

Homophobia: **Definition and Guidance**

For use in the Methodist Church



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Background

In 2014, the Methodist Conference received the report of the Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships. Among a number of recommendations, the report gave particular attention to the issue of homophobia. The Working Party encountered a number of responses to the issue of same-sex relationships that indicated a need for some clear guidance on what is, or is not, to be regarded as homophobia. The Working Party included the following in its resolutions:

The Conference ... directed the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion committee, in consultation with the (Marriage and Relationships Task Group), to work, as a matter of priority, on the production and dissemination of clear guidance on what is, or is not, to be regarded as homophobia and, if thought appropriate, on a formal statement for the Conference to adopt on this matter.

In 1993, the Methodist Conference passed six resolutions on human sexuality, including a reaffirmation of the traditional teaching of the Church regarding sexuality (see Appendix A for full list). Resolution 6 recognised, affirmed and celebrated the participation and ministry of lesbian and gay people in the Methodist Church. Furthermore, it called on the Methodist people to begin a pilgrimage of faith to combat repression and discrimination, to work for justice and human rights and to give dignity and worth to people whatever

their sexual orientation. In passing these resolutions, the Methodist Conference made its opposition to homophobia known.

The earliest use of the term ‘homophobia’ was by the psychologist George Weinberg, in 1965. Weinberg used the term to mean “heterosexuals’ dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals as well as homosexuals’ internalised oppression”.

There is no agreed definition of homophobia, either in secular or church contexts. However, some common themes emerge. They often describe feelings of hatred, intolerance and fear of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people that manifest themselves as negative behaviours (attitudes, language or behaviours, discrimination, exclusion or even violence towards people of a perceived LGB sexual orientation). Lesbian, gay and bisexual people, especially those brought up in homophobic contexts, may internalise the negative stereotypes and develop varying degrees of low self-esteem and self-hatred, often described as ‘internalised homophobia’. This has been linked to relatively high levels of suicide and depression among young LGB people.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, homophobia means “fear or hatred of homosexuals and homosexuality”.

There has been an evolving legal framework and the protections afforded to LGB people in law. The Equality Act 2010 (in England and Wales, and Scotland) includes sexual orientation and marital and civil partnership status as protected characteristics. This

means it is illegal to discriminate against an individual on the basis of their actual or perceived sexual orientation, in terms of employment, or in the supply of goods and services. It is also illegal to differentiate between married persons and those in civil partnerships. Religious organisations may opt into some very limited exemptions from this, only in relation to the performance of a religious function. The Methodist Church has largely chosen not to operate these exemptions, in order to be consistent with the 1993 Conference Resolutions on Human Sexuality.

Since the term homophobia has been used in a number of different ways as language has developed, individuals often find it difficult to understand what is or is not meant by homophobia. We recognise that there is also now a fear, particularly among some Christians and members of other faith communities, of being branded 'homophobic' for having traditionally held views on issues of sexuality. This fear has contributed, we believe, to an unwillingness on the part of some to engage in honest and open conversation with other Methodists.

When considering matters of sexuality and sexual orientation, Methodists not only consider the legal and social context. We must also engage with the Christian theological tradition and with the divine revelation recorded in the Bible. The

experience of the Methodist Church has been that there are differences in how we read the Bible and interpret what it says and means for Christian living today. We are not alone in this; a number of our Methodist and ecumenical partners are struggling with the same issues. The outcome of our deliberations, discussions and scriptural reflections on matters relating to same-sex relationships has not been consensus. At the present time, it seems that a sincere and prayerful reading of Scripture can lead some to conclude that same-sex relationships are wrong and others to conclude that they are within the will of God, with many others in between or undecided. This guidance does not alter that position but seeks to honour all those who continue to struggle with Scripture and context to find a way forward.

The 1993 resolutions committed the Methodist Church to a Pilgrimage of Faith, and called on all of us to respect our diverse range of scriptural understanding as we give dignity and worth to all within our fellowship. This guidance seeks to take another step on that pilgrimage and calls on all Methodists to recognise homophobic attitudes, words, and behaviours as being inconsistent with the nature of Christian conduct and a violation of the worth and dignity of all people. This applies not only to individuals, but also to structures, culture and institutional behaviour (eg our policies and practices).

Definition

Taking into consideration our history, our context and our reading of Scripture:

Homophobia is any statement, policy or action which denies the image of God in another person due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation; which is, treating someone in a discriminatory manner because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation.

Homophobic attitudes, words, and behaviours are inconsistent with the nature of Christian conduct and a violation of the worth and dignity of all people.

