

Missiology And Homosexuality

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I wish to reflect a bit from the perspective of missiology on a book I have recently edited, *Other Voices, Other Worlds: the Global Church Speaks Out on Homosexuality* (Darton, Longman & Todd [UK] and Church Publishing, Inc. [USA]). The book brings together essays from twenty-four different places from around the Anglican Communion to reflect theologically (in the broadest sense) on the issue of homosexuality. This issue, of course, is presently causing great conflict in the Communion, even to the point of threatened or real schism. The book's perspective is generally more 'positive' than 'negative' on the issue.

Providing a challenge

The essays were deliberately commissioned to challenge several common assumptions: (1) that the issue of homosexuality is only a 'northern' or 'western' one, and that the 'global south' is monolithic in its opposition to any homosexual behaviour; (2) that there are few lesbian and gay Anglican voices (and those of their supporters) in the global south to be heard; (3) that the ethical issue of homosexuality is a problem only within Christianity and absent in other religions; (4) that the cultural factors of global homosexualities are not to be taken seriously theologically and can be dismissed as, in effect, an updated version of 'heathenism'; and (5) that it is not possible to approach the issue from a fairly conservative theological perspective (classical Anglican approaches encompassing Scripture, natural reason, the teaching of the church and human experience) without agreeing with the totally prohibitive conclusions of the 1998 Lambeth Conference.

Some have argued that a more overtly missiological approach to the issue of homosexuality will bring better results than other approaches presently being tried. I doubt this very much, as missiological arguments cut both ways. For example, on the floor of the 1998 Lambeth Conference there was a vigorous exchange between a Nigerian bishop and an Assistant Bishop of New York. The former argued that any positive affirmation of homosexuality would cause a loss of credibility for the Gospel in that highly Islamic country, that mission would be impaired; the latter argued the same, except from the opposite side, that a complete rejection of all homosexual behaviour would cause a loss of credibility for the Gospel in a culture that has a high level of acceptance of homosexuality. Missiology just joins the polarization on the issue.

In truth, I think the issues are much more complicated (including both of the above situations – in Nigeria and New York) and one would do better to hear directly from persons within those situations who are living, one way or another, with homosexuality, including the perils of both prosecution and permissiveness. Despite the apparent polarization of large parts of the Anglican Communion on the issue, people's lives (whatever their perspective on this issue) are not really all that 'black and white'. Therefore, it is important to hear real stories – not 'potted' ones that 'prove a point' but stories that take into account ambiguity and uncertainty. It seems to me that such is a more irenic approach. Of course, individual chapters of the book may contain much

anger (including even at Primates) but I think a certain amount of anger can and should be absorbed. As editor, I toned down some anger but not that much. Even my own Introduction began life as a totally different piece of writing, which in the end I discarded for a less angry approach.

A preferential option

But why concentrate on these voices – doubly marginalized voices – of the global south? These days it is common to be somewhat dismissive of Latin American liberation theology as, for example, excessively ideological, therefore, a bit ‘off’ from the Gospel. However, one point of that liberation theology needs, I think, not to be lost – the so-called ‘preferential option’ for the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized. Many of the contributors to the book have somehow been able to bring together positively liberation from colonial (or neo-colonial) economic, cultural or even ecclesiastical oppression and liberation from homophobic sexual oppression, often using fairly traditional Anglican approaches.

An argument can be made that the view that the Gospel privileges those who suffer oppression is not only scriptural but deeply Anglican. George Herbert writes of the poorest and most miserable of his parishioners in 17th century England, ‘evident miseries have a naturall priviledge, and exemption from all law.’ (*A Priest to the Temple*, chapter 12). This assertion is not unlike an Asian proverb, ‘only the hunchback himself (or herself) knows on which side to sleep’. Natural privilege, reason and experience all come together to affirm the Gospel's preferential option for those who suffer.

Other Voices, Other Worlds tries to privilege these voices, beginning with a gay North American native Indian voice, moving on to women and men of Oceania and Asia, then Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and finally, *last*, voices of the global ‘north’. The voices are by no means in complete agreement with each other but each has its integrity. While the book is generally ‘positive’ on the issue of homosexuality, there are many cautions, for example, against accepting stereotypes on all sides, or overly simplistic theologies of ‘liberation’.

Other principles at stake

There are at least two other missiological principles that have been undercut in recent controversies on this issue that *Other Voices, Other Worlds* tries to reassert. One is that responsibility for mission belongs to the local church in that place first and foremost before any other groups come in. Of course, with the speed of internet and other electronic communication, today what is local and global and become quite blurred and no one thinks twice about pronouncing on another's ‘local’ situation, perhaps on the basis of insufficient information or under pressure from the media or one's own constituency. With so many ‘local’ voices, talking about quite ‘local’ situations, the book is a plea for a stepping back from global judgements.

Secondly, the Lund principle, that we should do everything together that we can do together and only what we cannot do together should we do separately, has also taken quite a beating internally in the Anglican Communion in the past few years, as provinces have ceased working together because of disagreement on ‘the issue’. The Archbishop of Uganda disagrees with the Bishop of New Hampshire's consecration so refuses to accept ‘tainted’ money from the Episcopal Church national office (for even urgently needed HIV-AIDS work) and a long-time working relationship ceases. Such a position seems to reflect in intrusion of American special interest politics into the Communion

more than anything else; it certainly is not a traditional Evangelical position. General William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, in questioned why he accepted money from the industrial capitalists of his day, declared, 'I would accept money from Satan himself if it were for the Lord's work.' And it is dubious that neo-conservative Texas oil money is any less 'tainted' than that of the Episcopal Church national office.

Other Voices, Other Worlds is an attempt to reassert the Lund principle (even with so-called gay and lesbian churches such as the Metropolitan Community Church, and similar independent churches in Hong Kong, Singapore and elsewhere, discussed in the book) – but especially within the Anglican Communion itself. Can we not still *all work together* despite our disagreement on this and other issues?

As one who has rather gone out on a limb personally in terms of my writing about my own sexuality in the Introduction to the book, the question of working together with those who see the matter differently is basic. I only hope for continued mutual *agape* and *koinonia* – despite disagreements and even anger. I am not sure that this mutual tolerance has always been the historical 'Anglican Way' – there are too many burnings at the stake in our history for that – but it has been present I only hope it could be the emerging 'Anglican Way' for the future.

Finally, I hope that somehow *Other Voices, Other Worlds* will keep alive and encourage serious theological discussion on the issue of homosexuality within the Communion, and help us all to move away from sloganeering and simplistic prohibitions and sanctions.