MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Homosexuality and the Church Of Ireland

Edited by

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Preface by
Judge Catherine McGuinness
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FOREWORD

Welcoming the exchange of views on sexuality

IT IS most regrettable that the Church of Ireland and our House of Bishops, like the wider Anglican Communion, is so divided on the issue of homosexuality – or, to be more precise, on the question of whether gay individuals should be accepted into the ordained ministry of the church. (That they are and probably always have been so accepted remains a fact, the difference being that both society and individuals are more open about these matters nowadays.)

It may be that the church is in the middle of what Hans Küng has called a “paradigm shift”, with the ship going through some dangerously rough water as it moves from one sea to another, threatened by the rocks of biblical literalism on the one hand and over-adaptation to the secular world on the other. And it may be that it will be some time before we come through it.

It is my heartfelt prayer and my hope that all of us crew and passengers on the ship of the church on this difficult voyage will remain true to our captain, whose core command is “that you love one another”, and not fall into rival factions trying to push each other overboard. And it is in that hope and with that prayer that this volume has been produced.

Changing Attitude Ireland is a group of Church of Ireland Christians and friends who are convinced that one of the variables in human nature as God created it lies in the area of sexual orientation. We want people of the minority sexual orientation to be respected and their gifts appreciated on a par with the rest of humanity. While CAI was started, I understand,
by gay people in need of support and affirmation, its membership today is both heterosexual and homosexual – or in our preferred language “gay” and “straight” – probably about half and half, though members are not asked to specify their orientation.

Unlike some more conservative Christians, we in CAI believe that our bishops have done the right thing in announcing a major conference on these issues for spring 2012, rather than feigning a non-existent common mind.

No such conference can hope finally to resolve all the issues to everyone’s satisfaction, but at least it will encourage all of us to think carefully about them and about each other’s sensitivities. In the meantime, I would suggest that ‘the truth which our church leaders have been urged to ‘clarify’ is not as simple as many of us would like it to be. The fullness of truth remains always over the horizon, and we must work our way towards it conscientiously under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; in the light of scripture, yes, but scripture read with an awareness of its original context and our own rather different 21st century context.

As to the assertion that ‘our chief aim must remain God’s glory’ – we agree, but let us remember that ‘the glory of God is man (including women!) fully alive (Irenaeus of Lyons). The glory of God must also be that His people love and seek to understand one another, however difficult that may be.

**Ginnie Kennerley**

Chairperson, Changing Attitude Ireland
PREFACE

Catherine McGuinness

ON THE back cover of this book, the co-editors Ginnie Kennerley and Richard O’Leary describe Moving Forward Together as ‘a publication to assist in discussion and mutual listening within the Church of Ireland’. Listening and discussion are desirable in many contexts; the context here is the deep division which has arisen in the Church of Ireland on issues of human sexuality, in particular on the issue of ordination of gay persons.

In the Foreword Ginnie Kennerley starts the listening and discussing process by welcoming the announcement by the House of Bishops of a major conference on those issues, comparing the Church of Ireland to a ship sailing through dangerously rough waters ‘threatened by the rocks of biblical literalism on the one hand and over-adaptation to the secular world on the other’.

The rough waters of which she speaks have rocked the ship in some very difficult debates in the General Synod and more recently in a somewhat barbed correspondence in the columns of the Church of Ireland Gazette, correspondence which is continuing as I write this Preface. Andrew Pierce, in his contribution to this book, quotes a perceptive comment that the current controversy was becoming ‘a dialogue of the deaf’ in which the two constituencies talk past one another, massaging their own obvious correctness at the expense of the other’s evident wrong-headedness. Anyone with experience of
Northern Ireland will be familiar with this kind of dialogue on a political level and in the context of sectarian divisions.

Moving Forward Together aims at opening our eyes and ears to a more rational discussion of the position of gay people in the Church of Ireland. Even more importantly, in its penultimate section it gives us the opportunity to hear gay people speak about their own situation and their relationship with the Church.

I have found the reading of all the varied contributions to this book both informative and moving. I learned a lot from the examination of the relevant biblical texts by Professor Nigel Biggar and Canon Charles Kenny and from the more purely scientific section ‘Facing Reality’.

I did, however, find it hard to believe that many people still believe that gay sexual orientation is a deliberate choice by an individual or that it can be ‘cured’ either medically or by prayer and fasting. No doubt this illustrates my own ‘deafness’ to the beliefs of others.

In the section entitled ‘Church of Ireland Perspectives’ both Andrew Pierce and Bishop Michael Burrows analyse the 1998 Lambeth Conference Resolution 1.10 on Human Sexuality. The Bishop was writing in 2001 and his strong criticisms of the Resolution are relatively ‘hot off the press’. Andrew Pierce has had rather more time to take a cooler look at the Resolution and, while also being critical of it, he sets it in the context of Anglican thought and practice over the centuries. I found this discussion really valuable, giving me new understanding and making me think. All the same, as someone who has sat through many meetings, both religious and secular, while every jot and tittle of a resolution was fought back and
forth, I cannot help being sympathetic to the complaints of the Bishop. In any case I find it impossible to believe that resolutions of the Lambeth Conference are necessarily a central part of the teaching of Christ.

Not all the contributors to *Moving Forward Together* are fully persuaded on one side or the other of the controversy, and it is to the advantage of the book that the discussion is widened in this way. I hope Gordon Linney will forgive me if I describe him as an establishment figure – what, after all, can be more establishment than an archdeacon? – but he is an establishment figure who can think outside the box. So I was particularly happy to find him frankly and honestly setting out the ‘middle ground’ position and expressing his own doubts. Interestingly he quotes from a recent announcement made by the House of Bishops of the Church of England which seems to indicate a new approach to the situation there, where a number of clergy are living in civil partnerships.

Even more important, I feel, is the short contribution ‘An Evangelical appeals to tradition’ contributed by my old friend and Synod colleague Alan Acheson. I cannot resist quoting from him: ‘The issue rather is whether our Church – and our Anglican Communion – is comprehensive, compassionate and charitable; in short, whether we are a Church/ communion governed by Love. If we aim to obey the central love command of Christ, we do not contribute to that end by speeches that are arrogant and intolerant; or adhere to this ethos by posturings that are judgmental and self-righteous.’

The fourth section of *Moving Forward Together* provides an opportunity for a number of gay people to speak of their own experiences, ranging from happiness to tragedy. The account by Henry Haslam and Charles Elliott of the joyful
church service on the occasion of their civil partnership is at one end of the scale; the horrifying story of Mary’s treatment at the hands of her rector and parishioners is at the other. That this could have happened in 2004 is astounding. The behaviour of the rector, as described, in organising a somewhat unwilling group of parishioners to assemble in the church to make an attack on Mary must at the least have given Mary good grounds for a defamation action. Albert Ogle’s story is also very difficult, but it took place about thirty years ago and his then rector has had the great grace of understanding and reconciliation in more recent times. Because Albert had been curate in the next-door parish to ours I remember the concern that my own father felt for Albert at that sad time; he would have been glad to see that reconciliation and contentment have come now.

How, then is the Church of Ireland going to steer our ship through these dangerous waters? Like Ginnie Kennerley I welcome the proposal by the House of Bishops that we confer and listen carefully to one another, before making decisions as a Church. As pointed out by Andrew Pierce, ‘when making significant theological decisions for the life of the church, as Anglicans – historically – we have debated among ourselves in order to discern a path that is consonant with scripture, tradition and reason, particularly when we are contemplating a change in current practice. This has been the case in our thinking about human slavery, for example, or about the ordination of women’.

I have been a member of the General Synod for many years – although age has now ‘knocked me out’. Forgive me if I look back a little at my own experience. In 1973 I was appointed to a Select Committee ‘to consider the theological, pastoral, legal and liturgical issues involved in the re-marriage
of divorced persons.’ I still have a copy of the General Synod Reports for 1975 which contains an early major report of that Committee. Though I say it myself it was historically, theologically and legally a considerable document. Unfortunately it did not meet with all that much approval in the General Synod. But we were not dismissed out of hand. From year to year we were sent back after further debate to try again. New members were appointed who were selected on the grounds that they represented the opposite side of the arguments which had been made. After a while, however, the new members became converted to our point of view. Some members, sadly, died; others joined us. The original members felt that ‘Till death us do part’ actually applied to the members of the Committee rather than to the married couple. Yet in the end consensus was reached, a satisfactory solution was found, a path was discerned.

Somewhat the same process was, as Andrew Pierce pointed out, experienced in the case of the ordination of women. Ginnie Kennerley has described it excellently in her book *Embracing Women*. To go back to her thoughts on this new crisis, it may well be some time ‘before we come through it’. I hope and pray that we will do so with calm, with understanding, and, as Gordon Linney says here, with inclusive and accepting love. This book should help us to do so, and I hope that it will be widely read.
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FOR THE BIBLE

TELLS ME SO
Does the faith stand or fall here?

Nigel Biggar

THE GRAVE THREAT that the controversy over homosexual practice poses to the Anglican Communion is, in my opinion, not further division within the church but rather chronic distraction from the Church’s mission to the world through intra-ecclesial quarrelling. Now this assumes that the Church’s very identity does not stand or fall by it - an assumption, of course, that many members of the Church do not share. A pivotal question for us all, then, is whether our proper identity as the people of God, called to further the health of the world through the faith and hope given us in Christ, depends on a particular stance on homosexual practice.

Of course, the question at issue is what might be called ‘responsible’ homosexual practice. No one is proposing that the Church accept sexual activity of any kind - where there is exploitation, say, of minors by adults, or which is promiscuous. The proposal is for the acceptance of gay practice that is respectful, careful, and faithful.

For some Church of Ireland people, acceptance of any homosexual practice would subvert the proper identity of the Church, on the grounds that it would involve renouncing the authority of Scripture. Maintaining Scripture’s authority is, of course, an absolutely proper and valid Christian concern, because unless what the New Testament tells us about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection is basically true, the foundation of our vision of God and hope for the world dissolves. And the
story of Jesus springs from its context in the Jewish tradition of the Old Testament.

Nevertheless, I want to argue that we need to be discriminating in our understanding of Scripture’s authority. Christian faith does not depend on our regarding every statement in the Bible as equally true and therefore equally authoritative. And by “discrimination” I do not imply an irresponsible, pick-and-mix selection of what we happen to like or dislike, nor indeed a spineless capitulation to the liberal, secular zeitgeist. On the contrary, it can be theologically responsible and intelligent.

The authority of Scripture in the Church is not exhausted by our believing its reports of the story of Jesus to be basically true. It also extends to our endorsement of prominent lines of interpretative reflection upon the theological and moral significance of that story, which appear across the New Testament and in the minds of several of its authors. One example of such a line of reflection is to be found across the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Pauline literature: the conception of love as something oblivious of status or rank or caste and free from the constraint of a sense of one’s own rank; something that moves rabbis to wash their disciples’ feet, fathers to embrace prodigal sons, rulers to take the form of servants, and God almighty to be born in human likeness. The authority of Scripture upon which Christian faith is founded remains secure so long as we trust its reports about the story of Jesus and so long as we trust the central theological and moral inferences that it draws from that story.

Not all the inferences that the New Testament authors draw, however, are central ones, nor have all their theological or moral considerations been fully reconceived in the light of Christ. What we have are the beginnings of a Christian vision
of things, not the finished product. The New Testament authors, like the rest of the Church, are pilgrim people on the Way, not yet settled people of the Destination.

For example, take St Paul's comments on relations between men and women. On the one hand, Paul reflects Jesus’—and therefore God’s—view of social status and authority: the good master is a good servant, and the point of having status and authority is not to enjoy being dominant but to use them to raise up and empower those beneath. In this light, slave owners should welcome back runaway slaves as beloved brothers (Philemon vv.15-16), and social hierarchies in general should dissolve (or at least become generously fluid): “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female” (Gal. 3.28). On the other hand, Paul continues to affirm the socially conventional marital hierarchy in which women are subordinate to men (e.g., Eph.5.22-23; Col.3.18). These two affirmations are not obviously consistent with one another. What are we to make of this?

One reasonable option is to argue that Paul, like all the other early Christian authors—indeed, like all Christians—is in the process of working out the moral implications of what has been revealed in Jesus about the nature of God, about human flourishing, and about the human condition. His thought is no more complete than any other body of creaturely human thought. The basic point is this: in the New Testament we find the beginnings of authoritative trains of thought inspired by the phenomenon of Jesus, but these trains of thought are not fully developed; they continue to contain elements that have not yet been baptized. So it is possible to contradict occasional ‘sub-Christian’ elements in the New Testament while still continuing to regard it as the authoritative basis of Christian
faith. We can also reject elements which on examination turn out to be false conclusions even though drawn from valid moral principles, because they depend on a mistaken understanding of the facts. In order to make a valid moral judgement, it is not enough to grasp the relevant principles. One also needs to grasp accurately the nature of what it is that is being judged.

It follows, then, that there can be theologically responsible reasons for dissenting from what biblical authors say about homosexual practice, either because their views have not yet been fully Christianised, or because they constitute moral judgements that affirm valid moral principles but misunderstand the matter to which these are being applied.

There could be responsible reason to dissent, but is there? What the Bible says about homosexual practice—or rather what it means by what it says—has been the subject of extensive controversy, and it is far beyond the scope of this article to rehearse and evaluate thoroughly all the relevant arguments. Fortunately, it is enough for us to note that the controversy has focussed on two issues: first, whether the relevant biblical passages condemn homosexual practice as such or only of certain kinds; and second, whether the biblical authors entertained the possibility that homosexual orientation might be determined (genetically, biochemically, socially) rather than (perversely) chosen.

Regarding the first matter, it seems clear that the subject of condemnation in Genesis 19 and Judges 19 is homosexual rape, and that in Deuteronomy 23.17 and I Kings 14.24 it is male cultic prostitution. It is also clear that a large part of what concerns Paul in Romans 1.24-27 are immoderate sexual relations where the partners are possessed by—“consumed with” (v. 27)—passion for one another. “[God gave them up] in
the lusts of their hearts … to dishonourable passions … consumed with passion” [vv. 24, 26, 27]). Further, it is arguable that Romans 1, I Corinthians 6.9-10 and I Timothy 1.9-10 refer to the forms of homosexual practice most visible in Gentile culture, namely prostitution and pederasty. Nevertheless, at least one exegete sympathetic to responsible homosexual practice, Jeffrey John, has concluded that the Levitical prohibitions (18.22, 20.13) do not limit their target to ritual prostitution, but encompass male homosexuality in general. And while the New Testament passages might have at the forefront of their minds culturally prominent forms of homosexual practice, they do not explicitly exclude other forms from their condemnation.

The second issue is raised by the passage in Romans 1, where Paul writes of men and women ‘exchanging’ the truth for a lie and ‘giving up’ natural relations for unnatural ones. Some argue that this implies that Paul assumed that those engaging in homosexual acts are ‘by nature’ heterosexual but have made a deliberately perverse choice, not being aware that some people are inclined to homosexual practice, not by wilful choice, but by their own nature. This may indeed be the case, but it does not settle the moral matter. The fact that I am ‘naturally’ inclined to do something, does not mean that it is okay for me to do it. The question is whether there are any moral reasons why I should resist doing what I desire.

Are there, then, moral reasons to resist the desire for homosexual sex as such—that is, as distinct from degraded forms such as rape, cultic prostitution, pederasty, and that motivated by unbridled lust? The surface of the Bible is of little help in furnishing us with an answer here. In Romans 1 Paul implies that he regards lack of sexual self-control as morally vicious, because it involves worshipping a creature instead of
God (v. 25). Such immoderation, however is hardly peculiar to homosexual relations, nor indeed, is it confined to sexual relations in general.

