

How Can the Church Help Those Battling Same-Sex Attraction?

SEPTEMBER 19, 2014 | [Sam Allberry](#)


REVIEWS

It has been a few years now since I first started telling close Christian friends that I battle with homosexual feelings. It was a lengthy process and in some ways quite emotionally exhausting. But it was one of the best things I have ever done. The very act of sharing something so personal with someone else is a great trust, and in virtually every case it strengthened and deepened the friendship. Close friends have become even closer. I also found that people felt more able to open up to me about personal things in their own lives, on the basis that I had been so open with them. Some wonderful times of fellowship have resulted.

It has now been several months since I shared about the issue of sexuality publicly with my church family. Again, it has been a great blessing to have done so. There has been a huge amount of support—people asking how they can help and encourage me in this issue, many saying that they are praying for me daily. Others have said how much it means to them that I would share something like this. It has also been a great encouragement to me that SSA does not seem to have defined how others see me. Aside from the expressions of love and support, business was back to normal quickly.

Based on this experience, I share these five steps that can guide churches in helping Christians with same-sex attraction.

1. Make it easy to talk about.

Pastors as well as church members need to know homosexuality is not just a political issue but a personal one, and that there will likely be some within their own church family for whom it is a painful struggle. When the issue comes up in the life of the church, you must recognize that this is an issue Christians wrestle with too, and the church needs to be ready and equipped to walk alongside such brothers and sisters. 

Many Christians still speak about homosexuality in hurtful and pejorative ways. I've lost count of the times I've heard Christians (even some in positions of church leadership) use phrases like "That's so gay" to describe something they don't like. Such comments are only going to make their Christian brothers and sisters struggling with SSA feel unable to open up. When I first began to share my experiences with friends at church, I was struck by how many mature Christians felt they needed to apologize for comments they'd made in the past about homosexuality, which they now realized may have been hurtful.

Key to helping people feel safe about sharing issues of SSA is having a culture of openness about the struggles and weaknesses we experience in general in the Christian life. Tim Keller has said that churches should feel more like the waiting room for a doctor and less like a waiting room for a job interview. In the latter we all try to look as competent and impressive as we can. Weaknesses are buried and hidden. But in a doctor's waiting room we assume everyone there is sick and needs help. And this scene is much closer to the reality of what is going on in church.

By definition, Christians are weak. We depend on the grace and generosity of God. We are the "poor in spirit" ([Matt. 5:3](#)). It's a mark of a healthy church that we can talk about these things, and we need to do all we can to encourage a culture of being real about the hard things of the Christian life.

But there is a caution: having made it easy for someone to talk about their sexual struggles, we must not then make the mistake of always talking to them about it. They may need to be asked about how things are going from time to time, but to make this the main or only thing you talk about with them can be problematic. It may reinforce the false idea that this is who they really are, and it may actually overlook other issues that they may need to talk about more. Sexuality may not be their greatest battle.

2. Honor singleness.

Those for whom marriage is not a realistic prospect need to be affirmed in their calling to singleness. Our fellowships need to uphold and honor singleness as a gift and take care not unwittingly to denigrate it. Singles should not be thought or spoken of as loose ends that need tying up. Nor should we think that every single person is single because he's been too lazy to look for a marriage partner.

I remember meeting another pastor who, on finding out I was single, insisted I should be married by now and proceeded to outline immediate steps I needed to take to rectify this situation. He was forthright and only backed down when I burst into tears and told him I was struggling with homosexuality. It's not an admission I should have needed to make. We need to respect that singleness is not necessarily a sign that someone is postponing growing up.

3. Remember that church is family.

Paul repeatedly refers to the local church as the "God's household" (for example, [1 Tim. 3:15](#)). It's the family of God, and Christians are to be family to one another. So Paul encourages Timothy to treat older men as fathers, "younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters" ([1 Tim. 5:1-2](#)). The church is to think of itself as immediate family.

Nuclear families within the church need the input and involvement of the wider church family; they are not designed to be self-contained. Those who open up their family life to others find that it is a great two-way blessing. Singles get to experience some of the joys of family life; children get to benefit from the influence of other older Christians; parents get to have the encouragement of others supporting them; and families as a whole get to learn something of what it means to serve Christ by being outward-looking as a family.

4. Deal with biblical models of masculinity and femininity, rather than cultural stereotypes.

Battles with SSA can sometimes be related to a sense of not quite measuring up to expected norms of what a man or woman is meant to be like. So when the church reinforces superficial cultural stereotypes, the effect can be to worsen this sense of isolation and not quite measuring up.

