



All God's Children...

Lesbian and gay people
in the Anglican Church

A brief guide to understanding
the role and history
of lesbian and gay people
in the Anglican church

WORKING FOR GAY & LESBIAN
AFFIRMATION WITHIN THE
ANGLICAN COMMUNION

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Introduction

Lesbian and gay people are a minority in a heterosexual world. We have been subject to prejudice and abuse in different cultures and different periods of world history, especially from the Christian and Islamic faith traditions. Lesbian and gay people have defended themselves in various ways from abuse – by hiding themselves and being secretive about their lives and relationships.

The Christian Church bears a heavy responsibility for encouraging and sometimes creating the prejudice and hostility against lesbian and gay people, which ultimately led many to the concentration camps and the gas chambers of Nazi Germany. The church is still failing to understand the direct relationship between traditional Christian teaching about lesbian and gay people and the oppression gay people have suffered and continue to suffer.

In the West, where society is increasingly open and accepting of lesbian and gay people, we have begun to create relationships in exactly the same way as adult heterosexuals. We flirt and date, fall in love, commit ourselves to partners in faithful, loving, monogamous relationships. We also fail in exactly the same way as heterosexuals. Partners are sometimes unfaithful, and relationships can break down.

Partnered lesbian and gay people who are practising Christians have heartfelt, strongly held, theologically grounded beliefs about our calling to live in a loving, faithful relationship. Such a relationship of commitment between two men or two women, no less than a heterosexual Christian marriage, is a reflection of Christ's covenanted love for his Church. It is no less a vehicle of grace, and is no less worthy of the Church's support and blessing.

The Bible nowhere condemns such a relationship. Those who claim that it does are selective fundamentalists. They choose to apply a literal interpretation to the small number of texts which mention homosexual acts, but would never think of applying such a literal interpretation to other texts where the result might be inconvenient for themselves – texts for example about the remarriage of the divorced, or usury, or the role of women.

The Old Testament

In Genesis chapters 1 and 2, God creates human beings in his own image. God creates human beings male and female. God creates us to live in relationship because 'it is not good for humankind to be alone'. Biblically speaking, it is this universal human need for intimate companionship, and not procreation, that is God's primary purpose in making us sexual beings. We are created, as Jesus taught, to live in loving relationship with God, with our neighbour and with ourselves. Of course the assumption in Genesis is that heterosexuality is the norm, but there is nothing here to condemn the minority who are homosexual.

The 'sin of Sodom' is the attempt on the part of heterosexual men of Sodom to commit gang rape on the men who were staying as guests at Lot's house. Where the 'sin of Sodom' is mentioned elsewhere in scripture (including by Jesus himself) the sin refers to this extreme violation of the rules of hospitality. The story has no ethical bearing at all on the issue of gay relationships.

There are only two verses in the Hebrew scripture which refer to same-gender sexual activity, Leviticus 18.22 and 22.13. Underlying the texts is the supposition that these acts are committed by heterosexual men who are choosing to be perverse. There is no recognition here, or anywhere in scripture, that some people are homosexually orientated, and have no choice in the matter. It should also be noted that many other activities are prohibited by Leviticus as 'unclean' which Christians regard as perfectly normal. It is highly tendentious to single out these verses and ignore the others.

The New Testament

We are Christians, people of the New Covenant, who seek to obey the new commandments of Jesus. They are:

- To love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind, and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves
- To love one another in the same way that Jesus loved his disciples and followers
- To love one another, and be prepared to lay down our life as one would for a friend
- To love our enemies and pray for our persecutors, knowing no limits to our goodness, as our heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds
- To love one another, when we are called to it, in a sexual relationship which models God's faithful, covenanted love for us

Jesus has nothing to say directly about homosexuality or lesbian and gay people; but all these commandments are binding equally on us all.

To live with our neighbour, Jesus also taught, is to live in relationship with the most unwelcome and unlikely person we can imagine – the Samaritan, the leper, the outcast. He challenges our prejudices, and demands that we see the image of God, the potential for good in everyone.

In Romans, Paul writes about men and women who 'exchange' 'unnatural' sexual intercourse for 'natural'. The word 'exchange' makes clear that he has in mind basically heterosexual people who engage in homosexual acts out of perversity or excess of lust. The same is true of two passing references in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. Paul never deals with the issue of homosexually-orientated people, or the kind of committed gay relationship Christian gay people wish to defend. For lesbians and gay men, sexual expression within such a relationship is of course entirely 'natural'.

Christians

We lesbian, gay and heterosexual people are only entitled to call ourselves Christians because God has called us into a relationship with him and made us members of his Church through faith and baptism. We have heard the call and responded in faith and love.

We are only entitled to call ourselves Christians because we believe in the message and mystery of God revealed through his living Word, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We are only entitled to call ourselves Christians because we seek to live out the teaching and example of Jesus in practice in our daily lives. Jesus' command was love, but love challenges, judges and changes as well as affirms.

So how do we know what love really demands of us in our daily lives and relationships?

Anglicans

We are Anglicans. "We learn the mind of Christ and the will of God in our modern dilemmas with reference to the three-fold authority of Scripture, the lessons of tradition and the voice of reason, which is informed by the experience of contemporary culture" (The Rt Revd James Jones, Bishop of Liverpool – NEAC4, 2003). The genius of Anglicanism is to allow scripture, tradition and reason to engage dynamically and constructively with each other. While scripture is primary, individual texts and topics must still be interpreted in the light of reason and new experience. In many issues of modern life, not only the gay issue, there are simply no easy answers to be had directly out of scripture. We have to do the hard work of thinking and praying them through, using these three sources of authority that our tradition gives us.

