



WORKING FOR GAY & LESBIAN
AFFIRMATION WITHIN THE
ANGLICAN COMMUNION

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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

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Sexual Ethics

A Report of the Lesbian and Gay Clergy Consultation Working Group

Edited by Andrew Henderson

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The Lesbian and Gay Clergy Consultation

In 1976 three Anglican priests - Malcolm Johnson, Peter Ellers and Douglas Rhymes - decided to ask their clerical friends if they were interested in forming a support network for gay priests in the UK Anglican provinces. Out of this initiative grew the Clergy Consultation, organised until recently by Malcolm from London and open to all gay clergy who wished to join. Its main purpose has been to provide a continuing support base for members rather than to campaign, but opportunities to influence for change have been taken. Membership country-wide has varied between 250 and 450. We meet twice a year for the inside of a day; the programme typically includes a presentation followed by discussion, worship and a good and sociable lunch! Business and network-building are given time and currently around 80 members attend each meeting; there is a newsletter which gives details of each meeting and advertises other events and issues. Responding to current issues, guest speakers have included groups of bishops and other senior clergy, and such invitations are led by suggestions from members and the Steering Committee.

Editor

This paper was drafted by the Group's secretary, Rev Andrew Henderson. After reading theology at Cambridge and Cuddesdon, Andrew was ordained into the Southwark Priest-worker Chapter in 1962. Interest in community mental health provision led him to work in London's social services. After 11 years as Director of Social Services for Kensington and Chelsea he retrained and practiced as an integrative psychotherapist. He was a founding trustee of two AIDS service centres, the London Lighthouse and CARA.

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- Part of the tradition that allows new understandings

This paper clearly argues for a developmental understanding of scriptural themes and principles, together with the re-interpretation of traditional doctrine in the light of contemporary knowledge and changing cultural contexts. We link this to our belief in the Spirit as our living experience of God in creation through whom we LGBTs are brought ever closer into the fellowship of *agape+eros*!

- A thought of our own—Solidarity with the marginalised

Comfortable Western christianity is often hard to identify with the authentic gospel preference for the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised. Relatively prosperous as we are, through the historical, social and ecclesiastical rejection of our sexual orientations we have something of that edge to offer.

Andrew Henderson
Secretary to the Sexual Ethics Group
July 2003

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The development of Anglican approaches to sexual ethics

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The Consultation's contribution

As LGBT clergy we have an opportunity shared with all Christians of similar orientations to engage in our church's current debate about the acceptability of LGBT sexual relationships within the church. By virtue of our ordination and theological training we are in varying degrees equipped to offer our own interpretations of scripture and doctrine, combining the authority of our office with the weight of our experience, both pastoral and personal. Our position has a particularly sharp focus on visible L&G partnerships, as the Bishops currently deny to us the qualified acceptance that is offered to lay L&G partnerships in the 'Issues' document. Our paper is a first attempt to see if it is possible to produce a position paper on sexual ethics that most of us find useful to ourselves. If it finds enough support in the Consultation, a next step might be to consider making it available to selected wider audiences by whatever means.

To conclude this stage we recall the reflections that Liz Stuart offered us on what weakened elements of the Christian tradition LGBT Christians might be holding on behalf of the whole church.:-

- The ancient belief that in the eyes of God gender is not ultimately important

We have argued that the biblical ethic of love, including sexual love, transcends gender considerations in its applicability to all human relationships

- In LGBT sexualities, spirituality and sexuality often are closely linked. All desire has its end in God.

Oliver O'Donovan in his discussion of gay orientation and sexuality in terms of possibilities of vocation instances the incorporation of eros into the Christian life. To be a fellowship of *agape* we might be 'holding' that the Church must also be a fellowship of *eros* (with due regard to the traditions of ascetic discipline!) This view is probably implicit in this paper which has not discussed spirituality specifically.

