

The Free Methodist Church's Response to Sexuality and Sexual Orientation

THE FREE METHODIST POSITION ON SEXUALITY

Anyone living in 21st century North America should be familiar with changing societal mores regarding human sexuality. Most pastors have frequent opportunities for ministry and face questions pertaining to Biblical teaching on sexual matters and how it applies to their ministry- preaching, teaching, baptism, discipleship, membership and marriage. What is the Free Methodist Church's position, understanding of and ministry counsel related to these matters?

The Biblical and historic understanding of the church on sexuality and marriage have remained largely unchanged in most of Protestantism and other Orthodox movements of the church throughout the centuries. But, societal changes in terminology and sexual expression press the church to clarify its terms and shape the church's response while maintaining integrity with Scripture and the church's doctrine. Refining responses and engaging societally changing norms is important for all pastors. Freelancing in theology praxis resulting in simply succumbing to societal pressure for conformity or developing unhealthy and graceless responses are not options for pastoral response. The church's primary task remains to serve Christ and remain faithful to Him and His Word.

Fidelity to a Biblical hermeneutic and Scriptural authority has been sacrificed on this one issue in many churches and denominations. Modifying Biblical interpretation in ways that forsake sound exegesis in this one area renders suspect exegetical integrity on all other matters. The list of churches and denominations that have modified their exegesis resulting in a diminished their view of Scriptural authority are numerous. This has become a hermeneutical watershed for many since the Scriptures are consistent and clear on most issues connecting gender relationships as it relates to sexuality.

The position of the Free Methodist Church on God's fundamental design for sexual expression is found in the church's statements in Chapter 3 of the Book of Discipline, specifically in Paragraph 3215 (see also 3214) and matters of monogamy and marriage in Paragraph 3311. A more robust Biblical explanation on same sex behavior is spelled out in the Study Commission on Doctrine's (SCOD) paper entitled, "Homosexuality According to the Bible . . ." by Dr. David Bauer and located online at <http://fmcusa.org/files/2014/03/HOMOSEXUALITY-ACCORDING-TO-THE-BIBLE.pdf>. Dr. Bauer exegetes the Scriptures consistently with history's most rigorous and exacting interpretations on these matters. Dr. Howard Snyder wrote a Seedbed monograph entitled, "Homosexuality and the Church: Defining Issue or Distracting Battle?" It apologetically addresses these matter from the Biblical/historical perspective held by the church throughout the ages.

A general framing document addressing the matter of same sex relationships and marriage from the posture of the FMCUSA entitled, "Framing a Mission Response . . . On Same Sex Relationships" by Bishop David W. Kendall which can be found at <http://fmcusa.org/files/2014/03/Framing-a-Missional-Response-to-21st-Century-Issues-Same-Sex-Relationships.pdf>. The intent of this document is to summarize our position while stating our preferred ministry posture.

Pastoral aids for understanding same sex attraction, orientation and relationship and describing how to best minister to those impacted within their congregations include Dr. Bruce Cromwell's writing, "Homosexuality and the Historic Church" located at <http://fmcusa.org/files/2014/08/Homosexuality->

[and-the-Church-Historic.pdf](#) and Dr. Denny Wayman's writing, "God's Love Expressed and Experienced" located at <http://fmcusa.org/files/2014/03/Gods-Love-Expressed-Offering-Pastoral-Care-to-LGB-Persons-and-Families.pdf>. Both of these documents are crafted by pastors. They familiarize the pastor/reader with not only the church's historic understanding, but a hopeful and relevant approach to ministry. Dr. Wayman's article incorporates a case study.

Implications and Guidance for Free Methodist Local Church Pastors

Many pastors have asked, "What are we to do in dealing with challenges to the church's understanding on LGBTQI matters? How do we minister, preach the good news, and serve those impacted by these lifestyle choices? We offer some comments and suggestions that will guide healthy pastoral thinking and ministry.

