

### **The Changing Church: *Gender and Sexual Issues***

Scenario 1: Janet has been attending your church for a number of weeks. One Sunday morning one of your elderly female church members confronts you in a highly exercised state. She encountered Janet in the ladies' room a few minutes earlier, only it turns out Janet is really a male. Later you and a female staff member have a private discussion with Janet. She claims it is her right to use the female facilities since she self-identifies as a woman. She wants to continue attending your church.

Scenario 2: Your church facilities are well-known in the community as a desirable wedding location. The church enjoys a nice rental income from non-church member ceremonies. In fact, the church just received a facilities rental application and down payment from a couple who are new to the community. The spouses' names are listed as Franklyn and Seth. They want to hold a "ceremony of commitment" at your facilities. When you inform them that the church does not allow same-gender ceremonies, they respond that the church is well-known as a public accommodation for special events – even marketed that way by the church - and that it would be illegal to deny their request. They angrily say that you will be hearing from their attorney soon. The next week a letter is published in the local paper accusing your church of bigotry and hate.

Scenario 3: Megan and Josh are a bright young couple who are new to your church. They are taking growth steps spiritually and have a servant attitude. Everyone likes them. One Sunday they show up in the new members' class. Afterward, they ask if it's a problem that they are living together but aren't married. They consider themselves committed to one another as in a marriage, but there are certain legal and financial matters that make it impossible for them to marry right now. They love the church and are ready to embrace all the commitments of membership if the church will embrace them.

Scenario 4: A female member of the youth group has just confided to your student pastor's wife that she is attracted to other girls. Youth camp is coming up in a few weeks at which this student will be staying in the girls' bunkhouse with other students and sharing restroom and shower facilities with them. When you discuss the situation with the student's parents, they tell you that they fully support their daughter "being who God made her to be." They expect her to participate in camp and other activities just like any other female member of the youth group.

Okay, you're probably thinking about now, "I wish Partain would change the subject. He's scaring me." My purpose is not to scare you, but to jar you into thinking about something that you would probably rather avoid. As the culture in which we live moves further and further away from a biblical view of gender and sexual issues, most of us in the church have our heads buried in the sand. We think of such scenarios as happening in far-off, left-wing places like Oregon or Vermont (okay, maybe Austin). But the truth is we all live in places where such scenarios are increasingly plausible. In fact, some of what you read above is based on actual occurrences in churches with which I am familiar.

My articles this year have been written under the general theme, "The Changing Church." Nowhere is change in the culture impacting the church more than in the area of gender and sexual

issues. In fact, I believe the way the church positions itself in this arena will be *the* defining stance of the church in our day.

Obviously I am not advocating that the church change its beliefs and practices to accommodate the culture. No, the change the church needs to embrace is that *it is now our responsibility to define what we believe and practice concerning gender and sexual issues and to clearly state these things for all to see*. There was a day when we could assume a general consensus about such matters in the culture and certainly in the church. We can make no such assumptions any more, nor can we assume the church will enjoy legal and other protections for “doing what we’ve always done.” It is now our responsibility to set in writing our beliefs, practices, and policies in a way that distinguishes us from the broader culture and sets biblical parameters for church activities.

At a minimum I recommend the following:

1. *Adopt a doctrinal statement in your church bylaws that includes a statement on human sexuality and gender.* Define clearly and biblically what you believe about marriage, sexual behavior, and gender identity. State that this doctrinal statement shall guide all church decisions and activities.

2. *Adopt a facilities use policy that sets parameters in keeping with your doctrinal statement on sexuality and gender.* I actually recommend that you restrict the use of facilities for weddings and similar personal events to church members in good standing. If you do rent out the facilities to non-church members, state clearly in the rental agreement the conditions of that agreement in keeping with the church’s doctrinal statement on sexuality and gender. Avoid advertising the rental of your church facilities in a way that puts you in the “public accommodation” category. When you do that you are on thin ice as to how restrictive you can be. Some churches allow public and civic groups to use their facilities, which is a good way to develop rapport in your community. In such cases you might consider a no-cost facilities use agreement that simply states that no activities will be conducted that are in violation of the church’s beliefs on sexuality and gender. You are not requiring the users to agree with you, just not to use your facilities in a way that contradicts your beliefs.

3. *Adopt a membership covenant that sets parameters in keeping with your doctrinal statement on sexuality and gender.* What is acceptable marital, sexual, and gender-identifying behavior on the part of church members? State it clearly and teach it in your membership class.

4. *Adopt policies for your ministry departments that guide leaders in responding to participants in those ministries.* When is a sexual or gender issue a counseling situation? When is it a “restrict participation” situation? Who has authority to decide? It is better to have a plan ahead of time than to be scrambling around in reaction mode.

Bottom line: Be proactive in defining what you believe and practice concerning gender and sexual issues. This is one of our greatest responsibilities in the changing church.