

# Proceedings of a Conference on Sexuality and Human Flourishing

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



Saturday February 6th 2010  
10.00 am – 4.30 pm  
Church of the Ascension, Stirchley, Birmingham

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

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Cover Photo: Window, Church of the Ascension, Stirchley, Birmingham

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### **CONFERENCE PROGRAMME**

10.00 am Coffee and Registration

10.30 am: Welcome from the Revd Canon Dr Alison Joyce, (Priest-in-charge, Edgbaston Old Church).

10.35 am: First presentation: Arnold Browne, Sexual Diversity in Scripture and Tradition.

11.00 am: Second presentation: Alison Webster, Sexual Diversity in one human journey.

11.30 am: Questions and Discussion

12 noon – 1 pm: Groups to discuss questions from the talks and issues arising from their own experience.

1.00 pm until 2.00 pm: Lunch

2.00 pm – 3.00 pm: A panel of Speakers share their own pitfalls, opportunities and spiritual resources on their journeys.

3.00 pm: Discussion Groups

3.50 pm: Tea

4.10 pm: Plenary Session: feedback of resources and questions – where do we go from here?

4.30 pm: End of Conference

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### **CHAIRS, SPEAKERS AND PANEL MEMBERS**

#### **Chairs**

**Alison Joyce** is the Vicar of Edgbaston Old Church and has a doctorate in Ethics within the Anglican tradition. She has been a lecturer in Christian Ethics on the staff of Queen's College Birmingham and is completing a book for OUP on the Moral Theology of Richard Hooker.

**Brian Thorne** is Emeritus Professor at the University of East Anglia, known internationally as a person-centred therapist and writer. He is a Lay Canon of Norwich cathedral and Professional Fellow in Residence at the Norwich Centre – a counselling and consultancy agency. His books include “Infinitely Beloved”, “Behold the Man”, and “The Mystical Power of Person Centred Therapy”.

#### **Speakers**

**Arnold Browne**, former Dean of Trinity College Cambridge, has a special interest in the use and abuse of the Bible and in counselling psychology. He has contributed chapters to “Sex and the Christian Tradition” (ed. Jeremy Morris) and to “An Acceptable Sacrifice? Homosexuality and the Church” (eds Duncan Dormer and Jeremy Morris).

**Alison Webster** is Social Responsibility Adviser for the Anglican Diocese of Oxford and has a long standing interest in identity issues, particularly gender, race, sexuality and disability. She is the author of “Wellbeing” (SCM 2002) and “You are Mine” (SPCK 2009), an in-depth study of the formation of identity.

#### **Panel Members**

Under Brian Thorne's guidance the panel considered the diversity of all our sexual experience and resources which we have used to help us overcome difficult obstacles on the one hand or to open liberating doors on the other.

**Peter Kaye** is a probation officer and parish priest. It is by his kind invitation that we are at home at the Church of the Ascension today.

**Nicola Slee** is a poet and theologian based at the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, Birmingham. She is the author of “Praying

like a Woman” and “The Book of Mary” (SPCK 2004, 2008) and is currently working on a series of poems on the Christa, or female Christ.

**Chris Dowd** of Journey Metropolitan Community Church, Birmingham, is the Free Church Chaplain at Aston University

**Christina Beardsley** is Head of Multi-Faith Chaplaincy at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, London. She has recently authored “Unutterable Love: The Passionate Life and Preaching of FW Robertson” (Lutterworth Press 2009) in which she explores the gendered thoughts and Romantic sensibility of this early Victorian liberal preacher and theologian.

**Jane Fraser** is a priest and qualified social worker who has worked with the Brook Advisory Clinic for 30 years and written the Just So booklet on teenage pregnancy. She is a Canon of Worcester and the Chair of the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality.

## **FIRST PRESENTATION**

### **Welcome one another: The Scriptures and Sexual Diversity Arnold Browne**

An address given at the Sexuality and Human Flourishing Conference at Stirchley, Birmingham on February 6th, 2010

#### **Disgraceful behaviour!**

Last week I did something for the very first time in my life. On this one occasion, at least, I managed to overcome my anxiety that this was unmanly behaviour.

It would not have happened had it not been so cold. There were only six of us, three women and three men, and the building was unheated. I had worn my hat on the way there, and this time I did what the three wise women did, and kept it on throughout. Paul may have told the Corinthians that 'Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head' (1 Corinthians 11.4), but he was honest enough to abandon theological justification and conclude that male and female headwear and hairstyle was more a matter of social convention: 'If anyone is disposed to be contentious – we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God' (11.16).

As my inhibitions testify, customs can be persistent and persuasive. But, even as he urged men to cut their hair and take their hats off for worship and women to grow their hair and keep it covered when praying and prophesying, Paul couldn't help observing that men and women are mutually interdependent, and that, above all, all of us owe our existence to the grace of God (11.11-12). Observing the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul by receiving communion with my hat on was perhaps part of the continuing process of my own conversion. My head 'was strangely warmed'. It was liberating!

#### **Well, yes and no!**

It was the snow and ice that led me to 1 Corinthians 11, but it may not be a bad place to begin our exploration of the resources that the Bible may have for us in the diversity of our sexuality and human flourishing.

In a brief introduction to his letters to the Corinthians (Canongate, 1998) the novelist Fay Weldon accuses Paul of prating love while demanding submission: 'don't smoke, don't own guns, don't be unrighteous, don't spit in church, let's have no dissension here! Don't, don't, don't. Put away our adulthood and submit'. But, of course, Paul's response to the difficulties and divisions facing the community at Corinth is much more thoughtful than that. Instead he shows the community ways of bringing together their reading of

the Jewish Scriptures, what they have heard and believe about Jesus, and their own concerns, experiences and questions. It is less a matter of giving them his answers than of giving them the resources to find their own.

Twenty-five years or so after Jesus' death in Jerusalem, our first Christian writer addresses this congregation in Greece. He begins by reminding them that they in Corinth are called by God to be saints, 'together with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours' (1.2), and he encourages them to focus on that call. They disagree about many things, and their communion is threatened with schism (1.10, cf. 11.19). Some have written to him with their slogans which he quotes, 'All things are lawful for me' (6.12, cf. 10.23), 'Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food' (6.13), 'It is well for a man not to have sex with a woman' (7.1), 'All of us possess knowledge' (8.1), and they may have hoped that Paul would pronounce as to who had the right answers.

But Paul does no such thing. Is it lawful to eat food first sacrificed to idols (8.1) and then sold in the meat markets? Well, yes and no! And the way you will find out is to bring together your reading of the Scriptures, your commitment to Jesus Christ, and the particular circumstances in which you find yourselves, where you are called to be saints. Paul acknowledges that from their reading of Scripture alone, the enlightened and sophisticated individuals in the community know that, in the words of the Shema, 'There is no God but one' (8.4, cf. Deuteronomy 6.4) and that in the words of the psalmist, 'The earth and its fullness are the Lord's' (10.26, cf. Ps. 24.1). And so Paul allows that there are occasions when they may 'eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience' (10: 25).

