

Sex and the Anglican Communion: An overview
A presentation in the Lenten Study Series "Love Incarnate, Carnal Love"
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Introduction

My task this evening is to give a sense of the big picture, of how the Anglican Communion, including the Anglican Church of Canada, has approached the question of human sexuality. Specifically, I will address the two major recent documents, the Windsor Report and the St Michael Report, and then move on to suggest some possible ways in which we as Province and as Communion might proceed in moving forward on our journey in human sexuality. But I believe the best place to start will be a survey of what the Lambeth Conference has had to say on the subject over the years.

Lambeth Conference

Ten of the thirteen Lambeth Conferences, including all nine Conferences held in the twentieth century, passed resolutions regarding sexuality and related matters. A total of 53 resolutions, representing some 6.4% of the total of 832 from the thirteen Conferences, reflect the thinking of the bishops as it has evolved since the mid 19th century.

The Lambeth Conferences' attitudes to sexuality may be discerned from resolutions on a variety of specific topics including marriage, polygamy, sexual morality, contraception and homosexuality. The first statements on sexuality are found in resolutions from the 1888 Conference on divorce (1888:4) and polygamy (1888:5). These resolutions argued against allowing remarriage after divorce and advocated withholding baptism from polygamists "until such time as they shall be in a position to accept the law of Christ" whilst allowing "that the wives of polygamists may ... be admitted in some cases to baptism" with the circumstances "left to the local authorities of the Church."

It is interesting to follow the developments in these two areas. With respect to divorce and remarriage, the 1888 Conference already contained the seeds of a nuanced approach to the strict discipline recommending against giving the Church's blessing to second marriages, by distinguishing between the "guilty party" and the "innocent party" and recommending "that the clergy should not be instructed to refuse the sacraments or other privileges of the Church" to those of the latter who remarry "under civil sanction" (though not under ecclesiastical sanction). By 1908 the matter was becoming less certain, as it was resolved that "when an innocent person has ... divorced a spouse for adultery, and desires to enter into another contract of marriage, it is undesirable that such a contract should received the blessing of the Church." (1908:40) Although this resolution is consistent with the 1888 statement, it passed only by the narrow margin of 87 to 84. In 1920 the Conference was prepared to "[admit] the right of a national or regional Church ... to deal with cases which fall within the exception mentioned in our Lord's words in St Matthew's Gospel, under provisions which such Church may lay down." (1920:67) In other words, the Conference recognized both the principle of Provincial autonomy and the legitimacy of any Province

using that autonomy to provide for remarriage by the “innocent party” when the divorce has been brought about by adultery, reversing the position of 1908.

The 1948 Conference expressed concern about an increase in divorce and “earnestly implore[d] those whose marriage, perhaps through no fault of their own, is unhappy to remain steadfastly faithful to their marriage vows.” (1948:92) But the same Conference was not without compassion, resolving that “mindful of those who are in deep distress and claim the Church’s sympathy ... provincial and regional Churches should consider how best their pastoral responsibility towards those who do not conform to our Lord’s standard can be discharged.” (1948:95) By 1958, the Conference was prepared to concede that “in certain cases ... there may in fact have been no marital bond in the eyes of the Church” and thus commend “for further consideration by the Churches and provinces of the Anglican Communion a procedure for defining marital status, such as already exists in some of its provinces.” (1958:118) Such a scheme had entered into the Canadian marriage canon in 1946. Later Conferences would continue to express concern for the need to offer pastoral support to families and preparation for marriage, but the trend is clear: over the course of a century the Conference’s attitude toward the divorced shifted from punitive discipline to compassionate, pastoral concern.

