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**Study Report on Homosexuality and Homosexual
Relationships**

**PASTORAL GUIDE TO SERVE LOCAL
CONGREGATIONS**

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Homosexuality and Homosexual Relationships

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Introduction

In 2012, our churches had approximately 74.000 members. Who can say how many of them have a homosexual orientation? Using a commonly accepted estimate of two to three per cent as a guide, that could be as many as 1.500 to 2.000 people. The estimated number of those who – to a greater or lesser degree – experience homosexual feelings is thought to be much larger. In any case, pastoral practice confirms that we do indeed have brothers and sisters in our churches who experience such feelings and have such an orientation. It is to be expected that in the future an increasing number of – both younger and older – members will ‘come out’ with a same-sex orientation.

Chapter I: Pastoral Principle

In this section, we articulate our point of departure for all pastoral activity in relation to these brothers and sisters: the pastoral principle.

This *Pastoral Guide* has been written on the basis of and is closely linked to the preceding *Vision Statement*. A careful reading of Scripture brought us to this conclusion: homosexuality is a consequence of the fall into sin, and an aspect of the brokenness of creation. The Lord has given only one expression of an all-encompassing human relationship in love and faithfulness: that is the relationship of marriage between a man and a woman. As much as we, driven by compassion, might wish to respond to the deepest longings of our brothers and sisters, we cannot regard a homosexual relationship as a responsible alternative. Nevertheless, the reality and complexity of specific situations within each congregation requires us to assess the pastoral and ethical dimensions of these situations with great care. In such situations it can be extremely difficult to arrive at the right choices. This pastoral guide aims to provide support for homosexual brothers and sisters as they go on their way with the Word of God, and take their rightful place within the congregation of Christ.

1. Precious and vulnerable

On the basis of the same Scripture that led us to the conclusion stated above, we receive any brother or sister with a homosexual orientation as a member of full and equal value in the congregation. As one who is created by God, and equally precious as any other. As a fallen human being, equally susceptible to sin, and equally to be found by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Through the power of the same Spirit, equally able as any other believer to turn away from darkness, and to the light. Equally able and available to be used, also, for tasks in the congregation, determined not by sexual orientation but by spiritual gifts. At the same time, brothers and sisters who are vulnerable in their own way.

¹ Translation of *Pastorale Handreiking ten dienste van Plaatselijke Gemeenten*, attached to *Studierapport Homoseksualiteit en Homoseksuele Relaties*, a report prepared for the General Synod 2013 of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken (CGK) in the Netherlands. The original document, including extensive footnotes not included in this translation, is available at <http://www.cgk.nl/index.php?generalesynode>. This translation by Aart Plug, September 2014, authorized by Deputaten Buitenlandse Kerken of the CGK. Scripture quotations and references are taken from *The Holy Bible: New King James Version*, Nashville, Nelson 1982.

Because of their own, specific vulnerability, such members deserve special attention. Their need is portrayed with the words of the Dutch poet Willem de Mérode – himself a homosexual: loneliness and fear. In, of all places, ‘love’s garden’. Their need is truly poignant.

Initially, those who become aware of a homosexual orientation will usually experience feelings of alienation. They may not know how to deal with their sense of being different. In general, homosexuality is regarded differently from heterosexuality. Lack of understanding, harsh judgements and thinly-veiled rejection will affect their well-being and development. Such responses often lead to internal conflicts and negative feelings, which may in turn give rise to severe psychological dysfunction. These feelings will often influence relationships with others. The percentage of homosexual young people who attempt or commit suicide is significantly larger than that of their heterosexual counterparts.

As they set out on a search for their own identity, a young person might arrive at the conclusion that their orientation is an integral part of their personhood, of who they really are. This could lead to a sense of rest, confidence and perhaps even joy. In such a situation, acceptance within the immediate environment and the broader community is often experienced as a valuable support.

For a believing Christian with a homosexual orientation, the experience of this tension will have an extra dimension. How did I, as God’s creature, come to have these feelings? How do I deal with them, in my relationship with Him? Does the Lord accept me as I am? What am I to do if I fall in love? The words of Scripture that touch on homosexuality are razor-sharp; they cut deeply and painfully. Reading them may arouse a sense of estrangement: is this really about me? What will this mean for my future, if I really want to submit to the Word, and be led by the Spirit? Questions like these may lead to fierce spiritual struggles. Psychologically, they could evoke feelings of insecurity, fear, depression and a crisis of identity. For young people brought up as Christians, also, negative experiences and a lack of self-acceptance can often lead to poor mental health, and may sometimes provoke thoughts of, attempts at and perhaps even actual suicide.

Whenever a brother or sister arrives at the conviction that they must live in abstinence, this will bring with it further difficulties. For the feelings don’t go away. For someone who has to go on alone, it will be difficult to persevere. Should another brother or sister conclude that there *is* room for them to engage in an intimate homosexual relationship, and still wishes to be a member of the congregation, another area of tension will arise.

In all such situations, it is critically important that someone – a pastor – stays close at hand. Such a person must have a maximum capacity for empathy, while at the same time recognizing that he will never fully understand. A pastor, who wants to be a fellow traveller and guide, in all the stages of fear, sorrow, alienation and lack of understanding; also in the acceptance and the concrete ordering of a life lived before the face of God and in the midst of brothers and sisters.

2. Love and commandment

As we go our way in life, we are faced with making choices. That is integral to our being human. A Christian, however, before making such choices, may and must bring a number of things to mind. The first thing is the grace of God in Jesus Christ for people in a fallen and broken condition. This grace has appeared to all men. It is not God’s will that we should be lost, but that we are saved, and ‘in Christ’ reach our goal. In Christ, He has revealed His love, and He makes us share through faith in that love.

We are called, not least in our pastoral care of homosexual members, to proclaim that love, and to let ourselves first of all be led by that love. In the discussion of homosexuality,

Romans 1 has an important place. We have already pointed out that in the first chapters of this letter, Paul is working towards what he says in chapter 5. Here, he sets out the saving justification of God through faith in Jesus Christ. In this context Paul specifically highlights the love of God that He has poured out in our hearts (ch 5:5). This love saves, and also gives direction. For on the basis of this love, Paul writes in the third part of his letter about the concrete exercise of love for one another. This love is one that fulfils the Law (ch 12:8)

Leviticus 18 and 20 uses sharp language to reject homosexual activities. In the intervening chapter we find the earliest expression in the Bible of the command to love one's neighbour as oneself (ch19:18b). This love finds expression in, for instance, special concern for the vulnerable within the society of Israel. They must be able to find a safe place there.

Of course, we should note that this chapter (Leviticus 19), too, is dominated by the recognition of the holiness of God. Safety will only be truly safe when it is encircled by holiness. The recognition of God's holiness finds its expression in the honouring of His justice and the keeping of His commands. While love protects us from legalism and Pharisaism, it does not exclude obedience. On the contrary. Those who know the love of God will want to test themselves in the light of His commandments. That is part of the life of God's children. The Lord Jesus, when speaking of following Him, confirms this: whoever would follow Me, obeys my commandments (John 14,15 and 21).

For whoever wants to share in the saving love of God, one's own feelings cannot have the last word. And public opinion not at all. Of course, that is easier said than done. Present-day society is strongly oriented to affirm what individuals experience as their personal identity. Especially their sexual identity. Obedience to something or someone outside oneself, obliging anyone to critical self-examination or perhaps even leading to naïve and unrealistic choices – that is dismissed as being downright ludicrous.

For the sake of the saving love of God, we will continue to urge obedience to the will of God, and we will be prepared, in love, to provide whatever help may be needed to do so. For anyone who has been entrusted to our care, including our brothers and sisters with a homosexual orientation. None of us will follow the way of God without a struggle; still, we may all expect a blessing when we follow the Lord Jesus in faith and obedience. We will all share in the saving power of Christ's death and resurrection. The One who now sits at the right hand of almighty God, far above all power and dominion (Romans 8:34), will be with us. Prayer is a strong lifeline to Him who is above.

Chapter II: Pastoral Attitude

In this chapter we will examine the basic attitudes arising from the loving application in the pastorate of the principle described above.

1. Humility

From the time of the ancient church right up to the 1960's, the Christian Church in the Netherlands has never seen room for homosexual relations. We may ask ourselves – admittedly with the hindsight of our present knowledge – whether the church, in its dealings with homosexual brothers and sisters, has always been sufficiently led by the love of Christ. The until quite recently commonly used expression 'sodomy' failed to do justice to the members concerned. All that did was to hurt them, stigmatize them, and put them in a bad light. We could also point to deeply disturbing historical examples of judgmental attitudes of the church. In the Netherlands, between 1730 and 1732, around three hundred homosexuals were sentenced to death by strangulation or drowning, and to the burning of their bodies. Often this took place with the explicit approval of the church. Our upright fathers were children of their time, and just as we do, they only knew in part. Still, for them

as much as for us, it is true that our thoughts and actions ought to stand the test, not of time, but of Scripture.

With a view to our own time, also, pastoral humility befits us. Among today's youth culture, 'gay' is often still a term of abuse, and in this respect the culture of the church's own young people often does not stand out favourably. To this day, homosexually oriented brothers and sisters sometimes tell of an absence of understanding, and of harsh, judgemental treatment from within their own congregations.

At the same time, they sometimes also feel let down by too-easily-expressed understanding, and by attitudes that are insufficiently critical of today's culture. In large parts of the Christian church in the Netherlands, views of homosexuality have indeed changed radically since the 1960's.

All in all, there is ample reason for us to confess, before the Lord and before our brothers and sisters, our many failings in pastoral care in the past and in the present. It would be a good thing if such confession could take place within the worship services and in conversations with homosexual brothers and sisters. Pastorate, when based on the principles set out above, can only be carried out in deep humility. With a prayer for the Spirit of love, wisdom and meekness.

2. Caution

This prayer is all the more necessary when we realize the importance of our pastoral activity in this respect. Every human being is created in the image of God, and as such is called to reflect His glory reverently, honourably and sincerely. Because of sin, this image of God in us has been deeply marred. Through regeneration in Christ, it is being restored. By the sanctifying power of the Spirit, it manifests itself more and more. Right through the struggle against our old self, with its corrupt nature.

