



Theology Wales

The Church and Homosexuality

A Contribution to the debate

Guest Editor

Reverend Jennifer Wigley

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THE CHURCH
IN WALES



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Introduction



The Guest Editor for this special edition of Theology Wales is Rev Jenny Wigley.

Jenny is a vicar in the parish of Central Cardiff, and Deputy Director of the South Wales Ordination Course. In addition to parish ministry, Jenny has worked in University Chaplaincy and taught at St Michael's College, Llandaff. She is married to Steve, a Methodist minister, and they have twin sons age 10.

The Background

Sometimes it feels as if it is easier to answer a question about what divides Anglicans from one another than what keeps us together. Over the years, dire warnings have been issued that we are on the brink of schism over one issue or another – most recently, the divisions have centred on homosexuality. Should people of homosexual orientation be ordained? Should they be ordained if they are in sexually active relationships? Should the Church offer a rite of blessing for same-sex partnerships? Reports have been produced, Bishops and Primates have conferred, but the disagreements over these issues are far from being resolved.

Worldwide, there have been a number of triggers which have heightened the tensions within the Anglican Communion. A diocese of the Anglican Church in Canada authorised a liturgy for the blessing of same-sex relationships; Gene Robinson, an openly gay man living with a partner, was consecrated as a Bishop in the

Episcopal Church of the United States. Nearer home, the nomination of Jeffrey John (gay and celibate) as Bishop of Reading caused such a furore that the Archbishop of Canterbury persuaded him to withdraw his acceptance of the nomination (Canon John has since been appointed Dean of St Albans).

Here in the UK, the secular press has continued to run stories about rich evangelical parishes withdrawing financial support for the Church of England, and of clergy and PCCs refusing to recognise the authority of "liberal" bishops. The will he/won't he saga of Jeffrey John was another headline-writer's gift. The Church was portrayed as being at war with itself, and at odds with (western) society's tolerance of homosexuality.

The Anglican Communion

The statement of the 1998 Lambeth Conference affirmed heterosexual marriage or sexual abstinence as the only choices for Christians; homosexual practice was declared to be incompatible with scripture. But the statement also committed the bishops to listening to the experience of homosexual persons, and called on people to "minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation".¹

After the Conference, 187 bishops signed a pastoral statement in which they expressed their concern that gay and lesbian voices had not been adequately heard; they pledged to continue to reflect, pray and work for the full inclusion of homosexual Christians in the life of the Church.

In October 2003, following a meeting of the Primates of the Anglican Communion, the Archbishop of Canterbury announced the setting up of a Commission chaired by Archbishop Robin Eames, to examine possible ways forward in situations where individual Provinces

¹ The official Report of the Lambeth Conference 1998 Morehouse Publishing 1999 p381

may feel a unable to maintain full communion with one another. The Commission is scheduled to report in autumn 2004. Its membership includes Professor Norman Doe, of Cardiff University, and the Archbishop of Wales.

The Debate in the Church in Wales

These controversies, conferences and commissions form the larger context reflected by this special edition of *Theology Wales*. Its publication was prompted by a debate at the meeting of the Governing Body in September 2003. At that meeting, the GB asked the Bench of Bishops to prepare a study guide on issues related to human sexuality and the Church, for discussion across the Province.

Taking its cue from the GB's desire to avoid any further polarisation of views, the collection of articles in this journal sets out to represent the thinking of individuals with particular areas of expertise and experience, who have been asked to share some of that with the wider Church. It is by engaging in a process of reflection, rather than by responding to their particular conclusions, which will be of most value. For that reason, the articles are interspersed with questions, some appropriate for individuals, others for groups to use. The aim is for us all to go a little deeper, to understand better both our own positions and those with which we may profoundly disagree, and to engage in what the Bishop of Oxford refers to as "interpretative charity".

Archbishop Barry's Presidential Address to the September 2003 Governing Body opens this edition of *Theology Wales*. He reminds us of something that lies at the heart of the Gospel – God's selfless attention to us, which demands our selfless attention to others. Also included is an article by the **Bishop of Oxford** who looks at what broadly informs our judgement on issues of sexuality – scripture, science, culture, and the statements of the Anglican Communion and the C of E itself.

Listening to one another is what underpins the article by **Lorraine Cavanagh**, as she explores the dynamic of interpersonal exchange, and the narrative of identity. It is also central to **Jean Mayland's** reflection on a conference she convened in 2002, to enable the churches in the four nations to come together to discuss issues of human sexuality. Those days together resulted not in greater understanding but in hurt and disappointment for many of the participants, which is a salutary warning for us all that even the most carefully planned and facilitated encounters do not guarantee "interpretive charity".

Will Strange asks us to examine the way in which we go about making our moral choices; what is the value of experience/self description over against an objective standard for matters of truth and ethics?

Two articles look at the Biblical material in detail. **DP Davies** examines the core texts and particularly the letters of Paul, exploring how particular passages might have been first heard, and then how we might be able to listen to them today. **Robert Paterson** comes at those texts from a different perspective, to enable us to explore our attitudes to scripture more broadly before tackling those which deal specifically with homosexual practice.

Finally, **Tim Heywood** offers his testimony, as someone for whom his own homosexuality is a "given" not something which he feels the need to justify. He is given the final word in this collection, reminding us that gay and lesbian Christians are to be found in all our churches, though many choose not to be open about their sexuality.

Other resources

Of the many publications on this subject, there are three that I have found particularly helpful in extending my own awareness of the issues.

Walter Wink's *Homosexuality and Christian Faith*² is a collection of short essays, including a piece I found extremely moving by Bishop Paul Wennes Egerton (a Lutheran) on his family's response to the news that his eldest son was gay.

Another collection of helpful essays is *The Way Forward?*³, edited by Timothy Bradshaw; it includes contributions from different sides of the debate.

Finally I would recommend the WCC publication *Living in Covenant with God and One Another*,⁴ by Robin Smith, which is a wide ranging study of sexuality and human relations using the statements of the different churches as tools for group discussion. Although it was published in 1990, and some aspects of the debate have moved on, this does not detract from its creative approach to enabling reflection and discussion.

Major pieces of work on homosexuality have been undertaken by our sister churches in England and Scotland, and several of our contributors refer to two reports from the Church of England. The first of these is the Statement by the House of Bishops published in 1991 *Issues in Human Sexuality*.⁵ Under 50 pages long, and admitting that it could not pretend to be the last word on the subject, its stated intention was to promote an educational process.

In 2003, the house of Bishops produced a new report, with the confusingly similar title of *Some Issues in Human Sexuality*.⁶ This is a comprehensive scholarly study, looking not just at homosexuality, but also issues of bisexuality and transsexualism. After a chapter on the background to/nature of the current debate, there is a detailed look at the biblical and theological issues surrounding sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, drawing on a

range of contemporary scholarship. There are shorter sections on bisexuality and transsexualism followed by a chapter looking at homosexuals, bisexuals and transsexuals in the life of the church. The final chapter explores the ways in which different churches have handled recent controversies over sexual ethics.

Some Issues... is not an easy read, but it does offer a range of standpoints and theological opinion. There is a detailed bibliography for each chapter, a good starting point for those wishing to delve more deeply into particular aspects of the debate. The Archbishop's Council published *A Companion to Some issues in Human Sexuality*⁷ as a guide to help individuals and groups use the report. It contains a brief summary of each chapter, followed by questions.

The Episcopal Church of Scotland has also produced material to promote discussion of issues of sexuality - *Human sexuality: a Study Guide*, published in 2001.⁸ This is available over the internet with permission to print/photocopy. It looks at the authority of scripture and at the main biblical texts and explores the sexuality of Jesus. It also covers a number of issues in human relationships, Christian ethics, insights from genetics and the social sciences. While it doesn't offer anything like the range of theological perspectives of *Some Issues...*, its broad based, open ended questions are very helpful in putting the narrow debate (on homosexuality) into a wider context.

Commenting on responses to the *Study Guide*, the Bishops of the Church of Scotland said "in this area, the church is called to set an example to the world as to how debate on matters involving deep disagreement and sincerely held convictions could be conducted".⁹ The aim of this special edition of *Theology Wales* is to enable the Church in Wales to play a part in that exemplary process.

2 Wink, W (ed) *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: questions of conscience for the churches* Fortress Press Minneapolis 1999

3 Bradshaw, T. (ed) *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church* 2nd edition SCM 2003

4 Smith, R. *Living in Covenant with God and One Another: a guide to the study of Sexuality and Human Relations using statements from member churches of the World Council of Churches* WCC 1990

5 *Issues in Human Sexuality* Church House Publishing 1991

6 *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* Church House Publishing 2003

7 Cox, J. & Davie, M. *A Companion to Some Issues in Human Sexuality* Church House Publishing 2003

8 *Human Sexuality: a study guide* www.scotland.anglican.org/humansexuality

9 *Statement by the College of Bishops of the Episcopal Church of Scotland* February 2004

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS TO THE GOVERNING BODY OF THE CHURCH IN WALES SEPTEMBER 2003

Rt. Rev Barry Morgan, Archbishop of Wales

During the week last April when I was elected Archbishop, I must have given at least twenty-five interviews to the press and television in both Welsh and English. Two matters dominated the questions asked. The first concerned the constant decline in membership of the Church in Wales over the last ten years and what I intended to do to reverse that trend. (It's interesting to note that the media at least think that the Archbishop has real power and think it's all down to me to reverse this trend - no matter how many times I said that it did not all depend on me, but on all of us, they would not let go of the question). It is of course a crucial matter and I will return to it in a future presidential address since we are trying to do something about this at the present time in the Diocese of Llandaff. But it definitely is not just a matter for me. The second question concerned human sexuality. The line here was, given Archbishop Rowan's liberal views (how he loves being called a Liberal!) did I intend to follow in the same vein? Again the assumption was that it was the Archbishop alone who determined such matters. All of that happened of course, before the appointment and withdrawal of Canon Jeffrey John as Bishop of Reading and the subsequent furore at the appointment of Canon Gene Robinson to the bishopric of New Hampshire in America.

How far does the media influence the Church's agenda?

What kinds of images of gay and lesbian people, positive and negative, do the media offer?

How far do these images influence our own ideas?

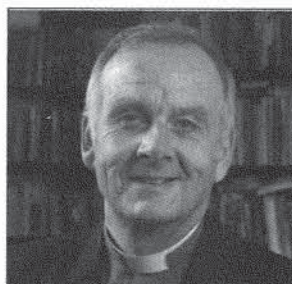
Those two things have, to say the least, caused debate across the Anglican Communion and beyond. Those two events had not occurred

when the Primates met in Brazil in May 2003, but as a result of them, the Archbishop of Canterbury called an extraordinary meeting of Primates in Lambeth the following October. The press has been constantly asking me whether I have any advice to give to Archbishop Rowan. My response has always been that he has received more than enough advice already - most of it unhelpful and it was not part of my job to add to his problems. Nor do I want in this presidential address to deal in depth with human sexuality in general or same sex relations in particular, but what I do want to do is to look at the some of the general issues that are at stake here and the background against which the debate needs to be conducted.

The five general issues that I want to talk about are:

- 1. The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture**
- 2. The nature of Anglicanism**
- 3. Decision making within the Anglican Communion**
- 4. The place of Lambeth Resolutions**
- 5. The sexual issue in a wider context**

Now all of those are enormous questions in themselves and all I can do is to touch upon them, but by doing so you might be able to see how any one issue has any ramifications in all kinds of ways, which is why of course feelings are running so high within the Communion.



Rt. Rev Barry Morgan has been Bishop of Llandaff since 1999. He was elected Archbishop of Wales in 2003

1. The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture

The central issue is the use and interpretation of Scripture, since the critics of developments in the Anglican Communion claim that Scripture must be followed without deviance.

The Anglican understanding is summed up in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. The sixth article of religion states that the Old and the New Testaments "contain all things necessary to salvation". They are the word of God, not because God dictated every word in them but because the Church came to believe that God inspired its human authors through His Spirit to reveal His plan of salvation for the world. The Holy Scriptures provide the basis and guiding principle for our relationship with God and they do so through narrative, law, prophecy and poetry - through quite a diverse collection of documents written by a variety of authors at different times and places.

Can you think of a particular example of each of these kinds of writing (Narrative, law, prophecy and poetry) that provide guiding principles for you? How have you responded to them?

Here are to be found the responses of God's people to God's saving acts - which come to a climax in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, who for Christians is God's human face. The New Testament bears witness to Jesus and the effect he had on the early Christian community. You might then think that if we want to know what the Bible says about a particular topic all we have to do is just look it up, see what it says and then apply it. The snag is that that method of reading scripture can lead to problems, e.g. Exodus 21: 15 reads, "whoever hits his father or mother shall be put to death", Exodus 21:17 reads, "whoever curses his father or mother shall be put to death". Deuteronomy 25:11-12 says, "a woman who tries to protect her husband in a fight by seizing his enemy's genitals should have her hand

cut off'. Deuteronomy 21:18-21 says, "a stubborn rebellious boy who drinks and eats to excess and refuses to obey his parents should be stoned to death". Deuteronomy 23:19 forbids taking interest on any money that is loaned.

Now I have chosen some rather extreme examples to make the point that we do not observe all biblical injunctions. We are selective in the way in which we treat the Bible because we do not regard all its injunctions in the same way as if they all had to be obeyed. The question is how does one interpret Holy Scripture? The Declaration of Assent taken by all clergy before they take up office puts it in this way: "The Church in Wales is part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the Catholic Creeds, which faith the church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation".

In other words the Church in Wales grounds itself on the Bible and the traditional Creeds - but also recognises that these truths have to be interpreted afresh to each generation, and that is where the problem begins.

The question is what can and cannot be changed? What can and cannot be disregarded? Put another way what is the role of reason in Anglican theology? Or how does the Spirit lead us into truth, whilst at the same time enabling us to be true to both scripture and tradition. In short how do we come to a belief system?

Let me give you some examples of what I mean. Over the centuries the Church has opposed things, which are clearly advocated by Holy Scripture and allowed acts that are prescribed by it. In the Book of Genesis both accounts of creation restrict human beings to

being vegetarians. After the flood however, the eating of animals is allowed, but their blood was not to be consumed. The Council of Jerusalem in the Book of Acts upheld this as being binding on Gentile converts to Christianity. The Canons of the early church continued the ban. Augustine however, argued for a relaxation of the ban and in Article Nineteen of the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion it says that the Jerusalem Church erred in this and other matters. Some churches today still forbid the consumption of blood on the basis of the ban after the flood and the ban imposed by the Council of Jerusalem but most Western Churches have set it aside.

Or take another issue. Slavery is accepted without demur in the Old Testament and Leviticus 25 sets out the rules for having slaves. The New Testament tolerates slavery and Paul merely asks for slaves to be treated well. He does not ask for it to be prohibited. Yet the Church in time came to see slavery as morally wrong. It is not something that we would want to defend on scriptural grounds. We now argue that our understanding of the moral law informed by respect for individual rights in the light of the Gospel demands that we abolish slavery. Many Christians in fact quoted Scripture to defend slavery against those who wished to abolish it.

Or take the question of divorce. Jesus forbade divorce in the strongest possible terms and re-marriage after it even more strongly. He says in the Gospel of Mark 10:10-12 "whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery". When his disciples question him why Moses allowed divorce, Jesus responded that it was because of peoples hardness of heart that it was allowed but that the original intention of God was that there should be no divorce and no re-marriage. In other words Jesus recognised that Moses allowed it but based his own prohibition on another bit of the Pentateuch, thus showing an inconsistency even within

those five books.

Let's leave to one side the whole argument about whether Jesus was legislating here and whether his statement on divorce was any different from the rest of his sayings and teaching on moral matters, and let's look instead at what the Gospel of Matthew has to say on this issue. In it, there is a significant difference from Mark's Gospel as far as divorce and re-marriage are concerned. In Matthew 5: 32 and 19:9 Jesus says, "everyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of *porneia*, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery". In other words there is an insertion here by the Matthean Church to the original teaching of Jesus, allowing divorce for *porneia*. Obviously then St Matthew's Church did not think that Jesus was legislating for all time and modified the teaching of Jesus on divorce. *Porneia* for Matthew (whatever that means - perhaps adultery), is sufficient ground for divorce.

Moreover the Orthodox Church has always permitted divorce and remarriage for certain reasons -adultery, suspected adultery, attempted murder or insanity. In the reformed tradition divorce is allowed and remarriage allowed in church according to the discretion of the pastor and the Anglican Church has moved in this direction in recent years as well. So here is a clear move away - both inside the New Testament and since - from the clear teaching of Jesus. One of the arguments that we have used in the Anglican Church is, that our reading of the New Testament as a whole and of a Jesus who reached out in forgiveness to those who had failed and who allowed people a second chance, should be given precedence over his literal words in a particular context.

What other sayings and stories in the Gospels and the New Testament generally could help us formulate our understanding of marriage?

How has your own experience (direct or indirect) of marriage and divorce shaped your view of the changing Church in Wales practice?

The way we have been shaped and formed as Christians and the context in which we live affects our interpretation of scripture. Different people interpret scripture in different ways and often the plain text of scripture, as I have just shown, has been put aside by the Church in response to the needs of the world and its current understanding of the mind of Christ. In doing so, the Church has done no more than Jesus did in his own day by ignoring parts of the Old Testament that required lepers, prostitutes, gentiles, sinners and others regarded as unclean to be excluded from God's presence.

2. The Nature of Anglicanism

As I understand it, the Anglican Church has from its inception been a broad and comprehensive church. It has often been called the Church of the *Via Media* the middle way. That certainly doesn't mean that it is halfway between Roman Catholicism on the one hand and the Protestant Reformed tradition on the other, but rather a church which draws its insights from all kinds of places and is not too anxious about pinning people down too precisely.

Read again Cranmer on the theology of the Eucharist. At times you think he is Zwinglian in his emphasis on Holy Communion as just a remembering of a past event. At other times he puts emphasis on the real presence of Christ in the elements and at other times on the real presence of Christ in the heart of the believer. What kind of presence is there in the Eucharist? You see the dilemma in the words of administration of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, which are actually a combination of what Cranmer set out in his 1549 Prayer Book and his later more reformed 1552 Prayer Book. The words are, "the body or blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee and feed on him in thy

heart by faith with thanksgiving." That is a fairly comprehensive statement and it could embrace a number of viewpoints.

The Elizabethan Church followed Elizabeth I's injunction that she did not want to make windows into men's souls. There has always been room for a variety of interpretations about a great number of things in the Anglican tradition, for instance the place of bishops. Are Bishops of the essence of the Church i.e. no bishop no Church? Are they of the *bene esse* of the Church i.e. are they just a way of exercising good oversight, one that is less problematic, than other methods of church government? Or are they of the *plene esse* of the Church i.e. the Church can only be found in its completeness or fullness where there is an episcopate as part of the order of ministry. All three viewpoints are held by different Anglicans.

The same variety of viewpoints is held on moral questions. There is no one Anglican line, on for example going to war. Some Bishops have in the past blessed naval nuclear submarines and others have been pacifists. Christians disagreed about the ethics of going to war against Iraq. To some it was justified because of the brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime towards its population for eighteen years in defiance of UN resolutions. To others it was a violation of the principles of a just war, taking preemptive action against a nation which was not about to attack us; whilst for other Christians any reason for waging any war against any nation is wrong.

Devout Christians and Anglicans after prayer, struggle and reflection have come to widely different conclusions on a whole variety of doctrinal and moral issues, conclusions which to some of their fellow Christians seem at the very least wrong headed and at worst perverse. So here we are as Christians struggling with the same data, reading the same scriptures, having to listen to one another as fellow members of the body of Christ and yet coming to different conclusions. That's what an imper-

fect body of Christ is like - recognising that all our understandings are partial, provisional and that we have to be open to one another and remain in communion with one another.