For example, to imply that men are supposed to be into sports or fixing their own car, or that women are supposed to enjoy crafts and will want to "talk about everything," is to deal in cultural rather than biblical ideas of how God has made us. This stereotyping can actually end up overlooking many ways in which people are reflecting some of the biblical aspects of manhood and womanhood that culture overlooks.

5. Provide good pastoral support.

Pastoral care for those with SSA does not need to be structured, but it does need to be visible. Many churches now run support groups for members battling with SSA; others provide mentoring or prayer-partner schemes.

Those with SSA need to know that the church is ready to support and help them, and that it has people with a particular heart and insight to be involved in this ministry. There may be issues that need to be worked through, and passages from the Bible that need to be studied and applied with care and

gentle determination. There may be good friendships that need to be cultivated and accountability put in place, and there will be the need for long-term community. These are all things the local church is best placed to provide.

Editors' note: This excerpt has been adapted from *Is God Anti-Gay?* (<https://www.amazon.com/God-anti-gay-Questions-Christians-Ask/dp/1908762314/?tag=thegospcoal-20>) by Sam Allberry, available from *The Good Book Company* (<http://www.thegoodbook.com/>). It appears here with the permission of publisher. It originally appeared (<http://gcdiscipleship.com/same-sex-attraction-church/>) on the Gospel-Centered Discipleship website.

Sam Allberry is an editor for The Gospel Coalition, a global speaker for Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, and a pastor based in Maidenhead, UK. He is the author of a number of books, including *Is God Anti-Gay?* (Good Book, 2013), *James For You*, and most recently *Why Bother with Church*. He is a founding editor of *Living Out*, a ministry for those struggling with same-sex attraction. You can follow him on Twitter.

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ATTRACTION

Seeking Revival Amid Recreation

Regional Report from Hawaii

SEPTEMBER 18, 2014 | **Gavin Ortlund**

CURRENT EVENTS

Editors' note: When the church in Jerusalem received a report of what God was doing in other regions of the world, it resulted in praise to God ([Acts 21:19-20](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Acts%2021.19-20) (<http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Acts%2021.19-20>)). With a view to facilitating similar praise, as well as prayer and missional thinking, this series reports on God's work in the areas where The Gospel Coalition hosts regional meetings. See our [earlier report from Atlantic Canada](http://thegospelcoalition.org/article/searching-for-fellowship-amid-friendliness) (<http://thegospelcoalition.org/article/searching-for-fellowship-amid-friendliness>).



We'd all probably enjoy a vacation in Hawaii. But what would it be like to stay and pastor a church there? How is God at work there, and what are the challenges?

Next month hundreds of pastors and other believers will gather in Kaneohe, Hawaii, for [Overflow](http://www.overflow2014.org/) (<http://www.overflow2014.org/>), The Gospel Coalition's Regional Conference in Hawaii. Keynote speakers include John Piper, D. A. Carson, and Michael Oh. To explore what God is doing in this region of the world, TGC editor Gavin Ortlund corresponded with Matt Dirks, pastor for teaching and leadership at Harbor Church in Honolulu, and author (with Chris Bruno) of a new book, [Churches Partnering Together: Biblical Strategies for Fellowship, Evangelism, and Compassion](http://www.amazon.com/Churches-Partnering-Together-Strategies-Fellowship/dp/1433541262/?tag=thegospcoal-20) (<http://www.amazon.com/Churches-Partnering-Together-Strategies-Fellowship/dp/1433541262/?tag=thegospcoal-20>).

Tell us a little bit about how God called you to serve in Hawaii. Are you originally from there?

I'm originally a mainland *hao/e* (foreigner) who fell in love with the people of Hawaii. My wife and I moved from California to the windward side of the island of Oahu in 1999 to serve in a church, then we were sent across the mountains to

Honolulu as church planters in 2005. Hawaii is home, and I would be disappointed to be buried anywhere else.

What are some of the greatest challenges in ministry in your area? What particular cultural idols or areas of resistance to the gospel stand out?

About 150 years ago, when Hawaii was still an independent kingdom, it was considered the most Christian nation on earth. Around 90 percent of the population attended church every Sunday. It started with just a handful of church-planters who came from New England in the 1820s and 1830s and introduced the gospel to Hawaii. Within just a few years, hundreds of thousands of people in Hawaii turned to Jesus. The church in Hilo became the largest church in the world, with 13,000 members.

