

## How can pastors and leaders make their churches more openly hospitable and welcoming to gay people?

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How do you feel when faced with that question? Do your hackles rise? Is this article going to be about being “welcoming and affirming” or “welcoming and not affirming”? Which side are you on? We all know the outline of the conflict in the church – and most of us either know where we stand or don’t want to go there! The experience of other denominations (URC, Methodist, Church of Scotland – not to mention the Anglicans) and indeed some Baptist churches is that when brought to a head the conflict often ends in a costly draw, with sometimes broken or splintered congregations.

Some good Baptists at the evangelical end of the spectrum are becoming concerned at the damage this conflict is doing to the gospel. (Seen from a negative point of view an anti-Christian website has this statement “That so much hate can be levelled at two people because they love each other, shows how evil religion is!”)

There is a place for addressing that conflict – Do we take seriously what the Bible says on sexuality? What does the Bible actually say? Is it not a wonderful thing that gay people (in this country since 1967) no longer have to live in fear and pretend to be straight and can be open and honest about who they are? Should we as Christians be silent when someone is beaten to death for being openly gay? What would Jesus do?

But, we have surely learned that when we discuss the position of black people, or women or people with disabilities in the church, we need the witness of those people. Shouldn’t the same be true when we discuss the position of gay people? As gay people we too want to say “Nothing about us without us!”

I guess I was invited to write this article because I am a died-in-the-wool Baptist and I am gay. By that I mean that I have had to accept that I am one of those people who are not attracted to the opposite sex and therefore should not enter straight marriage. (One of the people Jesus refers to in Matthew 19 v 12?)

I came to terms with that in my mid 40s, about 15 years ago. I remember that it was with some trepidation that I first plucked up courage to attend meetings of gay Christians. My prejudices at that time were, I am sure, no different from other Christians. Homophobic would be a fair description. Since then I have had the privilege to worship with many wonderful gay Christians. Far from being a group "obsessed with sex" as people might think from outside, I have found very "normal" Christians who want to meet to worship and be accepted as themselves.

As a gay person and an evangelical Christian, I am keen, with other gay Christians to engage constructively in seeking to resolve the conflict mentioned above, to listen to those who disagree with us, to search the Scriptures together, to tease out the many areas of agreement and to build a positive dialogue. That is an important work that I pray will move forward in God’s time. However, that is not the message of this article.

I mentioned that one of the casualties of the conflict was the gospel in general. Other casualties are gay people, particularly young gay people, who feel forced to take sides, when above all we need space to be

honest and discover who we are and to accept the good news of the gospel in all its fullness and the challenges it makes on our lives.

This was confirmed when I attended a meeting of Baptist ministers a year or so ago to discuss the subject of homosexuality. The story was told of a young gay man, the son of two of the other contributors, who had gone to his minister (of a Baptist church) and shared that he might be gay. Sadly the minister did nothing to support the young man and years later he is not part of any church.

That is why this article is about how we can step back from that conflict and encourage good pastoring of gay people.

I would suggest that a fruitful way to approach an answer is to consider a young person who is discovering that he or she is gay, bearing in mind that each such person is an individual with a different story.

How would you feel? Life has treated you badly! You will miss out on things like having children. You are in a minority that is often rejected and at risk in society. You know and hate the anti-gay jokes you have quietly borne. You probably haven't had sexual encounters, but if you have they will be most unlikely to be satisfying and are discouraged by those around you (unlike your straight friends). So, chances are you will feel discouraged and buttoned-up about life. The mass media tell you that Christians hate gay people. You may have come to hate that part of yourself that is attracted to the "wrong people", but that is who you are!

Yes there is a "gay scene". You may be able to "be yourself" there. But you risk being drawn into a promiscuous, unsatisfying and risky lifestyle. Deep down you hope to find a partner, someone to share your life with.

You may already be in a church and no-one knows you are gay – or you may not be a churchgoer. So you decide to "come out" - or to come in!

What welcome should you receive? I pray it might be something like this ...

"God loves you - just as you are. He made us all for a purpose - there are no "reject goods". In Christ, gay and straight are equally welcome!

We want to affirm you as a person! Gay orientation is not in itself sinful. Some in the church believe that all homosexual activity is wrong. Others believe that the Bible supports all loving faithful relationships. But though we disagree among ourselves, we will not make you a victim of our theological conflict.

We give you the whole Bible, focussing on what is really important, like John 3 v 16, Matthew 28 vv 16-20 and Romans 5 v 8, but engaging with you on the challenging bits.

Above all we will accompany you on your Christian journey and learn from you as you learn from us. As we travel together, we pray that the Holy Spirit will break forth yet more light and truth from God's word."

*Martin Stears-Handscomb*

**Personal Note:**

Martin Stears-Handscomb grew up in Cowes, Isle of Wight, where he attended the Baptist church and was baptised in his fourteenth year. He has been a member of a Baptist church ever since, for the last 36 years at Tilehouse Street, Hitchin.

Some years ago he wrote a paper describing his journey to accepting his sexuality.

In 2000 a group of lesbian and gay Baptists met with representatives of concerned Baptist ministers and lay people to found the Network of Baptists Affirming Lesbian & Gay Christians. Martin agreed to be joint co-ordinator, together initially with Revd. David Trafford. He has continued in that role ever since.