in being attracted to the same sex. We only sin if we act on our sexual attractions.' And:

for exploring gay experiences such as falling in love and perception of beauty.¹⁶⁵ The idea behind this is that the burden of Christian homosexuality should not be made heavier than it already is.

5.2.2 Room for living together

Other deputies believe that there should be room in the church of Christ for church members who live together in a homosexual relationship. And that living together in such a relationship is compatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ. This room for accepting homosexual relations is found in the following considerations:

Homosexuality as such is a phenomenon that is unknown to the Bible. And what we read in the Bible about same-sex sex ignores the recognizable and deeply human desires that LGB people have. Therefore, the church of Christ has the responsibility entrusted by Him to find—together with our homosexual brothers and sisters—a way that is pleasing to God and beneficial to gay people. The starting point is how, through the Bible as a whole, we get to know the LORD God Himself, His character. Of importance then is first of all that God's character, the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control) can also be reflected in a homosexual relationship, no less than in a heterosexual one. And next, that the LORD does not impose unbearable burdens on man breaking down when encountering the brokenness of existence. He is a merciful God and follows man in the brokenness of being.

'One of the great harms the church has done is to refer to anyone who is attracted to the same sex as a sinner simply because of the experience of this attraction. The fact that some church members are especially aware of and emotionally drawn to the same sex in the same way that most others are drawn to the opposite sex is not in itself sinful desire, nor is it even sexual temptation. Instead, the Bible teaches that to act upon that wrongful sexual desire is sin' (James 1:13-15). (p. 115).

¹⁶⁵ Wolter Rose, 'It would be an oversimplification to morally and by default approve of everything that falls under those other aspects of a homosexual orientation. It would also be too simplistic to condemn as unnatural everything that falls under those other aspects of a homosexual orientation, the emotional and romantic attraction.' Rose (2019), 242.

If the church of Christ deprives a homosexual brother or sister of the opportunity to enter into a relationship of love and fidelity, then it deprives them of an opportunity to grow and flourish here on earth in a way that corresponds to the image of God's love and justice that the Bible offers. However, this is not how we have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father. He says, the weightier things of the law are judgment and mercy and fidelity (Matthew 23:23). And therefore, before the face of God, there should be room for homosexual relationships, also in the church of Christ, based on how we have come to know our homosexual brothers and sisters in our culture.

5.3 Discussions

Over the past few years the deputies discussed the views and underlying considerations. This discussion was always respectful, but sometimes also heated and intense. For these discussions did not only involve the considerations in favor of one's own point of view, but also the difficulties with and objections to those with other points of view.¹⁶⁶

The questions and objections and the responses to them that have been voiced by the deputies, are presented below, because only in this way can justice be done to the whole range of considerations. And also because it is precisely these difficulties that cause such a deep separation in the church of Christ among Christians and churches that hold divergent views on homosexuality. Dialogue 1 features those deputies who do not see any room for gay sexual relationships. What are their questions and struggles? And what are the responses of those who do see room for it? In dialogue 2, the roles are reversed.

¹⁶⁶ For example, Wolter Rose wrote an article about the difference of opinion between him and Jan Mudde regarding homosexuality and homosexual desires to which Jan Mudde responded with a piece addressing the questions Wolter had asked him. Both articles can be found at <https://ngk.nl/studiecommissie-homorelaties-in-de-kerk/>.

5.3.1 Dialogue 1

Questions and struggles of those who don't see any room for homosexual relationships and the responses to them

1. God's Word is absolutely clear in its condemnation on same-sex sex. It is categorically condemned. How can it still be seen as a legitimate possibility? Surely this is a form of disobedience to God?

Categorical prohibitions do not have the last word in the Bible. The LORD Himself systematically opposes His law and order, for example, for the sake of vulnerable people.

From this we learn that behind the law we must see the lawgiver and behind the creation (ordinances) the creator. It is therefore not a question of disobedience to the LORD, but of following the LORD when, out of compassion for LGB people and in order to do them justice, room is made for homosexual relationships in love and loyalty.

2. 'When using God's character as the decisive criterion, don't we run the risk of selectively shopping in the Bible and letting our own views, that are partly determined by our sin and culture, of what fits God's character be the deciding factor?'¹⁶⁷

We recognize the question of whether an appeal to the character of God cannot lead to arbitrariness as a very relevant one. Can this not justify everything? Does that not lead to the meek acquiescence of an Eli who did not call his sons to order? That is surely the last thing we want. When can we appeal to the accommodating nature of a merciful God and when do we draw the line in the name of our holy God? The answer to that question cannot be given in a general sense, nor in an abstract way. It requires walking with God, knowing Him and knowing people. And then we see in the Bible,

¹⁶⁷ De Boer (2015), 3.

not just incidentally, but structurally, that God is guided by compassion in his dealings with people suffering from the brokenness of existence. It is, we believe, precisely that compassion that makes room for homosexual relationships in love and faithfulness. 'It is not good that man should be alone.'

3. Personal responsibility plays a crucial role in the position of those who see room for homosexual relationships in the church of Christ. But human judgment is fallible and unreliable. Can it bear the great responsibility regarding a sin that can ultimately lead to eternal judgment?

Personal responsibility and human judgment always play a role in moral considerations, even if an attempt is made to minimize them by applying biblical commandments and instructions as directly as possible. The interpretation and application of these commandments is also fallible human work and, however carefully and with integrity it is done, leads to diverse results. On the basis of this use of Scripture, not infrequently even profoundly immoral views have been defended.¹⁶⁸

What matters is that human responsibility and judgment are brought to the cross of Jesus Christ and immersed in the full breadth of God's revelation. We must sit again and again at the feet of our Lord, who did not always - often not even - act according to the letter of Scripture, but always in the Spirit of his Father.

Moreover, Christian ethics is more than just the rational extension of Biblical lines to the present.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Consider, for example, what the Pharisees taught about divorce and how white Afrikaners justified apartheid and white Americans justified racial discrimination.

¹⁶⁹ De Bruijne (2017), 181-198; Ibid., (2022), 25-28. See also Mudde (2015), 151-244, esp. 194-195 and 243-244.

*We recognize by what Kees Haak writes about 'the wise' - without in any way suggesting that those who advocate a different point of view are not among such wise people. The wise man knows the Scriptures, allows himself to be controlled by the Spirit, and his conversion has made him aware of the all-controlling meaning of the gospel. 'At the same time, he is blessed with the gift of discernment more than others. He is characterized by reason, empathy and, above all, scriptural wisdom to be able to build bridges across chronological and cultural distances and offer help in personal relationships. That wisdom is the art of combining creaturely, empirical decisiveness of people who know how to solve problems in everyday life, with the revealed mercy and justice in the salvation history of the Bible. The wise men of the Bible know how to bring these two worlds together in the one great reality of God's righteous world order.'*¹⁷⁰

*In addition, it should be noted that the margins of this broken existence are sometimes narrow. One of the deputies said, 'If I have learned anything, it is that many theoretical-ethical arguments ultimately don't make much sense. Ethics is fundamentally nothing more than groping for a way, improvising, weighing arguments, sometimes taking a step back. Searching in mercy that something of the work of God is revealed. The Bible also testifies to this.'*¹⁷¹

4. Homosexuality is indeed a modern concept, but sex between members of the same sex is of all times.

¹⁷⁰ Hook (2017), 172.

¹⁷¹ To give just one telling example: Exodus 21:2-6 (the first legislation following the ten commandments) reminds us how complicated reality sometimes is, and what impossible dilemmas people can face. That situations should not be lumped together, but considered on a case-by-case basis. That the choice someone has to make can be based on a conflict between principles that are each in some sense sacred. And that therefore that choice may differ from person to person and from situation to situation. Therefore, we should not condemn each other if the final choice turns out differently - even if something continues to itch. See Mudde (2023).

And also in Biblical times, there were people who had a deep affinity with their own sex not merely in a sexual sense, but also in terms of emotion. There were also long-term relationships between partners of equal age and status. So our culture is not as far removed from Biblical times as is sometimes suggested.

*It is impossible to say with any certainty whether this was the case and if so, to what extent gay unions in love and fidelity occurred in New Testament times and how familiar Paul was with them. But what Paul writes about 'men sleeping with men' indicates that he was unable to look into the hearts of gay people as we know them. There are sound arguments that they were not on his mind.*¹⁷²

5. In some ways, culture plays an undeniable role in how one applies biblical instructions in our time. But the biblical prohibition of same-sex sex, unlike, say, the instructions related to slavery or the relationship between husband and wife, is directly reducible, not to culture, but to 'nature', to how God intended creation to be.

Indeed, the Biblical prohibition of same-sex sex is anchored in creation. It is understandable that those who believe that homosexual relations are not permissible take this very seriously. And also that there are Christian homosexuals who conclude from this that they must live their lives in celibacy, or within a homosexual friendship relationship in which there is no place for sex. But within an utterly broken creation, creation itself cannot function as an isolated norm either. Then the human measure gets lost. We also learn this from the Lord Jesus and this is from his dealing with the Sabbath. If anything can be called an order of creation, it is the Sabbath. The Pharisees said, 'The Sabbath commandment weighs as much as all the other commandments together. But Jesus taught in this the human measure, 'The Sabbath was made for man,

¹⁷² Mudde (2015), 265-269.

and not man for the Sabbath. That is why the Son of Man is also lord even of the Sabbath.’ (Mark 2:27-28) In this, too, He spoke and acted entirely in the spirit of His Father, who in the same breath pronounced the curse on creation and violated His own creation by making warm clothes out of the animal skin to cover the nakedness of man (Genesis 3:21). The human measure is also lost when gays are not allowed to enter into a relationship of love and fidelity on the basis of ‘creation’.

6. Not only the Bible, but also the church throughout its history has categorically forbidden homosexual praxis. This implies that openness for homosexual relations can only be given on the basis of extremely accurate exegetical and biblical-theological considerations and that there must be broad support for this within the church of Jesus Christ. As long as there is no broad consensus around homosexuality, churches should refrain from giving room for homosexual relationships.

Throughout time, church and theology have been and still are constantly evolving. Partly because they inevitably move with and respond to developments in culture and society, which in turn are caused by developments in science, philosophy, and technology. This means that what is taken for granted at the time and culture of the Bible (and still is in some cultures), such as arranged marriages, casting lots, taking vows, child labor, slavery, corporal punishment, capital punishment, loses its self-evidence in other times and cultures, disappears off the radar, or even comes under criticism. Take sex during menstruation, for example. The Bible forbids it in the same clear terms as same-sex sex even in the same chapter (see Lev. 18:19 and 20:18). The people of Israel had to go into exile in part because this prohibition against sex during menstruation was not enforced. Throughout church history, therefore, this was considered an abomination. But however we may think about this and deal with this today, the fact is that the attention paid to this issue in church and theology is nothing compared with the attention paid to homosexuality. Everything indicates that, rightly or wrongly, this is no longer seen as a moral issue.

The point is that 'what the church has always taught' cannot be the criterion by which a new insight in response to a new phenomenon can be judged. Church and theology do have to answer to tradition and the fathers, but the fathers do not have the last word.

5.3.2 Dialogue 2

Questions and struggles of those who do see room for homosexual relationships and the answers to them

1. The difference between the classical and alternative positions is sometimes presented in such a way that the classical position proceeds from God's revelation, while the alternative is based on human experience. And that the classical position is based on what is written in the Bible, while the alternative departs from what is written. But is this representation of affairs correct? Is the classical viewpoint that is advocated today really so classical?¹⁷³ Isn't there a lot of culture and experience involved that is not further accounted for?

No one will deny that, in general, culture and experience are factors influencing our biblical considerations. We also agree that God revealed Himself in His Word in a particular time and culture and that this should be taken into account. At the same time, there are also things that transcend time and culture. For example, the creator very clearly established marriage: a life union between one man and one woman and also the only relationship within which sexual intercourse is allowed to take place. Nowhere in the Bible is this revoked, modified, or expanded, but rather underlined by Jesus in Mat. 19.

¹⁷³ Mudde (2019), 22-26.

2. If homosexuality is a modern concept that the Bible did not know in that way, is it relevant to apply what the Bible writes about same-sex sex to homosexuals who want to live together in a relationship of love and fidelity?

There is certainly a big difference between Biblical times and ours, but again, not so big that Bible words would no longer have relevance to the question of whether and in what circumstances same-sex sex is acceptable in today's context. Moreover, it remains against the order that the creator himself has set.

3. Within the concept of homosexuality a distinction can be made between emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction to one's own sex. Room is made for the former two, but not for the third, because the Bible condemns same-sex sex. Now the Bible does this because same-sex sex is unnatural. But same-sex orientation and falling-in-love are no less unnatural, are they not? In other words, if unnatural is the criterion on the basis of which Paul condemns same-sex sex, then surely this is precisely as true for same-sex orientation and the experience of same-sex emotional and romantic attraction?

You cannot simply say of same-sex orientation that it is unnatural. Perhaps this is how we perceive or experience it, but the Bible itself does not say so. Only same-sex sex is condemned as unnatural. From this one may not conclude that same-sex orientation is also unnatural and therefore sinful. And even if we were to consider such an orientation unnatural, it is still the case that not everything that is unnatural is Biblically sinful. Furthermore, it is good to point out here a common reduction reflex (term of W.H. Rose): every desire or attraction is often too soon qualified as sexual, whereas these need not be sexually oriented at all. This is an unnecessary, unjustified, and even harmful reduction.

4. Openness for the experience of same-sex emotional and romantic attraction is found in the by all means understandable argument that we should not make the burdens of homosexuals heavier than they are. But

doesn't this argument apply much more to the categorical prohibition of homosexual relationships in love and fidelity?

We should not impose unnecessary burdens on one another in the church of Christ. At the same time, we do want to listen to what Scripture teaches us. Sometimes this goes 'against our flesh'. This comes with following Christ and what He asks of us, however painful it may be.

5. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19: 3-12 occupies an increasingly central place within the considerations of those who believe that God-fearing homosexuals must, by definition, live their lives in celibacy. But isn't this teaching lifted out of its literary context, as well as out of its specific social context? As regards the latter: only men were entitled to send their wives away, and the practice left room to do so for rather arbitrary reasons. Could Jesus' focus on the hardness of heart and the one exception He makes (fornication) be related to this? As regards the first (the literary context: sex between members of the same sex, let alone homosexual relationships are not the focus, neither in asking nor in answering the Pharisees' question. Therefore, is the conclusion not too far-fetched that we learn from Christ 'that sex difference plays an indispensable role in assessing the moral status of sexual activity'?

In Matthew 19, a question about divorce is the immediate reason for what Jesus says. What is striking, however, is that in answering it, He goes back to the creator who created man male and female and instituted marriage. By referring to this, Jesus affirms the order established by the creator for human beings. Furthermore, the striking continuation about eunuchs and remaining unmarried, where Jesus adds a new, third category of eunuchs, gives rise to the idea that after Christ, being unmarried is also a full-fledged destiny of life, just as much as being married.

6. Jesus' teaching in Matthew is indeed strict when it comes to divorce. And especially in our time, when people can also divorce for any reason, there are good reasons to take that very much to heart. Yet the

message of Jesus' teaching and that of the New Testament is not that divorce is always forbidden. Jesus himself mentions *porneia* as a ground for divorce. Paul adds that a believing man or woman may consent with a divorce if an unbelieving partner chooses to do so. So if you want to relate Matthew 19 to homosexual relationships at all, isn't it reasonable to display an openness for these?

The fact that the further teaching in the New Testament on divorce shows that there can be various grounds for divorce and that the prohibition is apparently not absolute, does not automatically mean that this is also the case for other prohibitions in Scripture. Moreover, as in the case of divorce, this would then have to be made clear within Scripture itself. When it comes to same-sex sex, this is really not the case.

7. There is another issue in response to Matthew 19. The Lord only mentions *porneia* as a (possible) ground for divorce. In this broken existence, however, there can also be other causes for ending a marriage. Domestic violence, a drug or alcohol addiction, a serious psychological disorder can result in a marriage or family relationship being structurally unsafe for the other partner or other family members. In such situations, we do not infer from Jesus' words that spouses must stay together no matter what, and we do not simply consider the choice of one partner to leave the other simply as a matter of 'hardness of heart'. Sometimes this sin-broken existence leaves no other choice. And for these reasons we bring other notions to the fore from the scriptures that help the person(s) involved find a viable path. By analogy, why can't we also find a viable path for our homosexual brothers and sisters?

There is no one size fits all. The kind of argumentation that is applied to one ethical issue may not be applicable to another for many reasons.

5.3.3 Evaluation of interviews

The above dialogues make clear several things:

1. As deputies we have sought dialogue with each other and also critically reflected on our own position thanks to the objections and difficulties that others brought in. Based on the desire expressed in Proverbs 27:17, 'As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.'
2. For the opinions we formed, even in response to critical questions, we have all prayerfully sought an argumentation that arises from and returns to the scriptures themselves.
3. The conversations were beneficial. They underscored that we took each other seriously, gave the opportunity to look into each other's hearts, strengthened our commitment to God's Word and helped those who had not yet taken a stand to form their own opinions.
4. At a certain point, however, the conversation did not progress any further and there was a repetition of moves. Together we concluded: we each stand for our own point of view and we have not managed to reach a consensus. This is regrettable and painful even, but let's accept it for now, hoping that the time will come when we do find each other, after all.
5. And yet, we are obliged to make choices one way or another, even though we know we will hurt some and would like to avoid this. We must make choices for the sake of the churches and especially for the sake of the homosexual brothers and sisters in our churches, for uncertainty and unclarity about where the Dutch Reformed churches stand also contribute to a sense of unsafety.

6. Even when choices have to be made, the conversations held continue to have their meaning, because in the choices we have made we have tried to the best of our ability to include what is important and essential to all.

'We don't really belong'

The story of Bas and Charles

(part 1)

Charles was raised in a Christian family that attended a Reformed Protestant church. He discovered in early adolescence that he had homosexual feelings and was 19 years old when he came out of the closet. Not long before, his mother had left his father with the children. Because of that tragedy, Charles had not yet made his confession of faith.

Because of his coming-out, Charles was no longer allowed to join the band on Sundays. Praying and reading, Charles explored the possibility of a relationship with another man. His conclusion was I can't imagine God asking me to live a life without a partner.

Conversations with a close friend helped him find his way. So he left for another congregation with more openness. He had good conversations, but still was not allowed to confess his faith there because he was open to a relationship with a man.

Soon after that he met Bas. He went along to his church and was immediately enthusiastic about the singing and music there. But even there he was initially told that he could not immediately confess his faith because of his relationship with Bas, but later he was allowed to do so. Charles says that all this time singing gave him the confidence that God was carrying him and holding him.

In love

Bas grew up in a Christian family, in a conservative church setting. He came out of the closet at 24 and told his best friends and his parents. He also had a conversation with the pastor who started the search with him: what does my being gay mean for my life?

After a few conversations with the pastor, he got to know Charles through a Christian dating site. A date with Charles followed, and another, and yet another. Then he fell in love. The pastor asked an elder to be present at the talks and later Charles joined them: a good way of really talking to each other.

Then the time came when Bas and Charles bought a house and announced they were going to live together. At the same time, a need for policy arose in the church council. This added to the personal conversation the purpose of formulating a policy for a problem. According to the pastor and elder Bas and Charles were moving too fast; the congregation was not ready. But Bas and Charles thought: this is about us, we are 'a problem'.

Hope for acceptance

The church council did not send out the signal to find another church; on the contrary, the church wanted to keep Bas and Charles there. But because they were a couple, Bas was no longer allowed to participate in the church and participation in the sacrament was put on hold. Bas was willing to go this way for the sake of peace in the church. He hoped for better times, when policies were agreed on by all in which there would be room for acceptance of him and Charles. Charles was angry because once more he experienced being excluded from participating in church activities.

At that time, leaving was not an option. Bas wanted to stay to pave the way for subsequent individuals. But he now wonders if he would make this choice again. After all, he now doesn't feel like someone who can fully belong.

The purchase of the house made a registered partnership necessary/desirable. Bas's parents arranged a surprise party in response to this. This was very wedding-like in the eyes of the minister and elder.

Meanwhile, the church council held meetings every six weeks to develop policy. That policy was not yet in its final form when Bas moved into their new home with Charles. Charles was still not allowed to join the church at that time. The disappointment about the church's policy process began to weigh ever more heavily.

In survival mode

The policy was explained orally to Bas and Charles; then it went to the congregation. The oral version came across as friendlier and more positive than the written one to the congregation. In the written version, they read that they were sinners. The policy was discussed at congregational evenings, evenings which Charles was not allowed to attend but which Bas did attend once.

In retrospect, Charles would have liked to indicate more clearly that he was continuing to live his life with God himself - without the church, if necessary. Bas continued in church in survival mode. For example, he did not go to church when they celebrated the Lord's Supper. He felt left out, but clung to the

hope that everything would be all right once the policy process was finalized. The policy did indeed give some more openness, but not enough. Bas and Charles found the terms used in the piece rather painful. The door to the Lord's supper seemed open but actually was not. It was later revised, but 'who reads such a policy text'?

The policy aimed at keeping everyone in didn't materialize, with the result that Bas and Charles stand with one leg in the church and one outside, 'We don't really belong'.

They wonder whether the people who say 'no' to a relationship of two men have mainly been heard .

Silence

Charles became a full member five years ago. He was invited to introduce himself in the service and to do so he sent a slide with the two of them for the beamer. During the service it turned out that Bas had been cut out. By now, Charles has publicly confessed his faith and he does have positive memories of that.

In church, Bas and Charles are allowed to sing in a band, but singing together in the same band is not allowed. Six months ago they asked if singing together is now allowed. After all, the policy might change. But no, without talking to them about it, they were told that this is still a sensitive issue in the congregation and is therefore not allowed. Both are happy with friends, with the band in which they sing and with the meetings. But the lack of conversation, the lack of attention for their situation, the 'silence' about their relationship leaves a bad taste.

Bas and Charles have a desire for children, but church policy does not allow for it. Yet they are deciding on that now.

6 Making choices

The evaluation of the discussions held by the deputies ended with the conclusion that our churches will have to make choices one way or another. After all, unclarity and uncertainty do not contribute to the safety (and experience of safety) of our homosexual brothers and sisters. It is, therefore, in their interest - and that of the local congregations no less - to know what position the national context of the NGK takes on issues that concern them.

In this chapter we would like to advise the churches to make some statements. As stated in the introduction, in our proposals for this we want to keep our Lord Jesus Christ in mind above all else, no less our homosexual brothers and sisters and the congregation of Christ as a whole. Together we want to move forward, with and for and to and through Him.

It is important to note that what follows does not have unanimous agreement with our deputies. There are people who do not agree fully or even at all with the choices and advice below.¹⁷⁴ The difference in the assessment and appreciation of homosexual relationships in love and fidelity is the main point. This then affects the degree of openness that is seen for the admission of cohabiting homosexuals to the Lord's Supper, their fulfilling of the ordained ministries and the blessing and/or confirmation of homosexual unions.

In what follows, the choices made by the majority of the deputies are expressed and explained: they are the 'we' that have the floor in this chapter. Where possible and where appropriate, we also express the point of view of the minority: we want to do them justice as well, and we want to preserve and experience our unity in Christ with them.

For that matter, there will be majorities and minorities in church councils as well: some looking through a certain lens will see room for homosexual relationships, admission to the ordained ministries, or the blessing of gay relationships, others will not. Our prayer is that here, too, the desire exists to do justice to each

¹⁷⁴ Wolter Rose has indicated that he does not wish to take responsibility for this chapter. His vision can be found in this report in chapter 7.

other and to remain committed to each other.

