

Climate of care: Pastoral ministry to gays and lesbians

by [John Hobbs](#) in the [March 11, 2008](#) issue

There is no end in sight to the mainline denominations' debates over whether gays and lesbians will be fully integrated into the life and leadership of their churches. While that debate is important, so too is the need for congregations to meet the immediate pastoral needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, as well as people who are questioning their sexual orientation. "Care involves structured and intentional organization in response to specific educational, relational, and existential needs," says Larry Kent Graham (*Discovering Images of God: Narratives of Care Among Lesbians and Gays*). A ministry of inclusion and affirmation involves providing an intentional welcome to the gifts that LGBT people bring to the faith community.

First and foremost, such a ministry involves understanding the spiritual wounds of LGBT people and the mistrust that they have of religious institutions. Pastoral leaders need to understand how the dominant culture fosters doubt and self-hatred among LGBT people, which makes their coming-out process complex and risky.

So creating a climate of care begins with listening. LGBT people should define their needs and set the agenda; otherwise, care slips into being paternalistic or patronizing. Too many well-intentioned pastoral care providers are like Job's comforters: full of traditional ideas that fail to address deep concerns. Job's friends were invited to be in solidarity with Job's plight, but they could not hear his deep groaning. Care not rooted in authentic listening has no integrity.

Some unique issues in the gay community present specific challenges and opportunities for pastoral care. One such issue is the coming-out process. In most cases, coming out constitutes a crisis. In coming out, one realizes that one is going to be excluded from heterosexual privileges. Also, as one comes out, the old support systems fall away at a time when new ones are not yet in place. The result can be fear, anger, guilt, shame and confusion.

The hard work of coming out is a lifelong process. People are at many differing points in their coming-out journeys. The community that seeks to be welcoming does not push people on these journeys but gives them permission to be where they are. A community can honor different journeys and at the same time be a place where LGBT people are fully affirmed.

The long internalization of traditional gender expectations shapes people's consciousness even as they begin to reject or live beyond those expectations. Gender socialization informs our sexual expressions, professional choices, emotional attachments, imagined futures and perceptions of social norms and expectations. Congregations of care offer support as people move beyond traditional expectations.

Communities of care will recognize that LGBT people experience a special kind of loneliness. For single heterosexuals, every social event carries the possibility for meeting a potential date. The social system supports an informal process of inquiring about another's relationship status. Not so for LGBT people. They live in a world in which they may be ridiculed or threatened if a hunch about another person is acted upon or an inquiry is made about a potential date.

When gays and lesbians form committed partnerships, they face another set of unique challenges. For example, gay couples may need help navigating medical, financial and legal issues. No one working in an emergency room would think to ask a husband to prove his marriage to his unconscious wife before surgery. The institution of marriage is assumed, and a spouse is permitted to make critical medical decisions. But when a gay or lesbian couple arrives at the emergency room, few hospital staff will assume that a "next of kin" relationship exists, and they may exclude one partner from any interaction or decision making regarding the other partner. The couple should possess power-of-attorney-for-health-care documents to ensure that each partner can make crucial decisions if the other partner cannot.

Similar issues arise in handling financial resources and personal property. Couples should consider designating each other as the primary beneficiary on bank accounts, insurance policies and retirement plans. It is also important for couples to have documents indicating power-of-attorney for dealing with property.

Like all couples, gay and lesbian couples struggle with issues of competitiveness and control within the relationship. Partners bring different salaries or earning power to the relationship, as well as different patterns of decision making. Having learned to

survive in a sometimes hostile environment, many gays and lesbians have learned to take control of their lives, and they don't want to be dependent on others. They need to learn how to negotiate decision making as a couple, and how to navigate their interdependency in a healthy way, one that fosters mutuality and respects individuality. For example, to keep one partner from assuming too much of the decision making on the basis of what he or she contributes to the household, a couple may need to keep a tally of all household spending and ensure that each partner pays exactly half of all expenses.

Without true intimacy, relationships soon dissolve into a shallow routine of coexistence. In a world in which human interactions are often impersonal, building intimacy is a challenge for everyone. It is perhaps a special challenge for LGBT people who have long learned to guard their emotional selves. From an early age, they have been socialized to keep their feelings deeply private—that is the way to avoid ridicule or rejection. Many even learn to be ashamed of their feelings. Thus LGBT people often don't express intimacy. They don't engage in that spontaneous kiss or hold hands or touch. Being on guard takes a toll on one's ability to be affectionate, even when a couple is alone, and this trait has a damaging, long-term effect upon intimacy. Being knowledgeable about some of these unique issues helps pastoral leaders and congregations become welcoming and supportive communities.