We need, therefore, to bring to the surface the submerged rationale for the unqualified negative ethical judgement on homosexual practice that some biblical authors can be held to make; and in order to do this, we need to consider the broader hinterland of biblical views of sexual morality in general. According to one such view, the basic norm is that sexual relations are only appropriate within heterosexual marriage, where they are ordered to the procreation of children. This throws light on why the Levitical prohibitions only concern themselves with male homosexual practice. Having limited understanding of human biology, and no concept of ovulation, the ancients imagined that the female role in reproduction was merely to serve as a receptacle and incubator, whereas male semen was regarded almost as a person, as sacred, never to be profaned, wasted, or lost. The rightful, God-given purpose of semen was to procreate children. Therefore any sexual act that did not intend procreation—such as coitus interruptus, masturbation, and any kind of homosexual practice—was morally wrong.

However representative this view is of the biblical tradition as a whole, it certainly became dominant in subsequent Christian tradition, at least until the modern period, procreation being considered the only ‘natural’ end or purpose of sexual activity. But why should procreation be the ‘natural’ end sine qua non—the end without which no sexual act can be morally legitimate? Why is companionship not a sufficient purpose? And why not pleasure?

The obvious reason is that procreation has a social and public importance that far exceeds that of private pleasure and
interpersonal intimacy. Producing children and raising them is a crucial contribution to social survival and flourishing. It is also an expression of two basic tenets of orthodox Jewish and Christian faith: first, that the material, historical world of God’s creating is ‘very good’ (Gen. 1.31) and that it is therefore our duty to care for it; and second, that the end of history will comprise the salvation of the created world, so it is our duty to invest in it.

This explains why the procreation of children should be considered a major social contribution, and why it should be given priority over private pleasure and even, perhaps, over interpersonal intimacy. But it does not explain why procreation should be considered the obligatory end of every sexual act. Some couples, whether married heterosexuals or practising homosexuals, may make very important investments in God’s creation that have nothing to do with the production and upbringing of children. Why, then, should they be bound by a rule that posits procreation as the ‘natural’ end of sexual relations?

One answer is that such a rule makes sense in the context of a society whose physical survival is in jeopardy. Such a society could be one such as Israel, first dragged off into exile in Babylon, and then faced with the task of return and reconstruction in a hostile environment. This would help to explain the absolute prohibition of homosexual practice in Leviticus, which was probably composed shortly after the return from exile of the people of Israel and the restoration of the Temple. The precariousness of social survival, however, is not limited to these exotic conditions. Up until very recent times it has been universal: infant mortality has been high, adults have died young, and populations have been regularly decimated by waves of war and disease. Under normal
conditions in most parts of the world for most of human history the task of replenishing the social stock has been an urgent and important one—urgent and important enough to constitute a moral duty. And in many parts of the world even today that is still the case. It is no coincidence, I suggest, that some of the strongest opposition to the normalisation of homosexual practice within the Anglican Church has come from AIDS-ravaged, war-torn, famine-stricken Africa.

It seems to me that the need to repopulate precarious society - which in the light of the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of creation becomes a moral duty - best explains the absolute prohibition of homosexual practice that appears sometimes in the biblical tradition, and more frequently in subsequent Christian tradition.

But is it correct to suppose that homosexual practice poses a threat to this project? Would its normalisation really jeopardise society’s future?

This is a question about a matter of fact, and any answer to it will comprise a reading of the empirical data. One relevant set of empirical evidence suggests that those adults who regularly engage in homosexual practice do so not as a consequence of sheer personal whim, but as more or less inclined by genetic, biochemical, and socio-historical forces. Other evidence suggests that the proportion of the population subject to these inclinations - even in legislatively liberal societies - remains both fairly constant and consistently small. If these readings of the nature and incidence of homosexual inclination are correct, then it is unlikely that the future of society would be jeopardised by the normalisation of responsible homosexual practice. And in that case, the reason for its moral - and legal - prohibition lapses.
Before I move to bring this essay to a conclusion, let me anticipate one objection to what I have said so far and offer a pre-emptive response. Some might feel that my argument has been pragmatic rather than moral, in that I have made the moral character of homosexual practice depend on whether or not it hinders the survival of human society. This appears to identify what is moral with what is efficient in achieving a certain purpose - what is prudential - rather than with what is principled. That is only so, however, if one takes, dare I say it, a pharisaical view of morality as consisting basically in the dutiful observance of moral law. If, however, one follows Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, then morality is primarily about doing what promotes human flourishing and moral law is designed to direct us to the kinds of behaviour that usually do that. In other words, flourishing is fundamental; law is instrumental. And this is not at all unbiblical or unchristian. It was Jesus who said, “The [law of the] Sabbath is made for man [that is, human flourishing], not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2.27). And besides, my argument is not unprincipled. It does not imply that what is moral is what is efficient in achieving any goal. It takes its stand on the intrinsic, God-given value of the created world—including human society—and says that, all other things being equal, this is something that we should seek to prosper by our sexual behaviour and not to obstruct.

Here ends the apology. Let me now draw to a close.

In the body of this essay I have presented a hypothesis about the rationale that lies behind absolute condemnations of homosexual practice that one finds in the Bible and in Christian tradition, and I have also analysed and evaluated it. What kind of regard for Scripture and its authority does my conclusion imply? The first thing to say is that it wholeheartedly confirms the principles that lie at the base of the rationale: namely, that
God’s creation, including human society, is intrinsically valuable and deserves our care and investment; and that one of the most important expressions of such care and investment is the procreation of children. The point at which my conclusion dissents, however, is where this line of reasoning assumes that responsible homosexual practice is bound to pose a threat to procreation and therefore to the social future. That is to say, it dissents from an empirical assumption made by a moral judgement, not from the principles on which it is founded.

Need my dissent from the empirical component of a particular moral judgement made on a handful of occasions by a few biblical authors undermine my claim to consistency in continuing to hold Scripture as the basic authority of distinctively Christian faith? I do not think so. My dissent is at a marginal, not a central point. And the reasoning by which I arrived at it poses no threat, implicit or explicit, to any of the constitutive beliefs of Christianity.

It seems to me, then, that the current controversy among Anglicans over homosexual practice must be allowed to join the long list of moral matters on which Anglicans have long disagreed without feeling obliged to turn their backs on one another. We worship together in spite of our differences over whether the free market is the best way to meet the needs of the poor, over whether abortion should ever be permitted and under what circumstances, and over whether the US and its allies should have invaded Iraq. We should continue to worship together in spite of our differences over responsible homosexual practice.
This is not where the faith stands or falls. The normalisation of responsible homosexual practice will not subvert the proper identity of the Christian Church in its Anglican form. Nor will it hinder the Church’s mission to the world. Refusing to break bread with one another because of it, on the other hand, most certainly will.

A version of this article was first published in SEARCH – a Church of Ireland Journal in Autumn 2004
So what about Romans 1?

Charles Kenny on how he reads
Paul’s words today

THERE WAS a sermon story/illustration, popular with the preachers I was exposed to as a child in my home parish. A man, not particularly godly, is distraught with worry over some problem in his life. He remembers being told that the Bible contains the answers to life’s problems, so he decides to give it a go. It’s a big book; where to start? He opens it, takes a pin and sticks it in. What is God’s message to him? ‘Judas Iscariot went out and hanged himself.’ He contemplates that for a moment and decides to try again, and reads, ‘Jesus said to him, Go thou and do likewise’.

It must have been a favourite with preachers at the time because I’m sure I heard it at least 7 or 8 times in those years. But it’s a good story and it packs a serious punch. We have to be careful if we are to get the good news out of the Bible; we have to work at it, we must become familiar with it; it’s not somewhere we just rush to in an emergency.

All my life I have been aware of the danger that we can get the whole Gospel upside down if we concentrate on just a verse or two, maybe misunderstood or taken out of context, without considering it along with balancing verses of scripture. So I’m a little reluctant to base a whole talk, as I’ve been asked to do, on just a few verses from St Paul’s Letter to the Romans.

I’ll come to the prescribed verses in a moment but let me say first: as a teenager whose life was intimately associated
with the church, specifically the church in evangelical mode, I suspected that there was a missing ingredient in what I was being taught from the scriptures. The place was East Belfast, just after the war. Like most of those reared there, I absorbed with my mother’s milk a moderate unionist outlook and fear and suspicion of Roman Catholics. When I referred cautiously to the latter, I was not impressed by the answer I got: ‘We don’t hate RCs; we love everyone, even our enemies. What we don’t like is their authoritarian church; we want to save them from that.’ I didn’t think that was adequate; by then I had come across quite a few authoritarian adults on our side of the fence.

The ’60s I spent mainly in Southern Africa and as a young person from the UK, a recent graduate, again my feelings about racial matters were different from those around me. I noticed that some of the most virulent of those who despised Africans as ‘irredeemably childlike’, often, as it were, waved their Bibles in the air.

Genesis was popular with them. Unfortunately they favoured chapter 9 about the accursed sons of Ham (i.e. the blacks all around them) rather than chapter 1 and the creation of all of us, red and yellow, black and white, all precious in God’s sight, as I used to sing. It seemed pretty strange that they didn’t notice Genesis mention that the different races were all descended from the same couple, Adam and Eve, which makes all human-beings one huge family. That’s another example of people too often quoting the Bible but losing the Gospel.

Now, to Paul in Romans I.v.18f:

The wrath of God is revealed...against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress truth... What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Since the
creation of the world his power and his deity have been clearly perceived in the things he has made. So they are without excuse … they exchanged the glory of God for images resembling a mortal human being, or birds, or animals or reptiles.

A great rhetorical flourish for Paul’s intended audience. And no doubt they were impressed.

But when he was hobnobbing with the intellectuals of Athens, where apparently he was well received, I suspect Paul would have been a bit more profound. Socrates was four centuries dead but his followers would not have admired such sweeping statements; nor would the average teenager today who over the breakfast table informs his/her parents that he’s having doubts about the existence of the deity.

I don’t think the arguments of famous atheists like Bertrand Russell in my youth were knock-down, and I think less still of today’s Richard Dawkins; but an apologist for theism would have to take what non-believers say more seriously than Paul did in those verses of Romans 1.

Paul went on to itemise the wickedness perpetrated by those who reject what he describes as God’s obvious truth:

God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to the degrading of their bodies . . . their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men . . . consumed with passion for one another. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice, strife; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness … [vv. 24, 26, 27, 29]
I’m sure Paul would concede that society can and does have ‘every kind of wickedness’ without what he calls the ‘unnatural’ relationships. Clearly all murderers, all who worship success or power or money, are not gay folk. But Paul does certainly oppose same sex relationships, at least, I suppose, if ‘relationship’ includes genital involvement.

So the question is: what do I think of Paul on this matter? How do I value what he says? In a sentence; much as I value the apostle’s views on marriage or on buying and selling slaves or on women’s role in society. In each case I believe he is influenced by the culture of his day. I say that, aware that I may be described in the same way.

So I get my reply in first: much contemporary thinking is very short-term; much contemporary culture is seedy and suspect. I can be a real Cassandra whinging about the world going to hell in a handcart. But on the issues I’ve just mentioned I believe we are ahead of society as it was in St Paul’s day, maybe even ahead of St Paul. And why not? The Holy Spirit has been active among the faithful for a further 2000 years since then. I thank God for that.

William Wilberforce and his friends knew their Bible, they found wisdom and insight and courage there. They also looked at the world around them and brought the two together. The outcome was that the ethical bar was raised in the matter of how we treat other different peoples. We may still exploit people in faraway countries, we still shed much blood in war. But there is a trace of shame around. We do aim higher than, to be blunt, wallowing in blood-thirsty nationalism as do some passages of the Old Testament.
You will recall that the majority of Christian contemporaries of the 18th century abolitionists at first thought they were perverse or mad, and of course unscriptural; but Wilberforce and his brave friends persevered and triumphed, aided by the Holy Spirit. We have a long way to go; but at least in the wide swathes of the globe that share the Jewish Christian heritage no one takes slavery as part of God’s ordering of the world any longer. We don’t have Paul to thank for that, but Wilberforce and his colleagues.

Consider similar improvements in other theatres of life I mentioned: women for perhaps the first time in history now have a worth, a value, apart from being some man’s daughter, wife, or mother. The significance of that magnificent first chapter of Genesis is apparent now as never before, for those who have eyes to see it. We don’t treat it literally any longer but it is true and it is important.

As to marriage, God knows we have our problems. But I would claim, from observation and personal experience, that marriage today can be a wonderful life-enhancing experience for both partners. Marriage simply can mean a higher quality of daily life. Being widowed is a sad shock for many. I doubt if such a thought would ever have occurred to St Paul; and I doubt if any of us would want to go back to the ethos of marriage in 16th century Britain, or even to the days of Downton Abbey.

So why was Paul so hard on homosexuals?

For one thing, he did not have the biological knowledge we have today. He did know that his blood was pumped around his body by his heart muscles. He did not know that same sex attraction is a natural given for a small minority of the animal
world, including *homo sapiens*; that it is an orientation rather than a choice, no more chosen than being left-handed. Such knowledge was not available to him.

Homosexual activity to Paul meant the orgiastic behaviour seen at some of the shrines and temples of his country’s neighbours and in the Greek-dominated Mediterranean world. Like all Jews he was appalled at this. We must remind ourselves that Jews were not like the Christians were soon to become; they were not remotely anti-sex. Israel has never had any cult of virginity or abstinence, nor did they have any problem with sexual pleasure. But they saw nothing admirable about the licentious behaviour associated with temple prostitutes, whether homosexual or heterosexual, on the fringes of contemporary pagan worship. They wanted nothing of that careless mistreatment of the human body, something Paul is very eloquent about elsewhere. That sounds like wisdom which we Christians should recover, and it’s every bit as applicable to heterosexuals as it is to gays.

We are not talking about the casual, ‘for kicks’, promiscuity of people already sated by over-indulgence of the conventional kind. (For Paul it seems that homosexuals are really heterosexuals behaving badly in a desperate search for novelty. If that was in fact the case, those heterosexuals had already lost their way before they turned to homosexuality.) What we are talking about is quite different: it’s a matter of two people whose nature makes it likely for them to be in love with some one of the same gender. It is the same phenomenon of love; there is the same tenderness, gentleness, consideration, responsiveness, heartbreak, self-giving to the other. It is love. It is characterised by lust no more than straight love is. Gays didn’t set out to be such, they didn’t want it; they probably fought off admitting it to themselves. Many who find
themselves in this position damage, even kill themselves, rather than admit even inwardly their true nature in this one regard.

Secondly we need to consider that Paul belonged to a people who had struggled for 1000 years to survive. Always threatened by invasion, often losing men in battle and women to neighbouring tribes, they had to keep their numbers up to maintain the land God had promised them. Every human being was needed, every child who would grow up to defend and till the land and care for the next generation. That was why to them waste of semen – even one male seed which to them was a potential human being - was an abomination. Every sexual encounter, every ejaculation, had to have the potential to produce a new member of the Jewish people. Thus male homosexual acts carried lethal punishment. (I find it bitterly funny that the one form of contraception which ultra-conservative Christians still allow, even recommend, is the very practice which is singled out in Genesis 38 and denounced as an abomination!)

Incomprehensible though it may be to those whose life experience has not led them to consider it, same sex attraction exists, same sex couples exist; and they love each other tenderly. They don’t imagine or invent it. To have to think about it and talk about it is new to many of us and very difficult. But this out-group has a terrible time, not primarily because of the condition per se but because of people’s negative reaction to it.

This directly relates to one of the greatest of the themes of the Bible as a whole, both Old and New Testament: God’s desire for justice. And what does the Lord require of us? **To do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with Him.**
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CHURCH OF IRELAND

PERSPECTIVES
**Civil Partnerships and the Church**

**Gordon Linney**

AT A TIME when the church is in turmoil on the subject of homosexuality in general and civil partnerships in particular, it is important to remember that throughout the history of the church there have been serious disagreements on various issues. In the first century for example circumcision and attitudes to Jewish food laws were hotly contested but those issues were sorted out within the pages of the New Testament and that settled the matter. Other issues are not so easily resolved. For example we have learned to live with two distinct and apparently conflicting attitudes to war – pacifism versus the Just War theory. Peace was at the very heart of the ministry of Jesus but while many Christians - possibly most - feel that in an imperfect world war can be justified many do not. However we do not see such a fundamental difference as being detrimental to a shared common confession of faith. Yet that seems to be where we are when it comes to the subject of homosexuality.

