

THE ALLIANCE OF BAPTISTS

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A CLEAR  
VOICE

**A Document for Dialogue and Study**

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**Report of the  
Task Force on  
Human Sexuality**

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Dialogue and Study**



## Preface

This document represents the commitment of the Alliance of Baptists to address one of the most challenging issues facing churches in our time. In undertaking the study that led to its publication, we did not set out to make a statement. Rather, we determined to listen to the stories of persons of a same-sex orientation and to their families. After hearing those stories, our Board of Directors felt compelled not only to authorize its task force to study key issues surrounding homosexuality and the churches but to print its findings and commend them to Alliance-affiliated congregations.

Appointed in 1992, the Alliance Task Force on Human Sexuality labored diligently for more than two years before bringing the document you hold in hand back to the Board of Directors. Alliance President Ann Quattlebaum, a lay leader in First Baptist Church, Greenville, S.C., appointed the Task Force and provided courageous leadership throughout its deliberations. On September 24, 1994, meeting in Washington, the Board of Directors received the report of the Task Force “with profound gratitude” and pledged “to engage in an ongoing discussion of the issues raised in the report.” The Board also called its action “an occasion for recommitting ourselves to a fellowship and ministry of inclusiveness.”

When the Task Force presented the report to the membership of the Alliance gathered in annual meeting March 4, 1995, in Vienna, Va., a motion was adopted overwhelmingly to receive the report “with gratitude.” That gratitude is due most of all to President Quattlebaum, Task Force Chairperson Priscilla Asbury of Monroe, La., and each of its members. Throughout the process, this remarkable group of women and men led the Alliance well.

Although none of us knew at the time what reactions the report might provoke, even within our own constituency, we have learned in the intervening years it has proven a blessing to congregations that have chosen to study it and work out their own policies concerning the treatment of persons of a same-sex orientation. It has encouraged those congregations whose own acceptance of homosexual persons has resulted in their exclusion from associations, regions and conventions of churches. Perhaps most important, it has been a sign of hope to gay people themselves as they struggle to find their rightful places in the churches they love.

We in the Alliance hope this initiative in a distinctly Baptist context is an evidence of our commitment, in the words of our Mission statement, to “create places of refuge and renewal for those who are wounded or ignored by the church.”

Stan Hastey, Executive Director  
The Alliance of Baptists  
February 2005

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## ALLIANCE COVENANT

In a time when historic Baptist principles, freedoms, and traditions need a clear voice, and in our personal and corporate response to the call of God in Jesus Christ to be disciples and servants in the world, we commit ourselves to:

- (1) . . . the freedom of the individual, led by God’s Spirit within the family of faith, to read and interpret the Scriptures, relying on the historical understanding by the church and on the best methods of modern biblical study;
- (2) . . . the freedom of the local church under the authority of Jesus Christ to shape its own life and mission, call its own leadership, and ordain whom it perceives as gifted for ministry, male or female;
- (3) . . . the larger body of Jesus Christ, expressed in various Christian traditions, and to a cooperation with believers everywhere in giving full expression to the Gospel;
- (4) . . . the servant role of leadership within the church, following the model of our Servant Lord, and to full partnership of all of God’s people in mission and ministry.
- (5) . . . theological education in congregations, colleges, and seminaries characterized by reverence for biblical authority and respect for open inquiry and responsible scholarship;
- (6) . . . the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ and the calling of God to all peoples to repentance and faith, reconciliation and hope, social and economic justice;
- (7) . . . the principle of a free church in a free state and the opposition to any effort either by church or state to use the other for its own purposes.

## ALLIANCE MISSION STATEMENT

(The Alliance Mission was adopted in 1998 as a statement to guide our future actions.)

To keep faith with our Covenant, we:

1. Make the worship of God primary in all our gatherings.
2. Foster relationships within the Alliance and with other people of faith.
3. Create places of refuge and renewal for those who are wounded or ignored by the church.
4. Side with those who are poor.
5. Pursue justice with and for those who are oppressed.
6. Care for the earth.
7. Work for peace.
8. Honor wisdom and lifelong learning.
9. Hold ourselves accountable for equity, collegiality, and diversity.

