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Sexual Identity Concerns for Christian Young Adults: Practical Considerations for Being a Supportive Presence and Compassionate Companion

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Most sexual identity development models disregard the importance of valuative frameworks and faith for young adults with same sex attraction. This article is a theoretical and pastoral attempt to outline practical considerations for Christian professors, staff, and laity who seek a new role, that of compassionate companion, or a supportive presence for Christian young adults with same sex attraction. Observations and recommendations are based on 11 years of teaching and mentoring college students, sexual identity development research, and a theological concept of our human will-to-relate.

In colleges and universities throughout North America, students find their way to perceived "safe" faculty and staff offices to disclose confusion about and longings for emotional and physical intimacy with others of their same sex. According to the National Health and Social Life Survey, while only 2.8% of men and 1.4% of women identified themselves as gay or lesbian, 7.7% of men and 7.5% of women expressed homosexual desire (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). How men and women transition from experiencing homosexual desire to identifying themselves as gay or lesbian has been under significant exploration in the last 30 years, resulting in various models for homosexual identity development. Early models focused primarily on men, although work in the last 20 years began exploring different developmental issues for women identifying as lesbian (Brown, 1998). But as Laumann et al.'s research suggests, not all with same sex attraction ultimately identify themselves as gay or lesbian. Yarhouse and Tan (2004) made a significant contribution to this discussion by exploring why some with same sex attraction do not ultimately choose to identify as gay or lesbian. They critique earlier models for assuming the appropriate trajectory is accepting a homosexual identity, while overlooking the importance of valuative frameworks,

such as religious beliefs, as a contributing variable for one's sense of sexual identity.

In this article I explore some of the challenges confronted by college-age students with faith commitments. These challenges are viewed through a valuative framework in which same sex attraction is a broken representation of sexuality as God designed it. I conclude by offering practical approaches for faculty, staff, and peer members of college communities desiring to be supportive presences in the lives of Christian students who experience same sex attraction.

Sexual Identity Confusion and Christian Youth

Sexual identity confusion is not uncommon among adolescents and young adults as sexual desire can be directed both toward members of one's own sex and the other sex. In one study of 34,706 adolescents, 10.7% of respondents were unsure of their sexual orientation (Remafedi, Resnick, Blum, & Harris, 1992). Most of these young adults will eventually settle into heterosexual attraction, some will eventually identify themselves as gay or lesbian, or bisexual, and others will end up married yet continue to have some same sex attraction.

In an anonymous informal survey I give students in my Sociology of Sexuality class, I ask whether they have experienced same sex attraction, whether they have wondered if they might be gay or lesbian, and whether they have participated in same sex sexual behaviors. Over the years their responses have affirmed Remafedi et al.'s (1992) findings that young adulthood can be

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a time of uncertainty about sexual desire and identity. We discuss their responses in light of the research which suggests confusion about sexual identity is not uncommon—a discussion students find comforting and encouraging.

Sexual identity development is a time of liminality, the vulnerable phase of transition between one identity, or status, and another. Females with same sex attraction tend to be in a liminal phase questioning their identity for 3 or 4 years before resolution; and males for 5 to 6 years, though some studies suggest it can take up to 15 years for men and women to embrace a sexual identity (Yarhouse & Tan, 2004).

Traditional communities recognized the importance of offering a supportive presence to individuals as they moved from one status to another, providing community members with various rites of passage throughout life (Van Gennepe, 1960). While these were primarily transitions experienced by the majority of members as they entered puberty, marriage, parenthood, and old age, some cultures also had special rituals and communities for the minority of men and women who did not fit normative sex-gender identities. For instance, in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, the *bijras* are people who identify as neither male nor female and go through an initiation rite to become a third sex/gender. Some are intersex individuals, others are transsexuals, typically biological males who feel more female than male and exhibit female gender characteristics. *Hijras* organize themselves around historical tradition and Hindu or Muslim religion. Social and religious roles give *bijras* purpose, a place in society, and employment (Nanda, 2000).

