

# TALKING ABOUT HUMAN SEXUALITY

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**A couple of years ago I gave an ecumenical address on human sexuality. I commented at the time that I did so with some reticence because there is a tendency amongst Anglicans for some with the most polarised positions to review what bishops say on these matters in a harsh forensic manner. I decided this month to write about human sexuality because there is a need for a considered conversation within the church at the same time as the conversation is going on in the wider community. The church in other parts of the western world is already grappling with the consequence of governments having enacted legislation to permit marriage of people of the same gender.**

If we are going to discuss human sexuality in the church we must find ways of doing so with safety. That means providing space for people to be open about where they struggle with regrets or seek to address hurts. It means allowing space for people with progressive and conservative views to speak openly about their thinking. It means listening to hear rather than listening to offer response or rebuttal.

In relation to human sexuality, and in particular homosexual expression, one of the driving issues for some Anglicans is that they do not necessarily see, in those they know, who know themselves to be gay or lesbian, a distortion created simply from their sexuality. They do not see something that necessarily requires correction because it is inherently wrong or comes from illness or sin. They do see in people, of all orientations, distortions created by promiscuity, lust, commodification and adultery. They also see the distortions created by abuse, repression and depression. They are asking whether there is some way of recognising same-gender sexuality and relationship within Christian community in a way that can be open, affirmed and blessed.

The Anglicans who want to raise these questions are part of a minority movement from the Western world that is in contrast with the teaching tradition of the Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Islam and Judaism). The formal position of the Anglican Church of Australia is of faithfulness in marriage, understood

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to be between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and of abstinence for those who are not called to marriage. Any discussion by any church about affirming same gender sexual relationships or marriage has substantial ecumenical and inter-faith implications, as we have seen by the response to the Anglican Church of Canada and The Episcopal Church.

As a bishop I have been involved in these discussions over a number of years. The Anglican Communion has

been debating this for at least 25 years. It is part of the Anglican way to listen attentively to what may begin as minority views. In 2012, the Australian bishops said of this discussion, "We understand that issues of sexuality are subject to ongoing conversation within our Church and we undertake to support these conversations, while seeking to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" and in 2013, "We were unable to reach a common mind on the application of scriptural teaching for today. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that differing perspectives held by the bishops were held with integrity." In echoing the 1998 Lambeth Conference they said, "We assure [people who experience themselves as having same-sex orientation] that they are loved by God, and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the body of Christ."

In seeking to form my mind I read and think a lot. I try to make sure that my sources will not simply affirm my ideas but also challenge and critique them. I think a lot about the people I know, who have a variety of views, who have shared their joys and struggles about expressing their sexuality and exploring faith.

Richard Swinburne in his book, *Is there a God?*, says, "If you accept there is God, it follows that you have certain duties ... including above all the opportunities to mould our characters and to help others." When we acknowledge the existence of God we accept that God may have certain expectations of the things he has created. Two important life-courses then emerge. We seek to discover what God's expectations are and then endeavour to conform our lives to those expectations. As embodied people we understand that we can, with our bodies, give and obtain pleasure. We also understand that, with our bodies, we can cause harm and be harmed. With this knowledge it makes sense that God will engage us about embodiment. We recognise that God may have a view about how we use our bodies. Thus, we seek to discover what God's views may be and how to

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conform to them.

The Christian seeks to understand the mind and will of God by attention to the Holy Spirit who has been promised to help us, teach us, remind us of Jesus's teaching and guide us into all truth. In living by the Spirit we are drawn away from that which destroys and drawn towards that which makes us whole and assures us of participation in the kingdom of God. So, we ask, "What is the Spirit saying to us, what is the Spirit reminding us of, what is the Spirit calling us to?"

It is in seeking to hear what the Spirit was saying that the Evangelists recalled Jesus' teaching that looking with lust was the same as acting on lust. They overturned the food and ritual laws. They recalled that adultery could be forgiven. In hearing the Spirit, the early leaders recognised the power of sexual desire and advocated marriage where there couldn't be restraint. They called for church leaders not to have more than one spouse. They challenged gossip and argument. They confronted promiscuity and prostitution.

Christians understand that God has a lot to say including how we think about and use our bodies. As we engage the work of the Evangelists, Apostles and Writers in the New Testament, in seeking to hear what the Spirit is saying we are left with a continuum between – do the Scriptures represent the last word on all conversations (something like a manual for living) and do the Scriptures bear witness to past conversations

and teach us how to listen to the Spirit in our present conversations as we work with the complexities of our own day.

One view in the religious world is to be open to the question that God may be saying something in the movement that calls for better recognition and acceptance of those who know themselves as lesbian or gay and wish to find some way of publicly forsaking all others, giving love, supporting another through the travails of life and bearing witness to deep values. Other church members worry that those advocating this view are causing others to stumble into sin. They worry for the present and eternal consequences for those who stumble and those who cause them to stumble.

These conversations carry great weight for they involve that which we love – God, people whose lives are entwined with ours, and faith. We want people to avoid sin and separation from God. We want people to experience abundant life with the fullness of grace that comes from abiding in love as part of the kingdom of God.

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