

Is the Church Listening?

The Anglican Communion and Homosexuality. A resource to enable listening and dialogue

Editor Phil Groves, June 2008, SPCK, London, pp xiii plus 322.

This edited volume has been published just in time for the 2008 Lambeth Conference, its stated purpose to “listen to the experience of homosexual persons”. The Anglican Communion’s listening exercise began at the last Lambeth Conference in 1998 and will inform its decisions on homosexuality in the laity and clergy alike.

As the editor himself notes, this book is a curious hotchpotch of chapters on scriptural interpretation, the role of religious tradition, how to listen and conduct a dialogue, the cultural dimension, the voices of gay and lesbian people and finally what is referred to as the witness of science. It is densely written and a challenge for anyone trying to get to grips with the Anglican Communion’s approach to listening. A large part of the book is devoted to scriptural interpretation and the place of tradition, little of which is particularly new. Although the obviously sexual elements of scripture, such as the Song of Solomon, are discussed, generally the conclusions are banal. Most of the contributors shrink from accepting the fully erotic nature of many of these texts and are fairly unequivocal that homosexuality, or least same-sex behaviour, is not accepted by scripture. In classical heterosexist fashion, they make little of the suggestions that (just possibly) the intimate friendships between figures such as David and Jonathon or Ruth and Naomi might have contained a sexual element. The default assumption is heterosexual unless declared otherwise. We are told that although gay and lesbian people are “welcomed” by the Church, they are not “affirmed” in the sense that their partnerships might be valued. The choice offered is to be in the church and live by the rules of the Church. This means no possibility of same sex relationships. Concern is even expressed that “current political pressures” (read here gay lobby) will mean that gay and lesbian people will be denied their “human right” to seek therapy for their “unwanted same-sex attraction”. If God loves homosexuals, it seems that clues to his love won’t be found in scripture. In contrast, God seems to love polygamists. Polygamy, we are told, was part of the tradition of ancient Israel and no Old Testament passage actually proscribes it. Polygamy in modern Kenya is even regarded benignly as arising from the “great strains on the practice of monogamy” in that society. Strains for men I presume. One is left with the distinct feeling that anything heterosexual, although not entirely welcome, is not entirely banned either. The stress is on *heterosexual*. Opposite sex in - same sex out. A recipe for exclusion.

Trailing at the end is the “witness of science” on the biological basis of sexuality. As scientists, we might welcome such an approach but before the Church changed its mind on slavery or women priests did it debate the biological basis for race and gender? I suspect not. It appears here because of homosexuality’s persisting image as a deviation from nature’s heterosexual plan. But never mind. Just what have these chapters to tell us? The first by David de Pomerai and Glyn Harrison is a reasonable enough summary of what neuroscience and genetics can tell us about homosexuality and is fair to the literature. The second by Glyn Harrison is of much lower quality. Here we have an academic psychiatrist bending over backwards to suggest, on the basis of the weakest sort of evidence, that sexual orientation can be changed. I suspect if he were reviewing evidence of similar quality for the efficacy of a new medication he would dismiss it out of hand. And so unsurprisingly, he finds what he sets out to find - namely that given enough willingness there are treatments out there to make homosexual people into heterosexuals, or at the very least stop them wanting sex.

But not all is valueless. Hidden away in all this dross are two chapters of gold (6 & 7) that make it worth taking a second look. They are crucial contributions because they are the only sections to contain the narratives of gay and lesbian people, Christian and non-Christian alike. These accounts resonate with the pain and struggle that lesbian and gay people have always experienced at the hands of the Church and wider society and the ways in which they have prevailed over them. If the whole book were dedicated to such stories then the Church might hear what it so badly needs to hear; the views and experiences of gays and lesbians and their families and friends - their stories, their faiths. Those bishops who are here at Lambeth this July need to read and ponder these accounts. They can safely disregard the rest.

Michael King, Professor of Primary Care Psychiatry,

Department of Mental Health Sciences, University College London Medical School