

Gender and Sexuality in the Pastoral Encounter

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At the 'Embodied Ministry: Gender, Sexuality and Formation' conference at which the articles in this special issue were delivered, three people in active ministry in different denominations — United Reformed Church, Metropolitan Community Church and Roman Catholic — were invited to take part in a panel discussion on gender and sexuality in the pastoral encounter. Their remarks were originally delivered in this conversational context. Martin Pendergast chaired this panel discussion.

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Carla A. Grosch-Miller: vulnerability and risk

'Pastoral care' summons an image of a good shepherd tending sheep: binding wounds, carrying the lame, rescuing the lost and guiding those in danger. It is an image focused on the needs of the individual, ignoring structural or systemic forces that create wounds, lameness, loss or danger. Contemporary developments in the theology of pastoral care transcend these limitations, recognizing that individuals are shaped by and shapers of social contexts, asking us to take seriously these contexts and daring us to aim at the transformation of society in our caring of individuals and communities (McClure 2012: 276–77; Lyall 2001: 12; Miller-McLemore 2000: 242).

The word 'encounter' in our title anticipates this kind of pastoral care. The origins of the word in Old French reveal that encounters were first understood as challenge

and confrontation. ‘*Encontre*’ meant ‘meeting, fight, opportunity’. An encounter could result in change; power dynamics could be destabilized or strengthened. Pastoral encounters that take seriously matters of gender and sexuality introduce the possibility of change — that we may change each other and that larger systems or structures may begin to change. It is a risky business, calling forth courage and vulnerability. Our conversations may be converting, though perhaps not quite in the way expected. The opportunities opened up in encounters aim at the broadest horizon: the flourishing of the whole human family, as well as the wholeness of the Body of Christ.

Before exploring how pastoral encounters may enable us to walk together into God’s future, I tell a true story:

It was the beginning of the second day. I hadn’t slept well. The first day had ended with a strong statement by a participant that sex belonged only in marriage, God-ordained between one man and one woman. No one had risen to articulate a different view. A heavy silence hung over the class as we disbanded.

I had laboured to make the space safe and open. The participants held diverse theological viewpoints; I had hoped that we could teach each other as we explored this sensitive topic. As I tossed and turned that night, I wondered how, in my striving to make the space safe for all, I had empowered primarily those who kept to the party line.

At breakfast ‘Michael’ approached me. ‘I’m really angry about how the class ended yesterday. I’ve been angry all night. I felt like I was being told that I was not a Christian’, he said. ‘Can you say more?’, I asked. He then told me his story: the story of a young man active in church struggling with his sexuality who, when he had his first sexual experience with another man, was full of self-loathing. Michael became strident in his opposition to homosexuality, until he couldn’t bear the dissonance between what his heart knew and what his tradition taught. He went to his pastor and confessed his struggle. The pastor promptly removed him from all church responsibilities. Michael left and continued to wrestle issues of sex and faith. He came to accept his sexuality and discovered a renewed and deepened faith that in time blossomed into a vocation for ministry. I asked him if he would be willing simply to tell his story at the start of the day’s class. He said ‘Yes’.

I began the class (after psalm and prayer) with a statement that at the conclusion of class the previous day, we had heard a strong articulation of a scriptural and traditional view of the place of sex in human life and asked if there were any other viewpoints, perhaps drawing on other sources of theology. Michael raised his hand and told his story.

The impact of the story was to transform the space, opening and warming it. Some thanked him for his courage. People who held the heterosexual marriage-only viewpoint acknowledged that, while their opinions were strong, there was a need for pastoral sensitivity when dealing with this subject. (Indeed, the two most vocal protagonists of that view approached Michael during the tea break to speak with him.) The remainder of the course was marked by great sensitivity, which enabled others later to speak openly about struggles with internet pornography.

Michael later described the experience of the first day as extremely painful, triggering all the hurtful, destructive, unloving things he had heard as a young man. He knew he either had to live with the anger and survive the rest of the course or say something. He would have wanted to say something judgmental and angry, engaging with the issue theologically, but with my encouragement decided he would just tell his story. He couldn't have done that on day one because 'it would have felt like I was playing the victim, changing the discourse to a different, emotional level which didn't seem fair'. But that second morning, he felt he could offer it in the structure of a conversation about all the sources of theology (scripture, tradition, reason, experience).

