

# **Homosexuality and the Church**

**A Study Guide**

**AND AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ACTION**

## Preface

The issue of homosexuality has been growing in importance within the Church of England for the last four decades. It has reached a point where the possibility of committed, faithful homosexual relationships being justified by the church threatens a major crisis and serious division.

I address the subject in this study guide, not because it is the only sin or the worst sin facing the church, neither because of any hang-up about God's wonderful gift of sexuality, but because it is strategically important. It is the sin the church could possibly decide to justify, with dire consequences.

It is important to add that I do not address the subject because of any homophobic feelings. (I define homophobia as an irrational rejection of or even hatred towards homosexuals). I have never suffered from such feelings and were I to do so I would regard them as a temptation to be resisted.

The opposite to homophobia is a sentimental desire to justify homosexual practice out of a misguided compassion for the real pain homosexuals face in society. There is however an important place for true compassion to be shown towards this pain and I address this in Section Five of the Study Guide.

This Study Guide is intended for local churches, PCCs, study groups or home groups and individuals. It is divided into six sections but it is up to readers to decide how many sessions are required. It could be done in less than six.

I have also written a more detailed background paper for leaders of the course, or those interested in deeper study [\*What does the Bible say on homosexual practice?\*](#)

Although this Study Guide stands on its own as a course, it is intended to be a commentary on the report from the House of Bishops *Issues in Human Sexuality*\*. I recommend that you purchase and read this report. Each section in the Study Guide refers to appropriate parts of the report.

## Tony Higton

\**Issues in Human Sexuality* is available from Church House Bookshop, 31 Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BN (Mail Order 0171 340 0276/0277).

Throughout this publication "ABWON" refers to Action for Biblical Witness to Our Nation, an organisation directed by Tony Higton in the 1980s and 1990s.

## SECTION ONE: BACK TO CREATION

### *Introduction: the current position of the Church of England*

“There are circumstances in which individuals may justifiably choose to enter into a homosexual relationships.” So said a Church of England report in 1979. This report had been produced by a working party chaired by the Bishop of Gloucester, set up in 1974 by the Board for Social Responsibility of the Church of England. It was called *Homosexual Relationships - a contribution to discussion* but commonly known as the Gloucester Report.

The Board for Social Responsibility included in the report a section criticising its pro-homosexual conclusions. The report came before the General Synod in 1981 but the synod refused to take a vote on it.

Then in 1987 Tony Higton put his Private Member’s Motion to General Synod and the revised wording passed by a 98% majority of the synod was:

“This Synod affirms that the Biblical and traditional teaching on chastity and fidelity in personal relationships is a response to, and expression of, God’s love for each one of us, and in particular affirms:

1. that sexual intercourse is an act of total commitment which belongs properly within a permanent marriage relationship;
2. that fornication and adultery are sins against this ideal, and are to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion;
3. that **homosexual genital acts also fall short of this ideal, and are likewise to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion;**
4. that all Christians are called to be exemplary in all spheres of morality, including sexual morality, and that holiness of life is particularly required for Christian leaders.”

So the General Synod all but unanimously reaffirmed the traditional biblical view that homosexual genital acts are sinful, i.e. to be met by a call to repentance. *This is still the official view of the Church of England.*

However in 1990 a working party chaired by June Osborne reported to the House of Bishops. Because of its radical recommendations, the Osborne Report was never published. It acknowledged .”The Scriptural references are, without exception, hostile towards the experience of homosexuality which they are addressing.... Whenever the Bible talks openly about homosexuality it presents it in a negative light.”

However it later said a committed, faithful homosexual relationship might “make the best moral sense” of a difficult situation. It recommended work being done on whether services of blessing on homosexual relationships “could be right for the church officially to encourage.” The report acknowledges that some homosexual Christians are experimenting with small communities which share in sexual relationships. It makes the astonishing comment: “Patterns of life which have traditionally been regarded as sinful and unacceptable to Christian conscience, are now being affirmed as fully acceptable to Christian people...the Working Party by no means endorses all these various lifestyles as morally and pastorally equivalent.”

Finally the report recorded the opinions of the bishops, “[Some] appeared to take the line that, provided individuals were discreet, they either did not wish to know what they did in their private lives or felt it inappropriate to get involved unless invited ... A minority took a more liberal view ...”

Little wonder the Bishops suppressed the report. It was too hot to handle. Interestingly, a majority of the Working Party were Evangelicals.

