

Heaton Baptist Church's journey on the matter of sexuality

I can only write this story from the perspective of the last 18 months since my arrival as Minister at Heaton, but this journey – like with most churches – begins before then. Before I arrived, I was made aware that there was a live and complicated pastoral matter regarding the matter of sexuality. In my view, this is without doubt, the case in most churches, but the courage to step out varies wildly in those churches for a whole raft of reasons.

Stage 1: The church meeting

As I had expected, there were a wide range of views in the room in the initial discussion. There were those who had expressed concerns about the conversation being raised when I mentioned it in the Autumn, there were those who could not see why the matter of sexuality was even an issue (we kept the topic deliberately very broad in the first session) and there was a real kaleidoscope of views.

From my perspective, the key objective of the initial conversation was to sensitively open the discussion, whilst retaining the unity of the church. Mindful that I still did not know the characters or views of everyone in the church, I was nervous about the potential for this to be an incendiary meeting. We set ground-rules to ensure that differing views were able to be shared sensitively and appropriately, and to remain prayerful. We highlighted the need to be mindful of other peoples' views, underlined the need for unity and closed the meeting in communion as a sign of that unity. The meeting (which was very well attended) was discussion-based, focussing on how this matter affected those personally in the room, and what their views were. The meeting was gracious in its tone, and while there were strong and wide-ranging views, voices were never raised and hugely different perspectives openly shared. I was proud with how the church conducted itself, and the unanimous consensus for the way forward was to hold a short series of separate discussions, open to anyone actively involved in the life of the church, to explore differing perspectives on Scripture on the matter and to consider the pastoral implications of these. I was tasked with the job of seeking different voices to help us explore this, with the interest from the meeting particularly focussed on homosexuality.

Stage 2: Research

I sought two external speakers – not known within the congregation, in case of potential baggage – with alternative views to help us consider, in a discussion format, two differing perspectives of Scripture and help us wrestle with its pastoral implications. I set about doing a lot of background reading, approaching churches and ministers that I knew had begun this journey before and spoke to our wider Association, the BU and a couple of Bible colleges. What surprised me was the lack of formal resources or support that was out there. After three months of significant numbers of conversations, emails and correspondence, I had drawn a blank. The reasons cited to me predominantly included a mixture of (a) us being too far north for some (b) ministers had invested large amounts of time in this previously and their churches weren't keen for them to travel (c) a fear of the outcome of a debate format with an alternative perspective (d) us not being able to subscribe to their particular doctrine before beginning the discussion. Eventually, it became clear to me an alternative way was needed.

Whilst I had been exploring external options, I – along with the elders - had also spent a lot of time in email, phone or face-to-face correspondence with church folk trying to understand their perspectives. Unsurprisingly, these varied enormously, along with the strength of those views. Again, my concern turned to retaining the unity in the church and seeking a positive pastoral way forward. After lengthy discussions within the elders, we decided to make use of online videos to initiate the conversation in the sessions. This was not ideal but delaying the conversations indefinitely I believed would be detrimental.

Stage 3: Evening discussions

At the outset of both evening meetings, we reiterated the ground rules we had used in January, and the two evening sessions honed in on two key areas. The first focussed on Scriptural interpretation, whilst the second reflected more on our pastoral response. Both were discussion-based as a whole group, and about 75-80 people were present. Again, the discussions were sensitive, and the perspectives were wide-ranging and vastly different. However, the tone in both meetings was positive and I found myself again very proud of how the church had conducted itself. There was a real desire to hold the unity, to meaningfully wrestle with the views and to move forward together. After two lengthy and informative evenings (both of which again closed with communion), we unanimously approved three statements, namely:

1. We welcome everyone into the life of the church, even if others live or think differently to us.
2. Life is messy but in the things which are complicated or which we are unsure of, we commit to walking these things with each other.
3. Our theologies will differ, but we choose to focus on the primary aspects of our faith together which holds us together in Christ Jesus, and we choose to exercise love and grace to one another.

For some, this didn't go far enough. For others, it was the opposite. There remain views that we should be at Newcastle Pride next year, and there remain views that Scripture is very clear of the exact opposite view. However, we held the unity together of the church and I believe have laid groundwork for future discussions. Those who are gay and involved in the church emailed me or spoke with me afterwards to tell me how grateful they were that we had landed where we had, and whilst we could have gone further, I believe this was the realistic landing point for our discussions for now.

Stage 4: What next?

I believe we have corporately travelled a significant distance of understanding in a short period of time. Those who have adopted 'traditional' and 'affirming' views (I recognise those terms are clumsy) may not necessarily have changed their perspective, but we have considered how important it is for us as a church to adopt and live out the above three principles, and for that to inform any further conversations. We could have taken things further, but we have hit the 'pause' button, because I am keen for it not to define us as a church. Those who are openly gay are now actively involved in ministries within the church where that was not the case before, and the groundwork has been laid for those who are gay and who want to stand for membership to be able to do that freely in a way that I believe would have been difficult to consider previously. The outcome of that moment will be important, but it is a conversation I believe we are now prepared for.

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