A Discussion Paper: Lutheran Schools and Homophobia

[Graham Gallasch, elective presentation at ACLE 3]

The following paper will discuss the issue of homophobia in schools and whether Lutheran schools promote or counter homophobia because of their theological foundations. The range of Christian theological perspectives on homosexuality will be investigated and an attempt will be made to view these through the lens of Lutheran theological principles. Finally, the paper will discuss the challenge of finding a theological perspective that does not promote homophobic attitudes and behaviours.

What is homophobia? In an Australia Institute Webpaper in 2005, Michael Flood and Clive Hamilton use the following definition, “Homophobia refers to the unreasoning fear or hatred of homosexuals and to anti-homosexual beliefs and prejudices.” (Flood & Hamilton 2005:1). They also go on to state that while not everyone who is homophobic engages in discriminatory behaviour they are more likely to promote and support a general attitude of intolerance and to appear to sanction discriminatory behaviour.

What causes homophobia? Some people believe that it is an intellectual analysis which leads to the presentation of valid reasons for disliking homosexuality, while others argue that it is a purely emotional response to biological and cultural factors. Another approach was articulated by Leela Grace in her study of how attitudes towards homosexuals were formed, “... study showed the powerful impact of how children were taught. Those who were taught to believe in the evil nature of homosexuality continue to condemn and fear, …Those who were taught to be open-minded and respectful discovered the joys of diversity and were able to look beyond appearance or sexual orientation and discover the person beneath.” (Grace 1998) She believed that ultimately her research showed the transformative power of friendship and person to person interaction.

Another perspective, especially when viewing homosexuality from a Christian understanding, is that presuppositions and prejudices are not easily distinguished. Presuppositions are unavoidable because humans are innately unable to be objective. We always bring history, experience and feeling to every interaction with others and the world. Prejudice, however, is attitudes and feelings that negate, demean and harm others. Dreyer (2006:156) challenges faith communities to recognise this understanding, “It is imperative that the faith community, in its dialogue
with the Bible on the issues of sexuality and homosexuality, should search honestly for prejudicial attitudes which might be contaminating its presuppositions.”

Is homophobia present in our schools? The Australia Institute study ‘Mapping Homophobia in Australia’ states “Homophobic attitudes and behaviours have been shown to be prevalent in schools” (Flood & Hamilton 2005:4) and that homophobic abuse was most likely to occur at school. As a teacher in Lutheran schools since 1983 I have been increasingly aware of both homophobic attitudes and behaviours becoming more prevalent. Just recently I became aware of an incident with a boy in a Year 8 Physical Education class who accidentally bumped into another boy, and the immediate response of some other members of the class (male and female) was to say ‘oh X you’re so gay’. His response was to break down in tears and loudly exclaim, ‘Don’t call me gay ….this has happened my whole school life ….I am not gay!!’ Although similar responses to events like this are isolated, the epithet ‘you’re so gay’ and other similar statements, are frequent everyday occurrences in schools and the impact on regularly targeted students and innocent bystanders is incalculable.

In order to gain an appreciation for the level of homophobia at my school instead of relying on anecdotal evidence, I surveyed 114 students (55 female, 59 male) across years 8 - 11. (see Appendix for sample of the student survey). The following are some of the results:

- 49% of all students surveyed, consider homosexuality to be OK, 10% don’t understand it, 20% don’t like it and 21% consider it to be a sin.
- 76% of the girls consider homosexuality to be OK whereas only 24% of the boys do.
- 39% of the boys consider homosexuality to be a sin whereas only 2% of the girls do.
- 10% of the students know an openly homosexual student at school
- 25% of the students have a friend or family member who is openly homosexual
- 73% of the students admit to making anti-homosexual comments daily
- 18% have heard teachers make anti-homosexual comments
- 75% think that the school is not a safe place for homosexuals

These results are similar to the Australia Institute study, in which men are shown to be more homophobic than women. Of concern is the level of admitted and perceived anti-homosexual comment occurring within the school community. Even if...
these comments are not specifically directed at individuals (bullying and harassment) and are merely expressions of a general attitude, can a Christian school ignore this level of intolerance and does it need to consider its own role in the promotion of these attitudes? Does the school help promote homophobic attitudes by its tacit support of the public stance of the church against homosexuality? Is there a viable theological stance? Is homophobia another expression of the intolerance associated with racism, sexism, misogyny, ageism and religious fundamentalism?