Homophobia can be experienced in a number of ways, including:

- a) physical violence or emotional or psychological abuse, including the threat of or incitement to such behaviour (which may also be deemed hate crimes in law)
- b) applying stereotypes and assumptions to people based on their sexual orientation
- c) using language that is hostile, hurtful or offensive in its intent
- d) abusive or coercive 'spiritual practices' (ie demanding or requiring repentance or participation in healing or other types of service).

EXAMPLES

These are original narratives, each drawn from a variety of real experiences.

- a) Physical violence or emotional or psychological abuse, including the threat of or incitement to such behaviour (which may also be deemed hate crimes in law)

Roy is a presbyter at a church in a market town. As part of its welcome to the local community, the church hosted a series of services and celebrations for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians in the area. Roy received two letters of protest (which he did not consider homophobic), but also two letters from a member of the church which used threatening language against both Roy and the Church Council.

Lou is 18 and a very popular member of her church youth group. After a great deal of prayer and reflection, she confides in Jack, a youth worker, that she thinks she might be lesbian. The next Friday, Jack has organised a 'special meeting' to tell the youth group to help Lou seek forgiveness for being gay. Lou feels humiliated and vulnerable.

- b) Applying stereotypes and assumptions to people based on their sexual orientation

Case studies

Sarah is a presbyter, and new to a circuit where she is, at first, welcomed. However, when Sarah says she is gay, some people start criticising her integrity, others refuse to attend the services she leads. Several unfounded complaints have been made against her.

A circuit needs a new youth worker. Luke is a member of a church in the neighbouring circuit, and a qualified youth worker for a local charity. He expresses interest in the post, but his application is not considered. When he asked why, he was told that the circuit leadership team felt it was “unsuitable for a gay person to be in a position of influence over young people”. The leadership team had based their opinion on inaccurate assumptions and stereotypes.

- c) Using language that is hostile, hurtful or offensive in its intent

Case studies

Phil's church has organised Lent groups. The groups' organiser, Pat, chose not to include Phil, in any of them. When Phil asked to be included in a group, Pat said: “The groups are only for Christians. You can't join because queers aren't proper Christians.”

Andy is a middle-aged man who has come out as gay only recently, and feels very nervous when he attends church. Sue, who attends the same church, has been openly hostile, making hurtful and unkind comments - both about Andy and gay people generally. She has told him that (in her words) “his sort have no place being in church”.

- d) Abusive or coercive ‘spiritual practices’ (ie demanding or requiring repentance or participation in healing or other types of service)

Case studies

Fi and Gina are married and new to the area. They bring their adopted son Mark to church and ask that he be baptised. Matt, the minister of their church, asks them to attend a preparation class. They are happy about this, but become very anxious when Matt tells them that they must undergo a healing ministry for their sexuality before their son can be baptised.

During a conversation, Chris tells David that she is lesbian. David knows very little about Chris, but responds by saying that he loves her as a sinner, but hates her sin. Chris tells David that she is unhappy about his assumptions about her personal life, and that she feels judged. She adds that she and David clearly have different understandings of what the Bible teaches, and she asks him not to make assumptions about her personal life or integrity. David repeats what he has said, and says he is telling her to repent for her own good. Chris feels spiritually abused by David.

Homophobia can be expressed through personal behaviours and also through structures, culture and institutional behaviours, ie policies, procedures and (accepted) practices.

Having defined what we believe homophobia to be, it is important that we also confirm what it is not. As a Church we would want to affirm that it is not homophobic to:

a) disagree on matters of scriptural interpretation or to hold and express

a view that same sex activity is wrong (provided that is not repeatedly targeted at an individual because of their sexual orientation)

b) have lots of questions to ask; although the boundaries of personal space should be respected

c) 'get the language wrong' when talking about sexual orientation; it is more important to speak honestly and respectfully about our feelings.

EXAMPLES

These are original narratives, each drawn from a variety of real experiences.

a) It is not homophobic to disagree on matters of scriptural interpretation or to hold and express a view that same sex activity is wrong (provided that is not repeatedly targeted at an individual because of their sexual orientation).

Paula is a very active member of her church, and sees herself as conservative in her faith. Her understanding of the Bible is that "homosexual activity is wrong". Paula has very strong views about what her faith means for her, but she does not judge others. Paula does state what she believes about homosexual activity, and why, but, as much as she can, she acts graciously towards all people. She is good friends with Sally, a member of the church who is lesbian. They often joke with each other about their differences of view.

