

**The following is a translation of Document 1 of 5 written by the leaders of the Holland District of the Church of the Nazarene.**

[Key leaders involved in this series: Principle writer is Rev. Antonie Holleman, the national leader of the Holland District; Pastor Paul Brouwer, Rev. Hans Deventer, Rev. Ed van Hoof, Pastor Wilma Holleman, Rev. Dennis Mohn and Rev. Karel Muller, Rev. Frank van de Akker, Rev. Erik Groeneveld, Rev. Jan van Otterloo and Rev. Jaap Overduin.]

## **Starting All Over Again**

In comparison to other church societies, the Church of the Nazarene has started talking about homosexuality late. This comment can be used as a charge against the church. A charge against looking away, the inertia to make a difficult topic well-discussed, or against the naivety that it will not be such a move to us. But there is also another side. Because others have preceded us, we can learn from their ways. It is now possible for us to reflect on discussions that others have conducted. We have the privilege that much has been written over the years. There has also been a lot of change over the years. Highly escalating discussions about, for example, whether homosexuality is born or learned are behind us. The question has also changed. Previously, the conversation started with a case in which a homosexual person is said to be at the door of the church asking whether there is space for him or her. **The most important questions now are how you are the church for your own youth who say they are homosexual, and how the church deals with homosexual relationships of love and loyalty.**

### **The Past**

For the Church of the Nazarene, the starting point for the formal discussion on homosexuality was in 2005 when a theme day was held on "Leaders in Speech, dealing with ethical dilemmas." This day, in April 2006, a follow-up with a preacher's study day focused on homosexuality, and a theme day in October of that year on "Ethical dilemmas about homosexuality". A guide was then developed from these meetings.

After that, the discussion focused on the use of a homosexual relation. Even after a decision in 2008 to provide no room for our municipalities, the discussion remained concerned.

Polarization arose, which made the conversation difficult and eventually stagnated.

In 2011, a working group was set up to re-establish mutual discussion and provide frameworks for pastoral practice in the local municipality. However, the work of the commission was not continued in 2012. **The last "gunfight" was a letter in June 2012 from one of the General Church leaders to all the pastors in our district confirming the formal position of the church on the dedication of weddings. Then it became quiet.**

### **The Biblical Theology Series**

By 2015, the pastors took care of the conversation carefully. This has led to this initiative of a series of articles about a Biblical theological exploration of human sexuality, which will appear as a theological series in the coming months, in order to re-engage. We want to bring the readers into reading the Bible and to share our considerations about this topic and specifically the questions about homosexuality. It is a kind of Biblical theological series in which we slowly

go on step by step. Our goal is to arrive at a pastoral missionary position for our Dutch church. We have chosen to share our way to this end so that our conclusions will not be a surprise, but also because our conclusions are not yet fixed and we will give our congregations an opportunity to have input in this process.

The document is written in the first person plural. **The writer is Rev. Antonie Holleman, the national leader of our church.** He has the ultimate responsibility for the content, but is assisted by a core group consisting of Pastor Paul Brouwer, Rev. Hans Deventer, Rev. Ed van Hoof, Pastor Wilma Holleman, Rev. Dennis Mohn and Rev. Karel Muller. Together they discuss the content of all articles so that they are worked on by a larger group than one person. There are also four others, Rev. Frank van de Akker, Rev. Erik Groeneveld, Rev. Jan van Otterloo and Rev. Jaap Overduin, who read. **The final version will be a joint document of the elders, district officials and district leaders.**

We start the conversation again because it has stagnated twice. We do not have the intention to re-do everything, or the pretention that we are doing right now. But with the insights we and others have gained outside our church in recent years, we want to conduct the conversation in a new and different way. We hope to build bridges to people and groups that have grown apart in the past, and specifically for the Church of Nazarene, we hope to find a practice that connects us.

It may be that for some, this conversation is no longer needed. They have disappointed our church or turned back, but with wounds from the past and without much hope. We regret this and know that our church is not free of sins and shortcomings. Still, we think it's not too late. Restarting also offers the opportunity to learn from the mistakes within our own community, and now it is time to come to a conclusion.

## **New Insights**

What has changed to make us believe that we need to re-start our conversation? We would like to mention a few points below which have become clear in the recent past. These insights concern not only the conversation in the Dutch district, but also the conversation in other churches.

