

Sexuality and Human Flourishing

**A Day Conference to explore and celebrate our relationships
with God, with each other, and with our inner selves**

Saturday February 6th 2010

10.00 am – 4.30 pm

Church of the Ascension, Stirchley, Birmingham

The day conference was held to create a safe and holy environment in which people could explore the themes of human sexuality, faith, and relationships. There were 106 participants.

The event was organized by members of The Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality, Inclusive Church, Changing Attitude, LGCM, The Sibyls, and Church members in Norwich and Birmingham.



At this time, when the Church is deeply divided on these issues, many of us find the situation perplexing - both in the light of our own experience, and in the experience of people we know. What is it about our sexuality that informs and expresses the nature of our humanity and our relationship with God?

Two presentations were given in the morning. Arnold Browne, (former Dean of Trinity College Cambridge) gave a presentation titled "Welcome one another: The Scriptures and Sexual Diversity". The presentation by Alison Webster, (Social Responsibility Adviser for the Anglican Diocese of Oxford), was titled "Diversity in One Human Journey". A panel discussion and workshop sessions were held in the afternoon. To enable people to speak freely confidentiality has been observed and these activities are not reported in the proceedings. Instead a system of "Post It" notes was used to enable people to express their views and to report on the outcome of their discussions.

In his presentation Arnold Browne gave an analysis of the letters of Paul. He drew a contrast between Paul's texts which gave prescriptive directions about behaviour and compared these with the texts in Paul which showed how all of these issues are transcended through commitment to the Love of Christ. Paul did not condemn those who did not follow his own prescriptions. He never said that transgression was always wrong. He himself gave illustrations of exemptions from the edicts he declared. Instead Paul asked everyone to consider their actions, not by adhering blindly to the rules and regulations he had to state but by considering how their behaviour relates to a life which expresses the Gospel of Christian Love.

Alison Webster gave a presentation which drew on the experiences of her own personal journey. She argued that the categories in the Church we put people into are reflections of the power that people seek to have over them. Therefore culture and power matter. They become the restraining influence through which authority is imposed. Unnamed loves also matter because they become the vehicle through which all of us can become one in the Love of Christ.

The discussions made it clear that there is a need for the Church of England to come to terms with the reality of its own situation, and to adopt a pattern of engagement which deals with the issues involved in an atmosphere of trust and love.

This requires a process of disclosure and honesty. This has to be both in our own minds and with each other. It demands that we acknowledge our weaknesses and our strengths. Storytelling must take place in which people of all sexualities and gender identities (including people in the heterosexual community) can be heard and be listened to. There is a need to establish a range of "Safe Places" in which this can happen.

Such an enabling process would foster self esteem and mutual regard that would better enable us to address the challenges that are faced.

Attendance at the conference was almost equally split between people who labelled themselves heterosexual and people who labelled themselves lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered. The heterosexual group felt at least as strongly about the same issues around acceptable sex. Within this group, severe instances of rejection by churches were cited.

In many churches the requirement for faithfulness and the institution of marriage for heterosexual couples marks the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable sex. In civil partnerships the expectations of love and faithfulness ought to do the same. However in many churches the institution of a civil partnership is seen as a method of legitimising licentiousness instead.

There was a clear distinction made between sexual relationships that are given in love and those which are pursued for the sexual act. It was agreed by

both groups that acceptable sex is that which takes place in the context of loving relationships.

Within the churches it is a lack of understanding that imposes the greatest threat. Issues of sexuality (apart from rejection) tend not to be addressed and ignorance amongst clergy and congregations is high. Homosexuality is perceived as a desire to pursue the sexual act, and the core issues of relationships are ignored

The Church of England states that it is engaged in a listening process with Lesbian, Gay Bisexual and Transgendered people. For this to happen it must come to recognise that most Lesbian Gay and Bisexual people in the Church seek loving and faithful relationships with their partners, relationships where their sexual acts are in fulfilment of that love. It must also listen to those in heterosexual relationships as well.

The freedom given for people to talk in confidence about their personal lives during the conference, revealed a huge and diverse range of experience. This diversity makes it clear why the desire to impose labels must be avoided. Within the church there is a great reluctance to face these issues. A process of enabling is required, through which people can become free to express their views.

To achieve these aims a number of specific objectives were stated.

- Provision of safe space - somewhere where people can be honest about what they are struggling with. This may be either near to where they live or further away. It should include the provision of safe environments for the representation of friendship, partnership, widows etc and for LGBT adolescents.
- Education and training for clergy and laity involved in industry and pastoral situations - it was noted that there is a need to develop a culture of acceptance in ordinands. Parish training programmes are also required.
- A list of accredited churches. One suggestion emphasized the need to involve the congregations. This should be achieved by concentrating on resourcing the congregations and allowing them to resource the church.
- The need for a wider range of liturgies. Liturgy should not always be around "Almighty Father" and efforts should be made to develop more inclusive forms.
- The complexity of sexuality as a whole must be recognized. Other issues (such as hidden domestic violence) must not be ignored.

Some of the sessions in the conference may have concentrated on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender concerns but the focus of the conference was that of sexuality as a whole, and about how this may be celebrated within a truly Inclusive Church.

If the Church is to move forward on the issues of sexuality and human flourishing, there are further objectives that must be addressed. Four priority areas were identified from the post-it notes created during the discussions. These are expressed in terms of need.

- **The Need for Communication:** The current lack of communication means that attitudes about the other grow in ignorance and fear. Without the ability to be open and honest with each other prejudices and misconceptions develop and are reinforced.
- **The Need for Understanding:** The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community may feel it is understood, but it must also take note of the signals it gives. Any minority group has a particular responsibility to ensure that its position is known, and that its views can be clearly separated from other groups with similar interests who do not follow its path.
- **The Need for Interpretation:** The conference made a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable sex which is based on relationships given in love. For this to be understood it is necessary to examine the Old and New Testament texts in the light of this perception and in the context of the societies within which they were written
- **The Need for Authenticity:** Many referred to the hypocrisy of a church which takes a moralising attitude on sexual relationships and attempts at the same time to hide itself from its own situation by silencing people within it who possess dissenting views. Discussion of this topic raised the greatest anger. The refusal of the church to engage with these issues was the greatest concern.

The implications of these considerations raise a number of issues which extend beyond the lectures and discussions in the conference itself. The refusal of the church to engage with the perceptions of sexuality and human flourishing eliminates the possibilities of openness and reinforces prejudices which associate homosexuals only with promiscuity and sexual licence. Labelling becomes a means of control and minority groups can be made scapegoats for other ills. Recent statements by some senior Vatican clerics suggest this. An illustration of what can happen is seen in the opposition by the Bench of Bishops in the United Kingdom House of Lords to the sexual and gender measures in the recent Equality Bill and their effect on the legislation. In addition to permitting discrimination on the grounds of sexuality it impugns the integrity of the people against whom it is directed. In a society where the loss of secular authority by the Church means that it can no longer conceal

the misdemeanours of the past, it is not just the issues of sexuality that are involved, it is the integrity of the church.

The day conference was held to create a safe and holy environment in which people could explore the themes of human sexuality, faith, and relationships. It is imperative that this exploration continues as quickly as possible

The full conference proceedings may be found on the LGBT Anglican Coalition Website www.lgbtac.org.uk

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