

THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

(A Position Paper on the Inclusion and Affirmation in Communities of Faith of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, PLWAs, and their families)

Ministry of Reconciliation Statement

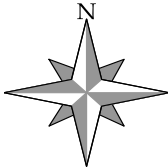
VISION: To form an inclusive, affirming, spiritually sound congregation of primarily African-American Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning persons, Persons Living With AIDS (PLWAs), and the family members of all God's children.

GOAL: To identify and encourage primarily African-American GLBTQ persons and PLWAs to regularly attend a traditional spiritual worship experience.

In the Spirit and conviction of II Corinthians 5:17-20 we go forward!

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (*New Revised Standard Version*)

A POSITION PAPER-THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION: a study of the spiritual, inclusive, affirmation of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning persons and their families.



Position Paper Overview

The objective of this paper is to introduce and articulate beliefs regarding homosexuality and spirituality.

Among African Americans in religious communities, there seems to be no other topic that provokes such heated debate as homosexuality. It is a cultural taboo that dare not speak its name. Many people say that the case of homosexuality is closed and that Scripture is clear and condemns homosexuality. So, the Church remains unyielding on its acceptance of homosexuality and homosexuals. Many more people claim the jury is still out and their belief of homosexuality and what the Bible says remains inconclusive. Regardless to which of these groups you find yourself we believe it is now time for the Church to take a stand and extend ourselves to all of God's children. God put His Church in the world to share with all of his creation the Good News about Christ, particularly His suffering, death, and resurrection. Christ himself charges us to go out and compel ALL people to come to Him.

The Bible has been used for years to condemn and condone practices thought to be socially acceptable such as slavery and the subordination and subjugation of women. People believe and are adamant the Bible means what it says and says what it means. For example, in some religious circles people interpret that the Bible doesn't permit women to preach or people to interracially date. To others these conclusions are both ignorant and prejudicial and are clear cases that exemplify people have not understood what the Bible was or is saying. This fact leaves us disagreeing on interpretation which has been the long-standing problem dealing with Scripture. The Bible has been used to legitimize violence and the victimization of Women, Blacks, Native Americans and Homosexuals. While these same scriptures are used to condemn these groups, there are other scriptures seem to call for their liberation, liberty and equality in the context of the Christian Church and Christianity. We are all Children of Christ and are no longer individuals but rather brothers and sisters in the family of Christ Jesus.

Christ commands the inclusion of all his children. Jesus declares, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28 KJV). So the issue of homosexuality really is not an issue. Homosexuality as we define and understand it today does not appear in the Bible.

Homosexuality is not referred to in the Ten Commandments, no Old-Testament prophets teach on it, and Jesus himself says nothing on the subject. In fact, the word homosexuality was not invented until the late Nineteenth Century. It doesn't appear in the original biblical manuscripts at all. No word for homosexuality appears in the Hebrew, Greek, Syrian, or Aramaic languages and never in the King James Version of the Bible. It doesn't appear in Biblical transliterations until 1946 solely in the Revised Standard Version (Gomes, 158-161).

The solution is to undo our cultural taboos and deep seeded prejudices regarding sex and sexuality. The perception that all homosexuals are sexually perverted, cross-gender acting, special rights activist, and pedophiles has to be done away with. These perceptions are the results of the absence of spiritual academia about sexuality. Many people, whether they acknowledge it or not are touch by homosexuals in some way and personally know someone who is homosexual. Many of our own mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, clergy, congressmen, presidents, deacons, stewards, trustees, church workers, cooks, teachers, bus drivers, construction workers, pilots, lawyers, doctors, and even military personnel are homosexual.

