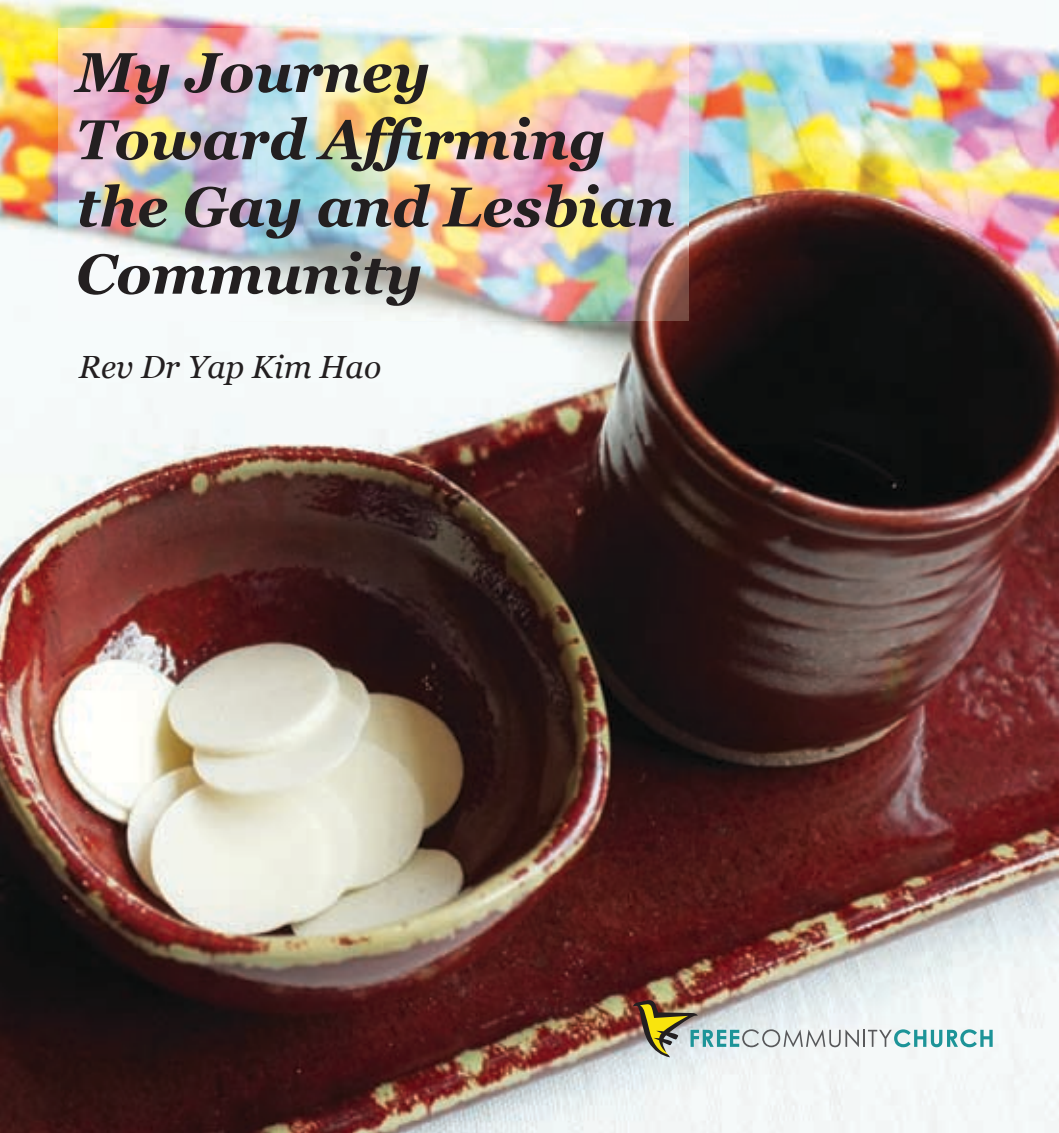
My Journey Toward Affirming the Gay and Lesbian Community

Rev Dr Yap Kim Hao



FREECOMMUNITYCHURCH

"My understanding of God is that God is the Creator and we are loved by God. God created each one of us and we are wonderfully made by God. God affirms my identity which includes my sexual identity."

~ Rev Dr Yap Kim Hao

Like many people I am a creature of the history and culture into which I was born and nurtured. As individuals we respond in different ways and our attitudes and views vary. In my time and location homosexuality was not discussed openly. There was misinformation resulting in misunderstanding. Like most people then, I was silently homophobic.