On the two extremes of the debate there are those, some for and some against, who allow no compromise and it is important to acknowledge that they are sincere in their beliefs. But we make a mistake if we think there are only two positions on this subject – for or against. I suspect that between the main opposing views there is a range of other views among church people, some of whom, perhaps like me, although deeply committed to the teaching of scripture and Christian tradition feel that reason leaves them less certain than they once were. This is especially true when we consider new medical insights.
and the range of sexual identity that exists within and between the genders.

Divided opinions do not only exist between groups but within individuals – genuinely anxious to say and do what is right – and yet not quite sure. I recall in the General Synod debate on women’s ordination that while wanting to support the legislation (which I did) part of me had concerns about the ecumenical consequences that might arise.

In 2004 I addressed the subject of homosexuality in a Lenten talk in Dublin’s Monkstown Parish and argued that ‘the state should enact legislation to allow gay people to have registered stable relationships with all the benefits and rights that go with that status such as inheritance law and so forth.’ This was prompted by a specific pastoral episode where a gay man was denied access to a partner of many years who was terminally ill and whose family, the legal next of kin, disapproved of the relationship ‘on moral grounds’. Since then the State has legislated for civil partnerships but leaves the moral issues unresolved for many people. So where do we go from here?

It is important for those who are heterosexual to remember what it means to enjoy an intimate and loving relationship with a person of the opposite sex. While the physical aspect of such a relationship is important it is by no means the totality of it – the essence of it is the relationship itself: ‘The mutual society help and comfort that the one ought to have of the other...’

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1 BCP 2004 Marriage 1.
It is probably true to say that the very fact of being heterosexual gives one a natural reticence in regard to homosexuality in the sense that ‘this is not for me’. But if we pause to consider that our needs for relationships as heterosexuals are felt in exactly the same way by gay people but in a same sex liaison then we might begin to understand their needs and their pain and frustration with those who don’t appear to understand. And that pain sometimes extends beyond the individual into the wider circle of family and friends. (As I write it is reported that the grave of Oscar Wilde is being restored. We would do well to pause and reflect on the shocking abuse visited on a truly wonderful human being by a homophobic and judgemental people.)

Father Donal Dorr in *Time for a Change*\(^2\) highlights the destructive influence of homophobia:

Even today, homophobia is quite widespread. This makes it extremely difficult for gays or lesbians to ‘own’ their sexuality and to give it the important place in their spirituality which it should have. Some of them try to escape from their sexual feelings entirely while others acknowledge their different orientation but only within a ‘secret world.’ Acceptance and respect by the majority for those who have a different sexual orientation will make it easier for the minority to accept themselves as they are. Acceptance by the majority and the minority of the diversity of sexual orientations will lead to an enrichment of our overall spirituality of sexuality.

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Father Dorr makes the case for dialogue and reflection but we also need to identify ways in which we can move forward at a practical level.

The introduction of Civil Partnerships puts the matter on a new footing. Gay couples now have a standing in the community; they have legal rights and protections and it is quite possible that these may be further developed. It’s a development that the churches can hardly ignore, so let’s be gracious, especially where the relationship is stable and monogamous.

Gay people and especially gay couples should be openly accepted and their status recognised in our church communities. We should never forget the rich diversity of women and men that Jesus welcomed and included into his company, often despite the protests of the holy people. And for those who cannot get the idea that ‘it is not natural’ out of their minds, courtesy and kindness cost nothing and when people come to know each other at a personal level it is amazing how attitudes change – and that can work in both directions.

But there are other more specific matters to be addressed notably the blessing of civil partnerships. There is nothing new in this kind of tension within the church. There was deep soul-searching at all levels of the church when the remarriage of divorced persons was being discussed. And over recent years it has become quite acceptable for couples to live together before marriage openly and without censure despite the statement by the Bishops that ‘The teaching of the church has been faithfulness within marriage as the normative context for
sexual expression.’³ But for some the acceptance or even toleration of homosexuality is a bridge too far.

The blessing of civil partnerships is a contentious issue but it is an issue that is there to be faced. A Pastoral Statement from the English Bishops in 2005 had this to say:

Clergy who are approached by people asking for prayer in relation to entering into a civil partnership are reminded to respond pastorally and sensitively in the light of the circumstances of each case, having regard to the teaching of the church on sexual morality, celibacy, and the positive value of committed friendships in the Christian tradition.

There is a delightful ambiguity in the last sentence so they went on:

It would not be right to produce an authorised public liturgy in connection with the registering of civil partnerships. In addition, the House of Bishops affirms that clergy of the Church of England should not provide services of blessing for those who register a civil partnership.⁴

But things have moved on and it is surely possible to find a way to recognise and celebrate ‘the positive value of committed friendships in the Christian tradition’ referred to above.

If it is to be done it should be done in an open and honest way and not flaunted as some kind of victory or defeat. This should be possible in dioceses where the bishop is supportive

³ Pastoral Letter from the House of Bishops, 2011.
and where there are clergy willing to officiate. But gay Christians in my opinion should avoid using the term ‘Marriage’. Marriage has a particular meaning and value within Christian tradition and accepting and respecting that tradition would be an important gesture by the gay community to the wider church community.

How does all this affect gay clergy? In common with other professions there have always been gay clergy in the Church of Ireland many of whom served and continue to serve with great integrity and devotion. In the past their status and their relationships were either hidden or ignored, which was cruel to them and unworthy of an institution which claims to be an advocate for truth. If the Church is prepared to acknowledge civil partnerships involving other gay couples then the same must apply to clergy. It cannot be unacceptable for clergy and acceptable for the laity. However I would add this caveat.

The relationship between clergy and people is by its nature another kind of partnership in which lifestyle can be an issue. This does not only apply to one’s sexual orientation, but is a more general thing to do with shared values and standards which apply to all clergy. Where there is a breakdown at such a level then effective ministry may no longer be possible and it would be in everyone’s interest to face that fact. Having said that, we must resist demands for a vicarious morality where things are expected of the clergy that the laity treat as optional extras for themselves and their families.

There may well be difficulties from a legal point of view in discussing personal details such as sexual orientation in any appointment process, but it would be better if clergy could be appointed to parishes without having to conceal matters that may derail their ministry later on. There is a point to be made
here about appointment processes in general in the church which is relevant. We appoint clergy with very limited experience to incumbencies with security of tenure for life, so that where appointments fail very little can be done to help the parish or the priest involved. I have long held the view that a reasonable probationary period for first incumbencies is desirable.

The House of Bishops, which reflects the diversity of opinion held across the Church of Ireland, announced in a recent Pastoral that they intend to engage in a process of reflection on these matters. They may be helped by a similar review process announced in the summer by the House of Bishops of the Church of England. They explained:

Over the past five and half years there have been several developments. Consistent with the guidelines in the Pastoral Statement a number of clergy are now in civil partnerships. The General Synod decided to amend the clergy pension scheme to improve the provision for the surviving civil partners of clergy who have died…. The review will need to take account of this changing scene. The Pastoral Statement was not concerned with clergy alone but with the whole people of God. We recognise that bishops and clergy have found ways of engaging pastorally with those in civil partnerships, both at the time of registration and subsequently. Within the Anglican tradition our theological thinking is formed by a reasoned interpretation of Scripture, within the living tradition of the Church informed by pastoral experience. The House believes there is a theological
task to be done to clarify further our understanding of the nature and status of these partnerships.\textsuperscript{5}

The most important gift apart from faith itself that the Church has to extend to humankind is the welcoming and inclusive love that so characterised the life and ministry of Jesus. He allowed nothing to get in the way of that. This has to be the chief characteristic of the Church’s mission, however we manage it, to an increasingly cynical and secular world. The issue of homosexuality presents huge difficulties for everyone, but the imperative of the Gospel is that inclusive and accepting love. All other laws and commandments are secondary to that.

\textsuperscript{5}‘Civil Partnerships and same-sex relationships’, Statement by C of E Bishops, 2011.
Communion where Convictions Divide

Andrew Pierce

BY WAY of introduction we have a parable. At Amsterdam in 1948, the World Council of Churches (WCC) was formed out of two movements: ‘Faith & Order’, concerned principally with matters of doctrine and ecclesial identity, and ‘Life & Work’, which witnessed to the unity of Christianity through concrete social engagement. To this day, the WCC embodies the tension represented by the presence of these two traditions within one institution. This tension between sustaining and articulating identity (orthodoxy), on the one hand, and witnessing to the relevance of the gospel through shared service (orthopraxy), on the other, can grow difficult to sustain. It is sometimes tempting to pick one obligation over the other. Yet, at their most creative and challenging, Christian ecumenical theologies have confronted the churches with the imperative to sustain and nourish the interrelationship between Christian identity and evangelical relevance. One without the other is not a safe option.

Those gathered at Amsterdam faced the grim reality of a post-War world, in which Christians were unable to act and speak together for peace and justice. Christian division in the West had become ingrained and institutionalised between – as the Amsterdam report puts it – broadly ‘Protestant’ and ‘Catholic’ constituencies:

The essence of our situation is that, from each side of the division, we see the Christian faith and life as a self-
consistent whole, but our two conceptions of the whole are inconsistent with each other.\(^6\)

The challenge faced at Amsterdam was that of addressing Christians who were sincerely persuaded (and who had been formed to imagine) that they had no need of the other Christian tradition. Ultimately, the Amsterdam report may be read as a call to repentance and to a new life in anticipation of God’s reign over the *oikoumene* (the whole inhabited earth). It invites us to imagine ourselves and our religious traditions as participants in something less obviously self-sufficient. What this ‘something’ is, has been at the heart of intensive and prayerful dialogue among divided Christians for more than half a century; to some it is the mystery of communion; for others it is the recovery of the church’s catholicity, wholeness or ecumenicity; others see it as a renewed awareness of the church’s mission. The key point, however, is that since 1948, many Christians have become far less convinced that their birth and upbringing in one particular tradition renders them immune from the workings of God’s grace in other traditions. *Au contraire*.

The point of this historical parable is two-fold. Like the WCC, Anglicans struggle to sustain a life-giving tension between the Reformed and Catholic dimensions of our complex identity. And, like all the major Christian traditions since the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Anglicanism has also had to contend with a further source of tension, between those more and less accommodating towards modernity (the labels ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ – often misleading – are regularly used to describe these tendencies). Sustaining tension

at the heart of its identity is not a new task for Anglicanism. That tension can be sustained, according to many Anglican thinkers, because it presupposes agreement on what is essential: disagreement over ‘inessentials’ is a hallmark of God-given diversity within the church. And, significantly, Anglicans have traditionally been slow to specify what these ‘essentials’ are – although one reading of the Lambeth Quadrilateral (1888) is that it attempted to locate essential Christian belief (Scripture, Sacraments, Creeds and Historic Episcopate). Hence, we might add in passing, the first three chapters of the proposed Anglican Covenant, are an exposition (at considerable length) of the Quadrilateral.

A recent letter to the editor of the *Church of Ireland Gazette* referred to the prospect of our current controversies becoming simply a ‘dialogue of the deaf,’ in which two constituencies talk past one another, massaging ‘our’ obvious correctness at the expense of ‘their’ evident wrong-headedness. This recalls the Amsterdam Report’s depiction of the collapse of Western Christianity into two self-sufficient, mutually-disregarding constituencies. The second point of this introduction thus concerns the nature and mission of the church: given our differing convictions, how do we engage with one another in a way that honours not only that difference, but that also upholds the more fundamental reality of God’s claim upon us in baptism, and to which we respond in a shared ecclesial life, nourished together by word and sacrament?

**Nature and Grace**

In Christian theology, the relationship between nature and grace has rightly been called *the* great ecumenical question: it lies at the heart of disputes between Christians in the east and west, and also within the west since the sixteenth
century. Theologically, ‘nature’ is that by which something is defined: we might ask, what is the nature of a table? Or of a sacrament? Or of a person? Grace denotes God’s mysterious gift of God’s very self in and with creation. Christians differ over our understandings of how grace secures an anchorage in nature.

Traditionally, the Reformed Christian tradition has stressed the limitations of nature. Nature is said to be fallen: human nature has been compromised by what St Augustine called ‘original sin,’ which he saw as a defect inherited by human beings as a result of the ‘Fall’ represented in Genesis 3. Thus the Fall of Adam and Eve carried dire consequences for God’s creation: nature – especially human nature – is presented in profoundly negative terms, even, for some, in terms of its ‘total depravity.’ Hence Martin Luther’s reaction against what he saw as a theology of ‘works’ in contemporary Catholicism: his doctrine of justification by grace through faith was intended to safeguard the divine initiative in salvation.

Reformed theology had reacted against scholastic Catholicism; in particular against its great architect and exponent, St Thomas Aquinas. Recent scholarship on Thomas has rescued him from his nineteenth century interpreters, to whom Thomas was primarily a philosopher. The ‘historical’ Thomas re-emerges, not only as a fine philosopher, but as a profoundly biblical thinker, who taught that human nature had indeed been damaged as a result of the Fall, but that it retained its fundamental orientation towards its Creator. Hence the famous dictum: Grace builds on Nature.

Divergent interpretations of Nature and Grace bring the Western debate between Catholic and Protestant Christianities
into sharp relief. A Catholic religious imagination presents nature and grace more in terms of continuity, whereas a Protestant imagination sees varying degrees of discontinuity. Note, however, that the terms in which we debate this division are profoundly western, and are deeply indebted to Augustine’s representation of the human condition: our sisters and brothers in the Eastern churches continue to view Augustine with considerable suspicion, and are far more influenced by the sunnier estimate of the human condition found in many of the Greek Fathers.

This sprint through the theological minefield of nature and grace is intended to highlight two points. First, the two Christian imaginative enclaves, to which Amsterdam drew attention, operate with significantly different understandings of the possibilities and limitations of human being. Yet, second, part of Anglicanism’s distinctiveness has been its capacity to comprehend in one ecclesial body Christians with differing (Reformed and Catholic) convictions about what it is to be a human person, created in the image and likeness of God.

**Anglican Self-Understandings**

When in dialogue with other traditions, one way in which Anglicans give an account of ourselves is by describing the history in which we have learned (and regularly have had to re-learn) the value of comprehensiveness: comprehending both the Catholic and Reformed aspects of our identity has never been easy, but, in general, Anglicans hold that it is unsafe to pursue one at the expense of the other. Another way in which we characterize ourselves is by our approach to theology: how do we make and justify truth claims about our Creator and Redeemer? How do we make moral choices? How do we respond to God in liturgy?
Faced by these kinds of questions, Anglicans have traditionally appealed to scripture, tradition and reason, and to their mutual interaction (this is not to claim that other Christian traditions ignore these three sources of authoritative insight – they manifestly do not – but it is to acknowledge that, from an early date, Anglicans were consciously wrestling with the complexity of this threefold cord.) Naturally, Anglicans differ from one another in the precise ways in which we appeal to scripture, tradition and reason, and in how we attach weight to the authority of each in relation to the others. The important point is that, when making significant theological decisions for the life of the church, as Anglicans – historically – we have debated amongst ourselves in order to discern a path that is consonant with scripture, tradition and reason, particularly when we are contemplating a change in current practice.  

This has been the case in our thinking about human slavery, for example, or about the ordination of women.

**Anglican Self-Understandings: A Concrete Example**

How, then, do Anglicans position the discussion of human sexuality in our tradition of sustained theological tension? Since Lambeth 1998, Anglicans have been in public conflict with one another over human sexuality, and in particular over the ways in which we include or exclude Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Anglicans from full participation in the life of the church.

