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Homosexuality and Social Intolerance

1. I am not a sociologist, but a pastor. I have a PhD in Christian Ethics, and my studies have informed my perspective, but most of my comments will be framed from my observations as the minister of a church with many gay men and lesbians.

2. I grew up in a small town in the desert of West Texas. There were two cultures there: cowboy culture and Latino culture. While much divided those two cultures, one thing united them: machismo. The image of a virile, strong, heterosexual male dominated that world. This was the world of Friday Night Lights. The worst thing you could be called was “queer” or “fag.”

3. I got actively involved in the church in high school and was preaching regularly by the time I was 16. I was a fundamentalist and proud of it. Homosexuality was just starting to emerge as a political issue, but in my world we didn't have to talk about it much. We all knew it was a sin and wrong and gross, or whatever other pejorative one could associate with it. I will note that homosexuality emerged as a dominant political issue in the 1980s and especially the early 1990s. Two things encouraged that development: the fall of communism and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Homosexuality became an issue that conservatives could rally people against and raise money off of.

4. I went away to college to prepare to be the next Billy Graham, but some things happened to me along the way that completely changed my mind about homosexuality:

- a. Learning that one of my closest friends was gay and then meeting other gay Christians.
- b. Discovering how weak the biblical case against homosexuality really was.
- c. Seeing the recurrent pattern of how social intolerance toward a certain people group was consistently undergirded by religious intolerance (e.g., slavery in this country).

5. In 2000 I was hired as the pastor of Pullen, eight years after the church had been kicked out of the Southern Baptist Convention for voting to perform a holy union and become an explicitly Welcoming and Affirming church. In these years, because of my leadership role in this church, I have been invited into a private, hidden culture

that most people never get to see. They hear caricatures about who gay people are, or maybe they have a gay friend or family member, but few people are invited to see the gay community for what it truly is. I have counseled with dozens, if not hundreds, of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals. Their stories are filled with tremendous pain, and great heroism. Gay people come to me from all over this state, from rural places and from mega-churches, and while everyone's story is unique, there are commonalities. One commonality is not that they had an overbearing mother or absent father. Gay people, like straight people, come from every kind of family background. Most know that they are different at an early age. Many of them have tried programs to fix their "gay" problem. Alcohol and drug addictions are very high because of the shame they feel. The suicide rate for gay teens is one of the highest of any group. I have never heard anyone say, "I learned early on I was gay and I was so excited about it." The fear, self-loathing, and depression have their roots in the social intolerance of homosexuality.

6. You may think that the very premise for my talk, "The Social Intolerance of Homosexuality" is off-base. You might believe that the intolerance theme is just hype generated by the gay community. So let me describe the examples I see of our society's continued intolerance:

- a. Prohibition against marriage
- b. Parental rights
- c. Violence against GLBT folks
- d. Employment discrimination—Wake County teachers and administrators
- e. Religious pronouncements—People who are ostracized from their church
- f. Public policy—ADAP funding in North Carolina
- g. It's one of the last acceptable public biases—Kids calling people fags or gay

7. The resistance to gay people is rooted in a kind of natural theology that sees the majority as somehow in God's favor and deserving to be privileged. We are threatened by that which is different and we don't understand, especially something that has no appeal to us like sex with someone of the same gender.

8. So, I see the movement for acceptance of gays and lesbians as a civil rights movement. Whenever I say that some African Americans take offense. The comparison I'm making is not that the groups' pain or story is the same; the comparison is about constitutional guarantees. The argument is made that GLBT folks don't have it so bad because they can hide and get good jobs. This is true

to a degree, but the cost of hiding one's identity is tremendous. In the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, black people were denied economic and political rights, but they had the support of their families and the church. The opposite is true for gay people.

9. The intolerance against GLBT people in our culture is getting better in some places, but we have a long way to go. And to be honest, we don't all have to agree on the morality of homosexuality in order to become a more tolerant society. One of our strengths as a nation has been the insistence that constitutional privileges should be granted to all people, even those we don't agree with. I hope that such guarantees will soon be granted my gay brothers and sisters.

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N.C. STATE PEACE LUNCH FORUM
January 25, 2007