- Subversive radical perspective on priesthood, possibly rooted in women's priorities, e.g. relationship building

This point is linked to the notion of a fellowship of *eros*. Current research in the UK indicates that many LGBTs feel they rely more on their intimate friendship network than on one sexual partner for emotional support. In this paper our own analysis arrives at the need for 'communities of relationships'. A role for the priest could be to promote and model this, for which many LGBTs are often particularly talented.

Introduction

1

Background to this paper

In November 2000 the Annual General Meeting of the Lesbian and Gay Clergy Consultation commissioned a group of about a dozen members to meet and see if it was possible to articulate some common approaches to sexual ethics from the standpoint of our experience as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Anglican clergy. We met five times, sharing our stories and identifying three possible aims for the exercise:-

1. To assist our membership by offering support in the daily life of LGBT clergy.
2. To provide material for those addressing the Church and outside audiences, e.g. to help LGBT members of the General Synod and Changing Attitude.
3. To make some response to 'Issues in Human Sexuality' as a discussion document which seemed to have been adopted as policy by the House of Bishops.

We anticipated that each of these aims might involve producing different material. The task was daunting and by the end of summer 2001 it was difficult to see how a relatively large group with varying attendance could make progress.

At the AGM later in 2001 it was agreed that a small group should take the work forward to the next stage and seek the advice of some external authorities engaged in this field to help us decide what might be feasible.

We produced an initial paper and discussed it with Professor Elizabeth (Liz) Stuart and with the Rt Revd David Atkinson, Bishop of Thetford (neither of them were involved in the writing of this final report). In between we continued our own meetings during 2002. We acted on Professor Stuart's advice that we should first explore our own theological approach since all ethical thought comes out of some philosophical or theological background, whether explicit or not. This was a useful exercise; for although we had initially agreed with a suggestion from Dr Stuart that we needed the assistance of a professional researcher, we began to be more confident that it was important to put together our own thinking, at any rate as a first step. Hence this report, which speaks out of our own experience as LGBT priests.

The group of five members included two women and three men from a range of traditions, - three broadly liberal Catholic, one ecumenical and feminist, and one 'reformed evangelical'.

We reflected on the fact that attendance in the original group seemed to drop off as our individual stories confronted us with our struggles around

the development of our sexual identity. It may not be coincidence that attendance foundered around this aspect. Our ambivalence over conforming to rules; our painful struggles to reconcile our striving for integrity with the expression of our true sexual nature and our anxieties and vulnerability in relation to the Church are some of the emotion-laden material that surfaced. However, we were clear that we should take care not to lose the "story" element: for too long we have suffered under the ethical pronouncements of theologians speaking from assumptions which tend to dismiss the validity of our experience of same-sex relating.

A number of important general points had also emerged:-

- The Consultation membership is distributed on a spectrum between those who primarily relate to traditional christian teachings and those who are reaching for a post-metaphysical, if not necessarily post-modern, form of christian belief. Most of us will be likely to locate ourselves somewhere in the middle. It followed that any thing we produced should try to acknowledge the whole spectrum.
- We have been on the receiving end of the Church's historical tendency to convert the gospel's dynamic challenge to our lives into set rules of behaviour. We needed to avoid that pit-fall ourselves and to cast what we say more in terms of a coherent set of aspirations and interim signposts appropriate for such a recently emergent set of varied same-sex lifestyles.
- Rather than adhering uncritically to historically established ethical tenets, there is a common view among us that we and the Church need to trust and to work from our current human experience in the sexual field, in the light of our understanding of the christian tradition. However, we will need to take some position on the knotty issue of authority for Christians, including the authority of the biblical material.
- Ethical systems make a positive contribution to societal and group cohesion when they accurately reflect gut-level values and are experienced as nurturing to most individuals in the group. However, such systems can be used by secular and religious authorities in the interests of powerful elites in a more or less abusive way. Specifically in the area of human sexuality, the inducement of sexual shame and guilt can be endemic to child-rearing practices and employed in the service of the socialisation of the young and the maintenance of adults' control over children. It is therefore likely that anything that emerges from gay experience will be most usefully interpreted as a particular angle on the nature of human sexuality as a whole.
- We should pay attention to the significance of belonging to a group that shares a common commitment in seeking to behave ethically. Since church groups only rarely offer total safety to LGBTs, such a group would nurture trust and friendship and be a safe enough place for sexual issues to be openly addressed in confidence. This consideration introduces the theme of 'friendship' which seems to be emerging as a key category when christians consider the ordering of gay relationships.

