

Teaching LGBTQ Pastoral Care and Counseling: A Formational Pastoral Pedagogical Approach

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Abstract In many seminary and pastoral counseling programs, students' religious, personal, and political beliefs regarding LGBTQ issues often fall within a broad spectrum. As teachers striving to create pastoral paradigms where future ministers and pastoral counselors can engage LGBTQ issues in respectful, compassionate, educated, and theologically informed ways, there are numerous dynamics to consider in a context of a diverse community of learners. This article broadly highlights some of these dynamics and proposes a formational pastoral pedagogical framework that engages multiple viewpoints from a theologically grounded and focused position. Within this overall formational pastoral pedagogy, specific classroom practices are outlined for consideration; practices that provide a clear path to responsible, compassionate care for those dealing with LGBTQ issues.

Keywords LGBTQ, Pastoral Pedagogy, Pastoral Care and Counseling, Formation

As Cody Sanders deftly reminds readers in a previous article for this journal, the ways pastoral counselors and caregivers approach their work with the LGBTQ population depends a great deal on their ability to be reflective upon and compassionately engage issues of sexuality from both the psychotherapeutic and theological perspectives of both client and therapist (Sanders, 2012).

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The persons primarily responsible for cultivating this ability are the professors and clinical supervisors scattered throughout various seminaries, clinical training programs, and graduate counseling programs. It is no easy task for professors to create an educational environment that comprehensively, compassionately, and holistically educates and equips budding pastoral clinicians to reflect upon and engage sexuality and the various pastoral needs of the LGBTQ population.

There are several factors that contribute to the challenges professors face in creating such a comprehensive, compassionate, reflective learning environment. Chief among them is the reality of teaching this subject in the context of a diverse community of students who span the spectrum of age, race, ethnicity, social class, political persuasion and religious beliefs. At first glance, this reality of student diversity within the context of teaching care and counseling of the LGBTQ population may not seem to be a significant issue. After all, virtually every class in every subject matter is full of the above-mentioned kinds of diversity and teachers maneuver and engage this reality on a daily basis. I would argue, however, that the context of a diverse community of learners becomes a unique and particular challenge within the context of teaching LGBTQ care and counseling precisely because of the nature of the subject matter.

While there have been profound shifts toward affirming the lives and experiences of LGBTQ individuals within society and the broader Church, morality issues of claiming a “gay” identity and legal issues surrounding same-sex marriage continue to be on the front lines of America’s vitriolic and divisive culture wars. In the midst of this bifurcated, paradoxical cultural space of growing acceptance for and staunch outspoken opposition to the rights and values of LGBTQ individuals, there is also the painful statistical reality of bullying and suicide rates for individuals who identify as gay or are struggling with their sexuality (Russell & Joyner, 2001;

Grossman & D'Augeli, 2007; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011).² Consequently, within this broader cultural context, at the very least it is fair to say that when it comes to LGBTQ subject matter, students bring a variety of opinions, experiences, and questions and they do so in a way that is often soaked in emotion and confusion. It is precisely this emotion-soaked reality that magnifies the dynamic of a diverse community of learners and turns it into more of a challenge when teaching LGBTQ issues in pastoral care and counseling.

For example, as I was teaching a course on theological integration in pastoral care and counseling, a student was presenting a clinical interview to a racially and theologically diverse class. The clinical and theological dynamics highlighted from the interview material centered on the interviewees struggle with his identity as a gay man in light of his faith. Passionate and heated conversation and debate arose from the students who voiced questions, opinions, and experiences from a variety of positions and perspectives. Needless to say, anxiety and emotions were high and it fell to me as the teacher to create a space that honored and named the anxiety and difference while creating avenues for new levels of reflection, inter-personal engagements, connection, understanding, learning, and empathy. In the end, I was reminded in a stark way that engaging a community of diverse learners around pastoral issues of sexuality and sexual identity is more emotionally charged and potentially conflictual than discussing pastoral issues related to chronic illness.