### *A Limited Biblical Theological Reflection*

In the conversation about homosexuality, two approaches to the Bible were often contradictory. On the one hand, the time-bound character of the Bible was discussed, and the Bible passages about homosexuality were interpreted as belonging to a world that is no longer ours and often is no longer relevant. Or the argument was that the contemporary view of homosexuality is different from that of the Bible and that the texts do not really have anything to say for the present time. In the defense of the other view, these texts were justified as authoritative and still applicable at this time. It was a battlefield for the correct interpretation of five texts throughout the Bible. And in all the many books, there are five recognized passages that are viewed as having a Biblical view on homosexuality<sup>2</sup>. The texts are Genesis 19 about Sodom and Gomorrah; the law of sleeping with someone of the same sex in Leviticus 18 and 20; Paul's words in his speech about human sin in Romans 1; and two passages in 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1.

This discussion has a tremendous narrowing of the Biblical theological discussion as if it were merely the explanation of some key texts in the Bible. **The rest of the Bible disappeared into the background and the conversation came apart from the whole biblical testimony and theological reflection.**

If we resume the conversation, we want to deal with the biblical testimony in a different way. In recent years, a narrative approach has come to the Bible that seeks more justice to the ongoing story of God and the people from Genesis to Revelation. We want to learn from this approach, and not only analyze certain key passages historically, but listen much more to how the Bible draws witness to the way God has gone and continues with God's creation and creatures. It is also important for us to gain an insight into what God intended for creation. The way he went with humanity and especially with Israel. And how he fully showed himself in Jesus Christ and by the congregation want to reach the nations until the end of his creation. How should we think about homosexuality in this broad framework and how should we put the familiar texts in this broad framework? This narrative approach means broadening the theme, but also enables us to link the theme of human sexuality with the major themes of theology, such as sin, mercy, forgiveness, sanctification and new creation.

### **A Negative And Limited Vision**

The conversation about homosexuality has demanded so much attention that other issues surrounding human sexuality have come to an end. Those who described homosexual practice as a sin could once again have the impression that this is indeed the most gross sexual sin and thus asks for a firm answer from the church. But what about porn addiction, sexual abuse of children and minors, sexual abuse in marriage, divorce and adultery? The question was rightly asked why churches proclaiming a morally pure life often directed their most vicious arrows on homosexual practice.

**When it comes to human sexuality, the church does not have a good reputation. She has the impression that sexuality is a major problem in itself.** In the history of theology, theologians have developed theories in which the desire of one another was slaughtered as the sins were preached, and the impression was that a pious life could be better practiced in celibacy than in marriage. Also the resistance of churches in the past to contraception communicated an image that sexuality is intended for reproduction only. The church has often expressed negative opinions about sexuality. We do not want to deny that certain warnings about sexuality are needed as well as a critical view on sexuality, but there is a much greater need for statements about sexuality that the church believes in than it is against.

In the introduction of his book, A Primer on Human Sexuality, Dan Boone shows in a simple overview how the Church of the Nazarene Manual illustrates this negative view on sexuality. He gives a list of topics described in the Manual and has counted the number of paragraphs spent on each theme.

This is the result:

Theology of Sexuality	7 Paragraphs
Theology of Marriage	11 Paragraphs
Pre-Marital Sex	3 Paragraphs

Homosexuality	10 Paragraphs
Pornography	15 Paragraphs
Repeat Sexual offenders	16 Paragraphs
Sexual Abuse	4 Paragraphs
Divorce	91 Paragraphs

Here it turns out that the statements made by the church say more about what the church is against than what it is for. Only 18 lines in the Manual are used to say something positive, while 139 paragraphs are needed to communicate church disapproval. **The conclusion that Boone attaches to this is that the church urgently needs a coherent biblical theology of sexuality.**

When we resume the conversation, we want to widen and talk about human sexuality as God intended. We want to talk about the ideals we try to pursue. We do not want to highlight one theme like homosexuality as if this is the biggest challenge the church is facing. If we express ourselves critically about homosexual practices that are inconsistent with God's purpose, we would like to be equally critical about heterosexual practices that go against God's will. There are still many more texts that reject certain heterosexual behavior than homosexual behavior. We want to put the words written in the Bible in the right perspective, and acknowledge that other themes, such as poverty and injustice, are discussed more frequently in the Bible.

### **A Limited Wesleyan reflection**

Because most evangelical churches have had the conversation, they have a backlog. Even the small size of the evangelical churches and the limited theological reflection in many of these churches have not contributed to the fact that there is a lot of good literature on the market where evangelical Christians can recognize themselves. Most literature that is prevalent, especially in Dutch, is colored by a non-evangelical ecclesiastical family. This is often felt in the manner in which the theme is discussed, how With the Bible being dealt with and in the theological positions that underlie the assumption of writing about homosexuality.<sup>3</sup>

The Church of the Nazarene is no exception to this outlined image. We also have a backlog, and this disadvantage harms the conversation within our own church in the Netherlands. Even though many of our pastors have had the necessary pastoral experience in dealing with homosexuals in and outside the congregation, we lack Biblical theological expertise to articulate an appealing Wesleyan belief in the conversation. As a result, we are driven too much in the conversation and we are tempted to shed our theology and church tradition.

