

# Anglicans and Human Sexuality: Finding our Way in Uncertain Times

Newcastle Synod Address: October 2019  
The Right Reverend Professor Stephen Pickard

## Four Preliminary Matters

### 1. Not a new matter for Anglicans

- a) Polygamy – the longest running agenda issue for the bishops of the Anglican Communion from late 19<sup>th</sup> century;
- b) Homosexuality – Lambeth 1988 and 1998 motion (e.g. see 1998 Lambeth resolution, 10.1);
- c) Same-sex unions - in recent decades this matter has been on the agenda and controversial;
- d) Same-sex marriage in Australia in more recent years;
- e) At present there are a range of different approaches to LGBTQI people by Christians and the Church.

### 2. A matter of mission: a tale from Lambeth 2008

Three stories about homosexuality, the church and mission:

- a) Northern Africa – *mission as apologetics* – for the sake of Christ’s mission and Christian apologetics vis viz Islam we must differentiate ourselves from the liberalising Christianity of the West.
- b) USA – *mission as inclusion* – for the sake of Christ’s mission we must welcome all into the body of Christ.
- c) South America – *mission as sanctuary* – for the sake of Christ’s mission we must protect all who are traumatised and oppressed by a society that will not tolerate/accept those who are gay.

### 3. A matter of intense conflict

It is worth pondering why issues concerning human sexuality, and in this case same-sex

relations, blessing of same-sex unions is so intense. One reason is surely that no matter whether one is for or against same-sex marriage, or the blessing of same-sex unions, the matter is viewed as going to the integrity of the gospel. Indeed, for some this is an issue of salvation. This intensity is compounded by the fact that matters of sexuality bring to the fore our essential vulnerability, weakness and incompleteness as human beings; our fundamental interdependence; our remarkable creative capacities; our deepest fears about identity and our shared hopes for human flourishing. It raises a very important and practical question: What might be required of the Church in order that it might more appropriately and humbly harness the intensities of its life that can hinder its witness to the Gospel of Christ? In turn this begs a question that we must not avoid: How shall we live together as the body of Christ?

#### **4. A matter with multiple layers**

The matter of same-sex marriage, same-sex blessings has multiple layers. There are legal matters to consider in relation to the Anglican Constitution and its current Canon law regarding marriage. There are doctrinal issues to wrestle with. There are profoundly personal issues involved. Most of us will have stories to tell in this respect. There are in my view major pastoral issues to attend to both as individuals and as a church. Indeed this for most is the most significant issue as it is closely linked to one's personal experiences and knowledge. There are missional issues to consider. Finally there is an abiding spiritual matter here. This is the hardest to open up. It has to do with issues about spiritual maturity; of learning to set aside prejudice and ignorance; discerning the voice and discipline of the Holy Spirit; learning again and again about referring all things to the Lord of the Church. A question arises: Are we spiritually mature enough to properly handle this matter as the Body of Christ.

### **The Australian Anglican context**

#### **1. Diocesan autonomy**

Australian Anglicanism has a weak central structure and a strong focus on diocesan autonomy. Such a balance was insisted upon at the time our Constitution was established in 1961 in order to optimize individual dioceses to determine their own life. As one commentator as noted Australian Anglicans enjoy low grade koinonia. This means that we

have over well over a century of handling difficult issues while still remaining one body constitutionally at least. As such we have much to offer the global Communion about how to work together with differences which are sometimes quite profound.

## **2. Constitutional Change**

Given the nature of the Australian Anglican Constitution it is difficult to imagine how a constitutional change to the marriage rite to permit same-sex marriage would ever be successful. In this respect, I note the valuable and important work by the Christian ethicist, Robert Song of Durham University, UK. His book, *Covenant and Calling: towards a theology of same-sex relationships* moves beyond the sharp binaries of much of the present debate (i.e. traditional marriage verses same-sex marriage).<sup>1</sup> Song strikes out on a different course developing an argument for a Christian theology of marriage between a man and a woman. But Song goes on to develop a theology of covenant partnerships that traverses a variety of sexual orientations and different kinds of relationships. Perhaps that is one way forward notwithstanding the contested nature of the issue.

## Some difficult issues for the church

### **1. Marriage, Same-sex unions and sacramental theology**

Anglicanism as seen in its formularies, liturgies and doctrine has a robust tradition of sacramental theology. I believe we need to give far more attention to the sacramental nature of relationships. In particular we need to rethink our theology of marriage and its sacramental quality, even as we wrestle with the wider issues of human sexuality and relationships. It intrigues me that the general debasement of marriage seems to go hand in hand with a new interest in various kinds of relationships that involve faithfulness and longevity. It is as though our culture is crying out for some constants in a rapidly changing world and changing social mores. This is a matter on the table but a lot more work is required. And we need to draw upon our best insights and learn again to reason together.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Song, *Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships* (London: SCM Press, 2014).

