

The Bible and Homosexuality

What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?

Bishop David Russell

■■■ HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG



4th Printing 2011

Funded by Heinrich Böll Stiftung

Published and distributed by Inclusive and Affirming Ministries

6 Silwerkruin Van Breda Street Durbanville Cape Town 7550

www.iam.org.za

Contents

Foreword	2
Preface	4
I. The Question	6
II. The Scriptures	7
1 Turning to the Bible	
2 Interpreting the Scriptures – how and who?	
3 Changing interpretations on major issues	
4 Problems with biblical literalism	
5 The misuse of Scripture	
6 Interpreting the Scriptures in the Anglican tradition	
7 The Spirit and the dynamic between Scripture and life	
III. Homosexuality	19
1 Human sexuality – changing understandings	
2 God’s gift of sexuality for loving relationships	
3 Returning to the Question: why should the Church not be accepting of faithful same-sex partnerships?	
a) Are the biblical texts decisive?	
b) Creation and Christian Anthropology	
c) Upholding the institution of marriage	
4 Concerns about a post-modern relativistic version of Christianity	
5 The inclusive Jesus does not condone sin	
6 Conservative Evangelicals respecting freedom of conscience	
7 Cultural perspectives and assumptions	
8 Inhuman treatment of homosexuals	
9 Affirming gays and lesbians as they are	
IV. The Church responding to new insights	34
1 Resolutions of the CPSA	
2 Other churches also grappling with change	
3 The way ahead	

Foreword

Historically, and still in these present times, Christian communities, broadly speaking, have been decidedly prejudiced in their attitudes towards people of same-sex orientation. As a consequence, their treatment of our sisters and brothers created in God's image, has been harsh and rejecting. The psychological damage that has been inflicted as a result has been devastating. The first step that we need to take corporately as churches (and individually) is to acknowledge this wrong. Thus when the question is asked (as in the sub-title of this booklet): *What is the Spirit saying to the churches?* on these issues dividing us, the beginning of the answer is to be found in the call of the Spirit of Jesus, to repentance for past wrongs. Only as we meet at the foot of the Cross, will we be given the *heart to hear* what the Spirit is saying, and so discover how we are to heal the divides.

The Christian community is being more than usually disturbed by significant cultural changes which challenge certain of our traditions and ways of thinking about human sexuality. However this is not an issue which will be *solved* by means of heavy-handed dogmatism. We are dealing here with a profound, mysterious, and intimate dimension of our humanity. Let us be gentle with each other, as with ourselves. We do not have all the answers to all the questions surrounding right or wrong expressions of God's gift of our sexuality.

Concerning how we are to give practical expression to this call to repentance, we should begin by examining ourselves, and helping people to face and acknowledge their prejudice, and to alter their attitudes. It is out of this focus that the important debate around

biblical exegesis and hermeneutics will evolve in God's way and time. The truth of the Scriptures leads us to Jesus. He is the Lord of the Church, and he will guide us.

I welcome what Bishop David has offered in this booklet. While there is a considerable literature on these issues, there is nevertheless a lack of material which is easily accessible and readable for our members. This booklet fills the gap admirably. It is well thought out, characteristically lucid and wonderfully eirenic. It will be a very useful resource for the Church.

– Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Preface

This little book is addressed in the first instance to fellow Anglicans, though of course the issues discussed affect all Christians, and in the end they concern everyone. We are all now aware of the deep divisions in the churches over questions of human sexuality. We were all brought up to believe that certain behaviour was clearly wrong. Yet in recent times, sincere Christians are raising challenging questions about some of our traditional understandings and teaching. Many of our members are shocked by this questioning. Others are confused and even angry.

In response to the serious divides, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev Rowan Williams, appointed a Commission to reflect on this situation and make recommendations. The Commission has published its findings in *The Windsor Report* (Oct 2004). Archbishop Rowan in thanking the Chair for the work done, observed that no “easy solutions” have been offered, but that what was made clear is that “the goal of any action must be healing and restoration.” He then concludes: “May God help us to listen afresh to each other as we think through what you have given us.”

What I am endeavouring to do in this simple and introductory way, is to help build a bridge of understanding. Since it would seem that the great majority of our members have grown up assuming that ‘homosexuality is wrong,’ there is a real need to reach out to *sisters and brothers of the majority*, and try and help them to understand how and why others in the Body of Christ think differently.

Jesus calls us to follow him in the way of goodness, truth and holiness. In seeking to follow Jesus along his way, we find life. But when

we turn from his way, and from the moral values of the Gospel, we harm ourselves and others. Sin corrodes the character; it is destructive of life. So what we need to examine, is how God intends us to use the gift of sexuality in ways which are good and life-giving, in contrast to ways which are destructive of life.

There are, I believe, questions which need to be faced about how we approach the Bible, and how we understand this gift of sexuality. Too many of our members have not yet really become aware of, let alone thought through, these questions. I believe that it is important for their (our) growth in the faith and truth of our Lord Jesus Christ, that we do in fact *become aware*, and *think through* the issues being debated in our day. I hope and pray that this little book will be of help to many in this process.

– *David Russell*

All Saints Day 1st November 2004

I

The Question

The debate that is raging in the Anglican Communion (let alone in other churches) around the issue of the morality of homosexual practice touches us all. Those Christians holding the traditional position (expressed by the majority of bishops at Lambeth in 1998), have been shocked by the movement to bless same-sex unions in Church. They regard this as contrary to a right understanding of the Scriptures, and against sound Christian theology and anthropology. There are other fellow Christians who equally sincerely believe that the Spirit is leading the Believing Community to apply the same Gospel values and ethical standards to both homosexuals and heterosexuals alike. This would include the way we express God's gift of sexuality, in the discipline of love.

So the crucial question is there before us: *What is the Spirit saying to the Churches concerning this difficult and emotive issue of homosexuality, and more specifically about committed and faithful same sex partnerships?*

However divided we may be about this issue, there is one thing we can agree on together: we truly want to be open to hear what the Spirit is saying to us, and to obey our Lord in this as in all matters of faith and life.

