

# Groundbreaking Conference on Homosexuality Held

BY CLINTON WAHLEN

An interdisciplinary conference on the theme “Marriage, Homosexuality and the Church,” sponsored by a number of church institutions including the Biblical Research Institute,<sup>1</sup> was held at Andrews University on October 15 to 17, 2009. Bringing together experts in religious liberty and public affairs, theology and ethics, and psychology and pastoral care, the presentations addressed a wide swath of issues that have churned within the Adventist church and other Christian denominations for some time. Here is a summary of the conference.<sup>2</sup>

## Scientific, Psychological, and Pastoral Approaches

Mark Yarhouse, professor of psychology and the Hughes Chair of Christian Thought in Mental Health Practice at Regent University, in the first of two presentations at the conference, squarely addressed the issue as to whether homosexuality is innate like skin color or results from a number of factors, including environmental influences. Yarhouse observed how some widely-cited studies supporting a biological determination for homosexuality have been seriously undermined by more recent investigations.<sup>3</sup> One of the most interesting of these studies, from J. Michael Bailey, involved identical twins and employed an improved methodology compared with that used in work done by Bailey himself and Richard C. Pillard ten years earlier. The more recent study “‘did not provide statistically significant support for the importance of genetic factors’ for homosexual orientation.”<sup>4</sup> A study published in 2008 concluded that environmental factors not shared by twins was predominant in the development of same sex attraction.<sup>5</sup> Yarhouse also pointed to other recent studies confirming that environmental influences play a larger role in homosexual orientation than previously allowed.

Perhaps most significant is the question of whether change in one’s orientation is possible. Yarhouse, summarizing the results of a longitudinal study co-authored with Stanton L. Jones of homosexuals enrolled in change ministries,<sup>6</sup> reported that at year six fully 53% of homosexuals seeking to move away from that lifestyle were successful to some degree while 25% experienced failure. Although these figures are not conclusive because only 64% of those studied remained participants through to the end, the study does demonstrate that “fluidity” can occur—significant change is possible for homosexuals.<sup>7</sup> In fact, they found that men on the extreme end of the homosexual spectrum experienced the most significant degree of change in a heterosexual direction. Another interesting finding is that undergoing a change attempt did not cause participants more distress but, if anything, served to reduce their distress.

Yarhouse’s second presentation was more practical, providing a paradigm for ministry to homosexuals. He argued that, since sexual identity is an act of “self-labeling,” it is important to move beyond the dichotomy of gay versus straight to a three-tiered distinction (based on studies of the intensity of attraction):

1. Same Sex Attraction (experienced by 6.2% of men and 4.4% of women).
2. Homosexual Orientation (present in only 2% of men and 0.9% of women).
3. Gay Identity (attaching to a percentage too small to measure).

Western culture tends to confuse homosexual attraction with homosexual identity. Studies indicate that it can take up to fifteen years from the time a person becomes aware of homosexual attraction to the adoption of a homosexual identity. The most critical ages are the teen years. The typical progression begins with awareness, moves on to confusion, then to behavior, attribution, labeling and finally to a homosexual relationship. Homosexual advocates try to insist that a person’s beliefs should change to conform to their homosexual behavior, a process of gay identification. A Christian approach, by contrast, moves the other way: encouraging behavior change to conform to the person’s beliefs. Rather than the “discovery metaphor” (discover who you already are) employed by gay rights advocates, Yarhouse proposes an “integration metaphor” (choose to center

your identity on aspects and experiences other than mere sexual attraction). Pastors should seek to protect those who experience same sex attraction from assumptions and labels imposed by others and should encourage them to explore the “weighted aspects” of their identity. In other words, like heterosexuals, the identity of a person who experiences same sex attraction derives from their physical gender, intentions, behavior, beliefs and values and not merely from the sexual inclinations they experience. It is up to each individual to assess the relative weight each of these aspects carries in forming their personal identity.