When I began my ministry in the mid-fifties, I was asked by a leading architect who must have been struggling with his sexual orientation about the views of the church. I had never studied the subject and just looked up the few isolated passages of the Bible and quickly concluded that the Bible is against homosexuality. In the minds of the Christian community until today it is not contestable, for the literal words of the Bible tell us so. Homosexuality is a sin then becomes the only conclusion and this is still believed by the majority of the Christian community.

Later, I met a gay man who wanted me to help his mother whom he had come out to, to understand his orientation. He is a UK-trained doctor. That was my first contact with a gay person and he later introduced me to his gay and lesbian friends here. He must have sensed that I could be sympathetic and took the risk. As a matter of fact I was very naïve about homosexuality. I even asked why he did not seek the best of psychiatric help to correct his condition. It was only later that I understood why he laughed at me and I realised how ignorant I was about the subject. This began my journey to affirming the gay and lesbian community.

Sexual Orientation

I read that Sigmund Freud had long ago attested that it is as difficult to change the orientation of a homosexual as it would a heterosexual. He has been proven right. The condition comes, as does being heterosexual, by a combination of genetic, hormonal, and very early societal development. It is both nature and nurture. It is not a disease to be caught.

Freud was before his time on this issue. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of personality disorders as did two years later, the American Psychological Association, indicating the naturalness of a homosexual orientation. In 1997, it passed a resolution declaring therapists who engage in conversion therapies to be following unethical and unhealthy practices.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, American Counselling Association, American Association of School Administrators, American Federation of Teachers, American Psychological Association, American School Health Association, Interfaith Alliance Foundation, National Association of School Psychologists, National Association of Social Workers and National Education Association in the United States developed and endorsed the following statement in 1999:

"The most important fact about 'reparative therapy' and also sometimes known as 'conversion therapy', is that it is based on an understanding of homosexuality that has been rejected by all the major health and mental health professions. [Our organizations], together representing more than 477,000 health and mental health professionals, have all taken the position that homosexuality is not a mental disorder and thus there is no need for a 'cure' ... health and mental health professional organizations do not support efforts to change young people's sexual orientation through 'reparative therapy' and have raised serious concerns about its potential to do harm."

Dr Robert Spitzer, professor of psychiatry at Columbia University announced a study indicating that "reparative" therapy has a failure rate on the order of 99.98 per cent. Indeed, the largest "reparative" therapy organisation, a ministry called Exodus International, initiated and supports Choices of The Church of Our Saviour, here in Singapore. Exodus was founded by two former homosexual men who, several years later, ended up leaving the ministry, divorcing their wives and living as a homosexual couple themselves.

With such official statements from reputable experts and organisations, how can I, a simple layman, not agree with these respectable scholars, teachers, mental health professionals, social workers and medical doctors?

Religious Attitudes

Continuing my journey of discovery I find that the church, like an ostrich, has its head in the sand. Gays and lesbians are compelled to stay hidden in their closets while there is so much homophobia within the church and in the community. In the past, I had kept quiet too but I saw that the movement was beginning to form in the West and I had expected it would take a long time to surface here in Asia, and especially in Singapore with its sanitised and conservative climate. But I was wrong and had little faith.

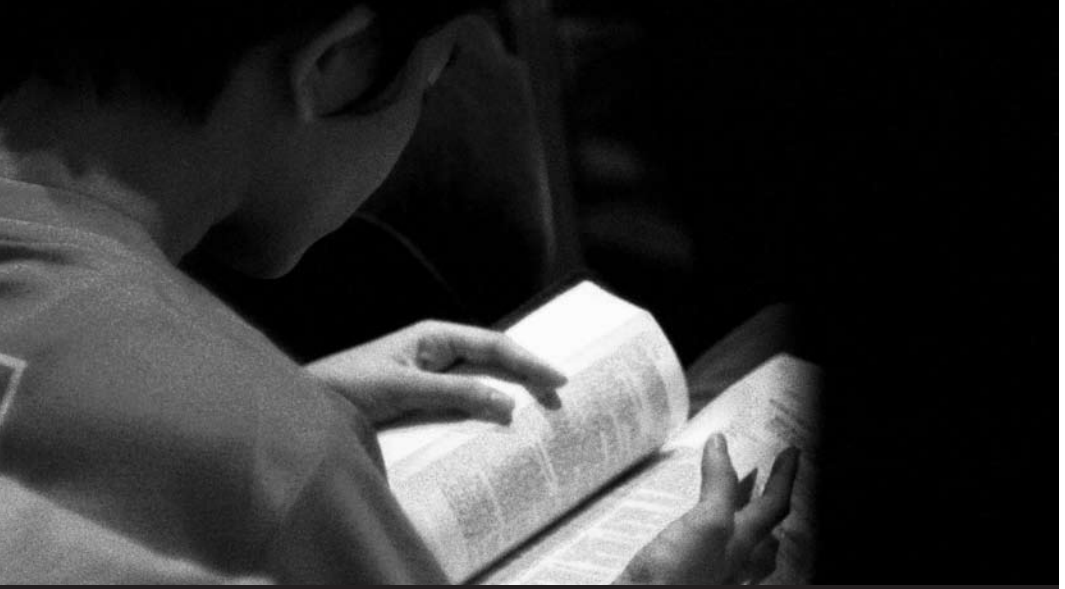
With women and blacks engaged in their liberation struggles, it was only a matter of time when the gay liberation movement would surface. My sympathies have always been for people who are victimised, the poor and needy, and the handicapped. This was heightened when I became part of the handicapped community due to the physical assault I received from the hands of a group of drunken Japanese military police in 1945. I was merely an innocent victim.