In this context the church is currently conflicted about what it might mean to recognize a faithful, covenanted same-sex partnerships. One question that arises is: can such relationships be both *equal* in dignity to a marriage, and yet essentially *different*?<sup>2</sup> From another perspective the question might be put thus: how might homosexuality embody a unique and *distinctive* truth about our identity as humans in the image of God? Why is this kind of question important? In the first place it presumes that there is something other than (a) a simple rejection of homosexuality or (b) its undifferentiated absorption into the monolithic empire of sex. Is it possible to think about homosexuality as itself a *kind* of human difference.

Martin Wright states: ‘male and female stand in a distinctive relationship of created “otherness” towards one another—but even granting sexuality the ontological priority that we have claimed for it, human difference is clearly not *reducible* to sexual difference. Ultimately, the otherness of male from female may be eclipsed, but the otherness of person from person may not. When all temporal distinctions cease, we remain persons, each unique in our own openness to love and be loved. So the iconic significance of covenanted same-sex relationships may lie in their simultaneous *likeness* to marriage, enacting the reconciliation of human difference, and *unlikeness*, pointing beyond (hetero-)sexuality to the even more basic and inalienable difference of person from person’.<sup>3</sup>

Wright continues: ‘It is at least conceivable that our churches and societies could be the healthier for some such rethinking of sexuality. The peaceful coexistence of same-sex partnerships alongside marriage might act as a check against the radical absolutizing of sexual difference—whether, for instance, the tyrannical abuse of patriarchal power, or the near-idolatrous elevation of the Family favoured by some Christian lobbyists—and against its reflex, the equally myopic denial of sexual difference altogether. Of course, *peaceful* coexistence requires a consensus on the different and complementary logics of homo- and heterosexuality. So long as the only equality available is equivalence, and the gay and straight

---

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to the finely tuned theological paper Martin Wright, *Marriage, Sexuality and the Church Cross Purposes* (Uniting Church of Australia), August 2012, pp. 7-14.

<sup>3</sup> Wright, *Marriage, Sexuality and the Church*, p. 13.

lobbies fight for common turf like the definition of “marriage”, such reconciliation will remain only an imaginative possibility’.<sup>4</sup> In my view there is some careful work yet to be done by the church on these matters not just for its own sake but for a wider society that in one sense appears quite clear on the future direction and in other respects quite confused and searching for a moral compass. One task for the Church is to encourage faithful and committed relationships that challenge the promiscuity that is such a feature of human relationships in our society.

## **2. The nature of blessing**

Some of you may have read the essay in the Doctrine Commission’s report on the nature of blessing and its relationship to same-sex unions. It is a careful and thoughtful discussion. The matter is contentious and I note that it is on the agenda of this Synod. A different approach to such blessing is offered by a Melbourne theologian in the current edition of *The Melbourne Anglican*. Perhaps there are different kinds of blessings. Perhaps it is more than simply giving approval or withholding approval. What exactly are we asking of God in the act of blessing? And it will come as no surprise that whatever we might think about the blessing of same-sex unions it will be closely related to what we believe about mission. The matter of blessing is an important, difficult and delicate matter that requires far more careful attention and discernment.

## **3. Unity and Truth: options and consequences**

Separation and division will not settle the questions around human sexuality. Why? Because the reasoning that leads to division is itself productive of more division. In part this has to do with the fact that we pit unity and truth over against one another. Historically the outcome of this approach to unity and truth has been to spiritualise unity and consign it to the realm of invisibility. This seems to go hand in hand with giving priority to truth concerns and public belief in the concrete life of the Church.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Wright, *Marriage, Sexuality and the Church*, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Ephraim Radner, refers to an ‘age-old Protestant reliance on unity as something existent within a spiritual and invisible realm, ... outside the visible boundaries of the church... At the same time, the realm of truth was maintained according to fragmented lives and claims in a way that has now been mirrored by postmodern culture’. See, *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017), 109. This does not imply indifference to truth concerns but it does mean insisting on not relegating concern for unity to a secondary matter.

However unity and truth are like twins. This is captured in the Johannine parable in chapter 15 of John's Gospel of the vine, the vine-grower the branches. In this discourse abiding in Christ (the true vine) is the precondition for (a) bearing fruit for the kingdom of God and (b) finding resonance between human desire and God's will. This organic image is a rich vein for ecclesial life in Christ. Being together as the Body of Christ and seeking the truth as it is Jesus go together like a hand in a glove. Unity and truth are co-related and this becomes even more clearly articulated in chapter 17 of John's Gospel where Jesus prays that disciples may be one in order that the world might believe that the Father has sent the Son. The relationship between a passion for the truth of the gospel and the desire for Christian unity has been a perennial one in the Church of God.

When unity is spiritualised and located within the interiors of the heart and truth is seen as a matter of concrete belief and action then the scene is set for continued splitting of the body of Christ. The danger is we end up with a Church of the like-minded. But this is inherently unstable since every new matter that requires decision regarding its truth or error generates continued fracturing in pursuance of the fantasy of the pure Church.