If we become involved again in the conversation, we must humbly say that we lack the expertise. We humbly think that our theological thinking is inadequate to come up with thorough reports, as other Dutch churches have done. **But we are also re-engaging the conversation with a commitment to address our backlog as well as our ability to speak out of a Wesleyan belief about homosexuality,** supporting our own people and our congregations in the Netherlands. We do not do this with the pretention that we now become a unique approach or that our view is the best. But we want to talk about homosexuality in a way that is consistent with our theological beliefs and hermeneutics. We also hope to contribute to the international conversation within our own church with arguments that have conviction within our tradition.

The urgency prevents us from taking a time-out to first get our backlog and set up all kinds of study projects before we proceed to a manual. Already in the conversation we will have to find the time to do our overdue homework. We want to focus on a Biblical theological discussion with a pastoral missionary application for the local congregation.

### **A Unilateral Critical Reflection**

The conversation about homosexuality in the last decades is clear how important and influential the role of the gay movement has been. In the 1970s and 1980s, the gay interest movement COC was a concept and in the 90's the Gay newspaper. Also, many well-known gay Dutch people have supported and honored the gay movement in the Netherlands, and events such as the Pink Saturday and the Canal Parade in Amsterdam had a major influence on the image of the gay movement in the Netherlands. The rise of this movement was difficult for the church. On the one hand, there was recognition, at some churches, that the church had seen and treated the gays incorrectly, and on the other hand many churches rejected the standards and values that were sometimes performed flamboyantly.

Much of this lies behind us and is now history. The time we live in now is different. And yet a question still keeps us preoccupied, which we think might be even more relevant in the future. And that is what the conversation about homosexuality within the church has most affected. Is that society and culture or the biblical testimony? Let there be no misunderstanding, it was social movements that burst on the doors of the churches and opened the eyes of believers. But when the conversation in the churches started, what voices were the most influential at that time? Those from the surrounding culture or from the Biblical tradition of the church?

Now that there is more distance from those agitated years and there is more opportunity for reflection, this question is becoming increasingly common, as it is a very relevant question for the church in a post-Christian environment. It raises the fundamental question about when the church must go against the surrounding culture on the basis of its testimony, and when the church has to speak through the surrounding culture regarding things that are not right in the church. **The question is increasingly asked whether the church in the conversation about homosexuality has not been willing to [address] the culture and unconsciously released too much a particular Biblical testimony.**<sup>4</sup>

The dilemma the church faces can be illustrated by the discussions about major moral issues in the history of the church. **It is conceivable that, like the theme of slavery in the 18th century, the church must now recognize that it has not read the Bible correctly and that it has to adjust its opinion on the subject of homosexuality and to blame guilt.** In such a discussion, we need the perseverance and conviction of a William Wilberforce who convinced British politics and church of the injustice of slavery in the 18th century. But it is also conceivable that the church must come to a whole different acknowledgment, one that corresponds to the work of Swiss theologian Karl Barth who opened the eyes of the people over a hundred years ago for the culling of the Biblical testimony by the culture. His theological work at the beginning of the twentieth century was a decisive attack on 19th century liberal theology, and a few decades later on the church, which had thus identified with the surrounding culture that they were insufficiently against the worldview of the Nazis. In this scenario, the church had to stand up against the prevailing opinion in society, and people such as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer needed the church to draw a clear Biblical testimony.

If we start the conversation again, we want to be fully aware that we are living in a post-Christian era in which the testimony of the church is threatened to be compromised to the prevailing opinion in society. The 21st century church is in the margins of society and, as a minority, with renewed self-awareness, must testify of her loyalty to her Lord Jesus Christ. Where the 20th century has taught us to be more critical of society, **the church in the 21st century must be courageous to hear a critical minority sound from a new understanding of the Bible.** Of course, we also have to keep a critical eye on ourselves and listen to the sounds of society that point to things that are not good to us, but our loyalty lies with Christ as revealed in the Bible and by the Holy Ghost to us Speaks.

Therefore, we are willing to go back and look critically at past choices, and to acknowledge that we have not always been critical or have easily lent our loyalty to the Bible. Returning also gives us the opportunity to acknowledge that the church has made mistakes.

The Church of the Nazarene is originally an American church, but by focusing on mission, the church has always been internationally oriented from the very beginning. The growth of the church outside of America at one point suggested the organizational model of the church. During the General Assembly of 1980 it was decided not to be a confederation of national churches but a global community in which each member and national district are equal and connected. It was also decided that the unity of the international church lies in the articles of faith, and in the preaching of sanctification as the special mission of the Church of the Nazarene.

