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Homosexuality and the Church

Adam Graaf
Iowa State University

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SEXuality and the church: a moral paradox
‘I hate to say this,
if I was a heterosexual, I probably wouldn’t be the biggest fan of homosexuals, just because of the way I was raised. And that sucks, it’s too bad. Tolerance is not taught in a lot of denominations, you’re taught to find sinners and help them.

When Justin Hope came out, his mother reacted by telling their pastor. Forced to meet with him weekly, the pastor concluded Hope was refusing to change. The pastor advised his mother and soon after, he advised Hope to change his life.

The pastor expected Hope to find new friends, get rid of any media influences that enforced his seemingly chosen lifestyle, to play more sports and hang out with males he could model his life after. Church leaders also asked Hope to resign his position as a preschool teacher; they were worried about the negative connotations.

All of this was expected to mold Hope into the man he was meant to be – a real man, a straight man.

Hope stopped attending his church, and found a new religious home in Des Moines. Although the church consented with the same ideals of Hope’s first church, the congregation was larger, the crowd bigger. Hope figured he could simply blend in.
When Hope came to Iowa State, his experience made him concerned about other students like himself; Christians, like him, who had found critics within their own churches. Through Iowa State's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Ally Alliance, Hope formed LGBT and Allies for Christ, a group that fosters the same beliefs as other Christian groups on campus.

As each person shared their stories, Hope realized why they came to the meeting. For some, opposition from within the church had pushed them away from Christianity; this group was their way back in. For others, their religious convictions had kept them closeted — they felt ashamed and guilty — but in the devotional group, they were accepted as both gay and Christian. Some were accepted by their home churches, but Christianity was still a source of a lot of the negative feelings students shared, he said.

“We talked about our coming out process and how it was affected by being religious and being a member of a church. It does push people away, but I refused to believe what the church was saying about my being gay,” Hope said. "One of the common arguments fundamentalists use is 'love the person, hate the sin.' What we say to them is, what they're calling the sin is not something separate of what they call the sinner — it's an integral part of what the sinner is.”

Hope is afraid Christians buy into these ideas. Through groups like LGBT
and Allies for Christ, he wants to dispel the myth that homosexuality is changeable, that a person's true, sexual identity cannot be suppressed.

"I think it's a very depressing way to live, to try to constantly ignore your own feelings," he said. "I think a fair and just and loving God would not make someone a homosexual and turn around and call it a sin — that would be hypocritical."

Joy Nash now leads LGBT and Allies for Christ. She said the biggest issue student members deal with is, understanding if how they are living is OK.

"I have two types of students in my group. I have, 'I am a Christian and I am a homosexual and I think it's the lifestyle God has chosen for me.' Then, you have the other side that says I'm 'Christian and struggling with homosexuality and it's something that God has not chosen for me and it's something I'm going to have to live with,' which is the side I am on," she said.

Despite her personal convictions, group meetings are a place for members to talk. Nash said she tries to present both sides evenly, citing their main source of spiritual guidance, the Bible, but other books as well. Because of her position as a leader in a spiritual group, Nash said she hopes she is doing God's work and giving others the right advice, as some could make big decisions based on her guidance.

"We talk about regular issues that come with being a homosexual and a Christian. I think we deal with things differently that other Christians don't necessarily have to deal with," she said. "Dating for instance. Some are left with 'I guess I'm going to be single for the rest of my life.' I don't talk about the possibility of change very much because I don't want to make [members] uncomfortable. I think that people who deal with the two need a lot of support and understanding that isn't offered in other places."

Nash said she has never dealt with critics of her being both a Christian and a homosexual but battles moral obstacles nonetheless.

"Unless you deal with it personally, how can you say what I'm feeling? How can I say that you're not a Christian when you deal with whatever sin is in your life?" she said.

At times, Nash has to fight feelings of attraction knowing she cannot act on and when she seeks help, she has to pick which friends to turn to.

"Half of my friends say, 'Joy, live your life and do what makes you happy — embrace your homosexuality.' I don't want to talk to those people because it's not something I need to hear when I'm in the middle of dealing with that. Then I seek out my other friends, who tell me to fight it, who tell me God will never give me more than I can handle."

Though some members of LGBT and Allies for Christ may battle with their lifestyle because of their Christian backgrounds, Nash said she found God on her own. Others, however, have battled their feelings because of their upbringings.