The magnified reality of a diverse community of learners in the context of teaching LGBTQ issues in pastoral care and counseling becomes an even more complicated challenge because of the time limit imposed by the survey courses in which LGBTQ material is meant to

² These studies show that LGBTQ youth are at increased risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors, suicide attempts, and suicide and that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth were more than twice as likely to have attempted suicide as their heterosexual peers. Furthermore, these studies demonstrate that students who were questioning their sexual orientation reported more bullying, homophobic victimization, unexcused absences from school, drug use, feelings of depression, and suicidal behaviors than either heterosexual or LGBTQ students.

be covered. Despite the presence of some seminaries and secular counseling programs that have dedicated programs and/or specializations in theologies and psychological theories related to sexual orientation and gender identity and despite the growing prevalence of pastoral care and counseling literature focused on LGBTQ issues, there is usually very limited curriculum space to dedicate to teaching this aspect of pastoral care and counseling. In the seminary context, as evidenced through my experience as a teaching assistant at a large university affiliated seminary and as an adjunct professor in other seminaries, there is at best one class period out of an entire semester of an introduction to pastoral care and counseling class that can be dedicated to this topic. In the context of CACREP accredited counseling programs, like the one where I currently teach, the same is true; though at least it can be couched in a mandatory multi-cultural counseling course.

In the end, due to the nature of the subject matter and curriculum time restrictions, it is clear that teaching LGBTQ issues of pastoral care and counseling in the context of a diverse community of learners is a particular challenge. The question becomes then, how can a professor create an educational environment that comprehensively, compassionately, and holistically educates and equips budding pastoral clinicians to reflect upon and engage the various pastoral needs of the LGBTQ population.

Given the complexity of this issue, a cursory review of literature reveals some interesting contrasts and trends. Within secular publications, pedagogical considerations for teaching LGBTQ counseling within a diverse community of learners are in active development (Case & Lewis, 2012; Dessel, Bolen, & Shepardson, 2011; Hodge, 2011; Nauri, 2014). Furthermore, there is active pedagogical development of dealing with diversity in the classroom in general (Frank & Cannon, 2010); as well as addressing the specific dynamics and needs of LGBTQ

students in the classroom (Furrow, 2012; Misawa, 2010). Conversely, there is little written about pedagogy in regards to teaching LGBTQ issues to a diverse community of learners within a pastoral care and counseling context. A cursory review of pastoral literature will highlight this fact.

Overall, the body of pastoral literature demonstrates a growing trend in the amount of attention given to addressing the counseling and care issues of the LGBTQ community in ways that proactively affirm their lives and needs (Culbertson, 2000; Graham, 1997; Griffin, 2006; Kundz & Schlager, 2007; McNeil 1976, 1988; Maloney, 2001; Marshall, 1997; Medeiros, 2009; Millspaugh, 2009; Sanders, 2012; Switzer, 1994, 1996, 1999; Tanis, 2003; Tigert, 1996, 2005; Tigert & Tirabassi, 2005; Way, 1977). This trend began in the late seventies and early eighties and continues today; and though initially pastoral literature was written from a gay, White male lens, a growing number of pastoral perspectives from women, the African-American community and other cultural viewpoints continue to emerge (Comstock, 2001; Cooper & Marshall, 2009; Griffin, 2006; Lee & Hoshino, 2006; Medeiros, 2009; Millspaugh, 2009).