But that is not the whole story, because the Scriptures are to be read in the light of their commitment to Christ, and reading this way Paul adapts the Jewish confession of God as one Lord: 'Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist' (8.6). And what a difference that makes. 'We know that "no idol in the world really exists", and that "there is no God but one" ' (8.4); but this one God is identified in Christ with what is foolish and weak, low and despised (1: 27f), and so the yes to eating must sometimes become a no for the sake of the conscience of a brother or sister who, although perhaps not so wise or strong, is one for whom Christ died: 'When you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ' (8: 12; cf. 10: 29). Far from taking one side with an easy answer, and very far indeed from simply saying 'don't', Paul suggests that for some of the community, who are more superstitious about idols, it may be dangerous to eat this left over meat. But, pressing the point about the particular circumstances of the community, for others the danger may lie elsewhere. If there are those who may be destroyed by eating food sacrificed to idols (8: 10), then there are also those for whom it is Lord's supper itself that has become dangerous to eat: 'For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement on themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died' (11: 29f.). This seems very strange indeed to us, and is another

reminder that Paul's cultural context is not ours. But it seems most likely that those who do not discern the body are those who are failing to recognize the needs of those poorer and weaker members of the body who are going away hungry. Being faithful to God's call is then not a matter of easy answers, such as no to idol meat and yes to the Lord's Supper. What matters is the nature of God in Christ, and the whole community whom he calls to be saints.

I find it particularly remarkable that when addressing that question of gender differentiation in worship, Paul offers, in that one short passage in chapter 11 (2-16), two different ways of bringing together the creation accounts in the Jewish Scriptures, commitment to Christ as Lord, and the particular experiences and concerns of the community. The first is hierarchical, God and Christ, husband and wife. From the story of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib (Genesis 2.21-23) Paul argues that men and women are fundamentally different, and the latter subordinate to the former. This was the common view of his Jewish and Graeco-Roman contemporaries, and was accepted as part of the natural order. Paul can ask, 'Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair it is her glory?' (11.14-15). What Paul here calls 'nature' we would call 'social convention', and it seems that he has an eye on those 'outsiders' (14.16, 23-24) who might be misled by seeing women prophets with dishevelled hair into thinking that Christianity was simply another ecstatic cult. The priority is the call to commend the gospel.

But even as Paul argues that hierarchical gender distinctions are natural, he offers a simultaneous second reading of the creation accounts in the light of Christ, stressing the mutuality of men and women: 'Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God' (11.11-12). And so he leaves no doubt that in the Christian community both men and women have the authority to pray and to prophesy as they build up the church.

This diversity of interpretation, even within one passage addressing one issue, suggests that we will need to listen to different voices as we work together to interpret the Scriptures in the light of our own call to follow Christ in the twenty-first century. And in our proclamation of the good news in our particular circumstances we will need to be aware that what we have discovered to be 'natural' and what might now be obstacles to the acceptance of the message in our society will be as important as, but very different from, the assumptions and conventions of first century Corinth.

### **Doing well and doing better!**

Because Paul has such a bad press, 'don't, don't, don't, ... submit', as Fay Weldon puts it, I would like to share with you one more remarkable example from 1 Corinthians of a bringing together of the Scriptures, following Jesus, and particular circumstances in ways that allow considerable diversity of sexual practice within one call to proclaim the gospel.



Paul finds it necessary to defend himself against fellow Christians who have questioned his apostleship. They have pointed out that he is not accompanied by a wife, as James, Peter and the other apostles are, and that, unlike them, he does not get his living by his preaching of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9.3-7). Paul acknowledges that the pattern of the other apostles' lives is based both on scripture and on the teaching of Jesus. On their side of the argument is, of course, Genesis 1-2 and the command, 'be fruitful and multiply' (Genesis 1.28). And Paul even finds a scriptural text for them, in support of their being paid by those to whom they minister. It seems a surprising one to us, but Paul allows to them that what is written in the law of Moses, 'you shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain' (Deuteronomy 25.4) was expressly written to give Christian apostles a 'rightful claim' on their churches (1 Corinthians 9.8-12). He also readily agrees that 'the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel' (9.14), which seems to recall Jesus sending out the twelve taking nothing for their journey (Matthew 10.5-15; Mark 6.8-11; Luke 9.2-5). And in allowing that the other apostles have the right to be accompanied by believing wives, he may also have been aware of the tradition that Jesus sent out his appointed seventy in pairs (Luke 10.1). On his own side of the argument, Paul repeatedly says that he engaged in manual labour so that he would not be a burden to those to whom he preached (1 Corinthians 9.18; 2 Corinthians 11.7; 1 Thessalonians 2.9), and he is clear that he would prefer all Christians to be single so that they can devote themselves fully to the affairs of the Lord (1 Corinthians 7.7, 32-34). Even so, Paul does not question the other apostles' interpretation of scripture or deny that they too are following Jesus. Instead he defends his own position by interpreting scripture in the light of Christ. He reads these scriptural texts not as commands that he must obey, but as rights that he has received. And, in the light of Christ, he gives up these rights to be accompanied by a wife and to be supported by the Christian community (1 Corinthians 9.12-18). For Paul this renunciation follows Christ in putting others before himself. His argument continues, 'For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win some of them' (9.19). What he says here of himself echoes the language he frequently uses of Christ, who 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave' (Philippians 2.7).

Interpreting scripture in the light of Christ, Paul argues that it is appropriate for him to remain single and to support himself by manual labour. However, he accepts that the other apostles are being loyal to scripture and to the teaching of Jesus in being accompanied by believing wives and supported by the Christian community. Paul believes that he is imitating the pattern of Jesus' life in renouncing his right to support just as much as the other apostles are following Jesus' teaching in their dependence on the community. Reading scripture in the light of Christ leads not only to a diversity of interpretation but also to an acceptance of such diversity.

Given Paul's own preference for singleness in the service of the Lord, and remembering the slogan of some of the Corinthians that 'it is well for a man not to have sex with a woman' (7.1), it is interesting that Paul does not point to the singleness of Jesus as his example or concede to the tendency of those in the congregation who wanted to turn celibacy into a rule. Instead he allows

both the right of those apostles to be married, and he affirms those Christians who still choose to marry: 'So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better' (7.38). In the service of the Lord it may only be a second best, for we owe more to Freud than to Paul if we see our primary calling to be to heterosexual partnership and procreation. But it is here an acceptable option, and it is worth noting that Paul's emphasis is on mutuality rather than dominance, wife and husband are equally owed their 'conjugal rites' and each has 'authority' over the other's body (7.4), and this is more about desire, 'if his passions are strong ... it is no sin ... let them marry' (7.36), than about procreation. It was good to hear Paul being drawn into the imagined pillow talk of John and Effie Ruskin in Peter Bowker's *Desperate Romantics*, a drama about the Pre-Raphaelites shown on BBC 2 last summer. After five years of his refusal to consummate their marriage poor Effie pleads with John, 'the husband does not have authority over his body, but the wife does'. That would have been a marvellous moment for 1851, but neither the imagined nor the historical John was persuaded. The real Effie later wrote to her father that among John's alleged reasons for the non-consummation were 'religious motives'. The marriage was annulled, and in 1855 Effie married John Millais and together they had a family of eight children.