Then I went to the United States for my college education where I had to work to pay my way through school, earning money from jobs as varied as a garbage collector in college, dishwasher in the kitchen, gardener and houseboy in a dormitory. On top of this, I was one of a handful of foreigners in a community of real heartlanders in the State of Kansas in the middle of the United States. It was at the time the start of the Civil Rights struggle and I made friends with the African-Americans and sensed in a personal way what racial discrimination is all about. The professors in my college and seminary had strong social passion and fully supported the civil rights struggle.

For me it was a natural transition to the issue of gay discrimination. It was my concern for yet another marginalised and oppressed group of people. It was a sense of justice and fair-play which arose in my own intellectual and religious development that propelled me in my journey. My understanding of God is that God is the Creator and we are loved by God. God created each one of us and we are wonderfully made by God. God affirms my identity which includes my sexual identity.

In trying to understand the question of same-sex attraction I can only look at my own life and examine my sexual orientation. Did I at any time choose between heterosexuality and homosexuality? No, it just came naturally and it was not a matter of choice. I don't experience how gays and lesbians become aware of their sexual orientation but I can surmise that it came naturally to you too. I did not choose to be heterosexual as much as you did not choose to be gay.

The more I learn from the gay community's stories, and the more I study the issue of homosexuality, the more I can affirm with conviction that homosexuality is not a sin. And I am convinced that the more heterosexuals meet gay and lesbian people, the more they will realise that homosexuals are just as normal or abnormal as they are. The only difference is in their sexual attraction – either to the opposite sex or the same sex.



Religions & Homosexuality

In my study of religions, I find that none of the major Chinese religions condemn homosexuality. The ancient Chinese believe man has a duty to produce children and maintain the family line. Sex outside of marriage and even with male lovers is viewed as a private matter. The purpose of sex is the procreation of children. It is also believed that sex strengthens male vitality by absorption of the female Yin essence which is the vaginal fluid. Same-sex acts do not diminish male vitality. This understanding prevails in Japan also.

Buddhism is traditionally neutral in its attitude towards homosexuality. It is not mentioned in any of Buddha's discourses. Buddhist countries have few social and legal prohibitions against homosexuality. Thailand is relatively free from homophobia. Buddhism does not see homosexuality as wrong and heterosexuality as right. Both are sexual activity using the body and are strong expressions of lust which increase wrong desires. Buddhism does not condemn homosexuality as wrong and sinful. It does not condone it either, simply because it, like other forms of sex, delays the deliverance from samsara or re-incarnation.

Hinduism's stance on homosexuality is unclear for there is conflict in Hindu scriptures over this issue. None of the sacred Hindu texts, such as the Vedas, contain condemnation of homosexuality. However, the Vedas mentions human beings as being classified into three different categories: male, female and a third sex. "Third sex" is the group most homosexuals identify themselves with. It is likely that homosexuality is not viewed as correct but tolerated. The Indian Kama Sutra written in the third century contains passages describing oral sex performed by men on men with tips to maximise pleasure. Prior to British colonisation of India, oral sex was not the only homosexual activity, many engaged in a form of pederasty which was openly practiced by Muslims and Sikhs in the north while being overlooked in the south by Hindus.