Within this broad and perhaps burgeoning body of literature, little addresses the realm of pedagogy and *how* to teach pastoral counseling and care of LGBTQ persons. In other words, there is a wealth of literature on the subject of pastoral counseling and care with LGBTQ persons, but there is little written on how professors of pastoral care and counseling effectively engage and convey that subject matter to students. The most promising move towards an intentional, codified, specific approach to teaching pastoral counseling and care of LGBTQ persons can be found in Joretta Marshall's (2009) article, "Models of Understanding Differences, Dialogues, and Discourses: From Sexuality to Queer Theory in Learning and Teaching Care." Interestingly, Marshall's article attempts to frame the context of teaching LGBTQ issues of care

and counseling within a classroom of a diverse community of learners. Drawing on Queer Theory and the theological education paradigm of Brookfield and Hess (2008), Marshall proposes a model of *redemptive discourse* in teaching and learning about LGBTQ counseling and care. Her model is, in part, an effort to push pastoral care pedagogy out of its comfort zone and frame the classroom as more than a passive learning environment. Her model is also an effort to push pastoral care practices out of the private, personal realm and into the public sphere of social justice. Marshall wants to cultivate a community of learners who care for each other, are impacted and positively changed by each other and who ultimately become caregivers that are dialogically and empathically equipped to offer care that seeks social justice and effects interpersonal connection. For Marshall (2009), *redemptive discourse* carries an explicit norm of vulnerability, connection, and change (something she sees as lacking in the pedagogical approaches in the field) and implies that the subject matter is not approached from “a simple conversation or a mutual sharing of ideas or opinions” (p.38). *Redemptive discourse* implies that the classroom becomes a “microcosm” where dialogical conversation, conversation where others are open to hearing and being impacted by a variety of experiential voices, becomes an embodied act that contributes to the “ongoing theological reflection necessary for the discovery of alternate and more ‘redemptive discourses’...that promote and support more positive and justice oriented images of God-other-creation-in-relation” (p.38). In the end, Marshall’s proposal of a pedagogical model of *redemptive discourse* points to her ultimate goals of providing just, respectful and compassionate care of the LGBTQ community and of inviting her pastoral counseling and care students into “concrete practices that are theologically reflective and that might inform their ministries [in such a way that they can] challenge the unjust structures of the world around the communities in which they participate” (p. 39).

Marshall's reflections point in the right direction when beginning to think specifically and intentionally about pedagogical considerations within the context of teaching LGBTQ issues of care and counseling to a diverse community of students. She seeks to effectively manage a cacophony of voices and opinions in a way that both critically deconstructs dominant narratives surrounding LGBTQ issues and judiciously constructs models of compassionate and respectful care. She seeks to create a *community* of learners. It is my hope to extend the inherent spirit of Marshall's work and outline a more methodical pedagogy specific to teaching LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling within a diverse student population. What is implicit in Marshall's work will become my explicit starting point; namely that teaching LGBTQ care and counseling within a diverse community of learners is a task that should be intrinsically connected to an overall formational pastoral pedagogy. Within this overall formational pastoral pedagogy, I also will offer specific classroom practices for consideration.

Pastoral pedagogy as formation

In our current global society and age where pluralism is the norm; where multiple, diverse perspectives not only sit side by side and compete for attention and validation but also demand to be treated fairly and respectfully, it is tempting to approach the subject of teaching LGBTQ issues of pastoral care and counseling like a buffet. In other words, in the interest of naming and honoring diverse viewpoints, this approach to teaching seeks to present students with a variety of perspectives, views, and positions and equip them with the necessary skills that address each perspective. In practice this means that a professor teaches approaches to LGBTQ care and counseling that span the theological, scientific, social, cultural belief spectrum and upholds practices of care that range from reparative therapy to same sex pre-marital counseling. This

approach is tempting because it seems to presume a fair and equal treatment of perspectives and it seems to create a space where a variety of voices and beliefs can be honored. This approach may also be tempting because it seems to lessen the possibility of conflict and pain in the classroom and between students.

The buffet approach to teaching LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling is also a tempting approach because it falls so nicely into the popular and pervasive wheelhouse of liberal arts education. In this educational tradition, informed by a lingering aspect of the Enlightenment, the autonomy of the student is sacred and the primary mission is geared towards “the conveyance of multiple bodies of information or technical skills that are useful in a market economy” (Smith, 2014). Furthermore, liberal arts education envisions learning as a way for students to consider larger questions of meaning and value and seeks to create a forum where the engagement of these larger questions promote tolerance, critical thought, democratic institutions, and civic engagement. In short, in the tradition of the liberal arts, it appears that there is room for a variety of views and perspectives and students are given a plethora of options to consider when approaching certain subject matters and asking certain questions. This context of education reinforces the appeal of the buffet approach to teaching issues related to LGBTQ care and counseling.

