

## Headway answers five questions from the “Sexuality” booklet 2017

### **1. What can the church do to become a community that helps people express their sexuality in healthy and fruitful ways?**

Christian guidelines for behaviour are based on the teaching and example of Jesus and are proclaimed from our understanding of Biblical truth. From these imperatives, we wish to accept people as they are and do not want to drive anyone into secrecy and concealment of their sexuality. We recognise that the churches have been diffident about expounding scriptural teaching on sexual mores or activity. In particular, we can develop programmes for young people who are seeking moral guidance. Christian parents and church-affiliated youth leaders should be consulted, so that sex education in schools and youth clubs is not the sole responsibility of the Education/Youth service providers. The charity “Love for Life” has been helpful in this regard.

### **2. How welcome can we be to those who do not conform to the traditional norms?**

All people should feel welcome in church services and organisations, homosexuals as well as heterosexuals. Biblical guidance on sexual relationships (as in 1 Timothy 3; Ephesians 5) affirms the value of fidelity within the marriage bond. The Church cannot have anyone in leadership, of any kind, who is involved in a sexual relationship outside of marriage. We acknowledge and repent that the Church has not always fulfilled this responsibility within a heterosexual context. The Church is a family whose Head is Jesus Christ and, although family members won’t always agree, there must be a common acceptance of what constitutes righteous behaviour so that His family will function harmoniously.

Our Lord Jesus Christ demonstrated truth and love when he was faced with the case of a woman taken in adultery (John 8:3-11). He challenged all consciences but in grace he refused to deal with her in condemnation. He did, however, command her to cease sinning. We affirm the person, while indicating that there is a duty to live life as our Creator intended. Jesus’ teaching and example indicate that debate about sex must be characterised by standards of openness, honesty and integrity. Our aim is to behave in a way that pleases God, as taught in the Bible and interpreted by the Church.

### **3. What might the Holy Spirit be saying to us through the many changes in society’s attitudes to sexuality?**

It is debatable whether there have been many changes in society’s attitude to sexuality. It has been Christian teaching which brought the gift of chastity to the world and brought clarity that sexual activity was confined to heterosexual marriage. The Bible teaches non-conformity to “the world” when the “the spirit of the age” is fallen, disobedient, opposed to God and in need of redemption (John 8:44; Romans 12:1; Ephesians 6:11,12). The New Testament teaches Christians to distrust any moral aberrations of culture and societal attitudes. Christians have a responsibility both to understand the world and change it by evangelising the world and by living holy lives, irrespective of any challenge from cultural norms. Our Lord lived among sinners and

called people to repentance and faith, and we should emulate His example of establishing the Church in the world.

It is important for the Church to faithfully stand for God's truth and to speak this in love (Ephesians 4:15), especially in the present cultural uncertainty about morality in establishing acceptable standards of sexual behaviour. To speak "Christianly" into such uncertainty is not easy and is often painful, because competing perspectives within society can make debate emotional and even aggressive. It is all the more important for the Church to maintain God's unchanging standards so as to promote love for God and love for others. 1 Corinthians chapter 5 warns that the Church will differ from popular morality.

#### **4. How can we disagree with each other without becoming divided from each other?**

This may not be possible. Christ was controversial. Disagreement among His followers may lead to productive debate, yet any division is to be regretted. Fidelity to the plain teaching of Scripture is central in the debate about sexuality. It is the sad case that, in the history of the Church, departure from founding principles causes schism and excommunication (Matthew 12:30; 1 Corinthians 5:5). The Methodist Church has always promoted good relationships across areas of honest disagreement but eventually there comes a point where we cannot agree to disagree. As an example, opposition to gay marriage may represent a non-negotiable position. Where two epistemologies contradict each other (for example traditionalists and revisionists, or biblicalists and rationalists), division may be unavoidably deep and irreconcilable.

#### **5. How can we listen to and interpret scripture as we wrestle with difficult moral and social questions?**

We should beware of suddenly rejecting the teaching of millennia about what is acceptable sexual behaviour. Many current debates about sexuality and gender are diverse and complex and, often, these are focussed on answering questions which begin with "how?" rather than "why?" As an example, even if scientists claim to discover a "gay gene", this does not change scriptural teaching. The bible takes seriously the flaws and distortions of sinful human nature (Romans 3:23).

Many current theories prove to be short-lived, or susceptible to refinement. But the doctrine of Creation, as outlined in Genesis and affirmed by the Lord Jesus, has proved to be enduring. Creation teaches us that we are not made for same-sex relationships and identifies the binary nature of humans, male and female (Genesis 1:27; Matthew 19:4-6).

In its deliberations, the Church is called to biblical obedience. In this, one challenge is to lovingly refute revisionism which finds the plain teaching of Scripture unacceptable in the area of human sexuality. Christians should always view Scripture with attention to its original context and in the light of tradition, reason and experience. We should allow Scripture to determine the meaning of other scriptures. Christians search the Scriptures in a spirit of humble self-denial and with commitment to live in holiness, grace and truth.