Rob has strong convictions that the Bible states that homosexual practice is wrong. When Jane, another member of his church, comes out as lesbian, Rob makes a point of telling her his views. Jane explains that her understanding of the Bible is different to his. Rob takes the time to listen to Jane's experience. Rob does not change his view, and still states it, but he respects that Jane's views and experience are different to his. Rob does not use his views to make personal challenges against lesbian and gay people, or to treat them with less respect than anyone else.

- b) It is not homophobic to have lots of questions to ask, but boundaries of personal space must be respected.

Case studies

Meg is a lay employee working across four districts. In her travels, she's often asked questions about how her husband and children cope with her travelling. When people find out that she is lesbian, their reactions range from embarrassment to genuine interest. While Meg feels that the questions can sometimes be a little awkward, she does not think people are being homophobic, and she welcomes genuine conversations.

Tim is a gay man in his 40s who has recently started coming to church. Joe is a pastoral worker at the church and is keen to get to know Tim. Joe hasn't really known many gay people and is nervous about speaking with Tim. Tim is also anxious, because he has had previous experiences of his personal life being treated as though it is 'public interest', but Joe takes the time to build rapport and mutual respect.

- c) It is not homophobic to 'get the language wrong' when talking about sexual orientation. It is more important to speak honestly and respectfully about our feelings.

Case studies

Anna is 83, is vaguely aware of 'political correctness' and feels that language has too many rules these days. She gets confused by how language changes all the time, and is worried that she is going to say the wrong thing. She asks Frank: "Have you always known you're queer?"

Like many gay men and lesbians, Frank does not like the term and prefers 'gay'. But he doesn't consider Anna's use of the word 'queer' to be homophobic, because he understands that it dates from her context and culture. He explains to Anna that he prefers 'gay', and Anna usually remembers this.

In Britain, many people would not normally find the term 'queer' acceptable to describe a gay man or lesbian, but context is important.

Using discernment

Accepting the broad diversity of understanding of Scripture within Methodism, it is important to draw a distinction between “beliefs and values” and “attitudes, language and behaviours”. This guidance recognises that Methodists have deeply held but contradictory convictions and any discussion held under the Methodist auspices must allow a range of views to be expressed and heard in an atmosphere of open-hearted, respectful Christian conferring.

The lack of clarity about what is and is not homophobia can cause anxiety. The Methodist people should use their judgement when deciding whether or not something in a particular context is homophobic. Only in specific situations can those involved have access to the whole picture and be able to make a judgement, taking into consideration matters such as language skills and levels of personal understanding, etc.

The nature of Christian conduct

When considering matters of sexuality and sexual orientation, as with all other matters, a Christian's words and actions should be guided by the Bible's teaching on the nature of love (1 Corinthians 13), the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) and Christian conduct (1 Peter 3:13-17). To do to others as you would want done to you and to love your neighbour as yourself are good guiding principles when dealing with difference.

It is recognised that there is a diversity of views and understanding, but it is important that in speaking of matters of sexuality and sexual orientation, no-one is left out of the discussion. The Methodist Church provides some resources which may help. They include:

- *Living with Contradictory Convictions* (report)
- *Living with Contradictory Convictions* (study guide)
- *The Nature of Authority and the Place of the Bible* (study guide).

These can be found on the Methodist Church website at www.methodist.org.uk/talkingofmarriageandrelationships

Appendix A

The Resolutions on Human Sexuality from the 1993 Conference

- 1.** The Conference, affirming the joy of human sexuality as God's gift and the place of every human being within the grace of God, recognizes the responsibility that flows from this for us all. It therefore welcomes the serious, prayerful and sometimes costly consideration given to this issue by the Methodist Church.
- 2.** All practices of sexuality which are promiscuous, exploitative or demeaning in any way are unacceptable forms of behaviour and contradict God's purposes for us all.
- 3.** A person shall not be debarred from the church on the grounds of sexual orientation in itself.
- 4.** The Conference reaffirms the traditional teaching of the Church on human sexuality; namely chastity for all outside marriage and fidelity within it. The Conference directs that this affirmation is made clear to all candidates for ministry, office and membership, and having established this affirms that the existing procedures of our church are adequate to deal with all such cases.
- 5.** The Conference resolves that its decisions in this debate shall not be used to form the basis of a disciplinary charge against any person in relation to conduct alleged to have taken place before such decisions were made.
- 6.** Conference recognizes, affirms and celebrates the participation and ministry of lesbians and gay men in the church. Conference calls on the Methodist people to begin a pilgrimage of faith to combat repression and discrimination, to work for justice and human rights and to give dignity and worth to people whatever their sexuality.

