

# HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE CHURCH

(Expanded version of article "Telling It Straight" published in "The Lutheran" October 2003)

*In the western world homosexual relationships are rapidly becoming part of mainstream culture. But the church was never called to be mainstream, says Rob Pollnitz.*

"The repercussions will start when people go home to their congregations, when rectors meet parishioners at the church door, when people start to say, 'I'm out of here'," comments the Rev David Anderson. He is President of the American Anglican Council, and is concerned about the confirmation of the Rev Gene Robinson as the first actively gay bishop in the US Episcopal Church and the worldwide Anglican Communion, on 5 August 2003. At their Minneapolis conference 62 of 107 US bishops voted to support Robinson, age 56, who left a wife and two daughters 13 years ago to live openly with a male partner.

Two days later the same conference considered the practice of blessing same-sex couples, and decided that such rites are "an acceptable practice within the church", although rejecting a move to write a formal liturgy for such ceremonies.

The world head of 70 million Anglicans, Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, said : "I hope we will find that there are ways forward in this situation which can preserve our respect for one another and for the bonds that unite us." He has called an emergency meeting of the 38 Anglican primates from around the world to consider the actions of the US church. Five years ago their Lambeth Conference declared homosexual practice to be "incompatible with Scripture". Africa and Asia are the fastest-growing areas of the Anglican faith, and many prelates there are unhappy with the US decision. "We cannot be in fellowship with them when they violate the explicit Scripture that the Anglican Church subscribes to", says Peter Karanja of Kenya.

Reading about the US decision reminds me that the Bible requires high standards of bishops. Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Timothy 3): "A bishop must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate and self-controlled, one who rules his own house well. He must have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace." Sadly the authority of gifted people can be diminished, even negated by them when they choose to live a life that is out of keeping with their profession.

Three weeks before the US Anglicans, more than 80 per cent of the national assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia voted that practising homosexuals can be ordained as ministers. Individual presbyteries can decide which minister they want on a case-by-case basis. Again, evangelical members of that church are unhappy with the decision, and a major split in the church appears likely. When the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational churches in Australia decided to merge in 1977, the Basis of Union stated: "Its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated by the Bible."

On June 17 the Prime Minister of Canada, Jean Chretien, and his cabinet approved a new national policy to open marriage to gay and to lesbian couples. Their draft law redefines marriage as "the lawful union of two persons to the exclusion of all others." Churches will be allowed to refuse to marry same-sex couples. Belgium and the Netherlands allow similar unions of gay and lesbian couples who are their citizens.

Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard, says he will not be changing our law to recognise same-sex marriages. "That's not an expression of discrimination, but people calling for gay marriages do not understand what marriage means. It's a basic institution of our society, and provides the most secure environment for raising our children." Our Macquarie dictionary defines marriage as "the legal union of a man with a woman for life."

What about us? The booklet "Introducing The Lutheran Church" closes with this paragraph: "Lutherans believe what the Bible says. The Bible is the word of God. So Lutherans accept the Bible as the authority that decides what they are to believe and how they should live. Lutherans believe that the good news about Jesus is the key to the whole Bible."

The Bible begins with Genesis and the story of creation. God made the light, and that was good. God separated the waters from the dry land, and saw that it was good. The grain and the fruit, the sun and the moon, the many living creatures, God saw that all of this was good. God created man in his own likeness, in the image of God. We read 49 verses before God says: "It is not good for the man to live alone. I will make a suitable companion to help him." So God created us male and female. Six verses later we read: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united with his wife, and they become one."

God is no dour puritan when it comes to sex. He invented it! He deliberately made us sexual beings, he designed us to be heterosexual, and he intended us to express our sexuality in marriage. However, the Bible makes it plain that we live in a fallen world where all humanity (and sexuality) is affected by sin. We are all sinners. Homosexual acts can be seen as just one of the many sorry consequences of our broken relationship with our Creator. Sin aside, God's plan for us is clear – one man cleaving to one woman, bearing children if so blessed, and raising those children to know their God. Living that plan is pleasing to God. The foundation of a moral society is that simple. Sadly, adultery tears at the unity, abortion destroys one in four of the children, and homosexual acts mock God's loving design.

It is important to distinguish homosexuality as a sexual attraction or orientation from homosexuality as behaviour. While there is much discussion about the causes of a homosexual orientation, genetics versus nurture, there appear to be many factors involved and the chain of causation is unclear.

Many passages in the Bible identify homosexual behaviour as a sin. As with all our other sins, God offers us the gift of forgiveness and new life in Jesus. The Christian who is burdened with a homosexual orientation is obliged to fight against this temptation and to strive to abstain from homosexual acts. This burden is not unique – many Christians will need to abstain from sexual activity for various reasons.

Trendy people reading this far will accuse me of being politically incorrect, discriminatory, even homophobic. Liberal Protestants can take their cue from changing "cultural standards", rather than sharing my firm ideas about Scripture and tradition. Yet discrimination is not an evil word. We discriminate every day when we choose what clothes to wear or what food to buy. We discriminate when we choose the God we wish to follow. Discrimination can imply wisdom or discernment.

Ah, the liberals will respond, but what about the gospel principles of justice and inclusiveness? Surely the Bible has nothing to say about homosexual relationships as we know them today, as caring committed relationships? Why, was not Jesus himself tolerant of homosexuality?