In order to begin to think about answering any of these questions it is now necessary to examine homosexuality and homophobia from a theological perspective. In the process of ‘doing theology’ the starting point must be to accept one’s own role as interpreter. No hermeneutical process can be separated from the personal views, biases and presuppositions of the person engaged in the process. Even as I begin to investigate the range of theological perspectives that homosexuality has generated, I must acknowledge that my own faith journey and experience will inevitably influence the reading and interpretation of these perspectives. “Presuppositions are not to be discarded or disparaged, but owned. Identified, and articulated, as long as they are also constantly being re-assessed and re-examined in the light of the Bible.” (Lockwood, 2004:5)

I believe that making sense of God and God’s revelation is not a singular event, captured in time by culture, tradition and words. It is an ongoing process, a forever evolving expression, influenced by the mystery of God’s continuing creation. This continuing creation occurs in the ongoing interpretation of Scripture, the human search for truth, the interpreting anew of traditional symbols, and the willingness to incorporate the cultural and experiential lenses of wider humanity. When theology speaks to schools about homosexuality and homophobia it must refrain from using a narrow theological model approach and instead must demand a more holistic, experiential, yet ‘fundamental’ approach. An holistic approach, in that no one model can speak God’s revelation to all people. An experiential approach, because young people learn by engagement and rather than speculating about God, they seek God to speak to their hearts. A fundamental approach in that the theology must be grounded in clear, concise fundamentals that are distilled over time, and contain within them the kernel of God’s truth.

It is generally accepted that a number of sources shape Christian morals and ethics: Scripture and God’s revelation, tradition, reason, experience and culture. The order of these sources also indicates an hierarchy of importance. It appears frequently that theological interpretations often focus on just one or two of these sources and limit the depth and breadth of the understanding. By restricting the
deliberation to just Scripture or tradition, or focusing exclusively on the experience of people we deny the mystery of God’s continuing creation. Perhaps it would be helpful to use a model that maintains the hierarchy of importance but requires a filtering through each source to work towards truthful understanding.

Beginning with Scripture is paramount to the interpretative process. It is here that one of the fundamentals, one of the Lutheran theological principles becomes apparent. “For Lutherans the Bible is the Word of God, the center of which is the Christ” (Childs 2003: 4) Beginning with the Bible means not limiting the theology to an academic process but also recognising that there is a spiritual component to ‘doing theology’. Luther suggests a three-pronged approach – oratio (prayer), meditation (meditation), tentation (testing). By praying for the Holy Spirit to guide the process, by meditating and examining over and over again the words, and by testing the understanding in practice, the process of doing theology remains grounded in truth.

Also underlying Lutheran theology are some principles that are fundamental to the process. The first of these is that the gospel is the key to ‘doing theology’. The Bible must be interpreted in the light of Christ and the gospel. Scripture is ‘christocentric’ and “no interpretation can be in conflict with the gospel.”
Following on from this focus on Christ is the teaching of justification by grace through faith (sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus) and so Lutherans see law and gospel as central to the teaching of the Bible.

Returning now to the issue of homosexuality, many theologians and interpreters of Scripture have limited the discussion by focusing only on the seven texts that mention sexual relations between persons of the same sex. Two of these passages, Genesis 19:1-9 and Judges 19:22-25, despite mentioning homosexual behaviour or intent, are really about rape and inhospitable behaviour. While the two passages from Leviticus (18:22 and 20:13) are unqualified and absolute in their prohibition of homosexuality, they are part of the Holiness Code, much of which the Christian church no longer teaches as being determinative for Christian behaviour or ethics.