In 1991 the House of Bishops produced its own report, *Issues in Human Sexuality* which, although it contains much excellent material, is, as we shall see, seriously flawed.

The American Episcopal Church is currently in danger of tearing itself apart over the issue of ordaining practising homosexuals. We do well to note this as, in a few years time, we could easily be facing the same problems.

In November 1996, amidst widespread protest, the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement held its high-profile 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration in Southwark Cathedral. There are highly likely to be similar celebrations in other cathedrals. We shall not be able to avoid the controversy. We need to know what we believe; why we believe it and what we can do about it. This Study Guide is a contribution towards that process.

In July 1997 the General Synod is due to debate a Private Member's Motion on Homosexuality. It focuses on "Issues in Human Sexuality" and may well commend it for study throughout the church. This Study Guide should assist with that.

What *does* the Bible teach on the subject?

### Bible Study

Read Genesis 1:26-28; 2:18-25. [Many Christians regard the first two chapters of Genesis as symbolical. But all agree that they are teaching important truths about God, humanity and the world]

### The Report

1. Read *Issues in Human Sexuality* chapter 1 (pages 1-4) which refers to the reports and debates on homosexuality within recent decades. Note how, even though it is the official view of the Church of England, this report completely ignores the major debate in 1987 (described above) when, by a 98% majority, the General Synod reaffirmed that homosexual practice was "to be met by a call to repentance."
2. Read *Issues in Human Sexuality* paragraphs 2:1-2:6 (pages 5-7) which highlight unifying themes within the diversity of biblical material. They describe Scripture as "the consistent, reliable and divinely inspired witness to salvation history ... the authoritative revelation of his redeeming purpose and moral will." They also outline the teaching in the Genesis creation accounts.

### Discussion

1. Bearing in mind those biblical passages, what do you see as the purposes of God's gift of sexuality?
2. What relevance do your conclusions have to the issue of homosexuality?

[The course leader might like to refer to pages 3-5 of the booklet *What does the Bible say on homosexual practice?*]

## SECTION TWO: PROTECTING THE FAMILY

“Marriage is given, that husband and wife may comfort and help each other, living faithfully together in need and in plenty, in sorrow and in joy. It is given, that with delight and tenderness they may know each other in love, and, through the joy of their bodily union, may strengthen the union of their hearts and lives. It is given, that they may have children and be blessed in caring for them and bringing them up in accordance with God’s will, to his praise and glory.” (*Alternative Service Book, Marriage Service*)

Sexuality is created by God and part of creation which God called “very good”(Genesis 1:31). It is a pure gift of God. He intends (and commands) a man and a woman to enjoy sexual intercourse in a committed relationship, namely marriage, for the purposes of fulfilment, partnership and procreation (Genesis 1:28; 2:24-25). The *Song of Solomon* is a book which exults in the beauty of erotic love and shows that God intends sexual relationships to be enjoyable, not simply a means of procreation. Married couples are not to deprive each other of sexual relations except temporarily for special reasons and by mutual consent (1 Corinthians 7:1-5).

However, because sexuality involves powerful emotions and may be misused, Scripture provides principles for sexual relationships. These principles are for the welfare of human beings. A misuse of God’s wonderful gift of sexuality leads to much human heartache: rejection, betrayal, desertion, violation, trauma, disease, unwanted pregnancy outside marriage and so on. The family (which in biblical times would normally have been the extended family) is the basic unit of human society. It is the divinely ordained and therefore most beneficial context for the nurture of children. A loving, united mother and father not only best cope with the demands of family life but they afford the children models of both male and female which is important for children of both sexes. This is not to deny that many lone parents make a very good job of bringing up children. But the norm and ideal is a family led by a loving married couple.

Scripture sees sexual relations outside heterosexual marriage as undermining the family and therefore society. So it rules them out. It is in this context, as we shall see, that it disapproves of homosexual practice.

We are not going to take time looking at the infamous story of Sodom in Genesis 19 because, although it includes homosexual practice, it is in the context of gang rape and a serious breach of important ancient hospitality rules. So it isn’t really a very helpful passage in considering whether God allows committed homosexual genital relationships.

### **Bible Study**

Read Leviticus 18:1-6, 20-22 and chapter 20:1-13.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are clear condemnations of homosexual practice. But what sort of homosexual behaviour are they referring to? Some claim that it is religious prostitution, the sort of behaviour found in ancient Canaanite religion. They point to the fact that these chapters refer to child sacrifice to the god Molech (18:21; 20:1-5); occultism (20:6) or ritual uncleanness (18:19). So, they argue, we must understand the references to homosexuality as meaning religious prostitution. If this is true, these passages are not relevant to committed, faithful homosexual relationships.

