

ADDENDUM 9 - REPORT ON HOMOSEXUALITY TO THE GENERAL SYNOD OF THE UNITING REFORMED CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA.

HAMMANSKRAAL, SEPTEMBER 27 TO OCTOBER 5, 2008

INTRODUCTION

At its General Synod meeting in Pietermaritzburg in 2005, the Uniting reformed Church in Southern Africa took the following decision (Decision 90):

- a) Synod confirms that the Bible is the living Word of God and the primary source and norm for the moral debate about homosexuality.
- b) Synod acknowledges the diversity of positions regarding homosexuality and pleads that differences be dealt with in a spirit of love, patience, tolerance and respect.
- c) Synod confirms that homosexual people are members of the church through faith in Jesus Christ.
- d) Synod rejects homophobia and any form of discrimination against homosexual persons.
- e) Synod appeals to URCSA members to reach out with love and empathy to our homosexual brothers and sisters and embrace them as members of the body of Christ in our midst.
- f) Synod acknowledges the appropriate civil rights of homosexual persons.
- g) Synod emphasizes the importance of getting clarity about the theological and moral status of homosexual marriages, or covenantal unions.
- h) Synod emphasizes the importance of getting clarity about the ordination of practising homosexual persons in ministry.
- i) Synod assigns the following tasks to the Moderamen:
 - Do an extensive study on Christian faith and homosexuality while taking into consideration the above mentioned principles;
 - Table a report with recommendations to the General Synodical Commission during the coming recess;
 - And encourage and direct discussions on the theme of homosexuality in URCSA.

This is the mandate the homosexuality task team appointed by the moderamen took as its frame of reference in the fulfilment of its task.

Upfront it must be said that the task team took the spirit in which we believe Synod's decision was taken very seriously indeed. The principles set out above are indicative of the way in which URCSA, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has over the years sought to grapple with similar challenges of the past: the questions of race and racism, the issues raised by the apartheid context, the equality of women and men in society and in the ministry of church, poverty and its eradication, and above all in the process of theological reflection and formation on the road towards the Confession of Belhar. It is a firm foundation upon which we set out to build. We first endeavoured to set the whole discussion within the context and parameters of the Reformed understanding of Scripture, in full knowledge of the fact that for many members of URCSA, the literal reading of the Bible has often been the way we thought the Bible should be read. Many of our members lately also uncritically accept the way the so-called New Pentecostalism interprets the Bible and has popularised those views on television and in the many religious books easily accessible to us. We invite the church to take our Reformed heritage seriously, and to grapple with the harder way of dealing with Scripture in all the wonderful and surprising ways it offers itself to us as the Word of God. This we do firmly within the parameters of a Reformed hermeneutic. Within this context, we sought to represent the opposing views on particular issues as we understand them, and then to offer a way of reading, interpreting and understanding that is in keeping with Reformed theological traditions as these have found resonance in the theological self-understanding of URCSA.

We have once again been struck by the complexities of the issues involved, and all of that complexity is reflected in the report. We have not tried to make it easy for ourselves, and neither for Synod. We have also been aware of the complexities surrounding this issue within our church. Over the last decade or so, just about every denomination has been struggling with this challenge, and opinions differ widely. But there are some denominations in this country which have come to a point of remarkable consensus, and thereby set a sterling example for the rest of us. Clearly the watchword here is: careful and honest reading of the Bible, solidarity with each other as we together seek for God's will in this, growing together towards greater and deeper understanding of the Word of God, the fruits of scientific research, of each other and above all, of our homosexual sisters and brothers. We are fervently hopeful that whatever conclusion Synod might reach, it will do so while reaching out and holding onto those who still differ.

But as in all other things, once our honesty with our own hermeneutical positions is established and our need for the guidance of God's Holy Spirit is acknowledged, there is freedom to recognize and honour the absolute integrity of Scripture. Our wholehearted acceptance of Scripture as the "norm" for our moral life therefore means that we respect the fact that the scriptures were written in times and places very different to ours. Hence taking Scripture not just as norm for those people who lived in cultures and times so far removed from ours, facing ethical challenges and forming moral judgements we do not understand today and therefore cannot relate to, but as norm also for us, means entering new ways of reading and understanding.

The reverse is also true: we are confronted with issues today the writers of the Bible could not know of. These issues simply do not form part of the view of life and the world that the Bible imparts. Our growing knowledge of the worlds of the Bible, cultural, sociological, political and economic situations that pertained then; what we are learning through Archeology and new ways of understanding history; new methods of reading the Bible, and what the modern sciences are teaching us – all this have opened enormous, new ways of understanding and interpreting the Bible. That does not mean that Scripture becomes obsolete or less important. To the contrary, it has opened our eyes to the intriguing worlds of biblical times, to new insights into the people of the Bible, their way of hearing and understanding and interpreting the voice of God, and most of all to the fact just how wonderful, exciting and awesome a book the Bible really is. It helps us also to see the foundational way in which the Bible continues to address our fundamental human condition, and enables us to read it in ways that shape, inform and form our moral judgment for our lives today. The way God speaks to God's people differs from time to time and from situation to situation, but *that* God speaks, and *what* God says, never changes. Just as God remains the same, yesterday, today and forever. We hope this is what readers of this report will discover, in the way we have discovered it while working with this material.

Our firm point of departure is that homosexual persons are not an object of study, a "phenomenon" to be discussed, weighed, judged, and either discarded or tolerated. They are "members of the church through faith in Jesus Christ", {decision 90, [c]}; our brothers and sisters in Christ, heirs of God, as Paul says, and co-heirs with Christ. (Romans 8:17) Synod's use of the words "embrace" and "empathy" we understood not to be gratuitous or opportunistic, and more than just a desire to express "tolerance", since neither "embrace" nor "empathy" can be understood to imply distance from the other or to sustain any notion of paternalism. We took as given {decision 90[d]} that we reject all forms of homophobia and any form of discrimination against homosexual persons, and that we fully acknowledge, under the Constitution of South Africa "the appropriate civil rights of homosexual persons". {decision 90[f]}. This was the firm platform offered by Synod for the work of the team, and we have tried to honour that. In that spirit we set out to seek "clarification" on the issues Synod has identified. All of those issues we try to address to the best of our ability.

In our terminology we tended to be led by the usage of words as chosen by Synod, since that allows a measure of recognisability and connect which is important. But equally important is that we try to introduce the words homosexual persons themselves use to describe themselves. We may not all know these words or use them regularly, but it is vital for our own education and for proper human relationships that we respect the way people refer to themselves. Language, as members of URCSA

well know, is important. Hence the reader will find that the words “homosexual persons” (Synod’s description) and also “gays”, “lesbians” or “lesbi/gays” (as homosexual persons who want to be more inclusive in their language prefer), are interchanged.

We have also discovered, inasmuch as those who are not themselves gay or lesbian can, just how deep are the pain and estrangement felt by homosexual persons; just how horrifying for some of them is the prospect of “being discovered” and “exposed”; just how debilitating the humiliation they experience in the ways they are being discriminated against and talked about; just how destructive is the helplessness felt by the daily injustices done to them; and just how devastating the feelings of rejection and alienation they experience from the church and Christians. Most of all we have felt their total disorientation in the myriad ways church and society have questioned, undermined and denied their childhood of God. We have also felt the painful disillusionment of parents and family members, and with all of them, the loneliness no child of God need ever feel while there is such a thing as “church”.

As a church who experienced the pain and dejection of legal and personal discrimination and through the grace of God have found the courage to resist and destroy it, URCSA is in a unique position to understand the reality with which homosexual persons, their parents and family have to live, and to respond to it. We have come to know the God of compassionate justice and personal and political liberation, so the cry for justice from others in similar situations resonates with us. We know just how uplifting and empowering it is to know where God stands. Above all, we have come to know the power of the confession that Jesus is Lord, and how that enables us to work for justice and liberation and the humanisation of society and the world. All of these motifs run strongly through this report, and they remind, confront and challenge us in ways that we ourselves have found surprising but gratifying.

As can be seen from the contents indicator, the report is presented in several parts. Each part is written with numbered paragraphs, to make reading of the report and referring to it in discussions easier. The introduction is followed by biblical reflections, Old and New Testament, which each includes an integrated excursion on hermeneutical principles. We first thought to have just one discussion on hermeneutics, but after consideration decided to let this introduction to both sections stand. We sometimes labour under the misapprehension that there are different sets of rules for the Hebrew Bible and for the New Testament. It is good to see how the same principles help us toward understanding and interpreting these different parts of the Christian Scriptures.

Then follows a section on homosexuality and the Confession of Belhar, which offers a unique entry to the discussion and without which a discussion of this and any other issue within URCSA would not have made any sense. A section on ethical reflections comes next, followed by a section on African perspectives on the matter. As a church in Africa we felt strongly that this perspective was vital, even though this view on the discussion is hardly ever found in the debates in the churches, even in South Africa. In some denominations this perspective was forced into the discussion as it were, by circumstances or pressure from outside the continent, but rarely arose from within. We thought we should do that differently in hopes that it will be a catalyst to open an honest discussion within the church which will have hugely beneficial consequences for all the members of our church and for the discussion on these matters in the rest of the continent.

The section on pastoral concerns deals with the two vital issues Synod has identified: ordination and marriage. But it also shows what we believe to be new and crucial understandings of responsible pastoral theology which remains so much at the heart of the church’s ministry. The report is concluded with recommendations offered for discussion and decision. These recommendations all flow logically from the discussion in the report and the arguments offered within it and the task team is unanimous in offering them to Synod in the way they have been formulated.

Working on this report dealing with this extremely timely and urgent matter has been a deeply moving spiritual experience for us and we sincerely hope that some of that experience is reflected in the report. It has been a learning experience as well, which brought new insights and new awe for the Bible and a deep humility before the God of the Bible, and God's ways of love, grace and mercy with humankind. We thank Synod for this privilege and pray God's richest blessings upon the meeting.

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PART ONE

HOMOSEXUALITY: BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS

Reading the Bible

1. We confess that the Bible, as witness about the revelation of the triune God in the history of Israel and the person and work of Jesus Christ, is our primary source for moral discernment. We accept the authority of Scripture. It is the norm for Christian faith and life, doctrine and ethics. We accept the trustworthiness of Scripture as faithful witness of the liberatory words and deeds of God. We believe that it is the Holy Spirit who helps us to experience, believe and confess that the Bible is for us the inspired Word of God.
2. In reading the Bible, Reformed Christians have always understood that the authors of the Bible wrote about God's great deeds in their own language, and idiom, out of their own experiences and from within their own culture. For this reason we take the own nature and intention of the Bible very seriously. "...the wonderful mystery is that God speaks to us, not in a mysterious, oracle-like manner, but through a book that was written by people in human language, and with the intention that it should be understood by humans according to the normal rules of understanding human language." (W.D. Jonker)
3. This means, Prof. Jonker says, that a responsible interpretation of the Bible demands that we do everything possible to understand the original intention of the author and the meaning of the words used. In order to do this we need to understand the cultural context of the times in which the authors lived and wrote. In this we come to understand the unique circumstances of their writing, the different literary styles they employed and the people to whom they addressed their writings.
4. Second, we should determine and evaluate the context of the broader meaning of Scripture. This is the *context of the text*. In other words, where and how does the specific verse fit into a bigger passage or chapter, or more pertinent, into the overall message of the Bible. This will help us to understand better the place and function of such legal texts as Leviticus and Deuteronomy, for example. This will help us also to understand why the words and teachings of Jesus often resulted in either a deepening of perspective as well as a change of perspective in understanding obedience to the Old Testament. This is important when reflecting upon those sections of the Bible dealing with homosexuality.

5. Third, the verses should also be read within the context of today. This is the *contemporary context*. This principle requires that the interpreter knows that the Word be understandable, credible, actual, prophetic and bear witness to the situation at hand. To achieve this, the reader should know and understand their own context and contemporary situation, as well as the questions that are of importance to that situation. With regard to homosexuality this implies knowledge of recent scientific research, insights of psychology, the ongoing debate within church and society, the different viewpoints and the courage to discern the truth in light of the teachings of the Gospel.
6. There are many Christians who confuse the belief in the Bible as the inspired Word of God with a literal reading of the Bible as if every word in the Bible carries the same weight. That is not so. A Reformed reading of the Bible makes the distinction between the central message of the Bible and what lies on the periphery. If we do not make this distinction we might miss the message of the Bible.
7. Literal readings of the biblical texts, without taking into account the different cultural contexts of their origin and the different ways in which they were understood, and meant to be understood within those contexts, hold grave dangers for the church. Such was the case, for example, when slavery was held to be biblically sanctioned. The same is true for the biblical “foundations” for the theology of apartheid, or for the viewpoint that the Bible demands that women wear hats in church or could not speak in church. Much the same is the case with those sections of Scripture that refer to homosexuality. Many in the churches have been interpreting these texts literally and took them as absolute norms for all time. But a truly Reformed understanding helps us to interpret them differently today, as well as understand that even in the time these words were written they were not meant to be taken against the central message of the Bible.
8. Another danger is the inconsistent application of the literal method. So we may find Christians who insist on the literal understanding of the whole Bible, but who cannot, and in reality do not want to sustain that belief. Some Christians read Lev. 18:22 literally: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination”, and use it as argument against gay persons. At the same time they ignore verses such as Deut. 22:5, the law against the wearing of men’s clothes by women; or the wearing of clothes made of two different fabrics (Deut.22:11), or the lending of money against interest (Deut.23:19). Likewise we know of churches who insist, on the basis of Scripture, that the Constitution of the country be changed in order to criminalise homosexuality or to deny homosexual persons their human rights, but none of those insist, in obedience to Lev 25, that government institute the Sabbath Year or the Year of Jubilee, that would make a monumental difference to the lives of the poor and would greatly contribute to the just distribution of land. By the same token, how many Christians demand that the laws of purification as described in Lev. 12 be applied to women today, including the prohibition that she sets foot in the sanctuary “until the days of her purification are completed”?
9. There is the danger also of reading the Bible in order to prove our own point of view. In reading the Bible, often our own tastes or distastes, likes or dislikes, positive or negative prejudices play a role. It is no longer disputed that we cannot read the Bible without having taken into account, and discounting, our own context: wealth or poverty, power or

powerlessness, the one who discriminates and the one discriminated against, the one protected by the rules of society and the other a victim of those same rules. The never-ending battle regarding the wording of the Confession of Belhar that God is “in a special way the God of the poor and the destitute” between URCSA and the DRC, is proof of the power of context and position and experience in life.

10. A constant question that accompanies our reading, especially in regard to texts concerning homosexuality is, do we know enough about the context of which the text speaks; do we know enough about ourselves; do we know enough, not just about homosexuality as phenomenon, but about the homosexual person about whom we form the judgement in which we call God as witness?
11. A related but nonetheless often forgotten problem is that of Bible translation. Bible translations are not always right. They may be well-intended, but they are often wrong. Translators, just like any other person, bring to the Bible their own prejudices, lack of knowledge and understanding and misconceptions. It is important to note that the words *homosexual, homosexuality or gay person* did not exist in the original languages of the Bible. The term *homosexuality* stems only from the 19th century. The Hebrew word *qadesh*, translated in modern translations as “homosexual” has very little in common with what the modern understanding of being gay is all about. The word is consistently associated with idolatry and heathen temple prostitution (which was often gay prostitution) as it was practised in biblical times. A totally different, but effective example is the translation of the Hebrew word *le* in different verses in the Bible. It is a word that can be translated both by “and” and “but”, depending on both the context, the intention of the writer and the approach of the translator. For instance, Song of Solomon 1:5 reads, “I am black (*le*) beautiful. Here the word *le* can be translated by “and” and “but”, and careful translations like the New Revised Standard Version (of 1989!) translated it with “and”. But for centuries, in numerous Bible translations all over the world, including translations for African peoples, the word was translated with “but”, as if “black” cannot be beautiful, or black *and* beautiful is somehow not natural, not the expected flow of things. But for black people it would be perfectly natural, and perfectly right, to read: “I am black and beautiful”.
12. Reformed theology believes that the central message of the Bible is God’s revelation in Jesus of Nazareth. That God became human and lived amongst us, that Jesus taught us as no other the perfect love of God and the love we should have for one another, forgiveness, reconciliation and the way to fullness of life – that is the most central tenet of our faith, and the core message of the Bible. In the community of faith, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit of God, we read the whole Bible from this central point of view. From this point of view we understand God’s intervention in history, God’s acts of liberation with Israel, God’s demands for justice and humanity and God’s preferential option for the poor and the destitute. From this viewpoint also we understand the meaning of the Cross and the resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the calling of the church.
13. All this we understand through the work of the Holy Spirit. As John Calvin reminds us: “The Bible will remain dead words, unless the Spirit of God enlightens the reader. **Word of God** is only applicable when the Spirit of God works with those who read the Bible”.

The Bible and Homosexuality

14. Keeping the above in mind, let us consider those passages most concerned with homosexuality directly or indirectly. It is perhaps useful to remember that, as we mentioned before, the term “homosexuality” does not occur in the Bible. Neither do the connotations associated with the homosexual act cover the meaning of “homosexual relations” as we use the term today, or more precisely as homosexual persons themselves prefer to use the term.

15. What is homosexuality then? Scholars agree and gay persons themselves have tried hard to explain that homosexuality is an orientation that determines the essence of a person’s emotional, psychological, romantic, and physical nature. In other words, a homosexual person is a *whole* person; not just a sexual being or a bundle of unbridled lust, just as heterosexual persons are whole beings. Just as with heterosexual persons, their failures are human failures, their gifts are God-given gifts. When the Bible refers to homosexuality, it usually describes *sexual practices* and especially *sexual lust* between persons of the same gender. The Bible does not know of *sexual orientation* in the way we have learned to understand. *Orientation* is much more than only sexual practices. This does not mean that people with a homosexual orientation cannot, and do not commit acts of sexual lust. The same is true for people with a heterosexual orientation. And the Bible is equally clear on those as well. There is strong condemnation in the Bible for all acts of sexual violence such as rape, all acts of faithlessness such as adultery. It does not matter whether the act is committed by a heterosexual or homosexual person. For the Bible it is the personhood of the victim that matters, and the fact that that personhood is rooted in the image of God. An assault upon any person in whatever form is an assault upon the image of God, as we stated before.

