

## Pastoral and passable

*Is there a passable route that we can take in order to stand by our homosexual brothers and sisters in the church? Many steps must then be taken and a careful approach is called for. Starting by creating a safe environment that is inviting enough to make yourself known as a homosexual. Pastoral support should show compassion, involvement and the love of Christ. Following Jesus goes beyond trying to manage, or avoid, the ethical dilemmas. Just like life itself, it is a road with ups and downs. The Christian identity encompasses more than behaviour alone. The gospel must lead the way and show the way, however intractable. The great Pastor **alone** can inform us, if we wish to maintain the standards (not condoning homosexual relationships and marriages) while, at the same time, taking care of our neighbour with compassion. The only route that is passable is the following of Christ, who shares with his fellow travellers and allows them to share with each other.*

My first reaction to this invitation was a sigh. Has not everything already been said and written about this? What do I have to add? Let me start by simply telling you how I found my way in the course of the years and indicate what attitude I try to adopt, in all intractability.

### *Openness*

I speak with youngsters of 16 years and older about homosexuality each year. Deliberately, I do not treat this as an isolated subject. I include it within the framework of being man-woman, experience of sexuality, relationships, living together, marriage and divorce. Homosexuality will be brought into the discussions in 2 to 3 of these sessions. My intention is to create an open atmosphere in which homosexuality can already be discussed at an early age. While doing so, I try to create a safe climate so that there is room for a coming out. I am well aware that this cannot always be achieved and the coming out must certainly not be forced. Creating a safe environment, by the way, does not begin with the pastor, but at home in the upbringing ('you are welcome, even if you are homosexual'). That is why it is important to give attention to this in general, during the church services and in the prayer intercessions.

Time and again I notice how vulnerable the subject of homosexuality is. Vulnerable for the person whom it concerns. I always bring forward the possibility that someone in the group has a homosexual nature. Or that we should speak as if someone in our midst is homosexual. I also show my own vulnerability by sharing my own experiences with friends who turned out to be homosexual, when I was at that age. It may be true that in the course of time the openness and acceptance of homosexuals has changed enormously in society (in extremes: from cuddling to beating up). Nevertheless, the taboo has not yet disappeared and a prejudiced attitude is not only to be found in the past. It remains a pastoral charge for Christians to work at a homo-safe atmosphere.

### *Pastoral-wise*

The word has already been mentioned: pastoral. With pastoral, I mean being a shepherd, in a living connection with the great Pastor, Christ our Lord. This shepherd task can be represented by a minister or an elder/deacon with an extra responsibility (or a pastoral team). But the pastoral care is not limited to a person or an office-bearer, it is meant for the whole congregation, which has the charge to take care of each other and to be each other's keeper. It should be so that the whole community is involved in the pastoral care, which is difficult enough to put into practice, for that matter...

Yet, within this whole, the pastor (minister or someone who has been charged with this) can play a meaningful role. If people have trouble with a coming-out, and do not experience safety around them, they could, to start with, make themselves known to the pastor. It is of decisive importance that he allows himself to be led by Christ, in the way He dealt with his fellow beings. By taking them seriously, showing compassion, uniting truth and love, and so many more qualities. From a pastor, in particular, it may be expected that he is supportive (a good listener), gives guidance (without taking over the responsibility), works toward reconciliation or healing (acceptance by God, by the subject and his/her environment). And last but not least, that the pastor duly takes into account that he himself is living in Christ's custody. He is not the Messiah and is himself also living off His goodness!

An important life rule is that the other receives the opportunity to identify their homosexuality themselves. It could *even* occur that this is not expressed as such and the person receives pastoral guidance, nevertheless. It is not an obligation for everyone to make themselves known. And usually the other has a good sense of whether the pastor does or does not know. Let the boundaries be respected so that the other may cross the bridge himself. Grant the other some space. Approach the other as a complete person.

