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The Morality of Homosexuality

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ABSTRACT. Homosexuality has been considered a form of mental illness, morally wrong and socially deviant. The purpose of this paper is to present both sides of the homosexuality issue from a religious standpoint: opponents of homosexuality versus supporters of homosexuality. It is proposed that how one interprets the morality of homosexuality will depend upon one's level of moral development according to Kohlberg's theory. Ten churches in the Raleigh area of North Carolina completed a questionnaire designed to ascertain the church's position on the issue of homosexuality. Specifically, questions were asked to ascertain the church's level of moral development.

During the past 20 years, gradual changes have occurred in the attitudes toward homosexuality. In 1974, the American Psychiatric Association deleted homosexuality from the Diagnostic Systems Manual III (Lovelace, 1973). The purpose of the change was to remove the stigma associated with homosexuality. Although bias still exists in the psychological community, the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Bias in Psychotherapy with Lesbians and gay Men found 44% of the themes used with homosexual clients to be exemplary and unbiased (Youngstrom, 1991). Although views on homosexuality have begun to change in the medical and psychological communities, religious organizations, particularly Christian denominations, are still debating the morality of homosexuality.

The intention of this paper is to present both sides of this controversy based on a review of a few Christian writers. Additionally, ten churches in

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the Raleigh/Cary area of North Carolina were asked to complete a questionnaire designed to assess their respective position on the morality of homosexuality using Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Reimer et al., 1983).

For clarity, the following terms are defined as they are used in this paper:

- Homosexuality—having a physical, emotional, and intellectual orientation for relationships with persons of the same sex
- Heterosexuality—having a physical, emotional, and intellectual orientation for relationships with persons of the opposite sex
- Gay/Lesbian—developing a homosexual identity free from feelings of guilt, shame, or regret.

IN OPPOSITION TO HOMOSEXUALITY

I am convinced that the homosexual way of life . . . is irreconcilable with the Christian way of life. It fails to adequately embody the normative Christian values of chastity, love and faithfulness to promise. (Malloy, 1981, p. 328)

Homosexual behavior originates from the depravity of man. (Gangle, 1978, p. 94)

This is the place for protest, warning and conversion. The command of God shows him irrefutably . . . that as a man he can only be genuinely human with woman, or as a woman with man. In proportion as he accepts this insight, homosexuality can have no place in his life, whether in its more refined or cruder forms. (Barth, 1961, p. 166)

No one properly functioning as a Christian refuses to recognize God-ordained human rights, regardless of race, color or natural sex. The church has been guilty of violating human rights in the past, but the homosexuality question is hardly an example. (Gangle, 1978, p. 30)

Traditionally, homosexuality has been considered contrary to the will of God and, therefore, sinful. Kirk (1978) argues that Genesis 1 describes humanness as sharing life with the opposite sex: "Therefore, to be created in the image of God includes being in relationships as male and female."

Malloy (1981) supports the natural law theory in which: "Man and

woman were made for each other and no other form of sexual sharing is adequate to the interpersonal and cross-generational institution that we call marriage and family." Essentially, Malloy (1981) and others who maintain natural law theory regard homosexuality as immoral for the following reasons:

- It is contrary to the procreative purpose of sexual intercourse.
- It is an attack on the basic unit of society—the family.
- It is deficient in the potential for complementary interaction between partners.
- It is a deliberate pursuit of sexual pleasure in the absence of a stable framework for mutual growth and understanding.

Although interpretations vary, the sin of Sodom (Genesis 19:4-11) was construed by some to be the desire to commit homosexuality on Lot's guests, therefore, the term sodomy was coined (Gangle, 1978). Typically, this biblical account has served as primary proof that homosexual acts were contrary to God's law: Due to the sin of homosexuality, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by God.