16. The texts that generally are used in the discussions around homosexuality and the Bible are the following: Genesis 1:27, 28; Genesis 2:18-25, Genesis 19:1-29; Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; Romans 1:18-32; I Corinthians 6:9; and I Timothy 1:10. Understanding of these texts differs widely and has had a decisive outcome on the debate on the issues. For some these texts are a direct and explicit reference to homosexuality and as such are a direct and explicit condemnation of all behaviour that can be described as “homosexual”. The biblical condemnation then, is *mutatis mutandis* as valid in our situation today. Others however, hold the equally strong opinion that these texts are not a condemnation of the homosexual orientation as we understand that today, but rather a rejection of specific, perverse forms of homosexuality, for instance rape, temple prostitution, idolatry and pederasty. In the next sections we shall discuss both points of view and endeavour to show why we choose a specific interpretation.

17. Some also include Judges 19, that horrifying text about the levirate wife and her treatment at the hands of the men of Gibeah. However, we do not believe that the text is appropriate for our discussion. It focuses on the evil of sexual violence, abuse of power, and the perverse expressions of sexual domination and lust. The text deals with the way the men of Gibeah abuse a woman whose cowardly husband has uncaringly thrown her to the wolves and in his turn becomes the exact opposite of what God expects us to be. He is as perverse as the Bethlehemites, and in that sense becomes the prime example of men who do not understand the value of caring, loving, respectful, protective and reciprocal relationships. The fact that

the Bible does not allow his priestly cloak to cover the depth of his sin must have sobering implications for those of us who call ourselves Christians. We must not try to shift the focus away from that, and from the Bible's anger and disgust at the behaviour of the men, *men* in the story. The judgement in Judges 19 is upon the men abusing a woman, not upon men who are homosexual. What we see here is perverse heterosexual lust. Because of the important nuances this text accentuates, it returns from time to time in our discussion.

Texts from the Old Testament

Genesis 1:27, 28

18. According to one view the creation story in this text is understood as establishment of what is called an "order of creation". God created man and woman and gave to them the instruction to procreate and multiply. This is an expression of the unalterable will of God for humankind and at the same time the norm for all intimate and sexual relations in every society. Because homosexuality does not respond to this particular order created by God it cannot express the will of God for men and women and has to be seen as a deviation from that divine will, a perversion of God's intentions. In this way also procreation and dominion over the earth are part of this "order" and thus part of our human make-up. There are only two ways of being human: male and female.
19. Other scholars however, point out that a different reading of the text shows that the text, the story of the creation of man and woman, is not so much concerned with sexuality or sexual relations, but about the fact that both, man and woman, are created in the image of God. For this reason it points to the creatureliness of both man and woman, both as image bearers of God and therefore both equal in God's eyes and with one another. Vs. 28, instead of being simply read as instruction to have children and multiply, must be read as God's blessing over humankind. If we were to read this as an "order" from God, it would lead to a totally unconscionable and intolerable situation. It is not reasonable to accept that God intended or even "willed" the now already acute possibilities for overpopulation which in itself is such a danger to the integrity of the creation of God. Children are meant to be a blessing, not the result of an "instruction".
20. Besides, this argument continues, it would mean also that those persons who do not marry, (like Jesus or Paul, for example) and married persons who cannot have children would for their whole lives live in sinful contravention of the created order of God. It would also mean that not only would all human relationships be wholly determined by sexuality, but that our ability to judge and discern would have to be eliminated. For instance, we would have to accept (as do the Roman Catholic Church) that all forms of birth control would be against the will of God, thus sinful and impermissible. Genesis 1 and 2 give no indication whatsoever that the discussion here is about homosexuality versus heterosexuality. It is not doing justice to the text to understand the text as if it does.

Genesis 2:18-25

21. Once again it has become tradition to read in this second creation story the divine sanction of the relationship between one man and one woman, as the universal norm, unchanged and unchangeable because it expresses the eternal will of God. God created man and woman as partners for one another and the divine will come to expression only as man and woman

grow in their relationship to become as one; as Adam says, “bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh”. If this is so, it follows that where sexual relations are separated from the relationship between a man and a woman, perversion takes place. Others holding this view add that it is indeed true that the text is not only interested in sexual relationships. But the expression “they shall be one flesh” denotes the exclusive, permanent and intimate relationship between a man and a woman. They also point out that the words “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife” point to the general norm for marriage and marital relationships even though in practice in Israel it was the woman who left her father’s home to join the family of the man in the home of *his* father. We note here that we all commonly accept today that the meaning of these words for us is not literal; it expresses a spiritual reality.

22. Over against this view, it is pointed out that once again the issue here is not heterosexual relationships as divinely ordained, but rather the question: where does the attraction between men and women come from? We are persuaded that this view reflects better the meaning of the text. Here is why: In the world of heathen religions where Genesis was first told and written, the story of creation was told over against the belief that sexuality was a primeval natural force and could be used as a weapon to manipulate not only people, but also the gods. Over against this Israel confesses that sexuality is a gift out of the hand of God, meant to overcome the aloneness and therefore loneliness of human beings by giving him and her the possibility of intimate camaraderie and togetherness with another human being. The emphasis in this text is not upon differences between men and women, but rather on the sameness of the two as created by God. Camaraderie and sexual relationships are possible, not because men and women differ from one another, but much more deeply because they share a common humanbeingness capable of such intimacy and love and commitment. That is the ultimate meaning of “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”, Hence some translations read the last part of vs. 23: “One out of myself, one like me”. What is described here is true for general relationships between a man and a woman, and there is no doubt that while male/female relationship is what Genesis emphasises, the language of the text concerns the deepest relationships between two human beings, and there is no reason to think that the man/woman relationship described here is the only relationship possible between those created by God.
23. Furthermore, already the fact that proponents of the more traditional view admit that the words “therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife” were almost immediately not applicable in Israel itself, tells us not only that we should be careful with literal applications here, but also that the deepest meaning of the text is to describe the intimacy of human relationships in the first place. Second, we should keep in mind that Israel understood this “one woman, one man” – the monogamy pattern of marriage also as not universally applicable, and it is nowhere debated or insisted upon. Almost immediately polygamy becomes the norm, as Rabbinic interpretation consistently emphasized procreation and multiplication rather than intimacy and one to one relationships as the ideal. It is only later in Judaism that this emphasis is shifted. This fact alone must make us careful when we speak of a “biblical model of marriage” as some are wont to do. It is only in New Testament times, and then again in contrast with, and over against the dominant culture, that the Bible speaks of marriage as a relationship between “one man and one woman”.

Genesis 19:1-29

24. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah remains throughout the centuries the one story that is used to point out the Bible's judgement of, and God's judgement upon homosexuality. It is the story of Lot and his family, the total depravity of the two cities, the visit of the strange men, Lot's offer of his daughters to slake the sexual depravity of "the men of Sodom", and the aftermath. It all led to the destruction of the cities through the wrathful hand of Yahweh.
25. In some circles it is held that the efforts toward homosexual gratification displayed in the story are the direct cause of the anger of God in this chapter, and as a result the destruction of the cities, and that therefore the story of Gen 19 should be seen as direct condemnation of homosexuality in the Old Testament. The fact that the men of Sodom wanted sexual relations with the two (male) angels who were visiting Lot, is the one single despicable deed that caused God's actions. The story is seen as a dire warning about the consequences of homosexual behaviour for our society today. People of the same gender who fall in love and wish to enter into a permanent relationship are thus subject to the same wrath of God and will bring destruction upon us all if we allow them to do so.
26. Closer reading of the story brings some other issues to light, however. Careful reading makes clear that Gen 19 is not a condemnation of homosexuality as such, but rather of an attempt at rape by the male population of Sodom, whose greater majority in all probability was heterosexual.
27. It will be worth our while to explore this further. Exegetically, first of all, the problem seems to be concentrated in the words "to know them", in vs. 5. According to traditional and popular exegesis, the word "to know" and hence also the word "sodomy" always mean "to have sexual relations with". Accordingly many translations, including the New International Version for example, do not hesitate to translate, "Bring them out to us, so that we can have sex with them". It all seems to centre around the Hebrew word *yadah* (to know).
28. But second, note that the word *yadah* is used no fewer than four times in Gen 24, for example, and only once refers to sexual relationships. The same word is used in Exodus 33:17, Numbers 14:31, Jer. 31:34, and Hosea 6:3. In not a single one of these texts the word is related to sex. Careful analysis shows that the grievous sin in Gen. 19 has more to do with breaking the laws of hospitality especially regarding strangers, and of protection (in other words "love") which are so central to the godly life in the Hebrew Bible, than with homosexual conduct.
29. Third, the same is true in Judges 19, as we have seen, where the desire of the men of Gibeah is not for homosexual relations per se, but rather for any violent sexual deed that would satisfy their perverse lust. In the end *their* victims were not the men of the house but the woman, and the biblical revulsion is not less, but greater. The Bible here in both places does not condemn homosexuality as such, but any form of sexual violence, rape, and unwanted intrusion.
30. In Sodom's case, the refusal to offer a home for strangers, to safeguard them from harm, feeds the violence that bubbles just under the surface and finally, inevitably, breaks out. These are all signs of the total depravity, the inversion of values and the loss of sensitivity

for right and wrong that are the hallmark of a people, a community, a world which turns its back on God. The violence can, and very often does, include sexual abuse, but is not by any means obviously “homosexual”. To make it simple: if the Bible were to describe the shameless and violent behaviour of South Africans towards foreign nationals in some of our areas over the last few months, it would use the word “sodomy”. Especially since it included the violent abuse and rape of women.

31. Fourth, the Bible itself tells us what it considers to be “the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah”. The first reference is Jer. 23:14. The context is Jeremiah 22 and 23 where the judgement of the LORD begins with the king who does not know justice. The king is condemned because he “does not know justice” and hence does not “know the LORD”. He does not care for justice and righteousness, and did not judge the cause of the poor and needy. “Is this not to know me?, says the LORD”. Then comes the judgement of the king and “all the shepherds of Israel”: “...no one turns from their wickedness, all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah” (vs. 14, 15)
32. This is what Ezekiel says; “*This was the sin of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did abominable things before me...*” (16:49) For the Bible the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah had to do with the lack of justice and the doing of injustice, with lies and adultery and unfaithfulness, with turning away from the poor and needy in haughtiness and pride; with excess of food and that prosperity that comes from robbing the poor. At issue here is a lack of love and a love of violence, the desire for wealth at the expense of the poor, not knowing the difference between good and evil.
33. In the New Testament Jesus’ reference to Sodom and Gomorrah points to the lack of hospitality that might be the lot of those who take the Gospel abroad (Luke 10:10-13); and in Jude vs. 7 the nature of that particular sin is the desire of people to have sexual relations with heavenly beings. It is only in post-biblical sources that we find the thought that the destruction of Sodom has anything to do with God’s judgement on homosexual behaviour. In Jewish tradition it is first mentioned by Philo and Josephus and in the Christian tradition by church fathers Clemens of Alexandria, Augustine and John Chrysostom.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

34. Many regard these two verses as the definitive expression of the biblical judgement against homosexuality, and hence against gay persons. In these verses the homosexual act between two men is described as “an abomination” (Hebrew: *tó’ evã*) and the persons concerned “shall be put to death”. The harsh judgement and penalty are seen as the protection of the heterosexual lifestyle as ordained by God. Such relations also had the potential to cause social unrest and conflict between families, undermined the ability to procreate and would bring danger to existing marital relationships, which helps explain the harsh punishment.
35. Most scholars however, are now agreed that these two verses do not refer to homosexuality as we, with the help of science have come to understand it, but to specific homosexual deeds in connection with temple prostitution, and the gratification of sexual desires no matter how. This means that the religious practises to which these sexual acts were linked, were seen as a cover for simple sexual lust. There is a growing body of opinion that these verses are aimed

at cultic homosexual practices in the fertility religions of Canaan; hence the deliberate setting of these words within the context of “holiness” and “purity”. This is confirmed by the emphatic use of the word “abomination” referred to above. It refers to an act that is utterly unacceptable (unholy) because it is done in submission to idolatrous religious practices. The same term is used in Deut. 23:18, this time in reference to both homosexual and heterosexual temple prostitution. That there is condemnation is without doubt, but what is condemned is not sexual relations as such, but sexual relations within the context of cultic practices or the pretext of religious devotion. The condemnation is not a moral-ethical judgement, but rather an insistence with the view to preserve the holiness and purity of the religion of Israel.

36. The prohibition on specific types of sexual behaviour within the context of holiness is not the only prohibition in the so-called “book of holiness”. Other rules and laws of purity have to do with the consumption of bloody meat (Lev. 17:10ff); the prohibition against contact with a menstruating woman ((Lev. 18:19); against cross-breeding of animals, the planting of different kinds of seeds in the same portion of land, and the wearing of clothes made of different kinds of cloth (Lev. 19:19); the “rounding off” of hair on the temples or the edges of the beard and tattooing (Lev.19:28); anyone “with a blemish” or who is “blind or lame”, with a “mutilated face or a limb too long”, anyone with any deformity whatsoever, doing service in the temple (Lev. 21:17-21).
37. Other scholars add the fact that these prohibitions should be understood within the context of the constant desire to protect family relations, which in turn had to do with the strengthening of the tribe, its existence and survival. The point is however that the very harsh tone of the prohibitions in our two verses does not refer to sustained, loving relations between two people of the same gender, but rather to heterosexual persons who seek homosexual relations in an incidental, gratuitous manner. The very harshness of punishment here is a reminder of the times in which these words were spoken, that we, even those who insist on a literal reading of this text, would today dare to appropriate for ourselves, let alone demand from government.
38. Homosexual relationships as stable, permanent, loving relationships are not the target of condemnation in these texts; may, in fact not even have been part of their consideration. To conclude. Taken thus from the Genesis texts to the Leviticus holiness codes, it cannot be said that the Bible condemns “homosexuality”. What the Bible condemns is the sexual act loosed from the divine love of God, and the will of God for the fulfilment of our humanbeingness through human relationships. In the same way the Bible condemns sexual relationships with animals. It is not just that these are simply generally “disgusting”, nor is it because they interfere with God’s plans for our procreation. Most of all it is that these express the wilful decision to alienate ourselves from the divine purposes of God for humanity. They interfere with our humanity. The guiding principle status of matrimony, including sexual relationships, is rooted in the fact that it is based on voluntariness, reciprocity and equality, which means love and affection, which involve the partner’s entire lives and not only parts of those lives. Marriage is celebrated as being binding and meant to last for an indefinite duration; that is, it is based on faithfulness and steadfastness and offers reliability in all circumstances, even in times of crisis and conflicts. Within this environment sexuality becomes a shared way of living, the celebration of God’s gift to

humankind and within this environment children are not a demand, nor an obligation, but a blessing through which we seek to bless God and the rest of creation. There is no reason, we believe, why a homosexual relationship if given the opportunity, cannot reflect all these characteristics.

Homosexuality: Biblical Reflections (NT)

Introduction

Terminology

1. Terminology used to refer to sexual orientation is fraught with difficulty and politically laden. It is important to realise and acknowledge that the Bible knows no concept such as the modern notion of “homosexuality”, and therefore a more appropriate term to express what the Bible ostensibly condemns, is “*homoeroticism*” (Nissinen). *Homosexual* and its derivatives are today often seen as inadequate, suggesting an essence and then also as distinct from heterosexual; they are perceived as too political, a late nineteenth-century, psychologically defined condition distinct from and parallel to heterosexuality, an abstract construct superimposed upon the widely diverse reality of human experience. Sex reformer Karl Kertbeny coined the term “homosexual” in 1868, and Swiss medical practitioner Karoly Maria Benkert used it in 1869 in opposition to the expansion of anti-sodomy laws in Prussia. It is therefore interesting to note that the invention of a homosexual category made its opposite possible in 1890: only after the term homosexuality was created, some decades later the term “heterosexuality” was used for the first time.
2. Among “homosexuals” or “homosexual people” the terms gay and lesbian, and bisexual, has become more accepted and are more often used than “homosexual”. However, at times even the terms “gay” or “lesbian” – often seen as white, middle-class labels – and in more recent literature and in public commonly subsumed in “queer”. Queer is then not used as a derogatory term, meaning not normal or perverse but has become an empowering and inclusive term regardless of the colour of those involved. “LGBT-communities” (or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual communities) and “lesbigays” are probably the politically more appropriate and socio-culturally more accepted terms to use.

Body and theology (“body theology”)

3. Of late, as will be explained in more detail in the section on pastoral care, the body has featured strongly in broader religious discourse, including in Christian discourse. Feminist scholars in particular have made us aware of the social construction of gender and sexuality in the biblical writings and challenged the normative value of these cultural ideas from a theological perspective. Without distracting or subverting the claim that a new anthropology has to start from real women and their bodies, such a new anthropology cannot be developed in terms of existing, modernist categories characterised by claims of rationality and (thus) objectivity. A new way of theorising the body and how it is perceived and described is required and in this regard it is useful to include recent discourses in cultural studies in our theological discourse, and to utilise such insights for understanding Paul’s body theology.
4. Until the eighteenth century when a “two-sex” model became the norm for human sexuality, people were thought to be physically different in degree rather than in kind. In fact, in antiquity a “one-sex” model determined the understanding of human sexuality. The human body was seen as a hierarchy with both male and female characteristics shared by men and women but in different degrees. However, while the two genders were understood as one sex,

sharing the same anatomy, female bodies were regarded as inferior to male bodies as symbolised by having internal and inverted male genitals. With the two-sex model of human sexuality, the material body that became the primary location for the distinction between men and women usurped the position previously occupied by gender.

5. In view of the contribution of modern linguistics, it is not only a new “anthropology” that is called for, but also a new understanding, a new epistemology of corporeality, of thinking about the body. In short, this entails moving away from and *beyond* essentialist notions of the body, with the focus shifting so as to recognise the body as a constructed entity that exists linguistically, along with other bodies: the body “is not a ‘being’, but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated” (Butler 1990:137). Another vital consideration for coming to terms with the body is to understand its reciprocal relationship with society. On the one hand, the body exists by virtue and in terms of the discursive practices of society with its “context of situation” (à la Burke) as the non-negotiable networks of meaning, and so assuming the status of “factual” or “objective”. The discursive practices represent, but also “form the basis for perception and their power lies in the objective impression that is created”. On the other hand, the body assimilates society’s discursive practices in an ongoing, dynamic way, embedding these in the body’s development. The culture of society is gradually inscribed on and into the body, to the degree that it is considered both natural and objective.
6. Two effects of the dialectic between the body and language are important. First, the establishing of social control over the body, continuously nudges a body to become a(nother) normal body. The social construction of the body does not incapacitate it, but secondly and almost paradoxically, the “languaging” of the body empowers it, turning it also into a locus of political meaning and activity, which functions as a strategy of power.