### **Becoming one flesh.**

Clearly Paul's positive attitude to sexual intimacy reflects the influence of the tradition about Jesus. He says that his teaching not to divorce and remarry (7.10-11) is based on a command of Jesus, and indeed it is very similar to the saying in all three synoptic gospels that remarriage is adultery (Matthew 5.32, 19.9; Mark 10.11-12; Luke 16.18). Paul seems closest to the tradition recorded in Mark (10.2-9) which assumes that both husband and wife could initiate divorce and where Jesus is innovative in teaching that adultery can be committed against a woman as well as against a man: 'whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her' (10.11). Of course, Paul has more to say, 'to the rest I say – I and not the Lord' (1 Corinthians 7.12), and it is possible that he is suggesting a circumstance where remarriage may be appropriate. His world is no longer that of marriage only within the Jewish nation (see Num. 25; Deut 7.1-7), and indeed he has nothing to say against interracial marriage. And in the world of his Christian congregations a believer may be married to an unbeliever, and bodily union is at best also a sharing of hearts and minds: 'Wife for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband for all you know, you might save your wife' (7.16, cf. 7.14). But where the unbelieving partner wishes to separate, then the believing partner should let them go, and, Paul adds, 'In such a case the brother or sister is not bound' (7.15). This not being bound would normally be taken to mean being free to remarry, and perhaps this is what Paul means here. In any event, Paul's discussion of Jesus' Palestinian teaching in the different circumstances of Greek Corinth is instructive. He at least does not make the mistake of turning Jesus' words concerning the preciousness of sexual intimacy and mutual faithfulness into a law that binds.

In his *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations* (Allen Lane, 2007) Martin Goodman considers how far the Christianity adopted by

Constantine had strayed from its Jewish roots and sees the Christian view of marriage as an unbreakable bond rather than the Jewish view of marriage as a contract between husband and wife as one of the key differences (p. 545). As we have seen from 1 Corinthians, it is questionable whether 'unbreakable' was always there from the beginning, but Jesus' challenge of divorce by his appeal to Genesis (1.27 and 2.24), 'So they are no longer two but one flesh', does seem to shift the emphasis from a legal contract to a personal bond (Mark 10.2-9, cf. Matthew 19.3-8). Divorce, says Jesus, was allowed by Moses 'because of your hardness of heart', and it seems that Jesus' fundamental attitude to the commandments is to see them as inadequate. It is often pointed out that, in looking back to the beginning of creation, Jesus is regulating sexuality by an appeal to the creation story as affirming a model of male-female monogamy. But we need also to notice that in speaking of regulations written 'because of your hardness of heart', Jesus is also using the creation story to look forward to the dawning of the promised new age when, in the words of Ezekiel, God 'will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh' (Ezekiel 36.26, cf. 11.19).

In this light it is worth looking again for a moment at Genesis 2.23-24:

Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken'. Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife.

Doubtless the institution of marriage is in view here, but in hearing that rapturous cry, 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh', we can perhaps understand why commentators such as von Rad and Westermann have seen this story as setting our sexuality in the wider context of the need for relationship and human community.

There seems to be just such a more inclusive of the passage in the New Testament itself. Paul writes to the Galatians:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer any Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (3.27-28).

Jew or Greek, slave or free, but male *and* female in an echo of Genesis 1.27, 'So God created humankind in his image ... male and female he created them', and in anticipation of the climax of his letter, 'for neither circumcision nor uncircumcision in anything but a new creation is everything' (6.15).

In this context Paul's 'no longer male and female; for you are all one' seems also to echo Genesis 2.24, 'they become one flesh', particularly when we remember that Paul uses this text 'the two shall be one flesh' in 1 Corinthians 6.16-17 in a discussion of the believer's relationship with Christ.

So in the New Testament we have not only Jesus' use of Genesis 2.24 to refer to marriage as the new age dawns but also Paul's use of it to refer to the wider context of human relationship recreated in Christ. In a conversation with the novelist Howard Jacobson shown two weeks ago (24/1/10) in the first of Channel 4's new series, *The Bible: A History*, Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, found the meaning of the creation narratives as 'the redemption of solitude'. The New Testament gives us two different account of this not being alone in two different interpretation of the 'one flesh' of Genesis 2.24.

In some ways these two New Testament accounts of 'the redemption of solitude' stand in tension with each other. We have already seen that Paul thinks that marriage can be a distraction from the fullness of life in the community of those called by Christ (1 Corinthians 7.32-35). And Jesus himself, in calling men and women into the community that shares his life and destiny, asks them to be willing to break the ties of family commitment, including, in Luke's version, *wife* in the list of those who might have to be abandoned 'for the sake of the kingdom of God' (18.29-30, cf. Mark 10.2-30).

Jesus, like John the Baptist before him and Paul after him, seems not to have chosen the way of marriage, and we have glimpses of the ways in which his 'redemption of solitude' was realized in the wider context of human community. For example, in his reaction to the woman who, in Luke's account, bathes his feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, kisses them and anoints them with ointment (7.36-50). Jesus shows no anxiety that her sensual and tactile act is humanly inappropriate or sexually dangerous. Instead he says, 'She has shown great love' (7.47). Perhaps we can link this with his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, 'Whoever looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart' (Matthew 5.27). Jesus suggests here that male sexuality requires male responsibility. Just as the men at that dinner table would have dismissed that woman from the city, so other men required women to cover themselves. Ben Sira warned fathers, 'Keep strict watch over a headstrong daughter – see there is no lattice in her room ... do not let her parade her beauty before any man' (Ecclesiasticus 42.11-12). But Jesus accepted the bathing, kissing, anointing as an act of love, and he expected men to be able to look at a woman without wanting to have her, without seeing her as someone to abuse or possess.

Again there is diversity of interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures, by Jesus and in the light of Christ, and there is diversity of practice. And neither is made into a rule. Some abandoned family to follow Jesus, but Peter remained married. Paul commended the unmarried state, but he never questioned the married Peter's status as an apostle.

### **To whom it is given.**

In Matthew's Gospel, after Jesus' teaching about divorce, 'his disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry". But he said to them, 'Not anyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given" '. And 'this teaching' seems both to refer back to his teaching about marriage and then forward to what Jesus says next about eunuchs, including

those 'who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven' (19.10-12).