erations are not always easy to take into account, but we do not think there should be any attempt to proscribe particular sexual activities between consenting and mature adults who genuinely believe they have thought about the 'Rights and Wrongs' outlined above.

If there is room for a specifically christian angle on sexual ethics over and above what would well serve the rest of the human race, the criteria would probably extend to include wider aspects, such as self-acceptance, recreation, renewal, forgiveness and transformation, together with sexual relationships contributing to, or at least being compatible with the christian vision of a more just world order.

Guidelines around the Rights and Wrongs of Sexual Behaviour

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When there is disagreement in principle over moral and ethical matters, or when there seems to be a major role for individual judgement relative to controversial situations, nevertheless there can often be some consensus around practical considerations. The relational values suggested under the banner of 'covenantal' are predominantly positive. In trying to distinguish between right and wrong in sexual behaviour we must avoid seeming to be naive about the negative potential of our sexuality. What follows is an attempt to distil some common-denominator hallmarks of ethical sexual behaviour, embodying our interpretation of what christians understand about the overriding ethic of love.

Ethical sexual relations should involve:-

- Respect for the integrity of self and others, i.e. free consent to sex; no serious physical hurt or harm; understanding and use of safe sex.
- Consideration for the cultural background of others and where they are coming from. This includes the balance of relative power and control between men and women, and between different age groups, as well as ethnic, national considerations, etc..
- Sensitivity to the role of power in sex. Thus it is always the adult's responsibility to hold and respect the boundary which outlaws sex with children; the customary prohibited degrees of incest are also a protection against the sexual abuse of power in the family.
- Realistic assessment of any consequences of starting a new sexual relationship on existing commitments of both parties. Respect for existing partnerships and friendships. A realistic assessment of the likely effects of the jealousy factor on all involved.
- As much honesty and clarity as possible about intention and freedom to act of both parties, especially where dependents are involved.
- Recognition of the significance of practicalities like time, money, location, health, etc.
- Respect for the secular law, and for prevailing social norms.

As to specific physical/genital activities during sexual relations, in the context of the parameters outlined above we think this aspect is entirely a matter for the mutual agreement of the parties concerned. It is clearly common sense to take account of current scientific and medical knowledge. For instance the use of condoms is indicated where there is a risk of sexually transmitted infection; anal penetration involves greater risk of physical damage than vaginal, so requires more care, as does sex during pregnancy. There may be some evidence that the number of sexual partners may be associated with certain sorts of cancer etc., etc. These consid-

- A valuable feature of all ethical systems is that they provide a generally accepted framework against which individuals may evaluate their own behaviour. The traditional christian ethic seeks to confine sexual relationships to heterosexual marriage. Therefore christian LGBTs wanting to live with integrity in sexual relationships have to create their own way. This paper attempts to start formulating a common ethical framework for sexual relating for LGTB people. Hopefully it will turn out to have a wider validity.

- We must avoid taking the victim position in what we say. It may be that clergy, being key figures in the playing out of the church's societal role in relation to moral norms, are particularly prone to buying into society's need to identify morally-outcast classes such as gays. If this is accurate, such an attitude would inevitably tend to affect our self-image as LGBT clergy.

- Somehow we must hold the tension between our conviction that we have something prophetic to offer from our experience and any tendency to appear to ignore the possible destructiveness of some gay sexual behaviour.

The importance of sexual ethics for LGBT clergy

Starting from our own concerns, the need for this exercise could arise simply from the fact that most LGBT clergy would say they aspire to live their sexual lives ethically but it's not very clear what this actually means! The Consultation is a unique and sizeable group and it could be significant in itself to discover whether it is possible to articulate a more or less common view. We may begin to evolve shared models of relating analogous to those historically available to heterosexuals.