Texts from the New Testament

7. It is important to understand the golden thread running through the various New Testament documents, albeit in different ways. People are expected, from the perspective of self-respect derived from their relationship with God based upon grace, to treat each other with *respect and dignity but also with consideration and love*, with *hospitality* as a privileged concept. Without insisting on unreasonable contrasts, it is nevertheless remarkable that Paul emphasised love above faith and hope (1 Cor 13:12). At the same time, the New Testament consistently encourage people to avoid sexual promiscuity, which was – as is the case with us today – filled with according to the prevailing norms and values of the time.
8. In the first century CE, homoerotic engagements (and relationships, as far as these may have existed) were predisposed towards *sexual promiscuity*, which meant sexual activities which were both contrary to what was understood as “natural”, or beyond the “limits” and “laws” (legal and socio-cultural) of the day, as well as exploitative. The New Testament did not know of modernity’s scientific studies and social norms (e.g. human rights) which extend to sexuality, orientation, gender and so on. We should therefore not be surprised if the New Testament does not address homosexuality directly, just as it does not address the abuse of the internet, cloning of stem cells, space exploration, and so on. This does not mean that the New Testament and its possible contribution becomes irrelevant or unimportant, but rather that its important and valuable coordinates for the thinking about and discussing sexuality in 21st century communities of faith, require of us to do so against the 1st century background (including the values, norms and conventions of the time) within which the New Testament texts were written.

Rom 1:18-32 (especially 1:26-27)

9. The *pivotal* biblical text on the topic of homosexuality in the New Testament is often considered to be Rom 1:18-32, in particular by those who hold what can be broadly referred to as an “anti-homosexual position”: believing that homosexuality is inherently sinful, that homoerotic acts are depraved or that same-sex relationships should be prohibited. Some of those holding an anti-homosexual position are willing to admit that Romans 1 “is neither a general discussion of sexual ethics, nor an explicitly prescriptive admonition about the sexual behaviour appropriate for Christians” (Hays 1986:187); yet, Rom 1 is nevertheless seen by some in an almost abstract way as the definite, biblical position on homosexuality.
10. The reference to homoerotic activities in Romans 1:26-27 has in the past been *interpreted in many ways*, taken to refer in its extreme versions to the so-called plain or literal sense of condemning “homosexuality”, to other and generally more nuanced positions on dismissing perverse and abusive homoerotic liaisons or to Roman, imperial sexual excesses. The *traditional* understanding of Romans 1 includes “homosexuality” in the inventory of moral depravity found in 1:29-32, indeed, puts it at the top of the list. The traditional understanding of the apostle Paul's teaching concerning homosexuality is an unambiguous “no”. The Romans 1 text is seen as condemnation of any and all homosexual relations and activities.
11. Explanations of Romans 1 tend to focus on the meaning of *phusis* (nature), because Paul seems to privilege this concept. The broader concern of Paul in Romans 1, is taken as the apostle's disquiet that people place themselves and their desires before God and worship of him. In the end, Paul is seen as addressing the sin of human egocentric selfishness, and swapping God for inferior gods: people act directly against their God-given goal. *Phusis* is consequently understood as more or less equivalent to God's intended purpose for people and with the world.
12. However, the polyvalent nature of *phusis* or at least its use is, on the other hand, clear from the following: it refers to the natural heritage of people (Jews) in Gal 2:15 and Rom 2:27; in Rom 2:14 to acts that are in accordance with customs and traditions; to qualities of persons and things in Gal 4:8; to the education and social customs within a certain cultural context. In the case of Rom 1, a theologised natural order is sometimes evoked. The description of homoerotic acts in Rom 1 should be read in light of the broader issue about idolatry. Idolatry is essentially a denial or lie about the truth which is God since in Jewish thought the opposite of truth is not error but the lie, and therefore early on it already seems that homoeroticism or “homosexual relations” is spiritual perversion in the sense that men would relate to their alter ego's (other men) as do women (and so women with women).
13. It is a problem that the *traditional* interpretation of Rom 1 as anti-homosexual text tends to *interchange* in his theological argument what Paul says about idolatry and homoerotic acts. Paul claims that rebellion against God is manifested, among others, in unnatural sexual liaisons, those threatening to destroy the hierarchical and patriarchal first century world. But the claim cannot be reversed without doing an injustice to Paul and perverting his argument: cause (rebellion) and effect or result (homoerotic activities) cannot simply be interchanged, also not on the premise that since rebellion is a specific sin then that specific sin is as good as rebellion. In fact, good reasons exist why this would not constitute a valid exchange. Firstly, it *confuses cause and effect*, and creates the dangerous misunderstanding that if you address the consequences, that you then are in fact also addressing the cause as well. An important consideration against viewing Rom 1 as first and foremost a proscribing homoeroticism is that the standard Jewish view on sin or transgression entailed that if it was not atoned for in ways prescribed in the Bible, it would be punished, whether in this world, by sickness, suffering, or death, or in the world to come. In Rom 1, however, homoeroticism is already the consequence of sin, the failure to acknowledge God as God.

14. Secondly, it does an *injustice to the real issue* which the texts are addressing and distracts from Paul's main point and the issue which he raised, namely rebellion against God. Thirdly, it creates the impression that a *particular* manifestation of the results of rebellion encapsulates the rebellion *fully*, which has over the centuries contributed to the fabrication of homophobia and to some extent, also contributed to growing negative view of sexuality in various forms of early Christianity. And, finally, it unnecessarily complicates the ability to *address* or *rectify* the situation – such redress obviously needs to start with the cause rather than the effect.
15. We need therefore to return to Paul's argument that is so heavily based on what is considered “according to nature”, with “unnatural” referring to unconventional or out of the ordinary practices, actions contrary to accepted social practices. In contemporary literature, *phusis* was generally used for two categories of meaning: origin or constitution, and secondly, in medical-technical and vulgar language with reference to the genitals. The reference to genitals should be read within the Greco-Roman socio-cultural context where the misleading translation “natural relations” (*tēn phusiken chrēsin*, Rom 1:26, 27) are referring to *acts* which were in accordance with the social hierarchy of society, the conventional or proper way of acting. Paul used “contrary to nature” or “unnatural” only with reference to *actions* as borne out by Paul's use of *chrēsis*, and as reference to desire (Martin 1995:341). “*Chrēsis* [Use] does not refer to a relation carried out in the medium of sexual pleasure but the activity of the desiring subject, usually male, performed on the desired object, female or male” (Frederickson 2000:199). The gender of the sexual partner is not as important as his/her social status and the sexual act have to conform to the “social status hierarchy” of the participants. In short, nature in the first century and in the twentieth century presupposes different cultural assumptions, worldviews and symbolic universes. Paul dealt with other issues within the early church also on basis on the “nature”-argument: ranging from extreme acts of courage to the perceived unnaturalness of eating meat; and, the length of women's and men's hair (1 Cor 11:14-15). In fact, in Rom 1 the phrase “contrary to nature” is anachronistically interpreted as referring to the wrong object choice.
16. The nature/natural-argument is therefore to be used with greater care than is often found in anti-homosexual readings of Rom 1 – Paul used the term differently and in different contexts. E g, Paul's argument on the inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God in Rom 9-11 is reliant upon the same contrast between what is natural and what is unnatural – *phusis* again the word being used. By using the same language, and having God as the implicit author of the cutting and the grafting, it is God acting against nature and Paul defending his gracious nature without claiming it to be natural: the creator's power transcends even nature's generativity. Moreover, by the same token, the followers of God are expected to follow suit: to act contrary to nature!
17. Thus, while it is not denied that Paul together with the other Jews of the day would have – and indeed had – reacted sharply against first-century, Greco-Roman homoeroticism, Paul however, at the same time, endeavoured to include the very same Gentiles, all of them (Rom 1:5, 7, 16), into the covenant *and* people of God. Rom 1 wanted to accomplish little more than to posit the need for Gentiles to acknowledge and belief in God, on the grounds of a caricaturised portrayal of the decay of society without God. And while Paul's expectation of Gentiles who join the fold of the followers of Christ would entail a different morality and lifestyle (cf Rom 13:13-14), it was not one of rigid conformity to social and other conventions: as Paul explains in Rom 12, Christian morality is a matter of discernment from the heart and mind.
18. A striking feature of the reference to homoerotic acts in Rom 1:24-26 – alluded to earlier – is its presentation as consequence rather than origin of sin, and so the absence of any descriptions of same gender-sex as sin. The descriptions boil down to impurity, social disgrace and Paul's idiosyncratic version of the Stoic concerns for nature and the natural: an “error” indeed (Rom 1:27). If the connection between Rom 1:24-27 and 1:28-32 is indeed secure, the strongest term

used for describing same gender-sex is probably *ta mē kathēkonta* (“things that are not fitting”, 1:28; or “inappropriate acts” in Stoic philosophy of the time), which was also typical “Greek-speaking Jewish polemic”. In fact, a number of different but (partially) interlinked concerns inform Paul’s condemnation in Romans 1, ranging from the official, imperial to the more conventional, domestic contexts.

19. In the *first place*, the broader socio-historical context of the contemporary, early Roman Empire with its focus on the restoration of public and private order and discipline, enforced through Augustus’ strong laws on morals and marriage, all of which was supported by a “massive propaganda effort”. Augustus was constantly portrayed as the best example of self-mastery, in contrast to his opponents; e.g. Cleopatra’s main concern was depicted as her own sensual gratification, served by Anthony as her love-crazed slave. In typical imperialist paternalism and self-justification, the Roman conquest and submission of other peoples were vindicated on the notion of the Roman rulers effecting self-mastery to the benefit of their subjects, and beyond what the subjects could accomplish on their own: “self-disciplined Rome rules subject peoples for their own good”.
20. While the strong heterosexual focus in theory if not in practice shows an analogy to the heteronormativity of today, it was, *secondly*, the socio-cultural perception of sex, gender and sexuality that differed in many ways from conviction, convention and practice today. A study of contemporary authors shows an understanding of “homosexuality” which differs radically from modern perceptions: sexuality was not separated by a homosexual-heterosexual dividing line, but adhered to a boundary informed by social status and determined by activity and passivity. Free-born males ruled the roost and asserted their masculinity through (sexual) activity, by penetration, in contrast to others being soft and therefore susceptible to be penetrated. Penetration was the role reserved for those lower down the social ladder regardless of their sex: women, slaves, effeminate males, eunuchs, “barbarians”, “captives” and so forth. “The reduction of sexual relations to the act of penetration enables sex to become a simple yet effective instrument for expressing hierarchical relations”. Gender and social status in the first century, Greco-Roman world were interlinked, rendering “class-infused views of masculinity”, and relegated femininity and women along with other non-dominant groups as subsidiaries to free men. In Rom 1 with its inversions (reversed gender hierarchy of female-male, and reversed gendered actions with women exchanging and men giving up), effeminate language is on the cards – with the loss of honour and implications of shaming involved for first-century readers.
21. A *third*, important context important in understanding Rom 1 is the socio-cultural world or symbolic universe of Paul which was heavily indebted to notions of clean and unclean. As a Jew Paul understood the world as orderly cosmos, classified and systematised so that everything, person, place and time could be categorised in terms of being “in place”, or in other words, purity. Paul’s strong words in Rom 1 deal with his concern with *cultural purity*, and not a moral matter, at least not in the first place. When it comes to the human body, wholeness was highly valued as much as bodily excretions were potentially dangerous sources of pollution with flows of blood, menses, semen or pus designating it unclean, and putting it “out of place”. Specific popular understandings of purity were important since they regulated full membership and participation within contemporary Jewish communities, and uncleanness received no sympathy or tolerance.
22. Other socio-cultural influences can also be detected in Rom 1:18-32, as well as hybrid positions incorporating elements of several of the above were common, especially since Jews and Christians in different yet analogous ways entertained similar claims to both philosophy and self-consciousness, and also to self-mastery, which served them well within the Roman Empire. The link to typical Stoic concerns in Rom 1 – “Rom 1:24-27 is thoroughly consistent with Stoic

denunciations of non-Stoic philosophers” (Swancutt 2004:65) – shows for example how what was considered the false understanding of people’s larger view of life was seen as the reason for passions and their inability to control passionate desire.

23. Greco-Roman homoeroticism should be understood within a context where sexual activity and penetration in particular was determined by *gender*, as well as by *class* and *status*. Given the acceptance of female inferiority, her submission to the male constituted what was believed as natural and therefore appropriate, and it was not only homoerotic acts between females but also women performing oral sex on men – considered servile and degrading – or women assuming an other active roles in sex with men, which was considered abnormal or contrary to nature, and therefore inappropriate. Men always had to assume the active position, to dominate – the sex of the person, i.e. whether it as a man or woman, was of lesser importance. Especially from a Jewish moral perspective, where legitimate sex was explicitly heterosexual and thus to be found in marriage and aimed towards procreation, such 1st century Greco-Roman sexual mores were caricaturised and frowned upon.
24. The nature of Paul’s argument in Rom 1 suggests that it is in a certain way an elaborate version of the argument found in 1 Thessalonians (1 Th 4:3-6 in particular), and cannot simply be cited in arguing against homosexuality today. Paul is concerned about the purity of followers of Christ from Gentile stock and they should thus avoid the sexual practices of Gentiles who do not know God, inevitably practices in which people are wronged. Paul did not, however, provide specific directives for either lesbians who know God or lesbians in committed relationships that do not exploit anyone, because such identities were not readily available options in the first century CE. No indication of the wide-spread presence of long-term homoerotic relationships in the time of the NT exists – rather exceptions that proved the rule – and also hardly convincing evidence of egalitarian, loving, non-oppressive relationships. First-century CE negativity towards homoerotic acts, such as found in Rom 1:26-27, was underwritten by what was seen at the time as the transgression of the social norms regulating male (active, penetrating) and female (passive, being penetrated) roles re gender and sex, as well as by the physical impossibility to procreate.

1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tm 1:10

25. The two other texts most often cited in the discussion of the New Testament and homosexuality, are 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tm 1:10, where in both cases only two terms (*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*) and one term (*arsenokoitai*) respectively are used. The terms employed in 1 Cor 6 (and the one used in 1 Tm 1) cannot simply be assumed to mean “homosexual”, as it is often translated, in an almost neutral way, amounting to modern use of the notion of homosexual orientation.
26. The words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* are usually considered as references to homosexual activity, and are sometimes even translated as one term, such as in the RSV (sexual perverts). The NIV, however, translates the terms with “male prostitutes” and “homosexual offenders”, and the Jerusalem Bible, with “catamites” (Afrikaans, “wellustelinge” [1933] or “skandjonge”[1983]) and “sodomites”. It is important to note from the outset that these terms are not used in the neutral sense of “homosexuality” as a phenomenon, but are used here with a negative reference in reaction to the 1st century Greco-Roman sexual practices.
27. *Arsenokoitai* was a neologism which Paul probably coined as term from the Greek translation of the Lev 20:13, building on the notion of “a man who lies with a man as with a woman”. There is debate on what is described with this word. Etymological claims are often disrupted when arguments in both directions are used: (males) “lying/having sex with males”, or “males [prostitutes or sexually immoral men] lying/having sex” (with males and females) – colloquially, “men who sleep around”.

28. The Afrikaans translation of “skandjonges” or English “male prostitutes” for *malakoi* is probably more adequate than other neutral terms in resembling the ancient context of male, often cultic, prostitutes as well as the frequent occurrences of pederasty in especially the Hellenistic world of the time.
29. Another important consideration with these terms is their inclusion in vice catalogues or sin lists, renowned for their stereotypical slander. Rather than denoting any specific “type” of person or any specific act or acts, the full (negative) impact of the list was intended to slander the referents regardless of whether all epithets were necessarily true or applicable.
30. In 1 Cor 6:9-11 “homosexual” relations and activities are listed along with two other sexual vices, *pornoi* (sexual immoral people or prostitutes) and *moichoi* (adulterers). It is important to note that both of these are characterised by their “*extra-marital*” sexual activities. This should probably be read against Paul’s insistence on sexual activities in a monogamous setting, where, indeed, Paul more than tolerates but in fact encourages sexual engagement (e.g. 1 Cor 7:5). Furthermore, the combination of homoerotic sexual activities with prostitution and idolaters may also suggest a religious-cultic setting for homosexual activities, or homosexual *cultic prostitution*. Should we not ask ourselves whether Paul would have addressed the situation differently if stable, monogamous relationships between lesbians are legally and socially possible, as it is in South Africa today?
31. While being identified as lesbians would hardly be considered shameful by lesbians themselves today, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* were in the 1st century intended to cause shame – and not to indicate, as some argue, sin or being sick. The focus was indeed on a “man” – as socially constructed entity – functioning as or assuming the role of a woman in the Mediterranean world, which was considered shameful, and contrary to the good order of society: Men had different social roles than women, regulated through an honour and shame culture, and had to act accordingly.

Conclusion: Rom 1, 1 Cor 6 and 1 Tm 1

32. An appeal to a supposed “plain sense” or “literal understanding” of Scripture in the gay-debate does not suffice, and is challenged by the now discounted “plain” meanings about slavery and the status and position of women in church as basis for socio-political programmes in society, and which people generally acknowledge to have been influenced by the power of convention and ideological positions more than anything else. The claim that no biblical author approved of homoeroticism “in any form they knew” is not difficult to show, but has to be read in the context that biblical texts focused on “physical sexual contacts”, that the Bible has no sustained or primary discussion on homoeroticism itself since it always appears as a secondary theme in other contexts, and that it are contemporary interpreters who have thematised different texts with regard to the topic of homosexuality.
33. A sexual ethic informed by perspectives from the New Testament challenges the assumptions which make reproductive sex into a norm. For example, when Jesus or Paul talks about marriage, neither of them insists upon procreation “as a rational or functional justification” (Williams 2002:6). Sexual orientation, or “constitutional” or “core” homosexuality was not considered options in ancient thinking about sexuality; neither were committed, caring same-sex relationships seriously contemplated in a context where homoerotic acts were necessarily conflated with “immorality, debauchery and licentiousness”. So, for example, Paul’s argument in Rom 1 cannot be applied directly to what modern people know about homosexuality, as much as his instructions about hair lengths and dress codes are also considered inappropriate for direct appropriation today.