Formal social structures and traditions that might help young adults work through questions about their sexual identity are largely absent in Western, modern societies. Therefore, many young adults either struggle alone with questions, fears, and implications of their same sex attraction, or turn to informal structures such as media and peer culture for answers. While communal rituals did not guarantee a smooth transition from one phase of life to another, they did formalize a process that legitimized the young receiving guidance, and seeking answers from older community members for difficult questions.

Creating a role for compassionate companions would help fill this need for guidance, especially for young adults with same sex attraction who do may not feel like they fit in with their peers. A compassionate companion would seek to walk

alongside people struggling with same sex attraction, to provide a place where questions can be safely and fully explored while staying cognizant of the individual's Christian valuative framework. By definition, a compassionate companion would not function as a counselor, pastor, or physician. While compassionate companions may believe homosexual behavior reflects distorted sexuality, they are not trying to "fix" those with same sex attraction, but to be a supportive presence to one experiencing it, and trying to reconcile their sexual identity with their faith beliefs.

While many adolescents with sexual identity confusion ultimately settle into a heterosexual orientation, approximately 2.8% of males, and 1.4% of females will eventually identify as gay or lesbian. Holding a tension that presumes fluidity in sexual identity development with the reality that some students will ultimately identify as gay or lesbian is important in creating supportive Christian communities for young adults with same sex attraction.

Challenges Identified by Young Adults With Same Sex Attraction

Questions around homosexuality are heightened for young adults with religious convictions as most of their religious communities prohibit homosexuality. Religious young adults whose sexual desire is for same sex partners identify a number of challenges, including self-hatred, feeling like an abomination to God, isolation that results from disclosure, isolation resulting from maintaining secrecy, and fatigue with being related to as one who needs "fixing." My observations are not based on a randomly selected sample or a large survey, but on a small convenience sample based on in-depth conversations and/or mentoring relationships I have had with about 15 students over 11 years of teaching at Christian colleges (see also McMinn, 2004). I have grown in my capacity to walk with students through listening and learning about their longings, the complexities of their questions, and how they strive to live well and to follow God. Following are summaries of individuals I quote, or whose stories I tell. In each case names and details have been changed to protect their identity.

Greg is a 43-year-old man now married and a father. While issues that impacted his 18 year struggle with same sex attraction are not fully resolved, they are resolved enough for him to be in a satisfying marriage. He is open about his past struggle

with same sex attraction and is heavily involved in church life.

Maggie is a 27-year-old woman who has a heterosexual orientation after about a six-year struggle with same sex attraction. She continues to work through some of the issues that impacted her same sex attraction, but is now attracted to men, hopes to marry, and is very involved in church life.

Jennifer is a 19-year-old woman who is only attracted to women, but believes this is a phase that comes from past wounds and that, with help from God, she will be able to marry someday. Currently she is seeking healing through therapy and Christian support. Except for family, she keeps her struggle a secret. She is involved in church life.

Natalie is a 21-year-old woman who is only attracted to women, and is unsure whether or not she will ever be able to marry. Her goal is to learn to live with integrity in this place, to accept her current life without always focusing on a future that might not materialize. She has disclosed to a few peers and some adults. She is involved in church life, but unsure if there is a long-term place for her in church.

Michael is a 23-year-old man with a homosexual orientation who depends on God for daily sustenance. He feels he will always be attracted to men, and wants people who will explore with him what that means as a devoted Christian. He keeps his struggle mostly a secret, and hopes to stay involved in church life.

Anna is a 30-year-old woman who loves God, believes Jesus died for her sins, and is in a monogamous, committed lesbian relationship. She has no involvement in church as she is not attracted to gay and lesbian churches and does not feel welcome elsewhere.

Charlene (30) and Rebecca are (35) are two lesbians living together with Rebecca's two children in a monogamous, committed relationship. They attempted to return to the church of Charlene's childhood and adolescence because they wanted the children exposed to Christianity and church life, though neither of them have particular faith commitments at this point.

Thad is a 26-year-old male with a homosexual orientation, who expresses his sexuality through homosexual behaviors, though he does not identify himself as gay. He keeps

his orientation a secret, wants to believe God is still capable of loving him, and has no current involvement with church life.