Brent Armel knew he was gay when he was 14 years old. He said his religious childhood made him suppress his true sexuality and postpone his coming out. He considered his unnatural feelings, a phase he thought would outgrow. Armel still attributes his frustrations in not coming out until college to the faith his parents pressed on him. It's not something he holds against his family but, like Hope, agrees it can be a source of conflict. He remembers seeing his mother reading the Bible every day and constantly questioning him to
make sure he was living his life within The Word.

"There were times I would make things up. I'd be reading things about homosexuality in the Bible, and I wouldn't want her to know I was trying to figure things out. We never missed church either. If we did, my dad would hold a mini-service at home," he said. "I hate a Catholic church in Ames, said, "One's sexual orientation has no moral dimension. The morality comes with the actions, not with whether you're gay or straight."

In 1997, American bishops wrote a letter titled "Always Our Children" addressing parents to be spiritually aware of homosexuality, he said. Basically, leaders were afraid the church had alienated homosexuals and took the stance that, although homosexual behavior is considered immoral, it is the church's duty to always respect those living a homosexual lifestyle and afford them the dignity and support they deserve.

"There is no official ruling, but most leaders would agree [homosexuality] is genetic or you're born with it," he said. "They would also recognize there is situational homosexuality, like a primarily male environment, where someone who has never before engaged in homosexual behavior could in a setting like jails, the military or seminaries; there is more of a tendency that one could act out in these types of environments, the conclusion of which is expressed in that pastoral letter that there are different degrees of homosexuality."

Under Father Hermann's guidance, a group called Belonging was formed to reach out to the LGBT community and help congregation members better understand the church's views concerning the issue. He also sought to create a welcoming environment for family members, allies and those living a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender lifestyle.

After the group was announced in the bulletin "a woman came to me, who I did not know was a lesbian, and said 'I grew up here in this parish, and have known I was gay since I was 16, and never thought in my wildest dreams that I would be welcome here. I felt like I was the sleazy person hiding behind the back pew...I found out that it was a common experience," he said.

Sawyer said several Protestant denominations remain divided on the issue, forming, in short, either accepting or intolerant ideals. Three mainstay churches – the United Church of Christ (UCC), the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA) – foster acceptance.

"The UCC takes the most progressive stance and will ordain homosexuals in
Because of her position as a leader in a spiritual group, Nash said she hopes she is doing God's work and giving others the right advice.

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openly gay relationships," she said. "Other denominations like the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) are very conflicted on the issue."

One local ELCA church is a minority among churches within its synod and is working to change ELCA's policy.

Pastor Sarah Larsen Nelson of Lord of Life Lutheran Church in Ames, said ELCA's official policy say LGBT people are welcome but not allowed to become ministers unless they are celibate.

"However, there is a large, growing group in ELCA of people who are affiliated with the Reconciling in Christ Congregation—we're only one in Iowa. The congregation is made up of people who are very open to LGBT people and are working towards changing church policy so practicing gays and lesbians can be ordained," she said.

There is also a shift for the church to recognize gay marriage and the entire youth faction is part of the Reconciling in Christ, she said.

Thirteen years ago, the Confirmation class submitted a statement of affirmation to the church that became Lord of Life's general affirmation of welcome. Part of that statement reads: "We affirm with the apostle Paul that in Christ 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female' (Galatians 3:28). Christ has made us one. We acknowledge that this reconciliation encompasses all within the larger community who exhibit difference in race, gender and ethnicity, as well as age...marital status and sexual orientation."

Nelson said the church has received letters criticizing its interpretation of Scripture but none of the negativity has deterred those who feel welcome to attend, including members raised as Lutherans who are now openly gay.

"We're being more open with issues of society. I think the other part of the church is aging and we're beginning to listen to the
younger voices of the church because we don't want to lose them," she said.

Not all Lutherans agree with Nelson. Though not intolerant of homosexuality, another Lutheran denomination – the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) – defines the lifestyle differently.

According to the LCMS Web site, homosexuality is a sin. The site also references three Bible verses where, according to Missouri Synod interpretation, "the word of God clearly condemns homophile behavior."

Individual congregations within LCMS do not stray from this policy. In a June 27, 2004 sermon titled "What does God say about homosexuality?" Ron Burcham, senior pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Urbandale, said the difference between homosexual orientation and homosexual behavior can be the difference between a non-sinner and a sinner.

