

LCC Pastors and Deacons Conference, 28-31 October 2013

## Human Sexuality – Pastoral Joy and Challenge

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Brothers and sisters - God's grace and peace to you, through our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom we are a new creation!

#### The invitation

Your good President Bugbee, in his wisdom and under the mysterious guidance of the Holy Spirit and on behalf of the program committee asked me to present a workshop to you on 'Human Sexuality'. And with equal mystery the Holy Spirit – or perhaps my own vanity – prompted me to accept!

Now I did warn your president that I'm no scholar, hot-shot exegete or ethicist but a third-vocation parish pastor who somehow was voted in as president, now bishop, of an LCA District and, more recently, Assistant Bishop of the LCA. Aware of this he still repeated the invitation with some kind words about pastoral sensitivity and knowledge of what our LCA's Commission on Theology and Interchurch Relations (CTICR) has done in this area. So it's on that basis that I spend this short 60 minutes with you on what must be one of the most complex subjects on earth and for each of us as individual human beings made together as male and female in God's image, let alone as pastors and deacons called to serve his holy church.

President Bugbee sent me this description as the starting point for this workshop:

*'So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them' (Genesis 1:27). But sin destroyed the perfection of Eden's human sexuality creating an ongoing struggle. In our increasingly secularized and sexualized society the Church must address this deeply personal aspect of life with a balance of Law and Gospel. In the area of same-gender issues on which our church has taken a clear position, how might we minister to people struggling with temptation to enable them to lead a faithful Biblical life?*

This is the same theological stance and pastoral context of the LCA. We are not one of those Lutheran churches making decisions approving same-gender relationships, including for the clergy, which prompted your own Council of Presidents to issue a statement carefully explaining such churches' actions as departing from historic Biblical teaching and *'the consensus of Christian churches for the last two millennia, and also from the mainstream of ecumenical conviction today'*. In a good model of applying Law and Gospel to oneself whenever doing so to others, that same statement acknowledges that *'some Christian churches and their members have at times distorted the Bible's instruction on sexuality and marriage, twisting it to insult and threaten people who claimed same-gender orientation'*, and goes on to *'repent of such sin and ask God to help His people overcome it wherever it occurs'* (Same-Gender Issues Among Lutherans in Canada, LCC website).

#### Questions we face

So in view of same-gender issues, *'How might we minister to people struggling with temptation to enable them to lead a faithful Biblical life?'* That question and others like it are clearly being faced by church leaders, pastors and faithful Christians alike. In particular the challenge is, *How do we communicate and act so that the gospel is properly heard and received?* I hope that's what's behind Pope Francis's recent comments about his welcoming approach to gay people, and it's certainly why the LCA's CTICR has been working at a new, more comprehensive paper on Human Sexuality to replace what many judge to be a quite un-pastoral 1975 statement on homosexuality.

For those of us in parishes it is very practical. Here's a scenario used at one of our District pastors' conferences recently to glean feedback...

*Two men in their mid-forties join your church and throw themselves into congregational life with a will – working bees, choir, community outreach, fund raising – they're always there. The congregation takes the men to their heart, they are so friendly and engaging and such willing workers. But the day inevitable dawns when one of your members reports to you and the leaders what some have known and the rest have suspected: that the two men are in a committed relationship. Their struggle with the sexuality came to an end some years ago. Now they live together happily as one. In your subsequent discussions with them you discover that they have read widely in the literature that makes the case in the texts where Paul speaks of same sex relationships he is only speaking of abusive or permissive*

*relationships. They have taken Paul at his word when he says it is better to marry than burn – which in their case, they say, means ‘it’s better to co-habit than burn’, because marriage isn’t an option for them [same-sex marriage is not legal in Australia]. They tell you about their former life of secrecy and shame, guilt and depression and near suicide. They speak of the aversion therapy and hypnotherapy they attempted in a separate effort to be healed. They tell you about the prayers that have been said over them in other congregations, with the laying on of hands, all to no avail. So you kind of know that taking a hard line will mean that they will leave your church and find one that welcomes them, or they’ll finally give up on the church altogether. They want to know if it’s okay for them to continue to participate fully in the worship life of the congregation.*

In preparing this paper I talked to Pastor Erik Trovall, your brother on six months exchange in our Victorian Hamilton parish, and I gather from him that this scenario touches the challenges you increasingly face.

## **2. HOUSTON – WE HAVE A PROBLEM (What in the world is going on?)**

We know that right treatment comes from proper diagnosis and, for God’s kingdom of grace, right application of the Gospel comes from a proper diagnosis with the Law – understanding with depth and truth. So let’s look at some of the issues underlying our situation.