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## ***P*ROCESS RECOMMENDATION**

The Board of Directors of the Alliance of Baptists invites Alliance congregations to participate in the search for a Christian response to homosexual persons by using the Task Force “**INVITATION**” on homosexuality as a stimulus for honest dialogue, prophetic witness and respect for one another.

The Board offers to relate to each participating congregation in these ways:

1. By suggesting a noncoercive, open process with the following components:
  - Visiting speakers addressing differing aspects of the issues involved
  - The sharing of stories from personal experience in a safe environment
  - The study of relevant biblical writings
  - The experience of the church through the years
  - The findings and questions from scientific research

For suggestions about processes engaged by congregations that have addressed this subject, you may want to contact the Alliance office.

2. By assembling a group of persons, experienced in the discussion of homosexuality within congregational settings, who would be available to consult with congregational leaders about a process that would fit each interested church. Names of these individuals are also available from the Alliance office.
3. By incorporating the learnings generated by the processes of participating congregations as a way to foster the Board’s ongoing leadership on the subject.
4. By providing an extensive bibliography of resources.

## **Purpose and Limitations**

The Task Force on Human Sexuality was commissioned to develop a working statement for consideration by the Board of Directors of the Alliance of Baptists on the subject of human sexuality with special attention to persons having a same-sex attraction. The Task Force thus focused its attention on the issues created by the presence in society and the church of same-sex oriented persons. The following working statement does not intend to be a statement on sexuality in general or specialized issues such as divorce, bisexuality or the sexual expression of single persons.

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# THE ALLIANCE COVENANT AS FRAMEWORK

Homosexuality, or more specifically, the church's response to same-sex oriented persons, may be the most divisive challenge for the church in North America since slavery. The Alliance Board of Directors has chosen to address this challenge and opportunity in a way congruent with our covenant principles, hoping to provide a safe context in which honest dialogue, prophetic witness and respect for one another can occur among us.

Specifically, the following portions of the Alliance Covenant serve as guidelines for this proposal to the Board:

(1) "...the freedom of the individual led by God's Spirit within the family of faith...."

Note in this proposal the use of "I," not "we." Each person is challenged to respond out of that person's sense of God's leading yet as a part of the church "within the family of faith."

(1) "...to read and interpret the Scriptures, relying on the historical understanding by the church and on the best methods of modern biblical study."

(See Appendix for "Discerning God's Will and Biblical Interpretation" assumed in this proposal.)

(2) "...the freedom of the local church under the authority of Jesus Christ...."

We encourage the Board to invite and assist churches in the design of non-coercive processes for considering this issue in a way that protects freedom, both of the individual and the local church, under the authority of Jesus Christ.

6) "...the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ and the calling of God to all peoples to repentance and faith, reconciliation and hope, social and economic justice."

This proposal addresses the unjust treatment of same-sex oriented persons by the church and society; it calls us to repentance; and it commissions us, as followers of Christ, to be ministers of reconciliation and hope in our day.

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of the text as well as the assumptions and historical setting which shaped the questions and intentions of the writer.

In addition, any text must be understood according to its place in the total picture of biblical revelation and, most particularly, in light of the revelation of God given in Jesus Christ. (For example, interpreters may ask whether the affirmation of heterosexual relations in the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 is intended also to prohibit all same-sex relations or whether the silence on same-sex relations is merely a descriptive reflection of a world where heterosexual marriage relations were so much the norm that alternatives were not mentioned. Again, interpreters may reasonably ask whether our attitude toward Old Testament condemnations of same-sex acts is affected by the priority of love in Jesus' teachings and his acceptance of women, prostitutes, tax collectors and others theretofore considered as second-class citizens or sinful outcasts.)