II

The Scriptures

1 Turning to the Bible

We begin by turning to the Holy Scriptures. We Anglicans are *Bible Christians* in very significant ways. Over 100 years ago, at the Lambeth Conference of 1888, the bishops of our Communion agreed to the *Lambeth Quadrilateral* – to four distinguishing marks of our Church, relating to the Bible, the Creeds, the Sacraments, and to Ministry. It was affirmed that the Bible is for us the “rule and ultimate standard of faith ... containing all things necessary for salvation.” And so it is that in the Service for the Ordination of Deacons and Priests, the candidates are asked: “Do you believe the holy Scriptures as uniquely revealing the word of God, and containing all things necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ?”

The Scriptures are the fundamental text of our faith. They tell the story of God’s plan for salvation in Jesus, revealing the basic moral values, and Gospel norms that we are to seek to live by in God’s grace. In our reading and meditation on Scripture we are given a way of encountering Jesus, being strengthened in faith, and finding guidance for our daily life.

2 Interpreting the Scriptures – how and who?

Our shared conviction and belief about the Bible, does not enable us to avoid the fact that the Bible needs to be interpreted, by the Church, by us, under the guidance of the Spirit. Remember Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch: the Spirit leads Philip to the

Ethiopian, and hears him reading from the Prophet Isaiah, and asks: “Do you understand what you are reading?” and he replies:

”How can I understand unless someone explains it to me?”(Acts 8).

For devotional purposes, we can and should read and pray with the Scriptures day by day. We can be touched and inspired without having to wait for a Philip to explain! Nor does our faithful morning bible meditation necessitate dependence on books of heavy biblical scholarship.

However, if we want to seek God’s guidance on which texts in Leviticus (for example) are morally binding for Christians today, we need the help of biblical scholarship. When studying and interpreting the Scriptures so as to discover and understand their true meaning and message for us, we engage in a process of exploration, using two important terms: (1) *Exegesis*: trying to discern what the writer of a particular text meant to convey, and what it means in the context of the passage and the particular letter or book. (2) *Hermeneutics*: trying to understand what the text means (a) in itself, (b) in the context of the passage and the Bible as a whole, and, very importantly, (c) what is its meaning for us today? When for example Paul writes to the Church in Corinth: “It is shameful for a woman to speak in church.... What I am writing to you is a command of the Lord” (1 Cor 14.34f), we must ask what this means and requires of us today.

There are other crucial questions we need to address concerning the interpretation of Scripture. Who is responsible for doing the interpreting? The Church? Each individual Christian? Which interpretation is authoritative. Who decides who can claim the authority. The Roman Catholic Church asserts that the Pope is the final authority, after due reflection on the Scriptures and Tradition. The Reformation leaders hotly questioned this claim. Different churches claim to have the ‘correct interpretation’ of various parts of Scripture. For example, the Seventh Day Adventists believe that

the rest of the churches have ‘got it wrong’ concerning Sabbath Day worship. Every church has argued that their doctrine of ministry is based on a ‘correct interpretation’ of Scripture. As a famous biblical scholar once said concerning such claims: “All have won the race and all have got the prizes”!

We have *asked the question* and we are agreed that we need to *turn to the Bible*. But this has led to the further question: How does God want us to interpret the Scriptures as *the rule and ultimate standard of faith*? As we grapple with this question we soon realize that the process is rich and complex. Quite apart from the fact that Christians, and churches have disagreed in their interpretations of Scripture, we are further challenged by the way in which the Church down the ages has changed in its teaching and understandings of Scripture concerning a number of very significant issues.

3 Changing interpretations of Scripture on major issues

The process of interpreting, and questioning, and reinterpreting the Scriptures is central to the Scriptures themselves, and was fundamental to their unfolding. We think of the classic drama of the Book of Job, questioning the assumptions of the deeply rooted orthodoxy of Judaism concerning the mystery of human suffering. We read in the New Testament how Jesus initiated in Paul a radical conversion, bringing him to a fundamentally new way of understanding the meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures. Then again, we read in Acts 10 how the Spirit led Peter in a dream, through an agonising break with the time-honoured sacred traditions of the faith of his forebears, with regard to the teachings of the Jewish faith concerning foods appropriate to eat. It is a dramatic and moving story: at first Peter stubbornly resisted this ‘new word’ from God, but the Spirit persisted, and the radically new insight prevailed.

Another very hard issue for the very early Church to handle was the matter of circumcision, which was so central as the long understood clear command of God in the Scriptures. There were serious and ongoing divisions in the early Christian Community over this. But the Spirit was leading them to a new understanding – on a new path – which after much wrestling, they recognized and accepted.(Acts 15).

This process has continued in the Believing Community down the ages: the Spirit leading God’s people into deeper truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (John 16.12f). The following are familiar examples of where the Church has moved significantly in its teachings and understandings in important areas of life and faith:

Slavery: “Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect....to show complete and perfect fidelity: so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Saviour.” (Titus 2.9f) (see also Eph 6.5; Col 3.22; 1 Tim 6.1ff; 1 Peter 2.13). We would be appalled if someone used these *biblical teachings* in support of such views today.

Status of women: “I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife” (1 Cor 11.2) “For he (a man) is the image and reflection of God; but a woman is the reflection of man” (1 Cor 11.7). We would be shocked to hear this *biblical word*, taught as Christian orthodox doctrine today.

Women in Church: “Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak in church, but should be subordinate....For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church” (1 Cor 14.34f) We would be outraged if such views were defended today, on the grounds that they are *in the Bible*.

Women to be subordinate: “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over

a man; she is to keep silent.” (1 Tim 2.11f) Once again, we have moved a long way from this teaching so clearly stated here in this *word of Scripture*.

Remarriage after divorce: Perhaps the most significant and radical *departure from Scripture* which we Anglicans have made, is in the matter of remarriage after divorce. The teaching of Jesus is very strict and clear about the permanence of marriage, yet the Church of the Province of Southern Africa, together with other Provinces, and sister churches, allow for the remarriage of divorcees for a range of reasons (quite apart from the debated Matthean exception). Paul reiterates Jesus’ teaching strongly and unequivocally: “To the married I give this command – not I but the Lord – that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband) – and that the husband should not divorce his wife”. (1 Cor 7.10f). In spite of the strong biblical teaching, and the long-standing traditional teaching of the Church, we have, for pastoral reasons, come to the conviction that the Holy Spirit has led us in this direction.