There are diverse callings, and they are all for those to whom they are given as God's gift, for those who live by God's forgiveness.

When I wore my hat last week no one commented as we warmed our hands with our coffee cups after the service. My sisters and brothers accept me with my head covered or uncovered. But in France a parliamentary committee has recommended a ban on women wearing veils in public places, and in a bleak refugee camp in Somaliland, Quresh, a woman whose husband had just been shot and killed, recently described how the religious police had then run into her house in Mogadishu: 'Woman, why are you not wearing a veil?' 'There were two of them with a whip ... even now you can see the marks' (*The Observer Magazine*, 31/1/10).

Paul was once one of the religious police – it was one of his credentials: 'As to zeal, a persecutor of the church' (Philippians 3.6). Circumcision, food laws, Sabbath observance were to be imposed by force if necessary. But 'the conversion of Paul' was to a new understanding of his religion. He had, he told the Romans, been reading the Scriptures as 'the law of sin and of death', but now he read them as 'the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus' (8.2). Now the commandments are not to be imposed, because loyalty to Christ comes above everything else. And so remarkably he could say to those same Romans about Sabbath observance, 'Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds' (14.5).

At the beginning of the same letter Paul depicts the disorder of a collapsed selfish society that, as he goes on to explain, is reversed when the new community in Christ follows his selfless way of 'peace and mutual upbuilding' (14.19). In describing this self-determined society Paul includes one example of behaviour that most of his Jewish and Gentile contemporaries would have agreed was a rejection of gender distinctions that were both natural and conventional. Same-sex relationships were disordered because men should not be the passive, penetrated partner and women should not presume to have the active mind and desires of a man.

As we read this Romans 1.26-27 in the light of Christ and in our own circumstances, we should consider:

that what we understand to be natural or conventional matters;  
that Paul is not offering ethical guidance at this point in the letter;  
and, above all, that the converted Paul left behind an understanding of religion as the imposition of commandments.

Paul challenged even those who keep the fourth commandment and those who did not keep the Sabbath *not* to pass judgement on each other (14.10). Instead they and we are to 'welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God' (15.7).

## **SECOND PRESENTATION**

### **Diversity in One Human Journey Alison Webster**

An address given at the Sexuality and Human Flourishing Conference at Stirchley, Birmingham on February 6th, 2010

I would like to begin with a poetic contribution from Audre Lorde, the African American womanist warrior poet who died, sadly, back in 1993.

'Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me – so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognise her. And in that growing, we came to separation, that place where work begins. Another meeting.'

I want you to hold that quote in your hearts as you listen to what follows. Not because I am going to reflect on it explicitly, or in any way analyse it, but because it undergirds everything I want to say today. So here it is again:

'Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me – so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognise her. And in that growing, we came to separation, that place where work begins. Another meeting.'

Like you, I am who I am today because of the diversity of people I have loved and been loved by. And I am who I am today because of the diversity of ways in which I have tried to be open to the love of God.

The particular aspect of diversity that I embody – and I suspect, the reason why I've been invited to address this particular aspect of today's agenda – is the diversity that comes from inhabiting both sides of the perceived gay/straight divide. Not that it is particularly unusual to have this experience, but it is, I think, an experience that is under-reflected upon. Tales of journeying in one direction (usually from apparently straight to gay – 'coming out' narratives), abound. Occasionally there are stories of making the journey in the opposite direction. Sometimes we talk about 'bisexuality', as though there were only two kinds of sexuality. But my own experience is one of considering myself to be both heterosexual and lesbian at the same time. All the time. I couch it like that because of considerations of how structural power works in our society – of which more later.

I want to begin with two reflections from my personal experience. I consider them to be stories of a transition to the underside of power, and back again. Both were written as conscious and careful attempts to describe the intense

and specific feelings associated with very particular events. The first was written in 1996, describing what it was like to be 14 and in love with another woman. As I was 14 in 1980, the writing was an act of remembering and recreating something from 16 years before. I wouldn't write it like this now, but I use it as I originally wrote it because I consider it to be closer to the actual feelings of the experience at the time. The second was written for my latest book on Identity, 'You are Mine', and launches the section in that book on 'telling untold stories' – a section that explores how, in order to resist the power of the apparently 'normal', we have to learn to articulate the uniqueness of our own experience – and tell it.

I will take these reflections slowly, as I'd like you to engage with them slowly. Notice how you feel: what resonates and what does not; and why. I will leave a few moments after reading each of them for you to fix those thoughts in your mind, before I pull out, briefly, at the end, a few lessons that are significant for me in them.

## **Reflection One**

### *Picture the Scene:*

I am on the school hockey field. It's a winter afternoon. One of those unspeakably bleak ones – mist hanging, semi-defrosted mud under foot. This is the 'cast-off' team – made up of those who want to muck around and have fun. I like this group. There are some good players, some utterly hopeless. The main reason for being here, though, is that she is here. Any excuse to be near to her, in her sights. 'Miss Brown will take the dunce hockey class'. OK, well I'll be a dunce for Miss Brown.

Her. How to describe what I felt for her? It goes something like this. This woman took up most of my head-space for the best part of six years of my life. Six years. From the age of fourteen, when she came, newly qualified, to the school, to the age of twenty when we started to make the successful transition from unbalanced devotion on my part, to equal friendship between the two of us. That blessed time when to call her by her first name became easy and natural. Miss Brown transformed into first-name terms. I – we, I guess, worked hard to achieve that.

Anyway, she was my RE teacher. 'O' and 'A' level. Four periods a week, plus the hockey. It wasn't enough. Nothing would've been enough. Let me describe the symptoms. You might recognise them. I can spot her across the other side of the school because I know her gait. I know her body language. It's a very definite stride – a bit 'loping' and certainly unusual. I love it because it's my early warning signal. When I spot it I can change my route. Go the long way round to the science block just to see her, just to be seen. Another symptom: I never go past her flat without seeing if her car is there. And I have to look up at the windows to see if there's any sign of her. When I'm anywhere near her, I'm never relaxed.

It was partly because of her that I studied theology. She brought religious questions to life for me. She made me think about meaning; made me think about value; made me feel joy and pain; enabled me to feel God; made me question everything I thought I knew about who I was and what I wanted out of life.

Anyway, she made me, made me, made me. In so many ways. Scary the power she had. I didn't know I was in love. I certainly didn't know it had anything to do with my sexuality. That was unimaginable.

Back to that hockey field. The game's over now. We're walking back up the hill to the sports hall. This is my weekly chance to walk next to her. Just for a few wonderful minutes. I work hard for this every week and usually succeed. The trick is to make it look casual. I look around at everyone else and think, 'they think we're just walking back to the sports hall. They're not even thinking about it, about her. Not giving her a second thought. Just walking. Part of me wishes I could be free of whatever this feeling is, and be like them. Normal, unconcerned, just walking, back to the sports hall. Some weeks I pretend to be like them, pretend to be blissfully unconcerned about whether I get to talk to her or not. But the feelings remain.