One of the subsequent panel discussions also addressed the practical pastoral and counseling issues involved in dealing with same sex attraction. Carlos Fayard, associate professor of psychiatry at Loma Linda University School of Medicine, described the therapy, based on John 7:37-38, which he administered to a clergyman who had lived a double life for most of his ministry. This man, after being exposed and contracting HIV, ultimately discovered the presence of God in a moment of sincere prayer and chose celibacy. Peter Swanson, assistant professor of pastoral care and chair of the Christian ministry department of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, observed that pastors are generally ill-equipped to deal with homosexual congregants. They not only have a duty to “call sin by its right name” but also to embrace sinners and to challenge the unchristian attitudes that church members often display toward homosexuals. The panel concluded with the observations of Mark Yarhouse that, more important than understanding the causes of homosexuality (drawing an analogy to John 9:1-3), is the opportunity for ministry that those in the church struggling with same sex attraction represent. He listed five principles for this type of ministry:

1. Avoid an over-emphasis on change while still encouraging hope.
2. Uphold the value of both marriage and singleness.
3. Enable same-sex-attracted individuals to create a Christian “script” or self-identity.
4. Equip people with a concept of stewardship that embraces all believers.
5. Lead by example.

### **Religious Liberty and Public Affairs Issues**

Several experts in religious liberty from across North America expressed the worrisome implications for the church and church-run institutions of permitting marriage to be redefined. Barry Bussey, Associate Director of the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department of the General Conference, chaired the panel. Drawing on his experience arguing cases in Canada and legal journals, Bussey delineated the efforts underway to prevent any indoctrination in the church or at home that would hinder people from embracing homosexuality as an alternate lifestyle. Gerald Chipeur, an Adventist lawyer working in Canada, used several legal cases to illustrate how his country’s legal recognition of marriage between homosexuals has moved the debate from toleration to outright support, resulting in expensive litigation in order for religious institutions to maintain employment discrimination. According to Alan Reinach, “it is impossible to overstate the risks” of allowing a similar redefinition of marriage to occur in the United States, warning that if sexual orientation becomes established as a fundamental right it would trump the right of religious freedom.

The conventional wisdom that “Adventists should not get into politics” was challenged as overly simplistic by Bill Knott, editor of the *Adventist Review* and *Adventist World* magazines. Leading the audience on an enlightening walk through the pages of the *Review* at critical junctures of American history, he showed that, from the beginning, Adventists had become vigorously involved in social issues of sufficient moral gravity. For example, the *Review* took an unequivocal stand against slavery in the mid-1800s and lent energetic support to the temperance movement in the early years of the twentieth century and, in the aftermath of World War I, to disarmament. In short, the church “saved moral weight and freight for issues that vitally affected its

interests.” He noted sadly, however, a “conspicuous silence” on the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II and the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

A second panel looked more closely at the religious implications of homosexual marriage. Scot Zentner, of California State University, San Bernadino, argued that, when it comes to marriage, we must distinguish between social and individual liberty. Homosexuality ignores common sense gender differences and undermines the system of natural law undergirding our modern legal code. Jason Hines, formerly a Philadelphia lawyer now studying religion in the Seminary at Andrews University, exposed the fallacious arguments sometimes employed for prohibiting gay marriage as a civil institution. Nick Miller, director of the International Religious Liberty Institute at Andrews, associate professor of church history of the Seminary at Andrews, and organizer of the conference, stated that when moral and legal concerns overlap the church has a duty to get involved, particularly as regards the two institutions surviving from Eden, the Sabbath and marriage—both of which will be under attack at the end. Pointing out that all human rights have a moral basis, he underscored the importance of natural law as “the only moral compass we have as a society” to define these rights.