However, it is clear that although both chapters do mention pagan religion, most of their teaching is against incest or adultery, which is not relevant to religious prostitution. Rather it is against the undermining of the family. We are right therefore to see Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 as ruling out all homosexual practice.

[*Other Old Testament Passages:* Deuteronomy 23:17-18 condemns religious prostitution, heterosexual or homosexual. Judges 19:22 refers to homosexual gang rape. Some have claimed that Ruth and Naomi had a lesbian relationship and David and Jonathan a homosexual relationship. But there is no evidence for that being true. Others claim Potiphar had a homosexual attraction to Joseph (Gen. 39) but this adds nothing to the debate about Scripture's attitude towards homosexuality.]

### **The Report**

Read *Issues in Human Sexuality* paragraphs 2:7-12 (pages 8-10) which refer to Old Testament sexual ethics and the stress on the importance of procreation as a purpose of the creation of sexuality. They deal with the Leviticus passages concluding that they condemn certain sexual practices as violating holiness and ritual purity and as typical of Canaanite practices. They also conclude that the sin of Sodom was sexual and not merely a breach of hospitality. (Paragraph 2:24 is also relevant but we shall refer to that later)

### **Discussion**

Part of the official Basis of Faith of the Church of England are the 39 Articles in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Article 7 divides Old Testament law into three divisions:

- a. *Ceremonial Law* (animal sacrifices etc.) fulfilled in Christ and not binding on Christians
- b. *Civil Law*, the rights, privileges and punishments of citizens in ancient Israel (e.g. the death penalty) which are not binding on Christians.
- c. *Moral Law*. **Here Article 7 states: "No Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral."**

[This distinction is important when some argue that we can ignore Leviticus because no-one keeps all the laws today].

1. What is your attitude towards the Old Testament law? Is the teaching of Leviticus relevant to today?
2. What is Jesus' attitude towards the Old Testament law? See Matthew 5:17-19.

However, the Old Testament needs to be read in the light of the fuller revelation in the New Testament. In the next section we shall look at what the New Testament says about homosexuality.

[The course leader may like to refer to pages 5-9 of the booklet *What does the Bible say on homosexual practice?*]

## SECTION THREE: THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING

### *What did Jesus say about homosexuality?*

As far as explicit references recorded in the Gospels are concerned the answer is: nothing! Some people make much of this. They argue that Jesus therefore wasn't interested in the subject and maybe he even approved of committed, faithful homosexual relationships.

However, this will not do. It is an argument from silence. Jesus' condemnation of "sexual immorality" in Matthew 15:19; Mark 7:21 may have included homosexual practice. And he does refer to Sodom and Gomorrah as examples of judgment. But it is true that he makes no explicit reference to homosexuality. The explanation is that he was addressing a Jewish audience. Dr Gordon Wenham comments: "Among Jews, at least after the exile, there seems to have been practically no homosexual activity by Jewish men. The later rabbis say that homosexuality is not a problem with Jews, so their rules about men associating with each other are quite relaxed compared with their ever-present worry of illicit male-female relations."

### *St Paul's teaching*

One of the key passages is in Paul's introduction to his letter to the Romans.

#### **Bible Study**

Read Romans 1:18-32

This passage is a very clear condemnation of both homosexual practice and lesbianism. But what sort of behaviour is it referring to?

Some claim it is only referring to the most common sort of homosexual practice in the ancient Greek world. That is a sexual relationship between an older man and a boy or young man (a practice called pederasty). However:

- a. Paul condemns lesbianism too.
- b. He avoids using any of the usual various Greek words referring to pederasty.
- c. Instead he uses a very general word for homosexuals.

Others claim Paul only knew about bi-sexuals (heterosexuals who choose to be involved also in homosexual relationships), not those who seem to have a fixed homosexual orientation. They refer to verses 26-27: "They exchanged natural relations for unnatural..." to back up the idea that he refers to heterosexuals who are doing something unnatural to them. However:

- i. Paul, as a scholar, would have known some people had a fixed homosexual orientation. Historians tell us that the ancient Greeks were aware of this. For example, Aristotle, 300 years before Paul, wrote about it.
- ii. Paul is not using the word "natural" in the sense of what feels natural to the individual. He is referring to creation in verses 20, 25. He is using "natural" in the sense of "according to Nature"; according to God's created order. Homosexual practice is contrary to Nature, contrary to God's created order.