A similar shift in attitude is discernable in the resolutions on polygamy. In 1888, as we have seen, the Conference was prepared to baptise the wives of polygamists, under certain circumstances, but would only sanction the baptism of male polygamists at “such time as they shall be in a position to accept the law of Christ.” (1888:5) In practise this would mean that a polygamist who wished to be baptised would have to divorce all his wives but one prior to his baptism, solving one problem by creating another one. In 1958 the Conference continued to “[bear] witness to the truth that monogamy is the divine will, testified by the teaching of Christ himself, and therefore true for every race of men.” (1958:120) But the Conference “acknowledge[d] that the introduction of monogamy into societies that practise polygamy involves a social and economic revolution and raises problems which the Christian Church has as yet not solved” and thus “urge[d] upon Church members the continuance of thorough study and earnest prayer that God may lead his Church to know the manner of its witness and discipline in this issue.” (1958:120) Ten years later the Conference “ask[ed] each province to re-examine its discipline in such problems in full consultation with other provinces in a similar situation.” (1968:23) This study and consultation resulted in the recommendation “that a polygamist who responds to the Gospel and wishes to join the Anglican Church may be baptized and confirmed with his believing wives and children” under the condition that he “shall promise not to marry again as long as any of his wives at the time of his conversion are alive.” Notably, the Conference also recommended “that such a polygamist shall not be compelled to put away any of his wives, on account of the social deprivation they would suffer.” (1988:26)

The bishops also reflected societal shifts in attitudes toward sex in several resolutions, notably those regarding marriage and contraception. For example, in 1908, “[t]he Conference regard[ed] with alarm the growing practice of the artificial restriction of the family, and earnestly call[ed] upon all Christian people to discountenance the use of all artificial means of restriction as demoralising to character and hostile to national welfare.” (1908:41) The depth of concern regarding contraception was made clearer in 1920, when the bishops “utter[ed] an emphatic warning against the use of

unnatural means for the avoidance of conception, together with the grave dangers ... thereby incurred, and against the evils with which the extension of such use threatens the race.” Furthermore, the conference decried teaching which “encourages married people in the deliberate cultivation of sexual union as an end in itself.” The bishops went on to explain that “we steadfastly uphold what must always be regarded as the governing considerations of Christian marriage. One is the primary purpose for which marriage exists, namely the continuation of the race through the gift and heritage of children; the other is the paramount importance in married life of deliberate and thoughtful self-control.” (1920:68) With respect to prevention of the spread of venereal diseases, the same Conference felt compelled to “condemn the distribution or use, before exposure to infection, of so-called prophylactics, since these cannot but be regarded as an invitation to vice.” (1920:69)

Just ten years later, the Conference appeared radically to alter its view of sexuality, stating that it “emphasises the truth that the sexual instinct is a holy thing implanted by God in human nature [and] acknowledges that intercourse between husband and wife as the consummation of marriage has a value of its own within that sacrament, and that thereby married love is enhanced and its character strengthened.” However, the Conference could not maintain such a sex-affirming position for very long, as it went on to state that “seeing that the primary purpose for which marriage exists is the procreation of children, [the Conference] believes that this purpose as well as the paramount importance in married life of deliberate and thoughtful self-control should be the governing considerations in that intercourse.” (1930:13) By 1958, at the height of the Baby Boom, the Conference was finally able to allow “that the responsibility for deciding upon the number and frequency of children has been laid by God upon the consciences of parents ... [and] that this planning ... is a right and important factor in Christian family life....” (1958:115) This apparent endorsement of contraception was tempered however, by the reminder that “Christians need always to remember that sexual love is not an end in itself nor a means to self-gratification, and that self-discipline and restraint are essential conditions of the responsible freedom of marriage and family planning.” (1958:113)

Although perhaps somewhat reluctantly, it is clear that the attitude of the bishops toward sex was changing. We see a similar shift in the liturgies of the Church. Consider the definition of the purpose of marriage in the marriage rite of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, which lists three purposes: procreation, “a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication,” and “mutual society, help, and comfort.” Within the explanation of the second purpose of marriage, it is made plain that marriage is essentially an exception to the preferred route of “the gift of continency,” backed up by the warning that marriage “is not by any to be enterprized ... to satisfy men’s carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding....”

The 1918 Canadian Book of Common Prayer contains a revised understanding of the three purposes of marriage: “the hallowing of the union betwixt man and woman”, procreation (now in second place), and “mutual society, help and comfort.” Gone is the reference to the “gift of continency”; marriage is now seen more positively and less ambiguously. By 1985, the Book of Alternative Services saw the three purposes of marriage as: “mutual comfort and help” (now in first position), “that they may know each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love”, and procreation, now in third position and bracketed as optional.