There can surely therefore be no question but that the Church has indeed come to very different understandings concerning the meaning, and *authority for us* of certain texts. The Church has, virtually from the beginning, felt no obligation to obey the Old Testament sacred Sabbath Law. They felt free – led by the Spirit – to disobey this commandment and replace it with worship on the First Day of the Week. The Church does not feel bound in any way to adhere to numerous serious injunctions in the Holiness Code of Leviticus, for example the death sentence for adultery (Lev 20.10). Why then the heavy selective emphasis on the injunction against certain homosexual behaviour? Is this not tellingly inconsistent and unduly dogmatic? We need to recognise and accept that in a number of instances the Church no longer teaches what is *stated in the written text*.

This fact needs to be applied without prejudice when we come to consider the conviction being shared with the Church in our time by sincere members, namely that the Spirit is leading the Church to accept faithful same-sex partnerships. At very least it should be recognized in principle, that this may be true. It is most encouraging to note that the respected conservative evangelical writers of the booklet *True Union in the Body?* do in fact concede this: “in principle Christian Tradition might be in need of correction and development in this area” (para 4.22).¹ So when we ask ourselves the fundamental question as to how God wants us to interpret the Scriptures as *the rule and ultimate standard of faith*, we need to acknowledge that the answer is not as simple as some may have thought. Let us avoid a hasty and dogmatic approach. Let us come to the question prayerfully, and with humility, trusting in God to lead.

4 Problems with *biblical literalism*

It will already have become clear from the above quotations of a number of scriptural teachings, that a literal reading of Scripture can often, (though obviously not always), lead to manifestly ridiculous contradictions, such as *letting women speak in church when the Bible tells us not to!* And again, when Jesus says in a particular context, and with a particular intention: “Call no one your father on earth” (Matt 23.39), it is absurdly literalistic to claim that he means us for ever to avoid the term in addressing our earthly fathers, or elders, or others.

Biblical literalism, is not the way that we in the mainstream Anglican tradition believe God wants us to interpret the Scriptures. We have long since moved from the belief that Moses actually wrote the first five books of the Bible. We are embarrassed by the fact that Bishop Colenso of Natal was once condemned for questioning this literalistic approach to Scripture. We are called to worship God in both mind and heart, and so the Spirit has led the Church to

understand such a claim as a *literary form*. Our awareness of how the Scriptures came to be written, deepens our appreciation of their true meaning and inspiration for us in our times. The Apostle Paul, when writing his letters to the churches, never thought of himself as *writing Scripture* in the manner in which Muhammad was inspired to write the Koran.

Yet it is a strange and sad fact that, in spite of this, so many Christians would appear to think that the more they take the Bible literally, the more they are somehow *being faithful* to Scripture, and that they are the true and authentic *Bible Christians!* We must object strongly to this presumptuous claim. This literalistic way of treating the Scriptures is misguided and simplistic and leads to all kinds of problems. It is precisely in this way – the quoting and literal reading of a particular text as God’s clear will and command – that the Bible has been tragically and dogmatically misused and abused down the ages to justify all manner of injustice and wrong.

5 The misuse of Scripture

There are many examples in history of this literalistic misuse of Scripture in self-serving support of injustice, and as a way of giving *religious sanction and legitimacy* to what is wrong and evil in the eyes of God.

- a) The **oppression of black people** was justified for centuries on the basis of the story of Noah and his sons. Ham and his future offspring were condemned to be slaves, because he had seen his drunk father naked! (Gen 9.18-27).
- b) The **institution of slavery** was vigorously defended on *biblical grounds*. There is no need to enlarge on this cruel misuse of Scripture.

- c) The racist system of **Apartheid** was justified and underpinned for decades by a theology of separation and discrimination, violently imposed, and yet vigorously supported by quoting from the Scriptures.
- d) The **oppression of women** was also upheld and consolidated by quoting Scripture, as if a literal *on the face of it* way of using Scripture provided God's clear word on this issue. We have referred above to some examples in the text.
- e) The Palestinians in today's **Middle East** have been violently and threateningly pushed from their land by the State of Israel, which continues to pursue an agenda of dispossession, justifying it all with the backing of numerous biblical texts. With the backing of this kind of self-serving literalistic text-proofing, the rights, dignity and lives of the Palestinians are being trampled upon. Another ghastly type of apartheid is being perpetrated before our eyes, as many Christian groupings also quote the Scriptures in support of a racist form of Zionism.

We in the mainstream of the Anglican tradition regard such literalistic ways of using biblical texts as a travesty of the way God intends us to read and teach the Holy Scriptures. It is an abuse of the Scriptures.

6 Interpreting the Scriptures in the Anglican tradition

As Anglicans we look to the Scriptures in the way expressed in the Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888, and in our Services of Ordination, (see Section II.1 above). The Scriptures are the fundamental and primary text of our faith. However as we noted above, the Scriptures need to be interpreted by the Believing Community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and looking to Jesus Christ as our way and truth. Jesus is the key to all interpretation of Scripture. This involves interpreting

the Scriptures in terms of the core values of the Gospel, and whatever promotes goodness and holiness, wholeness and humanity. It is these that provide the objective criteria for authentic interpretation, as we seek the mind of Christ on a particular issue.

“Christians need to discern what are the anchor points of their tradition, and what can be rethought in changing circumstances”² and “to consider how far these differences between scriptural times and our own, affect the interpretation of the biblical message.”³ The essential problem is how we are to discern and distinguish between those teachings of Scripture which were *of the times* and those which are *for all times*. It would now seem clear that there are some teachings in the Bible which reflected the cultural attitudes and outlook of the age in which they were written, and which are not intended by God to bind us today. For example, in the Old Testament, we no longer feel in any way bound by much that is contained in the Jewish Holiness Code, and, in the New Testament, we treat the texts referring to the institution of slavery, and some of the teachings about women, as simply reflecting the mind-set of the times.

Authoritative interpreting of Scripture is done corporately, in the Body. In addition, according to Anglican tradition, it should be done, under the authority of *those having oversight*. There are, however, times when God speaks through prophets, and confounds the *guardians of orthodoxy*, and the accepted orthodoxy of the time. This is quite often how the doctrinal teachings and traditions evolved, and continue to evolve.

A Gamaliel approach for times of change and division?