To preach against homosexuality being a divinely created orientation is to preach against and in turn polarize homosexuals. Sexual orientation is the natural, normal attraction one possesses for another on an emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual level. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas captures from Christian ethicist James Nelson in her book (Sexuality and the Black Church) that sexuality is more than who one has sex with. “Sexuality is a sign, symbol, and the means of our call to communication and communion. This is the most apparent in regard to other human beings and other body-selves. The mystery of our sexuality is the mystery of our need to reach out to embrace others both physically and spiritually...[Sexuality] is who we are as body-selves who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion-**human and divine** (Douglas, 6).” The Church, **and certainly NOT the US Government**, should ever polarize, stigmatize, or segregate any of God's children. We must act intellectually and acknowledge that homosexuality like heterosexuality is a small part of a whole God authorized, ordained and constructed individual. In our largely Anglo, heterosexual [White patriarchal] society exists a great prejudice against what is unknown and different. The reason homosexuality carries the stigma it does today in America is because society refuses to address sex and sexuality. Thus society relents of its pervasive homophobia, heterosexism, racism, and genderism and discrimination of those of different religions and cultures. **Homosexuality is defined as the loving, caring, nurturing, and relationship between persons of the same gender.**

So! What does the Bible say about homosexuality? NOTHING. So the question is what does the Bible say about same gender relationships? NOTHING. What does the Bible say about other forms of intimacy between persons of the same gender? Very little. There are only six passages out of 66 books of canonized scripture that refer to same-gender acts and have become the crux of debate for and against homosexuality:

- 1- The Creation of Adam and Eve (Genesis 1-2)
- 2- Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1-9)
- 3- The Holiness Code (Leviticus 18-20, 20:13)
- 4- Paul's teachings to the Romans (Romans 1:26-27)
- 5-6- Paul's lists of sins (I Corinthians 6:9; I Timothy 1-10)

1-The Creation of Adam and Eve appears to many to condemn same gender relationships because "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve," as the belief goes. While this is indeed fact a historical-contextual examination of these texts do not argue against same gender relationships. The story of Adam and Eve details the creation of humankind and answers the question where does humanity come from? This story simply relates and details an omnipotent Creator ordaining the existence of humankind. The story is silent about other social relationships such as friendships, but we do know that friendships exist and are not immoral or abnormal. Rev. Dr. Marilyn Usher-Hardy states in her Doctoral Thesis "The Creation Story" **is not** a lesson on sexual orientation. It is not to be a history of anthropology or of every social relationship. It **is not** a paradigm about marriage but rather the establishment of human society. There is nothing in the Creation story to suggest that heterosexuality in contrast to homosexuality was the concern of the author. Heterosexuality may be a dominant form of sexuality but it does not follow that it is the **only** form of appropriate sexuality (Usher, 55-6). To argue the fact that God made Adam and Eve and not Adam and Steve based on the Bible is as erroneous as to argue the first family Adam and Eve were immoral fornicators and all of humanity are bastards since the first family were never officially married.

The Command from God to "be fruitful and multiply" doesn't mean that sex is ordained solely for marriage for then comes into question those heterosexual persons who cannot procreate (barren, infertile, abstinent, celibacy, etc.). Should they or should they not engage in sexual behavior? Rev Usher-Hardy states that the command does not relate only to biological reproduction, but also means making life a fruitful endeavor that benefits the world in which we live. For those who engage in non-procreative sex, it is the opportunity to nourish intimacy and extend the longevity of attachment in couples (Usher, 57).

In conclusion, this passage answers the question of the origin of life and the Divine Creator's role in that origination. It, therefore, cannot be used to condemn any other social practice or relationship it fails to mention (Gomes, 149).

2-Sodom and Gomorrah seems to be the one place in scripture where same-sex relationships and those that practice these unions blatantly experience God's disapproval and wrath in the form of fire from heaven that totally

eradicates both cities. Once again, in context, this story doesn't condemn homosexuality or homosexuals but rather the sins of inhospitality and self-centered pride. This is confirmed by Ezekiel when he records the words of God in the 16th chapter of Ezekiel, specifically in verses 49 and 50: "Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty...therefore I took them away as I saw good" (KJV). Jesus Christ himself confirms this truth in Matthew 10:14-15 and Luke 10:10-12 where he declares to his disciples "And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet. Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Day of Judgment, than for that city" (KJV).

It is important to note that the word Sodom from which we derive our term sodomy only bears its negative connotation because of the King James biblical translation of the word sodomite. The Latin term used throughout the Middle Ages refers to same gender relations. The term sodomite has been used to refer to homosexual sex, heterosexual sex, unorthodox heterosexual sex, and sex with animals. The term in the King James transliteration most always refers to male prostitution which the Canaanites and Babylonians used in their practice of idolatry and not to same gender relations or relationships as we know and understand them today (Helminiak, 40-45).