While it is true that the restoration of the image of God is a wondrous work of His, this does not mean that He does not use people to carry it out. On the contrary, we all have a personal responsibility to open ourselves to the call of the Gospel. We also have a responsibility in relation to each other, to serve the work of the Spirit. That is why the church, in preaching and pastoral activity, must continue to call sin what Scripture calls sin (John 8:11). Just as every other member of the congregation, a homosexual member has a right to clarity. There is an ever-present danger to downplay the seriousness of sin, with the consequence that the light of grace no longer shines in its fullness either. This does not serve the honour of God; nor does it benefit our neighbour.

In this connection, we must say that critical judgments of specific actions are not in themselves foreign to loving interaction with each other, and not to loving pastoral care either. Judging one another, at least where we take it upon ourselves to pronounce a final judgement about another, is a different matter (John 8:10-11). Such a judgement is not ours to make; it is the Lord's. In addition, the Lord Jesus warns us not to judge rashly. Or to make judgements about others while keeping ourselves out of the line of fire. First, we must remove the beam from our own eye (Matthew 7:5). Meanwhile, we ought not to close our eyes for the speck in our neighbour's eye. On the contrary, not just our neighbour's eye, but his whole body is served where a speck is seen, pointed out and removed.

At the same time, we should realize that when dealing with homosexual members, we are often dealing with younger brothers and sisters, whose personalities are still undergoing a process of development, and are being subjected to intense pressures. They are still searching for their identity, and their sexuality is an extensive and profound part of that identity. Just as with heterosexual young people, this search is often accompanied by temporary experimentation, exploration of unfamiliar pathways, and the testing of detours.

Pastorate demands not only a clear content, but also a very cautious approach. This quality may well help decide which path the member will ultimately choose, hopefully within the perspective of one's humanity according to the image of God. Conversely, it is especially with these members that unintentional pastoral failings easily contribute to movement in other directions. Great caution is always of vital importance, along the whole length of the path we follow with these brothers and sisters.

3. Conviction

Much could be said about the distinctiveness and the purpose of the pastorate of a church that holds to the Reformed confession. In this context, that is a line we cannot pursue further, and we are pleased to refer to other works in this field. For now, we will confine ourselves to a description that draws on the linguistic roots of the word 'pastorate'. The word has its origin in the Latin *pastor*, or 'shepherd'. According to this description, 'pastorate' consists of the caring oversight of people in their path of life and faith, within the context of the society in which they live. This oversight takes place in obedience to the word of God, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, within and proceeding from the fellowship of the congregation of Christ. Expressed most compactly: "*Pastoral care says that there is a Shepherd*" (H. Andriessen). We are deeply convinced that pastoral care, carried out in this manner, is able to help brothers and sisters to be people as God intended them to be, and to help them find their ultimate destination in Him.

It remains for us only to point out that – consistent with such a description – 'pastorate' is not reserved exclusively to office-bearers. Of course, they will have their own place and task, but there are other brothers and sisters within the congregation who have their own pastoral gifts. They too can be put to work, also in the pastoral engagement with brothers and sisters who have a homosexual orientation. In the end, when it comes to loving care, all sheep of the flock bear responsibility for each other. It ought not to be that a pastoral hand is lent by office-bearers only. The congregation as a whole must receive homosexual brothers and sisters, and give them a place among them. We will come back to that later.

Chapter III: Pastoral perspective

Here, we will begin to deal with the intended and hoped-for effect of pastoral guidance, under the blessing of the Lord, of brothers and sisters with a homosexual orientation.

1. Self-acceptance

The *Vision Statement* to which this guide is attached gave attention to the process by which the awareness of a homosexual orientation develops. It could be said that this process is directed towards self-acceptance.

It does make a difference, though, whether this process is viewed from a psychological or a pastoral perspective. These two aspects are not separate, but they are not the same either. This is due to the fact that from a Biblical perspective, human identity is not separate from the way of God with human beings and their world. As human beings, people exist in relation to service in God's glorious kingdom. That being so, the natural identity of an human individual is not the greatest good, and the notions of 'becoming yourself' or 'being who you are' do not put an end to all argument.

In the miracle of regeneration, mind, heart and will are recreated. In the process of renewal that these undergo, the body is increasingly experienced as a temple of the Holy Spirit. Sexual orientation is given a place within the whole of a new identity, in which personal conviction and choices concerning sexual behaviour also find their place.

The identity of a believer implies that he loses his 'self' as an independent entity, and finds it again in Christ Jesus (Luke 14:26; Galatians 2:20). In Christ, the kingdom of God has come near, and is making its way in the world. A lost sinner finds himself again as a child of God, in Christ. How often doesn't the New Testament describe believers as people who are 'in Christ'? It no longer matters whether one is Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female (Galatians 3:28). And in this context we may confidently add: heterosexual or homosexual.

This inclusion does not mean that it no longer makes a difference whether one is hetero- or homosexual. Just as it belongs to someone's identity to be Jew or Greek, male or female, so in the same manner homosexuality may be an inalienable part of one's identity as a person. What matters is that our total identity, irrespective of how that is constituted, is 'ingrafted' into Christ.

In the light of Scripture, self-acceptance means that we accept our human identity 'in Christ'. That is how the image of God is restored in us (Ephesians 4:24). From a Biblical perspective, self-acceptance is the joyful and thankful acknowledgement that we are a new creation (I Corinthians 5:17), one who died with Christ and was raised again with Him. In faith we may accept that this new creation has, in Christ, become a reality. True, it exists within the tension between 'already' and 'not yet'. The sanctification of our lives is a path to follow. A path of being increasingly conformed to Christ. We are not yet what we will once be: like Christ (I John 3:2).

This 'not yet' implies that we will not just accept what belongs to our old nature, and that conflicts with the new creation. That is true of sin itself: we must more and more 'die to sin'. But it is also true of the brokenness that is the consequence of sin. No matter how this brokenness manifests itself, none of us may simply accept it as *fait accompli*. Faith in Christ as a complete Redeemer will give us the strength to look for ways to change. Should no such ways be found, the power of Christian hope to learn to live with this imperfection remains (II Corinthians 12:9).

We repeat: being 'in Christ' has to do with much more than just the sexual. It can do no harm to emphasise that. We live in a society that has been almost completely sexualized (we might even call it pornified). In our culture, the sexual aspect of our existence competes with the spiritual, has come to dominate it, and in practice is viewed on the same level. From a Biblical perspective, that can be characterised as idolatry. A comparison with the world in which Paul lived is by no means unreasonable. From a pastoral perspective, it is vital to point out that our identity consists of more than our sexuality, whether that might be hetero- or homosexual.

Of course, this is not to say that anyone's identity does not include his or her sexuality. Someone with a homosexual orientation may be helped in their own manner to find their identity in Christ. In that respect, it is still important whether someone is Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. In another place, Paul writes about '*the place to which you are called*' (I Corinthians 7:17,24). Anyone for whom homosexuality belongs to the essence of their identity may know themselves to be called to serve, as such, the Lord and His kingdom. We will do well to remain open to the awareness that homosexual brothers and sisters, specifically because of their distinctiveness, are able to serve in special ways. It would be good – together with these homosexual brothers and sisters – to explore this further.

'Identity' is an overarching concept. It encompasses all aspects of our being human: our thoughts and dreams, what we wish for and what we want, what we feel and what we say, what we do and what we don't do. Hence, it will never be possible to separate 'being' from 'doing'; 'who I am' from 'what I do'. 'Being' is never an abstraction; in itself it is already a way of doing, and in all our 'doing' our 'being' manifests itself. That can also be said of our sexual identity.

In warning us against adultery, the Lord Jesus showed that in the totality of our being human desire and action coincide (Matthew 5:28). 'Doing' begins, not in the bedroom but in the upper room of our being.

At the same time, when the Lord then calls His disciples to pluck out the eye that tempts them to sin, and throw it away, He also shows that desire does not inevitably lead to 'doing'. On the pathway between feeling, desiring and doing the will has an important place. The desire may remain, and our will may not necessarily fully conform to the will of God; still, a disciple of the Lord Jesus, while praying for the power of the Holy Spirit, may mobilise his will: not to give in to sinful desires but to resist them. Believing Christians accept their 'selves' in Christ, including a renewed will.

This will also be true, for example, of our temper, an internal dynamic that can easily lead some of us to ill-considered words and actions. This impulsive dynamic can be so deeply embedded in one's personality that it could be seen as part of their person. Still, for such a person, the statement: "Well, that's just the way I am!" ought never to be the last word (Matthew 5:21-26).

In the light of all of this, which path should a pastor follow with his homosexual brother or sister? To begin with, he will be wise to learn from psychology the process by which such a person first becomes aware of his/her homosexuality. After all, if someone is to be prepared to lose his natural 'self', he must first, in a sense, see and grasp what that natural self is. Depending on the developmental phase at which he becomes involved, the pastor will have to be able to know and support his brother or sister at the place where he is.

Someone who first becomes aware of somehow being different, and begins to express these feelings, will often undergo a conflict between the ideal "I" and the real "I". In the eyes of both the pastor and the one being pastored, this ideal "I" will usually have a heterosexual orientation. If, in such a situation, the pastor emphasises this ideal too strongly, he may temporarily or permanently direct his parishioner onto a path that bypasses the real "I". This has the effect of hindering rather than promoting the process of coming to terms with one's sexual orientation.

In many cases, the pastor will first become aware of the member's orientation when he 'comes out'. Where that is so, the pastor must first of all realize just how profound this phase will be for the brother or sister. Often, it will involve an irrevocable farewell to the possibility of a heterosexual relationship, and associated with that a deep experience of loss. After what could be many years of lonely struggle, he will search for a way of breaking out of his isolation. 'Coming out' is a very risky business: how will those closest to him – his family and friends – react? In such a situation, the minister's study, the elder's office or the living room of a trusted brother or sister can become a truly welcome place of refuge.