We saw how hard it was for the early Church to move from its natural adherence to the sacred customs of the Jewish faith. Significant change is inevitably a painful and uncertain process. So when the

Church finds its traditional teaching on some issue being challenged, and its traditional way of interpreting certain Scripture passages being questioned, it may be wise and helpful to opt for a kind of *Gamaliel approach* (Acts 5) – a period of testing to see and hear what God is saying concerning the new position and perspective. It involves a *suspension of judgement*, and an attitude of mutual tolerance and respect, between those with opposing convictions. It is part of a *process of reception* – seeking, over a period of time, to discern the mind of Christ.

There can in fact be no sure and infallible way of authoritatively interpreting Scripture. The Church of God can and does ‘get it wrong’ at times, nevertheless it is our joyful conviction that the Holy Spirit is guiding the Church of God, in spite of our frailties, and blindness of heart.

7 The Spirit and the dynamic between Scripture and life

In all matters of Christian moral teaching, we as Anglicans search the Scriptures, and seek to interpret them under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We seek to listen to God in the experience of his people, the Believing Community, relating our Faith (our teachings and traditions) to new insights and knowledge revealed by the Spirit.

We have observed how the Church has over time come to new understandings about the meaning and requirements of Scripture in connection with a whole range of issues of life and faith. This should not disturb or surprise us. There is nothing necessarily wrong in the Church *changing its mind* on some issues. We should expect this, and not somehow feel threatened by it.

It is very clear from the biblical tradition and writings, that the first Christians were keenly expecting the imminent return of Christ,

the Parousia, virtually at any moment. This *fact of faith* affected everything – their whole outlook and perspectives on life’s priorities. It was inevitable that Paul’s teaching would be coloured by this overarching conviction and belief. So Paul writes to the Church in Corinth:

“Now to the unmarried and to the widows I say that it would be better for you to live alone as I do. (I Cor 7.8).

What I mean my brothers is this: there is not much time left, and from now on married men should live as though they were not married.(v29)

The man who marries does well, but the one who does not marry does even better” (v38).(Good News Bible).

Given the early Church’s convictions and teaching; given their reading and understanding of Scripture and the teachings of Jesus *as they understood them*, Paul’s teaching is entirely understandable, and indeed fitting. All things were coming to an end. Jesus was returning soon, at any moment. It would indeed be better not to get married, but instead remain single. All energy and focus should be placed on preparing for Christ’s coming, bringing as many as possible into the fellowship, before it was too late. The priorities were clear, everything else was secondary.

We however know that the imminently expected Second Coming did not take place in the way they so fervently anticipated. A profoundly different context emerged. Life changed. People’s outlook and experience of life shifted significantly. Greater emphasis came to be placed on the significance of marriage, and of long term faithful relationships.

This familiar account of the impact of the *delayed parousia* is a helpful illustration of the creative dynamic between life-experience and Scripture. This can lead to significant *re-readings*, and fresh perspectives and insights. It should be seen as a faith-enriching and life-enriching

process. For it is the conviction of the Church that the Holy Spirit is at the heart of this creative dynamic, guiding the Church.

In the next section we will be considering how we may discern the work and presence of the Spirit in this whole dynamic between Scripture and life with regard to God's gift of human sexuality. The writers of *True Union in the Body?* once again graciously acknowledge that "Christian rethinking on this issue is not merely a capitulation to secular culture" (para 2.3). They may argue, as they do, against the particular *rethinking* on this matter, but they would seem to recognise that it arises out of a genuine search for what God might be saying to the Church, through the living dynamic of the Spirit's presence in people's life experience, as in the Scriptures.

III

Homosexuality

1 Human sexuality - changing understandings

We begin with this basic question: What is God's purpose regarding the sexual dimension of our being human? For a start, obviously for the procreation of the species. Is this the only purpose that God had in mind? We would all now say: of course not. Yet for a long time, perhaps for the greater portion of the Church's history, this was somehow the dominant message. Certainly, St Augustine of Hippo, that great doctor of the Church, was understood in this way, and his views have had an enormous influence on the Church's views about the purpose of human sexuality. The Church today would regard such a view as negative and minimalist; in other words, inadequate and even distorted. The Church of God, and the *guardians of orthodoxy* have moved a long way since then in their teaching about God's purposes for this gift, and profound dimension of our humanity.

2 God's gift of sexuality for loving relationship

The gift of human sexuality is most emphatically not just for procreation; it is for so much more as well. Anglicans are familiar with the moving words of the Marriage Service: "The union of husband and wife in heart, mind and body is given for their mutual comfort and help in prosperity and adversity. It is given that they may know each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love. It is given that they may have children and bring them up in the knowledge and love of the Lord." The gift of human sexuality is for loving – building relationship nurturing companionship, and expressing intimate joy and tenderness.

The debate in the churches during the last century around the use of contraceptives is instructive here. An early Lambeth Conference (1908) said no, in a seemingly final way! However by the time they met in 1930, the bishops had come to view the matter entirely differently, and decided yes! This shift was confirmed again at Lambeth in 1958. The bishops now asserted that “it is utterly wrong to say that intercourse ought not to be engaged in except with the willing intention of children.” Why this shift? Our church was coming to recognise, accept and affirm the significance of the relational aspect of the gift of our sexuality. There was a gradual shift in the mind-set of the People of God. A conviction emerged and grew that the Holy Spirit was leading the Church into a deeper understanding of God’s purpose in giving us this gift of our sexuality. It was now recognised that sexual intercourse with one’s spouse need have nothing necessarily to do with procreation as such. The gift of sexuality might find expression in a way which deliberately excluded the intention to procreate. It is fully appropriate to enjoy this gift of God simply and solely for the expression of loving relationship with one’s spouse. This became in time, and is now, the teaching of the Anglican Church.

3 Returning to the question: Why should the Church not be accepting of faithful same-sex partnerships?

Are there really decisive theological objections to such acceptance? Let us look at some of the objections which are commonly raised:

- a) **The biblical texts: are they decisive?** Those arguing for this position, refer to certain familiar texts, for example: Lev 18.22 and Lev 20.13; then in the New Testament to Rom 1.26-27 and 1 Cor 6.9-10, among others. It would seem to be clear that in these texts, certain forms of homosexual behaviour are definitely condemned. However, those now arguing in favour of a change in the traditional position of the Church, would want to point out that the kind of

behaviour which is being condemned in Leviticus and in Paul's letters, would seem to have very little to do with the faithful caring same-sex relationships which sincere Christians are referring to and commending today.