This time, we're talking about what we'll do in RE next week – what we'll discuss; what the class is like, what we think of 'the others'. I make a joke. She laughs. I love it that I can do that sometimes. Make her laugh. Affect her. Then she reaches out and touches the back of my neck. A friendly sort of 'cuff'. A light touch, in jest, that's all it is, but for me, this is the most delicious, powerful, unforgettable tactile gesture in my life to date. I'm speechless, light-headed. It's wrenching, pleasure and pain intensely mixed. I don't know what to do, don't know what to think. Don't know what this makes me and don't know if I care. I have no words for this and I'm not sure I want any. Certain words hover, but I don't let them take shape because I sense danger in them. I love this woman, and I am afraid.

### **Reflection Two:**

I think I am feeling an absence of an absence, and I'm wondering how I can tell.

I am walking with you in the hills. We are holding hands. This feels deeply unsettling to me, for you are a man, and I am a woman and this is not what I am used to. Nobody looks away when they catch sight of us. No-one averts their gaze. I expect to feel relief but I do not. This newfound sense of security has a paradoxical effect. I feel destabilised, cut adrift from my old identity, even as I am rescued from the sense of dislocation it brought with it. The social kaleidoscope has twisted; the pieces have fallen into myriad new places all around me, and I am located differently now.



I am angry that in another year, with a former lover, on a similar walk, in the same hills, if I dared to hold hands with her, even to let go when others came near, I was looked at differently. Not with hostility so much as a blank emptiness. With a weight behind the void – a sense of knowing who was in charge, and it wasn't us. A deep awareness that however self-confident we were, their tolerance could be withdrawn at any moment - if it was there in the first place.

Now, it seems, I am legitimised - worthy of recognition. It is so subtle that I wonder at the enormity of its effects; so slight that I doubt myself and my perceptions. To the extent that others are 'normal' they will doubt them too. Am I simply imagining this? Yet these fractional changes feel like the difference between belonging and not; between being a person and less than a person. Those I am meeting on narrow pathways in these wooded and fertile hills reflect something of me in their eyes as they meet mine. In their sense of recognition I experience estrangement. 'You are one of us', they seem to say. I do not want to be.

From the inside, I am the same person on the same walk in the same hills – whoever I am with. Holding hands or not. And it is suddenly clear to me how the variegated and nuanced, complex and beautiful, multiple inflections of my personhood have been forced by the world into a blunt and dichotomous either/or. I will not choose.

There are three things I would like to pull out of these stories: Culture matters; power matters; unnamed loves matter.

## **1) Culture Matters**

Whatever our personal feelings, and whatever our intellectual opinions, we embody the value system that we have imbibed from our social context. This is powerful, it is visceral. It operates at a gut-level, and must be resisted at that level too. When it comes to personal transformation, our minds and our intellect are severely limited in their potential to make a difference. They are important, obviously, but I don't believe they are decisive.

As I reread my first story, I am struck by the sense of hesitation; of fear; and of simply not seeing the blindingly obvious; living with a maelstrom of intense feeling, whilst being disqualified, by seemingly invisible and incomprehensible forces, from naming it. Because, culturally speaking, it was not possible for me to be 'one of them', a lesbian – or even to utter the 'L' word to myself at that stage, I was unable to feel what I was really feeling. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that I was aware of my feelings, and their power, I just could not name them for what they were. I could not afford to let them be real.

Being lesbian is about an 'absence'. Because it is an unsayable word, a stigmatised cultural category – a word of abjection and horror; a taboo, the

impact of naming oneself in line with one's feelings was something that – when it happened – had physical embodied consequences for me until I physically – at gut level – came to terms with it. I suggest that these powers of abjection cannot be as easily erased as practical forms of discrimination. They are carried in our collective psyche and live on. Or they did for me, back in 1980. But I suspect, social attitudes surveys notwithstanding, they still exert their power, for visceral value systems run deeper than individual opinions.

So my question to us all today is this: what other visceral value systems are at work in us as we pick our way through our relational lives? Racism? Orientation towards conventional forms of 'success'? Attitudes to our bodies, and our physicality? Who do we expect to love, and what happens when love visits us outside of our expectations? How does the reality of loving challenge these textures of the culture that lives in us – and how does it feel to embody that challenge in the deepest parts of our selves?

## **2) Power Matters**

The things that texture our psyches work themselves out in systems and structures: power structures. However tempting it may be to glibly assert that there is 'neither black nor white, male nor female, gay or straight', but that we are 'all just people'. In the real world this is not credible, for it takes no account of those systems and structures, and it does nothing to subvert them. And as people of God we are called to subvert them.

Think about the power of 'doing the right thing'; of being the right thing. Notice those systems of social reward and punishment. Remember feeling deserving in the wake of cultural approval; relive the vulnerability of being on the receiving end of cultural opprobrium. We live in a system that punishes and rewards according to its own conventions. Conventions that, as people of God, we cannot and should not own.

When you are on the underside of power – as I feel I was when I was living as a lesbian – your very being is delegitimized; called into question. You have a right to be only insofar as the power structures allow it. And the really clever thing is how hidden this is. Society takes away your full right to be, whilst asserting, in explicit terms, that you still have it. And it hides it so subtly and successfully that those NOT on the underside of power find it almost impossible to see that this has happened, and even harder to see their part in it.

So for me, flipping back to an apparently 'legitimate' way of being: that is, married - to a man - I could suddenly feel and notice the rewards and comfort that flowed from that position. I could see more clearly how the punishment had worked, because now the system wanted to reward me.

Resistance is the watchword according to which I lived as a lesbian, and I live it still, for different reasons. Because the things I learned as a lesbian are things I do not want to lose. I am glad for those 14 or 15 years. I was radically

reshaped by them – irreversibly so. I do not ever want to unlearn those things, and I do not think I ever will, because they are part of the fabric of my being now. My understanding of systems of power; and the alliances I found with others on their underside are gifts I cannot do without.

### **3) Unnamed loves matter**

Every human encounter is an invitation to go deeper; to embrace the challenge of difference and be changed. One cultural value we live with is the tendency to over-emphasise the importance of one, singular, partnered relationship. That applies to the gay world and the straight. It marginalises those with no spouse or partner, obviously, but it does more than that. It encourages us to devalue so many of our other deep connections – usually with the word ‘just’. ‘Oh, don’t worry about him, he’s just a friend’.