Ancient Greece and Rome accepted sexuality as a natural part of life. Marriage was monogamous but sex was not confined within the marriage bond. Homosexuality was accepted because human nature is bisexual. Sexual polygamy existed within marital monogamy. The male-dominated society had double standards. Brides were expected to be virgins but not bridegrooms. Wives did not have a public life and were confined to household duties. Men, on the other hand engaged in sex freely with slaves and prostitutes. Adultery was not proscribed except with another man's wife who was regarded as a piece of property. Fidelity was required of wives. Along these lines, the philosophers discussed adult male relationships with boys and male youths known as pederasty. At best, adult males saw pederasty as being primarily a mentoring relationship.

When the Bible condemns the "homosexuality" of the Greco-Roman society, it was condemning all forms of ancient pederasty, not modern homosexuality. We would be violating the historical context of these texts if we failed to account with the truth that homosexuality in our historical context is different from that which occurred in the Greco-Roman world. Homosexuality today may be a sin in the eyes of some, but you cannot prove it by referring to biblical texts that are condemning pederasty and not homosexuality.

Terminology of Homosexuality

Homosexuality in terms of personal orientation as a life-long pattern was first used by Swiss doctor K M Benkert in 1869. Homosexuality refers to a sexual orientation characterised by aesthetic attraction, romantic love and sexual desire exclusively or almost exclusively for members of the same sex.

According to the most recent edition of Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (tenth edition), "homosexual" as an adjective was first used in 1892 and as a noun in 1902, and "homophobia" was first used in 1969 and "homophobe" first used in 1975. The translation of any Bible word as "homosexual" is a mistake.

Homosexuality & Abrahamic Religions

Religion has played a significant role in forming a culture's views towards homosexuality, largely arising from claims of revelations in the sacred writings. Historically the negative perceptions have been limited to the Abrahamic religions. Other religious groups have commonly regarded homosexuality as sacred or neutral. In the wake of Colonialism and Imperialism undertaken by countries of the Abrahamic faiths, some non-Abrahamic religious groups have adopted new attitudes that condemn homosexuality.

The world's three major Abrahamic religions – Christianity, Islam and Judaism have historically been the primary sources condemning homosexuality in the world.

Orthodox Jews believe that homosexual intercourse by men and women is sinful, since it is forbidden by the Torah. An interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 maintains

that homosexual intercourse between men is considered on the same level as idolatry, requiring death; and for women it is based on Leviticus 18:2-3, where the Israelites are commanded not to follow the ways of the Egyptians or Canaanites.

Today some major Christian denominations have accepted homosexuality, arguing that the Jewish law was originally intended to distinguish between Judaism and pagan faiths, and is thus no longer relevant.

Conservative Jews recognise equality of congregation members regardless of sexual orientation, favour decriminalisation of homosexual acts, prohibit discrimination against homosexuals, and support equal rights for gays and lesbians.

Reform Judaism argues that homosexuality is a natural attraction, and that the prohibition in the Torah was addressing pagan religious rituals, specifically Egyptian and Canaanite fertility cults and temple prostitution. They accept gay and lesbian rabbis and support civil same-sex marriages.

In Islam, homosexuality is considered sinful. Muslims believe that people are not homosexual by nature and they become homosexual because of their environment. There are five passages in the Koran that relate to gay and lesbian behaviour.

Biblical Interpretation

Christians claim that the churches teaching on same-sex attraction is based on the Bible. They quote certain verses associated with this issue and regard them as divine truth revealed by God. The Bible is a difficult book written by inspired men and women of faith. Many Christians believe that the actual words written in the Bible were revealed to the authors by God. Some even claim that the Bible was dictated by God and just recorded by the authors. Soon it was realised that it was not dictation but interpretations of what ancient people believed to be God's revelation to them.

The early religious community had to determine whose writings should be included in the Bible and the Church in Council finally came to sort out these religious documents and officially gave its approval to the form as we now have as the Holy Bible.

The Church leaders continued to give their official interpretation of what was interpreted in the first place by the writers of the different books of the Bible. As good Protestants we could not accept this and rallied for individual interpretations of the Bible. The Bible which was in the past read to the masses by the Roman Catholic Church clergy, was soon made available to individual Christians for their reading, study and interpretation.

The interpretations of the Bible from the outset reflected the historical and cultural situations which prevailed then and this continues in the work of those who study the Bible today. Our task is to aim to understand what was meant when it was first written and how it relates to us in our contemporary setting.

In my early studies for the Christian ministry I was assigned a book that was influential in my understanding of the Bible and its interpretation. The title of the book is *The Bible Speaks to our Generation*. I must add that the Bible continues to speak to each succeeding generation and we need to re-examine our interpretation in every generation.