In the Old Testament tradition, the kind of homosexual behaviour which they were aware of, was strongly associated with the idolatrous and promiscuous practices of the surrounding cultures and religions.

Paul and the Christian community shared this outlook, and this teaching is both reflected in and confirmed in his letters to the Christians in Rome and Corinth.

It can be presumed that for the writer of Leviticus, homosexual behaviour was regarded as *unnatural*, contrary to the *way God made us*, and therefore against his will, and therefore sinful. This is the familiar traditional view. However it is precisely this assumption about homosexual orientation which is being questioned in our day. We will be enlarging on this below (III.7). At this point it can simply be stated that for people of a homosexual orientation, their sexual desire is as natural to them as it is to those of a different orientation. Sisters and brothers in the Body of Christ who happen to be gay and lesbian will testify to this truth. They regard it as hurtful and unjust, let alone just plain wrong, to regard their orientation as unnatural, just because they are not the same as the majority. So it needs to be emphasized that they do not recognise themselves in the *texts of condemnation*. Thus the writers of *True Union in the Body?* affirm that it is "important that the Church respects (and engages in serious dialogue with) individual Christians who see loving committed same-sex relationships in our culture, as lying outside these passages of condemnation" (para 4.15).

Furthermore, in this consideration of the texts, and the degree to which they should be regarded as decisive, we need to remind ourselves again about what we have shown above, namely that

the Church has moved in its teaching on a number of significant issues, in spite of particular texts. It simply won't do to claim rigid authority for the texts in question, while at the same time justifying *certain departures from the text* on other issues, for example the role of women in the Church.

In other words, (using another example), if one accepts an interpretation of Scripture (a hermeneutic of Scripture) which allows for the blessing and remarriage of divorcees in church, then one must at very least accept that a similar hermeneutical model could be applied to the ethics of faithful homosexual relationships. The weight of biblical witness and the tradition of the Church against remarriage after divorce, is quite as strong as any which might be argued against homosexual practice.

b) Creation and Christian anthropology: This is another area where the case against the acceptance of faithful committed same-sex partnerships has been strongly argued. "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Gen 1.27). From this great affirmation it has been argued that the only permissible expression of sexual intimacy is between a man and woman in a committed relationship of marriage. God, it is said, created us for heterosexual partnerships only. This is the basis for a whole *theology of complementarity* between male and female. The affirmation of complementarity in male and female relationships is surely a wonderful truth. A serious problem arises however when this dimension of human anthropology is somehow absolutised and presented in an exclusive way. It would appear that the great theologian Karl Barth, fell into this trap, when he seemed to be asserting that full humanity can only be achieved through a relationship with a member of the opposite sex (Church Dogmatics Vol III pt4 p184). Obviously such a view (if he really meant this) is totally untenable. Did the Apostle Paul fall short of his full humanity because he remained unmarried?

Did St Catherine of Siena remain incomplete as a human being because “she resisted her parents’ efforts to persuade her into marriage”? And what about Jesus? We must beware of absolutising a theology of complementarity. It is sobering to read Alison Webster trenchant critique of the principle of complementarity in her book *Found Wanting – Women, Christianity, and Sexuality*. We grow towards our full humanity in Christ through relationships with other human beings, whether they be of the same sex or not. There is no decisive argument against faithful homosexual relationships on the basis of the creation narratives.

- c) **Upholding the institution of marriage:** Those who object vehemently to any moves towards the acceptance by the Church of same-sex partnerships, often argue that such acceptance would undermine the institution of heterosexual marriage. The writers of *True Union in the Body*, (cited above) insist that those promoting this change in our tradition need to explain how this “does not undermine or destroy traditional teaching about marriage and singleness” (para 4.30). Why should the acceptance of same-sex partnerships have any negative effect on the institution of marriage at all? On the contrary, the recognition, affirmation and encouragement to faithfulness in such relationships could help to promote values which are at the heart of our moral teaching. The institution of marriage is already being worryingly and seriously undermined by a whole range of other factors, such as adultery, and lack of commitment, leading to a high divorce rate. There are many sociological and spiritual factors involved. But these have nothing to do with call for the Church to recognize faithful same-sex unions. It should also be pointed out that only a very small percentage of the population are homosexual by inclination; so on these grounds as well it is difficult to see how any threat could arise.

4 Concerns about a *post-modern relativistic version of Christianity*

The debate around issues of human sexuality touches us all, both at the core of our personal being and at the core of our faith. Many people are hurting. People are hurting because they feel rejected, demonized and *unchurched* on account of their sexual orientation, and their convictions. We will enlarge of this below. However others are hurting and deeply disturbed because they are convinced that certain central demands of the Gospel are being compromised.

As Archbishop Rowan Williams has said concerning this debate: “for a significant number of Anglicans, this has come to be the acid test of whether you are inside or outside the pale of authentic orthodoxy. And for such people, even to allow that it is an area in which Christians might just possibly disagree without fracturing the reality of a common language is to betray the essential principle”.⁴

The view that those who support the acceptance by the Church of faithful same-sex partnerships, are indeed placing themselves *outside the pale of authentic orthodoxy*, has been very directly and forthrightly expressed by Archbishop Greg Venables of the Southern Cone: “what’s happened is that over the last century a new version of Christianity has evolved – a post-modern, relativistic Christianity. ...We’ve got to declare what the Christian faith is. And if we keep waiting we’re going to say, ‘Well, look we’re not so sure.’ And the truth is that leaders of the global south are sure, that Christianity is very very clear on this issue”. (BBC Interview with Sir David Frost 12 Oct 2003)

It is probably true to say that Archbishop Venables is expressing the views of a very large constituency in our Communion. It is important that we respond. The concept of *ethical relativism* usually implies an *anything goes* approach – that one person’s idea of right and wrong is as valid as the next – that it is all a question of a person’s *subjective view-point* – that there are no objective Christian ethical norms.

However, one must ask: who among those seeking for change in our Anglican tradition are really saying: “anything goes”? Who is suggesting that adultery, abuse, promiscuity, predatory sexual behaviour, and paedophilia are not sinful? Who is saying there are no longer objective norms and values of the Gospel that need to be witnessed to and upheld – such as faithfulness, self-sacrifice, compassion, kindness, self-control, forgiveness, truthfulness, integrity, goodness and holiness of life? To accuse those promoting a change of understanding concerning faithful same-sex partnerships, of dragging the Church into ethical relativism is to do them a serious injustice.