Lambeth ’98 was not the first time that Anglican bishops discussed either same-sex relations or the authority of the Bible. Lambeth ’98 is, however, fascinatingly ambivalent in its

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7And, obviously, Anglicans are not alone in this. Evangelical Alliance Ireland, for example, produced a helpful response to the provision of Civil Partnerships for same-sex couples in the Republic.
message: a working group had reported to the bishops on human sexuality and reiterated a number of well-established findings. That report is still well worth reading. But, in addition to receiving the report with its account of this complex area of human experience, the bishops also passed a number of resolutions, which – to the eyes of Resolution 1.10’s advocates and detractors alike – suggested that the bishops’ reception of the report was remarkably selective.

Since 1998, this resolution has functioned in ways that are curiously analogous to the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in Roman Catholicism; for some it represents a disastrous blunder, to others it embodies the new issue by which the church stands or falls. But note how both sides in this debate invoke the Bible as authoritative. To some, the Bible offers a clear and negative response to LGBT Christians which has been embodied in much traditional ethical teaching and which cannot lightly be set aside. To others, that negative response is to be viewed alongside no less biblical injunctions against the eating of shellfish, or in favour of slavery: a prophetic call to holiness is always enmeshed in a culture and history, and both culture and history change. Jesus was a Galilean peasant who called his disciples in Aramaic: as his disciples today, we are no longer Aramaic-speaking Galilean peasants and artisans. Nor do we think that we should be. Repeating the past in every detail is not the same as being faithful to its authority.

When we invoke scripture, we need to remember the important difference between ‘what?’ questions and ‘so what?’ questions. ‘What?’ questions seek descriptive answers: what

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8Lambeth Conference 1998 Report, Section 1 Report ‘Called to Full Humanity,’ sub-section 3, ‘Human Sexuality.’ The extent of difference evident among the report’s writers was unlikely to be dispensed with simply by means of a resolution that flatly ignored what the report stated. See www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1998
is the Sermon on the Mount? What does it say about prayer and the moral life? ‘So what?’ questions, on the other hand, raise questions about our norms and commitments: this is the Sermon on the Mount – so what? Here is what it says about prayer and the moral life – but so what if it says this? Since both parties in the current Anglican controversy are familiar with what the Bible says, it is at the level of ‘so what?’ questions that we need to concentrate our attention.

In the brief discussion of Anglican identity, we noted how Anglicans have attempted to comprehend Catholic and Reformed imperatives within one ecclesial body. And, in pursuit of this comprehensive vision we noted how Anglican notions of authority invoke scripture, tradition and reason. It is worth thinking about how these traditional Anglican concerns with a nuanced theological equilibrium might connect with the remarks about nature and grace.

That grace builds on nature is St. Thomas’ characteristically Catholic insight; it appeals to many Anglicans for whom the wooing of divine wisdom relies on such ‘natural’ pursuits as attending to conscience, to the insights of philosophy and law, to the disciplines of natural science – or, more generally – to reflecting on the complex matter of human experience. From a more characteristically Reformed standpoint, human experience is of questionable theological value, since it is fallen experience. Where there is controversy in the church, John Calvin told his readers that they should ‘seek their determination from the pure oracles of God.’ Notice the terms in which Calvin makes his case: ‘Therefore, whenever any controversy arises, the proper course is not to settle or decide it by the will of man, but to set it at rest by the
authority of God only.’⁹ Yet, the more that we emphasize our fallenness, the more extrinsic (i.e., from outside of ourselves) and restricted our notion of divine grace must be in order to overcome the fallen nature of our experience and of the wisdom that it yields.

It is, however, very far from clear that Calvin’s estimate of the human condition appears unambiguously from the pages of scripture. And so, whilst agreeing with Calvin on the need to seek the authority of God alone, Anglicans have historically been conscious that any approach to the pure oracles of God – as these may enlighten our debates on human sexuality, for example – cannot bypass the human condition and its wisdom as preserved by tradition, and as both grasped and questioned by reason. *Sola scriptura* has never been part of Anglican theology: the Anglican Christians now in conflict with one another all read, mark, learn and inwardly digest *scriptura* – and continue to disagree, in good faith, with one another.

**Conclusion**

At the heart of our present controversy over human sexuality, Anglicans should be able to catch echoes of much older and more fundamentally significant debates that have shaped the tradition in which we now stand. In what sort of God do we believe? Is it a God from whose presence we are separated by our sin, and to whom we have access only by the inspired words of Scripture, to which we must be obedient? Or, do we stand together safely before a God whose wisdom

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creatively infuses the world of our experience, and who wills us to flourish in freedom?

Such blunt either/or questions as these are obviously crude, but they are intended to do two things. The first is to emphasize that our concerns about human behaviour are unavoidably woven into a bigger picture of our vision of God, the meanings of salvation and the life of faith. The second is to remind ourselves that divisions of this degree of magnitude have already been part and parcel of Anglican life and worship for centuries. We have learned to live with, and honour, difference. Undoubtedly we need to pay more grateful attention to this capacity to remain in communion with those with whom we disagree, perhaps profoundly.

But, let us be clear. The alternative for us is the un-churching of those with whom we disagree, and that way lies the forbidden ground of judgement.
Reviewing Lambeth '98 and the 1.10 Declaration

The Rt Revd Michael Burrows, attended the 1998 Lambeth Conference for the C of I Gazette when Rector of Bandon and our representative on the Anglican Consultative Council. This is a short version of his reflections on Resolution 1.10 on Human Sexuality, published in SEARCH 24.2. in 2001.

THE AIM OF this article is quite simple: to examine the text of Lambeth 1.10 in detail, and to reflect on how issues are raised there which impact on the everyday pastoral and worshipping life of the Church of Ireland, and expose a good deal of our own hypocrisy.

[Paragraphs of Resolution 1.10 on Human Sexuality will in what follows be cited above the writer’s comments.]

This Conference
a) Commends to the church the subsection report on human sexuality.

This paragraph is a pious reference to a subsection report which is rather broader and more balanced than is the much more narrowly focussed resolution itself. (The concluding paragraph of the subsection report is quoted near the end of this article.) The contrast between the two documents makes one wonder would Lambeth Conferences and Reports be better without resolutions at all. Sometimes it is impossible to distil the fruits of lengthy and painful theological work into a few phrases, and perhaps truth would be better served by letting a section report on a matter like sexuality
stand alone without any accompanying resolution. At least then people could see the two sides of an issue, and recognize that a way forward could only be found through a creative interplay of two at first sight irreconcilable opposites.

b) In view of the teaching of Scripture, [the Conference] upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage.

Paragraph (b) seems harmless and indeed virtuous enough in its affirmation of the marital ideal, but goes on to make an extraordinary and probably unintended statement about abstinence being “right for those who are not called to marriage”. Having watched the text of the resolution being cobbled together over the course of the conference, I believe that the implications of this particular paragraph were utterly undiscerned at the time. First of all, there is no hint of the possibility of a positive vocation to celibacy, yet this is something which should surely not have been ignored. Even more significantly, many homosexual couples do feel ‘called to marriage’, even if church and state will not at present legitimise their aspirations. Are they, therefore, provided their relationship displays a particular quality of permanence and whatever the rest of the resolution may say, not obliged to abstain?

An even deeper issue is raised by paragraph (b) in relation to heterosexual couples who choose to live together without marriage. Provided they feel ‘called to marriage’, that they have their eye on it as an aspiration for the future, 1.10 seems to be saying here that the church does not necessarily in principle disapprove of their lifestyle… And the fact is that
most of us, clergy included, turn a pretty blind eye to the cohabiting lifestyle of very many of our friends, to the extent that those who choose what Lambeth would term ‘abstinence’ prior to marriage, can feel strangely unaffirmed by fellow Christians.

Now this is all very well, but why then do many of us then come down like tons of moral bricks on homosexual couples who are living together? Have we a particular attitude problem, verging sometimes on homophobia, to the private activities of consenting gay adults? Yet a few generations ago we were undoubtedly content to accept same-sex couples in the fellowship of many of our parishes, regarding them as good friends who shared a house and were clearly blessed in their friendship. Now all is different, such friendships are regarded with suspicion and there is the virtual equivalent of a moral witch-hunt.

c) [The Conference] recognizes 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 experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptized, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ.

This paragraph very graciously (I am tempted to write ‘patronizingly’) recognizes that the church contains people who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. However the second sentence seems to say
implicitly that such people should be seeking ‘God’s transforming power’ so as to bring about a reorientation of their sexuality. The thought is not explicitly stated but it certainly lurks beneath the surface. Yet we all know how many miserable lives and marriages have resulted from notions of this sort.

Then comes, from the point of view of the gay community, the one positive nugget in Resolution 1.10, the one amendment sympathetic to their situation that was actually carried. The bishops and the churches from which they come ‘commit [themselves] to listen to the experience of homosexual persons’. It is to this phrase that the people who might otherwise feel so damaged and hurt by 1.10 cling, in the hope of positive action – after all, it is a *sine qua non* of listening that those who do it may actually be won over or have their minds broadened as they listen to the arguments and experience of a speaker.

But what single thing has been done in the Church of Ireland, despite all the discussion and indeed glorification of Lambeth 1.10, to act upon this section of the Resolution? What synod has suspended its standing orders to allow for a presentation from gay people who might have the courage to tell their stories and speak of their hurt? How many parishes have taken specific action to ensure that their gay members are acknowledged, affirmed and heard? But the voices of gay people, and indeed their parents, need to be heard so that the individuals concerned can find mutual support, affirmation, and insight within the church’s fellowship.

The final part of paragraph (c) affirms that all baptized and believing persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ; yet in paragraph (e) we are told
that the ordaining of practicing homosexuals cannot be ‘advised’:

\[e\) Cannot advise the legitimizing or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions;\]

Now how can a group of people be, on the one hand, full members of the Body of Christ and yet, on the other, be barred *en bloc* from ordination? Again this untidy Resolution, despite all the faith which has been placed in it, appears to contradict itself. To exclude a whole group even from consideration for ordination because they are – so to speak – made in a particular way, is about as sensible as the non-ordination of women for centuries now seems to be in retrospect.

The whole issue of gay clergy in the Church of Ireland is one of unmentioned challenges. Bishops dare not know if someone they are ordaining is ‘practicing’ their sexuality or not, and so their capacity to offer appropriate pastoral care is reduced. Yet most clergy fortunate enough to be happily married know in their hearts that it is unjust to require ‘abstinence’ for life from their homosexual colleagues for whom marriage is not available. They know too that homosexuals are no more inclined than heterosexuals to be promiscuous or to abuse trust placed in them when, for example, working with children. But at the end of the day this writer is aware of able clergy lost to the Church of Ireland on account of their sexual orientation, of clergy who have painfully and stressfully led secret double lives for years, of clergy who ‘dare not speak love’s name’ for fear of the consequences.
The conflict between the assurance in paragraph (c) and the ‘advice’ in (e) illustrates the fact that the church continues to live in a world of convenient double think, suggesting that a different code of moral behaviour applies to the clergy as opposed to everyone they strive to serve. Yet clergy, notwithstanding their leadership role, are sinners and possessors of broken spirits too; they reflect the reality of the life of the Body of Christ from which they come, as opposed to standing in judgment on it. It seems wrong in principle to set up moral absolutes that apply to clergy but are changed or overlooked in the case of other members of the people of God. Clergy do not need to inhabit some kind of separate moral realm.

*d* While rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, [this Conference] calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialization and commercialization of sex;

Paragraph (d) could be the basis for a paper in itself and here there is no point trying to repeat the plethora of scriptural reflection provided elsewhere. The paragraph makes an amazing broad-brush statement about the incompatibility of homosexual practice with Scripture; it is comparable to a piece of sublime ivory-towered certainty emanating from the Vatican on an off-day. One has to ask whether the compilers of these phrases realised that the kind of neo-fundamentalist reading of Scripture lurking beneath this section would have made it quite impossible for women to be ordained or to exercise headship within the congregation. We might as well return to the world of slavery to boot. Nothing is said of the relationship between Gospel and culture, of the insights of psychology, of the fact that none of this moral fervour concerns the core of Christian
doctrine or the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet here as in other parts of the Lambeth 1998 Report, we can detect a narrow biblicism which seems to have little in common with the traditional Anglican appeal to Scripture through the lens of reason.

Paragraph (d) goes on to condemn ‘irrational fear of homosexuals’. It is a pity that during the debate the word ‘homophobia’ was replaced by this phrase, supposedly to ensure clarity of meaning but perhaps with a more devious intent. If there is such a thing as ‘irrational fear of homosexuals’, there might also be such a thing as ‘rational fear of homosexuals’, and one dreads to speculate just what that might be perceived to be. The rest of (d) is in fairness much more laudable, and it is a pity that these items have been rather side-lined because of the preoccupation with homosexuality. We all know what huge issues violence within marriage and indeed child abuse and incest within apparent tranquil domesticity were in the bad old days of the hidden Ireland. These matters, so hastily alluded to in the Resolution, seem connected to what is objectively great evil, and rather place our unease and angst over gay priests in perspective.

It may well be with reference to paragraph (e) that the blessing of same-sex unions is not currently [i.e. in 2001] a great issue in Ireland in the same manner as it is in the USA or Canada. Let us not beguile ourselves, however – this issue will hit us openly sooner or later. And surely, incidentally, saying a few informal prayers seeking God’s guidance and blessing for a same gender couple in a relationship of long-term commitment does not involve an implication that such a relationship is necessarily in any wise equivalent to marriage. Those who argue that such praying is always a blatant attempt to engage in marrying are being rather unsubtle.
\textit{f) Requests the Primates and the ACC to establish a means of monitoring the work done on the subject of human sexuality in the Communion and to share statements and resources among us.}

At the Anglican Consultative Council of 1999 one of the principal items on the agenda was a practical opportunity for us to listen to the experiences of homosexual people. Yet the same ACC found itself unable to agree on a clear definition of the human rights of homosexual people, despite a request from the Anglican Peace and Justice Network to do so in the aftermath of 1.10, which the Network perceived had placed homosexuals in certain parts of the world under fresh strain.

Lambeth 1.10 is, all in all, a most extraordinary document. It does precisely nothing to affirm human sexuality as God-given, good in itself, and something for which to be profoundly thankful. The word ‘love’ never appears in the Resolution itself in relation to human intimacy, although it does appear in the much fuller and more balanced sub-section report, where the authors confess to not being ‘of one mind about homosexuality’ and offer various ways of viewing it which might be held by a conscientious Christian. The last paragraph of that sub-section report is worth quoting in full because there for once the traditional language of Anglican wisdom seems to be heard:

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 in him. Those who understand themselves as homosexuals, no more and no less than those who do not, are liable to false understandings based on personal or
family histories, emotional dispositions, social settings and solidarities formed by common experiences or ambitions. Our sexual affections can no more define who we are than can our class, race or rationality. At the deepest ontological level, therefore, there is no such thing as ‘a’ homosexual or ‘a’ heterosexual; there are human beings, male and female, called to redeemed humanity in Christ, endowed with a complex variety of emotional potentialities and threatened by a complex variety of forms of alienation.

This article has been an attempt to set some issues in human sexuality, particularly in our Irish context, against the text of the Lambeth Resolution 1.10 and to demonstrate how that resolution fails tests of both coherence and balance. It certainly provides no blueprint for individual conduct in this highly sensitive area, and does not deserve to become part of the corpus of truly seminal Lambeth utterances. So it is hard to comprehend the strength of feeling which seems to surround 1.10 – one would sometimes think it had become an appendix to the historic creeds.

Who knows what will happen next? For the present all we can do is open up the issues and hope that Irish people in particular are prepared to be open with each other about them. For too long shame and intolerance have surrounded many of these issues in the Church of Ireland and have obscured and distorted the real substance of the Gospel. After all, none of these things should be near the pinnacle of the hierarchy of truths.
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FACING REALITY
Homosexuality - Moving on?

