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ISSUES IN HUMAN SEXUALITY

A Statement by the House of Bishops
of the General Synod of the Church of England,
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Preface

The 1988 Lambeth Conference called on all bishops of the Anglican Communion to undertake in the next decade a 'deep and dispassionate study of the question of homosexuality' (Resolution 64). This Statement from the House of Bishops is partly a response to that call as well as being our reflection on the pastoral situation we face in our own Church and society. In formulating it we have been greatly helped by the work of a small group, chaired by the Bishop of Salisbury. We have also been assisted by the opportunity to share these issues and this Statement with all our brother bishops in the Church of England, including those who are not members of this House.

Our purpose has been 'to promote an educational process as a result of which Christians may both become more informed about and understanding of certain human realities, and also enter more deeply into the wisdom of their inheritance of faith in this field' (para. 1.9).

We cannot expect all to agree with our conclusions and, indeed, in our own discussions we encountered a wide variety of opinions and we benefited by vigorous debate, set as it was in the context of mutual affection and tolerance. It is our hope that this Statement – which we do not pretend to be the last word on the subject – will do 'something to help forward a general process, marked by greater trust and openness, of Christian reflection on the subject of human sexuality' (para. 1.9). We encourage clergy chapters and congregations to find time for prayerful study and reflection on the issues we have addressed.

On behalf of the House of Bishops

+ GEORGE CANTUAR

Chairman

November 1991

5. The Homophile in the Life and Fellowship of the Church

5.1 We come now to consider what guidance for pastoral practice can be offered to the Church in the present state of Christian understanding of this issue. The aim of us all must be to allow the Holy Spirit to lead us into the mind of Christ for all his members in a world where homosexual orientation is the experience of some. We begin by setting out two fundamental principles of equal validity and significance.

5.2 The first is that homophile orientation and its expression in sexual activity do not constitute 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.

5.3 We are aware that some regard such a position as tantamount to a rejection of the homophile as a person. Personal identity, it is argued, is so fundamentally bound up with sexuality that to categorise the latter as in some way imperfect is to treat the whole person as also essentially inferior. The argument is, however, false. Sexuality is a very important and influential element in our human make-up, but it is only one aspect of it. Our sexuality may vary from the norm in many ways, of which a homophile orientation is but one, without affecting our equal worth and dignity as human beings, which rests on the fact that all of us alike are made in the image of God. It is crucial to stress this point, because by equating the principle set out in the preceding paragraph with an inhuman rejection of the homophile person great harm has been done. Sexuality is given an inflated significance in human life; homophiles are wrongly made to feel devalued by the traditional teaching of the Church; and those who hold to that teaching are pressed to abandon it by implied accusations of cruelty and injustice.

5.4 This leads directly to our second fundamental principle, laid upon

us by the truths at the very heart of the faith: homosexual people are in every way as valuable to and as valued by God as heterosexual people. God loves us all alike, and has for each one of us a range of possibilities within his design for the universe. This includes those who, for whatever reason, find themselves with a homophile orientation which, so far as anyone at present can tell, cannot in their case be changed, and within which therefore they have the responsibility of living human life creatively and well. Every human being has a unique potential for Christlikeness, and an individual contribution to make through that likeness to the final consummation of all things.

5.5 Of Christian homophiles some are clear that the way they must follow to fulfil this calling is to witness to God's general will for human sexuality by a life of abstinence. In the power of the Holy Spirit and out of love for Christ they embrace the self-denial involved, gladly and trustfully opening themselves to the power of God's grace to order and fulfil their personalities within this way of life. This is a path of great faithfulness, travelled often under the weight of a very heavy cross. It is deserving of all praise and of the support of Church members through prayer, understanding and active friendship.

5.6 At the same time there are others who are conscientiously convinced that this way of abstinence is not the best for them, and that they have more hope of growing in love for God and neighbour with the help of a loving and faithful homophile partnership, in intention lifelong, where mutual self-giving includes the physical expression of their attachment. In responding to this conviction it is important to bear in mind the historic tension in Christian ethical thinking between the God-given moral order and the freedom of the moral agent. While insisting that conscience needs to be informed in the light of that order, Christian tradition also contains an emphasis on respect for free conscientious judgement where the individual has seriously weighed the issues involved. The homophile is only one in a range of such cases. While unable, therefore, to commend the way of life just described as in itself as faithful a reflection of God's purposes in creation as the heterophile, we do not reject those who sincerely believe it is God's call to them. We stand alongside them in the fellowship of the Church, all alike dependent upon the undeserved grace of God. All those who seek to live their lives in Christ owe one another friendship and understanding. It is therefore important that in every congregation such homophiles should find

fellow-Christians who will sensitively and naturally provide this for them. Indeed, if this is not done, any professions on the part of the Church that it is committed to openness and learning about the homophile situation can be no more than empty words.