Self-loathing: Aka "an Abomination to God"

For some students everything about their body and sexuality causes pain. Jennifer spoke of immense self-hatred that infiltrated all of who she was. Much of her focus with her therapist was unpacking a past full of wounding that had caused so much self-hatred. As an adult, Greg sought to change a negative definition of sexuality and his body that had permeated his young adulthood. He began by affirming that he was created as a male, rather than cringing from his maleness. He said:

Changing my perception was an incremental process. I learned to curtail my self-incriminating remarks. I found areas to express my masculinity where I could achieve—like running. Running connected me to my body—gave me appreciation for what my body could do. I realized God had made a divine imprint on me—*divine imprimatur*, and that my body was good. If I was created in the image of God—how could my body be disgusting? The journey of my life has been a battle with despair—dealing with the doubt that I would ever feel whole. I've learned to let life be a process, to keep yearning for, hoping for fulfillment.

The young adults I have talked with largely come from Christian traditions that understand the Bible to say homosexuality is an abomination to God. This relates to their view of themselves, and their relationships with others. Most of the students I have mentored or interacted with regarding their sexuality anticipate or have experienced rejection by their Christian friends and faith communities, or have distanced themselves out of awkwardness. Maggie felt like a leper, unclean and likely to contaminate anyone to whom she got close. So Maggie maintained distance from males and females alike. Jennifer, who struggled with same sex attraction, found a good friend in Karen, who had a boyfriend back home, and was alone and lonely as a transfer student. The two became fast friends, and their emotional attachments grew increasingly intense and time-consuming. Jennifer came to me feeling guilt and remorse for the tension and trouble she

had introduced into Karen's life, contaminating her, as it were.

While some students identify feeling deeply loved by God in spite of their same sex attraction, others doubt God could love them at all—convinced they are an abomination. Some stay in the Church, hoping to find God there, though the majority that continue to have same sex attraction have left the Church, even as most hold to some hope that God could yet find them lovable. Thad said:

I used to think that there was no way God could accept me if I was gay, and while I still think like that a little bit, I've decided that He's probably not all-out disgusted with me. I no longer blame God for allowing things to happen to me when I was young or for "cursing" me with being gay. Instead of looking to Him as a cause or as a silent criminal, I now look to Him as a possible way of getting out of the lifestyle. If things do change for me there will be some sort of spiritual awakening associated with it, and I think it will mean a return to a modified version of my earlier Christian roots. God has almost become a motivation for me—another reason to change if that's possible.

Those who stay in the Church cling to God, holding to hope, wanting to find a way to live well with their sexuality. Their challenge is to move toward healing—which they often express as a desire for heterosexual attraction, but includes healing from a broken past that keeps them from moving forward. Jennifer finds her hope in believing that God loves her, and will not let her go. She knows her choices have the potential to be destructive—and is counting on God to intervene.

Young adults I interviewed have all said they longed for a heterosexual friend of the same sex who could love them in a non-sexual way, affirming their lovability, without feeling like it was their job to fix them. They need friends who will maintain appropriate boundaries to keep the relationship from becoming enmeshed or overly dependent, but who will walk closely with them, and not be afraid of intimacy. Like all humans made with a will-to-relate, they long for relationship, yet feel painfully isolated.

Isolation and Unmet Intimacy Needs

Young adults with same sex attractions talk about feeling isolated—whether or not people know about their struggle. For students who do not disclose, neither same sex nor other-sex friendships feel particularly safe. A friend of the other sex might become romantically or sexually interested, introducing awkwardness and shame to the relationship. Even when Maggie was not attracted to a same sex friend, she feared that if the friend found out she struggled with same sex attraction it would introduce an awkwardness that would doom the friendship. Thad said:

Having to hide, or rather choosing not to be completely open about my attraction to men makes me feel less than honest. Then again, I really don't consider myself gay so it would be foolish for me to "come out" when perhaps I'm not even "in." If I did "come out" it would just make things worse. People would start expecting more of certain things and less of certain things. I would end up being more uncertain. I like it that not many people know about me. It's like if I tell people, I become committed to that identity, or to how they view that identity.