34. The focus on sexual abuse in the indictment of injustice cannot be explained according to a theology of homosexuality, since Rom 1, 1 Cor 6 and 1 Tm 1 do not deal with modern categories such as homosexual orientation. Sex was a medium of power in the first century CE, and homosexual sexual activities, like all other sexual activities and relationships, took place in relationships characterised by inequalities of power.
35. Paul's assumption, that certain sexual relations were wrong but others legitimate, was derived from the substantive ethical convictions of his Jewish tradition, and also wider first century notions of legitimate sex. Paul also did not shrink back from providing these notions with specific "Christian" motivation and legitimation, and evidently appreciated, at least at a subconscious level, their value in supporting his ultimate focus on sustaining Christian identity and community. This militates against any direct appropriation of Paul's convictions as necessarily either the only option for Christians or the correct option.
36. A precarious position emerges when formulating Christian sexuality or sexual ethics based on what is claimed to be a literalist reading of Rom 1, which would require a chauvinist approach to human sexuality, complete with sanctioned male prerogative and regulated female submission. Accepting Paul's argument on homoerotic acts being unnatural because it subverts the ancient natural order of male-female hierarchy, would not allow the modern reader to escape the accompanying gender ideology of the inferiority of the woman, the seducible seductress, whose dangerous sexual ability should be controlled by male sexual power. Subscribing to the sexual norms of a first-century author without appreciation for his contemporary socio-historical context and a long history of interpretation, results in a selective reading, choosing to retain certain elements while discarding others – but often the link between misogyny and homophobia are latent beneath the surface, with heteronormativity which goes beyond "compulsory heterosexuality", clearly maintained by and therefore biased towards patriarchy.
37. Paul believed that followers of Jesus in Rome could not give up their boasting until they discerned the lie at heart of imperial policy, which is why he condemned the impiety (*asebeia*) and injustice (*adikia*) of mortals who suppress truth by their injustice (1:18). In the end, if – as Paul argues – that injustice is the result of enslavement to sin, as much as impiety is the shackling of truth at the level of consciousness and conscience (Elliott 1994, 181-230), then – to follow the apostle's argument in the modern context – today's institutionalised churches' condemnation of faithful, Christian lesbians living in responsible partnerships not only amounts to injustice but also to impiety! "Injustice toward the vulnerable neighbour, on the basis on human-made, time-bound, patriarchal rules, constitutes a practice of idolatry in elevating cultural norms to the status of divine commandment" (Van Wijk-Bos 2003, 73). Paul's emphasis in Romans is on justice, the doing of justice, which would nudge the believers of today in our context and with our cultural perceptions, towards the promotion of lesbian/trans-rights as a matter of social justice.
38. It is also noteworthy that the reference to what is perceived as homosexuality in the New Testament basically amounts to the *three texts* discussed above. This is hardly an indication that this matter occupied the minds of the New Testament authors. Indeed, in the case of Paul who was perhaps most deeply immersed in Roman-Hellenistic culture with a high level of homosexual activity and even glorification, the number of references to homosexual relations and activities hardly suggests that it constitute any serious problem for Paul. "Same-sex intercourse" is not singled out "as specially perverted or monstrous". On the other hand, listing same-sex activities along with other vices, such as theft, drunkenness, perjury, and adultery and murder, as well as taking the context of Paul's broader teaching on sexuality in consideration, suggests that Paul saw same-sex activities contrary to "God's creative purpose". Quite

significant is the *reasoning* or motives applied for reproaching homosexuality: the argument often relies upon convictions informed by specific cultural patterns such as the belief in a “natural”, hierarchical order – the irony (the hidden issues of power and ideology) which is highlighted by the juxtaposing of these two words!

39. Being faithful to Pauline methodology today would imply the implementation of his moral discernment, rather than taking over his first-century morality, in totality (*en bloc*) and as is (*sito sito*). Paul's moral arguments rely on at least three elements: his interpretation of the Old Testament (in this case, concerning idolatry), the common wisdom and customs of the day, and his own empirical understanding of homosexuality's nature and consequences. So, a Pauline methodology would have us discuss homosexuality today with our best biblical interpretation, our best common wisdom of the contemporary day, and the best empirical understandings we can find.

Other relevant New Testament themes and texts

40. To adequately hear the voice of the New Testament on the issue of homosexuality, one has to move beyond Rom 1, 1 Cor 6 and 1 Tm 1, especially since our Reformed tradition has always emphasized the importance of making sense of individual texts in their wider biblical context. Space limitations prevent more exhaustive and long discussions, but the following texts and themes should be considered when the New Testament is used to argue a position on homosexuality in our church.

God incarnated: The flesh-and-blood Jesus Christ

The New Testament as well as the whole of Christianity rests upon the central affirmation that God became a human being, that God was incarnated in Jesus, that God became flesh and blood – fully human – in Jesus Christ (cf Jn 1; Lk 1; etc). The Christian faith is therefore one that proceeds from the principle of embodiment, of flesh and blood bodies being vital and important for understanding Jesus, and through him, ourselves. One aspect of bodiliness or corporeality is sexuality, and it is inhumane and unjust to deny any human being's sexuality – this is of course different from condoning criminal or abusive sexual practices.

Homosexuality and lesbian people therefore have to be understood from an embodied perspective, and the debate is first and foremost about human beings and their sexualities; sexuality as a vital component of personhood, of existing bodily, of identity and consciousness – all very important concepts in an incarnated religion like Christianity (where God became a person!), with accompanying claims to people exuding the “image and likeness” of God (Gen 1-3). To simply focus on sexual activities in the discussion of homosexuality amounts to pornography where the focus is on genitals and sexual intercourse! Lesbian people like all others have the natural longing for companionship and fellowship, love and nurture and comfort and similar qualities people look for in their spouse, partner or significant other.

In this respect, it is significant that the same three grounds for the attacks against Jesus and the reasons why he was considered offensive, as portrayed in the Gospels – namely, lack of honour, his non-reproductivity and forsaking holiness in breaking through the usual conventions of society – were the reasons why ancient Mediterranean culture loathed homoeroticism (White 1995:22).

The counter-cultural Jesus Christ: A different “household”

It is interesting to note that the Bible contains no statements of Jesus Christ on the matter of homosexual relations or activities. In his reference to *Sodom* (Mt 10:15, Lk 10:12; cf Ez 16:49) Jesus is recorded to ascribe the destruction of the city not to homosexual activities but rather to inhospitality and injustice. In fact, Jesus' vision of the kingdom of heaven challenged the first century-household, the traditional image of men and the accompanying image of masculinity

among the followers of Jesus. The household was a place where everyone knew his or her place and had a sense of limits and boundaries; its traditional roles and order were prescribed by the patriarchal social order of the time, and inscribed around binaries such as male and female, we and them, inside and outside, central and marginal – with each of the first elements privileged in terms of the societal norms. The household was an elemental version of the larger community, in the end encompassing everyone (and every social structure and institution) from village to the nation or people at large.

The focus of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels is unexpected, singling out young men and encouraging them to leave their households (along with their livelihood, work and inheritance) which defined their identity and provided them with both a sense of being and social position and function. Jesus further encouraged small children and women, not married and not childbearing for whatever reasons, towards the kingdom of heaven. The young males who identified with the kingdom of heaven were structurally similar to the women who followed Jesus, inhabiting the same space *outside* of the household, and thereby outside the village system based on households. And the role which Jesus assumed for himself, claiming to be without a home and not claiming his rightful sonship within his father's household, showed him to be an atypical male in the first century.

While Jesus did not break away from the notion of household altogether, he re-envisioned the composition and function of household, and its social place as well as social roles. Jesus refers to his followers in terms of a household, as brother, sister and mother, but not as father or wife, and more importantly, without notions of authority, procreation or patriarchy – the household is repositioned in the kingdom. This transformed household with its transgression of roles and order, is encapsulated in Jesus' saying about himself and his male followers who became "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:12), since using the eunuch figure was to employ a metaphor that infracted masculine identity. "Jesus was an ascetic who transgressed the boundaries of what it meant to be male in first-century Palestine. Moreover, he introduced that transgression as characteristic of the kingdom" (Moxnes 2003:105). This Jesus broke through established social boundaries, and offered an alternative social environment for the household in particular, amidst socio-political developments such as Herod Antipas' attempt to establish a new, Graeco-Roman style economy, which favoured cities and the elite.

Centrality of love in the NT

In the full diversity of the New Testament, and in fact the Bible, the challenge is to love, and to love amidst a variety of abilities and possibilities. It is not only Paul in his ranking of faith, love and hope (1 Cor 13:13) who chose hope. The exhortation to the followers of Jesus to live in love, to love others as they love themselves (Lev 19) is a constant refrain in the New Testament in all its constituent books (e.g. 1 Jn 4; James). The love which people should have for one another is not self-generated, but based on the love of God for people (Jn 3:16) – but therefore love among people is not optional but a divine imperative!

In the history of the church, a strong case can be made that the abolition of slavery is the logical extension of Pauline thinking and theology – notwithstanding 1st century conventions which merely elaborated on the structuring of slavery rather than to question it altogether. Although there is general agreement today among people that this is the appropriate way to understand the New Testament with regard to slavery, when it comes to the ordination of women and the full and unconditional acceptance of lesbians however, the love commandment seems to be forgotten amidst different contemporary sentiments among and "feelings" of people.

Inclusion: Jews and Gentiles

In the Pauline letters the single biggest problem that the apostle had to deal with, was the inclusion of Gentile followers of Jesus in the early church which grew from Jewish roots and emulated Jewish beliefs such as belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and conventions such as the ongoing value and importance of the Scriptures of Israel (“Old Testament”). The theological rationale of this practice of inclusion of Jewish and Gentile believers in the church has become the defining theological presupposition in the Reformed tradition: justification by faith alone! Nothing else is required of people, no ethnic heritage, no ritual participation, no unique or specific lifestyle, only faith! In the New Testament times, as today, there was an ongoing discussion of what the morality of the believers in Christ should look like, but the inclusion of people in the grace of God depended on their acknowledgement of God as God and belief in Jesus Christ.

The importance of inclusion in this discussion is that it can serve as an alternative paradigm on reading the Bible with regard to lesbians, as indeed many scholars and theologians have suggested in the past with reference to situations such as where Jesus acted inclusively although it would have challenged the purity conventions of the day by touching a woman suffering from continuous bleeding; as well as texts such as Acts 10 where God challenged Peter on his exclusivist thinking, as well as Paul’s insistence that all are one in Christ (Gal 3:28). Jesus reacted against the accusation of the Pharisees that his disciples eat with unclean hands, and insisted that the physical cannot make impure (Mk 7). The notion of the inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God can therefore act as a paradigm for including lesbians in the church: no prerequisites are required, only the grace of God; no Law and requirements are necessary, and people do not have to swear off their own identity.

Should the church in its care and concern for the marginalised, in its attempts to promote justice on earth, and to counter discrimination and violence against those on the periphery of society, not actively engage the LGBT-communities of faith and include them with the same boldness that Jesus invited all to the Kingdom of heaven, with a particular invitation issued to the marginalised of society? Is it appropriate to simply appeal to Jesus’ remark to the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:11) “to go and sin no more” when lesbian people are living in non-adulterous and in fact wish to commit to stable, monogamous same-sex relationships? In this regard Jesus in Mt 5:21-47 insists that one should not be blinded simply by acts of people, but that the moral perspective behind the deeds is all-important.

Acceptance, embrace (e.g. Lk 15) and hospitality

The parable of the Prodigal Son or maybe better titled, of the Loving Father, is an important, key text for thinking about inclusion, acceptance and embrace – without setting pre-conditions, first making certain requirements the criteria for embrace. Without focussing on any detail, this parable has long suffered theological impositions, masquerading as interpretations, and has led to neglect and even discarding of the dynamics of the story. More recently, attempts were made to read it in its first-century context, and explained as a parable of failed relationships. “[T]he inability to take account of ambiguity and complexity results in inappropriate and oppressive exclusion” (Volf 1996:163). This is a helpful approach to understand the parable, but the animosity which is breached and overcome in the story is brought about by the acceptance of vulnerability.

The parable of the Prodigal Son demonstrates and even emphasises vulnerability, what it means to find oneself in liminal positions, the implications of living on the margins. The initial, literal setting of the parable in the Gospel of Luke already underlines vulnerability with the binary of 99 and 1, of those who are or consider themselves found and the lost, strongly underlining the tensions between the two sides. The telling literary setting portrayed in Lk 15:1-2 underlines the vulnerable position of the tax collectors and sinners, and that of Jesus in view of the grumblings of the Pharisees and scribes about Jesus “receiving and eating with them”

“The father’s most basic commitment is not to rules and given identities but to his sons whose lives are too complex to be regulated by fixed rules and whose identities are too dynamic to be defined once for all” (Volf 1996:165). First-century people’s lives were regulated by rules and conventions, which were seen to have made life possible in the first place, and through which certain identities were attributed to people. The parable supersedes traditional concerns and even though the father may not have been capable of really “choosing” to protect his children as opposed to abiding to traditional (household) rules, the father becomes an important illustration of how his realisation and engagement with vulnerability enables a new relationship between rules and identity.

While some could argue that the parable of the Prodigal Son contemplated family relationships, the emphasis on hospitality which is necessarily directed to the Other, the outsiders is an important theme in the New Testament (e.g. Lk 11:37-54). In various different ways the New Testament encourages the acceptance of prophets (Lk 9:3-5; 10:2-16), and even provide models for how to show hospitality (e.g. Lk 10:38-42; Matt 23:11-15; and in Heb 11:31 the focus is on how models for hospitality can be borrowed from the Old Testament figures of Abraham and Rahab for the hospitality shown by them in Gen 18:1-15 and in Josh 2:1-21 respectively.

New creation, new identity

Paul insists on the new identity of the followers of Christ, and that the things of creation, the natural things including those which could cause one’s impurity in the Jewish system, are no more to be perceived as such. Circumcision or uncircumcision (Gal 5:16-17; Rom 4), pure or impure including such natural things as semen, body parts and bodily orifices (mouth, genitals [penis, vagina], anus) and all other categories and dualisms have been subverted by the ministry that sets people free (1 Cor 3:9).

The goal of creation is reached in humanity, which also means that the human creature is a living being (1 Cor. 15:45), and as God’s creatures, people have no claim on God but belong to this creation. In Jesus Christ, there is a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; cf. Eph 2:10, 15; 4:24; Col 3:10), by the Word and Spirit (cf. Jas 1:18) to new life in the Spirit (Rom. 6:1ff.). The new aeon breaks into the course of this aeon in a creative work of God which unites divided humanity into one new humanity (Eph. 2:15). The goal is the totally new creation, the new heaven and earth, in which death will be abolished, Christ will be fully manifested as the pneumatic man, and the glorious liberty of God’s children will be fulfilled with the redemption of the body (Rom. 8:21). Being part of, in fact, being the new creation, requires of the church to challenge itself to renew its thinking, its relationships, its notions of unity and inclusivity – all of which can be so easily become bound into the old age! In a similar way, Paul calls upon the early followers of Jesus (Rom 12) to transform their lives through living out of a new discernment, a new perspective on life.

2.4 Conclusion

Without repeating the conclusions that were already formulated in the Old and New Testament discussions above, it is clear that the claim to a literalist reading of the Bible which is often offered as the ground for a simple rejection of homosexuality and lesbians in the church cannot be maintained.

The so-called “six-shooter texts” which have caused so much harm, suspicion and negativity among heterosexual and lesbian people cannot – as is the case with any biblical text – be properly understood outside or divorced from its original context. However, the meaning of texts are not therefore locked up in the past, with no relevance for today; rather, such contemporary relevance amounts to more than simply quoting a text in response to a moral issue.

On basis of the full biblical evidence, both Old Testament and New Testament, and when considering the texts most often used in the lesbian-debate as well as other important relevant

texts, we can conclude that there is a strong enough rationale to argue that on basis of the Bible a homosexual orientation should be acknowledged as part of God's created cosmos with all its diversity. In the church we can therefore welcome and embrace lesbians with open arms and hearts, confirm and bless them in their unions or "marriages" with one another and ordain those who are called to the ministry by the Lord – in the same way and according to the same measures we apply when dealing with heterosexual people.

THE HOMOSEXUAL REALITY AND THE CONFESSION OF BELHAR

Introduction

Unlike other churches who have grappled with this issue, the URCSA does not only have the understanding and interpretation of Scripture and the legacy of ecumenical wisdom to work with. We have, as fundamental to all our theological deliberations, also the Confession of Belhar. It brings with it a burden of responsibility URCSA cannot deny nor avoid. The Confession of Belhar, together with the three well known confessions we have inherited from our Netherlands Reformed roots, form the confessional basis of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. Together these four confessions are required to be believed, accepted, embraced by all members of URCSA, and undersigned by those who wish to enter her ministry as pastors. For URCSA Belhar is the continuation and affirmation of the ecumenical creeds and stands within the Reformed theological tradition. It is our understanding of how this tradition with its particular dynamic theology could be applied to a particular situation in the times in which we live. In essential ways, Belhar is for URCSA the validation of the Reformed tradition in the South African context and increasingly it is becoming that for other situations world wide as well, as Belhar continues to gain acceptance and continues to become a theological point of reference for churches in the world wide Reformed community and the wider ecumenical church.

But for URCSA Belhar is more. It has fundamentally changed the life, outlook, and witness of the church. Together with Scripture, the ancient beliefs of the Christian church, and the Reformed theological tradition it has become the bedrock of all our theological reflection and action. Through Belhar we have sought, and it has placed us in the company of believers who have, in life threatening situations of the more recent past, looked towards the Word of God and the Reformed tradition to seek a way of witnessing to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the life-giving Word of God and the Holy Spirit in situations where to the judgment of the church, the integrity of the Gospel and the witness of the church in the world were at stake. The Theological Declaration of Barmen *vis-à-vis* the Nazi heresies in Germany was such a situation. The idolatry of racism in South Africa was ours.

