

Principles of Ministry by the Reverend Dr. Jeffrey Winter

It was Sunday morning and I was completing the second week at my new church. While greeting the worshipers after the 11:00 service a young man approached me and shook my hand. He looked so despondent. After a few awkward moments of introductory remarks I asked him if he would talk with me after I finished greeting the worshipers. A half hour later in the privacy of my office, David shared with me that he had just been diagnosed with AIDS. David also related that he had been involved in a homosexual lifestyle for over sixteen years. Not knowing how to respond I asked God to give me His love and compassion for this young man who had the word DESPERATION written across his sullen face. After listening to David share his story I spent a few minutes praying for him. My prayer seemed awkward. I felt very inadequate.

Addressing the needs of a person struggling with homosexuality was new territory for me. Before David left my office we made an appointment to see each other during the coming week. As my new friend left the church on this particular Sunday nine years ago I intuitively knew that my life and ministry were about to change.

Since my initial meeting with David, God has been graciously teaching me how to be a pastor to those who are in conflict with their homosexuality. This has not been an easy process because I tend to like easy answers and quick fixes. Not only has God been reshaping my understanding of ministry to those who struggle with sexual issues, but He has also given me some insights on how the local church can make a difference in the lives of those who are caught in homosexuality. The following is what God has been teaching me about ministry through the local church.

The Church and Homosexuality.

If loving pastoral care is to be given to those who have conflict with their homosexuality the leadership of a local church needs to conclude that homosexual practice is uniformly forbidden in Scripture. When a church is divided in its thinking concerning this issue whereby some say, "God has designed some persons to be homosexuals," and others believe, "Homosexuality is not God's best. . .in fact it is a sin," little or no ministry will occur. One of the strategies of the evil one is to divide churches over this issue. In doing so, members of the local church are so caught up in debate that no one has any energy to reach out to those who are struggling with their homosexuality.

Minister from a Platform of Grace.

If persons who struggle with homosexuality are not welcome in the local church then I will have to walk out the door along with them, leaving in the sanctuary only those entitled to cast the first stone. The local church needs to minister to all heterosexual and homosexual brokenness confessing that God's grace moves us out of confusion and alienation and toward wholeness. Pulpit messages, Sunday School classes and evening seminars that lift up the message of God's grace will help a congregation begin to minister to those who struggle with homosexuality from a platform of grace rather than law. Persons who struggle with homosexuality already feel guilty enough for their feelings and actions.

A pastor at my former church was driving my son and two of his friends to a youth activity. They passed through a park that was frequented by gay and lesbian persons. The boys in the car spotted two women kissing and embracing one another. Instead of deriding this couple the pastor engaged the boys in a "teachable moment." They talked about how the church should reach out with grace to these two women.

Cultivate a Spirit of Honesty.

I have found it helpful to be real and honest about some of the personal issues I face. I have told my congregation I have struggled in the past with pornography. It was quite a revelation when I revealed to the worshipers one Sunday morning that my wife and I lived together before we became Christians. My honesty has given others in the congregation permission to share the personal struggles they face. If there is a spirit of honesty within the body of Christ those who deal with homosexuality will hopefully be a little more open in coming forward to share some of the sexual issues they are dealing with.

From time-to-time I have asked persons who have found hope and healing in his/her struggle with homosexuality to share their testimony in front of the congregation. A few years ago during a sermon on God's grace I invited a middle-aged man to share his journey out of homosexuality. I had him give his testimony in the middle of my message. A week later no one could tell you anything about the three points of my sermon. They could, however, share the essence of Robert's testimony.

Deal with Identity then Behavior.

Homosexuality is different from other sexual sin in that it becomes an identity. For example, those who are tempted to commit adultery do not therefore consider themselves to be adulterers by nature. However, individuals who have homosexual feelings/temptations believe that those desires define who they are. Therefore, as pastors and counselors we need to help individuals sort out the difference between feelings and what God's Word says about us. We can trust that God does not create individuals to be homosexual based on his Word. Secondly, we must look at any relational deficits and legitimate emotional needs which may be the roots of homosexual temptation. This typically a lengthy process and may require the supplemental help of a professional counselor or formal ministry to men and women overcoming homosexuality

In attempting to get their actions to line up with God Word, Christians who deal with homosexual lust can be compared to the person who struggles with heterosexual lust. The local church needs to realize that the principles of ministry that work for heterosexual Christians can be effective for persons with same-sex desires. Pastors need to ask, "How would I counsel a heterosexual man who came to me for help in overcoming masturbation and pornography?" Many of the same biblical principles that would help a person deal with heterosexual lust will also help a homosexual with his or her lust. Furthermore, what would a pastor tell a woman who has fallen into sexual sin with a male business associate? The same principles that apply to her can be applied to a lesbian as she tries to untangle her emotional and sexual involvement with another woman. It is important for the local church to not be afraid of a person who struggles with homosexuality. A gay or lesbian person has many of the same needs as a heterosexual person.

Develop Deepening Friendships.

Over the years I have tried to find heterosexual persons (male and female) and ask them to befriend someone who struggles with being gay or lesbian. These persons need to be secure with their own sexuality and have a desire to be a safe relationship for those who struggle with his or her homosexuality. Persons who desire to come out of a homosexual lifestyle or to find healing in their attraction to someone of the same sex often desire to be in relationship with a healthy heterosexual person. Because sexuality is an intimate area of a person's life, it takes time to deepen a friendship to the level where private subjects can be discussed openly. One-on-one relationships can be very redemptive for both persons involved. A local church does not necessarily need to have a large, formal ministry to those involved in homosexuality, but developing same-sex relationships with strugglers is a positive first step for churches to take.

Jesus Christ Still Transforms Lives.

A person's sexuality is often not the real issue that needs to be addressed. A local church should set forth a clear message that we are acceptable to God in Jesus Christ. Homosexual men and women, like many of us, are usually trying to fill legitimate unmet needs for love and affirmation through same-gender relationships. Many of these needs can never be fully met outside of personally knowing Jesus Christ's love for us. When a person experiences God's love and acceptance, he or she can then begin to find the strength to deal with troubling sexual issues. Knowing Christ's love is the beginning of inner transformation.

Most pastors know the passages that condemn homosexual behavior. But people coming for help do too. These persons need to know that the Bible also talks about those who found freedom and transformation from homosexuality. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, "Do not be deceived--neither fornicators nor. . .homosexuals shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you, but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God." Pastors and members of the local church need to lovingly share a message of hope--Jesus Christ is still in the business of transforming lives.

I met with David once a month after that first awkward conversation. The AIDS virus finally destroyed his body. He is now living in the presence of his Savior. I wish David was still with us. I want to give him a hug and thank him for how much I learned and grew because of our relationship.

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