In the end, however, especially in the context of teaching pastoral care and counseling from the Christian tradition, the buffet approach breaks down (Hauerwas, 2007; MacIntyre, 2006; Smith, 2010). Making room for a variety of views and perspectives to be presented alongside of each other under the guise that students get to choose the perspective and approach to pastoral care and counseling that resonates best with them largely trains them (at best) to be technicians of applied theory and (at worst) to be spectators who remain unaffected and separate

from the subject material. But more importantly, in the context of teaching pastoral care and counseling from the Christian tradition, the liberal arts buffet approach neglects the aspect of the educational process that may span beyond the interests of democratic institutions and civic engagement. It also neglects those educational contexts geared toward personal and professional identity formation within a particular religious tradition that fosters “habituation to a particular vision of the good” (Smith, 2010).³

Framing pastoral care and counseling education as an overall endeavor that is geared toward personal and professional identity formation within a particular religious tradition that fosters a particular *vision of the good* and not just as a venture in transmitting a buffet of information and views, shifts the classroom context for teaching LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling within the context of a diverse community of learners in important ways. First, it forces the professor to provide a particular *vision of the good*⁴ that drives, guides, and permeates the entire course and becomes the foundation and starting point for class engagement in regards to LGBTQ issues of care and counseling.

The *vision of the good* that I operate from as an ordained Christian minister teaching in Christian seminaries and pastoral counseling programs is one that is based on the *imago Dei* as expressed through contemporary Trinitarian theologies.⁵ This *vision of the good* ultimately speaks to an understanding that we are all created in the image of the Triune God. This divine reality of personhood that we are created in, for, and with is our reality of personhood and is the basis for our understanding, respect, care, empathy, and compassion for ourselves and others. It

³ Though this is a direct quote from J. Smith, this language and idea of “habituation” and “vision of the good” can be found in Stanley Hauerwas’ (2007) book, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledge and the Knowledge of God*. I will continue to use the language and idea “vision of the good” throughout as I outline my notions of formational pastoral pedagogy.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For an example of the Trinitarian theology that I draw from, see Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s (1993) book, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*.

is a reality that says we are subjective, relational and communal beings called to be open and affected by others. It is a reality that says unity is derived from and exists in a diverse community of persons. Just as there is no uniformed, mono-culture of sameness within the Godhead, there is no uniformity to the image of God within humanity. There are only separate, fully subjective persons with their own distinct experiences who are called to be united in a spirit of reciprocal, mutual, divine relationship working in love for the redemption and creative transformation for each other and the world.

Operating from this *vision of the good* invites me as the teacher to understand that I am called to see my students as relational, communal beings created in the image of God and that I am called to create a community of diversity that reflects the spirit of the Triune God. I am called to cultivate and form a particular kind of learning community where there is open, vulnerable, sharing and engagement of unique experiences and perspectives. I am called to form a community where those experiences and perspectives are heard, held, and empathically engaged and transformed in the Triune spirit of empathy, mutuality, and reciprocity.

My *vision of the good* based on the *imago Dei* ultimately leads me to my understanding of the venture of teaching LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling in the context of a diverse community of learners. For better or worse, the pain and joy of the human experience is wrapped up in the experience of culture, race, gender, and sexual orientation. These experiences cannot be denied and all of the joy, hurt, pain, and “sin” that each of these experiences bring must be named, worked through and engaged in relationship and community. A colorful tapestry of diversity must be created where all gifts are honored and all are seen as fully accepted and created in the image of God. We must do this because it is a part of who we are as created in the image of God and we cannot deny this aspect of our personhood.