All LGBT christians live within a tension. On the one hand we try to express our sexual identity with integrity. At the same time, as church members, we have to cope with the broadly negative teaching of the churches concerning same-sex lifestyles and sexual relationships. Clergy have an additional pressure because we have opted through ordination to take on formal roles in the churches; and western societies have traditionally looked to clergy to provide and to uphold moral and ethical norms. Visible LGBT lifestyles are very new (though covert homosexual behaviour is not). Some of us will have opted for low-profile acceptance of the church's current approach to the domestic arrangements of clergy, particularly those resident in parishes. Others may feel able to be more open, but it is likely that all members of the Consultation find their own ways of helping to bring about change. Now, if we decide to make use of this report as a corporate contribution to the ethical dimension of the current debate, we have an opportunity to work for the positive incorporation of the particular varieties we represent into christian understandings of human sexuality.

At the outset we needed to recognise that our position as LGBT clergy in the CofE and our focus on the traditions of christian theology and ethics are not simply our private concerns, albeit set in our wider society and culture, but are continuously in interaction with a very complex and changing cultural context. Regarding sexuality, we felt it would be important to have an eye to what reliance we might already place on disciplines other than theology. For instance:-

- **Philosophy / politics** An increasingly multi-cultural society and the emergence of post-modernism have gone hand in hand with historical/critical theories of language and culture. It is harder for fundamentalist views to remain intellectually respectable. On the sexual front, feminism, queer theory, liberation philosophies and 'human rights' have all contributed to the greater social acceptance of sexual variety in visible lifestyles. De-criminalisation of same-sex activity between consenting adults followed by current legislative programmes show that in some measure this trend is supported by society's institutions.
- **Biology / medicine** Clearly the possibility that genetic factors affect sexual orientation is potentially important. Is it also possible human-beings have a built-in predisposition to faithful coupling? Homosexuality is no longer classed as pathological per se by psychiatry. Gender change is becoming established. 'Sexual addiction' seems to be a label or diagnosis that is gaining ground, with treatment implications.
- **Psychology / social research** There is greater general awareness of the developmental importance of family, education, church etc. in socialising individuals into sexual roles – or failing to do so! Long-term research results and population surveys are establishing the nature and prevalence of sexual variety.
- **Counselling / psycho-analysis** There is growing awareness of the possible influence of unconscious motivations on behaviour, e.g. the part of unconventional lifestyles in establishing independence or expressing protest. Classic psychoanalytic thought extends the sexual and erotic domain into all aspects of human relating. Therapies can offer alternatives to medical – and pastoral - approaches to compulsive sexual behaviour.

low – particularly balancing the destructiveness of sexual jealousy against the enriching potential of variety.

- **Friendship as group membership.** Groups may be informal, perhaps sharing an interest; for the young, gangs often express this urge to belong. Groups can exert a very powerful emotional hold and rely on the same covenantal virtues to continue as positive influences. Often groups have a more or less recognised erotic charge, e.g. sports teams. Structured groups are often part of life at schools, colleges, churches, work places, pubs, clubs etc. Sexual relationships that develop via group involvements would also be measured against the 'Rights and Wrongs' below

- **Friendship expressed through commitment to causes,** professions and passionate interests. At first sight this level might seem a bit abstract to be subsumed under friendship. However this is the mode through which a celibate priesthood has been expected to sublimate and to invest sexual energy. Same-sex communities harness the same erotic dimension. Membership of professional bodies typically involves assent to codes of conduct that echo 'covenantal' principles.

- **Friendship with God.** The various christian traditions would emphasise the importance of different points in the above matrix for our encounter with the offer of God's friendship. Our view is that it is helpful to think of relating to God's friendly otherness through the mediation of all these modes of friendship together – holistically, in fact.