In 1 Corinthians 6:9 Paul writes that "homosexual offenders" (as well as other sinners) will not inherit the kingdom of God. Again he uses a very general word for homosexuals. The same word is used in 1 Timothy 1:10 which says homosexuals (translated "perverts") are behaving in a way contrary to Christian truth.

#### **The Report**

Read *Issues in Human Sexuality* paragraphs 2:13-2:17 (pages 10-13) which deal with New Testament sexual ethics in the context of the world of its time. They outline Paul's condemnation in Romans 1 of dishonourable passions as "a disordering of God's purpose." It also refers to 1 Corinthians 6 and 1

Timothy 1:9-10. The report concludes that the New Testament world was aware of people who were homosexual by orientation. It also concludes that because Jesus uses the Genesis account of God creating humankind male and female as a basis of ethical teaching he regarded heterosexual love as the divine pattern.

#### Discussion

1. How do you respond to the argument that if homosexuality feels natural to a person (i.e. they seem to have a fixed homosexual orientation) it is right for them to be involved in a committed, faithful homosexual relationship? (Look at ii above)
2. How much do you think Christians are influenced by society's attitudes towards homosexual practice rather than by the Bible?

[The course leader may like to refer to pages 9-14 of the booklet *What does the Bible say on homosexual practice?*]



## **SECTION FOUR: IS THE BIBLICAL TEACHING RELEVANT TODAY?**

It seems quite clear that whenever Scripture refers to homosexual practice it condemns it as contrary to the divine order of creation. It seems equally clear that it rules out all homosexual practice, not just pederasty (the sexual relationship between an older man and a boy or young man, common in the ancient Greek world) or rape or religious prostitution. The main passages are Leviticus 18:22; and 20:13 in the Old Testament and Romans 1:18-32 ; 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 in the New Testament.

The question is, though, whether the biblical teaching on the subject is still relevant today.

### **Doesn't love make a homosexual relationship right?**

Could homosexual genital relationships ever be right, in circumstances unforeseen by the biblical writers? If such a relationship is by mutual consent, is caring and involves commitment, does that make it right? Adultery and incest could happen by mutual consent and with a caring attitude but that doesn't make those practices right. Neither do mutual consent, caring or commitment make a homosexual relationship right.

In any case, for the Christian, love isn't just positive feeling and a caring attitude. Jesus said: "If you love me, keep my commandments". Paul writes similarly in Rom 13:9-10 "The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law." Love includes fulfilling God's law as well as having a positive feeling and a caring attitude. Indeed we do not truly love a person if our love is not a reflection of God's love, which is defined in his word (in the person of Jesus and in Scripture).

### **What about the parallel with slavery?**

This argument is based on the apparent support of Scripture for the oppression of slaves. The church now believes that to be wrong. Similarly, the argument goes, Scripture upholds the oppression of homosexuals and the church should now treat that as wrong too.

Actually, Scripture has a relatively compassionate approach to slavery and in New Testament times the conditions of slaves were generally being improved throughout the ancient world. The parables of Jesus illustrate that slaves were employed more as administrators with labour being recruited casually.

Slavery is undermined by 1 Cor 7:22 "For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave." and Gal 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Paul commands masters to treat slaves well: "Masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him." (Eph. 6:9) "Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven."(Col. 4:1).

However slaves are to respect their masters: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord."(Col. 3:22) "All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy

of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered. Those who have believing masters are not to show less respect for them because they are brothers. Instead, they are to serve them even better, because those who benefit from their service are believers, and dear to them. These are the things you are to teach and urge on them."(1 Tim 6:1-2)

Paul even encourages slaves to gain their freedom: "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you— although if you can gain your freedom, do so."(1 Cor. 7:21)

The Old Testament Law showed compassion towards slaves. But the New Testament clearly set the seeds of slavery's downfall: there is neither slave nor free in Christ; Onesimus, the runaway slave, is Paul's "very heart", he is "very dear", Philemon, his master, should regard him as a brother not a slave. The abolition of slavery is a clear implication from New Testament teaching. There is no parallel with homosexuals. Both the Old and New Testament strongly condemn homosexual practice and give no hint that this view could change.

Had the New Testament writers deliberately incited slaves to rebel this could have led to widespread reprisals and bloodshed and militated against the spread of Christianity at that time. This would not have been the case in the Greek world had the New Testament liberated homosexuals, because the Greek world accepted homosexuality. Yet there is no hint of homosexual liberation in the New Testament.