### **Theology and Ethics**

Robert A. J. Gagnon, Associate Professor of New Testament at Pittsburg Theological Seminary, emphasized many of the points made in published works.<sup>8</sup> Understanding 2 Cor 4:7-10

to teach that not acting on natural impulses is necessary for a satisfying spiritual life, he considered what Jesus and Paul had to say about marriage and homosexuality. In Mark 10:1-12, Jesus quotes two key verses from the Genesis creation account (1:27; 2:24) in order to establish God’s original ideal for marriage: that it is between one male and one female and that these two complementary beings are to become one flesh. Homosexuality ignores the divine intention and the principle of complementarity. In examining Paul, Gagnon used a two-pronged approach: (1) careful exegesis showing that Rom 1:26-27 deals not with violent, coercive or abusive homosexual relationships but condemns in fact homosexual relationship based on mutuality and consent; (2) demonstration from classical texts and iconography that homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world tended to

### ***IMPORTANT POINTS PRESENTED***

1. Environmental influences play a larger role in homosexual orientation than previous studies allowed.
2. Significant change is possible for homosexuals and attempting change did not heighten their feelings of distress but seems to have reduced it.
3. A Christian identity derives from many factors including physical gender, intentions, behavior, beliefs and values, and should not be defined primarily in terms of sexual attraction.
4. Adventists have often become vigorously involved in social issues of sufficient moral gravity.
5. Legal efforts are necessary to prevent sexual orientation from becoming established as a fundamental right which would endanger the right to religious freedom.
6. Homosexuality ignores common sense gender differences and undermines the system of natural law undergirding our modern legal code.
7. While not all biblical laws can be directly applied today, the prohibition of homosexual relations in Leviticus 18 and 20 are timeless moral laws.
8. Jesus, in Mark 10:1-12, quotes two key verses from the Genesis creation account to establish God’s original ideal for marriage: that it is between one male and one female and that these two complementary beings are to become one flesh (Gen 1:27; 2:24).
9. Paul deals in Rom 1:26-27 not with violent, coercive or abusive homosexual relationships but in fact condemns same-sex relations which are based on mutuality and consent.
10. Five Important Principles for Ministry to Homosexuals:
  - a. Avoid over-emphasizing change while still encouraging hope.
  - b. Uphold the value of both marriage and singleness.
  - c. Enable same-sex attracted individuals to create a Christian self-identity.
  - d. Equip people with a concept of stewardship that embraces all believers.
  - e. Lead by example.

be like its modern counterpart: consensual, loving relationships between equals. In short, Paul's unequivocal and categorical condemnation of homosexuality applies with just as much relevance to our day. Following the presentation, Pastor Dwight Nelson chaired a panel discussion with Gagnon and other conference presenters in order to give the university students an opportunity to ask questions.

Sabbath morning began with brief presentations. Robert Gagnon rejected the idea that a "sexual same" person could be a kind of "sexual other," calling it a form of sexual self-deception because it presumes that one needs a second person of the same sex in order to be a sexually whole person. Worse, he said, the absence of a true sexual complement does positive sexual harm because there is no moderation of a given gender's extremes nor supplying of the gaps by the gender's complement. Richard Davidson dwelt on the two most important OT contexts relevant to the subject of homosexuality: Gen 1-2 and Lev 18, 20. Homosexuals cannot receive the blessing nor fulfill the command of Gen 1:27-28 to be fruitful and multiply. Gen 2:22-24 describes the first wedding "ceremony," complete with vows (v. 23) and the divine command (v. 24) that marriage is to be between a male (*ish*) and a female (*ishah*) and that "this is what should happen from now on." Lev 18:22 prohibits male homosexuality regardless of age, while 20:13 implicitly condemns not homosexual rape but consensual intercourse because both partners are subject to the death penalty. Significantly, homosexuality, among other sins, is labeled an abomination (*to'ebah*), meaning it is viewed with repugnance by God because of its evil and given as one of the reasons the Canaanites were vomited out of the land (18:24-28). These laws in Lev 17-18 are incumbent upon foreigners as well as Israelites and, for that reason, are reiterated in the Apostolic Decree of Acts 15:29 as binding on Gentiles.

