Panel members tell moving stories of brokenness, change

March 19, 2014

A panel of three Seventh-day Adventists who lived gay lifestyles told their stories last evening during the denomination’s summit on sexuality, discussing their journeys away from homosexual activity.

Addressing the summit were Ron Woolsey, an Adventist pastor and founder of “The Narrow Way Ministry,” Virna Santos, president of “By Beholding His Love” ministry, and Wayne Blakely, founder of “Know His Love Ministries.” The Adventist world church this week is holding the “In God’s Image: Scripture. Sexuality. Society.” summit at the Cape Town International Convention Centre.

“We are here tonight to listen to testimonies,” said panel moderator Bill Knott, editor of the Adventist Review magazine. “We’re here to listen to believers tell the stories of how God has redeemed them.”

Knott invited the panelists to share their experiences at several different life stages.

Woolsey said he grew up in a “good Adventist home,” but was molested as a child by a family friend. From then, he found himself increasingly focused on same-sex relationships. While attending an Adventist college, he began dating, and ultimately married, thinking marriage was a solution to his troubled identity and relationships. When his young wife soon discovered his ongoing relationships with men, however, the marriage soon dissolved.
After more than 15 years in multiple gay relationships, Woolsey returned to his childhood faith and a relationship with Christ through reading the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White, co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. “I began reading Steps to Christ with a cigarette in my hand and a martini beside me,” he noted wryly. “By chapter 5, I had put the cigarette out.”

Woolsey was re-baptized, and soon began telling his story of recovery to church groups around the United States. Now married for 21 years, he is the father of five children, and an ordained pastor of the Church in the Arkansas-Louisiana Conference.

For Wayne Blakely, early childhood rejection by his mother—who had wished for a daughter—soon drove him to seek male relationships. Placed in several adoptive situations, he was raised by a succession of relatives who noted his challenging behaviors and sent him to psychologists and pastors for counseling.

Invited at age 18 by a college friend to join a gay community, Blakely says he found there an acceptance he had not previously known. “That’s when I gave up on God,” he said.

More than 30 years of multiple sexual partners and drug use followed, as Blakely watched 40 gay friends die during the first years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

A series of divine providences brought him back to faith, Blakely said, including the prayers of friends who had not given up on him. In his youth, Blakely said he prayed the prayer, “God, make me straight.” Retrospectively, he now realizes that a change of orientation was not the goal: getting to know Christ as His Saviour was actually the goal.

Santos believes that her journey to lesbianism was rooted in a painful and dysfunctional family situation. A victim of childhood sexual abuse, “No one told me [the abuse] wasn’t my fault,” she said.

Santos’ family joined the Adventist Church in her late teens, but she struggled with same-sex attraction throughout college and secretly maintained a lesbian relationship. She moved to San Francisco and became a gay-rights political activist, and was reportedly the first to adopt under the AB25 law in the U.S. state of California, which allowed same-sex couples to adopt each other’s children. The dramatic disappointment to the gay and lesbian community that accompanied the passage of California’s Proposition 8, which no longer allowed gay marriages, proved to be a crisis for Santos.

A reawakened interest in Adventism was accompanied by a series of profound personal spiritual experiences that highlighted for Santos the importance of the Church’s teaching about the meaning and relevance of the heavenly sanctuary. Understanding for the first time that Jesus was her Advocate, she began to reassess the life she had been leading.

A Sabbath morning Communion service became the pivot point for Santos, who recalls her wonderment that the pastor’s wife was washing the feet of a proud lesbian.

Panel moderator Knott asked a question about whether the panelists’ stories should be thought of as typical: “In recent weeks, there have been a number of voices raised to question the authenticity of this event because the organizers chose to hear primarily from those who are no longer practicing homosexuals. How would you respond to those comments?
Woolsey responded, “We’ve all been there. We’ve been where they are. We gave those same arguments all our lives. We have come out of that. We’ve learned to put God first, not self.”

Santos said she shared with her lesbian friends the story of her conversion, saying, “I’ve had an experience with Jesus Christ and I’m no longer a lesbian. But I’m no better than you.” She remembers a friend’s partner saying, “I’m happy for you. I can see it all over your face. You’ve found the love of your life.”

Santos reminded the delegates, “We’re no better than them.” She said that she is a friend of many who wrote to express concerns about the summit, “God is about having a relationship. He pursued me. ... I have faith that even my friends will be knocking on our door soon.”

Written questions from the delegates concluded the 90-minute session, and addressed whether the panelists still consider themselves as gay or lesbian; how the church should treat same-sex attracted and practicing individuals; and the nature of the ministries in which each panelist now serves. Interrupted frequently by audience applause, the three continued to describe the transforming power of Christ as the cause of their new lives.

“We have seen and heard courage here tonight,” Knott concluded. To persistent audience applause, he added, “Let’s express our appreciation to those who have shared their testimonies of redemption with us.”