Elizabeth Butler

UNTIL the late 1970s I don’t suppose I ever gave any serious thought to the issue of homosexuality. Of course I recognised its existence, but considered it to be a mode of lifestyle chosen, and followed, by a minority. Probably in my subconscious I felt that the sobriquet ‘queer’ was apposite. Certainly I experienced no vehement anti feelings, rather I seem to recall that, at the time, the topic of homosexuality featured frequently and at all times laboriously within the realms of popular spy/political fiction, and amongst the offerings of some stand-up television comics. In contrast I know that my awareness encompassed a puzzled yet deep admiration for the extraordinary gifted nature of homosexuals and their contribution to the aesthetic world down the ages: the latter extending from the artistic genius of, for example, Michelangelo, to poets, writers, musicians and to those endowed with outstanding talent on the stage – all contributing to the pleasure of the many. Today such recollections seem mundane, but they are part and parcel of faithful memory revealing the limits of my interest in the issue.

Enlightenment

Some time, in or about 1978, and then onwards through the next two decades, my knowledge and understanding of the homosexual status increased. It grew, unsought, through my medical work, and occurred in a somewhat circuitous manner. This gradual change took place in the following way. I will explain only briefly!
A significant part of my professional commitment as a clinical haematologist incorporated the responsibility for, and the care of, the Northern Ireland population of patients suffering from the lifelong, inherited bleeding disorder – haemophilia. The nature of their treatment necessitated the frequent, sometimes two to three times a week, administration of intravenous blood products in order to correct their clotting factor deficiency, and stop their bleeding, which, on occasion, was life-threatening in character. By the early 1980s such ‘blood products’ became virally contaminated. Ultimately the virus was identified and soon became known globally as HIV. Thus, the international haemophiliac population became involved in the tragic HIV pandemic and all its attendant problems of AIDS.

It is well known that the first infected patients identified were from within the homosexual population of San Francisco. By 1964 other infected groups were identified, including drug addicts and the haemophiliacs. Later, it became evident that inevitably the infection progressed to heterosexual transmission, but for the first few years the homosexual mode of transmission dominated the reporting both in medical literature and within the media. The drug addicts acquired their infection through the interchange of contaminated needles; the haemophiliacs through their medical treatment. The latters’ blood products were prepared from pooled plasma from as many as 25,000 donors per batch. Subsequently the problem was resolved by the introduction of HIV testing for all blood donors, but of course the damage had been done.

In order to disseminate information, and derive the best possible case for the HIV patients, local, national and international committees were convened. Northern Ireland was no exception. The number of haemophiliacs being small, they
did not warrant separate arrangements, therefore all medical and allied personnel involved with the problem, regardless of the mode of infection, held joint meetings and consultations. In parallel the United Kingdom haemophilia patient group developed linkages with the Terence Higgins Trust Body Positive and the London Lighthouse – organisations all directed towards helping the afflicted homosexual population. Later the British Council of Churches organised London meetings to consider the problems of all HIV sufferers. I attended, representing the Northern Province of the Church of Ireland. Thus, from all these sources I was able to meet with, and listen to, many homosexuals and on many occasions.

Orientation

Almost immediately I learned that homosexual orientation has very little to do with choice. Most indicated that their sexual preference just happened/developed in or around puberty. They realised that they were different. A few felt that it had always been present, at least from around the age of eight or nine. All expressed the same difficulty. No one wanted to know, discuss or help with the problem. Advice was sought from parents, godparents, clergy, teachers and youth leaders but to no avail. The responses were couched in the form of ‘grow up’, ‘take a cold shower’ or ‘it’s just all in your mind’. Hence, the majority decided that it was better and wiser to keep quiet. Thereafter a few did nothing, and made the best of the situation. Others sought out like-minded folk, for company, companionship and sexual solace. Some embarked down pathways which led to overt or hidden disaster.

I met individuals from all walks of life, academics, postmen, clergymen, ballet dancers, doctors, ex-prisoners etc. The more I heard the more I pondered. I came to the
conclusion that the issues were complex! Eventually, I postulated at least to myself that most likely there was a spectrum of homosexuality. The differing degrees seem to range from celibate orientation to bisexuality, through lifelong partnership to overt promiscuity. I came to the view that probably it is the last mentioned which figures in the oft-quoted biblical references. At this point I found myself comparing homosexual and heterosexual promiscuity. I came to the conclusion that both are equally loathsome, evil and sinful. In sharp contrast I spent three days staying with a couple who had been in partnership for thirty years. It was an enlightening experience. I was struck by their steadfastness and their caring attitude to one another, their guest, and indeed to their entire neighbourhood. The visit was short, but long enough for me to realise that their mode of living encapsulated a very real ‘Christian’ way of life. Sadly they had little time for the conventional church – ‘it had let them down’.

Now I come to the very salient question: what is homosexuality? I don’t know the answer. However I hope that the medical profession (I confess to some bias in this direction), particularly those involved in the fields of genetics and developmental medicine, may one day elucidate the problem. In the interim I have come to realise that we all, and especially the Church, have a role to play. I suspect that it is the vehement anti feelings that drive the homosexually orientated down the pathways of disaster. If there were more tolerance, would trips to Clapham Common and the haunting of public lavatories etc be avoided? I cannot be sure, but I am sure that it is these very activities which continue to fuel the reluctance to discuss the issue in an open and fair manner. Little constructive discussion takes place about the other side of homosexuality.
Finally the last sentence brings me to consider the acceptance or otherwise of a homosexually orientated bishop within the Anglican Communion. Initially I felt that Gene Robinson’s election in New Hampshire was ill-advised and premature. I thought that the Church was not yet ready to take such a giant step forward. Now, on reflection, I take the opposite view. It may well transpire to be the very situation required to enable the entire problem to be debated and considered in its totality. It is to be hoped that Church members will give serious thought to the subject, and communicate their thoughts to the Bishops for ongoing deliberation by the committee under the chairmanship of the Primate.

I cannot believe that Our Lord would withhold his blessing from many of the individuals that I have met during the past twenty years. Therefore, how could I reject a Bishop, simply on the grounds of his personal sexual orientation? To be honest, initially I did but now I am in contented acceptance.

Conclusion

Writing this in 2004, I have had the opportunity and privilege of enhancing my knowledge and understanding of homosexuality as encompassed within the article. However it would be fallacious to say that now I fully comprehend. I do not; I am still perplexed and in ignorance, but, surely, surely I have moved on…

This article was first published in Catalyst, No. 11, 2004.
Science, Faith and Sexual Orientation

The scientific literature on sexuality is vast and complex for a non-scientist readership. The following comments by Dr. Jack Drescher on what science says about homosexuality, and by Jeff Lutes on the causes of sexual orientation, are reproduced with permission from the publication ‘What the Science says and doesn’t say about homosexuality’ (www.soulforce.org)

What Science says and doesn’t say about Homosexuality

Jack Drescher

IT CAN BE difficult to negotiate the terrain of science and faith. That scientific findings do, in fact, shape and change religious beliefs, is proven by history. Such changes can take a long time and spark social turmoil. Consider the example of Galileo Galilei, a scientist whose research demonstrated the earth revolved around the sun.

Though no Christians today argue about whether the earth is round, five hundred years ago most Christians, based on the Bible, believed the sun revolved around a flat earth. They could not integrate their reverence for the authority of Scripture with Galileo’s scientific work. The Church tried Galileo and condemned him for heresy in 1633, banning the publication of his scientific work. Still under house arrest, Galileo died in 1642. Yet in the following century, as the weight of scientific evidence proved the earth revolved around
the sun, Galileo was reburied in hallowed ground, and the Church allowed his scientific work to be published. In 1992, 350 years after his death, Pope John Paul II expressed regret for Galileo’s treatment by the church.

Similarly in our own time, people of faith find themselves challenged by new scientific findings. For example, while the causes of homosexuality (or heterosexuality, for that matter) are unknown, research strongly suggests both a biological and environmental component to the development of a person’s sexual orientation. Such findings have troubled those whose religious leaders and perspectives teach that heterosexuality is the God-ordained standard; that homosexuality is unnatural; and that no one is ‘born gay’.

Ultimately, however, science cannot decide the moral question of whether our society should treat same-sex relationships as a normal form of human expression. What we do with scientific discoveries is always mediated through culture. Even if science were one day to prove an incontrovertible genetic basis for homosexuality, those who disagree might then simply label homosexuality a genetic disease or disorder.
What causes sexual orientation?

Jeff Lutes

THE MOST honest answer is that mainstream scientists do not yet know for sure what causes sexual orientation, be it heterosexual or homosexual. The American Psychological Association states:

Most scientists today agree that sexual orientation is most likely the result of a complex interaction of environmental, cognitive, and biological factors. In most people, sexual orientation is shaped at an early age. There is also considerable recent evidence to suggest that biology, including genetic or inborn hormonal factors, play a significant role in a person’s sexuality. In summary, it is important to recognize that there are probably many reasons for a person’s sexual orientation and the reasons may be different for different people.10

Unfortunately, the question itself can be problematic. While it is certainly a legitimate scientific query, it is associated with paradigms that view homosexuality as a disorder, illness, or abnormality with causes that need explanation. (When was the last time you heard anyone ask ‘What causes heterosexuality?’) Implicit is the assumption that since the majority of people are heterosexual, heterosexuality is normal (and in no need of explanation), while any deviation from the norm is not.

The scientific community believes sexual orientation to be a complex mix of both biological and environmental factors, yet many religious leaders and organizations continue to perpetuate the myth that homosexuality is caused by family problems or poor parenting—even though these theories were discredited by the mainstream social-science community several decades ago.

The Kinsey Institute conducted interviews with almost one thousand homosexuals and five hundred heterosexuals to examine a variety of possible determinants of sexual orientation. Participants answered extensive questions about family dynamics, childhood sexual experiences, the quality of the connection with their parents and peers, and dating experiences. The results found that gay men and lesbian women were no more likely to have overbearing mothers, distant fathers, or to have experienced sexual abuse than their heterosexual counterparts.¹¹

Most medical and mental-health professionals now believe, based on consistent genetic and prenatal brain research findings, that biology (nature) more than nurture, influences sexual orientation.¹²

THE ROYAL College of Psychiatrists wishes to clarify that homosexuality is not a psychiatric disorder.

In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association concluded there was no scientific evidence that homosexuality was a disorder and removed it from its diagnostic glossary of mental disorders. The International Classification of Diseases of the World Health Organization followed suit in 1992.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists holds the view that lesbian, gay and bisexual people are and should be regarded as valued members of society who have exactly similar rights and responsibilities as all other citizens. This includes equal access to healthcare, the rights and responsibilities involved in a civil partnership, the rights and responsibilities involved in procreating and bringing up children, freedom to practise a religion as a lay person or religious leader, freedom from harassment or discrimination in any sphere and a right to protection from therapies that are potentially damaging, particularly those that purport to change sexual orientation.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists believes strongly in evidence-based treatment. There is no sound scientific evidence that sexual orientation can be changed. Furthermore, so-called treatments of homosexuality create a setting in which prejudice and discrimination flourish.
There is now a large body of research evidence that indicates that being gay, lesbian or bisexual is compatible with normal mental health and social adjustment. However, the experiences of discrimination in society and possible rejection by friends, families and others, such as employers, means that some lesbian, gay and bisexual people experience a greater than expected prevalence of mental health and substance misuse problems.

*Good Psychiatric Practice* clearly states: ‘A psychiatrist must provide care that does not discriminate and is sensitive to issues of gender, ethnicity, colour, culture, lifestyle, beliefs, sexual orientation, age and disability’ (page 12, point 13). The Royal College of Psychiatrists expects all its members to follow *Good Psychiatric Practice*.  

15 February 2010

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LISTENING TO
GAY PEOPLE
AWARENESS of the existence of gay and lesbian clergy is high among our Anglican neighbours in the Church of England and the North American Anglican Provinces. In contrast, gay clergy in the Church of Ireland are relatively invisible. In relation to the issue of homosexuality the general Church of Ireland policy seems to be ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’. While this approach can provide some space for gay and lesbian clergy to exist within the Church of Ireland, it falls far short of the acceptance of gay and lesbian clergy which has been achieved in other provinces of the Anglican Communion. Furthermore, it perpetuates invisibility, requires dishonesty, and fails to facilitate the much heralded ‘Listening Process’.

The Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of the Church of Ireland, *Human Sexuality*, issued in September 2003 stated that:

Where there is dialogue within the dioceses and between local communities, it should above all include those who are most immediately affected by the discussion.

We have seen little evidence of this being put into practice on the ground with respect to gay and lesbian clergy, who have not been offered assurances that they would not be disciplined by making themselves known. If gay and lesbian
clergy are too afraid to come forward, because of their fear of homophobia and their concern about being disciplined, how are they to be listened to? If the Bishops and senior officers of the Church of Ireland are inhibited or lack the knowledge or willingness to engage with gay and lesbian clergy, how can a full ‘Listening Process’ take place?

One reason for the predicament of gay and lesbian persons in the Church of Ireland, and of gay clergy in particular, has been suggested by the Bishop of Cork, Rt. Revd. Paul Colton. The Bishop said that ‘because the presenting issue of the controversy within Anglicanism appears to be human sexuality, one result is that gay people have become scapegoats in what is a more deep-seated constitutional crisis’.

He elaborated that:

Therefore, gay people in lay and ordained leadership…..or those who have been driven away by a sense of rejection, together with gay people in the community outside the Church need to know and to hear our apology. Gay people in the Church have been caught in the middle of a row which is primarily about the way different Anglicans read, approach and understand the Holy Scriptures, the Bible.¹⁴

It is not clear how the Bishops collectively intend to move from expressions of regret for prejudice to effective action to change prejudice. In the meantime developments within both the Anglican Communion and wider society are working to increase the visibility of gay and lesbian clergy and

¹⁴ Church of Ireland press release 12/06/06 www.ireland.anglican.org/
to change their status within the Church of Ireland. Dioceses of The Episcopal Church in North America and of the Church of England have for decades accepted openly gay clergy, including partnered gay clergy. Furthermore, same sex civil partnerships were made legal in Northern Ireland in 2005 and in the Republic in 2011 and clergy of the Church of Ireland are legally entitled to enter into them. The Church of Ireland Pensions Board has acknowledged the existence of clergy in civil partnerships and now treats civil partners the same as spouses in its pension scheme.

In a study published in 2008 in *Search: A Church of Ireland Theological Journal* (vol. 31, no. 2) I carefully considered the question of the numerical presence of male gay clergy in Church of Ireland parishes. My main method for counting the presence of gay clergy is through direct personal enquiries to gay clergy who are known to me. As a clergyman I have been privileged to provide a small measure of pastoral care to gays and lesbians, including clergy, for the past 30 years. In 2008 I was able to record at least 65 gay clergy as having served in the Church of Ireland since World War II. These clergymen had on average each served in four parishes. By noting from *Crockford’s Clerical Directory* and other sources all the individual parishes where these gay clergy have come from, served in and retired to, what becomes clear is that by my reckoning a majority (235 of 464) of parishes in the Church of Ireland have had an experience of a gay clergyman in the period from the second world war.

By drawing attention to the not insignificant number of gay clergy in the Church of Ireland and by showing how they are or have been serving in all parts of the Church, it becomes clear that the issue of gay and lesbian clergy is not a distant or abstract issue but part of the reality of parish life in Ireland.
Most of the gay clergy were/are highly respected, and their ministry was acceptable in each place, but of course the parishes did not know about their sexuality. Most of the gay clergy counted above would also have been invited annually to visit other parishes as Harvest Preachers. Therefore the combination of clergy, both resident and as visiting preachers means it would not be an exaggeration to claim that that it is likely that the large majority of parishioners have heard a gay clergyman preach. More recently a number of gay clergy have become publicly known throughout the Church, e.g. Dean Tom Gordon, who is supported by both his local congregation and by his Bishop.

Through my work with Changing Attitude Ireland we have initiated a number of meetings called ‘Listening to Gay Christians’. At one of these with a clerical rural deanery in the Diocese of Down the clergy present said it was the first time they had participated in such a discussion with a gay Christian. They said they welcomed the opportunity for dialogue and declared it would help them in the pastoral care which they recognized they should provide to gays and lesbians within their parishes.