The unavoidable conclusion is that there is no parallel between Scripture's acceptance of slaves and its condemnation of homosexual practice. Consequently the church would not be justified in liberating homosexuals, in the sense of accepting homosexual practice.

As regards state legislation, most Christians would argue it is right that private consenting homosexual practice should have been decriminalised for all except minors. It is highly likely that further permissive legislation will be passed, including by the European Community. The police are recruiting gays and lesbians. The army will lift its ban on homosexuals. Section 28 of the Local Government Act will be repealed. Christians of all political persuasions will be aware that this will free local authorities intentionally to promote homosexuality in schools. The Scouts have recently decided not to discriminate against homosexuals. Soon the church is likely to be the only institution without such a liberal equal opportunities policy. And it will be a target of immense pressure, including through the European Court of Justice.

But this study is about the beliefs and practice of the church. **It is imperative that the Church of England is definite now, both in theology and practice, so that a clear case may be made for the church being exempt from any obligation to conform to a pro-gay equal opportunities policy.**

### **The Report**

1. Read *Issues in Human Sexuality* paragraphs 2:18-2:29 (pages 13-18) which seek to evaluate the biblical material, relating it to our own experience. They say in some cases Scripture must judge contemporary views, showing them to be in error. In other cases new factors or understandings make our situation very different from that of the biblical writers and careful study of Scripture may afford us new insights. The report also deals with how we distinguish which Old Testament laws are relevant to us. It concludes that the Leviticus passages are not only referring to cultic purity but are relevant to us. The Report's overall conclusion on the biblical teaching is that "Sexual activity of any kind outside marriage comes to be seen as sinful, and homosexual practice as especially dishonourable."
2. Read *Issues in Human Sexuality* Chapter 3 (pages 19-30) which contains very helpful material on sexuality in general. It covers the importance of total commitment (marriage) before full sexual intercourse and the importance of marriage for providing a loving, stable context for bringing up children. The report has a good section on the single person, reminding us that Jesus was single and urging the church to respect its single members. It distinguishes celibacy as a calling from chastity. After dealing with various sexual deviations it concentrates on the

goodness of sexuality. Finally it states that the physical expression of sexuality will not be needed in the world to come.

#### Discussion

1. Should the church be stricter than the state?
2. Discuss how you can encourage young people in your church to have a chaste lifestyle outside of marriage.

[The course leader may like to refer to pages 14-18 of the booklet *What does the Bible say on homosexual practice?*]

## SECTION FIVE: THE EQUALLY IMPORTANT QUESTION OF ATTITUDES

Scripture makes it quite clear the second great commandment is to love your neighbour as yourself. In this paper we have argued that Scripture condemns all homosexual practice. However, if we do not love our homosexual or lesbian neighbour we are equally sinful.

### **Bible Study**

Read 1 Corinthians 13 and John 8:1-11

Paul makes it quite clear in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

*“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”*

The plain fact is that many homosexual and lesbian people do not feel loved by their fellow Christians. To love them does not, of course, mean accepting homosexual genital behaviour. But it does mean accepting them as people. Jesus exemplified this attitude in responding to the woman caught in the act of adultery in John 8:11. He said to her, “Neither do I condemn you ... go and leave your life of sin.” God’s forgiveness and strength to overcome temptation are made readily available to the penitent through Jesus.

Sexuality inevitably raises powerful emotions. Christians have often dealt badly with the subject. They are threatened by it, even in our “liberated” age. We must avoid a fixation on sexual sin as if it were more serious than other sins the New Testament links with it. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 lists “idolaters, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, slanderers and swindlers” with “the sexually immoral, adulterers, male prostitutes and homosexual offenders” who “will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Judging by the way that Christians slander each other in negative gossip in the average church, that passage should be rather worrying to many churchmembers, not just those who have sinned sexually.

It follows that we should treat homosexual sinners in the same way as we treat other sinners. They should be made thoroughly welcome to attend church. Any “gut reaction” of homophobia (an irrational rejection of or even hatred towards homosexuals) which some Christians have towards homosexuals should, in itself, be treated as a temptation to sin and resisted firmly. A homosexual ought to know he can reveal his orientation within our churches without risk of rejection or being kept at arms length. No-one should be embarrassed to show the same affection to him or her as to everyone else, including giving a hug, if that is part of the culture of the church concerned.