When he opened his mouth to speak to the group, he thought 'Oh my God, what am I about to do?' He knew that people would see him in a different light forever after. But once he began, the atmosphere in the room changed. He got visual clues of support around the room: thumbs up, smiles, tears. He immediately felt relief — having said all that was on his heart, not repressing or bottling anger. The man next to him, who was theologically more traditional, put his arm around him when he finished.

'The best thing', Michael said, 'was the spirit of generosity, openness and honesty — real listening to each other — treating each other as sisters and brothers, once we got over the hurdles of fear, doubt and hurt ... "Hearing each other into speech"¹ summed up the whole experience of the course ... the Holy Spirit was definitely there.' (Grosch-Miller 2013: 158–59)

The story includes a number of pastoral encounters: teacher–class; teacher–student; student–class; student–student. In every pastoral encounter there was the opportunity to:

- surface the feelings and truths in the situation;
- affirm people's reality and make the space for them to work with it;
- equip and enable the right response for the person and the situation; and
- constructively engage all the sources of theology — scripture, tradition, reason and experience.

Noting that pastoral care conventionally is concerned with healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling, Miller-McLemore posits that there are four pastoral practices that are particularly important when engaging matters touching on gender and sexuality: resisting, empowering, nurturing and liberating (2000: 242). In the story above, both conventional and liberating care practices transformed a classroom into a place where a person who had experienced rejection in the Church and who had struggled mightily to know himself beloved of God was able to experience the healing acceptance and affirmation of his reality; a class was enabled to experience the tensions and pain around sexual issues in our contemporary context; and people with opposing theological views were enabled to sit with one another acknowledging the pain and difficulty of our current reality.

Most notable in the story are the role and the risk of shared vulnerability in making the space for God to do a new thing. Michael made himself vulnerable by

¹This is a feminist strategy articulated by Nelle Morton (2001: 178 n. 1, 209–10).

approaching the teacher and telling his story; the teacher made herself and others vulnerable by eliciting the possibility of a classroom encounter without knowing how it might work; class members made themselves vulnerable by being present to Michael and later approaching him to speak personally despite theological differences. In an atmosphere of undefended vulnerability (facilitated by an etiquette agreed beforehand), the fullness of humanity was able to grapple with the brokenness that attends to matters of sexuality, be it the pain caused by certain scriptural interpretations or that caused by addiction to internet pornography. I repeat Michael's concluding thoughts: 'The best thing was the spirit of generosity, openness and honesty — real listening to each other — treating each other as sisters and brothers, once we got over the hurdles of fear, doubt and hurt ... the Holy Spirit was definitely there.'

McClure (2012: 272–73, 277) writes of pastoral care as 'being with, in and for God', and 'participation as both a means to and a sign of healing'. Participation requires honesty, courage and vulnerability.

'Fear not', the angels say to those on the cusp of change. There are always temptations to bottle anger, mask discomfort and avoid the inevitable conflict that comes with taking matters of gender and sexuality seriously. The Good Shepherd leads us in our shepherding to take the risk and exercise the kind of pastoral care that calls forth the healing of the whole human family.

Sharon Ferguson: a different perspective

As a pastor with the Metropolitan Community Church, the issues I face in pastoral encounters are often very different from and sometimes completely the opposite of those faced by pastors in mainstream denominations.

The first major difference is that, whilst in most churches there is often a reticence to discuss sexual issues, in my church the complete opposite is true, to the point where at times I wish some of my congregation were perhaps not quite so forthcoming! However, I also view this as a blessing that they feel comfortable enough to disclose such intimate details.

The one encounter that is probably the same is where a person is struggling to reconcile their faith and their sexuality. This is an issue that arises mainly amongst those in my congregation who are asylum seekers from Africa, predominantly Uganda and Nigeria. They will have been raised in families where faith is a major component and integral to both family and daily life. Unfortunately the theology preached in these churches and consequently lived out in the community is one that considers homosexuality to be a sin. Any divergence from getting married and raising a family is considered an abomination.