2. Change

This raises a legitimate question: where the concept of 'identity' is understood in a so distinctively Christian manner, should this not lead to a search for change in this aspect of the brokenness of life? May a believer not expect that the power of Christ will change his sexual orientation in the direction of God's creation intent? After all, is He not a perfect Redeemer? Wouldn't the pastor do well to point his brother or sister in the direction of therapy that aims for a change in orientation, and to refer him to a professional therapist for that purpose? Anyone inclined to give such advice will be flying in the face of public opinion, and anyone who might be inclined to follow such advice even more so. The influence of public opinion should not be underestimated; at the same time, it need not be decisive either.

In the preceding *Vision Statement*, it has already been pointed out that the possibility of a change or shift in sexual orientation may not be completely excluded. There is some evidence for it. However, there are also distressing instances of some who believed that they had undergone such changes, but who later relapsed. This is all the more painful when, in the meantime, a marriage and a family have eventuated.

In cases where the development of a homosexual orientation is connected with certain dysfunctional circumstances during late childhood and adolescence, the possibility of change might be considered. Having said that, in pastoral conversations with adolescents, it would be better to provide guidance during the formation of a sexual identity, and not to talk about 'change' as such.

It is also well known that sexual abuse can be the catalyst for the development of a same-sex orientation. Professional treatment to address such traumatic experiences may sometimes bring with it a shift in sexual feelings.

In this connection, we should acknowledge the almighty power of God. If God can perform the miracle of raising the dead – and spiritually speaking He still does that every day – then He also has the power to perform the miracle of a change in sexual orientation. In this, however, God is free to do as He pleases, and such miracles can by no means be expected. Hence, the provision of pastoral care ought not to have the possibility of a miraculous change in sexual orientation as its first goal, but the possibility of the miracle of spiritual recreation in Christ.

Generally speaking, when we consider the possibility of a change in orientation or a shift in feelings, we need to be on our guard for the opposite extremes of arrogant optimism on the one hand, and cynical pessimism on the other.

A pastor might, with the greatest of care, assess with the brother or sister if he/she is open to exploring, with professional help, whether there might be a possibility of change in the direction of an orientation that fits with God's original purpose. This will always be a very difficult process. The support of a prayerful and actively engaged pastor in this process will be indispensable.

In most cases, this way of change will prove to be impassable, or the hoped-for change will not eventuate. In such situations, we may not place an added burden on each other, by suggesting that the homosexual brother or sister apparently must have had insufficient faith or prayer to be 'healed'. The 'not yet' character of the Kingdom also includes that not all brokenness will be taken away in the here and now. In many cases, a homosexual orientation remains a lifelong 'thorn in one's flesh'. In such situations both the pastor and the congregation are called upon to provide continuing support and help to the brother or sister in need, as much as their ability allows. Here, the pastorate may contribute to the acceptance of one's own identity, including the imperfection of a homosexual orientation. This cannot happen without prayer. To this end, the worship services and separate prayer groups can often be especially meaningful.

3. Abstinence

Where change to a heterosexual orientation is not an option, or does not occur, the pastor will have to speak with the brother or sister about abstaining from sexual relations. In saying this we realize only too well that this touches on a very important aspect of the cross that a homosexual member must bear.

In the light of Scripture, however, we can point to two positive approaches to such a conversation. The first one draws on what Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians. Here, he writes that each believer has received his own gift from God (I Corinthians 7:7). He

makes this comment in the context of his own unmarried state, and his life of sexual abstinence. These can be gifts from God.

In this context, it is important to understand what Paul means by a 'gift from God' (*charisma ex theou*). This gift stands in the service of an effective functioning of the congregation. God distributes all kinds of gifts, so that the church may be built up and grow. Not everyone will receive the same gift, but the gifts received by each serve to edify them all.

Paul regards his life of abstinence as one of the gifts that may be given to some members of the congregation. What counts for him is not abstinence from a (marriage) relationship in and of itself, but the use of all available time and dedication for the building up of the congregation and the spread of the Kingdom of God. Likewise, members with a homosexual orientation can be of great service. A pastor can take this approach when speaking of abstinence: might the fact that undertaking a relationship has been ruled out, not be a calling from God to special service within His Kingdom? Wherever the apostle speaks of the gifts of the Spirit, the personal distinctives of each believer are not set aside, but put to work. In this sense, the one who has received this gift will him/herself become a gift to the congregation.

We ought to guard, however, against too easily making a virtue of a necessity. For when a homosexual member gradually learns to see what they are missing in this light, it will often not remove the pain of having to do without. It is still true, however, that in this situation a trial can be turned into a blessing.

There is a second approach that could be taken when discussing the need for abstinence. This draws on the calling that every Christian has to live by the fruits of the Spirit. One of these fruits is self-control, including abstaining from sexual relations outside of marriage. In this respect, every Christian is called to live a life of abstinence, whether or not they have a homosexual orientation. The positive meaning of this is the purity and holiness of a walk of life in imitation of Christ, set free from the chains of slavery.

Here also, we ought to consider whether we do not, in the context of a homosexual orientation, talk too glibly about 'a life of abstinence'. Such a life brings with it a lifelong struggle, which for those who are married is often difficult to grasp. We therefore ought not to make easy or oversimplified statements about 'living a life of abstinence'. Those who are called to such a life have to bear this burden for life.

To the unmarried, if they cannot control themselves and are unable to place their unmarried state in the service of God, Paul says that they ought to marry. While elsewhere he throws a very positive light on marriage (Ephesians 5:32), here he draws on a negative motivation: marriage as a means to prevent sexual impurity (1 Corinthians 7:2). It is better to marry than to burn (7:9).

In order to accommodate those who must experience this tension first-hand, this argument is sometimes used by way of analogy to permit a homosexual relationship in love and faithfulness. Every truly compassionate pastor will recognize the intention behind such a plea. And we leave ourselves open to the same charge as was directed at the Pharisees (Matthew 23:23), if we do not explore it seriously. In advancing this plea, the following questions are often asked: Could not this path be open for a member of the congregation where a marriage with a partner of the opposite sex is not an option, and where the prospect of remaining single raises fears of serious psychological harm, with all its awful consequences? Or would the member's burning desires not otherwise draw him into casual homosexual encounters? Can we not, while insisting that homosexual relationships are not in accord with God's original purpose, concede that it is better to live with a partner in love

and faithfulness, than to burn with desire, and to try to quell this flame by means of a greater evil?

Mindful of our pastoral principle (see Ch I, above), we must at all times be able to hold to the conviction that the way we go with homosexual brothers and sisters, by the light of the Word of God, is valid and reliable. Now, in support of this plea, it is asked: can we not point to the way in which God responds to His children in the brokenness of their existence? Doesn't Scripture provide examples of that: the certificate of divorce (Mark 10:4) and the acceptance of polygamy, even in New Testament times (I Timothy 3:2).

These analogies, however, cannot be upheld. A certificate of divorce formalizes an existing brokenness, in a manner that limits the harmful consequences for the wife, who would otherwise be left with no social rights at all. The certificate of divorce is not intended as a licence to begin a new relationship that would alleviate going on alone (Matthew 19:9; I Corinthians 7:11). After a divorce, someone may still burn with desire, but for Paul that is clearly no argument to urge such a person to enter into another marriage.

In relation to the second example, that of polygamy: it is highly doubtful that this is what Paul has in mind with his reference to a 'husband of but one wife' (I Timothy 3:3,12). This would be tolerated with members of the congregation – so the argument goes – but not for office bearers. Most expositors, however, take a more general view, namely that complete faithfulness to one's wife is demanded of office bearers, and an abstinence from all forms of adultery or sexual misconduct.

Even in the Old Testament, it is clear that in the light of God's purpose for humanity (Genesis 2:24), polygamy is to be considered deficient. It should not surprise us, then, that in practice such arrangements were often marked by quarrels and strife. It is possible to point to out that God, in the development towards monogamy as He intended it, allows some degree of accommodation. This is apparent, for example, in some of the stipulations of the Mosaic law (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). The so-called 'levirate marriage' (ch 25:5-10) even seems to promote a form of polygamy.

Still, nowhere in Scripture do we find that God similarly accommodates homosexual relationships in any form. Hence, we do not feel any freedom – not even with an appeal to the 'compassion of God' – to walk down this path with homosexual brothers and sisters. It is our aim to continue in the line of the *Pastoral Guide* of 1986, which in this context states: "*True pastorate can ... never consist of pointing to a path that must necessarily lead to transgression of the commands of God*". Even where the gift of abstinence is lacking, the commandment to abstain from homosexual activity – as painful as that may be – remains.

4. Self-control

We realize that to many of our homosexual brothers and sisters, the 'narrow way' of sexual abstinence on which we believe we must accompany them can quickly appear to be oppressively narrow. However, if it is the Lord Himself who points out this way, it cannot be so that He will leave our brothers and sisters standing there with empty hands.

Not every believing follower of Jesus Christ possesses the gift of the grace of abstinence, as described at the beginning of the previous section. Every believer, however, has been given the Spiritual fruit of self-control (Galatians 5:22). This aspect of the fruits of the Spirit is gifted to every single believer, since not one believer can survive without it. The powerful working of the Holy Spirit enables our feeble will to be strengthened in self-control, so that we will not let ourselves be led by our natural desires. Self-control may be fed by knowledge (including the knowledge of good and evil) so that it, in turn, leads to perseverance (II Peter 1:6).

Previously, we acknowledged that sexuality is a comprehensive and profound aspect of our humanity. In the previous section we spoke about the gift of abstinence for the edification of the congregation, a gift that has not been given to everyone. In this light, we must attempt to fathom something of the heavy burden some will bear – even though they have received the spiritual gift of self-control – in renouncing a relationship in which sexual union has a place. And how we can support pastorally a brother or sister who must bear this burden.

We ought to be careful in pointing to brothers and sisters within the congregation who may have a comparable cross to bear, and from whom self-control is also asked. Examples of such might be young couples who are doing their best to ‘wait’ on the way to their wedding day. Or those who may be married, and for whom, due to physical or psychological circumstances, normal sexual relations are no longer possible. Or those who may be alone, because of marriage breakdown or the death of a spouse. A valid point of comparison may be that self-control will be called for in such situations also. And yes, sometimes that may bring with it a great struggle.