But in his secrecy, Thad also felt isolated.

For young adults attending Christian colleges, the roommate situation itself can be isolating. The fear of being found out often keeps students somewhat distant from their roommates. Whether or not students are attracted to their roommate, they fear roommates would become uncomfortable, or "freak out" upon discovering they identified as gay or lesbian, or even struggled with same sex attraction. So many students maintain some emotional and social distance from others. Some fear they will not control their desire to move toward what they identify as inappropriate emotional or physical intimacy, and some keep their distance for fear of being found out and rejected.

Students who disclose to others experience a different kind of isolation. Natalie said:

Friends and family who knew my past, and what I struggled with needed for me to be "getting better." So I would flirt with boys, and talk like I was interested in them, and I tried convincing myself it was true—that I

was starting to like boys. I still mostly pretend for friends and family, but I'm not pretending to myself anymore. I'm okay just being this way for now, I want to focus on living well now, in this. I find it more hopeful to let go of my expectation to be able to get married someday, but my friends don't understand that.

Living in college communities where students with same sex attraction perceive (however inaccurately) their heterosexual classmates to be in warm and deep relationships, a sense of isolation is compounded by the stigma of their same sex attraction. From this place of distress, some students make their way into faculty or staff offices, or counseling centers, looking for someone who will receive and embrace them.

Perceived as Being "Needy" and Needing "Fixing"

A number of the students with same sex attraction I have worked with speak of the burden of being perceived as one who needs fixing or healing. Students do not want to be projects or prayer items. What they say they need are friends who will journey with them without holding on to a particular picture of wholeness and healing.

Michael grew up with an early awareness that he was different from other boys, and by college his same sex attraction felt immutable. Other than his exploration of internet pornography, he had not been involved in same sex behaviors, and his strong faith in God encouraged him to persevere as he sought to live with sexual purity and integrity. What he longed for were people who would let it be okay for him to accept his same sex attraction without assuming it meant he was abandoning God or the faith. Before disclosing to his close male friends his senior year, he spoke of how close they had become, how he had helped them become more authentic with each other, to value nurturing, caring relationships characterized by a depth of intimacy they hadn't known how to develop. When he disclosed, most friends maintained some level of friendship, though they began to treat Michael as someone who needed fixing. All but one distanced himself from Michael emotionally. Michael expressed a longing for friends who would stay vulnerable to closeness, and not be fearful of it. He said he thought some fear was motivated by homophobia, but most of it came

from their perception that they helped him by not being too close, thus contributing to his greater sexual confusion or frustration. For Michael's friends, his same sex attraction became what identified him to them, his defining characteristic; and their desire to "help" him inhibited their ability to stay engaged with him in authentic intimate friendship.

Faculty, staff, and peers from religious communities find it challenging to resist becoming helpful counselors. When troubles, illnesses, or conditions are disclosed to friends or other adults, the default position of "helping" can reaffirm one's own sense of being "okay," which is comforting. But assumptions about same sex attraction and ideas of healing are complicated by faith-based beliefs about homosexuality that encourage helping young adults with same sex attraction get redirected firmly in heterosexuality. While counseling is appropriate and helpful for many young adults during this liminal phase of sexual identity development, the important role of the compassionate companion is to walk with young adults, to provide a safe place to express and discuss questions related to faith and sexuality with another who shares their religious evaluative framework.

Being A Supportive Presence or Compassionate Companion

From an institutional perspective, the issue of homosexuality is fraught with polarizing political complexities—particularly for evangelical Christian colleges and universities. How can evangelical institutions be a supportive presence without appearing to encourage homosexual behaviors? Michael said his Christian college was a good place to be as he strove to live well because there was so much potential for healthy, supportive relationships in his Christian community. He spoke more from hope than an experienced reality, but his ability to hold to hope suggests that students with same sex attractions desire for their Christian friends and communities to provide places for authentic, mutually supportive relationships.

