

GAY CHRISTIANS AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

by

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Gay Christians and Spiritual Direction

Introduction

People who possess a homosexual orientation are more common in the community than many “straights” suppose. It is claimed that every congregation of 200 people has at least five to ten men struggling with homosexual attraction and two to five women.¹ If this is so, churches owe a considerable pastoral responsibility to these people. Unfortunately, congregations and church councils have not been conspicuously successful in taking up this responsibility. As Briar Whitehead says, the liberal church wants to ordain homosexuals, the radical conservatives want to hang them, and in between, a lot of good people are very confused.²

My own interest in the subject was sparked in the early 1980s after the AIDS scare hit the headlines. In the course of missionary furlough I spent a valuable week at the Bible College of New Zealand auditing the occasional lecture but also spending hours in the library trying to understand what homosexuality was all about. Not until I retired from mission service in the early 90s did I take up the subject again, in the form of Briar Whitehead’s readable work on relationship addiction. Much more recently, in the preparation of this short paper, I have become deeply aware of the bewildering complexity of the subject.

The minister of a church has an unenviable task in walking the tightrope between the compassionate openness of Christ, as he or she understands it, at the one end, and the commonly-held perceptions of what is appropriate for the people of Christ, at the other. Or, putting it more starkly, between a concern for human beings and a concern for the dogmatic interpretation of Scripture.

The office of spiritual director is much freer. Normal institutional considerations are irrelevant in the face of these basic questions:

- What is God doing in the life of this gay directee?
- How might the directee be enabled to recognise, respond, and “come out” to this personally communicating God?
- How then might the rest of his life’s pilgrimage be modified and even transformed?³

This paper is an attempt to set out some of the considerations to be weighed by the spiritual director contemplating his or her special service to the homosexual who seeks to walk with God. Although gays and lesbians are frequently mentioned by people in the same

1 Quoted by Briar Whitehead in “Craving For Love” (Monarch, 1993), p.176.

2 Whitehead, “Craving For Love” (Monarch, 1993), p.171.

3 These questions are based upon the definition of spiritual direction provided by William A. Barry & William J. Connolly in “The Practice of Spiritual Direction” (HarperCollins, 1982).

breath, it is unsafe to generalise from one to the other. The area of my inquiry was entirely amongst gay Christians.

The Spiritual Director: Attitudes And Risks

At the outset we must pose the basic question of whether a “straight” is not inherently unsuited to serve a gay in the capacity of spiritual director. G--- is a gay member in an evangelical congregation. He somewhat light-heartedly suggested that the very best thing a “straight” director can do when a gay person presents for spiritual direction is to pass him on to somebody else.

Several others had made the same suggestion, less light-heartedly. K---, a minister, referred to cultural safety, saying “The directee has a right to ask, ‘How safe is this going to be for me? If I invite you into my inner world, I need to know that you are not going to impose yourself upon me, or trample over all my dreams!’” “At the very least”, K--- added, “a director should be honest as to his personal convictions on the subject, and clearly ask the applicant whether he feels it is appropriate to him, as a gay directee, to have a straight director guiding. For it is not enough for a spiritual director to be overtly non-judgmental: he must also be aware of the danger of subtle judgmental attitudes within himself”.

L---, in a respected profession, and a regular churchgoer as well, was just as explicit. If the directee is in a same-sex relationship, he said, the director should be sympathetic and open to exploring with the directee where that relationship fits into church and family. If on the other hand the director does not agree with the path taken by directee, this needs to be made clear at the outset. In any case, it is for the director to help the directee explore his own situation at God’s behest – “After all, God may be expected to talk to the one who is most involved in it!”

L--- also pointed out that “Gay Christians face unique barriers of hatred and bigotry, and these must be recognised with understanding and even sympathy. After battling to keep their place in the church, they don’t want to come and fight the same battles with their spiritual director.” He added that folk in his situation are sniped at from opposite directions. Not just from the “straight” community, but also from other gays who regard the churchgoers in their midst as “idiots, masochists, self-flagellators, people who are not happy with their own sexuality but persist in going to an institution that hates you.”