Reality of fallen world calls for nuance, humility, Adventist behavioral scientist says

March 20, 2014

Family dysfunction, sexual trauma and other environmental factors are often identified as triggers of homosexual conduct, but the reality may be more nuanced than some faith communities are comfortable acknowledging, a Seventh-day Adventist behavioral scientist said this morning at the church’s sexuality conference.

“We tend to see things in terms of black and white. The shades of gray between them provoke a lot of anxiety,” said Curtis Fox, professor and department chair of Counseling and Family Sciences at the church’s Loma Linda University in the U.S. state of California.

Fox's presentation at this week’s “In God’s Image: Scripture. Sexuality. Society.” summit offered a social science perspective on the challenges facing the Adventist Church’s approach to the gay and lesbian community.

“Reality is complex,” Fox said. “Simple explanations will not suffice, and will be seen as less than helpful by those who are dealing with this nature,” Fox said.
So-called “reparative therapy” Fox said, assumes that sexual orientation for every individual is exclusively a matter of choice that can be reversed through the exercise of willpower in a supportive, Christian environment.

While some people say they have found personal transformation through such therapy, others report no change in same-sex attraction and, in many cases, exacerbated psychological and emotional trauma, Fox said. Such outcomes have raised “serious concerns” and prompted major health and mental organizations in the United States to “denounce” reparative therapy.

Fox also outlined the effects of “societal prejudice” against LGBT youth. Marginalized gay and lesbian young people are more likely, he said, to attempt suicide, have high levels of depression and drug abuse and are more vulnerable to HIV and STIs.

He went on to counter widespread myths about members of the gay and lesbian community, among them that most pedophiles are gay; that gay relationships are transient; and that gay parents tend to raise gay children.

“My role as a behavioral scientist is to get people to think, inspire dialogue and be inquisitive in the pursuit of knowledge,” Fox said, acknowledging that he brings his own “set of assumptions” to the discussion table.

“My biblical worldview takes into account creation by God and the fall. Hence chance, variation, anomaly and degeneration are now part of human reality,” he said. “God works with humans in their imperfections, but the [Adventist] Church needs not be apologetic for its stance on [gay and lesbian] relationships.”

Rather, it should become “skillful in interpreting and declaring truths as revealed in a highly defensive, politically charged and radically individualistic environment.”

The church’s approach, then, Fox said, “should be characterized by humility—not bigotry, hatred and marginalization. We must adopt not just the message of Jesus, but the ministry methods of Jesus as well. It is the high calling of the church to love homosexuals as our neighbors, no less than we do our heterosexual neighbors.”

Top Adventist health leader calls for compassion, regardless of cause

March 20, 2014

The Seventh-day Adventist Church’s top health leader said there is no clear model to understand why some individuals are homosexual, saying it is a “complex interplay of genetic and environmental factors.”

In a plenary address yesterday at a denominational conference on sexuality, Dr. Peter Landless, the Adventist Church’s Health Ministries director, illustrated with both words and
images the complexity of procreation and the genetic variances and disorders that sometimes occur.

He delivered his remarks at the Cape Town International Convention Centre in South Africa, where the Adventist world church is holding the summit, “In God’s Image: Scripture. Sexuality. Society.”

The four-day conference is addressing how the Seventh-day Adventist Church should respond to the experiences of homosexuality and alternative sexuality. Presenters have called attention to possible implications for the Church’s pastoral ministry to individuals, employment practices, the operation of its many educational systems, and management of its far-flung health system.

His address was a call for compassion to those in gay and lesbian relationships, and also a reaffirmation of the church’s biblical stance on marriage as being between one man and one woman.

Early on he offered a rebuke for a comment he had overheard in a convention center hallway: “I’ve even heard it said at this conference that we’re talking about ‘those people,’” he said. “We’re talking about fellow people on the journey of life.”

Landless, who became director of the Adventist world church’s Health Ministries department last year, is a native of South Africa. Internationally known as a nuclear cardiologist, he previously worked at Johannesburg Hospital and served on the late President Nelson Mandela’s cardiology team. He is also an ordained minister with significant pastoral experience.

The physician began his address with a detailed overview of the procreation process and genetic variances that can occur. He gave an example of a child who was born intersexed—a condition known as Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia—and how the child’s father rejected him.

“If fathers and relatives [would] reject children born with such rare conditions, how about the church?” Landless asked the audience. “Should it be different?”

Homosexual men, he said, often have anatomical differences in their brains. Post mortem studies of homosexuals and heterosexuals have shown the differences, but it’s unclear whether the variation is causal or associated, Landless said, because the populations studied have been small. The differences show that many homosexual men have a larger superchiasmatic nucleas, which is involved in determining circadian rhythm, as well as larger anterior commissure, which communicates between the brain’s left and right hemispheres.