Thinking theologically about supporting students with same sex attraction is an exercise that includes engaging the biblical text on issues related to sexuality, the witness of Christian thought throughout history, and considering the social context of homosexuality in light of our particular time and place in history (Cole, 1993). Most evangelical biblical scholars agree that a

careful interpretation of scripture leads to the conclusion that homosexual behaviors are sinful. Yet to be a supportive presence, we need a theology of sexuality that grapples with the complexities of same sex attraction. A beginning point is acknowledging that the desire for intimacy and relationship still represents a created good, that is, a will to relate. Sexuality was created by God, giving us, as theologian Graham Cole said, a will-to-relate, that by divine intention, is not adequately satisfied in our relationship with God, or in relationships with non-human creation. We are created to desire relationship—friendships, parent-child bonds, work relationships, and sexually intimate relationships—and this desire is good. While evangelicals believe genital sexuality reflecting the created intention is expressed in a monogamous marital relationship between one man and one woman, the longing for relationship experienced as same sex desire still emerges from a created will and desire for relationship.

Sexuality has been distorted--not only in homosexual expression, but also, and more profoundly, in heterosexual expressions. In patriarchal societies, men dominate women and other men. The woman who is to satisfy the longings for man's relationship becomes an object, a possession, that can be carted off as spoils of war, exchanged in marriage for property rights, cows, or gold, and brought into harems and brothels without her consent. Fundamentally the will-to-relate, a created good, became easily distorted (Cole, 1993).

While evangelical theologians largely agree that same sex attractions also reflect a distorted sexuality, liberal theologians, such as Dan Via, have interpreted the biblical text differently, allowing for an affirmation of homosexual practice (Gagnon & Via 2003). Other liberal theologians suggest there is cultural evidence for accepting homosexual relationships in scripture as seen between Naomi and Ruth, and David and Jonathan (Helminiak, 1999). Distortion of sexuality for liberal theologians is found in abusive, coercive, exploitative, or promiscuous relationships, whether heterosexual or homosexual. The implications of this interpretative debate determine whether or not one affirms homosexuality as a created good, or encourages those with same sex attraction to seek some form of "healing," typically defined as a redirecting of one's attractions. As an evangelical, my understanding of scripture suggests homosexual

behavior reflects distorted sexuality. The challenge remains to integrate a biblical understanding of homosexual behaviors as a distortion, with humanity's will-to-relate as being a created good. Following are three suggestions for compassionate companions and a challenge for faith communities that seek to minister well to people with same sex attractions.

Broaden Definitions of "Healing"

How "healing" is defined has bearing on the way compassionate companions offer support to students with same sex attraction. When students enter faculty and staff offices, many are still in a 3 to 6 year liminal period of indecision about their sexual identity. Some, like Jennifer, will be struggling to change their same sex attraction; some, like Thad will be living with incongruence—neither embracing a homosexual identity nor continuing to struggle to change a homosexual orientation. However some, like Michael and Natalie, will embrace their orientation, and seek healing of a different sort.

How a compassionate companion defines "living well" with same sex attraction is largely determined by assumptions about the causes of homosexuality. As a backlash against gay-affirming claims that causes of homosexuality are biological, some evangelicals claim it is all about choice. The nature/nurture research is inconclusive, leading many in the social sciences to conclude that biology and social environment both have bearing on individual predispositions toward same sex attraction.

But many evangelical communities of faith continue to hold to a position suggesting same sex attraction can be un-chosen. Success or "healing" means a redirection of one's orientation. While many of the 10.7% of young adults who express having some same sex attraction or confusion will ultimately settle into a heterosexual attraction, those still struggling in adulthood are less likely to experience a complete redirection of their orientation. For a variety of reasons, measuring the effectiveness of redirection efforts is challenging. The most generous numbers in the scientific literature suggests that no more than 30% of adults with same sex attraction that seek redirection succeed (Jones & Yarhouse, 2000) and this may be an optimistic figure.

In 1948, Alfred Kinsey published a seven-point scale that suggested homosexuality and heterosexuality were not clear-cut categories, but reflect a continuum—how strongly one felt

attracted to members of one's own sex and the other sex. Given Kinsey's model, people most likely to succeed in redirection attempts are those toward the middle of the continuum of sexual attraction who are able to engage in a loving, heterosexual marriage and who were not deeply engaged in a homosexual lifestyle. Even so, success for adults seldom means all homosexual desire or longing for intimacy with a same sex person dissipates.