1. The cultural war has been waged over this topic for decades. Positions unfriendly to the Biblical/historical understanding of the church have prevailed in both society and law. The most common expressions are the legalization of same sex marriage, social acceptance of and legalized benefits for cohabitation and domestic partnerships outside the bonds of marriage. Additionally the general tolerance of or advocacy for sex outside of marriage has changed. As a result, heterosexual, monogamous marriage has little more acceptance than other cohabitation alternatives. That does not give pastors or churches permission to alter church doctrine or membership covenants in these matters. The church at its best has always sought to honor Christ and His Word, not simply mirror societal mores back to the society in which it ministers. We are to be Christo-centric, mirroring Christ- his love and truth- in a fallen world. It should challenge us to "speak the truth in love" in meaningful and helpful ways in our ministry.
2. This shift by many unfriendly to the Biblical/historical position has moved this discussion from one classically framed by moral choice and selected behavior with consequences for breach of fidelity in faith to one of biological necessity (genetics) and justice- human rights. Such cannot be supported by Scripture or defended by church history. Though societal shift has taken place regarding homosexuality specifically, other sinful sexual expressions are not treated by society in general as matters of biological necessity or human rights (Leviticus 18:6-23; 19:20-22; 20:10-21 et. al.). For example, matters like infidelity in relationship (adultery and fornication), incest (host of family relationships engaged in inappropriate sexual relationships), pederasty, and bestiality are unquestionably moral choices both in the Biblical record and as in society at large. Whether these are socially acceptable or socially abhorrent, no defense based on biological necessity or justice is leveraged with the exception of homosexual expression (verse 22) which has led to the movement toward legal equality and social acceptance. It could be easily argued that this particular shift has been intentionally directed for or by specific communities over the past 25 years. No strong, socially accepted advocacy for other sexual expressions of brokenness and sin have been successfully forwarded to the point of social and legal acceptance. Hence they are for the most part still deemed as moral sexual choice. They are either largely ignored as acceptable in society or excoriated as reprehensible behavior.
3. Many in the medical and psychological community as well as in pedestrian circles attach "orientation" and "identity" to sexuality, which on the most fundamental level misplaces the role of sex in defining person and human value. Ministry here as well as with all persons

engaged in or trapped by any sin, must focus upon the person as created in the image of God (original design, core identity with orientation toward God) yet bent toward sin (competing and reshaping identity with orientation toward self). We understand the fall of humanity and the consequent orientation toward sin and self that God, in Christ redeems and reverses. Our identity is only truly perfected in Christ and cannot be fulfilled through sex or any other behavior or bent. Human orientation angles toward sin and self-fulfillment which, at its core, opposes God and correction. But, one of the key markers to mental, emotional and spiritual health is impulse control. Therefore, discipleship always will lead to restraint and mature resistance to

4. The good news is that God's grace applies here as everywhere. Sexual sins are not unforgivable. They are not destructive to the point of pushing a person beyond the God's redemptive hand. It would be a travesty to believe that no grace is required, no sin is involved and no breach in relationship with God is at stake in this or any other area where the Biblical record clearly identifies behaviors as sinful. Equally devastating would be to believe that these are sins from which it is impossible to recover or find forgiveness. Pastors must minister truth AND grace. It is critically important to do both. Truth requires teaching- something some pastors may feel unqualified or may be reluctant to do in such a socially charged atmosphere. But, courageous Biblical instruction is important. Without it, the divide widens and social mores embed as acceptable on the basis of pastoral silence. Teaching the Biblical understanding of sin and the hope of salvation is essential for effective ministry.

Grace requires a loving, non-condemning, welcoming environment that allows the Holy Spirit to do his work of conviction, comfort, revelation and empowerment. Grace requires pastors and people to refuse certain behaviors to determine human value and worthiness of love and respect. Grace and truth together require pastors and people to understand what wholeness and holiness in Christ look like and to be prepared to lovingly disciple people toward holy living.

5. What does that level of discipleship look like in practical, day-to-day ministries for Free Methodist pastors? Following is a pastoral guide, not an exhaustive list of all ministry challenges or possibilities related to human sexuality.
 - a. We will actively share Christ with all people, welcoming them into our fellowship, sharing the love of Christ. We believe that God wants none to perish but all to come to repentance and to find life in Christ. Regardless how people sexually identify, they should find love, grace and truth in Free Methodist Churches.
 - b. We will not wait for changes of behavior to invite people to enter into a relationship with Christ and begin their journey of faith. We will not make behavior-based conditions for people to make themselves "ready" to hear the gospel of Christ.
 - c. We will commit to disciple all people who receive the grace of God to understand His word, truth and path toward wholeness. We will disciple all people who receive Christ to become mature servants of Christ. For those trapped in any sin, it is our understanding that struggles with "besetting sins" may exist. Nevertheless, we remain committed to faithful relationship and ongoing discipleship for all who are willing to seek forgiveness and commit and/or those who recommit to grow in Christ. We will offer guidance and help as people seek to be obedient to God and obediently follow his commandments.