Is that possible? In a lecture at the Lambeth Conference of 1998 Archbishop Rowan put it like this:

"In the body of Christ, I am in communion with past Christians whom I regard as profoundly and damagingly in error - with those who justified slavery, torture or the execution of heretics. They justified these things on the basis of the same Bible as the one I read, and these were people who prayed - probably more intensely than I ever shall. How do I relate to them? How much easier if I did not have to acknowledge that this is part of my community, the life I share; that these are the consequences that may be drawn from the faith I hold along with them. I do not seek simply to condemn them but to stand alongside them in my own prayer, not knowing how, in the strange economy of the Body of Christ, their life and mine may work together for our common salvation. I do not think for a moment that they are right on matters such as those I have mentioned, but I acknowledge that they 'knew' what their own concrete Christian communities taught them to know, just as I 'know' what I have learned in the same concrete and particular way. When I stand in God's presence or at the Lord's Table, they are part of the company to which I belong".

In other words then we have to live with differences of viewpoints on a whole range of moral issues. Those who threaten splits on any issue should listen hard to the wisdom behind Archbishop Rowan's words especially when the issue is a moral rather than a doctrinal one.

What are the issues of disagreement that have exercised your Church Council over recent years? How have you resolved them?

Re read Archbishop Rowan's words - how might they help us respect different views?

3. Decision-making within the Anglican Communion

We do not have a centralised system of government in the Anglican Church. The Archbishop of Canterbury is not our Pope. Bishops at Lambeth Conferences do not have authority to legislate. The Anglican Consultative Council is precisely that - a Consultative Body. The Primates meeting together do not have authority to legislate either. The Anglican family and the Anglican identity is defined by our acceptance of scripture, the Creeds, the two dominical sacraments and the historic episcopate locally adapted - what has been called the Lambeth quadrilateral. Each province is autonomous. Obviously we have to be sensitive to one another's needs and to our wider inheritance of faith but at the end of the day we are all self governing provinces with our own system of choosing bishops, our own synodical procedures and our own way of dealing with moral issues. In other words, as Anglicans we believe that we learn our faith in a particular place, be that in Wales, England, Canada or Africa.

That doesn't mean that we are swamped by the local culture, but it does mean that Christian communities in different parts of the world have different emphases. Thus provinces have moved at different paces both with the ordination of women to the priesthood and to the episcopate. The Church in Nigeria allows polygamy because it is found in the Bible whereas we in the West believe in monogamous marriage relationships. This is part of what it means to belong to a worldwide church, which is not uniform or monochrome.

4. The place of Lambeth Resolutions

Lambeth Resolutions are not meant to be prescriptive - rules binding on all provinces of the Anglican Communion. At Lambeth, the Bishops of the Communion agree on the importance of certain matters and commend them for study and discussion and possible implementation to the wider church. The trouble is, that the resolution on human sexuality has become the only resolution that people remember and it seems to have become the defining resolution of who is and who is not a Christian or at least who is or is not an Anglican. You could swear that Lambeth '98 discussed nothing else. In fact there were sixty two pages of resolutions dealing with things such as the universal declaration of human rights, religious freedom and tolerance, uprooted and displaced persons, justice for women and children, the plight of people in various parts of the globe, nuclear weapons, landmines and international debt. Which province and diocese has taken to heart the challenge to fund an international development programme by giving 0.7% of annual total diocesan income to this cause?

Moreover the resolution on human sexuality is far wider than the resolution on homosexuality. It speaks about violation of women, AIDS, and the abuse of children. It was a document that was discussed for two whole weeks by a group of bishops who discuss little else. They were very diverse in their views and in their approaches. It was chaired by the Archbishop of South Africa and he said that after two weeks of prayer and study they had arrived at a statement on which they could all agree. When they took that statement to the Plenary Session of all the bishops of the Communion he thought that it was understood that it would not be modified or amended but accepted as a statement of the group's understanding. In fact it was amended, chaos ensued and it unbalanced the carefully crafted statement. The Lambeth debate on human sexuality was an object lesson in how not to do theology. No

other resolutions were treated in this way in plenary and most of these to be honest have been confined to the dustbin. In all of this, one also has to remember that this is not a doctrinal issue but a moral issue.

5. The sexual issue in a wider context

Finally, I now want to look at the wider questions concerning the Mission and Ministry of the Church. After Lambeth '98 the then Archbishop of Canterbury set up a group of bishops to look at issues in human sexuality. That group came to the conclusion that "the legislative process was an inadequate way to discern the mind of Christ in some of the sensitive issues that face us as we continue to grow as a communion of Churches. What we need is face to face conversations across provincial lines".

I have just come back from the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches in Geneva and it too has been looking at issues in human sexuality and set up a group after the Assembly in Harare in '98 to provide what it called "Space for discussion, debate and analysis." A number of consultations were held on this issue at Bossey where individual participants were able to be open and vulnerable to one another and were able to share reflections. It concluded that, "the mainstreaming of positions and the production of authoritative statements is counter productive and deepens the rifts within and among churches. What there is need for is space for encounters, analysis, dialogue". In other words the WCC concurs with the post Lambeth bishops about the most creative way forward being through conversations not through strident statements.

Can you think of ways in which your church can make space for encounters, analysis and dialogue?

The Anglican Communion has a great deal to learn about that method of discourse because

what has happened in the last few months has not been edifying. No real communication or conversations have really taken place - just the assertion and counter assertion of differing viewpoints. What kind of witness has that given to the world about our way of engaging with God and one another? The Church claims to be the Body of Christ, where members are urged to look not to their own interests but to the interests of other members of the Body (Read Ephesians). It most truly witnesses to the Gospel when it tries to serve Christ in the other person. In other words there ought to be about us a selfless attention to the other because of God's selfless attention toward us. That is the heart of the Gospel. In an attempt to state views stridently on this one topic we have missed something fundamental as a Communion on the core values of the Gospel. Or to use Jesus' own picturesque language

"we have strained at gnats and swallowed camels", for we seem to have forgotten that we live in a world ravaged by bloodshed, poverty and disease. We are in danger in the Anglican Communion of making this sexual and relational issue, the only real issue that counts almost the defining issue for who is and is not an Anglican or even a Christian.

If we do that then we are in danger of failing to take seriously both the central values of our gospel and the traditions of our Church.

SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS - THE UNRESOLVED QUESTIONS

*Rt Rev Richard Harris,
Bishop of Oxford*



Richard Harris has been Bishop of Oxford since 1987. Before that he was Dean of King's College, London. He has been a parish priest and a lecturer in Christian Doctrine and

Ethics. He is a Fellow of King's College, London and an Honorary Doctor of Divinity of the University of London.

The status of same-sex relationships is the most divisive issue now facing the Church of England, indeed the whole Anglican Communion and many other churches as well. It is therefore vital that we engage in the discussion with what has been termed "Interpretative charity".¹ This means first, assuming that the views with which you disagree are not only sincerely held but are put forward by a rational person who holds them for good reasons. Secondly, stating those views to yourself in the most rationally persuasive way. In a debate between Christians I assume of course that what is rationally persuasive will be biblically based. It is usually easy to destroy weak arguments that are put forward.

Interpretative charity involves taking the strongest argument and, if necessary, stating in even more persuasive terms than the person with whom you disagree. To love one another in disagreements of this kind involves, at the least, this kind of interpretative charity, putting the best possible construction on the other person's arguments, reformulating them in such a way as to see their full force.

Another point that needs to be made at the outset is that those of us who call ourselves Christians find our human identity first and foremost in Christ. Our sexuality is important, very important, for it is part of our God given nature. But the question whether we are heterosexual or homosexual by orientation is subordinate to the fact that we belong together at the profoundest level of our being, within the body of Christ and we find our common identity in him.

The point is made in the St Andrew's statement, a document drawn up by thoughtful Evangelicals and quoted in the 1998 Lambeth - Conference section report on human sexuality. This says "There can be no description of human reality, in general or in particular, outside the reality of Christ. We must be on guard, therefore, against constructing any other ground for our identities than the redeemed humanity given us in him".²

Elizabeth Stuart, who has written in favour of sexual intimacy for gay and lesbian people makes the same point when she says "Baptism incorporates us into a community that deconstructs all other identities and regards them as non-essential".³

This is a discussion in which attentive listening is crucial. Those of us who are heterosexual need to listen to gay and lesbian people who are willing to share something of their experience with us. It is not easy to make ourselves that vulnerable to one another. This will include listening to those who believe that loving sexual intimacy is open to them. It will also include listening to those who believe that the bible allows sexual intimacy only in the context of life long heterosexual marriage and that they must therefore try to live a life of chastity. It will involve listening to parents whose children have come out as gay and lesbian. A philosopher once said that "All ethics is a training in sympathy".⁴ Certainly any ethical reflection worth the name can only be based on a real

¹ Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, Blackwell, 1998, p86 ff

² *The Way Forward?* ed Timothy Bradshaw, Hodder and Stoughton, 1997, p5 ff. This book continues the work of the St Andrew's Group and contains a number of helpful essays in a spirit of "courteous listening to many voices, and exercising respect as well as honesty."

³ A statement verbally at a seminar chaired by the Archbishop of Canterbury

⁴ Keith Ward, in a private conversation

and sympathetic understanding of the experience that is being debated.

Find ways to listen to the variety of voices on gay and lesbian experience – if this is not possible face to face, read some of the collections of interviews and testimonies referred to in the introduction to this journal.

Listening is not unproblematic. We all have a tendency to listen to or read books by those who reinforce our own point of view. At the 1998 Lambeth Conference two fringe meetings on this subject were organised. At one of them gay and lesbian people who believe that life-long chastity was the only option open to them shared their experience. At the other gay and lesbian people who did not limit themselves to that option spoke. Despite the huge furore over this subject at Lambeth only one or two people found it in them to attend both meetings.

Listening is not unambiguous. For people can be quite sincere in how they interpret and speak about their experience but that interpretation or construction can be shaped in ways that they may not be fully aware of by the prevailing culture. This point will be returned to when I consider what is termed constructivist views of human sexuality.

The position of the House of Bishops of the Church of England is set out in *Issues in Human Sexuality*. The House is not about to change its mind on this issue. Nevertheless, all of us need to get beyond the present highly polarised debate, with its unhelpful stereotypes. Whatever our views and whether or not they are changed or adjusted as a result of this discussion, I believe that serious engagement with this dilemma can take us all deeper into the mind of Christ. And that, as I understand it, is what all of us, Bishops, clergy and lay people want: to enter more deeply into the mind of Christ for his church on this pressing issue.

The first unresolved question concerns the causality of our sexual orientation, whether it is heterosexual or homosexual. But this in turn raises the wider and in some ways more important question about the implications of our answer to that on our ethical judgments.

During the 1990s claims were made by some American scientists to have found a genetic basis for homosexuality. No so called "gay gene" was discovered but it was claimed that studies of twins identified a marker on the X chromosome where genes important in the formation of our sexuality may be located. Recent research however has raised major doubts about those findings.⁵ In any case, if there is a genetic basis for our sexuality, it is likely to be polygenic and complex involving other biological factors as well. At the moment there are no assured, generally accepted findings. Unfortunately the ethical implications of any scientific findings have not always been properly thought through. There has been a drive in some quarters to find a genetic or more widely, biological basis, for homosexuality on the assumption that society would then have to accept gay people without question. This does not necessarily follow in practice, as we have seen over questions of race. The colour of our skin is certainly genetic in origin but this knowledge has not resulted in the dissipation of racial prejudice. Nor does it follow in logic. For some have suggested - for example the last Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits - that if a "Gay gene" were identified then genetic engineering techniques could be used to eliminate this strain from the human gene pool. Theological and ethical reflection needs to be informed by scientific findings but it cannot be decided by them.

Another approach to the question of causality, the so called development hypothesis, assumes that people become gay or lesbian because of shortcomings in relationships with parents in the process of growing up.⁶ For example, it has

⁵ A summary of the evidence is provided by John Bancroft, "Homosexual Orientation, The Search for a Biological Basis" in *British Journal of Psychiatry* (1994), 164, 437-440. A fuller and more popular account is given by Chandler Burr, *A Separate Creation, How Biology Makes us Gay* (Bantam 1996). Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse "Science and the Ecclesiastical Homosexuality Debate" in *Christian Scholars Review* (December 1997) takes a critical look at all the scientific studies. The research that cast doubt on previous alleged findings was reported in *The Guardian* on 25th April 1999. A selection of books on research in this area was reviewed in *The Times Literary Supplement* on 8th May 1998 by Ruth Hubbard

⁶ A psychotherapist who has been influential in this field is Elizabeth Moberly, *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic*, James Clarke, 1993

been argued that gayness in men is derived from having a distant father and a close relationship with a mother. But such an argument can be turned on its head. It has been suggested for example that where such a situation occurs it is likely to be because the father has been unduly influenced by macho understanding of masculinity and is unable to relate satisfactorily to the more gentle qualities in his growing son and that that son would inevitably draw closer to his mother. This development hypothesis has been important for organisations that claim that homosexuality is a condition that can be healed. For if something has gone awry in the process of growing up then it might be that through appropriate therapy a person can be re-orientated.

Challenging both these interpretations is the view that human sexuality is a purely social construct.⁷ In other words, there is nothing given about our orientation. It is totally shaped and conditioned by the culture in which we are set. Clearly there is some truth in this, in that how same-sex relationships have been understood and evaluated does vary both from society to society and from age to age. It is a view that can appeal to those take a traditional, Christian understanding of this issue. For it would indicate that the church has a sound basis for taking up a contrary stance to the culture of our day, in some quarters of which at least being gay or lesbian is accepted without question.

On the question of causality then we have to acknowledge that there is no agreement, no generally accepted finding from either science or sociology. In any case, the answer to the question about causality cannot be determinative for theological and ethical reflection, any answer will bear on the subject and needs to be taken into account but it cannot determine it.

How familiar are you with the theories of the causes of homosexuality?

Are you persuaded by any of those outlined by Bp Richard? How does it fit into traditional Christian teaching about creation and free will? What difference would it make to our attitudes if one or other of these theories were to be adopted?

My own view, and this is of course a personal judgement, is that though there is some truth in the social constructivist understanding of sexuality, there really are people who are predominantly attracted to members of their own sex in every age and every culture, even though the form and acceptability of the expression of this will vary. For it seems clear from autobiographies of gay people that from an early age there are people who, whatever society thinks of the matter, are conscious of being strongly attracted, not just sexually but as a whole person, to members of their own sex.⁸ The origin of this I suspect is likely to lie in the interaction of the genetic and developmental, the biological and psychological. But whatever explanation there is a percentage of the population, however small, who are predominantly attracted to members of their own sex and whose orientation is, in the vast majority of cases, irreversible. The actual percentage has been a matter of dispute from Kinsey's ten percent to studies which suggest that only about two percent of males or less are predominantly homosexual. Such gay and lesbian people do not choose their orientation, nor does our culture totally condition them to be that way. That's the way they are, and if I am a gay or lesbian Christian person, that is the nature with which I come before the God who in Christ cherishes me. It is significant that recent official pronouncements by the Roman Catholic church, whilst taking a traditional line on all forms of sexual expression, refers to homosexual **persons**, thereby implying that there are people

7 Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (three vols), trans. R Hurley, Allen Lane, 1979-88

8 Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal*, Picador, 1995, p6 ff

9 The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith produced *Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* in 1986. Cardinal Hume issued a statement based on this in 1993 and then another one in 1995 "A Note on the Teaching of the Catholic Church Concerning Homosexual People". Whilst repeating the traditional teaching of the Church in unequivocal fashion it strongly asserts the value of homosexual people in the life of the Church and underlines the importance of friendship and human love between people, whether of the same sex or a different sex. He also strongly defends the human rights of homosexual people and condemns "violence of speech or action against homosexual people". Individual Roman Catholic Theologians such as Kevin Kelly, *New Directions in Sexual Ethics* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1998) are more open to the possibility of affirming stable gay relationships.

who are of their very nature homosexual.⁹ A consideration of lesbianism will further complicate this issue. For some lesbians their sexuality is a political statement, a rejection of male dominance. This often goes with an emphasis on it being a personal choice, not something given either by biology or psychology. If this were so, then the Christian perspective would be quite clear. We are called to choose either chaste singleness or marriage. But whilst the political protest of lesbianism is very understandable, as is the desire to make this a responsible personal choice, not something determined, I suspect - though again this is only a personal judgement - that there is a percentage of women who are primarily attracted to other women; though studies reveal this to be smaller than the number of men who are homosexual by orientation.

The question of scripture must be crucial for all of us, for as the preface to the declaration of assent puts it "The Church of England professes the faith uniquely revealed in the holy scriptures and set forth in the Catholic creeds". Together we seek the mind of Christ so together we must look to the scriptures to guide us. This cannot be separated from another question however, that of hermeneutics: the assumptions, presuppositions and principles which guide us in the interpretation and application of scripture.

All are now agreed that the notorious story of the destruction of Sodom is not relevant to this debate. The sins that were punished were the violation of hospitality and gang rape. Several passages in the book of Leviticus need looking at. These chapters condemn many things that today we take for granted, and order the death penalty, sometimes by stoning, for a number of offences in a way which we can only regard as cruel, morally repugnant and totally contrary to the mind of Christ.¹⁰

Romans 1: 18-32 however remains for all of us a crucial text. In this passage St Paul says that because the pagan world has failed to recognise God in his creation they have turned to idolatry and this in turn has led to many immoral practices, including same-sex relationships. It can be asked about this passage whether what St Paul condemns is identical to the committed same-sex relationships which are suggested as a role model for today. Furthermore, as what St Paul condemns is, in his view, a direct result of turning away from God, it can also be asked whether those whose faith in God is sincere but who uphold the validity of same sex relationships are open to a similar condemnation.

For some, these questions can be faced in a way which leaves this text as decisive for our discussion. For others, however, it needs to be set against the example and teaching of Jesus in his outreach to the marginalised of his time and his willingness to keep close to human need rather than the strict letter of the law. The way the early church admitted gentiles also, it is argued, offers a precedent for us today.

The first Christians, who were Jewish, saw the Holy Spirit clearly at work in gentiles and as a result came to the conclusion that they could be baptised as Christians without first having to be circumcised and without keeping the Jewish law. The clear teaching of the Old Testament about ritual purity and food laws, for example, was set aside. On the basis of mutual friendship within the Christian community today it has been argued that we might be able to see the Holy Spirit at work in loving same sex relationships and as a consequence gay and lesbian people in such relationships should be warmly welcomed and fully affirmed. In those days being a woman, a slave or a gentile carried overtures of moral defilement.

¹⁰ The text usually taken to condemn sexual relations with members of the same sex are Genesis 19:4-11; Leviticus 18: 22; 20, 13; and Romans 1: 26-27. A traditional interpretation of these texts is taken in *Striving for a Gender Identity*, ed. Christal Vonholvt, German Institute for Youth and Society, Reichelsheim, 1996 and in *God, Family and Sexuality*, ed. David W Torrance, The Handsel Press, 1997. A similar view is taken by the Evangelical Alliance in *Faith, Hope and Homosexuality*, 1998, whilst adding that the Church must repent of its homophobia. A different view is taken in *Homosexuality, the Bible and the Fundamentalist Tradition* by David Bruce Taylor, LGCM, 1999

But as St Paul wrote "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus". (Galatians 3:28) In the same way, if we can see the Holy Spirit at work in loving gay relationships then this should override any moral stigma that traditionally attaches to such relationships and we should add to St Paul's statement that in Christ Jesus "There is neither heterosexual nor homosexual."¹¹

Those who conclude from a study of scripture that gay and lesbian people must refrain from sexual intimacy offer two alternatives. The first suggests that with appropriate prayer and counselling a person can - over time and painfully - change their sexual orientation, at least enough to get married. This used to be the position of organisations like The True Freedom Trust, The Courage Trust and Living Waters. However, it now appears that their main stress is on a person coming to terms with their sexuality and, through prayer, living a chaste life.¹² Obviously the position that a person can change their sexual orientation depends either on a developmental or a constructionist understanding of the causality of our sexual orientation. For those who believe that the basis is primarily genetic, there can be no question of a change. These organisations have in the past aroused the anger of many gay people but they can offer a valuable pastoral ministry, particularly to young gay or lesbian people in strictly traditional congregations.

The other alternative is life-long celibacy. The single state, in which a person consecrates all their bodily desires and longings to God so that, through a celibate life, they can offer a profound spiritual friendship to a wide range of people, is a highly esteemed Christian vocation.