In the debates with the Dutch Reformed Church for example, the point was often made that Belhar confirms in a special way the identity of URCSA, that its formulation and acceptance was a defining moment for us. That is to say, it is not the exclusive identity or even founding identity of our church: that identity was, is and forever will be Jesus Christ. But Belhar, more than any other document perhaps, *confirms* that identity. That is true. We see it even stronger: Belhar was not just a defining moment, it *is a defining presence* for us. By "defining presence" we mean that Belhar cannot and will not be confined to a single moment in our history, as if itself defined by that moment. In other words, Belhar cannot and will not be seen as a response to racism, and even more narrowly, to apartheid only. Belhar continues to define still today who and what we are, our understanding of the demands of Scripture, our response to the realities of the world in which we live, our obedience to Christ in terms of the great challenges facing the church today. It is for this reason, for instance, that the Confession of Belhar features so strongly in the Accra Documents and the new *processus confessionis* called by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

Like all true confessions, we believe, Belhar was born out of the hearts of the faithful, and in a situation of deep despair and uncertainty, of trial and tribulation, of crisis and testing; a time in which the fundamental tenets of the Gospel and the heart of our faith were under so severe a threat

that no mere religious statement or even a theological declaration, no anxious repetition of doctrinal certitudes would suffice: the church could only turn to the rare and radical act of confession to proclaim the Gospel anew. It was a moment of truth and of *kairos*, of being overpowered by the Word of God and being empowered by the Holy Spirit of God. It arises in a specific situation, but like all true confessions, because of its rootedness in the Word of God and its sensitivity to the human situation, it speaks to a universal reality. Its necessity was parochial; its application is universal and ecumenical. The Gospel was at stake, our very lives were at risk and the testimony of the church was in jeopardy. We could only call upon the One who is the Source of it all. Hence the Confession speaks to the human situation everywhere.

Like all true confessions, the Confession of Belhar seeks neither to attack nor defend, but to uphold and affirm; not to condemn or rationalize, but to testify and proclaim. Like all true confessions, it responds to heresy, that wilful and deliberate turning of the truth away from the light of the Gospel into the shadow of human distortion and satisfaction. The rediscovery and recognition of that truth is not a moment of triumphalist gloating, but rather a moment of profound and humble joy: the truth has found, recovered and reclaimed *us*. We are not the light; the light illumines and leads *us*. Hence we do not *announce*, we *proclaim*; we do not pontificate, we *confess*. For that reason, joy is the most visible, sustained, shared and enduring trait of the confession; not certitude or triumphalism. “The joy of the LORD, it is your strength!” (Neh.8:10). That joy is shared by *all* the people of God. Joyfully we claim with all the saints the affirmation of the unity of God’s people as gift and obligation, the message of reconciliation God has entrusted to the church and the truth that through Jesus Christ we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth, called to be peacemakers. We celebrate the good news that God is a God who brings true justice amongst all humankind and that the church as the possession of God, not of human beings or cultural groups or earthly powers, must stand where God stands: against all injustice and with the wronged and that we are empowered to stand with the powerless against the powerful. We sing joyfully that we are called to confess all these things not through our earthly power, arrogance or recklessness, but in obedience to Jesus Christ, even though it may provoke the wrath of earthly authorities and human laws, because above all we know: Jesus is Lord.

This joy, the joy of belonging to Christ and to the community of believers, the joy of knowing one’s rootedness in the love of Christ and the love of the brothers and sisters; the joy of sharing that community in its fullness and the sharing of the fullness of one’s own humanbeingness within that community and in the world: that joy is not to be denied to any member of the body of Christ, in whom we all find our “only comfort in life and in death”. That sense of belonging, in Christ and as a consequence with each other, is unbreakable and untouchable by any human law or cultural or personal prejudice.

It is within this context also that Belhar calls upon us to remember that “we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another (since) we share the one faith...” As true as this is of our racial relations, it is true of our other human relationships as well, especially in the church.

Context and Situation

It is important to make the point that the context of racism and apartheid may have been the original *casus confessionis*, the immediate cause of the Confession, but it certainly does not proscribe it, nor does it denote the limits, or exhausts the depth and scope of the Confession. We have already made the point that Belhar is universal in its applicability and in its inherent ability to speak to different situations in the world. The theological truth Belhar proclaims transcends borders, geographical and otherwise, cultural, political and human situations. The fact that Belhar is so understood by Christian churches from Korea to Palestine, from Africa to Europe to the United States, testifies to this. In other words, while Belhar indeed defines racism from the viewpoint of faith, Belhar is not defined by racism, nor is the confession contained or exhausted by it.

Much of the misunderstanding that surrounds Belhar, from others certainly, but also often from within our own URCSA circles, stems from the fact that Belhar is understood as a testimony against

apartheid, bound historically and theologically to a particular political situation that existed at a particular time, and hence proscribed by that situation, and only applicable to that situation. However, the theological basis of Belhar, the structure and the intentions as well as the language of the Confession argue strongly that this is an unpermissible reduction. It is a matter that touches the heart of the Confession, and is crucial in our understanding of the impact of the Confession on the life and witness of the church.

The historical contexts of slavery and colonialism, racism and apartheid are not the only contexts Belhar addresses and to which it speaks so powerfully. The Confession lives by the affirmation with which it begins, that concludes Article One which deals with the unity of the church, namely that “true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church”. “This church” is not in the first instance URCSA, but rather the church of Jesus Christ. This is the faith of all who call upon the name of Jesus Christ, who find in Him their “only comfort”. This affirmation has much more radical consequences than might hitherto have been admitted to, perhaps because the Confession is too readily read as a document responding to a “racial” situation.

It is perhaps important to emphasize the point: the Confession, for good reason, never mentions the word “apartheid”, for the issue never was apartheid, but rather justice, unity, reconciliation; the integrity of the Gospel, the faith of the church and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Focusing on apartheid would have fatally defocused Christ and would, both spatially and historically, have parochialised the Confession beyond redemption.

Notice that the “forced separation of people on the grounds of race or colour” is mentioned for the first time and only in Article Three which speaks of the “enforced separation of people on a racial basis” and in the “rejection” which follows. The affirmation of the “true faith in Jesus Christ” is related first to the rejection of any “absolutisation” of “either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people” that “hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church”, and next to the kind of belief that professes that genuine spiritual unity is truly being maintained “in the bond of peace whilst believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation”. In other words, our alienated reality cannot be condoned, tolerated or alleviated by our “spiritual unity”. The latter means nothing if the former is not real. This holds not just for racial matters, it pertains to any other reality or perceived reality that “breaks the visible and active unity of the church.”

Diversity, Dignity, Humanity

We shall have to say more about the language of Belhar here. Belhar disputes against an understanding of “diversity” that is abused for reasons of negativity and rejection, instead of a diversity that celebrates the other and the richness of difference. The diversity that is absolutised is the diversity that seeks to find a negative “otherness” that comes with enmity, distance, aversion, discrimination and degradation and in so doing eliminates dignity and the bond of humanity. The diversity that Belhar celebrates is the diversity that comes from celebrating both the richness of the creation of God and the dignity of the difference we see in the other. To “absolutise” this diversity is to make it the foundation of the other’s existence. The foundation of the other’s existence is not the difference of skin colour, or gender, or culture, or sexual orientation. Rather it is their humanbeingness, their being created in the image of God, sharing humanity in all its fullness with us. We dignify both the difference and the togetherness with our respect and love and the embrace of our common creatureliness as image bearers of God. The dignity of difference is the dignity of personhood. This is what the church celebrates and embraces.

Absolutising this natural diversity which we should actually embrace and celebrate not only breaks the visible and active unity of the church, but accepts that the church must live “in despair of reconciliation”. This is an attitude Belhar utterly rejects. On the contrary, it is our calling, gift and obligation to live together as reconciled community. There is nothing that falls outside of this call and gift; nothing that makes us “despair of reconciliation”.

This goes far beyond the issue of race. This addresses quite profoundly the historical and actual contexts of oppression, rejection and exploitation of gay persons, but also people mentally and physically challenged (whom we used to call “disabled persons”) and women. It begins with the

recognition that Belhar's understanding of the diversity mentioned above is a holistic, positive, enriching one, as opposed to the understanding of "diversity" that is negative and therefore leads to "natural" separation that should be enforced by law and then sacralised by the church. Or conversely, a diversity that is considered to be contrary to the will of God, but enforced on an unwilling church by a secular Constitution.

Belhar rejects the sinful absolutisation with a view to inferioritise, separate and discriminate, but expressly celebrates the diversity that affirms humanity and welcomes it as a gift from God for the richer life of the church. Belhar embraces that diversity as enriching and building the visible and active unity of the church. In this regard rejection of gay persons or the degrading of women as if their "true faith in Jesus Christ" is not enough, but is in reality subjected to some form of human approval, something extra, or subject to their ability to "change" and become "more acceptable" (to us), is part of the sinful "doctrine" that Belhar rejects. Not only is our rejection of them a sin, but a sin also is, according to the Confession, the "refusal earnestly to pursue this visible unity *as a priceless gift.*" The hallmark of this very strong language is its inclusiveness. All manifestations of the sinfulness that "breaks the visible unity", "despairs of reconciliation", causes "alienation from one another", blesses the "enforced separation of people" on whatever grounds, are as applicable to the situations of separation and oppression and discrimination of gay persons and women as they are to the realities of racial oppression and separation.

We must consider further the implications of our confession that all human beings are created in the image of God. The Confession of Belhar grew out of the growing theological understanding of the church on these matters since the early 1970s. We came to understand, in contrast to earlier times, that with regard to racism, we could no longer speak of it simply in individual, personal, that is to say, attitudinal terms. We understood racism in its historical, structural, systemic dimensions and manifestations as well. This same maturity of insight is called for in the matter of homosexuality. The injustices and suffering inflicted upon homosexual persons are not just personal, a matter of attitudes; it is severely systemic and structural. It is for this reason that the Constitution of South Africa regards discrimination against homosexual persons a criminal act, as are their rights considered a civil, legal and political responsibility.

The church began to speak of racism as "sin" because it denies, as we have stated before, the creatureliness, and hence the humanbeingsness of others. It denies the truth that all human beings are created in the image of God, people whose humanity is confirmed and made sacred by the incarnation of God through Jesus Christ. We are human in the likeness of God, which means not a physical likeness, but our unique, dynamic relation to God and hence to one another. The uniqueness of the other person confirms the communality of both of us and turns both of us toward the divine. No wonder that when we say *ubuntu* we speak out of deep Christian conviction. Our humanity is confirmed by and in the humanity of the other; our own humanness is affirmed by our recognition of the humanness of the other, and therefore our existence is incomplete without that human recognition and reflection. Cultural, racial, ethnic, language or any other difference cannot invalidate that basic truth that constitutes human life together. In Jesus Christ, these considerations become utterly compelling.

We called racism a form of idolatry in which the one dominant group assumes for itself a status higher than the other, and through political, cultural, military and economic power, as well as socio-economic and psychological structuring, seeks to play God in the lives of others, demanding from them a "correction" of their humanity that is in fact God-given: to be celebrated, not denigrated; to be embraced, not discriminated against; to be dignified with love, not vilified by ignorance and abuse.

And so we called apartheid racism a pseudo-gospel and a heresy because it claimed to have salvific power, made demands in the name of the Gospel the Gospel itself does not make, claimed to know better than God the way of salvation. We rejected the apartheid pseudo-gospel because it claimed that the most important thing about a person is not that he or she is a human being created in the image of God the Liberator with inalienable rights, but his or her racial identity. It meant that racial identity determines, with an overwhelming intensity, everything in a person's life. This pseudo-

gospel was perhaps willing to admit that God created us all, but added a “but...” That “but” was the beginning of the heresy, the human hubris and arrogance that dared to question the completeness and rightness of God’s creation.

That view, we further determined, has all sorts of bitter consequences. Because it dehumanizes the other, reduces them to the caricature we, not God, created, they are stripped of their human dignity, of the freedom of choice and options. Dislodged from the image of God, they are not fit to be considered in terms of pain or humiliation, dreams or aspirations, human degradation or human fulfilment and human rights. They become, in our sinful minds, the completed and completely distorted “other”, the product of the perverted, racially-obsessed imagination of the dominant group, the object of our scorn. This same process of thinking and action can be detected in homophobic prejudice. When Belhar rejects “any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the Gospel”, this is what our Confession points to also.

Justice and Inclusivity

Moreover, the whole of Article Four, which deals with God as “the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth”, speaks to the situation of gay persons and women. The situation of the homosexual person is in its deepest reality a situation of injustice. Their search for the recognition of their humanity is a search for justice. In their woundedness, their vulnerability to the denial of their rights, the enmity of many in society and the church, and the rejection of their true and full humanity, homosexual persons have an inalienable right to call upon the God “who in a special way (is) the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged”. Their suffering is no less wrong than the suffering of the widows and the orphans and it is in regard to their right to justice that God “wishes to teach the people of God to do what is good and to seek the right”. Therefore, with regards to gay persons and women, in their struggle for the recognition of their rights to full humanity, the church also must learn “to stand where God stands”, to witness and strive against “any form of injustice”, so that also for those members of the body of Christ “justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”.

As the church seeks to follow Christ in the struggle for justice for the poor and the discriminated-against, so the church must follow Christ in this matter. This not only means that the church ought to support, uphold and implement those rights afforded homosexual persons in the Constitution of South Africa, the church ought to seek to actively safeguard and promote those rights within its own structures, its preaching and living, its worship and witness. Rejecting, as Belhar enjoins us, “any ideology which legitimates any forms of injustice...” means by the same token, or better still, by the same conviction, rejection of any form of oppression of women, or any form of homophobia, blatant or subtle.

This is the way in which the inclusiveness of the Confession of Belhar reflects the inclusiveness of the embrace of God. We further believe that this is the meaning and interpretation of the 2005 General Synod decision on this matter when Synod spoke of its “embrace” of homosexual persons into the body of Christ. “Embrace” is inclusive, it does not tolerate any notion of distance. Not in terms of membership, nor in service or in ministry in any sense of calling recognised by the church. The only yardstick here, as with all members of the church, is “true faith in Jesus Christ”.

The confession states, “We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only Head, the church is called to confess and do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence. Jesus is Lord”. We believe that it is wrong to restrict this sentence to “governmental powers and authorities” only, even though this statement remains only too painfully true. Most West African states criminalise homosexuality, and most recently according to news reports, the Gambian president warned that all homosexual persons should leave the country “within twenty-four hours” otherwise their heads would be “chopped off”. Since President Yahya Jammeh threatened that his country’s laws would be made stricter “than those in Iran”, many gay persons have been arrested and otherwise persecuted. “All homosexuals, drug dealers, thieves and other criminals” have to leave the country. But there is also the tyranny of

cultural chauvenism, homophobic prejudices and societal perceptions in many cases driven by the media and propagated by churches, which exert enormous pressure over against what we know to be the call of the Gospel. These are powers and authorities Belhar calls us to resist. There are frightening reasons why so many homosexual Christians suppress their identity and even allow themselves to be forced into heterosexual marriages in order to hide their being gay, causing untold suffering to themselves, their spouses, their families and in the end, the church. This is not a church reflecting the love Christ demands, the respect and dignity homosexual persons deserve or a testimony to the glory of God.

It is worthwhile to quote the whole of Article Three, reading it not as a statement of faith about racial injustice, but as testimony against *all* forms of injustice, prejudice and exclusivity, and affirmation of the fundamental truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for any human situation:

“We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ;

That the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word and deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells;

That God’s life-giving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity;

That God’s life-giving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world;

That the credibility of this message is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people... promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity;

That any teaching which attempts to legitimate such enforced separation by appeal to the Gospel, and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the Gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine.”

Conclusion:

In our view, the above considerations in light of the Confession of Belhar cannot but bring URCSA to accept and embrace homosexual persons in the fullest sense of the word. That means that synod accepts:

That homosexual persons, on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ as personal Saviour and Lord of their life and of the church, are without any reservation full members of the church of Jesus Christ.

That homosexual persons deserve justice in the same way the church claims justice for the destitute and the wronged, both before and under the law, in civil society and in the church, and the church commits itself to actively seek that justice in all areas of life.

That our commitment and calling to unity and reconciliation require that homosexual persons, as confessing members of the church, have access to all the offices of the church, including the office of minister of the Word.

4. This access should, both in the interests of justice and pastoral concern, not be prejudiced by demands for celibacy if the relationship is one of love, respect and real commitment. Should the criteria for heterosexual married persons apply, URCSA must then take a decision on support for homosexual civil unions as allowed by the Constitution.

HOMOSEXUALITY AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

A sexual ethic for heterosexual and homosexual Christians

To strive to execute the mandate given the task team as embodied in the decision of Synod, the following contribution discusses ethical positions about heterosexuality that Christians broadly agree upon. On basis of that discussion the theological and ethical stance of churches regarding homosexual Christians is discussed.

2. In a first round some guidelines for moral decision-making within the Reformed tradition is offered. Thereafter ethical directives for heterosexual living are proposed. In a third round ethical directives for homosexual living is discussed. And in a final round recommendations regarding homosexual living are formulated. Specific attention is paid to the marriages or covenantal unions of homosexual Christians, as well as the ordination of homosexual Christians.

Some guidelines for moral decision-making

3. In reflecting about ethical matters, also about ethical matters relating to the sexual dimension of our lives, Reformed Christians follow under-mentioned guidelines. At the 2005 General Synod most of these guidelines served as basis of the discussion on homosexuality.

4. We *pray* for the guidance of the triune God. *We need God*. We echo the prayer of Solomon for wisdom and discernment. “*Give me now wisdom and knowledge to go out and come in before this people, for who can rule this great people of yours?*” (2 Chronicles 1:10).

5. We join Paul in his prayers for discernment: “... *I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family heaven and earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, He may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God*” (Ephesians 3:14-19). “*And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God*” (Philippians 1:9-11). Where love overflows, discernment flourishes! “... *we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.*” (Colossians 1:9-10). We concur with Paul’s statement that we can only discern the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect, through commitment and surrender to the merciful God who transforms us through the renewal of our minds (Romans 12:1-2).

6. We also know that *we need each other* to discern the will of God faithfully (cf. Ephesians 3:18). We are in the quest to know with the saints, with those who lived before us, with those in other parts of the world and in other denominational traditions. Our joint discernment and quest for faithfulness and obedience even keep coming generations in mind. With regard to homosexuality we embark on this process of discernment not alone, but with other churches in other parts of the world, and in South Africa, who strive to discern God’s will.