Furthermore, it is evident that gay clergy are to be found in all shades of churchmanship in the Church of Ireland, from catholic to evangelical. While the greater acceptance of gay clergy within the catholic tradition is generally recognized, the presence of gays within the evangelical tradition is less well known. In this regard I may draw on my own experience of a large evangelical Belfast Parish. Over a period of thirty years I have become aware of twelve gay Church of Ireland persons, including Sunday school teachers, choir members and former members of the Boys Brigade and Christian Endeavour. They
were all actively engaged in the work of the parish, but of course homosexuality was never discussed. Of these twelve, six were members of the Fellowship of Vocation. Three were ordained and one became a diocesan reader. Three persons originally from that parish but now living elsewhere have entered into civil partnership - one after 26 years, one after 16 years and one after 8 years. Each had a service of blessing, one at home and two in church.15

In conclusion, gay laity and clergy are and have been part of the Church of Ireland for many decades. If we are to be a truly open and inclusive church, then we need to find ways to welcome them by our words and actions. What is needed is a listening exercise at rural deanery and diocesan level where clergy and lay church members get to meet in person some of the gay and lesbian Christians who serve and worship in our churches. The challenge is how to release them from invisibility, to value them and draw on their particular experience as part of a meaningful ‘Listening Process’ with gay and lesbian Christians.

15Two of the Services of Blessing took place in 2004, prior to the introduction of Civil Partnership.
I AM AN evangelical Anglican. I moved to a large town in Northern Ireland, and after a time began going to my local Church of Ireland church in 2000. I was made people's churchwarden that year, then rector's warden the following year, a post which I held for three years. I was a regular contributor of articles to our parish magazine and did not miss an issue for four years. I attended the weekly Bible study. As churchwarden I went to church twice every Sunday. I was on the rota for reading the lessons and I sometimes did the intercessions at communion services.

Church was kind of my second home; I loved the people and they loved me. In late 2001 I joined the Fellowship of Vocation and commenced a part time theology degree at the local university. I went to the Selection Conference in 2004 and was selected for training for the ministry.

I was single from when I started going to the church until I met someone in 2003. I had never been in a same sex relationship before, but I had certainly queried my sexuality before I met my partner. She came to church with me occasionally although for several reasons it was not easy for her to do so often.

In summer 2004 I went to hand my magazine article to the rector. She did not take it, but said she would not be using ‘that’. ‘My place, 3 o'clock’. I was terrified and felt sick the rest of the day. I felt like someone might catch something from me, like I was an agent of Satan or something. I went to the rectory at 3pm where she began by saying I'd made a liar of her. She questioned my relationship with my partner. This
whole homosexual thing was a bit new to me and I wasn't ready to admit to it, so I denied it all and the rector softened a bit, but reminded me of her views on the subject.

Several weeks later she cornered me in the vestry, asking what my partner was doing ‘there’. ‘Is she there to tease and to tantalise?’ She spat the words at me. I continued to deny it. I took the view that I would come out when I was ready, not before. I was at the time writing my dissertation: ‘A pastoral and theological response to homosexuality’. I hoped that by the time I got through it that I would be on firmer ground theologically speaking and maybe ready for the rocky road ahead.

I finished my dissertation and sent a copy to the Bishop along with a letter resigning from the Fellowship of Vocation. I thought the Bishop was a safer bet than my Director of Ordinands, and so it turned out. A week later I admitted the situation to my rector who had already removed me from the readers list and stopped me doing the intercessions. She told me I would have to resign from the select vestry, which I wasn't keen to do: on what grounds?

Although she didn't ban me from anything else at that time, it was not long before I was in a healing service and she was praying the dark things out of the church, ‘anything that is not of You’ and whilst praying in agreement with this I did consider that I might be one of those dark things. That night she asked me to come down to the church on Monday evening as ‘some of us would like to talk to you’. I assumed ‘some of us’ would be three or four of her closest parishioners but in fact turned out to be eight plus her, and two more would have been there except they had prior engagements - (one was a 17-year-old boy!) Lamb to the slaughter... And I guess that was what Jesus did when he went to Jerusalem, which is I guess why I
went there that night. The folk were in tears. I was very upset too. I did love them and they did love me, after all. She told me how wrong it was that I had gone for communion with my partner not long before that: ‘You put me in a terrible position.’ People told me Satan had veiled my eyes, that Scripture was black and white, that the Bible says . . . that it was an affront to see me worship God. And it was made clear that I would not be welcome at the Lord's table again. I tried to say something, to tell a little of my story but was cut off pretty quickly.

When I was told that I wasn't welcome to receive communion any more I called a halt and said I would leave. The rector gave me a hug and blessed me. I haven't been back although I have run into some folk since and they have been pleased to see me and one commented that some of them felt they had been rushed into that Monday night meeting without enough time to think about it.

I was disappointed as I had been under the impression that a homosexual was entitled to be a full and active lay member of the church. The Bishop did point me in the direction of a more accommodating church, but losing ‘communion’ with the church that was home, that was just down the road from my house, has been painful and has shaken my faith to its core. Recovery has been very slow. I am not the same Christian as I was before - much more cynical and wary, but being accepted in the other church has been helpful.
FOR MOST PEOPLE, their wedding day is one of the most significant in their lives. It is an occasion of solemnity and of celebration, as the couple makes deeply personal lifelong commitments in the presence of their family, friends and community. For most committed Christians, the natural context for this important rite of passage is the church to which they belong: the building with its personal or family resonances, the carefully designed liturgy, the appropriate and familiar readings and music. As well as declaring their commitment, the couple seeks the help of God and of their community to uphold their vows, and gives public thanks for the blessings and joys of human love. The church (of whichever denomination) thus fulfils an important aspect of its pastoral mission by supporting its members at this crucial point in their lives.

All denominations have members who are gay, and those who are in committed relationships now have an opportunity (and a right under law in both jurisdictions on this island) to enter into civil partnerships. This new situation demands an appropriate pastoral response from the churches, but sadly this has been slow to emerge. We believe that most members of any congregation, when confronted with a gay couple in their midst who wish to formalise and publicly acknowledge their relationship, are likely to respond generously, being guided by the central message of the Gospel: ‘Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.’ (John 13:34).
This has certainly been our experience. In November 2011 we registered as civil partners, having been in a committed relationship for twelve years. We are active members of a small Irish Protestant congregation, and felt a great need to add a spiritual dimension to what we felt would be a rather arid civil ceremony. After careful consideration, our local church council acceded to our request to hold a service of prayer and thanksgiving’ to mark our civil partnership. This took place in the church on the day after the civil ceremony. Though present and fully supportive, our minister was prevented by current church policy from taking part; instead the service was led by two close friends - both lay persons with experience of conducting worship - and members of the congregation gave the readings and led the prayers. The entire service (including the sermon) was drafted by us, largely modelled on the ‘Form of prayer and dedication after a civil marriage’ found in the Church of Ireland Book of Common Prayer. And the music was splendid!

For us the service was profoundly significant, both for its content and for the response it received from the congregation present on the day (numbering about 100). It was dignified, moving and joyous in equal measure. During the service we placed our committed relationship before God, pledged fidelity to each other, sought the affirmation and support of the congregation, and offered thanks and praise for all the blessings of God’s creation. Many members of the congregation afterwards commented on the remarkable atmosphere they felt in the church that day – full of warmth, joy, and Christian love.

Such observations serve to confirm the essential message of Charles’s sermon (below): that the ‘grassroots’ of
the churches have an innate understanding of the Christian Gospel of love, and will readily embrace pastoral leadership based on Christ’s message of justice, compassion and inclusivity. We are acutely aware that at present many other gay couples do not have the good fortune to belong to a church or congregation which would allow such a service. Let us hope that the churches will not delay too long in recognising their undeniable pastoral responsibilities towards a significant minority in their pews.

Sermon at the Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving to mark our Civil Partnership

‘God’s word is a fire in their bones that they can hold in no longer.’ Surely most people at some point in their lives have burned with the need to say what they can hold in no longer? How often have we felt that overwhelming need, a fervour to stand up and speak out for what we know is right, what is just, and what also for many is the message of Christ?

‘God’s word is a fire in their bones that they can hold in no longer.’ There can be little doubt that what is described in these words from Jeremiah is one of those pivotal moments in life when one realises – in utter crystal clarity – that something is intrinsically wrong, profoundly and completely at odds with what is right. Maybe even at odds with conventional belief or morals. What better example can there be than those who first stood up against slavery in the eighteenth century? A system based on greed and racism; one which was predicated upon the idea that those of black skin were somehow inferior and could be treated as chattels – to be bought and sold.

I am sure that by now you can see the direction this meditation is taking. Over the generations so many gay people
have ‘burned with a fire in their bones’ not even for equality, but simply to be rid of the daily burden they carry. How many have felt obliged by social convention to marry a member of the opposite sex and in doing so not only ruined their own lives, but those of their spouses too? Unfulfilled lives blighted through incommunicable frustrations: the gay spouse leading a life full of misery and daily dread, while the straight partner experiences bewilderment and dejection. Surely, these are the ultimate conditions to nurture low esteem and self-hatred? I wonder how many inexplicable suicides from past years were the fruits of society’s compulsive hatred of that which was different from the norm - from the majority?

The minister of this congregation often sums up debate by calling us ever to keep in mind that while the majority might carry the day that doesn’t mean that they are inevitably correct in the view taken or the decision made. So, as odd as it might sound, being part of a minority is often something to be thankful for – something liberating! It makes one engage one’s brain; to question the ‘what’, the ‘why’ and the ‘wherefore’.

For the minority who are gay - what a change we have seen in recent years! At last people like us can begin to take a pride in ourselves. But more importantly we now know that our sexuality is so ordinary and so everyday that it is no longer what defines us. But most of the Christian Churches have a long journey still to travel on this issue. They have chosen to stick doggedly to Old Testament passages which, as well as flying in the face of the Christian message, are utterly at odds with human experience and social science - that same science which, to my mind, the more it discovers about the world, the more it reveals of the existence of God Almighty.
While the Bible is undoubtedly God’s word, we have to accept that rigid applications of what it has to say cannot always be what God intends his written word to convey to us today. Many social conventions in today’s world appear to be against God’s word in the Bible, yet for some reason we feel free to pick and choose what to accept or discard. For example: numerous passages in the Bible indicate that lending money to earn interest is wrong, yet as we have so recently learned to our bitter cost our whole society is built on this very principle! But when it comes to homosexuality the Christian churches in general hold rigorously to the traditional line, allowing some of the nastiest of human frailties to bubble up to the surface.

But, as so often happens with change, its initial buds appear at grassroots level, in a small and often almost unnoticed way. Small groups of people; local congregations; quietly held meetings of laity, ministers and priests who recognise in each other a yearning for change.

In 1960 Harold Macmillan spoke of the ‘winds of change’ then blowing through the continent of Africa. Those three small words ‘winds of change’ were loaded with portent, for change was indeed coming. Those same three little words can be applied in so many circumstances, because change, and more importantly the human ability to instigate change (even in the face of the fiercest opposition) is unquenchable. Justice knows no bounds; like water it will naturally level out, treating all the same. The Vatican must have felt the winds of change when recently it tried to silence Fr. Owen O’Sullivan, a Capuchin priest, who wrote in the Catholic magazine The Furrow that homosexuality is ‘simply a facet of the human condition’ and that imposed celibacy is ‘unnatural’. Further, he said that any distinction between ‘being homosexual’ and ‘doing homosexual acts’ is phoney. The Congregation for the
Doctrine of Faith responded by banning any further publication of Fr. O’Sullivan’s views. But the grassroots struck back: the Irish Association of Catholic Priests issued a statement noting that it was ‘dispiriting and discouraging that an important and necessary exploration of the interface of theology and pastoral life, as represented by the writings of Owen O’Sullivan, is now regarded as unacceptable’.

So the winds of change are blowing. Currently, the Methodist Church in Ireland is looking at the whole issue of human sexuality in the context of Society and the Church. It has canvassed widely for opinion and, most encouragingly, from gay people in particular. We can be thankful that at least one Christian Church on this island recognises that perhaps this whole issue is far more complex and complicated than the Book of Leviticus might suggest.

The views of Senator David Norris are widely quoted in relation to Civil Partnership. One of his observations concerned an incident in the Church of Ireland. He said: ‘The Bishop of Tuam recently issued an edict forbidding ceremonies of affirmation of the friendship and love of a lesbian couple. I thought that was extraordinary. I wrote to the Bishops of the Church of Ireland some years ago asking them to interfere to stop the parades at Drumcree - and they said they could not … They can interfere and intervene to stop a service that affirms love and friendship but they cannot apparently stop one that foments and spreads hatred and division. The day after I thought this, I listened on the radio to a charming priest of the Roman Catholic Church. He was accompanied with various sound effects, whilst talking about the blessing of animals. He was blessing hamsters, goldfish, cats and Great Danes ... [So I thought]: Would it not strike one as a bit odd that they could
not bless a pair of unfortunate lesbians along with the hamsters, goldfish and everything else?’

In John’s Gospel, chapter 9, we read how Christ gave sight to a man blind from birth. One of the disciples asked ‘Who had sinned that the man was blind?’ Christ’s replied: ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him’. What is important in this Bible story is not only that the blind man gained his sight, but that the results of an action can have repercussions far beyond what might be apparent at face value. In this instance, the actions of Jesus caused those who witnessed the event to question the Pharisees and their interpretation of the law. And maybe in our case, in the twenty-first century, it’s not just the fact that through new legislation the relationships of gay people are finally recognised – if not with complete equality as yet – but that through such recognition the blindness of many, inside and outside the churches, may finally be washed away!

So, perhaps we should close by referring to Jesus Christ’s most fundamental commandment: ‘A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.’ (John 13:34-35). Christ’s disciples were individuals, each different from the other, and each had a different role to play after Christ’s time on earth. And as we read in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, Jesus’ followers, even when they disagreed, were all part of the one body in Christ; and that, brothers and sisters, is what Christ calls each of us to be … rich or poor, young or old, gay or straight …

And to the Father - who is equally our mother, our sister and our brother - be the everlasting glory. Amen.
IN 1980, I was fired for being a gay priest. It was a long time ago but it was very difficult, and an example of the results of a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy practised by both Church and state. In the early 1980s it was still illegal to be gay in Ireland; and there was a stigma which the Church strongly endorsed through its interpretation of Scripture. My partner Frank and I were young and naive and we didn’t really know what we were dealing with in terms of the culture of the Church of Ireland, which was still very homophobic. At St Bartholomew’s Church in Dublin, my rector, John Neill, when he discovered I was gay and in a relationship, suspended me from all duties and even from saying goodbye to parishioners. This hurt me personally, but it also profoundly hurt the congregation. Even worse was the impact this decision had on the whole Church of Ireland. The story of what happened circulated for many years after my departure and was cited as an example of the Church’s poor handling of gay and lesbian clergy.

I later learned that John Neill might have been elected Archbishop of Dublin sooner than he was, partly because clergy in Dublin were worried about his ability to deal with his clergy as a fair and compassionate pastor, given that he had fired me without any significant support or agreed transition plan. Henry McAdoo, the then Archbishop of Dublin, also dealt with the issue in a very reactive and hidebound way. He allegedly said, ‘I want him out of here, quickly and quietly’.
When I finally met with him at the See House in Dublin, he told me he did not know any gay people and assumed I was a paedophile. His last words to me (I was also a trained teacher and youth worker) were, ‘I will not be able to recommend you for any position that involves working with children’. Given the power of the episcopacy over clergy, there was nothing I could do to challenge his ignorance.

**Forced to leave Ireland, family and friends**

I had to leave my home and my country within three months and it was horrific. I was dealing with my own grief and the grief of my parishioners. I had to come out to my father - (my mother already knew) - worried that the news might hit the press. He told me that he never wanted to see my partner ever again. He got his wish. This premature coming out to my father led to a rift between my parents which took many years to heal. The shame of being fired for being gay cast an enormous cloud over everyone, our family, the parish and the whole church.