In such a close-knit community, it is not only difficult but also dangerous to be different, which is why many have had to flee their homes and seek asylum in the UK. On arriving here, they are very reticent to engage with mainstream denominations, where they expect to receive the same abuse and rejection that they received at the hands of their faith community in Africa. When they eventually find my church, a lot of work has to be done to assist them in reconciling their faith with their

sexuality, and helping them to build up their relationship with God once again, a relationship that has been immensely damaged by other church leaders. This involves not only theological education, but also slowly rebuilding trust in church leadership. For those whose lives are already incredibly fragmented by their need for asylum, being able to reunite them with their faith is a huge step forward in improving their mental health and future prospects as well as an enormous blessing.

However, for many in my congregation, it is not reconciling their faith with their sexuality that is the difficulty, but more reconciling their sexuality with their faith. As much as the Church is always portrayed as being against the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, so the LGBT community is against religion. This means that, for many LGBT people of faith, finding their place in the LGBT community without sacrificing their faith can be very difficult. Often the 'lifestyle' expectations of each community can seem to be in opposition. The stereotypical lifestyle for a gay man is likely to include the use of pornography, casual sex, visiting 'darkrooms' in night clubs and buying the services of rent boys.

As a denomination, the Metropolitan Community Church does not promote dualism, and portrays the positive acceptance of the body and human sexuality as integral to the development of the soul. However, how does a person live out the fullness of their sexuality in a way that is in keeping with their faith?

I am often approached by people who have engaged in some form of sexual activity that they feel is not in keeping with their understanding of themselves as a Christian, and are therefore making a confession and seeking absolution. It is very easy for these people to fall into at least two downward spirals: first, the merry-go-round of behaving in a way that makes them feel guilty, seeking absolution and then behaving in the same way again the following week; and second, adding any guilt they feel at their behaviour to past feelings of guilt about their sexuality, and feeling they can never be a 'good' Christian and a gay person, and so trying to separate their sexuality and faith which can involve leaving their faith behind. In an attempt to avoid some of this, and also because of my own beliefs about confession and forgiveness, I try to get the person to work through this conflict for themselves. This is done simply by referring back to the great commandment. Jesus told us in Matthew 22:37–39, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

For me, loving in this context involves honour, respect and value. Consequently, I believe that, in everything we do, including sexual behaviour, we should always ask ourselves if our actions are honouring God, our neighbour and ourselves. If the answer is yes, then all is well. If we answer no to any part of this, then we need to think whether we want to continue with that action.

It is my hope that, in this type of pastoral encounter, I am employing both Christ's indictment not to judge in Matthew 7:1, and also the regular instruction of Paul to rebuke one other in order to help each other grow in faith. It is clear to me that, whatever I may think or believe about the appropriateness for a follower of Christ to engage in whatever activity a person is sharing with me, they are feeling bad about it and it is getting in the way of their relationship with God.

There are two other situations that I encounter that are probably not common to other churches. The first is brought about because of the huge diversity of the congregation and the desire to be seen as ‘normal’. There is a broad spectrum of how people present within the LGBT community: straight-acting, camp, cross-dressing, butch, lipstick lesbian, and so on. An important factor for me is to do all I can to allow people to be truly themselves when they come to worship God. This includes making it possible for some people to change from one persona to another prior to the service. It also includes allowing that person to still participate in all aspects of worship regardless of how they present.

One pastoral situation I was faced with was when a ‘straight-acting’ gay man told me he felt he had to leave the church, because he couldn’t cope with seeing a man dressed as a woman and singing baritone in the choir, as he was just a ‘normal gay man’. How do you support two people who have very opposite needs? Being able to worship God dressed as a woman had clearly been a massive changing point in one person’s life and allowed them to develop a deeper relationship with God, and yet this was proving to be a stumbling block for another person whose spiritual well-being I was also responsible for. How do you create a ‘safe space to discover who I am before God’ in a way that encompasses everyone’s needs? I am pleased to say that, after taking a couple of months away, this person returned having realized what was truly important about belonging to this weird and wonderful community.