Still, the perspective will be quite different. It really does make a difference, on the one hand, to exercise self-control while waiting for marriage, with the expectation that the day will come, or on the other hand, with the realization that a relational experience of sexuality is a life-long impossibility. In the end, each person must carry their own burden (Galatians 6:5).

For believers, comfort is not to be found in the weight of another’s cross, but in following in the footsteps of Jesus. We may follow Him as we bear our own cross. For us, receiving this gift of the Spirit goes hand-in-hand with the obligation to obey. But this obedience will not go without the promise that in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus, we can learn to live with imperfection and unfulfilled longing. The Spirit draws strength and hope from the perseverance of Christ, and gives it to those who desire to live according to the will of God (Hebrews 12:2-3). If the Lord is who He says He is – and who would dare to doubt that? – then His children may expect that He will keep them standing in this struggle, and grant them perseverance in walking in newness of life.

Here, we must emphasise the significance of prayer. However, we must watch for presenting or practicing prayer as some kind of band-aid. With such a simplistic approach, a brother or sister will be left to their own devices, under the pretence of the contrary. Prayer is the channel that connects the branch to the vine. By means of this channel, the Lord Jesus can make us abound in whatever is necessary to make the fruit of the Spirit grow (John 15:16b). Including, among others, the fruit of self-control.

Of course, this calls for great care. How far does self-control as the fruit of the Spirit reach? We may be captivated by the beauty and the attraction of someone of the same gender: but can this merely be a manifestation of our old nature? That would amount to a complete denial of the sexual dimension in the life of a converted homosexual human being. It would amount to saying that such a one has, in Christ, become a new person, except for their sexuality. Such a denial would do an injustice to the redeeming work of Christ.

From this perspective, it has to be possible to acknowledge homosexual feelings and a corresponding orientation, and to accept them for what they are. True, this orientation belongs to the brokenness of human existence, but it can receive a place in the life of one who, in Christ, has become a new person. That is possible in dealing with anything that is missing or broken in the life of human beings. It is also possible in the brokenness of this sexual orientation, as interwoven as it may be in one’s personhood.

Someone who has a homosexual orientation is allowed to acknowledge and accept the reality that they feel more at home with someone of the same gender than with someone of the opposite sex. At the same time, this reality is an expression of our brokenness. Concretely, this will imply that our captivation by the beauty of someone of the same gender, and our feeling more at home with someone of the same sex will not become idealised. No, this experience must stay on the level of acknowledgement and acceptance, and not move beyond it.

Those who are in Christ, while acknowledging and accepting this being-different, will also resist, in the power of God, the temptations of same-sex relations. We leave aside, for now, the question whether the congregation could leave room or perhaps even create avenues for distinctive forms of interaction between homosexual members.

Speaking positively, self-control can be greatly supported by seeking joy in God and by a focus on Christ, who in His appearance, presence and fellowship is *'fairer than the sons of men'* (Psalm 45:2). Also in this fruit of self-control, it is the Spirit's aim that Christ is glorified. The Spirit makes both hetero- and homosexuals find each other, at their deepest level, in the worship and embrace of Christ.

Every believer – irrespective of sexual orientation – finds his or her completion in this communion with Christ. This new identity in Christ renews the totality of our lives: who we are as well as what we do. This brings with it the Lord's calling for each of us to bear our own cross, in the light of the Kingdom that has already come near, and that in the future will break through in all its fullness. It is of vital importance to recognize that a homosexual orientation is something that may be lived with, bearing our cross in the footsteps of Christ. In Him, a homosexual person, too, may reach his destination. Bearing one's cross, then, is not only negative; it is a positive part of the manner in which a believer has, and increasingly gains, communion with Christ.

On the one hand, our homosexual brothers and sisters in Christ have been given an extra-heavy cross to bear. On the other hand, they walk as cross-bearers, together with all other cross-bearers, in the footsteps of the crucified Christ. Here we find what we have in common: whoever – irrespective of sexual orientation – will be Christ's disciple, must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Him. And we add that in the way of prayer, the Lord may even make it possible to bear this cross joyfully and with uplifted head.

It should have become clearer that comments – often increasingly cynically expressed – like *'you're allowed to be a homosexual, but you can't act like one'* do not justice to our position. In any case, we do not recognize ourselves in an approach that so emphasises the negative. Together with our homosexual brothers and sisters, we want to travel the road of faith, prayer and obedience. For all of us, this is a narrow road, one that we wish neither to widen without proper authority, nor further narrow unnecessarily.

And there is more: none of us have complete self-control. All of us are weak in ourselves; we all stumble often and fall. Should our brother fall into sin, and ask for forgiveness, we will kneel next to him, and together with him ask the Lord for forgiveness, for renewed courage and strength for the struggle, and for preservation in temptation. The Lord is great in His patience – most willing to forgive, and with Him is our strength. We will therefore kneel together, time after time, whenever that is necessary.

The aspects described above: self-acceptance, exploring the possibility of change, commitment to abstinence, and the practice of self-control are all part of the life *'in Christ'*. We do not assume that this life will automatically be present in everyone who belongs to the congregation. There are so many who struggle to gain this certainty. Even those who by grace know this life *'in Christ'*, are still subject, in the reality of this life, to periods of doubt

and temptation. Such periods may add to the burden of finding the right place for one's own sexuality. The deepest pastoral perspective, therefore, will always be the peaceful relationship with God Himself (Romans 1:5).

In line with the Canons of Dort, we have spoken of the miracle of regeneration. We can add to this the genuineness of God's promises and His earnest and sincere call to faith and conversion. Those who take refuge in the Lord, and who use the means He provides, may reverently and humbly expect more abundant grace. Those who sincerely long for greater godliness and progress on the road of sanctification may be reminded of the promise that He will not snuff out the smouldering wick or break the bruised reed (Canons, I,16)

Chapter IV: Pastoral Profile

In conjunction with the description, provided above, of the required pastorate, the pastor himself in his care, and the pastoral fellowship in its support, must reflect the image of the Good Shepherd. Of course, not just in relation to homosexual members. Still, it may be a good thing, in this context, to give some added colour to the pastoral profile. We previously pointed out pastoral failings in relation to homosexual brothers and sisters in the history of the church; these failings should serve for us as beacons in the sea.

1. Compassion

The pastor must approach and deal compassionately with a member who has a homosexual orientation: he must stand next to him.

Meeting such a brother or sister must first of all impress upon the pastor the brokenness that is present in his own life, making him deeply mindful of his own struggles and his own failures, including those in his own sexuality. Only then will he be able to offer true pastoral support. Whatever fine words a pastor may utter, the homosexual member – who often has a sensitive and finely-tuned nature – will quickly sense whether the pastor is willing to stand next to him in subjection to the Word. The feeling that the pastor considers himself a morally better person will be a hindrance and probably quickly become a road-block to communication.

In addition, the pastor must become aware of any inner resistance he himself may have to people with a homosexual orientation. He too may have an aversion to the 'different-ness' of the other. His attitude and actions must be determined by love: love that is patient and kind, love that does not envy or boast, or puff itself up, or hurt others... (1 Corinthians 13:4,5a)

2. Listening

First of all and most of all, such love will make the pastor listen. Listening well includes that the pastor will give the member room to tell his whole story, without interruptions, without trying to explain or amplify the thoughts and feelings of the other. At the same time, the pastor must assume a posture of active listening, so that the other will understand that he is being truly listened to. Active listening practices include the following:

- Non-verbal signals that reinforce the attention given
- Positive feedback, demonstrating empathy
- Asking questions for clarification, to ensure the greatest possible understanding
- Repeating part of the story in one's own words, to ensure that it has been properly understood.

As part of 'listening' we note that the pastor ought to gain some theoretical knowledge from an expert source. It will do the member good to notice that his pastor has gone to the trouble to find out about homosexual orientation and the world of experience that he lives in.

3. Speaking

In relation to our speaking, Scripture teaches us many wise lessons: *"A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver"* (Proverbs 25:11). It is especially when dealing with deeply sensitive subjects such as identity and sexuality, that this is vitally important. For the pastor, a prayerful study of lessons from Scripture about our speech can be valuable preparation for a pastoral conversation.

In the discussion, the pastor must exercise caution in using Bible texts about sexual activity between persons of the same sex. In most cases, the member will already know these texts only too well. He knows what their message is, and may already feel – depending on how these texts have previously been applied – that God has rejected him. In addition, the member may experience these texts as so alienating, that where they are brought to bear too quickly, he might conclude that he has already been dismissed as Scripture-critical or unspiritual.

However that may be, in many case it is best to leave the discussion of Bible texts – such as those referred to in the preceding document – to a later stage of the pastoral contact. Let the pastoral conversation begin with who the Lord is, and who He wants to be for us; and who we may be in, for and through Him. With all we are and have, with our heart, soul and body, with our joys and our sorrows, with our hurt and our shame. In doing so, the pastor will highlight the love of God, the love with which God accepts everyone who comes to Him with an open and receptive heart. In most cases, such a conversation will be concluded with Scripture reading and prayer. Let the reading of Scripture be one that is encouraging, most of all.

4. Openness

The pastor must be known as 'someone you can talk to'. Which is not the same thing as being known as a 'popular guy' who knows the language of the street. Without resorting to stereotypes, we can say that many homosexuals have sensitive antennae for style, beauty and civilized language. A simple, open, accessible and approachable attitude will often lower the threshold for a brother or sister to ask: could I come and talk to you? The member himself should determine the degree of openness of the conversation. Often, just to come out and express one's sexual orientation, and to be able talk about it, can release tensions and create a liberating feeling.

When the first contacts are positive, the brother or sister will usually grow in confidence, gradually revealing more and more of themselves. This openness, however, can never be forced upon them. Every member with a homosexual orientation, just as any other member, has the right to cry out his need, in a quiet place and alone with God, to seek for help in temptation, and to confess his sin.