7. As Reformed Christians we recognize the *complex, ambiguous, tragic, aporetic* and sinful nature of existence. We know that in a broken and sinful world we are so often unfaithful, we discern wrongly. In this broken world we are also well aware of the fact that we cannot always choose between right and wrong, good and bad only. So often the context of the moral landscape is that of complexity and ambiguity. More than often we have to choose between less wrong and more wrong, as for instance in the case of divorce and some forms of abortion. We also have to choose between less right and more right. We have to prioritise and choose the most appropriate response

in a specific time and place. In the awareness of this brokenness, tragedy and guilt, we embark on the journey of ethical decision-making in the knowledge that we belong to a *faithful and grace-ful God*. We endorse the view that the most important thing in life is not to be right all the time, but to be *forgiven*. This recognition of our own shortcomings help us to guard *against judgementalism and the stereotyping, stigmatization and even demonisation of others*, especially those who differ from us.

8. In the tragic, complex and ambiguous context within which moral deliberation takes place, we guard against two more dangers, namely that of *relativism* and *absolutism*. Recognition of the complex nature of the moral life, acceptance that we sometimes have to choose between more wrong and less wrong, acceptance of ambiguity does not imply moral relativism, lawlessness, an “everything goes” approach which teaches that nothing is wrong and nothing is right anymore. On the other hand we also guard against the temptation to get rid of ambiguity by opting for absolutism that is taking decisions that pretend to be the absolute truth, whilst all other views are considered to be absolutely wrong and demonic. To steer our ship between the rocks of relativism and absolutism we need wisdom.

9. We confess that the Bible, as witness about the revelation of the triune God in the history of Israel and the person and work of Jesus Christ, is our primary source for moral discernment. We accept the *authority* of Scripture. Scripture is the *Canon*, norm for Christian faith and life, doctrine and ethics. We accept the *trustworthiness* of Scripture. In terms of the central message of comprehensive and eternal salvation in Jesus Christ, Scripture is infallible. In terms of the message that it intends to convey, Scripture is also *clear*. Although we also learn from the long tradition of the church, and from processes in nature, history and science, and although our rational capacities, consciences, as well as emotions and attitudes, and our experiences regarding various moral issues, play a role in moral discernment, Scripture is a sufficient guide for the faith and life of Christians. In fact, these other sources of moral knowledge are informed, transformed and interpreted by Scripture. In new situations and contexts Scripture needs to be interpreted afresh through various exegetical methods and through the interpretation of specific parts of Scripture in the light of the whole, and in the light of the central message of salvation in Jesus Christ.

An ethic for heterosexual Christians

10. There is among Christians from various traditions, and specifically also Christians in the Reformed tradition, more or less central points of agreement and consensus regarding the constitutive elements of a heterosexual ethic.

Points of broad consensus about heterosexual identity

11. Sexuality is a gift of God. It is something to be celebrated. It is, therefore, not *per se*, as such, sinful and something to be ashamed of. Due to our sinful human natures sexuality, just like the other good gifts of God, can also be corrupted.

12. Sexuality is an essential part of our humanness. As ones created in the image of God, we are relational beings, beings in search of communion, *ubuntu*-people. We seek community and relationship with others and ourselves *as sexual beings*. We relate to God, other humans, other believers, the environment and to ourselves as embodied, sexual beings.

13. Sexuality is to be understood in a comprehensive way. It has physical, affective, ecclesial, ecological and theological dimensions. It does not only refer to the process of coitus and copulation, to the *physical* act of sexual intercourse. Sexuality does not only have to do with our genitals. It also has to do with our total bodily lives as beings that see, hear, smell, taste and touch. Besides this inclusive physical dimension of sexuality, sexuality also has an *affective* dimension. It involves our emotions, and our interaction with others as affective beings. Moreover, sexuality has an *ecclesial* dimension. In worship and other practices of the church we relate with each other as bodily beings that see, hear, smell, taste and touch. Sexuality even has an *ecological* dimension. We relate to the environment as bodily, sexual beings. We enjoy the gifts of the environment that care for us as bodily beings, and we strive to care for the environment as bodily beings. And sexuality has a *theological* dimension. We relate as sexual, bodily, and affective beings to the triune God, who created us, cares for us and calls us, who reconciles and justifies us, who renews and sanctifies us.

14. Sexual identity, i.e. maleness and femaleness, is determined by various factors. Biological factors, determine masculinity and femininity. Cultural, psychological and sociological factors also determine our sexual identity. Bio and human sciences teach us about the complexity and ambiguity of the interplay between these factors in establishing maleness and femaleness. They teach us that boundaries between what we traditionally define as purely maleness and purely femaleness, is not that rigid, but these boundaries are more fluid. These factors determine our self-understanding, self-expression and our behavior as sexual beings.

Points of broad consensus about heterosexual practices and marriage

15. As married and single persons (i.e. single persons who plan to get married at a later stage, and single persons who feel called to a life of celibacy outside marriage) we, in broader sense, continually relate to God, other humans, other believers, the environment, and ourselves as sexual beings. We treat each other with honour and respect, dignity and reverence, and we enjoy each other as embodied, sexual beings.

16. For our most intimate expression of physical sexuality, in the specific sense of sexual intercourse, we follow the guidelines of Genesis 2:24 and related passages about the space within which intercourse is to take place. This is a space of *permanent* relationships (the man clings to his wife.) It is a space of *exclusive* relationships (it is about *the* man and *his* wife). It is a space of *public* relationships (the man leaves his father and mother). Sexual intercourse takes place where partners live in a permanent commitment to each other. It takes place where they show exclusive and unique loyalty to each other. And it takes place where their relationship is public. Parents, families and other believers know about this permanent and exclusive commitment. Marriage (which is mostly accompanied by wedding feasts), therefore, functions as public and institutionalized form of this commitment. Mentioned groups support the couple and help them to keep this commitment. And the couple fulfills their responsibility to these communities as those who do not live in the single or free-state anymore, but in the united state of holy matrimony. Their becoming one flesh, their being united physically, their act of physical intercourse, is a symbol, an affirmation and a celebration of this permanent, exclusive and public (marital) commitment. This act is engaged in within an ethos and calling of hospitality to children, within an ethos of welcoming children into the world with all the joy and responsibility this entail.

17. The state is also invited as one of the communities that should be aware of this permanent, exclusive and public commitment. Without blurring the distinctions between church and state, for Reformed Christians, discipleship is not to be separated from citizenship. The state has the task to provide the spaces within which Christians, and for that matter people of other religions, can practice their convictions about marriage. Appropriate marriage laws are therefore formulated. And as married couple Christians fulfill their appropriate responsibilities regarding each other as marital partners, regarding their children (if they are granted children), and regarding family, church and broader society.

Points of broad consensus about heterosexual practices and the office of minister of the Word

18. Through faith in Jesus Christ, as symbolized, confirmed and celebrated in baptism, we become members of the church and Christians. We are called to enjoy the many gifts of God with other believers, and to minister in church and society as prophets, priests and royal-servants. In fulfilling our joint ministry all Christians are called to engage in sexual expression, sexual conduct and sexual practices (in broader and more specific senses) in the framework provided above.

19. For those called to the ministry of the Word in a fulltime leadership capacity, the same framework applies. In fact, this framework of a life of celibacy and enjoyment of others as fellow-bodily and sexual beings, or of sexual intercourse within marriage, applies to a higher extent to these leaders who are called in a special way to exemplary living.

An ethic for homosexual Christians

20. The next part of this contribution deals with the discussion about Christian ethical guidelines for homosexual persons. It is demonstrated that, despite the highly divisive nature of homosexuality in church and society all over the world, various crucial points of agreement and consensus do exist among Christians. Consensus also exists about the presence of mainly two conflicting theological

and ethical positions, which can both be subdivided into a variety of sub-positions, amongst Christians regarding homosexual living.

Consensus about the guidelines for moral decision-making processes

21. The guidelines for moral decision-making in paragraph 1 above, which informed the ethical discussion about heterosexuality, also apply to the ethical discussion about homosexuality.

Consensus about the position that needs to be rejected

22. Christians are in overwhelming agreement that homophobia as prejudice against, and stigmatization, demonization and victimization of homosexual persons need to be rejected in the strongest terms and actions possible.

Consensus about the guiding principles of tolerance and embrace

24. Christians are in strong agreement that heterosexual and homosexual brothers and sisters need to relate to each other in a spirit and ethos of love, graciousness, and embrace. The same spirit and ethos should guide those who have conflicting theological and ethical positions about homosexuality.

Consensus about the complex causes of homosexual identity

25. Christians that adhere to conflicting ethical positions about homosexuality do agree that homosexual identity is constituted by a complex set of biological, psychological and sociological factors. They do agree that combinations of these factors constitute homosexual identity. They also agree that these constituent causes of homosexual identity are manifested differently in different homosexual individuals. For some the permutation of causes might be such that they can change sexual identity and become heterosexual, and for others the combination of causing factors might be such that they cannot change their homosexual identity.

The weight and persuasive power of unfounded prejudices

26. It also seems important to quell a number of generalized fears and address some frequently cited, “pet” arguments on homosexuality often encountered today. These are often not voiced publicly in synod meetings, but nonetheless simmer just below the surface and bedevil our thinking about these important matters. As happens so often scientific and medical evidence on homosexuality is largely eclipsed by *popular notions and beliefs* on the subject.

27. One, ours is a patriarchal world with an exceptionally strong emphasis on masculinity (see for example advertisement campaigns, where anything from food through deodorants to cars are portrayed as attracting women to men and where scantily clad young women are the “sales pitch”). Amidst this male-centeredness of the world which still privileges maleness and discriminate against women, the misunderstanding that homosexuality is about “femininity” is often found, whereas homosexuality concerns, to be sure, the celebration of masculinity and femininity respectively. The notion of gay males as “effeminate”, “sissies” and “moffies”, therefore miss the point completely. Likewise this applies to lesbian females as being “tough”, “butch”, and “dykes” etc.

28. Two, the sometimes overwhelming anti-homosexual stance of and within the church is sometimes cited as indication of homosexuality being “unnatural”, “evil” and thus to be condemned. This is an argument fraught with all kinds of difficulties: does this mean that because the majority supports an argument it is therefore true? Historically the majority of people were against the emancipation of slaves, equal rights for women, voting rights for all citizens. Those for these things were for a long time a very small majority.

29. Three, the popular notion that AIDS is found almost exclusively among homosexuals is not borne out by experience and that same experience has taught us through painful lessons in our own communities how wrong we were. HIV and AIDS know no sexual orientation barriers, just as they do not know social and economic barriers. Of the 900 persons who die of AIDS in South Africa daily, at least 200 are children and the vast majority of adults are heterosexual.

30. Fourth, the common belief that homosexuals are compulsive and sex-hungry pedophiles given to child molestation and thus dangerous, especially to young children, is also not borne out by evidence. Heterosexual abuse of children, rape and other sexual offences are much more prevalent than homosexual abuses. But the division of statistics here does not do us honour. For the church,

all kinds of abuse, whether homosexual or heterosexual is equally deplorable. Here again, it is not the sexual orientation that defines us as Christians, it is the way in which we live that will testify whether we reflect the life of Christ.

31. It is our evangelical responsibility not only to condemn all kinds of prejudice, unfounded rumour mongering about and hurtful labeling of other people, but to resist and fight those within and outside the church. We know that Jesus was right: it is in the impure heart that the sinful act originates, (Matt. 15:18,19), so we submit the renewal of our minds to Christ. "In that renewal" Paul reminds us, and it is as fitting a conclusion for our discussion of this section as it is a reminder for this whole subject matter, "there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all and in all!" (Col. 3:11)

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Homosexuality: A controversial yet unavoidable subject for Christians of African descent

Introduction.

The subject of homosexuality is one of those subjects that are intentionally avoided by some Christians of African descent. One of the reasons for such avoidance is locked up in the inculcated perception that homosexual practices remain un-African at best. For the purpose of this exercise it is important that we clarify concepts such as African or un-African. The clarification of such terms is made simply because our realisation that once a concept is defined before it is used, we immediately realise that we are talking many different things.

The question 'Who is an African?' posits a number of social, economic, political and cultural meanings. Recently South Africans from different disciplines have started to define anew what is meant by the concept in question.¹ It is also clear that the understanding of 'who and what' constitutes Africa and therefore African people, appears to be very different to the South African situation when compared with other parts of the continent. The well known definition of State President Thabo Mbeki is a helpful indicator of how differently the notion African can be defined. Mbeki defines him as an African as follows:

"I owe my being to the Khoi and the Sun whose desolate souls haunt the great expanses of the beautiful Cape - they who fell victim to the most merciless genocide our native land has ever seen, they who were first to lose their lives in the struggle to defend our freedom and independence and they who, as a people, perish in the result...I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home in our native land. Whatever their actions, they remain still part of me. In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slaves who came from the Far East. Their proud dignity informs my bearing, their culture is part of my essence...I am the grand child of the warrior men and women that Hintsa and Sekhukhune led, the patriots that Cetshwayo and Mphephu took to the battle, the soldiers Moshoeshe and Ngungunyane taught never to dishonor the cause of freedom. My mind and knowledge of myself is formed by the victories that the jewels in our African crown, the victories we earned from Isandlwana to Khartoum, as Ethiopians and as the Ashanti of Ghana, the Berbers of the desert. I am the grandchild who lays fresh flowers on the Boer graves at St Helena and the Bahamas, who sees in the mind's eyes and suffers the suffering of a simple peasant folk: I am the grandchild of Nongqause...I come to those who were transported from India and china, whose being resided in the fact, solely that both be at home and be foreign, who taught me that human existence itself demanded that freedom was a necessary condition for that existence. Being part of all these people, and in my knowledge that none dare contest that assertion I shall claim that I am an African".

Self-evidently a definition of 'who and what is an African' differs from context to context and therefore from interpretation to interpretation. The definition given above by Mbeki is but one definition of who and what an African is. It differs nonetheless from some definitions given elsewhere on the African continent. Furthermore his definition clearly exhibits the complexity that

¹ See the collection of essays on this subject in: W. Makgoba (ed.). *African Renaissance*. Johannesburg: Mafube Publishing, 1999.

surrounds this concept. This explains that because Africans exist within the broader cosmos, they are not immune from being influenced by other cultures and values. It is therefore frivolous to attempt to hygienically separate something which is not considered African from oneself when that something is part and parcel of one's being.

The notion 'African' refers significantly to a way of being and a worldview that differs fundamentally from ways of being and worldviews held by Europeans or Asians etc. Having pointed this out, it must immediately be stressed that Africans are not a homogeneous group of people. What remains fundamental in a debate about Africa and its people is of course the notion of culture. By culture we mean the manner in which a particular society organizes and conducts itself. Thus culture is that yardstick or norm that determines a particular society and distinguishes it from the rest.

Seen in this way, culture as a human phenomenon is not something that fell from the sky but instead it is something that is manufactured and agreed upon by members of a particular society. To illustrate this point, let us consider the following example. Let us assume that each individual present in this room today is a member of a society called this room. If it is agreed that every member of this community shall walk on his/her feet, any member of this society who knows this agreement and wittingly decides to walk instead on his/her head will be contravening the ethical code that governs this society. This is what we mean when we argue that culture is manufactured. However this example does not take into account many other factors; for instance it does not say anything about those who are not in a position to comply with the demand of walking 'normally' because of issues that are beyond their control. In addition, the very example cannot haphazardly be applied in the argument that is made about the reality of homosexuality because it is inevitable that homosexuality is not a preference but a reality.

The attitudes that many of us have about homosexuality are attitudes that were necessitated by the dictates of our societies. The need to conform to the dictates of our different societies remains pervasive. Yet upon closer consideration, it appears that the struggle that many homosexual people are faced with resembles the Black liberation struggle. The reasons that are given for justifying homosexual people as somewhat sub-human are very similar - we shall say more about this later. The bible is used conveniently, as it was during the black liberation struggle as a gun that shoots at this people.

Homosexuality as human phenomenon.

Different submissions about the reality of homosexuality will be made. Among them, it will be pointed out that homosexuality is a phenomenon that we cannot wish away. This contribution is aimed at imploring Christians of African descent to avoid emotion that is inevitably tied to this subject and to see the matter at hand with all objectivity.

Africa finds itself at the crossroads. On the one hand there we are faced with the need to look to ourselves for inspiration and to assert ourselves because we have accepted who and what we are. On the other hand Africa must do all these and still acknowledge that it is not an island. There are attempts by many to discredit those that defy group thinking which has come to characterize many African leadership styles. While it is not altogether improper to promote group thinking, it is crucial for many Africans to balance group thinking with individual thinking.

Those who think for themselves are invariably dismissed as those who are in one way or another on the payroll of some foreign force. While we recognize this characterization of those leaders who opt to think independently, we also concede to the negativity that has surrounded Africa and hence the need for African people to remain in solidarity with one another in defiance of those who look forward to the collapse of African leadership. In participating in such a controversial debate, we remain vigilant not to be a negative reference point that can be used by some to negate the attempts that have been made so far.

In arguing that homosexuality is a human reality that is unavoidable, we deliberately outlined the precarious position that Africans who are ready to talk about this phenomenon face. In his

foreword to a book titled *Aliens in the Household of God*, edited by Steve De Gruchy, Desmond Tutu writes,

“I come from a section of society that has been deprived, discriminated against, oppressed and marginalized. What I found attractive about Jesus Christ was how he identified with those who belonged to such a group of persons. It was heart-warming that he actually sat at table with those whom society of the time considered scum, those whom it despised and vilified – the prostitutes, the sinners and tax-collectors. What Jesus did was to say they belonged, they were insiders too, not strangers, not aliens”.²

These words are uttered as a foreword to a study that investigated the question of homosexuality and the Christian faith in South Africa immediately after the first democratic election in South Africa. In 1997 like the years before and definitely today, one of the most contentious and divisive subjects for the church remained and remains the subject of homosexuality. Africans in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa don't only have their common history of struggle for full humanity but also have the Belhar Confession which continues to challenge us to stand firmly and unapologetically with God on the side of the marginalized and vulnerable in our societies.

African Society and Sexuality.

In African societies where the majority of inhabitants are Christian, coupled with the African consciousness which has been invoked recently in matters pertaining to the renaissance of Africa and its people, it is almost impossible to speak about the subject of homosexuality without anticipating division and ferocious disagreement. Throughout the history of humankind, the human was always seen as that being which for good or for ill remained a religious being (compare this with the concept of human beings as “political animals” of Plato in his philosophy).

