

Welcoming Gay Friends at Church

By Rev. Andrew Millsom, member of PCQ's GiST committee

I was blown away recently that one of my wife's gay friends wants to come along to church. Not regularly, just to visit. But he wants to come along just the same.

James (name changed) recently heard about a special celebration our church is having and asked if he could come. James takes his aunt along to her church from time to time, so church is not completely alien to him. He even believes in God in some sense. But he knows that Christians oppose gay marriage, and his impression is that Christians hate gay people. So the fact that James wants to come along to church at all is a big deal, a big step for him. A big risk. Could it be that God is working in his life?

It got me thinking though, what kind of welcome will James receive when he comes along to church, especially when people find out he's gay? Don't get me wrong, our church is pretty welcoming, but having a gay man come along is foreign territory to us.

And what would it look like if James decided he wanted to come along to church more often?

In seeking to answer those questions I think we need to be aware of the tension going on for us as Christians, between wanting to show love and acceptance to gay people on the one hand, and not wanting to condone homosexuality on the other. Between combating James' view that Christians hate gay people (and so maybe God hates James) and holding onto the Bible's clear teaching on homosexuality.

As our society increasingly affirms same-sex relationships, we're going to be faced with this kind of tension more and more often. What do you do when a gay friend invites you to his/her 'wedding'? What happens when a gay parent wants to bring along his/her child to Sunday School? What happens when that same gay parent asks if he/she can help set up chairs for church or hand out Bibles at the door?

This is new ground for us. I'm not sure if anyone has all the answers yet (and I'm sure I don't). But in my stumbling efforts to begin to grapple with this issue, here are a couple of initial thoughts on how we might start to think about responding.

1. Gay people are sinners *just like everyone else*. The Bible tells us that all of us fall short of God's glory (Rom.3:23). It's not that there are some sinners God seeks out because they are less sinful than others and some he passes over because their sin is just too bad for him (c.f. 1Tim.1:15). Therefore our treatment of gay 'sinners' needs to be guided by the same kinds of principles we would apply to heterosexual 'sinners', for example people in de-facto relationships.
2. We are going to be misunderstood no matter how we respond to gay people who come along to church. If we respond in ways that look loving to our gay friends we are likely to be misunderstood by some people as condoning homosexuality (ironically probably

misunderstood more by our Christian friends than by gay friends). If we respond in ways which make our views on homosexuality very clear to gay people up front we will likely be misunderstood by our gay friends as saying Christians hate gay people.

In thinking about this it's worth noting that Jesus himself faced this kind of tension. It's well known that as he sought sinners Jesus welcomed prostitutes, tax collectors, and drunkards. In the process he was misunderstood by some in the religious establishment as endorsing those sins and accused even of indulging in some of them himself (Mt.11:19). The phrase 'Jesus friend of sinners' was not initially a compliment!

For us, though, as we seek to reach our gay friends with the good news of Jesus, the question in my mind is, "How do we become the kind of people who desire the salvation of our gay friends so much that perhaps we start to be in danger of being called 'Christians friends of gay people'?"

This article is the first of what the GiST committee intends will be a number of short articles exploring the practical implications of GiST's more extensive papers which have been produced over the past few years. You can view these papers at www.pcq.org.au/gospel-in-society-today-gist.php