6.1 What does the congregation have to offer?

Thus, the question presented to us as deputies was: What does the church of Christ have to offer lesbian sisters and gay brothers in its midst? Along with this, we were assigned some sub-tasks:

- ◆ provide a scripturally based view of existing sexual diversity.
- ◆ provide a scripturally based appreciation of possible sexual relationships.
- ◆ describe how the Christian congregation can provide safety for men and women who are unable to follow the path indicated by Genesis 2:24.
- ◆ describe how the Christian congregation can offer support to those who choose a celibate lifestyle based on texts such as Matthew 19:2 and 1 Corinthians 7:37.
- ◆ describe how a church council can act in the event that church members enter into a sexual relationship that, in the judgment of the church council, does not conform to the scriptural norm.
- ◆ include in the reflection the decisions that have previously been taken and the statements that have previously been made by general synods of the GKv, the national assemblies of the NGK, the general synods of the CGK and affiliated churches abroad.

Below we focus on answering the central question and include the sub-tasks without addressing them one by one.

6.1.1 God's gift to us

What does the church of Christ have to offer lesbian sisters and gay brothers? Before we answer the question, let's turn it around

- courtesy of Samuel Wells.¹⁷⁵ What do lesbian sisters and gay brothers have to offer the church of Christ?

Wells points out that LGBTQ people are in a unique sense qualified to identify with people who seem to be closest to Jesus' heart, companionship, and ministry. In them, it becomes apparent that God sustains his church, not through procreation, but through baptism and his kingdom by grace.¹⁷⁶ In our view, these are also valuable insights.

Thinking through this question together, we also came up with the following notions:

First of all, homosexual brothers and sisters, like any other member, serve the congregation with their God-given gifts. And if what is said is true namely that homosexuals are, among other things, above-average sensitive, caring, and artistic, this has its own blessing.

Furthermore, in line with Paul, we see the congregation as a body that has many members, and if gays are indeed among the more vulnerable members of the congregation because of their sexual orientation, then vulnerability may be seen as a gift in that light: it calls for the other members to be caring and protecting.

We were also inspired by the choice of celibacy made by some members of the congregation, homosexual or not. By not putting the fulfillment of personal needs first, but rather seeking God's kingdom and his righteousness, celibate brothers and sisters are a blessing to the church of Christ and an example to it.

This blessing also goes out to those who, out of obedience to Christ or because they want to live to the glory of God, renounce a homosexual relationship. From them a powerful appeal goes out to the congregation as a whole to live in such a way that the splendor of God's holiness becomes visible in it.

Finally, we also want to mention this: homosexuality has been called a sexual minority variety. It is an orientation that is foreign

¹⁷⁵ See section 4.2.3. Verg. Rose (2020), 203.

¹⁷⁶ The CRC report also has these notions, p. 10-11: 'These believers can often alert the church to the unbiblical notion that marriages and families are the core of the church. The first-century writers tell us that Christ's church is not a collection of biological families but a new family of Jesus' followers.' And: 'Helpfully, too, those who do not fit culturally prescribed male and female roles are more able to point out the falseness of the polarity our world assumes between men and women. They can help the whole church see where it wrongly follows the world in setting women and men against each other and slotting people into stereotypical gender roles.'

to most people and can even provoke resistance and aversion - as can be the case with anything different and strange. In the church of Christ, diversity can be a test, when people are different and when things start to itch or clash. Diversity is enriching for everything - in the new Jerusalem, peoples and people from all nations bring their own special gifts. But dealing with diversity and differences can also be very complicated. Living together as very different people offers the church of Christ an opportunity to be a training ground for learning to deal with those who are, think and act differently, a training ground for humility, patience, tolerance and commitment and thus a place where the love of Christ dwells.

6.1.2 Humility

When we then ask ourselves what the church of Christ has to offer its homosexual brothers and sisters, we first think of words like guilt and humility.¹⁷⁷ Humility, because in the church of Jesus Christ there was and is also misunderstanding of, exclusion of and discrimination against LGB people. A desire that goes back to something that God put in the creation ('It is not good for the man to be alone...'), was and is sometimes considered a sin. And the divisions within both the local and the global church around LGB suggest that there is apparently something very problematic. We find this shameful and sad. And we too carry a sense of guilt within us, because of how gay people in the past and sometimes still, here in the Dutch churches and worldwide, have been

¹⁷⁷ The CRC arrived at a confession of guilt toward LGBTQ people, and the report of the CGK suggested this. We recognize ourselves in many of the phrases the CRC used. At the same time, we feel downright uncomfortable with an admission of guilt for the fact that homosexuals have been treated as if they were greater sinners than those who engage in pornography, and pre-marital and extramarital sex (p. 114). Cf. p. 10: 'We confess that we overlooked the sexual sins of the majority while sharply condemning those of the lesbian and gay minority.'

We also have ambivalent feelings about the confession of guilt that the CGK report proposed for how gay people were treated by the fathers in the past (including by punishing their sin with death). For that same report advises churches to exclude cohabiting gays from The Lord's Supper. Here too, in our opinion, there is something wrong. Within the church of Christ, surely we consider exclusion from The Lord's Supper to be a far more severe sanction than any punishment the government can impose on anyone?

treated. It befits us as churches to speak out and then act on it.

6.1.3 Safety

We hope that the church of Christ may be a safe haven for homosexuals, 'an inn on the road' (Andre Troost)¹⁷⁸ - just as it should be for everyone else. Some characteristics of what we believe to be a safe congregation were already mentioned in Chapter 5 (see §5.1.4). In a safe congregation:

- ◆ LGBTQ people feel as welcome as anyone else
- ◆ no derogatory or discriminatory remarks are made about them
- ◆ all can talk openly about LGBTQ
- ◆ the subject gets good attention both at home and during youth clubs and catechism meetings
- ◆ LGBTQ people can be open about who they are
- ◆ the congregation works toward being an open and welcoming community for those going through life as singles or celibates
- ◆ at least LGBTQ people who are not in a relationship living together can in principle become ordained ministers
- ◆ LGBTQ people have such a natural place that LGBTQ is actually no longer an issue.¹⁷⁹

There are still good reasons for all this to be named. Gay people do not always feel safe within our society either. Young people who find that they are attracted to their own sex often have something to deal with and sometimes this results in

¹⁷⁸ Reformed Church Book 2017, Song 163.

¹⁷⁹ Wolter Rose notes here that a safe congregation is above all a church where the teaching of Christ and the apostles, rooted in the Torah for Israel, is safe. A congregation where God's Word is not safe is by definition not a safe congregation for gays. The other members of the deputation completely agree with this, but do not consider it something that should be mentioned in this place, because this is the foundation on which we stand and build as churches.

a personal crisis. Let the church of Christ be a place where gays feel welcome and wholeheartedly accepted. A place that is like of a field hospital. In the brokenness of life, we incur wounds that need to be taken care of, so that we can go on.

We also point to the provision of hospitality for those who go through life as singles or celibates. We think in particular of the meal fellowship that is frequently mentioned in the Old and New Testaments. The meal is a place where you enjoy together the good things that God gives: food and drink, being together, commitment, sociability. It gives, however mundane, something of a foretaste of the meal that will be served at the new heaven and the new earth. *Hineh matov oomanyim shevet achim gam yachad!* See how good it is when brothers and sisters dwell together! (Psalm 133:1).

6.1.4 Openness

The majority of our deputies believe that there should be openness for LGB people, as much openness as they need to flourish before God's holy and gracious face.

If there is someone with a homosexual orientation who wants to explore the possibility of changing it to a heterosexual orientation, they are free to do so - although we have strong doubts whether LGB people with deeply rooted orientations can change this orientation.

If someone is convinced in their conscience that a homosexual relationship is incompatible with the Bible, they are free to choose a life of sexual abstinence and seek meaningful and blessed alternatives to marriage.

If someone is free in their conscience to find a partner for life, then we should welcome these brothers and sisters in the church of Christ and at the Lord's table.

We therefore believe that within the church of Christ there may and should also be openness for homosexual brothers and sisters who live together in a relationship of love and fidelity. We do not want to repeat the arguments for this here.¹⁸⁰ Not all deputies want to take equal responsibility for the arguments mentioned above, but that does not change the overall majority picture: within the church of Christ there should be openness for homosexuals, also when they live together in love and fidelity.

¹⁸⁰ See chapters 5.2.2. and 5.3.1. (Dialogue 1). See also chapter 4.2.2.

6.2 The Lord's Supper

In particular, we draw attention to participation in the Lord's Supper. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is the heart beat of the church of Christ. For every believer, participation in the celebration of the Lord's Supper is of inestimable significance, because it is the gospel made tangible: the assurance of being accepted by God through grace and of belonging to Christ and his congregation. The congregation and the members of the congregation receive the Lord's Supper in order to strengthen their faith in Jesus Christ and to enjoy fellowship with Him and one another. In our opinion, believing homosexuals should not be denied this necessary strengthening. The Lord's Supper is for all sinners who humble themselves and want to repent of their sins. This means that those are welcome at the table who worship Jesus Christ as their Savior and want to live holy before Him, regardless of whether they are heterosexual or homosexual, single or celibate, or living together in a relationship of love and fidelity.

Some churches with whom we are affiliated (the CGK, the CRC) have declared that homosexual church members living in a relationship should be kept from participating in the sacrament, for such a relationship is sinful and for the sake of their salvation. It is possible that some church councils within the association of the NGK hold this same view.

We advise the Synod not to go down that road. There may be sins in the life of a church member that can lead to abstinence from the Lord's Supper. As the apostle Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 5:11, 'What I mean is this: you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother or sister, but who is in fact a fornicator, a money-grubber, idolater, troublemaker, drunkard, or exploiter. With such a person you should definitely not eat.' The message of exclusion from the church was a very urgent and serious one: if you continue in this sinful way, you will also be excluded from the kingdom. Undoubtedly, Paul was also thinking of the *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* (the men who played a passive and active role in same-sex sex) among the fornicators, see Corinthians 6:9.

For several reasons we are of the opinion that no is-equal-sign can be put between the *malakoi* and the *arsenokoitai* and our homosexual brothers and sisters. The latter do not seem to have been on Paul's mind. And of course, renunciation is always done out of the desire to bring someone back to the

Lord and his congregation, but is that really the evangelical attitude the church has to take toward brothers and sisters who cannot or will not live their lives in solitude? And who respond to a heart's desire recognized by all and placed in them by God himself? And if living together in a homosexual union is still considered sin, is that sin really so much more serious than other forms of evil that we are all guilty of as a result of living in this culture and society?

The 2016 decision of the national assembly (LV) of the NGK on 'ordained ministry and homosexuality' - is like a pastoral letter and also talks about the sacrament. It also implicitly calls the openness for homosexuals to participate in the celebration: 'Who does not know this self-awareness of things in your life that you cannot or can no longer change, while trying your best to find a viable way and being in need of God's help so badly. If homosexual brothers and sisters are seeking a viable way knowing that even 'the most holy person' can only make but a small start, shouldn't we share the bread and wine with them in Communion? We wholeheartedly conclude that we should.

Advice

We advise the Synod to call on churches to welcome to the Lord's Supper our LGB brothers and sisters, including those who are living together in a relationship of love and fidelity.

6.3 Homosexual unions

In our opinion, the blessing or confirmation of a homosexual union or marriage is of a more far-reaching significance than admitting homosexuals, including those we are living together, to the table of the Lord. While in the latter case there can still be pastoral considerations, the former presupposes a heartfelt acceptance of homosexual relationships and a willingness to support and even celebrate these.

There is no clear majority or minority of our deputies for or against blessing a same-sex union or marriage within a liturgical framework.

Of course, those who believe that homosexual relationships are sinful have great problems with this. But even those who believe that there should be openness within the church of Christ for

LGB people to live together in a relationships do not always believe that gay unions should therefore also be blessed, or confirmed.

Some people are in favor of this, but find it difficult to make a general statement about it, because such a blessing requires the heartfelt cooperation of the congregation and the pastor concerned, and it is not certain that there is support for it. Others do not have the boldness to do so, because they are not sure for themselves whether such a union is according to God's will or not. Although they wholeheartedly grant homosexuals who live together a place in the church of Christ, they also believe that a life of sexual abstinence is the royal way.

Those who do believe that gay unions or marriages within the church of Christ may receive a blessing give various reasons. To begin with, these relationships too are both 'precious and vulnerable'. They are total relationships in which people share the heights and depths of their existence, their joys and sorrows, their shame and guilt. For gay people, making a lasting commitment is as much of a perilous adventure as it is for straight people, and their relationship therefore needs just as much legal protection and prayer and the blessing of God.

A relationship of this intensity and intimacy, like a union between a man and a woman, needs the support of a publicly expressed and law-affirmed promise of love and fidelity. The church of Christ that welcomes gay couples in their midst will therefore encourage them to give their relationship the character of a covenant.¹⁸¹ Being allowed to receive a blessing for their union underscores that gay couples are truly accepted within the church of Christ and not merely tolerated.

Within our deputation we have not had sufficient time to think through all the questions surrounding the blessing or confirmation of a same-sex union. Questions that arise in this context are:

¹⁸¹ In the words of Ad de Bruijne, 'When the eros-love within a homosexual partnership includes sexual dimensions, the church must make demands on it that are analogous to the requirements in a marriage relationship. Both the nature of sexuality, in which one person entrusts himself vulnerably to the other, and its biblical meaning, in which sexuality marks union and unity, makes it necessary that such gay relationships also be characterized by love and (in principle lifelong) fidelity. De Bruijne (2022), 385.

The government puts an is-equal-sign between the marriage of man and woman and marriage between two men or two women. But can the church do the same, given what we read in Genesis 1 and 2 about the origin of marriage?

Not all church members who make a lifelong commitment, homosexual or not, choose civil marriage. How do these compare: civil marriage and regulated partnership or cohabitation contract? And what role can or cannot the church play given the provisions of the civil and penal codes?¹⁸²

The provisions of the Church Order speak only of the ecclesiastical confirmation of a civil marriage (see Article C7). And in C7.3 it says: 'In special situations the church council decides.' Does this include the possibility of confirming same-sex marriages?

What personal responsibility do church council and pastor have when they see possibilities that the national church body does not (yet) provide? And, how to handle a situation where a gay couple expresses the wish that their union be blessed or confirmed, but a church council has no boldness to do so?

Questions like these - and no doubt there are more - we as deputies have not been able to answer. However, there is a trend. The differences in nuances that exist among our deputies will also exist within the churches. Some church councils will be reluctant to put homosexual unions under God's blessing; others will do so freely. As long as the intercession is in the more or less private sphere, it is our impression that the national church association need not regulate this. However, if the confirmation of a marriage between members of the same sex is at issue, a national decision seems to be necessary, because this is an obvious change with respect to how marriage has traditionally been defined on biblical grounds.

¹⁸² Civil Law 68. 1 reads: 'No religious ceremonies may take place before the parties have made it clear to the minister of worship that the marriage was performed before the registrar of births, marriages, and deaths'. And Criminal Code art. 449.1 reads: 'The minister of divine services who leads any religious ceremonies in a marriage service, before the parties had made it clear to him that their marriage was performed before the registrar of births, marriages, and deaths, shall be punished with a fine of the second category.'

Advice

We recommend that the Synod appoint a new deputy committee whose task will be to answer the above questions and, if possible, to provide examples of liturgical formulations that can be used for blessing and/or confirmation a same-sex union or marriage.

The premise for the formation of a new deputy committee is, of course, that homosexual relationships are accepted by the churches.

Should the churches decide to appoint such a deputy committee, we propose to consider the following. In our churches some brothers and sisters, regardless of their sexual orientation, expressly choose to remain celibate out of obedience to the Lord and for the sake of the kingdom. Often they make this decision for themselves, without experiencing that the congregation blessingly surrounds them and supports them in this. We propose that the choice for celibacy be given a spiritual and liturgical framework. After all, celibacy is also a life choice of a radical nature and at the same time bears the character of ministry. Marking such a choice in the midst of the congregation and placing it under God's blessing does justice to what is at stake and at the same time supports and encourages the brother or sister concerned.

Particular attention is required for Article C7.1 of our Church Order. It says, 'The church council shall promote that members of the congregation who wish to unite as husband and wife shall enter into a civil marriage and have it confirmed ecclesiastically.' If the churches accept homosexual relationships in love and fidelity, it is in line with this article that the churches also state that homosexuals who are going to live together are urged to enter into a covenant for life. In so doing, the churches are not erasing the distinction between marriage and gay covenant, but are signaling that no form of total relationship within the church of Christ should be of a non-committal nature.

6.4 Ordained ministries

There is no clear majority or minority among our deputies for or against admitting into ordained ministry those who live together in a homosexual union. Incidentally, we use the word 'union'

here to emphasize that there is an enduring relationship in love and fidelity.

Of course, those who believe that homosexual relationships are sinful have major problems with this. But even those who believe that there should be openness within the church of Christ for LGB people to live together in a relationship do not always believe that those living together in a homosexual union can serve in an ordained church ministry, if they have the gift to do so.

In part, this reluctance corresponds to that regarding the blessing of homosexual unions. Some are in favor of this, but find it difficult to make a general statement on the subject because the fulfillment of an ordained ministry requires the heartfelt cooperation of the congregation and the candidate. Others do not have the boldness to express themselves on the issue, because they do not know for themselves whether such a commitment is according to God's will or not. They believe that celibacy is the royal way.

Additional arguments are

- ◆ The position of homosexual brothers and sisters who, out of deep conviction, have chosen a celibate way of life may become uncomfortable or even problematic if the ordained ministries are opened to those living together in a homosexual relationship.
- ◆ Serving in ordained ministry is of a different order than participation in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Thus, full membership of the church of Christ does not require someone to serve in ordained ministry .

Advocates of opening up the ministries to gays living together in union believe that in principle there is nothing to prevent this. After all, those living in such a relationship are full members of the congregation and entitled to participate in the celebration at the Lord's table.

Additional arguments taken from NGK's report are

- ◆ Although it may be true that heterosexuals and homosexuals are becoming equal within our culture, the reality is that the position of homosexuals in any culture will always be somewhat insecure and possibly even threatening, because for many heterosexuals homosexual praxis is by definition 'unnatural'. For this reason,

it is of the utmost importance that gay people experience and perceive that the church of Christ is a place where they are truly safe and accepted. This argues for opening up the ministries to homosexuals who live in a relationship of love and fidelity.

- ◆ There is a difference between the issue of women in ministry (for centuries sisters in Christ's church were not allowed into ordained ministries and in many churches they still cannot) and the issue of gays in ministry. That women were (are) not allowed into the church's ordained ministries had (has) nothing to do with their lifestyle. In the case of community members living together in a homosexual relationship, this is different. The fact that they - unlike celibate homosexuals - are not permitted to serve in ordained ministries may therefore create or underscore the impression that there is something culpable in their lives, something that makes them fall short of the measure of God's intention and make them members of the congregation, but not full members. This apparent reproach must be removed, and this can only be done if the congregation opens the ministries up to them.
- ◆ For too long issues such as 'women in ministry' and 'homosexuality' have attracted so much attention and drained so much energy from church life that it is desirable to leave them behind. Now that there are good, biblical grounds for openness to homosexual relations, the ministries must also be opened to homosexuals, so that we can then engage with renewed vigor in the affairs of the kingdom to which Christ calls us.
- ◆ Those who do not have a homosexual disposition are naturally somewhat alien to homosexual relationships and homosexual praxis. This explains why gays worldwide - and also in the Netherlands - experience intolerance. The church, however, is a training ground for learning to accept that which is different and inherently strange. It is a place that wants and has to be inspired by Christ's bridge-building love. Due to the church's divisions and their underlying causes, this has only been achieved partially. Partly for this reason, it is desirable and even necessary that ministries be opened up to congregation members living in a homosexual relationship. In this way

Christ's church can take the path appropriate to its calling, '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.' (Ephesians 4:2-3).

Advice

We recommend that the Synod decide that local churches have the option of also calling to the ordained ministries those members who live together in a homosexual union, provided there is sufficient support for this within the local church community.

Explanation

For this advice we limit ourselves to the opening up of the ordained ministries to elders and deacons. It is in line with this advice to also open up the ministry of pastor/preacher to those living together in a same-sex union. However, this raises some questions that we have not been able to think through sufficiently:

A pastor has the authority to minister God's Word and the sacraments in all churches (see KO (church order) B3.2), and a candidate or pastor is made eligible for calling by a regional assembly with the cooperation of the national committee established for this purpose (KO B4.2). Opening the ministry of preaching to those in a homosexual union presupposes that there is sufficient support for it within the churches as a whole and within the regions. Is there? And, when and on what grounds is it considered 'sufficient'?

What conditions should be imposed on the covenant that homosexual brothers and sisters enter into, before they can be declared eligible for the ordained ministry as a pastor and preacher?

Advice

We recommend that the Synod appoint a new deputy committee whose task will be to identify the questions surrounding the vocation of those who live together in a homosexual union, to answer them if possible, and to advise a subsequent Synod on this matter. The premise for this advice is that homosexual relationships are accepted by the churches.

We also recommend that the Synod appoint a deputy committee to conduct a study on a more far-reaching mission regarding gender issues and report to the next Synod.

In addition we advise the Synod to request Kerkpunt to take the initiative for a follow-up of this report, to organize or further facilitate the discussion about homosexuality within the churches and to develop tools for this purpose (see part 3 Practice).

6.5 National decisions and local churches

We advise the churches to make some decisions that will give our homosexual brothers and sisters clarity about what our churches stand for and help the congregations form policies at the local level, together with the congregation as a whole and the homosexual brothers and sisters in particular. But what about unity in diversity? Is there still room for local congregations to form their own policies?

For us, Romans 14 and 15 provide guidance in this regard. Although this Bible passage is about dealing with differences within the local congregation, we believe it is no less significant for dealing with differences within a national or global church.

On the one hand, Paul has his own firm conviction, which he does not conceal, 'I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.' (14:14). The churches could make a similar statement about homosexual relationships and accept them in their midst.

On the other hand, Paul is very decisive, 'everything that does not come from faith is sin' (14:23). Therefore, as churches and brothers and sisters, we must not force or even tempt one another to do what goes against conscience, what goes against a conviction of faith. Therefore, a national decision must not be forced upon a local church for which it forms a problem of conscience.

There is much more to say after Romans 14 and 15, but with the above we want to indicate that a decision at the national level does not preclude room and respect for differences at the local level.

But how do you deal with those differences? How do you make choices and, if possible, arrive at a common policy? Below we offer some advice on how to approach the discussion in the local church communities. We also refer to the third part of our report

for more in-depth discussion and policy making.

Some advice on how to approach the discussion in the local church community:

- ◆ Put the issue up for discussion within your own congregation. As an estimated few percent of the population has a homosexual orientation, it is short-sighted to think that this is not an issue in one's own congregation. Give the subject some thought and also make it clear to whom people can speak personally if they have questions in this area. The report (see Part 3) makes various suggestions as to how to conduct this discussion within the council and within the congregation.
- ◆ Conduct the discussion with an open Bible. Too often and too quickly, a discussion is primarily based on experience, intuition, and emotion. The discussion conducted must be based on the Bible. This is our source of knowledge, and the guidance of the Spirit is indispensable for the discussion. Then personal experiences and positions come along with it. The discussion must dig deep, progressing calmly and peacefully. The discussion cannot remain open-ended. The congregation as a whole and each individual member has the right to find clarity about whether and how this congregation is a safe place for each member.
- ◆ Accept that there is diversity, that there are differences and that it is necessary to have the discussion and make policy within one's own congregation. Current church practice within the Reformed churches shows diversity with regard to the degree of openness to people of same-sex orientation when it comes to living together and having a sexual relationship. The deputy committee as a whole has no boldness to reject that diversity.
- ◆ Accept that the various policy choices each present their own challenges. For churches that reject gay sexual relationships, there is the challenge of supporting fellow LGB members in their midst and of giving voice to the issue

within the congregation as a whole. For congregations that do offer openness to live together as a gay or lesbian couple, the challenge is to fully support those who see no room for this themselves in their choice.

