



Kerstin Söderblom

Queer-Affirming Pastoral Care

V&R



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VANDENHOECK & RUPRECHT

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FOREWORD TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

“Could there not be an English translation of your book?” I was often asked by various European friends from the European Forum of LGBTI+ Christian Groups. *“But the book is about my experiences as a queer-affirming pastor and university chaplain in Germany”*, I used to answer. Hence, I wrote about the specific religiopolitical context of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD). Discussing the matter with several colleagues, I decided to have my book translated anyway. Aside from the religiopolitical settings, the concrete case studies and my evaluation of them present some general findings and insights: no matter how progressive church laws are, queer people of faith often have to struggle with certain challenges and obstacles in their home parishes or faith communities. Controversies around biblical hermeneutics and theological topics concerning diverse sexual orientations and gender identities are some of the biggest problems they have to face. Therefore, queer-affirming pastoral care is not an easy thing to do, anywhere in the world. What has to be taken into consideration? What can be said about biblical “clobber passages” that condemn homosexuality? What is a queer re-reading of biblical texts? What should be offered, to make pastoral care a queer-affirming endeavor? My book provides insights and suggestions that are valid not only for the individual case study in question, but also for general discernment. I hope that my book can encourage pastoral care givers in different countries to contextualize and adapt the material and develop queer-affirming pastoral care education and training in their specific countries and religious settings.

Kerstin Söderblom

FOREWORD

For more than twenty years, I have been working in various church positions as an openly lesbian pastor. Even as a young theology student, the human resources department of my church, the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN), encouraged me not to give up my studies after coming out, stressing that they hired their staff based on their qualifications and not their lifestyles. Nevertheless, they also explained that my lifestyle could be an obstacle for some local church members. As it turned out, they weren't wrong; what lay ahead was a learning curve that would not always prove easy for all parties involved.

A lot has happened since I came out in the 1980s. Many regional churches in Germany now offer weddings or services of blessing for same sex couples. Most of them allow lesbian and gay pastors to live as couples in the parsonage and for trans* people to remain in their church jobs, even post transition.

However, if one looks at the worldwide ecumenical church landscape, churches are far too often part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Right-wing evangelicals of all denominations – also including non-religious fundamentalists and those taking extreme right-wing positions – are organizing internationally to stand up for traditional family values.

Quite a few pastors and church employees publicly condemn queer people in sermons and speeches, threatening them with hell and damnation. Some even incite their parishioners to hatred and exclusion, with Bible in hand. Again and again, queer people are excluded from congregations or religious groups after a voluntary or forced coming out. Social contacts and networks are lost in the process and it is not uncommon for queer people to be verbally or physically attacked. Cyril I, the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow, stated one reason for Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine was the need to protect Russian family values from the Western "gay epidemic" and Pride Parades.

Little wonder then, that queer-affirming pastoral care is still urgently needed today. Queer believers need safe spaces where they can talk about their experiences without having to justify them or fearing re-traumatization. They need

places where they can experience that being queer and being a believer are not mutually exclusive, but in fact go together well.

This is exactly what I am passionate about as a pastor. I am committed to respect and equality for queer people in various places in the church – in preaching, in church discussion events, in educational work, in pastoral care, and in counseling. And right from the start, queer believers, or those in search of a religious home, have approached me for pastoral care and counseling. The need was and still is great. And yet, explicitly queer-friendly pastoral support is still hard to find in church circles.

The importance of queer-affirming pastoral care is also evident in my current work as a university pastor at the Evangelische Studierendengemeinde/ESG (Protestant University Chaplaincy) in Mainz, Germany. From the very beginning, students from very different disciplines have approached me about queer-affirming pastoral care and counseling. After all, young people too experience how difficult it is to be queer and religious on a daily basis. Fortunately, queer-affirming pastoral care services are well established in the Catholic (KHG) and Protestant university communities in Mainz. However, this is by no means the case everywhere.

Moreover, to my knowledge there has not been a single book published on this topic in the German-speaking world. Queer-affirming approaches are neither official topics in pastoral care training, nor in further and continuing education. And there is a long way to go, until they become concepts within the curriculum.