St. Bartholomew’s was considered a liberal progressive parish where a large number of parishioners were in mixed marriages, where there were known to be a number of gay couples, and the church was a refuge from the cultural and religious bigotry of the day. This status was undermined by the decision to fire me and in retrospect, it must have become difficult for John Neill to continue to function there as a spiritual leader, given what had happened.

I had nightmares about being rejected. It affected my spiritual life and as a priest I wasn’t able bring myself to celebrate the eucharist for another three years. My only ‘sin’ was that I was living in a six year committed relationship with another man.
Picking up the pieces in London, but losing a partner

We limped off to London, like so many Irish gays before us, trying to pick up the pieces. The exile had devastating consequences on our relationship and we finally parted in 1982 when I moved to the USA. Frank got sick in 1985 and died from AIDS. I threw myself into full time AIDS work in California and helped to set up some of the early AIDS services in the UK with our good friend Christopher Spence. A fountain in the London Lighthouse is dedicated in memory of Frank, whose inspiration and leadership in the early years of a frightening disease helped us to mobilize resources and move forward.

Between leaving St. Bart’s and moving to California, I worked in the UK as a Project Director with Newham Community Renewal Programme. I learned a lot about living in an alien land from children born to young West Indian parents living in London’s East end. Needless to say, I remained in the closet during my two years there and worked hard to build up the ‘Out of work Centre’ for fellow exiles – they were black Londoners and I was a gay Irish priest. The UK was also a very difficult place to be gay and the Church of England remained a place of clergy closets with a few supportive bishops. Partners of clergy were reduced to ‘lodger’ status.

Moving to Los Angeles to work with homeless gay youth

I had heard about how progressive the American Episcopal Church was becoming, and on a vacation in Los Angeles in 1982, I met Marsha Langford at my first Gay Pride parade. As President of Integrity, the Episcopal Church’s LGBT advocacy organisation, she was looking for an openly gay priest to begin a ministry with the hundreds of runaway
gay youth that flocked to Los Angeles every year, as refugees from homophobic Middle America. I moved to L.A. later that year and began the ministry at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center.

These exiled kids were the product of the same forces that had kicked me out from my home and church. I was lucky as a university graduate with friends and connections to a better life. They ended up selling their bodies on the streets of Santa Monica Boulevard. Within five years, many of them were sick or dead with AIDS. I watched a whole generation of exiles either die of AIDS or become care-givers and activists to fight the discrimination caused by it. As a priest, I had a unique role to play and my mediation skills, which had been honed in Ireland as a reconciler on the streets of Belfast, were now used to get insurance companies and health care providers to help the marginalized. The Episcopal Church became, in the words of Ed Browning our amazing Presiding Bishop, “The Church of no outcasts”. I had found a home where my gifts and calling could be validated.

A profound healing experience

Later that year, I was invited to celebrate the eucharist at St. John’s church, now the Pro-Cathedral. It was the first time I had celebrated in over three years, and I was terrified. There was something very painful about standing as a priest before the altar and saying those words again. The damning words of the Archbishop of Dublin haunted me and I felt so unworthy; yet surrounded by members of the Los Angeles chapter of Integrity, the blessing of sharing in the feast of love and reconciliation was one of the most profound healing experiences I have ever known.
When clergy stand at the altar, they are called to represent Christ, to sometimes stand with the suffering ones; but for me priesthood is more than ever to hold the sacred space open for everyone, so they can experience the power of God’s redeeming love. The altar became for me ‘a place of wounded memory’, just as sitting in church for most LGBT people is a painful returning to the place where we first heard ‘our love was not good’. It is my belief that the authentic spiritual journey begins in exile (the Garden of Eden story affirms it) and being fully healed as an LGBT person, we are gently encouraged to return to the place of the wound. The sacrifice that is being made by LGBT people on a global scale, on altars of certainty and righteousness, is a daily occurrence. ‘Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us’ takes on a new meaning when one’s own spiritual journey follows a pattern of crucifixion, death and resurrection.

Canon Malcolm Boyd, one of the great openly gay mentors for the church who I came to love and respect in Los Angeles, once told me, ‘Albert, for every one of us who have survived, ten have not’. I think of the many gay and closeted clergy I know from the Church of Ireland who either committed suicide, drank themselves to death in a bid to numb their alienation, or were shipped off to London as I was. The toll is devastating and the waste of God-given gifts is a great blight on the church’s stewardship of creation in all its diversity.

What thousands of blessings have been withheld from the Church as a result of the rejection faced by clergy like me? Yet many lives, mine among them, have experienced healing and reconciling love thanks to dioceses, parishes and non-profit organizations conscious of the needs of LGBT people. We now have the opportunity to tell our stories, and there are thousands more to tell. Integrity and the Diocese of Los Angeles
welcomed me and took me in, broken and afraid and humiliated, and surrounded me with the friends of God. They believed in me when I could not believe in myself. As I come up to my 35th year of ministry, I realize that my move to the United States allowed me opportunities that most gay clergy are not given.

**Uganda, AIDS work and reconciliation**

My ministry also involved getting to know the Anglican Church of Uganda and working on AIDS prevention there from 1991 to 1997 and more recently with the amazing Bishop Christopher Senyonjo. As a straight ally for LGBT inclusion, he too shares the shame and exile of the ‘crucified ones’. He has been stripped of his status in the church and refused the privileges of baptizing his own grandchildren or being buried in consecrated ground. The sacrifices are endless for those who are called to ‘stand with the crucified’.

More than anything, my ministry has been helped by returning to Ireland following a wonderful reconciliation that sprang from taking part in the ‘Hands of Healing’ process in Los Angeles in 2005. At the end of a two-day training programme, we were invited to write down the name of someone we either sought forgiveness from or wanted to forgive. After twenty years of carrying around the negative energy of John Neill and his impact on my life, I committed HIS name on a little piece of paper with others seeking healing that was then prayed over in a large bowl of water. Months later, I would receive an email from my old parish of St. Bartholomew’s in Dublin, congratulating me on becoming a Canon in Los Angeles. The present rector, who obviously knew the story of what had happened to a former priest at St. Bart’s, invited me to preach and celebrate next time I was in Dublin. I could not believe what I was reading! I wrote back
thanking Fr. Thompson and suggesting he run it by his present Archbishop, who happened to be none other than John Neill. I was certain John would not want me around Dublin any time soon. But I was wrong.

What followed was an email from John Neill - a very wonderful email apologizing for what he had done to me. He said he understood a lot more about LGBT issues and had great respect for some of his clergy who are gay and lesbian. He also admitted that, if faced with a similar situation today, he would handle it very differently. I immediately wrote back, accepted his apology and arranged to meet with him as soon as possible. I arranged a special trip to Dublin to have dinner with him and his wife Betty. I remember the difficult drive down the very street where Archbishop McAdoo lived and rang the doorbell of the same house where over twenty years before, John Neill’s predecessor had told me he could not recommend me for ministry where children were involved. It was a very difficult thing to do, but I had to ‘return to the place of the wound’ if I was going to find healing and we were all going to move forward. So I reconciled with him and we became good friends. We had a lovely dinner in their kitchen and it was just like old times. We picked up where we left off and tried to catch up on what each other had been doing, what their family was up to. It was a grace-filled blessing to all of us. A few months later, while I was web-surfing for a course on conflict resolution as part of a planned sabbatical, ‘The Irish School of Ecumenics’ popped up. The course was perfect for what I wanted to do, but if I had not reconciled with John Neill, I could never have come back to Ireland.

So in 2006 I returned to complete a Master of Philosophy degree at the ISE and was licensed by John to officiate in the Diocese of Dublin. Fr. Thompson’s invitation to preach and celebrate in St Bart’s after twenty years was gladly
accepted. I found myself back in the place of my nightmare of shame and rejection. The amazing thing about that Sunday morning, seeing parishioners who I knew and were certainly familiar with the whole story, was how ORDINARY and matter of fact it all was. It was an unconditional welcome to my old parish after twenty years. It was healing for me and I even acted as John’s chaplain at the enthronement of the new Archbishop of Armagh, Alan Harper, who was a contemporary of mine in seminary. There in front of the whole Church of Ireland gathered that day in Armagh Cathedral complete with the Duke of Edinburgh and President of Ireland, John and I demonstrated Christian forgiveness and reconciliation.

Yet while I was in Ireland, two fine Irish gay clergy once again left for London. There was still no place for them in the Church of Ireland either. Another priest friend, suffering from a terminal illness, was fighting for his rights to give his church pension to his legally recognised civil partner, having been refused permission to officiate by his diocesan bishop. I witnessed the inhumanity of a church that may have done wonders for the Irish peace process, but was continuing to discriminate against gay clergy. Like institutional sectarianism, institutional homophobia can creep up on us and before we know it, we are reverting to old patterns of relating.

I recently visited the Ulster Museum to read the damning consequences of the Penal Laws against Catholics, supported and encouraged by the Church of Ireland, then the established state Church. Such state-sanctioned violence against Catholics in the 18th century has much in common with LGBT criminalization in many countries in Africa where the Anglican Church supports criminalising LGBT people. The consequences are death-dealing and it is difficult to provide HIV education and services in many of these 76 countries. If there ever was an opportunity for the Church of Ireland to
repair its dark past, it has to be today’s engagement with LGBT people. It begins by listening to the stories of your own children and fellow clergy and then to the stories of African LGBT Christians. What do both very different contexts have in common, and what could the Church of Ireland do to take leadership and, in the words of my friend John Neill, ‘to do it differently’?

**Final thoughts**

There are two final reflections I’ll end with. My reconciliation and return to Ireland taught me that I, as well as others, had been limited or even downright wrong in how I told myself my own story. The reconciliation with my past actually changed my story. Was I ‘kicked out’ or was I ‘birthed out’ became an important question. That is what is spiritually scary about any form of reconciliation. We would rather stay safe in our anger and brokenness, with our identity secure, than step out through a door to an unknown land where our preoccupation with what was done to us paralyses us from dancing to a different song. Twenty five years after the fact, I realized I was ‘birthed out’ and God had other things for me to do in ways I could not have imagined. Given the difficulties faced by gay and lesbian clergy in the UK and Republic, I realised I had more opportunities to exercise my gifts and ministry than if I had stayed under the ‘don’t ask don’t tell’ policy that secretly still exists in many communities.

The way the Irish have always dealt with problems is to go away. So it is really good that the issue of Church of Ireland clergy in committed same-sex relationships is now in the public domain and being openly discussed. I would encourage the Church of Ireland to engage sincerely and wholeheartedly in the Listening Process demanded by our faith.
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ACCEPTING

DIVERSITY
An Evangelical appeals to tradition

Alan Acheson

AT THE 2005 General Synod I startled many by a speech calling for tolerance and compassion in respect of human sexuality in the Church of Ireland. I addressed myself primarily to Evangelicals, whose tradition I share and whose core principles I affirm. My appeal sprang from an understanding of the role that Evangelicals have played in history in ‘letting the oppressed go free’.

William Wilberforce and others of the Clapham Sect took the lead in promoting such freedom. Their social gospel was the fruit of the Evangelical revival. Bishop Jebb, a close friend of Wilberforce, wrote of the many Evangelicals in Parliament: ‘The Saints, as they are nicknamed...are the best individuals in the country... I find, in them, most solid and substantial goodness.’ The Saints, mostly liberal Tories in politics, crusaded to free two downtrodden peoples: the negro slaves of the British Empire and Roman Catholics, both in Great Britain but more especially in Ireland. Spearheaded by their efforts, Catholic Emancipation was attained (though not without O'Connell's direct action) in 1829; slavery in the British Empire was abolished in 1833, as Wilberforce lay dying. Theirs is a noble legacy.

My second consideration was that, in human sexuality issues, both discussion and policy have been dominated by hard-line stances. In British Columbia in 2002 I came up against liberal intolerance. The Bishop of New Westminster, Michael Ingham, dealt harshly with those Evangelicals who
held to the traditional teaching on same-sex relationships. One of these, Dr James Packer, remains inhibited from ministry in the diocese. This sad impasse might, and should, have been avoided. To respond to one proclaimed intolerance with another is tragic.

On that day at General Synod, I had not intended to speak. My impromptu intervention was in response to several hard-line speeches that made me ashamed that fellow Evangelicals could be so cruelly judgmental of and so bitterly hostile to homosexual partners striving to live loving, faithful lives in Christ.

The heart of my speech, based on hastily scribbled notes, and reconstructed now from memory, ran on these lines:

… This question of human sexuality is not a liberal issue.

The issue rather is whether our Church – and our Anglican Communion – is comprehensive, compassionate and charitable; in short, whether we are a Church/communion governed by Love. If we aim to obey the central love command of Christ, we do not contribute to that end by speeches that are arrogant and intolerant; or adhere to this ethos by posturings that are judgmental and self-righteous.

To my knowledge, some of our best priests – in Canada, in England, and yes, in Ireland – live in stable, loving single-sex relationships. But what do we hear:

‘Woe unto you who live in stable, loving single-sex relationships!’
That pronouncement deserves full marks for inventiveness. But it comes up against this barrier: if we invent our own woes, then we become blind to the dominical woes. We cannot see, or will not see:

- to whom the Lord addressed His woes
- at what attitudes He directed them
- to what purposes He targeted them

Alarm bells started ringing for me when I learned that a leading conservative evangelical had asked every Bishop in the Church of Ireland to state his position on this issue. Evangelicals are not thought police: if any of us think otherwise, the Church of Ireland is not our true home.

I appeal to our great tradition to adhere to evangelical essentials, to the esse of the faith; and in matters non-essential to preserve the compassionate, inclusive, loving ethos of our Evangelical tradition.
IT IS TRAGIC that the Church of Christ, in the spiritual desert of the early 21st century, is better known for being anti-gay than for the message that Christ entrusted to us. The Church has become the last place most unbelievers would expect to find inspiration or solace, or to satisfy their spiritual hunger. Jesus’ words, ‘Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation’ (Mark 15:16) are well-known amongst Christians. But better known to gay people are the infamous quotes from Romans and Leviticus. Understandably, gay people believe that, ‘God thinks homosexuality is against nature, and gay people like me are an abomination’.

Throughout 24 years of pastoral experience, I’ve met thousands of gay Christians struggling to make sense of their sexuality in the context of their faith. Many are pastors, worship leaders, youth workers, Sunday School teachers. They have served the Church faithfully all their lives. Yet if they dare to speak honestly about their sexuality, they are shunned like the plague.

Every denomination is split over the issue today. Even heterosexual church members are being accepted or rejected according to their view on homosexuality. Why does the
Church create and maintain such a stumbling block to the Gospel?

The modern plea for tolerance in our society does not go down well with evangelical Christians; it sounds as though we are being asked to tolerate sin! We were taught that the whole point of the Gospel message was that Jesus Christ came to save us from our sins in order that we might not perish; that through sincere repentance and faith, we might have eternal life with God. Unless we earnestly repent of our sins, not only do we remain lost, damned sinners, we add to our own faithlessness the crime of approving the sin of others rather than confronting it. So in the minds of a great many Christians, when it comes to preaching to gay people, the issue is clear. They are welcome to come to Church to hear the Gospel message of salvation from sin, like anyone else. But they must not carry on sinning or they’ll end up worse off than before.

Having been brought up with the Church’s traditional teaching on homosexuality, I endeavoured to apply that to my own life, and to all who sought my ministry. Courage, the organisation I founded in 1988, was an ‘ex-gay’ ministry that supported celibacy and pursued change of orientation. Tragically, over our first 12 years, this approach destroyed the faith of many and was completely ineffective in changing a person’s sexual orientation.