In this connection, Dr Philip Culbertson⁴ quotes American pastoral theologian James Nelson who lists four possible counsellor attitudes towards homosexuality, namely:

- “rejecting-punitive” -- being gay is a tragedy and a stigma
- “rejecting non-punitive” -- being gay is not a sin but living it out is unacceptable
- “qualified acceptance” -- being gay is less than ideal but one must make the best of a painful situation
- “full acceptance” -- being gay is a gift, a discovery, and a way of imaging God.

Culbertson goes on to urge that unless a pastor is fully committed to the fourth position of full acceptance, he or she should not attempt to counsel gay men and women:

“The other three attitudes described by Nelson suggest a homophobia which is so destructive of the counselling relationship in general that it can only interfere with the counsellor’s ability to engage the counselee fully enough to effect healing, as well as reinforcing the counselee’s own homophobia internalised from years of society’s negative messages. Many gay men and women approach a pastoral counsellor already suspicious that he or she will call their very right to exist into question . . .”

Later in his paper he brings spiritual direction within the ambit of his remarks, commenting that much of the relevant literature raises the issue of whether heterosexual counsellors or spiritual directors can be maximally effective with gay and lesbian clients.

Maybe, or maybe not. One should not lose sight of the notional third chair in the spiritual direction room,⁵ nor of the central task of directors who would be true to their calling: “Teaching, preaching, and moral guidance are not the proper task of spiritual directors. Their task is to help people experience God’s action and respond to him. Fostering discovery rather than teaching doctrine is their purpose.”⁶

Are they, then, prepared to stay substantially within these boundaries, while seeing their directees of whatever sexual orientation as valuable persons with whom Jesus is prepared to interact? If so, they may not need to buy uncritically into Nelson’s fourth position as outlined above -- full acceptance without any qualification whatever. “I have to declare myself an agnostic regarding the question of whether homosexuality was part of God’s plan in creation,” confessed Ken Sehested, of the Baptist Peace Fellowship in America. “I would give anything to be able to give a clear, unequivocal answer. But I simply don’t know.”⁷

On the other hand, the words of L--- ring in my ears: “I would expect a spiritual director to value my uniqueness as a gay person; I do not want that to be rendered invisible!”

4 Rev. Dr Philip Culbertson, St John’s College, Auckland, in his paper “Counselling Gay Men and Women” (1997).

5 “Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst.” - Aelred of Rievaulx, 12th C.

6 Barry & Connolly, *op.cit.*, p.43.

7 Quoted by Brian Jaudon, “From Debate to Dialogue” (Sojourners Magazine, July 1991).

In other words, he would not be happy that a director or anyone else for that matter, should put the issue in the “too-hard” basket and shove it decently out of sight.

Explaining to me why he had not opted for fellowship in, say, a Brethren assembly, L--- said: “If I am in a Bible study group with six other people, however friendly they may be, I feel I cannot trust their opinions. The probability is that if they were really pressed, every one of those six would admit that they do not approve of my lifestyle.” So he had found it easier to withdraw from such threatening “fellowship” and immerse himself in the ethereal atmosphere of a strongly liturgical church, with its Eucharist, Rosary and Adoration. Symbols easily accessed and heavy-laden with comfort and warmth.

The fact remains, as a Catholic sister with experience in spiritual direction of gays and lesbians informed me, that gay spiritual directors are still thin on the ground. In most centres the choice will be very limited for some time to come, so the homosexual directee may have to take a calculated risk.

