

# Some issues in human sexuality

A guide to the debate

A discussion document from the House of  
Bishops' Group on *Issues in Human Sexuality*

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# Preface

This document is published under the authority of the House of Bishops and is commended by the House to the Church for study.

On behalf of the House of Bishops

✠ Rowan Cantuar

✠ David Ebor

November 2003



# Foreword

The title of this study exactly defines its purpose. It is a guide to the theological debate on questions that have arisen in response to the 1991 House of Bishops report *Issues in Human Sexuality*. It works within the parameters of this earlier statement and does not seek to change the position of the House of Bishops from the one expressed there.

In the eleven years since *Issues in Human Sexuality* was published there has been much debate in the churches, not least the Anglican Communion and the Church of England, on the issue of sexuality, particularly homosexuality. This document is intended to help people to enter into that debate, especially into issues connected with Scripture and its interpretation. Our hope is that readers may find here the resources to engage with the questions in an informed way, enabling all of us to enter more deeply into the outlook and theology both of those with whom we agree and those with whom we disagree.

Above all, this guide is intended to bring about greater levels of mutual understanding, encouraging us not only to be better informed but to listen to one another with genuine hearing and imaginative insight. A philosopher once said that that ‘All ethics is training in sympathy’. That sympathy, that is, the attempt to enter into both the mind and feelings of the other person, is crucial to this debate because sexuality is an integral part of being human. When Christians argue for their position in a forthright manner, which of course they are entitled to do, this can be painful to others, especially to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual Christians. For them, this debate is a debate about their personal sexual identity and practice, and all too often they experience rejection by other members of the Church.

At the same time, those who believe that the Church’s traditional teaching on sexual morality embodies the God-given teaching of Holy Scripture itself can also feel pained by those who interpret Scripture differently or who appear to set aside the teaching of Scripture entirely. This is why the words from the final report from The International Anglican Conversations of Human Sexuality are particularly pertinent.

We discovered in our own experience the importance of ‘Interpretive charity’: imputing the best intentions to our colleagues and other members of our communion, telling the better stories about them, checking (if possible at first hand) before drawing conclusions.

The report came from a group of twelve Anglican leaders meeting for three years after the 1998 Lambeth Conference. In commending it to the Anglican Communion Archbishop George Carey noted that:

We use dialogue in order to *clarify* where misunderstandings may lie; to *probe* deeper into the motives for adopting this or that position in regard to certain issues; and to *appreciate* better (even though we may not agree with them) the reasons why some people’s views differ so radically from our own. In this way our deeper search for truth will not be divorced from the fellowship we need for truth to emerge.<sup>1</sup>

That, we hope, has been the model followed by our own working group and will be the model for continuing discussions throughout the Church on the basis of this guide.

As we have already explained, this guide is intended to inform the current debate about human sexuality in the Church of England. It is hoped that it will be a useful resource for both individual and group study. No previous knowledge of the debate about human sexuality is assumed, and it is hoped that the material will be accessible to anyone within the Church who is prepared to invest the necessary time to think through the issues involved. (A study guide to help people work through the material is also available from Church House Publishing.)

A note about terminology: the terms ‘heterosexual’, ‘homosexual’, ‘bisexual’, ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ and ‘transsexual’ are all inventions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their use tends to reflect the widely held modern beliefs that we each have a specific sexual orientation and that this can be distinguished from our actual sexual activity. These beliefs cannot be assumed to underlie earlier discussions of human sexuality and it is, therefore, strictly speaking, anachronistic to use the modern terminology when referring to these earlier discussions. For ease of reference, however, this guide does use these modern terms throughout, though wherever possible it refers to same-sex or homosexual activity, rather than homosexuality, when referring to the premodern era.

Bishop Richard Harries  
Chairman of the Working Party



# The current debate on sexuality

## A. The background to the current debate

### 1.1 Changes in society

**1.1.1** If one were to choose one word with which to sum up the current state of play in regard to human sexuality within British society then that word would have to be ‘diversity’. There is currently in British society a great variety of sexual practice and diversity of attitudes to sexual morality.

**1.1.2** Looking first of all at sexual practice, it has to be acknowledged from the outset that there has always been a wide variety of sexual practice within British society. Research by social historians has made clear that there never was a ‘golden age’ in which sexual behaviour was limited to consensual sex between heterosexual married couples. Sexual activity outside marriage is something that has been known throughout recorded history.

**1.1.3** Lack of information from the past makes it extremely difficult to say with confidence whether there is a greater variety of sexual expression today than there has been in the past. For example, although it seems probable that homosexual relationships and premarital sex are more common today than they have been in the recent past, it is not clear whether the same is true for prostitution, which was extremely widespread in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Then again, with regard to paedophilia, it is not clear whether there is more sexual abuse of children today than there was in the past or whether people are simply more willing to admit that it is taking place.

**1.1.4** However, what seems unarguable is that there is now a greater diversity of attitudes to sexual morality than was the case in the past.

**1.1.5** In the middle of the twentieth century there was a widespread consensus that the proper context for human sexual relationships was

marriage and the begetting of children and deviations from this norm were regarded as morally wrong. The particular form of family life that this consensus presupposed – a father, a mother, and their children as opposed to an extended family or household – may be a product of the modern era and industrialized society (although the changing structure of the ‘family’ or ‘household’ throughout Western history has been much debated by historians in recent decades), but, as we shall see, the view of sexual morality underlying this consensus was one that had been accepted throughout Christian history.

**1.1.6** Today, there are still very many people who would continue to hold to this traditional position, but there is also a growing number of people who would argue that some forms of sexual relationship outside marriage are to be accepted.

**1.1.7** Surveys of social attitudes make it clear that most people would regard violent or exploitative sexual activity as wrong and would, therefore, be opposed to rape or paedophilia. In addition, most people believe that fidelity in marriage is important and would, therefore, be opposed to adultery. However, the *British Social Attitudes Survey* for 1998, for example, indicates that two thirds of those surveyed did not believe that sex before marriage was wrong and, indeed, thought that it was a good idea for people to live together before marriage. Furthermore, a small majority of those surveyed rejected the idea that same-sex sexual relationships were always wrong, with young people in particular taking this approach.

**1.1.8** Evidence from those working with young people indicates that there is a growing trend for many of them to have sexual relationships with partners from both sexes. This does not necessarily mean that they are bisexual, if this term is understood to refer to some form of fixed sexual orientation. What it does mean is that they feel sexual attraction to members of both sexes and see no moral objection to having a sexual relationship with them as part of a journey of sexual exploration and discovery that may very well end up with their entering into a long-term relationship with a partner from one particular sex.

**1.1.9** If we ask what has caused this shift to a greater diversity of approaches to sexual morality, the first thing to note is that it is part of a much wider cultural shift to a greater variety of lifestyles and beliefs than we have ever seen before.

**1.1.10** In the words of the Christian social commentator Os Guinness:

Life is now a smorgasbord with an endless array of options. Whether it is a hobby, holiday, lifestyle, world view or religion, there's something for everybody – and every taste, age, sex, class and interest.<sup>1</sup>

**1.1.11** The result of this multiplication of choice is a vast diversity of lifestyles. There was recently an advertisement for an Internet search engine, which exhorted people to 'define your own universe' and people are increasingly attempting to do just that, not simply through their choice of Internet search engine, but through the way they choose to decorate their homes, the clothes they choose to wear, the music they choose to listen to, the TV channels they choose to subscribe to and so forth. People, that is to say, are increasingly attempting to construct the world that immediately surrounds them, 'their world', by the selection they make from the huge variety of choices that are available to them and, because the choices they make are different, a diversity of lifestyles is the inevitable result.

**1.1.12** It is, of course, true that human beings have been making choices since the dawn of time and there has always been a diversity in the way that people have lived their lives but, until very recently, the range of choices available to individuals within particular cultures has been very limited. There have been two main reasons for this limitation of choice.

**1.1.13** The first reason has been a scarcity of material goods. That is to say, in pre-industrial societies most people were dependent on what could be caught, grown or manufactured in their particular local area and this limited their range of choices. If you were an English peasant in the Middle Ages, for example, it would have been no good wanting to wear cashmere and eat pineapple. You had no choice in the matter. It is only since the industrial revolution and the growth of efficient systems of communication associated with it that people in the Western world have had access to a vast range of material goods and have, therefore, been able to make a choice between them.