We must do it honestly and unselectively. In using scripture, a consistent and just process of interpretation must be applied. Otherwise scripture itself becomes an idol and a tyrant, a tool of our own prejudices, and the letter (as Paul puts it) will kill the Spirit.

Sin and Justice

Jesus was scathing in his attacks on the Pharisees of his day who placed greater value on adherence to their own highly selective interpretation of scripture and their own supposed 'orthodoxy', and punished those who did not adhere to their interpretation by exclusion from the community.

In stark contrast to the Pharisees, Jesus focused on the primacy of love, and the inclusion of those who were excluded by their strictures.

- What would Jesus make today of those leaders of the Church who think it is more important to engage in a battle for their version of the truth than to welcome those who already feel belittled and marginalized by Church and society?
- What would Jesus make of the arrogance and ignorance which dares to condemn all homosexual relationships as sin, and is willfully blind to the fruits of the Spirit visible in many such relationships?
- What would Jesus make of those who seek to justify the condemnation of lesbian and gay relationships as being more important than building people up in love, sustaining the Christian community, or committing themselves to Jesus' prayerful desire that we may be one?
- And what would he say about our moral priorities, and our obsession with sexual sin? Both Testaments have far more to say about justice for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the alien in the land, the abuse of wealth and power than they have to say about sex or sexuality.

The sin of today's Church that is most likely to offend the Jesus of the Gospels is our failure to concentrate energy, hearts, minds, global opinion and the attention of world leaders on the blasphemous injustices of world trading practices and Third World debt. These create suffering and poverty on a scale too terrifying to contemplate. God will judge the leaders of today's Church for their failure to utter prophetic words about those who are dying from poverty, hunger, malnutrition, lack of clean drinking water and HIV/AIDS, while wealthy countries wage war and spend billions of dollars protecting their own selfish interests.

The Church's mission has been hijacked for too long by its present-day Pharisees, who abuse scripture to 'tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and place them on the shoulders of others'. In the process they have narrowed the Church and made it repugnant, not only to lesbians and gays, but to millions of decent and fair-minded people.

This must change now. Lesbian and gay Christians will no longer put up with being belittled, insulted and excluded from our own spiritual home. We are not leaving, we are here to stay, and we are determined to make our Church what God wills it to be: a home for all his children – rich, poor, black, white, male, female, gay, heterosexual – all sinners, all redeemed, all beloved in Christ, without distinction or discrimination.

Trinitarian Principles

I

Jesus Christ is the living Word of God, the divine made flesh, fully human and fully God. In his life, the love of God shone forth in all its glory. His teaching, his relationships, his self-giving in life and in his death on the cross, his resurrection and ascension reveal the life of suffering, sacrifice, love and glory to which God calls every created person. The way of the cross is the way of love, holiness, self-giving, risk-taking and letting-go.

II

The Spirit of Jesus Christ has been poured out in creation. The Spirit groans with an aching longing for the kingdom of God to be manifest on earth in human lives, relationships, political structures, human systems, and in the church. The Spirit is not a Spirit that enslaves or diminishes our humanity, leading us to be fearful and inhibited, but is a Spirit of adoption, enabling us to relate to God as Father and good parent, affirming that we are children and heirs of God, sharing the suffering of Christ as we share in his glory. There is a spiritual power at large in creation which reveals to weak, fearful human beings the hidden wisdom and secret purposes of God.

III

The Father of Jesus Christ is creator, infinite, ultimate love and mystery. God is love; those who dwell in love dwell in God, and God in them (1 John 4.16). God is within all things and beyond all things. Through the Spirit, God is present at every moment of time in every dimension of creation. God's energy and love flow through the universe, drawing us reluctant human beings to himself, not by coercion but through the still, small voice, the subtle inner stirring of our hearts and minds. It is in contemplation, silence, inner reflection and stillness that we become aware of the immense love God has for us and his constant, gentle, desiring presence.



CHANGING ATTITUDE

WORKING FOR GAY & LESBIAN
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www.changingattitude.org

WHO WE ARE

Changing Attitude is a network of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and heterosexual members of the Anglican churches of the UK founded in 1995.

We welcome as members everyone whose concern is to work for change in the church's understanding of human sexuality.

A group of trustees is responsible for developing the work and structure of Changing Attitude through Changing Attitude Trust. The National Office is staffed by Colin Coward, the Director, Sally Rogers, the Development Worker and Brenda Harrison, the Office Manager.

OUR AIM

We aim to move forward the debate about human sexuality in the Anglican church, by:

- Raising awareness
- Providing education
- Introducing our experience
- Building relationships
- Integrating sexuality and spirituality

BECOME A SUPPORTER

As a supporter you will receive:

- Changing Attitude newsletter five times a year providing news of Diocesan groups, developments in church and society, information about coming events, reports and articles of relevance to the unfolding debate within the church
- invitations to take part in Changing Attitude conferences and workshops
- the opportunity to participate in a local group to work for change and develop initiatives and ideas to engage the wider church in thinking about human sexuality

To become a supporter please write to the address below or visit our web site

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