For all of these reasons, I decided at the beginning of 2022 to write down and evaluate my pastoral care experiences on these topics in the format of condensed case studies. A three-month study leave, which my regional church allows its pastors every ten years, gave me time and space to put the plan into action.

With this book, I hope to make queer-affirming pastoral care perspectives more comprehensible and deepen existing insights.

My wish is that it offers suggestions to those providing pastoral care today, as well as material for modules on queer-affirming pastoral care education and training.

Kerstin Söderblom

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INTRODUCTION

The book is structured into five steps: Classification (Chapter I), Perception (Chapters II–III), Understanding (Chapters IV–V), Implementation (Chapters VI–VII) and Interpretation (Chapter VIII). I will use the first chapter to clarify my concept of pastoral care and to put it in the context of basic queer-theological assumptions. In the second chapter, I will then introduce the social and religiopolitical context of the topic. In Chapter Three, I will describe and summarize the challenges and opportunities for pastoral care in a queer context, with the help of five anonymous case studies from my pastoral care practice. From these, I will propose case-based insights for queer-affirming pastoral care in Chapter Four.

In Chapter Five I will comment on the popular observations made with reference to the so-called “clobber passages”, i. e. biblical passages that are weaponized against queer people in order to devalue or condemn them. This is a necessary step in queer-affirming pastoral care, as care seekers often struggle to put them into context. After that, I will use the sixth chapter to summarize pastoral care actions taken in ceremonial services in a queer context, which I experienced as a congregational pastor and later as a pastor at the “Protestant Scholarship Foundation” “Evangelisches Studienwerk” in Villigst/Germany. In the process, I will describe five case studies: a blessing ceremony for a same-sex couple, a baptism for a rainbow family, confirmation classes with the coming out of a teenage participant, a naming ceremony in the context of a transition and a funeral service for a gay man. I will then reflect on the significance of pastoral work in the context of queer-affirming ceremonial services. In the seventh chapter, I will present seven sermons that I have provided in different contexts and that have initiated or supported queer-affirming pastoral care work. I will follow this up by adding further insights and comments I received in response to these sermons. The eighth chapter will be used to formulate conclusions and basic requirements for queer-affirming pastoral care, before finally offering some key proposals for a queer-affirming pastoral theology of diversity. The main part of the book is followed up by a glossary, (self-) reflective questions

on queer-affirmative counseling, a checklist for safer spaces, a bibliography, as well as a selection of international queer-affirming and religious networks.

All Bible texts are taken from the King James Bible Online and from translations of the German Revised Lutheran Bible of 2017 or from translations of the German “Bible Edition in Inclusive Language”. In addition, I have also supplied some translations of my own.

I understand this book as a written reflection on my pastoral care practice from a queer-theological perspective. I refer to good practice examples from more than twenty years of pastoral care work, from instances where I believe something more can be learned above and beyond the individual case study in question. Of course, there have been counseling sessions that did not succeed for various reasons, or where I reached my own limitations from a professional perspective, and had to refer pastoral care seekers to specialized professionals. It is a book derived from practice, made for practice. In this sense, I hope that it will invite those active in pastoral care, whether it is on a full-time, part-time or voluntary basis, to counsel joyfully, and for the benefit of themselves and others, in a queer-affirming way.

CLASSIFICATION

I What is pastoral care?

1 Approaching pastoral care

Physical accompaniment

The risen Jesus accompanied two disciples to Emmaus. They did not recognize him. Jesus listened to them, talked to them and shared part of the journey with them. He took their worries and needs seriously and perceived their insecurities. Jesus ate and drank with them and finally shared bread and wine with them. This is how he had done it before, so that the two disciples could finally recognize him. The scales fell from their eyes. Jesus was back. How could they not have recognized him before? He had risen from the dead, hallelujah! Through the encounter with the resurrected Jesus, they gained new courage. After Jesus had disappeared again, they went back to Jerusalem to tell the others about their joyful experience.

This biblical story from Luke 24 lays the basis for my thoughts on pastoral care. In this sense, pastoral care is bodily accompaniment along the way, involving attentive listening and participation in both small and large concerns and crises, for a limited period of time, and in very different everyday situations. Asking questions and being silent, listening and providing company, were decisive interventions made by the risen Jesus. He also reactivated memories of the disciples, by sharing the communion with them. Through the familiar ritual, he released inner sources of strength in the disciples and changed their view of the future, so that hope rather than despair shaped their perspective on life.