Many churches have driven homosexuals into the clutches of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement because of the lack of warmth, welcome and affection shown to them in those churches. Like Jesus with the woman caught in adultery, we must distinguish the sinner from the sin. As we have seen, he warmly affirmed her, then told her to go and sin no more. The hypocritical and vindictive holy joes around him would have criticised him for being soft on adultery!

It is only when these attitudes are sorted out that the church can begin to help with the emotional and moral problem. Otherwise any approach will seem judgmental and hard. *Ultimately*, anyone who persists impenitently in a sinful lifestyle must face proper godly church discipline. But patience and mercy are primary considerations. (Sadly, however, most practising homosexuals will still regard anyone as unloving who disapproves of that practice).

As for “curing” homosexuals, counselling and prayer for emotional healing is important. But anyone who thinks a quick-fix will happen in all, or even most cases, is mistaken. The problem is more complex, and great damage can be caused by a simplistic quick-fix approach.

There is no substitute for on-going pastoral support and for discipling (in the best sense of the term). Something along the lines of a Christian version of the Twelve Steps to Recovery of Alcoholics Anonymous could perhaps be adapted to homosexual practice.

Many may never change in orientation, but can be helped to live a chaste lifestyle. After all, in a church which for decades has had a membership of two thirds women, traditionally many women chose to remain single and chaste, rather than marry a man who did not share their Christian beliefs.

Above all, like the rest of us, those with a homosexual orientation need to be loved.

### **The Report**

Read *Issues in Human Sexuality* chapter 4 (pages 31-39) which deals with questions about the origin of homosexual orientation. It points out that neither a genetic nor a psychological explanation indicates whether a condition is good or bad, and a genetic explanation does not mean the condition is the undistorted will of God. The report does not entirely rule out the possibility of changing a person’s sexual orientation in certain cases. It continues that the church should be accepting and friendly to homosexuals as people. Then it condemns homophobia. (Note the fleeting only reference to the 1987 General Synod debate in 4:10). Finally the report deals with the meaning of the word “natural”, particularly as used by Paul in Romans 1. It favours the view that it means in accordance with the divine order of creation.

### **Discussion**

1. Why do you think some people experience homophobia (an irrational rejection of or even hatred towards homosexuals)?
2. What can be done to overcome homophobia?
3. How welcome (as people) would homosexuals feel in your church?
4. In what ways could your church become more welcoming and loving towards homosexuals, without compromising on the moral issue?

[The course leader may like to refer to pages 18-21 of the booklet *What does the Bible say on homosexual practice?*]

## SECTION SIX: “ISSUES IN HUMAN SEXUALITY” – THE BISHOPS’ REPORT

Hopefully, readers will have seen from earlier sections that there is much good material in the first four chapters of the House of Bishops report *Issues in Human Sexuality*. It will be helpful to read the final chapter, chapter 5 (pages 40-48) at this point. **Although containing further good material, this is the chapter which contains serious weaknesses which should be of grave concern to us.** We shall remind readers of some important statements earlier in the report as well as examining chapter 5.

### The good news

The report’s treatment of Scripture is encouraging. As we have seen, it accepts that the Old Testament is against all homosexual practice not just ritual (cultic) prostitution, as some people argue (para 2:24). It also affirms that Jesus upheld the teaching of Genesis and was therefore against homosexual practice although he made no explicit reference to homosexuality (para 2:17). The report states that when Paul said homosexual practice was “unnatural” he wasn’t simply saying it was contrary to what felt natural to the individual. He meant it was contrary to God’s Order (paras 2:28; 4:13).

Its conclusion on the biblical teaching is as follows: “There is therefore in Scripture an evolving convergence on the idea of lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual union as the setting intended by God for the proper development of men and women as sexual beings. *Sexual activity of any kind outside marriage comes to be seen as sinful and homosexual practice as especially dishonourable.*” (para 2:29, emphasis ours)

The report concludes that “the biological evidence is at least compatible with a theological view that heterosexual physical union is divinely intended to be the norm.” (para 4:14).

The report states that the causes of homosexuality are uncertain (para 4:2) and it does not rule out the possibility of change in a person’s sexual orientation (para 4:4).

It points out that there are few clergy of a homosexual orientation (para 5:11). We need to get the issue in perspective. The homosexual lobby inflates the figures for propaganda purposes. They are fond of quoting Kinsey’s figures from the 1940s which claim that 10% of the population have a fixed homosexual orientation. But Kinsey’s figures have long since been discredited as based upon unrepresentative samples. Recent university studies, e.g. the University of Chicago in 1989, have recorded that less than 1% of the population are of a “fixed” homosexual orientation. It is interesting in this connection that the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement has been in existence for 20 years but only has a small membership.