### *Life Story*

Every homosexual neighbour lives in certain context. A pastoral approach allows the other the possibility of telling his life story. With this I do not mean that the other is obliged to bare his soul from the start and confide everything. And especially not that the focus should be on his or her homosexuality and experiences, but to approach the other as a *complete* person, as far as possible. The purpose here is to prevent a direct narrowing down when the behaviour is being addressed, loose from the context. How painful it is felt to be when homosexuals are approached using the template: is he a practising homosexual or not!

This is about your identity... who are you, where do you stand, where do you live, where are you coming from. While I realize that being homosexual is part of your whole identity and that it sets its mark on you, I try to see the identity in a broader sense first: you are created, you are a sinner... you are a Christian. *The connection with Christ is the identity that surpasses all else.*

Why such a broad approach? In order to do justice to the typical quality of that person (identity) and leave room for his or her personal development. Without directly pushing him or her in a certain direction, standing in his way. So that you are not quick to fill in things for the other.

Let me give a few examples.

1. A pastor can start off with slogans like: 'accept yourself', 'God accepts you', etc. But it may well be that the homosexual neighbour is still in the middle of a process of rejection. He or she may still be wrestling with his own acceptance, because he or she does not want to be 'that way', and detests the feelings and thoughts they have. Here is a deep pain of not feeling accepted, through which the other is not yet ready for solid expressions that can stand in the way of his or her own feelings. There still can be so much resentment and feeling of estrangement or self-pity. It is important to take the other seriously in the process he or she is

going through. The triangle discussion: acceptance by God, the other and oneself... needs some time. This person must first be helped to accept his or her essential disposition. *A pastoral attitude accepts the other in the process they are in.*

2. With our convictions, we can stand in the other's way. Take, for example, the approach by the association 'Different', in which the possibility of a (certain) change is not ruled out. The pastor has already chosen on forehand: 'for' (you must change) or 'against' (you cannot change). With this you stand in the way of the homosexual neighbour. It may well be that this fits his life story, so that it is worth exploring this route. Certainly in a case of abuse, by which he or she may have been pushed, or have grown in the direction of homosexuality, this *may* be beneficial. In this too, allow room for the other's situation, what does and does not suit his life story and specific context.

By keeping the life story foremost in mind, the other is allowed some space, and is also allowed to explore that space. What I have in mind is a *relaxed* space, in which the homosexual person can discover more and more who he/she is and what is beneficial to him/her. Understand me well, I do not mean a space *without boundaries* in which to experiment. That is not compatible with your identity as Christian and the corresponding moral standards. What I want is to do justice to person as well as possible.

### *Gift*

From that life story you try to connect to God's great Story (= history). To start with, by knowing God as your Creator. Then it may become apparent that the homosexual neighbour is also blessed with distinct gifts and talents. If you invite the person to name those gifts, a one-sided rejection can be prevented. Often there are talents like special sensitivity, creativity, musicality, or of being artistic, photogenic, mediagenic, etc. All these things belong to God's Creation, gifts distributed by Him.

Let it be clear that we come from a good creation, in which homosexuality is not a variation, but a result of a broken world. You see this reflected when homosexuals themselves initially reject the feelings they discover. The trouble they experience goes deeper than just the social reason of 'rather not being this way' (J. Mudde). Yet this does not take away the fact that the homosexual is originally created in God's image and, even though there is a fault line, that does not at once make everything in the essence of being homosexual wrong.

Herman van Wijngaarden (a non-practising Christian homosexual) writes somewhere: the bible is clear on the fact that God sees the homosexual *relationship* as a sin, but where does it say that homosexual *feelings* are condemned? He invites us to take the step of approaching the homosexual condition positively. Not all that is beautiful in the attraction of the sexes becomes ugly when homosexual fellow-beings admire and love each other. Homosexual feelings of affection and security do not always have to be wrongful feelings of lust. Of course people then cry out: but where is the boundary? But instead of walking directly to the boundary, you can also first start with exploring the area. The homosexual orientation does not have to be hidden, denied, ignored, but may ask for recognition.