The strongest argument that adversaries of homosexuality have is based on Leviticus that describes legal prohibition against homosexual acts between men (Malloy, 1981):

Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind; it is an abomination. (Leviticus 18:22)

If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them. (Leviticus 20:13)

The imposition of the death sentence indicates the seriousness of homosexual relations between men. Arguments also center on New Testament proscriptions of homosexuality, which include female homosexuality:

That is why God has abandoned them to degrading passions: why their women have turned from natural intercourse to unnatural practices and why their menfolk have given up natural intercourse to be consumed with passion for each other, men doing shameless things with men and getting appropriate reward for their perversion. (Romans 1: 26-27)

Barth (1961) also quoted this biblical passage in support of his argument that homosexuality is contrary to God's will in addition to being a

"physical, psychological and social sickness" (Barth, 1961, p. 166). Malloy (1981) asserts that this text is a clear condemnation of homosexuality for both sexes because it is contrary to God's intention in creation and contrary to the Old Testament law:

Because they have forgotten how to properly exercise their sexual faculty, they have become steeped in sin and death is their proper end. (Malloy, 1981, p. 206)

Although oppositionists reason that homosexuality is morally wrong many are willing to accept homosexuals into the church in an attempt to change and cure them of their sinfulness:

But it cannot be denied that the power of God, while offered in judgment against practicing homosexuals, stands ready to forgive and change those involved at the levels of both propensity and practice. (Gangle, 1978, p. 102)

The solution to this moral dilemma, according to opponents such as Kirk (1978), Lovelace (1973), Gangle (1978), and Malloy (1981), is for the individual to abstain and live according to God's will. Kirk (1978) asserts that the church "must give considerable emotional and spiritual support to such persons," since breaking from homosexual acts will result in much pain and confusion.

In summary, adversaries state that "there is no hope for the homosexual if the church of Jesus Christ changes its historical-biblical view of sexuality, morality, and homosexuality as sin, or the necessity to turn from that sin" (Kirk 1978, p. 111). Supporters of homosexuality hold a different view.

IN SUPPORT OF HOMOSEXUALITY

If a homosexual relationship is a matter of two human beings trying to relate to each other with emotional sincerity, this is a morally proper relationship to the extent to which they succeed in that. (Macourt, 1977, p. 104)

Homosexual acts between persons who intend a genuine union in love are not sinful nor should the church consider them as such. (Pittenger, 1976, p. 80)

I am ready to say that in homosexual love of the kind I have been discussing, God is present. He is present in the loving relationship and present also in the acts that express and cement that love. (Pittenger, 1976, p. 80)

Supporters of homosexuality argue that condemnation of homosexuality stems from homophobia, "a form of mental illness often reaching proportions of mass hysteria underlying most of the institutions and attitudes used to oppress and degrade gay people" (Macourt, 1977, p. 40). Malloy (1981) admits that this fear can be traced to the Sodom and Gomorrah story: Homosexuality was connected with idolatry, rape, and promiscuity; therefore, serious sanctions ensued against same-sex relations. Although this biblical passage is tied to homosexuality, many writers, including Gangle (1978) and Malloy (1981), support the view that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was inhospitality towards Lot's guests, not homosexuality.

With respect to biblical prohibitions of homosexuality, Mohr remarks that "Condemnation is merely a quirk of history and rhetoric rather than a moral precept" (Mohr, 1988, p. 33). Theissen (1977) purports that the intensification of norms and restrictions in Jewish culture resulted from a desire to resist assimilation of surrounding, "alien" cultures. Because it was imperative for the Jews to separate themselves from the practices of the Canaanites and Babylonians, who practiced homosexuality and idol worship, the laws in Leviticus were created:

The biblical materials are always contingent in the sense that they are always the products of specific cultures and therefore of specific cultural understanding so that their status as "revelation" for us now has to be argued at every particular point. (Macourt, 1977, p. 102)

Pittenger (1976) also supports this concept: He argues that the Leviticus passages served the social needs of the Hebrew people. Many of the Leviticus laws are no longer strictly adhered to because they are obsolete, such as the "handling of anything dead, violation of dietary laws, ritual impurity, contact with women in the menstrual period and the like" (Pittenger, 1976, p. 87).

Defenders of homosexuality oppose the theory of natural law. Macourt (1977) delineates the paradox of natural law: How could the church condemn nonprocreating homosexuals in one instance while praising celibacy in the next? Again, this relates to the social context at the time the Bible was written. It was imperative for the Jewish people to grow as a nation; therefore, emphasis was on procreation. This is not an issue today when nations are competing for valuable and scarce resources.