As a gay man, I discovered the true story of Jesus to be most enlightening and releasing. He is irresistible; my heart has been captivated by him. But getting to know this Jesus has been difficult—for me and many other gay people. We all imbibed the notion that unless we conform to the perceived norm of heterosexuality, God would be terribly angry with us.
Everyone seemed to think so. Only after many years of feeling the draft of suspicion in the Church and experiencing outright rejection from many quarters, did I come to God for myself. Alone in prayer, kneeling at his feet like the woman who visited Jesus in Simon the Pharisee’s house, I discovered God’s unconditional love and acceptance; there I came to believe Jesus’ words, ‘Your faith has saved you, go in peace’.

It has been a long and very painful journey. Starting with my first inklings that I was gay at the age of 13, I began a life in which I shunned my homosexuality altogether. I did not want to be classed as an enemy of God. I wanted to be normal, accepted and liked; to belong to my society and the Church. To achieve that meant not being gay.

When the feelings of longing for a same-sex partner became almost overwhelming in my twenties, I sought psychiatric help. But my psychiatrist thought my biggest problem was my religion. So I sought Christian counselling, healing prayer and ex-gay support groups. For the first time in my life, I met other gay Christian people who instinctively understood where I was coming from. These groups provided a ‘safe’ environment because we all agreed it was wrong to be gay. We struggled together to be celibate and seek change.

In our work at Courage the change I sought still eluded me. But we believed we just had to go on with the struggle. We had to overcome, not give in to temptation! When the opportunity came to marry, I believed I had to ‘step out in faith’ to receive all that God might have for me. I was still basically homosexual, but this was a small detail I’d got used to pushing aside. Christians can be as good as anyone at denying what is true, for the sake of maintaining loyalty to a preferred doctrine.
Many years passed before I discovered that however much one claims to love one’s wife, the cruellest thing a gay man can do to a woman is to ‘use’ her as God’s potential road to healing. This idea destroys wives as well as husbands. You can’t fake heterosexual love to a woman; she soon realises the truth, even if her husband remains in complete denial. Then when he just can’t keep up the image anymore and, perhaps in a time of loneliness and vulnerability, meets another man who he connects with, the charade is blown into orbit.

How have I stayed on the ‘straight and narrow’ road for so long? I suspect that my personal level of self-discipline, driven by the need for acceptance of others, has been the biggest factor. But also, running a ministry to help others has given me a vicarious feeling of satisfaction and fulfilment. However, those who came in the early days to Courage for help to change found that their potential for healing lasted about as long as they remained in a supportive environment . . . then evaporated the moment they left the community!

So the long term fruit of my ministry was to set people up for failure. Only after years of seeing people lose their faith in God, leave their churches, and in many cases end up in severe depression, even become suicidal, did I finally have to conclude that my work was downright damaging and dangerous.

Even while recognising the ruin all around me, I still did not see that the pathway might be to accept gay people and recognise that supporting committed same-sex partnerships could be the right way forward. Years longer passed before I reached that point. Only in 2001, when I had the opportunity to attend an Evangelicals Concerned conference in the USA, did I see what long-term committed gay relationships could
look like. (EC is a gay-affirming ministry.) Clearly God was at work amongst gay Christians in a wonderful way.

I finally began to take time to go through the apparently anti-gay scriptures again, and saw them in a new light. Now, when asked about those ‘clobber passages’ (as the Americans call them), I like to ask, ‘How do those passages inform and guide your own life? Because if they don’t have anything to say to your own life, please don’t dump your favourite anti-gay Bible passages on me as a gay Christian’. But I can still never convince those who don’t wish to know to take a different view.

In 1 Corinthians 7:9, Paul says, ‘It is better to marry than to burn’. Would he say to gay Christians, ‘Sorry but in your case you’ll just have to burn. Burn now or burn in hell later’? That is the message we have received from the Church. That seems to be the way so many Christians perceive the Gospel. Jesus came to save us from God and his wrath. So keep yourself in God’s good books, or you’ll be tortured forever. Too often that is the image of God we project. But when we are forced to walk closely with God ourselves, in spite of all the rejection from the Church, we begin to discover the pearl in the oyster: the love of Christ who laid his life down for us out of his great and amazing love—for all of us sinners.

Whenever we learn to love our fellow human beings, including those with whom we disagree and may disapprove of, we bring into light the existence of the kingdom of God—a kingdom where love and understanding reigns. To love with integrity, one must start with the realisation that God loves us and draws us into relationship with him. Out of that love from God, we become empowered to love our partner, our neighbour, our ex-gay or pro-gay Christian friends and
enemies. At the feet of Jesus, we encounter his tender love and kindness, his goodness, especially to those society rejects. Jesus is the one on whom we can cast all our cares and anxieties. He was hated and vilified by his religious contemporaries, yet he never allowed his anger or hurt to provoke him to retaliation in kind.

In every generation some issue comes up that divides the Church. In my lifetime I have seen Churches split over the charismatic movement, women in leadership and now the gay issue. Such division will surely convict those who think that the Christian life is up to us—who believe that self-discipline, commitment to a perceived kind of holiness, will enable us to escape the wrath of God. Whereas those who will bear much fruit of the kind Jesus commended have come to understand that it is enough to believe in the Good News of Jesus Christ and what he has done for us. That trust in our wonderful Saviour empowers us to live in His love.

So often in life, indeed throughout the Bible, we see God’s glory manifested in the most unexpected places. Who would ever have imagined that in the fellowship of gay people, Christians could see God clearly at work? This is what we have found: when we dared to come to God as we are, as gay people who experience feelings of love and attraction towards someone of the same sex, we discovered true healing and transformation—not from gay to straight, but from being neurotically self-obsessed with our profound sense of unworthiness and alienation (imbibed from the Church), to become whole people, able to serve the community—glad to serve Christ with our whole heart.

My personal story is an unusual one, working out my spiritual journey as a gay man in a very public context. The
journey has been even harder for my wife, who never anticipated the course our lives and ministry have taken us, even though she has supported me all the way. My opponents in traditional Christian groups are perplexed because, unlike many others, I have not abandoned my wife to live with a boyfriend, confirming their conviction that gay people are incapable of faithfulness. But my endeavour to be faithful to my marriage vows does not impress them; they still tend to reject everything I say because they don’t like the conclusions I have drawn.

Some gay people are perplexed too, and understandably wonder if my marriage is the exception - that somehow it has worked for me when clearly it does not for most other gay people. Or if it is simply a charade? In which case they ask why are we still married?

The answer is not an easy one; from the point of view of my personal fulfilment as a gay man, marriage certainly has not worked for me at all. But it is the choice my wife and I made in good faith at the time and to give up being married now, after we have been through so much together, is not an easy choice to make. We both put everything we owned into making the ministry work because the Church would not support us; today we have no home of our own, no scheme pension to share out, to give us financial freedom to go our separate ways. We would both end up living out our old age alone and in serious poverty. Moreover, we have worked through enormous challenges and hardships together over the past quarter of a century. Our companionship and teamwork still count for much, even though we would not have chosen to get married if we had our time again. These are the very real dilemmas for couples in a ‘mixed orientation’ marriage. Time will tell how things will work out in the long term. In the
meantime, everyone needs the respect of others and freedom to make our own choices in our own time.

My hope is that as the Church learns better to share Christ’s love, many other couples may be spared the pain and confusion that we and others of our generation have had to go through. If the Church could only listen to and accept the spiritual journey of many gay Christians, who endeavour to live for Christ with integrity, the Gordian knot of schism and alienation might at last be severed and the Good News of Jesus Christ preached once again without impendiment.

An earlier version of this paper was delivered at Queen’s University Belfast in February 2009 as part of a series of public lectures organised by Changing Attitude Ireland on the theme of ‘The Churches and intolerance’.
The Hard Gospel Project: from sectarianism to racism to homosexuality

Richard O'Leary

THE CHURCH of Ireland brings to the Special Conference on Human Sexuality in spring 2012 more than a decade of work addressing the subject of diversity through its Hard Gospel Project. In this article we trace how the Hard Gospel has addressed three areas of diversity – the dominant differences over religion and sectarianism, the increasing ethnic diversity and the greater visibility of gay and lesbian persons.

Dealing with Sectarianism

The impetus for the Hard Gospel Project arose from the sectarian violence and public controversy in the late 1990s surrounding the disputed Orange Order parade at Drumcree. In this context the General Synod of the Church of Ireland in 1997 adopted a motion that the Church was opposed to sectarianism and committed ‘to promote, at all levels of church life tolerance, dialogue, co-operation and mutual respect between the churches and in society’. This led to the 2003 Scoping Study Report entitled The Hard Gospel: Dealing Positively with Difference in the Church of Ireland. The work was also widened beyond sectarianism to consider how to deal with differences based on attributes other than religious affiliation.

The Scoping Study Report (2003) was circulated to Diocesan Synods where it was discussed often in dedicated sessions. It was also translated into action by involving the
parishes through the use of specially designed resources. For example, the material for the ‘Good Samaritan’ course for parishes was described by the Hard Gospel Project thus: ‘It blends the study of scripture and group discussion, but it is especially focused on learning from real life experiences…. At its heart is the desire to build relationships, especially across boundaries’.

The title ‘Hard Gospel’ was inspired by the words of Canon Charles Kenny who was interviewed for the Scoping Study and who said, ‘I want to see a return to the hard gospel… that you love God and love your neighbour as yourself.’ Whatever may have been the impact of the Project in tackling sectarian attitudes, it also provided a helpful framework which could be extended to addressing newer challenges of diversity – notably immigration and ethnicity.

**Dealing with Ethnicity**

The Scoping Study (2003) reported that, ‘Clergy do not, on the whole, feel resourced to respond to the issue’ of immigration and ethnic difference. The Project responded to this deficit by investing in the following areas of work, which are described on the Hard Gospel website. On ‘Anti-Discrimination and Equality’ resource materials such as ‘Faith and Difference’ were developed. On ‘Intercultural Education and Training’ regional ‘Intercultural Training’ was delivered. Educational lectures, presentations and workshops were delivered through the Church of Ireland Theological College, secondary schools, youth groups, migrant-led churches and parish groups. On ‘Communication and Networking,’ eleven Diocesan Consultations on Immigration were organized to hear and respond to the needs of migrants, laity and clergy.
Of particular interest to us is the resource pack called ‘Faith and Difference’. These educational leaflets on how to discuss difference were distributed to parishes for use by fellowship and youth groups. They included the two-sided educational leaflet on ‘faith and ethnicity’. On one side we see the picture of a Black African man, face clearly visible. On the other side of the leaflet in the very first sentence of the text we are introduced to this man. We are told that he is the visiting preacher to the church, thereby stating something positive about him and indicating inclusiveness. In the third paragraph he is ‘warmly greeted by the rector’, indicating the possibility of positive engagement with him; but we are also told that some of the congregation are a bit awkward around him thereby recognizing that there are some negative experiences around ethnic difference. The first question accompanying this leaflet and presented for discussion is ‘What impressions would the visiting preacher have of the church?’

The Hard Gospel did not shy away from acknowledging and confronting the problem of racism. Regional intercultural days organized by the Project and led by an anti-racist activist took place for Church members. In addition the Hard Gospel Report ‘Living with Difference’ (2007, section 6.23) made the strong statement that ‘…the church should be proactive in contributing positively to the drive to eliminate racism’.

**Engaging with homosexuality**

In contrast to its strong statement above on the need to eliminate racism, the same Hard Gospel Report states that ‘given the sensitivity of this issue some contributors felt it best that the church proceed cautiously in engaging in work to reduce homophobia…’
This cautious approach is also evident in the Hard Gospel leaflet on ‘faith and human sexuality’. Unlike the front view picture of the black man in the leaflet on ethnicity, the face of the gay man is not visible as he is facing away from the camera. None of the other leaflets in the series, even that on ‘the paramilitary’, hid the subject’s face. We are not introduced to the gay man in the text but instead to a visiting eminent Professor on ‘family values’ who is present at the church. This suggests a conservative ‘framing’ of the subject to be discussed. By the third paragraph we are introduced to the mother of the gay man who we are told bursts into sustained tears. We are being prepared for something terrible! She describes her son – he used to be a very outgoing young man… but after ‘admitting’ he was gay he had become withdrawn. This was the first time she had left him alone in the last three days! The suggestion is that even the gay man has a negative view of himself. Furthermore, neither we the reader nor the rector gets to meet the gay man – he isn’t present in the scene in church – he is kept at a safe distance in the margins, he doesn’t get to tell his story.

The General Synod Report (2009) refers to the ‘Hard Gospel Diversity Audit’ which recommends that ‘an agreed sensitive approach should be implemented in relation to the church’s ministry to gays and lesbians within the church and the wider society’. However, as recorded above and below the Church’s ministry has arguably been insensitive. Despite the lack of provision by the Church of Ireland of suitable resources and training for clergy and lay persons, there are however two causes of hope for the Church as it cautiously engages with the issue of ‘human sexuality’.

First, there are the initiatives being taken by gay and lesbian members of the Church of Ireland at the grassroots
level with the support of their heterosexual allies. After a long period of invisibility and silence of gay and lesbian persons in the Church, Changing Attitude Ireland (CAI) and the Church of Ireland chaplaincy at TCD jointly published ‘Share your Story: Gay and Lesbian Experiences of Church’ (2010) edited by Mervyn Kingston. It presents real-life accounts by gay persons of the welcome or otherwise that they have experienced in church. The booklet was launched (May 2010) by the chairperson of the Hard Gospel Implementation Group, the Rt Rev Trevor Williams, Bishop of Limerick who said:

In reading these stories there is a sense that the encounter being described is the first time that the clergy person had to confront the issue of homosexuality, face to face. There is a sense of fear, and a rush to a solution, rather than any attempt to listen or understand. The problem had to be dealt with and disposed of.

He added:

On the subject of homosexuality and Christian faith, I wonder have we even started this Listening Process in the Church of Ireland?

Church of Ireland parents of gay and lesbian children too have taken the initiative in the absence of the production of pastoral resources by or engagement with the Church. At a fringe meeting at the 2011 General Synod parents Paul and Margaret Rowlandson from Derry spoke on the subject ‘Parents speak: my child is gay’. Their talk was followed by the launch of another resource produced by CAI, written by Gerry Lynch and titled ‘I think my son or daughter is gay: Guidance for parents of gay children in the Church of Ireland’ (available on the CAI website).
The second positive development was the motion which was passed at the General Synod 2011 to allow that, ‘The Hard Gospel Implementation Group will consider the materials presented by Changing Attitude Ireland, which has requested that the Church provide an information pack on pastoral issues affecting gay and lesbian Christians, and will return suggestions to the Standing Committee’. The dissemination of these resources to the dioceses and parishes, and material from conservative viewpoints, is surely the next step.

It is noteworthy that the Church has allocated substantial resources for clergy and lay persons at diocesan and parish level to learn about ethnic diversity and racism and it has allowed a period of a few years for this learning to take place. The use of resources and the holding of events at diocesan and parish level in the next couple of years may ensure that the long delayed ‘Listening Process’ on human sexuality in the Church of Ireland can at last begin.

This publication, which we have titled *Moving Forward Together: Homosexuality and the Church of Ireland*, is offered to our Church to that end.
Selected Reading on Faith and Homosexuality


White, Mel, *What the Bible says - and doesn't say - about Homosexuality*, website. www.soulforce.org


*For the Bible tells me so*, (DVD). This award-winning film tells the stories of families of faith who learn that their child is gay. Karslake, Daniel, 2007.

Publications downloadable free from CAI website.  
[www.changingattitudeireland.org](http://www.changingattitudeireland.org)


Lynch, Gerry, *I Think my Son or Daughter is Gay: Guidance for parents of gay children in the Church of Ireland*, 2011.


Changing Attitude Ireland

Changing Attitude Ireland (CAI) is a Church of Ireland organisation, with ecumenical friends, heterosexual and gay, lay and ordained, working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons within the Churches in Ireland.

It is dedicated to celebrating and maintaining the traditional inclusivity and diversity of the Anglican Communion.

Since its foundation in 2007, Changing Attitude Ireland has contributed to the ‘Listening Process’ on sexuality by producing pastoral and educational resources and arranging public lectures and information meetings with church groups. See the CAI website for details.

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