

# **Report of the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church**

## **Mind of the House Resolution**

Adopted by the House of Bishops on March 18, 2003 meeting at Kanuga in North Carolina

### **THE GIFT OF SEXUALITY: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

#### 1. Preface

[1.0] The House of Bishops, meeting in the 73rd General Convention of the Episcopal Church, resolved to continue to study and be in conversation about issues of human sexuality. The resolution called for the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops, in consultation with the Pastoral Development Committee, to prepare a report on the matter, in the hope that a Mind of the House resolution will result.

[1.1] The following paper is the product of an eighteen-month study undertaken by the Theology Committee. The House of Bishops Theology Committee consists of six bishops and seven academic theologians of the Episcopal Church who represent diverse theological viewpoints. The Committee has not attempted to consider exhaustively all the issues related to the subject of human sexuality, but has focused primarily on those brought before the 73rd General Convention. The scope of this paper, therefore, has not included consideration of bisexual and transgendered persons or the broader range of heterosexuality. It has been our special concern to encourage the Church to think about how disagreement over issues of human sexuality may become open to God's grace.

[1.2] In our choice of language and approach we have attempted to respect the dignity of all persons whose lives and faith are affected by the complex subject of human sexuality. We have been sensitive to the cross-cultural issues of the Anglican Communion of which we are an integral part. For instance, we have consciously chosen to speak of "homosexual persons" rather than the self-appellation of "gay men and lesbians" as widely used in the United States of America. We have met in the context of corporate worship and prayer and have held our questions before God for guidance. We have sought wisdom from Scripture, reason, and tradition. We have been sustained by our mutual faith in Jesus Christ and our commitment to God's mission of reconciliation in the Church and the world.

[1.3] We offer this work to the House of Bishops and the Church, to the glory of God and in faith that, as our Lord promised, the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Church into all truth (John 16:13).

#### 2. Introduction

[2.0] The Episcopal Church in the United States, the worldwide Anglican Communion, and many other Christian Churches and other faith traditions, are engaged in a debate over issues surrounding human sexuality. Our age has experienced new challenges in the understanding of the meaning of sexuality and its ordering for the good of persons and society. Scientific research into the complexities of human sexual behavior and technologies such as birth control and in vitro fertilization are changing how many in our world view human sexuality. We believe sexuality is one of God's wonderful, complex, confusing, and, sometimes, dangerous gifts. At the same time, we have been made freshly aware of how sexuality can be cheapened and exploited in human society and made an occasion of sin, hurt, and disorder, rather than the blessing God intends it to be.

[2.1] One of the more challenging areas of human sexuality in our Church is homosexuality. A certain percentage of human beings experience and understand themselves to be homosexually oriented. Homosexual persons are increasingly visible in our society, our churches, and our communities, bringing particular challenges and gifts to Christian ethical and theological understanding.

[2.2] The Christian community, from generation to generation, must address the new spiritual and moral concerns that emerge in the experience and understanding of God's people. The right ordering of human sexual behavior has always been an aspect of the Jewish and Christian visions of the good for human life and society. In relation to new and emerging learning about the experience of homosexually-oriented persons, our Church especially struggles with two related questions: (1) Is it ever appropriate to pronounce the Church's blessing on same-gender relationships as we do on heterosexual marriages and, if so, under what conditions? (2) Is it ever appropriate to ordain non-celibate homosexual persons, and thereby commend them as "wholesome examples" to the Church and society, and, if so, under what conditions?

### 3. The Theological Context

[3.0] Before addressing issues of homosexuality directly, it is important to reiterate the context within which this debate is taking place, namely that of Christian theology. Christian theology seeks to discern and articulate the grace and truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ and to guide the Church in mission. God, whom we know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has lovingly created the world and all that is therein. Human beings are graciously created in the divine image (Gen. 1:26a), but we have fallen into sin and fail to live into the fullness of this gift and calling. In his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, has restored us to unity with God and each other and calls us to become agents of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18). Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are called to grow into, rejoice in, and herald God's grace for all creation.

[3.1] We believe the Old and New Testaments are the revealed Word of God and contain all things necessary to salvation. We further believe that the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds are enduring statements of the essentials of the Christian faith and express our basic beliefs about God and God's saving work. The truth of the Creeds is further expressed in the teaching, ascetical discipline, and ordering of the Church in its pastoral ministry. The

Creeds and the great Ecumenical Councils of the Church thus help us to interpret and live into the saving story of Scripture. They shape the inherited faith of the Church in which we stand as Anglicans.