**1.1.14** The second reason for lack of choice in the past was that most traditional societies were marked by strong systems of social control that shaped the way that people behaved in most areas of their lives. In Western Europe during the Middle Ages, for instance, the way people

lived their lives was heavily determined by the popular local manifestations of the teachings of the Catholic Church and the traditions of feudal society. This would have meant that the choices open to an English peasant would have been further limited. What they could eat and when, what they could wear, where they could live, the jobs they could do, and the religion they could follow would all be limited both by strong social custom and by civil and ecclesiastical law. The Reformation and the other social, economic and political changes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries broke the Roman Catholic Church's monopoly of ecclesiastical power in much of Western Europe. However, for the most part, this simply meant that one form of social control was replaced by another, otherwise the situation for most people remained unchanged until the last two hundred years.

**1.1.15** It is only during the last two centuries that the idea that there can be a variety of equally legitimate ways of living from which an individual is free to choose has become widely accepted. This has been due to three key changes in Western society.

**1.1.16** The first of these has been the breakdown of the traditional social patterns of pre-industrial society as a result of industrialization and the urbanization that has accompanied it. This, in turn, resulted in the breakdown of traditional forms of socially imposed morality.

**1.1.17** The second has been the combined influence of Enlightenment philosophy and the growing prestige of the natural sciences. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many countries saw a reaction to the Enlightenment that led to increased intellectual and social conservatism. However, in the long term, the Enlightenment and the development of the natural sciences can be seen to have resulted in a widespread unwillingness to conform to accepted patterns of thought and behaviour because of:

- a. a growing belief that personal choice rather than the acceptance of given moral norms is the proper basis for moral commitment.<sup>2</sup>
- b. a growing belief that accepted patterns of thought and behaviour have been inimical to the growth of human knowledge and happiness and based on a view of the nature of human existence that science has shown to be mistaken.

**1.1.18** The third, and in many ways the most important, factor has been the twentieth-century emphasis upon personal fulfilment and emotional happiness as the proper goal of human existence. This emphasis has been connected with a decline in religious belief in much of Western society, particularly a decline in the belief that this life is a preparation for the hereafter, and that the character of our existence in the hereafter will be determined by our obedience or disobedience to God. When people cease to hope for heaven or fear hell they naturally seek their happiness in this life and, for many people, traditional forms of Christian morality have come to be seen as barriers to the achievement of this happiness.

**1.1.19** The multiplication of choices that has emerged from the technological and social changes just outlined has inevitably spilled over into the area of sexual relationships. In traditional Western society the range of choice in sexual behaviour was severely constrained by two factors.

**1.1.20** The first of these, which has already been alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, was the widespread social acceptance of the traditional Christian belief that the only form of legitimate sexual activity was that which took place between a man and a woman who were married to each other. As was previously noted, other forms of sexual activity were met with strong social disapproval and were often subject to punishment under the laws of both Church and State.

**1.1.21** This was not only because they were believed to be theologically wrong but also because they threatened the orderly transmission of wealth and property from one generation to the next and were seen as bringing dishonour on the families of the people involved.

**1.1.22** The second factor was the absence of reliable forms of contraception and the comparatively unsophisticated state of medicine in general. This state of affairs meant that sexual activity was perceived as a more risky business than it is today since, in its heterosexual form, it was likely to result in pregnancy for the woman involved, and because all forms of sexual activity carried the risk of sexually transmitted diseases for which there was no effective treatment.

**1.1.23** Studies such as Angus McLaren's *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History*<sup>3</sup> show that the history behind the changes in sexual behaviour

and attitudes that have taken place has been a complicated one, but a number of factors seem to stand out, including the ones alluded to above.

1. The widening of choice in all areas of life has made people increasingly unwilling to accept external restrictions in their choice of sexual activity. If people now have greater freedom than ever before to choose what to believe and how to behave in all other areas of life, why should this not also be true of their sex lives, providing that what they do does not cause harm to others?

2. The existence of an unprecedentedly high standard of living in a market-dominated society where the consumer is supreme has also affected sexual conduct. Throughout history the rich have always been able to buy the sexual activity they wanted and to use their wealth to defy religious and social norms. In recent times the spread of wealth in Western society has meant that many more people have been able to do the same.

3. The development of reliable forms of contraception and increasing confidence in the effectiveness of medicine in general has meant that, in spite of the AIDS scare of the early 1980s, people are much less concerned than they once were about the medical consequences of sexual activity. Furthermore, the work of 'sex experts' such as Havelock Ellis, Marie Stopes and Alfred Kinsey has led people to believe that sexual fulfilment is a key to emotional and psychological well-being. These two facts together have led increasing numbers of people to feel neither the need nor the inclination to accept the traditional restrictions on sexual activity because such activity is felt unlikely to do serious harm and likely to give much pleasure. Furthermore, reliable contraception has broken the link between sexual activity and having children, with the result that increasing numbers of people link sex with pleasure rather than the possibility of procreation.

4. Marriage has come under increasing pressure. Arguments rage over why this is the case,<sup>4</sup> but the explanation that seems most plausible is that people are now entering into marriage with higher expectations than ever before in terms of personal fulfilment but, paradoxically, these expectations are harder than ever to meet because of the current confusion about what such fulfilment might mean and how it might be achieved, and because of conflict between men and women caused by the changing pattern of gender roles in British society. Because people

have high expectations and these are often not being met, and because there is no longer the social and legal pressure to remain married that there once was, more people than ever before are choosing to end marriages that they find unfulfilling in order to try to find a better life either on their own or with someone new. In addition, people who are aware of the pressures on marriage and the harm that marital conflict can cause are choosing to remain unmarried and either to cohabit or lead a single life.

Because the decline in the number of marriages and the increasingly diverse pattern of relationships have not been accompanied by a corresponding decline in the desire to engage in sexual activity, more and more people are engaging in sexual relationships outside marriage. People still seek happiness and fulfilment in intimate sexual relationships but increasingly they do not see marriage as the only or even the best context for such relationships.

5. It is also arguable that the increase in the variety of sexual activity in Western society is not purely driven by people's exercise of personal choice, but is heavily influenced by a new form of social conformity. The great proliferation of the print and electronic media and the continuing reduction in censorship, combined with the fact that there is always money to be made from sexual titillation, have meant that there have been increasingly widespread and graphic descriptions and depictions of sexual activity of all kinds in books, newspapers, magazines, the cinema, television and now the Internet. This has in turn led to ever-increasing acceptance that varied sexual activity is a normal state of affairs. British society is being increasingly shaped by the influence of the media, and the message that is coming across is not in favour of traditional sexual morality.

6. All the factors mentioned so far have meant that most people know people among their friends or family who engage in a variety of sexual activities that differ from the traditional moral norm. This makes moral condemnation of such activity much more difficult since it is much more difficult to condemn people you know and of whom you are fond. It is easy to condemn moral stereotypes but much more difficult and painful to disapprove of the behaviour of your own friends and family.

**1.1.24** All these factors taken together have meant that across the Western world people have simply not been willing to restrict their sexual activity to marriage, and there has been less and less social

pressure for them to do so. It has also meant that restrictions on gay, lesbian and bisexual activity have come to be seen as increasingly outmoded and hypocritical. If heterosexual people can freely engage in sexual activity that is purely for pleasure and is not aimed at the production of children, then why should not gay, lesbian and bisexual people do the same? Why should heterosexual people deny others the emotional and physical pleasure of sexual activity that they allow themselves? As the American writer David Greenberg puts it:

The acceptance of some forms of sexual experience whose sole purpose is pleasure, sociability, or the expression of love makes it hard, in the absence of rational grounds, to reject others that are equally harmless and consensual.<sup>5</sup>

**1.1.25** Similar issues concerning personal choice and the search for personal fulfilment, allied to advances in medical technology, also apply in the case of people suffering from ‘transsexualism’ or ‘gender dysphoria’ who are seeking to achieve a greater degree of self-acceptance and personal fulfilment by changing their bodies to conform to what they believe to be their true sex. Why should they be trapped in what they believe to be the wrong body and thus be unable to achieve emotional and sexual fulfilment? Why should they not use medical technology to give them the same chance of fulfilment as everyone else?