The straight person who would become available as spiritual director to gays also has his or her own personal risks to face, such as:

1. Having to scrutinise and face up to his or her own sexuality with all its secret weaknesses and imbalances. Robert Wicks has written of “immature needs which may include a desire to work out personal problems in the process of helping others, or a voyeuristic urge to see others in an intimate light . . . In working with others in an intense fashion, directors must have a good grasp of who they are and how they are reacting to their directees.”⁸
2. Coming to distrust the sharpness of the line which society customarily draws between itself and those whom it labels as “queers”. Two American researchers have observed that the “coming out” process of gays as they come to terms with their special identity may well be paralleled by the experiences of their counsellors as the latter move from their initial position of nonawareness towards strong advocacy as unashamed allies. Along the way they may well have to take personal and professional risks, face possible alienation from some colleagues and organisations, and endure a measure of confusion, anxiety and fear.⁹ Spiritual directors, too, must take account of the possible effect on their own thinking as, like Alice, they step through the mirror and begin to see the view from the other side.

8 Robert J. Wicks, “Countertransference in Spiritual Direction” (Human Development, fall of 1985).

9 Joseph Chojnaeki and Susan Gelberg, “The Facilitation of a Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Support-Therapy Group by Heterosexual Counsellors” (Journal of Counselling & Development, Jan.- Feb. 1995, p.353).

The Need To Tell The Story

The most concise piece of wisdom that I heard was from a young theological student who cordially greeted me at the close of a service for gays. Learning that he was familiar with the concept of spiritual direction, I asked his opinion as to the most important thing for a director to remember when dealing with gay directees. There was no hesitation in his reply: "Let them tell their own stories - they may not have heard them before." This was enlarged upon a few days later by G---, who remarked that the first thing a spiritual director can do for a gay directee is to let him tell the story of his own journey and find out where God is on that journey.

In truth, the story and the journey ahead can be long and harrowing for any boy or youth who has begun to sense that he is different from his peers. An Australian psychologist, Vivienne Cass, has developed a SIF (sexual identity formation) model. This is a six-stage progression in which a person may move from a confused initial awareness of homosexual thoughts, feelings or physiological response, through a growing sense of community with other gays or lesbians, to the point of fully accepting one's sexual orientation and seeing it as part of one's larger identity.¹⁰ It can be a bumpy and spasmodic journey. One person might recognise his difference, search out all the information he can, and learn to cope with the social alienation. Another, not at all wanting to be different from everyone else, will resist the orientation in a variety of ways, such as outright denial, dissembling, or even becoming a moral crusader!

The problem can be difficult for anyone. A few years ago the principal of Hutt Valley High School, concerned about snowballing publicity, banned a fledgling gay support group. Investigating the story, a columnist from the Listener asked a seventh former if there were gay students at the school. Came the reply: "If there were, they definitely wouldn't want to admit it to anyone. They would just be abused or even beaten up."¹¹

For a Christian the issue can be particularly acute. John C. Cress, college campus chaplain in Washington, U.S.A., tells of the experience of "Don", who sensed from an early age that he was different from his peers:¹²

"When he learned that there were words to describe who he was and how he felt, he discovered that such terms were frequently pejorative, punctuated with expressions of hatred, disgust, and fear. Despite his keen intellect, winsome personality, and many talents, Don encountered the indicators of rejection everywhere. His theology studies on a conservative Christian college campus only compounded his despair over the powerful inclinations within him that ran so diametrically counter to his strongly held and closely examined moral convictions."

¹⁰ Vivienne C. Cass, "Homosexual Identity Formation: A Theoretical Model" (Journal of Homosexuality, 4 of 1979, p.219 et seq.).

¹¹ Denis Welch, "Avoiding Their Gays" (New Zealand Listener, Nov.27, 1993).

¹² John C. Cress, "Compassion -- an alternative lifestyle" (Ministry Bimonthly, Nov. 1996, published by Seventh-day Adventist Ministerial Association).

Rejection everywhere - even in New Zealand, and even in the Church! L--- told me: “A spiritual director would need to have some handle on what it is like to be confronted with an aspect of life that is hated and despised. We are detested by the Church. So it is not the haven that it should be; rather, it reflects the general community attitude.”