Where a pastor senses – with himself or with the other, and for whatever reason – that the degree of confidence and openness is diminishing, he might raise that in the form and manner of a question. Does the other feel the same? In such a situation it may be better to decide, by mutual consent, to ask another office bearer or trusted member of the congregation to continue the conversation.

In some circumstances, it may be wiser not to stimulate a broader conversation about homosexual orientation, especially when dealing with adolescents. After all, it is possible

that a same-sex preference could be a temporary – and therefore passing – phase in the young person’s development from childhood to adult. Besides, no person is 100% male or 100% female. A fully heterosexual male could well have typically feminine characteristics and *vice versa*. In the field of psychosocial therapy, distinctions such as male-men, female-men, male-women and female-women are sometimes used. And within these distinctions, further nuances could be identified.

It is not impossible that a young person may be mistaken in their understanding of themselves. Given the strong emphasis that we find in our culture on the sexual dimension of life, it is conceivable that a deep friendship is –erroneously – thought to have homosexual overtones. An openness that develops too quickly or broadly could possibly confirm a young person in this misplaced understanding of the self. That would make the way back more difficult.

5. Humour

It may seem strange that in this pastoral resource a small place is given for humour in the pastorate. Still, we do this intentionally. Humour is one of God’s gifts that we may use to make each other’s lives more agreeable.

Of course, we mean the kind of humour that can stand this test: *whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy* (Philippians 4:8). Humour in this spirit can be an instrument to relativize somewhat the weight of this broken existence. Paul, in this context, provides the benchmark for this relativization: *the Lord is near*. We are on our way to the restoration of all things. And every pastor will remember instances where humour has helped to bear one’s cross – sometimes even cheerfully – if only for one step in the right direction.

Chapter V: Pastorate Locally

The General Synod judged that it would be useful for the authors of this document, in carrying out their mandate, to gain knowledge of the policies already adopted by church councils at a local level. This committee has done that.

It should be noted that not many church councils have actually developed policy statements concerning homosexuality or homosexual relationships. A number of church councils indicated that the *Pastoral Guide* of 1986 served as the point of departure for the place of homosexuals within the congregation.

Wherever the committee was able to gain knowledge of local policy statements, they noted unity in diversity. All of the churches took their starting point in the Word of God, and took seriously what they found there. Not one church stated that homosexuality was merely an (acceptable) alternative. Not one church was willing to solemnize homosexual marriages or baptise children adopted by homosexual couples. In no place were the offices opened to members who lived in a homosexual relationship.

On the other hand, the documents all demonstrated a deep compassion for brothers and sisters with a homosexual orientation, and a tangible desire to offer them a place of full equality within the congregations. In this section we have made grateful use of a number of these documents. In the interests of confidentiality we have done so without attributing our sources.

At some not insignificant points, policies differ. Most notably, these concern the possibility for those who live in a homosexual relationship to make public profession of faith, perhaps to receive baptism and to participate in the celebration of the Holy Supper. Sometimes these differences reflect the thought that a homosexual relationship in love and faithfulness

may be a concession of last resort in the brokenness of life; sometimes they reflect the exercise of pastoral patience in relation to the ongoing sanctification of life in imitation of Christ. In this chapter, we wish to direct our focus to the local congregation, and in the next we will turn to the bond of churches as a whole.

1. Preaching

It is fundamentally important that the preaching in our churches continues to be the proclamation of the whole counsel of God. This means that His Word comes to people who all, without distinction, were, are and remain sinners. That is a very serious condition: we do not just *commit* sin, we *are* sin. Even our best works are defiled with sin. This radical conception of sin helps us to realize that in ourselves, none of us – as regards our nature, our orientation in life, or our sexuality – can stand before God. It is to such people that redemption in Christ is proclaimed, for faith and repentance. In Christ, the One who has saved us from wrath, and who has become for us our wisdom, our righteousness, holiness and redemption (I Corinthians 1:30).

This proclamation must be accompanied by our prayer for the working of the Holy Spirit. It is His work that lost sinners who go to God find in their regeneration in Christ a new, righteous and holy identity. A new identity, that by the power of this same Spirit increasingly appears and radiates, to the glory of God and in the service of the neighbour. The work of the Spirit, in the coming of Christ and in our life in Christ, remains a subject of this proclamation.

Within the framework of the sanctifying work of the Spirit, the degree to which the preaching – and by extension the catechesis – shapes our lives cannot be overestimated. To begin with: if it is true that a homosexual orientation can – also and partly – be caused by environmental factors during childhood, then concrete preaching in relation to marriage and family life can serve to counteract such a development. Even aside from that, in the development of a new identity the preaching of the Word, which is the seed of regeneration (I Peter 1:23), pure and nourishing milk (I Peter 2:2), remains the most important means by which He works.

In our time, the preaching must speak of sexuality as a gift of God. As an important, though not all-dominating aspect of our humanity. We may pay attention to human sexuality in a positive, thanksgiving manner. At the same time we do so with humility, because of the corruption that the fall into sin brought about. With joy and thanksgiving, because sexuality has been redeemed in Jesus Christ. And with clarity about the framework of regeneration by the Spirit within which sexual relations may have a place: within a publicly solemnized marriage between a man and a woman. In the light of Scripture, all sexual activity outside of such a marriage – and therefore all homosexual activity – must be characterised as sin. The preaching of the Word must call on its hearers to confess and resist such sin. With God there is forgiveness! At the same time, the preaching must clearly convey that a homosexual orientation is in itself not sinful, and that homosexual feelings and longings are in themselves not sinful either.

Brothers and sisters with a homosexual orientation will be challenged by this kind of preaching. Perhaps more than others, they will experience their sexuality as an inalienable part of their being. For they have had to work consciously to give their sexuality a place, and they have had to come to grips with the position others appear to give them. It can happen easily that they, with their sexual orientation, feel themselves to be either completely accepted or completely rejected. There is much more nuance than that in the preaching of the new person in Christ, and in the continuing struggle against the old person.

On the other hand, homosexually oriented brothers and sisters may be able to remind their heterosexual counterparts that their sexuality is no less marked by brokenness and by susceptibility to temptation. When the Lord speaks, He speaks to the totality of our existence, not because the one might be purer than the other, but because we all belong to the world that God so loved, that he gave His only-begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16). God receives us all as sinners.

Public righteousness, too, is an aspect of sanctification. Here, the preaching may call and equip the congregation to take a stand in the public domain against all forms of hatred, rejection and discrimination because of sexual orientation. Recent developments in society, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage and the right of same-sex couples to adopt children, could easily nourish an antithetical attitude towards homosexuals within the church. It is true that the preaching must speak prophetically against unscriptural developments within society. At the same time, homosexuals must be able to count on the support of Christians in their socially vulnerable position.

2. Acceptance

Within the congregation we are called to accept one another, just Christ has accepted each of us (Romans 15:7). We accept each other, including our brokenness. Both the ground and the example of our acceptance is to be found in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ. The love that He showed in such a unique manner, by giving His life for us. This mutual acceptance will, of course, be part of a learning process. We experience that in many respects in all our dealings with each other. That is why loving acceptance will also involve patience. Just as Christ is patient with us, so we must be patient with one another. As a learning process, this mutual acceptance becomes a test case, not least in the coming together of hetero- and homosexual members of one congregation.

In the New Testament, the congregation is called to make an extra effort to accept those who are in vulnerable positions. Among those, we include brothers and sisters with a homosexual orientation. They are vulnerable because of their position in society – which is often far less tolerant than it claims to be – and because of their own inner struggles. The congregation may offer them warm fellowship and a safe place. It will lend support to those who, because of their orientation, must follow a way of their own. It will approach them in love and offer them room to be themselves. Such brothers and sisters must know that the congregation will look out for them and listen to them.

Within the nurturing embrace of the body of Christ our identity in Christ may be received and moulded. Our brothers and sister must be able to find within the communion of saints a counterweight against rejection, loneliness and depression. After all, Scripture describes the congregation as ‘the bride of Christ’. Even though it is unable to provide in what they must miss most deeply, it will still, for its homosexually oriented members have something of the poet’s ‘garden of love’. Within the congregation of Christ, nobody should be able to say: “I have no-one” (John 5:7).

Practical hospitality is a beautiful and concrete manifestation of such acceptance. Some have a special gift of generously opening their house and their heart for others. However, the New Testament calls the entire congregation to show hospitality, and promises that in doing so, it may unwittingly entertain angels (Hebrews 13:2). For those who must go their way alone, regular contacts at addresses where they can drop in unannounced can be highly meaningful.

In line with our confession, we may also call on our homosexual brothers and sisters to take up all kinds of tasks and roles within the congregation, so that they may use their gifts

“readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members”. Brothers who have the gift of spiritual leadership may be nominated in thankfulness for the offices.

3. Friendship

Would the congregation do well to stimulate or perhaps even facilitate same-gender friendships between members with a homosexual orientation? Should the church council be able to accept that two friends, while promising to abstain from any sexual activity, could live together in the same dwelling?

Anyone who wants to help his brother or sister to follow the way of God’s Word ought to make a serious effort to dissuade them from the way of living together. Not because he would want to deny his brother or sister friendly companionship in a homely environment, but because he, in all sobriety – and beginning with himself – will not underestimate the strength of the devil’s power behind temptation to sin, and will not overestimate our power to resist this temptation. Someone who knowingly places himself in the way of temptation will make it very difficult for himself to pray: “Do not lead us into temptation”.

On the other hand, the question is legitimate whether every homosexual member, who already deeply misses so much, may be denied the blessing of a pure friendship with someone of their own gender. The fact that in our society also the concept of ‘friendship’ has fallen prey to individual interests and desires, has made fruitful reflection on this question much more difficult. This is illustrated by the superficiality of ‘friending’ and the corresponding ease of ‘unfriending’ on social media like Facebook. In our culture, elements that belong with deep and lasting friendships, such as affection and physical nearness, are often thought to have sexual overtones.

In years past, it was quite common for two female friends to live under the same roof. There was no suggestion or implication that this might be a lesbian relationship. No-one felt free to question that, and no-one did. We no longer have that innocent open-mindedness. Certainly not when it comes to two friends.