In the decades after 1980, money has not been saved to implement this vision. Many organizational changes have taken place, many international gatherings were organized where Nazarenes from other countries can meet each other, and created opportunities to interact and support each other.

The constitution, articles 1 through 27 of our Manual, is the most important document for our church and consists of our creed and a number of Articles about church, life walk and organization. **One of the rules states that the church calls on its members not to enter into sexual relations with others of the same sex (§ 21.2). This is the official view of the Church of the Nazarene. Now this view is not cut in stone.** Each general meeting, held once every four years, can make changes here. And in the more than 100 years of existence of the Church of Nazarenes, not only rules and ethical views have been changed, but also passages in our creed. Looking at a longer period than human life, the Church's textbook appears to be much more a living document than is often suggested.

With the growth of the church in the non-western countries, diversity within the Church of Nazarenes has increased dramatically. Often the international character of our church is experienced as a contradiction between the American church and the European - which is the Western European, or perhaps the Dutch church. But if you look broader, the American and Dutch districts are much closer together in the international church. The great cultural contradictions lie between the church communities of different continents; The Asian Church, the African Church, the Latin American Church and the Western Church. **Each continent has its own major ethical dilemmas surrounding human sexuality, and in an international church, believers must find a global approach from the common confession.** This requires an empathy to understand the struggle of the other, but also to provide space if we do not understand the other. We have the way of peaceful dialogue with love and respect.

The discussion about homosexuality that has so far been conducted in our own national church has been too little oriented to the international character of our church and is often conducted without too much knowledge of how things in our church are regulated. This has often led to the discussion being isolated from us and not in association with the international church. Too often a contradiction was created between the American church and the Dutch district and we assigned ourselves the role of precursors in a global process, where this might be an example of Dutch selfishness.

If we start the conversation again, we want to do this in humility, knowing that we have taken too much of our own situation in the past and have not felt sufficiently connected with our fellow Nazarenes in so many different countries and cultures.

Now the discussion within the Church of the Nazarene is not silent. An international committee has been set up at the last General Assembly to address the issue of human sexuality. At the next meeting in 2017 she will report. If we start our conversation again, we also want to contribute to this international conversation within our church and learn from the experiences of other international churches, such as the Anglican Church, the Methodist Church and the Salvation Army.

Sometimes it can start a lot of news. In stuck processes, it may sometimes help to take a number of steps to see where it went wrong or what was overlooked. Restarting also offers the opportunity for others who did not participate for the first time to be fully involved.

If we reconsider the conversation we acknowledge that we have not listened to the canonical testimony in the full width of the Bible and have not followed our own theological tradition of sanctification. **We re-engage this conversation because we believe it can lead to a renewal that goes far beyond the actual theme. Then we are reaffirmed by God who has revealed himself in Christ and urges us to believe in Him and to be disciple of Jesus. Then God may use this conversation to renew all of us. Then it's no longer about homosexuality, but we are all challenged - heterosexuals, gay, transgender and asexual people - to show in practical terms what our holy theology means and what we believe in ourselves.**

If we start the conversation again, we will do it with a prayer for renewal. First of all, every participant is personally affected and willing to give his or her opinion for a better one. But we also pray that the church should be able to listen to a holy life and have mercy on the other.

## **Comments**

You can send an email to all members of the core group and contribute to the conversation. In later publications we will also respond to the comments received. The email address is: [hetgesprek@kvdn.nl](mailto:hetgesprek@kvdn.nl)

## **-----Notations:**

1 In the nature, deed and the word, David Bos describes how the Protestant churches in the Netherlands dealt with this theme from 1959 to 2009. The evangelical congregations such as Baptists, Army and Pentecostals did not dare publicly discuss homosexuality during this period (35-38). Even though the Church of Nazarenes is not mentioned, we can count to this group.

2 In Ganzevoort, Olsman, Van der Laan, Adam and Evert, 109-120, the different interpretations are always divided into a traditional and an alternative explanation in the treatment of the passages. See also the analysis in Prosman, *Homosexuality between Bible and Actuality*, 51-62, in which he contradicts a purely historical approach to the Bible (57).

3 An example is Jan Mudde's book, *Van Sijbbolet to Shalom*. A thorough and good book, but in which his way of arguing is probably more convincing with the people in his church, the Dutch Reformed Church than in the Church of Nazarene. It is a difference in context and tradition.

4 Two books written by gay Christians illustrate the dilemma the church stands for. Lee tells in torn out of his own experience how relentless the church can be to homosexuals. Shaw describes in the plausibility issue how the church has released too much the biblical testimony, which causes him little support to be celibatically living homosexual followers of Christ.