Pastors and lay leaders should also speak clearly and publicly about where they and their congregations stand on including LGBT people. Can gays and lesbians serve as church leaders? Will the church celebrate holy unions? Will the church baptize the children of gay couples? Congregational leaders must have the pastoral integrity to be honest about where their community stands on these questions. The day a gay or lesbian couple knocks on the pastor's door to request that their child be baptized is not the time for the congregation to struggle with how it will respond to this request.

Congregations that are intentional in their study of these issues and their policy making are far more likely to become welcoming environments. To back away from affirming an LGBT person in the midst of addressing pastoral concerns can be tremendously hurtful. The common experience of so many is that of being abused and betrayed by religious institutions. Faith communities may get only one chance to retain a person's trust.

Being a trustworthy community is related to being a safe community. From the time LGBT people begin discovering their orientation, they are always asking themselves:

“Is this space or are these people safe? Can these people be trusted not to demean, abuse or discount me in the fullness of my human identity?” Congregations that wish to be open and affirming often say, “But we have always been welcoming.” But that may not be what LGBT people have experienced.

Congregations have to become intentionally public about their welcome. Welcoming signals can be subtle, such as a rainbow flag on the sign board, or as direct as a specific welcome to LGBT people spoken at the beginning of the worship service or printed in the bulletin. Enacting genuine welcome is the first step toward building a safe, trusting environment.

Creating a climate of care includes being sensitive to how some theological language might be heard. “Anyone who does theology within [a privileged context] needs to be aware of the contribution that his or her scholarship may be making to the spirit of oppression, domination and imperialism,” writes theologian Douglas John Hall. For example, for LGBT people the word *sin* holds special power. All their lives they have been told that they are not just regular sinners like everyone else, but abominable sinners. While heterosexuals might hear the word *sin* as an appropriate judgment on aspects of their lives, LGBT people are likely to hear it as one more assault on their very beings. Liturgies can be revised so as to name the behaviors that abuse, damage and oppress people while inviting the community into new ways of relating to God, neighbors and self.

To become a welcoming, affirming community, pastoral caregivers within that community should explore learning opportunities. Over the past 20 years, a mountain of resources have been published on the psychosocial dynamics and spiritual needs of LGBT people. It is worth making an effort to stock one’s bookshelves and learn some of the prominent psychological and social theories about LGBT people—not to become a therapist, but as a way of increasing one’s awareness of the inner world of LGBT people.

Another part of this learning process is building a referral system—the capacity to connect people to informed, sensitized physicians, lawyers and counselors. There are many organizations or caucuses within denominations that offer a remarkable inventory of literature, videos, speakers and other educational resources for individual study and congregational workshops.

Finally, the learning process calls for the pastoral caregivers to evaluate their own internalized homophobia. Virtually everyone has internalized homophobic feelings and thoughts, and to ignore or to disown them only creates delusions. A willingness to admit and examine one's own feelings, both to oneself and to others, is a public barometer of the integrity of one's work.

I started by suggesting that it is important to push beyond the denominational debates about sexuality. But a community that affirms and welcomes LGBT people will also do advocacy at the denominational and civic levels. When this advocacy work becomes a part of the community's mission with the same intentionality as the summer mission project, it sends a strong message of affirmation to gays and lesbians. If only people who are gay show up for the work of advocacy, the effort soon becomes hollow. A common experience of LGBT people is that of feeling that the rest of the world is painfully silent about their needs. Often when people disclose their sexual or gender orientation, there is a hurtful silence within their family and among their friends, or a statement like this is offered: "Of course we still love you, but there's no need to ever talk of this again." Silence effectively dismisses and marginalizes the full humanity of LGBT people. And so it is with church families. Silence and lack of advocacy, even if unintentional, is another way of undermining the message of welcome.

Moving beyond the debate and returning to it are difficult tasks requiring patience and energy. But to be a fully welcoming and affirming community, one that normalizes the lives and realizes the gifts of LGBT people, is part of becoming a more fully incarnating community of Christ. The primary objective of any community rooted in the love of Christ is to stimulate the imagination of people to live more fully human lives, immersed in the compassion and justice of God. This is a defiant and risky act, filled with glimpses into the mystery of God and filled with disappointments at how frail are human attempts to embody God's love. The community that welcomes all people fully and joyfully is more likely to experience a deeper connectedness to one another as an incarnational community of Christ.