In 2000, Exodus, a ministry that helps gays and those with homosexual orientations toward healing, lost credibility when John Paulk, a married ex-gay and then chairperson of Exodus International, was found in a gay bar. The media condemned Exodus-type ministries for the damage it did by purporting it could change sexual orientations when apparently it could not. Yet Paulk's experience fits with an understanding of healing as movement toward a life-long journey striving for wholeness. "Healing" that is defined as moving toward spiritual depth and maturity through God's grace is available to all Christians stretching toward redemption. Healing then, is *not* necessarily characterized by a lessening of same sex attraction. Greg, who, after an 18-year struggle with same sex attraction is now contentedly married, said:

People need to know that there is always potential for sexual growth and development. That means different things for different people because they start from different places in terms of their life experience and degree of sexual wounding. But at any point, they can use whatever remains of their life journey to grow and mature, to become more holy and virtuous.

Greg found several communities of compassionate companions. One was a support group of other Christians dealing with homosexual issues. Later he became part of a ministry team (all of whom were heterosexual) who prayed for, encouraged, and embraced each other. He also belonged to a group in his church that met together for prayer and friendship—ordinary people who made themselves vulnerable to each other.

Since at least 70% of those who desire to exchange a homosexual orientation for a heterosexual one fail to do so, most psychologists and psychiatrists, a few Christians among them, have concluded it is unethical to try to redirect a

homosexual orientation. They argue that the defeat experienced by the 70-90% who fail leaves them worse off emotionally and sometimes spiritually than if they never tried. In 2000, the American Psychiatric Association reaffirmed its position on reparative therapies:

Psychotherapeutic modalities to convert or "repair" homosexuality are based on developmental theories whose scientific validity is questionable. Furthermore, anecdotal reports of "cures" are counterbalanced by anecdotal claims of psychological harm Until there is rigorous research available, APA recommends that ethical practitioners refrain from attempts to change individuals' sexual orientation, keeping in mind the medical dictum to first, do no harm (*APA reiterates position*, 2001, 34).

A primary focus of both the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association is discouraging therapists from determining the goal of treatment for their client, either overtly or covertly. Compassionate companions adopt this stance as well. Their goal, like that of Courage, an apostolate of the Catholic Church, is not redirection; it is care of the soul, and the maturity and growth of individuals on a journey with God. Courage seeks to provide a safe community where people with same sex attraction can be honest about their struggles and find support as they seek to grow spiritually and to live chaste lives. "Healing" is thus a lifelong process that occurs for all who seek to grow in maturity and Christ-likeness through authentic, vulnerable, life-affirming relationships emerging from our will-to-relate.

Affirm Contributions and Personhood

Related to redefining "healing" is recognizing the unique spiritual and relational strengths that can accompany same sex attraction. Henri Nouwen, the well-respected and loved Catholic priest with psychological training, struggled with same sex attraction. He lived a celibate life and let God use his unmet longings to deepen his spirituality, and minister to others. Nouwen's biographer said, "... I sensed that Nouwen's struggles with his sexuality had been integral to his life and his spirituality, probably even inspiring his writings on loneliness, love, and alienation" (Ford, 1999, vi). Nouwen believed people with homosexual orientations served a unique

purpose in the Christian community, and endorsed Carl Jung's view that, "homosexual people are often endowed with an abundance of religious feelings, and a spiritual receptivity that makes them responsive to revelation" (Ford, 1999, p. 213).

Michael spoke of how deeply he had experienced God through suffering and his life was marked with compassion for others who suffered from structural inequality, oppression, and poverty. He questioned if some good pieces of who he was as a nurturing, vulnerable, compassionate man might get lost in a battle to become a "real man," someone more like the friends who simultaneously affirmed that he taught them it was possible to be in vulnerable, non-competitive relationships with other men while pushing him toward a kind of healing that would make him more like them.