G---’s response to his own orientation had been to live in denial to some extent. He took theological training, then “buried” himself in overseas service for a number of years. Also, he discovered that church folk who on any other issue would show a great deal of compassion were completely inflexible when it came to consideration of gays. They would cite the slogan, ‘We love the sinner but hate the sin’, and readily accept the stereotype of a homosexual as a paedophile and a promiscuous person.

So, as K--- said, the path of effective pastoral care is for the spiritual director to let them tell their story. It is likely to be a story of guilt, shame, anger, and pain. But it must be told.

Scripture -- And The Real Reason

The gay and lesbian issue is a lightning rod for several kinds of human thunderstorms. Michael Vasey, a writer who is both evangelical and Jewish, is conscious of the way that Christianity has been used in the past “to fuel a murderous hostility to a non-conforming people”, as if the Church existed only for Gentiles.¹³ He sees close parallels between the experiences of gay people and Jews in western society, and asserts that both have historically experienced peril at the same time, for instance in Hitler’s concentration camps.¹⁴

Briar Whitehead asserts that “Conservative Christians protective of the authority of Scripture often don’t realise that they are not defending the truth, but a prejudice -- a deep-seated emotional attitude that has its roots less in holiness than in fear, ignorance, anger, self-righteousness, guilt, and self-doubt.”¹⁵

Rosemary Ruether comments that homosexuality is “being used as the stalking horse of all the current social fears concerning the disintegration of moral and social structures Homophobia is a vehicle for the conservative ideology that links the defence of the patriarchal family with the maintenance of class, race, and gender hierarchy throughout the society.”¹⁶

Not that the traffic is all one way. G--- rather disgustingly shared with me his first-hand observation that some of the liberal Christians who enthusiastically support the gay cause

13 Michael Vasey, “Strangers and Friends - a new exploration of homosexuality and the Bible” (1995).

14 According to “Christian and Gay”, a booklet issued in the late 1970s by Open Church Group, London, Hitler exterminated 250,000 homosexuals.

15 Whitehead, *op.cit.*, p.173.

16 Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Homophobia, Heterosexism, and Pastoral Practice” (“Sexuality and the Sacred”, Mowbray, 1994).

from the outside do not seem to show much interest in becoming acquainted at depth with the world of the homosexual. He believed that they have their own agendas within the Church.

All of which may serve to remind us that motivations are not always what they seem. Initially we might feel intimidated by the bold confidence of one who deftly turns up Genesis 19, Leviticus 20, and Romans 1 to justify a hard line towards all homosexuals, especially when he reminds us that “if you reject what the Bible says about homosexuality you are rejecting what God says!” Later, more aware of the realities, we can venture to reply, “If God said it, that sounds like a good reason. Now what’s the real reason?”

Real reason or not, spiritual directors would do well to keep their hermeneutics warm in respect of the key Scripture passages, while remaining aware of the diversity of responsible interpretations of both Old and New Testament passages. Dr Derrick Sherwin Bailey’s “Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition” appeared in 1955, and was an important re-evaluation of the relevant Scriptures, forming a basis for writers ever since.¹⁷ But John Stott, English evangelical stalwart, 30 years later found Bailey’s arguments “exaggerated”, “not convincing” and “positively mistaken”, and sought to ground the issue in the institution of marriage in Genesis.¹⁸ More recently, L. William Countryman has referred to the wide cultural gap between Bible times and our own. He suggested that the sexual ethics of the first-century Mediterranean world are not of the substance of the Gospel; but that “the Scripture can show, by reference to the way that the grace of God broke into the self-sufficiency of another culture, how it breaks into our own as well.”¹⁹

Out of the smorgasbord of interpretations a director has to decide, Where is God in all this? What really is the mind of Christ? On one occasion I sought advice from a knowledgeable person on an entirely different matter, and was reminded that in the terms of the new covenant promised in Jeremiah 31:31-34 the law of God would no longer be a body of written rules and regulations but would be “written on their hearts”.