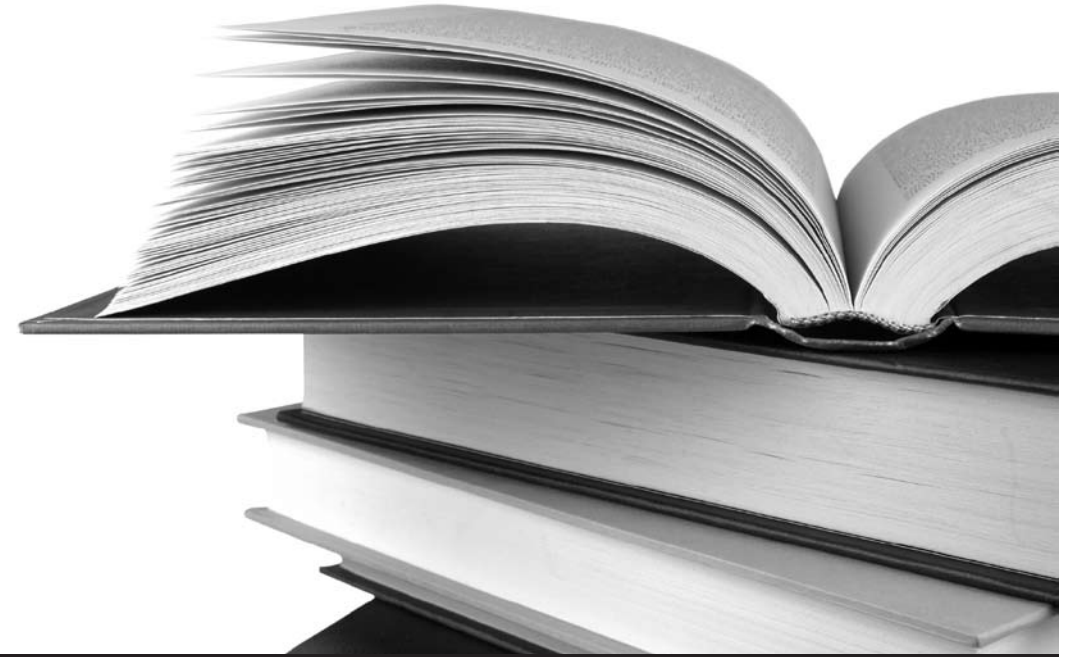
In Biblical times and in Jewish history we find a patriarchal society in which men ruled. Men were the heads of the household. Women were to be subordinate and therefore submissive to men. In fact, the wife of a man was his property and it was the religious duty of the women to produce babies, take care of the family, and satisfy the sexual needs of men. You will find a number of Biblical passages describing this role of women. Do we subscribe to this restrictive female role today?

This famous quotation from Greek writer Demosthenes makes it clear: "This is what it means to be married: to have sons one can introduce to the family and the neighbours, and to have daughters of one's own to give to husbands. For we have courtesans for pleasure, concubines to attend to our daily bodily needs, and wives to bear children legitimately and to be faithful wards of our homes."

Furthermore, the bible passages relating to same-sex acts must be seen in the light of the Jewish opposition to pagan religions. The Greek and Roman culture influenced those who wrote the New Testament and coloured their reactions to pagan temple prostitution and ritual sexual acts.

Let us look at 1 Corinthians 6:9. The two Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* have been translated differently at different times in different versions of the Bible in English. The King James Version in 1611 regarded these to mean those who are effeminate and abusers of themselves with mankind, which was close to the Greek meaning.

The Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the New Testament first appeared in 1946 and it was the first translation ever to use the word "homosexual". It translated the two words to mean homosexuals or sexual perverts. Then in 1978 the New International Version (NIV) translated these words as male prostitutes and homosexual offenders. It was the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) in 1989 that renders them, male prostitutes and sodomites. It must be noted that the word homosexual was not used in the earlier periods. It was in 1180 that the word sodomy was first used. There is no such word as "sodomite" in the original languages (Ezekiel 16:49-50 describes the sin of Sodom as pride, gluttony, not caring for the poor and needy).



Views of Some Theologians & Church Leaders

John Boswell, *Professor of History, Yale University:*
"The Hebrew word *toevah,* here translated abomination, does not usually signify something intrinsically evil like rape or theft (discussed elsewhere in Leviticus), but something which is ritually unclean for Jews, like eating pork or engaging in intercourse during menstruation, both of which are prohibited in these same chapters."