What this matrix does is to emphasise the common covenantal principles in all the different degrees of friendship, whether or not sexual expression is an element in the relationship. Via the biblical notion of a covenantal framework it may be possible to forge a bridge between christian and secular approaches to relational and sexual ethics, inclusive of all mature sexual orientations. Marriage is not rejected, but is seen as a valued and particular sub-set of friendship.

This approach would raise the question as to whether ultimately there is any valid distinction to be made between sexual ethics for christians and non-christians, or between straights and LGTBs.

Michael Vasey has made a good case from the LGBTB perspective for us to see 'friendship' as a comprehensive category that can embrace all intimate and sexual relating. Current research among L&Gs in the UK shows that many of us see our friendship networks as more enduring and ultimately significant than our partnerships and sexual liaisons.

Societies in the West have now evolved into forms where the institution of marriage no longer plays such a pivotal role in social and cultural cohesion and continuity. Even the procreation of children has lost its preeminent priority for all sorts of reasons, and the churches are struggling to maintain the traditional religious and moral doctrines that seek to confine sexual activity within marriage now the social imperatives have changed. Secular mores now tend to accept serial marriage as well as committed partnerships and a certain amount of more or less safe sexual experimentation amongst the young. Yet there remains in wider society a generally positive value put on certain qualitative aspects of intimate and sexual relating that seem to derive directly from the marriage tradition. These values include notions like trust, honesty, kindness, faithfulness, mutuality, material responsibility as well as romance, passion, fulfillment of desire and parenting. Most of these values and aspirations could apply as well to close platonic friendships as to more intimate and sexual relationships. So in 'friendship' we have a concept with the potential to bridge between the marriage tradition and the practicalities of life as we actually live it today, between a God-centered ideal and what we find workable. A problem with the word 'friendship' is that it has been understood mostly to exclude specifically sexual relationships, (e.g. "just good friends" and "She's not just my wife: she's my best friend!"). We would argue that it is precisely this compartmentalisation of sex that our culture needs to adapt in favour of greater integration of our capacities for desire, tenderness and passion into the full range of our relating.

A 'friendship' matrix might look like this:-

- **Friendship with self** as the fundamental building block of all relating. Religious and mystical traditions tend to locate our basic connection with the divine here. Self-pleasuring, sexual and otherwise, is an integral element.
- **Friendships with individuals.** All friendships rely on a certain amount of trust, creativity and mutual benefit to persist. In this sense they can be seen as covenantal. As marriage includes a legal contract, other forms of partnership, including same-sex arrangements, might involve public and/or legal commitments. There is a strong case for this around child rearing, and the civil rights movement has established a further range of compelling grounds for legislative changes now in prospect.

All friendships probably use erotic energy. Whether or not they include sexual expression is a matter for the discretion of those concerned, based on the complex of considerations we outline be-

All five of us wrote papers on our individual approach to theology which we then discussed. We found we all embrace the tension between the claims of the traditions that have nurtured our religious formation and the pressing authority of our own experience. We found it difficult to use the traditional theological categories and headings in any consistent way, yet we kept falling back on them; in particular the significance and permeating influence of the Bible became very obvious in the formation of all our values and convictions – to the surprise of some of us!

Our view of christian **authority and tradition**, expressed through scripture, creeds and doctrine, is that they should never be seen as static and permanently unchanging 'deposits of faith'. Vital to the transmission of the Gospel truth in every age is faithful and discriminating reinterpretation of what is handed down in order to discern the movement of the **Spirit** in the contemporary context. Having said that, we follow the line that certain authoritative principles, patterns and directions, do emerge from **scripture** and the biblical narratives, including the clear **development** over time of our human understanding of the divine nature. This insight sits uneasily with the notion of proof texts.

This dynamic and developmental approach informs our understandings of the activity of the **Holy Spirit** in the world and of the continuing **revelation** of God by God.

