

The Challenge of Same-Sex

Sam Allberry is an Anglican pastor with a confession to make — one that's uncomfortable in some circles. He is same-sex-attracted.

He has made another inconvenient confession, though — one of fidelity to historic biblical teaching on sexuality. As one of three operators of the Living Out website, Sam helps minister to Christians who experience same-sex attraction by bringing out into the open the questions and dilemmas that such Christians can often face.

M&L managing editor Paul Schwarz talked with the associate pastor at St. Mary's Church in Maidenhead, England, about Living Out and what it is (and isn't), as well as how the church should respond to the new sexual revolution in our world today.

Q How did Living Out come to be?

It came about through a set of friendships. I knew the other two editors already, but when we first became friends, we didn't know each other struggled with same-sex attraction. We soon realized there were quite a few of us who had experience with this issue, and we felt the Lord had given us a friendship with one another in order that we could do ministry together.

Q What's the scope of Living Out, and what is it not?

Living Out is a resource for three groups of people. One is Christians who battle with same-sex attraction, to encourage them in godliness and faithfulness through testimonies, articles, reviews, Q&As and those sorts of things. We also want the church in general to know more about what the Bible says on this issue, and to respond in truth and kindness. The third audience is the wider world — we wanted something where someone outside the church could get an authentic sense of what should be the real Christian response to this issue.

What we're not is an ongoing pastoral resource for individuals. All of us have full-time jobs doing other things, so we don't have the time or capacity to follow up with all the people who write in with their questions and stories. Our main concern is that they be pastored by their local congregations.

Q What kind of responses are you receiving?

The vast majority of them are from Christians expressing gratitude for the site, the stories, the articles and other resources. A significant number of people battle with this issue — we were thinking primarily of our own context in the UK when we started this, but we've had e-mail from all corners of the globe. Some of them have been pretty heartbreaking, from Christians who have battled with this issue but have been in contexts where it's not been safe to share that battle with anybody else, with no means of particular support. Others have shared encouragement as they've sought to follow Christ in this context. Occasionally people call us names or tell us we're deluded, but the vast majority have been encouraging.

Q What does your particular journey with same-sex attraction look like?

My story is that I was really becoming aware of my same-sex attraction around the same time I came to faith, just as I was finishing high school. I'm grateful to God for the timing, because I never really had much opportunity to express my homosexual feelings in any way prior to coming to Christ. So I've never lived in a practicing homosexual way. The feelings and temptations have been there my entire adult life, but I've always had a Christian framework within which to understand and respond to them. My story is different from others who have been converted from a practicing homosexual lifestyle. It is about coming to terms with my own feelings, and seeking to grow in understanding and responding to them in a manner that honors Christ.

Q What are the most common misconceptions about same-sex attraction?

One is that any kind of same-sex attraction must inevitably have come from some childhood trauma or unhealthy relationship with a parent. That has been a feature of a good number of cases of homosexuality, but it is certainly not the case for all. I had a very happy, stable childhood and always had a good relationship with both parents, and for many others with same-sex attraction, that is also the case. One of the most frustrating things about that misconception is that often Christians are fishing for the "real reason" why you struggle with this, as if the fact that we're all fallen and broken isn't enough. I've known Christian friends who have

Attraction



been hesitant to share their struggles with same-sex attraction because they're nervous of people saying things that would hurt their parents.

Another common misconception is that if, for example, a Christian man is attracted to other men, then he's attracted to every man. Someone who thinks this might believe that someone who's same-sex-attracted shouldn't have any male friends, or that we're going to be strongly sexually attracted to any male we encounter. Actually, one of the most important ways to respond to this in a healthy manner is to have good, God-honoring friendships with people of the same sex.

A third misconception would be that people make very quick assumptions about what this will mean long term. Some would assume that because you're same-sex attracted

now, you will be forevermore, with no possibility of change. Other people make the opposite assumption and say it's just a phase and that if you pray hard enough, it will definitely go away. I remember thinking very early on in my journey on this issue that I mustn't presume I will change, and I mustn't presume I will not — I'll leave that in God's hands. My main concern is to grow in godliness.

Another is the growing misconception that the Bible doesn't speak clearly on this issue. I've seen people purporting to be evangelical taking a different line, that certain Bible passages can be interpreted in different ways. That's led a lot of Christians to believe it's one of those issues we need to put aside and agree to differ over. I want to say strongly that this is not the case. First it's because this issue doesn't come down to six particular passages — it has to do with the whole grain of the Bible, what God says about marriage being a picture of Christ and the church. I don't buy the argument that the Bible can be taken in more than one direction on this issue — this can only be if you loosen your relationship to the authority of Scripture.