Seow Choon Leong *of Princeton Theological Seminary:*
"I used to believe that divorce is wrong under any circumstance, simply because that is what the scriptures teach. I could -- and still can -- quote chapter and verse from the Bible (Matthew 5:31), particularly the words of Jesus. I have since learned from friends and loved ones what horrible traps bad marriages can be. People suffer enormously; some people even kill themselves because of bad marriages that they cannot otherwise escape. Some people suffer physical abuse in such marriages. Some are even killed. Unlike the friends of Job, I am not willing to uphold dogma at all costs, certainly not when I know that people are suffering and dying. I have gone back to reread the scriptures and I have heard the gospel anew.

I also used to believe that homosexual acts are always wrong. Listening to gay and lesbian students and friends, however, I have had to rethink my position and reread the scriptures. Seeing how gay and lesbian people suffer discrimination, face the rejection of family and friends, risk losing their jobs, and live in fear of being humiliated and bashed, I cannot see how anyone would prefer to live that way. I do not understand it all, but I am persuaded that it is not a matter of choice. Seeing how some gay and lesbian couples relate to one another in loving partnerships, observing how much joy they find in one another, and seeing that some of them are better parents than most of us will ever be, I have reconsidered my views. I was wrong.

From the testimony of homosexual persons and from various reports, I have learned that there is an extraordinarily high rate of suicide among homosexual persons. People are dying every day because of society's attitudes -- indeed, because of the church's stance. Many people hate themselves because of what society and the church say about them. I know of many homosexual persons in the ministry who have been very effective for the cause of Jesus Christ, but they suffer tremendous guilt because they have to keep their secret from the church they love dearly.... They are hurt by the church. I cannot believe that we are called to perpetuate such pain and suffering in the world.... For me there is nothing less than the gospel at stake."

Rev Dr Mona West, *Senior Pastor of Church of the Trinity in Sarasota, Florida:*
"Only a small number of passages in the entire Bible reference same-sex activity (six passages out of sixty-six books of the entire Bible). Obviously this topic was not of great concern to the biblical writers. Yet these verses have been used to justify hatred, condemnation and exclusion of God's lesbian and gay children."

Rt Rev Michael Ingham, *Bishop of New Westminster, Toronto, Canada:*
For the greater part of my life I have believed that God has ordained the sexual act for men and women alone. For the greater part of my life I have believed that all forms of same-sex relationship are a distortion of the biblical ideal of marriage; that marriage is for men and women; that marriage is for life; that in the absence of marriage one should remain celibate; and that even if these ideals are difficult to live up to, they nevertheless represent a high and noble Christian ideal, and are the revealed will of God.

My study of Scripture, and twenty years of pastoral work among all sorts and conditions of people, has led me in another direction. I still believe the Christian life means choosing the harder path of self-discipline and self-sacrifice over the easier path of following our selfish instincts. And I still believe that sexual relationships between people are profoundly sacramental, that is, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace that connects people with each other at the deepest core of their being.

I continue to believe that sexual activity needs to be between people of relatively equal power, between people who have both the maturity and security to give themselves freely to each other in mutual love, and that all forms of exploitation and degradation, coercion and manipulation, are morally wrong. I also believe our Church has been correct to say that sexual activity achieves its highest expression in the context of a sacrificial commitment by one person to another, in a covenant of mutual love, that sex it is a sacred act and a sign of the unconditional love God has for us and for all creation. None of this has changed for me.

But I no longer believe that only heterosexual people are capable of such sacramental relationships, and I no longer agree with the double standard our church has imposed on gay men and lesbians as a condition of their inclusion within the Christian community. I continue to believe that the celibate or single life is always an option for people, that voluntary abstention from sexual relationships is a courageous choice and should be treated with respect. But I no longer believe sexual abstention can be required of an entire class of people, simply because of their sexual orientation, and regardless of their personal vocation and calling.

I've crossed over from one side of the divide to the other not because of I've lost sight of the Gospel, but because the Gospel itself cannot and will not sustain continued discrimination against people simply because they are attracted to others of the same sex. And after many discussions with people in countless coffee hours and forums after church, I have come to think that the basis for our continued denial of dignity and intimacy to gay and lesbian people is not theology but pathology. I believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ now requires us to recognise the full humanity of every child of God, whatever their sexual orientation.

Concluding Remarks

All the religious, historical, social and cultural factors must be taken into account into reading and interpreting specifically the few Biblical texts regarded to be related to the issue of same-sex attraction. Just to quote the words of the Bible without looking at the context and the traditions related to them is just not enough and irresponsible.

Then we have to examine our contemporary understanding of ourselves and our community. We are sexual beings with our urges, drives, desires and attractions.