- ◆ Transcend differences. The view of homosexuality, along with the issue of women and ministry, could prove divisive for 21st century churches. In the past, this was true of the view on the church or the view on baptism. The challenge for the churches is to transcend these different points of view in a common life before the Lord.
- ◆ Learn to live and deal with differences within the congregation. It requires great sensitivity from the whole congregation to live with diverse views. This is especially true for gays and lesbians who choose a life of abstinence within a congregation that is open to gay sexual relationships, as well as for those who are open to gay sexual relationships themselves, but are part of a congregation that is not open for gay sexual relationships.
- ◆ Provide a safe climate within the congregation. It should be a sacred endeavor within the church of Christ to allow each person their place. So that each can fully use their gifts for the benefit and salvation of the other members of the congregation. And so that each, without distinction, can participate in the conversation within the congregation.
- ◆ Make statements in the policy about participation in the sacraments and ministries. Everyone living within the congregation benefits from clear answers to the questions: who can be a full member in our congregation, have children baptized and participate in the Lord's Supper, who can serve in ordained ministry within our congregation?
- ◆ Don't put too heavy a burden on each other's consciences. Openness for one person, may lead another to feeling less welcome. If a church council formulates as its policy that gays who are married or live together in a relationship of love and fidelity can participate in the sacraments unhindered, this can put an intolerable weight on the conscience of others, for example a celibate gay or lesbian,

and vice versa. Church councils should be well aware of this and seriously take this into account when formulating their policies. It is advisable to look for ways to prevent this kind of situations. Ways that are viable in love for every member of the congregation.

- ◆ Be a praying congregation. Prayer is a unifying force for salvation.
- ◆ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7).

***'I don't want to experience this
another time'***

The story of Daan and Jan, elder and pastor of Bas

(The story of Bas and Charles, part 2)

A reflection on homosexuality had already begun in the council. The reason for this was the general discussion in the national church, not a concrete case. The reflection proceeded in harmony but also proved difficult. It did not succeed in bridging the gap between the different views on the subject. An impasse arose and the process stalled for some time. During this impasse, Bas reported to pastor Daan. He reported that he had come out of the closet. Daan mainly listened and made it clear to him that for him this did not change anything about the relationship.

After a conversation between Daan and Bas and a report of this, the council decided that elder Jan would join these discussions. This in order not to let Bas's coaching come down to one person and to get input for the policy to be formulated. The policy should become a 'general policy'. With answers to questions such as: what should you say when an active community member comes out of the closet and has a relationship? What do you say to church members with critical questions? How do you protect Bas and his friend from awkward comments? How do you provide a safe context for them? How do you deal with this in the congregation in the biblical context?

Bas agreed. There was no boyfriend or relationship yet, and he was afraid he would have to quit his work in the church. He didn't have to, of course, because being gay is not a reason for such decisions.

Speedboat and supertanker

Soon after, the subject of 'love relationship' came up in the discussion. Daan and Jan's advice was, 'Take your time and don't take any hasty steps. First quietly discover whether you want a relationship and whether you think that is allowed.' Ideally, Bas's investigation of the issue would run simultaneously with the policy making process of the council in consultation with the church community.

Daan and Jan had agreed to work with Bas and Charles to find the answers, developing the policy, trying to keep them on board during the process of policy forming and coaching them pastorally and leading them into the congregation as a couple.

That didn't work out. Charles and Bas developed their relationship at the speed of a speedboat. Developing policy with the local church at large is like changing the course of a supertanker. Fairly soon after the relationship was out in the open, Bas and Charles told them that they were going to buy a house and enter into a registered partnership. The church council was overtaken by these facts. Daan and Jan felt that they had been left out of the process, which meant that confidence in a process that could be followed together came to an end.

Double responsibility

Jan and Daan reported to the council on the main points. It was suggested that there could be unpleasant reactions from the congregation towards Bas and Charles. It was also expected that the situation would create unrest in at least part of the congregation. The double responsibility toward the couple and the church community was heavy and not easy to handle, but it did require concrete action from the council. The couple and the church community did not keep the same pace. Love would not be forced to slow down at the pace of the church community.

Bas and Charles knew of the initial idea to keep their relationship in pace with the development of policy. Now that their relationship was deepening at a much faster pace and the house was bought, the partnership registered and publicly celebrated, the council felt compelled to put all tasks on hold for Bas and to ask him temporarily not to attend The Lord's Supper. Charles was advised to wait with his public confession of faith until the next season, to allow calm to return first, both in themselves and in the congregation at large. The decision was unanimous and intended to keep the peace for both the couple and the congregation as a whole until the policy had taken further shape.

Heavy conversations

Daan told Bas about these decisions and felt bad about it. Elder Jan knew that the council was forced to make this decision, but also felt that there was room to talk with the church community, because the situation was out in the open. Daan went with the small-group elder to Bas's parents and had a difficult conversation that went down very bad with the parents.

After the conclusion of the policy decision-making process, there was another meeting between the parents, the (new) small-group elder and two people directly responsible from within the council. It was possible to talk openly about the pain and disappointment in the entire process and apologies were also made for the pain that was unintentionally inflicted. A report of this conversation was used within the council to learn from the situation.

Bas indeed did not participate in the Lord's Supper. He was in the church hall and Daan and he saw each other at the time of the celebration and Daan thought: I don't want to experience this another time.

Talking Stick

The church council organized a couple of evenings to survey the opinions in the congregation using statements as input for policy development. At these evenings, explanations were first given in plenary sessions. Afterwards, subgroups listened to each other using the talking stick: whoever holds the stick may give their response to a question or statement. The rest listened, without discussion. Jan or Daan summarized the response to check whether it was well understood. Then the stick was given to someone else. This listening exercise allowed much to be shared and learned, without discussion. One of Bas's parents also attended one of these evenings. It was exciting how each would respond. The parent broke down in tears, but this was okay and welcomed. In total, about 15% of the congregation attended the two evenings.

Bas and Charles knew that there were general policies being developed that aimed at any situation where homosexuality was at play. It must have been very difficult for Bas and Charles because that policy would be applied directly to them. This will have affected them personally quite a bit.

Sufficient support for all involved

Jan and Daan did their best to manage the process of both policymaking and concrete guidance for both men. For Daan, the good relationship that had existed for years also played a role. Pastor and elder were taken by surprise by the rapid development of the relationship.

Both experienced sufficient support from the church council, as much as one might expect in a situation that was new to everyone. For example, someone always accompanied them during conversations and four people worked on the policy proposals. The council unanimously adopted the proposed policy. Jan and Daan's wives supported them and for Daan, the

consultation with fellow pastors was a source of support. They were also able to share with the council the difficulties they had with the decision of keeping the gay men from participating in the Lord's Supper.

Bas was able to consult with Daan. The small-group elder was available for Bas's parents. This was agreed upon at the start of the counseling for the sake of a balanced process. The established policy was personally communicated to Bas and Charles. Bas then observed, 'Now all I get to do is pour coffee and set up chairs.' This is still a sore point for Jan, because you so wish someone could use their talents.

Staying in conversation

Staying in conversation with each other continues to be necessary, Jan believes. And don't keep saying that a homosexual relationship is not okay. It is better to keep talking and to support each other in faith development. When Charles made his confession of faith, a member of the congregation came to him and gave his negative opinion: he was angry and thought it was unacceptable. It is about the question of active acceptance versus passive tolerance of a relationship. This question returns all the time. As when at a Christmas celebration in which Bas participated in the Christmas story. Then, too, there was a reaction from within the congregation. The policy provides openness for joining in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The policy allows for participation in supportive roles, not participation in a leadership role. The council considers it on a situation-by-situation basis. Daan and Jan think Bas and Charles will probably feel merely tolerated. They are not sure.

The council takes as its Biblical premise that man and woman are united in marriage. And not a man with a man or a woman with a woman. Bas and Charles were asked how they read and explain the Bible and in what way they see support from the Bible for their relationship. This question was asked purely to gain insight and understanding of their view on this, not to (re)start any discussion. Jan heard their subjective opinions - and respects them - but heard no clear substantiation.

A retrospective

Daan now works in another congregation and recognizes much in the discussions there: one should not judge individual and personal choices. Both parties lack a personal accountability based on the Scriptures, while the Scriptures should receive real attention, with careful explanation and straightforward attention to a concrete brother or sister.

Jan adds that people prefer to keep a low profile in these personal discussions; at least then you don't hurt anyone, you don't have to take a concrete position yourself, and so you can't be asked to account for it.

Jan and Daan appreciate that Bas's father said that he understands the church's position, despite personal pain. He seeks to walk in peace with God within the context of the church.

Also, both have respect for the congregation, a large majority of which made room for Bas and Charles in a very short time and tried to keep them on board. Unfortunately, the ideal - full acceptance by everyone in the congregation - is further away than one would wish.

Tips and tops

- ◆ The conversational format of 'the talking stick' is a winner. It gives room to everyone's opinion without getting into endless discussions. It allows for more mutual understanding, without having to immediately agree. It provides valuable input for policy making.
- ◆ Make sure that as a church community you are prepared for these situations, that you have formulated policy and that all those involved have a supervisor. Pay attention to the speed at which different people progress in that process.
- ◆ Trust is a great good between brothers and sisters in faith. But that can be lost just like that. In a process started as brothers and sisters of one congregation trying to hold on to each other, you may even end up facing each other in opposition. And in the context of the congregation that is a great loss for all those involved, both for the mutual relationships within the church community and for the relationships with the world outside.

7 Sidetracking, leading astray

Wolter Rose

A (too) brief explanation of why I don't want to bear responsibility for Chapter 6 'Making choices'

Summary

Introduction

1. The belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that he rose from the dead has been called the most dangerous idea in the history of mankind and philosophy. The Son of God, born of a woman ... who could have expected such a thing? He is good, He is the King. What if the most dangerous thought is also the most happy thought?

Wisdom and correction, peace and justice

2. Chapter 6 'Making Choices' (RC6)² gives our churches the advice 'Conduct the discussion with an open Bible.' The credibility of that advice is undermined when the chapter itself a few pages earlier allows things like experience, intuition, and emotion to become decisive. The context there is a plea to make room for same-sex unions with a sexual dimension. The teaching of Christ and the Apostles on marriage and sexuality is sidetracked at an essential point. Thus, a primary teaching goal from the wisdom and knowledge transmission in Old and New Testaments is not realized in RC6: 'correction'. Wisdom and correction are inseparable. Those who are not open to correction lead astray. The fruit of correction is a life of peace and righteousness.

Unity, diversity, and the Kingdom of God

3. In RC6, the statement of intent is declared: 'For us, Romans 14 and 15 is the guiding principle'. The credibility of this statement is undermined when, in the next paragraph, RC6 suggests to the churches to declare that same-sex unions with a sexual dimension 'are allowed to be there'.

² Abbreviations like RC6 refer to the chapter so numbered in the Report.

I quote passages from the Bible as a rule from NIV. When I make a minor change in an existing translation, I mark it with »...«.

4. To avoid the appearance of arbitrariness or bias, RC6 had better declare Paul's entire oeuvre guiding — rather than two less relevant chapters. One of the consequences of that move would be that it is no longer possible to make an appeal to the Bible to support RC6's call for acceptance of the existence of diversity of opinions with respect to same-sex unions with a sexual dimension.

Exegesis and hermeneutics

5. 'The Bible can have something to say without needing other forces to regulate that or introduce a special hermeneutics from outside the text so that we can know when and where it can speak' (Seitz).

Introduction

2. **The belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that he rose from the dead has been called the most dangerous idea in the history of mankind and philosophy. The Son of God, born of a woman ... who could have expected such a thing? He is good, He is the King. What if the most dangerous thought is also the most happy thought?**

To see the Law by CHRIST fulfill'd,
To hear His pard'ning voice,
Changes a slave into a child
And duty into choice.
~ William Cowper (1783)³

In this contribution I will explain my decision not to take responsibility for rc6, the chapter in our report titled: 'Making choices'. If you want to understand in what context the statements below should be read, I recommend to first read my personal reflection, 'Taste and enjoy the goodness of the Lord' (elsewhere in the report). It also cannot hurt to take note of what I have written over the years about the connection between spirituality and homosexuality.⁴

In what follows, my arrows are not directed at LGB Christians.⁵ I take a stand against advocacy invoking the Bible for making room in the church of Christ for same-sex unions with a sexual dimension.

Wisdom and correction, peace and justice

The main exegetical conclusion

The exegetical chapter in our report, rc3, formulates as its most important conclusion 'that we only find texts in the Bible that disapprove of same-sex sex. There is some discussion about the views of the Bible writers, but the texts themselves are speaking in general terms'. Suppose this conclusion is correct. It would put into perspective the confusion surrounding the interpretation of such passages as Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6. That confusion is fueled by the argument that Paul's rejection would not cover same-sex sexual behavior in general. The rejection would be limited to a specific manifestation

³ The original had a Dutch translation here (note by the translator, MvGP)

⁴ Rose (2018), (2021), (2022) and (2023).

⁵ What I would like to say specifically to LGB Christians, in addition to the contributions found in the previous footnote, can be found, for example, in Rose (2009) and (2012).

of same-sex sexual behavior, such as sex with minors ('pederasty'), or sex for payment as a religious act ('temple prostitution'), or sex in a 'pagan-idolatrous context'. RC3 places appropriate critical caveats to these limitations.

I am convinced that the conclusion at the end of RC3 just quoted is indeed correct.⁶ This conclusion is also drawn by other denominations at home and abroad that are close to the NGK in terms of denominational conviction.⁷ The conclusion is shared by a selection of knowledgeable biblical scholars and scholars of other theological disciplines.⁸

Wisdom and correction

- (a) *Conduct the discussion with an open Bible. Too often and too quickly, a discussion is primarily based on experience, intuition, and emotion. The discussion must be conducted based on the Bible.*

~ RC6

3. **Chapter 6 'Making Choices' (RC6) gives our churches the advice 'Conduct the discussion with an open Bible.' The credibility of that advice is undermined when the chapter itself a few pages earlier allows things like experience, intuition, and emotion to be decisive. The context there is a plea to make room for same-sex unions with a sexual dimension.**
The teaching of Christ and the Apostles on marriage and sexuality is sidetracked at an essential point. In doing so, RC6 fails to realize a primary teaching goal from the wisdom and knowledge transmission in Old and New Testaments: 'correction'. Wisdom and correction are inseparable. Those who are not open to correction lead astray. The fruit of correction is a life of peace and righteousness.

The denominations mentioned above have deduced from this exegetical conclusion that there can be no room in the church of Christ for same-sex unions with a sexual dimension. RC6 takes a different path where it explicitly pleads for openness to such unions. In this way the teaching of Christ and the Apostles, rooted in the Torah for the people of Israel, is sidetracked on an essential point (see statements #3 and #4 below).

I cannot interpret this plea in any other way than as a choice in which experience, intuition, and emotion ultimately are decisive (see statements #4 and #5 below). The result is that the teachings of Christ and the Apostles lose their corrective function at an essential point. For me this is unacceptable, because in the teaching of wisdom and knowledge in Old and New Testament correction is a primary teaching goal. Let me explain this.

⁶ Cf. Rose (2010).

⁷ Such as CGK Task Force (2017), CRCNA (2022) and PCAGA (2020).

⁸ I limit myself to a few names of biblical scholars and theologians who argue *in favour of* the acceptance of same-sex unions with a sexual dimension, while concluding that the Bible unequivocally rejects same-sex sexual intercourse: Brooten (1996), 244, 301, 302; Johnson (2007); Sanders (2015), 370-73; W. Loader (2017), 120, 144-49; MacCulloch (2003), 705.

The first time the pupil is addressed directly in the book of Proverbs, he hears these words, 'Listen, my son, to your father's »correction«'.⁹ The word *correction* refers to 'teaching the avoidance of faults'. It is 'originally, and usually, a lesson intended to correct a moral fault'. Correction 'is always given by a superior to an inferior, who is morally obligated but not forcibly compelled to listen and learn'. It involves 'authoritative correction and discipline' and not 'counsel that one might offer a superior'.¹⁰

The presence of the word *correction* at the beginning of Lesson One in the book of Proverbs ties in with the brief introduction at the very beginning of the book. There the learning objectives of the book are formulated. In those learning objectives, surprisingly, it is not the word *wisdom* that is dominant, but the word *correction*.¹¹ To despise wisdom and correction is typical of a fool, says the last verse of this short introduction.¹²

Correction and experience

The theme of 'correction' forms a common thread throughout the book of Proverbs. In Lesson Three¹³ of the long introduction to the Book of Proverbs¹⁴ the pupil is first warned not to rely on his own insight and not to be self-willed.¹⁵ A little further on in the lesson he is urged to be open to correction. There is also a reason given, linked to an empirical observation:

My son, do not despise the LORD's »correction«,
and do not resent his rebuke,
because the LORD disciplines those he loves,
as a father the son he delights in.
Blessed are those who find wisdom,
those who gain understanding.
~ a wisdom teacher (Prov. 3:13, NIV ['discipline'])

The comparison with a loving father is a good example of the function of empirical observations in the book of Proverbs. These serve the *transfer* of wisdom and knowledge, which is different from wisdom and truth finding. 'The results of the observational exercises that the fathers give their sons are known in advance'.¹⁶

The degree to which people are open to correction determines the direction they point out to themselves and others:

⁹ Prov. 1:8, NIV ['instruction'].

¹⁰ Fox (2000), 34. Cf. Widder (2014), 192-93; Stewart (2016), 86-87; Winkler (2017), 89.

¹¹ This dominance is easily recognized in the concordant rendering in NJPS (3x 'discipline').

¹² Prov. 1:7.

¹³ Prov. 3:1-12.

¹⁴ Prov. 1:8-9:18.

¹⁵ Prov. 3:5-7.

¹⁶ Kartje (2014), 48-52. Cf. Fox (1989), 90-91 and (2007), 670-74 on Prov. 6:6-11; 7:6-27, 24:30-34.

Whoever heeds »correction« shows the way to life,
but whoever ignores correction leads »« astray.
~ a wisdom teacher (Prov. 10:17, NIV [‘discipline’; ‘others’])¹⁷

Correction and love

In the teaching of Christ, ‘correction’ also is a recurring learning objective. In the Gospels it is found, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount (e.g., the repeated opposition: ‘You have heard’, over against: ‘But I tell you that [...]’, in older translations: ‘But I say to you’)¹⁸ and, for example, in Christ’s teaching on the grounds for divorce (‘I say to you this: [...]').¹⁹

Correction is a regularly recurring teaching opportunity in letters of Christ to Christian congregations recorded by John the Seer in the book of Revelation. Words such as ‘But this I have against you [...]’ recur several times in these letters. In the letter to the church in Laodicea, Christ designates himself as, ‘the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation’. In this last of the seven letters, Christ — like the wisdom teacher in the book of Proverbs — makes a connection between correction and love:

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent.
~ Christ (Rev. 3:19)

Correction, peace, and righteousness

The anonymous writer of the letter to the Hebrews also sees correction as a proof of love: ‘God is treating you as his children.’ He points out the purpose of correction: ‘God disciplines us for our own good, in order that we may share in his holiness’. At the same time, the letter writer is realistic: ‘No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful’. Yet there is a good reason to persevere: for those who have been formed by correction ‘it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.’²⁰

Unity, diversity, and the Kingdom of God

Context and scope

- (b) *But what about unity in diversity? Is there still room for local congregations to form their own policies? For us, Romans 14 and 15 guide us in this.*

~ RC6

¹⁷ A rendering such as that in NRSV (‘goes astray’) does not do justice to the root of the verb used; see (in addition to dictionaries of Hebrew): Fox ([2000](#)), 520; J. Loader ([2022](#)), 146-47.

¹⁸ Matt. 5-7.

¹⁹ Matt. 19:9.

²⁰ Heb. 12:4-11.

- (c) *The churches could make a similar statement about same-sex relationships: they are allowed to be there.*

~ RC6

3. **In RC6, the statement of intent is declared: ‘For us, Romans 14 and 15 is the guiding principle’. The credibility of this statement is undermined when, in the next paragraph, RC6 suggests to the churches to declare that same-sex unions with a sexual dimension ‘are allowed to be there’.**

‘I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean’.²¹ These words of Paul the Apostle, quoted in RC6, are set in a clearly defined context: disagreement about food and drink (and about feast days).²² This context defines the scope of Paul’s words. RC6 declares Romans 14-15 ‘the guiding principle’ and then suggests that the churches should accept same-sex sexual relationships in their midst in analogy to Paul’s words in Romans 14.

This suggestion of RC6 does not do justice to the specific context of Paul’s words. ‘The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’.²³ These words of the Apostle a few sentences further on indicate the — from the perspective of the Kingdom of God — relatively small weight of the subjects of disagreement in the church of Rome, such as eating and drinking. That small weight explains that when it comes to eating and drinking, Paul says, ‘whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God’.²⁴

Being part of the Kingdom of God

There are also topics of relatively great weight — seen from the perspective of the Kingdom of God. Then Paul sees no room for dissent. The reason is that they threaten one’s being part of the Kingdom of God. *Porneia* (‘forbidden sex’), including the same-sex variety,²⁵ is such a subject. In such cases, the Apostle speaks in the imperative, ‘Flee from »porneia«,’²⁶ or ‘flee from idolatry’.²⁷

The two themes of *porneia* and idol worship — often in this order — are in the Top Three of lists of sinful behavior that threatens one’s being part of the Kingdom of God.²⁸

²¹ Rom. 14:14.

²² About this identification of the subject in these chapters there is presently ‘[an almost universal agreement](#)’, Barclay (2013), 192. Cf. Shogren (2000), 242.

²³ Rom. 14:17.

²⁴ Rom. 14:22.

²⁵ See RC3 for the explanation of the words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* in 1 Cor. 6:9.

²⁶ 1 Cor. 6:18.

²⁷ 1 Cor. 10:14.

²⁸ 1 Cor. 6:9-10, Gal. 5:19-21 (in these two letters *porneia* is in a higher position than idol worship), and Eph. 5:3-5. Cf. Rom. 1:26-32; Col. 3:5-6.

You will not find the themes of Romans 14 and 15 (food and drink, feast days) in such lists of Paul.²⁹

The guidance of the Apostle Paul himself

- (d) *Accept that there is diversity and that there are differences [...] The committee in its entirety does not have the boldness to reject that diversity.*

~ RC6

4. **To avoid the appearance of arbitrariness or bias, RC6 had better declare the complete oeuvre of Paul guiding — rather than two less relevant chapters. One consequence of that move would be that it is no longer possible to make an appeal to the Bible to support RC6's call for acceptance of the existence of diversity of opinions with respect to same-sex unions with a sexual dimension.**

A reader of the chapter might suspect that for RC6, Paul may apparently be directional when he affirms the ideals and preferences that Western societies of the twenty-first century, such as the acceptance of diversity. RC6 could refute this criticism by making not Romans 14-15 but their author's complete oeuvre the guiding principle.

To declare the complete oeuvre of Paul the Apostle the guiding principle has two consequences. It would mean (i) that the Paul of all the epistles written by him has as much authority as the Paul of Romans 14-15. Specifically, this means, for example, that the Paul of Romans 1 cannot be used against the Paul of Romans 14. It would mean (ii) that RC6 would allow itself to be pointed by the author of Romans 14-15, Paul, to a passage from his oeuvre that is many times more relevant because of its related theme: 1 Corinthians 5-7.

Declaring Paul's entire body of work to be the guiding principle, including Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 5-7, is not without risk. It is a bold step, however. It will help boldness to grow in rejecting the existing diversity around same-sex unions with a sexual dimension. The call in RC6 for acceptance of this diversity will no longer be defensible with an appeal to the Bible.