In the context of a diverse community of learners, my proposing a particular *vision of the good* based in the *imago Dei* is not an axiomatic move. Rather, it becomes a dialogical, constructive process and its inherent manifold mysteries unfold and take shape (Palmer, 2007). In other words, pastoral care and counseling gets presented as an embodied, creative possibility grounded in a particular tradition; and the diverse questions and viewpoints of students and teacher become the lines and colors that give shape and form to the what it means to be created in the image of God, the proposed *vision of the good*. The proposed *vision of the good* becomes an entry point into more sustained and meaningful dialogical opportunities and invites us into “the kind of space that allows for new questions and alternative visions that we have not yet even thought of to emerge” (Marshall, 2009, p.38). This proposed vision of the good also means that the classroom becomes the formational experience that students engage and ultimately take out into the world as a model for healing and justice.

To be clear, starting with a particular *vision of the good*, the image of God, and having it be an effective subject centered framework that truly holds, honors, and allows for the constructive potential of diverse viewpoints means that there must be a level of accountability where multifarious voices are encouraged, held in tension and not allowed to claim an authoritative last word. Tension, dissonance, and an ever unfolding constructive process of meaning making must be the valued ethos that undergirds the *vision of the good*. Professors, students, scripture, tradition, reason, experience – this cacophony of voices must be held in dialectical and dialogical tension and the subject cannot be resolved by landing solely in the voice box of one. In this vision of the good, authoritative resolution and accountability can only be framed in the ultimate mystery and inviolable reality of personhood and what it means to be created in the image of God.

This insistence on dialectical and dialogical tension, dissonance, and the mystery of the reality of the image of God also becomes one way to address the inherent power dynamic between dominant narratives and other more marginal, non-normative narratives around particular subject matter. Professors must be intentional and explicitly mindful of creating a space for ALL narratives to emerge and sit in tension beside each other; for it is only in honestly naming and engaging the narratives that they can be engaged, empathically and compassionately confronted, and transformed. To be clear, this does not mean that the professor sits idly by as words of hate are hurled; as it is the professors job to actively maintain and promote the vision of the good that all are created in the image of God and are to be engaged in that way. This also is not promoting a passive, politically correct tolerance where opinions co-exist unaffected and unchanged; and it is not promoting an ambiguity that is steeped in confusion or indecision. Creating an environment where all narratives are allowed to emerge and sit side by side is an exercise in privileging the process of creative conflict and tension and its constructive contributions to producing an open, on-going communal *vision of the good*. The process of creative conflict and tension is privileged over the need and desire to authoritatively resolve and violently exert a close-ended dictum.

Second, framing pastoral care and counseling education as an overall endeavor that is geared toward personal and professional identity formation within a particular religious tradition that fosters a particular *vision of the good* reminds us that the care and counseling of LGBTQ persons is not an objective, inert idea to be studied and dissected. In the context of a *vision of the good* based on the *imago Dei*, we are constantly reminded that the subjects that we teach are embodied, living realities and the interactions we have in the classroom are live, embodied encounters with difference and otherness (Palmer, 2007, p.37). In this context, we see that

education requires a *relationship* and a recognition that there is an interactive connection between the knower and the known. Furthermore, knowledge and learning are rooted in experience and become a vital, interactive part of our lives (Palmer, 2007). According to Parker Palmer (2007), “knowing of any sort is relational, animated by a desire to come into deeper community with what [we are trying to learn]” (p.55). Consequently, respect, compassion, curiosity, and understanding become the norms of approach. And we must intentionally create space to honor, incorporate and integrate our knowledge as part of our identity and experience as human beings created in the image of God.

Embodied, relational, experiential subjective formational learning breaks down the artificial distance between persons and their opinions and the artificial distance between persons who hold different viewpoints. Differences cannot merely be entertained and tolerated; differences must be ingested and integrated. The professor and student must leave the educational encounter intimately connected with the subject matter and each member of the class. Ideally, the professor and the student ultimately leave the educational encounter changed.