And we should salute those Christians, heterosexual or homosexual, in the past and the present, who have served the church so wonderfully in this way. But it is a personal vocation and it is difficult to see how a whole class of persons, simply through their sexual orientation, are by that fact called to it. As Rowan Williams has put it "Anyone who knows the complexities of the true celibate vocation would be the last to have any sympathy with the extraordinary idea that sexual orientation is an automatic pointer to a celibate life: almost as if celibacy before God is less costly, even less risky, to the homosexual than the heterosexual".¹³

The other question is that of the meaning of bodily desire. It has been suggested that one of the reasons why this debate arouses such emotion is because it brings to the fore the issue of bodily longing. When considering marriage this can be side stepped by a focus on procreation. This is not possible in same-sex relationships. So what is the purpose of bodily desire, theologically considered? Rowan Williams, has argued that in the desire for one another and our desire that they should desire us, so that an essential part of our desire for them is that we should feel desired, we make ourselves vulnerable: hence it is so easy for sex to be tragic or comic. But this mutuality in desiring reflects the love of the Trinity.

The whole story of creation, incarnation and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, as if we were God, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the trinity. The life has as its rationale - if not invariably its practical reality - the task of teaching us this: so ordering our relations that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy.

¹¹ This is the view taken, for example, by Stephen Fowl in *Engaging Scripture* and by Eugene Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, Blackwell, 1999

¹² Jeffrey Satinover, *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*, Baker Books, 1996 believes that homosexual behaviour is changeable and Mario Bergner *Setting Love in Order*, Monarch, 1995 sets out the case based on his own experience. Tony Green, Brenda Harrison, Jerry Innes, *Not For Turning: An Enquiry into the Ex-gay Movement* argued the opposite case from the experience of people who have not been helped by organisations that claim to heal homosexuals.

¹³ Rowan Williams, "The Body's Grace", now reprinted in *Ourselves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God*, ed. Charles Hefling, Cowley Publications, Boston, 1996. The original lecture is available from LGCM, Oxford House, Derbyshire Street, London, E2 6HG

Two things, he suggests, follow from this. The first is the need for time for two people to achieve a genuine mutual recognition and not simply be passive instruments to each other. The other is that sexual relationships fall away from their proper purpose when there is no making vulnerable.

Building on these insights by Rowan Williams it has been argued that Christians should never lose sight of our overall goal, which is to be taken into the wedding feast of the Lamb, the divine banquet and that this is primarily about relationships and their quality, about love and holiness, rather than procreation.¹⁴

Whatever the implications of this for same-sex relationships and whatever qualifications or further discussion might be necessary before such categories can be applied to same sex relationships, there are clearly important insights here which can enrich and illuminate the whole discussion, putting it, quite properly, in a wider theological context.

Whatever differing views there are about sexual intimacy all Christians are agreed in wanting to oppose homophobia. The seriousness of this should not be underestimated. One survey found that over a period of five years 34% of men and 24% of the women surveyed had experienced violence. The percentages for those under 18 was even higher. One in two people under 18 had experience of violence, 61% recorded harassment and 90% verbal abuse.¹⁵ This is entirely unacceptable and Christians will want to do all they can to oppose it. But here we run into a two edged problem.

Such people are not willing to believe that the church is sincere in its protestations about opposing homophobia until it is able to affirm same-sex relationships. The other side of this problem is that those who take a traditional stance very much object to being regarded as homophobic when they take a position that Many gay and lesbian people feel that the

Church, because of its traditional attitude, has the effect of reinforcing homophobia, whatever its stated intentions. They judge is rooted in clear Christian principle.

How do you respond to the statistics on homophobic violence?

What should the Church be doing to overcome homophobia?

There is no easy resolution of this tension. Nevertheless both *Issues in Human Sexuality* and the 1998 Lambeth Conference Resolution strongly affirmed the place of gay and lesbian people in the life of the Church.

Issues in Human Sexuality said

“The church in its pastoral mission ought to help and encourage all its members, as they pursue their pilgrimage from the starting points given in their own personalities and circumstances, and as they grow by grace within their own particular potential. It is, therefore, only right that there should be an open and welcoming place in the Christian community both for those homophiles who follow the way of abstinence, giving themselves to friendship for many rather than to intimacy with one, and also for those who are conscientiously convinced that a faithful, sexually active relationship with one other person, aimed at helping both partners to grow in discipleship, is a way of life God wills for them”. (5.23)

The Lambeth Resolution said that the Bishops “Recognise that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these are members of the Church and are seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church and God’s transforming power for the living of their lives and the ordering of relationships. We commit ourselves to listen to the experi-

¹⁴ This is the theme of Eugene Rogers in *Sexuality and the Christian Body*

¹⁵ Angela Mason, Anya Palmer, *Queer Bashing*, Stonewall, 1996

ence of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the body of Christ". (Resolution 1, 10 (c))

The above passage from *Issues in Human Sexuality* has given rise to some misunderstanding. Earlier the Bishops' statement had said

"There is, therefore, in Scripture an evolving convergence on the ideal of a lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual union as the setting intended by God for the proper development of men and women as sexual beings." (2.29)

But what the Bishops' statement takes into account is the traditional Christian, particularly Anglican, respect for conscience. If after prayer and reflection a person makes a conscientious judgment before God that a particular course of action or way of life is right, is compatible with or even demanded by Christ, then that judgment is to be respected whatever the formal teaching of the Church. So, referring to gay and lesbian people who enter into committed sexual relationships the Bishops' statement says that whilst insisting that whilst conscience always needs to be informed

"Christian tradition also contains an emphasis on respect for free conscientious judgment where the individuals have seriously weighed the issues involved. The homophile is only one in a range of such cases. While unable, therefore, to commend the way of life just described as in itself as faithful a reflection of God's purpose in creation as the heterophile, we do not reject those who sincerely believe it is God's call for them. We stand alongside them in the fellowship of the Church, all alike dependent on the undeserved grace of God". (5.6)

That said, there will be a difference of emphasis in this welcoming between those who warmly accept people in same-sex relationships regarding such relationships as valid and those who,

whilst welcoming them fully into the fellowship of the Church, believe that their conscience needs to be re-educated and that their relationships need to be re-ordered.

Is Bishop Richard right to speak of a difference only of "emphasis"?

Issues in Human Sexuality makes it clear that this liberty, as they call it, applies only to lay people not to clergy. The full paragraph reads

"We have, therefore, to say that in our considered judgment clergy cannot claim the liberty to enter into sexually active homophile relationships. Because of the distinctive nature of their calling, status and consecration, to allow such a claim on their part would be seen as placing that way of life in all respects on a par with heterosexual marriage as a reflection of God's purpose in creation". (5.17)

This paragraph has been criticised as advocating a double standard, one for clergy and one for lay people. This is not quite right. The standard set out in the Bishops' teaching document is faithful, life-long, heterosexual union, i.e. marriage. There is one standard, not two. Although this bears upon clergy and lay people in different ways this is by no means unique. For example whilst most mainstream churches have allowed lay people to take up arms in defence of their country when the cause is just, this liberty has not been accorded to chaplains. Chaplains have been forbidden to carry weapons so that in however small a way they can bear witness to God's peaceable kingdom in which there is no violence of any kind.

The problem with this teaching, even with its limited concession to lay people, is that it offers no role models to gay and lesbian young people, except that of life-long abstinence. The thoughtful American writer Andrew Sullivan has said that one of the great points of anguish for someone growing up gay or lesbian is that they have nothing to aim for.¹⁶

The point is also made particularly powerfully by Jeffery John in relation to the clergy.

Heterosexual young people have the ideal of a committed life-long relationship, gay and lesbian young people have no socially sanctioned ideal in which their longing to love and be loved can take human form.

Acknowledging that there is much promiscuity in the gay community he argues that clergy ought to be able to offer an alternative to this in relationships that are permanent, faithful and stable.¹⁷

The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) with which the Church of England is linked through the Meissen Agreement, offers a compromise ceremony. The blessing is not to be during an ordinary worship service, it is not to be on the homosexual partnership as a life-style but on the people who live in an ethical responsible way in a same-sex relationship. The late John Boswell in his pioneering work on the history of homosexuality and attitudes to it argued that at one time the Church had a special relationship for the blessing of same-sex unions. There was certainly a special ceremony described "as a prayer for" "or office of' *adelphopoiesin* but other scholars have not been convinced that Boswell's translation of this as "same-sex union" is accurate.¹⁸

Within the gay community there is a debate about whether such permanent partnerships should be seen in covenantal terms, based upon Ephesians 5 or as a particularly intimate kind of friendship involving sexual expression. But even if both these models are rejected, all Christians are agreed that Scripture affirms tender, intimate friendships of a nonsexual kind and that it is sad today that as these seem so little valued in their own right.

How would you respond if the Church refused to bless your relationship with the person you love? (experiences of divorced couples seeking

a church wedding may help here).

Another aspect of this debate concerns what is natural and unnatural and this overlaps with a more technical discussion about natural law, or what we can know of God's purpose in creation. It is however important at the outset to try to distinguish between any emotional reaction we might have and considered ethical reflection. I may find certain ways of going on extremely distasteful or embarrassing. But this so-called "ugh" factor¹⁹ is not in itself a sure guide to ethical evaluation. Again, although the bodies of men and women are clearly designed to come together in a sexual union that produces offspring, this cannot of itself be regarded as settling the matter. First, there are many ways in which heterosexual couples make love that do not involve full sexual union or which do not produce offspring. Secondly, what is natural according to God's purposes cannot be discerned simply by observing what happens in nature. What is natural, from a Christian point of view, is nature as it is grounded in and reordered in the light of Christ's resurrection. What this is must be discerned by reflecting on God's purpose in nature as revealed in the scriptures, not simply by watching natural processes. It is nature as restored in Christ that is normative.

What is the practice of the majority may be the norm but need not be normative. We might say that brown hair is normal but ginger hair is not only perfectly acceptable but is part of the variety and richness of human physicality.

This brings us to the heart of the matter as far as many gay and lesbian people are concerned. They discover that they are attracted to other members of their own sex, not just sexually but with a profound longing for a committed relationship. Are they able to accept and affirm what they cannot help but feel is profoundly bound up with their whole being - a nature which they did not choose but which they find

¹⁷ Jeffrey John, *Permanent, Faithful, Stable* (Affirming Catholicism 1993, St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London, EC2V 6AU)

¹⁸ John Boswell, *The Marriage of Likeness, Same Sex Unions in Pre-modern Europe*, Harper Collins, 1995

¹⁹ Michael Ruse, *Homosexuality, A Philosophical Enquiry*, Blackwell, 1998 p201

they are - or are they to flee from themselves in fear and self-loathing?. Official Roman Catholic teaching, whilst taking a strictly traditional line about homosexual practice, has been very affirming of homosexual persons. At the same time it has described the homosexual orientation as "disordered". Is it possible to regard oneself as deeply loved and cherished by God if one believes that the nature he has given one, a nature which expresses one's deepest feelings, is "disordered"?

The New Testament gives us the assurance that in Christ we are profoundly accepted and that liberation comes through accepting God's acceptance of us. It is a very genuine, testing and painful question about how far, if at all, this is possible whilst rejecting one's deepest longings.²⁰

The cultural context in which this debate is taking place needs to be noted. Not only are there openly gay MPs but their partners have been accorded spouses' rights in the House of Commons. The "pink pound" is an increasingly important economic factor making for gay acceptability. The Guardian newspaper has traditionally been liberal on gay issues and The Independent has been strongly pro-gay. Now *The Times*, for example in its obituaries, will refer quite straightforwardly to the partners of gay people in the final paragraph where the wives or husbands of married people are mentioned. Legislation continues to change. A lesbian employed by a railway company was accorded the financial rights of her partner equivalent to a spouse. At the end of 1997 the European Commission on Human Rights decided in favour of Euan Sutherland that the UK's higher age of consent for homosexuals breached two articles of the European Convention. A recent court case allowed a surviving partner of the same sex to inherit the lease of a flat. In France there has been the

introduction of PACS, as a result of which same-sex couples can have a status in law for financial and other benefits.

All this poses a major question about the relationship of the Christian Church to the wider culture in which it is set. In the past the Church of England has been very much part of the wider culture a "church type" as opposed to a "sect type". It would be possible in the future for the Church deliberately to take up a contra-culture stance, distancing itself from wider society on this issue. On the other hand it could quite consciously decide to relate to the gay phenomenon in a more positive way and adopt what the late Michael Vasey²¹ termed a "missiological pragmatism".

The Church today is confronted by a genuine dilemma - the presence in the Church of those who are openly gay or lesbian some of whom ask for the same liberty as heterosexual people, namely to be able to enter into life long loving relationships with members of their own sex in a good conscience. For some it appears inevitable that the church will eventually rethink and repent, as it has in the past in its attitudes to slavery and women. For others, this is a different kind of issue and not one on which the church should conform to the prevailing cultural norm.

It has become such a crucial issue in the church because it raises in stark form the question of scripture and how we are to interpret it. It therefore touches on our whole understanding of revealed truth. So it is good that all of us will be drawn back to the very basis of our faith in Jesus Christ and how the church is to follow him faithfully in the circumstances of our own time.

²⁰ Stanley Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming*, Westminster John Knox, 1998. Welcoming is better than not welcoming but what is the effect of not affirming upon a homosexual persons feeling of worth particularly as it affects their deepest longings to love and be loved?

²¹ Michael Vasey, *Strangers and Friends*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1995

THE FREEING OF ANGLICAN IDENTITIES

Rev Dr Lorraine Cavanagh



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This paper is an edited version of a proposal submitted to the Eames Commission and draws on insights and reflections gained during her recent doctoral research. It is in part a response to a paper by Chris Sugden "What is the Anglican Communion for?" which appears on the Anglican Communion Website [Hhttp://eames.Anglican-mainstream.net](http://eames.Anglican-mainstream.net)

I have written this paper because I believe that a possibility exists for developing new attitudes and ways of thinking about the unity of the Anglican Communion. The difficulties which the Communion is currently experiencing indicate that superficial and shallow notions of unity are inadequate in a dispute in which conflicting loyalties and deep convictions are at stake, and that a new understanding of unity is needed which would help re-focus Anglican thinking and so prepare the way for renewed dialogue and for a reconciliation which would release the current deadlock.

During the course of the discussion, I hope to demonstrate that the difficulties which the Communion faces, as it attempts to resolve

this conflict, relate to its collective spiritual life and to the way in which its thinking and relationships may not be fully engaged in God at a deep and intuitive level. The discussion therefore aims to discover new and more intuitive ways of thinking about unity, with a view to helping the Commission re-discover a shared meaning for Anglican life, arising from a deeper understanding of the spiritual significance of communion.

I. The Theological and Spiritual Implications of the Conflict

Clause I of the Mandate issued to the Commission by the Archbishop of Canterbury, suggests the need for discovering a deeper theological meaning for the common life which Anglicans share. Depth of meaning implies that such an understanding has a spiritual basis which, if ignored, risks causing permanent damage to the life of communion. With this in mind, I now turn to some of the implications for the self understanding of Anglicanism, as it has been affected by the current crisis.

To speak of a common life, and of the meaning which informs it, should not be understood as a covert glossing over of difference but, on the contrary, as the basis for inquiring into new ways of thinking which would subsequently permit the life of communion to be strengthened in a mutuality which is based on trust.

For this to be possible, theological work would need to be undertaken as a spiritual exercise in the context of relationship. In the first place, in a relationship with God, as the primary act denoting what is meant by 'spiritual' and, in the second, where this spirituality informs theological debate and restores broken human relationships. Taken together, these initiatives form the prelude to re-establishing a climate of trust in which to address the issues which dominate this conflict.

1.1 Mutuality - The Relational as encounter

The re-establishing of trust in the fractured life of the Anglican Communion will therefore require a costly process of renewed encounter between separated churches and individuals. Although this does not in itself guarantee unity, the establishment of a climate of trust might initially allow for an understanding of unity which is open to the action of grace and to a transformation of the Communion's common life together in new and surprising ways.

The *Virginia Report* describes Anglican unity as one of diversities 'held in tension'. The force of the present conflict suggests that this description of communion is too superficial to bear the weight of differences which exist across party and denominational borders. It is also not helped by the fact that many people perceive being 'held together in diversity' as no more than a way of describing an outworn and external structure whose primary function is the maintenance of decline and/or the prevention of total disintegration. What is needed, therefore, is a way of thinking about communion which enables it to deepen its unity in such a way as to permit all its members to grow in the confidence of their fundamental unity in Jesus Christ. Such a unity begins with a reaffirmation of the kind of solidarity which is acquired through free exchange of honour and human affection between people. Being simply 'held together' is now no longer adequate as a model of unity for the life of communion, since it fails to imply the need for a shared common life which is rooted in its inner life of prayer and in the dynamic life of the Spirit. This suggests the need for new ways of thinking about unity which embody strength and the possibility for movement, the movement of God's continuing abiding presence sustaining and transforming the life of communion from within.

A unity which is informed by the inner transforming movement of God's Spirit is a dynamic unity which is sustained and enlivened by grace, so that grace becomes the operative force of Jesus Christ at work transforming the life of communion.¹

In being dynamic, and as the force of God's activity in the Church, grace adds substance and depth to a unity which is based on 'holding in diversity'. The transforming work becomes the 'activity' or 'movement' of God's Spirit which 'holds' or embraces separated individuals in such a way as to enable them to surrender the theological identities which are frequently defined in party or denominational terms. Taken together, the surrender and subsequent embrace might constitute the initial step which needs to be taken towards freeing identities and opening up the current theological *impasse* with which the Commission is faced.²

This is not to abstract human identity and self understanding from concrete reality, since the work of transformation needs to be effected in the human life of communion with identities which reflect a person's self understanding, both in relation to God and to other people. Identities are not simply shaped by an individual's self perception. They grow in a sociological and historical context, one which subsequently informs a person's spiritual life. Identities are therefore 'contextual' and need to remain so if the process of exchange is to lead to the sort of mutuality capable of enriching the whole life of communion. For this to be possible, ways need to be found for developing theologies which remain faithful to the historically received teaching of the Church in scripture and tradition but which also derive from a moving or dynamic life experienced in its inner life of communion.

1 I owe this association of grace with the dynamic of the Spirit and the ongoing life of communion to Richard Hooker whose participatory understanding of what it means to be both a social and a historical Church informs much of the following discussion.

2 Miroslav Volf describes this process of surrender and embrace as he has experienced it in the aftermath of the Balkan Conflict. See Miroslav Volf *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* Nashville: Abingdon Press (1996) ch.3 especially pp. 140ff.

What short-hand terms would you use to describe your own identity? Are these the same labels others would give you?

How has your awareness of your identity changed over the years?

1.2 Mutuality and the collective inner life

This life derives from a deeply contemplative experience of God and is manifested in the life of the Church as the abiding ongoing (dynamic) presence of Jesus Christ in its relationships. The present climate of conflict denies this contemplative dimension and so prevents it affecting the life of communion, with the result that repercussions of the conflict are felt in all areas of the Church's life.³

Polarising issues, and the slogans and identities with which they have become associated, have led to an identity driven agenda dominating the concerns of separated parties in the Communion. This polarisation of identities would seem to indicate not only a paralysis of the human sociality of communion but also of its spiritual life together, since different 'integrity' must find it increasingly difficult to encounter the same God in the same theological and spiritual 'locality'.

2.A Spiritual basis for the life of communion

It is therefore in this area of spirituality – a shared 'locality' where the same God is encountered – that different integrities might begin to re-encounter one another. If this is the case, the Communion needs to find new ways for re-establishing a spiritual basis for its life together.