²⁹ [Whereas participation in](#) idolatry, or in sex with a prostitute, were utterly incompatible with Christ, and could not be performed in honour of Christ or in gratitude to God (1 Cor 6,12–20; 10,14–22), there is nothing about kosher-rules or Sabbath-observance that Paul considers intrinsically incompatible with loyalty to Christ'. Barclay (2013), 200. cf. Brooten (1996), 282; Belousek (2021), 264-66.

Paul joins Christ's teaching with this distinction in Mark 7:17-23 (cf. Matthew 15:12-20), where the Gospel writer concludes that Christ declares 'all food to be clean. He deduces this from Christ's preceding words, 'that nothing that comes into man from outside can make him unclean because it does not enter his heart but his stomach and disappears again in the cesspool.' After declaring 'all foods clean', there still remain matters that are marked 'unclean', so much becomes clear from the remainder of Christ's words. He lists thirteen 'evil things', including 'porneia' (this time in the plural) and 'adultery' (also plural). Of these he says, 'all these evil things come from within, and these make man unclean'.

Exegesis and hermeneutics

5. **'The Bible can have something to say without needing other forces to regulate that or introduce a special hermeneutics from outside the text so that we can know when and where it can speak' (Seitz).**

In 2006 Old Testament professor Christopher Seitz took stock of his years of participation in church discussions about the Bible and homosexuality. He observes that the interpretation of the Bible is in crisis. He distinguishes three phases on the road to an acceptance of same-sex sexual relationships. In *Phase One* it is *argued* that relevant passages of the Bible need to be interpreted differently, e.g., 'Romans 1 was about specific, exotic *kinds* of homosexual misconduct in late antiquity' (compare at thesis #2 above).

Phase Two admits 'that the texts did in fact say what they had previously been heard to say [...] And so it was conceded that the Bible really was consistently negative about same-sex sexual behavior. Now it became necessary to argue that what the Bible offered us was something like an overall guide for making decisions'. In *Phase Three* it is argued 'that the Bible does not help us with same-sex sexual behavior in our day, because what we have in our day was unknown in biblical times'.

In this typology, RC6 is clearly not in Phase One. It is very much like RC6 is in what Seitz calls Phase Two. In RC6, on the issue of same-sex sexual behavior, the Bible has, as Seitz puts it, 'no legislative (halakhic), exhortative, constraining, or strictly referential sense'; it has 'themes, which' resonate with intuitions or convictions already in place.³⁰

Shutdown

'I think it is important to state clearly that we do , in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture', writes Luke Johnson, New Testament professor. We 'appeal to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good'.³¹ This is clear language. I disagree, but I can comprehend it.

I cannot comprehend it when our report in RC6 culminates in a plea to make room for same-sex relationships with a sexual dimension, and in the call for acceptance of diversity on this point. It is a plea which — as I have argued above — undermines the credibility of (i) the recommendation to conduct the discussion in the congregations 'with an open Bible', and of (ii) the declaration of intent to make Romans 14-15 be 'the guiding principle'. My brain has a shutdown. My body protests: it gives me — literally — a stomachache.

³⁰ Seitz (2006), 176-78.

³¹ Johnson (2007).

Hermeneutics as reflection on the process of understanding

In 2013, the Deputy Committee Unity GKV & the Committee for Contact and Dialogue with other churches NGK (DOECCS) presented a ‘Second agreement on hermeneutic principles’. The two committees expressed, among other things:

‘we see that both in the NGK and in the GKV, obedience is under pressure and nowhere self-evident, but at the same time we see in each other the desire to obey God who speaks to us in his word. Hermeneutics is not a sham, meant to massage scripture and walk away from obedience.

[...]

By hermeneutics we do not mean an activity that follows exegesis, in which the gap between an ancient text and a modern reader must be bridged.

[...]

We understand hermeneutics as a critical reflection on the whole process of understanding, which includes exegesis. This process of understanding is not dependent on hermeneutics, but hermeneutics can critically guide the process of understanding and improve it where necessary.

[...]

In the ‘Agreement on hermeneutical principles’ we had already reached consensus on the relationship between exegesis and hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics must not be a means ultimately to set aside the Word of God with fine words.³²

Needless to say, RC6 ignores the consensus between two committees from the then NGK and GKV on the relationship between exegesis and hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is used once again in RC6 as ‘an activity that follows exegesis, in which the gap between an ancient text and a modern reader must be bridged’. As long as in RC6 several times the credibility of its own words in the report is undermined, I cannot but conclude — I wish that I did not have to say this — that what happens in this chapter of the report is exactly what it wants to avoid: ‘ultimately to set aside the Word of God with fine words’.

An interpretive process without regulation by hermeneutics

I experience the impasse in the discussion about the moral status of same-sex unions with a sexual dimension as — in Seitz’s words — ‘a crisis having to do with the Bible becoming a kind of “wax nose”, capable of any interpretation.’ I agree with Seitz that same-sex sexual intercourse is not ‘a particularly loathsome sin’. Indeed, LGB people in a relationship including a sexual dimension are not a category of ‘special sinners’.

Seitz lucidly describes where for me the problem lies: in ‘the Bible’s possible inability to speak in any clear or straightforward way at all’. The Bible contains a consistently negative judgment on same-sex sexual intercourse (cf. RC3 in our report). Seitz argues that an

³² DOECCS (2013). For criticism of an earlier version of the hermeneutical argumentation in RC6, see Minutes of NGK LV Zeewolde (2015), 7-8; De Boer (2015). Cf. also the discussion of NGK CAH (2015) by Nullens (2015).

appeal to 'a "plain sense" hearing of scripture' is born of a specific persuasion that is also my conviction. It is the conviction

that the Bible *can have something to say without other forces needing to regulate that or introduce a special hermeneutics from outside the text so that we can know when and where it can speak.*

[...]

the Bible is being forfeited in the specific area of sufficiency and trustworthiness, and that no cause, however well intentioned, can have that as an acceptable fallout.³³

Do good to your servant
according to your word, LORD.
Teach me knowledge and good judgment,
for I trust your commands.
[...]
I have strayed like a lost sheep.
Seek your servant,
for I have not forgotten your commands.
~ a person praying (Ps. 119:65-66, 176)

³³ Seitz (2006), 178-79 (emphasis original). Cf. Rose (2022).

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'It's not a pleasant silence'

The story of Gert and Anke, parents of Bas

(The story of Bas and Charles, part 3)

Gert and Anke grew up believing that homosexuality is not good and that a homosexual relationship should not be. This was not explained to them, nor was it talked about. But when they both got to know people in homosexual relationships who lived close to God, they thought: who are we to judge them? It is now clear to them that the Bible is not at all clear about homosexuality.

After a personal process of coping with the coming out of the closet of their son, Gert made a booklet. He made paintings, wrote short texts to accompany them and passed them on to people from the Wijdekerk (i.e. Wide open church). Because he received so many positive responses, he sent it to three publishers, one of which responded the very next day. The uniqueness of the booklet is that parents are the target group.

It is an honest story. Pain and struggles are also named. Really difficult was the story about the church. Gert kept on polishing and rewriting. Because the booklet also had to be a bridge between parents and church. When the new minister read a piece from the book in a service, it was a positive surprise for Gert.

In tears

Both of them found the discussion in their own church rather disappointing. There was a church evening when you were allowed to share your thoughts. Responses were not allowed. Gert burst into tears after a harsh condemning remark by a member of the congregation. As a start it was good, but there was no follow-up. A congregation-wide discussion about a draft policy document did not take place, even though this had been promised. The memorandum was immediately final, but it was verbally explained to son and son-in-law and to Anke and Gert. Then it seemed that the door to the Lord's Supper was open, but on paper it was worded in such a way that the door was as good as closed. The wording was changed at a later stage. At a second congregational meeting, the policy was explained but not substantiated. For Anke and Gert, it felt like a violation of

their privacy when throughout the process their son and his friend were mentioned by name.

Things could have gone differently

According to Gert and Anke, what would a good process in the congregation have looked like? It should have started with a church service, about tolerance, unity and connection with each other. That would have set the congregation the task of loving and enduring one another, Gert and Anke think. But the difference in pace between the congregation and individuals involved could not have been avoided.

The fact that their son Bas was temporarily kept from joining in certain church activities should have been avoided. During the policy-making process, Bas was no longer allowed to participate as a leader of the youth club, he had to leave a combo, and he was not welcome at The Lord's Supper. If he had been told in a conversation that the church had a hard time with this involvement of his, he could have withdrawn. Now he was 'suspended'.

For how long? Really very painful was the withholding from the Lord's Supper. Not welcome to the body of Christ, not welcome to God? At that time, Gert and Anke did not go to the Lord's Supper either.

Not a pleasant silence

By now, everyone is welcome at the Lord's Supper, Bas and his partner sing along in the combo but not together on stage - in accordance with a temporary direction from the council. But otherwise it is now completely silent. Gert and Anke have no more energy to enter into new discussions. There are some other gay people who remain in the background in the church. Or leave. This is not a pleasant silence. There has been no pastoral care for five years, no more talking about it. The policy is set, so the problem no longer exists. Gert and Anke feel a distance, they have the idea that they are shunned. Once they were at the center of the congregation, but now they are no longer asked for tasks.

The circle around Gert and Anke has become smaller, but is close and interested and often present at the right time. A blessing.

Contact with the council and pastoral care did not go well for Gert and Anke. In an initial conversation, the local elder felt that homosexuality was a choice. Gert and Anke felt held accountable for the choices the boys were making. The contact cooled and it still has not improved. The new pastor, on the other hand, surprised them positively by paying attention to the appearance

of the book.

The church communications team wanted complete control over the media releases following the publication of the book. That control went quite far by wanting to edit interviews. Still, the community continues to be valuable, Gert and Anke think. Bas and Charles are active there, and they themselves have good friends.

Child Wish

There is still a stumbling block: Bas and Charles' desire for children. The church's policy does not leave any room for children in a gay relationship. The church council does not want to clarify its content but only wants to respond when the boys' situation changes. So again ad hoc policy is made, Bas and Charles being the subject.

Ideally, the church should listen and listen again. Forming policy with all these different people with different thoughts is difficult, but listening to individual church members is more important. A theological discussion alone is not enough.

One of the other two children, deregistered due to the entire process; the other child is still involved in the church.

Bas and Charles need pastoral care, Gert and Anke think. Earlier they received that from the pastoral assistant, a wise lady of about 65 with good ears and a big heart. A former pastor of the congregation also came to their aid, giving attention and prayer. This is fine, but also confrontational because they did not get that empathy from the congregation.

Gert and Anke themselves learned more and more not to judge. They left that to God. They did not grow to dislike God, but they were angry and displeased with His ground staff. With harsh and dismissive reactions from people. Fortunately, God's love remained noticeably present in their lives. Also for the boys.

Advice

- ◆ In policymaking, the interested parties are easily forgotten. Policy makers should be aware of the tension between being careful in the relationship, on the one hand, and formulating policy, on the other.
- ◆ We should not be too quick to use words that are judgmental or can be taken that way. In a conversation, listening should have priority, in order to establish

understanding. Only then you can start passing on your own views or policy statements.

- ◆ Beware of silence after the policy has been formulated; for then church members still have a lot to talk about with each other.

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PART 2 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

8 Homosexualities from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century — an exploration

Wolter Rose

This chapter briefly maps out the developments in scientific research on homosexuality in three sections: developments where there is ‘overwhelming agreement’, developments where there is ‘almost general agreement’, and developments where there is ‘no agreement yet’.

CONTENTS

Introduction: Károly and Karl, 155 years of *homosexuality*

Topics, theories and models

Overwhelming agreement

Almost general agreement

No agreement yet

Conclusion: sexual diversity

LITERATURE

8.1 Introduction: Károly and Karl, 155 years of *homosexuality*

According to some, the history of homosexuality begins in 1869; according to others, that year saw the start of a new chapter of the history of homosexuality. It is the year when the originally German word *homosexuality* first appeared in a text intended for the general public. It was an anonymous pamphlet written by Károly Kertbeny. He had coined the word ‘homosexual’ a year earlier and used it in a letter to Karl Ulrichs. Károly Kertbeny (pronounced: *Kertbenj*) was an AustroHungarian writer, Karl Ulrichs a German lawyer. They wrote letters to each other about their shared mission: having the act of sex between two men removed from criminal law (decriminalization).

8.2 Topics, theories and models

Several topics in Kertbeny and Ulrichs' correspondence have continued to play a role in thinking and theorizing about homosexuality, such as the spiritually healthy homosexual, feminine or masculine homosexuality, and the innateness of homosexuality. In addition, there are some more topics, altogether ten. They are listed below in three sections.

8.2.1 Overwhelming agreement

1. *Mentally healthy, not mentally ill*

The homosexual described by Ulrichs and Kertbeny in their pleas for decriminalization is a mentally healthy man or woman. At the same time, psychiatrists are publishing scientific articles describing 'contrary sexuality' (their terminology for homosexuality) as a mental illness: a 'symptom of a neuropathic (psychopathic) drive',³⁴ or a hereditary 'sign of degeneration'.³⁵

In 1889, a psychiatrist decided to adopt Kertbeny's terminology for the mentally healthy homosexual in his own theory of homosexuality as a mental illness.³⁶ It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that the interpretation of homosexuality as a mental illness was widely abandoned. An important impetus for this was that in 1973 the American Psychiatric Association, a professional association of psychiatrists, removed homosexuality from the *Manual of Mental Disorders*.

8.2.2 Almost general agreement

The development of new models and theories of homosexuality contributes to a more representative picture of reality. An important step is a model developed by Klein.³⁷

³⁴ Westphal (1869), 73.

³⁵ Von Krafft-Ebing (1877), 305-11.

³⁶ Von Krafft-Ebing (1889).

³⁷ Klein (1993), 15-19.

VARIABLE	PAST	PRESENT	IDEAL
A. Sexual Attraction			
B. Sexual Behavior			
C. Sexual Fantasies			
D. Emotional Preference			
E. Social Preference			
F. Het/Homo. Lifestyle			
G. Self-Identification			

People rate themselves on a 7-point scale from 1 to 7 as follows:

For variables A to E.:	For variables F. and G.:
1. = Other sex only	1. = Hetero only
2. = Other sex mostly	2. = Hetero mostly
3. = Other sex somewhat more	3. = Hetero somewhat more
4. = Both sexes equally	4. = Hetero/gay-Lesb. equally
5. = Same sex somewhat more	5. = Gay-Lesb. somewhat more
6. = Same sex mostly	6. = Gay-Lesb. mostly
7. = Same sex only	7. = Gay-Lesb. only

(a) Factors of sexual orientations and phases over time on the 7point spectrum of the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid ~ source: Klein (1993), 19.

The [Klein Sexual Orientation Grid](#) (KSOG), figure (a), adds depth to the picture in two ways. First, it does not look (unlike an earlier model) at one aspect of sexual orientation, but at seven: A. Sexual attraction; B. Sexual behavior; C. Sexual fantasies; D. Emotional preference; E. Social preference; F. Het/Homo. lifestyle; G. Self-identification.

Second, the KSOG distinguishes three phases in time: past, present, and an ideal situation in the future. Those completing the KSOG can assign themselves a score of 1-7 for each of the factors and in each of the phases in time, for example, for the factors A-E: 1. Other sex only; 2. Other sex mostly; 3. Other sex somewhat more; 4. Both sexes equally; 5. Same sex somewhat more; 6. Same sex mostly; 7. Same sex only.

A publication by the Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau³⁸ identifies three issues as the strength of Klein's model: (i) 'gradations of sexual preference'; (ii) 'differences in experiences among dimensions as a real option'; and (iii) preferences and people's behavior 'can change over time'.³⁹ Each of these three concerns are explained in the following three topics (## 2-4).

³⁸ SCP (2012).

³⁹ Keuzenkamp and Van Lisdonk (2012), 10.

2. Same-sex attraction — more often non-exclusive than exclusive

The first issue the scp points out is ‘gradations of sexual preference’. Empirical research over the past decades shows that the reality is more complex than what is suggested by the usual dichotomy between *either* homosexuality *or* heterosexuality – ‘a gross simplification which ignores the reality of human behavior’.⁴⁰ A growing number of persons indicate that they are in an intermediate category in terms of sexual attraction, for example: (i) I am *slightly more* attracted to the opposite sex, or (ii) I am *predominantly* attracted to the same sex, or (iii) I am *equally* attracted to both sexes.

According to many, the binary model is in need of replacement. There are calls for a continuum or spectrum model of sexual orientations: a sliding scale with exclusive heterosexuality at one end and exclusive homosexuality at the other, and a number of intermediate categories in between.⁴¹

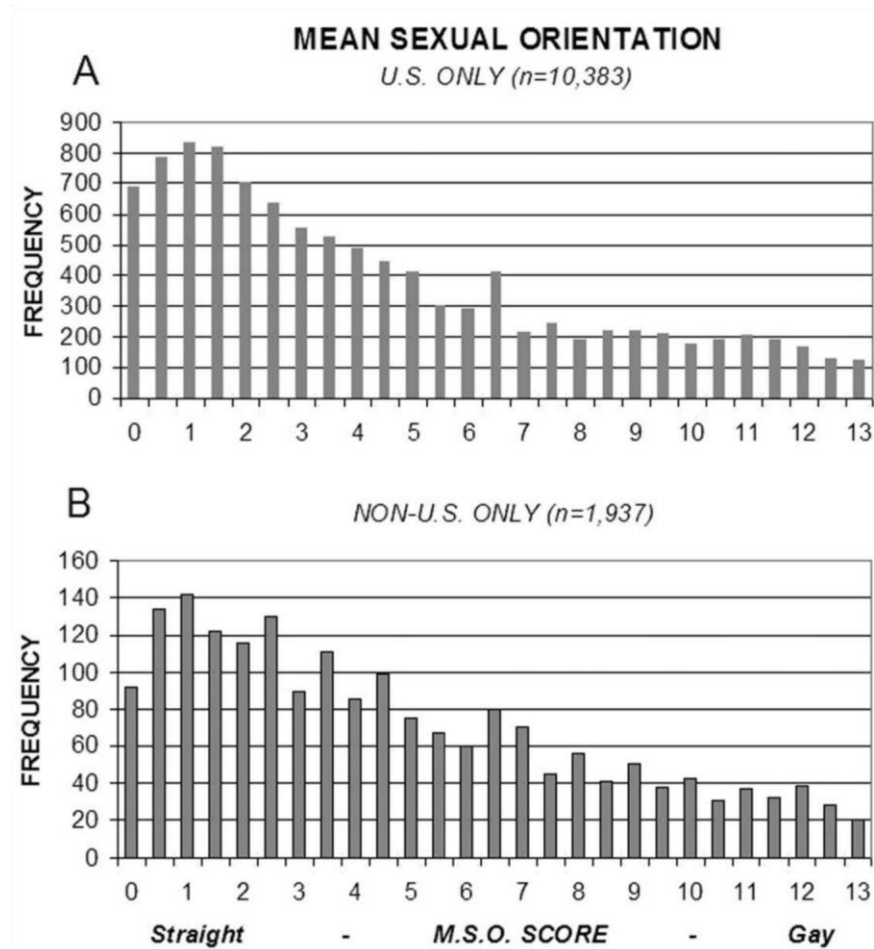
Such intermediate categories (ksog A 2-6) now appear to be numerically more strongly represented than exclusive homosexual attraction (ksog A 7), both in the Netherlands⁴² and elsewhere.⁴³ Figure (b), from an Internet survey with participants from the United States and 47 others countries, shows the [distribution of sexual orientations](#) across the spectrum.

⁴⁰ De Waal (2022), 319.

⁴¹ Keuzenkamp and Van Lisdonk (2012), 10-11; Diamond and Rosky (2016), 369-70.

⁴² RutgersWPF (2013), 13, 17; Nikkelen and Vermey (2017), 38.

⁴³ Diamond and Rosky (2016), 381.



(b) Distribution of sexual orientations across a 13-point spectrum ~ source: Epstein et al. (2012), 1372.

3. *Attraction, behavior, self-identification — for some a complete overlap, for others an incomplete overlap*

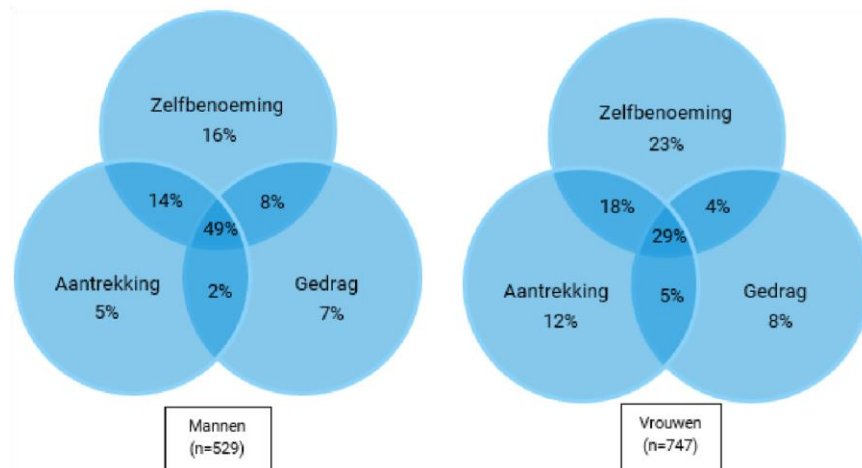
With respect to the second strength of the KSOG (differences in experiences among dimensions): a recurring topic in the research on sexual orientations is the not always complete overlap for the dimensions of attraction, behavior, and self-identification.⁴⁴ 'Many variations are possible', e.g. (i) someone labels themselves 'straight', is in a relationship with someone of the opposite sex, but only experiences attraction to the same sex; or (ii) someone experiences attraction to both

sexes, is in a relationship with someone of the same sex, but labels themselves 'gay'.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Epstein et al. (2012), 1368; Bailey et al. (2016), 48; Raaijmakers et al. (2019), 15.

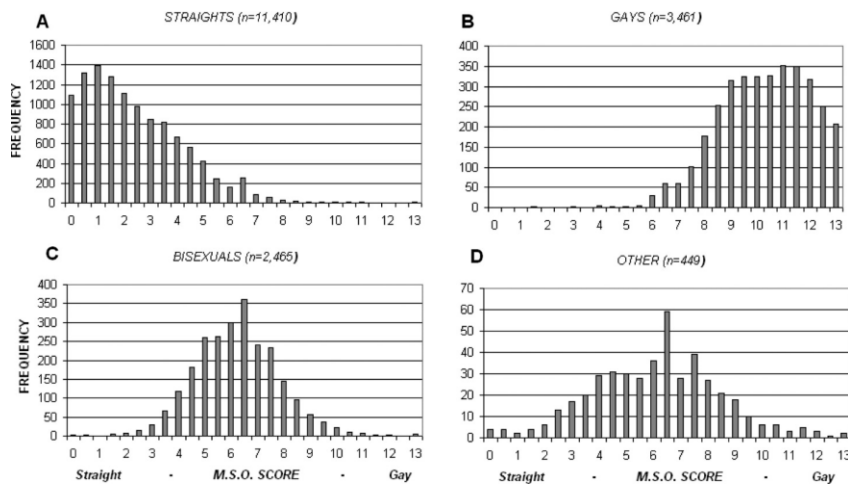
⁴⁵ Kuyper (2015), 33.

Figure (c) shows [the overlap](#), complete and incomplete. For example, in this small-scale Dutch study, the percentage of complete overlap of the three dimensions is higher in men (*Mannen*) than in women (*Vrouwen*): 49% vs. 29%. In 5% of the men and 12% of the women there is no overlap of attraction (*Aantrekking*), behavior (*Gedrag*) or self-identification (*Zelfbenoeming*).