5.7 It will be noted that what we have said no more countenances promiscuous, casual or exploitative sex for the homophile than for the heterophile. The ideal of chastity holds good for all Christians; and homophiles who do not renounce all physical sex relations must nevertheless be guided by some form of that ideal appropriate to them. In this regard we would make specific comments on three particular matters, all connected in some way with the themes of fidelity and the personal dimension in sexual relations.

5.8 The first is that of bisexuality. We recognise that there are those whose sexual orientation is ambiguous, and who can find themselves attracted to partners of either sex. Nevertheless it is clear that bisexual activity must always be wrong for this reason, if for no other, that it inevitably involves being unfaithful. The Church's guidance to bisexual Christians is that if they are capable of heterophile relationships and of satisfaction within them, they should follow the way of holiness in either celibacy or abstinence or heterosexual marriage. In the situation of the bisexual it can also be that counselling will help the person concerned to discover the truth of their personality and to achieve a degree of inner healing.

5.9 The second concern arises from developments in the ideology of homosexual relations. The argument is heard that the norm of a faithful one-to-one relationship – dismissed as 'coupledom' – is simply an alien legacy from the heterophile world with its family and social responsibilities. By contrast the homophile can and should enjoy the freedom to express through physical sex a whole range of relationships, profound or superficial, transient or longer lasting, with any number of partners. Clearly this flies in the face of all that has been said earlier about the sacramentality of the body and the importance of proportion between physical intimacy and personal commitment. It should, indeed, be recognised that one-to-one partnerships are not the only ethically serious model for homophiles, who may find that the more appropriate way of life for them is, for example, that of a network of warmly, even intensely emotional friendships. But the attack on permanent

partnerships here described has nothing to do with such alternatives, but is simply a pretentious disguise for the evil of promiscuity. Its emergence, we believe, should make Christians more aware of the importance of faithfulness and commitment in relationships.

5.10 The third matter is that of paedophilia. This may be either homosexual or heterosexual. Because, however, it is commonly linked in popular misconception with homosexuality, let it be stated yet again that a homophile orientation does not, any more than a heterophile, of itself entail a sexual interest in or attraction to children. It is mistaken and unjust to assume, for example, that children in school or in a church choir are particularly at risk from gay or lesbian members of staff. Turning to the question of paedophilia itself, those who promote or practise it often claim that sexual activity expresses and enhances a personal relationship between adult and child. This claim is to be totally rejected. Whatever the paedophile may choose to believe, a child is not capable of integrating physical sexual activity into a genuinely personal relationship, nor can there be that equality and complementarity between an adult and a child which is proper to sexual relations. Inevitably, therefore, paedophilia becomes abuse by the adult of the child, with all the damage and distortion to the child's personality which that entails. Paedophilia breaches the limits of what is right and healthy in the child-adult relationship, and in Christian terms is a sin not only against chastity but also against charity and justice. To these evils paedophilia adds the further danger of making it difficult later for the child to achieve a mature adult sexuality.

5.11 We come now to the question of the homophile clergy. Within the population as a whole a small percentage is predominantly homophile in orientation. It may well be that in the ordained ministry, as in the arts and the caring professions, the percentage is higher. We believe that the great majority of such clergy are not in sexually active partnerships. What we know for a fact is that the ministries of many homophile clergy are highly dedicated and have been greatly blessed. God has endowed them with spiritual gifts, as he has his other ministers, and we give thanks for all alike.

5.12 There are, however, questions to be faced concerning the ministry of homophile clergy who believe that the right way of life for them is that of an exclusive and permanent but also sexually active partnership. These

questions are additional to those which arise in the case of the Christian people in general, and they relate to the representative and pastoral responsibilities of the clergy.