**1.1.26** All these changes have, of course, had an impact on thinking within the Churches and the practices of individual Christians and Christian communities. The Christian ethicist Mark D. Jordan has called this ‘the undoing of Christendom’s sexual compact’.<sup>6</sup> It is this development that we will now explore.

## **1.2 Changes in the Church**

### **a. The traditional Christian view of sexual ethics**

**1.2.1** When C. S. Lewis wrote in his classic work of Christian apologetics *Mere Christianity*: ‘There is no getting away from it; the Christian rule is, “Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence”,’<sup>7</sup> he was expressing what has always been the mainstream Christian approach to sexual ethics.

**1.2.2** As Derrick Sherwin Bailey shows very clearly in his study *The Man-Woman Relation in Christian Thought*<sup>8</sup> there has been a



variety of approaches to this subject among Christian authors down the centuries.

**1.2.3** This variety has been caused by a number of influences, among the most important of which have been:

- Differing views of the place of the human body in our relationship with God.
- Differing views of the place of sexual abstinence in Christian discipleship.
- Differing understandings of the relationship between human sexuality, the fall of humanity recorded in Genesis 3, and the subsequent transmission of original sin.
- Widespread male fear of women and their sexuality as sources of temptation and impurity.

**1.2.4** However, alongside this variety there has also been a core of commonly held beliefs about human sexuality that together have led to an acceptance of the conclusion expressed by Lewis.

**1.2.5** The first belief is that God's intention for human sexual activity has been made known to us primarily in Holy Scripture.

**1.2.6** Furthermore, there are three passages of Scripture that have been seen as especially significant for understanding God's intention. These are the creation narratives in Genesis 1–2, the teaching on marriage by Christ himself in Matthew 19.1-12 and the teaching on marriage by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 7.1-40.

**1.2.7** Corinthians 7.1-40 has had a particularly important history, having been used by the patristic writers to argue for celibacy as the greater good, and by the Protestant reformers to argue for the equal importance of marriage and celibacy as forms of Christian discipleship. It therefore provides an interesting instance of a biblical passage that has been interpreted in two opposing ways.

**1.2.8** The importance of philosophical reflection on human existence has been widely acknowledged, particularly by those in the Catholic tradition, but its conclusions have been seen as subordinate to, and supportive of, the teaching of the Bible.

**1.2.9** The second belief, based on the teaching of Genesis 1.26-27 and 2.18-24, is that the division of humankind into two distinct but complementary sexes is not something accidental or evil but is, on the contrary, something good established by God himself when he first created the human race.<sup>9</sup> By complementary what is meant is that the differences between men and women were intended for the mutual good of each.

**1.2.10** The sixteenth-century Protestant reformer, John Calvin, for example, while acknowledging the dissension between men and women caused by sin, writes in his commentary on Genesis 2.18:

If the integrity of man had remained to this day such as it was from the beginning, that divine institution would be clearly discerned, and the sweetest harmony would reign in marriage; because the husband would look up with reverence to God; the woman in this would be a faithful assistant to him; and both, with one consent, would cultivate a holy, as well as a friendly and peaceful intercourse.<sup>10</sup>

**1.2.11** What Calvin's comments also indicate, however, is that until recent times this belief in the complementary nature of the differences between men and women was also combined with a strong belief in a hierarchical relationship between them, in which men were destined to rule and women to assist and obey. Only since the Enlightenment has a belief in equality between men and women found widespread acceptance, although it was held earlier by radical Christian groups such as the Quakers and by some of the earliest Christian churches.

**1.2.12** The third belief is that God ordained that men and women should relate to each other in marriage for the three reasons classically expressed in the marriage service of the *Book of Common Prayer*: 'for the procreation of children . . . for a remedy against sin and to avoid fornication . . . for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.'

**1.2.13** This is the belief set out, for example, by St Augustine in his treatise *On the Good of Marriage* in which he argues that the three 'goods' of marriage are *fides* (the sexual fidelity that prevents sexual activity being fornication or adultery), *proles* (the begetting of children) and *sacramentum* (the lifelong union of man and wife that meets the human need for love and companionship).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, as Augustine's

teaching about *sacramentum* indicates, it has been universally accepted that marriage is meant to be for life, although both the Orthodox and Protestant traditions have allowed for divorce in certain circumstances.

**1.2.14** The fourth belief is that sexual union has a legitimate place in the context of marriage.

**1.2.15** The patristic tradition held that sexual activity was good in the context of marriage in so far as it acted as a remedy against lust outside marriage, and led to the production of children, although St Augustine argued that sexual pleasure was a venial sin because, in our fallen state, it represented the triumph of lust over reason.<sup>12</sup>

**1.2.16** However, from St Thomas Aquinas onwards, it came to be seen that sexual pleasure within marriage was good in itself providing that it did not unduly dominate the marital relationship, and that sexual activity was engaged in appropriately and with due moderation. In his discussion of the matter in the *Summa Theologiae*, St Thomas responds to the Augustinian argument that sexual activity within marriage is sinful because it involves immoderate passion. St Thomas' response is as follows:

The excess of passion that amounts to a sin does not refer to the passion's quantitative intensity, but to its proportion to reason; wherefore it is only when a passion goes beyond the bounds of reason that it is reckoned to be immoderate. Now the pleasure attaching to the married act, while it is most intense in point of quantity, does not go beyond the bounds previously appointed by reason before the commencement of the act, although reason is unable to regulate this during the pleasure itself.<sup>13</sup>

**1.2.17** This is a somewhat difficult argument for us to follow today, but what St Thomas is saying is that sexual pleasure within marriage is not sinful because, although the pleasure itself is not governed by moral reason, the act itself takes place within a virtuous context that has been established by the exercise of moral reason. As Lisa Cahill explains, what this means is that:

Although Aquinas retains the Augustinian teaching that sex for pleasure's sake is a sin, he does not see the enjoyment of pleasure itself as wrong, as long as it is properly contained within the marital and procreative union. Aquinas has achieved a link between sexual

intimacy, even sexual pleasure, and the intense love of spouses; his definition of marriage as a sacramental vehicle of Christ's presence in the church is not achieved over against or apart from sexual love or sexual pleasure.<sup>14</sup>

**1.2.18** Where St Thomas led, the Christian tradition has subsequently followed, so now it is generally accepted that the enjoyment of sex within marriage is something that is God-given. As the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it, quoting the Papal encyclical *Gaudium et Spes*:

The acts in marriage by which the intimate and chaste union of the spouses takes place are noble and honourable; the truly human performance of these acts fosters the self-giving they signify, and enriches the spouse in joy and gratitude.<sup>15</sup>

**1.2.19** The fifth and last belief is that because sexual activity has its proper setting within marriage it followed that those who were not married should not engage in any sexual activity at all and that those who were should engage in it only with their spouse. The alternative to marriage was, therefore, abstinence or celibacy; abstinence for those who might get married at some point in the future, and celibacy for those called to this vocation.<sup>16</sup>

**1.2.20** There has been a classic division of opinion at this point between the Catholic and Orthodox traditions on the one hand and Protestantism on the other, a division of opinion that reflects the difference of opinion about the importance of sexual abstinence referred to earlier.

**1.2.21** The Catholic and Orthodox traditions, while accepting the goodness of marriage, and of sexual relations within marriage, have followed patristic precedent in seeing celibacy as a higher form of Christian discipleship than matrimony.<sup>17</sup> The Protestant tradition, however, has seen marriage and celibacy as having equal spiritual value (though in practice it has tended to see marriage as the vocation to which most Christians are called).

**1.2.22** Because of the high estimate of the value of celibacy in the Christian Church prior to the Reformation, it has sometimes been suggested that a positive view of marriage only developed at the Reformation.

**1.2.23** It is true that the understanding of marriage developed after the Reformation, and Protestant theologians generally placed a greater emphasis on the relational rather than the procreative aspects of matrimony. However, the relational aspects of marriage had always had a place in Christian thinking about this subject and it would certainly not be true to say that pre-Reformation Christianity took a negative view of marriage as such.