Q What's the basic thrust of your counsel to someone who confesses to being same-sex attracted?

First, I want to thank them for saying that. The people who most worry me are those who are thinking it but aren't saying it. If someone's been open and honest, that's commendable, because it means we can get counsel and help.

I also want to say to them that it comes down to our confidence in the goodness of God, and therefore the goodness of what He says to us. We learn from Scripture that discipleship is costly for anyone. There are particular ways it is costly for those with same-sex attraction, particularly if lifelong celibacy is involved. I don't want a person with same-sex attraction to think this is unfair, because Jesus calls all of us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him. But at the same time there are wonderful blessings for us even in this age that Jesus makes many promises about. Yes, it's difficult, but it's always worth it, even in this life. God's Word is always good, and therefore if we don't like what His Word is saying, we're effectively saying we don't like Him, and therefore we're not trusting Him.

Q What should someone do if they think they are same-sex attracted?

It's a good thing to pray about it. Also, we're not designed to face these battles alone, so it's good to have another Chris-

Continued on Page 18

Interview: Sam Allberry with Living Out

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Sam Allberry



Continued from Page 17

tian who can give us counsel — someone who knows something of what we’re facing and how they can pray for us.

If someone is starting to experience same-sex attraction, I wouldn’t want them to think this is the issue they’re going to deal with forevermore. I know many people who have gone through seasons of dealing with this temptation, only for it to eventually sort of go. I wouldn’t want anyone to read too much into it at the early stage, which is one reason it’s so destructive when our culture insists to young teenagers that the instant they experience any kind of feelings of homosexuality, they own it and “come out” and define themselves. It might be a passing phase or it might not be, but it’s the worst time in life to decide that’s going to be who you are.

Also, they need to know what the Scriptures say, and they need the input, accountability, encouragement and fellowship of other believers. Another thing is this may be a battle for you, but it may not be the biggest battle for you. This goes back to the earlier question — a misconception may be that if someone struggles with same-sex attraction, it must mean this is the biggest battle they face. For many of us, it’s one of many.

I was talking to someone who’s also same-sex-attracted and asking how things were going on that front, and he said, “Actually, the biggest sin I’m dealing with at the moment is anger. I’m a really aggressive boss at work.” So it’s good to not define ourselves and our Christian struggle by this one issue.

Q How do we minister to those who do identify themselves as homosexual?

First, we need to prove we are genuine friends. A lot of non-Christian people who self-identify as gay find Christians hard to talk to on the issue because of the perception that we’ll hate them. I want to encourage Christians, and this would be the case in any kind of evangelism, to make genuine friendships with people, and when people know

we’re genuinely for them and care about them, they’re far more likely to be interested to hear what we believe.

In terms of how we do that, I always want to start with the biblical doctrine of marriage, because the Bible says what it says about homosexuality because of what it says about marriage. Uncapping the biblical vision of marriage and what it means as an illustration of the gospel is a good place to start because it gets at the center of the Christian faith and then provides a rationale for why it says that certain forms of sexual practice are forbidden.

Q How can our churches support those struggling with same-sex attraction?

Our conviction at Living Out is that God’s strategy for winning and growing people in faith is the local church. We don’t want this issue separated from the local church, to be an outsourced means of pastoral care — we want people to work this issue through in their churches. Churches can best facilitate this by making sure they have a culture where this issue is one they know they can share, where people aren’t looking down on them or treating them as the worst of sinners.

Some churches have a particular ministry for those with same-sex attraction, and that can be helpful, provided it doesn’t take the place of regular fellowship. In our church we have a little group for those with same-sex attraction, and we deliberately only meet three or four times a year because we don’t want that group to become a substitute for normal small-group and pastoral care. Otherwise you give people the impression that only same-sex-attracted Christians can understand and help same-sex-attracted Christians.

Q How can pastors respond to the issue of same-sex attraction?

A key thing is to make sure they don’t duck the issue. It’s hugely tempting for pastors in the Western world to say, “If I teach on homosexuality, there may be all kinds of controversy” — it’s one of the most provocative issues in our culture. Sadly, a number of pastors say, “I’m not going to touch that issue because it’s too volatile.” Actually, our people need to hear from us, because if they aren’t taught by their pastors, they’ll be taught by the world. So the key thing for pastors is to be clear on this issue — not to avoid it, be frightened by it or outsource it, but to teach on it in a manner that models clarity and compassion, showing biblical insight and tenderness. The tone the pastor sets will shape how the church responds. **M**

Living Out can be found at www.livingout.org.