The setting and message of Scripture must also be compared to the situation faced by the modern church to see if they are, in fact, the same. (For example, regarding the menstruating woman as "unclean" (Lev. 18:19), the bias against her came from a social setting in which her blood was seen as taboo. If we do not, for good reason, accept that view, then the prohibition in the text may not be morally binding on us. In like manner, it may be questioned whether the references to abusive same-sex behavior in Scripture are comparable to consenting acts by same-sex oriented adults today.)

In other words, Scripture must be interpreted using all the gifts of human experience and aspects of human reason given by God. Reason, logic and clear analytical thinking are not enemies but friends of those seeking to understand God's revelation in Scripture. Personal experiences, as well as the relevant insights of historians and social and physical scientists, are to be received as legitimate resources in our understanding of God's truth.

The Task Force assumes that Scripture must be interpreted in light of the experiences of the interpreters — individual and shared — in and through which the Holy Spirit may speak in new and insightful ways. Baptists take seriously the promise that believers are given "another Counselor, even the Spirit of Truth" (Jn. 14:16-17) and take confidence in the hope that there is yet more truth to be revealed. (For example, the following sources of knowledge deserve a place in our moral reasoning: 1) the growing body of evidence of modern science that a same-sex orientation may not be deliberately chosen any more than is a heterosexual orientation — both being the product of complex biological and psychosocial factors; and 2) the revelation we receive when listening to the stories of gay and lesbian people.)

## Report of the Task Force on Human Sexuality

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# APPENDIX

## Discerning God's Will and Biblical Interpretation

In seeking to discern God's intention for us in this ministry of reconciliation and hope, we look to the resources available to us in Scripture, tradition, reason and experience.

*Scripture:* Baptists have always given priority to Scripture, the record of God's revelation to God's people, particularly in the person of Jesus Christ. Scripture is interpreted through prayer, the leadership of the Holy Spirit, and the most informed and careful reflection.

*Tradition:* Tradition includes the reflection of how the church, under God's leadership through Scripture, prayer and reason, struggled with the moral and theological questions of the day. While not binding on the present, the insights, successes and failures of Christians in the past can be useful guides to the reflection of the present. Baptists have consistently shown a willingness and desire to learn from and repent from past errors.

*Reason:* Reason refers to the God-given capacity to love God with all our mind as well as heart and soul (Luke 10:27), to think clearly and logically, to use the information (scientific and historical) gained by applying the mind to God's creation and to reflect clearly on God's revelation in Scripture.

*Experience:* Experience includes the insights of individual Christians and the church as a whole gained through prayer and the leadership of the Holy Spirit, as well as through the stories of individuals whose life experiences cause the church to ask new questions and seek new understanding.

Each of these four shapes the way we make moral decisions. Each of these sources requires interpretation and does not offer unambiguous guidance. Therefore, they are more effective in a context of dialogue in which each speaks to and challenges the other. As Baptists, we give particular attention to Scripture, which necessitates a clear understanding of our principles of interpretation.

Baptists assume that moral decisions about sexual expression or any other issue must be rooted in Scripture.

There is a need for clarity, however, about *how* Scripture is used. Though central to moral decision-making, all Scripture is interpreted; the question is whether that interpretation is conscious or hidden, justifiable or driven by unwarranted assumptions. The following is a brief description of the principles of interpretation (hermeneutics) accepted by the Task Force.

Scripture must always be interpreted with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, using the best available tools of biblical scholarship in order to determine the original meaning of any text. This involves striving to understand the language and form

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# DISCERNING GOD'S WILL

In seeking to discern God's intention for us in this ministry of reconciliation and hope, we look to the resources available to us in Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Each of these four shapes the way we make moral decisions. Each of these sources requires interpretation and does not offer unambiguous guidance. Therefore, they are most effective in a context of dialogue in which each speaks to and challenges the other. As Baptists, we give particular attention to Scripture, which necessitates a clear understanding of our principles of interpretation. (See the Appendix for an elaboration of these principles.)