Because Lutherans affirm the Old Testament as well as the New Testament as the Word of God, dismissing these passages is not an option and neither is believing that the entire Old Testament is binding on all Christians. How then can a Lutheran theological perspective guide this dilemma? Sarah Dille (2005:4) in an essay for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada posits the following discussion:

> For Luther the most important function of the ‘Law’ is to convict us of our sins and drive us to Christ as our only source of justification before God..... Luther believed the Old Testament law codes were relevant for the ancient Jews but not binding on Gentile Christians. In Luther's understanding of Law and Gospel, the law of the love of God and neighbour is an important admonition for the Christian life. But more importantly, it is our judge – as we all fail to consistently love God and neighbour and so stand condemned. This drives us to Christ, to rely on the grace of God alone, and not on our own merits.

She goes onto use the gospel proclamation that as we are all sinners we can all rely on God’s radical grace and as a community of sinners we are all welcome, and to not be welcoming to homosexual people is to not proclaim the gospel. This stance is reinforced by Cole-Kinal (2004:3), “a Lutheran approach to welcoming, must never depend on character, behaviour, race, gender, sexual orientation; the only condition for welcoming involves no conditions whatsoever.”
The Formula of Concord expounds the importance of teaching both law and gospel but with distinction, because whenever there is confusion between law and gospel, the gospel suffers and loses its power. “…(the law) leads not away from the Christ who is the end of the law (Rom 10:4)”. (Tappert 1959: 562)

The two New Testament passages of 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 are also quite clear in their condemnation of homosexual behaviour but Mark Powell, in Childs (2003: 26) asks a legitimate question: “must all homosexual acts be considered sinful just because the acts associated with the first-century people known as arsenokoitai and malakoi were regarded as such?” The text most commonly used to condemn homosexuality is Romans 1:18-32. Even when Lutherans use the principle of interpreting Scripture in relation to the gospel, the good news of God’s unconditional love, interpretations differ. Hegedus and Buck (2005) in their essay on a hermeneutic of grace in the New Testament discuss these differences. One option is to believe that the passage does not understand homosexual orientation as we do today and that homosexuals are no more sinners than all other people. The other is to interpret the passage as condemning homosexuality then and now. Hegedus and Buck ask everyone to consider the overall point that Paul is making in Romans chapters 1 -3, “in passing judgement on others we are also passing judgement on ourselves, for we are all sinners who stand in need of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.” (Hegedus & Buck 2005:5).

Regardless of the variations in scriptural interpretations, an important consideration is that people are hurting and will be hurt on both sides of the debate. Perhaps the one agreed response is to focus on the words of healing, acceptance, community, love, and respect scattered throughout the Bible.

The next lens through which to view the topic is tradition. Throughout Western Christian history homosexuality has been afforded a range of degrees of sinfulness that has often been linked to the secular environment of the time. The greatest condemnation occurred during times when heterosexual activities were subject to rigid conformity. Many theological teachings on human sexuality have changed or are changing over time –women, marriage, celibacy, contraception and divorce (Porter 2006). Is there a viable theological perspective that welcomes homosexuals, yet to be constructed? The creeds and confessions of the Church and also Luther himself loom large in the Lutheran tradition, and as such have much to say about ‘doing theology’ and in this particular situation, a perspective on homosexuality. Luther had much to say regarding celibacy and considered it to be a gift of the spirit (that was rarely given) and that it should not be required of ordained
priests. And yet the current church position on homosexuality (LCA 1975) states that the Christian homosexual if unable to change their sexual orientation should live a celibate life. "The Bible and the Lutheran confessions contend against the practical effectiveness of such advice for all but a few.." (Powell 2003:34). Homosexual Christians not wanting to be alone and 'to marry rather than burn with passion' as Paul (1 Corinthians 7:9) puts it, are told that this is prohibited. The Church must recognise the dilemma for the homosexual, of God declaring that it is not good for a person to live alone and at the same time prohibiting same-sex intercourse. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America while not formally embracing homosexuality by 'marrying' homosexuals or ordaining them, has made a move towards 'welcoming' homosexuals. The current statement of the ELCA on sexuality states,