The important thing to note is that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is never clearly articulated in Scripture. The fact that God's judgment of the cities was determined prior to the recorded incident at Lot's door and no where else in the Scriptures is the destruction of these cities linked to same gender sex or same gender relationships. Even if one believes the episode at Lot's door is deplorable and an evil condemnation of same gender rape, one cannot label all homosexuals as rapists nor more than one can condemn all heterosexuals because of the sin of pedophilia (which statistics show the majority of pedophiles are heterosexual).

In context the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was that of being inhospitable to strangers, a practice that was crucial during that time since there was not the existence of hotels, motels, etc. to accommodate travelers. God's people were to be those that were accepting of all strangers and inclusive of humankind not self-focused. Scripture articulates for the sins of arrogance and inhospitality God's indignation and judgment came upon these two cities.

3- The Holiness Code, particularly the Law of Leviticus, is one of the most quoted scriptures against same gender relationships. Leviticus 18:22 clearly states "Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination" (KJV). Leviticus 20:13 ordains the penalty for such egregious behavior to be death by stoning.

Again it seems the Bible clearly condemns same gender sex and same gender relationships. A more intrinsic, contextual analysis of this text articulates a different meaning. One must know the term "holy" simply means to be separate and peculiar in word and deed specifically to distinguish God's chosen from the rest of the world. I Peter 1:16 records God's command "Be ye holy; for I am holy"

(KJV). The Holiness Code that is found in chapters 18-20 of Leviticus is all commands to make Israel different and separate from other heathen cultures, namely the Canaanites who worshipped idol gods. This code was to be God's standard of moral behavior for the Jews. It is imperative that we understand the Holiness Code was given for a particular time, for a particular setting, and for a very specific purpose. The main function of the code was to build Israel as a nation and give them an identity. Thus any practices that were potentially contradictory to this purpose and non-procreative were condemned (Gomes, 158-161).

The term abomination does not mean hateful or deplorable, as we know it today. In the original Hebrew, *toevah*, means unclean or impure. The same word was used to reference those animals Israel wasn't supposed to eat. Same gender sex was offensive to the status quo of Israel because the Canaanites practiced it. It was ritually wrong because the practice didn't build Israel as a nation. Thus culturally it was offensive but certainly not immoral. (Helminiak, 60).

It is important to note that if the practice of same gender sex was sinful in and of itself then the Hebrew word *zimah* which means intrinsically evil, would have been used to refer to the practice. This is confirmed by the fact that the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) uses the Greek term *bdelygma*, for *toevah* instead of *anomia* which in the Greek means a violation of the law or sinful. So scripture confirms that Israel's admonishment against same gender sex, as they knew it was because the non-Jews practiced it and therefore it was unclean. Under the New Covenant in the New Testament we as Christians are not bound by this code just as we as Christians do not observe the dietary or sexual restrictions of the Jewish Laws. One must remember this fact when opponents against same gender sex use this passage as a construct for their bigotry.

4-Paul's teachings are perhaps the most controversial New Testament arguments against same gender sex and relationships. In the first chapter of Romans the Apostle Paul seems to command the Romans against all the sins that have caused humankind to fall away from God. However, a closer examination of the text in its original language yields a different perspective. It is imperative to note that at this time there still existed no word for homosexual in the Greek or Hebrew. Furthermore, the same gender sex that Paul knew or would have known was male prostitution (also known as sodomy) and pedasty, not the monogamous, wholesome, loving devoted relationships between people of the same gender of today.

Paul talks extensively about natural (*physiken* in the Greek) and unnatural (*para physin*). The terms refer to acts considered natural and unnatural in term of societal normalcy. The Bible records in Romans 11:24 that God acted unnatural (*para physin*) when he grafted Jews and Gentiles together in Christ. This was not normal and many Jews believed it was contrary to the Law, but God perpetuated His will regardless. It is important to note that though the word *para physin* is used to describe this act of God, it doesn't carry any negative immoral connotations.