Many Christians who are committed to what they believe are biblical admonitions against same sex behaviors endure a life-time of unfulfilled sexual and emotional longing and desire for intimacy, learning powerfully what it means to depend on God daily for sustenance because they deny themselves that for which they long. They have great potential to be spiritual guides to those willing to acknowledge that personhood transcends issues of sexual orientation.

Many young adults with same sex attraction are still in the process of synthesizing their attractions with their identity; they do not yet know what the future holds. During this liminal time, compassionate companions affirm that personhood is bigger than sexual identity. They affirm that maturity emerges from questions and struggles, developing a depth of character that enables one to minister to and contribute significantly to the life of the Church—regardless of one's sexual identity.

Like most challenging issues, there are errors at both extremes: to ignore sexuality as though it does not exist is equally unhelpful as focusing on sexuality as though it is the only element of personhood that matters. For peers, sojourning implies a mutuality of care given and received, of helping and being helped, of learning and teaching. For mentors, sojourning involves avoiding setting conscious or unconscious outcome goals for the young adult, while being open to learn from, and to be enriched and blessed by those they walk alongside. Such relationships affirm the contributions and personhood of young adults struggling to find an

identity that stretches beyond their sexual identity confusion.

Appeal to the Created Good of the Will-To-Relate

If the will-to-relate is fundamentally good, is there room in orthodox Christianity to acknowledge that the desire for a relationship characterized by loyalty, commitment, care, and intimacy represents something good even if outside a heterosexual marriage? Humans are made for relationship, yet many young adults with same sex attraction feel isolated, unable to engage most relationships with authenticity. As they graduate, leaving their ready-made college communities, many will desire to talk about what awaits them relationally, about various living arrangements they might pursue. For true compassionate companions, the journey does not stop when students graduate. Some will have resolved their sexual identity issues, many will not have. Compassionate companions continue conversations about relationships, living arrangements, and alternative ways to affirm the will-to-relate, even as young adults continue to experience same sex attraction.

Some young adults with same sex attraction have addressed the will-to-relate by finding a small community of other Christians who live or room together. Commitment, sexual integrity, and intimacy are fostered in a loving, loyal community. Whether or not one has same sex or other sex attractions is not a determining factor in living in the community, but rather the ability to be authentically known, and the willingness to contribute meaningfully to the life of the community.

Some Christians who have accepted their homosexual identity choose to live as couples who enter covenant relationships where they promise to live together as lifelong partners, yet in celibacy (McLaren & Campolo, 2003). The will-to-relate is affirmed and acknowledged as partners live in loyal relationships characterized by commitment, care and intimacy, yet without sex. Doubts about how possible it is to sustain this, combined with evangelical assumptions suggesting individuals should always be moving toward redirection keep this option from being discussed very broadly, or received warmly. The idea is not a new one, as celibate relationships were blessed in the Church of England from the middle ages through the mid-17th century (McLaren & Campolo, 2003). Compassionate companions who are willing to engage the

conversation seriously are acknowledging that intimacy needs and longings are significant and need to be discussed, rather than avoided or dismissed.

Many Christians who have moved through young adulthood and ultimately embrace a homosexual identity live in tension, feeling torn between their sexual orientation and the teachings of their Church. Celibate covenantal relationships were likely never considered, because the concept is absent in our evangelical culture. The perceived choice is to deny all longings for same sex intimacy, or embrace them fully and leave the community of faith. Some will embrace them in covenant relationships with a partner in the context of gay and lesbian affirming communities of faith that will welcome them.

Compassionate companions who believe homosexual behavior to be a distortion of God's intention will eventually find themselves walking alongside men and women who ultimately identify as gay or lesbian. Christians believe the spiritual journey is a life-long pursuit, and that God uses people to keep drawing others toward greater maturity, wholeness, and deeper faith. Some Christians identify good aspects of the will-to-relate as being present in a homosexual union, even if the practice of sexuality is not the way God intended. One student described how her brother responded when she ultimately told him she was a lesbian:

My brother is a pastor. When I told him, he said, "Anna, answer me these questions... do you still love Jesus? Do you still believe he came, died, and rose again? Do you still have a personal relationship with him?" When I said "yes" to all three he paused and said, "I could judge you on an issue I disagree with, but when we face the Lord on judgment day we will be judged for what we have done equally. When I say I love you know that I mean it. As your brother, friend, and Christian, I love you no matter what." His speech brought me to tears. The truth of the matter is this: I am a human who loves another human. And true, it may not be what God intended, but there are a lot of things he didn't intend that still have some good in them.

