

HOW WE AGREE

*by Bob Buehler and the
Bridges Across Working Group*

The title of this essay has two possible meanings. It could herald a list of things that we agree about; but it could also introduce a discussion of the procedures, or methods, we use to sustain the ongoing discussion that is Bridges-Across. Both meanings apply to most of what follows.

The Bridges Across the Divide project is defined, in the first instance, not by agreement but by disagreement. About homosexuality as a moral question, there is much deep disagreement. It has been suggested more than once that because of this, the bridges-across project is a useless exercise, because there is no foundation on which to build a bridge. Yet, over a period of months, and in some cases stretching into years, there are those – from both sides of the divide – who, despite frustration, misunderstandings, and frequent re-hashing of a lot of the same old ground, consider the project not only worthwhile, but worth a great deal of investment of time and energy. Why? What makes us tick?

We do share some common convictions, although we have arrived at them from a variety of paths. First of all, we are unanimous in the view that every individual human being is of immeasurable worth. Some of us (but not all) would put that in theological terms: made in the divine image, an object of God's infinite love, etc. But however we phrase it, we are agreed that every person is of great value.

Secondly, we agree that is wrong to mistreat

anyone or to promote mistreatment of anyone. We find common moral ground on the question of whether or not it is right for any person to be harassed, intimidated, insulted, beaten, ridiculed, humiliated or murdered. Whatever our views on sexual morality, we believe all such behavior is wrong. Those of us who are Christians would agree that wherever such things happen, Jesus stands with the outcasts. We share concerns, from different perspectives, for the safety and future of the most vulnerable among us, our children.

Thirdly, we recognize that for dialogue to be fruitful, those who engage in it must be prepared to listen carefully and with respect, as well as to be listened to. We value the process of dialogue, of conversation. We refuse to presume that nothing can be learned from someone whose experience or opinion is different from our own.

Fourthly, while we have “agreed to disagree” on some matters, and therefore do not expect to change each others’ minds, we are united in the desire to change many people’s attitudes. We deplore the demonization of one group of people by another, and especially public and political attacks. We find sweeping generalized statements, whether about “the homosexual agenda” on the one hand, or about the “Religious Right” on the other, to be decidedly unhelpful.

Part of our goal in dialogue is to model ways of addressing the issues without resorting to extreme and emotionally charged rhetoric, even when our feelings and opinions are very strong. We have agreed to abandon intentionally hateful speech, which can lead to or legitimize violence and ridicule. Part of the process of dialogue is learning how speech that is not intended to be

hateful can sound that way.

We are agreed that care must be taken in the use of language, because many cultural differences that have grown up on the opposite sides of this divide are reflected in the choice of words that are used. We are learning that words which seem simple and straightforward to one group can seem terribly “loaded” to another. We are working to discover why this is so, and to educate one another and be educated so that a clearer understanding of the language that we use can form the basis of further discussions.

Together, we hope that this bridges-across project will demonstrate a working model for respectful, thoughtful dialogue that can be useful as a resource for creative action wherever the divide appears.

Finally, we are agreed, based on the immeasurable worth of every human being, that one of the most important things we can do is provide a safe space for persons to tell their own stories. We value the creation of relationships of trust, even across this divide. It is the establishment of such relationships that allows all our stories to be told.

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Bridges Across the Divide

*excerpts from Steve Calverley's speech to the Canadian
Intervarsity Christian Conference, McMaster University,
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For someone like myself who was gay, and who still has friends who are gay, there is a deep and profound sadness at the separation this divide brings. I believe it is a little taste, a bitter taste, of the great sadness that God feels at the estrangement from that most loved of creations - us, human beings.

You see, many people who experience same-sex attraction feel that Christians say "God cannot love them." There is a tremendous feeling of despair that "God has forgotten them." I know. I was there and believed that too.

We have sinned. Like the Priest and the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan, we have turned a blind eye to our neighbour who's laying emotionally, spiritually. and possibly even physically, beaten.

Now I am asking you, begging you, for Christ's sake will you go back to your schools and be points of light? Will you allow Jesus Christ to BE the "light of the world" through you to lesbian and gay people? Will you risk your reputation with the Christian generation before you who will say you are "compromising" when you defend and respect others. Because when it comes to the matter of compromise I firmly believe Jesus wants to say this to you - "Don't compromise my Love."

I am asking you, literally for Christ's sake, will you love others who experience same-sex attraction? Will you love them and respect them whether or not you agree with their understanding?

For Jesus sake and the sake of the hurting, return to your universities and begin this new year, 1997, to build Bridges Across the Divide for "blessed are the peacemakers ..."

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A CYBERSPACE INITIATIVE

WEBSITE

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E-MAIL LISTS

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The Purpose Of The Bridges-Across Website and E-mail lists is to provide models and resources for building respectful relationships across the divide in the homosexuality issue.

The divide is between those who, for religious or other reasons, believe that homosexual relationships have the same value as heterosexual relationships, and those of many faiths who believe that only a male/female relationship in marriage is the Creator's intent for our sexuality.