



Church of Ireland

A province of the Anglican Communion

Human Sexuality

A Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of the Church of Ireland

September 2003

Society is experiencing the breakdown of national, community and inter-personal relationships on a scale that none of us has experienced before. The problem is made more difficult because there is no universally agreed standard, religious or secular, social or ethical, by which to order our affairs.

One aspect of life in which this brokenness is most personally and painfully experienced is in the realm of human sexuality. While this has become the area of immediate concern, it is equally a matter of concern that the sexualisation of almost every area of life in today's world has seriously damaged the potential for deep and lasting enrichment that comes from close personal friendships between and within the sexes that do not have any sexual expression. Life today has become greatly impoverished as a result.

In the case of homosexuality, social attitudes range from complete acceptance through indifference to complete rejection. Within the Christian tradition, notwithstanding the pastoral care and compassion shown by many, the attitude has more often than not been one of non-acceptance and at times harsh condemnation. At its worst this has led to the demonising, demeaning and oppression of those who, by inclination or in practice, have found themselves attracted to others of the same sex.

This has meant, among other things, that a wholesome engagement with, and open discussion of, the issues surrounding homosexuality has for too long been side-stepped by the Churches. It is a basic assertion of the Christian faith that God has created all that is, and that in Jesus Christ he has entered fully into, and redeemed, a broken world. Despite that affirmation, it has often been people of no particular religious affiliation, or religious people unsupported or opposed by their own institutions, who have been to the fore in engaging with the issues in a way that should have been dealt with by the Churches.

The current debate within Anglicanism has shown that harsh condemnatory attitudes on both sides in the current debate have not gone away. There is still no unanimity on the question itself across the Churches. In trying to discern the mind of Christ, the bishops believe that the Church of Ireland as a whole ought to address the question prayerfully, humbly, carefully and generously.

The bishops have been engaging in this pastoral issue, both individually and corporately, in a process of consultation and research that began before the Lambeth Conference of 1998, and has been continuing ever since. The fact that little has been said collectively is an indication of the pastoral sensitivities felt by the Bishops, together with the complexity of the issue, and of a considerable range of viewpoints among the bishops themselves.

It is evident that no clear-cut solution will be found independently of Biblical reflection, mature thinking, and patient listening on the part of the Church as a whole. This process must involve prayerful and respectful consideration of views and insights within the Church and beyond it. The traditional Anglican concept of the consensus fidelium would seem to demand this.

Together the bishops:

- Affirm the centrality and authority of the Scriptures for all Christian discourse.
- Recognise that the interpretation of Scripture is itself an area of divergence among Christians.
- Hold that the study of Scripture must also engage with the God-given gifts of the cumulative insights of the Christian tradition, and of human reason.
- Remind the Church that since all people have been created in the image and likeness of God, no one should be understood solely, or even primarily, in terms of his or her sexuality.
- Encourage an attitude of respect for one another.

In general, four main viewpoints may be identified within the Church of Ireland with regard to same-sex relationships. They are not so much clear-cut, isolated points of view as relative positions on a spectrum, and the views of the members of the present House of Bishops are to be found across this spectrum.

- The witness of the Scriptures is consonant with a view that rejects homosexual practice of any kind, and that marriage between a man and a woman in life-long union remains the only appropriate place for sexual relations. This must remain the standard for Christian behaviour.
- The witness of the Scriptures is consonant with a more sympathetic attitude to homosexuality than has been traditional, but this would not at present permit any radical change in the Church's existing stance on the question.
- The witness of the Scriptures is consonant with the view that a permanent and committed same-gender relationship which, through its internal mutuality and support brings generosity, creativity and love into the lives of those around, cannot be dismissed by the Church as intrinsically disordered.
- The witness of the Scriptures is consonant with the proposition that, in the light of a developing understanding of the nature of humanity and sexuality, the time has arrived for a change in the Church's traditional position on affirming same-gender relationships.

There is general agreement among the bishops that the mind of the Church must be discerned in relation to sexuality in general. The same requirement also applies to any form of new definition or new pastoral practice in relation to the question of ordination, appointments to positions of leadership, or to the blessing of same-sex unions.

The quest for a common mind is not simply an academic exercise. It has long been tacitly if not formally recognised, that homosexual people have held positions of leadership, ordained and lay, within the Church. Their ministry has frequently been highly imaginative and characterised by great pastoral sensitivity that has deeply enriched the lives of those who have experienced it.

We believe that the search for a *modus vivendi* for the Church is more important than the assertion of abstract and disembodied decrees. This search should be undertaken regardless of the conclusions to which the exercise may take us all.

A process of understanding of these issues cannot be furthered without overcoming many of the fears and insecurities that surround this discussion. To that end, where there is discussion, it is most effectively undertaken in a safe space, where people are able to let go of their own agendas without betraying their deeply held convictions, where they are prepared to listen sensitively to one another, and where attitudes of condemnation are avoided.

Where it is felt that there is urgency for discussion to commence within the Church of Ireland, experience has shown that it is much more fruitful to spend time on learning how to listen and to grow in understanding than to move rapidly beyond that stage in a desire to reach conclusions as quickly as possible. For that reason, the conversation surrounding sexuality is not suited, at this stage, to large legislative assemblies.

Where there is dialogue within dioceses and between local communities, it should above all include those who are most immediately affected by the discussion. It cannot be sufficiently emphasised that the quest itself carries its own risks, and should not be undertaken lightly. This is an area of life where deeply held views, powerful emotions and the potential for causing great harm hold sway. We may have to learn how or whether we will be able to live peaceably and with integrity with very different viewpoints within the family of the Church and the household of faith.