**1.2.24** There are three pieces of evidence that indicate a positive view of marriage in the pre-Reformation period:

1. Those groups such as the Gnostics, the Manichees and the Cathars, who did teach that marriage and sexual intercourse were evil, were condemned as heretical by the Church. Thus, in his treatise entitled *To his Wife*, Tertullian argues that Christians should become celibate after the death of their husband or wife. His argument might seem to us to imply a depreciation of marriage but, in this very work, Tertullian rejects as heretical the ideas that marriage should be abolished or that it was not given by God:

But let it not be thought that my reason for premising this much concerning the liberty granted to the old, and the restraint imposed on the later time, is that I may lay a foundation for teaching that Christ's advent was intended to dissolve wedlock, [and] to abolish marriage unions; as if from this period onward I were prescribing an end to marrying. Let them see to that, who, among the rest of their perversities, teach the disjoining of the 'one flesh in twain;' denying Him who, after borrowing the female from the male, re-combined between themselves, in the matrimonial computation, the two bodies taken out of the consortship of the self-same material substance. In short, there is no place at all where we read that nuptials are prohibited; of course on the ground that they are a 'good thing.'<sup>18</sup>

2. On the basis of Ephesians 5.32, the Western Medieval Church developed a sacramental view of marriage. That is to say, it came to be believed that, far from being something negative, or simply a remedy against lust, marriage was an instrument of divine grace.<sup>19</sup>

3. The very reason why voluntary celibacy, also referred to as holy virginity, was given such a high spiritual value was precisely because it meant the renunciation of something that was in itself good, for the sake of the kingdom of God.

This point is made very clearly by St John Chrysostom in his work *On Virginity*:

Whoever denigrates marriage also diminishes the glory of virginity. Whoever praises it makes virginity more admirable and resplendent. What appears good only in comparison with evil would not be truly good. The most excellent good is something even better than what is admitted to be good.<sup>20</sup>

**1.2.25** Because of the five core beliefs about human sexuality previously mentioned, and because it has been believed that it has been specifically condemned by a number of biblical texts (Genesis 19.1-14, Leviticus 18.22; 20.13, Deuteronomy 23.17-18, Romans 1.26-27, 1 Corinthians 6.9-10, 1 Timothy 1.9-10), homosexual activity has been consistently condemned within the Christian tradition. The Yale historian John Boswell argued that homosexual relationships have been tolerated in some periods of Church history and that provision was even made for the blessing of same-sex unions,<sup>21</sup> but his controversial claim has been not been widely accepted by historians.<sup>22</sup>

**1.2.26** The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, although not representing the range of contemporary Roman Catholic thinking on the matter, gives clear expression to the traditional Christian position on homosexuality when it declares that:

Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, Tradition has always declared that ‘homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.’ They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.<sup>23</sup>

**1.2.27** Bisexuality has not received separate treatment in the Christian tradition but, if bisexual activity involved same-sex relations, it would have come under the condemnation of homosexuality and, if it involved heterosexual relations outside marriage, it would have been seen as either adultery or fornication. Transsexualism has also not featured in the tradition for the simple reason that the medical techniques that have made it possible to try to change the sex of people’s bodies did not exist until very recent times. However, the Christian tradition has rejected transvestitism on the grounds that cross-dressing is forbidden in the book of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 22.5) and, more widely, on the

basis of the belief that the distinction between male and female instituted by God at creation is a boundary that must not be transgressed.

## **b. The development of Anglican thinking**

**1.2.28** In the centuries since the Reformation, the Church of England and the Anglican tradition in general have continued to adhere to the mainstream Christian position on human sexuality, affirming that marriage, understood as a lifelong exclusive relationship between one man and one woman, was the context created by God for the proper expression of human sexuality.

**1.2.29** This Anglican consensus is reflected in the following words from the report of the subsection on Human Sexuality at the 1998 Lambeth Conference – a report that was, however, produced in the midst of a fierce debate about whether this Anglican consensus should hold or whether our thinking should shift after dialogue with those gay and lesbian Christians who have found themselves excluded from the churches by this very consensus:

Human sexuality is the gift of a loving God. It is a gift to be honoured and cherished by all people. As a means for the expression of the deepest human love and intimacy, sexuality has great power.

The Holy Scriptures and Christian tradition teach that human sexuality is intended by God to find its full expression between a man and a woman in the covenant of marriage, established by God in creation, and affirmed by our Lord Jesus Christ. Holy Matrimony is, by intention and divine purpose, to be a life-long, monogamous and unconditional commitment between a woman and a man.<sup>24</sup>

**1.2.30** Within the Church of England this consensus has been reflected in the two recent House of Bishops teaching documents, *Issues in Human Sexuality* and *Marriage*.

*Issues in Human Sexuality* declares that there is, in Scripture, ‘an evolving convergence on the ideal of lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual union as the setting intended by God for the proper development of men and women as sexual beings’<sup>25</sup> and holds that: ‘God’s perfect will for married people is chastity before marriage, and then a lifelong relationship of fidelity and mutual sharing at all levels.’<sup>26</sup>

In similar fashion, the document on *Marriage* maintains that: ‘Sexual

intercourse, as an expression of faithful intimacy, properly belongs within marriage exclusively'<sup>27</sup> and declares that 'marriage is indissoluble in the sense that the promises are made unconditionally for life'.<sup>28</sup>

**1.2.31** However, neither the Church of England nor the Anglican tradition as a whole has been static in its thinking about issues connected with human sexuality and human sexual relationships.

**1.2.32** There has been a development of thinking on these issues that has been reflected in a change of attitude and approach in a number of areas, and which has both influenced and been influenced by changes in society as a whole.

### **1. The purpose of marriage**

**1.2.33** First, in line with development of thinking about marriage in the Christian Church as a whole, and secular thinking as well, the Church of England has moved away from an emphasis on the avoidance of sin and the production of children as reasons for marriage, in favour of an emphasis on marriage being a context for an intimate, pleasurable and mutually supportive relationship.

**1.2.34** This movement of thought can be seen very clearly if one compares the reasons for matrimony given in the *Book of Common Prayer* with those given in the *Common Worship* marriage service. As was noted earlier, in the Prayer Book the first two reasons given for marriage are the procreation of children and to provide a remedy against sin and fornication, only then is there mention of marriage as a source of 'mutual society, help and comfort'. In *Common Worship*, marriage as a remedy against sin drops out entirely, and the birth and upbringing of children are only mentioned after material emphasizing the relational and sexual aspects of marriage:

Marriage is a gift of God in creation through which husband and wife may know the grace of God. It is given that as a man and woman may grow together in love and trust, they shall be united with one another in heart, body, and mind, as Christ is with his bride the Church. The gift of marriage brings husband and wife together in the delight and tenderness of sexual union and joyful commitment to the end of their lives. It is given as the foundation of family life in which children are [born and] nurtured and in which every member of the family, in good times and in bad, may find strength, companionship and comfort, and grow to maturity in love.<sup>29</sup>



## **2. Divorce and remarriage**

**1.2.35** At the time of the Reformation, Archbishop Cranmer had proposed a revision of English canon law, the so-called *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum*. This set out several grounds on which divorce might be allowed, including not only adultery, but also insanity, desertion and leprosy. He also proposed allowing people divorced on such grounds to remarry during the lifetime of their previous spouse. His proposals never became part of canon law and, in 1602, Archbishop Bancroft ruled that marriage was indissoluble.

**1.2.36** However, the memory of Cranmer's approach remained and, as late as 1912, it was still being quoted as an authority by those who did not take the indissolubilist point of view.<sup>30</sup> Overall it may be said that, until the beginning of the twentieth century, the Church of England does not appear to have had a unanimous policy on the issue of whether remarriage after divorce should be permitted.

**1.2.37** From the early years of the twentieth century the attitude of the Church of England became more definite. Stress came to be laid on the indissoluble nature of marriage and, as a result, it came to be seen as theologically unacceptable for someone who had been divorced to marry in Church while their former partner was still alive.