Perhaps the deepest irony of a spiritualised and invisible unity is that division for the sake of truth does not leave division behind in the newly created ecclesial structure and polity. The broken body of Christ carries within its bosom the fractures, frailties and follies of its life. The poison of division is not expunged. Rather like a cancer that travels through the blood it is always threatening to manifest in another part of the mortal body. The Church gets itself into an impossible tangle and cycle of fracturing, in so far as unity and truth are atomised and separated. The extent to which this occurs is a sign of the failure of the Church to be configured to its life in Christ under the form of Scripture.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> See the powerful argument for a Christological focus for truth and unity discussion in Ephraim Radner, *Hope Among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2004), chapter 6, *The Figure of Truth and Unity*, 111–120.

## Disagreement and the wounded church

### 1. A wounded and suffering body

The prevailing problem in the history of the Church is one of fracture as the truth is divided up through multiple divisions and separations; the body of Christ suffers its own self-mutilation. Self-harm is a medical and psychological condition; it has its ecclesial counterpart. Anglicanism has consistently placed high value on an organic understanding of the Church as the natural environment for the contest for truth and disagreements to be conducted. As such it has always regarded schism as a dangerous act *in extremis*; and divisions always risk fracturing the gospel of Christ. It is also true that the Anglican Church has struggled with its own commitment to being an inclusive Communion, working hard to remain one body amidst the tensions, eruptions, wilful blindness, mistakes, misunderstandings and stupidities. But it does try hard and it grieves all greatly that this is the case. And I believe it grieves the Holy Spirit. Right now the worldwide Anglican Communion is trying to deal with issues regarding human sexuality in very different cultural and political contexts. There are fractures, there is splitting there is a suffering body. As a result the church lives with its wounds, it bears the scars from the past and fresh unhealed wounds of the present. Perhaps there is another kind of suffering that the body is called to participate in for the sake of the coming kingdom?

I am not suggesting that Christian beliefs and moral positions are not important; quite the contrary. But what I am saying is that such beliefs and moral and ethical imperatives are held in the body of Christ. But the last thing we seem to have the wisdom to recognise let alone take stock of is the fact that the body of Christ is fundamental to our life. Moreover as St Augustine taught so long ago, and the scriptures before him, the body of Christ is a mixed economy body; the wheat and the tares grow together and not really distinguishable till the final harvest at the end of the age. Short of apostasy, which is the outright denial of the divinity of Christ and rejection of the gospel of Christ, short of this, the body needs tending and nurture not surgical removal of parts deemed by some as needing to be removed. This is why schism has always been viewed with great concern by the church. In effect it involves splitting the body and the body parts litter the centuries since Christ.

## **2. Prototype for messy church**

As a church it can often seem that we are caught between a rock and a hard place. When we are unhappy or alarmed at the direction of parts of our church we usually desire tighter control and top down management. When we are focussed on our local context and the challenge of living the Gospel as faithfully as we can then we invariably desire greater autonomy. We hear both kinds of voices in the Communion today. And perhaps not surprisingly such calls at the macro level are echoed at the micro level of provinces and dioceses.

Clearly in a Church which gives primary emphasis to local leadership through Provinces and Dioceses, a bishop's leadership will, of necessity be of a moral and persuasive kind rather than legal and juridical. The search for wider consensus will always be a priority. This accords with an ecclesiology that operates from the ground up. This means that Anglican leadership and decision-making at synods for example, will always have a somewhat messy feel about it, a bit ragged at the edges. The reason is clear; finding consensus, as any family knows, requires conversation, forbearance and willingness to compromise. Anglicanism is a polity of persuasion not coercion. The Anglican way in the gospel ends up generating a body of Christ that is a prototype of messy church.

## **3. Disagreement as positive learning**

I suggest that disagreement has a very positive function of facilitating deepening understanding and clarity about the implications of the gospel. And the very disagreements point to the fact that the Body of Christ is not monolithic but diverse and admits of very differing views on many matters of practice and belief. Of course, not everything is up for grabs so to speak. The ancient creeds map out the contours of the heart of Christian faith concerning the triune God and Christ as Lord and saviour. But even at this most central focus for faith there will always continue to be discussion, testing, probing and new insights as the Church in every age reconnects the faith proclaimed with the eternal Gospel.

It is sometimes suggested that we must first be clear about the common ground upon which we all stand prior to arguing our points of difference and disagreement. But the idea of the

commons goes beyond that. This latter notion reminds us that none in fact can lay claim to a justified place of standing notwithstanding our rhetoric to the contrary. To find our common ground we need to travel metaphorically and spiritually to the commons.

I am suggesting that staying with the suffering Church—the visible and concrete Church that suffers its own internal enmities—may be the only way in which the Church is able to genuinely bear witness to the character of God’s suffering love for the world. This will require sacrifice; a giving up without claim; a new way of engaging with those with whom we profoundly disagree; a kind of non-rivalrous disagreement; even one might say a truly ‘godly disagreement’ (pp. 264-265).

Now for an exercise to briefly practice leaving one’s silos and hallowed positions and travel to the commons. In the session that follows I invite members of synod to listen and reason with one another with the aid of a paper you will have received. This brief paper outlines 7 or so different approaches the church and/or individuals might take to issues to do with same-sex relationships.