While a person may not be able to control the inclination they have toward a homosexual orientation, they can control their behavior. While their orientation may not be a decision they make, their behavior is a decision they make, he wrote. The distinction is important because in God's eyes, in God's Word, homosexual behavior is wrong and sinful.

Burcham said church members thanked him for tackling the issue – they were looking for a clear, definitive statement of God's definition. He also equated a person's struggle with homosexuality to a person battling alcoholism.

"First of all, I don't think God gave [anyone] the burden; he made a perfect world and we sinned – he gave us the strength to deal with that. We don't accept alcoholism in our society. We don't encourage the practice of drinking. I'd say the same thing about that in homosexuality. Simply because you have this burden, doesn't mean you have to practice the lifestyle. Is it fair? No, it's probably not... and I know it sounds hypocritical. The problem is, how can you minister to them without them thinking "why are you condemning me?"

An associate pastor at a Missouri Synod church in Ames made similar comparisons.

"There's a difference between a homosexual who's struggling and one who think they're fine. They may never beat that," said Mark Heilman a pastor at Memorial Lutheran. "I could be an alcoholic and struggle to work on it all my life and hope for God's forgiveness... We [as Lutherans], and Christianity in general, have not been consistent... The issue is not about homosexuality, but sexuality. If we say one thing about homosexuality, we would need to say at least three times that about heterosexual sins, which are far more pervasive."

The inconsistency, Heilman explained, lies in the way Christians have taken homosexuality and made it into a worse sin than adultery. It's easier for heterosexuals to point their fingers at homosexuality and preach its wrongs because their own sexuality distances them from those wrongs. For example, heterosexuals have a harder time pointing out adulterous relationships because it could come back on them; by doing this, they create distance between an idea of something they should not do and an idea of something they are less likely to be tempted to do.

Burcham said, though interpretation of Scripture separates the two Lutheran denominations, he, like Nelson, is concerned for the younger generation.

"When you're teaching in the schools that this is an alternative lifestyle, and you take kids that are already struggling with their sexuality at that age, and it's a lot tougher to say it's wrong," he said, citing part of the charge has come from pressures in society. "In society, we don't want to judge – 'judgmental' has become a dirty word – but if you don't have a sense of what's right and wrong, how do you live your life? A lot of it now is situational ethics."

Heilman said, "Today you have more of a shopper's mentality, picking a church and picking what you're doing with your life. You find a church and life you're comfortable with and if a person wants to be a practicing homosexual, you can find a church."

One of those churches is also found in Ames.

Reverend Brian Eslinger, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ames, said, the Unitarian Association is a principle-based religion rather than one with set, dogmatic teachings. Of the seven principles they follow, one teaches to honor the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

"So much of what we think comes out of that principle," he said. "Human sexuality is expressed in many different ways." Eslinger does not see a difference between sexual orientation and behavior because, "sexuality is a normal, healthy part of being human, and like so many acts can result in negative things happening, but being forced to repress who they are is extremely dangerous."

Gay and transgender persons are clergy members at the fellowship; Eslinger also performs civil union ceremonies. Despite the church's openness to all sexualities, some members are uncomfortable with the church's stance but they understand its importance as a civil rights issue.

"I wish I could perform weddings, but our laws does not allow that. I think it's a violation of civil rights. There's an anomaly in our country where civil and religious laws overlap. [Homosexuals] living like a heterosexual couple are not allowed to marry. It's a civil discrimination based on a religious ideals and I think it's a violation of church and state," he said.

Sawyer calls this anomaly a "culture war," which is partly being fought by the Religious Right who, according to her book, has "elevated this condemnation to the level of public, political discourse, even as they offer the rhetorical admonition that one should have the sin but not the sinner."

She equates the current movement with the civil rights movement women and African-Americans battled in the 1960s and 1970s.

"Once those [movements] go into effect, those that are not part of it lash out against it, especially in a capitalist society where allocations could be changed and especially with Christian groups," she said.

A statement made by a Protestant bishop in casual conversation, Sawyer wrote, is representative of the attitude of many church leaders: "Oh, we know they're there," he said. "They're in the choir and in the pew and in the pulpit. We all know that. And that's fine, as long as they don't bring it up, as long as they don't make an issue of it."