

EARS TO HEAR?: why the Eames group will not be debating homosexuality

To be clear. The hearing deficiency alluded to in the above heading is not a reference to the members of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission. Equally the sub-heading is not a prediction of what will or will not be talked about during their meetings over the next few months. What is implied is that no matter who is discussing whether non-abstinent same-sex relationships disqualify Christian men and women from full participation in the life and ministry of Anglican churches, then the incomprehension on both sides of the debate is so great that no resolution of the issue is yet remotely in sight. Statements to the press when the new Commission was announced made clear that it was not going to deal directly with issues of human sexuality.

That was not what had been expected by a number of people. The IATDC had been told unequivocally that it was not expected to deal with the subject of homosexuality and the church, and that when the time was right for that subject to be discussed, a new Commission would be appointed to discuss it. Many observers, including Archbishop Ndungane, had anticipated that the meeting of the Primates in October, 2003 would be the occasion for such a body to be brought into being. When that proved not to be the case several media reports suggested a fudge, an attempt to buy time, to postpone the inevitable, to use techniques of crisis-management rather than theological principle to solve the Communion's dilemma.

Another view, and one that this note prefers, is that wiser counsel prevailed. The present state of the discussion between supporters and opponents of (for instance) the consecration of Gene Robinson or the provision of services of blessing for gay and lesbian couples in the diocese of New Westminster, means that the time is not yet ripe for decisive jurisdiction. Recriminations and counter assertions, incomprehension and outrage are not the ingredients of theological clarification. There is little point in promoting a dialogue of the deaf.

Even, perhaps especially in church controversies, there is a tendency to compare the worst of an opponent's arguments with the very best of one's own. Perhaps part of the reason for the vituperative nature of some public exchanges on attitudes to homosexuality and the church is that *at their best* proponents of both points of view believe that they take their stance because it is "a gospel issue". On one hand it might be a defence of plain teachings of Scripture and the issue of salvation for sinners: on the other, perhaps an appeal to interpret the overall sweep of Scriptural teachings in diverse cultural settings and insight into the redeeming work of God for his whole creation.

But there is another, darker side of things. Heterosexuals can be prey to exploitative, violent or predatory sexual tendencies, even when married, even within the church. Homosexuals need to recognise that not all of even their most comfortable, committed relationships manifest fruit of the Spirit such as kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. In fact the one unifying factor in this whole debate is the way in which all Christian people, straight and gay, stand together in the need to hear afresh about that 'life in all its fullness' which Jesus Christ came to bring. In a post-modern world where a rootless, individualistic hedonism increasingly holds the ring, *the* gospel issue is about the way all human life, including our sexuality, is made new in Christ. The debate about homosexuality and the church is not just about winning an argument, it is about re-discovering wholeness and holiness, goodness and truth. What is the gospel message for a sexually confused global community? To discover that, perhaps both sides in the current controversy will need to be ready to hear some unexpected, and perhaps uncomfortable answers.

Is it because churches of the Anglican Communion still find themselves some distance from facing their differences with that sort of expectation that it is not yet ready decisively to debate the issues that divide it? The role of the ABCC is presumably to find ways in which the disputants can be held together in one institution in the meantime. The IATDC is seeking to discern the sort of theological framework in which particular disputes can be set and, ultimately at least, resolved. The discussion which is developing throughout the Communion around the 'Six Propositions' (2002) suggests that polarisation over issues like sexual behaviour is itself a result of disagreements concerning the use of Scripture, the ethical framework of discipleship, the contextualization and inculturation of the gospel, the relative place of the local and the universal in the fellowship of the church, and appropriate ways of gathering and then speaking to or for the whole Anglican community. A middle way through these and other controversies may point towards a meeting place where current questions surrounding sexual identity and fulfilment can be addressed with integrity and hope.

At present however, the image which comes to mind is that of two great ocean liners passing each other in the night, seemingly without realising how great is the danger of their colliding. The only communication between them is from passengers shouting distantly and incoherently at indistinct figures they fancy they can see on the decks opposite. So great is their tumult that they fail to hear the cries of distress and confusion which arise from the crews of unnoticed and less sumptuously appointed fishing boats which bob about between the larger ships, in danger of perishing in the turbulent wake thrown up by their passage.

Let those that *have* ears

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