[3.2] In baptism all Christians are born anew by water and the Spirit (John 3:5), incorporated into the Body of Christ, and made part of the Church's disciplined communal life of worship and witness. Theology is the way in which we speak of the mystery of God and express the faith of the Church. Theology is both derived from and informs our common life in prayer and sacrament. As we pray so we believe, and as we believe so we pray.

[3.3] As Christians, we seek to hold all our thoughts before God for guidance and blessing. We know this is especially important in times of intense disagreement. We pray for God's wisdom, for the continual conversion and illumination of our minds and hearts. St. Paul teaches that the wisdom of God is the great reversal of strength and weakness, as the world understands these (1 Cor. 1:27-30). Political, military, economic, and social power often bespeak spiritual weakness. God's wisdom and strength is displayed in the humility of the Incarnation and cross. The cross unites enemies (Eph. 2:15-16) and reconciles those who are separated and divided by difference. Enmity and division ill befit the Church, and weaken its ministry and service to God's mission.

[3.4] With Christ, the wisdom and the power of God (1 Cor. 1:24), we humble ourselves to one another as evidence of God's reign in which we participate by virtue of our baptism. Therefore, we commit ourselves to hold up our deliberations, especially our most painful areas of disagreement, to the wisdom of the cross and to the loving mutual scrutiny and testing of the spirits (1 John 4:1) to which Christ crucified and risen calls us as members of his Body.

#### 4. The Complex Gift of Human Sexuality

[4.0] Sexuality is a fundamental and complex aspect of human nature, which we both use and abuse. As Christians we believe it is part of God's good creation and intended to be a source of blessing and joy for human beings. We also believe sexual desire and behavior can be an occasion of sin leading to personal unhappiness and social disorder.

[4.1] The links between love and sexual pleasure testify to the way in which sexuality blesses human intimacy. Sexual intimacy has a public and social dimension as well. When healthy and well-ordered, our sexuality and sexual expressions contribute to the health and stability of individuals and society. Levels of sexuality and intimacy are factors in all human relationships and receive a range of expressions along a spectrum of relationships, from friendship to family in its various configurations. Within the context of marriage healthy sexual intimacy supports the couple and the possibility of children and their care and nurture.

[4.2] Yet this great and mysterious gift is often the cause of pain to individuals and suffering throughout society. Human beings are most vulnerable in sexually intimate

relationships. Our sexual lives can be very fragile and complex. When disordered, sexual behavior can destabilize human society and become a means of exploitation and damage. The staggering divorce rate in the United States, the proliferation of serial marriages, and the increase of promiscuity, especially among the young, attest to the varied struggles many experience around sexuality.

[4.3] Why did God give humankind this wonderful and often overwhelming gift? If we thought it was solely as an aid to intimacy and pleasure, we might come to a particular set of conclusions. Alternatively, if we believed it was solely designed as a means of procreation, our conclusions might be of quite a different character. Our conviction is that God's gift of human sexuality embraces all of these goods, which are perfected in a yet higher reality, namely, making present in creaturely life a self-sharing and mutual fidelity that images the divine life and nurtures and protects both partners involved and the well-being of the social order.

[4.4] Holy Scripture teaches that God gave sex as one of the means for married persons to share themselves with each other (1 Cor. 7:3-5); for procreation (Gen. 1:28); and to be an icon, on the human level, of the relationships between God and the people of Israel, and Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:25-33).

[4.5] We also recognize there is a range of sexual identities among human beings, and a portion of the population experiences itself as having a homosexual orientation. As Christians, we affirm that persons of all sexual orientations are created in the image of God, and they are full members of the human family. The Church vigorously denounces discrimination and violence based on sexual orientation, and we call upon all members of our society, and especially members of the body of Christ, to honor their baptismal vow to respect the full humanity and dignity of every human being (BCP 305).

[4.6] If we have correctly discerned God's purpose in giving us the gift of human sexuality, and if there are those both within and outside of the Church who experience themselves as exclusively homosexual in their sexual orientation, difficult questions inevitably arise as to what patterns of sexual intimacy are most congruent with the holiness of God's self-giving life. In particular, many are asking, with attendant pastoral concern, whether some forms of homosexual activity might be open to God's blessing in ways the Church has not previously recognized. Does the Church remain persuaded that all expressions of homosexual intimacy are sinful, or are there conditions under which we might be able to recognize that intimacy as a source of God's blessing, just as is true in some, though not all, expressions of heterosexual intimacy?