We each have, potentially if not actually, a vast hinterland of passionate connections that make up the rest of our relational lives, once the question of whether we are partnered or not is answered. The paucity of our language in this regard interests me. For naming is power, and we have very few names for those we love who are not spouses or blood relatives. Think about your life. Who are those on whom your life depends? Without whom you would be bereft? Those who have made you who you are, and those who still do. They may be those you share passionate interests with; those you have creative partnerships with; you may share a deep spiritual connection. These relationships may or may not be conventionally ‘sexual’, but they involve our sexuality because we are whole people within them. These are those with whom we are bold; take risks; make ourselves vulnerable. These relationships have no name. They are often trumped, in the conventional pecking order of priorities, by the contractual; the legitimate; the defined. Yet they are always bursting into and through relational spaces and gaps – sometimes chaotically, reminding us of the mystery of love; its giftedness; its unpredictability. If love is of God, how could it be otherwise?

If love is of God, we must embrace this hinterland; work with the grain of it. Not allow the world to tell us that these connections that have no name have no importance. On the contrary, we must work to articulate them better, to develop a language for them.

### **Conclusion**

Each of us is not a category – of sexuality or of anything else. We are human beings, flesh and blood, infinitely beloved of God, trying to learn how to love one another as God would have us love one another. With our hearts, souls, minds and bodies. Our different locations in the power structures give us a diversity of perspectives, and we need one another’s perspectives to learn to be better at it. To learn how better to open our hearts to one another; to create

spaces beyond convention where God can speak and live and do God's creative work. My question and challenge to us today is: how can we do this?

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## DISCUSSION GROUP PROGRAMME

The theme of the conference addressed the issues of how God speaks to us in our sexual experience and identity and how or where the Church impedes the flourishing of that experience and identity.

The opportunity for gay and lesbian people to be heard throughout the Anglican Communion is an important move forwards. However the discussion about sexuality within the churches affects everybody.

The discussion groups in the morning and afternoon sessions gave a safe space for people to talk about their own concerns and experiences. There was no note taking during the sessions, however people were invited to write comments they wished to make on "Post-It" notes for display during the conference.

Confidentiality was again preserved in the afternoon groups. However the group leaders were also asked to prepare points for presentation during the subsequent plenary session. The following report is an analysis of the "Post-It" notes and the feedback provided.

In the morning each group considered a theme. The groups were also asked to base their discussions around the following two questions.

What difference does your understanding of the Bible make to your engagement with this issue?

What difference does your own experience make to your understanding of this issue?

The themes assigned to each group were:

1. **Parenting:** Privilege, pain, perspectives, problems? The group gave a safe space in company to explore these issues.

2. **Cultural Loyalties:** When negotiating our sexual feelings and personal relationships, we may become aware of the power of the cultural influences which surround us. How has our culture made us who we are? Are we able to resist and change it?

3. **In Christian Ministry?** Questions arising from the Bible and our own sexual and gender identity may be highlighted for those of us engaged in the lay and ordained ministry of the Church. The opportunity to explore these questions was given.

4. **Under Pressure:** This was an opportunity to explore how our own sexual and spiritual development has been influenced by our feelings of being under

pressure. It might include pressures to conform or to succeed, the desire for the approval of others, or our own search for self-esteem.

5. **Issues with the Church:** The questions that were raised by the morning's talks about the Bible and our sexual experience may heighten tensions for us or help us discern how much we value the community and/ or institution of the Church. These were discussed in the group.

6. **To disclose or not to disclose?** Sometimes it is best to be honest with information about our sexual orientation, gender or other identity, or our past experience. But sometimes it is less helpful. An opportunity was given to discuss these issues.

7. **Square Peg, Round Hole:** A group for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities who, for whatever reason, feel out of place in society and especially the Church, and want to share that experience with others who feel similarly.

8. **Sexual and Single?** This group gave an opportunity to explore the question whether a commitment to the single life means a denial of our sexuality.

9. **Acceptable Sex:** An opportunity to explore what we believe is acceptable and ethical in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

10. **Issues at Work:** Problems and/or delights arising from our sexual or gender identity at work

## **DISCUSSION GROUP FEEDBACK**

Not all of the groups provided feedback. The following reports of the discussions are based round the “Post-It” notes which have been provided. Each note has been assigned to one of the sections given below by theme. Not by the group who provided it.

### **Inclusion**

The word “Categories” has been used a lot. The question was asked, is there a limit to inclusion? Choice can imply exclusivity and sometimes we have to choose. The celebration of gay freedom can in itself be excluding.

We are angry about the Church of England. Why is the Church leadership not speaking out injustice and inequalities instead? The discourse of Language is excluding and the Prayer Book is very heterosexual.

Those of us who find ourselves square pegs in a round hole have had to examine our relationship with our faith to our sexuality in a way that others have not. We may see the church as the “Round hole” and needs to change but this will involve suffering and (maybe) chipping of the edges of squares

We can make our own special contributions in terms of the valuing of relationships, accepting difference, experiencing diversity. We can offer our struggles and experiences as resources for transformation, with the intention of exploding the myths.

There is a link between sexuality and self esteem. Therefore both in ourselves and in our churches we must build and foster the confidence and the self esteem which enables us to explore the great diversity of human experience - instead of being imprisoned by and reacting against the difficulties and misunderstandings that divide.

### **Disclosure**

Disclosure to others begins with disclosure to one’s self. We should aim to be able to celebrate who we are. One person commented that this experience was spiritually uplifting – “Being honest with my self took off my mask”. Another found that their acceptance of being completely homosexual was a great help.

The level of disclosure depends on context. The question was asked “Is disclosure a political strategy?” - Are there benefits to making others face uncomfortable issues? - How do we balance the political benefits against the personal risks?

Reasons for disclosing were considered as follows: Church and society is now more open and accepting, the support of LGBT fellowship that becomes available, support of family and other gay groups. The greater acceptance by the younger generation was also noted.

Reasons for not disclosing were given as: Fear of the Church as a judgemental threat, fear about what relatives and friends think of us, society's reaction, old school values, difficulties in marriage with children.

There is no universal approach for everyone but the fear of disclosure can be a greater barrier to overcome than disclosure itself.

### **Threats and Acceptance**

There were a number of comments made about the perceptions others have about LGBT people, and the perceptions LGBT people have of themselves

Other people feel threatened by LGBT people. This fear is often that of recruitment, propositioning and seduction. Anyone not married is unsafe. Others may see transgender people as less of a threat than gay/queer people since this is not perceived in the context of sexual relationships

The place of fear in those who oppose LGBT people is a major issue. It is important to develop positive role models for both older and younger people. The economic contribution that LGBT people make to the community is considerable. We should develop the positive contributions that can be made through our place in the economy (the "Pink Pound")

### **Sexual and Single**

While it is necessary to address a healthy understanding to sexuality in all its diversity, the question was asked "How do we address the issue of our society being over sexualized?"

One person commented "I am single at the moment but am still content with my sexuality, passion for theatre, singing, dancing" The comment was also made that most people think older women are not sexual at all.

Can we exploit and explore church as a family, i.e. as essentially inclusive, and move on from the concept of the church being an institution made up of nuclear families as the norm.