- d. We will give clear biblical teaching on human sexuality and God's intended role for sex in the human experience. In this area, homosexual behavior cannot be seen as part of God's intended role for human sexual expression, regardless of a person's attraction. Pastors must be thoroughly informed and equipped to teach on sexuality and should seek guidance for materials and instruction from their superintendent and denominational leaders that assist them in teaching Biblical wisdom on these matters.
- e. We will not accord same-sex relationships the status the church holds for God's intended design for marriage and intimacy. We will not, in other words, perform same sex unions or marriages.
- f. We will baptize people who have received the grace of God AND renounce sin, seeking the Lordship of Christ in all things- sexual expression not excluded. New Testament instruction on baptism teaches the twofold purpose of baptism- washing from past sin and cleansing for and commitment to new life (Romans 6:4; 1 Peter 3:21). It is deliverance from sin and death and to righteous living. The second part cannot be ignored. As the FM baptism liturgy states regarding a commitment to righteous living: "You must now promise, in the presence of this congregation, to keep covenant with Him, renouncing the life of sin, believing His Holy Word and obediently keeping His commandments." [It should be noted that for the most part, churches that have the best record of sustained discipleship and long term ministry with those they baptize are the ones that have some form of catechetical instruction prior to baptism that articulate both what Christ has done in deliverance and affirming what Christ will do for those He delivers. Pre-baptism instruction for new believers may or may not be as rigorous or exhaustively comprehensive as membership and does not afford the baptized to formal standing in the church. But, it will fully inform the believer of the change that occurred in his/her life and the implications of baptism- cleansing from past sin and for future living.] It must be further noted that the Free Methodist Church holds baptism to be a means of grace. So, though it is not salvific, susceptibility to God's gracious work is part of baptism. Hence, delaying or denying baptism for appropriate reasons is not a condemning or Kingdom excluding activity. However, those who not only testify to God's inward work, but commit to obediently serve God in all areas of their lives may be baptized.
- g. We will fully instruct the congregation as to the meaning of the Lord's Supper and expect those who receive the elements to do so with a repentant and committed heart. We do not require pastors to inspect all who receive. But, we expect pastors to teach clearly on sin and righteousness so the congregants understand and are informed on both and open to the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
- h. We will commit to give full instruction to those who desire to dedicate their children in the context of the church. All persons have the right to dedicate their children to the Lord in any context they choose. The church has the responsibility, however, to participate in the dedication of those who commit to raise children in environments and in instruction and example laid out in Scripture. As a result, there are three parties committed or committing in the act of infant or child dedication: the child, the parent(s) and the church. If parents are unable to understand or agree to conform to the Biblical description of family, they run

the risk of answering the questions poorly and inviting the church to endorse or affirm a lifestyle they cannot.

- i. We commit to receive into church membership only those who have received Christ's forgiveness and redemption, are committed to a life of growing discipleship, acknowledge God's pattern of health for the believer and commit to live out the membership covenant of the Free Methodist Church. Membership involves not only the commitment of the believer to Christ, but his church. It is also the church's acceptance of and commitment to the believer. Membership is a privilege, not a right for all who attend Free Methodist Churches. Membership is a privilege appropriate to specific levels of Christian understanding, commitment and maturity. Membership instruction should be both rigorous and thorough. In the Free Methodist Church all members are eligible to lead the church in some capacity if so elected or assigned. And, as such, leaders and members must not only agree to keep but live out a life that is in harmony with our Articles of Religion and Membership Covenant.

The Study Commission on Doctrine is committed to creating additional resources in the future that will assist pastors and lay leaders as they minister to a wide range of people who experience brokenness and seek healing regarding sexuality and other areas of life.