5.13 From the time of the New Testament onwards it has been expected of those appointed to the ministry of authority in the Church that they shall not only preach but also live the Gospel. These expectations are as real today as ever they were. People not only inside the Church but outside it believe rightly that in the way of life of an ordained minister they ought to be able to see a pattern which the Church commends. Inevitably, therefore, the world will assume that all ways of living which an ordained person is allowed to adopt are in Christian eyes equally valid. With regard to homophile relationships, however, this is, as we have already explained, a position which for theological reasons the Church does not hold. Justice does indeed demand that the Church should be free in its pastoral discretion to accommodate a God-given ideal to human need, so that individuals are not turned away from God and their neighbour but helped to grow in love toward both from within their own situation. But the Church is also bound to take care that the ideal itself is not misrepresented or obscured; and to this end the example of its ordained ministers is of crucial significance. This means that certain possibilities are not open to the clergy by comparison with the laity, something that in principle has always been accepted.

5.14 Restrictions on what the clergy may do also stem from their pastoral function. If they are to be accessible and acceptable to the greatest number of people, both within the Church and outside it, then so far as possible their lives must be free of anything which will make it difficult for others to have confidence in them as messengers, watchmen and stewards of the Lord. There can be no doubt that an ordained person living in an active homophile relationship does for a significant number of people at this time present such a difficulty.

5.15 Some would argue that a deeper understanding of God's will would show these difficulties to be unfounded. The Church, they would say, needs to undergo a profound and radical transformation of its attitude to and understanding of the whole of human sexuality, including homophile relationships. Homophile couples, on this view, are simply witnessing to part of a truth which the Church will eventually come to accept, and ought to be allowed freedom for that witness. To this we

would reply that, though the Church is not infallible, there is at any given time such a thing as the mind of the Church on matters of faith and life. Those who disagree with that mind are free to argue for change. What they are not free to do is to go against that mind in their own practice.

5.16 Another dissenting view is that clergy living in such permanent and faithful relationships are needed in order to provide others in the same situation both with role models and with wise and understanding pastoral care. On the question of the clergy as role models, the Ordinal of 1662 and the Canon Law do indeed require those ordained deacon and priest to make both themselves and their families wholesome examples and patterns to the flock of Christ. But this points to a particular difficulty as regards clergy in sexually active homophile partnerships, namely that, given the present understanding of such partnerships in the Church as a whole, it is unrealistic to suppose that these clergy could in most parishes be accepted as examples to the whole flock as distinct from the homophiles within it. On the second point, that of good pastoral care, it is mistaken to suggest that this can be given only by those who have shared the relevant experience. Shared experience can in some cases enhance pastoral care, but if it were essential no pastors would be able to help or guide more than a small proportion of those to whom they were called to minister. The good pastor who, in the power of the Holy Spirit, looks honestly into his or her own heart, and is prepared to listen and observe sensitively and imaginatively, will have sufficient empathy to be able to bring the Gospel truth-in-love to bear in word and deed. Finally on this question, we would point out that in a mature Christian congregation pastoral care for distinctive needs of any kind does not all have to be provided by the clergy alone.

5.17 We have, therefore, to say that in our considered judgement the clergy cannot claim the liberty to enter into sexually active homophile relationships. Because of the distinctive nature of their calling, status and consecration, to allow such a claim on their part would be seen as placing that way of life in all respects on a par with heterosexual marriage as a reflection of God's purposes in creation. The Church cannot accept such a parity and remain faithful to the insights which God has given it through Scripture, tradition and reasoned reflection on experience.

5.18 In the light of this judgement some may propose that bishops should be more rigorous in searching out and exposing clergy who may

be in sexually active homophile relationships. We reject this approach for two reasons. First, there is a growing tendency today to regard any two people of the same sex who choose to make their home together as being in some form of erotic relationship. This is a grossly unfair assumption, which can give rise to much unhappiness, and the Church should do nothing that might seem to countenance or promote it. Secondly, it has always been the practice of the Church of England to trust its members, and not to carry out intrusive interrogations in order to make sure that they are behaving themselves. Any general inquisition into the conduct of the clergy would not only infringe their right to privacy but would manifest a distrust not consonant with the commission entrusted to them, and likely to undermine their confidence and morale. Although we must take steps to avoid public scandal and to protect the Church's teaching, we shall continue, as we have done hitherto, to treat all clergy who give no occasion for scandal with trust and respect, and we expect all our fellow Christians to do the same.