Miroslav Kiš, professor of Christian ethics and chair of the Theology and Christian Philosophy department of the Seminary at Andrews University, explored the biblical concepts of innocence, guilt, and shame in relation to homosexual practices, which Paul labels "shameless acts" (Rom 1:27) for several reasons: first, because they set God aside, making no difference between right and wrong; second, because homosexual behavior is "unnatural"; and, third, because of "the almost universal experience of shame" by homosexuals prior to their "coming out." Society has failed homosexuals by making "ought" what "is." The church has often failed also by emphasizing the "ought" to the point that the "is" of homosexuality appears hopeless whereas in fact "God in His limitless love has the complete cure" (Heb 7:25) through confession and repentance.

Roy Gane, professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Languages of the Seminary at Andrews University, drawing on a recent article and his commentary on Leviticus,<sup>9</sup> rebuts the assertion that a same-sex relationship that is loving, mutual, committed, and exclusive similar to a monogamous marriage between heterosexuals is acceptable to God. He dispenses with the arguments for this in turn: (1) although not all biblical laws have direct application today, the prohibition of homosexual relations in Lev 18 and 20 are "timeless moral laws" (like the prohibition of incest in these chapters, cf. 1 Cor 5); (2) although ceremonial impurity laws are no longer in force, "the impurity of homosexual practice was not simply ceremonial, but moral" (rejecting also, in view of Lev 18:19, 29; 20:18; Eze 18:5-6; 22:10, the assertion that only a cultural basis exists for the prohibition of intercourse during menstruation). (3) against Jacob Milgrom's assertion that the laws of Lev 18 and 20 only apply to inhabitants of the holy land, Gane points out that this limited scope, while present elsewhere in Leviticus (14:34; 19:23; 23:10; 25:2), does not figure into this legislation, which deals with *porneia* or sexual immorality also condemned in the NT (Acts 15:20, 29; homosexuality specifically in Rom 1:27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10; and lesbianism in Rom 1:26); (4) even though these prohibitions helped distinguish Israel from the surrounding nations, this does not exhaust their purpose any more than Israel's honoring of the Sabbath nullifies its ongoing validity—unlike circumcision, the Apostolic decree upheld the timeless moral character of the prohibitions against immorality; (5) although there were exploitive

relationships in ancient times as there are today, Paul's use of *arsenokoitēs* ("homosexual") appears to be derived from the Septuagint terminology of Lev 18:22 and 20:13, supporting the ongoing validity of these prohibitions; (6) although Paul shares pre-Christian Jewish condemnation of these gentile vices, his argument is that since gentiles recognize homosexuality as unnatural even more so should Christians (and where discontinuity exists between Jewish norms and freedom in Christ Paul does not hesitate to point it out); (7) against the idea that God would not condemn people for living according to the way He made them, God does not limit the application of these laws in any way and the sinful tendencies of our fallen nature in no way justify our acting on them. Homosexuals also "can be redeemed, transformed, and experience full peace with God."

The sermon by the senior pastor of Pioneer Memorial Church, Dwight Nelson, "Sex in the Temple: What's So Gay about That?", focused on 1 Cor 6:9-20, noting several kinds of sexual sins mentioned by Paul<sup>10</sup> and emphasizing the hope represented in the words "such *were* some of you" (v. 11). What the Corinthians *were*, they no longer *are* because they have been transformed by grace, washed clean, justified, and sanctified. Since our bodies are a temple for the indwelling Holy Spirit, immorality is out of place (vv. 18-20).<sup>11</sup>

The main presenter on Sabbath afternoon was Richard Davidson. Addressing what is at stake in this debate, Davidson said the main issue centers on the authority of Scripture as superior to all human sources of knowing. When science conflicts with the Bible, the Bible must have the final say. The prohibition of homosexuality impinges on most, if not all, of our key doctrines. Also at stake is the power of Scripture to transform lives—of the homosexual as well as of those who hate homosexuals, pointing to the written testimony of a college classmate of his. In it, his friend "Jonathan" tells how he had been freed by God from Satan's "Plan B" (homosexuality) and enabled to believe in God's "Plan A" (His "original plan for your life") which encompasses change, healing, restoration, recovery, "little daily miracles," and "a real, believable friendship with Him."