Considering a person holistically – body, spirit and soul

In my understanding, pastoral care means seeing and addressing a person holistically – body, spirit, and soul. It is G*d who made them unique and full of wonders (acc. to Ps. 139,14) and it is in their wholeness that they become G*d's image. That is why empathy and appreciation for all are non-negotiable prerequisites

for pastoral care. Understanding and recognizing people in their complexity and uniqueness is only possible, though, when they are seen within the context of their family structures, social systems, and sociopolitical connections, which in turn can only be done by considering their humanity.

In so doing, psychological and psychosocial insights are equally as relevant as systemic, socioeconomic, gender-sensitive considerations – and maybe even intercultural and interreligious ones. In a pastoral context, that means considering the self-identification and worldview of the person seeking guidance, as well as treating their self-interpretation with respect – all while non-judgementally accepting that their views may well differ from one's own. This mode of pastoral care needs to be sensitive to differences and requires “interpathy” (a term coined by the US-American pastoral care worker David Augsburg) in addition to the concept of empathy (see Augsburg 1986, p. 27–32). Interpathy means relinquishing one's own views for a limited period of time, in order to substantially enlarge them later by adding the views of others.

Meaningfulness and interpretation of life

Individuals seeking counsel in pastoral care are seen as “simul iustus et peccator” or “simultaneously just and sinful people.” In the counseling process, they soon realize that this ambivalence has been a genuine part of the Protestant perspective on humanity since Martin Luther. This insight can significantly relieve pressure and stress, thus enabling a more relaxed approach within the framework of a meeting. If in the face of pain, challenges and crises G*d's words can resonate through biblical storytelling, symbols, psalms or prayers, G*d's loving acceptance and justification of people “through grace alone” becomes tangible. And it is in that moment that individuals seeking advice feel enabled to address feelings of guilt and shame and to name their own mistakes. Human lives and G*d's salvation history forge a connection that resonate with each other. As a result, Christian pastoral care views people within the framework of their potential, as humans standing before G*d instead of reducing them to their limitations. Sources of strength, inner resources, and potential courses of action come into play, enabling their development in pastoral spaces. In that sense, pastoral care work always offers guidance, meaningfulness, and an interpretation of life in the face of adversity.

Where does pastoral care take place?

Pastoral care can take place in short everyday conversations in the street, in the supermarket or outside the church doors. It happens in children and youth work, in schools, at parent-teacher evenings, with those preparing for their confirmation, or in conversations with young people in general. Pastoral care has its

fixed place in the life of the congregation, be it at baptisms, weddings, funerals and bereavement care, at birthday celebrations, or in meetings with the elderly, the sick, the dying, and their relatives. However, pastoral care also takes place as part of inter-congregational socio-diaconal work with the unemployed and the homeless, as well as in work with migrants, people from the LGBTQI+ community, people who are HIV-positive, addicts, and other social groups. Finally, specialized pastoral care is a field on its own. It takes place in specific places such as hospitals, universities and colleges, schools, psychiatric wards, prisons, retirement homes, airports or hospices. Pastoral care in the parish is neither more nor less important, neither better nor worse than pastoral care offered for instance in a hospital or a psychiatry unit. The different locations where pastoral care takes place cannot be pitted against one another.

How does pastoral care happen?

Pastoral care is a holistic and interactive communication process. It is characterized by verbal, non-verbal and dynamic parts. All the senses are involved. The process opens up a space for pain and grief, but also for joy, gratitude and other feelings, thereby offering a protective space as well. Especially in end-of-life conversations, with grieving relatives or with traumatized people, silence or non-verbal gestures, facial expressions, haptics (touch) and ritual acts play an important role. Liturgical lament, prayer, psalm reading, singing and acts of blessing may be included. The flow of energy through the laying on of hands and gestures of blessing, touching and even hugging are possible, but may only be offered gently to those seeking advice, and under no circumstances should they be imposed on them. It is equally important to be present in the counseling encounter, to bear raw feelings and grief, to absorb topics (containment), to release resources (coping) and not to over-dissect feelings and experiences. And sometimes, when there are simply no more words left, it is a matter of sharing silence with the person seeking counsel in the face of unspeakable pain.