Anna's brother, a pastor with convictions against homosexual behavior, chose to be a compassionate companion with Anna primarily because he focuses on her relationship with God rather than their different convictions about homosexuality, but also because he sees some good in her life that has come from a monogamous, intimate, caring relationship. Some, like Anna, will end up in monogamous gay or lesbian relationships, yet are committed to the message of Christ, and long for a vital place in the Christian Church. Except for gay Christian churches that openly affirm homosexual couples, they find little welcome in the pews of most Christian churches.

A Challenge to Faith Communities

Christian men and women whose same sex attractions persist, and those who eventually identify as gay or lesbian pose a dilemma for the Church. Except for gay- and lesbian-affirming churches, most churches, in their desire to be true to biblical admonitions against homosexual behavior, do not attempt to support those with same sex attractions, nor to welcome them as significant contributors to the faith community. Concerned members of Charlene and Rebecca's church encouraged the leadership to address the sin associated with two women living in a lesbian relationship. The elders met and eventually decided Charlene and Rebecca could continue to attend services, but that members would be discouraged from being in fellowship with them outside of church services. After the two were told the decision, and the letter describing the elder's actions was read to the congregation, Charlene, Rebecca, and Rebecca's children stopped attending.

The Church's dilemma is particularly challenging in a pluralistic culture where norms and values are not shared by all who identify themselves as Christian. The dilemma is to extend the grace of God to those seeking God, while also being an authoritative community that helps move all members toward greater holiness and virtue—not just around issues of homosexuality, but also adultery, addictions, abuse, and unethical business practices that involve the exploitation of laborers, economic markets, and natural resources.

While the most difficult challenge for churches may be determining how to extend grace and truth to gay and lesbian couples who are seeking Christ and a Christian community, a second and related challenge is determining what to do

with Christians with homosexual orientations who want to be active members in the church. Can churches embrace Christians who want to contribute meaningfully to their faith communities even if they no longer seek "healing" in terms of redirection of their sexual orientation? A third significant challenge is providing safe places for young adults confused about their sexual identity to explore questions without the fears of heterosexual peers, adult mentors, and pastors shaming them into silence, or moving them too quickly to resolution.

This article is not an effort to resolve this complex, multi-faceted dilemma for the Church. Rather, in identifying some of the issues confronting Christian young adults with same sex attraction, I hope to demonstrate the need for compassionate companions, Christian individuals committed to soul care, who will walk alongside other individuals seeking to live well. What the Church may not be able to do as an institution, individuals within the Church can do as compassionate companions—offering community and relationship, and extending grace as fellow compassionate companions striving to follow God given the challenges posed by sexuality.

Conclusion

Approximately 10% of adolescents are unsure of their sexual identity. Whether or not these adolescents end up identifying as gay or lesbian is based on a number of variables, including religious beliefs. During this period, young adults struggle with feelings of self-hatred, isolation, and question whether their contributions as fellow humans will be valued in their Christian communities. They need places to explore feelings, faith, and relationships. Some will do this in the context of therapy, while others will seek it from members of their churches, friends, or from faculty and staff at their schools. Compassionate companions are people who recognize the will-to-relate is a good desire, even if the desire is represented in a broken sexuality. As such, compassionate companions seek to be in intimate, caring relationships with the young adults they walk alongside, affirming the importance of relationship as they provide a supportive presence to them. They engage questions of personhood, giftedness, and contribution without rushing too quickly toward sexual identity resolution. Some compassionate companions will continue to journey with young adults—both those who eventually identify as heterosexual, and those who ultimately identify as

gay or lesbian—well into their adulthood, believing God calls us to relationships that transcend differences in a mutual journey toward greater wholeness, maturity, and spiritual depth.

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