There are, of course, many who have committed homosexual acts who have done so because of the libertarian climate of our society, who would not actually describe themselves as homosexuals. This is extremely disturbing.

The Bishops call clergy to give a good example (para 5:13). They address the matter of practising homosexual clergy and say, “There is at any given time such a thing as the mind of the church on matters of faith and life. Those who disagree with that mind are free to argue for change. What they are not free to do is to go against that mind in their own practice.” (para 5:15)

They continue: “We have to say, therefore that in our considered judgment the clergy cannot claim the liberty to enter into sexually active homophile relationships (para 5:17) ... We therefore call upon clergy to live lives that respect the church’s teaching, and we shall do everything in our power to help them do so. This means that candidates for ordination must be prepared to abide by the same standards.” (paras 5:21-22)

All of this is good news, even if one could wish for more definite language at times.

## **The not-so-good news**

The report states that homosexual behaviour is not “as complete within the terms of the created order as the heterosexual. ... Heterosexuality and homosexuality are not equally congruous with the observed order of creation or with the insights of revelation ...” (para 5:2). Here one could wish for more definite wording which would completely rule out homosexual practice.

## **The bad news**

Sadly, there are some gravely disturbing aspects to the report.

### **A double standard**

The Bishops rightly say they respect the conscience of individual lay people and continue that, while they cannot commend a homosexual lifestyle, “we do not reject those who sincerely believe it is God’s call to them, we stand alongside them in the fellowship of the church, all alike dependent upon the undeserved grace of God.” (para 5:6)

What does this mean? If it only means that we should warmly welcome homosexual people (as everyone) to attend church then we should applaud it. But if it means they can be full communicant members who are also able to take office or leadership in the church, that would be seriously contrary to the direct implications of biblical teaching. One Evangelical bishop stated that these people “would not normally be in leadership”, which is a profoundly disturbing statement in that it implies sometimes they would be.

The report then continues to teach a double standard: one standard for clergy, another for laity. “Certain possibilities are not open to the clergy in comparison with the laity, something that in principle has always been accepted.” (para 5:13) It is true that the qualifications for presbyters (priests) and deacons in the New Testament would rule out some lay people. A candidate for ordination must have a record of good behaviour and a good reputation. But the Bible never approves anyone – ordained or not – persisting in a sinful lifestyle. The wording of the report appears to do so.

### **A door left open**

The report allows for the possibility of the church changing its mind on the subject (and so contradicting Scripture and 2000 years of Christian tradition). It uses phrases such as “**given the present understanding**” of homosexual relations it is unrealistic to expect the church to accept practising homosexual clergy (para 5:16). It would pose a problem “for a significant number of people *at this time*.” (para 5:14, emphasis ours) That is an understatement: many overseas bishops have warned it could lead to the break up of the Anglican Communion. Recently, Bishop John Baker, who helped write the report, has stated publicly that it’s ban on practising homosexual clergy is no longer tenable.

### **An inadequate discipline**

We should recognise the complications and difficulties faced by bishops in seeking to practise godly discipline. Many of them try to do so, but it is not easy. Sometimes it is well-nigh impossible within the rules of the church.

However the report is irresponsible in saying: “Although we must take steps to avoid public scandal and to protect the church’s teaching, we shall continue, as we have done hitherto, to treat all clergy who give no occasion for scandal with trust and respect.” (para 5:18) No-one wants a witch-hunt or unpleasant judgmental attitudes. But it is not good enough for a bishop only to take action if there is a danger of public scandal. He should take action when there appears to be sufficient private evidence to warrant it. (Some do already)

There is even less justification for the report’s irresponsible attitude towards ordinands. “Candidates for ordination also must be prepared to abide by the same standards. For reasons already mentioned,

however, we do not think it right to interrogate individuals on their sexual lives. Ordinarily it should be left to the candidates' own consciences to act responsibly in this matter." (para 5:22) The word "interrogation" is unhelpful but it is not difficult to ask a candidate for ordination his or her views on sexuality and, assuming they are in line with biblical teaching, whether (s)he seeks to uphold them in practice. This can be done sensitively in confidence.

## ***Conclusion***

This report is much better than previous ones: the Gloucester Report and certainly the unpublished Osborne Report. It is helpful on the biblical teaching and it clearly rules out in principle practising homosexual clergy, at least for the foreseeable future.