We have referred above more than once, to many changes that have taken place in the Church’s understanding on significant issues of life and faith. Consider once again the role of women in the Church: is it really being suggested that the whole movement for the ordination of women represents a *new version of Christianity*? Was this too a sign of *post-modernism undermining the Church*? Presumably not! No-one would deny however, that the decision by our Church to ordain women did indeed constitute a most significant shift from a very long-standing, and strongly defended tradition of our church. The presence of women bishops at the last Lambeth Conference was hugely symbolic for our church, but hopefully we as Anglicans are not regarding this as a *new version of Christianity*.

One must ask then, what is this *new version of Christianity* that the faithful are being warned against? Sincere and orthodox Christians are asking, (and being asked) important questions about human sexuality. There are those who believe that the Holy Spirit is leading the Church in a process of change. The writers of *True Union in the Body*? acknowledge that “Christian rethinking on this issue is not merely a capitulation to secular culture” (para 2.3). How then can it be claimed dogmatically that it is not possible for the Spirit to be leading the Church towards a change in its traditional teaching about God’s gift of sexuality. Is it really tenable to be so

“sure that Christianity is very very clear on this issue”, and that those who question the traditional teaching have placed themselves outside the pale, and that their only resort is to repent? Is this not being presumptuous and judgmental? Can it seriously be said that the present Archbishop of Canterbury is a mere post-modern relativist commending a new version of Christianity? Of course not! Such an assertion would be ridiculous, and a sign of culpable ignorance. So while it is fully recognized and appreciated that there are many sisters and brothers in the Church who sincerely believe that it would compromise the Faith to allow for the acceptance of faithful same-sex partnerships by the Church, they should not attempt to base their case on talk of *post-modern, relativistic new versions of Christianity*.

5 The inclusive Jesus does not condone sin

We have a God who is love – loving all people infinitely. We are all precious to God, and have equal worth in his sight. The Scriptures reveal our Lord as the one who accepts and affirms those rejected and despised as sinners in the eyes of the Law of Moses. So people are of course correct in asserting and rejoicing in the fact that *God loves me as I am*. However, as we rejoice in this life-giving truth, we would not for a moment therefore wish to suggest that God would not have problems with a person's behaviour if they are dishonest, nasty, betray a friend, or commit adultery. Of course God has a problem with sin, and with my sin! It is not that he wants to judge me, but rather that he wants to heal me of such destructive behaviour. God invites me and longs for me to repent, and to make a new beginning.

In the powerful and moving story of the *woman caught in adultery* (John 8), Jesus approaches the whole situation with one central intention – to heal and make whole. He exposes the sinful

hypocrisy and self-righteousness of those in the crowd – “let the one who is not guilty, throw the first stone”. We are all sinners. That is the first truth to be acknowledged. He then turns to the woman after the guilty crowd has sheepishly dispersed, and asks the woman: “was there no-one to condemn you?” and then says those freeing words: “neither do I; go and sin no more.” Jesus did not condemn the woman, but neither did he in any way suggest that she had not sinned. He healed her, and blessed her.

In the whole debate in the Anglican Communion and beyond, around the morality of certain expressions on God’s gift of sexuality, there is no attempt to deny that sin is sin! The essence of the debate has to do with whether a particular expression of this gift, is sinful or not. Those who believe that the Spirit is leading the Church to accept faithful same-sex relationships are of course, in this way, asserting and expressing the conviction that such relationships are not sinful. This is stating the obvious, but it needs to be said.

They do however (and again this ought to be obvious) share with the whole Church the clear belief that (for example) adultery is sinful and destructive of relationships. Paedophilia is sinful; it is profoundly abusive of young people, and manifestly harmful and wrong sexual behaviour. In the eyes of God, let alone for any gospel-formed conscience, such behaviour is to be condemned.

In contrast, faithful committed homosexual relationships (as with heterosexual relationships) can and should be an expression of God’s love, and of his gift of human sexuality. Such relationships can and should lead to growth in Christian virtue and holiness of life. There is nothing inherently abusive, exploitative or destructive about such relationships. All the values and demands of the Gospel apply. Sin and the devil can and do get in, but our loving God can lead to repentance, healing and new beginnings.

6 Conservative Evangelicals respecting freedom of conscience

The booklet, *True Union in the Body?*, was produced in 2003 by a group of leading theologians from the conservative wing in our Communion. While arguing vigorously in favour of the traditional teaching on sexual matters, they nevertheless, would seem to be affirming that on the issue of faithful same-sex partnerships, the Church should respect the freedom of conscience of individual members. “It is important”, they say, “that the Church respects (and engages in serious dialogue with) individual Christians who see loving and committed same-sex relationships in our culture as lying outside the scope of these passages of condemnation.” (para 4.15). They go on to make what is surely a significant *concession* coming as it does from respected and conservative evangelicals: “Strong opposition to the public conferral of legitimacy on same-sex unions does not necessarily entail the exclusion of all Christians who enter such unions in the sincere belief that they are an acceptable pattern of Christian discipleship. Here there is room for a generous inclusivity in the name of Christ” (para 5.10). In other words, in this matter of committed same-sex partnerships, even from their conservative perspective, we are dealing here with what is at very least an *ethical grey area* in which it is appropriate to respect members’ freedom of conscience.

7 Cultural perspectives and assumptions

We need to bear in mind the degree to which people’s beliefs about what is right and wrong, are profoundly rooted in, and indeed tend to arise out of their culture, and their assumptions about human nature. This has a direct effect on the way they read and understand and interpret the Scriptures. The Scriptures were written in a time and cultural context where patriarchal views were simply part of everyone’s

unconsciously assumed mind-set. The teaching of the Church was deeply affected by these patriarchal cultural beliefs. This became the dogmatically taught way of understanding and interpreting the Scriptures.

Over the centuries, great theologians like St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, being people of their time and culture, regarded the subordinate role of women as ‘natural’. The belief that this was natural was part of their cultural heritage, and they theologised accordingly.

This teaching of the Church about women and their role was particularly tenacious and *hard of change* because two powerful factors were mutually reinforcing each other. Ideas and beliefs about the role of women were rooted not only in people’s cultural assumptions, but also to a significant degree in the Scriptures themselves. **People read and interpret the Scriptures through the *spectacles of their culture*, and then have a tendency to use the Scriptures to support their often unexamined and *taken for granted* cultural views of what is right and natural.** It is a kind of mutually supporting circular process of interpretation. It is therefore not surprising that it has taken so long for this tradition, concerning the role of women, to change.