Finally, whilst some churches are becoming more welcoming of lesbian, gay and bisexual people, there is still a huge issue with transgender people. This becomes even greater when a person identifies as non-binary gender. How do you walk with someone as they discover their gender identity both physically and spiritually? There are no textbooks on how to pastor positively in these situations, although plenty on how to banish the devil of homosexuality and transgenderism!

For me, the pastoral encounter is not simply about sharing a few Bible verses and listening to someone in the safety of my office or church. It is not about only walking alongside them metaphorically in prayer. It is also about putting ‘feet to prayers’ and physically walking alongside them. In this instance, that included going shopping to help them choose what clothes felt comfortable and enduring with them the raised eyebrows, muted giggles and whispered comments from sales assistants. It included attending the Gender Identity Clinic and learning about hair removal techniques.

Whilst the issues that are brought to me in a pastoral encounter may be different in many respects from those faced by pastors in mainstream denominations, what remains the same is the fact that we are all dealing with human beings who are complex, confused, frightened, unique, incredibly beautiful and loved by God. Consequently, all we can ever do in any pastoral encounter is get out of the way and allow the grace of God to get to work.

Brendan Callaghan: sacramental intimacy

It is possible that what I want to say has already been said, perhaps over and over again. Maybe that’s no bad thing, if it implies that there are measures of convergence

in our discussions. I think I want to put across one big idea and suggest a few of its implications. The big idea, far from original on my part, is that we can't separate the mission of the Church and its way of life. As a document on integrity in ministry from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia puts it, 'The relationships between the women and men of the Church, and their relationships with the world, are ... the very mission of the Church. Out of love we desire the deepest well-being of one another' (National Committee for Professional Standards 2004, ix). So our encounters and relationships with one another — including but not limited to our pastoral encounters and relationships — are not just the *framework within which* the mission of the Church takes place: they *are* the mission of the Church.

In our pastoral encounters we are present as we are: that is a truism, but a helpful one. We don't switch off the sexual dimension of ourselves: in this pastoral encounter with you I am present as a sexual person, with my particular gender and sexual identity. And it is precisely in and through my sexuality — my gender identity, my sexual identity — that God is at work. So to the measure that I am able to bring my sexuality into how I engage with God, God can work more effectively or less effectively in my engagements with others.

In our pastoral encounters it is above all in our presence one to another that God's grace — God's love at work in the world — is active. Whether we speak or whether we listen, it is in our presence that God is present: our presence is God's presence; *the language of our body is sacramental*. Alastair V. Campbell (1984) long ago invited us to believe that the English word 'graceful' is no accident: if I am present as one who knows they are loved by God, held in God's grace, then I am present gracefully.

In a pastoral encounter I need to be there with intimacy. The Irish woman writer and lecturer Ben Kimmerling says:

Intimacy is a way of being with oneself and others ... It is an attitude of truth and authenticity: an open space between oneself and others which is free of physical distaste, emotional blocks and intellectual prejudice. It is about availability. It is about appropriate, relevant and truthful disclosure in every relationship. It is about revealing vulnerability as well as strength. It is about transparency ... In its presence people feel deeply moved: they feel invited to change and to grow. In this kind of intimacy a person is fully present to others and so God is present too. (Kimmerling 1996: 430)

To be present to you as I am, to be present to you gracefully, to be present to you intimately, and so to be present to you sacramentally: to *be* in this way requires me to know and to be comfortable with myself, as loved and delighted-in by God.

But in any pastoral encounter there is more than just me present. You are present as another sexual person, another person with gender and sexual identity. To the measure that I am comfortable with who I am, I am the more likely to be comfortable with who you are. And I am also the more likely to be comfortable with how I respond to you — even when I take myself by surprise.

God will use my pastoral encounters to bring me closer to God and to the fullness of life, but I am able to be present *for* you and to you, if I am sustained by accepting friendships and relationships where I experience closeness, mutuality and personal

support. In the words of the US playwright Eugene O'Neill, 'Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue' (O'Neill 1926: Act 4, Scene 1).

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