The pastoral pedagogy of formation based on a particular *vision of the good* of the *imago Dei* that I have just proposed and outlined provides a viable and constructive environment for teaching LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling to a diverse community of learners. The notion of formation shifts the teaching venture in important ways. It resists a safe, static, neutral style of education where multiple views and perspectives are set out and students are given a plethora of options to consider when approaching issues of LGBTQ care and counseling. It insists that pastoral education in general, and as it specifically relates to LGBTQ care and counseling, is more about who we are than what we do. It demands that we engage and experience the lives of those in the LGBTQ community and each other in ways that change, shape, and form our own

lives and beliefs. It instills courage to boldly teach and proclaim a clear *vision of the good* without pride-fully presuming the final shape of what it means to be created in the image of God.

Formational pastoral pedagogy in action

With the overall formational pastoral pedagogy that informs my teaching delineated, I would like to offer an outline of my personal approach for teaching LGBTQ care and counseling in the context of a diverse community of learners. My hope is that this spurs the teaching imagination and contributes in some small way to the field of teaching pastoral care and counseling, especially as it relates to LGBTQ care and counseling. Like the pedagogy itself promotes, my approach should be viewed as an on-going constructive process that invites constructive critique.

Formational pastoral pedagogy: It is who you are

When teaching LGBTQ care and counseling, my goal is not simply to provide knowledge to students. My goal is to form a community of learners who are seen, engaged, and being formed as being created in the image of God and to form pastoral practitioners as people who are continuously growing in empathy, compassion, and understanding of the human condition. Consequently, I begin the class devoted to LGBTQ issues of care and counseling with an intentional reminder of the kind of pastoral practitioners we are striving to become. This reminder is also couched in the overall pastoral framework proposed and covered towards the beginning of the semester. Informed by my particular *vision of the good* of the *imago Dei* and by post-modern theologies and therapies, I remind students that pastoral care and counseling comes from a stance of curiosity, a stance of not knowing, and is a dialogical process that does not simply seek to provide answers or solutions. I remind students that true listening demands

silence and an open, hospitable mind and heart. I remind students of the idea of inter-pathy, that being empathic, fully engaged and pastorally present means bracketing (not abandoning) one's own beliefs and experiences and taking the imaginative leap into someone else's world (Lartey, 2003). I remind students that taking the empathic, imaginative leap into someone else's world means that the pastoral enterprise is one in which we, the counselors and caregivers, ultimately are changed and affected.

All of these reminders serve as guideposts for engaging material related to the care and counseling of LGBTQ persons and their families. "This is not an easy topic to cover in one day," I say, "and there are plenty of opinions, emotions, and experiences to manage. But if we can remember who we are striving to become as pastoral practitioners and people of faith and operate from the pastoral framework we established from the beginning of the semester, I am confident that we can listen to each other, learn from one another, and discover together how to offer respectful, compassionate, just care to persons in the LGBTQ community and how we can all better understand each other as created in the image of God."

Formational pastoral pedagogy: Establishing a container to creatively hold multiple perspectives

As a professor of pastoral care and counseling in a Christian context, I am also interested in creating pastoral clinicians who engage in theologically reflective and informed practices of care. I establish a method of theological reflection at the beginning of the semester that also continues to serve as the container that creatively and constructively holds multiple perspectives. The theological reflection paradigm I use not only creates a holding environment, it also establishes the norm that all perspectives must sit side by side and be held in tension. It is

imperative to remind students of this theological reflection paradigm at the beginning of the class on LGBTQ care and counseling.