At the same time, we do discern a counter-movement, in which there is greater attention for a non-sexual, affective and intimate friendship. There are examples of such friendship in the Bible. The best-known of these is the friendship between David and Jonathan. In David’s own words: for him, the love of Jonathan *‘was wonderful, surpassing the love of women’* (II Samuel 1: 26). There is no basis at all for the suggestion that this was homosexual love. What David is trying to say here is that what he shared with Jonathan was deeper than any other kind (including sexually experienced) of love. What we have here is a male friendship between two heterosexual persons. The question could be asked: could such a deep friendship not go some way, for a homosexually oriented brother or sister, in meeting their entirely human longing for affection, intimacy and closeness?

They, in their turn, could also contribute to a re-evaluation of friendship in a Biblical sense. Also in that this friendship points to the future fellowship in the new world of God, in which unity is created, not by the bond of marriage, but by the fellowship with Christ. Within the Christian tradition, it has always rightly been emphasised that marriage as a social relationship is exclusively for husband and wife. Homosexual brothers and sister can help reinforce for the Christian congregation the understanding that this does not make the marriage relationship absolute or eternal. The Lord Jesus Himself (Matthew 19:11-12) and they apostle Paul have taught us to relativize this relationship, with a view to the Kingdom of heaven. A better understanding at this point would create room for the congregation to explore possibilities to prevent or relieve loneliness among homosexual brothers or sisters. The church would do well to consider what forms and/or places of interaction might be

created, in which brothers and sisters with a homosexual orientation who desire to live in sexual abstinence might be able to enjoy friendship and affection with each other and others.

The challenge for the congregation will be to provide room for such initiatives, generously and without suspicion, seeing to it that no place is given for the devil (Ephesians 4:27), and avoiding even the suggestion of wrongdoing (I Thessalonians 5:22; Jude 23) that would arise where two people lived under one roof.

We do not have ready-made solutions for local situations; what we really mean to say is that a church council does not yet fully act according to the instruction of Scripture when it indicates what may *not* happen; it must also consider carefully what *can* be done. After all, within the congregation of Christ nobody should be able to say: *"I have no-one..."*

4. Relatives

Members with a homosexual orientation stand within a circle of family and friends. These will often have much to deal with when they discover that someone within their immediate circle is 'like that'. The pastorate should not ignore or bypass this circle of close relatives and friends.

Parents are likely to experience feelings of disappointment, sorrow, shame and anger. Sometimes behind a mask of acceptance and generosity of spirit. It may also happen, now that it concerns one of their own beloved children, that genuine doubt may arise about what they had always held to be Scriptural truth. They may experience denial or self-accusation. There may be regret about a lack of openness in the preceding period. In many cases, close relatives will have a need for understanding, recognition and support in finding inner peace.

The pastor may – not without the consent of the homosexual member! – get in touch with the parents, to see if they would appreciate a visit. Once again (primarily!) to listen, and hopefully also to provide encouragement. The pastor should keep in mind that a mother may well respond differently to the 'coming out' of her child than a father does. This could give rise to tensions within the parents' marriage. Parents may be encouraged to stay close to each other. Especially to strengthen this closeness by seeking the face of the Lord together, and to put their trust in Him alone, the One who is more powerful and more merciful than we could ever be.

We may help parents to take a step away from the bondage of blame and accusation. Reproach towards their child, or themselves. The pastor will help them see the command to love their child, whom they are learning to know in a new manner, as much as themselves. Pastors must be open to the fact that parents will always have a special sense of loyalty towards their children. This especially applies to (possibly negative) experiences that their child has had within the church or with office-bearers. Pastoral failures should not be excused or glossed over. They may legitimately be pointed out and should be acknowledged as guilt. Parents should, however, encourage their children to acknowledge the Lord in all their ways, not to break the fellowship with the church, and to seek out counsellors who proceed from a Biblical view of man.

Things become rather more challenging for parents when their child has taken up a same-sex relationship. Generally, parents will feel ill at ease when their son or daughter comes home with their new partner. They will have the tendency to postpone this moment as long as possible, or even make it impossible. Dilemmas will arise: can the son or daughter's partner come along to a family event? Parents may be afraid that allowing this will have a harmful influence on the upbringing of the other children.

Parents will have to learn to distinguish between their child as a person - including their sexual orientation - on the one hand, and what they do with this orientation on the other. It is critically important that they are clear about who has responsibility for what. Parents may not allow themselves, or their children, to be deprived of their parenthood. Parenthood is far too precious a gift for that. The door should always be left open! The love, wisdom and patience of parents should always be a reflection of the love, wisdom and patience of God. While there may come a time when this can no longer be done with words, the prayer should always continue that the Lord will open doors for the right words to remind their child of Him and of His holy and saving Word.

Pastoral care for family members may become difficult when differences in insight arise between the pastor and the family concerning the room that Scripture allows for homosexual relationships. In such situations, the pastor will need much wisdom to be able, notwithstanding, to continue giving the necessary support. Sometimes, it will be necessary to walk along reflectively with parents in the direction they have chosen to follow. This can create room for self-reflection and the recognition of inner uncertainty about it. Attempts to convince through argument will often not be very helpful. A confrontational atmosphere ought to be avoided, since that could negatively influence the contact with the homosexual member.

Consideration could be given to bringing together parents of children with a homosexual orientation. This might be contact within the congregation; it could also extend beyond the congregation's boundaries. Here, a Scriptural point of departure will be important. On the other hand, it is questionable whether the church is the most suitable agency for such initiatives. Professional organizations are often best placed to provide such services, while the church could act in a facilitating role.

A whole new field of pastoral attention is opened when the 'coming out' concerns a member who is married, one who may perhaps be the father or mother of children. We sometimes hear it said that within the Reformed community pastoral care for its homosexual members is steadily improving, but that there is rarely much attention for the pastoral needs of their partners in marriage. The discovery that one of the partners has been harbouring homosexual feelings cannot but put marriage and family life under enormous strain. Not only will the other partner experience sorrow, estrangement and shame; the degree of faithfulness and confidence in each other within the marriage will be sorely tested.

Depending on how the partner who has the homosexual feelings deals with those feelings, at a certain moment the question is likely to arise whether the marriage itself can survive. In and of itself, a continued marriage is not impossible. There are moving examples of marriages that – in coming through such a crisis – developed in the direction of the kind of intimate friendship that was described in the previous section. In some cases, the marriage relationship has actually even deepened as a result. For the sake of the marriage vow, once given under the blessing of the Lord, pastoral care ought to begin with an exploration of this possibility. The more so when the married couple has been entrusted with the care of children.

It is even open to question whether the disclosure of a homosexual orientation by one of the partners can in itself be a ground for divorce. After all, the marriage vow, once made, does not stand or fall on the basis of a satisfactory sexual relationship, as painful as the absence of such satisfaction might be. In any case, the initiative to end the marriage may not come from the homosexual partner, as a precursor to (perhaps) undertaking a homosexual relationship. In the light of Scripture, such an initiative must be regarded as adulterous and (in the event of an actual sexual relationship) sexually immoral.

The children of a so-called 'homo-hetero marriage' will also need pastoral care. Often, they will be deeply shocked by the message from their father or mother, and will be at a loss as to how to deal with it. Children are likely to grieve about the sorrow the other parent undergoes; they may experience fear of being abandoned themselves, and deep insecurity as to how this will affect relationships within the family. Should teachers and classmates be told, and how will they react? At a more abstract level, for some children this development will throw a whole new light on the meaning and value of marriage and other relationships. And children, too, might ask the question: and what does God think of all of this? In such situations, the value of having a female pastoral or youth worker to assist the minister, elder or deacon is beyond dispute.

In this context, we also highlight the importance of pastors encouraging open and in-depth conversations between partners during their time of courtship. All too often, the possible presence of homosexual feelings remains undiscussed, in the fond hope that 'these feelings will pass' once a couple is married.

Marriage catechesis provides suitable opportunities to raise such matters in a general way among young couples. Where 'sexuality' in general is discussed with integrity during catechesis, room will be created for discussion of homosexual feelings in a more personal setting. In consultation with experts in the field, the pastor may explore how deeply these may be felt, and the degree to which they may be a threat to a normal and healthy marriage relationship. Where necessary, the pastor will need to have the courage to advise the couple not to marry. This will cause pain, and he must always be ready to give close pastoral support.

5. Admonition

Also and especially within the context of an open and hospitable congregation, where people are accepted as they are, and where compassionate pastoral care is given, the attitude of the pastor must always continue to be governed by the norms of God's Word. After all, the pastor provides spiritual leadership and guidance, not just in the style of the Good Shepherd, but also with His voice. The pastor must hold fast to what Scripture teaches: homosexual orientation diverges from God's creation intent. It is not simply a variation within creation; rather, it is a deviation from it.

In practice, this truth imposes a constraint: on the one hand, a person experiences that it will be impossible to enter a sexual relationship, in love and faithfulness, with someone of the opposite sex; at the same time Scripture does not leave room for such a relationship with someone of the same sex. In the foregoing, we have attempted to offer a helping hand, to give loving support to brothers and sisters in their need and deprivation because of this constraint.

As pastor, congregation and church council we may still be confronted with a member who, notwithstanding, chooses to engage in a homosexual relationship. In not a few such cases, the member will simultaneously withdraw from pastoral care within the congregation, and from the labour of the office bearers. This could be a sign that the member is not (or no longer) willing to be led by the Word. However, the feeling within the congregation (whether expressed or unspoken) that it has been relieved of a difficult problem is just as much a sign that the congregation is not willing to be led by the Word either. Regardless of circumstance, the congregation must respond to a member's withdrawal with the deepest compassion and continuing prayer. Pastoral care for relatives and friends remains necessary.

The pastorate will have room to continue when a homosexual member engages in a relationship, while at the same time choosing to remain a member of the congregation.

Here, great care and a sound insight into the situation is vital. Sometimes, we are dealing with the desire to have an intimate friendship, along with a sincere intention to abstain from sexual relations. In the light of what we wrote previously about such a friendship, the pastor will honestly express his deep concern about such a step. But not everything that causes deep concern and gives rise to serious warnings need necessarily lead to the exercise of church discipline. Even if the situation should lead to a repeated falling into sin, as often as that happens the members should be directed to the need for confession of guilt and a renewed resolve to fight against sin. Not everything that is miserable is necessarily censurable (J Douma).