The history of Africans reveals that way before Europeans settled in Africa the African had known the essence of religion and this reality was inculcated in the Africans' way of life. About this fact Steven Biko declared:

‘We believed in one God, we had our own community of saints through whom we related to our God, and we did not find it compatible with our way of life to worship in isolation from the various aspects of our lives. Hence worship was not a specialized function that found expression once a week in a scheduled building, but rather it featured in our wars, in our beer drinking, our dances and our customs in general. Whenever Africans drank, they would first relate to God by giving a portion of their beer away as a token of thanks. When anything went wrong at home they would offer sacrifice to God to appease him and atone for their sins. There was no hell in our religion. We believed in the inherent goodness of man, hence we took it for granted that all people at death, joined the community of saints and therefore merited our respect.’

This understanding of religion and community far transcends the western understanding of religion and community. In his explication Biko goes even beyond the duality of religion which has remained conspicuous in western Christianity.

Homosexuality is a sub theme to sex and sexuality. The African Christian whose norms and values are always those of his/her society, cannot begin to speak about homosexuality unless he/she has sincerely engaged the subject of sex and sexuality which still remains a taboo subject in many African households. The subject of sexuality has been a subject that has been relegated to the background of the daily normative lives of Africans. While definitions are important for these submissions, we have decided to wittingly refrain from the technical definition of the concepts ‘sex’ and ‘sexuality’. We did this because we have realized that many are trapped in these definitions. It is our view that in as much as sex and sexuality have to do with intercourse, the understanding of these concepts goes beyond this simple definition. Wittgenstein once said that when the brain is fed the same diet of information, this information becomes the reference which is used when something

² D. Tutu in foreword. Cf. Steve De Gruchy, et al (eds.). *Aliens in the Household of God: Homosexuality and Christian faith in South Africa*. United Kingdom: David Phillip Publishers, 1997.

is judged; i.e. when we are fed the same diet of what constitute sex and sexuality whether that be bad or good, it becomes impossible to rely on any other frame of reference.

With regard to the discomfort with conversations relating to sexuality, it cannot be denied that there are histories that have determined to what extends this subject have acquired the back seat of civil conversations. Pertaining to the silence on this subject, this paper shall concentrate extensively on the reason for the relegation of this subject to the background within the African church and communities.

It is the view of this section that the histories that accompanied the definition of white aesthetics and its comparison with black aesthetics cannot be ignored as we deal with sex and sexuality in Africa. The contorted definition of black aesthetics that compounded and still continues to compound the stereotypes that became/and are 'normative' when conversations about black sexuality is at issue in African churches and communities must be dismantled in the minds of many, including especially African people.

While it is one thing to speak about the African church, our current situation impels Christians of African descent in the Reformed tradition to ponder for themselves the extent to which this subject was ignored because of the caricatures that European culture made of blacks and their sexuality. Suffice it to say that in addition to the silence which is preferred when it comes to talk about sexuality in Africa, our African culture which has at its core respect for the elderly stifle even further any attempts to look at this subject afresh.

Pityana maintains that 'the notion of respect for elders presupposes a variety of social networks interacting in a variety of ways on the basis of mutual relationships between the young and old, high –and low-ranking people in any hierarchy, the members of different social groups and organizations, the members of smallest social unit in a community (a family), and so on'.³

The African reawakening poses a further challenge to the church and the Reformed church, in particular to do more in its attempt to domesticate this faith on the African continent.⁴ Part of this call for the Reformed church to accelerate its domestication of this tradition in Africa also means that this church shall have to deal with issues that were traditionally chastised as heathen. By this we refer to the worldviews held by us. In addition to this we will have to approach issues such as homosexuality with all earnestness as well as an appreciation that human beings are fallible.

Among the issues confronting the church in Africa is the eradication of stereotypes that have become normative - black sexuality is one such issue. In dealing with these stereotypes it shall have to be remembered that modern Africa continues to struggle with the challenge of being authentically African in a modern world.⁵ In the spirit of the African Renaissance as well as the fact that Africa cannot ignore its interrelatedness with the rest of the world, the Reformed church in Africa is challenged to take up this debate.

African Reawakening calls have contributed immensely to the process of castigate black aesthetics. Although controversial, current pop cultures have influenced how black people view themselves and consequently this has impacted their understanding of their sexuality. No longer is black sexuality the antithesis to white sexuality.

Concerning homosexuality, it is our contention that Africans can tolerate homosexuality in so far as it is kept secret and removed from the public. The heterosexual Africans who remain the dominant group in societies are most opposed to the flamboyance that at times (one would suppose according those individuals' personalities) accompanies homosexual assertion. However this opposition is intrinsically linked to the inherent contempt of public sexual expression which is invariably seen as obscene. For instance the affection that is displayed in public between heterosexual couples in white

³ B. Pityana, 'The renewal of African moral values' in: M.W. Makgoba (ed.), *African Renaissance*. Cape Town: Mafube, 1999, 158.

⁴ Conceding that the Reformed churches in (South) Africa are not doing enough to make the Reformed faith more tangible for its African context, I have argued that the Reformed church will have to devise for itself yardsticks which will determine the progress of the domestication of this faith in Africa instead of being content with yardsticks that do not seem to take the Reformed ecclesiastical tradition seriously. For this debate, see R.S Tshaka, 'The inevitability of culture and its continued struggle with Christianity: a challenge for Reformed Theology in South Africa today' paper delivered at the 6th IRTI Conference in Seoul: South Korea. 05-10 July. 2005. Publication forthcoming in *Studies in Reformed Theology*.

⁵ Cf. B. Pityana, 'The renewal of African moral values' 146.

and coloured communities, while for them completely natural, is always frowned upon by many blacks as obscene. Although children of the growing black middle class is challenging the mentioned stereotype, these children are seen as being lost and are being assimilated into a foreign culture. Because there is an inculcated belief that expressions of affection in public is obscene, many are quick to remind others that such practices are foreign to African culture.

The statement made by Tutu which was mentioned in this paper, suggest a close link between the struggle faced by Homosexual people and the black liberation struggle for humanity. Suffice it to say that calls were made for the self determination of black people both in North America and South Africa, such attempts were usually frowned upon by the dominant white groups as well as black people themselves. The Black Consciousness Movements of North America and South Africa in particular were seen by many Africans as flamboyant in a time where they should rather have been content with private black self determination. To be black and proud in public made many black leaders who were in essence stooges of the white hegemony very uncomfortable. Many black people across the world and in South Africa in particular were raised to know their places in a society that was governed by white people. Whites were more comfortable with a black person who knows his/her place. Like all dominant groups heterosexual cultures are more comfortable when homosexual groups know their place in society– which for the dominant group is on the margins of society. From *ubuntu* to black self determination, African people have never been a private people; hence it cannot be expected for homosexual people to continue their struggle in private.

African Values

From time immemorial Africans have always been a wandering people. There are many reasons why they moved from place to place, a subject that will not help our point here. Suffice it to say that Africans wandered from place to place in search of something better. For the survival of communities it was imperative that strict norms and values be enforced to insure that the identity of a particular society is kept intact. While norms and values were important and had to be honoured at all times, it was equally important that conformity be adhered to at all times. When members of particular societies did not conform to the dictates of the governors of that society, they were usually punished differently. Sometimes people were exiles, ridiculed and marginalized.

Pityana has referred earlier to the different roles that were conspicuous between the different sexes, et al. Men were taught to behave in particular ways, the same applied to women. Because of the possible punishment that would be meted out to those who defied the rule and did not conform, parents raised their children very early to respect the law of the society. Since respect for elders remained one of the tenets of African society children never dared to embarrass their parents. We have mentioned the fact that culture is something which is manufactured. In extreme cases when an individual is threatened with death, this only came to pass when there has been total consensus by the society that such punishment is fair. The wholeness of life remained one of the essential issues in many African societies. This point was succinctly made by Biko in contrast to the duality of life view which was held by Europeans. The wholeness of life resonates in the Behar Confession's call for unity.

Community which is crystallized in the African maxim '*Motho ke motho ka batho*', remains an important pillar in African thinking and mores. It must immediately also be said that this view is increasingly being diluted because it is applied in situations that are not considering the changed and changing context of traditional societies. Community in African thinking remains opposed to the individuality that is mostly associated with western norms.

Since community was so important for the African, communities were interlinked. Inter-marriage between the different ethnic groups consolidated the ties that communities shared with one another. It is inevitable that the divide and rule tactic that was applied by western colonizers has challenged the link between many communities. But where this tactic was resisted, we see African societies that embody the call of carrying each other's burdens – '*Re jarisana merwalo*'. One society's pain

becomes the pain of the other. Since 're *jarisana merwalo*' together we strove for justice. Once again the Belhar Confession becomes an important reference point that calls on those who are able (who are not being persecuted) to stand on the side of God for justice and against injustice. The wholeness of life which is upheld in African mores is also displayed in the manner that human beings interact with each other. When a Zulu person greets another, he/she says *Sawubona* – which means we see you. In African culture it is important to see the other, not only as the other but as a complete human being. Seeing is important. It is also interesting to note that the word *Sawubona* is in the plural and is used as such even when a single person is greeted. It is not the 'I' that sees you, but it is the 'We'. It is me, my community, my God and my everything that acknowledges you as being fully human. Since we are together, we live as reconciled agents.

How does this reflect Christian Conviction?

Homosexuality is a human phenomenon that cannot be denied or wished away. Being a very sensitive issue as it is, we must nonetheless engage its reality. As Christians we have an example set out by Christ which we must emulate. The sensitivity around the issue has forced many leaders to postpone the urgency of the matter until such time that the masses will be ready. Although many are not ready to speak about this issue, there are many who have brothers, sisters, friends' et al, and of these individuals they cannot say that they had chosen such a lifestyle out of malice to societal conformity. In some sections of this church we can perhaps speak bolder about this issue for the leadership of such sections have not postponed the matter.

The question that is posed above is answered in one statement, our acknowledgement of our brokenness both as heterosexual and homosexual people. Tutu augments the answer in the quote referred to in this paper. These words by Tutu must set the mood of our approach to the matter at hand. Christian conviction asks that we empathise with those who are being persecuted. It seems that Tutu expects Africans to have much more empathy with those in the margins since they themselves have been there. The fact that the subject in question is intentionally being avoided and that no one wants to be seen as a spokesperson for homosexual people is doing a disservice to our Christian integrity which begs of us to be more vociferous in defending the weak and persecuted. Archbishop Tutu understands, as should all Christians, the terrible consequences of a lack of this Christian conviction towards compassion, justice and humanity. As just one example among many, in 2007 near Johannesburg, four young women and the two young daughters of one of them were attacked and brutally murdered by what the law describes as a "hate crime". The reason for this killing was because the young women had professed to be homosexual, and the children were considered to be "contaminated" because they lived in such a household. These are the inevitable results of attitudes not identified and condemned by the church, and highlights the responsibility of the church to take seriously our own decisions to be vigilant and courageous in resisting any form of discrimination and homophobia in society as well as in the church.

The general disapproval expressed in public about homosexuality in Africa often claims cultural, religious and moral positions, holding that homosexuality is abnormal and morally abhorrent. The presence of homosexuality in Africa, and while its pre-colonial existence is not denied, is often presented as chiefly about sexual pleasure and loosely ascribed to western (and USA in particular) influence amidst globalisation and "temporal fun" which develops into "homosexual fixation" in urban situations of abundant wealth. It is claimed that homosexuality depreciates human sexuality and is not an expression of love. More ominously, "the evil of same sex love affairs" deserves more than homosexual disgust in Africa and correctives presented includes that "gays and lesbians ... convert to heterosexuality or ... sever their links with their perverse practices". (Chuku, 2004; 313) Taking the limited number of studies on sexuality in Africa and its overwhelming emphasis on heterosexuality into consideration, a measure of homosexuality has always characterised traditional African society and these patterns were further stimulated by working conditions such as male-only migrant worker situations on the mines, for example. In fact, evidence of all three types of

homosexual activities are found in traditional settings in Africa. *Egalitarian* homosexual relations are seen as natural part of human existence usually during adolescence and various examples exist, such as the !Kung and Nama in Southern Africa and the Fon and Nyakusa of Benin and Tanzania respectively... Such homosexual relations usually cease with marriage, and post-marital homosexual relationships are frowned upon as irrational and the actions perceived as witchcraft. However, in the case of women there is generally a greater frequency of reciprocal homosexual relations between adults than between adolescents and case studies of the Tswana in South Africa,, the Nyakusa, the Mogo, the Nupe of Nigeria, the Azande of Sudan provide some evidence of these trends.

Transgenerational homosexual relations are considered important for the growth of children into adults, but such relationships between men and women are rare in Africa, except in South Africa with its single-sex mine compound communities, and the “mummies and babies” relationships between girls in Lesotho. The emphasis is on “the adult partner offering social and spiritual guidance to his companion in his transition to adulthood”. In these relationships “inter-crural” sexual technique that is practiced resembles that of heterosexual courting practices.

A fairly common form of homosexual relationship in Africa is the *transgenderal* relationships that are often linked to certain types of religious authority: men-women or women-men are then perceived as sacred and spiritually powerful individuals. Instances of such practices are found among the Tonga of Zambia, the Zulu of South Africa, the Ambo of Angola and the Lugbara of Uganda, to name but a few.

Although homosexual activities of various kinds and for various reasons and purposes clearly were always part of the African society, “only in Southern Africa, where African migrant workers were forbidden to bring their families to the mining compounds, did the colonial conquest lead to an intensification of homosexual relations”. (Baum 1993::34). Still, in Africa the influence of European values as well as Christianity did not allow such homosexual relations to become important as sources of spiritual power and religious education, as was the case in other parts of the world. The effort to take away the religious dimension is welcomed by most Christians in Africa societies. The challenge that remains is whether homosexuality, as expression of genuine love and mutual respect, and capable of enduring and stable relationships, will be acknowledged, supported and allowed to flourish on grounds of the arguments set out above in this section as well as the considerations we have drawn from our interpretation of Scripture, our conclusions from the ethical and pastoral perspectives, and our reading of the Confession of Belhar.

That the Belhar Confession is seen as something which is locked into its historical past is also a hindrance since we are unable to see the relevance of this confession in the present context.

Although that point is not yet made poignantly, the Belhar Confession – removed from its immediate past – is one of the greatest asserts of the Uniting Reformed Church. It must not and it cannot be elevated beyond the other articles of faith of this church, yet our context and proximity to its past must galvanize into wanting more from this confession.

One is only able to see the potential that the Belhar Confession has if this confession is unlocked from its past. In line with Karl Barth, we have argued elsewhere that a confession such as the Belhar Confession exist in acknowledgement of our calling as Christians to speak about God as well as our inability to do so because of our humanness and therefore our brokenness. Because of our brokenness we must acknowledge that we cannot speak about God as though we know God absolutely. In an attempt to unlock Belhar from its past and to see its relevance also in the struggle of homosexual people for humanity, maybe it is time that we concede that the accompanying letter has served its purpose.

Homosexuality: Pastoral reflections

The task of the church

For the church, homosexual persons are not the objects of discussion or study, whose lives are to be pronounced on and regulated by church bodies. They are human beings, children of God, created in God's image, persons in need and in search of love and understanding and fulfilment. They are our brothers and sisters, our flesh and blood for whom in a world of enmity and oppression justice must be sought. Inasmuch as they love the Lord, they are "heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ, if indeed [they] share in his sufferings in order that [they] may share also in his glory". (Romans 8:17) For the church the first question is not how we shall judge, but how we shall share the pain, the joy and hope, how we shall carry one another's burden and in so doing fulfil the law of Christ, (Gal. 6:2); and how we shall do justice.

It is the task of the church to be a bridgebuilder between its homo-sexual and heterosexual members, and to act on the challenge of homosexuality in a wise and life-giving way. This is in accordance with Decision 90 (b) of the 2005 General Synod in which "Synod acknowledges the diversity of positions regarding homosexuality and pleads that differences be dealt with in a spirit of love, patience, tolerance and respect."

It is therefore the task of the church to embody the needs and contributions of its homosexual members – as much as that of its heterosexual members - in the preaching, liturgy, pastoral care and offices of the church. This is in accordance with Decision 90 (c) of the 2005 General Synod in which "Synod confirms that homosexual people are (full) members of the church through faith in Jesus Christ."

Furthermore, it is the task of the church to embrace – and not only to tolerate - *all* its members, homosexual and heterosexual, and to liberate them from structures and prejudices that keep them from growing towards God's love and grace. This is in accordance with Decision 90 (e) of the 2005 General Synod in which "Synod appeals to URCSA members to reach out with love and empathy to our homosexual brothers and sisters and *embrace* them as members of the body of Christ in our midst". It is also in accordance with Decision 90 (d) in which "Synod rejects homophobia and any form of discrimination against homosexual persons."

It is also appropriate and necessary for the church to give clarity on the moral validity of homosexual marriages, and the theological admissibility of homosexual people to the offices of the church. This is in accordance with Decision 90 (g) and (h) of the 2005 General Synod in which the "Synod emphasizes the importance of getting clarity about the theological and moral status of homosexual marriages, or covenantal relations ... (and) about the ordination of practicing homosexual person in ministry."

As pointed out before, the technical term "homosexuality" stems from only the 19th century. As a human phenomenon however, it has been with us in all periods of human history and at all levels of society, in all societies. At various times it has been seen as an illness, a perversion, a deviation from what was considered "normal". Recent scientific research however shows that homosexuality should be understood as a normal variant of human existence. It is for this reason that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of psychological illnesses. In South Africa too, both science and the law no, longer regard homosexuality as "sexual deviance", "abnormal" or criminal.

Today we recognise that sexual orientation is not something a human being "learns"; it is inborn. In other words, homosexual persons do not have the freedom to "choose" their sexuality, just as

heterosexual persons do not “make” that choice. Neither can the choice be made *for* them. Despite the ongoing debate about the influence of social factors in the formation of a person’s character, for instance social and economic deprivation or the moral standards of a particular community, homosexual orientation has to do with a person’s being; who and what that person is, rather what that person is being born into.

An argument that is being used with greater frequency today is that persons *become* homosexual because of external factors: absent fathers and domineering mothers; educational patterns (boys being brought up as girls and vice versa); exposure to the example of homosexual adults or sexual abuse by older persons. This argument has very little scientific authority however. Continuing research confirms that many heterosexual persons have been exposed to all these circumstances and have remained heterosexual, whilst many homosexual persons remain homosexual when not at all exposed to these external factors. What might happen is that persons born with a homosexual orientation may be affirmed in their homosexuality by external factors, but they cannot be formed by them. Most scientists now agree that the sexual orientation of a person is formed very early, probably before birth. Most recent scientific tests suggest that the kernel of the issue lies in the brain, and that the reactions to certain stimulæ of homosexual persons are entirely and intrinsically different to those of heterosexual persons.