2:1 Dynamic and locality

The *via media* continues to be seen as the hallmark of Anglican identity and this is a helpful interpretation of the spirit of Anglicanism. If we understand the 'middle way' as signifying

neither inconclusive compromise, or an unstructured synthesis of 'inclusive' theologies, but a dynamic holding together of difference in the ongoing life of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we begin to see how the concept of locality might help to free Anglicans into a more dynamic unity. It could provide Anglicans with a conceptual 'middle' space in which to forge new friendships across old divisions. It now becomes especially important to retain a sense of the innate 'permeability' of Anglicanism. When brought together, the two concepts of permeability and dynamic allow for the possibility of movement to take place across existing boundaries in the life of communion. Taken together, these terms allow us to think about the 'permeability' of different party or denominational contexts, and of the way in which exchanges of understanding and growth in the mutuality of common affection might occur as a movement of reconciliation across existing boundaries of understanding and interpreting the Christian faith. I would argue, therefore, that the locality created in such exchanges is also a spiritual one, originating in the Communion's life together in Jesus Christ.

From the vantage point of a shared and deeper life in Christ, the 'permeability' of Anglicanism becomes one of its greatest strengths, allowing the two-way flow of ideas and of human affection in the honouring of the other in his or her separate integrity. This constitutes a dynamic of exchange which allows the Communion to continually re-work its self understanding in freeing the identities of its members from the constraints of non-dynamic thinking. In other words, dynamic exchange might permit affection for the other to flow from a candid acknowledgment of our shared belonging in Christ. This shared affection, discovered in the natural permeability of communion, opens up new and 'dynamic' ways for separated parties to face their differences with respect to the interpretation of God's

³ In many parishes we experience the effects of a disunity which stems from a loss of confidence in our belonging together in God as a distrust of other churches, in the activism of secular methods employed towards mission and growth and in a task-driven view of ministry dominating parish life at the expense of its inner life of prayer

will and purpose for the Anglican life of communion. The particular strength of Anglicanism consists, therefore, in the way in which the 'permeability' of Anglicanism allows the dynamic life of God's Spirit to move and to transform what is at present a 'static' situation.

Who are the people with whom you disagree on particular issues but for whom you still have respect/with whom you enjoy a depth of friendship?

On what is the relationship built?

2.2 Participation and Dynamic

Richard Hooker bases his participatory understanding of Church life on a similar premise. For Hooker, God's will and purpose for 'the highest good' is wholly identified with his being, in whom the Church participates in a profoundly Christological and eucharistic sense. His thinking is informed by an understanding of the Church as one which is fully integrated, both in the ongoing dynamic of God's purpose for its highest good and in its relationships. Such an understanding of God, and of the way God works in the life of the Church, derives in turn from an understanding of divine and natural laws as comprising a complementary system whose source and purpose for the highest good of people is in the dynamic nature of God's own being. That is to say, that God's will and purpose are constitutive of his being. The will and purpose of God is dynamic as a continuing activity which occurs within the movement of historical time and events.

A more intuitive approach to Hooker's thinking, as it derives both from participation in the life of Christ in the Eucharist and in a coherent system of laws, prepares Anglicans today for a deeper and more dynamic understanding of the life of the Spirit in the Church. Hooker's integrative thinking provides us with

a conceptual basis for thinking in new ways about Church polity, and about the authority which shapes it into unity. A contemplative reading of Richard Hooker allows us to see the Church as an integrated life of relationships which are continually being transformed by the abiding Spirit of Christ's authority who enables its structure to become a supple and enduring framework holding the Communion together at greater depth.

In the theological and political circumstances of his own day, which were closely related and correspond in many ways to our own, Hooker's thinking was informed by the need to retain a sense of the dynamic nature of history and of the way in which contextuality informs the intellectual process. For this reason, he describes the Church in terms which are both historical and participatory, 'that every former part..give(s) strength unto all that followe'.⁴

Retaining a sense of the dynamic and permeable nature of its life together in Christ allows the Communion to discover greater intensity and depth in its experience of unity. Consistent with Richard Hooker's thinking, this might lead to a greater 'collective'⁵ discernment of his will and purpose, especially with respect to the polarising issues which currently divide the Church. Allowing for the social permeability of the life of communion to be transparent to God's action prepares the Communion not only for transformation of its understanding of the issues which divide it, but for a corresponding transformation of its understanding of unity, as one which is to be found at the deepest level of human existence in the abiding Spirit of Jesus Christ. It now becomes possible to renew the search for genuine meaning and purpose for the life of Communion in the full expectation that it will be found in new and surprising ways.

4 *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* [The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker Vols. I & II], W. Speed Hill, (General Ed.); Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1977 I.1:2 Hereafter referred to as *Laws*

5 A contemplative reading of Richard Hooker, allows his principle of participation, as it applies to the life of the Church, to inform the way in which scripture is read. The reading of scripture becomes, in Hooker's terms, deduced 'by collection' and so allows for the whole Church to acquire a deeper understanding of God's purpose at a pre-rational level. See especially *Laws* I.14:2

3. Disunity and Truth

Allowing the communion to take full advantage of its natural permeability makes it possible for the life of God's Spirit to begin to move it more deeply into the 'truth'. This movement, manifested in a continual rediscovery of a truth which is also unchanging, generates a new kind of unity, one which has deeper and more far-reaching implications than the vague and centralist notions to which Anglicans have become accustomed. This new kind of unity therefore requires a clear spiritual, as well as theological, basis on which to build an enduring Anglican ecclesiology for the future.

The foregoing discussion suggests that permeability, especially as it is associated with freedom of exchange, does not sit comfortably with a definition of the life of communion which ignores the dynamic. The same is true with respect to the historical way in which God has been active in the life of the Church. In both cases, a denial of the dynamic transforming activity of God's will and purpose in the life of communion gives rise to static or non-dynamic definitions of truth. The challenge which permeability poses to new concepts of unity therefore lies in our acceptance or rebuttal of what Chris Sugden, in a paper addressed to the Eames Commission, terms 'sub-optimal ethics'.

3.1 Purity and holiness

As a reflection of puritan ethical thinking which lends itself to excluding (and exclusive) ideas of virtue, the idea of the 'sub-optimal' in relation to the teaching of scripture denies the possibility for deeper and more intuitive collective reading, as well as transformation, in implying a holiness which is, broadly speaking, to be equated with purity and separation.⁶

Much has been said by all parties to the current conflict about the implications and effects of applying (or failing to apply) the

social and sexual mores of one historical context to the vastly different contexts of today, but the theological implications which this kind of artificial ethics has for the dynamic life of communion merit further consideration. Of primary significance, and in contrast to a dynamic understanding of the life of communion, is the need which some Anglicans experience to define, and thereby enshrine, the concept of truth. Truth defined is permanent and unchanging but it is also 'static', incapable of gestation and growth and likely to wither and die as a result.

What these Anglicans are advocating is a truth which has not been independently 'constructed'. They are understandably concerned about the threats posed by individualism and syncretism to a clear and unequivocal delivery of Anglican teaching. Furthermore, these fears are also justified by the fact that teaching which is unstructured and without intellectual boundaries often fails to 'connect' with those who receive it. This is true both intellectually and at the deeper and more intuitive level of contemplation, when the insights of the contemplative are allowed to become disconnected from those of the intellect. Truth is also received as embedded in history. It is revealed, and its meaning renewed, within the context of the Church's temporal life through the interpretation received in the context of a given tradition. Tradition now becomes the context within which, collectively, we are able to make sense of truth today.

In allowing the present conflict to become 'issue driven', individuals and parties to the present conflict separate the truth from the dynamic of the Spirit, as well as from the history and contextuality of the Church's intellectual and spiritual life with the result that each 'particularity', as a way of understanding truth, is reflected in what are essentially 'static' theologies and ways of thinking about the Church.

⁶ This is particularly evident when 'optimal' ethics derive implicitly from Levitical purity codes established for sociological (largely hygiene related) as well as theological reasons (the separation of God's chosen people from alien cultures). For a more general anthropological discussion of the distinctions between purity and holiness and their effect on societies see Mary Douglas *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London, Boston, Melbourne: Ark Paperbacks [imprint Routledge, Kegan & Paul plc.], 1984

The truth is rendered static when 'true' Anglican teaching is appropriated by particular parties who each claim the right to a moral and/or spiritual high ground. As a result of this appropriation of the truth, party and issue based identities become an expression of a 'truth' which has been severed from the meaning which it should acquire in relationship with God and in relationships between persons.

In terms of human relationship, this meaning is often discerned as a glimmer of understanding which 'connects' people at a deeper level in conversation. For the life of communion, as it is resourced from the activity of God's grace in Jesus Christ, we experience such an understanding in the recognition of the integrity or 'truthfulness' of those with whom we disagree. The recognition has its source in God and so witnesses to the transforming work of grace.

These considerations indicate the existence of a spiritual dimension to this conflict, as well as a social one, which the Communion is possibly ignoring. This being the case, the risks to the spiritual life of communion posed by separation from God in relationship and in the doing of theology exist on two fronts: **1)** As individualism (whether expressed in selective and arbitrary readings and interpretations of scripture, or in 'constructed' truth) which attenuates the link between Christian teaching and that of scripture and which denies the possibility for a 'collective' reading of scripture. In both cases, the truth is ultimately appropriated and subsequently used to define the superior identity of one or other party and **2)** As a result of this appropriation of the truth by separated parties, in a weakening of the vital connection which exists between the transformation of the whole Communion into a body which is deeply reconciled in Jesus Christ. Both cases would seem to indicate the need for a shared spiritual life which is resourced from a continuous re-

engagement with scripture at a deeper intuitive level.

3.2 Truth and receptivity

Reading scripture together at this deeper level requires a positive 'receiving' of the truth by all parties to the conflict. It contrasts sharply with the exchanging of slogans, a sign of the breakdown of truthful dialogue in the life of the Anglican Communion at present. Being receptive to the truth by reading scripture in the desire to connect with its deepest meaning is not passivity, neither does it lead to 'constructions' of the truth. Instead, it requires a willingness on the part of the whole Communion to take active responsibility for understanding anew the word of God as it is received *by those with whom one disagrees*. In Laurence Freeman's words, it is a listening which embodies the idea of discipleship: 'To listen is not mere passivity. To listen is to turn towards another, to leave self behind; and that is to love.'⁷ In the context of the crisis which currently dominates the life of the Anglican Communion, the listening and receiving process might begin with a de-centring of the collective self into the person of Christ. Focusing on the identity of Jesus is helpful in this respect.

4. Who do you say that I am?

The gospels portray the question of Christ's own self understanding in two ways. The first, in his relationship with the Father and the second, in his understanding of his own identity in relation to those around him.⁸ In both cases, identity hinges on relationship, with all the risks which relationships entail, rather than on a simple definition of what he represents or believes.⁹

In the life of the Anglican Communion and, for that matter, in that of the universal Church, we are who we are by virtue of our relationship with the Father in our being held

7 Laurence Freeman 'And Who Do You Say That I am?', *Jesus, The Teacher Within*, London: Continuum 2000

8 Of especial significance to this discussion is the way in which the identity of Jesus as it depends on his relationship with the Father is also *morally* defined as *doing* the Father's will. John 5:30

9 Self descriptive statements (in particular, the 'I am' statements in the St. John's gospel), are often directly connected to people in the context of specific events.

together in and by Jesus Christ. This is a shared identity which is not *exclusively* defined by the manner in which individual parties interpret truth.

4.1 Identity and Discipleship

The relationships which Jesus has with those around him also define the fundamental condition of Christian discipleship as one born of a self knowledge which requires self abandonment. This has nothing to do with 'spiritual' detachment from the real world. It is concerned with a deeper engagement with reality, discovered in the neighbour's need to know and to be known by God. In the life of communion, Christian identity is defined in terms of serving discipleship but at the same time the Christian disciple is always open to Christ's question, 'Who do you say that I am?'

When a community is open to this question, separated parties begin to recognize the need for Christ in themselves and in the way in which that need exists in one another. In so doing, they discern truth at a deeper level and in a new way. In the context of the present conflict, rediscovering the truth in the need for God which the other experiences, also allows party identities to be released from the kind of individualism which is the result of selective readings of scripture giving rise to a biased understanding of truth. Rediscovering the truth in new ways by allowing our intellectual reading of scripture to be informed by contemplation allows the glimmer of understanding experienced in truthful exchange to reconnect different perceptions of truth with the transforming activity of God's Spirit which is at work in the whole Communion. This forms the basis for lasting and meaningful reconciliation.

4.2 Truth and Reconciliation

Reconciliation, as well as the deepening or renewal of existing friendships, now provides a new foundation on which to establish relationships of trust in which the truth might be dis-

cerned in who the other understands Jesus to be. These relationships might later enrich the spirituality of the whole community, returning wisdom and understanding to the heart of its collective and individual life in the Spirit. It might now be possible for the life of the Church as communion to be renewed in relationship and resourced from its inner life, allowing for a recognising of Christ, and of the truth, as being embodied in his question, 'Who do you say that I am?' It is a question which, as I have sought to demonstrate, can only be fully answered by embracing the understanding of Jesus which others have. This is worked out in a continued process of growth in self understanding and is linked to the discovery of meaning as it is to be found in the truth perceived by others. I therefore equate meaning with the transforming of belief into an 'understanding' of faith acquired in communion.

How has your own understanding been enriched by "embracing the understanding of Jesus which others have"?

What have you learned by sharing with Christians of other traditions?

The foregoing discussion suggests that this understanding is closely related to the way in which identities are freed into a new and dynamic life of communion as a result of the movement inherent in the reconciliation process. Meaning begins from the same principle of recognition and receptivity which governs the relationship between Jesus and the Father, so that in Christ's relationship with the Father, the rational process is also given meaning in relationship. It is a dynamic relationship involving the will to continually go forward to meet the other in a covenant of exchange which is worked out in dialogue. Separated parties in the Anglican Communion are invited to participate in this relationship at the deepest level and, as a result of this depth and dynamic of participation, to re-discover the

meaning and purpose which is defined through different ways of believing the same truth, a believing which defines their shared Christian identity.

There is therefore no reason to limit our understanding of God and of his purpose for the good of the Church to a single answer to the question 'Who do you say that I am?'. This is not to 'construct' a new or different truth. Rather, it requires that the question be heard with the kind of expectations of a particular person which Jesus himself had. In other words, it becomes an intuitive waiting on the truth from the perspective of the other. In this respect, Jesus himself questions a specific and particular person, whose context is coloured by a particular history. The truth which the person speaks is also heard and understood by Jesus within the contextual framework, or narrative, of the speaker. The narrative, or context, is composed of all the events and circumstances in the person's life and will affect the answer which she gives to the question 'Who do you say that I am?'.

Parties and groupings in the Anglican Communion also have collective and individual contexts which shape their answers to this question and so place their understanding of who they are in the self understanding of Christ. This, as we have seen, is both a relational and dynamic process, a freeing of identities into his abiding presence and, as a result, a continuing outworking of God's will and purpose in the life of the Communion.

5 Freeing into unity –

Some practical suggestions

The foregoing discussion suggests that if unity in communion is to consist of something greater and more enduring than superficial politeness, a way needs to be found whereby identities might be sought anew in God himself, through a genuine experience of what it means to be the Body of Christ. The conclusions I have drawn during the course of this

discussion suggest that prior to reaching a long-term agreement about the structural and political future of the Communion as a whole, the fragmenting of the Communion's life together might need to be addressed from the kind of intuitive perspective which begins with rediscovering a commonality of identity in Jesus Christ. This would involve surrendering particular ways of seeing issues which simply reinforce *a priori* held positions, with a view to rediscovering in relationship a new and fuller truth capable of sustaining the life of communion and of moving it forward.

If the life of communion is to be informed by a renewed experience of the dynamic of God's Spirit at work transforming its life, this transformation will also be felt at parish level, across the existing boundaries of liberal/traditional churchmanship; in a greater commitment to a shared life in the Spirit, leading to a mutually respectful questioning of scripture, and in a genuinely eucharistic life of encounter and reconciliation. As with the global Communion, dynamic encounter with one another from within a shared belonging together with Christ in the Father begins with the identities we take for granted. This suggests that if the dynamic of its life is to be convincing to a world grown cynical and even despairing of Christianity, the Anglican Communion and local Anglican churches need to think and live at a deeper level in the 'ordinariness' of our life together.

FACING UP TO OUR DIFFERENCES

Rev Jean Mayland



Jean Mayland worked as Ecumenical Officer for the North East and the Anglican Diocese of Durham. She was appointed as Associate Secretary for the Community of Women and Men at

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland in May 1995, then as Co-ordinating Secretary for Church Life at CTBI in December 1999. She retired from that post last year. She is married with 2 daughters and 3 granddaughters.

The Background

November 2002 – an Ecumenical Conference takes place on the attitudes of the member churches of CTBI towards the rightness or wrongness of Christians – particularly ordained Christian Ministers – living in same-sex relationships which include full sexual activities. As the positions of the churches are presented it becomes clear that almost all churches are deeply divided on these issues. Most have fairly traditional statements which half their members do not accept. A few have more liberal statements but agree that many of their members are unhappy about them. Papers are given about theological positions and different exegeses of the Biblical texts are presented. A practising gay priest speaks movingly about his life and his faith. A woman priest expresses the views of young people. The conference ends in deep division with the way forward not at all clear. After the event the gay and the woman priests send emails describing themselves as deeply hurt and traumatized by the whole event. Two 'traditional' participants write to say that they have been deeply offended and hurt by the attitude of others to traditional church teaching. One

says that it is no use trying to go any further as the divisions are too deep and the positions irreconcilable.

The Setting- some insights

A priest goes into her Parish Church and finds a woman sitting weeping. After a suitable interval, she approaches her to see if she can help. After some hesitation the woman shares with her the discovery that her son, whom she loves very much, is gay. He came for a visit the day before and for the first time 'came out' to his parents and also told them that he intended to move in with his partner. She is devastated. What will people say? How can she cope with the knowledge that her lovely son is like this and how do she and her husband deal with the knowledge that they will never have grandchildren?

A 31 year old woman who only goes to church at Festivals discusses the issue with her Mother who is a priest. 'What's the problem Mum?' she says. To her and her friends same-sex and heterosexual relations are both acceptable. Commitment, loyalty and faithfulness are what matter.

Religious bodies may continue refusing to employ homosexual and lesbian people under certain circumstances, the High Court ruled in a case brought by a group of Trades Unions. But the judge made it clear that exemption from the Government's equality legislation was intended to be "very narrow. He said 'it has to be construed very strictly since it is a derogation from the principle of equal treatment.'

A gay priest writes 'Lesbian and gay people are in a minority in a heterosexual world. We have been subject to prejudice and abuse in different cultures and different periods of world history, especially from the Christian and Islamic faith traditions. The Christian Church is still failing to understand the direct relationship between traditional Christian teaching about lesbian and gay people and the oppression gay people have suffered and continue to suffer'.¹

1. Colin Coward *All God's Children. Lesbian and Gay People in the Anglican Church* - Changing Attitude pamphlet

Nineteen primates of the Anglican Church announce they are ready to break with the Episcopal Church of the USA over the consecration of Gene Robinson.

Other Bishops are quoted as follows:
As I listened to perspectives from around the globe, I realised that there were certain things that I had heard before, but perhaps never really assimilated, if I am truly honest. Primate after Primate from Africa and Asia said how sex, let alone same-sex relationships, were taboo subjects in his culture; how the row over such matters in the Communion weakened relationships with Muslim neighbours, especially where Christians were in a minority; and how newly converted Christians, believing that they had been taught what the Bible said about sexual relationships, were now so confused by the happenings in Canada and the United States that they were leaving the Anglican Church in droves.²

'I have sympathy with fellow Primates feeling hurt, but the hurt is not all on one side. There are outstanding gay and lesbian people doing fantastic work, people of integrity seeking to be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ. They, too, feel victimised.'³

Reflection

The Conference on issues of sexuality which I organized while still Coordinating Secretary for Church Life was one of the most difficult and painful I have ever attended. The people present reported that their Churches were deeply divided and within the Conference they showed that they reflected those deep divisions. The atmosphere was charged and often hostile and the differing view points were expressed with passion and pain. The gay priest who told his story was so devastated by the homophobia he experienced that he was unable to lead the evening worship as he had promised. At the end of the Conference it was difficult to see any resolution of the conflict and the only way ahead that was suggested

was a further consultation on the use of the Bible. I drove home wondering why the whole matter had raised such passion and fervour. One could understand the passion of the gay priest as it was a discussion about his whole being but why did those opposed to him express their views with almost fanatical zeal? On Monday I received the emails voicing the views given in the paragraph with which I began this paper. Obviously the pain was on both sides. One traditional person just felt we could do no more.