### **Testimonies**

As important as the presentations on psychology, pastoral and legal issues, and theology and ethics were, it was the testimonies that made the meetings "real"—hearing the stories of people like "Jonathan" (though he was only virtually present through his written testimony referred to by Davidson). Pastor Ron Woolsey recalled his conflicted feelings while studying theology. He ultimately became angry with God because, he felt, "God could help others but couldn't help me." Finally, after sixteen years of looking for love "in all the wrong places," a turning point came: "When I stopped blaming [God] I started hearing" and "studied the word of God for my very life." He said he found answers when he finally acknowledged homosexuality activity as a sin-issue. "I walked away. But not without a struggle."

Another presenter, Wayne Blakely, unimpressed with SDAKinship as offering no real hope, found help through GLAdventist.org. Its founder, Inge Anderson, was also present. Her ministry focuses on helping people improve their relationship with Christ. Any change in orientation that might result is a bonus. She stressed that we need to love people where they are. According to Anderson, a person's homosexual orientation (as distinct from practice) is not sin because it is part of a person's inherited sinful nature. She was told, "I never knew Christians like you would care for a person like me."

Overall, the conference marked a significant beginning in bringing together a wide range of people to discuss at length from a biblical standpoint a topic that is seldom even mentioned let alone closely examined. For many of those in attendance, including myself, it was the first time to really hear directly from those who have struggled with same sex attraction as well as from those who have devoted a significant portion of their ministries to this issue. A book comprising papers from the conference should be out by this summer.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Andrews University International Religious Liberty Institute organized the conference in cooperation with Andrews, Oakwood, and Southern universities, The Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, the General Conference's Biblical Research Institute and the Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department, the North American Division Ministerial Department, the Church-State Council of the Pacific Union Conference, the North Pacific Union Conference and the Northwest Religious Liberty Association.

<sup>2</sup>In compiling this report, David Hamstra's blog on the conference proved most helpful; cited 10 November 2009; online: <http://apokalupto.blogspot.com/2009/10/blogging-homosexuality-conference.html>.

<sup>3</sup>His presentation updates information found in Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 78, citing J. Michael Bailey, Michael P. Dunne and Nicholas G. Martin, "Genetic and Environmental Influences on Sexual Orientation and Its Correlates in an Australian Twin Sample," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78 (March 2000): 524-36 here 534.

<sup>5</sup>N. Langstrom, Q. Rahman, E. Carlstrom and P. Lichtenstein, "Genetic and Environmental Effects on Same-sex Sexual Behavior: A Population Study of Twins in Sweden," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* (2008). Online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10508-008-9386-1>.

<sup>6</sup>Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, *Ex-gays?: A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2007).

<sup>7</sup>See also L. M. Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup>Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2001), 185-303. See also Daniel O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2003), 68-88.

<sup>9</sup>Roy Gane, "Same-Sex Love in the 'Body of Christ?'" in *Christianity and Homosexuality: Some Seventh-day Adventist Perspectives* (ed. David Ferguson, Fritz Guy, and David Larson; Roseville, Calif.: Adventist Forum, 2008), Part 4:63-72; *idem*, *Leviticus, Numbers* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004), 325-30.

<sup>10</sup>Citing Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation. A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 389: "Though only a few biblical texts speak of homoerotic activity, all that do mention it express unqualified disapproval. Thus, on this issue, there is no synthetic problem for New Testament ethics. In this respect, the issue of homosexuality differs significantly from matters such as slavery or the subordination of women, concerning which the Bible contains internal tensions and counterposed witnesses. The biblical witness against homosexual practice is univocal."

<sup>11</sup>The sermon is available at: <http://media.pmchurch.org/mp3/Sermon091017.mp3>; and the study guide at: [http://www.pmchurch.tv/site/1/docs/2009-10-17\\_Temple-7.pdf](http://www.pmchurch.tv/site/1/docs/2009-10-17_Temple-7.pdf).

<sup>12</sup>The oral presentations and written materials are available from American Christian Ministries on 19 CDs: <http://www.americanchristianministries.org/categories.cfm?categorydesc=CDs&subcategoryid=473&itemid=4657>.