### What we observe and experience

There’s no doubt that individual scenarios like the above come not just from the inclinations of those directly involved but from the whole secularised and sexualized culture of which they and we are members – as this workshop’s terms of reference indicate. We know the situation: a culture which values hypersexuality over wholeness. We see it in fashion, in film and in unfettered access to internet pornography. Relationships are brokered around ‘sex’ and people ‘have sex’ where ‘sex’ is reduced to the act of sexual intercourse for its own sake. The consequences are enormous, with reductions in levels of marriage, increased rates of sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, abortions, breakups and divorces. The heart-ache is equally enormous yet the behavior goes on.

### What’s going on underneath

So what is going on behind it all?

That’s a complicated question and one I can’t fully explore, but I do think it’s important to think about a few facets and hear what others have said.

First and most obvious is the sinful inclination that abides in us all, including toward sexual sin. *Flee youthful lusts*, is the translation of 2 Timothy 2:22 I learnt as a youth! None other than King David fell into terrible sin because of lust. *Every inclination of man’s heart is evil from his youth*, God himself declared as he nevertheless made a covenant with Noah in Genesis 8 and 9.

The valuable *Ambassadors of Reconciliation* group provide study material to help teach that our lusts are in truth *idolatry* (*Getting to the Heart of Conflict* workshop at <http://www.hisaor.org/web-content/Training-Seminars-GettingTo.html>). God calls us to fear, love and trust only in him above all else, but when we love/lust after something else we create an idol. And as long as we serve that idol it demands sacrifice, as all idols do. So people sacrifice their deep personal integration as God intended, as well as the proper richness of human relationships including the unique relationship of marriage, to the idol of sex. We even sacrifice our children and our children’s children to these idols, as their well-being is put below the satisfaction of sexual lust.

Of the authors I know I find that Marva Dawn has the most perceptive analysis, and with it a joyful breadth and depth of grace and direction to match, in her 1993 book, *Sexual Character* (Eerdmans). I’ll draw on her substantially throughout this paper.

In diagnosing the present malaise, Dawn makes a primary distinction between *social* sexuality and *genital* sexuality and posits that today’s sexual behavior, with its consequent pain, is grounded in society’s *confusion of the two* and our *failure to live faithfully according to God’s design* in relation to them (9).

*Genital sexuality* is essentially the excitement of genital stimulation – a delightful gift of God but also distorted by society’s reduction of all things sexual to it, as betrayed by the term ‘to have sex’. Genesis 2 delights in this gift and its proper use when God creates woman as complementary to man and takes him out of his parental home and brings them together in the union of marriage to become ‘one flesh’. One happy purpose of genital sexuality in the context of the ‘one-flesh’ union of marriage is the opportunity for being God’s agents in creating the next generation of humanity.

*Social sexuality* by contrast is the whole complex of being given to us as either femaleness or maleness in addition to genital sexuality – an even more foundational gift of God. This is shown in Genesis 1:26-27 where, as the culmination of God's creating and ordering of the world, we are uniquely made male and female in his image. This gives us profound sameness and equally profound difference to mirror and model God's own Trinitarian community in our relating and relationships. We relate to one another as a male or as a female, quite apart from any genital activity, and we bring our children up accordingly. Most people know it's quite wrong to engage children in genital activity but it's quite right and necessary to form their social sexuality. Dawn writes,

*How I relate to everyone else in the world in every human interaction depends on the way in which my social sexuality has been formed. I write, teach, buy groceries, or talk with someone on an airplane out of my social sexuality. Also, in my own unique personality, in social situations I express a woman's affection in many ways – hugs, touches, kisses, words – but these are carefully chosen to be fully loving and honorable, thoroughly reserving all expressions of genital sexuality for one and only one person, my husband (11).*

To a certain extent Dawn's distinction between genital sexuality and social sexuality mirror the secular distinction between biological sex (whether we are born male or female) and gender (whether we feel male or female according to how society regards male and female behavior), but I find that her categories free us from the pre-suppositions and debates these politicised terms carry while helping us think through our current situation in terms more faithful to the scriptures and their focus on behavior.

At this point it's worth noting that Dawn married only later in life and so also speaks from the perspective of a long period as a Christian single person – and that she has multiple disabilities which sharpen her appreciation of physical and relational life. She also has been a sex educator in schools and on campuses, and exhibits a significant awareness of youth attitudes (recognizing that her book was written in the 1990s). And she knows about the impact of the technological revolution on the human situation through her studies of a favourite author of mine, the French theologian and philosopher Jacques Ellul.

Drawing from this experience Dawn makes these observations:

*Much of the sexual behavior in US society today is grounded in the failure to distinguish between our profound needs for support on the level of social sexuality and the attraction of exciting genital stimulation (9) and because of this, sexual expression has to become more and more explicit to excite. Human nature requires a continuous escalation of stimulation, especially if the scintillation itself is the only meaning that remains (4);*

*This has devastating effects on our children and young people as they are suffering abuse themselves, bombarded by media, or exposed to the sexual confusions and behaviours of their parents... A large percentage of children live in single-parent homes, are shuffled between two sets of parents, or are raised by grandparents – and wonder about the possibility of security and stability. They observe their parent's adultery or fornication and wonder about the meaning of sexual union (6f);*

*A significant factor in our situation is a loss of social affection and intimacy, including in the home, because of the advance and invasion of technology which has separated home and work place (going all the way back to the industrial revolution) and which draws and absorbs so much of our time and attention. In trying to create the lost intimacy we habitually turn to 'technique' including sexual technique, that is, genital sexuality rather than social sexuality (paraphrased from p16).*

I am strongly drawn to this diagnosis for several reasons.

