

Submission from the Modern Churchpeople's Union to the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission

From the Modern Churchpeople's Union, 20 July 2004

The Modern Churchpeople's Union believes it would be a major error to apply any sanctions with respect to the appointment of a gay bishop or the approval of same-sex marriages.

We concur with the view, already expressed in other submissions, that the Anglican view of authority is best described as a balance between Scripture, reason and tradition. The MCU was founded in 1898 largely to defend this theological tradition, and has now had just over a century's experience of promoting it in debates over a wide variety of issues.

In our experience the value of this approach has been proved in the way contentious issues have, in fact, been resolved. Time after time, when new ideas have been promoted, their opponents have appealed to biblical proof texts or elements of the church's tradition in order to defend the status quo. Far from being sufficient to conclude the debate, however, these appeals have contributed to it, alongside other considerations such as new knowledge and concern for human well-being. Satisfactory resolutions have, in practice, resulted from periods of open debate in which different sources of authority are compared and weighed.

Examples are numerous. When the MCU was founded the dominant issues were the theory of evolution and literary-historical studies of the bible. Since then many of our members have taken leading roles in a variety of debates including women in the ordained ministry, remarriage after divorce, capital punishment and contraception. In each of these issues the majority Anglican view has changed. In each case the process of change took time. The time was made available because church members, including bishops, had the freedom to express views at variance with the inherited position. Nor is this true only of the twentieth century; further back in time one might instance the debate about the slave trade, where again supporters of the status quo had biblical texts on their side but nevertheless a Christian consensus against it emerged.

We believe that this granting of time and freedom, within which a consensus can slowly arise or change, is justified by the Anglican understanding of authority. Central to the traditional balance of Scripture, reason and tradition is the recognition that no single authority is infallible and we therefore need them all to balance each other. This makes Anglican theology *open*, in the sense that every age has the potential to discover new insights. The methodology is inductive rather than deductive; absolute certainty is not given to us, so theological reflection should be done with humility and creativity. Within the church divergent voices need to be heard, or our ears will be blocked; churches at their best are *inclusive*.

We recognize that many are attracted by a contrasting approach which appeals to a single source of authority and employs deductive processes to establish doctrines. Such an approach offers a greater sense of certainty and is *closed* in the sense that it provides no place for new insights. However, churches in this tradition characteristically become *exclusive* by, for example, excluding from teaching or leadership roles those who deviate from their inherited teaching. When such exclusions fail to resolve differences of opinion, the history of modern western Christianity illustrates all too amply how easily splits occur and sectarianism develops. We would not wish this to be the fate of Anglicanism.

The view that the Communion should refuse to acknowledge Bishop Robinson's status as a bishop, because his stance disagrees with inherited Anglican teaching, implies that currently inherited doctrine is the only legitimate position and that diversity of opinion among the Communion's leadership is not acceptable. We understand this to be an example of an *exclusive* ecclesiology based on a *closed* theology, and therefore inappropriate to Anglicanism. To impose sanctions on ECUSA, or Bishop Robinson, or priests who wish to be open about their gay or lesbian sexualities, would suppress the debate and constitute a major change in Anglicanism's decision-making processes.

We see no reason why Anglicanism should not remain united while disagreeing about the ethics of homosexuality. However, it cannot remain united if there is no consensus about how to make decisions. Anglicanism's traditional balance of Scripture, reason and tradition, with its openness and inclusivity, has enabled it to manage change creatively and consensually, and needs to be protected.

We therefore propose that the current public debate should be allowed to take its course without any sanctions against those who disagree with the traditional view.

The signatories

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