**1.2.38** However, as Owen Chadwick notes in his biography of Archbishop Michael Ramsey, by the beginning of the 1960s both English society and the Church of England had found it impossible to maintain a simple rejection of all divorce.

In the conditions which prevailed in European society then, it had to be accepted that sometimes a first marriage was a calamity and a second marriage was made in heaven. Social right, and the interests of children, were often made safer by recognizing this fact than by asserting still that it was wrong. But this could only be done in such a way that the Church preserved the ideal of a permanent marriage between two people. By the time Ramsey became Archbishop of Canterbury it was well established as general custom that the Church refused to marry in church a person who had a previous partner still living – thus maintaining the ideal – but soon accepted back into its bosom the remarried couple – thus not depriving them or their children of the pastoral care which they might need.<sup>31</sup>

**1.2.39** The development of the Church of England's thinking moved the Church on from this position in two ways.

**1.2.40** First of all, in 1966, a report entitled *Putting Asunder*<sup>32</sup> was produced by a Commission on Divorce Law Reform chaired by the Bishop of Exeter, Robert Mortimer. This Commission, which had been set up by the Archbishop of Canterbury to consider the question of whether civil divorce law needed reform, argued that the grounds on which a divorce could be obtained needed to be changed

**1.2.41** At the time, the Commission reported the grounds for obtaining a divorce were that one of the parties involved had committed a grave matrimonial offence (adultery, cruelty, three years' desertion, five years' continuous insanity, or bestiality). In the words of Chadwick, what the Mortimer Commission recommended was that: 'the idea of an offence against marriage be dropped at last and that the sole ground for divorce should be that marriage had broken down irretrievably and despite efforts at reconciliation could not be repaired'.<sup>33</sup>

Together with the report of the Law Commission, which appeared at the same time and took a similar line, the Mortimer Commission report was the basis of the Divorce Reform Bill, which became law in 1969, although the Bill departed from the proposals of the Mortimer Commission by shortening the period of separation necessary for a divorce with the consent of both parties from three years to two, and by introducing divorce with the consent of only one party after five years' separation.

**1.2.42** As Chadwick further explains, the changes in contemporary society that had led to a change in the civil law on divorce also raised questions about the Church's own practice.

If it was once accepted that in the conditions of modern society some first marriages were born to fail and some second marriages were made in heaven was it right of the Church to keep to its rule of refusing to remarry divorced persons in Church? And was it not pastorally better for the Church to do what it could to accept the higher ideals of couples who came to them even if one of the pair had been married before? Some thought that the old rule of no marriage in church while a former partner lived maintained the sanctity of marriage while it caused no serious hardship. But others in parishes were faced with heart rending pleas. Some clergymen began to marry in church couples who had a partner still alive.<sup>34</sup>

**1.2.43** Clergy who acted in this way could legally do so because of the conscience clauses in the 1937 and 1965 Matrimonial Causes Acts, which left the final decision with the member of the clergy concerned, but their actions were contrary both to the Church's general teaching on divorce and to resolutions passed in the Convocations of Canterbury and York in 1938 and 1957, which declared that the Church's marriage service should not be used for the remarriage of someone whose former partner was still living.

**1.2.44** This tension between precept and practice led to the production of a series of reports that looked at the issue of the remarriage of divorced people in church.<sup>35</sup> All of these reports recommended, though on one occasion by a majority rather than unanimously, that the Church should make official provision for the remarriage of such people in church.

**1.2.45** The principle that remarriage of divorced people should be permitted was accepted by General Synod in 1981. A private member's motion was passed declaring that the Synod considered that: 'there are circumstances in which a divorced person may be married in church during the lifetime of a former partner'. In addition, in July 1985, the House of Bishops approved a service of prayer and dedication after civil marriage that could be used in the case of people who had been divorced and, in 1990, the bar on people who had remarried during the lifetime of a former partner, or who were married to someone who had done so, being ordained was removed.

**1.2.46** Partly because of continuing opposition to the principle of remarrying divorced people in church, but mostly because of disagreement about how such a change of policy should be implemented in practice, it has proved difficult to reach agreement on officially permitting such marriages to take place, even though increasing numbers of clergy have been exercising their legal right to officiate at such weddings.<sup>36</sup> However, the meeting of General Synod in July 2002 accepted in principle the recommendation of the 2000 report *Marriage in Church after Divorce*<sup>37</sup> that there are exceptional circumstances in which divorced people should be allowed to marry in church in the lifetime of their former partner.

**1.2.47** Synod then followed this up in November 2002 by formally rescinding the marriage resolutions of the Canterbury and York

Convocations. By so doing it removed any inconsistency between the cleric's right in civil law to solemnize further marriages in cases where the former partner is still living – which remains unaffected – and the Church's official exhortations against such marriages.

**1.2.48** The Church's official position is, therefore, that, while God's intention is that marriage should be for life, this fact should not be seen as an automatic bar on remarriage in church in the lifetime of a former spouse because there are circumstances in which this is the best Christian response to a less than ideal situation.

### **3. Contraception**

**1.2.49** Because the procreation of children was traditionally regarded as one of the key reasons for sexual activity within marriage, the idea of a married couple restricting the number of their children or even deciding not to have children at all was traditionally regarded within the Christian Church as a rejection of the purposes of God as laid down in Genesis 1.27-28.

**1.2.50** During the twentieth century, however, Anglican thinking on this issue changed and Church of England thinking changed with it. A clear indication of this change can be seen in the resolutions on this subject passed by the Lambeth Conferences between 1908 and 1968.

**1.2.51** Reflecting a concern about falling birth rates as well as the theological concerns just outlined, the 1908 Conference declared that it:

... records with alarm the growing practice of the artificial restriction of the family and earnestly calls upon all Christian people to discountenance the use of all artificial means of restriction as demoralising to character and hostile to national welfare.<sup>38</sup>

**1.2.52** By the 1920s, an increasing number of Anglicans had come to believe that a sexual relationship between a husband and wife might be good in itself even if it was not intended to lead to the procreation of children, and that it might be legitimate to limit the number of children in order to give those children who were born a better chance in life.

**1.2.53** The 1930 resolution, which had a mixed reaction, marked this beginning of a change in attitude, a change that was rooted in theological reflection on the experience of Anglican married couples.

The view was still held that procreation was a necessary part of the purpose of marriage, and the resolution still advocated sexual abstinence rather than artificial birth control: ‘Where there is a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, complete abstinence is the primary and obvious method.’<sup>39</sup> However, the resolution also declared that:

... in those cases where there is ... a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, and where there is a morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence, the Conference agrees that other methods may be used, provided that this is done in the light of the same Christian principles.<sup>40</sup>

**1.2.54** By 1958, contraception had become widely accepted among Anglicans and the resolution of the 1958 Lambeth Conference on the issue said that that the responsibility for deciding on the number and frequency of children was to be decided: ‘in such ways as are acceptable to husband and wife in Christian conscience’.<sup>41</sup> Finally, the 1968 Lambeth Conference rejected the ban on artificial contraception contained in the Papal Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* published that year.<sup>42</sup>

**1.2.55** It needs to be noted, however, that Anglican thinking would be sympathetic to much that is said in *Humanae Vitae* both about marriage in general and about the importance of procreation as a fundamental part of what marriage is about. Where Anglican thinking would part company with the teaching in *Humanae Vitae* is over the specific issue of whether the use of artificial as opposed to ‘natural’ methods of birth control is always wrong.

#### **4. Abortion**

**1.2.56** It has been argued that the issue of abortion should not be considered in connection with issues to do with sexuality and marriage because it is really an issue to do with the sanctity of human life. As noted below, Anglican thinking about this issue has acknowledged that it is an issue that involves respect for the sanctity of life. However, it also an issue that is connected with sexuality and family life because, like the issue of contraception, it involves the question of whether it is right in certain circumstances to try to prevent sexual activity resulting in the birth of a baby.

**1.2.57** During most of the history of the Christian Church, abortion, except as a side effect of an attempt to save the life of a mother, was

rejected as a form of infanticide, and this position was also taken by the Church of England. Until the 1960s, abortion was also illegal under British law.