Our churches, our congregations are deeply divided. The issues seem to be even more painful and emotionally divisive than those to do with women priests. I can only suggest that this is because sex is such a powerful and powerfully charged issue. Issues of different views on the Bible and on Ecclesiology underlie many of our divisions but on this issue they rise to the surface with a tremendous power and a passion and many people for whom the Bible has an enormous authority see them as absolutely key tests for orthodoxy and the preservation of Biblical authority.

Yet we cannot leave it like this. We have to face up to our differences and diversity. We have to dialogue with each other in a more constructive way. We have to reach agreement where we can and where we cannot we need to find more loving and creative ways of living with our differences.

As members of our churches we cannot live in nice sound-proofed boxes cut off from the world around us. We have to listen to the voices of the society in which we live and take them fully into account in our deliberations. Our mission is to the real world in which we live and not to some fantasy world in which we might wish we existed.

2. Dr Barry Morgan, Archbishop of Wales - *Church Times* 24 October 2003

3. Most Revd Njongonkulu Ndungane Primate of Southern Africa. - *Church Times* 24 October 2003

In many of our congregations there will be women like the one described above secretly weeping because they have discovered that their son or daughter is gay or lesbian and feel that the Church will never understand. On the other hand there are many young people from Christian backgrounds who cannot understand the attitude of the Church. 'What's the problem Mum?' they say. Many people in Society are shocked by the attitude of the Church and like the group of Trades Unionists who took the matter to court are horrified that the churches are seeking exemptions from European law and claim the right not to provide equal opportunities.

Lesbian and Gay Christians do feel that the Church has oppressed them and persecuted them. On the other hand in parts of the Anglican Communion to depart from the traditional teaching of the church brings pain and confusion as the Archbishop of Wales realised as he listened to Primates from other parts of the Communion. Yet it was one of their own number from Africa who pointed out that gay and lesbian Christians feel victimised.

This is the world in which we must witness and carry out our mission and the way in which we conduct the exploration of our differences is part of that mission. As Archbishop Rowan Williams pointed out in his interview on the Today Programme with John Humphreys on Friday October 17 2003, the discussion in the Anglican Communion is about two groups that both feel excluded namely the homosexual community and small struggling churches in the developing world.

We have to tread gently as we are treading on other people's dreams.

Look again at the vignettes with which this paper began and Jean's reflection on them.

Which – if any – of the comments/stories makes you feel angry? Or shocked? Or sad?

What are the Major Areas of Discussion?

There seem to me to be four major areas, which need to be explored

1. The place of the Bible and the interpretation of its text
2. The views and opinions of gay and lesbian people
3. The situation in the Anglican Communion.
4. The nature of unity and the holding together of diversity.

The Authority of the Bible and the significance of relevant texts.

Just as the 16th century controversy about indulgences revealed a deeper disagreement about scripture, the papacy, and, ultimately, the ground of our justification in Christ, so this disagreement is the tip of the iceberg. Again, the authority of scripture is at issue. Again, the limits of diversity within the worldwide Church are challenged. And, again, those issues lead us back to how we understand the gospel itself and its relevance to our contemporary world

Can God's word to us in Holy Scripture be relied on or not? Is what the Bible says the controlling factor for our faith and conduct or just a collection of disputed texts from which we can select what we currently like and discard the rest?

Listen to these two contrasting views:
*"So the Primates have firmly repudiated two key planks in the campaign to force acceptance of active homosexual people into the Church's leadership. The first is that the received tradition rests on a few "disputed texts", which ignores the fact that all the scripture texts about homosexual practice are negative, and that scripture is abundantly clear that the only acceptable context for sexual intercourse is within heterosexual marriage."*⁴

4. Dr Philip Gidding Convenor of Anglican Mainstream Church Times 24 October

The Church owns the Bible, the Bible configures with the Church's experience, and the intersecting interpretive communities of the Church work sometimes together, sometimes in opposition and sometimes in uneasy alliance, to make sense of this reciprocal relationship. We cannot, therefore, expect a consensual outcome; what we must concede is the right of each community interpretation to coexist with others and to make its own way in a sort of free market of opinion. Even the CTBI- even Rome- has to accept this reality.

*Social and cultural issues: This is perhaps the realm where the most striking misfits between the biblical world and our own are to be seen. There are good grounds for the claim that the Bible has more in common with contemporary Afghanistan than with Britain or North America. We ought to reflect on that uncomfortable probability: the Bible's assumptions about women, gay men, ethnic minorities, blasphemy, slavery, war and capital punishment are decidedly pre modern, and must be offensive to every liberal, democratic, inclusive minded Christian.*⁵

In some ways the two quotations above reflect the most widely differing views about the place of the Bible in this discussion. There is also a range of positions between them.

- Only a small number of texts in Leviticus and the Pauline Epistles refer to homosexual practice and all of these condemn it. To some people these texts are authoritative because they are in the Bible and so homosexual practice is always sinful.
- For others these texts are important because they are set against a wider background of Biblical teaching that sexual intercourse has its sole place within a permanent and exclusive relationship between two people of opposite sex. This is the view taken by Dr Gidding.

- For some people the authority of the Bible lies in their view that it is the word of God and has prime position in the Church. For others the authority of the Bible lies in the way it points to a person -Jesus. They would claim that the central fact of Christianity is not a book but a person- Jesus Christ, himself described as the Word of God. They ask what the Gospels show us about the attitude of Jesus to marginalized groups.
- Some people try to get around the Leviticus and Pauline texts by claiming that we need to read them as condemning lustful acts by heterosexual men and not referring to those who are homosexual by nature. Others regard this as convoluted and would rather accept the texts as they stand but say that they have no relevance to the current situation and our understanding of homosexual people.
- Some believe the Biblical text stands as authoritative for ever. Others believe that the text has to be re interpreted age by age by the community of the Church.
- Some believe that there can be only one interpretation of Scripture. Others such as Dr Hunter believe that there can be many and that these interpretations within and between Christian Communities are influenced by history and culture.
- Some believe that the Bible can be regarded as a text book of ethics for every age. Others maintain that it is impossible to read off a set of rules from the Bible. Resolving ethical dilemmas involves an ongoing dialogue with the text in the light of new discoveries.
- Some conduct this dialogue by beginning with the text. Others begin from experience and use the text to interpret that experience.

5. Dr Alistair Hunter – Essay in *Growing into God* pub CTBI 2003

Somehow in the Church we need to examine these different approaches and resolve where we ourselves stand. To find out where the Church stands is much more difficult. Can we really have one view or must the Church learn (as Dr Hunter suggests) that there can be no single interpretation and we have to live with difference?

How would you answer Jean's question?

The Views of Gay and Lesbian Christians

My partner and I started going to church...It was Church of England with an evangelical feel to it-it was very lively and always full. At first we went on Sundays, then we made ourselves known to the vicar and curate....As we attended church and became friendlier with the people in it, the curate became aware that we were a couple and that the Vicar of the Church would not allow us to receive communion. The curate produced a book which was basically "how to become straight." He said he wanted to meet us for weekly discussions about our sexuality...Our reaction was surprise and hurt....Since then we have not attended the church. The memory still hurts very much and we both feel angry towards the church. Christians are supposed to be loving and non-judgemental. We still believe in God and Jesus but not in the way that the church teaches.⁶

When I became a Christian, I began to believe it was wrong to be involved sexually in homosexual relationships and struggled how to tell my gay friends. We had always been close and supported each other. In fact had it not been for my Christian beliefs I would have been happy to continue my homosexual relationships. When I first became a Christian, it was not difficult for me to be celibate. A few years later I did struggle with homosexual feelings and temptations, but this time my faith was meaningful enough to prevent me from abandoning Christianity and becoming involved in homosexual relationships again.⁷

These two stories come from the report of the Church of England Bishops on 'Some Issues in Human Sexuality.'

Once more they reflect two different views within the gay community. One person believes that to be a Christian gay person means one has to be celibate. The other believes that Christian gay and lesbian couples should be able to express their love in a life-long partnership, which involves sexual activity.

We need to ask ourselves whether the Church has any right to ask gay and lesbian people to be celibate. Some would say yes as the Bible specifically condemns homosexual practice. Others would say 'No' arguing that if God has made some people gay or lesbian and planted within them an attraction, physical and spiritual for others of the same sex but is then requiring them to remain celibate, in effect he is playing a cruel game with them. Such a God would be a tyrant and not worthy of our love and obedience.

If the qualities we celebrate in marriage – for example, faithfulness, mutual love and support- are to be found in other relationships, should the Church find ways to celebrate and encourage them?

Or should the relationship always be rejected if it is sexually expressed?

What is to be gained and risked by encouraging gay and lesbian individuals either to remain celibate, or to find a partner of the opposite sex?

The Anglican Communion

The Anglican Communion is very divided on these issues. Nineteen Primates from the developing countries have declared that they are prepared to break with the Episcopal Church in the USA. The Presiding Bishop believes that it was right and proper to consecrate Gene Robinson as a Bishop and many

6. Story in *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* House of Bishops Group of the Church of England pub 2003

7. Ibid

Anglicans throughout the Communion reacted to this decision with joy. They similarly support the Blessing of gay and lesbian unions in Canada. To many traditionalists such unions are destructive of the whole institution of marriage. The Eames Commission is trying to find ways of holding the Communion together in this difficult situation.

The mission of the Church genuinely seems to require different approaches in different situations. For some the mission of the Church demands that the traditional teaching of the Church is upheld. For others the mission of the Church is doomed to failure unless we respond to new understanding of lesbian and gay people and new attitudes in society

We cannot make one united decision on these matters. We have to find ways of holding our diversity together in some kind of union without resorting to whole squadrons of flying Bishops. We also have to deal with these issues in our own nations where traditionalists threaten to break away if practising gay clergy are ordained or consecrated.

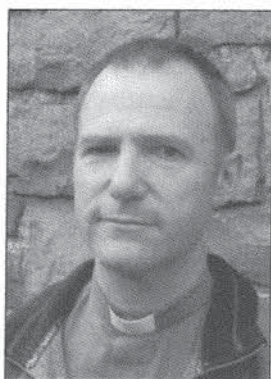
Unity and Diversity

The World Council of Churches found out years ago just how difficult it is to hold together the issues of the unity and renewal of the Church with the issues of the unity and renewal of the human community. The Faith and Order Commission could make progress in seeking unity in matters of faith and doctrine but then the demand of other parts of the WCC for justice and equality for marginalized groups such as women and gay and lesbian people brought new problems and new divisions. The unity of the Anglican Communion is similarly threatened by division between those who believe it is vital to stand by traditional Biblical and ethical teaching and those who believe that the attitude of the

Church to gay and lesbian people is sinful and oppressive and must be challenged. We have to discover a kind of unity, which can find room for legitimate diversity on deeply felt issues. None of us should threaten to take our bat and ball and our bank balance and play elsewhere. We have to learn to play together and we have to begin now.

Same-Sex Unions: Personal experience, social convention and scriptural witness

Rev Dr Will Strange



Will is Vicar of St Peter's, Carmarthen. Before coming to this parish he has been engaged in theological education as well as in parochial work. He has published three books and a number of articles, which have been in the field of biblical studies and church history.

'Getting real' over gay relationships

Archbishop Carnley, retiring Primate of Australia, recently called on the church to 'get real' over gay relationships. His case, as quoted in the church press, was:

Whilst some heterosexual people might say that those relationships are unnatural, if you talk to the gay people themselves they'll say that what is unnatural to them is a heterosexual relationship, so you can't appeal to a kind of natural law to solve this problem.¹

It is a neat summary of some of the strongest and most persistent arguments currently being proposed to revise Christian attitudes to same-sex relationships. The church, it is said, has to listen to the stories of gay and lesbian people. Their experience can be – and indeed ought to be – the guide for the church to find an appropriate ethic of same-sex relationship. It is urged that the moral directions which Christians in the past have perceived in natural law or in scriptural witness must take second place to the pressing need to hear these stories and to acknowledge this experience with an authentically Christian compassion and wisdom.

This is the kind of argument which, in a more elaborated form, we can find in Jeffrey John's *'Permanent, Faithful, Stable': Christian Same-Sex Partnerships*.² In this short but significant book it is coupled with the supporting argument that because the essential features of heterosexual relationship (permanence, faithfulness, stability) are equally to be found in same-sex relationships, then the gender identity of the partners is insignificant. But John's argument clearly begins with – and frequently refers back to – the experience of gay and lesbian people. A person attracted to people of the same sex has particular needs, and it is recognition of these needs which justifies and drives John's argument. Or, to take a more elaborated argument still, Rowan Williams in his 1988 address to the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, *'The Body's Grace'*, had already argued that the harmful experience of heterosexual relationships should make us question what he called 'conventional heterosexist ethics': many marriages 'are a framework for violence and human destructiveness on a disturbing scale'. Conversely, same-sex love brings us up against the far more constructive possibility of 'joy whose material "production" is an embodied person aware of grace'. Nine years later, in *'Knowing Myself in Christ'*, Williams returned to the theme of the experience of same-sex love and asked more directly whether:

a description of 'homosexual behaviour' and desire centred around Romans 1 can be given a privileged position over, let us say, a conscientious self-description by a homosexual person in terms of his or her longing to live a life in which their sexual desire, like other aspects of their identity, can come to image the love and justice of Christ.³

Rowan Williams appears to imply that a homosexual person's conscientious self-description could (or even should) be given a privileged position over a description based upon the witness of scripture. Experience is foundational.

¹ Quoted in *Church of England Newspaper*, 4.3.2004.

² London, DLT, 1993.

³ R. Williams, 'Knowing myself in Christ', in T. Bradshaw (ed.), *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1997, p.17.

So a case is made for the revision of the church's traditional understanding of same-sex relationships: the experience of lesbian and gay people, together with their interpretation of that experience, demands a positive response; everything that is essential in traditional marriage can be true of same-sex relationships; therefore the case for recognising same-sex relationships is overwhelming. The obstacles to this case, in the form of natural law arguments and scriptural witness, can either be demolished (the texts do not mean what they have traditionally been understood to mean) or if not demolished, then sidestepped (whose nature dictates 'natural law'?).

These arguments have an obvious importance and appeal to those who themselves are attracted to members of their own sex. The arguments derive their wider power and appeal from the fact that today most heterosexual Christians will know lesbian and gay people whom they like and respect.

One of the consequences of the increased openness of lesbian and gay people in the past generation or so is that the discussion is no longer about a faceless and anonymous 'them'. It concerns a person with a face, a story and perhaps a pain. The introduction of a human element into reflection about homosexuality is an undoubted gain, and it makes discussion more complex.

It is an uncomfortable feeling for a heterosexual Christian to think that a loved relative or respected friend might not be permitted by the church to express their need for sexual love and acceptance. The secular world seems to be a good deal more accepting and tolerant on this issue than parts of the Christian church, and that also is an uncomfortable feeling.

How do you respond to those changes that Will describes – do they make you uncomfortable?

Is it a help or a hindrance to be so aware of "a face, a story and perhaps a pain"?

The most common Christian arguments in favour of recognition and celebration of same-sex unions build up to proposals which alleviate this discomfort by arguing for something reassuringly familiar, something comparable to same-sex marriage: stable monogamous unions which apparently preserve the social landscape by doing no more than ask us to extend the existing concept of marriage to include a hitherto excluded group. To many it seems nothing more than the next step in the justice agenda, and to others the only path to a truly inclusive church. Either way, it seems to give lesbian and gay people what they legitimately demand, and enables heterosexual Christians to feel more at ease with their lesbian and gay friends and less exposed to criticism from a censorious society.

Obstacles to the case for revision

Most arguments which question or oppose the case for Christian recognition of same-sex unions concentrate on setting out the full force of the obstacles – the natural law and scriptural evidence which has to be taken into account in the debate. In the opening stages of the debate on same-sex unions the revisionist scholars effectively reshaped discussion on these issues. By introducing novel and unanticipated arguments they exposed some unexamined assumptions and built up a strong position for believing that the conventional view was no more than that, a matter of social convention without solid foundations either in the scriptural witness or in an informed contemporary understanding of humanity.

In the past ten years, however, a number of significant studies have in their turn called some of the revisionist arguments into question and have reinforced the case for maintaining the traditional approach. The 'obstacles' in the path of the revisionist argument are a good deal more substantial now than they were when, for instance, Pittenger⁴ or Boswell⁵ first attempted to clear them out of the way. The restated and more

4 N. Pittenger, *Time for consent: a Christian's approach to homosexuality*, London, SCM, 1st ed 1970.

5 J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980; *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, New York, Villard, 1994.

sophisticated explorations of the scriptural evidence by, for example, Gagnon⁶ or Webb,⁷ and of natural law considerations by Schmidt⁸ or Hilborn⁹ need to be countered with equal care and commitment.

These studies have changed the landscape of debate during the past ten years - at least for those who are willing to discuss the issues in detail. The scriptural witness and the natural law arguments have been so thoroughly set out elsewhere that there seems little point in rehearsing them here.¹⁰ Instead this article will look again at the starting-point of the revisionist argument in the 'conscientious self-description by a homosexual person'. The article will ask: what are the consequences of taking people's self-description as the base of our ethical debate? From this starting-point, we will explore the question of whether the proposals for legitimising same-sex unions are coherent and can sustain their promised commitment to the virtues of traditional marriage.

What else is 'natural'?

To return to Archbishop Carnley: as well as affirming the 'naturalness' of same-sex relationships, the Archbishop went on, as reported, to express dismay at the frivolous nature of proceedings at the recent issuing of marriage licences to gay couples in San Francisco. Perhaps not all the participants regarded their licences as the kind of solemn commitment which the Archbishop thought they ought to be entering into. But why should they? It is after all *their* experience which is being affirmed, and *they* quite understandably choose whether to be frivolous (we might say in post-modern parlance, 'playful') or serious, committed or experimental. Bishop Spong has had a similar difficulty: when speaking to lesbian and gay people about the new look in Christian sexual ethics which recognises homosexual experience and offers the church's blessing to monogamous unions, the riposte has sometimes been 'What right do you have to impose your monogamous ethics on us?'

It is a good question. Jeffrey John was very aware of it when writing '*Permanent, Faithful, Stable*'. In that manifesto, he devotes almost as much attention to protecting his case against criticism from the 'left' as he does from the 'right'. He has to defend himself as much from the arguments of Elizabeth Stuart (and we might now add Marcella Althaus-Reid) as from the arguments of what he describes as 'difficult evangelicals'. It is vital for his case to establish that it is 'natural' for same-sex relationships to be 'permanent, faithful and stable', and not 'natural' for them to be transient, open and experimental.

John is right to concentrate on this issue. He wants to maintain that the transience of many same-sex relationships has more to do with social pressure than with anything inherent in them. Once create the framework for more stable relationships, and stability will flourish. However, if we begin our argument by appealing to a homosexual person's 'conscientious self-description', then we are free to renegotiate all moral and social frameworks. Elizabeth Stuart has argued that acts of physical intimacy carry only the meaning we decide to attach to them, so that any form of sexual experimentation, whether in a committed relationship or not, is legitimate as long as the participants have negotiated the terms.¹¹ Starting with the experience of lesbian and gay people leads Marcella Althaus-Reid to affirm that this experience breaks apart the patriarchal, power-fixated God of traditional theology, and puts in its place the 'Queer God', an image of God which affirms the experience of marginalized, oppressed and 'perverted' people. Part of that oppression is the insistence on 'mono-loving'.¹²

These alternatives to the position adopted by Jeffrey John might view his case (and Rowan Williams') as a bourgeois compromise. Having accepted the premise that we build our theology on the 'conscientious self-description by a homosexual person', John and Williams refuse to

6 R.A.J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, Nashville, Abingdon, 2001.

7 W.J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*, Downers Grove, IVP, 2001.

8 T.E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate*, Leicester, IVP, 1995.

9 D. Hilborn, 'Homosexuality, Covenant and Grace in the Writings of Rowan Williams: An Evangelical Response', *Anvil* 20:4 (2003), pp.263-75.