At the same time, the counselor may fall prey to being overly prescriptive, giving unsolicited advice, exceeding their own limitations, overestimating their own abilities or going way beyond the original remit. Prudence, humility and acknowledgement of one's own limitations help with the responsible organization of counseling sessions. For this reason, pastoral care workers regularly reflect on their roles and limitations within supervision settings.

At this point, I would once again like to stress what is most important to me: pastoral care means perceiving the individual person with the eyes of G*d and through the eyes of others, as this creates space and hope for development and change.

2 My personal position

Concern for the well-being of the people who seek pastoral care drives me as a pastoral counselor. My desire that they may be well in body, mind and soul has accompanied me in my work for over twenty years. At the same time, I seek to promote the biblical message of liberation from injustice and oppression. Biblical stories reveal the stories of those who have suffered, or who have been marginalized or excluded. I am convinced that this message is still relevant today. Therefore, it is important to me that chaplains exercise vigilance, especially towards those who are threatened, discriminated against or marginalized. Often these are old or sick people, socially marginalized people, people of different backgrounds and ethnicities, those who are physically/mentally impaired and/or queer people. Their experiences are of central importance to me from a theological point of view. And to me their everyday issues and concerns represent central challenges for theology and pastoral care.

In this book, I focus on the situation of queer people who also identify as believers or spiritual. Many of them have had to endure exclusionary and humiliating experiences in church settings. They were, and still are, disparagingly viewed as second-class Christians in some places, especially in (right-wing) evangelical circles of all denominations (see Schulz 2022, pp. 76–80; for further life-history examples also see Platte, 2018). Their way of life or their gender identity denote them as ‘people living in sin’, who do not fit in, or who allegedly disturb the peace of the church.

Changing the attitude towards their concerns, issues and desires is a central theological task for me, rather than a marginal side issue. This perspective has accompanied me ever since I became first involved in liberation theologies during my theology studies.¹ All of these approaches – within liberation theologies – are contextual theologies. Their content must always be related concretely and in close proximity to everyday life, within the relevant context and without general validity. It is in using these theological approaches that I learned to work theologically in a context-sensitive and concrete way. Audre Lorde, Katie Cannon, Sarah Vecera and others have taught me not to pit issues of racism, colonialism, homophobia and transphobia against each other, but to include

1 I was especially interested in feminist liberation theologies (see Schüssler-Fiorenza 1988; Schottroff 1990). However, these approaches often fell short with regard to the question of different forms of life and sexualities. Therefore, I studied lesbian-feminist-liberation theologies such as Carter Heyward’s book (1989) and later queer approaches in theology. Marcella Althaus-Reid has influenced me in a special way (see Althaus-Reid 2000, 2003).

their structural and intersectional interconnectedness within my theological reflections (see Vecera 2022; Lorde 1984/2021).²

The concepts that have become especially important for me over the past twenty years have been those that have broadened the focus on social privilege, skin color, and gender justice in the context of the so-called Global North.³ Such approaches challenge theological positions with regard to gender-sensitive, anti-racist, and postcolonial issues. Queer-theological approaches such as those of Marcela Althaus-Reid, Linn Tonstad, and Patrick Cheng have ultimately enabled me to engage with queer-theological concerns and translate them into the German-speaking context (see Tonstad 2018; Cheng 2011; Althaus-Reid 2000, 2003).

Against this background, I am interested in a theology and pastoral care that allows queer people to speak in their daily contexts and to have their voices heard. For a long time, they have only been the topic of theological debates rather than participants. It is now time to take them seriously in theology and pastoral care as subjects and experts on their own life stories and to listen to them. To this end, I explore what conditions must be met in pastoral care so that queer people can accept pastoral care without fear and while feeling safe and respected.

In this respect, theological and pastoral work is not a neutral occupation for me, but rather one of accompanying those who have suffered injustice or pain in a spirit of solidarity. When they come to me for counseling, I listen to them attentively and take them seriously as subjects of their own life story.

The goal is to bolster the resources and resilience of those seeking pastoral care so that they can discover and learn to implement action plans that will strengthen them in the tension between personal challenges and structural circumstances.