"Mindful of the sin to which all succumb, Christians are called to:
Respect the integrity and dignity of all persons, whatever their age, gender, sexual orientation or marital status

(ELCA Statement, 1996)

This statement now underpins the current ELCA church-wide study entitled ‘Journey Together Faithfully’ a study on sexuality and homosexuality that hopes to guide the church towards a position of respectful difference bound by a common freedom under the gospel. Is the LCA open to a similar journey or is the pathway to understanding stymied by tradition? (No papers or articles have been published in the Lutheran Theological Journal that openly discuss the issue of homosexuality and Christianity!!)

The lens of reason has for many theologians over many years, been seen as a 'poor cousin' amongst the sources for understanding. And yet for the secular world it is often seen as the primary source for understanding. The science of sexual orientation elicits many questions: What causes homosexuality? Can sexual orientation be changed? How do attitudes towards homosexuality develop? Are significant mental health issues associated with sexual orientation? Is child development affected by being raised by two same-sex parents? Unfortunately it is the first question that is the prime focus in any discussion on homosexuality, and is also the question least able to be answered currently by science. (Olsen 2003).

Reason should not be dismissed as contributing to an understanding just because it does not provide definitive answers. Lutheran confessional theology also supports the use of reason. The Augsburg Confession teaches that "man possesses some measure of freedom of the will which enables him to live an outwardly
honourable life and to make choices among the things that reason comprehends." (Tappert 1959:39). Bartsch(2001:108) states “Reason is a good gift of God to be used in exploring God’s creation…..It is not seen as an easy or comfortable activity, especially when established patterns of thought and action are challenged.” Perhaps, instead of focusing on the statements of reason connected to this issue that support our stance, the real task of the human mind should be to listen empathetically to others who disagree and to interpret their actions and behaviours in the most favourable light. Only then can reason be removed from the distortion of self interest.

When it comes to using experience as a source for theological interpretation, the difficulty of reaching consensus is particularly evident, as everyone is an expert – everyone has their own lens of experience. Perhaps the greatest challenge occurs when the individual experience becomes defined by language and words. The stories that have shaped the Christian experience, the Bible stories, began in people’s hearts and minds, and only in their re-telling and recording have the challenges of interpretation occurred. This, however, is not sufficient to dismiss experience as a meaningful source of moral and theological deliberation. To dismiss experience is to dismiss those Christians who are homosexual and yet whose faith is bound by the gospel. A faith that states that we are justified by grace alone, through faith alone because of Christ cannot be exclusive.

Undoubtedly human experience is not innocent and to use experience wisely in this process it is necessary to understand the language and the culture of the expounders of the experiential perspective. Stortz (2003) has reshaped the sexual ethic to avoid either ignoring experience or using it to justify affirmation of all lifestyles. By beginning discussions of sexuality with baptism, she has maintained the focus on Christ. “What a baptismal sexual ethic demands is behaviour that befits members of the body of Christ. Beginning with baptism does not endorse either homosexual or heterosexual “lifestyles”.” (Stortz 2003:73) She elaborates on this by stating that baptism makes sexuality a public matter with communal dimensions, and that the exercise of sexuality should be within the context of relationships shaped by promises of “fidelity, service and generativity” (Stortz 2003:76). She concludes her discussion by stating “If baptism functions as the central orientation of a Christian, a Christian sexual ethic should be equally binding on all Christians, both homosexuals and heterosexuals.” (Stortz 2003:77)