First, because it accords with the warnings of God and the different narratives of sexual sin in the bible.

Second, because it clearly explains the things we observe, our own temptations, and the pastoral realities we face. As Dawn herself says,

*Basically, the assumption in our society is that genital sexual expression is the 'be-all-and-end-all' of human existence. Persons deserve sexual pleasure, they must have it, and – no matter what – they will have it. What attitudes, behaviors, and results does such an assumption generate? On the one hand, peer pressure teaches teenagers that they must 'score' on the first date. On the other hand, men express confusion about how to court a woman without it being perceived as harassment. Singles are ridiculed if they remain virgins; others wonder how to ask the right questions so they won't risk having sexual intercourse with an unsafe partner. Militant gays and lesbians disrupt worship services to demand that churches accept their unions; the behavior of child molesters is sometimes driven by homophobic fears. Meanwhile, rapes and parental sexual abuse are increasing and are increasingly*

*reported. The incidence of sexually transmitted diseases is on the rise. Half the marriages in the United States end in divorce – often as one or both spouses turn to a new, more exciting sexual partner. Yet a U.S News and World Report Science and Society feature on ‘Sexual Desire’ begins with the large-print caption, ‘Whether it’s dull appetite or ravenous hunger, millions of Americans are unhappy with their intimate lives.’ (6f)*

A third reason I like Dawn’s approach is because it lifts our eyes from individual sins and sinners which present to us pastorally to the social sin behind it. I believe this is essential to healthy pastoral diagnosis and response. How can we properly minister Law and Gospel to people when society itself is corrupt and we don’t help the penitent, the impenitent and the body of Christ recognize this, confess participation in it and, empowered by the grace of God and guided by his word, learn what it means to live the new-creation life in this context? If we don’t do this we are stuck with making synodical statements which seem to single out particular types of sinners while tacitly condoning others – even though we don’t intend this at all and are well aware of our Lord’s challenge to take the log out of our own eye before taking the speck out of our brother’s! And at the congregational front we are stuck with responding to the homosexual men in the opening scenario as if it’s purely a problem of their own making and their own solving – even though we know that no-one is without sin and we all fall short of the glory of God. We need to be acutely aware that, in his journey of exposing sexual sin in Romans 1, Paul does not stop with others but turns the finger back at each one of us. After getting us on-side in the condemnation of gross sin in others he then springs the ‘rhetorical trap’ by going on, *You therefore have no excuse, you who pass judgement on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgement do the same things* (2:1), ending with universal desperateness of our situation at 3:20, *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin.* All this, of course, is for the purpose of proclaiming the wonderful good news of justification through faith for Jesus’ sake by grace alone, apart from works, ‘so that no one can boast’.

So the task for us is to be clear and comprehensive in the diagnosis so that we not only apply Law and Gospel to individuals but to all of us as we participate in sexualized society. I agree with Dawn that recovery from the sexual mess entangling us all is to more deeply appreciate the distinction between social and genital sexuality, and for the church to create a more affectionate and caring community, including better formation of children and young people in God’s design for life. This is what we turn to next.

### **3. GOD’S VISION AND OUR AGENDA (Building communities of truth and grace)**

So what do we do? What do we do in regard to the whole sexual malaise and what do we do in regard to those two men who have surfaced as a challenge for us and for the congregation?

#### The church as the new creation

In essence we must be and do what our Lord has always called his people to be and do: to be his forgiven, redeemed and sanctified people, and to live out our new identity and life in him. As Paul says,

*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17), and again, You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 5:22-24).*

In relation to human sexuality this means, through Christ, being and living free from the sexual slavery of the world around us and instead rejoicing in and embracing his new creation according to his design.

This always means starting with ourselves and with our own community. Isn’t that what our Lord directs when asked, in relation to those unjustly killed by Pilate and by the falling tower of Siloam, *Unless you repent, you too will perish* (Luke 13:1-5)? Only when we personally and our congregations collectively live a self-conscious baptismal journey of daily repentance and renewal, always under grace but always also sharpened by the Law, will we be in the right mind and spirit to apply that same Law and Gospel to others. This is nothing other than the regular Lutheran pastoral and congregational life, but in today’s particular context of sexual chaos it also needs to be *specifically focused on the identification and repentance of sexual sin*, and the *formation of mature sexual character and a socially healthy and supportive community* according to God’s design. This will address every phase of life beginning from infants with their parents through to retirement and singleness again for those who lose a spouse. And it will be fueled by the holy word of God, confession and absolution, and the body and blood of Christ.