These findings, as those of earlier scientific evidence, raises the very important question whether the orientation of homosexual persons who are so from birth can be changed either by psychological intervention or, as some churches have pronounced, by “conversion”.

If one accepts the view that homosexuality and homosexual behaviour is a matter of choice, wilfully made by an adult person, then one believes that such a person can indeed be changed. On the basis of this belief different forms of therapy have been experimented with, such as forms of psychological conditioning, including so-called aversion therapy, hypnosis, electrical shock therapy, hormone treatments and operations on the brain. The aim of all this was the ‘conversion’ of the homosexual person to heterosexuality.

These efforts have generally not been successful, and for persons whose homosexual orientation has been inborn, these experiments have been extraordinarily painful and entirely inhuman and dehumanizing. The same can be said of those treatments which are offered not as psychological, which in essence they remain, but as a religious experience, a conversion “through the Holy Spirit”. The point of departure is always that God could not have created such a perverted creature, that their lives therefore are a “mistake” that has to be rectified, that the sexual orientation of the majority is necessarily the only “natural” and “Godgiven” one, and that human beings therefore have the right to improve upon God’s handiwork.

On the theological implications of this attitude regarding human beings as the reflection of the image of God, and of the meaning of the incarnation of Christ Jesus, not much thought seems to be spent. The church should seriously ask the question whether this desire to “change” people other than ourselves in this respect truly has to do with seeking the salvation of that person and therefore the glory of God, or whether it is seeking the kind of conformity that reflects the image we have invented of what constitutes true and worthy humanity. In other words, what we consider to be the “correct” form of femininity and masculinity; what makes a woman a “woman” and a man a “man” in our eyes. We should also ask the question whether salvation can ever be the denial of the deepest humanbeingness of any person. If these questions are seriously, and now more frequently asked of the cultures into which Christianity was brought – whether everything that was called “heathen” is indeed a denial of the will of God for humanity and of the ministry and message of Jesus – how much more seriously should these questions be asked of the very being of a person?

Relationships and marriage

From a pastoral point of view, which is the view under consideration in this section, we ask the question a homosexual Christian asked as he struggled with self-hatred because of what he believed

was his “condition”. He mentioned this in his submission to the task team: “If God is my Creator, why did God make me like this? It is God who has made me even though I am different. Some people are created white and others black, male or female, others gay or straight. But God does not discriminate against those God has made in God’s image. If I should discriminate against myself, (not recognise and rejoice in who I am) I am insulting God!” This person, if he could, would have chosen not to be “different”, but he cannot. Should the church ignore this reality and thus ignore the struggles of homosexual persons? Should the church think of them as mistakes to be corrected or as persons to be embraced as the image of God?

All these considerations do not answer all the questions surrounding relationships. How we are born tells us nothing about the wrongness or rightness of our relationships. It is *how we conduct* these relationships that matters. These are matters that are not genetically formed: they are shaped by our moral behaviour, our understanding of the will of God for our lives, including our relationships. And here the church must lay down the same standards for heterosexual and homosexual persons alike. A relationship that is built on and guided by mutual love, faithfulness and respect, support and upliftment of one another, teaching and learning from each other, sharing our love for God and for humanity, creating in the home a community of safety, honour, respect and loving correction, so that together we grow toward the fullness of Christian existence, and the fullness of our human potential: that is a relationship to the glory of God.

At the moment we consider these issues, the all important matter of marriage must be raised as well, as the decision of synod asks of us. If we speak about homosexual relationships, what are we saying about marriage, which the church has always seen as an institution of God? Is marriage not undermined, is the order set by God not set aside, is sin and a sinful way of life not condoned? This is what happens, some say, when we speak of homosexual relationships. Marriage is laid down by God in the Genesis stories already and that is the “biblical norm”.

First of all, as we have pointed out in the section on biblical reflections (O.T.), Genesis 1 and 2 cannot be taken as a “biblical format” for a marriage relationship. The one man, one woman formula is fairly quickly abandoned by Israel itself and polygamy becomes the order of the day. We have also pointed out how that “formula” should be read against the background of the necessity to build the numbers of the tribe, and in that sense for example, we should understand the biblical anger about the actions of Onan, who, rather than produce children with his brother’s wife, Tamar, engages in *coitus interruptus*, (not masturbation, as is still commonly, but mistakenly thought, even in our dictionaries), because he knew that in law the children would not be his, but his dead brother’s. Onan thought of his honour as a man, and his rights to inheritance. Here it is not the strange relationships and ideas of “marriage”, so very different from what we read in Genesis 1 and 2 that are punished by God, but Onan’s selfishness, his unwillingness to put the interests of the tribe above his own desires. (Gen. 38:6-10) The same is true of Judah’s command to the same Tamar, now both Er’s and Onan’s widow, to go back to her father’s house and “wait” for Selah, the younger son to grow old enough to marry her. In this part of the story, Tamar decides that what was being done to her was an injustice, and she rights matters by posing as a prostitute and allowing Judah to seduce her. Upon discovery of the fact that she was pregnant, the community was ready to stone her to death, except that she reveals Judah as the father of her illegitimate child. Judah acknowledges his unjust treatment of her by not giving her to his son Selah to marry. Here again, it is not the “institution” of marriage that is at issue, but the question of justice. Not even a judgement on prostitution is evident in the story. The Bible’s sole concern is justice and how a young woman, against all odds and the customs of her time, finds the courage to challenge that order and its institutions, and finds justice for herself.

If we take Genesis 1 and 2 as the “norm” by which all must live or be separated from God, it leaves us with great difficulties about procreation and our own current world population situation for instance. But conversely, it leaves us with a deeply unsatisfactory situation of the rightful place of the woman in relationships of inequality on which these same Christians seem to insist. It does not offer, for example, an answer to those persons who do not feel the urge to get married, or to married heterosexual couples who cannot have children. Are these persons indulging in a sinful lifestyle?

For these last two matters we do not find answers in the Genesis stories at all. We have to wait for Jesus to assure us that such persons do not live outside the will of God and that they are not to be judged.

Genesis 1 and 2 are about the grace of a loving God who blesses human beings with the capacity to love and to respond to love, to build relationships on the basis of, and for the sake of that love. Together these creatures of God shall be responsible for one another and for the rest of the created world, as stewards of God's caring and compassionate love. And the woman as "helper"? It is useful to remember that the word "helper" in Hebrew is used in its masculine form. At the very least this means that a literal understanding of these texts in fact does the text a grave injustice. But it means further that the Bible does exactly the opposite to what we do with this text: it does not want to be read as a text about sexuality, or maleness and femaleness. It is about the quality of human relationships, about permanency and stability, about faithfulness and the willingness to be a soul mate. Measured by these standards, there are countless homosexual relationships which are built on exactly these foundations. These are the relationships the church ought to bless and support, and offer the sanctuary of a loving community. By the same token, there are countless heterosexual marriage relationships that in their destructiveness are in no way a reflection of this Genesis ideal, and this reality cannot be held up as a "norm" simply because it is heterosexual. We have to find the norm not in the fact of maleness and femaleness, but in the reality of love, respect and genuine companionship.

These conclusions do not in any way imply that the church devalues marital relationships in general, thinks less of heterosexual marriage or of the joy of maleness and femaleness. We rejoice in it and hold it high as an expression of God's will for us. At the same time we do not make this the exclusive expression of God's will for human relationships. As in other things, we rejoice in the wideness of God's mercy, in the endless depth and always surprising shadings of God's love. We cease to look at sexuality as if all our humanbeingness is concentrated in our sexual organs. Rather we see ourselves as whole persons encompassing all the complexities of our being human in God's world. We expect of homosexual relationships no less than we do of heterosexual relationships, we reject in the same way any distortion of those relationships, we seek to support and foster love and fidelity, and we nurture the stability necessary for the creation of a loving community.

The church as bridgebuilder

The church can build a bridge between its homo- and hetero-sexual members by redefining what the church understands about being a body (bodiness). Today we understand that a person has a variety of bodies. (S)he has a *sexual* body through which (s)he reacts to the other people as male or female. (S)he has a *symbolic* body through which (s)he symbolises certain values to other people. In biblical times, and until recent times, these values were harshly fixed in terms of honour and shame. A man, for instance, had to look and act in a specific way in order to be considered a man. (S)he also has a *political* body through which (s)he is controlled by society to practice her/his sexuality in a specific way. Finally (s)he has a *spiritual* body through which (s)he enters into an intimate relationship with God.

We believe that homosexual people should be embraced in all four aspects of their bodiness. And we take our point of departure from Jesus himself. During Jesus' time on earth, homosexuality was not recognised in the forms we know today. We therefore take our point of departure not from what Jesus might have said about homosexuality, but on the way he reacted to the bodiness of people. We take Jesus' incarnation seriously, and thank God for taking the risk of becoming a body. We also rejoice, as said, in finding that Jesus took the bodiness of people seriously during his incarnated life. He dined with people. He healed their bodies, and touched them when doing so (see, for example, the healing of the man living with leprosy in Mark 1:40-42). Jesus acknowledged the complexity of the *sexual* body when he saved a woman caught in adultery from a certain death (John 8:1-11). He liberated the *symbolic* body when he refused to view leprosy, illness and menstruation as symbols for exclusion. He ultimately liberated the *political* body, that is, the body

held captive by the political power of the Romans and the religious power of certain Jewish office bearers, by rising from the dead. Finally, Jesus embraced all bodies as spiritual bodies, that is, as bodies capable of choosing for a relationship with God. In the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) Jesus chose these young girls to make a choice to inherit the kingdom of God. He thereby acknowledged *as spiritual bodies* the bodies of these young girls, who otherwise were prevented by society to make any decisions about their lives.

The church, then, embraces the sexual body of the homosexual person, and respects stable and affectionate relationships between homosexuals. The church, furthermore, rejects views that depict the homosexual body as one exclusively symbolising sinfulness and ungodliness. The church also supports legislation that protects the homosexual body against discrimination.

The church affirms that, like any other person, a gay person not only has a physical body, but also a “spiritual body”, that is, a body capable of forming a religious identity. As such, the church acknowledges that the homosexual body can be holy; the homosexual body can be home to integrity and experiences of deep spirituality.

As such, the church embraces the homosexual body as one that fully participates and contributes to the Reformed identity of the church, an identity that is built on evangelical convictions.

In sum, it is the task of the church to act as bridgebuilder, firstly, between its homo- and heterosexual members, as explained in the above paragraphs. Secondly, it is the task of the church to build a bridge between human rights and religious rights, when the two are in apparent opposition to one another as far as the rights of homosexual people are concerned. URCSA is proud of its history as a church defending and embodying the human rights of believers, and will persevere on this road also in the case of the human rights of homosexual believers. Thirdly, it is the task of the church to build bridges between different ways of reading the Bible on the issue of homosexuality, as was explained in the first part of this report. Fourthly, the church is the ideal bridgebuilder between believers that view homosexuality as “unAfrican” and those that acknowledge that a measure of homosexuality has always characterised the traditional African society and that these patterns were further stimulated by working conditions such as male-only migrant worker situations on the mines for example.

The embodiment of homosexual spiritualities

We as church are not to hurt our homosexual members by mere toleration, but must actively engage in embracing them in all forms of structural church life. The church is to be the place where homosexual people feel safe and included. We need to embody gay spirituality in our theology, preaching, liturgy, and offices, as will now be described.

We, the church, invite our homosexual members to be co-authors of our *theology*. We acknowledge that, for this purpose, we have to reread the Bible on homosexuality (as was done in an earlier section of this report) and to rewrite our theology, especially to rename those who share our faith but not our sexual orientation. URCSA is proud of its history of providing the faith community with a theology that takes the context and experiences of believers seriously, and will do so with respect to its homosexual members also.

We as church should be explicitly inclusive of the experiences of our homosexual members in our *preaching* by, on the one hand, addressing possible stigmatisation of such members, and, on the other, acknowledge the contribution made by their spirituality to the body of Christ.

We as church reaffirm the faith community as a place of healing, where all our members are not only accepted but affirmed in accordance with their sexual orientation. We as church respect the dignity of difference in sexual orientation amongst our members.

We as church therefore need to “restory” ourselves, and to invite our homosexual members to tell their stories in the faith community, in order to prepare all of us to confess the body of Christ.

Redefining all of us within God’s grace, *the pastoral counselling and care* of the church need to shift in focus. The church needs to deal in a pastoral and caring way with the experiences of its homosexual members, and refrain from trying to convert them from their “wrong ways”.

We as church are obligated to embody the spirituality of our homosexual members in our *liturgies*. This is especially true with reference to liturgies for homosexual unions (see paragraph 14).

Marriage and ordination

In terms of our reading of the Bible and our understanding of bodiness as explained in the above, we are obliged to allow those ministers of the Gospel who feel free to do so, to marry homosexual people according to the Civil Union Act of 2006, and also to bless these unions in liturgies appropriate to the experiences and needs of the couple. The church does not expect its homosexual members to remain celibate, but to practice their sexuality in marriage within the Christian parameters of mutual faithfulness, love, responsibility and respect.

Finally, embracing our homosexual brothers and sisters and embodying their experiences and contributions in our church practices, necessarily and fortunately also mean that they should be affirmed and ordained in the offices of the church. The church (as explained in the above) regards the homosexual body as potentially holy and capable of forming a Reformed religious identity. What the Confession of Belhar affirms in regard to membership of the church, is *ipso facto* true of those who qualify for the offices of the church. It is faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour first and foremost that determines admission to the offices, and secondarily whether that person has fulfilled the necessary academic requirements prescribed by URCSA. A believing person with the right qualifications, exemplary lifestyle and tested spirituality – who is also of a homosexual orientation – should therefore be considered for serving in the offices of the church on the same grounds as other candidates. Nowhere in Scripture is celibacy required in order for a person’s calling to be recognized. We are reminded that celibacy is given as a gift by God, but not to all. (cf. 1 Cor. 7:7,9 and 1 Tim. 4:1-3) In 1 Timothy compulsory celibacy, such as that now enforced by some churches for homosexual Christians who want to enter the ministry, is rejected as heresy. The church should never fall into the trap of laying down double standards for those who enter the ministry, not just because it would be illegal, but because it would be unjust, and not the way of Christ.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having studied the Scriptures and other relevant scientific material on the subject of homosexuality, and having considered this in light of the Reformed theological perspectives and the perspectives offered us by the Confession of Belhar held precious by the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and as set out in this report, and in reconfirmation of the principles set out in decision 90 of the Proceedings of General Synod (2005); General Synod

Affirms

Our confession that the Bible, as witness about the revelation of the triune God in the history of Israel and the person and work of Jesus Christ is our primary source for moral discernment. We accept the authority of Scripture as the norm for Christian faith and life, doctrine and ethics. We accept the trustworthiness of Scripture as faithful witness of the liberatory words and deeds of God. We believe that it is the Holy Spirit who helps us to experience, believe, trust and confess that the Bible is for us the inspired Word of God;

Our belief that the guiding principle status of matrimony and of all human partnership relationships is rooted in the fact that it is based on voluntariness, reciprocity and equality; that its deepest foundations are love, trust and affection, which involve the partner's entire lives and not only parts of them;

That marriage is celebrated as being binding and meant to last for an indefinite duration, based on faithfulness and that it offers stability and reliability in all circumstances, even in times of crisis and conflicts;

That such relationships make possible the integration of sexual relationships into a shared way of living and a shared commitment, in order to enrich life;

That such relationships create an environment for children, in which they are welcome, feel safe and can grow up in security;

Our conviction that the call to the ministry of the church is open to every believer, and that that call is heard through, and as result of the work of, the Holy Spirit and is responded to by faith alone;

Our confession with John Calvin, "that we stand, are upheld by God alone, that naked and with empty hands we take refuge in God's grace, completely therein trust, deep within find shelter, and to which we reach for any merit at all; that in Jesus God's face shines upon us (all) in perfect mercy and tenderness", and in this, as in all other matters, we are compelled by the love of Christ.

Acknowledges

That new knowledge provided by modern science shows that homosexual identity has very complex biological, psychological and sociological causes, and that these are factors of which biblical writers in their times and circumstances have not been aware and saw no need to address;

That Scripture's rejection is centered upon gratuitous homosexual acts (homoeeroticism), and was determined by conventions and norms current in the ancient contexts of the biblical authors, rather than the homosexual orientation and the desire of homosexual persons to enter into lasting, caring and loving relationships such as described above;

That moreover the evidence of Scripture is overwhelmingly in favour of hospitality to those who are traditionally not welcomed, acceptance of those who are stigmatised, rejected and alienated, compassion towards those who endure anxiety, suffering and humiliation because of their identity, and solidarity with those who are marginalised and oppressed, justice to those who are wronged – in this case homosexual persons;

That these principles constitute the heart of the ministry and Gospel of Jesus Christ as they are in equal measure found at the heart of the Confession of Belhar, and in this matter the church is once again called to "stand where God stands";

That these considerations are essential to the unity of the church, the calling toward reconciliation placed upon the church by Jesus Christ, and the justice to which the church is obligated;

That in light of all this our response to the questions posed by our homosexual brothers and sisters is vital as regards the integrity of the witness of the church today.

Decides

That our considerations entail that the same ethical directives that apply for heterosexual living in all its facets should also apply for homosexual living. Synod shall not require of them what it does not require of its heterosexual members.

This means that homosexual persons express their intimate sexual relations within the context of the relationships accepted above, which for us means the context Christian marriage blessed by the church.

In line with the provision made by law and the Constitution of South Africa, those who have conscientious objections to these unions shall not be obliged to officiate in them.

Since homosexual couples cannot bring children into the world they should have the opportunity to adopt children and to participate in the Christian practice of hospitality to children and provide a safe home for them. The church offers the same covenantal support as it does heterosexual couples. As confessing members of the church of Christ homosexual Christians shall, on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ have access to all the offices of the church, and upon fulfillment of all the academic requirements for the ministry, to the office of minister of the Word.

Ongoing study and discussion in congregations of this report and these decisions is highly recommended and encouraged.

In the ongoing process Synod pleads for an ethic of love and graciousness, embrace and togetherness in the midst of differences that might still exist. Those who disagree with it shall not in any way be forced to accept it, while we hope that all will remain open to discussion and to the persuasion of the Holy Spirit of God.

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