Today however, the ethos has thankfully shifted dramatically and fundamentally. We now argue for the essential equality of human beings. The texts which were used to support the old tradition, we now regard as *representing the outlook of the times*, and not part of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. Now we turn instead to other classic texts: “So God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them”. (Gen 1.27). And Galatians 3.28: “There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Jesus Christ”.

As with ideas about the role of women, so it is with attitudes relating to human sexuality; people’s attitudes are hugely affected by

cultural traditions, assumptions and mind-sets. Historically, within Christendom in particular, social attitudes to homosexuality have been decidedly negative. We examine this further in the next section.

8 Inhuman treatment of homosexual people

It is surely true to say that in the tradition of the Church, the attitude of Christians towards homosexuals has been largely cruelly rejecting. The Church has made outcasts of these sisters and brothers in Christ, in a demeaning and judgmental way. Such treatment surely grieves the Holy Spirit.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu in his foreword to the book *Aliens in the Household of God*⁵ writes: “One would have expected that the church of Jesus Christ would reflect those attractive characteristics of its Lord and Master. Alas, this has not always been the case, for the church of Jesus Christ has caused him to weep yet again, as it has been riddled with racism, sexism, and heterosexism”.

In recent times, the Church has begun confessing its sins of destructive prejudice. The official teaching is now stressing God’s welcoming love towards all people. Alas however, too many church members (perhaps a majority) are still guilty of a cruelly prejudiced attitude towards homosexuals, *just for being who they are*.

People of this orientation are actually trapped in a psychologically and morally intolerable situation. For the heterosexual it is perfectly natural and healthy to find a person of the opposite sex attractive. Sexual desire in heterosexuals is a God-given aspect of one’s make-up, needing control of course, but otherwise fine and good. For the homosexual however, same-sex desire is by definition, as it were, disordered, unnatural, wrong, and therefore virtually, by implication, sinful. “You are sick, not fully or properly human in having such thoughts and desires. Having such

desires means that you should not accept yourself as you are! You must change, you must be healed.”

In his book, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, James Alison speaks of “the great annihilation of being which accompanied same-sex desire throughout the monotheistic world and beyond” ⁶. Elsewhere he refers to “the profound ‘do not be’ which the social and ecclesiastical voice speaks to us, and which forms the soul of so many gay people” (p39)

It is becoming clearer that it is not all that helpful to make too significant a distinction between the orientation and the expression of it. How can a person be, and yet not be, who they are. We must be who we are in the expression of our sexual orientation. The implication of the traditional position is that God is in effect saying to people of homosexual orientation: “You are not. I didn’t create you. I only create heterosexual people. You are a defective heterosexual. Agree to be a defect, and I’ll rescue you. But if you claim to be, then your very being is constructed over and against me, and you are lost”(Alison p202). This is utterly devastating. It is inhuman. Does the Church not need to revisit its traditional teaching and approach on this matter? What is the Spirit saying to the Church in our time?

Celibacy for those called

It is important to point out at this juncture, that there is a profound difference between what is being presented above, and the position of those who have received a call by God to the celibate life, for example in a Religious Community. In this special category, the call of God to abstain from sexual intimacy is accepted by heterosexual and homosexual alike. God calls some people to this special witness, and God enables them to follow and live out this call.

9 Affirming gays and lesbians as they are

Returning to the crucial question being examined here: why should it be assumed that being homosexual is necessarily a disorder, a type of sickness that requires healing? Why can it not be accepted that some people grow up differently? What is so terrible about this condition that those so orientated are encouraged to seek healing at all costs? Why the annihilating pressure to insist that all homosexuals need to change? Why can't this minority be accepted as different, and affirmed as they are? Is the reluctance to accept them as they are not perhaps rooted in a deep-seated prejudice? The human community has suffered for so long from dehumanizing racial prejudice. People need to be cleansed and freed from all forms of destructive prejudice, including that which is based on a person's sexual orientation.

There have been those who after a period during which they have identified themselves as homosexual, then do in fact change, and actually settle into a heterosexual orientation. For some this happens naturally. For others it might be a painful struggle arising out of psychological problems which might beset anyone on their journey to wholeness.

Having recognised this however, it is another matter altogether to dogmatically assume and assert that all homosexuals can and should go the same journey. We have questioned above such sweeping assumptions, which have led to such cruel prejudice and treatment of homosexuals in the history of the Church. The vast majority of homosexuals don't change, either because they see no reason to do so, or because they might have tried to change, but found it just *didn't work*.

Concerning this overwhelming majority of homosexuals, why not accept that God accepts them as they are? Does God really want to change their orientation? Is God bothered with a person's sexual orientation? Why are people so often disturbed by difference, and unaccepting of diversity? God looks to the heart, and longs to help us

grow in likeness to Jesus Christ. It would surely be not only cruel but seriously misguided to suggest that in order for people of homosexual orientation to grow in likeness to Christ, they need to change their orientation. Archbishop Desmond Tutu referring to the sin of racism speaks of how God's children were made to feel less than who they were. Skin colour was the criteria of worth! He then went on to say that when we discriminate against people on the basis of ethnicity, or gender, or orientation we undermine their humanity, and insult God the Creator ⁷.

We repeat once again the question posed above: surely the Church needs to re-examine its traditional teaching and approach to these issues. Put more directly: why should not the traditional moral norms in the area of sexuality and sexual behaviour be applied equally to all human relationships whether heterosexual or homosexual?