Supporters of homosexuality assert that the foundation of Christianity is love; therefore, how can love between two people of the same sex be considered sinful? Pittenger (1976) believes that the law of human life is to love one another:

This is the absolute center of the New Testament and it is important for us to realize that it follows from this that how we love is dependent upon our really loving, not the other way around. (Macourt, 1977, p. 96)

Peck (1978) defines love as the will to extend oneself for the purpose of one's own or another's spiritual growth. Peck (1978) and Pittenger (1976) stress that the intention of the action (love) should be the focus, not the overt actions (sex).

When homosexual men and women try to live "in love," in the sense here defined, they are fulfilling themselves and acting in accordance with God's purpose. (Pittenger, 1976, p. 103)

Pittenger (1976) feels that demanding homosexuals to abstain is to treat them as "outsiders" and refuse them the possibility of a genuine union with another person. Also, "those who urge that all homosexuals should thus suppress their sexuality are asking that they should become incipient or actual neurotics" (Pittenger, 1976, p. 79).

The New Testament barely touches on the issue of homosexuality. Paul notes individual responsibility with respect to the issue of morality:

One man esteemeth one day above another, another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. (Romans 14:5)

Essentially, Paul is saying that a person's own conscience will indicate whether his or her actions are wrong. If guilt ensues, the action is not in line with the person's morality.

Today, some churches accept homosexuality whereas others do not. "Until such time as Christian thinking is indeed rehabilitated in its attitude toward homosexuality, the only salvation for the homosexual is to reject religious orthodoxy and the church as an institution" (Oberholtzer, 1971, p. 218).

KOHLBERG'S THEORY OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

As noted by Mohr (1988), moral beliefs should not be based on feelings; rather, they should be based on reasons and justifications that are not

subject to rationalizations or prejudices. Kohlberg's theory views moral development as growth that takes place according to a predetermined sequence (Duska & Whelan, 1975). Please refer to Appendix I for the breakdown of the stages and their respective characteristics (Reimer et al., 1983).

Kohlberg designed an interview which "involves the presentation of a moral situation or moral dilemma, and the asking of questions designed to uncover the reasons for subjects recommending specific sources of action in such situations" (Duska & Whelan, 1975). The presentation of a moral situation was the basis of this study; therefore, Kohlberg's theory of moral development seemed appropriate. The dilemma centered on the church's acceptance of homosexuality.

METHOD

Subjects

The churches were selected out of the Raleigh telephone book. The first available leader within the church was asked to participate. One church out of each of the major denominations was selected. Each subject was granted anonymity. Some participants chose to waive anonymity. All ten subjects who agreed to participate returned the questionnaire.

Instrument

The questionnaire (Appendix II) for this study was based upon Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Eighteen questions were generated to measure the church's level of moral development with respect to the issue of homosexuality. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure agreement for the questions. Table I provides scale values for each level of moral development.

In order to provide content validity for the classifications of questions (within the three levels of moral development), three independent raters were given the questionnaire along with Appendix I which delineates Kohlberg's levels of moral development. Rater #1 is a 40-year-old editor with a BA in history. Rater #2 is a 44-year-old designer with a BS in education and an MPD in design. Rater #3 is a former teacher turned copy editor of 24 years of age with an MED in education.

Specifically, the raters were asked to place six questions within each level (1-3) for the total of 18 questions. Appendix I served as a guide for question

TABLE 1

Likert Scales for Levels of Moral Development

	1	2	3	4	5
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
Level 1:	5	10	15	20	25
Level 2:	7	14	21	28	35
Level 3:	6	12	18	24	30

placement. From the results, questions 1, 3, 9, 14, and 16 were placed in Level 1 with an 87% agreement among raters. Questions 5, 6, 10, 12, 13, 15, and 17 were placed in Level 2 with 81% agreement. Questions 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, and 18 were placed in Level 3 with 89% agreement (Appendix III). Table 2 provides a breakdown of the percentages of agreement for each question. No question had less than a .67 (two out of three raters supported placement) agreement.

Scores were based on percentage of agreement; higher percentages indicating support of the level of morality and lower percentages associated with disagreement with the level of morality. For instance, strong agreement with Level 2 moral reasoning has a Likert value of 35. Strong disagreement with Level 2 moral reasoning is equated with a score of 7. In the hypothetical case, the sum of the scores for this level is 31. This score indicates 89% agreement or support of Level 2 of moral reasoning. If 89% was the highest percentage of support among all three levels, it would be stated that the examinee's view of homosexuality is associated with Level 2 moral reasoning.