### **Acceptable Sex**

Acceptable sex has to be experienced in the context of the valuing of relationships, accepting difference, accepting diversity and seeing God as



God of Relationships, not a God of Rules. This must also include awareness of each other's feelings, communicating those feelings, dealing with conflict, knowing LGBT clergy and being able to talk and listen to each other even if we do not agree.

There must be honesty about our relationships. The link between sexuality and self esteem was again emphasized. The creation of friendships is important, enabling others know people who are gay.

All of these considerations apply both to heterosexuals and homosexuals. Compassion and Moderation were keywords quoted.

Connection and Rejection occurs on 2 levels (for both heterosexual and homosexual). One is that of placing people in boxes, the second is interaction between Society and Church. The concept expressed is that churches have difficulty, not just with homosexuality but sexuality as a whole.

The negative main point identified by the group is that rejection exists at two levels, both in Society and in Church, and is around sexual identity and practices. This can apply to both heterosexual and homosexual situations

The positive main point was one of knowing that LGBT clergy are available and do help. Inclusive Church and the Metropolitan Community Church were commended.

### **Issues with the Church**

There were many contributions to this section!

Duplicity and hypocrisy were in many people's thoughts. One comment clearly stated "The Church (of England and Rome) rewards deceit and punishes integrity in the treatment of gay people", another comment asked "How embarrassed is Rowan Williams about having written "The body's Grace"?"

The conflict for priests in a church institution which is discriminatory and hypocritical over inclusion is a major issue. The energy that this issue takes up at the expense of Justice Mercy and Love was noted. God says he wants mercy and Justice for all and has condemned his people for not doing this.

Progress in church biblical study should be understood by the living and organic church as not anti-gay. One person commented "I am committed to work at Grass roots Catholic level rather than collude with hierarchical dysfunction and pathology". We must listen to each other's stories and strive for a loving and inclusive church.

It is the tip of the Iceberg. The church is hiding behind the issue and there are many other social and cultural factors involved. There is a need to be honest. Why should we collude behind the dysfunction of the hierarchy? Is subverting Christ-like? Why should we have to resort to subversive activities?

The challenge for us is to unearth past history, encourage love not legalism, to promote the message in the Gospel – to Love your neighbour as yourself. There is a need for the Church to learn from theologians such as James Allison and other denominations, such as the Quakers. To use storytelling and hearing other experiences to break through taboos.

A Step by Step Process is required: Priority areas to be addressed were considered to be:

To encourage equity: including economic equity through Fair Trade.

To promote the development of doctrine: including the Catholic and Christian understanding and interpretation of the teachings in the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church.

To demand that issues with the Church are addressed. The context for this is known, and the knowledge is available, but the Church is hiding from it by adopting an Iceberg Image, where these issues are only seen at the top. Anything underneath is denied.

To assert intellectual rights of dissent and inclusion: To consider what protest one can make in regard of one's history and to challenge the double standards and hypocrisy that is presently encountered, in the same way that Christ subverted and revealed the wrongs in the Jewish Establishment.

To address outside issues: To engage in dialogue over current legislation with the House of Lords and Anglican Bishops.

We need dialogue round diversity and be able to take risks.

## **Resources**

A number of comments related to resources that the church needs. Some which were identified related to the provision of safe space - somewhere where people can be honest about what they are struggling with. This may be either near to where they live or further away.

This should include the provision of safe space for the representation of friendship, partnership, widows etc and for LGBT adolescents.

Education and training for clergy and laity involved in industry and pastoral situations is needed. It was noted that there is a need to develop a culture of acceptance in ordinands. Parish training programmes are also required.

We should recognize and make use of the wealth of experience that comes from people's work places and non church activities.

Tools to enable people to reflect theologically on their experience are required.

A list of accredited churches would be helpful. One suggestion emphasized the need to involve the congregations. This should be achieved by concentrating on resourcing the congregations and allowing them to resource the church.

The need for a wider range of liturgies was also noted. Liturgy should not always be around “Almighty Father” and efforts should be made to develop more inclusive forms.

The focus should be on encouragement and training to become self reflective people. The need to develop the skills of the clergy and of their own awareness of sexual issues is required.

The question was asked “Can we hold and balance the range of vocations we are called to?” It was left unanswered and is a challenge to be met.

## **Plenary Session Discussions**

The key points established in the final plenary session were as follows:

- The Church should move from doctrines of Sin/Salvation to Human Flourishing
- Taboos within traditions are a problem
- There is need for Love not Legalism  
Engaging with the Message/ example of Quakers  
Hearing and listening experience.
- We should learn lessons from history and women’s experience
- A Culture of acceptance should be developed by  
Engaging with Ordinands  
Spiritual Accompaniment  
The Language of Liturgy
- The diversity of human experience should be welcomed. It should be used as a resource for transformation – but how?
- We must all provide space for honesty within the church, (for which counselling and resources will be needed)

- Dialogue should be engaged in. It involves risk and conflict, but this can lead to change.
- The need to resource congregations must be recognized. This will differ in different contexts. It includes:
  - Liturgical Resources
  - Better use of existing resources
  - Bible Study Resources
- The complexity of sexuality as a whole must be recognized. Other issues (such as hidden domestic violence) must not be ignored.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS AND REVIEW

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a clear distinction made between sexual relationships that are given in love and those which are pursued for the sexual act. It was agreed by both groups that acceptable sex is that which takes place in the context of loving relationships.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- **The Need for Communication:** The current lack of communication means that attitudes about the other grow in ignorance and fear. Without the ability to be open and honest with each other prejudices and misconceptions develop and are reinforced.
- **The Need for Understanding:** The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community may feel it is understood, but it must also take note of the signals it gives. Any minority group has a particular responsibility to ensure that its position is known, and that its views can be clearly separated from other groups with similar interests who do not follow its path.
- **The Need for Interpretation:** The conference made a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable sex which is based on relationships given in love. For this to be understood it is necessary to examine the Old and New Testament texts in the light of this

perception and in the context of the societies within which they were written

- The Need for Authenticity: Many referred to the hypocrisy of a church which takes a moralising attitude on sexual relationships and attempts at the same time to hide itself from its own situation by silencing people within it who possess dissenting views. Discussion of this topic raised the greatest anger. The refusal of the church to engage with these issues was the greatest concern.

The implications of these considerations raise a number of issues which extend beyond the lectures and discussions in the conference itself. The refusal of the church to engage with the perceptions of sexuality and human flourishing eliminates the possibilities of openness and reinforces prejudices which associate homosexuals only with promiscuity and sexual licence. Labelling becomes a means of control and minority groups can be made scapegoats for other ills. Recent statements by some senior Vatican clerics suggest this. An illustration of what can happen is seen in the opposition by the Bench of Bishops in the United Kingdom House of Lords to the sexual and gender measures in the recent Equality Bill and their effect on the legislation. In addition to permitting discrimination on the grounds of sexuality it impugns the integrity of the people against whom it is directed. In a society where the loss of secular authority by the Church means that it can no longer conceal the misdemeanours of the past, it is not just the issues of sexuality that are involved, it is the integrity of the church.