A homosexual member of the congregation has gone one step further when he has made a conscious and committed choice to engage in a full same-sex relationship – whether living together or not. He must then realise that he is going against the Word of the Lord, even if he himself has that conviction to a greater or lesser degree. His own motivation for undertaking a homosexual relationship may well be that the burden of abstinence is simply too heavy for him to bear. If he himself is clearly convinced that the Bible does not permit homosexual activity, he will recognize that his relationship can only be seen as a measure of last resort. In such a conversation, the pastor must be merciful and compassionate. He will watch carefully not to lead the brother or sister into despair. He will try, together with the member, to open the Scriptures. The Word of God never aims to bring us to despair; rather, it always wants to bring us closer to our destination.

Still, as difficult as that may be, at some point the pastorate will take on the character of admonition, and include a call to repentance: whatever is not from faith is sin. Faith builds up, but it is also willing to bow before the authority of the Word of God. Whatever goes against the Word of God – even if it is chosen as a last resort – cannot be help in time of need. Perhaps for one's feelings, but not for one's faith. As long as we continue in a manner of living that is contrary to the way of Scripture, we will stand in the way of the liberating power of Christ's victory in our lives (Romans 8:37).

At this crucial point, we go back to the pastor's profile: he must beware of the danger that in his disappointment over the lack of openness or unresponsiveness of the brother or sister, he becomes harsh. When he sees in himself his own vulnerability to temptation, he will continue to deal with others in a spirit of gentleness (Galatians 6:1).

Where pastoral admonition is governed by love and gentle wisdom, it will not be inconsistent with support and encouragement. The New Testament Greek uses the same word for 'comfort' and 'admonish': often, the context will determine which aspect is (predominantly) meant. The pastor must accompany his admonition with prayer, if at all possible *with* but at all times *for* the member. He must pray for trust in God's promises, for the hope that does not disappoint (Romans 5:5). Whoever, in all weakness, follows the path of obedience will follow a difficult but not impossible road. It is especially in our weakness that the strength of God is revealed.

Loving admonition is important also for those who, while often struggling severely, want to walk obediently in the way of God's Word. Pastors who know themselves will certainly beware of a judgemental attitude towards others. It is often remarkable how much patience and forbearance homosexual Christians display towards those who make different choices. Still, the power and credibility of support for those who choose, in obedience to God's will, to abstain from homosexual relations will be diminished where those who choose to follow a different way are not admonished.

This kind of admonition will take time. Often, the Holy Spirit has to overcome a great deal of resistance in the human heart. A church member will often need time to take in and digest words of admonition. In a different manner, the same is true for the pastor. Admonition is

a task that calls for patience, for endurance. The pastor and the church council may not let themselves be rushed by other members who may have a less spiritual attitude.

Where a member of the congregation chooses to follow a manner of living that is not in accordance with God's purpose, and persists in such a choice in spite of loving and patient admonition, where they cherish and defend such a way of living, and where they do not wish to break with it, the church council is called to continue further in the way of church discipline. This is according to the demand of Scripture and agrees with the Reformed confession. The honour of God and the holiness of the congregation require it. But also the salvation of the sinner, for whom suspension from the Lord's table is a serious appeal, and excommunication from the congregation remains the ultimate appeal, in the name of the Good Shepherd (James 5:19-20).

This path is consistent with what our Synod declared a number of years ago in relation to those who live together in an unmarried state.

6. Perplexity

We do not wish to hide that we, next to conviction, also experienced a feeling of perplexity as we wrote the last section of the previous chapter. According to the Reformed confession, the exercise of discipline is one of the marks that distinguish the true from the false church. Hence discipline, if the church is to remain true, must also function at a local level. That is our conviction. The Good Shepherd causes His sheep to hear His voice; however, if it is necessary to keep them on the right path, He also causes them to feel His staff. The Heidelberg Catechism portrays the exercise of discipline as one of the keys of the Kingdom, entrusted to the congregation. To lose those keys would be a disaster!

We certainly do know of instances where church discipline, exercised with great care and in persevering love, has sometimes had a salutary outcome; still we must express concern about what we see as a worrying development. We seriously wonder whether, in the everyday practice of our church life, this key is more and more falling into disuse. Not only because it is being taken from us by the spirit of our times, a spirit that no longer wants to know about discipline. There is certainly some truth to that. Individualism and personal autonomy do not stop at the doors of the church. It regularly happens that church councils encounter a lack of understanding, much less acceptance, of their admonitions within a large part of the congregation. To what extent is mutual admonition still a part of our congregational life?

At the same time, situations in life are often so complex that it is fair to ask whether our church councils are able or even competent to undertake the necessary investigations.

The Dutch word for 'discipline': *tucht*, is related to the German *ziehen*, which means 'to pull' or 'to draw'. Discipline, indeed, aims to pull sheep, to draw them away from the abyss, to draw them back from darkness into the light of salvation. But whenever we still do 'draw' in this manner, the effect is often one of *withdrawal*. Withdrawal to no church at all, or to a church where 'they don't give you such a hard time'.

That in itself is an additional problem in situations of admonition or discipline: the fragmentation of the church. Congregations that in terms of their confession are still reasonably close may sometimes come to widely different responses about the same situation.

At the same time, however, it is just as true that we ourselves have been too careless in our use of the key of discipline. And that leaves us in a state of perplexity, especially in regard to our compassion for brothers and sisters who are serious about love and faithfulness in their

relationship, but who nevertheless, because of its sexual aspects, are subject to the exercise of church discipline.

Where the world has sexualized happiness, the church has – long before that – sexualised sin. We ought not to discount the likelihood that the former is – at least in part – a reaction to the latter, and that it therefore may well be – more that we would care to admit – an unpaid account of the church.

Church discipline has often been disproportionately applied to sins against the seventh commandment. Occasionally sin against the eighth commandment, in cases of fraudulent acts. But how often has church censure been applied in instances of covetousness, greed or extravagance? And what about the other sins that Paul lists in Romans 1? Are all those barred from the Lord's table who for years have nursed grudges or enmity against a brother, and refuse to be reconciled? Or those who destroy people's lives through gossip or slander? Or those who at Bible study meetings freely express opinions that are completely in conflict with Scripture and the Reformed confessions?

In connection with situations where members live together while unmarried, our General Synod has pointed to the place of church discipline within the whole of pastoral admonition. Rightly so, but once again, this also is a matter of sin against the seventh commandment. And how many instances do we know of where young couples have let themselves be pulled *back* through discipline, rather than pulling *out* because of it? We also have a clear impression that where marriages end for reasons other than adultery, censure takes place less often and much more hesitantly than before, and that after divorce, churches are more likely than before to solemnize remarriages. However, since this point is not part of our mandate, we do not pursue it further.

It is true that where Paul, in his letters, makes up lists of sinful behaviour, sins of a sexual nature often figure prominently. That should not surprise us, because sexuality divorced from God has proved to be one of the devil's most useful weapons. That was true in Paul's day; it is just as true today. We should not, therefore, as a reaction to a selective concept of sin from days gone by, now give less weight to sins of a sexual nature. Still, it remains instructive that in almost all of his letters, Paul mentions these sins together with many others. And he adds to all the others the same threat of exclusion from the Kingdom of God (I Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:21).

Synod gave us the mandate to give attention to *“all relevant aspects of the question concerning the place of homosexual brothers and sisters within the congregation of Christ, and of the pastoral care they are to receive”*. The exercise of church discipline is one such aspect. It is our impression that here a number of lines converge, all of which touch on the unity of the congregation as well as the unity of the bond of churches. That is why we give explicit voice to our sense of perplexity here. We consider that the exercise of discipline is an essential and indispensable element of pastoral activity, but the manner in which it functions requires further reflection. Such reflection might begin with the question whether, in view of today's language usage, a different word than 'discipline' can be found, one that more clearly conveys its positive purpose. For many, not only outside but also inside the church, the word 'discipline' will always have negative connotations.

Chapter VI: Pastoral periphery

The outer reaches of a large city are sometimes referred to as its 'periphery'. This is a circle of smaller towns and localities that lie within the city's metropolitan area. While these surrounding communities are often governed independently, they do form a greater unity.

By analogy, we now intend to 'zoom out' from the local congregation as such, and view it within the framework of the federation of our churches as a whole.

1. Holding on to each other

From the time when they came into being at the time of the Separation (in 1834 - tr) our churches have been marked by a diversity in spiritual direction. We have learned to live with differences in accent in the preaching, liturgical practice, style of living and ecumenical contacts. We thank that Lord that up to the present day our fellowship has remained intact. Honesty requires us to acknowledge that this has not always been pain-free. While it is true that for some this has been harder than for others, and that we can point to beautiful instances of collaboration in spiritual unity, we cannot deny that there seems to be a lessening of spiritual cohesion among us. As long as we, by the grace of God, and in a desire to serve each other in love, humbly acknowledge this diversity, we may receive it as a tool that will help us to avoid confusion on the one hand and excessive rigidity on the other. We as a study committee have aimed to work with our internal diversity in this manner, and we have striven for one *Vision Statement* and one *Pastoral Guide*, with a view to serving our whole federation of churches.

At the beginning of Chapter 5 of this *Pastoral Guide*, we briefly summarized our findings arising from the variety of policy statements that are in use in churches. All of these statements draw on a range of givens from Scripture, and all conclude that homosexual orientation must be regarded as deviation from God's original purpose. In addition, all of them reject the notion that a homosexual relationship in love and faithfulness may be regarded as a legitimate alternative to marriage.

