

Guest Editor's Introduction

LGBTQ Pastoral Counseling: Setting a New Scholarly Agenda

Cody J. Sanders, Ph.D.¹

For a few decades, pastoral theologians and practitioners have attempted to develop practical theories and theologies that help to meet the emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people in ways that affirm our dignity and worth and contribute to our health and wellbeing. It is one of the reasons this field was initially so appealing to me when I was a queer Baptist seminarian exploring graduate theological study. So it is certainly an honor to serve as editor of this issue of a journal striving to contribute further to this base of knowledge and practice for pastoral scholars and practitioners.

The articles in this issue of *Sacred Spaces* illuminate several areas of concern for pastoral practitioners working with LGBTQ people in ways that build upon previous literature in the field. But read a different way, these articles also serve to set a new agenda for pastoral theological engagement with LGBTQ concerns. With critical attention to the praxis of pastoral counseling and the pedagogy of pastoral theology and care, the authors contributing to this issue illuminate for us four areas of critical growth and imaginative development necessary for pastoral theologians to engage in the years to come.

First, a substantial number of articles herein contribute to the lagging literature in our field on concerns of transgender care and counseling. While the writing of pastoral theologians addressing concerns of lesbian and gay people has been comparatively robust, we have yet failed to give equally serious and sustained attention to concerns of trans people.

¹ Pastor of Old Cambridge Baptist Church, Cambridge, Mass., and member of the adjunct faculty in pastoral care at Andover Newton Theological School, Newton, Mass.

In this issue, Horace Griffin helps practitioners to address transphobia as it arises in families struggling to embrace a trans family member – often a child. Griffin draws upon vignettes from his own practice and published first person narratives to offer guidance for clinical practice drawing on the literature of object relations theory. Malcolm Himschoot illuminates “practices of spirit” for genderqueer and trans Christians, deconstructing the harmful dynamics foisted upon trans people by many theologies and offering, instead, converse practices of spirit toward the promotion of health and spiritual wellbeing: guilt/creation, shame/community, fear/vocation, disintegration/integrity. And Jeanne Hoeft offers a contribution unique in the field, addressing intimate partner violence among queer people by drawing upon queer theory in which she illuminates the additional challenges trans survivors face as they encounter the power of the sex/gender binary in shelters and programs.

What is largely still missing from the field’s literature is thorough treatment of gender identity and expression with attention to embodiments that transcend our typical picture of trans people as transitioning from male to female or female to male. For example, intersex persons, born with physical characteristics of both genders or ambiguous genitalia, and even those born with chromosomal variations beyond xx and xy markers, haven’t yet gained the treatment they deserve in the theological and clinical literature in our field. The articles you will encounter in this issue of *Sacred Spaces* point the way toward our future engagement with gender identity and expression. My hope is that they promote imagination for new types of theological engagement possible for the future.

Second, the authors featured in this issue move us toward greater engagement with the challenges and imaginative possibilities that queer theory poses to our field’s engagement with sexuality and gender identity. Queer theory critically pushes us beyond theories of sexuality and

gender that are dependent upon an imagined fixed, static, and “natural” binary of male/female, gay/straight and lifts the veil on the history and relations of power attached to these assumptions.

Jason Hays focuses attention – scant in the field up to this point – on bisexuality and sexual fluidity, aiming to help practitioners reconceive embedded theories and theologies guiding our praxis, often to the detriment of bisexual and sexually fluid clients. Hays does this through a full-bodied engagement with queer theory and theology, deconstructing both embedded images of God and embedded theories of sexuality, moving toward a “more dynamic, relational, and fluid” conception of both. Jeanne Hoefft, again, engages queer theory to deconstruct the sex/gender binary that limits our perspective and hinders our best practice in relation to intimate partner violence. And Insook Lee draws on queer theorists to deconstruct the homosocial-homosexual continuum influencing the understanding of same-sex sexuality in Korean contexts.

The question still lingering in my mind, ripe for further pastoral theological engagement, is how queer theory – often intensely critical of individualistic assumptions and relations of power embedded in psychotherapy – offers a more complete critique of the field of pastoral care and counseling, pushing us to imagine how our practices (beyond just those oriented toward LGBTQ clients) might more dramatically shift and change in relation to queer theory’s critique.

Third, these authors call pastoral practitioners to greater focus on the intersectionality of embodiment and the intersecting nature of oppression. Griffin draws upon his own embodiment as a racial and sexual minority to empathically and critically peer through a window into “a world that understands gender much too simplistically and monolithically.” Hoefft addresses the care and counseling of battered women and men in a way that “cannot separate what part of their experience is due to sexism and what part is due to heterosexism, racism, classism or any other way power is structured,” helpfully illustrating the intersecting nature of oppression as “fine-

tuned interlocking systems through social institutions, cultural practices, and symbol systems.” While Lee engages intersectional embodiment in a way that, to my knowledge, is a unique contribution to the field of pastoral care and counseling, focusing on the merging of contemporary Western concepts of homosexuality with the traditional Confucian ideology of gender and sex and the ways this confluence impacts the lived human experience of Korean people.

Fourth, Mary Elizabeth Toler advances the literature in pastoral theological pedagogy engaging LGBTQ concerns in ways that are not often explicit in our field’s publications. Her vision of a “formational pastoral pedagogical framework” assists readers to consider how to develop our classroom contexts in ways that promote the “respectful, compassionate, educated, and theologically informed ways” that we wish students to engage LGBTQ people *and* one another. This is, of course, a challenge in seminaries and graduate theological programs encompassing students from diverse theological perspectives. Toler offers a model that is helpful to those who teach courses in which LGBTQ concerns are not the primary focus, but are a part of a more general introduction to pastoral care. I am hopeful that Toler’s article will help more of us to consider how to approach LGBTQ concerns by not only introducing the topic in class, but through developing pastoral pedagogies that are, themselves, models for addressing this embodiment of human difference in contexts of practice. These questions hold implications for those who engage in classroom teaching in seminary and graduate settings, as well as all who engage in clinical supervision.

It has been my pleasure to work alongside Ryan LaMothe and with these six authors in the construction of this issue of *Sacred Spaces*. I hope that you find this issue one that is both informative to your practice of care and counseling, as well as one that prompts your own

theological and theoretical imagination beyond the restrictive dictates of the status quo so that, in your own ways, you can pursue these new directions (and invent others) in our field's engagement with LGBTQ lives.