**1.2.58** As Chadwick explains, in the years after the Second World War, pressure began to mount for a change in the law:

In an urbanized world this ancient law and moral code produced as a side-effect 'back-street abortions'; illegal operations performed for fees by criminal surgeons with dirty tools. After the Second World War there were widespread demands for the legalization of abortion under proper conditions; to prevent the criminal trade; to help the health of girls endangered by the incompetence of criminal surgeons; and to recognize that there might be reasons, other than the immediate peril to the mother's life which justified the performance of the operation.<sup>43</sup>

**1.2.59** The Church of England had to think how to respond to this change in public attitude and in 1964 a report was published by the Church's Board for Social Responsibility, which argued that there were circumstances in which abortion could be justified:

After surveying the matter afresh in the light both of traditional discussions and of present proposals, our broad conclusion is that in certain circumstances abortion can be justified. This would be when, at the request of the mother and after the kind of consultation which we have envisaged in the report, it could be reasonably established that there was a threat to the mother's life or well-being, and hence inescapably to her health, if she were obliged to carry the child to term and give it birth. And our view is that, in reaching this conclusion, her life and well-being must be seen as integrally connected with the life and well-being of her family.<sup>44</sup>

**1.2.60** This report was welcomed by the Church Assembly (the forerunner of General Synod) in 1966 and helped to influence the Abortion Act of 1967, which legalized abortion in this country. Although many Anglicans felt at the time that the 1967 Act went too far in the direction of abortion on demand and have continued to feel this ever since, the majority opinion in the Church of England has been that abortion could be justified in exceptional circumstances.

**1.2.61** The resolution passed by General Synod in July 1983 reflects the tensions that have continued to be felt over this issue. It declared

that: ‘all human life, including life developing in the womb, is created by God in His own image, and is, therefore, to be nurtured, supported and protected’.<sup>45</sup>

On this basis it expressed serious concern about the rising number of abortions and called for the amendment of the 1967 Act. On the other hand, it also recognized that: ‘in situations where the continuance of a pregnancy threatens the life of the mother a termination of pregnancy may be justified and that there must be adequate and safe provision in our society for such situations’.<sup>46</sup>

### **c. The pattern reflected in these developments**

**1.2.62** If we look at these developments in Anglican and Church of England thinking, what we find is a consistent pattern in the developing Anglican approach to sexual ethics. This pattern has two key elements.

**1.2.63** The first of these is a reassertion of traditional Christian principles such as the lifelong nature of marriage, the production of children as one of the purposes of marriage, and the sacredness of human life, including that of the life of the unborn child.

**1.2.64** The second is a willingness to allow the outworking of these principles in practice to be shaped by pastoral realities and dilemmas such as the realities of marital breakdown and the need and desire of couples to limit the number of their children, and the dilemmas posed by backstreet abortions and the threat that could be posed by an unborn child to the life of the mother.

**1.2.65** As we shall see, the development of Anglican thinking about homosexuality has reflected a desire to uphold both of these two key elements in Anglican sexual ethics in this area as well.

### **1.3 The development of Anglican thinking on homosexuality**

**1.3.1** As we have already noted, the Christian Church as a whole has traditionally rejected homosexual activity as sinful. However, from the 1950s onwards there has been a growing debate about whether this traditional teaching should continue to be upheld.

**1.3.2** As we shall see in more detail in Chapter 9, this debate has taken place in all the major Protestant Churches in the Western world, and in the Roman Catholic Church as well. Although some Churches,

such as the Church of Christ in the USA and the United Church of Canada, have moved to an official acceptance of homosexual relationships and a willingness to ordain those in such relationships, most have not been willing to go this far. In most Churches there has been a division of opinion on the matter, and Churches have seen both the blessing of same-sex relationships and the ordination of openly practising homosexuals even where this has been contrary to official policy.

**1.3.3** This debate has also affected both the Church of England and the Anglican Communion as a whole.

### **The debate in the Church of England**

**1.3.4** The modern debate in the Church of England can be seen to have begun with the publication of an article by Sherwin Bailey on ‘The problem of sexual inversion’ in the edition of the journal *Theology* for February 1952.

**1.3.5** In this article, Bailey discussed the moral issues raised by what he called sexual ‘inverts’, by which he meant those who are by nature sexually attracted to members of their own sex. He rejected the idea that the Church should recognize homosexual relationships as a form of marriage, but he did argue very strongly that the Church ought to campaign against the law that then existed against male homosexual relationships:

It is, without doubt, a Christian duty to press for the removal of this anomalous and shameful injustice, which has done untold harm, and has achieved no good whatever, and it is to be hoped that those who looked to the Church for a lead will not be disappointed.<sup>47</sup>

**1.3.6** The discussion provoked by Bailey’s article led to a report on the subject being produced in 1954 by the Church of England’s Moral Welfare Council, of which Bailey was a member. This report, entitled *The Problem of Homosexuality – An Interim Report*, did not accept the ethical legitimacy of homosexual activity. It declared that a man who was a sexual invert was not responsible for his inversion, but:

Where such a person expresses his condition in overt acts of a sexual nature, thus deflecting the activity of the sexual organ from its proper end, we rightly hold him responsible as we would hold a heterosexual man responsible for immoral sexual acts with girls and women. In



neither case does the fact that he is of a certain nature (homo- or hetero-sexual) excuse the immoral expression of his sexual urges.<sup>48</sup>

**1.3.7** Like Bailey's original article, however, the report held that the law against male homosexual activity ought to be abolished. It was unjust because the law did not also punish heterosexual fornication and adultery, it encouraged blackmail, and it discouraged the homosexual from seeking help for fear of prosecution.

**1.3.8** It recommended a male homosexual age of consent of 21 in order to protect young National Servicemen from the particular risks associated with living in a predominantly male service community.

**1.3.9** The Moral Welfare Council Report was significant because it was one of the major influences that led to the setting up of an official government committee under the Anglican layman Sir John Wolfenden, which reported in 1957 and argued for the same position taken by the Moral Welfare Council – the abolition of the law against male homosexual activity and the setting of the homosexual age of consent at 21.

**1.3.10** The Wolfenden recommendations received strong support from members of the Church of England, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, and after much debate eventually became law in 1967.

**1.3.11** The fact that members of the Church of England were in favour of a change in the criminal law regarding homosexuality did not mean that they were in favour of changing the Church's traditional rejection of homosexual activity. For example, Archbishop Ramsey was asked in 1971 whether the Church could ever bless a marriage between two people of the same sex and his reply was:

I don't see the Christian Church ever giving its blessing to that. Because the Christian Church gives its blessing to the best and perfect use of sex, which is the union of a man and a woman in marriage. We confine our blessing to that.<sup>49</sup>

**1.3.12** The combination of beliefs that we find in the case of Archbishop Ramsey – a belief that homosexual activity between consenting adults should not result in criminal prosecution<sup>50</sup> combined with a belief that the Church could not rightly bless

homosexual relationships – remains the official position of the Church of England.

**1.3.13** Three reports on the issue of homosexuality were produced by Church of England working parties between 1970 and 1989 in response to the need for guidance about the selection and training of homosexual ordinands.<sup>51</sup> All three revealed the extent to which the Church was divided on the matter, but all three were prepared to consider the possibility that homosexual activity might be regarded as morally justifiable in certain circumstances.

**1.3.14** The 1979 report declared, for example, that while it would not be right for the Church to view ‘homosexual erotic love as an alternative and authentic development of the living Christian tradition’ nonetheless:

we do not think it possible to deny that there are circumstances in which individuals may justifiably choose to enter into a homosexual relationship with the hope of enjoying a companionship and physical expression of sexual love similar to that which is to be found in marriage.<sup>52</sup>

**1.3.15** However, while these reports were regarded as valuable contributions to a continuing debate, their teaching was never endorsed by the Church.

**1.3.16** The mind of the Church came to be expressed instead in two other ways.

**1.3.17** The first way it was expressed was through a debate in General Synod in November 1987 initiated by the Revd Tony Higton. This debate reflected the fact that the failure of the 1979 report to receive synodical endorsement meant that the Church lacked any kind of official guidance on the matter, and that many people in the Church, particularly on its evangelical wing, wanted a clear restatement of traditional principles.