(c) An example of complete and incomplete overlap between dimensions of a homosexual orientation ~ source: Van Lisdonk and Nikkelen (2017), 54.

Figure (d), from the same study as figure (b), clarifies what an [incomplete overlap](#) between the two dimensions of sexual attraction and self-identification concretely means. Especially with the labels ‘straight’ (A), ‘gay’ (B), as well as ‘bisexual’ (C), and with a non-specified self-identification group (D), it becomes clear that the spread across different positions on the (in this case 13-point) spectrum is much broader than the self-identification would suggest.



(d) An example of the incomplete overlap between sexual attraction and self-identification among A. straights, B. gays, C. bisexuals, and D. others
 ~ source: Epstein et al. (2012), 1368.

4. Fluidity — for some, not for all

The third strength of the KSOG is attention to change over time. This phenomenon is called fluidity, and defined as ‘[change](#) in attraction, behavior and/or identity over time or within different social contexts’.⁴⁶ In an earlier stage of empirical research, this form of fluidity was observed primarily in women, heterosexual and homosexual.⁴⁷ At a later stage, fluidity in men also entered the picture.⁴⁸ It seems that fluidity does occur [more](#) in women than in men,⁴⁹ and [more](#) in the non-exclusive homosexual and heterosexual categories than in the exclusive ones.⁵⁰

Sexual fluidity is generally not categorical, e.g., from gay sexuality to heterosexuality, or vice versa, but concerns a [single position](#) on the spectrum of sexual orientations,⁵¹ e.g., someone recalibrates his sexual attraction (i) from ‘slightly more to opposite sex’ to ‘both sexes

equally’ (KSOG A 3 to 4), or (ii) from ‘mostly same sex’ to ‘somewhat more same sex’ (KSOG A 6 to 5). According to some, fluidity is primarily a [younger-generation](#) characteristic.⁵²

⁴⁶ Raaijmakers et al. (2019), 15.

⁴⁷ Diamond (2008).

⁴⁸ Savin-Williams (2017).

⁴⁹ Bailey et al. (2016), 56.

⁵⁰ Rosario and Schrimshaw (2014), 562.

⁵¹ Savin-Williams, Joyner, and Rieger (2012), 106, 107, 109; Rosario and Schrimshaw (2014), 562.

⁵² Kaufman and Powell (2014), 2; Murray (2019), 23.

Sexual fluidity is distinguished from a change in sexual orientation driven by conversion therapy or other intervention,⁵³ it is something that happens to a person spontaneously. Fluidity is not a general characteristic that occurs in every individual person.⁵⁴

The term '*sexual orientation range*' captures the degree of flexibility or choice in expressing one's sexual orientation. That degree is not the same for everyone, but varies, 'with some having little or no flexibility in the way they express their sexual orientation and others having considerable flexibility'.⁵⁵

5. *Female and male homosexuality — differences*

The attention to both male and female homosexuality from the early years gradually narrowed to a focus on male homosexuality. In the course of the twentieth century, the uniqueness of female homosexuality gets a more prominent place on the agenda. Differences are pointed out when it comes to, for example, causes of a homosexual orientation;⁵⁶ the positioning on the spectrum of sexual orientations (see above, topic #2): on average, fewer differences between the extremes (exclusive orientations), more among the intermediate categories; and a higher degree of fluidity (see above, topic #4).⁵⁷

6. *Masculine, feminine — some (more of) the one, others (more of) the other*

Ulrichs (mentioned in the introduction) initially thought that a homosexual man always had 'a female soul in a male body'. Kertbeny disagreed. This is an example of manifestations of homosexuality that are not mutually exclusive alternatives, but variants. Thus, in addition to masculine homosexual men, there are also homosexual men who have a more or less feminine personality. Something similar applies to feminine lesbian women and masculine lesbian women.

The distinction feminine vs. masculine can play a role in the perception of the ideal partner.⁵⁸ In research on the origins of homosexuality the variation between feminine and masculine homosexuals can also play a role. For example, there is evidence that the fraternalbirth-order effect (see below, topic #9) is more prevalent with feminine homosexual men than with masculine homosexual men.⁵⁹

⁵³ RCPSYCH (2014), 2-3; Waidzunus (2015), 141.

⁵⁴ Bailey et al. (2016), 56; Diamond (2016), 250.

⁵⁵ Epstein and Robertson (2014), 393, 394; Epstein et al. (2023), 2, 5.

⁵⁶ Diamond and Rosky (2016), 366-67.

⁵⁷ Kuyper (2006), 174.

⁵⁸ Parsons and Grov (2013), 21.

⁵⁹ Blanchard (2018), 8-10.

8.2.3 No agreement yet

7. *Attraction — to sex or to gender?*

A recent development is the definition of a homosexual orientation as attraction to the same *gender*, in the sense of ‘the sense of being male, female, both or neither’,⁶⁰ rather than attraction to the same *sex*. A (complicated) example: ‘[A person](#) who has been assigned the male sex at birth and identifies himself as a woman and falls in love with a man who identifies himself as a man, does [...] not have homosexual feelings, but heterosexual ones’.⁶¹

Approaches such as these assume that the distinction between biological sex and social gender, and sometimes also the distinction between male and female sex, is a social construct. This assumption is not uncontroversial: ‘[We regard](#) the claim that sex is neither fixed nor binary as entirely without scientific merit — there are two sexes, male and female, and in humans sex is immutable (disorders of sexual development are very rare and in any event, do not result in any additional sexes)’.⁶²

8. *Bisexuality — one of the intermediate categories on a spectrum, or a residual category in a dichotomy of exclusive heterosexuality and exclusive homosexuality?*

In the binary model of sexual orientations (see above, topic #2), bisexuality functions as a residual category: those who did not fit into the categories of exclusively heterosexual or exclusively homosexual were called bisexual. Even at a time of increasing use of a spectrum model of sexual orientations, some continue the practice of bisexuality as a residual category. Thus it may happen that in a survey, ‘[f]or

the sake of [clarity](#) [...] people who are “more gay/lesbian” than “bisexual” are included in the category of “bisexuality”’.⁶³

In addition to such a pragmatic reason, strategic reasons that may play a role are also pointed out, such as: defending ‘an [interest](#) in the stability of categories of sexual orientation’;⁶⁴ or: ‘[t]o achieve a status of normality [[by placing individuals](#)] in fixed sexual orientation boxes’.²⁴⁶

Others propose that bisexuality should be considered one of the intermediate categories, in addition and equal to other intermediate categories, such as attracted to ‘*slightly more* same-sex’, or ‘*predominantly* same-sex’. [Research](#) suggests that people identify more

⁶⁰ SCP (2018), 6.

⁶¹ Van der Lee (2021), 13.

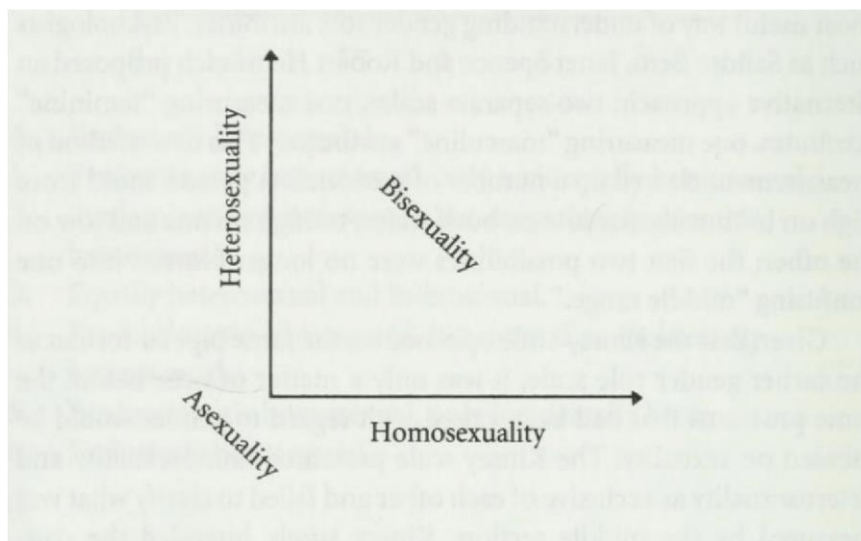
⁶² Hilton et al. (2021); Marinov (2020); Bhargava, Arnold, et al. (2021).

⁶³ RutgersWPF (2013), 13.

⁶⁴ Yoshino (2000), 362, 400-10. ²⁴⁶ Waidzunus (2015), 16.

with intermediate categories such as “predominantly homosexual”. This in turn argues for sexual orientation as a continuum approach’.⁶⁵

There may be an additional argument for this approach to bisexuality as a full-fledged intermediate category. That is when bisexuality is ‘the “combination” of homosexuality and heterosexuality, not a compromise between the two’,⁶⁶ i.e., a mutually independent attraction to both the same and opposite sex, including the possibility of a *high degree* of attraction to *both* the same *and* opposite sex,⁶⁷ see figure (e).



(e) The Storms Sexuality Axis System, revised by Amanda Udis-

Kessler

~ source: Udis-Kessler (1992), 314.

9. *The origins of homosexual orientation — one factor: biology/genes, or a combination of factors: biology/genes and postnatal environmental factors?*

This section of the overview of developments in scientific research on homosexuality is longer than the other sections, and yet it is too short. First, we discuss two recent deviations from a trend. Then we look at a possible connection between the impasse at which research into the origins of homosexual orientation has arrived and the diversity of the phenomenon of homosexuality.

⁶⁵ Raaijmakers et al. (2019), 14.

⁶⁶ Weinrich, Klein, et al. (2014), 350.

⁶⁷ Storms (1980), 785; Udis-Kessler (1992), 313-14; Swan (2018), 33-35; Hale, Miller, et al. (2019), 2-3; Zietsch and Sidari (2020).

Two recent deviations from a trend

A first deviation from a trend is a less adamant speaking about what we know about the causes of homosexual orientation. '[T]he causes of sexual orientation (homosexual or heterosexual) are not known at this point,' writes the American Psychiatric Association,⁶⁸ which in 1973 erased homosexuality from the *Handbook of Mental Disorders*.

'There is no consensus among [scientists](#)' despite 'much research' on 'the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation', wrote the American Psychological Association a few years earlier.⁶⁹

This cautious tone is different from the tone in the following two statements by different scientists. (i) '[Modern scientific research](#) indicates that sexual orientation is largely determined by the time of birth, partly by genetics, but more specifically by hormonal activity in the womb arising from various sources', or in other words, '[sexual orientation](#) is biologically determined'.⁷⁰ (ii) 'All the [research](#) points to an early programming of our sexual orientation in the brain during our development in the womb, which fixes it for the rest of our lives [...] The environment after birth does not have any influence on this'.⁷¹

In the second deviation from a trend not only is the tone different, but also the content. There is a greater openness to a multitude of factors that may play a role in the development of a homosexual orientation: not only biology/genes, but also postnatal environmental

factors. Many scientists '[think](#) that nature and nurture play complex roles'.²⁵⁴ Around the same time the British Royal College of Psychiatrists wrote that '[\[s\]exual orientation](#) is determined by a combination of biological factors and postnatal environmental factors'.²⁵⁵ That statement was a notable change: two years earlier, the same College made a statement that mentioned only one factor, '[i]t [would appear](#) that sexual orientation is biological in nature, determined by genetic factors [...] and/or the early uterine environment'.⁷²

Research into the origins of homosexual orientation and the diversity of the phenomenon of homosexuality

'None of the biological factors identified to date can by themselves explain homosexuality', Balthazart observes at the end of his book *The Biology of Homosexuality*.⁷³ He wants to consider various options. One of these is 'different types of homosexuality', each with its own origin. Another scenario is a different combination of 'the effects of the different biological factors that have been identified' for each individual person. Finally his third option, which he cannot rule out, is that 'all the biological factors I have described only produce a predisposition to become homosexual,

⁶⁸ APA (2013).

⁶⁹ APA (2008), 2.

⁷⁰ Wilson and Rahman (2005), 10 (authors' emphasis), 41.

⁷¹ Swaab (2010), 91.

⁷² RCPsych (2012).

⁷³ Balthazart (2012), 158.

and these predispositions can only develop in a specific set of psychosocial contexts that are not yet identified'.⁷⁴

The current state of research combined with the diversity of the phenomenon of homosexuality is reason for Adriaens and De Block to be not very optimistic about a breakthrough in research on causes of homosexual orientation. Despite unanimous efforts, 'scientists have still not been able to identify any essential biological property or set of properties of homosexuality, and there is little reason to believe that they soon will.' The number of biological markers identified is small, 'and reliable findings invariably come with the caveat that they do not explain the sexual orientation of all homosexuals, meaning we cannot consider them *essential* properties'.⁷⁵

They mention the fraternal-birth-order effect as an example. It is 'one of the most robust findings' in research on causalities of homosexual orientation. The fraternal-birth-order effect implies that the probability that someone will be homosexual increases by about 33 percent per older brother, this means that '[a]ssuming that a man

²⁵⁴ APA (2008), 2; APA (2013).

²⁵⁵ RCPSYCH (2014), 2.

without any older brothers has a 2% chance of being homosexual, [a man](#) with one older brother has a 2.6 % chance; with two, three and four older brothers, the chances are 3.5%, 4.6% and 6.0%, respectively'.⁷⁶ The fraternal-birth-order effect has a limited scope: it does not occur with women, and with men in no more than '[about 15-29%](#)' of men in any homosexual group.⁷⁷

The limited explanatory power of the fraternal-birth-order effect 'should make us cautious in expecting scientists to find any essential property soon', Adriaens and De Block argue. They find it 'odd to expect, as essentialists do, that homosexuality would be a highly homogeneous category of people, when it seems likely that its biological etiology will be rather diverse'.⁷⁸

Similar observations can be made about the results of research on homosexual orientation in identical twins. About 25% share a homosexual orientation, which does not indicate genetic *determination* of a homosexual orientation. Rather, it indicates that genetic *influence* is

'[moderate](#) — certainly not overwhelming'.⁷⁹

Bailey et al. use the words '*largely misplaced*' to describe the association sometimes made 'between [political attitudes](#) about homosexuality and beliefs about the causes of sexual orientation'. They speak of 'faulty reasoning about causation and about the relevance of causation to moral judgments'. They point to the importance of the distinction between orientation and behavior: 'it makes no sense to say that one chooses

⁷⁴ Balthazart (2012), 158-59.

⁷⁵ Adriaens and De Block (2022), 112; Müller (2008), 147.

⁷⁶ Bailey et al. (2016), 79.

⁷⁷ Blanchard (2018), 9; Bailey et al. (2016), 79; Balthazart (2018), 234.

⁷⁸ Adriaens and De Block (2022), 113.

⁷⁹ Bailey et al. (2016), 76; Diamond and Rosky (2016), 367.

one's sexual orientation'. What a person does choose is 'to behave consistently or inconsistently with one's sexual orientation'.⁸⁰

10. *Sexual orientation and identity formation — the core or a thread?*

What does sexual orientation mean for someone's identity formation? One answer to this question states that it means that '[t]he [object](#) of one's desire—and whether she/he is of the same or opposite sex—becomes a powerful indicator of what kind of person the desiring subject is', it is 'a key that unlocks deeply secret aspects of that person's psyche'.⁸¹ Some identify with this answer, e.g., '[My homosexuality](#) is the most central part of my identity. I sensed from an

early age that I was different. That has fundamentally influenced the course of my life'.⁸²

What opinions diverge on is whether this interpretation of the significance of a sexual orientation to one's identity is an essential characteristic of modern homosexuality. This question is often answered in the affirmative. One problem is that there are also people with a homosexual orientation who do not recognize themselves in the answer above. For example: he 'does not hide his homosexuality', but 'he does not experience it as his identity [...] that he happens to be gay, well, that is coincidental', writes the accompanying text to an interview. The interviewee, *NRC* journalist Bas Heijne, put it this way himself, 'The fact that I am gay is completely natural for me, but I do not identify myself as gay. I *am being* identified as gay'.⁸³

Diamond and Rosky want to do justice to people 'who do *not* consider their [sexual orientation](#) to be a central and fundamental component of their personal identity'. They cite two groups: (i) younger generations who do not wish to assign themselves a sexual identity or use the usual labels *lesbian*, *gay* or *bisexual* 'more critically and strategically than previous generations', and (ii) 'sexual minorities from ethnic, cultural, or religious backgrounds that do not share the contemporary Western conceptualization of sexual orientation as a defining status designation'.⁸⁴

A new paradigm has been emerging in the United States over the past two decades, in which 'the individualized [emancipation](#) of young people is central, as is the approach that sexuality is positive and fluid'. The paradigm assumes that [sexual identity](#), as a result of processes of normalization, is no longer an essential characteristic for people. A Dutch researcher qualifies '[t]his positive and promising paradigm [as] appealing', even when she has to note that it has not yet reached this point in the Netherlands.⁸⁵

Opinions differ on exactly what has happened in terms of sexual orientation and identity formation over the past 50 years. Verhaeghe points to a 'potentially dangerous side

⁸⁰ Bailey et al. (2016), 61-62.

⁸¹ Ormand (2018), 7.

⁸² Buijs (2019).

⁸³ Heijne (2021), 103, 105.

⁸⁴ Diamond and Rosky (2016), 376, 383.

⁸⁵ Van Lisdonk (2018), 154, 81-82, 124.

effect' of a shift 'from sexuality experience to sexual identity': 'the evolution toward a corresponding, compelling identification' to 'even the idea that a particular sexual preference determines who you are as a human being', a notion he finds 'alienating'.⁸⁶

Others, on the contrary, see an increase in freedom of choice. Especially those born after 1970 'have much more latitude in deciding the place of being gay in their sense of identity' and many many are choosing to view it as a thread rather than a core self-definition.⁸⁷ This would imply that there is not but one way in which a person's sexual orientation associates with his or her identity formation: 'Sexuality makes up a large share of self-perceived identity of some people, a small share of others'.⁸⁸

8.2.4 Conclusion: sexual diversity

The developments in scientific research into homosexuality outlined above over a period of 155 years (1868-2023) provide a diverse picture, with a multitude of topics, theories, and models. Homosexuality is a much more complex phenomenon than is sometimes realized. All in all, it is understandable why people talk about 'sexual diversity' today.⁸⁹

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⁸⁶ Verhaeghe (2021), 40-41.

⁸⁷ Seidman (2002), 9-11, 255n14.

⁸⁸ Sedgwick (1990), 25.

⁸⁹ TNO and Rutgers (2020), 120; Rutgers, COC and WOMEN Inc. (2023).

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9 Biological aspects of sex, gender and sexual orientation

A report that deals with aspects of sexuality should pay attention to the biological side of our humanity. We are human beings of 'flesh and blood'. This physicality is an aspect that is easily overlooked in ethical reflection. The present chapter provides an overview of data from biology with regard to being male and female and with regard to sexual orientation.

It is good to remind ourselves in advance that biology does not prescribe what is right or wrong. This idea has been called the naturalistic fallacy: the idea that what is natural/biological would automatically be right. This chapter is not about biological knowledge as a source of normativity, but about the interpretation of sexuality and sexual orientation as the landscape in which we make our way.²⁷⁴ A second preliminary remark is that the representation of data from biological science is not value-free. Popularizing literature in particular can easily produce simplistic and colored representations of biological phenomena.

9.1 How do we become men or women?

Biologically speaking, the beginning of our humanity lies in the fusion of sperm and egg into a single cell (zygote or fertilized egg). That cell contains 46 chromosomes, two of which are referred to as sex chromosomes (X and Y chromosomes). One half of these chromosomes come from the mother and the other half from the father. Egg cells contain a

²⁷⁴ I ignore here the fact that the letters of Paul in particular do make reference to nature (e.g. Romans 1:26,27 and 1 Corinthians 11:14). We must realize that the concept of nature in the Bible is different from that in modern natural science, which is limited to the factually observable. See also: T.M. Hofman, 'Phusis bij Philo: Theologische kanttekeningen' ['Phusis in Philo: Theological comments'], in: P.H.R. van Houwelingen (ed.), *Exeget[h]isch. Feestbundel voor prof. dr. J. van Bruggen [Exeget[h]ical. Celebratory volume for Prof. Dr. J. van Bruggen]*, Kampen: Kok, 2001, 184-205. F. de Lange, 'Leert de natuur ons mores?' ['Does nature teach us mores?'] In: *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift*, volume 46, no.1 (January 1992), 34 - 50. See also A. de Bruijne, *Verbonden voor het leven [Connected for Life]*, 38 and 198.

single X chromosome, sperm cells contain an X or a Y chromosome and depending on that, a zygote with xx or xy arises.

From the single-cell cell, a clump of cells is created by cell division, all of which have basically the same genetic information stored in the chromosomes. Gradually, an embryo grows where initially there is no difference in body shape between boy and girl. Only later *differentiation* occurs. Differences *develop* (!) in male or in female direction. This is a complex process which is primarily regulated by one gene normally located on the Y chromosome, the SRY gene. If this gene is present, a testicle will form from the originally undifferentiated bipotential sex organ (gonad). If it is absent, an ovary will be formed from the same ground structure. The testicle and ovary then produce hormones that direct the development of the internal and external sex organs in either a male or female direction. Again, they develop from a basic structure that is still the same for both sexes in the beginning.

9.2 Variations in sexual development

What has been written above about sex differentiation is a huge oversimplification of an extremely complex process. A process that can be disrupted or run differently on many levels. For example, there are children born with two X-chromosomes in each cell, where the adrenal glands make too much testosterone and a development in the male direction can occur. (NB this is rare today thanks to improved diagnostics and treatment. But in the past there were people who went through life as men with two X chromosomes). There are also people who are born with an xy chromosome pair, develop testis and make testosterone, but where the cells in the body are insensitive to testosterone due to a mutation in the DNA. These people develop in the female direction and are fully seen as girls at birth. It is not until puberty, when it appears that there is no menstruation, that it becomes clear what is going on. This is usually identified as an androgen insensitivity syndrome.

The above variations in sex development are nowadays referred to as Disorders of sex development (DSD, formerly 'intersex') and are relatively rare. People can be very troubled by this and struggle with questions (am I a 'real' man, a

'real' woman?)).²⁷⁵ The Christian community should give special attention to these people and their questions. In addition, knowledge of this can save us from a too black-and-white approach to the topic of man/woman. Sex is a multi-layered concept. People can be chromosomally 'male'" and outwardly 'female'. There can also be physical 'in-between' forms. The clitoris and penis develop embryologically from the same basic structure, and sometimes it is unclear in a child after birth whether it is a boy or a girl.

With the knowledge of biology and medical science, the variations in sexual development described above can often be easily explained. They almost always develop from rare mutations in the genes coding for the production of hormones or hormone receptors or of substances responsible for signal transduction.

9.3 Gender identity and brain development

So far we have been talking about things that can be seen, sex characteristics or differences in brain structure. But it is evident that identity development also diverges in two directions. A person gradually develops the awareness of being a boy or a girl. This awareness is referred to as *gender identity*. Usually the gender identity developed is in line with physical sex characteristics, but not always. There are people who exhibit physically male sex characteristics, but have much more of a female gender identity (and vice versa). That situation is referred to as gender dysphoria or gender incongruence.

The biological cause of gender dysphoria is much less clear than that of the variations in sex development described above. We do know that there are not only differences between men and women with regard to sexual characteristics (sexual organs, breast development, beard growth, etc.) but also differences in brain structures. Some areas are larger in men than in women and vice versa. Here too there is variation and there are men who show more female development in brain development and vice versa. It could very well be

²⁷⁵ See above: Den Heijer, M. (2023). Waarom ben ik zo? Zelfbeeld en geslachtelijkheid voor het aangezicht van God. [Why am I like this? Self-image and sexuality before the face of God.] In: *Psyche & faith* 2023 (4), 195- 203.

that our gender development is related to the development of our brain.

