

POLICY ON ISSUES OF PERSONAL MORALITY.

(adopted by the South Yarra Community Baptist Church on 11th June 1995)

The South Yarra Community Baptist Church affirms that those who live in response to the love of God in Christ are expected to progressively shape their personal behaviour and relationships by the Christian values of love, justice, reconciliation and forgiveness, and so to more fully reflect the image of God. We also recognize that no-one is ever able to completely fulfil this calling, and that the ability of a person to respond to this call will be enhanced or inhibited by their previous life experience in ways they are not able to fully control.

We acknowledge the authority of the Bible in witnessing to the character and concerns of Christ and in calling us to be conformed to that image. We recognize that the Bible provides moral instruction in many areas and that we need to hear and understand that instruction. However we also believe that many of those instructions were historically and culturally specific and that the call to reflect God's love, justice and mercy will often lead us beyond those instructions. The purpose of any moral teaching is not to define perfection, but to inspire and assist people to move towards it. We believe that the church needs to continually evaluate its moral teaching to ensure that it is actually encouraging those who most need it to respond to God's love and open themselves to God's transforming influence.

We strongly affirm the belief that God's love is all-inclusive and that God's offer of mercy and acceptance is not withheld from anyone regardless of the way their life is lived. We also believe that it is in an atmosphere of acceptance and love that a person is most likely to find healing and the strength and inspiration to make significant changes in their lives.

Therefore we wish to reflect God's love in accepting all those who would join us in our journey of faith, regardless of the extent to which their lives are shaped by Christian values. The only situations we can perceive in which we would act to restrict a person's involvement in our church community are where their behaviour poses a threat to the physical, emotional or spiritual safety and development of other people, or where their behaviour seriously undermines the purposes and mission of the church.

We accept that this policy leaves us vulnerable from two directions. Some people may take advantage of our open acceptance without genuinely committing themselves to struggling with the demands of the journey of faith. Others may misunderstand by hearing only our call to growth and change and feel unable to respond to our welcome and acceptance. It is our hope that all will feel welcome and able to join us in seeking and cooperating with God's liberating and fulfilling influence in our own lives, in our community and in the world.

POLICY ON RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY.

(adopted by the South Yarra Community Baptist Church on 11th June 1995)

The South Yarra Community Baptist Church regrets that the Christian Church has often become divisive and hostile in its attempts to express the implications of the good news in the areas of relationships and sexuality. In order to offer some protection to those who have been hurt, and in the hope of reducing future disputes, we have sought to add to our policy on issues of personal morality some specific stands on these matters.

We believe that God's intent for humanity was that the expression of physical sexuality, and the procreation and nurture of children, belong within secure relationships characterized by exclusivity, equality and the growth of mutual love, respect and intimacy. Such relationships are the most significant environment in which most people learn love, trust, faithfulness and forgiveness. We also acknowledge that the Bible and Christian tradition have often held singleness and celibacy in high esteem, and we respect and support those who follow this path, whether by choice or by limited opportunity.

For those who seek relationships in which sexual intimacy may be expressed, we affirm that the Bible and Church tradition have usually advocated the religious and legal formalizing of this relationship in Christian marriage. We believe that this is the path most likely to express and protect the value of such a relationship, and so we too encourage it and support its practice.

However we acknowledge with regret that the Christian church has often endorsed the unjust denial of this opportunity to some couples, and pushed it upon others who were inadequately suited and prepared. This has caused great pain in alienating the former from the church and in precipitating inevitable tension and breakdown for the latter.

We also recognize that some couples will choose not to marry for a number of reasons including legal impediment, past marital trauma, or an as yet insufficiently developed relationship. We recognize that sexual intimacy is frequently expressed in such relationships in ways that express and promote love and growth. We also recognize that for some people, marriage has been an environment of abuse and destruction. On the basis of this experience and in recognition of the fact that the understandings and practice of marriage have continued to evolve over the years, we do not believe that marital status is a sufficient criteria on which to determine the appropriateness of sexual intimacy.

We believe that, regardless of marital status, the more a relationship is characterized by mutual love, respect, equality, faithfulness, commitment and security, the more it is an appropriate environment for the expression of sexual intimacy.

We are unequivocal in our opposition to any sexual relationships that are characterized by unfaithfulness, fear, violence, coercion, lack of respect, inequality of power, or anything that devalues the gift of sexuality or the persons concerned.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the difficulty the church has faced in reconciling the demands of love and justice with some of the biblical statements about homosexuality and divorce. While we recognize that we are stepping beyond the positions reflected in the Bible, we wish to affirm the right of homosexually oriented people and divorced people to seek sexual intimacy within the same type of relational context affirmed above.