**1.3.18** At the end of the debate the following motion was passed by 403 votes to 8:

This Synod affirms that the biblical and traditional teaching on chastity and fidelity in personal relationships is a response to, and expression of, God’s love for each one of us, and in particular affirms;

1. that sexual intercourse is an act of total commitment which belongs properly within a permanent married relationship.
2. that fornication and adultery are sins against this ideal, and are to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion.
3. that homosexual genital acts also fall short of this ideal, and are likewise to be met with a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion.
4. that all Christians are called to be exemplary in all spheres of morality, and that holiness of life is particularly required of Christian leaders.<sup>53</sup>

**1.3.19** The second was the publication in December 1991 of *Issues in Human Sexuality*, which was produced by the House of Bishops after it had decided not to publish the 1989 ‘Osborne’ report. As has already been noted, this statement endorsed the traditional Christian belief that the teaching of the Bible is that heterosexual marriage is the proper context for human sexual activity. This in turn led the statement to declare that what it called ‘homophile’ orientation and activity (it preferred the term ‘homophile’ to ‘homosexual’) could not be endorsed by the Church as:

... a parallel and alternative form of human sexuality as complete within the terms of the created order as the heterosexual. The convergence of Scripture, Tradition and reasoned reflection on experience, even including the newly sympathetic and perceptive thinking of our own day, make it impossible for the Church to come with integrity to any other conclusion. Heterosexuality and homosexuality are not equally congruous with the observed order of creation or with the insights of revelation as the Church engages with these in the light of her pastoral ministry.<sup>54</sup>

**1.3.20** It also argued, however, that the conscientious decision of those who enter into such relationships must be respected, and that the Church must not ‘reject those who sincerely believe it is God’s call to them’.<sup>55</sup>

Nevertheless, because of ‘the distinctive nature of their calling, status, and consecration’ the clergy ‘cannot claim the liberty to enter into sexually active homophile relationships’.<sup>56</sup>

**1.3.21** The 1987 Synod motion and *Issues in Human Sexuality* are currently the two most authoritative Church of England statements on

the issue of homosexuality, and they take a more traditional line than the three reports that were not accepted by the Church. While stressing the need for pastoral compassion for homosexual people, they follow the Christian tradition in holding that homosexual sexual activity cannot be endorsed by the Church.

**1.3.22** In 1997 *Issues in Human Sexuality* was debated in General Synod and at the end of the debate Synod voted to accept the following motion moved by the then Archdeacon of Wandsworth, the Venerable David Gerrard:

That this Synod

- (a) commend for discussion in dioceses the House of Bishop's report *Issues in Human Sexuality* and acknowledge it is not the last word on the subject;
- (b) in particular, urge deanery synods, clergy chapters and congregations to find time for prayerful study and reflection on the issues addressed by the report.<sup>357</sup>

The purpose of the present guide is to contribute to this process of prayerful study and reflection.

**1.3.23** The fact that the person who proposed the 1987 General Synod motion was a leading member of the evangelical group in Synod is significant. It is significant because it indicates that, if a part of the context of the debate about homosexuality has been the rise of liberal attitudes to sexuality within the Church of England, another part of the context has been the resurgence of conservative evangelicalism in the years since the Second World War.

**1.3.24** In the first half of the twentieth century traditional conservative evangelicalism remained strong at a parochial level but, at the national level, the most prominent evangelicals were liberal evangelicals such as Vernon Storr and Max Warren, who sought to combine an evangelical emphasis on a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ with a liberal commitment to reinterpreting Christian belief in the light of contemporary thought.

**1.3.25** From the 1940s onwards, however, there was a conservative evangelical renaissance and the leadership of the evangelical movement in the Church of England passed to men like John Stott and J. I. Packer,

who pioneered a return to a theological position rooted in the teaching of the Bible as interpreted by some of the English reformers, the Puritans and the evangelical leaders of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (although it should be noted that the modern evangelicals' interpretation and use of those English reformers and other earlier English thinkers has been much debated within Anglicanism). Under their leadership, evangelicals became a much more influential tradition in the Church of England. Following the National Evangelical Anglican Congress held at Keele in 1967, evangelicals became increasingly committed to playing a full part in the national life of the Church of England, and in this context they have led the opposition to an acceptance of same-sex relationships by the Church.

**1.3.26** Although their critics have accused them of a naïve fundamentalism,<sup>58</sup> evangelicals have become increasingly aware of the importance of engaging with biblical criticism and issues of biblical interpretation<sup>59</sup> and have sought to engage constructively with the ethical issues raised by contemporary culture.<sup>60</sup>

However, generally speaking, this has not led evangelicals, any more than it has led many other more Catholic Anglicans, to depart from the traditional Christian rejection of homosexual practice. As we shall explain in more detail later on in this guide, this is because most evangelicals and many others remain convinced that, even when looked at in the light of the most up-to-date interpretative techniques, the Bible still seems clear in its rejection of same-sex sexual activity, and for them this necessarily settles the matter.

### **The debate in the Anglican Communion**

**1.3.27** Debate about homosexuality has also taken place in other parts of the Anglican Communion, particularly in North America and Australia, and this wider Anglican debate has been reflected in resolutions produced by the Lambeth Conferences in 1978, 1988, and 1998.

**1.3.28** The first two resolutions refrained from making a judgement about the moral status of homosexuality, calling instead for more study of the subject and for dialogue with homosexual people.

The 1978 resolution declared:

While we reaffirm heterosexuality as the scriptural norm, we recognise the need for deep and dispassionate study of the question of homosexuality, which would take seriously both the teaching of Scripture and results of scientific and medical research. The Church, recognising the need for pastoral concern for those who are homosexual, encourages dialogue with them . . . .<sup>61</sup>

The 1988 resolution reaffirmed the call for further study issued in 1978 and went on to say that the Lambeth Conference:

Urges such study and reflection to take account of biological, genetic and psychological research being undertaken by other agencies, and the socio-cultural factors that lead to the different attitudes in the provinces or our Communion<sup>62</sup>

and that it

Calls each province to reassess, in the light of such study and because of our concern for human rights, its care for and attitude towards persons of homosexual disposition.<sup>63</sup>

**1.3.29** At the 1998 Lambeth Conference the subgroup studying human sexuality was unable to reach a ‘common mind’ on the ‘scriptural, theological, historical, and scientific’ issues raised by a study of homosexuality.<sup>64</sup> As the subgroup report noted:

Our variety of understanding encompasses:

- Those who believe that homosexual orientation is a disorder, but that through the grace of Christ people can be changed, although not without pain or struggle;
- Those who believe that relationships between people of the same gender should not include genital expression, that this is the clear teaching of the Bible and of the Church universal, and that such activity (if unrepented of) is a barrier to the kingdom of God;
- Those who believe that committed homosexual relationships fall short of the biblical norm, but are to be preferred to relationships that are anonymous and transient;
- Those who believe that the Church should accept and support or bless monogamous covenant relationships between homosexual people and that they may be ordained.<sup>65</sup>

**1.3.30** In spite of these differences of approach, the subgroup did reach agreement on a general approach to the ethics of human sexuality, which the Conference as a whole then built on in its resolution on the subject (Resolution 1.10). This resolution, which was more conservative than those produced in 1978 or 1988, recognized:

... that there are among us those who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these are members of the Church and are seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church, and God's transforming power for the living of their lives and the ordering of their relationships.<sup>66</sup>

**1.3.31** It also stated that the bishops committed themselves 'to listen to the experience of homosexual persons' and wished to assure them that 'they are loved by God and that all baptized, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are all full members of the Body of Christ,'<sup>67</sup> and called on all Anglicans to 'minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialisation and commercialisation of sex'.<sup>68</sup>

**1.3.32** However, it rejected homosexual practice as 'incompatible with scripture', declared that 'abstinence is right for those not called to marriage' and refused to advise 'the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions' or 'ordaining those involved in same gender unions'.<sup>69</sup>

**1.3.33** Although this resolution was passed by 526 to 70 with 45 abstentions there are Anglicans who have refused to accept it on the grounds that it does not adequately reflect the development of contemporary scientific and theological understandings of homosexuality. Nevertheless, it remains the nearest thing there is to an official statement by the Anglican Communion on the subject, though it needs to be remembered that resolutions of the Lambeth Conference have not been seen as binding upon the Anglican Communion.