10 The arguments are helpfully set out in the paper commissioned by the Archbishop of the West Indies: A. Goddard and P. Walker, *True Union in the Body? A contribution to the discussion within the Anglican Communion concerning the public blessing of same-sex unions*, Cambridge, Grove Books, 2003; and available on the internet at: <http://www.acinw.org/articles/true-union.pdf>

11 Stuart, *Just Good Friends: towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships*, London, Mowbray, 1995, p.224.

12 M. Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, London, Routledge, 2003.

recognise the conclusions to which their premise leads them. They start with the experience of the gay and lesbian person, but will not follow where it leads, choosing to cling instead to (at least some) of the conventions of traditional heterosexual Christian society.

Neither Jeffrey John nor Rowan Williams believes that their case in favour of same-sex unions opens the door to promiscuity, whatever conclusions more radical thinkers might reach from very similar starting-points. Neither writer believes that their case has implications for other forms of sexual expression, and especially not for paedophilia, which both writers explicitly criticise. But can that line of demarcation be drawn with conviction? Have the more radical voices in fact discerned more clearly where the argument inevitably leads?

To take paedophilia as an instructive parallel: Thomas Schmidt demonstrated very persuasively that all the arguments used to support the recognition of same-sex unions can be deployed to support adult-child sex. For instance: the concept of an 'age of consent' is arbitrary; adult-child sex is accepted in some societies; there is evidence that children are not harmed by sexual encounters with adults;¹³ this form of sexual expression is 'natural' for the paedophile; paedophiles are a persecuted minority, made to feel bad about themselves by a prejudiced and hostile society. In the case of adult-child sex, critics sometimes argue that it is morally questionable because there is an imbalance of power between the two parties. Not so, the paedophile might say, because the child who offers sex has power over the adult who wants it.¹⁴

This is no mere debating point. An issue of *Archives of Sexual Behavior* in 2002 was devoted to discussing whether paedophilia should be removed from the diagnostic manual of the

American Psychiatric Association.¹⁵ Most of the considerations mentioned by Schmidt in 1995 were in fact brought forward as supporting arguments in 2002, as Schmidt surmised that they would eventually be. The contributors added one more argument which mirrors the homosexuality debate: the negative view of paedophilia in contemporary Western society is the legacy of a Judaeo-Christian tradition which has restricted and stigmatised 'natural' childhood sexuality.

The author of the opening article in the 2002 symposium was Richard Green, who in 1973 had taken a significant role in the debate which removed homosexuality from the APA diagnostic manual. In a subsequent debate in the American Psychiatric Association (May, 2003) on the 'paraphilias' (unusual sexual interests, which include paedophilia, exhibitionism, fetishism, transvestism, voyeurism, and sadomasochism), the parallel with the debate on homosexuality was made explicit by the keynote speakers, Charles Moser of San Francisco's Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality and Peggy Kleinplatz of the University of Ottawa in their statement that, "The situation of the paraphilias at present parallels that of homosexuality in the early 1970's."¹⁶

Recognition of same-sex unions can be seen as the next item on the justice agenda. But the discussion of the APA makes us ask: why stop there? There are other groups marginalized on account of their sexuality, and where is the justice for the exhibitionist or the paedophile?¹⁷ Equally, the church may want to bless permanent, faithful and stable same-sex unions. But Stuart and Althaus-Reid pose the question: why privilege these qualities over, say, experimentation, spontaneity and the life of the free spirit?

13 The most significant study to reach this apparently surprising conclusion is: B.Rind, P.Tromovitch, & R.Bauserman, 'A meta-analytic examination of assumed properties of child sexual abuse using college samples', *Psychological Bulletin*, 124 (1998), pp.22-53.

14 Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow?*, pp.60-62.

15 "Special Section: Pedophilia: Concepts and Controversy," in *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, vol. 31, No. 6, December 2002, p. 465-510

16 Moser, Charles and Peggy J. Kleinplatz, "DSM-IV-TR and the Paraphilias: An Argument for Removal," paper presented at the American Psychiatric Association annual conference, San Francisco, California, May 19, 2003.

17 A recent Channel 4 documentary (2004) gave air time to exhibitionists who argued the legitimacy of their preferred mode of sexual expression and proposed a vindication of their human right to act in the way which they find 'natural'.

What, apart from the residual, bourgeois liberal adherence to heterosexist ethical norms, makes permanence, faithfulness and stability things that we *ought* to value? In fact, once we have begun our debate by affirming our own experience and self-knowledge as valid, how can we bring an 'ought' into the argument at all?

How do you respond to the parallels Will draws with other types of sexually marginalized people?

Is there a difference, or is it a fair comparison?

Why?

Finding an ethical base for stability, permanence and faithfulness

So, is there an ethical base for affirming same-sex unions which exhibit the characteristics of traditional marriage, while drawing a line at that point, and denying the same recognition to other forms of sexual expression?

Jeffrey John's defence against the conservative 'right' is of a familiar type. He atomises texts in scripture, and belittles Leviticus in particular (though if we followed his argument consistently we would also have to set aside 'love your neighbour as yourself' since it comes from Lev 19:18). He argues that Paul was not aware of the concept of orientation and was thinking in Romans 1 of individuals acting against their own nature. In any case, and really whatever the Bible says, the traditional view causes so much unhappiness that it cannot be right.

His defence against the radical 'left', though, is interesting and instructive. Arguing against Elizabeth Stuart's case for open-ended or casual sexual encounters, John wrote:

Observation of 'what happens' both on the 'gay scene' and on the 'straight scene', leads me to believe very strongly that the Church's wisdom in advising men and women to confine sexual activity to permanent, faithful relationships remains as wise as ever it was.¹⁸

His subsequent discussion draws from pastoral experience to conclude that anonymous or recreational sex is never unproblematic or irrelevant to a person's emotional or spiritual health. As pastoral observation and as advice this is undoubtedly sensible. But it is a piece of prudential *advice* and not strictly an *ethical* statement at all. John does not say exactly that casual or anonymous sex is *wrong*, merely that it is *unwise*, and this is not the same thing at all.

Advice is usually kindly meant. But what is a gay person to make of this advice? As a grown-up individual I will want to make my own decision about the advice I follow. If I have sufficient personal autonomy to follow what is 'natural' to me, then I must surely be free to reject advice which does not commend itself to me. The 'Church's wisdom' is just as culturally bound as the Bible's injunctions. The Church has a pretty poor record, I might think, on oppression and curtailing freedom, and I may very well conclude that this advice is just one more instance – even if wrapped up in an apparently pro-gay message – of the Church's inability to cope with real dissent or difference. The Church will let gays and lesbians go so far, then tweak the reins to bring them back into its own approved categories. It will affirm their self-description up to a point (attraction to people of the same sex), but in other respects (exercising the freedom to be committed or not) will turn around to tell them that their self-description is not valid.

Jeffrey John is attempting to say 'yes' to stable same-sex unions, but 'no' to promiscuity. This attempt is undermined by the fact that he is trying to tell people what they ought to do, but bases this 'ought' on the 'is' of observed experience.

Experience is a helpful guide to the soundness or otherwise of ethical principles established on other grounds, but as the *only* basis it will take us no further than advice to follow our own true self-interest as the advisor perceives it.

A case for same-sex unions which is based on the fundamental principle of following what is

18 John, 'Permanent, Faithful, Stable', p.36.

'natural' for the individual, but then draws limits to that behaviour, limits based on considerations of prudence and expediency, is inherently untenable. The fundamental principle will, once accepted, easily push aside the restraining arguments because these rest on nothing more than a subjective vision of wise conduct.

Finding an ethical base to reject other forms of sexual expression

What, then, of the attempt to say 'yes' to same-sex unions, but 'no' to unusual forms of sexual interest?

We have already noted that some professionals in the field consider that nothing more than an outdated and prejudiced adherence to Judaeo-Christian ethics prevents us from recognising these 'paraphilias' as legitimate forms of sexual expression. While some Christian advocates see the recognition of same-sex unions as the *end-point* of a process of liberation, opinion-formers elsewhere are already well at work on making this recognition into the *starting-point* for further liberation.

Rowan Williams frames a response to this problem by reference to the work of Thomas Nagel.¹⁹ From Nagel, Williams formulates the notion that authentic sexual encounter entails being 'perceived from beyond myself in a way that changes my self-awareness'. This notion then becomes a yardstick against which to measure sexual experience.

Nagel makes, in passing, a number of interesting observations on sexual encounters that either allow no "exposed spontaneity" (p 50) because they are bound to specific methods of sexual arousal - like sadomasochism - or permit only a limited awareness of the embodiment of the other (p 49) because there is an unbalance in the relation such that the desire of the other for me is irrelevant or minimal - rape, paedophilia, bestiality.

These "asymmetrical" sexual practices have some claim to be called perverse in that they leave one agent in effective control of the situation - one agent, that is, who doesn't have to

wait upon the desire of the other²⁰

It is an interesting case, and in contrast to Jeffery John, it is building a genuinely ethical basis for what it has to say. But it seems to privilege the experience of sensitive and well-adjusted people and to make this the norm by which others are judged. Yet why should they be the norm? Perhaps I find 'exposed spontaneity' important, but how or why can I then say from my own subjective point of reference that there is something inadequate in the experience of the sadomasochist (or any other 'paraphile') because he or she does not match a yardstick I have created to describe the way I perceive matters? If we listen to the experience of the sadomasochist, to their 'conscientious self-description', they would presumably tell the rest of us that they find their sexual encounters satisfying and pleasurable. Indeed, if they were obliged to engage in sexual encounters of a different type, they might well feel that they were acting contrary to 'their nature'. You could substitute the word 'sadomasochist' in place of the word 'gay' in Archbishop Carnley's statement with which this article began, and the same point would still be made.

An American commentator, Russell R. Reno, has argued very persuasively that the welcome given to prudent homosexual practice by the leadership of the American Anglican church is more indicative of the 'Bourgeois Bohemian' nature of the (Episcopal) church's leadership than of any substantial theological commitment: '[homosexuality] symbolizes the Bourgeois Bohemian confidence that liberated sexual practices can be prudently and wisely absorbed into a socially respectable way of life'. However, Episcopalian revisionists are arguing mainly from their own experience of sensible and cautious social relationships and are ignoring the raw and edgy realities of a wider society, where crudity and violence are more frequent concomitants of sexual behaviour:

'Our stunning complacency about the power and perversion of human sexual impulses is, I think, unique to those of us

19 T. Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge, 1979.

20 Williams, 'The Body's Grace', p.313.

who have the good fortune to be socialized into the benevolent repressions of well-off suburban life. We think we can tuck new sexual freedoms into the traditional patterns of career and civic responsibility'.²¹

Rowan Williams' argument is, of course, articulate and nuanced, but it runs into the same problem as Jeffrey John's attempt to close the door on promiscuity. Because it begins with an account of experience (being 'perceived from beyond myself in a way that changes my self-awareness') as a test of authentic sexual relationship, it has to explain why *this* account of experience rather than any other is *the* test of authenticity. Like all experience, it is rooted in a particular social and historical environment. Is it, in the end, simply an expression of 'bourgeois bohemianism'?

Conclusion

The case for 'getting real on gay relationships' seems a strong one. The adjustment needed to accept same-sex relationships on an equal footing with heterosexual marriages seems a small one: the same category (marriage, or something like it), but with a different group included within it.

In fact, though, what looks like a small step is huge shift, the magnitude of which is obscured by the articulate arguments of its proponents. It is revealed by the more consistent arguments put forward by those willing to take their principles to a conclusion. An ethic based on what is 'natural' for me as an individual is totally different from an ethic based on scripture, tradition and reason. It is even rather different from an ethic based on what is 'natural' for humanity as a whole.

How would you summarise the "huge shift" that Will has been outlining here?

Is there any way to hold together "natural" and scripture, reason and tradition?

Once we accept *some* individuals' experience as the basis for our ethical formulation, there is no point at which we can consistently settle until we have accepted *all* individuals' experience as the basis for our ethics, and until we can say with Professor Charles Moser that, 'Any sexual interest can be healthy and life-enhancing.'

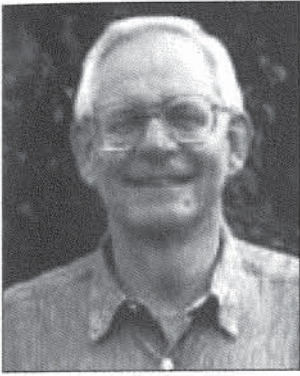
We can build our ethical reflection on the 'ought' of scriptural witness. Or we can build our reflection with the 'is' of people's experience. What we cannot do, if we want to create an ethical framework which is stable and coherent, is to build on people's experience and then constrain the ethical process by introducing an 'ought' from elsewhere – especially when we have a suspicion that this 'ought' has been conjured out of the reassuring respectabilities of middle-class bourgeois conventions.

It is neither comfortable nor easy for a heterosexual Christian to say to any gay or lesbian person that the expression of their sexuality is not something that God can bless. But it is at least more consistent, and in an odd way more respectful, than saying: 'We affirm your experience and your conscientious self-description – but we will tell you how you ought to express it'.

21 R.R.Reno, *In the Ruins of the Church: Sustaining Faith in an Age of Diminished Christianity*, Grand Rapids MI, Brazos Press, 2002: and on the internet at http://www.marshillaudio.org/resources/pdf/RENO_SEX.pdf

HOMOSEXUALITY – THE BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

Rev Professor DP Davies



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The controversy over the ordination of practising homosexuals to the priesthood/episcopate, like the debate over the ordination of women to the priesthood/episcopate, brings into sharp focus the authority of Scripture in relation to the discussion of doctrinal and moral issues in today's Church. Is what Scripture has to say on a particular issue – for example, homoerotic (I use this term to avoid misleading anachronism, since 'homosexual' is a relatively modern term and in popular parlance refers to a male whose sexual orientation is to other males) acts, the sole determining factor in establishing the Church's attitude on the matter? Or is Scripture to be set alongside other sources of authority, such as Church tradition (the Catholic and Orthodox position) or human reason (the characteristically Anglican view) or the experience of individual Christians or the Christian community, however defined (the position of the spiritual heirs of John Wesley and of various 'liberation' theologies today)?

For those evangelical Christians who take the classical Protestant stance of *sola Scriptura* (Scripture is the sole source of authority for the Christian) the matter is comparatively simple. All we have to do is to establish the plain meaning of Scripture and accept it. But is it that simple? As we all know, the plain meaning of Scripture is not always easily discerned, nor does Scripture always speak with a single voice. This immediately leads us into another debate – how should we interpret Scripture? Should we restrict ourselves to the plain, literal meaning, or may we open ourselves to the guidance of the Spirit that promises to lead us to a fuller understanding of what Scripture is saying, the so-called *sensus plenior*?

The challenge posed by such questions will become only too apparent in the course of our discussion, so it is only fair that I should begin by indicating where I myself stand. I accept Scripture as the authoritative Word of God, but I also believe that we should set alongside this the accumulated wisdom of the Church and of Christians down the ages and around the world. I also believe that there is a place for human reason in wrestling with the meaning of Scripture and its role in contemporary debates within the Church. Furthermore, I adhere to the methodology of liberation theology and therefore believe that Scripture must be critically interpreted in the light of experience and that experience too must be subject to the critical scrutiny of Scripture in a kind of hermeneutical dialogue. I am also acutely aware that none of us approaches Scripture without bias. We are all creatures of our cultural and ideological background. I therefore accept that my own prejudices will soon be evident to readers of this essay.

One thing, however, is clear. Whatever view of authority within the Church we hold, Scripture is universally believed to be authoritative.

It is in all our interests to consult Scripture and to take serious note of what is said in Scripture as we grapple with controversial doctrinal and moral issues.

At the very least Scripture is *a* guide, even if we do not all subscribe to the view that it is *the only* guide. We need therefore to establish what Scripture has to say – in this instance on the question of homoerotic practices.

Look again at the author's description of where he himself stands on the authority of Scripture. Where do you stand?

II

In turning now to the text of Scripture, two important preliminary points need to be made. First, it is remarkable, and perhaps significant, that Scripture has comparatively little to say directly about homoerotic acts. There are two basic texts in Leviticus, which very largely determine the attitude not only of the Hebrew Scriptures, but of the New Testament as well, and then there are three passages in the letters of Paul. We shall consider each of these texts in turn, but the paucity of them, compared, for example, with the number of texts, which deal with social justice, is noteworthy. It may be an indication that homoerotic activity was comparatively rare in the Jewish world, in contrast to the Greek world, for example. This view is, I think, supported by the texts themselves, as their immediate context makes clear. Homoerotic activity is regarded by Jewish writers as characteristic of Gentile nations.

The second general point that needs to be remembered is that the whole concept of sexuality is foreign to the world of Scripture. Like the notion of sexual orientation and indeed homosexuality, it is a modern concept. Scripture simply does not consider the possibility widely accepted in the modern world that a particular human being may *naturally* be inclined to be homosexual. For Scripture, sexual activity makes sense only in the context of procreation and is therefore natural only between male and female of the same species.

Scripture is not concerned with the psychology of sex, nor even for that matter with the emotional state of those who engage in sexual activity. It is not concerned with these questions because they simply had not arisen in the cultural world of the authors of the various books that make up the Bible. Such approaches to sex and sexuality are entirely modern.

How much does it matter that the Bible has so little to say on this subject?

III

The basic text then is Leviticus 18:22, which may be read alongside Leviticus 20:13. Both texts are found in the so-called Holiness Code, which is concerned with the purity of the nation. The nation must avoid those things that defile other nations who do not follow YHWH, the God of Israel. Among the things that defile listed in ch.18 of Leviticus are incest, sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman, adultery, child sacrifice (the odd one out in this list), homoerotic sexual acts between males, and bestiality. Much the same list is repeated in ch.20, where it is stated that the punishment for such deeds is death. The death penalty applies to both partners, even though from our perspective one of the partners would be regarded as an innocent victim – for example, an animal assaulted sexually by a human. The whole series is addressed to the male, as if the female counts for nothing, and this strikes a discordant note in today's society; but even if the male is held responsible, in each case (incest, adultery etc) the other partner must also die, since both have been defiled by the 'unnatural' sexual union and purity demands that all those defiled must be purged. What Leviticus 18:22 actually says is this: 'Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable' (NIV). The word 'detestable' ('abomination' is another translation) here signifies something unclean that must be cut out. Not surprisingly therefore Leviticus 20:13 says, 'If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them

have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads' (NIV).

The context then is the need for purity, the need to avoid physical defilement and to cut out that which is physically unclean. The emphasis is not on what we would consider moral integrity. In that sense it is not really a 'moral' issue. The prohibition is also very specifically directed at the sexual act of anal penetration – this is what is meant by 'as one lies with a woman'. This also suggests that the root of the problem was the 'unnatural' nature of the act in that one of the male partners was thought to assume the role of a woman. In sexual intercourse the natural role of the male was believed to be superordinate and active, while the female was expected to be subordinate and passive. So insofar as Leviticus gives us any guidance the text is saying that acts of anal penetration are prohibited. It makes no reference to homoerotic acts between two females or indeed homoerotic acts between males short of anal penetration, nor is it concerned with what we might call the 'relationship' between two individuals of the same gender. It is simply and solely concerned with the prohibition of a specific act which brings defilement not only on the two individuals concerned but on the whole community. For that reason the impurity must be removed.

In applying this text to today's world we would, I think, have to say that it is of little help to us in determining the moral status of a homosexual relationship between two males unless or until such a relationship involves acts of anal penetration. Nor I think would anyone, not even the most rabid fundamentalist, argue that those guilty of such acts should be put to death. The act is, moreover, seen as equivalent to incest and bestiality, neither of which is acceptable in today's world, as well as to adultery and intercourse with a menstruant, both of which are widely tolerated, even if frowned upon, today.

Should the rules still apply even if we no longer accept the reasons for which they were made?

Should they still apply even if we no longer apply the punishments which were attached to them?