As a heterosexual, I accept my sexuality without question. I was made to be attracted to the opposite sex. Since the majority of God's people are heterosexual this powerful majority became regarded as normal. They view those who are different from them as abnormal or deviant. Those whom God has endowed with same-sex attractions are forced to question themselves. Is this normal? Is this acceptable to God? You cannot change your sexual orientation just as we heterosexuals cannot change ours. We have to relate to our different sexualities as given by God. We cannot fully comprehend the purposes of God in ordering different sexual conditions.

Within the Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious and cultural traditions we have changing attitudes towards sex. It is made more difficult when we view the spirit or soul as spiritual, and matter and body as material, and we place a higher value on things of the spirit and tend to despise the material body. We tend to believe that God is only spiritual, dwelling in the heavenly realm and totally unrelated to the material and earthly plane. Consequently we regard sex as evil and celebrate the virtue of celibacy and the denial of all things sexual. Who dares to say anything about Jesus' being? He is seen as divine and therefore assumed to be sexless. But such is not the case of our friend Paul the Apostle who recognised the flaming power of sex though he did not give room to express it himself.

The Early Church Fathers viewed sexuality as a result of the Fall of Adam. The highest virtue for the Christian is that of martyrdom followed by virginity and celibacy. The lowest rung is the state of marriage. Sex is seen as a danger to Christian piety. Sexual abstinence in marriage is better than that of procreating children. The least good is that of enjoying sex. St. Augustine was troubled about sexual lusts and linked all sexual union with original sin. Later St Aquinas judged sexual acts in this manner: "They must be done for the right purpose (procreation), with the right person (one's lawfully wedded spouse), and in the right way (heterosexual genital intercourse)."

Now there is general recognition that sex is not only for procreation. In Biblical times we have injunctions about semen, masturbation and attitudes about menstruation relating to procreation. The Catholic Church with regard to family planning and population control modified this. The Protestant churches generally have no problems with the use of condoms to prevent conception and with the issue of abortion.

Today there is also increasing acceptance of sex as described by James Nelson: God's primary purpose in creating us as sexual beings is not that of procreation, but rather to give us the desire and capacity to love and to bond with others in intimacy. Thus, theology has given new attention to the insight that sexuality is crucial to God's design that creatures do not dwell in isolation and loneliness but in communion and community.

God's fundamental purpose in creating us as sexual beings was not that we might make babies, but that we might make love. I believe as sexual beings we are made for love, intimacy, mutuality, sexuality. Sexual intercourse is exploitative when it is not mutually satisfying or an expression of intimacy and love for one another.

John Boswell in his historical studies revealed that the Early Church did not generally oppose homosexual behaviour as such. The opposition that arose during the third to sixth centuries was due to the demise of urban culture, government regulation on personal morality and church pressures toward asceticism. Hostility appeared only in the late twelfth century.

Marriage was not celebrated by Christian wedding services in church worship until perhaps the ninth century. It was considered as a civil order and not a religious rite or church ceremony before then.

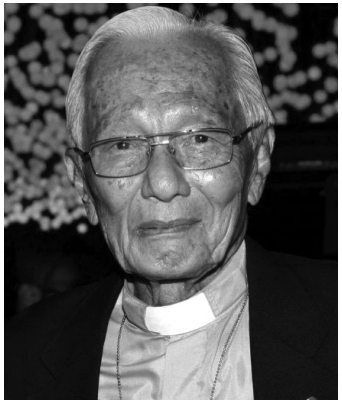
Today, I regard mutuality, intimacy, life-long committed relationships, and sexual pleasure as important values for marital relationships for heterosexuals as well as homosexuals. Same-sex attraction is not a sin but an orientation, holy and acceptable in the sight of God.

Excerpts from a talk on
"Same-Sex Attraction: A Christian Perspective"
organised by RedQuEEn!,
a queer women's discussion group in Singapore 23 July 2005

About the Author

Rev Dr Yap Kim Hao, in his retirement from full-time Christian ministry, serves as Pastoral Advisor to the Free Community Church, a role he regards as a calling of God, to declare Christ's inclusive love to those who have been ostracised and neglected for far too long by the Church.

Rev Dr Yap was the first Asian Bishop of The Methodist Church in Malaysia and Singapore. Subsequently, he served as General Secretary of the Christian Conference of Asia, an ecumenical organisation of over a hundred churches and national council of churches in Asia. He holds Master of Divinity and Doctor of Theology degrees from Boston University and was honoured by them with a Distinguished Alumni Award in 1988.