## **B. The nature of the current debate**

### **1.4 Introduction**

**1.4.1** Overall then it can be said that the official teaching about homosexuality in both the Church of England and the Anglican Communion in general has remained more conservative than it has on

other subjects connected with sexual morality. However, the debate continues, as it does also on the subjects of bisexuality and transsexuality, on which there has as yet been no official Church of England or Anglican teaching.

**1.4.2** The second part of the chapter will go on to look at the nature of the continuing debate on these subjects.

**a. The debate on homosexuality**

**1.4.3** As Elizabeth Stuart and Adrian Thatcher note in their book on sexual ethics entitled *People of Passion*,<sup>70</sup> the issues raised for the Churches by the issue of homosexuality are both theoretical issues concerning theological method and practical issues about how both individuals and the Church as a whole should act.

**1.4.4** As they indicate, the theoretical issue is to do with the authority of Scripture and tradition and, more generally, how God makes his will known to us. In specific terms the questions under discussion in the current debate are the following:

- Where do we find the authoritative revelation of God's will for his people in this area?
- How should we interpret those biblical texts that have traditionally been seen as condemning homosexuality, in the light of our current understanding of the original meaning of the texts themselves and the cultural context in which they were written, contemporary research in the natural and human sciences, and the experience of gay and lesbian people?
- How do we relate what the Bible has to say about homosexuality with its wider teaching about the nature and expression of human sexuality, and the need for us to treat all people with justice and compassion?

**1.4.5** In terms of practical issues the debate focuses on five issues:

- Do homosexual people simply have to come to terms with their orientation or should they be encouraged to change it through some form of therapy? The discussion here includes both the question of whether it is right that someone should seek to change their orientation and the question of whether such therapy is ever effective or simply causes psychological harm.



- Is it right for those who feel they are homosexual in orientation to respond to that deeply held self-identification and desire by expressing it in genital sex, or does obedience to God mean abstaining from same-sex sexual activity?
- Should homosexual people be encouraged to enter into permanent same-sex partnerships or is continence considered to be impossible, in distinction to single heterosexual experience?
- Is it right for people who are in same-sex sexual relationships to be ordained?
- What is the right way to respond pastorally to the needs of homosexual people?

**1.4.6** The debate around these issues is as complex as the debate around sexual ethics in general, but it is nevertheless possible to identify three broad approaches within this complexity.

**1.4.7** Tradition holds that same-sex sexual activity is wrong in all circumstances and that those of a homosexual orientation should either seek to change their orientation or accept a life of permanent chastity.

**1.4.8** Others would argue that, while homosexual sexual activity cannot be regarded as being as consonant with the will of God as heterosexual activity within marriage, nevertheless those who are homosexual by orientation and have not received the gift of celibacy should enter into a permanent faithful same-sex relationship as a better alternative than a life of sexual promiscuity.

**1.4.9** Still others would argue that same-sex sexual activity has exactly the same status as heterosexual sexual activity, that the Church should regard permanent same-sex relationships in exactly the same light as marriage and bless them accordingly, and that same-sex sexual activity should be no bar to ordination.

## **b. The debate on bisexuality**

**1.4.10** There has not been nearly so much discussion of bisexuality as there has been of homosexuality. There is, for example, almost no literature devoted to the issue and it receives very little attention in official Church documents on sexuality. When it is mentioned it tends to be subsumed within the wider debate about homosexuality. However, it is not a subject that can be ignored, because it raises important

theological issues in its own right. As Stuart and Thatcher note, potentially, ‘bisexuals undermine the whole sexual system, the neat classification of people into homosexual and heterosexual, the pathologizing of homosexuality as a heterosexual disorder and so on’.<sup>71</sup>

**1.4.11** The point they are making is that the existence of overtly bisexual people draws attention to the theory put forward by Sigmund Freud and endorsed by students of sexuality such as Kinsey, that human beings cannot be divided neatly into a large majority of heterosexuals and a small minority of homosexuals. Instead, it is bisexuality that is the norm. Most people have both heterosexual and homosexual tendencies and it is only social pressure that stops more people from accepting or expressing their homosexual ones.

If accepted, this theory means that any argument advanced against homosexuality on the basis that heterosexuality is the norm, loses credibility, and it becomes much more difficult to maintain that God’s creative intention was that people should be heterosexual.

**1.4.12** The suggestion made by Stuart, Thatcher and others may or may not be correct, but it is certainly something that Christians need to consider and discuss.

### **c. The debate on transsexualism**

**1.4.13** There has also been comparatively little attention given to the subject of transsexualism, the condition in which people feel that they are a member of the opposite sex from that of their present body, although theological literature on the subject has now begun to appear<sup>72</sup> and it has recently become the subject of attention in the media.

**1.4.14** Christian discussion of this topic has focused on the issue of whether those who feel that their existing bodies do not express their true sexual identity should nevertheless accept that their birth sex is that given to them by God and seek help in overcoming their rejection of it, or whether it is possible that someone’s God-given sex is not identical with their physiology, and that it is therefore legitimate to allow people to change their bodies to allow this true sexual identity to be expressed.

**1.4.15** In addition, there has also been discussion of the relevance of the prohibition of castration in texts such as Leviticus 21.16-23 and Deuteronomy 23.1, and of cross-dressing in Deuteronomy 22.5, and

about whether it is right for those who have gone through gender reassignment surgery to be married in their new identity, to have their birth certificate altered to reflect this identity, or to exercise ordained ministry.

## **1.5 The importance of the continuing debate**

**1.5.1** The debate about human sexuality that we have looked at in this chapter is not one that is going to go away. Furthermore, it is not a debate that should go away. Real people really do have homosexual and bisexual desires and do feel that their current bodies do not represent their true identity, and the Christian Church, therefore, has a duty to think carefully about the status of these desires and feelings before God, and how people who have them can be given appropriate pastoral care, taking into account the pressures and expectations of a highly sexualized social culture.

**1.5.2** The Anglican tradition, which we have considered in this chapter, is instructive. It has sought to combine long-held principles with a response to changes in society in a mature and responsible pastoral manner. On some issues, for example the need for faithfulness within and abstinence outside marriage, its beliefs have not changed. On others, for example contraception and divorce, the Church of England, in a relatively short period of time, accepted what had previously been regarded as morally unacceptable. What this means is that we have to accept that the Church of England could in principle change its current approach in the case of the particular issues under consideration in this report providing that (a) it had sufficient theological grounds for so doing and (b) that such a change did not entail a change to its core ethical beliefs. Much of the current debate, for example on homosexuality, turns on whether (a) and (b) apply.

**1.5.3** On the issue of abortion, however, there is a different lesson to be learnt. Although the Church of England accepted that abortion might be legitimate under certain exceptional circumstances, there is now widespread unease at the way it is possible to obtain an abortion for reasons that were not originally envisaged. So those who say that the Church can change its mind even on crucial moral issues must face the fact that mistakes can be made in ways that were not originally predicted. The fact that there is widespread acceptance of homosexual relationships in the wider culture does not necessarily mean that the Church of England should reflect this change in the way that it did over

contraception and divorce. The issue of gay and lesbian relationships may be one in which the Church should hold fast to its original teaching, even though in other areas it has changed, and the same may also be true in the case of bisexuality and transsexualism.<sup>73</sup>

**1.5.4** This current report is intended to help those in the Church of England to think more deeply and more theologically about the issues we have explored in this chapter. It is an attempt to encourage the kind of learning commended by Professor Oliver O'Donovan in his contribution to the 1997 symposium on Christianity and homosexuality *The Way Forward?*:

Our first and last duty in this sphere is to discern the light the Gospel sheds on the Gay movement of our time. The Church must learn to attest its faith in the Gospel before this cultural phenomenon. The gay Christian must learn to attest the truth of the gay self-consciousness in the light of the Gospel. What we commit ourselves to, when we commit ourselves to true debate is no more and no less than this learning.<sup>74</sup>

**1.5.5** In order to begin to provide a framework for such learning to take place the next chapter will go on to look at how we should use the Bible in the debate about sexual ethics.