9.4 Sexual orientation

Just as gender identity is formed in the early years, sexual orientation also develops in the early years. Statistically speaking, most men will fall for women and vice versa. But there are also variations in sexual orientation, such as homosexual orientation. How our sexual orientation is formed and whether biological factors play a role in this has been the subject of many studies. Broadly speaking, these can be divided into: a) genetic studies, b) studies into prenatal influences, c) neurobiological studies, and d) comparative animal studies.

Genetic studies can be distinguished into those in which DNA research is carried out to find out which parts of DNA can be associated with certain human traits and those in which no DNA research is performed, but only the mode of inheritance is examined. For example, Mendel discovered the inheritance pattern of certain traits of the pea plant without even knowing about the existence of DNA. Only much later were the genetic variations found that were responsible for these traits. While some traits in humans show the same single inheritance pattern (for example, eye color), many traits are the result of a multitude of genes or of a combination of certain genes and certain environmental factors. For example, height is a trait that is clearly heritable, but where it is now clear that hundreds of genetic variations play a role. Together, these explain about 80% of the differences between people in height. This measure is referred to as 'heritability' and is estimated from twin studies and family studies.

In similar ways, studies have been done on the heritability of sexual orientation. The heritability of homosexuality is estimated at about 30%.^{276,277} This estimate is lower than commonly found for gender dysphoria (about 40%).²⁷⁸

²⁷⁶ Ganna et al. *Science* 2019 (365), 6456.

²⁷⁷ Långström et al. *Arch. Sex. Behav.* 2010 (39), 75-80.

²⁷⁸ Polderman TJC, et al. *Behav Genet.* 2018 (48), 95-108.

The same study that measured heritability also looked at the association with genetic markers on DNA. This was a large study of just under half a million people, which ultimately found five sites in the genome that were related to same-sex sexual behavior, but each explained less than 1% of the variation. Taken together, all the genetic variants tested were responsible for 8 to 25% of the variation in sexual behavior.

All in all, these studies indicate that while there is a certain genetic influence, it is not as strong as for other traits, such as intelligence, for example, where the estimates are around 60%. Recent studies are paying attention to the fact that it is not only DNA that is influential, but also the regulation of DNA. This epigenetic research is relatively new and it remains to be seen whether it will really provide new insights.

In addition to studies on genetic determinants of sexual orientation, numerous studies have been done on other biological influences such as hormonal and immunological factors. Studies in adults show no differences in hormonal factors. However, there are indications that exposure to sex hormones in the womb might play a role. The problem is that this exposure is difficult to measure and can only be estimated indirectly. For example, the ratio in finger length between the second and fourth fingers is considered a measure of prenatal exposure to the androgens (substances with male hormone activity). Although a number of studies show that people with *same sex attraction* have a different 2D:4D ratio than people with a heterosexual orientation, meta-analyses appear to confirm these results only for women and not for men.²⁷⁹

Another observation indicating biological influence on orientation is that homosexual preference is more common in men with multiple older brothers.²⁸⁰ This observation has been confirmed in multiple studies and is associated with an immune response to proteins encoded on the Y-chromosome.

²⁷⁹ Teresa Grimbos 1, Khytam Dawood, Robert P Burriss, Kenneth J Zucker, David A Puts. Sexual orientation and the second to fourth finger length ratio: a meta-analysis in men and women. *Behav Neurosci* 2010 (124), 278-87.

²⁸⁰ Blanchard R. Fraternal birth order and the maternal immune hypothesis of male homosexuality. *Horm Behav* 2001 (40),105-114.

9.5 Neurobiological studies

In recent decades, neuroscience has rocketed up. Much of our daily life, such as eating and drinking, sleeping and getting up, but also numerous behavioral aspects such as aggression, being introvert/extrovert, are related to processes and structures in our brain. In 1989, the Dutch brain researcher Prof. Dick Swaab reported that a certain part of the hypothalamus is clearly larger in homosexuals than in heterosexuals.²⁸¹ At the time, this led to a major uproar in the public discussion about the usefulness and necessity of research into the causes of homosexuality.

With the advent of functional MRI, it was possible to study not only brain structures in living people, but also brain activity while performing certain tasks (for example, doing a sum or seeing certain pictures). This resulted in many associations between the function of certain brain areas and particular behavior. On the basis of this approach, research was also conducted to relate differences in brain areas to variations in sexual orientation. Just as in genetics, there are various studies that have found differences, but there is a lack of replication in other studies, so that there is no generally accepted theory.

In addition to genetic and neurobiological studies, comparative research on animals may help answering the question of biological determination. Ecclesiastes already describes the strong association between humans and animals and wonders who notices that the breath of human children rises upward and the breath of animals descends downward to the earth (Ecclesiastes 3). Much of our behavior has analogies in the animal kingdom. For example, it has been reported that same-sex sexual behavior has been found in many animal species. Scientific publications about this are very much in the context of an evolutionary question: how can homosexual behavior develop if it does not lead to reproduction?

²⁸¹ F. Swaab, M.A. Hofman An enlarged suprachiasmatic nucleus in homosexual men. *Brain Research* Volume 537, Issues 1-2, December 24, 1990, Pages 141-148.

9.6 Conclusion

It is not easy to summarize all these scientific publications. In any case, it shows that the development of our sex and gender is a comprehensive and complex process, in which there is variation at many levels. With respect to gender identity and sexual orientation, it is very plausible that biological factors play a role. At the same time, there is no overarching theory or model. Probably both are the sum of genetic factors, early hormonal factors, and environmental factors, all of which also interact in complex ways.

It must be said that in many studies the definition of sexual orientation is ambiguous. Often studies deal with people who identify themselves as gay or lesbian. This includes not only sexual orientation, but also self-identification and self-acceptance. Incidentally, it is questionable whether many new insights will emerge in the coming years. Studies on causes (etiology) are under social pressure because they can easily give the impression that this is a disorder or that results can be used for discriminatory measures by regimes.

De Bruijne concludes his chapter on biological aspects of homosexuality with a section on everyday experience. Even if science does not provide a unified and conclusive view of the biological determinacy of homosexuality, it is obvious that many people who discover in themselves that they fall for persons of the same sex feel that this 'happens' to them (and in Christian circles often in a staggering ways) and is in no way a 'choice'.

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10 Identity development and trends

In this chapter, we explore the question posed in Chapter 2:

‘Is sexual orientation the core of a person's identity, or is it the core for some and a thread in their identity formation for others?’

10.1 What do we mean by ‘identity’?

In everyday speech, we associate identity with individuality. We think of core traits that make something or someone unique. This applies to objects and persons as well as to groups and peoples. You can recognize a Rietveld chair at a glance. There is no misunderstanding about that. The identity lies in the chair as a whole, the design, construction, color, and design as only Rietveld made it.

Next, when we talk about the identity of persons, it is also about the uniqueness of persons. What makes my father, sister, partner that unique person we know among thousands? Since we discovered that personalities are mainly shaped by what is innate and what is offered by their environment (*nature and nurture*), it turns out that the identity of someone is already more difficult to describe. A person's individuality is more than their personality and character. This is where origin, family, and life course come into play. It also has to do with how someone behaves, how he presents himself to us. Do we then see his identity? If we know someone well, we think we can tell. If someone is further away from us, it becomes more complicated. Do we know Donald Trump's identity? Or do we only know the image he spreads of himself through the media? Then the main issue is to recognize the apparent individuality of someone. A polished identity. Trump wants to appear different, nicer to us than he is. When others then take that up, they make a caricature of him.

We can also speak of identity of social groups. What makes a group unique and recognizable? Over the past 75 years, there has been a clear effort to express ‘*vrijgemaakte*’ (liberated reformed, gkv) identity in education, youth ministry, newspapers, politics,

mission, development work and trade unions. Studies and publications appeared, for example on 'the identity of Reformed education'. In the seventies of the last century, a specific elaboration of the text 'Thou entirely different' (Ephesians 4: 20 NBG51) was often given on youth days (national gathering days!) and in sermons. A striving for uniqueness, which also led to uniformity. The 'image' of the 'liberated GKV' was that they thought the same about everything and also did many things the same. This then led to a stereotyping: 'GKV-members are the only true church' and to less flattering caricatures. Determining the identity of social groups entails the phenomena of inclusion and exclusion. The more clearly and unambiguously the identity is formulated, the sharper the dividing line can be drawn between those who are within and those who fall outside the group. Who does not remember the discussions about the admission policy of Reformed organizations? For the new Dutch Reformed churches, the challenge is to break away from these caricatures and build a new, inclusive identity.

10.2 Biblical identity

In this context, we also speak of 'biblical identity'. In the Bible itself, you can already see that groups have certain fixed and inalienable idiosyncrasies that make them include or exclude others. There are various examples of this: the patriarchs wanting their sons to marry within the family, the Egyptians' disgust with shepherds and Hebrews, certain groups not being allowed to participate in the temple service, David's dislike of the lame and blind, Nehemiah's sending away of the Moabite women, etc. That presupposes something that we call identity and that we want to keep pure. Jesus breaks through that thinking and sometimes in a very surprising way as in the parable of the Good Samaritan. At the same time, that tendency (wanting to keep one's identity pure) also becomes an essential characteristic of the New Testament church: read 2 Cor. 6:14-18(!). Moreover, the New Testament regularly speaks of 'those outside'.

For completeness, we mention here 'the national identity'. What constitutes the Dutch identity? We are not like the Americans who show their unity with their *Rally round the flag*. We cherish the identity of 'just act as usual, there is no reason to

exaggerate' and of 'everything goes'.²⁸² We like to call ourselves 'tolerant and hospitable' but in practice that turns out to be more of an 'image' than an 'identity'. We are also familiar with the stereotypes of a 'Calvinist' nation where 'minister and merchant go hand in hand'. But where few people still know who Calvin was and what he actually taught.

In this chapter, we further explore how sexual orientation has come to play a role in the identity of individuals in the present age. In doing so, we also look at how this influences the identity of social groups and especially the church of Christ.

We approach this topic not from theology, but primarily from philosophy. With regard to identity, philosophy asks the question of the development of the concept of identity in the past and present.

10.3 Sexuality in relation to identity in today's society

Over the centuries, man has made himself known in many ways in his relationship to others and to his environment. And man has also been known in many different ways. In our time, we see that the manifestation of sexual orientation is more prominent and outspoken among both heterosexuals and homosexuals than, say, a hundred years ago. Back then, biological sex, church, family, ancestry, and profession played a determining role in a person's identity. One person was known primarily because of his social position: civil servant, clerk, artisan. Someone belonged to the working class. Another person belonged to the notables and was a lawyer, notary, doctor, mayor. Yet another belonged to the peasantry. Furthermore, a person was mainly a family member, father, mother, brother, sister, daughter, son. People manifested themselves via their social position. That is how they made themselves known and that is how they were known. Society was clearly divided into distinct roles for men and women, classes, columns and boxes. In part this had to do with the morality of sexuality, but the main thing was that identity was determined by other factors such as work or social position, being a man or a woman. In this way, much of one's identity remained hidden from others. The

²⁸² 'Moet kunnen', op zoek naar een Nederlandse identiteit, Herman Pleij, Amsterdam 2014.

question about one's sexual preference was hardly ever asked openly, if at all. It was not done.

I²⁸³ remember well from my youth the baker who came every day to sell the bread from door to door. He had his own melody, the singer-comedian Herman van Veen would say. He sang arias from operas. And every day he had the same joke: 'Tomorrow I will give you a currant bun'. When I reminded him of this the next day, he would invariably say, 'That's right, that's what I promised, tomorrow, I'll get you a currant bun.' This baker was known to us in the first place as a baker, then as a singer, choir member, member of our church and as a neighbor, the store was two blocks away. We knew he was unmarried, but this was dismissed with the remark that he had not yet met the right person. That was also because he had to work so hard. He had no time for a wife. Only a few people close to him knew that his sexual orientation was towards men, people of the same sex. He was not known to us as such. This was partly because he did not disclose himself as such either. He would never have manifested himself as gay.

During the twentieth century, we see a new development regarding sexual orientation. We see that for many people sexual orientation is becoming an important part of their lives. This greater emphasis can be seen, for example, in activities aimed at being male or female. Statements such as 'the man-cave is really a thing for men' are strongly stimulated by influencers via social media such as Instagram and TikTok. Via the same media, the ideal woman is also framed.

A person's sexual orientation thus seems to become more defining of his identity. The possibility of a different orientation is increasingly seen as an inescapable fact, that one had better bring out into the open. For gays and lesbians, it can cause a lot of difficulty, suffering, and struggle to acknowledge their orientation. In a later phase, being differently oriented is no longer seen as something you just are. It can also be a choice. It is not limited to being gay or lesbian, but there are as many identities as there are colors in the rainbow. Views on sexual orientation thus change into views on fluid gender, as we find in part of the LHBTIQ+_movement. Here we must remind ourselves

²⁸³ Henk Schaafsma.

that identity has much more to do with personal choice and is directly related to concepts such as 'freedom' and 'self-determination', 'self-realization' and 'self-expression'. For 'self-realization', we think of an inner process, in which the person is primarily concerned with discovering and clarifying for themselves who they are. For 'self-expression', we see primarily an externally directed manifestations of how a person presents themselves and how they want to be seen. We see this particularly in those who proudly manifest themselves as 'gay'.

10.4 The development of the concept of identity.

Identity develops from Descartes onward as a reflection on the question, 'Who am I?' From that time on, a more detached philosophical question increasingly develops into an essential and existential question. Important moments in this development are the Enlightenment, Romanticism, the time before World War I, the time between the World Wars and after World War II, and the modern era.

Along with the development of the concept of identity toward the existential essence of being human, we also see a development toward the emancipation of man in his bodily appearance. More attention is being paid to physicality as part of being human. That which was suppressed, hidden, and undervalued is coming out. It becomes known and is made known, manifests itself, and becomes decisive for one's identity. Think of the abolition of slavery, the emancipation of women, the focus on racism and sexual orientation. The twentieth-century sexual revolution extends to all walks of life. The individual is liberated from the bourgeois-Christian frameworks that had existed since the nineteenth century and that reappeared after World War II. Now people are also defining the concept of identity separately from such external, higher orientations as virtues and religion. Identity is defined more from physicality. The liberation of norms and values is also reflected in the manifestation of sexual freedom. This freedom gives room for confessing otherness as an aspect of identity. Homosexuality acquires an important symbolic value. It becomes a sexual identity.

A next step in the development of the concept of identity is the view that sexual identity and the whole concept of identity is a linguistic construct. We find this view with Foucault

and Huijer. In the current LGBTQ movement we find the concept of sexual orientation defined as a definite trait, on the one hand, and as a choice, on the other. Even when they continue to speak of sexual identities, they no longer think of an inescapable predefined identity. It is their own unique, individual identity of choice which they themselves (co-)construct and which can therefore change just like that in the course of their lives. The writer Gerbrand Bakker rails against this. He denies this and states that being gay is part of his being, but that it is not all-important for his identity. He describes this aptly, 'Splinter Chabot, as a professional homosexual, has become the embodiment of that remarkable shift from being gay as part of your being to being gay as your identity'. This statement is a clear example of the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, 'Is a sexual orientation the core of a person's identity, or is it the core for some and a thread in their identity formation for others?'

10.5 Contemporary philosophy

Drawing on some contemporary philosophers, we describe below the concept of identity as an illustration of today's thinking.

10.5.1 Paul Verhaeghe²⁸⁴

'Our identity is an original plagiarism', Verhaeghe argues. The 'original' lies in the combination of the various choices the person makes that make him unique. The 'plagiarism' lies in the fact that we make those choices from existing images from the past, upbringing, family, and history. In that process, identification and separation work for life. Identification brings us into groups and in most cases this leads to conformity. We want to belong somewhere and so we conform to the norms and values of the group. We also want to develop our own style and distinguish ourselves. This requires choices resulting in separation. Separation therefore makes

²⁸⁴ Paul Verhaeghe is a doctor of clinical psychology and professor emeritus at Ghent University. He is also a practicing psychoanalyst. He wrote the trilogy: *Autoriteit, Intimiteit en Identiteit* [*Authority, Intimacy and Identity*]. In it, the relationship of man to the other is central.

autonomy possible. For Verhaeghe, , identity is not innate. He sees it as a construction. In his view, identity comes down to a complex composition of a number of crucial social relationships, in each of which a person occupies a typical position. He distinguishes four basic relationships: toward the opposite sex, toward the older generation and thus to authority, toward one's peers (in age group, as neighbors, colleagues), and finally toward one's own body and one's 'self.' He rejects religion, science, and knowledge as constitutive sources of identity. He advocates choices of the self for the good life.

10.5.2 René van Woudenberg²⁸⁵

Van Woudenberg has written an analytical-scientific study of 'the mystery of identity'. In it, he distances himself from the idea that a person is a social construct, or a *self-made* person. He claims that the phenomenon of personal identity through time is a mystery. 'It is amazing that a person remains the same person despite the many developments he goes through, despite the passage of time, despite misunderstanding. All I see is that there is such a thing as the identity, in the strict sense, of persons through time. I can do no other than accept this as a brutal and mysterious fact.'

10.5.3 Charles Taylor²⁸⁶

Taylor distinguishes 'authenticity' and 'originality' as concepts for expressing the self. Authenticity takes shape only in the relationship to the common. Dialogue with others and defining a shared horizon of values is essential. Authenticity does not imply reclusiveness, but contact. In emphasizing my own originality, I define myself. But you cannot define yourself without a 'significant other'.

²⁸⁵ René van Woudenberg is a Dutch philosopher and professor at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (vu). His field of study is knowledge theory and ontology. He wrote among others *Gelovend denken. Inleiding tot een christelijke filosofie* [Thinking as a believer. Introduction to a Christian philosophy].

²⁸⁶ Charles Margrave Taylor is a Canadian philosopher. He has made contributions primarily to political philosophy, although he is also known for his analysis of the modern self. He wrote, among other things: *Sources of the Self* (1989) and *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1992).

To do that, I need to use language. I need language to communicate myself to the other. We need relationships to come to fulfillment, to maturity. My identity comes about in dialogue. For this dialogue, the *interlocutor*, the significant other, is a condition, a necessity. This can be my life history, my narrative, but also an authority outside of me, such as religion and art. Taylor argues that you cannot know man without his story.

10.5.4 Paul van Tongeren²⁸⁷

Van Tongeren puts into perspective the overemphasis in our time on identity and how it is perceived as a man-made construct. We pay insufficient attention to the tragedy and vulnerability of life. We live in a culture that has gone from surviving to experiencing. The search for a meaningful existence has been replaced by the pursuit of a happy life. Van Tongeren identifies a development from ethics (how should we live) to aesthetics (how is our style of living). Self-expression is the illusion that you can construct your own life. Thus we have lost our orientation, we live in an uncertain time. Religion offers no solution for this. We have to search again for the concept of the art of living.

10.5.5 Marli Huijer²⁸⁸

Huijer makes a plea to end the obligation to confess to a particular identity. She relates this to sexual identity. Such a confession leads to coercion: people must declare their sexual identity in order to be able to claim the rights that flow from sexual freedom. Without sexual identity, there are no sexual rights. But every confession carries the danger that we are locked into that identity, that we must behave according to the norms and expectations that come with it and are no longer free to adopt a different identity. Huijer thus follows the line of Foucault who speaks of 'a new harness'.

²⁸⁷ Paul van Tongeren is Professor of Philosophical Ethics at Radboud University Nijmegen and Parttime Professor of Ethics at KU Leuven. He wrote among other works *Deugdelijk leven: een inleiding in de deugdethiek* [*Virtuous life: an introduction to virtue ethics*] (2003). In 2021, he became Denker des Vaderlands (National Philosopher).

²⁸⁸ Marli Huijer is a Dutch professor emeritus at Erasmus University Rotterdam, philosopher and former physician. From 2015 to 2017, she was Denker des Vaderlands (National Philosopher). She wrote among other works: *Beminnen. Nieuw licht op seksuele vrijheid*. [*Loving. New light on sexual freedom*.]

10.5.6 Hans Burger²⁸⁹

As a theologian, Burger has thought a great deal about the 'subject' and the implications of our changed thinking about the subject for the meaning of religion. He states, 'whether we are modern, postmodern, or already past that, no one can avoid the consequences of a "turn to the subject", [i.e.] the human self with its thinking, will, and feeling.' Burger characterizes the self-image of people in our culture as an 'enclosed self'. One may say that a buffer has formed around the self. In this he follows Taylor. Burger states that Christ is the source of unity of all Christians. It is also the source of the identity of the individual Christian.

10.6 Evaluation

We agree with Verhaeghe when he states that 'identity' takes shape through development and interaction. On the one hand, during growth and development, a person identifies with the environment in which they grow up. This leads to conformity. On the other hand, there is separation that demands choices and leads to originality. Verhaeghe thus describes identity pithily as an 'original plagiarism'. It is also clear that for almost every philosopher consulted, the interaction or dialogue with the environment plays a constituent role to a greater or lesser degree. It is appealing that Van Woudenberg accepts one's personal identity as a 'brutal and mysterious fact'. It remains something to wonder about, that one human being is more than superficially different from another. 'Uniqueness' and 'identity' are inseparably related. Identity does not come about as a matter of course; it involves choices that have to be made for each person with pain and effort, with joy and sorrow.

In our time, it is characteristic that people rely less than before on external sources for their identity formation, such as family, tradition, knowledge, and religion. Instead, there is much more of a concentration on internal sources such as: emotion, feeling, the will, and desire. The emphasis is on the fact that a world

²⁸⁹ Hans Burger is professor of Systematic Theology at Utrecht Theological University. Hans Burger studied theology in Kampen and Zurich. In 2008 he received his PhD from Barend Kamphuis on presenting a dissertation entitled *Being in Christ*. In 2017, his book *Leven in Christus. Over de betekenis van het verhaal van Jezus*. [*Living in Christ. On the meaning of the story of Jesus.*]

is being created in which 'being happy' is the highest goal. Identity for many people equals self-expression in a bubble of like-minded people. In these groups, people look for and find confirmation of their identity. We observe this in young people who reveal themselves to others mainly through social media in clothing, fashion, style, and gadgets. Around us, we also see it among adults and the elderly in their religious orientation. Previously, the main question in churches was: Where is the Lord most served according to His Word? In our time, we see many people asking themselves: Which community suits me, where do I come into my own, and which church or movement do I feel at home with?

In a world full of unease, the desire for a protective home plays a dominant role. That home can lie in new, modern forms and also in older, traditionally colored communities. It's just where you feel happy. Remarkably, this desire is accompanied 'with more passion than ever'. It brings with it a drive that brings like-minded people together. In networks and communities, people encourage each other to 'go for it'. However, passion also leads to ambition. We are not satisfied with anything less than the best. Passion leads to a high standard. Demands may be made for the highest attainable. This applies not only to education and diplomas. It also applies to our identity. If you want to join our group, you have to meet a number of conditions. Otherwise, I will 'unfollow' you on Insta or TikTok and start 'hating you'. Otherwise, you will no longer be welcome in our app group and *mancave*. This merging of passion and high ambition should lead to great happiness and freedom. However, in practice this also leads to a closed group culture of like-minded people. That culture also has the effect of excluding and ignoring those who are not among the like-minded. It seems that nothing has changed since Biblical times, when certain outward appearances or norms used within a group were also the criterion for whether someone could belong to a group or not. If we apply this development to sexual orientation as a determining aspect of identity, we arrive at the description given by Huijer. She speaks of the emergence of a new frame, a construct with new frameworks, norms and values. In this she follows Foucault, who speaks of the emergence of a new harness.