The paradigm that I utilize is the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. It is a paradigm for theological reflection that seeks to connect, honor, and balance diverse sources of authority. And it is a paradigm that provides a model for creatively managing and holding diverse viewpoints. Though the term was not officially coined by John Wesley himself, Methodist scholars deduce that "Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason" (Cropsey, 2004, para. 103, sec. 2).⁶ Consequently, when approaching any issue, though scripture is the central starting point, each aspect of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (scripture, tradition, experience, and reason) must be held in balance and no aspect can be used in isolation.⁷

Formational pastoral pedagogy: Proposing a common *vision of the good*

In the formational spirit of proposing a common starting point grounded in a particular tradition and *vision of the good* that has framed the class, I rely on the Quadrilateral approach that encourages scripture as the central starting point. In the context of teaching LGBTQ care and counseling, I do this not only to remain faithful to the method of theological reflection, but also because Hebrew and Christian scriptures are often the first entry point into the conversation surrounding LGBTQ issues. Scripture also often is used as a dominate narrative to condemn and shame LGBTQ persons and their families.

⁶ I remember from class notes and readings throughout my seminary experience at The Divinity School of Duke University that Albert Outus, a Methodist scholar, is the person who first coined the term *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*.

⁷ In my experience, Methodist scholars are quick to point out the frequent misinterpretation of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral that posits that all four sources of authority and engagement – scripture, tradition, experience, and reason – are all equal and viable starting points for discerning matters of doctrine and revelation. It is true that all are to be considered together and in tension when discerning matters of doctrine and revelation; but scripture is always the starting point.

Rather than start with the overused and somewhat pedantic scripture, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23, NRSV), I choose to frame my vision of the good in relation to LGBTQ persons around the Genesis 1 declaration that all humans are created in the image of God. Like the Romans passage, this passage provides common language and students are able to support and agree on this basic and central tenet of faith. However, unlike the Romans passage, the Genesis creation narrative intersects with tradition, experience, and reason in a way that invites students to positively and constructively imagine how each person, including persons in the LGBTQ community, reflect, illuminate, and embody the image of God in their lives and relationships. Furthermore, as I frame and propose an image of God who is a relational God that exists within and as part of a divine community of mutual, reciprocal life giving relationships (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), I offer an alternative paradigm of human relationships. Gone are the binary concepts of man and woman and the focus on physical attributes that uniquely transmit the image of God; instead there is a focus on the nature and charism of intimate, life giving relationships.

Formational pastoral pedagogy: Embodied, subjective, relational learning

Up until this point in my class, my reminders about who we are as pastoral practitioners and how we engage in the art of dialogical and constructive theological reflection, as well as my proposed vision of the good grounded in scripture have not been framed fully as embodied, living acts of learning that challenge us. Sure, there has been some conversation and respectful, constructive engagement of multiple perspectives within the context of teaching LGBTQ care and counseling. But there has been a distance and safety maintained between me, the students, and the ideas of framing and offering counseling and care of LGBTQ persons. My words and

proposals have remained more in the realm of objective, disembodied ideas. I have not cultivated a personal connection and subjective relationship with the issues surrounding LGBTQ care and counseling.

I make this move in two very particular ways. First, the *vision of the good* that flows from the common, positive reframing of the *imago Dei* and the Genesis creation narrative demands that the value and dignity of the human person before God and the quest to embody the God-like qualities of relationship, mutuality and intimacy are affirmed. Furthermore, this *vision of the good* demands that the multiple viewpoints, different perspectives, and various questions that get raised become constructive, dialogical realities that illuminate what it means to be created in the image of God. They also speak of the joy and the pain, the possibilities and limitations, the clarity and the ambiguity inherent in addressing and understanding the human condition in light of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

In other words, the process of dialogue about this issue becomes an embodied, communal act and a part of the living, breathing tradition of what it means to be created in the image of God. Diversity and multiplicity are honored and cultivated in an open spirit of love, connection, and sharing. This embodied act of managing diverse viewpoints ultimately requires that raw, emotion filled experience (a piece of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral) be shared, named, and reacted to honestly. As a teacher attempting to create an embodied, mutual, Trinitarian community, I intentionally ask students to share their gut responses about the possibility that LGBTQ persons and relationships reveal something about the image and nature of God. The responses and the direction of the conversation varies. Sometimes, silence is the first reaction. Sometimes the first reaction is relief from students who have wanted to affirm LGBTQ persons of faith because they have at last been offered a scriptural and theological hook on which to hang their hat. Usually,

however, at some point there is palpable discomfort and tension surrounding the voices of the “all have sinned” camp and the voices of LGBTQ students and their allies who continually feel like they have to fight for their right to have a place in the Kingdom and a legitimate voice in the conversation.