We see the incarnation of God in **Jesus** as the climax of the revelation of the Creator active through creation, interpreted by the Spirit. The transformative energies of love fully emerge and promise to change radically our subjection to temporal powers; our addiction to happiness and pleasure; our attitudes to suffering, to death and loss. As we meet the powers of this world and 'spiritual wickedness in high places', the graceful gifts of faith and hope can turn us towards the waiting and welcoming energies of the **Holy Spirit**, to lead us towards change and growth in love and truth.

Our perception that the **love** of God for us and for the world flows from **Trinitarian** intimacy translates out into our understanding that a healthy love of self always underlies our capacity for intimate relationships. Current theories of the Self and personhood address the paradox that the development of any individual comes about through successfully relating to other people and to external realities in general: hence the importance of challenging the contemporary tendency to privatise spirituality, an observable corollary to the enterprise culture. We would want to emphasise the communal aspect of our theology, i.e. rooted in membership of a **community of faith**, and by stressing the importance of public and social acceptance and support for visible and committed relationships.

We believe that our sexual relationships should reflect the **covenantal** nature of God's graceful relationship with humanity, brought to fulfillment in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. **Faithfulness** and **promise** are key features of the biblical portrayal of covenantal relationships, whether human or divine, and underlie the establishment of trust in the normal development of children. Likewise in our sexual relationships we agree it is likely that an approximation to the ideal of an exclusive lifetime commitment will yield the optimum for mutual flourishing and fulfillment. Yet the New Covenant seems to hold out God's promises beyond the boundaries of the Old Covenant and we want to remain open to further interpretation of what 'faithfulness' might embrace and the implications for human sexuality.

So the **Trinity** expresses for us our experience of the relational nature of the whole of creation, interactive and desirous of intimacy both inwardly and outwardly. We recognise **God** in all the restorative impulses and initiatives suffusing a world also torn with the opposite forces of division and destruction.

In reflecting further on God in relation to good and evil, we agree that **religious truth** can embrace conflicting and even contradictory beliefs. The majority of us adhere in some sense to the doctrine of **the Fall** as the consequence of God-given human freedom to make moral choices: and we hold to the saving and redemptive power of the **incarnation** and all the **Cross** represents. So on balance we remain with the Western tradition of God identified with life and goodness, and opposed to death and evil, but we recognise that ultimately the divine may transcend or comprehend the apparent opposition we now perceive.

This actively relational view of God extends into **creation and the human condition**. We are created as creative beings, in the image of God. **Sexuality** is integral to the holistic nature of creation: while we recognise its potential for both growth and destruction, we resist a dualistic interpretation. Women's theology has helped us to recognise we love through our flesh, and sexual love can mirror divine playfulness as well as the serious business of procreation.

LGBT sexualities are part of the prodigal range of potential and variety in God's creation.

This inclusive approach to current manifestations of new patterns of intimacy and visible sexual lifestyles in the West implies a belief in the continuing revelation of sexual truths by the Holy Spirit. This is our **eschatological** connection, via our recognition of the provisional nature and developing forms of human sexuality until all is gathered up at the **Parousia**.

We consider that the evident difficulty of the religious 'right' (both catholic and protestant) in accepting that LGBT sexualities are God-given must be

to remain faithful to our covenantal relationship with God through the Spirit (which, as the gospels warn, may challenge conventional family obligations) Thus while it is clear to us as LGBTs when we survey the gay scene, and indeed much of contemporary social life, that casual sex can often be addictive and destructive, we think it is important to remain open to the possibility that brief and loving sexual engagement between mature adults in special circumstances can be occasions of grace. Risky, but then as Paul Tillich said 'A Christian is safest taking risks!'

The exploration of our sexual selves can be something which benefits from involvement with more than one person. Sexual involvement does not necessarily involve any greater psychic risk to a person than does emotional involvement (though the two are deeply intertwined). We recognise that people fall in love, become involved, get hurt, experience love not reciprocated or mutuality achieved. All this is an inevitable and appropriate part of the process of finding a life partner; becoming sexually involved can be part of the process and may well cause less damage and pain than the emotional dimension. It may seem that there is an irreconcilable clash between the ethical ideal of love and the realities of our sexual lives. But maybe our human struggles to live with integrity, embracing these tensions, come closer to a greater Christian reality? One of us put it thus - "What's real is the relationship between idealistic aspiration and so-called 'real life'."