Same-sex marriages are not solemnized in our churches. This too is consistent with the statement prepared by our synodical deputies for contact with the civil authorities: *'Marriage is an all-encompassing relationship of one man and one woman, undertaken for life, formally and publicly confirmed'*. In Article 70 of our Church Order we find a differently formulated but substantially identical description: *"Marriage is to be understood as a lawfully regulated, and as such formally and publicly confirmed, all-encompassing relationship between one man and one woman, undertaken for life, in accordance with the sense and meaning of the institution."*² In the report of the deputies referred to above, and adopted by Synod, we read: *"Where church councils are faced with a legal marriage between two persons of the same gender, it will be impossible for them to accept such a relationship as a lawful marriage. Within the church we are bound to the norms of God's Word, even though they are no longer considered binding within the broader community"*.

We also pointed out that within our churches there are, at some points, variations in pastoral practice with regard to brothers and sisters with a homosexual orientation. Some of these can be seen as emergency measures, concessions of last resort. We wrote about that already. While in most situations we can have a greater or lesser degree of sympathy for the underlying intentions, we do not believe that Scripture gives any support for such an approach. Sometimes, homosexual relationships are tolerated within the framework of pastoral care for those who are joining the church from outside. We will deal with that further in the next section.

The fact that in some local churches persons living in a homosexual relationships are allowed to make public profession of faith, can be baptized and may participate in the Holy Supper, gives cause for concern, or at the very least raises serious questions within the denomination.

² Translation mine – AP: none of the English-language versions of the Church Order of Dort adopted by Reformed churches include a comparable definition of marriage.

Within our presbyterian/synodical system of church government, great value is attached to the independence of the local church, and the own responsibility of the local church council. This independence also extends to pastoral activity. That is what we understand by 'presbyterian', a word that has '*presbyter*' or 'elder' as its root.

At the same time, does our unity in faith according to Scripture and confession not demand that local churches of one federation, draw one line in the matter of homosexuality? And does 'synodical' not imply that the Synod of 2013 rightfully made a binding declaration in regard to this matter?

It should be clear that we as a federation of churches cannot avoid joint reflection on these questions. Around the globe there are examples of churches where diverging views in relation to, and approaches to dealing with homosexuality have led to great tensions and in some cases even a rupture. We think of the Anglican Church. But we also need clarity with a view to our own homosexual brothers and sisters. They are members of a local congregation, but how much room does the denomination they belong to allow them? Is it conceivable, that when they move to another congregation within the denomination, they will have to deal with a different policy or practice in relation to homosexuality?

To begin with, we should honestly acknowledge that conformity with the world and accommodation to a secularised view of relationships is a real danger within our churches. No church council may consider itself invulnerable to the influence of the spirit of our time. These influences can affect our actions in the office when dealing with homosexual brothers and sisters.

Should we fear that such is the case, we have recourse to the assemblies of the church, to discuss these matters together. To do so in a spirit of brotherly love testifies to our reverence for the Lord and our concern for each other. So does the fact that we open ourselves to each others' scrutiny and if necessary correction. Holding on to each other includes sharpening each other.

In the meantime, it does not take much for a point of tension to become some kind of *shibboleth* among us. We ought to beware that we do not measure one another's faithfulness to Scripture and confession wholly and solely by the standard of our own pastoral practice in dealing with our homosexual brothers and sisters. It could well be that our diversity in this respect has a background in what we discuss in the next section.

2. Winning others

In recent years it has become apparent that especially those congregations within our denomination that have a strong missionary focus are confronted with a growing number of interested homosexuals, some of whom wish to join us as members. Some of these are singles; others are living with a partner. This is something that is most common in the larger cities, where homosexuals comprise a relatively large proportion of the population. These congregations, sooner or later, are faced with the question when such converts might be received as brothers and sisters in the congregation.

They have received instruction about the person, the work and the doctrine of Christ, and also about His teaching concerning marriage and sexuality. Some of them have lost their hearts to Him, and have decided to follow Him according to His Word. They have experienced tension and struggle, but often were unable to come to the point where they could break off an existing relationship or commit themselves to abstaining from a relationship in the future. The core question here is: how much progress must such a person make on the way of sanctification before he can bear credible witness that he shares in Christ and His salvation?

This is the same question that arises in other ways when non-communicant members already in the church wish to profess their faith. After all, when we think of ‘winning others’, we think, not only of those who come to us from outside, but also of those who have grown up in the church but who have not yet come to faith and conversion. The distinction that we within our church community make between two kinds of covenant children serves to relativize the emphasis being laid here upon our missionary focus. Or in other words: should our missionary-pastoral forbearance towards ‘outsiders’ not also be extended to our own non-communicant members?

How many of those who profess the faith are not told: welcome to the battle? Young people who have grown up as non-communicant members in the church will often have undergone a great struggle already, and we willingly allow them the time for that. They themselves, more than anyone else, realize that when they profess the faith, they will not yet have ‘arrived’; rather, there is still much for them to learn and unlearn. They still must struggle against bosom- and daily sins. Often they do so in secret; occasionally, they talk about it with their pastor. They may still find it quite difficult to appropriate certain aspects of their salvation. Sometimes, it leads them to delay participating in the Holy Supper. Still, we receive them in the sincerity of their intentions, as members in good standing, in the confidence that the Spirit, by Word and sacrament, will lead them further. Our prayer is that He will lead them further into salvation in Christ, the One who has become our justification *and* our sanctification.

In itself, sin does not have the right to exist in our lives, even for a minute. But to be truly rid of the influence and power of sin – that will not happen from one moment to the next, not in any of us. We do not attain perfect holiness in this life. While the longing for perfection keeps us going, the reality of life teaches patience. Patience for us with others, and patience for others with us. To use an image of our day: the congregation is more of a workshop than a showroom.

Taking into account the profound and comprehensive character of human sexuality, we ought not to be surprised that especially here, both hetero- and homosexuals often experience great difficulty in appropriating their salvation as it relates to the actual and practical sanctification of sexual life. Paul too points out that in the area of love and sexuality we are faced with ‘a profound mystery’ (Ephesians 5:32). It is especially here that Satan will try to keep us in his grip as long as he can.

In the case of a homosexual living in a relationship, and who wishes to join the church, we also are faced with his sense of loyalty: he does not want his conversion drive a wedge between him and his partner; rather, he wants to win him for Christ. And it is quite possible that in such a situation children will also enter the picture. Some of our congregations take this position concerning those who wish to join the church, and for the time being they are willing to tolerate that such a relationship continues.

Our denomination directs a genuine question to these churches: How do you do justice to your concern for the holiness of the congregation in its communion with Holy God? Conversely, these churches direct a genuine question to our denomination: How do we do justice to the fact that the sanctification of the congregation is not yet complete, that it is a work in progress? How do we do justice to the patience of Holy God Himself?

Of course, it is important that in case of such a homosexual relationship we are not dealing with a public but with a private sin. In keeping with the Reformed tradition, if it were public, that would render brothers and sisters liable to the exercise of church discipline. As long as those involved ‘cheerfully’ continue in such a situation, the claim that they are ‘striving to enter’ is hardly credible. Moreover, for other members, sitting together at the table of the

Lord could become quite difficult. It would also be hard to explain to young people who still have their own struggles in following the way of faith.

That alone ought to be a valid reason to hold back on allowing those who are living in a homosexual relationship to make public profession of faith. We can quite soberly remind ourselves that in New Testament times baptism could sometimes be administered very quickly, but that those so baptised could spend years as catechumens before being admitted to full membership of the church. In congregations where these situations create tensions, the church council can legitimately ask whether sometimes baptisms take place too quickly.

One of the consequences flowing from the whole of this report is that – also in ‘missionary’ situations – the point of departure ought to be that those who are continuing to live (or are open to living) in a homosexual relationship cannot to be admitted to public profession of faith, the administration of baptism, or the celebration of the Holy Supper.

We acknowledge that we cannot now predict (and therefore may not exclude) the possibility that exceptional circumstances may arise where a church council may feel compelled to deviate from this starting point. The ‘not yet’ of the Kingdom also includes that what ought to be an ‘impossible possibility’ becomes, for a time, a ‘possible impossibility’ (J. Hoek). However, even in such a situation the goal and direction must be a clearly understood: bringing the homosexual relationship to an end, and a further life of abstinence. It must be experienced as a painful reality that this is not yet attainable, and the aim must always be to take steps in the right direction.

In such a situation, the congregation must be united in its conviction that the church council, in this exceptional and incidental circumstance, has recognized the work of the Spirit and the ‘already’ of the Kingdom, and has admitted the member to profession of faith, baptism and Holy Supper. Seeking the advice of classis or presbytery beforehand, in confidence, will enhance the thoroughness and soundness of the decision-making process, and serve the unity within the bond of churches.

In conclusion

Synod instructed us to prepare a pastoral guide, a helping hand for church councils. The wisdom of this instruction became increasingly clear to us as this study proceeded. A helping hand, no more and no less. A pastoral pointer would not have been sufficient. That would have been limited to pointing in a certain direction, indicating what to think or the path for the shepherd and the flock to follow. While leading sheep is indeed directed towards a goal, it is also a ‘step by step’ process, and for that just a pointer would not be enough.

At the same time, a detailed pastoral guideline would have been too much. Sheep are too unique for that, and the landscape is too refractory. That is why we provide a helping hand, one that aims to serve the local pastoral care for brothers and sisters, especially brothers and sisters with a homosexual orientation. In keeping with the clear and modest description of pastorate that we gave earlier: *“Pastoral care says that there is a Shepherd.”*

Appendix :

Recommended readings: (Note – the list below only includes those resources that are available in English. For a complete listing, we refer to the original *Handreiking* attached to the *Studierapport Homoseksualiteit en homoseksuele relaties* at <http://www.cgk.nl/index.php?generalesynode>

Gagnon, Robert A J: *The Bible and Homosexual Practice. Texts and Hermeneutics*, Nashville 2001;

Grenz, Stanley J. Grenz: *Welcoming but Not Affirming. An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality*. Louisville 1998;

Hays, Richard B: 'Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies. The Witness of Scripture Concerning Homosexuality', in: RB Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament; Community, Cross, New Creation. A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, San Francisco 1996, pp. 379-406;

Hill, Wesley: *Washed and Waiting. Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*, Grand Rapids 2010;

Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate*, Downers Grove 1995.

Yarhouse, Mark A: *Homosexuality and the Christian. A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends*. Minneapolis 2010;