In my experience, this place of tension is where the real work of community is fostered and the image of God is honored. The key is to shift from the beginning point of scripture and theology and move towards engaging relationship, fostering direct communication, and exploring the “here and now” of the conversation. Questions from me (that demand a level of honesty, vulnerability, intimacy) revolve around key questions like: What it is like for students to hear their peers voice certain viewpoints? What is at stake for you personally if it is true that LGBTQ persons are loved fully as created in the image of God? What do the LGBTQ persons want their peers to know about what it is like for them to be gay and Christian? What are some of your fears? What is it that you don’t understand that you want to understand? What is God calling you to hear and understand in this conversation?

If things get too heated between two people, I rely on solid group therapy techniques to foster conversation, understanding and compassion between particular students while also highlighting the larger issues being raised and throwing those out to the class so that the focus does not remain solely on the conflict. This is the avenue to creating community and creating the *imago Dei* in the classroom. Hopefully, this avenue of honest, compassionate sharing and dialogue becomes the model that students can also take out into the world as an embodied act of care.

The second move towards embodied relational learning comes with the guest I invite into my class. Each time I have taught this class, I have had the privilege of inviting an out, gay

faithful Christian man who is partnered and has children with two Christian lesbian women, one of whom is an ordained Christian minister. His presence in the room at this juncture and the sharing of his story of how he understands himself to be a faithful Christian and a gay, partnered man reminds the entire class that the subject of LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling is not an abstract idea or an objective reality upon which we can only mentally muse. LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling is a personal issue that involves real live people, our sisters, brothers, friends, cousins, parents, and neighbors. The ways in which we reflect on this issue and create acts of care impact the lives of real people.

The presence of a “real, live, gay person” and the space to engage his experience in a spirit of openness and honest sharing also offers the possibility that our thoughts, reflections, and perceptions around LGBTQ issues of care and counseling can be shifted, shaped and formed in a very particular way. For example, the student who clings to the notion that homosexuality and Christianity are incompatible has been presented with embodied experiential knowledge and challenged in a new and personal way. The student who struggles to conceptualize how the image of God is illuminated through the lives of LGBTQ individuals has now had the opportunity to have an embodied example and can see possibilities not seen before.

Embodied, subjective knowledge is a risky venture and introducing it in such a personal way can be even riskier. Hearts and minds are exposed to the possibilities of judgment, rejection, and pain. Preconceived notions are vulnerable and open to renegotiation in a way that is different than just talking about ideas. In the end, the personal relationship forces us to make room for and hold someone’s experience of faith without judgment and treat it as a viable reality.

The final formational act: Engaging the context of care and counseling

By the end of class, even in the midst of the ever present, yet shifting, various viewpoints, students are ready and eager to construct care and counseling practices that are sensitive to the needs of the LGBTQ community. In a very general way, students become attuned and educated about certain dynamics of care and begin to imagine how to engage them respectfully and compassionately. These dynamics include but are not limited to the process of coming out, family of origin dynamics, sexual identity development, sexuality and mental health, negotiating issues of faith and sexuality, claiming and affirming dignity, creating families, and same sex relationships.

Conclusion

Teaching LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling in the context of a diverse community of learners can be a daunting and challenging prospect. Yet, as I have demonstrated, if approached thoughtfully and intentionally, this daunting prospect can hold a treasure trove of constructive possibilities. Differences of opinions need not be feared for their divisiveness; they can be mined for their wisdom and their ability to invite connection and relationship. I hope that my proposed pedagogical model of pastoral formation offers a broad, constructive pathway in teaching LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling and contributes to the overall development of best practices in the pastoral care and counseling classroom.

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