The correspondent continued: “This is crucial; the age of the Spirit means a dynamic internal relationship with God must rule . . . Written laws are inadequate as a basis for ethical decisions and moral living; obedience is an organic, rather than a mechanical, process . . . For the Christian, obedience is not attention to rules; it is a response to the grace of God . . . The real issues are internal ones.”²⁰ So if we are to be agents of the grace of God, our procedures will be driven by the need to open people to the Spirit’s inward renewal, rather than to constrict them in a web of demands and regulations.

17 Published by Longmans.

18 John Stott, “Issues Facing Christians Today” (Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1984).

19 L. William Countryman, “New Testament Sexual Ethics and Today’s World” (“Sexuality and the Sacred”, Mowbray, 1994).

20 Rev. M. Sutherland, in a letter to the researcher, 1995.

The Directee's Contribution

Any suggestion that the river of God's Spirit may be already flowing in the heart of a gay or lesbian may be a startling thought to some. Vasey somewhat mournfully recounts the story of how the SPCK, under pressure, cancelled the publication of a collection of prayers. "To publish the prayers of gay and lesbian people is to admit that God may be with them, that they may have something to teach the rest of the Church on the subject of homosexuality."²¹

However there appears no reason to presume that the "comfortable words of Scripture" must always flow in one direction only. Melanie Morrison, the co-pastor of an inclusive church in Michigan, U.S., reported that as she came to Scripture with a lesbian feminist hermeneutic, the stories of oppression and exodus, exile and homecoming, death and resurrection, took on new meaning. "Our scriptural study will be stunted if we stop our inquiry only having asked, 'What does the Bible say about homosexuality?' and fail to ask, 'What do lesbians and gay men have to tell us about the Bible?' and 'How do the biblical stories come alive in fresh ways when they are read, seen and heard by lesbians and gay men?'"²²

In the same strain, what may homosexual Christians contribute to the process of spiritual direction? Culbertson suggests four special gifts -

1. The gift of being mentored: they have learned to listen carefully to those who meet them in love, concern, and acceptance.
2. The gift of introspection: having already looked deeply within their own lives, they may be skilled at opening themselves up verbally.
3. The gift of discriminating insight: they can readily recognise hypocrisy, but also appreciate the ambiguous and the paradoxical, and therefore the complexity of God's self-revelation.
4. The gift of eclecticism: they are prepared to modify their Christian faith with insights gathered from the less-explored paths of spiritual identity.²³

In this regard Melanie Morrison's quote from the words of a woman at a retreat seems relevant: "I feel blessed to have a lesbian daughter as one of my children. Through her, I have come to see the world in new ways."²⁴

²¹ Vasey, op.cit.

²² Melanie Morrison, "A Love That Won't Let Go" (Sojourners Magazine, July 1991).

²³ Culbertson, op. cit.

²⁴ Morrison, op. cit.

Specific Concerns

No one can tell the future. However, matters that a gay directee is likely to put on the table in spiritual direction could well include the following:

Anger and Bitterness. On the two occasions within the research period that I attended a gay church, the sermons were well crafted and encouraging, though not without a polemic streak. One preacher proclaimed his disgust that the command to carry one's cross had been used "to miserable advantage" against gays, who were being told that their sexual orientation is a cross which they must bear. The following Sunday a different preacher spoke strongly of Christ being found at the edges, among those persons that respectable people find difficult to handle. The probability is that a gay directee carries a heavy overburden of anger, bitterness, and sense of injustice against the heterosexual community and against church folk. This is hinted at in the poetry of A. E. Housman, quoted by Vasey: "O they're taking him to prison for the colour of his hair", referring to Oscar Wilde's incarceration on homosexuality charges. Similarly in the lament of a priest some years ago: "Why is it that you can believe in either nuclear deterrence or pacifism and be a good Catholic, but you can't argue for homosexual relationships and be a good Catholic?"²⁵

And Culbertson sets a formidable three-part task to those who would give spiritual direction to gays and lesbians:

1. Confront their own internalised homophobia and heterosexism.
2. Be able to absorb lesbian and gay anger at the church and culture.
3. Give space for gays and lesbians to work out their conflicts in the positive manner.²⁶

There could well be a lot to absorb and a lot to work out!