[4.7] If some, though not all, expressions of homosexual intimacy might be open to the blessing of God, might they also be open to the blessing of the Church? If so, which ones? Under what conditions? Would the Church's blessing be considered in any sense a marital blessing? Parallel or analogous to marriage? Or something else? And if something else, what?

[4.8] If some, though not all, expressions of homosexual intimacy might be open to the blessing of God, and the blessing of the Church, is it thus appropriate for the Church to ordain as "wholesome examples" certain non-celibate homosexual persons? Again we would have to ask: which ones? And under what conditions?

[4.9] These questions are controversial in part because they challenge the Church's traditional understanding of human sexuality which can be summarized as follows: Holy Scripture nowhere condones homosexual practice; in fact, a few passages of Hebrew Scripture and of letters of Paul explicitly proscribe homosexual acts; marriage is defined as the joining together of a man and a woman; marriage is the only appropriate setting for genital sexual intimacy; the norm for singleness, as for marriage, is chastity; but in the case of singleness that norm means abstinence.

## 5. Disagreement and Division

[5.0] The Episcopal Church, and the larger Anglican Communion, belongs to the tradition of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, and we are thereby bound by the decisions of the first Four Ecumenical Councils. These decided the Trinitarian identity of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Creator of heaven and earth; and the full humanity and full divinity of Christ. These two great doctrines anchor the Church in orthodoxy. As Anglicans we further believe Christian unity is grounded in the principles of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral (BCP 876-878). It is our conviction that only those issues that undermine these foundational doctrines and commitments should constitute grounds for separation within the Church.

[5.1] We are aware, of course, that many other matters over the long course of Church history have in fact divided the Body of Christ. In many cases institutional arrogance, corruption, or timidity have underlain Church fracture. Other instances of Church division have been highly principled, including some over doctrinal issues that were never universally or even generally agreed upon at any council or public synod. Often such divisions are framed as a necessary pursuit of holiness.

[5.2] Nevertheless, authentic fidelity to Christ cannot posit the Church's unity and holiness over against one another, for they are integrally related marks of Christ's Body and only flourish as they are held together. It is a serious question whether the unity and catholicity of Christ's Body can ever rightly be held over against its holiness or apostolicity and vice versa. In other words, the holiness of the Church cannot be received from God and exercised apart from the continual conversion to Christ that the unity of the Church calls forth from us all. Apart from an abiding commitment to remain with one another in Christ, the desired holiness of one position or another may tend to fall into exclusivity and self-righteousness. Conversely, apart from a faithful desire to seek the holiness and moral goodness of Christ's Body, an intention to uphold the unity of the Church may lapse into unrooted toleration.

[5.3] We believe that disunity over issues of human sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, needs to be taken seriously by all members of the Church.

And diverse opinion needs to be respected. But we do not believe these should be Church-dividing issues.

[5.4] There are those among us who believe that Scripture and/or the order of nature render all homosexual behavior intrinsically sinful, and therefore the normalization of any homosexual intimacy in liturgical and sacramental practice would so radically depart from the Church's historic teaching and practice that it would cut to the very integrity of the biblical historic Faith. Even though homosexuality has never been the subject of an ecumenical council or the cause of Church division, normalizing any homosexual behavior, and thus, arguably, changing the Church's understanding and teaching regarding marriage and sexual propriety, would be considered by some due cause for delegitimizing such a Church.

[5.5] There are others among us who believe that statements of Jesus and admonitions of Paul which call all within Christian community to lives of mutual upbuilding and fidelity open the door to reevaluating at least committed homosexual relationships. For some, the refusal to normalize those homosexual relationships that are intended to be "life-long committed relationships. . . characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication and the holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God" (Resolution D039, from the 73rd General Convention) is the perpetuation of discrimination, prejudice, and injustice.

[5.6] Many Christians believe homosexual relationships as described in 5.5 to be holy and to indicate God's blessing on their unions. The Church's unwillingness to bless such unions or to accept individuals in such unions as appropriate candidates for ordination is seen as an oppressive betrayal of Christ's love and the denial of the unfolding of the Holy Spirit.