In practice that is not always simple. It remains 'double', in any case, but that is true of every human being: you are creation and sinner simultaneously. As homosexual, too, you can fully say 'yes' to all that is good in creation: the ability to love, to long, give and share, enjoy, experience intimacy, appreciate beauty and so much more. At the same time learning to say 'no' to sinful tendencies (licentiousness, lechery, disorderliness, homosexual sex and porn) that lead you away from God's intention with His creation.

### *Calling*

Nobody chooses to be homosexual... You could even see it as a calling. In this I am led by 1 Corinthians 7, where all are called to lead the life that the Lord has assigned to them, and to which God has called them. For in Christ is neither man nor woman, nor free, nor slave. That doesn't mean that it no longer makes any difference, but it is in your manliness and womanliness, in your being a slave or free, in your homosexual or heterosexual orientation that you are called to devote yourself to Christ. You are taken into His service with your whole being. Wherever you may find yourself on the Kinsey scale (the heterosexual-homosexual rating scale), you are called by Christ in your being different. So that you can let place its mark on your being Christian. You give yourself back to Christ, as it were, in all your characteristics and He takes you into his service. Thus, even what is a painful result of the fault line now in creation, can be used by Him.

This calling can be abused... I am thinking e.g. of a homosexual couple who kissed in the church yard, just to provoke church members. Or those who start twisting Bible verses in an aggressive reaction, ridiculing the others' interpretation. That is by no means fitting to the highest purpose of life, that you live not for yourself but for Christ. It is also unfitting to the style of God's Kingdom.

But it can also be that you are taken into service by Christ, as a homosexual with your gifts and abilities. Not seeing yourself as a sorry victim, but daring to be a Christian homosexual in this pronounced culture. That is an exclusive gift indeed. I have boundless admiration for homosexuals who have the courage to walk this road, deliberately choosing not to engage in a sexual relationship, even though they are mocked and jeered at. In this manner, the homosexual identity can become a positive life calling and gift of God (De Bruijne). Especially when others ask themselves how, in a society that places so much pressure on you, you can keep this up, be it with ups and downs.

Thus sending out, in the heart of the lawless and licentious western culture, a strong signal of connection with Christ. I think of Henri Nouwen, who carried his brokenness as homosexual without a relationship, while propagating that it was the friendship with God that was carrying him. From his intimate association with God, he was able to mean a lot to others in all his vulnerability. Reality compels us to say that this is not given to everybody.

### *In Christ*

It must gradually have become clear that I deem the connection with Christ to be crucial. It can happen that your homosexuality drives you towards Him, but also that it drives you away, until He seeks you out again. He knows life from within with all its temptations. And He has born our brokenness - in both senses (carried and tolerated). He calls on us to trust and start with, not ourselves, but with Him, and to learn to see

ourselves in His light, finding your way in His wake, by holding onto Him. My statement would be that, without Christ, it is an impossible charge to be a Christian homosexual.

With this I mean, as Luther did, that in connection with Christ you acknowledge yourself to be justified and sinner at the same time. All your life it will remain a struggle between your old identity (sinner) and your new identity (justified) given to you by Christ. The struggle between the one and the other stays throughout your life. God has a greater aversion to you than you realize, but He loves you more than you can even experience. If you say 'no' to your homosexual orientation, it can feel as if you are unfaithful to yourself, and it can feel as if you have no reason for existence. How can you ever overcome that? That can only be done, is my conviction, if you receive your permanent identity in Christ. You are Christian above all else. And with Him you, as a homosexual, begin a new life. But it is only a *beginning*...

It is a great temptation to play off the ethical element against the pastoral. Or to express your embarrassment: 'I also don't see why this should not be allowed, a homosexual relationship, but it is not in the Bible, so ...' I see that as a weak deal. The other side is that you could be promoting your own vision as *the* biblical vision on homosexuality as if that puts an end to all argument. Decisive is the connection with Christ and He has always called upon the Scriptures, even when it was painful, with reference to what it was like in the beginning. Furthermore, He took a big-hearted and compassionate stance, without detracting from God's original intention.