We consider the public dimension of committed relationships to be extremely important.

Christian communities have always emphasised the communal aspect of marriage and regarded all other sexual liaisons as irregular. This approach has provided powerful social support for the institution of marriage. Increasingly in post-modern culture, couple relationships, particularly same-sex but heterosexual unions also, tend to be experienced as private commitments. Faced with the indifference of a largely urbanised society, a couple may come to feel that their relationship is a matter of significance only to themselves. Relationships often have little or no social support; they depend almost entirely on the two people involved and can therefore become increasingly precarious.

What needs to be encouraged (but how on earth do we do it?) is communities of relationships with a shared concern for discernment of the christian way in sexual relationships of whatever orientation. The current gay scene is certainly not that. Often christian LGTBs, caught between at best ambivalent reactions from their churches and disenchanting with the commercial scene, will opt for discreet lifestyles and keep their relationships as invisible as possible and publicly undeclared. This sort of reaction, with all its accompanying stress, is particularly common amongst LGBT clergy employed by the church. Here surely there is a clear need for all LGBT christians and our supporters to determine what the Spirit is calling us to do to further the coming of the Kingdom in this respect.

counter the ethical value of personal growth and creativity, the commitment to risk change in allowing one's personal identity to expand and develop. This can lead to relational failure or conflict, where one partner grows beyond the capacity of the relationship to sustain further intimacy and growth.

Infidelity at this point may wound the partner: it can be destructive of trust and relationships - not just between the two partners, but in social networks and wider society: it can cause emotional and psychic damage to the person themselves.

Yet to leave a failing relationship can be a creative move towards allowing oneself to discover in another relationship new experiences and a new phase of growth.

James Nelson's ideas on sexual ethics in Embodiment are definite and idealistic:-

"The physical expression of one's sexuality with another person ought to be appropriate to the level of loving commitment present in that relationship. Our relationships exist on a continuum - from the fleeting and casual to the lasting and intense, from the relatively impersonal to the deeply personal.

Genital sexual expression should be evaluated in regard to motivations, intentions, the nature of the act itself, and the consequences of the act, each of these informed and shaped by love.

Each genital act should be motivated by love, for one's partner and for oneself.

Each genital act should aim at human fulfilment and wholeness. The intent should be the engagement of the whole person - body, mind and feelings.

The concern for fulfilment-in-communion involves such intentions as sustaining, healing and growth through our genital expression. The intention to sustain the partner involves emotional security and sensitive, empathetic communication, and these imply continuity in relationship."

There is often an implicit assumption in using the words 'faithfulness' and 'commitment' in this discussion that we are always talking about sexual relationships persisting over a long period of time. And of course time provides the vital conditions for development, change and growth. To be committed is to take things seriously. It is to say 'Tomorrow I will be here as well as today, which means that we have time. Time for facing up to the reality of each other. I am not going to run away (from you or myself).' However, the biblical theme is primarily about the overwhelming demand

more to do with historical attitudes in our cultural traditions and with individual and social prejudice than with discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit in our times. Fundamentalist adherence to selective and literalist interpretations of scriptural texts about sexual behaviour seem to stem from fear of what might follow if the validity of sexual relationships outside marriage was accepted by the churches; a major consequence might be the final collapse of any rationale for insisting that the letter of scripture can be used like a rule book.

Our theological outline in the last section embraces a broadly developmental understanding of the nature of the christian life through the centuries. Right from earliest times as chronicled in the book of Acts through to current debates in modern Synods and Conferences, christians have adapted the churches' precepts and guidance to changing conditions in the belief that prayerful interpretation of the tradition is needed in every age. This suggests an approach to ethics that is visional in the sense of aiming to be conducive to aspiration, hope and development in the field of sexual and intimate relating rather than seeking to impose a rigid system of rules of behaviour. This approach to relational ethics is probably valid generally for everyone, not just LGBTs; and the recovery of provisional (eschatological) thinking in sexual ethics may be part of our contribution to the church. As Walter Wink points out, the only consistent scriptural ethic is the ethic of love as interpreted in different times and situations through narrative, prophecy and teaching.