#### Sexual character

A key concept here is the development of sexual character, drawing on the principles of an ethics of character rather than a reduced ethics of decision or behaviour. It's about *who we are*, not simply *what we do*. Marva Dawn puts it this way,

*Though an ethics of character makes use of the same biblical commandments as part of the narratives which form our character, its focus is not on the rules themselves but on the kind of people we want to be. Moreover the motivation lies, not in the rules as laws for behaviour, but in the positive invitation of God's grace and in the delightful results of obedience (33).*

I'm reminded of a memorable line spoken by Margaret Thatcher in the film *The Iron Lady* as she recalled with appreciation the lesson drummed into her by her father, *Guard your thoughts for they become your words. Guard your words for they become your deeds. Guard your deeds for they become your habits. Guard your habits for they become your character. Guard your character for it becomes your destiny!* This is an underlying theme of the book of Proverbs of course, beginning with the fear of the Lord, just as Paul draws the trajectory from suffering for the faith developing perseverance and character to its completion in confident hope of the glory of God sustained by his love and Holy Spirit (Romans 5:1-5).

Hence, in relation to sexual matters, Dawn makes this application:

*Each time a person chooses sexual faithfulness, that choice reinforces that kind of character. Each time someone allows themselves to view pornographic materials, traits of exploitation are fostered. Whenever a person uses sexually explicit language, she promotes vices of immodesty and hardens herself against the mystery and beauty of God's design for sexuality (35).*

Nurturing godly sexual character in our young people then becomes a critical priority, as does developing and maintaining that in the life of all God's people. It is about living a particular way not 'because we have to' but because our Lord gives us a vision of his beautiful design and leads us in sexual faithfulness himself. Reflection on Jesus' own sexual character and the way he lived it out provides a rich resource here. For us it includes always being secure in our salvation because of God's grace, never by looking at our own performance, or by judging others but by depending on our Lord's purity and sacrifice.

#### Key actions for us as church

So what steps can we actually take along this path? Here are four matters to think about.

### **3.1 Express the church's teaching / the biblical truth and gift and grace and call**

First it is incredibly important that we clearly express the church's teaching – God's Law and Gospel – in relation to human sexuality and the present context. This is what St Paul's epistles do. As God's holy word they still teach us today, but we have a responsibility to help people understand what they say by addressing them to today's situation in a way people can absorb. It's the reason I draw so much from Marva Dawn's book – because of its depth of perception and skill at re-presenting God's holy design and his grace and will for us in our failure to live by that design.

This is a responsibility for the synod as a whole. It's why our congregations come together as synod – to confess the faith together and to implement this together more effectively than we can do so apart.

Of course all expressions from the church need to clearly articulate Law and Gospel and actually be gracious as they do this, especially given the culture's sensitivities around sexuality and the range of individual experiences. This is the way our Lord comes to us – full of both grace and truth – and this is as we are go to others – speaking the truth in love.

But more than this, our communications in this area need to show the wonderful *beauty and greatness* of God's design in creating us male and female, *lifting people's eyes* from mere genital sexual function and personal pleasure. We have the joy of sharing God's profound intention in creating the sexes which come together in life-long, faithful marriage *for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health*, as a daily, public and intimate sign of God's life-long faithfulness to humanity through Israel, and of Christ the groom's intimate union with his bride the church despite our sin (Ephesian 5). As Dawn says,

*The point of Christian marriage is not to find happiness in each other, but together to find great joy in being God's servant (67).*

In her chapter titled, *Marriage Is for More Than Two*, Dawn quotes Stanley Hauerwas as follows:

*Marriage so understood is a heroic task that can be accomplished only by people who have developed the virtues and character necessary for such a task. The development of such virtues and character is a correlative of a narrative that helps understand the struggle in which we are involved. But it is exactly*

*such a narrative that we have been lacking, or perhaps more accurately, our primary problem is that our experience of marriage has been captivated by narratives that have done little for, and have perhaps even perverted, the role of marriage in the Christian community (49).*

So... we need a narrative which lifts and captivates our imaginations afresh! Here's a start from Dawn:

*The greatest gift of sexual union is its truth – the assurance that this man is committed to me for life, the divine call that our marriage is to be a sign of God's grace, the security that love does not depend upon our attractiveness or sexual prowess (56).*

These narratives, writings, statements, expressions of God's will must of course place us all under the cross. They must be careful not to single out one group such as homosexuals, even as they address specific issues. We must not throw stones but rather gladly preface *Go and sin no more* with our Lord's *Neither do I condemn you* (John 8:11). This means we must address all involved – not just a select few – just as Paul's examples of 'desires of the flesh' are broad-ranging in Galatians 5:19-21 before he lists the contrasting 'fruit of the Spirit'. So we have to address sexual faithfulness in *all* our situations, as well as specifics like singleness, dating, living together without marrying, the use of pornography, betrayal and violence, and the matter of divorce. And we have to get into detail so that we actually *do* cover the questions that people have – especially the young who want clear guidance about what is and is not right.