### *Differentiation*

Does a pastoral attitude not require that you walk the mile along with the other and be very forthcoming? Acknowledging that it is not a variant in Creation but deviant, and therefore taking into account the brokenness, so that you do not ask too much of the other? I am not sure, but would not want to make any general statement on this. I believe this would not do justice to each person's life story. When, some years ago in a workshop, my colleague Rev. Van de Geest commented on a concrete situation, many were quick to run off with this. It was pastoral and sensitive of him, forthcoming, searching, to advise a homosexual brother a faithful loving relationship, in order to tear him away from the life of prostitution he was in. I fully understood his considerations, sometimes the better option is so far away that you may want to consider the lesser option. But that is not the same as condoning.

The comparison to an unmarried single heterosexual, too, is limited, because it is an analogy at the most. Just as I was once silenced by two lesbian sisters who exclaimed that they did not call on me to leave my wife, did they? Honesty compels me to say that these are cases of non-symmetry and that comparisons are unlike quantities.

Furthermore, I would not like to make any general statements about the example of resigning oneself to a relation of friendship between homosexuals, on the condition that they make a vow of abstinence. Young people often cry out that this is unfeasible and too much to ask. But here too, the first responsibility lies with the people themselves and in listening to their life story and considerations. I really don't want to make any loose remark about the extent to which a congregation can bear (carry and tolerate) a homosexual relationship. To be sure, there are boundaries to the possibilities of compromise in broken situations. Where that boundary lies is not to be ascertained just

like that, separate from the situation. But I also always keep in mind the burden, that could be made even heavier, of that person who, difficult as it is, has chosen the road of abstinence, and feels left out in the cold. The biggest care is that we allow room, in awe of the holy, yet compassionate God, the Creator.

### *Network*

It is not good that the *man* should be alone! There is much loneliness among homosexuals Christians. And by this I mean loneliness in all aspects (psychological, spiritual...), even if there are others in the vicinity. Homosexuals *are* a gift in the Christian community. Not to be pitied, but to accompany and fully associate with. Therefore I would make a plea to broaden the pastoral contacts to a wider circle. Not to stigmatize homosexuals as victims but especially with a view to reciprocity in the encounter. Stimulating friendships, developing connections with people that are not in love with each other. But also encouraging friendships with others, not just between homosexuals mutually. That also demands an open attitude toward your homosexual neighbour, acceptance of him or her in their being different. They then don't have to stay alone, longing for Christian friendships as they do.

I realize that it can be an ideal in the broken reality. Yet I persist in demanding attention for this, the personal approach. So that, in the loneliness and isolation in particular, the unwanted behaviour is not given a chance, with people pointing in judgement afterwards. We only have a right to say something if we have been a neighbour to the other ourselves. Creating networks and stimulating the mutual relations and friendships is what I see as an important means to express pastorate. In this way the pastoral attitude takes form. And then we will see that homosexuals receive the most support from fellow-Christians who themselves know what it is to carry a cross and make sacrifices. And do that gladly.

If we wish to be radical, let us also be radical congregation-wide on all fronts. And not point a finger at others. For with the measure you use it will be measured to you. It could be so, that the church community cannot cope with homosexuality because it itself is led and influenced too much by the surrounding culture. Only through the Spirit of Christ can we manage the struggle, and time and again make a *beginning* with a Christian life attitude and the practice of Christian co-existence.

### *Promising beginning*

'De witte kiezel' (The White Pebble) is a moving book by Frans van Houwelingen. It is derived from the white stone that Christ promises to give us (Revelations 2:17). In this lies our solid identity, hacked into stone. An identity that has been hidden to everyone up until then, except for the one who receives it. We are given a new name, in which we will recognize ourselves. For at the end of the road, we are on our way to a new society. Not to the eternal marriage of man and woman but to the eternal marriage of Christ with everyone in his or her own identity. In an eternal relationship that tingles with faithfulness and love. A completely transparent society in which full justice will be done to each person. That future starts here and now, if you live with Christ day to day. With Him you do not lose yourself, but find yourself again in all perfection. Freed from all that is not in accordance with your original purpose.