5.19 This, however, leaves unanswered the question of those clergy who feel it their duty to come out, that is, to make known publicly either their orientation or their practice. Within this group there are two main categories. The first ought to present no problem to anyone. It consists simply of those who wish it to be known that they are homophile in orientation, but who are committed to a life of abstinence. Their desire is to be free to live among their neighbours with dignity and without concealment, unembarrassed, for example, by speculation or by suggestions of marriage. A community which cannot accept such an honourable candour is not worthy of the name of Christian. We greatly regret the way in which candidates for appointment who are open in this way are often rejected by parishes and others solely on these grounds.

5.20 The second category comprises those who are themselves in active homophile partnerships, and who come out as a matter of personal integrity. They believe their relationship to be right in the sight of God, and find concealment both repugnant and destructive; or they feel it their duty to show solidarity with others in the same situation. Inevitably such a declaration is also in effect a pre-emptive action within the movement for change in the Church's perceptions and teaching on this whole question, and therefore raises the issue we have already identified in 5.15 above.

5.21 We respect that integrity. But it is also our duty to affirm the whole pattern of Christian teaching on sexuality set out in these pages, and to uphold those requirements for conduct which will best witness to it. We therefore call upon all clergy to live lives that respect the Church's teaching, and we shall do everything in our power to help them to do so.

5.22 This means that candidates for ordination also must be prepared to abide by the same standards. For reasons already mentioned, however, we do not think it right to interrogate individuals on their sexual lives, unless there are strong reasons for doing so. Ordinarily it should be left to candidates' own consciences to act responsibly in this matter.

5.23 Let us try to sum up the essential points of the guidance we are seeking to give in this chapter. The Church in its pastoral mission ought to help and encourage all its members, as they pursue their pilgrimage from the starting-points given in their own personalities and circumstances, and as they grow by grace within their own particular potential. It is, therefore, only right that there should be an open and welcoming place in the Christian community both for those homophiles who follow the way of abstinence, giving themselves to friendship for many rather than to intimacy with one, and also for those who are conscientiously convinced that a faithful, sexually active relationship with one other person, aimed at helping both partners to grow in discipleship, is the way of life God wills for them. But the Church exists also to live out in the world the truth it has been given about the nature of God's creation, the way of redemption through the Cross, and the ultimate hope of newness and fullness of life. We have judged that we ourselves and all clergy, as consecrated public and representative figures, entrusted with the message and means of grace, have a responsibility on behalf of the whole Body of Christ to show the primacy of this truth by striving to embody it in our own lives. But we also wish to stress the Church's care for and value of all her clergy alike, and that where the Church's teaching results for any ordained person in a burden grievous to be borne we, the bishops, as pastors to the pastors, will always be ready to share in any way we can in the bearing of that burden.

5.24 In conclusion we return to the observation quoted in our opening chapter concerning the many fundamental questions which underlie this whole debate. The predicament of the conscientious Christian homophile raises complex issues. How are we to use the Scriptures to

guide us today? What is the relation between law and grace for a Christian who seeks to follow Christ in the freedom of the Spirit? Granted that we all have to start our Christian pilgrimage from where we are, how diverse can the journeys be by which we come home to God? Given the complex tangle of human sexuality, and the fact that sexuality as such may have no place in eternal life, is specific sexual conduct as important for our destiny as the values and attitudes expressed through it? On what understanding of the ordained ministry do we base our requirements of different standards for the clergy and the laity, and are we coherent or consistent in these demands? These are the kind of questions to which we have had to reply with practical guidance for our Church in this particular time, society and culture. In making our response we have tried never to forget our two principal duties as bishops: to be guardians of the Christian faith and way of life; yet equally to be pastors who not only respond in love to those who cry out of any pain of injustice or distress but also seek to discern when love is summoning the Church to rethink its existing perception of the truth. The story of the Church's attitude to homosexuals has too often been one of prejudice, ignorance and oppression. All of us need to acknowledge that, and to repent for any part we may have had in it. The Church has begun to listen to its homophile brothers and sisters, and must deepen and extend that listening, finding through joint prayer and reflection a truer understanding and the love that casts out fear. If we are faithful to Our Lord, then disagreement over the proper expression of homosexual love will never become rejection of the homosexual person.