Culture also plays an important role in deliberating on moral behaviour. Lutherans have traditionally understood that God (Christ) and culture are in a relationship of tension, and this tension is in the form of a choice between God and being human. As humans we are sinful and are trapped in our culture but only God’s
grace through Jesus Christ can save us. This tension is by its very nature dynamic and inter-related rather than being static and separate. The search for God’s saving grace is also valid in language and culture. “…one should listen to the stories of homosexual and heterosexual Christian people as well as the stories of the multitude of cultures. In other words, Lutherans want to embrace the stories because the Holy Spirit may be leading us into a newer and deeper understanding of God’s grace.” (Perry & Rodriguez 2003:85)

We return now to the issue of homophobia in Lutheran schools and how should the theology of homosexuality speak to the issue. There can be little doubt that there are homosexual students and (despite unwritten staffing policies) homosexual staff in Lutheran schools. Currently the public silence from the schools and the church is deafening. This silence may well be a contributing cause to the level of homophobia in schools. There exists within each Lutheran school a ‘community of faith’ – those who belong to Christ. It is beholden on this community to be a catalyst and a voice in this theological dialogue. A voice that not only has “a clear understanding of the relevant theology” (Bartsch 2007:17) but that is prepared to listen to the pains and problems of the wider school community. If this is to occur effectively and guide all concerned towards a deeper understanding, the model discussed in Fig 1 (pg 3) must be considered. For listening, discussion and dialogue to occur everyone must feel an included part of the community. This does not mean that everyone is required to hold an homogenous belief and understanding but all must feel welcome. Perhaps a legitimate way forward is to begin by focusing on developing an attitude of ‘welcoming for all’, by using the theology of ‘inclusivity’ explicit in the Gospel.

…the act of welcoming is a visual and active proclamation of the Gospel, since welcoming requires of the one at our doors absolutely nothing, no credentials at all. When we welcome we act as God’s servants, embodying God’s radical grace of welcoming everybody without condition. Hence “welcoming” makes alive the Reformation solas of the faith-grace dynamic. And secondly the act of welcoming emerges with powerful frequency as a fundamental practice throughout our Bible. The Scriptures of both Testaments emphasize that welcoming is at its most profound when our open arms are extended to the most marginalised within our society. On the basis, then, of our Reformation solas we are enjoined to build a welcoming position and practice
that embodies a radical inclusivity.

(Cole-Arnal 2004:5)

APPENDIX

STUDENT SURVEY

This survey is to provide some preliminary data for a research paper associated with a staff member’s post-graduate study at Australian Lutheran College.

Please circle answers honestly.

1. What is your attitude regarding homosexuality?
   
   It is a sin. I don’t like it. I don’t understand it. It is OK.

2. Would you be comfortable being friends with someone who is homosexual?
   
   Yes No

3. Would it bother you if you heard someone use an anti-homosexual comment?
   
   Yes No

4. How often do you hear put-down comments such as “that’s so gay”, “fag”, “dyke”, “queer”, “homo” or “lesbo” at school?
   
   Never 1–2 times per week 1–2 times a day 10+times a day

5. How often do you hear teachers make anti-homosexual comments?
   
   Never 1–2 times per week 1–2 times per day 10+times per day

6. How often do you make anti-homosexual comments?
   
   Never 1–2 times per week 1–2 times per day 10+times per day

7. How often do you hear teachers intervene when anti-homosexual comments are made?
   
   Never 1–2 times per week 1–2 times per day 10+times per day

8. How often do you ask people not to make anti-homosexual comments?
   
   Never 1–2 times per week 1–2 times per day 10+times per day

9. Do you think this is a safe school for students to be openly homosexual?
   
   Yes No

10. Do you know of any openly homosexual students at this school?
    
    Yes No

11. Do you have a friend or family member who is openly homosexual?
    
    Yes No

12. Do you think that things need to change at this school to help homosexual students feel safer?
    
    Yes No

What year are you in at school? What gender are you?

8 9 10 11 12 Male Female
Thank you for your time and honesty.

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