Without pretending that the LCA's CTICR work-in-progress, *Human Sexuality – Key Issues Today*, is by any means complete or perfect in these respects, this is how we are going about it from the Table of Contents as it stands at the moment (noting that much is to be learned, positively and negatively, from other churches' publications as well):

LCA's CTICR paper, *Human Sexuality – Key Issues Today*, Draft Contents

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A valuable feature of this paper is its attention to singleness. Most people will be single sometime in their adult lives, and many will be single for the majority, if not all, of their life. Marriage is, after all, a temporary state for this life only – there is no giving or taking in marriage at the resurrection (Matthew 22:30) because there will be no more need for it as a sign of the union of our Lord with the church; we will experience that directly as the angels do now. Here are some samples of what the paper says about singleness:

Singleness is pleasing to God:

*St Paul and the Lutheran Confessions follow Jesus in teaching that singleness is a good and God-pleasing state (Matt 19:10–12; 1 Cor 7:6–8, 32–40 AC XXIII,38). The Church must combat its constant tendency to speak about marriage and present it in such a way as to create the impression that people must marry in order to please God, or as if it is the only good way of life...*

*While a person is single the Bible teaches that they are to remain celibate. Jesus and Paul recognise that not many have the gift of celibacy (Matt 19:10–12; 1 Cor 7:7–9). Whereas all Christian singles are called to a life of celibacy, they do not all necessarily have the gift. That is, many would prefer not to be single.*

Singleness as a vocation:

*...Those who are single should be aware of themselves as people who bear the image of God, and who are called into relationship with God through their creation, their redemption and their sanctification. They have the great task of enjoying God's goodness and serving his purposes. The calling to the vocation of singleness, no matter how long the calling lasts, can expect to receive opportunities to serve God and their neighbour that are specific to their situation (AC XXVII, 49). This calling is no less holy than the calling of marriage.*

Singleness and sex:

*...In our highly sexualised society it is widely assumed that singles are not celibate. It is expected that people have sex early and often and even on the first date. This means that those who understand it is God's will that they do remain celibate before marriage and outside of marriage are likely to experience the pity and bewilderment of their peers, and at times even their disapproval and ridicule. The Church needs to be a place that affirms and supports those who have chosen this seemingly harder path.*

Singleness and loneliness:

*Dealing with the loneliness of not being married is the greatest challenge faced by some singles (Gen 2:18)... Singles are social creatures, like everyone else, with the need to live in community. It is hard for singles to find appropriate and life-giving relationships; it is a challenge for the Church to identify and address this vital need. The Bible provides many examples of non-marital relationships, and it speaks of the intimacy and value they have for the single person...It is clear, then, that singles and married couples must play a vital role in helping one another. Single people support and uphold marriages by their example of chaste living and personal encouragement of spouses to stay faithful to one another. They can also help couples meet some of the non-sexual relational needs that are not necessarily met within marriage. Married couples, likewise, must give an example of legitimate Christian sexuality by their behaviour, and they can use their relationship as a secure base from which to offer Christian hospitality and fellowship to those who are single. The mutual conversation and consolation of the saints is not limited by marital status.*

A second feature of this paper is the pastoral tone it takes in addressing homosexuality. One example will suffice:

*The Church's teaching on homosexual practice... presents major challenges for those who see themselves as homosexuals. The teaching implies, in fact it requires, that they lead a life of singleness and celibacy. It goes without saying that some Christians who identify as homosexuals willingly accept the Church's teaching and bear the cross that the Bible and their conscience assure them that they are called to bear... It is also important to realise that there are homosexual Christians who see the situation differently and to try to see things from their perspective... As the Church grapples with the topic of homosexuality, it quickly becomes apparent that for many in the Church the discussion is far more than a matter of biblical and theological enquiry, but one that impinges on their humanity and their sexuality at the depths of their being...*

### 3.2 Teach, teach, teach

Not only do we need clear and unequivocal material to draw on as servants of our Lord's intention to redeem people from sexual idolatry and to call them to the joy of his true design, but we need to *teach* it too. Dawn is optimistic:

*Our world is desperate for the truth about our sexual design and how the Creator intends for it to be maintained and enjoyed. There are many who will gladly choose God's intentions for their sexuality over the patterns of our society's behaviour – if only we who know the truth will proclaim it more boldly! (38)*

This is critical for the young – and therefore for parents too. As a father who had some sense of my responsibilities as my infant daughter grew (drawing on the memory of my mother and father each in their own way taking up this responsibility with me) I was glad to find the CPH *Learning About Sex* books. They've been very helpful in presenting God's design according to biblical Lutheran teaching which responds to the cultural context in an age-appropriate way, a far cry from the how-to-use-a-condom kind of 'education' our kids get in many schools.