## AN INVITATION

The Alliance of Baptists community is invited to consider the following statements of Christian witness and invitations to action as stimuli for honest dialogue, prophetic witness and respect for one another.

In response to the unjust treatment of same-sex oriented persons by the church and society, the Task Force believes that God is calling us, as followers of Christ, to repentance and to be ministers of reconciliation and hope in our day. As you shape your response to this call, consider these statements of acknowledgement, confession, affirmation and action.

### I. Statements of Christian Witness

#### **AS A PART OF THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH, I ACKNOWLEDGE:**

That well-informed and well-intentioned Baptists can differ on biblical interpretation as well as the understanding of contemporary scientific opinions. Such questions include:

- Whether the Bible actually addresses the issue of sexual orientation as we understand it today
- Whether there is an unambiguous sexual norm in Scripture
- Whether persons with a same-sex orientation should have equal standing in the membership and leadership of congregations
- The causes of sexual orientation
- Whether sexual orientation is chosen or discovered
- Whether sexual orientation can be changed

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***AS A PART OF THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH, I CONFESS:***

- That we, the church, have too often adopted the stance of society which discriminates against and fosters fear of those who are different.
- That we, the church, both heterosexual and same-sex oriented persons, have too often engaged in sexual behaviors which are personally and interpersonally destructive and life-denying and therefore morally repugnant.
- That we, the church, while believing in the cherished value of each person as created in the image of God, have nevertheless often participated in the violation of persons and their essential dignity.
- That we, the church, have sinned against same-sex oriented persons through isolation, rejection, devaluation, discrimination and violence to such an extent that they lead lives that are either hidden, ridiculed or threatened within the church and society.
- That we, the church, have intentionally and unintentionally excluded a portion of the human family and thus hindered the healing and nurturing work of the Gospel.

With fellow Christians, I repent and ask for God's forgiveness and forgiveness from those against whom I have sinned.

***AS A PART OF THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH, I AFFIRM:***

- That human sexuality is a gift of God to be accepted with gratitude and expressed responsibly and that physical expression is but one aspect of our sexual being.
- That genital sex, for both heterosexual and same-sex oriented persons, is most responsibly expressed when it occurs in the context of caring, loving, committed, covenant relationships between monogamous adults.
- That sexual abuse and exploitation as well as destructive quests for sexual gratification are contrary to the intention of God.
- That divine intention for sexual expression is love, intimacy and mutuality and includes but is not limited to procreation.
- That sexual behavior, as with all human behavior, is imperfect, standing under God's judgment and grace.

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**II. Invitations to Action**

In order to develop a responsible Christian sexual ethic, the Task Force on Human Sexuality invites the Alliance of Baptists community to consider the following recommendations:

- We encourage the study of the biblical/theological understandings of sexuality, as well as the way those understandings have been interpreted and affected by cultural changes and scientific advances through the centuries.
- We encourage the teaching of responsible sexual expression applicable to all Christians.
- We encourage listening for revelation in the sharing of stories in a safe environment such as the life stories of same-sex oriented persons and their families, friends and loved ones; and the stories of the struggle against homophobia by both heterosexual and homosexual people.
- We encourage individuals and churches to accept, in response to the biblical mandate for justice, the call to witness before the state, the church, private institutions, and individuals on behalf of the civil rights and equality of opportunity for persons of same-sex orientation, and to oppose the humiliation and violence done to them.
- We encourage churches to welcome all persons without regard to sexual orientation or marital status into the life of the congregation and to recognize that there probably are persons of a same-sex orientation already present and involved within the life of most congregations.
- We encourage churches to recognize and develop gifts for ministry in all persons without regard to sexual orientation.
- We encourage churches to lift up the ideal of covenant — that is, challenging persons, whether heterosexual or same-sex oriented, to express sexual intimacy within the covenant context of a committed, monogamous relationship. One example of that support could be a ritual of covenant-making between the couple, the couple and God, and the couple and the Christian community.