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

Susan Gilchrist, April 2010.

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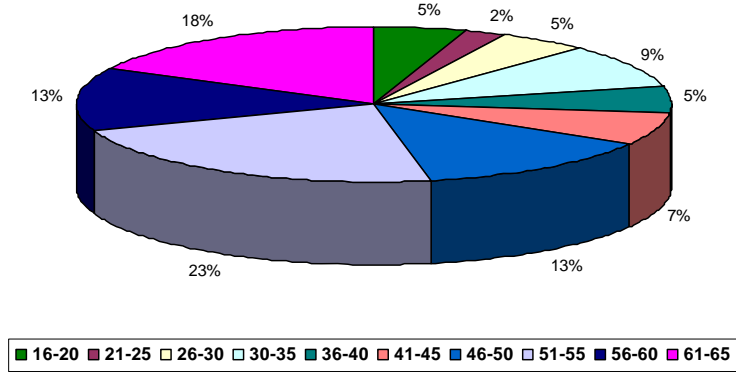
# **Proceedings of a Conference on Sexuality and Human Flourishing**

## **Appendices**

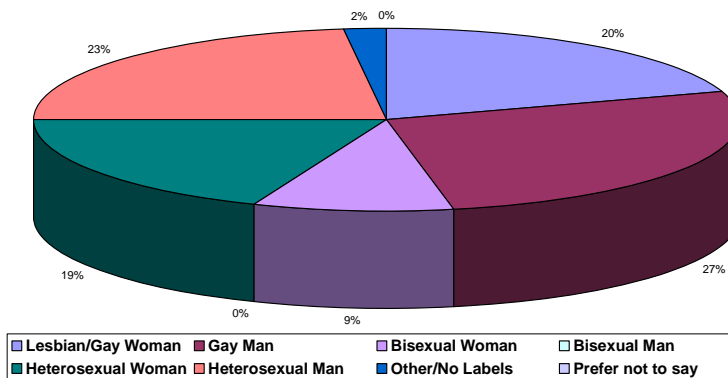
## CONFERENCE STATISTICS

There were 106 participants. Each participant was asked to complete an anonymous survey. Some of the results are shown below, 44 (42%) of the participants returned the documents.

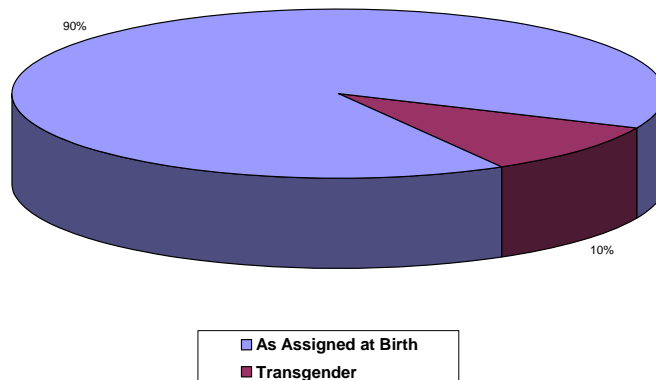
Age Distribution



Sexual Orientation



Gender Identity



## CONFERENCE PHOTOGRAPHS

Speakers:  
Arnold Browne  
Alison Webster



Panel, from left:  
Nicola Slee  
Chris Dowd  
Brian Thorne (Chair)  
Jane Fraser  
Christina Beardsley  
Peter Kaye

Group Photograph:



## STUDY PACKS AND RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### “Sexuality and Human Flourishing” - RESOURCES

Top Ten Tips for you, your Church group, your parish, your wider Church

1. **Group work packs offering general explorations of sexuality and gender issues** with considerable guidance on how to create a context of caring, prayerful groups which nevertheless face sensitive issues
  - a) We are Created by God: A Mothers' Union Discussion Booklet (Participants' Guide and Facilitators' Guide from [www.themothersunion.org](http://www.themothersunion.org); [mu@themothersunion.org](mailto:mu@themothersunion.org); Mothers' Union, Mary Sumner House, 24 Tufton Street, London SW1PP 3RB
  - b) “Everyday Bread” a 5 Step Group Programme of Introduction to the Eucharist which asks “But who is excluded and why?” from Inclusive Church, [www.stores.lulu.com/inclusivechurch](http://www.stores.lulu.com/inclusivechurch)
  
2. **Leaflets, books and group work packs which address the topics of homosexuality, bisexuality and the Church.**
  - a) Listening for the truth in love – A pack of material to enable the Worcester Diocesan Listening Process on Human Sexuality (includes excellent short book list) – from the Worcester Diocesan Office
  - b) DVD and Study Booklet “Listening to Gay Men and Women’s Experiences within the Church” – contact [jctimm@aol.com](mailto:jctimm@aol.com). Chair of Changing Attitude.
  - c) Christianity and Homosexuality: a short introduction , leaflet from [www.lgcm.org.uk](http://www.lgcm.org.uk) [lgcm@lgcm.org.uk](mailto:lgcm@lgcm.org.uk); 0207 739 1249
  - d) “An Acceptable Sacrifice? Homosexuality and the Church” Eds Duncan Dormer and Jeremy Morris, SPCK, 2007 – a useful and sympathetic guide and review of the issues for the ordinary lay or clerical reader.
  - e) “Living it Out – a Survival Guide for lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians and their friends, families and churches” , Rachel Hagger-Holt and Sarah Hagger-Holt, Canterbury Press, 2009

### 3. An introduction to Transsexuality in the context of the Church

- a) "The Transsexual Person is My Neighbour: pastoral guidelines for Christian clergy, pastors and congregations" , Christina Beardsley, The Gender Trust , 2007 The Gender Trust , [www.gendertrust.org.uk](http://www.gendertrust.org.uk)  
Also available via the LGBTAC website [www.lgbtac.org.uk](http://www.lgbtac.org.uk)

### 4. Books for all of us and about all of us , including young people

- a) "Memories of Bliss: God, Sex and Us" , Jo Ind, SCM,

This book is a general, provocative and unusual reflection on the whole range of human sexual experience. Reflection on how we humans as sexual beings are given an added depth by the author's experience of being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at a relatively young age.

- b) " You are Mine" , Alison Webster , SPCK , 2009

An in depth study of the formation of identity.

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This list of resources is by no means exhaustive, nor does it include all the books and courses which each member of the organising group would personally recommend! What it represents is the **Top Ten Tips to get you thinking** after the conference – if you want to think or help others to think about "How may we take this further?"

These are books, pamphlets, leaflets and group work DVDs and course books which the organising group for today's conference chose to present to one another as "up to date" and "well worth pursuing".