IV

These two texts determined the attitude of Jews to homoerotic acts for centuries. It is hardly surprising therefore to find that the apostle Paul, who was brought up and trained as a strict Jew, shares this general approach. It is interesting, incidentally, that Jesus appears to have nothing to say on the subject. The likelihood is that he too shared the same approach. This suggests that those on the eccentric fringe of scholarship, who have claimed that Jesus was 'homosexual' on the grounds that he remained (as far as we know) unmarried, are wide of the mark. Jesus' unmarried status is probably to be interpreted as a vow of celibacy undertaken for the sake of his mission.

As far as the New Testament evidence goes we must rely on Paul alone and on three texts in particular, namely Romans 1:18-32 (the key passage), I Corinthians 6:9-10 and I Timothy 1:9-10.

We may start with I Corinthians 6:9-10 where Paul lists a number of 'wicked' persons, who will not 'inherit the kingdom of God'. The list includes two Greek words that represent the passive and active partners in anal intercourse. The second term (*arsenokoitai*) is a rare word and its form strongly suggests that in using (possibly coining) it Paul has the Leviticus prohibition of anal penetration in mind. It is also possible that the combination of these two technical terms indicates that Paul is referring to the fairly common Greek practice of pederasty, so that the passive term (*malakoi*) represents an adolescent boy (possibly a prostitute) and the active an older man. If so, this would not be a condemnation of homosexuality as such, but of a very specific form of sexual activity. The other point to make is that the list also includes 'idolaters, adulterers... thieves, the greedy, drunkards, slanderers and swindlers', so in any discussion of the propriety or otherwise of ordaining practising homosexuals we should not concentrate unduly on Paul's disapproval of homoerotic behaviour in this particular text. The context also suggests

that such behaviour is linked in Paul's mind, as it was in the minds of Jews generally, with the idolatry characteristic of Gentile nations.

Arsenokoitai, the word used for the active partner in anal intercourse, is also found in I Timothy 1:9-10 in a not dissimilar list of 'lawbreakers and rebels', whose conduct 'is contrary to the sound doctrine'... 'of the glorious gospel'. The same list also includes 'murderers, adulterers ... slave traders, liars and perjurers'. As with the text in I Corinthians this text in I Timothy is of limited help to those who must determine who may or may not be ordained in today's Church since it covers such a wide range of human wrongdoing and is hardly a specific prohibition directed against the ordination of practising homosexuals. Indeed, on the face of it, neither of these texts takes the form of a prohibition. They represent rather Paul's view of the kind of conduct, which is incompatible with being a Christian of any kind.

By far the most important text in Paul (and indeed in the whole Bible) is Romans 1:18-32, and in particular verses 26 and 27, which read: 'Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion' (NIV).

The context is Paul's lengthy demonstration that the whole of humanity is in the power of sin, Jews as well as Gentiles. This then enables him to proclaim that salvation is available to all, Gentiles as well as Jews, without distinction. Some have argued that in this passage in Romans Paul has Gentiles in mind and that the reference to homoerotic activity in these two verses is highlighting conduct believed to be characteristic of the idolatrous Gentile world. This may be so, though others have argued that Paul is not here singling out the Gentiles as such. In any case, no single human being can be complacent, since all

have sinned. Incidentally, the shameful conduct Paul alludes to here is presented more as the punishment or consequence of (original?) sin than a sin in itself. It is evidence of the sinful condition of humanity. God has punished humanity by abandoning humans to their fate. As a consequence they engage, women as well as men, in all manner of activity contrary to nature and therefore contrary to the order of creation – this is the force of the reference to them receiving 'in themselves the due penalty for their perversion'. The reference to females engaging in homoerotic activity is unique in the Bible and, like Paul's exposition on marriage and divorce in I Corinthians 7, shows that Paul was far ahead of his time in recognising the equal status of women in God's order, even if here their equal status as sinners.

That Paul condemns homoerotic acts of sexual intercourse (again the reference seems to be to specific acts) as sinful is beyond doubt. There is little to be gained in attempting to make Paul say something that would today be regarded as more politically correct. In adopting this attitude to such conduct Paul unquestionably reflects his Jewish background.

Similar disapproval of homoerotic activity is found in Paul's near contemporary, the Jewish philosopher Philo, who saw such activity as a denial of natural human sexual instincts and capitulation to unnatural lust. It was associated with idolatry and with pederasty. Philo also believed that, unless it was stamped out, such conduct would lead to the extinction of the human race! Paul no doubt shared these opinions.

How does your understanding compare with that of the New Testament as regards the relationships between women and men, between people of different social status, and between people of different faiths?

Does this make a difference in interpreting the particular texts examined here?

V

We have established then that, following the prohibition of such acts in Leviticus, Paul specifically condemns acts of homoerotic intercourse. No more, no less. The question we now have to address is this: If Paul's views on homosexual conduct, and indeed on what is believed to be 'natural', were so strongly conditioned by his cultural background, are these views of any direct relevance today in a vastly different cultural context, which has a very different view of what is natural in terms of sexual relationships? We might also ask if there is other teaching in the Bible, which is more directly relevant to our contemporary attempts to reach a proper understanding of sexual orientation (to use the modern term) than these specific prohibitions or condemnations of anal or other penetrative acts of homoerotic intercourse.

For evangelical Christians who believe in the absolute authority of the Bible the answer to the first question is simple. If the Bible condemns such acts as sinful, then they are sinful. There is no room for debate, no matter how different our culture is from that of the Bible. But would such Christians call for the death penalty to be imposed on convicted homosexuals? Would they defend the exclusively patriarchal attitude to human sexual relations that informs almost everything (Paul is a notable exception here) the Bible has to say on the subject? Even Christians who set tradition alongside Scripture as their authority would give much the same answer to my question since Church tradition has consistently condemned homosexual practices, but this too, others would argue, is largely due to cultural conditioning. Appealing to reason in addition to Scripture and tradition would introduce the insights of modern psychology into the debate. Such insights would not necessarily determine the mind of the Church today, but they would suggest that we must take full account of the cultural divide between the world of Scripture and our world today and of contemporary understandings of what it is to be human. Finally, if we read Scripture critically in

the light of our experience as individual Christians and the experience of the believing community we are seriously challenged. All of us know practising homosexuals who are devout Christians. Moreover, the believing community has been faithfully and effectively served by men and women whose sexual orientation (and in some cases practice) has been 'homosexual'? Are we to deny that such people are faithful servants of God? Or should we hold the line and say that in terms of the teaching of Scripture their ministry has been fatally flawed? At the very least we must say that those who practise celibacy in a homosexual relationship are not touched by the Scriptural disapproval of homoerotic acts. Indeed, it seems to me that since penetrative homoerotic intercourse is the only sexual activity prohibited in Scripture, physical expressions of mutual love, including sexual acts that fall short of penetrative intercourse, are allowed.

Further food for thought may be derived from exploring possible answers to our second question. In this connection I suggest there are three major biblical themes that have a direct bearing on our discussion: creation, the sinful condition of humanity and divine grace or love.

First, even if they are not seen as historical accounts, the Creation stories at the beginning of Genesis are recognised by most Christians as setting out the norms of what it is to be a human, including a sexual, being. The norm is quite clear. Male and female are intended for union with each other for the purposes of procreation and companionship. This is what God intended. We then have to ask if this norm is to be regarded as exclusive and universal. In other words, is any other form of sexual union, e.g., between two males or two females, which in terms of the Genesis accounts would be 'abnormal', allowed? It may be helpful to think more widely of what we mean by 'normal' and 'abnormal'. For example, the norm (what God intended) for humans is to be physically and mentally healthy or whole, but our experience is that

sadly not all humans are whole in this sense. We speak of physically or mentally handicapped people, but unlike our ancestors we do not see their condition as a punishment from God. Nor do we say that they are any the less human because they are less than fully healthy. The same issue of norms arises in the debate over divorce and the remarriage of divorced people while their former partners are still living. We no longer exclude such persons from the Christian community – indeed, they may now be admitted to the ordained ministry and in some cases become bishops. Is this right or is it wrong? We must beware of defining norms in too rigid a way. We must also beware of a double standard whereby something which is permitted in the case of Christians generally is not allowed in the case of those who are ordained.

Secondly, Scripture is absolutely clear in saying that all human beings, without distinction, are sinners. Our common human experience confirms this. Since then all are sinners, including those who seek ordination, we might next ask if there are any particular sins which should debar someone from ordination. Perhaps a prior question is to ask what precisely we mean by sin in this context. Is homosexual orientation in itself a sin? Few of us would say that it is. But are certain sexual acts between two persons of the same gender sinful? The Bible (i.e. Leviticus and Paul) condemn as sinful acts of homoerotic intercourse, but they do so in the context of condemning a whole variety of sinful acts. On all three occasions that Paul refers to the subject he makes it clear that this is only one among a number of different forms of behaviour incompatible with being a Christian. This suggests that it is difficult to justify singling out this one sin as automatically disqualifying someone from the ordained ministry of the Church.

My final point is that just as the Bible teaches that all humans are sinners, so too the message of the New Testament is that no sinner, however grievous the sin, is beyond the reach of the grace of a loving God. The Church today lives under grace and not under law. We must therefore guard against adopting an exclusively legalistic approach to moral issues.

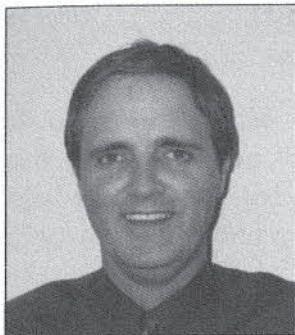
In relation to the question with which we began, namely the ordination of practising homosexuals to the priesthood/episcopate, there is now an urgent need for the Church under the grace of God and in Christian love to reach a common mind. In this debate the evidence of Scripture will be one element, a significant, but not the only element. It is nonetheless clear from the way the debate has been conducted hitherto that the attitudes of particular groups of within the Church to homosexual orientation and practice are very largely predetermined by what they see as the Church's source of authority. Where they see this as Scripture alone or a combination of Scripture and Church tradition, their attitudes tend to be negative, but where they recognise a dispersed authority, as traditionally Anglicans have done, the question becomes more open. I fear that the process on which we have embarked will be protracted and painful.

Creation – sin – grace: how can looking at the bigger Scriptural picture help us in the way we respond to gay and lesbian people?

ENGAGING WITH THE SCRIPTURES

The Sexuality Debate in Anglicanism

Canon Robert M E Paterson



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"Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation." (Article VI of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion)

"Are you persuaded that the holy Scriptures contain sufficiently all doctrine required of necessity for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ? And are you determined out of the said Scriptures to instruct the people committed to your charge, and to teach nothing (as required of necessity to eternal salvation) but that which you shall be persuaded may be concluded and proved by the Scripture?" (The Ordinal, 1662)

"... we re-affirm our common understanding of the centrality and authority of Scripture in determining the basis of our faith. Whilst we acknowledge a legitimate

diversity of interpretation that arises in the Church, this diversity does not mean that some of us take the authority of Scripture more lightly than others." (the primates of the Anglican Communion, meeting at Lambeth October 2004)

Understanding the Scriptures I

I come to the issue of engagement with the Bible with a basic assumption, that in the post-Karl Barth world we recognise that we have no right to dismiss any part of Holy Scripture, however uncomfortable it may make us feel and for whatever reason, and also that when readers are faithful to and serious in their engagement with the whole of the Bible, they should not accord the same truth-value to each individual scripture. This forces readers to ask themselves basic questions about the major underlying theological principles of the Bible and of the revelation of the Word of God, literary and incarnate. The Church has said that the Scriptures are the word of the Lord, but clearly some parts are more Word than others.

There will always be wide diversity in interpretation based on our reasoned appreciation of Christian tradition and experience. We have traditionally referred to the source of Anglican theology being a three-fold cord of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. Put another way we might describe this as reading the Bible together in fullest awareness of who we are and where we are; or as reading the Bible together in light of others' readings of Bible in order to hear and obey the word of the Lord today.

Understanding any text of Scripture cannot be done without first coming to terms with what it meant to its original author. This is crucial and is often neglected. For instance, in the fourth Servant Song in Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12, who was the Servant? An individual such as the prophet or someone known to the hearers whom we can't identify, but subsequently identified (not in the sense of pointed out in an identity parade, that is, not fortune-telling, but seen to reveal profound truths) by Christians with Jesus Christ (as in Acts

8: 27-35). What did he mean? Well he certainly described someone suffering for others, innocently and silently, even if we know nothing more of the original context than that it is likely to have been delivered towards the end of the Babylonian exile, i.e. after c. 550 BC. It goes without saying that we always need to understand the text as much as we can. One of the failings of some contemporary preachers is that they think they don't need to study the Bible! It is often said that there are four aspects to the technique of understanding of the Scriptures:

- faithfulness to the text,
- humility of approach,
- provisionality in interpretation and
- charity in application.

Understanding Scripture is like setting foundations on the sides of a chasm in order to build a bridge - it must be firmly located on both sides. Bridge-building is our trade - we're all *pontifex*! One of our primary tasks as preachers and teachers is to build links so that the two-way traffic of ideas, revelation, knowledge and experience can cross in order to enrich and change us all. On the far side, it must be located in careful and honest scholarship, never partisan scholarship - I am always fearful of partisan translations of the Bible, particularly when produced by people who purport to believe in the open book! This, the far end of the bridge moves when Biblical scholarship moves, as it did frequently during the controversies of 19th century.

When that pillar of the bridge is built, the other pillar must be built, the place into which the message of the Scriptures will come - our own context in time, in history, in our own story and in our social context, etc. - where we have come from and where we are now. Some exponents of the Christian Way find the ground on this end of the bridge extremely difficult to survey. And it does tend to shift frequently - some have likened it to building a bridge from land to a boat!

One of the great preachers of the twentieth century was Helmut Theilicke, who describes the primacy of preaching (where the active Word

becomes Event) over doctrine. He refers to the gospel constantly being "forwarded to a new address because the recipient is repeatedly changing his place of residence". When that is done with integrity, faithfulness, humility, provisionality and charity, the hearer will say, "Why, that has to do with me!" When it is done carelessly, the hearer says, "That is no concern of mine! It has nothing to do with me."

Only when both ends of the Bible-bridge are built can the link, the bridge itself, be put in place, the link between the writing-place and the reading-place, for which we need 'tradition' and 'reason'.

Tradition is *not* a static concept of a body of precedents but a living handing on of recognitions and understandings, the witness of the on-going Spirit-guided life of the Church by which the Spirit constantly brings the message of the Scriptures to its readers. Reason is not simply thought processes but also and in particular that acute sense of moral awareness which is the painful gift of 'knowledge' to humanity, sin's curse of having to 'be like God' - Genesis 3.

Do you give equal weight to these four aspects of faithfulness, humility, provisionality and charity when reading Scripture, or does one have priority?

In many issues related to Scriptural interpretation, there is ongoing controversy. Let me illustrate this from the Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of the Church of Ireland (September 2003): ... *four main viewpoints may be identified within the Church of Ireland with regard to same-sex relationships. They are not so much clear-cut, isolated points of view as relative positions on a spectrum:*

- *The witness of the Scriptures is consonant with a view that rejects homosexual practice of any kind, and that marriage between a man and a woman in*

life-long union remains the only appropriate place for sexual relations. This must remain the standard for Christian behaviour.

- *The witness of the Scriptures is consonant with a more sympathetic attitude to homosexuality than has been traditional, but this would not at present permit any radical change in the Church's existing stance on the question.*
- *The witness of the Scriptures is consonant with the view that a permanent and committed same-gender relationship which, through its internal mutuality and support brings generosity, creativity and love into the lives of those around, cannot be dismissed by the Church as intrinsically disordered.*
- *The witness of the Scriptures is consonant with the proposition that, in the light of a developing understanding of the nature of humanity and sexuality, the time has arrived for a change in the Church's traditional position on affirming same-gender relationships.*

Four positions reflecting four readings of Scripture related to sexuality. I find myself sympathetic with three of them, more attracted to two of them and one of them is a rough approximation of where I think I am!

It's my view that this is a helpful analysis of the divergent views. In contrast, the discussion document, *Some Issues in Human Sexuality- A guide to the debate (SIHS)*, is an extremely detailed and helpful piece of analysis, (tough going as a discussion starter, which presumably is why there is a separate booklet to assist discussion), is full of paradoxes and occasionally describes views in a less-than-nuanced way. For example, SIHS defines what it describes as five attitudes regarding Scripture and homosexual relationships, all of which are mutually exclusive; but most of us will

find it difficult to find one which describes clearly where we are, unless we are unusually uncomplicated people. It also makes the point that neither pastoral considerations (tending to liberality) nor theological tradition (tending to conservatism) should be allowed to cloud our judgement of Scripture: that is, to my mind, an extraordinarily idealist and facile approach which fails to acknowledge that Christians are what they are. It would be lovely to think that all human experience could be predicted by experimentation in a pure and morally sterile environment - that all car accidents would occur in a crash studio - but life, and humans, just aren't like that!

So I'd like to turn the clock back 200 years to the controversies surrounding the campaign which followed the abolition of the slave trade, that is, the abolition of slavery itself in the territories subject to the British Crown. (An issue which continued in the United States of America until the end of their Civil War.) As an aside, I should explain why I have fixed on the issue of slavery and not whether Christians can eat prawn cocktails (no fins and scales - Leviticus 11: 9-12) or black pudding (blood - Deuteronomy 12: 23, 24), nor whether men should exercise headship over women, because these issues tend either to trivialise or to appear unresolved. The issue of slavery is one which is not trivial, was seriously controversial and has been resolved. One of the most serious issues was how to read the Scriptures.

Slavery in the Bible

The Old Testament clearly sanctioned slavery, albeit exercised in a compassionate manner (Exodus 21, etc.) and with particular restrictions on the ownership of Hebrew slaves. Slavery itself was acceptable but the memory of national slavery in Egypt was to moderate their attitude and practice. The New Testament presents a rather more diverse picture, and slavery is used also as the basis of a number of similes. The Letter to Philemon, in particular, expresses what seems to be the general approach: slaves may be one's Christian brothers and sisters - or one's Christian brothers and sisters may be slaves.

Slaves are not simply disposable property but, on the other hand, there seems to be no serious challenge in the New Testament to the institution of slavery itself. William Wilberforce (a leading evangelical, of course) had an uphill struggle to convince conservative theologians that there were, within the Scriptures themselves, more fundamental principles which had to be applied to one's reading of individual texts.

It would seem that the rules and regulations in the Bible were for the good treatment and well-being of slaves. This carries with it the implication that God's people were to be more compassionate than their contemporaries; it must say something about a Christian approach to 'subordinates' and is likely to say something about our approach to minorities.

What might be the contemporary approaches to the slavery issue?

- A capitalist might point out that freeing slaves without compensation would amount to theft which contradicts the Commandments, which is why there are detailed regulations relating to Jubilee (Leviticus 25).
- The slave trade as it had become by the eighteenth century was indefensible, but there is some justification from history for asking whether slaves would be better off free or remaining as well-treated slaves?
- Those who are temperamentally conservative would be inclined to assert that slavery is a given of the social order which should not be challenged.
- A vital element in thinking of the eighteenth/nineteenth century context would be a consideration of humanity's progress over the previous centuries from the time that the Scriptures were written.

- What we cannot ignore is the liberating principle, found in scripture, and the principle of social justice as a foundation of biblical theology and ethics.

What are the parallels between these possible responses to the issues raised by the practice of slavery, and responses to issues of homosexuality?

Understanding the Scriptures II

We looked earlier at the image of bridge-building to help us understand how to engage with the Scriptures. Now I would like to explore another model – that of theatre.

Let's imagine the Bible as a theatrical play. Who are the central characters? Certainly God, and, in particular, Jesus the Word of God, and humankind. Who are the other principal actors? We may list people like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Mary, the Apostles, and so on.

Who are the other characters central to the plot? Perhaps we'd say Eve, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, John the Baptist, etc.

What of the scenery and props? Placed centrally would be the cross and empty tomb; next might be the Garden of Eden, the rainbow, the tablets of stone, the promised land, Jerusalem, the Temple, the stable, the River Jordan, etc.