But young people need *more* than that as they swim in the secular sea. Underneath the push for genital sexual activity are contemporary creeds like, *Each person can do what they like as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else; Everyone makes up what is right and wrong for themselves; Science has disproved Christianity; You can't take the Bible literally;* and the assumption behind the reduction of 'gender' to a social construct that therefore we are free to re-construct it however we like. Young people – and adults too – need these false creeds exposed so that they are freed from the idea that belief as a Christian means intellectual suicide. This is critical as secular zealots like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens (author of *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*) attack young Christians and the faith. I believe that evangelising the contemporary world requires strong apologetics – and not just the type which defends the Christian creed using reason to support the scriptures, but also that which debunks the fallacies of secularism with reason as well. There are many modern apologists of whom C S Lewis stands out, but he addresses an earlier community than the one our young people live in today, so I find someone like Timothy Keller and his *The Reason for God* more suited to our times. A school pastor emailed me this recently,

*I have been using the videos and discussion guides at Victory College for Staff Bible Studies and have found it to be an excellent apologetic tool for our secondary staff, many of whom are young adults who have such obstacles in their search for faith. They have found it refreshing in our Christian context and it has given them an opportunity to talk freely about their questions and hopefully hear a non-judgemental response. Thanks again for recommending it.*

I don't know what it's like in the LCC but I believe that we in the LCA have a long way to go in training our pastors and layworkers to be skilled apologists equipped to bring the gospel and God's wonderful truth about sexuality to a sceptical age.

One other teaching and pastoral resource I found with an appropriate voice and very helpful in the parish is the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau's series of tracts addressing sexual matters. These are the titles available from <http://www.alpb.org/tracts.html>:

American Lutheran Publicity Bureau tracts available from <http://www.alpb.org/tracts.html>

Spiritually Safe Sex (To those looking for a clear Christian word)  
 What Does Your Marriage Mean? (To those contemplating marriage)  
 The Love That Can Be Promised (To those preparing for their wedding vows)  
 Both Parents and Priests (To Christian parents and pastors)  
 Can Homosexual Love Be Blessed? (A Christian reflection about forgiveness)  
 Is This The Way God Made Me? (A Christian reflection about orientation)  
 When New Life Is an Unwelcome Gift (To those considering abortion)  
 When "Love" Hurts (For those who are living with violence)  
 When Home Is Where the Hurt Is (To those who have been sexually abused)

To inspire us to teach, teach, teach, listen to Marva Dawn again:

*In the midst of the sexual anarchy of our culture, the Christian community should be the locus of clear thinking about the issues and clear proclamation of God's design. We can serve our youth best if the church decisively affirms the biblical narratives, upholds the traditional values of sexual union (without the customary legalism or denunciation of delight), and models the beauty of covenant-promising faithfulness (59ff).*

And, *It is especially important to help young people learn, in contradiction to what they hear in our culture, that it is not true that 'sex' is the most important thing in a relationship – a fallacy that sets marriages up to fail when the excitement wanes* (128).

### 3.3 Work at a local church culture which supports Godly sexual character in a spirit of truth and grace

With clear expressions of God's high purpose for our sexuality, and with comprehensive teaching, we will be helping to build a different culture in our congregations. This is the aim: that the local church is an *alternative community* which, through holy forgiveness and inspiration, receives and reflects God's *faithfulness* rather than Israel's *faithlessness* – sexually too. There are particular points of focus for this local community as the Lord embraces us as his bride:

Create healthy places for social fulfilment. Dawn says,

*If a fish swims in toxic water, it will die. Many of the youth in our society are growing up in a poisoned milieu of violence, rage, and sexual exploitation. How can young persons choose purity, celibacy and faithfulness when they are bombarded constantly by false values... Those of us who care must take seriously the imperative need to create an alternative milieu. We dare not let the moral indifference of our society immobilize us!* (36)

Work against self-righteousness, judgementalism, and the tone of rejection in our congregations. In research into why young Christians leave church published by the Californian Barna Group, 2011, ([www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)) 17% surveyed said they 'have made mistakes and feel judged in church because of them,' and 36% said they were not able 'to ask my most pressing life questions in church'. The report says the problem of connecting with young adults is urgent because there is a 'new normal' with which church leaders are not comfortable engaging. This may seem threatening to us but we must remember that our Lord was an expert at welcoming sinners and eating with them and by his Spirit we can become the same.