It wasn't just a superficial fad—this was true revival. One church planter on Maui wrote in his journal, "I have never witnessed more earnest, humble, persevering wrestling in prayer. One can scarcely go in any direction, in the sugar-cane or banana groves, without finding people praying and weeping before God." The gospel turned the islands upside down, to the point that King Kamehameha III paid to send a team of native Hawaiian missionaries across the South Pacific so that other nations could be blessed by the gospel as well.

This was Hawaii's Great Awakening, but it only took a few decades for everything to change. Spirit-soaked revival turned to man-centered revivalism. Pastors began to use contrived spiritual experiences to do what had been previously done by the Spirit. The result today is that everyone in Hawaii is spiritual (I've never received anything but warm enthusiasm when people find out I'm a pastor), but less than 8 percent of the population attends an evangelical church.

Almost everybody in Hawaii respects Jesus, but nobody really needs him anymore. Honolulu is consistently rated among the top three happiest cities in the nation. Why do you need Jesus when you're already happy? What do you need God to provide when, even if you lost all your possessions, you could just live on the beach? Thousands of people already do.

There aren't more than a handful of atheists in Hawaii, but there are a million "recreationalists"—people (including myself) who are tempted to worship leisure and comfort. We tend to believe that the ideal life is when we can find a job that will pay enough to sustain our recreational lifestyle, but won't be so demanding that it takes us away from our sports, hobbies, and pursuits.

Where do you see God at work in Hawaii? What encouraging trends do you see?

God is drawing many people out of "recreationalism" as they experience much more pleasure, contentment, and rest through Jesus than they ever could from waves, hikes, sports, and other me-time pursuits.

God is raising up an army of Christ-centered, Bible-saturated, Spirit-filled, fire-breathing young local church leaders, pastors, and church planters.

God is turning churches from man-centered pragmatism and experientialism toward gospel-driven faithfulness and ministry fruitfulness.

God is uniting many of these churches together to do big kingdom things they could never accomplish on their own, and we're boldly praying that God would use these churches to launch Hawaii's Second Great Awakening.

Tell us about the Hawaii Regional Chapter of the Gospel Coalition. What resources does it offer?

Our mission is to multiply gospel-centered churches across the islands and around the world. We do three things to accomplish that mission:

- **connect** pastors and leaders through fellowship and networking events. We plan monthly pastors' lunches where pastors can collaboratively explore practical issues of ministry from a Christ-centered perspective.
- **build** leaders and churches through training events and conferences. We plan major conferences every two years. We partner with local churches and ministries to plan smaller conferences throughout the year on topics like evangelism, leadership development, counseling, marriage, and so on.
- **send** church-planters and missionaries to launch new gospel communities, through a partnership for training, coaching, and support. We help local churches identify, equip, and send gospel-centered planters. We partner together to support these new churches in many different ways.

Tell us about Antioch School Hawaii. What needs is it designed to meet?

Antioch School is a partnership that grew out of the TGC Hawaii network. We believe that local churches must reclaim their biblical duty to proactively train gospel-centered, reproducing leaders, so a number of island churches have joined together to do so. We collaborate on one-year training residencies for church leaders and two-year residencies for up-and-coming pastors, church planters, and missionaries. Our goal is to challenge Hawaii leaders to grow not only in knowledge, but also in ministry skills and personal character in their local church context.

Local pastors do most of the training and mentoring, but we've also been blessed with guest professors like Bruce Ware and Tom Schreiner teaching intensive classes.

How can we be praying for the spread of the gospel in your region?

Three things:

- **A sense of urgency.** The relaxed nature of life in the islands tends to make Christians drift into happy contentment along with our neighbors. We need to feel the weight of the sin and darkness that lies just under the physical beauty and aloha spirit of the islands.
- **An ability to lovingly offend people.** There's a small-town mentality on each of our islands that makes us hesitant to make waves. We need courage to proclaim the stone of stumbling and rock of offense.

- **A passion for the gospel.** Island churches are tempted to emphasize implications of the gospel (good and necessary things like spiritual experiences, cultural engagement, social justice, biblical knowledge, and so on) more than the gospel. We need to continually proclaim Christ and him crucified as the foundation of everything we do, believe, and pursue.

Gavin Ortland (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is a husband, father, minister, and writer, currently working as a [research fellow](#) at the [Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding](#) at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. Gavin blogs regularly at [Soliloquium](#). You can [follow him on Twitter](#).

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