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome he was aware of loving homosexual relationships in that city. Read Romans 1 and you will find that Paul strongly opposed homosexual acts between men or between women as against nature, as calling down God's anger from heaven. In Matthew 5 Jesus says: "I have not come to put away the law but to fulfill it." The Jewish law against homosexual behaviour was widely accepted among the Jews. I would argue that Jesus never needed to explicitly mention homosexuality because it was not an issue. Jesus repeats the Genesis 2 view of husband and wife becoming one flesh in Matthew 19. Turning to Revelation 2, Jesus says that he cannot tolerate evil people nor can he tolerate the sexually immoral. I believe that Christ's love and compassion should not be confused with tolerance. We can care for people while at the same time being intolerant of certain aspects of their behaviour.

Several state governments are moving towards recognising same-sex relationships for civil purposes in areas such as home ownership grants, sick leave and superannuation. The law recognises non-married couples by calling them de facto partners, putative spouses or domestic partners. I see no

major moral problem in extending similar privileges in these areas to domestic co-dependents, including same-sex couples.

The homosexual lobby proposes that gay and lesbian singles or couples should be allowed access to assisted reproductive technology (including surrogacy) and to adoption in order to secure children to raise as their own. My views on this issue are shaped by over 30 years experience as a specialist paediatrician caring for children. Throughout this time I have observed that children develop best, both physically and emotionally, when they are reared in a stable heterosexual two-parent family. Without criticising single parents or making judgments about people's situations or experiences, when families fracture we see large increases in health problems, learning disorders, defiant behaviours, drug use, sexual promiscuity, and criminality.

WA Democrat Senator Brian Greig claims that gay and lesbian parenting is as successful as that of heterosexual couples. I have read the studies he quotes, and they are either inconclusive or subject to major flaws. In contrast, there is a large body of social science evidence to support the view that children are best raised by their own mother and father.

This is not a new concept – for about 5000 years societies have valued marriage between a man and a woman as the social nucleus in which children are best born and raised.

Our reproductive technology and adoption laws both focus on the welfare of the child to be created or placed. I believe that this key principle that the rights and interests of the child are paramount should not be bent to meet the wishes of single persons or same-sex couples. A baby being created or placed in our society should have the reasonable expectation, other things being equal, of the care and affection of both a mother and a father. In my opinion people who make lifestyle choices that preclude the normal procreation of children have no right to demand to have children by other people and by other means. Our children are too important to be treated as social guinea pigs to appease the demands of a tiny if vocal minority.

Research indicates that gay and lesbian relationships tend to be unstable. While lesbian unions tend to last longer, a 1990 study found that 50% of lesbian pairs break up in 6 years. Granted the divorce rate for married couples has been increasing, but it is still below 50% over a lifetime of 50 years. Homosexual couples also face increased health risks, with a 1996 study noting HIV-AIDS, substance abuse and domestic violence as their three leading health problems. I believe that our government has an obligation to protect our children by deciding not to electively place them in such high-risk situations.

In South Australia at present 14 schools are trialing a new sex education program designed by SHine SA (Sexual Health information network and education – formerly Family Planning SA). This program is so lacking in discrimination that digital, anal, oral and vaginal sex are presented to children aged 11-15 years as options of equal value. Condoms are alleged to ensure “safe sex”, and abortions to have few after-effects. A supporter says the program seeks to respect diversity in sexuality. Journalist Christopher Pearson responds that children need adequate instruction, which the program does not provide. Abstinence is not presented as a viable alternative. At most, students are advised to “wait” – perhaps for 2 or 3 months – until their partner “feels ready”. Pearson (himself a homosexual who chooses to remain celibate) says there is a strong recruiting element in the gay lobby. “They put pressure on vulnerable adolescents, who may be experiencing passing same-sex attraction. They say, *You are one of us*. They can be very manipulative.”

Healing is possible for homosexuals who want to change. Interested doctors, pastors and support groups such as Exodus and Love in Action can help. A reformed homosexual tells me his favourite verse is Romans 6:14 : “For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.” Whatever the sin, to turn to Jesus in repentance and receive his forgiveness is life changing.

The proudly homosexual who seek approval for their behaviour and defiantly condemn the church's stand on homosexual acts may angrily deny that they have any need of healing. However, sometimes

under the veneer of pride there is a sense of guilt or depression and a hidden longing for change that may emerge with time.

We are left with the classic Christian response: to love the sinner, even as we hate the sin. Lutherans believe that God loves every human being, even though none of us are worthy of his love. Too often church people shy away from the homosexual, sending out signals of rejection. The homosexual person needs *agape* (the care and compassion shown by Jesus) and acceptance, to attend worship services, to hear the word and receive the sacrament, as the means by which God forgives, strengthens faith, and heals.

The families of homosexuals also need our love and understanding. They are often ashamed of their child's lifestyle, and sensitive to any ill-informed criticism that his or her sexuality derives from faulty rearing. They too need our compassion. "We are to welcome and accept both the weak and the strong into the worshipping community, as Christ has welcomed us." (Romans 15:7)

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*The Lutheran Tract Mission has ten brochures regarding human sexuality, from the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau. Two of these brochures deal specifically with questions surrounding homosexuality: 'Is this the way God made me?' and 'Can homosexual love be blessed?'*

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