3 Biblical-theological basic assumptions

In my experience, biblical stories can have an important meaning in queer-affirming counseling – especially because queer people have often only experienced biblical texts when used as a weapon against them. Yet the Bible has a central overall message: G*d is with the oppressed and marginalized. G*d sides with them. The core of G*d's proclamation is the healing of unholy conditions and relationships, as well as the peaceful coexistence of all people. Whether in the great biblical narratives, or within smaller passages of Scripture, this mes-

2 Antiracist and womanist liberation theologians lamented white feminists' lack of engagement with racism and privilege (see, e.g., Cannon 1988).

3 The theologian Sarah Vecera was the first to spell this out theologically in a German context (see Vecera 2022).

sage prevails – and that despite, or perhaps even because, biblical texts are enormously diverse or even contradictory in themselves. The texts cover a period of many centuries and reflect very different cultural, socio-political and economic conditions – which is why biblical texts can only be read and understood within their linguistic/etymological and historical context. Nevertheless, an overall message runs through all the books of the Bible: the texts are directed against oppressive structures and stand up for holistic well-being (shalom) and a life worth living for all. The focus on upright and respectful coexistence is also central to pastoral care. In the following, I will mention some other significant aspects of biblical stories.

Listening without reservations

Jesus allowed himself to be approached and invited, without reservations, by so-called outsiders, thus giving signals that are decisive for my understanding of pastoral care. Jesus visited people regardless of their origin, skin color, gender identity and social status. He listened to them, ate and drank with them, took their life stories seriously and considered their resources in order to alleviate their ailments or change their circumstances for suffering, and thereby transform their lives. Jesus was both interlocutor and advocate, role model and initiator of change. He confronted rigid doctrines and spoke out in favor of a people-centered coexistence. He made those on the margins the center of his attention and criticized complacency.

In 2016 I published a poem on these thoughts on my website. It is called: “Without Reservations” (Söderblom 2016):

Without reservations

“I invite you!” (Matthew 9:9–12)

Jesus lets the tax collector be the host.

He accepts with pleasure. Eats and drinks with him.

What, him? But he’s horrible! A cutthroat!

Jesus enjoys what is offered to him without further questions.

He shares the meal with the outsider.

What, him? But he’s horrible! A cutthroat!

Jesus knows: Those who meet the other without reservations can be surprised.

Each and anyone deserves a chance.

What, him? But he’s horrible! A cutthroat!

Jesus is not interested in the protest. Others are outraged.

Why doesn’t Jesus eat with us? Why with this outsider?

Jesus speaks to all.

He takes them from the margins to the center. He includes the marginalized.
He reinstates the seemingly useless, the strangers and others with their dignity.

What, him? But he's horrible! A cutthroat!

Jesus meets the lonely, the strangers, the sick, and the outsiders.
He does not condemn them. Instead, he listens to them, takes them seriously,
wants to understand their story. He does not label,
does not pigeonhole, does not exclude.
Everyone deserves a chance.
Because you can meet G*d through every human being.

*Seeing G*d's image in the other person*

G*d created human beings male and female and everything in between, just as G*d created light and darkness with dawn and dusk and everything else in between; just as G*d created water and solid land with bogs, marshes and swamps and everything else in between, G*d also created the animals in the water, in the fields, and in the air, and all other living beings in between. Although the Creation Story only uses dualistic juxtapositions due to the poetic structure of the text, they encompass all phenomena and creatures in between. And everything and everyone in between also belong, including non-binary, trans* or intersex persons, because according to biblical testimony, every human being is made in G*d's image (Genesis 1:27 f.).

Each and every one is unique, an original before G*d and blessed by G*d. As Martin Luther put it, this blessing is awarded to every human being without any advance performance, "by grace alone". By grace alone, every human being is granted unrestricted dignity. At the same time, G*d establishes human beings as governors of the whole creation on earth in the first creation account. In other words, G*d trusts humans to act ethically and with ecological responsibility. G*d expects humans to be mindful and respectful of creation and all of its constituent parts, instead of ruthlessly plundering, polluting or destroying creation.