Some researchers, Landless said are convinced there is a genetic component to homosexuality, with some searching for a “gay gene,” but there is no consensus on causes for homosexuality in either the medical literature or among professional psychologists. “The jury is definitely not resolved,” he said.

Homosexuals have slightly higher rates of increased non-communicable diseases, including hypertension and a higher cardiovascular age compared to their actual age. And lesbian women, Landless said, are 3.2 times more likely to die of breast cancer than heterosexual women.

“There are very significant health needs in the LGBT group,” Landless said. “We as Adventists are ideally equipped and situated to reach out to them. We as a church need to look to ourselves and understand, ‘Who is my neighbor?’”
Following Landless’ plenary session, several delegates said they appreciated his medical overview and his calls for both compassion and the church’s biblical standard to be upheld.

“He contrasted the physiological picture of what healthy looks like and also the full extent of what brokenness can look like,” said Audrey Andersson, executive secretary of the denomination’s Trans-European Division, based in England. “People can choose how they respond to others’ brokenness.”

Onaolapo Ajibade, executive secretary of the denomination’s West-Central Africa Division, based in Cote d’Ivoire, said since there is no known cause of homosexuality, there is no “cure.”

“In the meantime we have to adopt a Christian approach,” Ajibade said. “Since we don’t know the cause, we have to be sympathetic.”

Before coming to the summit, Ajibade said he questioned whether it was worth the effort and cost.

“Originally I thought this summit was not needed, but having come here and having listened to all the presentations, I’m convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that it is worth it,” he said. “The church is making a spiritual step to equip us to be able to help our brothers and sisters who are in this state.”

Adventist professor’s devotional series urges appropriate conversation about sex

March 25, 2014

No other denomination today is “better positioned” to reclaim the “spirituality of sexuality” than the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a theology professor said at the church’s sexuality summit in Cape Town last week.

In a series of morning devotionals, John Nixon, professor of Religion and Spirituality at Southern Adventist University, said dysfunctional attitudes toward sex among Christians are the result of “alien influences” that “undermine and distort” the teachings of Jesus.

“We’ve been lax in teaching Christian sexuality in our churches, schools and homes. This is the root of the sexual crisis we are now facing. Even the word ‘sex’ spoken from the pulpit makes us uncomfortable,” Nixon said.

“The spectrum of teaching about sex in the church is limited to extremes—love without sex (abstinence) and sex without love (promiscuity). The Bible rejects them both,” he told delegates at the church’s “In God’s Image: Scripture. Sexuality. Society” summit at the Cape Town International Convention Centre in South Africa.

A brief historical overview helped explain how broken attitudes toward sex gained a foothold in the church. Hellenistic thought, Nixon said, pitted the spiritual world against the material world; thus a “good” soul was trapped in an “evil” body with sinful desires. Christian writings and practices of the
second and third centuries A.D. reveal an obsession with asceticism, or severe physical debasement as a measure of spirituality. Saint Augustine (354-430 A.D.) argued that all sin was rooted in sexuality and advocated procreation only without recreation.

Asceticism glorified hardships and taught that because the body was evil, all physical enjoyment should be eschewed, including sex within marriage. This notion encouraged the practice of celibacy among Christians, Nixon said.

“The vestiges of this philosophy still exist in our church,” Nixon said. “For many of us, there is still something a little suspicious about sexual pleasure, even in marriage. Engage in it, we think, but don’t have too much fun.”

But God does not forbid or even “just tolerate” sex, Nixon said. “He celebrates it in the context of pure, genuine love between husband and wife.”

Indeed, the union of husband and wife within the “sacred institution of marriage” is a full expression of the plural image of God,” he said, citing Genesis 1:26 and 27. “We are relational creatures made to complement each other. Sex is not just an act; it is part of our beings,” Nixon said.

“We do not teach a divided human nature—a soul trapped in a body. We teach a holistic nature. Sex, which is physical, also impacts the spirit and mind,” Nixon said.

Still, challenges persist in teaching biblical sexuality in homes, schools and churches—especially in a world that views any act between consenting adults as permissible, he said. On Adventist college campuses, Nixon said he has observed that students are increasingly concerned about gender identity and often view sexual choices through the lens of social justice.

All too often, he said, the Adventist Church has chosen silence rather than engaging in the conversation. “Our children learn about sex from the world. They grow up in a world of alternative sexuality as the ‘new normal.’ Sex [for them] is about self-gratification, about the happiness I am entitled to,” Nixon said.

He told the story of Joseph recorded in Genesis to illustrate that chastity and celibacy are indeed attainable goals. Joseph, he said, demonstrated integrity and faithfulness even in the face of major temptations.

“Sexual sin lends itself to secrecy where no one sees, but private moments are the ones that reveal true character,” Nixon said.

Adventist parents, teachers and pastors have the responsibility to pass on a healthy view of sex within the parameters of heterosexual marriage, he said.

“May God help us to fulfill that responsibility.”