Keep God's call to holiness. Welcoming sinners is not the same as welcoming sin. Our Lord never did that and we are not to do that either – we have no mandate to declare right what God calls wrong. It is for the sake of the gospel that church discipline needs to be upheld so that God's people do not slide into accepting sin or being accomplices to others' sin and put their salvation at risk. St Paul is clear about this in his letters as he chastises his congregations for accepting sin and even being proud of sexual sin (1 Corinthians 5). This is clearly the pressure-point in our churches now – to accept some sexual behaviour as within God's will rather than against it, and to accept 'new' exegesis which supports this, per the opening scenario where Romans 1 is interpreted to speak of abusive or permissive relationships rather than homosexual acts. But we have no mandate for this but just the opposite – overwhelming scriptural witness that such misuse of God's word is the greatest of all sin as we preach 'peace where there is no peace.' When we break the first commandment, breaches of the others follow. Our call is to stand firm under this pressure. It also means that we must not be selective but also examine where we tacitly accept *other* sin in our communities – sins like gossip or abuse of power. It is just as necessary to say 'No' to these things in the life of the congregation as it is to sexual sin. In addition, proper mechanisms for preventing and working against sexual abuse in the life of the church are an important component of saying 'No' to sin.

This means on a broader front we need to work at equipping the saints to name and face their habitual sins. We cannot be selective in pointing the finger of the Law. And of course we must start with ourselves. Are our communities infected by gossip? Do we tacitly accept conflict and resentment and sweep them under the carpet? Then we will be hypocrites loading heavy burdens on others if we do not rejoice in and apply God's refining and freeing word to all of our behaviour. Again, resources from Ambassadors of Reconciliation are great aids here, helping us put into practice the Lord's call to daily repentance and renewal, including in our behaviour with others. Parishioners who know the joy of regular personal confession for the sake of forgiveness, and who have learnt the power of forgiving those who sin against them, will shine more brightly for those who are fearful. Dawn says,

*It is important that we announce this forgiveness especially to youth in our culture. Because many of them have been misled by the values that surround them in our society, once they hear of God's design they are often too overwhelmed with their past failures to choose it. Their attitude sometimes parallels that of a person who has cheated on her diet and therefore thinks she might as well go ahead and binge. We can often prevent future sexual misconduct if we enfolded a person in God's forgiveness, to give him the courage to start again with better choices* (79).

The call is for the church to be a safe place for the hurt and those with a guilty conscience; to be a place for deep friendships built on the character and faithfulness of God expressed in proper social sexuality; to be a

place which is supportive of those who struggle with sexual temptation, homosexuals included, as they bear the suffering of sexual celibacy; to be a place which teaches and practices godly marriage with all the supporting disciplines both for married couples themselves and as a vision for others (remembering that faithfulness in marriage is not natural to sinful nature either); to be a place which gladly receives children and takes up the responsibility to shape their character including their sexual character; to be a place which is properly nuanced in relation to marriage troubles, divorce and remarriage; and to be a place which nurtures teenagers and young adults in the critical years of dating and confrontation with the sexual idolatry of the world around them. Dawn has a chapter on each of these matters and here's some of what she says.

Concerning friendships:

*How can we counteract our society's loss of communal guidance and lack of genuine friendship to be more helpful agents as the sexual identity of community members is formed? What alternative models can we offer the world for sexual understanding, for sexual chastity and fulfilment, for friendship?... Many persons who do not have the skill to form friendships are desperate for intimacy and reach for it in clumsy, deviant, manipulative, or oppressive ways (84).*

Concerning homosexuality:

*How can our Christian communities be more supportive of homosexuals as they bear the suffering of sexual celibacy? Even more important, how can we stop causing them other kinds of suffering – by our misunderstandings, our labels, our failures to listen, our inability to see that homosexual orientation is not sin and that we, too, are tempted to rebel against God's design for celibacy and genital purity? All of us are sinners worthy of God's judgement and yet receiving grace instead through Jesus Christ (108f).*

Concerning marriage:

*We will want in our Christian marriages to talk openly about our sexual union as a sign of God's faithfulness and to cherish it as such a sign... Our emphasis on sexual union as "sign" also takes the pressure off intercourse to preserve marriage... It takes its proper place as the fullest, most precious expression of a unique commitment, a covenant promise to share the rest of life in order to manifest the grace and faithfulness of God to the world (123f)*

Concerning divorce:

*Divorce is one of the myriads of issues that get confused if we are not able to make precise nuances... For example, we can avoid extremes by saying that divorce is usually not so much a sin as it is the result of sin and brokenness. Often it is not so much the breaking of the marriage bond as it is the decisive declaration that the marriage has already been irretrievably broken, not by such merely flippant categories of disruption as 'incompatibility,' but by adulterous bonding with another person. Sometimes in our violent world, divorce, though certainly not God's best, is critically necessary for preservation of life... Because the pain of this is so great and the tide of easy divorce in our culture is almost too overwhelming to counteract... we need the whole community to help in the supportive and healing processes (125ff).*

Concerning children:

*Before conception could be prevented by other than natural means, children were received; now the couple (or even single individuals) decides whether or not to have them. This paradigmatic shift turns the focus away from the former emphasis on the children to a new stress on the choice of the parents. This shift in perspective is enormously significant. It changes the major question from 'How shall we raise children?' to 'Do I want children?' or even 'How can I avoid having children and still enjoy sexual pleasure?...' In spite of the state of our world, we declare by bringing children into the world that there is hope, that God is indeed sovereign and good, and that he is able to use us as agents in his care for all his children... Our gluttonous society will never understand that pleasure is heightened when it is reserved, so we must explicitly proclaim that fact and incarnate it in our own habits if we want our children to delight in God's design for sexual intercourse only within its proper framework of marriage... Because the media in our culture so explicitly promote sexual values with which we disagree, we must be more intentional in avoiding them, discounting them, contradicting them, and, most important, demonstrating that God's values are more satisfying, more truthful to who we are... (135ff)*

Concerning teenagers:

*How can we help youth to see both the delight and the discipline of our relationships in Christ? We want them to recognise that marriage is serious business, for we are joined in a permanent union only by the*

*purposes of God. On the other hand, we also want them to know that it is fun. The delightful side of that dialectical tension gets lost in a puritanical understanding of Christian marriage, but the serious side gets lost in our society's view of marriage and in churches that do not recognise the higher significance of Christian marriage...*

*If we want our youth to choose God's design for sexual intercourse, then we must consciously address the fact that the human body needs an escalation of pleasure... Because of the need in this muddled society for clear directions, youth always want me to draw the line for them. I respond instead, 'That is between you and the Holy Spirit.'... A major key is helping them to realise that slavery to lusts is not fun. Desperate or frantic expressions of affection are not beautiful. God wants to come along on our dates, not to lessen the enjoyment, but to deepen in it. Perhaps one way is to challenge the youth with the adventure of finding gentle ways to express genuine affection that say more precisely because they are understated. In this outrageously gluttonous culture, it is very difficult to help people understand that more does not mean better (154ff).*

And overall:

*I am convinced that, if the church could provide more thorough affection and care for persons, many would be less likely to turn falsely to genital expression for the social support they need (11f).*

### **3.4 Pay close attention to one's own sexual and spiritual well-being**

One further action in developing and maintaining strong sexual character as part of our new-creation life in Christ is to guard carefully our *own* sexual and spiritual well-being as pastors and deacons.

This topic will touch us all by the inescapable reality that we are sexual beings, male or female. And we can't avoid this in our vocation in the church. Perhaps it also touches some deep personal wounds in your own life – raising questions, evoking guilt, awakening hurt. Matters of respect, intimacy and loyalty are all involved in our own sexuality, and they touch us deeply.

Whatever our situation, it is critical that we ourselves receive the Lord's ministry of grace and direction in this area – because that's his heart for us, and it's also his will for those who serve his church. How we work with the whole matter of human sexuality and sexual character for *ourselves* will have a key impact on how we work with others. To see just how our significant our Lord considers this, think of the integration of social sexuality and other qualities asked of overseers in 1 Timothy 3:

*Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect... If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church? (1 Timothy 3:1-5)*

The truth is that communities are highly influenced by their leaders and pastors, and experience shows that when pastors and other church leaders break the trust of those they serve, people are hurt, the community is damaged, and the church's witness to Christ is marred. And sexual sin can have the most devastating impact of all.

Here we need to recognise the reality of sexual abuse by some clergy and the sometimes inadequate response to this. We repent of that and pray God's grace, his mercy and his healing and peace to those affected. History tells its own story here.

In our own situations we need to be aware of the nuances. Church servants are vulnerable to sexual sin when others become wrongly dependent on us because of our care for them. Our flesh can move us to self-pity and self-indulgence for the long hours we put in and the pressure on relationships at home. Justifying immoral behaviour destroys a pastor's ministry and often divides communities.

So your own care as servants of God is really important. I don't think anything substitutes for a professional person for vocational supervision, and a confessor as well. Whatever you do, *deepen your own journey under the cross*, knowing that our Lord is gracious and has called you to serve his kingdom. Look to the eschaton when all will be put right, enact anticipation of this in rich worship and holy living, and receive your Lord's deep and personal love for you in daily word and prayer and at his blessed table too.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

So back to the beginning. What will you do with those two men?

Our pastors' responses in the District where this scenario was put, ranged from treating this basically as a matter of mechanically restricting attendance at the Lord's supper to 'all sin is equal' so do nothing. I hope I've painted a much bigger canvas on which you might view the situation and others like it, and from that canvas continue the joy and challenge of bringing God's Law and Gospel to bear in the whole dynamic of our new-creation life in Christ as sexual beings – with the Lord's eternal blessing.

*Lord, in your light we see light. Enlighten our minds with the truth and wonder of our identity as male and female made in your wondrous image. Bring us deeply into your design for us as new-creation people redeemed by the holy life and death of your dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Have mercy on the sinful world and our part in it. Forgive, renew and bless it in every human interaction and dimension. And bring our ministries to bear the fruit of faith, repentance and communities of social grace and truth, for the sake of all your people. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ who lived with sexual perfection for us, who gave his life in place of ours, and who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

Greg Pietsch

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