Accordingly, the Christian view of humankind and the world belong together. They are shaped and supported by G*d's promise and blessing. Both encourage and empower us to deal responsibly and mindfully with each other and the whole of creation, to live together in harmony. Alongside this encouragement, is the requirement to fashion this responsibility within a prudent, ecologically mindful and peaceful framework. In the event of crises, problems and emergencies, this attitude entails being collectively and individually vigilant and standing up for one another. And it is precisely this attitude that is also significant within Christian-based pastoral care.

Relating the concept of liberation from oppression

Where people are oppressed, where they suffer injustice and violence, where they are marginalized or deprived of their rights, G*d's liberating message applies to them. It is the same promise that G*d gave to Moses, Miriam, Aaron and the whole people of Israel in the book of Exodus. In essence, G*d spoke to Moses at that time like this: Leave slavery and look for another place, a just and peaceful one, where you can live free from oppression.

I will be with you. I will accompany you by day and by night and give you guidance. But protect the old, the widows and the strangers! For you yourselves were strangers in Egypt (Exodus 3).

G*d's promise and commands are inseparably linked. They involve both encouragement and empowerment to take responsibility. Unjust conditions are to be abandoned or changed through social, Christian and socio-political commitment in such a way that people change from being affected to being involved, from being objects to being subjects of their life story and their living environment. For this, people need just socio-political conditions, participation, security, healthy nutrition and education. This also includes physical, mental and spiritual support. Thus, diaconia and spiritual care, everyday proclamation and community action, share a task that can only succeed through wise and prudent interactions.

Living the Body of Christ

According to Pauline understanding (Romans 12:4–6; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27), people with their different life experiences, ways of life, abilities and talents all belong to the one Body of Christ. It is only together that the Body of Christ can be the living embodiment of Christian life and radiate it in a credible way. Nevertheless, its members are different. They are endowed with different functions, qualities, contexts, life stories and needs, and it is precisely in their diversity that they represent the unity of the Christian community.

For me, this leitmotif is central to perceiving people in their differences, recognizing and welcoming them as equal parts of the Body of Christ. Exclusion, devaluation and condemnation have no part in that. But respect for others, openness and hospitality do play a part, because this is the only way to reach and touch people who have not yet experienced G*d's liberating message – be it within the mainstream church or beyond. Those who live differently, speak a different language, have a different skin color, have knowledge of very different sacred writings and symbols – they all are seekers and pilgrims on their life's journey. By turning Christian meeting places into resting places and shelters, where people tell each other life stories and learn from

each other, the Body of Christ can grow and work internally and externally. In this way, G*d's love for neighbor and enemy alike finds real representation. Pastoral care that takes this image of Christian community into consideration and takes it seriously, actively contributes to people's ability to feel a sense of belonging in both times of joy and suffering – despite or precisely because of their differences.

Baptism knows no gender

“There is no longer Jew nor Christian, there is no longer enslaved nor free, there is no longer male nor female. For you are all one in Christ!” (Gal 3:28).

At this point in Galatians, Paul quotes an older early Christian baptismal formula. In this formula, Greeks and Jews, masters and slaves, women and men are no longer defined by social, cultural or religious roles, but all are called together to follow Christ without distinction of position or status. Not only was this a vision of the future, but it also became a norm-transcending activity that would distinguish the first Christian communities. Within these communities at least, all gender, religious and class differences were considered to be overcome through baptism – the mere act itself creating heavenly conditions on earth, in a very real, concrete, and tangible way. This original Christian baptismal formula (still) forms an important base for the gender-sensitive considerations of today.

“For you are all one in Christ and heirs of the promise!” continues Paul (Gal 3:29). The power of baptism, effected by the Holy Spirit, overcame norms and boundaries then, and it still invites us to do so today.

Called to freedom

“To freedom you have been called!” – states the letter to the Galatians (Gal 5:13). This is no arbitrary call to freedom, though, but to the freedom to testify to G*d's love in very different voices, images and stories, to pass it on and to live by it. In so doing, people open up spaces to live their lives in a spirit of care and respect. For me, this means being mindful of oneself and others and acting in a resource-oriented way, to respect each other without patronizing, to support each other without encroaching on another, and to create and protect spaces for a happy and colorful togetherness.

