

Human Sexuality A Statement by the Anglican Bishops of Canada - 1997

The Background

In 1976 the House of Bishops of the Anglican Church of Canada sought advice as it faced the issue of homosexuality in contemporary society and how the church ought to relate pastorally, and in terms of ordination. A task force presented a lengthy report to the bishops.

By 1979 the bishops had committed themselves to further study and they requested the preparation of study materials to help further discussion at all levels of the church. These materials were published in 1985.

In 1979, as an interim measure, the bishops issued a statement based on the following belief:

We believe as Christians, that homosexual persons, as children of God, have a full and equal claim with all other persons, upon the love, acceptance, concern and pastoral care of the Church.

As well, the Bishops issued a four point pastoral guideline for themselves as they considered the admission of individual persons to the church's ordained ministry.

1. Our present and future considerations about homosexuality should be pursued within the larger study of human sexuality in its totality;
2. We accept all persons, regardless of sexual orientation, as equal before God; our acceptance of persons with homosexual orientation is not an acceptance of homosexual activity;
3. We do not accept the blessing of homosexual unions;
4. We will not call into question the ordination of a person who has shared with the bishop his/her homosexual orientation if there has been a commitment to the Bishop to abstain from sexual acts with persons of the same sex as part of the requirement for ordination.

In referring to this guideline in the press, Archbishop Scott, Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada at that time said,

Our statement is not meant to be, in any way, legislation or a final doctrinal statement. It is a pastoral statement and we intend it to assist us in the exercise of our pastoral ministry within the Church.

The house held a number of study sessions on the topic of human sexuality through the 1980's. In 1991 a new task force was constituted by the Primate.

At the General Synod of 1992 a major block of time was devoted to an open forum on the topic. More materials were made available for study and by 1994/1995 approximately 170 groups and 2500 people had used the study guide *Hearing Diverse Voices, Seeking Common Ground*.

At the 1995 General Synod, an important report was presented, following a hearing, which led to a motion being presented and strongly supported which:

Affirmed the presence and contributions of gay men and lesbians in the life of the church and condemned bigotry, violence and hatred directed toward any due to their sexual orientation.

This report recommended among other things, that the process of dialogue continue; that all of us should, "learn and reflect more about our sexuality as a whole," and that the dialogue should be extended so that the, "whole church family has an opportunity to be involved". The Faith Worship and Ministry Committee of the ACC was given a mandate to provide leadership to the church to ensure a continuation of the dialogue.

All of this effort has fostered a greater understanding of what it is to be a gay man or lesbian in the church and a heightened sense of pastoral concern on the part of the church. Also, as gay men and lesbians have found greater acceptance in the church, they have been enabled to share their experiences in a more public way to the benefit of the whole church which has become increasingly aware of the breadth and depth of their contribution.

At its April 1997 meeting, discussing this topic for the first time in open session, the House of Bishops continued its deliberations and requested the task force to redraft the 1979 guideline in the light of new pastoral awareness while at the same time retaining the original intent of the guideline. In undertaking this task we seek to articulate how far we have come, as well as to acknowledge those areas where continued study and dialogue is necessary. Theological reflection and pastoral action in the Church since 1979 have focused on four key areas, and it is these that shape our considerations in this statement. The church has reflected on the place of gay and lesbian persons in society; the place of gay and lesbian persons in the church; the significance of committed sexually active relationships between people of the same sex and the significance of such relationships for ordination of gay and lesbian persons.

Gay and Lesbian Persons in Society

As Christians we believe that homosexual persons are created in the image and likeness of God and have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, concern and care of the church. As an expression of this love and care, the gospel of Jesus Christ compels Christians to oppose all forms of human injustice and to affirm that all persons are brothers and sisters for whom Christ died. It is on the basis of these theological insights, which remain pertinent irrespective of any considerations of the appropriateness or otherwise of homosexual acts, that the Anglican Church of Canada has affirmed that gay and lesbian persons are entitled to equal protection under the law with all other Canadian citizens. Thus, this House supported the passage of bill C-33 that made sexual orientation a prohibited ground for discrimination under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We call upon the church and all its members to continue to work to safeguard the freedom, dignity and responsibility of every person and to seek an end to discrimination.

Gay and Lesbian Persons in the Church

We are thankful to see a new sensitivity emerging towards gay and lesbian persons in the Church. No longer can we talk in the abstract. We are experiencing a growing awareness that the persons of whom we speak are here among us. They are our sons and daughters. They are our friends and relatives. This recognition has not always been present. The story of the Church's attitude to gay and lesbian people has too often been one of standing at a distance, even of prejudice, ignorance and oppression. All of us need to acknowledge this, and to repent for any part we may have had in creating it. In our baptism we covenant to seek and serve Christ in all persons. We now call the church to reaffirm the mutuality of that covenant, a covenant that encourages and enables us to love others as Christ loves us. This covenant will no longer allow us to regard those among us whose orientation is homosexual simply as "needy objects" for

pastoral care. Instead we are partners, celebrating together the dignity of every human being, and reaching out together for the wholeness offered to us in the Gospel. The church affirms its traditional teaching that only the sexual union of male and female can find appropriate expression within the covenant of Holy Matrimony. However, we recognize that some homosexuals live in committed sexual relationships for mutual support, help and comfort. We wish to continue open and respectful dialogue with those who sincerely believe that sexuality expressed within a committed homosexual relationship is God's call to them, and we affirm our common desire to seek together the fullness of life revealed in Christ.

Blessing of Covenanted Relationships

We continue to believe that committed same sex relationships should not be confused with Holy Matrimony. The house will not authorize any act that appears to promote this confusion. There is, and needs to be, ongoing discussion about how to respond appropriately to faithful and committed same sex relationships. In the context of the ongoing debate this would necessitate respectful listening and learning about the nature of such relationships and their meaning for the persons involved in them. We recognize that relationships of mutual support, help and comfort between homosexual persons exist and are to be preferred to relationships that are anonymous and transient. We disagree among ourselves whether such relationships can be expressions of God's will and purpose.

While consensus may be unlikely in the near future, we believe that study and dialogue continue to be fruitful. As we continue to listen together to scripture, tradition, and reasoned argument based on the experience of the Church, including and especially the experience of its gay and lesbian members, we grow in our recognition that our disagreements reflect our attempts to be faithful to the Gospel in our different personal and pastoral contexts.

As long as such dialogue continues to be fruitful we believe it should continue. We are not ready to authorize the blessing of relationships between persons of the same sex. However, in interpreting the Gospel, we must always reflect on the context to which it is addressed. We are, therefore, committed to ongoing study of human sexuality and of the nature and characteristics of human intimacy and family life as it exists in our society.

Ordination of Gay and Lesbian Persons

Among our clergy there are some who are gay or lesbian. Their ministries are often highly dedicated and greatly blessed. God has endowed them with many intellectual and spiritual gifts and we give thanks for their ministries. We reaffirm that sexual orientation in and of itself is not a barrier to ordination or the practice of ministry within the church. Within the wider parameters of suitability, it is the manner in which sexuality is expressed that must be considered. Our intimate relationships are an expression of the most profound possibilities for human relationships, including our relationship with God (Eph.5:32). At ordination, candidates promise to live their lives and shape their relationships so as to provide a "wholesome example" to the people of God (BCP, 642). Exemplary behaviour for persons who are not married includes a commitment to remain chaste.

Conclusion

Our discussions over the past few years have taught us much. We do not have a common mind on all things. We see in part and we know in part. Where we disagree we need to continue to read the scriptures together and to engage in dialogue, that we might listen for what the Spirit is saying to the Church today.