[5.7] The challenge we now face is how to maintain the unity of the Church in the face of such intense disagreement. Despite the common Faith that makes us one, we confess that on the issues surrounding human sexuality just now, we are of different minds. The depth and complexity of human sexuality are reflected in the multiple understandings and interpretations held by thoughtful people. There are at least three major perspectives: (1) Homosexuality is constitutional, i.e., an unchangeable given. Some believe this form of sexuality is a gift of God and therefore good in and of itself. As a gift of God, homosexuality is to be accepted and affirmed by those of this sexuality and those who support them. Others argue that even if a given, homosexual behavior is nonetheless an offense against nature and may be contrary to the will of God. (2) Homosexuality is a psychological reality that might be changed through therapy. (3) Homosexuality is a social construct of gender identification and therefore malleable.

[5.8] Regardless of the origin of homosexuality, there are at least two contrary positions regarding homosexual intimacy: (1) Homosexual genital expression is always sinful and is not acceptable within the Christian ethic. (2) Some homosexual genital expression is legitimate and Christians should lend pastoral support for such relationships. Neither the complexities nor the issues end here.

[5.9] Some understand the conflict sparked around homosexuality to be a matter of justice calling for redress of grievances and violence suffered by homosexual persons at the hands of both Church and society. Others see it as a pastoral issue, calling for compassion. Some believe that the intent of long-term faithful relationships among homosexual persons should be adequate grounds for normalizing them. For others intent does not address the issue. In a world in which all things have been corrupted by sin, neither our affections nor our intentions alone can be dispositive. Some see questions about homosexuality linked to questions about heterosexuality, while others object vigorously to making such connections. Some believe there is in homosexuality an inherent disposition to promiscuity, which undermines any argument that such unions should be blessed. Others are offended at this suggestion, and point to the high rate of heterosexual promiscuity in reply. Still others feel the Church is paralyzed by debates about this issue which distract us from pressing needs for attention to mission. Others would say this is an integral part of our mission.

[5.10] To overcome the painful disagreement present among us over these matters, some believe compromise is necessary to preserve the unity and peace of the Church, while others believe that compromise with the truth as they understand it is not possible.

## 6. Questions about Same-Sex Blessings

[6.0] The question before the Church is whether some homosexual relationships are, like some heterosexual relationships, open to the blessing of God through the Church, or are they always inherently sinful? And for those who believe that at least certain homosexual practices are sinful, the question must be raised, "how sinful"?

[6.1] We have insisted there are no doctrinal grounds for inhospitality to homosexual persons as members of the Church. What, then are the grounds for refusing to bless the relationships of homosexual couples who are prepared to commit themselves to the same standards and vows as do heterosexual couples?

[6.2] The Episcopal Church is committed "to support" those whose relationships of sexual intimacy are other than those of marriage. As noted above, it calls all such persons, whether heterosexual or homosexual, to standards of life-long commitment, "characterized by fidelity, monogamy, mutual affection and respect, careful, honest communication" and the kind of "holy love which enables those in such relationships to see in each other the image of God" (Resolution D039, from the 73rd General Convention). The question remains, does extending this support include pronouncing the Church's blessing on such relationships?

[6.3] Those who argue for the Church's blessing see it as an ecclesiastical support for the difficult task of sustaining long-term faithful unions. They contend that the Church need not choose between supporting heterosexual marriage and supporting the concerns of homosexual relationships. Just as the Church's blessing on Christian marriage is for the sake of the common good as well as for the psychological, physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being of the partners, so the Church's blessing on relationships of

homosexual couples may be argued on grounds that have little to do with homosexuality per se.

[6.4] Those who argue against the Church's blessing believe it is a contradiction in terms to bless relationships that involve behavior proscribed by God. More broadly, they object that changes in the Church's moral teaching on this question will impair the larger witness and mission of the Church.

[6.5] Liturgy provides cohesion for the Anglican Communion, and it is through our liturgies that we define what we most deeply believe as Christians. Because at this time we are nowhere near consensus in the Church regarding the blessing of homosexual relationships, we cannot recommend authorizing the development of new rites for such blessings.

[6.6] For these reasons, we urge the greatest caution as the Church continues to seek the mind of Christ in these matters. This will require a diligent and perhaps painful willingness on the part of the Church to engage in focused conversation among all of us, and an openness to the guidance and movement of the Holy Spirit. We urge the Church to cherish all members of the Body of Christ without fail, and to seek always for the fullness and diversity of that unity we are called to in Christ (Rom. 12:4-8).

[6.7] We call upon the Church to develop and provide pastoral support and spiritual guidance and specifically to provide prayers as we wrestle and discern the will of God with regard to human sexuality and its various expressions.