What Paul is referring to specifically in Romans 1:24-31 is Gentile idolatry and converted Christian's role in this deplorable practice. He in essence is arguing that because of this idolatry that the entire Gentile nation was unclean as cleanliness related to Jewish law and practice. He begins in verse 21 stating how the Romans had become self-absorbed, self-centered, and self-reliant. Thus they had become worshipers of themselves and not God and put carnal images above spiritual ones and so received God's indignation. The reference to "forsaking natural relationships and exchanging them for unnatural" refers specifically to any acts done heterosexually that were different from the procreative missionary position Paul believed was "natural". It referred to sex during menstruation, oral sex, anal sex, or sex with an uncircumcised man, all of which are unnatural in the context Paul was using. What Paul was in essence saying was humankind had become so self-reliant as to answer all of the questions God had purposed for them including salvation and thus had no need of God. The reference to receiving the due penalty for their perversion is not necessarily a negative action as in the English. In the Greek it simply states they receive recompense, reward, or payment for these actions of uncleanness. These actions are unclean because the Gentiles do it and so receive the reward that their entire nation is unclean (Helminiak, 92-96).

So once again the Bible is not condemning of same gender sex, and is silent on the monogamous, loving, responsible relationship between same gender persons.

5-6-**Paul's list of sins** are also a point of controversy since he seems to state that people who practice same gender sex have no inheritance in the Kingdom of Heaven along with liars, adulterers, fornicators, drunkards, thieves, slanderers, and swindlers. The Greek verb used by Paul to refer to persons who practice same gender sex is *malakoi* that literally means soft but in this context refers to boy prostitutes. Until the reformation of the 16th Century it was a wide held belief that the same term referred to masturbation. As prejudices changed so did the translation of this term. Now in Catholicism the term refers to those actively involved in same gender sex. In 1970 the Catholic Catechism articulated that to be attracted to persons of the same gender is not sinful, but to act on these feelings is sinful. Now it is a widely held belief that *arsenokoïtes* refers to any perversion or propensity taken to be abnormal and diseased. So these terms refer to abusive forms of male-to-male as well as male-to-female sex acts. But the original term did not refer to monogamous, loving same gender relationships. As Rev. Dr. Marilyn Usher-Hardy states, "African American clergy must develop a paradigm for biblical revelation that does not utilize the Bible as an archetype, but as a prototype. A hermeneutical understanding of Scripture as prototype demands a critical exploration of historical-social-theological dynamics operative in the interpretation of Scripture. In and through structural transformation, the Bible and the biblical community will be able to respond to new social needs and theological insights" (Usher, 72).

What we must realize is that same gender relationships (like other relationships) are not all about sex. It is erroneous to think that sex is only for procreation. God gave sex for procreation yes, but primarily for two individuals to

totally express their love and affection for and to each other in a manner that is totally exclusive of any other individuals and outside of oneself. The key to an understanding of this topic is to acknowledge that it centers on God's love. Christ loves us because of who we are not because of what we do. It is for that reason and His example of self-sacrifice that we are to love one another as Christ loved us. By this all men shall know we are his disciples if we love one another (John 13:34). If Christ looked past our faults to see our needs shall we do no less?

I am convinced that we should leave the judging to Jesus Christ and focus on loving thy neighbor as thyself. Poet Edwin Markham states:

*He drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.*

God's love (agape-unconditional) compels us to take all of His children in. If we as a Community of Faith do not take up this awesome task then who should? It is our responsibility as communities of Faith to form an inclusive, affirming, spiritually sound Body of Christ. All of God's Children: gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning, persons living with HIV/AIDS, Blacks, Whites, Hispanic (Latino(a)), Asians and the like are to worship Him together as brothers and sisters in the Spirit. Will you join this Ministry of Reconciliation today?

**FOR MORE INFORMATION OR ADDITIONAL COPIES PLEASE
CONTACT:**

Tommie L. Watkins, Jr.

1335 15th Street

Apt#8

Miami Beach, FL 33139-2261

(305) 785-5111

revtlw@bellsouth.net

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