However, it is seriously flawed:

- in using language which appears to tolerate lay homosexual couples being full communicant churchmembers;
  - in leaving the door open to the possibility of justifying homosexual practice in the future;
  - in advocating clergy discipline only where there is a danger of scandal, and
  - in refusing to question candidates for ordination on the matter of sexual activity.
- in virtually ignoring the 1987 resolution passed by a 98% majority of General Synod [although this was based on a private member's motion it was radically amended on behalf of the House of Bishops and a successful private member's motion has the full status of a General Synod decision].

## **Discussion**

This Study Guide has been sent to all the full time clergy in the Church of England. It affords the opportunity for every parish to make an impact for good over the issue and to counteract the progress of the homosexual lobby within the church. Bear in mind that some parishes might decide to respond by expressing support for that lobby. Discuss what action you can take as a church.

## **Action**

We invite you to take the following action:

1. For the PCC to pass motions such as those below;
2. To convey them to
  - your bishop(s), both diocesan and suffragan (if any)
  - your General Synod representatives
  - your archbishop

NB.

- a. *Issues in Human Sexuality* is available from Church House Bookshop, 31 Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BN (Mail Order 0171 340 0276/0277) at £3.95.
- b. To take part in this action is not taken as identifying your clergyman or church as supporting ABWON.

## **Motions**

*[suggested wording]*

### ***Suggested Motion 1***

"That this council affirms the 1987 General Synod resolution on sexuality, respectfully urges the House of Bishops and our clerical and lay representatives in General Synod to uphold that resolution in future debates on the subject and not to support any motion which could be understood as approving homosexual practice."

[The 1987 resolution was:

"This Synod affirms that the Biblical and traditional teaching on chastity and fidelity in personal relationships is a response to, and expression of, God's love for each one of us, and in particular affirms:



1. that sexual intercourse is an act of total commitment which belongs properly within a permanent marriage relationship;
2. that fornication and adultery are sins against this ideal, and are to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion;
3. that homosexual genital acts also fall short of this ideal, and are likewise to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion;
4. that all Christians are called to be exemplary in all spheres of morality, including sexual morality, and that holiness of life is particularly required for Christian leaders.”]

*Suggested Motion 2*

**This council:**

- a. **is grateful for the many strengths of the Bishops’ Report Issues in Human Sexuality (1991), particularly for its helpful treatment of Scripture, its welcome for all who attend church and its disapproval of practising homosexual clergy, but**
- b. **expresses deep concern that it uses language which appears to tolerate lay practising homosexuals being full communicant churchmembers\*; leaves the door open to the possibility of justifying homosexual practice amongst clergy; advocates clergy discipline only where there is a danger of scandal, and refuses to interview candidates for ordination on the matter of sexual activity, and**
- c. **urges the House of Bishops and the General Synod to rectify these weaknesses as soon as possible**
- d. **respectfully requests the House of Bishops to support clergy in upholding the 1987 Synod decision on sexuality**

[\* See section about this below]

*Suggested Motion 3*

*A more detailed PCC Motion*

**This council**

- a. **is grateful for the many strengths of the Bishop’s report *Issues in Human Sexuality (1991)*, in particular for its helpful treatment of Scripture, its constructive comments on many of the issues and for making clear its disapproval of practising homosexual clergy;**
- b. **expresses deep concern that clergy discipline is advocated only where there is danger of scandal, and respectfully requests that discipline is always initiated where the bishop knows a clergyperson is a practising homosexual or lesbian or otherwise engaging in a sexual relationship outside of marriage;**
- c. **requests that candidates for ordination are privately and sensitively asked whether they uphold in principle and practice the traditional teaching of the church on sexuality and are only recommended for training if they intend to confine their own sexual relationship within heterosexual marriage (or else remain chaste or celibate); and intend to teach these principles to congregations in the future.**

- d. deeply regrets that the report appears to tolerate lay practising homosexuals being full communicant churchmembers\* and opens the door for them to be in lay leadership, and requests that this impression be reversed; and**
- e. reiterates that this parish rejects homophobia and will continue to offer a warm welcome and pastoral care to all who attend services, so that they might discover more of the saving love of God in Christ, but will continue to remind prospective communicants of the need for repentance before receiving communion, and through teaching will ensure that regular communicants and lay leaders understand that this includes the importance of upholding sexual morality as traditionally taught by the church and reaffirmed by General Synod in 1987.**

[\*See section about this on page 15]

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