IV

The Church responding to new insights

1 The Church of the Province of Southern Africa

The Anglican Communion, and the churches world-wide are grappling with the challenge of this question, and the CPSA is struggling with it too. In a Statement issued in Sept 2003 the Bishops openly and candidly admitted that “we are not of one mind on these important matters. However we are of one mind in our desire to be loyal to the mind and heart of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In the same month our Provincial Standing Committee comprising bishops, priests and laity affirmed the following in a resolution:

- “1) The CPSA has declared that homosexual orientation is not, in itself, sinful. It is not clear what forms our sexual orientation. Are we born that way (nature)? Is it our early life experience (nurture)? Is it a combination of several factors? ⁸.
- 2) What is now being debated by many Christians is whether sexual intimacy between people of the same sex is right or wrong. The Church has always taught that the holy place for sexual intimacy is in the context of a life-long, faithful marriage relationship between one man and one woman. Some are now arguing passionately that gays and lesbians should be affirmed in same-sex relationships that are faithful, monogamous and committed.
- 3) These important issues are being addressed at various levels of the CPSA. We believe that as we seek further understanding we need to listen to people of all orientations as we seek the heart and mind of Jesus Christ in this and all things”

2 Other churches also grappling with change

The Doctrine, Ethics and Worship Committee of the **Methodist Church of Southern Africa** have produced an excellent Discussion Guide for their members. It is entitled *Christians and Same-Sex Relationships*. It was presented to the MSCA Conference in 2003, and was referred to circuits and districts for discussion. The Discussion Guide has “taken as its departure point the Conference-endorsed conviction that as a church we are required to be a community of love rather than rejection”. It begins by setting out six principles for constructive debate:

- a) Seek the truth of Christ in the spirit of Christ
- b) Seek to move beyond *corners of conviction*
- c) Seek first to understand and then to be understood
- d) Seek to see the human face of this issue
- e) Seek to become well-informed
- f) Seek to celebrate the gift of diversity

The **Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa** continues, like other churches, to wrestle with the challenge of this issue, and has not yet produced any official document at a national level. The Presbytery of the Western Cape produced two submissions to the South African Law Reform Commission with regard to proposals about domestic partnerships and same-sex unions. The majority submission upheld the traditional position, while the minority submission expressed the view that a case could be made for the legal recognition of homosexual unions.

The **United Congregational Church of Southern Africa** at their Assembly in 1995 unanimously adopted the Report of their Theological Commission – *Our Faith, Our Sexuality*. As with other churches, it reflects marked divisions around the issue of homosexuality. However the Assembly did endorse “support for the protection of the rights of

gay and lesbian people in civil law and any bill of rights.” Apart from this the UCCSA has been unable to find consensus in an agreed policy, and continues to commend further study and dialogue.

The **Dutch Reformed Church** has moved significantly from its uncompromisingly condemning position taken at their Synod in 1986. In 2002, their Synod expressed regret and sorrow for their share in judgmental attitudes and unloving actions in the past. They further affirmed that they in no way questioned the integrity of fellow Christians simply on the grounds of homosexual orientation. They also agreed that in the light of continuous study they could no longer identify with the 1986 position. They therefore asked the Study Commission to prepare a more acceptable and compassionate Report for consideration at the Synod in October 2004. This Report was received and its recommendations accepted. It was recognised that there are different views concerning biblical interpretations on the issue, and the Synod committed the church to an ongoing search together.

3 The way ahead

These are certainly not easy times for the Church. One thing is clear however - the only way is with Jesus. He will guide and help us, just as he came to the help of his disciples when they were being tossed about by the waves. They heard his saving words: “It is I; don’t be afraid” (Matt 14.27). Truly, we should not be afraid. God is looking after his Church and will continue to do so. For our part, we must continue to take the trouble to engage in real and respectful dialogue across our present divides, listening and seeking to understand.

A final word then to gay and lesbian members of our Church, who wait and work and long for change: Be encouraged! You are greatly needed. There are so many of our members still bound by prejudice, who need help and healing. You have a mission to undertake,

witnessing to your faith in Jesus, helping those still unaccepting, to listen and understand. It is our prayer that through this redeeming process, they will, in God's time, come to recognise God's gift of who you are in your very being, and rejoice with you in our shared journey to wholeness in Christ.

Paul's word to all God's people: "I urge you then – I who am a prisoner because I serve the Lord: live a life that measures up to the standard God set when he called you. Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another. Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace which binds you together. There is one body and one Spirit, just as there is one hope to which God has called you. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; there is one God and Father of all humankind, who is Lord of all, and is in all. (Eph 4.1-6)

End Notes

- 1) *True Union in the Body? – A contribution to the discussion within the Anglican Communion concerning the public blessing of same-sex unions*, commissioned by Archbishop Drexel Gomez, Archbishop of the West Indies.
- 2) *Being Human – A Christian understanding of personhood illustrated with reference to power, money, sex and time*, Report of the Doctrine Committee of the General Synod of the Church of England, Church House, London, 2003. p80
- 3) *Being Human* p84
- 4) *Seeking the Truth in Love – The Church and Homosexuality* by Bishop Michael Doe, Darton Longman Todd, London, 2000. See foreword by Archbishop Rowan Williams.
- 5) *Aliens in the Household of God – Homosexuality and Christian Faith in South Africa* by P. Germond and S. de Gruchy (Eds), David Philip, Cape Town, 1997.
- 6) *Faith Beyond Resentment*, by James Alison Darton Longman and Todd, London, 2001, pxi
- 7) *Created in the Image of God*, Video produced by Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM), Cape Town, 2003. Excellent presentation of the issues in the South African context.
- 8) The debate around the *nature/nurture* issue has been the subject of extensive scientific research (genetic, neurological, hormonal, and psycho-social). Numerous experiments have been undertaken, and various claims asserted. However, thus far, no results have proved decisive. It would seem that what is likely to emerge (scientifically speaking) is that nature and nurture will prove to be an inseparable dynamic in how we become who we are.

About the Author

Bishop David Russell was born in South Africa in 1938. He did his first degree at the University of Cape Town, then studied for an MA at Oxford. He did his training for the priesthood at the College of the Resurrection, Mirfield, England. He later obtained his PhD in Religious Studies (specialising in Christian Ethics) from the University of Cape Town.

He spent the greater part of his ministry as a priest working in Xhosa-speaking congregations, both rural and urban. From his student days he was involved in the struggle against Apartheid, and while working as Chaplain to Migrant Workers in Cape Town, he was banned and house-arrested in 1977 for 5 years.

He has served on the Bench of Bishops of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa since 1986, the same year that Archbishop Desmond Tutu was elected to lead the Province. While serving later with Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane, he was Chairperson of the Southern African Anglican Theological Commission, and Dean of the Province.

Since retiring as Bishop of Grahamstown in 2004, he has been working in Cape Town with Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM), a Christian NGO. IAM affirms LGBTI persons along with all God's people regardless of orientation.

He lives with his wife Dorothea, and they have two sons.