10.7 Finding a way

When reading this piece, the reader might get the idea of a flow chart: you are naturally engaged in self-expression and self-realization, because that is what society prescribes in the present time, and so you look for a group you fit into and then you are either rejected or embraced. This is how it is often presented in the media. Does the idea of this flow chart also affect the church? Does it work the same way there?

All kinds of social developments and thus also those of self-realization and self-expression have a natural entrance into the church more than ever these days. We hear from young people that they do not understand what we in the church are so concerned about. The Bible gives them no answers as to how you can and may live with God if you want to be yourself. do not relate to 'Come as you are.' Most of them are still very much in the process of becoming someone. Their parents are already equally confused. Where should I stand between love for God and love for my child? ²⁹⁰Where we used to stick to clear frameworks and boundaries, now everything is so debatable. The church has not grown into this culture yet and is often awkward in matters related to homosexuality. Many congregations are not ready for the discussion about it. For many church members, the question we posed at the beginning is barely alive. For them, the answer to the question of whether gays can 'do it' or not is important because you can answer it with 'yes' or 'no'. They ignore what we, following Wolter Rose, call 'reductionism'. Nor do they employ speaking in the first person rather than the third person as proposed by De Bruijne. This too often leads to polarization and misunderstanding within the church. Fortunately, there is also warm embrace.

It is in this situation that Christians who are aware of their otherness seek a way. Or should we say they are trying to carve a path in which they make themselves known in their identity as a Christian? This can be a wrestling process, a struggle, and an exciting quest.

De Bruijne describes that the assumption of a homosexual identity changes the way gays deal with their orientation.

²⁹⁰ Read, for example, Annemarie van Heiningen: 'Zit jij bij ons in de klàs?' ['Are you in our school class?'] Bij het LHBT-vraagstuk gaat het vooral mis in de communicatie. [When it comes to the LGBQ issue, the main thing that goes wrong is communication]. <https://www.nd.nl/opinie/columns/1196168/zit-jij-bij-ons-in-de-klas-bij-het-lhbt-vraagstuk-gaat-het-vo>

Before the sexual revolution, only a small proportion of gay people practiced homosexual behavior. The others adapted to the prevailing heteronormative frameworks. Many were even married to a partner of the opposite sex and endured the complications this caused them to varying degrees. Others remained unmarried but controlled or hid their feelings from others and sometimes from themselves. When people began to experience homosexuality as an identity, these strategies became untenable. Gays have since experienced living in a heterosexual marriage as a rule as unbearable. Denying, suppressing, or controlling homosexual feelings conflicts with one's own identity and is therefore considered unhealthy and almost impractical. Conversely, it feels increasingly natural to be allowed to express one's own identity and to be fully who one is. We began this chapter by referring to this.

10.8 Christian gay and identity

Which way should you go as a Christian gay, when you do not want to confess yourself to those who indulge in free expression and fluid gender? Where will you be accepted if you want to lead your life's journey as a Christian-gay without entering into a love relationship with another person?

Where can you find a home if you as a gay person have chosen a celibate life? Where can you turn if, as a Christian, you want to give shape to your homosexual identity by entering into a relationship with someone of the same sex and promising love and fidelity to that other person? Where can you find a home and protection? In the development of their identity, many Christian homosexuals have already experienced a certain degree of acceptance by the Christian community in which they grew up. Often with ups and downs, sometimes with good memories. Would it be possible to seek a balance between living from a Christian-gay identity on the one hand, and living within the warmth of a Christian community that accepts you, on the other? Finding that balance offers space on the one hand and protection on the other. Can there be a community in this time and in this world that offers protection from loneliness, abandonment, and feelings that lead to suicide? Is there a community where there is unconditional acceptance in love?

It requires a contribution from each person in the community. In search for that, you will have to start together acknowledging that

perfection is not feasible. Suffering and brokenness cannot be denied. In the struggle that sometimes arises, you cannot avoid the unhappy moment. If you can bear it together, it usually produces moments of love and peace. It is the philosopher van Tongeren who calls it life art if you can go that way. Taylor emphasizes dialogue and story in relation to the bigger picture. Verhaeghe seeks the 'good life', but does not find it in faith and religion.

Nevertheless, they do provide building blocks for developing a healthy identity, for discovering 'the art of living'. Following Hans Burger, we can say that finding your identity in Christ lays an important foundation for accepting one another within the church of Christ. The recognition that my identity as a Christian gay starts with faith in the risen Lord Jesus and the recognition of the members of the church of Christ that they accept each member in their identity, may lead to a blessed life within that community.

10.9 Assignment

At the time of the pillarization, it was strongly emphasized within the church that its members should distinguish themselves. This was done by founding their own organizations. In word and writing, church members were urged to make themselves known in conversations, by their behavior, and their testimony. Young people were defined by the text from Ephesians 4:20-24, 'Thou entirely different'. In our time, that appeal has largely been hushed and dusted. Christian life takes on different connotations and content. The text acquires a new content for those who are differently oriented: they are completely different. When it comes to questions regarding the sexual orientation of each person in relation to the development of their identity, it is advisable to reconsider and respond to this text as a question. If we in the congregation confess together that we have all come to know Christ, how do we offer a place to those who are completely different (in sexual orientation or otherwise)? How do they enrich the Christian church community? There is a need for churches to energetically and attentively consider questions of gender in relation to the place of sexuality in Christian faith and in the Christian congregation. This should be an important task for the next deputy committee.

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11 Personal Reflections

Looking through a lens

A meeting with a woman many, many years ago. A conversation at her request, a conversation without a prayer at the end. That was a precondition, though. It became a kind of confession and a coming out. A conversation full of despair. She was divorcing her husband. She could not do otherwise. She had also let go of God. And thrown her Bible in the waste paper bin. Miraculously, that detail is etched in my memory.

Just before I left, she asked another question. Whether we could pray together. We could leave each other in peace despite all the sadness.

We saw each other many years later. Divorced. 'Happy?', I asked. She thought so. 'Religious?', she thought not. We were happy to meet. We wished each other all the best. But I left with a heavy heart. No faith. No praying together.

In the years of reflection for the deputy study, I came across the image of lenses. Through the lens of creation you see other phenomena than through the lens of brokenness. Through the lens of variation you see something different again than through the lens of re-creation. This is recognizable in the stories, interviews, and literature, and a lens does indeed help to look more closely at people and listen to or read their stories. But ultimately, how do these lenses help?

I also know the description of another encounter. A woman, a sinner, stood behind Jesus. Her tears cleaned His feet. She dried those feet with her hair, kissed them with her lips, rubbed them with fragrant oil. Simon the Pharisee saw a sinner. Jesus saw someone who showed much love. They were looking at the same woman and the same event. They looked through a different lens and saw something very different happening.

Can I learn to look that way? Like Jesus? Can we learn to look that way? To see how someone loves Jesus? Through a lens that reveals love for Jesus? After which we can say, 'Your faith has saved you, go in peace.'

That is what I hope for. That's what I pray for. In every exciting encounter of two people. Learning to see and discern together with a lens that Jesus offers us. The lens of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who is with us. And then continuing in the search for what is wise and good for the other person I meet, for gay or straight, for us as a faith community.

Wytze Bijleveld

A testing ground of congregational conversation

It was June 2020 when I was approached to participate in the deputy study 'Homosexuality in the Church'. They were looking for someone from the scientific community who is knowledgeable on that level about the ins and outs of sexuality and/or how our brains interact with it. With possible influence on the experience of sexuality. Preferably also a member of the CGK, but in a personal capacity.

In recent years, as an endocrinologist, I had been intensively involved in gender identity and gender dysphoria and had been partly involved in MRI studies and influence of genetics on these topics. I had also studied the ethical aspects of transgender care. In doing so, I had often put aside the subject of homosexuality a bit. I felt that the question being asked urged me to stop avoiding this topic.

At the same time, I felt the tension that this topic produces within church circles, including those of my own. How church unity is under tension from mainly two topics of which dealing with homosexual relationships is one. Yet it is precisely because of my commitment to the theme of 'church unity' that I have chosen to participate in the deputy study. We cannot preserve unity by avoiding topics.

Together with others, I have worked to ensure that the report is not only a theoretical approach - however important. The search for a way forward in adjacent issues requires deeply

listening to what the Bible says, but equally listening deeply to people's life stories. I would like to thank the people with whom I and the other deputies have spoken. They often feel many times the tension that I experience myself.

I am impressed by the many and deep conversations that have taken place among the deputies. Despite this, the report does not provide any totally new insights into the discussions that have been going on for decades. It is all about bringing together a variety of considerations about which the opinions differ. However, I did feel and experience that the commitment to Christ and to each other transcends opposing opinions.

In this, I believe, lies also the main challenge for the churches. How do we rise above the opposition of accepting and not accepting, when serving the only God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? In my opinion, it would be good to give a lot of attention to this in the discussions within and between the churches. In fact, the deputies have been the testing ground for this discussion.

Martin den Heijer

I just can't let it go

I just can't let it go. I haven't been able to for years. And I still can't. And probably won't for the rest of my life. It began in 2006 when I wanted to become a pastor later in life and studied in Kampen. I vowed to think about at least two things very carefully before leaving Kampen. One was homosexuality. I realized that it is not an issue you can discuss academically. After all, it concerns brothers and sisters in Christ, people of flesh and blood.

It felt more and more like an heavy duty to try to understand as best I could what was going on in all of them, the struggles, the thoughts, temptations, the search for acceptance, a place in church and society. I said to myself, 'Either you do that as best you can, or you keep your mouth shut. You can't

send people who come to you as a pastor in their distress back home with a few Bible verses and that's it. As if you say to them, 'Be well, dress warmly' but have nothing else to offer them.

One thing led to another. It became a final graduation project from which a booklet emerged. A conference followed. I was asked to give training sessions for church councils, for meetings of congregations and finally for the present deputy committee. Several times I was on the verge of quitting, but my wife said that this had come my way for a reason and that I should continue. I have a wise wife. But to this day, it is hard for me. Why? Because I get short circuits in my head and heart. I feel like Luther who kept knocking on a Bible text he just didn't grasp. He finally got it. I haven't. I struggle with all kinds of rules in the Bible, hermeneutical principles and more. I hesitate whether you can find approval in it for same-sex relationships in love and fidelity. And at the same time, there is that phrase 'it is not good that man should be alone', there is the thought of 'whatever can be against it when two people of the same sex want to be together in lifelong commitment'. And this short-circuit has only increased when I see how these things regularly coincide: living in a homosexual relationship and sincerely wanting to live as a Christian.

My heart's got it by now. But my theology hasn't yet. And if I ever get it theologically, will that match my heart or will they argue? I am not saying this to evoke pity. After all, it's not about me. I am straight as can be, have a lovely wife and a fine family. I am telling you my struggles because I think it is also necessary. I don't want to wrestle with this any other way. This does not go with dry eyes. In fact, it shouldn't. In the church of Christ, sometimes we have to speak to each other with tears flowing. In my opinion, we need to do that more than we do now. How beneficial that would be!

Maarten van Loon

Why I got back into it anyway

You don't join a church & gay sexuality deputy committee for fun. And certainly not if you have previously been involved in a church committee on 'ordained ministry & homosexuality' for six years.

These are long and quite demanding processes that take their toll on everyone involved. There is a great deal of personal involvement, everyone has a heavy responsibility to do justice both to God's Word and to homosexuals, the discussions are intensive and sometimes, no matter how good the personal relationships are, they are accompanied by clashes, lack of understanding, distrust and frustration. It sounds melodramatic - and the Dutch are not fond of that - but such a deputy committee is at times something of an agony. In the end, everyone is tired and relieved and grateful that the finishing line has been reached.

So why did I get back into it?

The book that grew out of my involvement with the 'Ordained Ministry & Homosexuality' committee of the Dutch Reformed Churches (*Van sjibbolet naar shalom. Ruimte voor homoseksuelen in de gemeente van Christus - From Shibboleth to Shalom. Space for homosexuals in the church of Christ*) I dedicated it to my parents, Rien Mudde and Ger Mudde-Bakker. They had died shortly before publication. Again almost forty years ago, a younger brother of mine had his *coming out*. He told me that he was gay and also that he had been on the verge of suicide for years, partly because he knew that our parents would have a hard time with this. He was right: they kept it from family and friends for years.

How complicated and difficult it was, and sometimes still is, to reveal that you are gay, to come out of the closet - and not only in church circles, but also in liberal and freethinking circles. And what gay people have suffered in the past from condemnation, stigmatization, and discrimination. And there are still so many homosexuals, both in the Netherlands and worldwide, who sometimes suffer greatly from this.

The sometimes difficult journey that a (deputy) committee on homosexuality has to go on is nothing compared to the journey that homosexuals themselves sometimes have to go on. And I wholeheartedly want to contribute to such a deputy committee again, if it can make a small contribution to relieving the pain of

homosexual brothers and sisters - and that of their parents - and if it can help them to stand before the face of God and lead their lives in freedom and peace.

Jan Mudde

Taste and enjoy the goodness of the Lord

It surprises me every time I read it: that pithy summary of the Gospel by Paul in a letter to a young colleague. The more often I read it, the more his words take on the character of something like a banquet: taste and enjoy that He is good - the great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ.

The appetizer is the grace of God, his undeserved goodness, which has appeared on the world stage. Not every subsequent dishes on the menu has immediate appeal. 'Rejecting Godless and worldly lusts and living prudently, lawfully and piously in this world' ... do I always feel like it?

The appetizer turns out to be the main course: grace is the teacher that develops your taste. You don't want to skip this appetizer. It puts your taste buds in the right mode and makes you a gourmet - in some people just suddenly, in others slowly but surely.

And then another fantastic dish, further down the menu: the prospect of another special appearance on the world scene, this time in the future: the appearance of the glory of this great God, our Savior, Jesus Christ. We currently know this ultimate greatness ('glory') of God only from stories and descriptions in the Old and New Testaments. There will come a time when we will see it with our own eyes!

From the Old Testament, my favorites are words about God's glory from an unnamed praying person: 'Great is the Lord, to Him be all praise, formidable is He, more than all the gods.' And from the New Testament, I think of the words of Christ recorded by John the Seer in the book of Revelation: 'Be not

afraid. I am the first and the last. I am the One who lives; I was dead, but now I live, forever and ever.'

The more you allow such words to sink in, the more you are already beginning to 'see' something of God's ultimate greatness - with quotation marks, seeing in the sense of: now I begin to understand (a little). Then you begin to hope for the moment when you will see God's glory with your own eyes - without quotation marks.

Paul makes the Gospel a banquet you don't want to miss a course of. It gives the citizen courage, especially when you are aware of your own weakness and instability.

Taste it for yourself - and remember to chew well! Then it will be pure joy.

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the 'glory' of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

~ Paul (Titus 2:11-14)

Wolter Rose

One never fully understands

'And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best. (Philippians 1:9-10a)

It must have been around the turn of the century. I met a pastor in my coaching practice. He came in with complaints about stress and overwork. This is more common among pastors, even when they are in their first congregation. Usually the issue then is for the pastor to learn not to

feel responsible for everything. Not taking all the burdens on his shoulders. That he learns to schedule properly, instead of working days and nights in a row. And that he learns to deal with the often blunt criticism of his sermons and other work. Usually that goes a long way toward helping him find a good balance in life and work. But with this pastor it was different. Although there seemed to be much to gain in that area, there appeared to be something else pressing like a heavy stone on his stomach. In the third interview, he came out of the closet under tears and deep emotions: 'I'm gay!' What touched me was the loneliness, the deep valley, the struggle and confusion that was going on inside him. And the relief that he could share this with someone. It became a long coaching process and actually more than that. In-depth conversations, from which I learned a lot. In which I especially discovered that you should not just say to someone: 'I can imagine' or 'I understand you completely'. Because you don't. You can't just stand in that other person's shoes. Above all, I learned to listen for a long time without judgment.

It must have been around the turn of the century. One of our Daughters seemed happily married. No harm done. Until she and her partner tearfully and emotionally confessed that he was gay. What touched us was the loneliness, the deep valley, the struggle and the confusion that they experienced. Which then affected as parents as well. They parted ways, each going his own uncertain path. It took years for our daughter, her ex-partner and the parents on both sides to find a new balance in their lives.

In my coaching practice over the past twenty years, I have met a number of pastors and also others who openly admitted to be gay. Again and again their situation touched me. How they got stuck in their own struggle and the expectations of others. Again and again I managed to walk a path with them to a way of life in which they could find peace. By trial and error.

It's 2020. Time at age 73 now to really think about quitting work and activities that demand time and energy. The synod president calls. 'The Gay Sexuality Study Deputy Committee is in need of a president. We are thinking of you.' My love thinks I shouldn't do it because of my age.

With that, she has a point. I contemplate what I have gone through from the turn of the century with those who have come my way. 'I do it', I answer the Synod president. 'For them and for all those others who stumble, fall and rise again.'

I marvel again and again of how the Word of God is beneficial and healing to those who are defenseless and dare to express themselves vulnerably. And sometimes, just sometimes, I have the idea, the feeling, that I am beginning to understand what that kingdom is all about. That I'm learning to discern what it's all about.

Henk Schaafsma

Teach me to act according to Your will

Years ago, I spoke regularly with an elderly man. He was intelligent, humorous, and gay. We also regularly discussed homosexuality. One day he said, 'Then people say "You can be it, but not practice it" ... and that makes me puke!' I almost had to cry when he said it, because I saw and heard the pain in him.

Also many years ago, I received a call from a pastor of the CGK: whether I wanted to participate in a deputy study on questions surrounding homosexuality in the church. My first question was, 'What makes you ask me this question?' The answer was, 'We already have several theologians/scientists in the group and we are looking for another woman who knows something about theology and who works with people. You work as a spiritual director and you're a woman, so that's how it came about.' I said to him, 'I'm not an expert', to which he said, 'That's convenient.'

Last year, I heard Prof. Dr. Mariecke van den Berg say, 'We - LGBTQ+ people "are dangling" ...always waiting for yet another decision about what we may or may not do.' She also called the discussion about homosexuality 'too thick'. It could well be, that this discussion is 'too thick', but I also believe that discussions on other topics are 'too thin'. If we stop pointing (mainly) at gays, but also dare to look at...fill in the blank...then the gays may still be dangling, but then we are dangling with them...on the life-line called Jesus.

I spoke to another somewhat older man. He talked about his bisexuality and how he had struggled with it and still

struggled. He believes in God and fears he is too big a sinner, 'The world pulls at me so much...'

Another woman tells me that she is single – 'alone' she calls it - she struggles greatly with this. Never before has she seen or heard anyone from the church ask her how she is doing...in that respect...This woman is middle-aged and feels like an outsider in the church...it is always about relationships children...she has neither. It makes her feel lonely, she feels lonely in this struggle.

I so hope that the church community will be a place where people love to be, especially if they are struggling with homosexuality or whatever... that they feel (dare to feel) a beloved child of God and that they experience that his grace is infinitely great.

How do we keep sight of Jesus, Him first? Some time ago - while reading, thinking, and praying about these things - Psalm 86:1 came to mind: 'Teach me your way, Lord, that I may rely on your faithfulness; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name..'

I have sometimes expressed the split I find myself in when it comes to these things: on the one hand, God could say, 'You know what is written in My Word, why didn't you point that out to people?' On the other hand, He could say, 'You know how infinitely great My grace is, why didn't you make that clear...?'

In response, a fellow deputy said, "'I am not concerned with God's judgment of my actions, I try to live in such a way that in doing so I give God the glory.'

At the institution of The Lord's Supper by Jesus, Judas was taking part. He sinned and did not repent. That led to death. Peter and the other disciples were also taking part: They sinned many times after that...they repented of their sins, went to Jesus - and/or Jesus came to them - and received forgiveness.

I believe it is not good to selectively keep people away from The Lord's Supper - to keep away gay people and not the people who live in conflict with others. I believe that lovingly disciplining people - all people living in sin - is merciful! It leads people - back - to God.

The question once came up, 'Who can you be when you are broken?' We are all 'broken' ... I read about Kintsugi: In the Japanese theory of beauty, the traces of breakage and repair contribute to the beauty of an object. Thus, in brokenness, God's greatness and grace can 'come out' properly.

The question remains with me, 'In what ways do we honor God?
How do we walk in His truth?'

Remains my prayer: 'Teach me/us to act according to Your will!'

Christel Steenhart

No easy answers - LEF

Up close, I see how it affects her. When I ask her, 'Who is Jesus to you?' She remains silent for a long time. When I see the expression on her face, I seem to see sadness, pain, resignation, distrust, and indignation mixed together. 'I cannot come to God, there is something wrong with me.'

What an impact it has on a person's life when someone feels they do not fit into the views of the environment and/or the church. So that there seem to be only two options: adapt or flee. As a psychosocial therapist I've encountered many distressing stories. And also during process counseling within churches, I've often seen at close range how sensitive issues surrounding this topic are. It is precisely in God's house that we want to offer security. The most difficult thing for me is that people sometimes discard God with the church. Personally, this sets me in motion. Do they see through me the heart and hands of Jesus?

And then comes the question, 'Would you like to participate in the homosexuality study deputy committee? Wow, I have to think about that for a while. What is my added value? Surely that's something for theologians? 'Well you know what', I say, 'I can always see what it entails'. And so I tumble into it. Here I am with 'my feet in the clay'. While there is study and discussion, my thoughts turn to practice. It's not that simple. So no easy answers.

I often ask myself: am I doing the right thing? Over the years, I have become convinced that for questions around LGBTQ, fleeing or adapting is not an option. It requires LEF. Love, Empathy, and Fundament. Then I think: did I pass on the love of God? Was I willing to be with the other person, to hear and see them

without judgment and/or easy answers? Did I point the person to the one fundament, Jesus Christ? Were we able to delve into God's word together? No easy answers, like adjusting or fleeing, but taking time to go underway together in search of that which God has in mind for His child.

It is my personal wish that LGBTQ people may encounter LEF and that the defined word 'safety' may be a lived reality. That we walk together, underway with God, and search together for what is good. That trial and error may be part of it. That the church can deal with differences. I also hope for mutual patience and the prevention of eternal damage. That loving dialogues develop and that people in the church are able to hold each other. I hope that everyone who confesses that Jesus is Lord and needs and wants to accept the sacrifice of His blood may participate fully in the church. And when two people of the same sex enter into a civil marriage based on love and fidelity, we as a church will not be reticent to bless them.

Where love dwells, the Lord commands His blessing (Psalm 133).

Ellemieke Tempelaar

PART 3 - THE PRACTICE

Introduction

In the practice of our church life, we want to give hands and feet to what God teaches us in His Word. Many in the congregation are committed to seeking the best for the congregation in a variety of committees. And whether it is practical matters, finances, care of the sick, or children's work, nationally or locally, we may do it diligently to the glory of God.

Big topics like children and the Lord's Supper, women in ministry, church reunification, or homosexuality have one thing in common: they require a lot of Bible study and time for discussion to form an opinion and give room for everyone's story. Homosexuality is a topic that concerns or has concerned many. Books have been written about it and countless studies have been done on it, but it still evokes division. It takes finesse and at the same time courage to deal with it for the sake of clarity in the congregation.

In this section of the report you will find, partly in this document, partly online, several suggestions for finding a way in this. This overview is not complete and the sources mentioned are not automatically supported by every single deputy. We do believe, however, that the materials listed do justice to the breadth of the discussion.

Discussion and policy development

It is not easy to engage in a good, constructive and caring discussion about homosexuality in the congregation. The working method should be appropriate for the congregation entering such a process. A church council or working group can often sense best what is appropriate and what is not. Just think about the starting point: do we start the discussion because we have a concrete situation on our hands? Or do we think it is important to discuss it in order to be prepared for when a situation should arise? Is the congregation ready? Has the topic been discussed before? Or not at all? How much room is there in the church's annual calendar? All aspects that must be taken into account. Two deputies have described a working method for discussion that may lead to policy. Wytze Bijleveld has years of pastoral experience in the Lichtboog in Houten and Ellemieke Tempelaar is a psychosocial therapist.