## 7. Questions about Ordination

[7.0] There is a subset of questions that needs further exploration. Chief among them is whether unmarried, non-celibate persons, heterosexual or homosexual, should be ordained. In our polity, ordination is at the discretion of the bishop as overseer in the community of faith with the advice and consent of the Standing Committee. Sexual discipline and holiness of life must be a very serious consideration for bishops, Standing Committees, and Commissions on Ministry as they discern what constitutes a "wholesome example to all people" (BCP 544).

[7.1] We affirm the responsibility of Dioceses to discern and raise up fit persons for the ministry of word and sacrament to build up the body of Christ in that place. We call on bishops and Standing Committees to be respectful of the ways in which decisions made in one Diocese have ramifications on others. We remind all that ordination is for the whole Church.

## 8. Living in Disagreement

[8.0] Our present conclusion is that equally sincere Christians, equally committed to an orthodox understanding of the Faith we share, equally looking to Scripture for guidance on this issue, are deeply divided regarding questions with respect to homosexuality. It

will be crucial for all parties in this debate to ask God's blessing on their ever-deepening conversion in Christ, and to pray for God's love and forgiveness to be granted to all. Faithfulness and the courage to offer love and acceptance to those with whom we disagree is the great need of the moment.

[8.1] For these reasons, we believe it is imperative that the Episcopal Church refrain from any attempt to "settle" the matter legislatively. For a season at least, we must acknowledge and live with the great pain and discomfort of our disagreements. The act of trusting those with whom we disagree intensely bears witness to the reconciling power of God, which is always beyond our imagining. Sensitive restraint and mutual forbearance is needed rather than a vote that might "win" the argument for some and leave others seemingly rejected. "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness" (James 1:19-20).

[8.2] At the Lambeth Conference in 1998, the bishops of the Anglican Communion addressed questions of human sexuality. Although overshadowed by a controversial Resolution on Homosexuality, the report, *Human Sexuality*, was well crafted, and we believe it remains relevant to the present discussion. We share the principal conclusions of the report: Clearly some expressions of sexuality are inherently contrary to the Christian way and are sinful. Such unacceptable expressions of sexuality include promiscuity, prostitution, incest, pornography, pedophilia, predatory sexual behavior, and sadomasochism (all of which may be heterosexual and homosexual), adultery, violence against women and in families, rape and female circumcision. From a Christian perspective these forms of sexual expression remain sinful in any context. We are particularly concerned about the pressures on young people to engage in sexual activity at an early age, and we urge our churches to teach the virtue of abstinence. All human relationships need the transforming power of Christ which is available to all, and particularly when we fall short of biblical norms. We must confess that we are not of one mind about homosexuality. Our variety of understanding encompasses:

i) Those who believe homosexual orientation is a disorder, but that through the grace of Christ people can be changed, although not without pain and struggle.

ii) Those who believe that relationships between people of the same gender should not include genital expression, that this is the clear teaching of the Bible and of the Church universal, and that such activity (if unrepented of) is a barrier to the Kingdom of God.

iii) Those who believe that committed homosexual relationships fall short of the biblical norm, but are to be preferred to relationships that are anonymous and transient.

iv) Those who believe that the Church should accept and support or bless monogamous covenant relationships between homosexual people and that they may be ordained. prayed, studied and discussed these issues, and we are unable to reach a common mind on the scriptural, theological, historical, and scientific questions that are raised. There is much that we do not understand. (Called to Full Humanity, Section 1 Report, pages, 16, 17)

[8.3] We encourage the continuing examination of God's gift of human sexuality. We urge Church leaders everywhere, both within our own household of faith and in other denominations, to join us in seeking the mind of Christ and the wisdom of God. But the responsibility for doing so is not reserved to theologians and ecclesiastical leaders alone. All those who bear the name of Christ share such responsibility. We believe that by patience, prayer, and continuing study, with forbearance and charity for all, God will guide the Church through this season of conflict to a place of reconciliation and peace for all. Let us support each other in love and prayer. Guide us, O God, in our continuing consideration of human sexuality to be responsive to and respectful of all persons, their ideas and experience. Convert and empower us to listen penitently and, with humility, to speak honestly with one another. Set our disagreements within the mutual knowledge and love which we experience in you as Holy Trinity. Whenever we experience fear, anger, or mistrust with one another, give us new hope and consolation in your never-failing love for your children. In all things, let us submit our ideas to your thoughts, our desires to your will, and our actions to your purpose. In our diversity as members of the Body of Christ, help us find our way, through Jesus Christ, Our Redeemer.

*Amen.*

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