The goal is to walk a little of the way together, to accompany those seeking pastoral care as they face obstacles, and to make it possible to experience the liberating message of the Gospel. Dogmatic teaching has no place here. It is about making G*d's promise tangible and passing on G*d's love. For G*d's promise was first given to people by G*d, without people having to do anything to earn it.

Activating power, love, and prudence

*“G*d has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, love and prudence” (2 Tim. 1:7).*

If counselors can both bring strength, love and caution into their sessions and draw from them as resources, they will have a good spiritual toolkit at their disposal, in addition to humility and faith in G*d, even when they are overcome by doubt and despair. Death and dying, injustice, illness and distress are topics regularly encountered by pastoral care givers, which makes building up one’s own personal resources and resilience important. Reflecting on one’s own role, as well as on personal and professional boundaries, is a permanent feature of all pastoral care.

4 Approaching queer-theological research

“Queer” is a derogatory term, a slur initially used to describe and reduce homosexual women and men to their sexualities or gender identities. Since the 1980s and 90s, the term has increasingly been reclaimed by the LGBTQI+ community, transforming it into a source of strength. “Queer” is now used by people positioning themselves outside of heteronormative categories, with regard to sexualities, lifestyles and/or non-conformity to the gender binary. It consciously pushes the envelope, challenging norms and categories, adding fluidity to the mix.

As such, queer theologies are not a theological discipline as much as they are an umbrella for different perspectives in theological research. They mirror the realities of individuals experiencing exclusion and rejection based on their sexual orientation, their non-binary identities or their otherness, making queer theologies contextual and specific in the process. They embody critical approaches and a plurality of perspectives.

Queer research perspectives are aimed at questioning seemingly self-evident heteronormative and cis-normative notions of sexuality and gender identities and crossing borders, i. e. “queering” them (see Söderblom 2020b, pp. 146–150). In so doing, patriarchal power structures and hegemonic images of masculinity are also exposed (see Söderblom (2009, p. 71 ff.).

In queer-theological approaches, sexual diversity and diverse gender identities are no longer defensively justified, but taken for granted (cf. Tonstad 2018). Therefore the focus is no longer on the few biblical passages that comment on same-sex sexual practices. (These so-called “clobber passages” can be found in Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20:13; Deuteronomy 23:17; Romans 1:18–32; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10; and 1 Timothy 1:9–10.) Through a queer-theological lens, these texts are predominantly seen in the context of prostitution, pederasty, and sexual contacts between married men at that time. Most biblical scholars

and exegetical researchers do not consider them meaningful as a context for lesbian, gay, and bisexual forms of relationships of the 21st century (see Plisch 2016, pp. 23–31; Lings 2013; Greenough 2020, pp. 97–100).

Instead, they understand people as being made in G*d's image (Genesis 1:27 f.), thus guaranteeing the uniqueness and dignity of all people – regardless of origin, skin color, age, physical ability, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Diverse lifestyles, sexualities and gender identities are viewed from the standpoint of the biblical double commandment to love (Mark 12:29 ff.; Matthew 22:34–40; Luke 10:25–28) both neighbor and oneself. This commandment of G*d to love both neighbor and self does not distinguish between individuals. It calls on everyone individually and collectively to respect and accept the other.

Social, cultural, and linguistic historical research has also been advanced by queer-theological approaches, with hermeneutic changes in perspective practiced. This work is called a queer re-reading of biblical texts.

Queer biblical interpretations consciously conduct biblical exegesis and hermeneutics from a queer perspective (see Söderblom 2020a, pp. 11–73). They use linguistic complexity, literary interstices, the unsaid and the empty spaces in biblical texts, to point out the creative act of interpretation in every Bible reading. They consciously frame their interpretive perspectives as intersubjective meaningful spaces between ancient biblical texts and queer contexts of the 21st century, queer-brushing biblical texts in an undogmatic and provocative way, while examining them for ambiguous representations of bodies and gender. Homoerotic hints in biblical texts are tracked down and contextualized. The results of queer re-readings and research are then interdisciplinarily and intersectionally linked to findings from other research fields (such as studies into anti-Semitism, colonialism and poverty) and related to each other (see Söderblom 2021a, p. 167 f.).