THE CHURCH'S VIEW OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Before presenting the results of the questionnaire, the reader should be aware that the results of one particular church may not be representative of the entire denomination. Some branches of a particular denomination are more liberal than others. Additionally, the hierarchical structure and level of authority differ for each church. Chart 1 displays each church's percentage of agreement for each level of moral development.

TABLE 2

Inter-rater Agreement for Questions

Question #:	Percent Agreement:	Level of Moral Development:
1	67%	1
2	100%	3
3	100%	1
4	67%	3
5	67%	2
6	67%	2
7	67%	3
8	100%	3
9	67%	1
10	100%	2
11	100%	3
12	67%	2
13	100%	2
14	100%	1
15	100%	2
16	100%	1
17	67%	2
18	100%	3

Level 1: Preconventional Morality

The five questions in this section centered on the view of homosexuality as morally wrong due to various reasons such as fear of God's punishment and obedience for its own sake. Chart 2 displays the churches' support of preconventional moral reasoning with respect to the issue of homosexuality. Three of the churches participating were classified at Level 1.

The Interdenominational church contacted indicated 100% agreement with preconventional morality. Additionally, the church agreed 89% with Level 2 and only 27% with Level 3. Reasons for questions were not provided.

Also showing 100% agreement with Level 1 was the Charismatic church. Also, the Charismatic church indicated 71% support for Level 2 and only 20% support for Level 3. Pastor Herbert Carter provided a com-

WHEREAS, the law and the Gospel of Jesus Christ are to be proclaimed and applied to all conditions of mankind; therefore be it Resolved, that the Synod recognize homophile behavior as intrinsically sinful; and be it further Resolved, that the synod urge that the Law and Gospel of the Scriptures be applied to homophiles as appropriate with a view toward ministering the forgiveness of our Lord Jesus Christ to any and all sinners who are repentant. (Resurrection Lutheran Church, 1991)

From reading a more detailed version of the statement, it seems understandable why there is support for each level of moral development. On the issue of treatment, the statement suggests that counseling be made available. The issue of treatment appears to be in line with Level 2 moral reasoning:

Punishment does not result in change of propensity, although it may restrict overt behavior. As cooperation and motivation are needed for any change by therapeutic process, legal sanctions are questionable, as they may be on other grounds. (Lutheran Church Synod, Australia, 1973)

The questioning of legal sanctions indicates Level 3 moral reasoning; whereas the statement "God's Word regards this disruption and perversion as a judgment of God on the whole of Mankind so that in this sense all mankind is somehow involved" (Lutheran Church Synod, Australia, 1973) displays Level 1 moral reasoning. It appears from this church that one's level of moral development is not static and may be subject to change.

Level 2: Conventional Morality

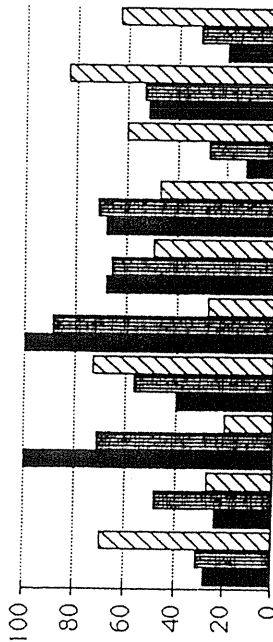
Level 2 does not support the morality of homosexuality on the basis of living up to the expectation of being a "Good Christian" and avoiding the breakdown of the family system. Mutual interpersonal expectations, social system, and conscience are the focus of this stage. Chart 3 displays the churches' percentage of support for Level 2 moral reasoning.