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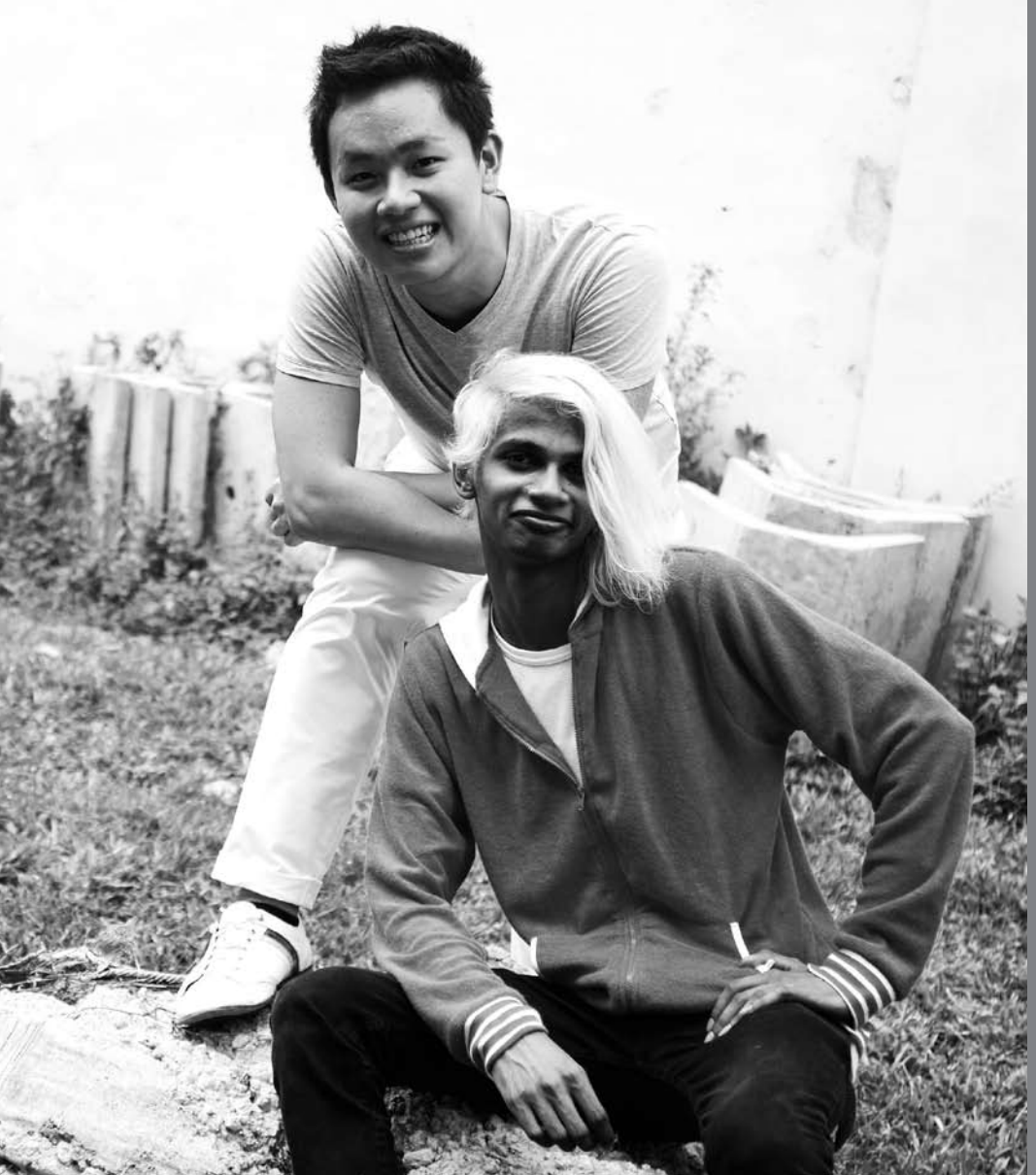

FreeCommunity**Church**

The Free Community Church is a congregation of diverse individuals and families gathering to worship and grow as a Christian community. We desire to develop a vibrant heart relationship with God and a thinking-mind relationship with the Bible. We affirm that all individuals, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered persons, are individuals of sacred worth created in God's image. Our church affirms that same-sex and transgendered relationships, when lived out in accord with the love commandments of Jesus, are consistent with Christian faith and teachings.

Our VISION is to be an inclusive community that celebrates diversity in living out God's love and promise of abundant life for all.

Our MISSION is to create sacred space and give voice to the lives and experiences of minority communities, recognising their potential to transform lives and the wider church for the common good and glory of God.

We welcome all people regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or economic status to our worship services and activities.

For more information, please visit *www.freecomchurch.org*
or e-mail *info@freecomchurch.org*

Notes

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