Ethical systems always develop to meet the needs of societies or communities. Often they reflect the interests of the majority over the interests of individuals or minority groupings. In our case we are talking mainly about christian communities existing in the context of more secularised wider societies. Although the christian ethic of love specifically encourages outreach to the marginalised and oppressed, in the case of LGBT genital sex there is a prevailing attitude in the churches that judges it to fall outside what is acceptable in christian communities. Interestingly, right across the span of the traditions we represent, there seems to be substantial agreement that emotion and prejudice are playing quite as strong a part as reason. For instance, many would still think of LGBT sexual relationships as 'disgusting'. To find something disgusting may indeed be an indication of the presence of moral disorder. Precisely whose disorder is another matter!

It is tempting to propose a separate LGBT sexual ethic in reaction to our rejection by the church, but we think this would only reinforce divisive policies. We have therefore attempted to formulate an approach that can apply to the whole range of human sexual and intimate relating rather than something specific only to LGBTs. Maybe we can help to catalyse in our church a wider welcome of difference, variety and disagreement within christian communities.

Possible Ethical Frameworks

1 Scriptural and thematic

It follows from our view of the relational nature of the Godhead that we think the role of ethics, including sexual ethics, is to help us to remain in a positive relationship with God. All societies develop some forms of commu-

nal normative guidelines for intimate and sexual relationships. In Judaeo-Christian traditions and cultures there is an acute problem for LGBTs because the normative guidelines exclude our sexualities from what is perceived as natural and God-given. More broadly, traditional doctrine in this area seeks to confine genital sex to marriage.

In wanting to integrate LGBT sexualities into a general ethical framework we considered the feasibility of casting what we say to reflect the church's teaching on marriage. While there is a clear tactical advantage in such an approach within church communities, wider society is already adapting the institution of marriage and exploring other ways to formalise degrees of commitment between couples in a more or less public way. Moreover there is considerable controversy as to whether marriage will ever be able to shake off its patriarchal origins. (We believe this factor well may play a part in attracting some married women into lesbian liaisons.) What follows recognises the validity of many of the criteria and principles associated with successful marriages but goes behind that particular institution to discover what christians might regard as the essential characteristics of all sexual and intimate relationships.

Acknowledging that the issue of the nature of biblical authority is critical in this discussion, we agreed with one evangelical consultant in wanting to be able to talk about sexual ethics in terms of biblical themes and values rather than focussing on the interpretation of texts. A good starting point given our appreciation of the communal basis of ethics is the scriptural representation of God's relationship with Israel as covenantal. Faithfulness, commitment, mutuality, self-giving, healing, sustenance and growth characterise covenantal relationships whether with God or with each other; as christians we may also wish to emphasise the role of forgiveness and the potential for transformative experience within covenantal relationships.

Translating this thinking into the sexual sphere, the ideal outcome may be for mature adults to live in covenantal relationships that are stable, sexually exclusive/monogamous and permanent. This ideal is in tension with our common inheritance of genetic predispositions and developmental damage that compromise our capacity for relating, and often make serial commitments, and serial faithfulness, a more realistic aspiration.

Even harder to cater for and to evaluate is the degree to which any committed relationship may actually inhibit one or both partners from realising their full potential in some respects. To this scenario we must add consideration of children's need for consistent nurturing, and responsibility for other vulnerable members of family networks.

It seems to be axiomatic that from the individual's point of view respect for the communal norms of sexual behaviour will always be in tension not only with the realities of the human condition, but also with the radical gospel challenge to remain open to a possible call to 'forsake all' to follow the Way. The role of the individual conscience comes to the fore. Here we en-