Only two churches were categorized at Level 2. The Methodist church supported Level 2 (71%) and Level 1 (68%), with 47% support for Level 3 moral reasoning. As Gangle (1978), Sharpe of the Methodist Center stated that:

Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's Grace is available to all. (Sharpe, 1991)

CHART 1

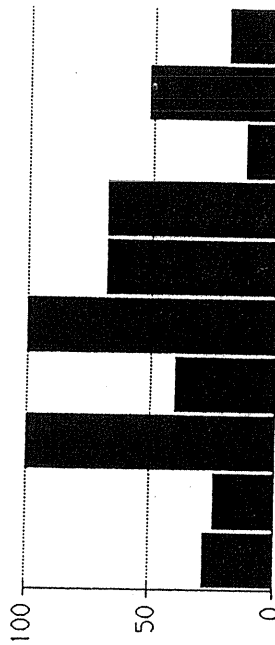
Percentage Agreement for Levels of Moral Development



Bapt Cath Char Epis Inter Luth Meth Metr Morv Pres

CHART 2

Churches' Percentage Support For Level 1 Moral Reasoning



Bapt Cath Char Epis Inter Luth Meth Metr Morv Pres

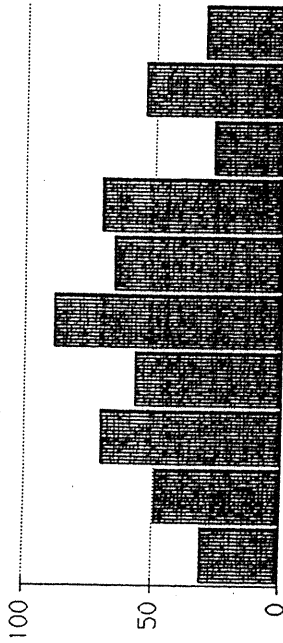
ment to question number six stating that "homosexuality is sinful and homosexuals are expected to abstain from homosexual practices to be considered moral members of the church" (Carter, 1991).

Although the Lutheran church showed highest support for Level 1 (68%), support for Level 2 was 66% and for Level 3 was 50%. The Lutheran church submitted a statement on homosexuality that was recorded in 1973 (Commission on Theology and Church Relations) Resolution 2-04:

WHEREAS, God's Word clearly identifies homophile behavior as immoral, and condemns it (Lev. 18:22; 20:13 and Rom. 1:24-27); and

CHART 3

Churches' Percentage Support For Level 2 Moral Reasoning



Bapt Cath Char Epis Inter Luth Meth Metr Morv Pres

Sharpe (1991) also stated that the Methodist Center also expects that homosexuals commit to abstinence. They are not considered moral but are provided with the ministry of the church as other members:

Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggle for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. (Sharpe, 1991)

Sharpe (1991) stressed that the church does emphasize "male" and "female" and the importance that they "be fruitful and multiply." According to Sharpe (1991), a study group on the issue of homosexuality was commissioned by the 1988 General Conference and is to report findings in 1992. Presently, "the congregation would question the morality and goodness of the church if homosexuals were *ordained*. No self-avowed practicing homosexual shall be ordained in a United Methodist Church" (Sharpe, 1991).

Also showing Level 2 support was the Catholic church with 49% agreement with Level 2, 24% agreement with Level 1, and 27% agreement with Level 3. The Catholic church respondent used a chapter on homosexuality from *Catholicism* (McBrien, 1980) and the *New Dictionary of Theology* (Komonchak, Collins, & Dermot, 1991) as reasons for the answers given. Highlighted within the Komonchak et al. (1991) article was the statement that the traditional Roman Catholic teaching considers homosexual acts to be evil. Additionally, total abstinence is required of homosexuals:

This is the position taken by official Roman Catholic magisterial documents which argue that, since in God's creative plan genital sexual expressions must be open to their life (procreative) and love (unitive) giving potential, homosexual acts will always be "intrinsically disordered" and be able in no case to be approved of. (Komonchak et al., 1991, p. 491)

Highlighted sections in the McBrien (1980) article state that homosexuality is unnatural. Again, the issue of abstinence is stressed. According to the Catholic religion, the only proper expression of sex is in the context of marriage between husband and wife. "Because homosexual acts cannot possibly fulfill these principles, they are a grave transgression of the goals of human sexuality and of human personality, and are consequently contrary to the will of God" (McBrien, 1980, p. 1030).