12 Building on a safe and a holy congregation

Wytze Bijleveld

A safe congregation is a clear congregation. Clarity helps people with a homosexual orientation and their families by creating a safe church environment. They know where they stand, from what vision they are approached, and how welcome they are. And also whether the sacrament is open to them, whether the (ordained) ministries are open to them and whether a blessing on any marriage is possible. This also helps others in a congregation.

A holy congregation knows how to deal lovingly with differences of opinion, with objections and difficulties that stem from deep convictions and that are related to clarity.

Safety and holiness require protection from harsh criticism and require open conversation and an open heart with which to listen to each other and to the Lord.

In short, building such a congregation requires a council to come up with a clear question or mission and appoint a working group to investigate that question and provide an answer. The working group decides how it will get to work, how it will involve the council in its work, how it will discuss differences of opinion fairly and respectfully, how it will come up with advice to the council. The council processes these opinions into decisions after consultation with the church community and ensures the proper elaboration of these decisions. This usual approach requires special attention to the following factors.

Process and communication

Building on a safe congregation is a process with a beginning and an end. A year is a long time for such an intense topic in the congregation. At the same time, it is short when you consider how big and complicated the question can be. At the start, consider what steps will be taken. And how many steps and how quickly. Consider how the congregation will be involved in the steps in the process. Announcements, letters, articles in the community magazine, home visits, community evenings, prayer meetings. Indicate whether and how congregation members can participate. Consider whether you want to inform anyone in particular,

The interested parties and their families, the council, or others and consider how best to do so.

Talking *about* people and not *to* people almost always goes wrong. Of course, this is no different when it comes to people with a homosexual orientation and their families. Therefore, one of the steps involves who are going to speak and how. Conversations with gay church members and with their families? A communal evening with a speaker who can tell their own story? And another speaker with another story alongside it? Watch and discuss a documentary like *Uit de kast* [*Out of the Closet*] from the EO?

Protect those affected where appropriate by keeping information and narratives anonymous. Prevent a congregation-wide discussion where people are named. Or prevent it as much as possible. Especially in a small community where everyone knows each other, cooperation with other congregations should be considered for this reason.

Invite all interested parties from the congregation, i.e., all people with a homosexual orientation and their families personally to come and tell their story under the promise of confidentiality.

Mission and collaborators

Building is a process with a client and a team of builders, from architect to carpenter. The council, out of its responsibility to the congregation, is the client. The team preferably consists of intrinsically motivated or personally involved people from the congregation. People who are open to people with different opinions without immediately following them. People who can listen to each other, to stories of experience. People who pray together and listen to their Lord. People who are also able to study the Bible and all kinds of study material in depth. The council could do this themselves if they can spare enough time and attention to do so. Seriously consider whether an outside facilitator in addition to the local people in the working group could help or is needed. Also consider starting the work with neighboring councils, especially if your council is modest in size or if your council already has their hands full with the usual work.

Start thinking about building in time. Think and discuss any task or question without the burden of an acute situation that must be 'solved'. The reason for the assignment is a first and important building block. Does it involve a request from a gay couple who want to know if and what the policy

is? Is it a question from the leadership of a youth group wanting to provide an evening on sexuality and asking for vision and guidance to answer any questions young people may have? Does a pastoral team ask for attention to people with a homosexual orientation? It also makes a difference whether the topic was previously unmentionable, whether the congregation is familiar with talking about sensitive topics, whether everyone knows each other as in a well-organized village congregation, or whether everyone participates more or less anonymously and detachedly in a large congregation.

The importance of clarity in the task or question speaks for itself. Be precise in your wording. It is important to name two different aspects in the task:

- ◆ develop a culture of dialogue and respectful behavior in the event of (deep) disagreement
- ◆ develop a clear vision that can be translated into policy and education, a vision that can concretely show people the way in personal counseling.

The idea that everyone in a congregation can be a blessing to the other can help to explicitly consider the question of what the congregation can offer people with a homosexual orientation and, conversely, what these people have to offer the congregation.

Content and tone

As a working group, first gather knowledge (scientific and Biblical), insights and personal experiences. Share your personal experiences with each other and explain why the topic of homosexuality and the church has your heart.

Make sure you are well informed about knowledge and insights from science. This avoids unnecessary misunderstandings or pastoral mishaps and take the topic and people with a homosexual orientation seriously.

Explore the task or question through interviews with various interested parties or through some reflection in your own circle.

Consider Bible texts thoroughly, in a context where you trust each other and listen to each other. Read and discuss a good book or two together.

Ask your pastor to contribute. Through an interview or his favorite textbook. Through a teaching service followed by discussion groups. Ask a theologian to attend who has profoundly studied exegesis and hermeneutics.

Listen carefully to each other, especially if there are differences. Listen until you hear from the other person that you have understood the other person. Don't start trying to resolve differences earlier. Name and discuss that you are not necessarily on a slippery slope or a liberal if you see room, for example, for gay relationships and a blessing over a gay civil unions. Or conversely that you are not immediately conservative or homophobic if you do not see that space for gay relationships.

Recognize and discuss the diversity, the different points of view in the congregation. How do we deal with it, how do we continue to carry each other? In all the diversity, how are we church together? Can we endure with each other even though we deeply disagree? Where are the limits of sticking together despite differences? Here, too, others can be called to the rescue, such as (fellow-)pastors or congregational leaders.

The building process may be accompanied by feelings of worry, fear, loneliness, or rejection. Consider how to pay attention to these in the process itself, as well as in the final formulation of the vision and proposed policies.

Talk in person, with the right tone. And if that doesn't work at once, try again. A heart-to-heart conversation is more than a lesson in how things should be done or what is expected. Or the exchange of the latest interesting trivia.

Realize that your partners in dialogue are talking and listening with their sister, their son, their friend in mind, and so they are listening and responding personally.

Delivery and decision-making

The working group gathers insights and experiences and at some point must report their advice to the council: a vision, policy intentions and what else the working group thinks is wise to report.

The council would do well to set aside enough time to discuss and decide on this advice. A separate consideration weekend for this could be very appropriate. Especially if there are different voices, plans, and ideas in the proposals. Especially if there are differences of opinion within the council. Take time to listen to each other. Take time for prayer and listening to the Lord. And use a second meeting if decisions cannot be made all at once.

The concluding story with the vision and policy intentions should be shared within the congregation in an appropriate way. It is desirable to spend particular

attention to what is necessary for external communication. It is also important to spend special attention to those who have difficulty with the vision and intentions.

Appoint people responsible for giving attention to the interested parties after decisions are made, to the culture that is changing as more openness and hospitality has been achieved, and to the implementation of policy intentions. After a year, ask for a retrospective with evaluative comments and adjust the vision or policy as needed or if desired.

NB: pastoral care during and after reflection

During a process of reflection, pastoral help to someone may suddenly become necessary. The need is discovered during or possibly triggered by the reflection. Individual pastoral care and the process of reflection may intersect. Someone may have the impression of having become the subject of a congregation-wide discussion. Others may hesitate to participate in the reflection because their responsibility to the person cared for weighs heavily.

It is important to preserve space for separate trajectories: confidential pastoral care and congregation-wide reflection. In confidential pastoral care, we are endlessly patient, ready to listen and encourage, and postponing judgment. Listening and encouragement provide openness in a relationship for expressing any warning, admonition, or disciplinary action.

No doubt interested parties may be disappointed with the outcome of the reflection. Too much or too little space, too much or too little acceptance may be reason to take a individual pastoral path with those involved. This may involve encouraging the disappointed person to persevere, or seeking alternative options within the congregation, or searching together for another congregation where the person concerned hopes to live in his spiritual home with blessing.

The process of reflection, progresses and at some point the process comes to an end. Then there is a vision and decisions on policy: the building plans for the safe and holy congregation. Building the congregation and living in the house of the Lord, making policy or being part of a congregation with all your questions and your vulnerability: these are different trajectories. Both trajectories cannot be done without God's blessing.

13 Is staying in the closet safer in the church?

Ellemieke Tempelaar

'They are going to talk about LGBTQ in our congregation, exciting...' 'Until now I felt safe, but what is going to happen?'

Is church an unsafe place for LGBTQ individuals? Perhaps not always, but far too often it is. Ellemieke Tempelaar, psychosocial therapist and owner of *'Praktijk in Gesprek'* (Practice in Conversation) developed her own working method and in recent years she has been able to guide many churches in their search for starting points regarding LGBTQ. Two concepts are central to her, namely *carefulness* and *perseverance*.

Homosexuality in the congregation is not just another topic. It is about people who experience their LGBTQ-ness very differently. There are those who are in a relationship, those who are still in the closet, those who find it difficult or those who don't really care, those who are mature or very young, those who are stuck in a heterosexual relationship, those who experience confusing when falling in love, those who choose to be celibate, those who are ashamed, who are happy, who live a double life, who are sad and lonely, who feel misunderstood, who think about death, who (as men) wear women's clothes in secret, who experience God's nearness, who are happy with their church, but also those who do not feel safe there and so on. It is important for a church council to put the thought of these people on the front burner when making plans. For example, visit people first for personal attention.

Carefulness

When starting communication in the congregation around the topic of LGBTQ, it requires careful preparation. Because what terms do we use when we make an announcement? Differently oriented? Homosexual? Non-hetero?

Do we want to 'reflect'? On what exactly? How much time do we want to set aside for it? How and with whom? And will we stop at reflection? Will there be a decision, a starting point, a helping

hand, a report, a recommendation? How do we want to inform and possibly involve people?

And when we have an LGBTQ person in the congregation, how do we make sure that person and their family get the care and attention they need? Do we have their vulnerability sufficiently in mind when discussions take place? Which terms do we use and which we do not? Care is also required in terms of knowledge development.

Sometimes a Bible text is simply taken out of context. But what does it really say? How can we do justice to Bible texts in their context?

Tension and pain

When the church council announces to the congregation that they want to reflect on this theme together, there is usually a lot going on in the congregation. This is not always immediately visible but is something to take into account.

There is often a group of people in pain. For example, in the past a son or daughter of church members may not have been heard or seen. Now that it is too late for him/her, they experience the pain of damage already done. How beautiful would it be if, in such a case, an acknowledgment of guilt were first expressed so that we can move forward together in purity.

When this topic starts to be discussed, it can yield a lot of insecurity for the LGBTQ person but just as much for every church member. What will happen when this topic is discussed in the congregation? Won't it become very uncomfortable? Or there is a group of people who are not interested in this topic at all. They think: do we have to voice an opinion about every target group? Surely we are one body of Christ, with all our differences? Before long, in addition to the low-stimulus service and the service for the impaired, there will also be a service for singles and single-parents, for voluntary or involuntary childless people, for the elderly, the youth, and now also an LGBTQ celebration.

High time?

Then there is another group of people who have already formed their opinion. They wonder: what is this all about? The world is being brought in our church! It's plain as day! Marriage is for man and woman and homosexuality is an abomination in God's eyes. Still others indicate that the church should have been talking about this a long time ago. Parents, for example, whose children are being handed all sorts of ideas from society and increasingly have to deal with

LGBTQ friends. Social media offer them all kinds of information and an idealized image of humanity that says that you can and may be yourself everywhere; that every person may go in search of their own happiness. It is high time, these parents think, that the church gives some direction on this. And then there is perhaps a group of people who are deeply disappointed. They think back to a couple of years ago when the church council had also started working on the topic. The hope was that there would be more clarity, but there are still no answers to questions and there is still the feeling of being a kind of second-class church member.

Perseverance

Therefore it is important to persevere. In for a penny, in for a pound. Often enough, plans are postponed and reports disappear into a drawer. And when a new (pastoral) council is appointed, they no longer have any idea of what was once started. This is careless and not good towards our brother or sister who is struggling with questions of faith. It takes decisiveness and courage to enter into the conversation and persevere. We are used to being able to organize everything into boxes and compartments. And if everything fits, then we can make our policies accordingly. But that is not so easy with this topic. Bookshelves full of books have been written, studies have been carried out for years, lectures and conferences have been organized on this topic, and we still have not figured it out. While the people concerned are in church.

On top of that, knowledge, science, social and cultural development are overtaking us and at least influencing our way of thinking. The government is also putting it high on the agenda. A lot of money is being allocated to get the gender-neutral message through in schools, clubs, and business. The non-binary world is forcing itself on us before we have even thought about it ourselves. Just think of the transgender law where you no longer have to first visit a psychologist to change your 'M' into a 'F' or vice versa. Or the debate on whether there should be gender-neutral toilets in public places. The ticket person who is no longer allowed to say 'ladies and gentlemen'. Our daily lives and those of our children are full of ideas that before we know it we simply assume to be true and good, and that makes that the church, especially when it comes to LGBTQ, must deal with them carefully and seek God's truth and goodness. We do justice to church members who have to deal with LGBTQ when we persevere. But also when they themselves can participate in the discussions

and learn to understand the process and quest of a congregation. It is time that we conduct our discussions. That when we find it difficult, we look for each other and our bond in Christ.

And then if we persevere carefully, we can begin to take the journey of thinking, praying, growing, falling, getting up, and moving on again. God gives us time of life when we go on the journey with Him. We are allowed to make mistakes and start over. During our life journey we are molded and formed and are on our way to the perfect kingdom of God. Now it is not yet perfect and may we assist and support each other, reprimand and help each other get up. Giving each other space for self-reflection and room to learn and improve. Let it be an example to us how God deals with us. He is patient with us. We may practice engaging in respectful dialogue when we disagree. We may wait when we don't know what to say for a while. We may rest when it is too much for a while. We may trust in God's work in us and in the other as we surrender to His guidance in our lives and in the lives of our brother or sister in Christ. So we have the challenge to persevere but certainly also to be careful. We want to deepen our knowledge and look at the facts and the fables, see and hear each other, believe and connect, and show courage and love. In doing so, we will have to realize that the last word has not yet been spoken and that we will have to learn to live with differences that we will not always be able to resolve.

Process and content

When the topic of LGBTQ is going to be discussed in the congregation, it always involves a journey of process and content. The process, as it were, carries the timing of the content and does so in three layers. The first layer is the layer of *attuning*. The second layer is the layer of *providing background information* and the third layer is that of *making decisions*. Within each layer we start small and provide a snowball effect. The Church Council and working group, if any, always take the first step and prepare well, after which the congregation follows via the small groups.

Attuning

The first question should always be: how do we approach it? Where do we start? Some advice: provide time and space in the church calendar, never just start without a plan, start small and

work with the snowball effect. Move on when it is sufficiently safe to take the next step. There are two reasons why it is important to start with a good plan with a timeline and clear steps and goals. First, it reduces the risk of the topic disappearing from the radar because it is swallowed up by other church work. And second, it is important to be prepared for questions and possible sensitivities. Also, experience has taught that as soon as this topic appears on the church agenda, a lot is released. Are we ready for this? Are we well attuned? Can we deal with difficult questions and differences of opinion? Good alignment also includes determining the right attitude. How do we want to deal with each other? Can everything be heard and seen? Are people allowed to speak out? Are we engaging in dialogue or struggle?

When a church council contacts '*Prakijk-in-Gesprek*', we first have an exploratory conversation in which the possibilities are explained. When we actually want to start working together, we start with an introduction within the church council. Throughout the process, it is important that the church council, in cooperation with the working group set up for this purpose, anticipate the steps that need to be taken. It is important that safety is felt within the church council itself. This topic on the agenda can be a welcome step for some and a source of (personal) tension for others. We tune in on several components: what experiences do you have in your personal lives with regard to this topic? What have you learned at home? How do you deal with Biblical data? What do you see in your neighborhood? Do you know LGBTQ people? What do you think might be difficult in pastoring? What exactly do you want clarity on in the congregation? Can LGB and T and Q be united in one vision? But you also exchange knowledge and experience: What actually is LGBTQ? How is this on the agenda in church and society today? And next, where do you stand as a congregation? How has this issue been dealt with in the past? Where has damage possibly been done? What could you do with that? Specifically, what do you envision if you want to be a safe congregation? What steps are needed to achieve this? What could be the first step? What people and resources are needed for this?

It is very important to first have a conversation with the people known to the church council who are dealing with LGBTQ staying true to the motto: don't talk *about* the people but *with* the people it concerns. They themselves often know exactly what they miss in the church. Then it is advisable to

form a working group under the responsibility of the church council. The tasks of this group would be to monitor, guide, and coordinate the process of attuning, deepening and decision-making with the church council. It would be nice if the composition of this group reflected the diversity of the congregation. A point of attention here is that someone should be able to rise above the material and not be too personally affected.

It is also important that good pastoral care is always available during the process and that people know where to find it. Prepare this well and make sure that this is secured during meetings. Experience shows that there must be a place where people can go to someone for a confidential talk and/or prayer.

The working group and church council are always one step ahead of what is happening in the congregation during the process, ensuring that the right step can be taken at the right time in the right group. Thus, like a snowball the attuning will eventually lead through church council/working group, small groups, and other groups to an attuned congregation as a whole. The same goes for providing background information and ultimately the decision making.

Providing background information

While the attuning in the congregation is going on, the working group is getting down to the preparation and actual spreading of background information. It is good to select materials first. The workgroup studies, the church council studies the materials that can be used for providing background information in the congregation are determined, and finally Biblically based views and schools of thought are considered. There are plenty of books that are easy to read and there is also plenty for people who like to study a bit more. Also use existing manuals for this purpose. There is no need to keep reinventing the wheel.

Also consider an appropriate sermon series. It would be nice to preach from the wider context as it were toward the theme. Possibly link that to an annual theme. Provide study materials for small groups. Consider knowledge transfer within youth work and catechism. When the preparations are ready presentation in the congregation and when the congregation is ready to study background material after attuning, the church council and the congregation are more aligned, as it were, although the church council always remains one step ahead of the process. Knowledge is needed about the Bible, ethics, and pastoral care; about what the Bible says; about the schools of thought within churches, but also about backgrounds from the various fields of knowledge,

such as history, culture, society, and health. Consider sermons, books, discussion materials, forms of work, etc. Also consider structuring and continuing knowledge transfer around this theme. Make sure that this theme remains current even if it is not the main topic on the church's annual agenda.

Making Decisions

It is important to take time to arrive at a starting point for the congregation. But too much time can also be damaging. Especially when urgent matters increasingly take priority. The interested parties have gained (new) hope now that the church council is working on it. If that still takes too long, they drop out and the damage is all the greater. But if all goes well, something has already been put on paper. If it has become a large document, make sure there is also an easy-to-read summary that fits on two pages max.

Communicate this to the congregation and make the full document available via the website. Indicate until when people can respond. Take every response seriously. Both written responses, and personal conversations. After this process, the document can be finalized after a structural revision, if any.

Stepwise approach summarized

Inventory and startup

- ◆ Assemble Working Group. Take stepwise approach of 'Praktijk in Conversatie' [Practice In Conversation] as an example.
- ◆ Church Council formulates tasks for working group and take stepwise approach of 'Praktijk in Conversatie' [Practice In Conversation] as an example Tailor stepwise approach to specific needs of congregation.
- ◆ Present plan and timeline to church council.

Attuning

What is your experience with the topic? What interests you? Everything can be said. From workgroup and church council through small groups to attuning of the entire congregation.

Providing background information

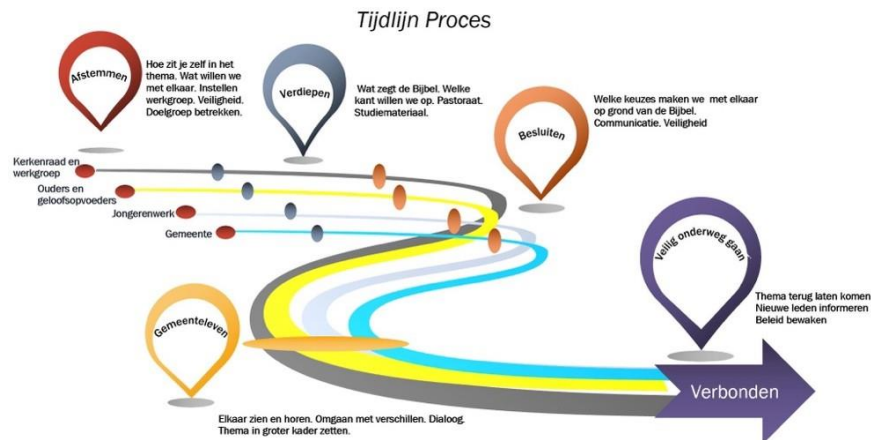
Use of various work forms, books, sermons, examples from other churches, study materials. From working group and church council via small groups to providing background information to the entire congregation.

Making Decisions

Proposed decisions, handle reactions from the congregation, formulate conclusions. From working group and church council via small groups to congregation-wide decision making.

Church life: safely on a journey

Finally, it is important to keep this theme alive. Make sure that the theme keeps coming back. That new members are informed. That people know where to go. That there is information on the church's website that someone can use when a conversation becomes awkward.



The above model shows how to work out the process steps of 'attuning', 'providing background information' and 'making decisions' from the small group, to the congregation at large.

14 Church discussions with the talking stick method

The *talking stick* has been and still is used by indigenous peoples in North America and Africa to reach a decision that everyone can support.

It is a way to get and give room to different opinions and experiences. It helps to really listen to each other.

What effect does a talking stick have?

The talking stick is used during dialogues and discussions. The idea is that only the person holding the talking stick speaks. The other people present remain silent and listen attentively to what the person with the talking stick has to say. The effect of this is that you as the speaker get the feeling of being heard. Everything can be said and you experience complete freedom while telling your story. Because you get sufficient attention from the others, it feels as if you can better reach certain insights and you become more aware of what you actually want to say.

It's about learning to speak with your heart and not from your head. On the one hand, you learn to take your time to tell your story. On the other hand, you also learn to listen much more attentively when other speakers take their turn. The idea is that you do not interrupt the story or immediately come up with a comment or 'personal experience of your own'. In this way, you learn to empathize before you say anything to the other person. The most valuable and at the same time the most difficult thing is to listen with attention, respect, and without judgment.

When to use this method?

The talking stick method has also proven its worth in church circles. In situations where a complex problem has been outlined, there appears to be great willingness to actually work it out together. People can vent their hearts and feel heard and often even understood. Because the speaker cannot be interrupted and opinions cannot simply be given, you learn to

think carefully before saying anything about the other person's story. And then there appears to be more room for collaboration, creativity and solution-oriented thinking.

How does communicating with the talking stick work?

The talking stick indicates which person is currently the speaker in the group. The person with the talking stick talks and the others are silent and listen attentively to what the speaker has to say. This immediately creates more engagement with the group; the connection with all present creates respect and understanding. Equality is paramount and everyone participating in the dialogue, meeting, or discussion can express their views and important feelings, and feel heard and understood during the session. The person holding the talking stick may talk until they pass the stick to another person. It is also possible to decide on a time limit in advance. In addition, you can agree with each other that everyone only gets to speak once during an agenda item.

Sources: talkingstickinstituut.nl (no longer accessible), vergaderendoejezo.nl

15 Online toolkit for church communities

In addition to the above tips for policy and discussion, you will find a toolkit on the website of the Dutch Reformed Churches, under 'study committee on gay relationships in the church'. The toolkit contains the following:

1. examples of local policies
2. links to creative material, book reviews, Bible studies, and sermons
3. links to national reports (GKv, CGK, NGK, CRC)
4. titles of literature, websites, films, documentaries, and podcasts
5. *Kerpunt's* offer of (process) guidance in church communities (still being developed)

To do so, go to: <https://kerpunt.nl/kerk-en-lhbt-toolbox-van-studiedeputaatschap/>

In due time the toolkit will be supplemented with new information and links, if so required.