So how far down the cast or props lists do the regulations of the Torah come? If you were to cast every word of the Scriptures in a 'starring' rôle – and to hear some people speak about the Bible, you might think so - how would you explain to the parents of a deceased child what God meant when he said, "I will not fail to punish children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation for the sins of their parents"? (Exodus 34: 7). It would seem clear from the Sermon on the Mount in particular that Jesus Christ did not hold to a single, simple rule of interpretation of the Scriptures, so how are we supposed to make judgements? And how are we ever going to communicate our judgements in a sound-bite world?

Let's look at Titus 1: 12, 13:

"It was a Cretan himself, one of their own prophets, who spoke the truth when he said, 'Cretans are always liars, wicked beasts and lazy gluttons.' For this reason you must rebuke them sharply."

It is possible to exegete ourselves out of the problem: "Well, it's all about ...", and these are genuine interpretations, not excuses, but they rarely confront the particular problem here, which is that canonical Scripture refers to the 'truth' that all Cretans are liars, wicked and lazy!

To be honest in our interpretation of Scripture, we need to avoid making excuses for it, finding comforting ways to read uncomfortable texts, and to recognise that we do apply understandings to our reading of the Bible other than a simplistic rule of reading verses in isolation from 'the whole counsel of God'.

Reading each part of the Bible in an awareness of the whole was one of the Reformers' fundamental principles, and it was adhered to by Wilberforce and his contemporaries, who did not try to simplify challenging scriptures but insisted that the Bible taken as a whole itself forced on them more important principles and altered their reading of the plain text.

- Given that Titus contains much that is central to the Faith just a few verses away from the text quoted above (eg. 2:11-14; 3:4-8) we certainly can't write off the letter. So how does this text compare with John 3:16, 17?
"God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its saviour."

In saying that "whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby" Article VI reminds us that the reading of any individual text must be viewed in the light of the whole.

Because we appreciate the over-arching message of the whole, we can recognise consonance in the verses from John and dissonance in the verses from Titus. We are not making a fundamental value judgement on any individual text and we are not writing-off any part of the Scriptures, but we are saying that one more closely matches the key message of the whole Bible.

- So, what distinctions of over-arching principle does this comparison draw our attention to?

John 3 points us to the love of God not simply for believers, or for the Church but for the world, a costly love which led him to give his only Son as its saviour.

James 2 reminds us that "mercy triumphs over judgement".

A number of parables of Jesus highlight the outsider principle - the good Samaritan, the lost coin, sheep and son - and also the call of Matthew and Zacchaeus.

John 8 draws our attention to Jesus' forgiveness of the woman caught in the act of adultery and also to his injunction, "Do not sin again." - a word not only for the woman but also for readers of the gospel.

In Romans 15, Paul urges his readers who risked dividing the Church along Jew/Gentile lines to "welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you".

In Matthew 7 (as elsewhere in the New Testament) we are told, "Do not judge others, so that God will not judge you."

Matthew 12 provides us with a practical test of principle: "A tree is known by the fruit it bears."

- What do we mean by the 'inspiration' of Scripture?

At the writing end of 'the bridge', when we say the Bible is inspired, we mean that in the power of the Holy Spirit a person wrote (or edited) a work, and that the Spirit guided the Church to receive this writing as authoritative in faith and life. We do not mean that the

Scriptures were "dictated by the Holy Spirit" [from the Council of Trent, 1543-53, and quoted in *Providentissimus Deus*, 1893]. There is also a measure of inspiration at the reading end, as some have suggested, like sunshine illuminating a stained glass window? It is worth analysing how we have come to the conclusions above and what part reason, tradition and the understanding of context have in our thinking.

Think about the theatrical image - what for you are the "principals" in the Scriptures?

Are they people or events?

Are they stories or rules?

Are they themes, or particular books?

Are there parts of the Bible you know by heart or that you quote/refer to often? Does this give another clue as to what are your "principals"?

As preachers and teachers, we reckon not to throw the Bible at people, nor to use the Bible as a series of pretexts for our own reading of the *Guardian* or the *Telegraph*, but we seek to place ourselves and our Christian communities into the Bible, to help them and us to find our way around it, and to think Christianly.

The importance of this way of handling the Bible can be seen in the approach taken by the infant Christian Church on the issue of Gentile believers. Clearly, Jesus was a Jew, the fulfilment of Jewish messianic hopes; though he criticised the way in which the Hebrew religion was practised and moved forward to a new way in his teaching, nonetheless it was perfectly natural for the first Christians in Judea to assume – no, to believe – that being a Jew would be bound up with being a Christian. In Acts 10 & 11, we read of Peter's introduction to the concept in the conversion of Cornelius and his household: being a Gentile does not make a person spiritually unclean. Paul, particularly in the dispute

referred to in Galatians, takes this a step further and asserts that since Jesus is for all humanity and all come to him equally in need of forgiveness and new life, so the old religious order is gone and the new has come. The shocking impact of that approach is almost entirely cushioned by two millennia of gentile conversion, including our own, but it was clearly Paul's conviction that this gospel-for-all is implicit in the promise to Abraham (Galatians 3:6-9).

We are reminded by this important controversy that in the Christian faith every generation in each place must receive the Bible and struggle with its interpretation, not just in the light of when and where it was written but also in the light of when and where it is being read.

Turning to the issue of human sexuality, and in particular to same-sex relations we will want to be committed to integrity in our understanding and compassion to all in our application.

The remarkably few key individual texts which appear in both testaments are:

Genesis 19: 1-14; Leviticus 18: 22; 20: 13;

Deuteronomy 23: 17, 18; Romans 1: 24-27; 1

Corinthians 6: 9, 10; 1 Timothy 1: 9, 10.

SIHS neatly summarises the commentators on the various texts and comes to the conclusion that these individual texts in their various ways are not favourable to homosexual acts. For example, you can excuse Romans 1 in terms of perversion but you must also ask what the text reveals of the Apostle's attitude. It would be very difficult (and, I am convinced, also unfair) on the basis of the evidence of Paul's writings to conclude that his view of gay sex was then or would be today sympathetic!

Thus, we need to secure the far end of the 'bridge' and it is a varied picture, but the very least we can say is that it does not sanction same-sex unions. Of course, the key texts do *not* deal with the matter of sexual orientation or the vexed question of 'nature versus nurture'; this was something of which the writers would all have been completely unaware.

Now we need to decide the weight we are going to give to these Scriptures - and don't let anyone tell you that this need not be influenced, at least in part, by your subjective judgement, because inevitably it will: there is no escape! Reverting to the metaphor of a play, it is about deciding what rôle the texts play in the drama: do they have starring roles (which may, for instance, lead to refusing the baptism of a gay couple), are they supporting actors, or just incidental props? This takes us back to the search to discover whether there are fundamental biblical principles which need to be applied to one's reading of specific texts and what those principles are.

Finally, we need to connect this side of the bridge, to evaluate the context into which we bring the message and all our thinking about it. This is immensely tricky, for it can be too easy to dismiss problem texts by stamping them, 'Not applicable today!' If this is true, it needs to be proved by bringing past and present contexts and text together and, in a sense, letting them wrestle with each other.

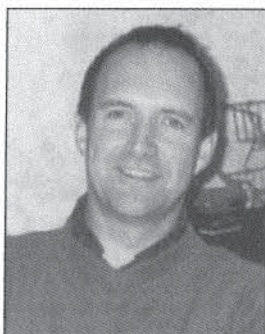
None of this is easy. Taking the Bible seriously, at face value **and** as a whole is what we are called to do.

Two other books well worth reading:

- A very interesting package of essays, *'The Way Forward? – Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church'*, edited by Timothy Bradshaw, [Hodder & Stoughton, 1997, enlarged and reprinted 2003].
- The Church of England's Doctrine Commission report, *'Being Human – A Christian understanding of personhood'*, [CHP, 2003].

A VIEW FROM THE PEWS

Tim Heywood



Tim Heywood has lived and worked in Cardiff for the past 6 years. Born and raised on a farm in North Devon, he worked for Voluntary Services Overseas in Uganda for 5 years before taking up a career in the NHS. He has an MBA in health service

management and has worked as a health service manager for the last 16 years.

I want to start by making one thing clear: The fact that I am gay is not a big issue for me. I'm a senior manager and Executive Board member of an NHS Trust and for years now, I've been open about my sexuality with work colleagues, friends and family. I am not aware that my sexuality, or other peoples' knowledge of it, has adversely affected my career; I have been appointed to several senior management positions by people who were well aware of my sexual orientation. It has not created difficult working relationships with peers and subordinates, or compromised my ability to do a challenging management job.

As far as family and friends are concerned, my being gay has not shaken my parents' love for me, nor has it deprived me of friends or meaningful relationships. I've had my share of knocks and setbacks, of course, and will doubtless have more. But...

my sexuality is part of my identity with which I'm quite comfortable – it is about as much of an issue as my Devonian accent or my inability to kick a football straight: just in there with all the many other things that make me who I am.

What are the most important things in your own sense of identity?

Are you surprised that Tim sees being gay as just one of the many things that make him who he is?

I am very aware that these words would not have been written a generation ago. Expressing gay sexuality was, of course, illegal until 1967; just as it was illegal for women to vote until 1918, and it's not so very long ago that we got around to making slavery illegal in Britain. None of these changes was achieved without a struggle and those in the vanguard often paid dearly. My freedom to write this has been bought at a price, but it is a price I feel very fortunate not to have been called on to pay personally. So there will be nothing from me about a tortured journey through abuse, rejection or self-denial. I have heard plenty of those stories and many have moved me or made me angry, but they are not experiences I can claim to have shared.

I want to start, not with my discovery that I was gay (which would be difficult, as I cannot recall any moment of discovery. I am sure I have always known, certainly before I knew any words to describe it) but with my coming out as a Christian, a process that began only 4 years ago. This was not an easy decision to take and I can explain why: I think that I have a reasonable level of fundamental self-belief and it is a quality for which I thank my parents.

I have learnt over the years that one of the most essential pre-requisites to building a capacity to love others is the ability to believe in and love yourself. Furthermore, one of the best ways to build your self-belief and capacity to love is to avoid the company of individuals or institutions that regard you as inherently inferior, or of lesser potential than anyone else. My decision to return to church after 25 years was difficult because I believed the Church to be just such an institution.

Many would argue that the fact the Church finds it necessary to have a debate about the acceptability of homosexuality at all is sufficient evidence to justify my trepidation. However, I don't want to use these pages to follow that argument – there is plenty of that elsewhere. What I want to share is my experience of taking the step of returning to church, as my experience has not been quite what I expected.

But first, I need to offer a brief explanation of why I had any desire to cross the threshold of a church anyway. I was brought up broadly as an Anglican and have always been interested in spirituality, but gave up on the Church by the time I was sixteen. Over the succeeding years I have explored a number of different traditions, including Buddhism, Tai-Chi and Transcendental Meditation. I have attempted to follow the arguments of Western philosophers supporting religious, agnostic and atheistic ideologies. Overall, I have learned much that continues to be very useful to me in navigating my way through life. However, none of this gave me a completely satisfactory answer to the fundamental question of who, or what, I am.

In struggling with this question, I came to realise that we communicate meaning about such fundamental questions, not by analysing, dissecting and intellectualising, but by telling stories. So if you ask me who I am, I am likely to start with the story of my life – where I was born; who were my parents; significant life events that have influenced me, and so on. However, I also realise that my birth is not really a sufficient starting point: my life has been influenced by the story of my parents' lives and of others who have been significant to me. Therefore, I have been influenced by the stories they were told and events that shaped their lives; and so the story stretches back, through the generations and interwoven layers. At some point in the past, my antecedents first heard the stories contained in the Bible. Few would doubt the impact those stories have had on the development and identity of our society as a whole and I believe that the same is true for me as an individual. Whether I like it or not, the Christian story is

part of who I am, and it was the desire to reconnect with that part of my story that first got me back through the church door.

What follows here is another part of my story; the story of some of the things that happened after I crossed the threshold. Like most stories (including, I increasingly realise, those in the Bible) it is likely to mean different things to different people. I cannot be sure what meaning it will communicate to anyone who reads it, but I hope at least that it is worth sharing.

St Margaret's on a Sunday morning is probably much like many Anglican Churches across the UK. During my first visit, the congregation looked suitably self-conscious when it came to the 'Peace', but their smiles and hand-shakes were warm enough without being effusive. The liturgy brought back enough old memories to stop me feeling too alienated and whilst the sermon may not have been inspiring, I found nothing that offended me. After the service, I stayed for coffee and people did talk to me. In short, there was no pressure, but enough warmth to make me feel I would be welcome if I chose to come back. So I did, and over the following weeks started to get to know some people and to let them get to know me.

For years, my practical approach to personal integrity in 'getting to know you' type conversations has been to accord my sexual orientation about as much importance as my marital status. So, whilst I would never use sexuality as a conversational opener, my answer to the direct question: 'Are you married?' is quite likely to be 'No, I'm gay'. That was the approach I used during the post-service coffee at St Margaret's and I didn't notice it cause anyone to reach for the heart pills! In some cases the conversation just moved straight on to other issues. In others, my honesty seemed to liberate other people to disclose things about themselves, or their own relationships. There was nothing momentous, but it wasn't long before I was invited to help on the church soup run, or to the pub after a prayer meeting. Within a few months I was on the sidesman rota

and the following year I found myself, albeit slightly bemused, as a new member of the Parochial Church Council. Nobody had rejected me. It seemed they had recognised what small talents I might be able to bring and were encouraging me to use them.

Has anyone ever said to you "No, I'm gay" (or similar words?)

What did you - or might you - feel and say?

What do you think the wider Church can learn by the way the St Margaret's congregation responded?

Later that year, I first made contact with the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (LGCM), mainly because I was interested in their publications and booklist, but I discovered that there is an active group in South Wales, so started to attend some of their meetings. For several years the LGCM has hosted a 'Carols for Christmas' evening in the Quaker Meeting House in Cardiff and at the November monthly meeting we were asked if we would distribute advertising fliers to suitable venues around Cardiff. The Church Hall near St Margaret's is regularly used by other groups and it occurred to me that it would be good to display a flier in the Hall porch. I spoke to the Parish Secretary who was very positive and agreed that certainly there was no problem with me putting up a poster (which was very modest, A5 and salmon pink).

The following Sunday, to my slight disappointment, but not complete surprise, the flier had disappeared from the notice board. The parish secretary was at coffee and I joked to her that it seemed that the drawing pins had not been as strong as I had hoped. She, however, was less than amused and asked me to give her some spare copies so that she could replace the poster if it 'fell down' again. Over the next three weeks, it did indeed disappear, several times. However, each time this happened, she replaced it. I later found out that the week before the Carol Service she actually ran out of copies, but the following Sunday there was still a copy on the board. She

had made an extra copy: twice as large and a rather more eye-catching shade of pink!

The reason I am recounting this is that it was the first time I realised that in my local church I wasn't just passively accepted, but actively supported. It wasn't me that was campaigning, but a heterosexual committed Christian who believed that taking that poster down was wrong and was willing to do something practical about it. During the subsequent two years, there have been other examples of active support. Last year, eight of my friends from St Margaret's were there at the Quaker Meeting House for the LGCM service. They talked about it afterwards and told other members of the congregation how much they had enjoyed it. That made me feel proud and it made me feel like I belonged.

As in many churches, a parish newsletter magazine periodically appears at the back of St Margaret's. The Editor is an intelligent and well-read woman who manages to balance internal communication alongside some challenging and thought provoking contributions from local or published sources. During the course of last year, she included an excerpt from the Rector's letter of another parish, which railed against the evils of 'liberalism' and included the following:

'... Yet I love people of all sorts and conditions: those of other faiths, homosexuals and lesbians, drug addicts, blasphemers, thieves and murderers, but that does not mean I approve of their actions.... I love them so much, I want to see them saved in Christ Jesus....'

At the end of the article the Editor's note questioned whether we parishioners would agree with the Rector's views, or would take a different stance and asked us to write in with our opinions. In my response, which was published the following month, I included the following:

'As a gay man, maybe the Rector intends me to feel comforted by the news that he loves me, helpfully categorising me alongside drug addicts, blasphemers, thieves and murderers. However,

feeling patronised always gets my back right up and I doubt that my fellow travellers, singled out to be special recipients of the Rector's love will feel much different'.

Re-read the other Rector's letter putting something that applies to you in the place of "lesbians and gays" e.g. divorcees, parents whose grown up children live with their partners, Christians who drink alcohol, those who advocate smacking small children. Do you still feel loved?

How better can Christian people express their concern for those whose behaviour they consider sinful?

Happily, such ranting has not been my experience of attending St Margaret's. Sometimes I have to listen hard, but God speaks to me as much from the pews as from the pulpit, showing me examples of what it is like to not judge, to show love without pontificating about it and to be welcomed as a fellow traveller on a spiritual journey where we might not have easy answers, but we can make progress together much faster than we ever could on our own.

The interesting thing was what happened when the newsletter was published: a number of people came up to me to thank me for the letter and to say they agreed with me. These were not high profile church people, but they surprised me. They included a young mother from the Sunday school and an older member of the Church choir. One said she admired my 'bravery'. I was flattered that someone thought I was brave, even if I was puzzled that she regarded writing such a simple letter to a church magazine as demonstrating it.

I am not describing these experiences because I think they are extraordinary. I suspect that St Margaret's is actually a very ordinary church with a congregation not very different from hundreds of others. But I do sometimes wonder if the Church hierarchy knows as much about the views of its congregations as it thinks it does.

Confronted with real flesh-and-blood gay people, rather than abstract ideas or moral positions, I suspect that the fearful, the suspicious and non-accepting will generally be found to be a far smaller minority than is currently assumed.

However, my return-to-church experience has not all been positive and there is one other experience that I feel compelled to include here. Just before Christmas last year, I was given the news that a cleric from another part of the Province had heard, that I had heard, that he was gay. The fact was that I had met him a couple of times and had assumed that he was. I have many friends who are gay from many walks of life, including teachers, doctors, a senior naval officer and a police constable. The prospect of a gay 'man of the cloth' is neither shocking nor particularly newsworthy to me.

However, on Christmas Eve I learned that he was very upset at the prospect that I might tell people and of the potential consequences for him. I was in the usual frenzy of last minute preparation before driving off to Devon for the Christmas break, but confronted by the prospect of his distress, the only response I could think of was to make a diversion en route to Devon to try and give him some reassurance. He is a warm and friendly man and he welcomed me at his door before we went through to his front room to talk. Our conversation probably only lasted 15 minutes, while I tried to reassure him that I was not in the business of 'outing' anybody. But in that time I learned that he was frightened that if people found out he was gay it would be so catastrophic that his church would be closed and he would lose his livelihood. I also found out that he had never felt able to tell his own parents that he was gay, or that he had a partner, and was frightened of how they might react.

I wanted to give him a hug and tell him it would all be alright; that the Church was not so fragile

that it would fall apart at such news, and that all gay people face the difficult 'what will my parents think' question, although parents generally know their off-spring better than we give them credit for. But I didn't feel able to. In particular, I felt unsure about an institution whose leaders are sometimes forced to live so divorced from their own integrity. As a manager I've been through the hoop of leadership development courses on several occasions. One thing I have learnt is the necessity for a good leader to have integrity, and that you cannot have integrity towards others without integrity towards yourself. I do not think the Church is different from any other organisation in that respect.

What do you understand about living with integrity?

What are the ways in which Church leaders live divorced from their own integrity?

So that is the story of my return to church so far. Personally, I have found active support there, even if it is not the main thing I was seeking. My friendships and support networks outside the church have also remained intact, even if I have sometimes been strongly challenged (mostly in the pub, or over the dinner table) about why I have any desire to be associated with an institution that is so out of touch with the modern world. But most of all, I have the support of a partner. He is not the greatest church-goer, but he does come to church with me sometimes and when he does, he is made welcome. For the record, my relationship with him, in all its facets, is one of the most rewarding, challenging and life enhancing influences in my life, and I thank God for it.

In the light of your own understanding of the rightness or wrongness of homosexual relationships, how can you enable the church to be a place where homosexual women and men feel welcomed and supported in their journey of faith?