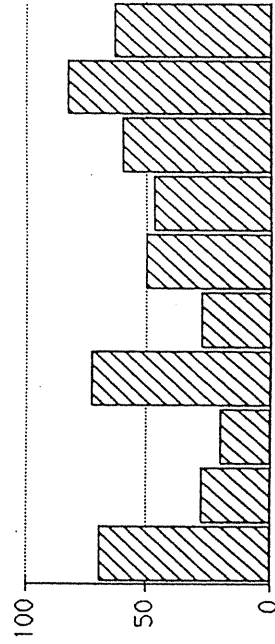
Level 3: Postconventional Morality

The majority of the respondents were classified at Level 3 moral reasoning (see Chart 4). This level is supportive of the morality of homosexuality due to respect for individuality and human rights. The social systems and legal restrictions are sometimes considered relative and inappropriate if they oppress individual rights.

The Moravian church showed some support for all levels of moral reasoning but with primary support of Level 3 (83%). This was the highest percentage of support for Level 3. The respondent showed 52% support for Level 1 and 54% support for Level 2. No other comments were provided.

CHART 4

Churches' Percentage Support For Level 3 Moral Reasoning



Bapt Cath Char Epis Inter Luth Meth Metr Morv Pres

The Metropolitan church indicated 80% support for Level 3 but did not show support for Level 1 (20%) or Level 2 (31%). The respondent stated that the Metropolitan church does not consider homosexuality as morally wrong:

Lesbians and Gay men are to be considered moral members of the church based on their individual character and individual morality, not on the basis of their sexuality. (Anonymous from Metropolitan Community Church, 1991)

The respondent also stressed that gay men and lesbians are capable of making "excellent and just decisions" and therefore, should be permitted to serve.

The Episcopalian respondent showed 73% support for Level 3, 57% support for Level 2, and 40% support for Level 1. The only comment provided was that this information represents only one Episcopalian's point of view.

The Baptist church showed 70% support for Level 3 and only minimal support for Levels 1 (28%) and 2 (31%). Scholenburg (1991) stated that it was difficult to present the church's perspective since the church is still working towards consensus. With the statement that homosexuality causes a breakdown in the family system, Scholenburg (1991) replied that "The so called 'family' system of 1950 is an economic not a spiritual phenomenon." In speaking about homosexuals, Scholenburg (1991) commented that:

They must be cared for—we do *not* condone multiple partners nor the gay lifestyle. Morality is centered on loving life-supporting relationships not casual sexual pleasure incentives—using others, etc. We apply the same standards for couples—gay or straight.

Also showing support for Level 3 (63%) was the Presbyterian church. The respondent for this church showed only 20% support for Level 1 and 31% support for Level 2. Procter (1991) stated that "the answers here reflect the views of my congregation, but *not* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as a denomination, which has recently taken a traditional stand against the ordination of gay men and lesbians."

DISCUSSION

Pearson Product Moment Correlations values for Levels 1 and 2 was .92, for Levels 1 and 3 was -.63, and for Levels 2 and 3 was -.64.

Although the study was designed to indicate three levels of moral reasoning the results indicate that the items represent two categories. The very high correlation between Levels 1 and 2 suggests that there is little distinction between the items in these levels. On the other hand, the negative correlations between Levels 1 and 3 and 2 and 3 indicate that items in Levels 1 and 2 do indeed differ from items in Level 3.

From the results of the questionnaires and the literature reviews, it appears that the higher the level of moral development, the more accepting the churches would be of homosexuals and their plight. One's level of moral development is not constant and may be situational in nature. The Lutheran church and the Methodist church, for instance, support all levels of moral reasoning for the issue of homosexuality. Also, the churches may display different levels of reasoning with respect to different moral situations.

Attitudes toward homosexuality are changing within the religious communities. Pullen Baptist is a prime example. Although some churches do not accept the morality of homosexuality, individuals within these churches are seeking to change negative attitudes about this issue. For instance, Bill Sharpe of the Methodist Center conducts workshops for gays and lesbians. He hopes that the attitudes in this church will change and become more open with respect to the issue of homosexuality (Sharpe, 1991).

This discussion covered the morality of homosexuality from a Christian perspective. Continuing the research presented in this paper would require further refinement of the questionnaire to distinguish among the three levels of development. Additionally, a representative sample within each denomination could generate norms on the level of moral reasoning.

Future investigations might examine this issue from other religious and cultural perspectives. Additionally, Bronstein and Quina (1988) noted that cultural and gender biases may be embedded in Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Alternate moral development theories, such as Loveinger's Ego States (Lewis & Lewis, 1989) or Freire's (1971) Stages of Critical Consciousness, may be considered for the criteria.

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