Sense of Grief. Pinned to the notice board of a suburban Presbyterian church in Auckland was a two-page statement from one of the parishioners, setting out his opposition to the call to ban gay people in the ministry: "Most straight people have absolutely no conception of what it means to be gay Many gays realise that like Jesus they have on this earth no continuing city. Some of them refuse to enter into loveless marriages." And, he added, they contemplate a future without children or family. Culbertson refers to the "profound grief" that can accompany an emerging homosexual identity: "If marriage and family are not in one's future, what is? What will there be to give form and structure to one's life? With the letting go of the perception of self that is clearly heterosexual, one can experience a profound feeling of loss."²⁷ The grief can be even more intensified by the revulsion and rejection encountered from church members, friends, and family.²⁸ Within the spiritual direction session may well come a time for weeping.

25 Quoted by Brian Jaudon, *op.cit.*

26 Culbertson, *op.cit.*

27 Culbertson, *op. cit.*

28 E---, a minister, told me that among the horror stories is the one of the homosexual youth whose mother told him: "I only made one mistake in my life -- I should have had you aborted!"

Self-perception Problem. Vivienne Cass describes the first tentative commitment that a young person may have to a homosexual self, in which he realises that “all the guidelines for behaviour, ideals and expectations for the future that accompany a heterosexual identity are no longer relevant . . . and, most importantly, have not been replaced by others.”²⁹ He must somehow attempt to find new meanings for life.

Vasey makes the same point in terms of finding a “working script” for one’s life. This he defines as “an understood pattern that gives subjective shape and meaning to a person’s experience, expectations, and relationships”, and on the basis of which a person can make ethical judgements, find and develop sources of wisdom, and secure access to spiritual energy. But, he adds, public hostility perceives the gay person as being interested only in unruly sexual acts, and does not recognise other aspects of his life. For such a one, positive scripts are not available. He therefore makes do with one of the poor-quality scripts. One such script is based on the idea of a covenanted gay relationship being a form of marriage. Another mirrors the practice of many heterosexual men who divorce sex from true intimacy. The result is that, whether as a social conformist or an outcast, he harms his own psyche badly.³⁰

Though saying substantially the same thing, G--- preferred to use the image of a map. He pointed out that a young person coming to grips with his homosexual orientation has no maps of behaviour and no role models such as a normal heterosexual has. The result may well be a string of broken relationships - potential friendships ruined in the course of a (clumsy) search for intimacy and identity.

If G--- and the above-quoted authorities are even half-right, they are pointing to the formidable challenge faced by a spiritual director in helping the gay directee to rebuild his confidence in the Creator God who made him, to establish his relationship with the Redeemer God who befriends him, and to rouse his sense of expectation through the Holy Spirit who would guide and renew him.

29 Cass, op. cit., p.225.

30 Vasey, op.cit.

Conclusion

Let the basic question in the spiritual director's tool kit be reiterated - where and how is God moving in all of this? K---, the minister, shared with me his suspicion of the common view which represents people as needing to be saved out of a wicked world and the Church as needing to take God into the city - as if God was not working in the world and in the city already, waiting for us to join him. The Church, he maintained, is a community of response to what God is already doing.

So, when the gay director turns up in the director's parlour and begins to open the doors to the deep-down parts of his life and personality, the director should not be too surprised if he or she should find that the Spirit of the Lord has already gone on ahead.

About the Author

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