Note in this progression a downgrading of the position of procreation from the primary purpose of marriage, to secondary and finally to a third and optional position. Second, we see a significant shift from a concern about the “avoidance of sin” to a positive statement about the role of sex in marriage. Finally, we see the promotion of the relationship between the couple from third position to the primary purpose of marriage.

Liturgical expression of the acceptance of sex perhaps reached its zenith in the hymn, “Now thank we God for Bodies Strong” (Hymn #202, *The Hymn Book of the Anglican Church of Canada and the United Church of Canada*, 1971 [The “Red” Hymn Book] tune Kingsfold)

Now thank we God for bodies strong,
vitality and zest,
for strength to meet the day’s demands,
the urge to give our best,
for all the body’s appetites which can fulfilment find,
and for the sacrament of sex that recreates our kind.

As the Church and its bishops were becoming increasingly sexy over the course of the twentieth century, a new issue arrived on the agenda of the Lambeth Conference and other deliberative bodies: homosexuality. The topic was first addressed by Lambeth in 1978, when the Conference affirmed “the need for theological study of sexuality in such a way as to relate sexual relationships to that wholeness of human life which itself derives from God...” The Conference went on to state that “[w]hile we reaffirm heterosexuality as the scriptural norm, we recognise the need for deep and dispassionate study of the question of homosexuality, which would take seriously both the teaching of Scripture and the results of scientific and medical research. The Church, recognising the need for pastoral concern for those who are homosexual, encourages dialogue with them.” (1978:10) Ten years later, under the rubric of “human rights for those of homosexual orientation” the Conference called for more study, this time “urg[ing] such study and reflection to take account of biological, genetic and psychological research being undertaken by other agencies, and the socio-cultural factors that lead to the different attitudes in the provinces of our Communion.” Finally, the Conference “call[ed] each province to reassess, in the light of such study and because of our concern for human rights, its care for and attitude towards persons of homosexual orientation.” (1988:64)

The 1998 Conference spent a considerable amount of time and energy discussing the matter of homosexuality. It concluded, amongst other things that:

This Conference:

(c) recognises that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these are members of the Church and are seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church, and God's transforming power for the living of their lives and the ordering of relationships. We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members

of the Body of Christ;

(d) while rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialisation and commercialisation of sex;

(e) cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions;

(f) requests the Primates and the ACC to establish a means of monitoring the work done on the subject of human sexuality in the Communion and to share statements and resources among us. (1998:I.10)

House of Bishops - Anglican Church of Canada

In addition to the Lambeth Conference resolutions, the Canadian House of Bishops has also issued a series of statements and press releases over the years, dating back to 1978.

In 1976 the House of Bishops commissioned a Task Force to assist them in beginning the study of the “problems raised by homosexuality in contemporary society”. In 1978 the bishops committed themselves to continuing to study. In 1979 they issued a set of pastoral guidelines, which included the need for further study. Through the 1980's the House of Bishops continued to study the question of homosexuality. In 1991 they asked the Primate to set up a new Task Force to help them study the issue of homosexuality. In 1992 they studied for two days, and committed themselves to do more studying. In 1997 the bishops again committed themselves to “ongoing study of human sexuality and of the nature and characteristics of human intimacy and family life as it exists in our society.” As you can see, when it comes to sexuality, the bishops have been nothing if not studious.

But some interesting things have emerged from all this study, as one might hope.

First, the bishops have been consistent in affirming that homosexual people are first and foremost children of God, made in the image of God and thus “have a full and equal claim, with all other persons, upon the love, acceptance, concern and pastoral care of the Church.” The bishops have also affirmed from the beginning “that homosexual persons are entitled to equal protection under the law with all other Canadian citizens.” This latter affirmation led the bishops in 1996 to send a letter of support to the federal government with respect to the Human Rights Act, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

The bishops have been equally consistent in stating that they cannot recognize the blessing of same-sex unions, nor can they sanction the ordination of non-celibate gay persons, although they have since the beginning of the discussion affirmed that there is no objection to ordaining celibate gay persons.

In effect, then, all the study since 1976 leaves us with the pastoral guidelines first enunciated in 1979 which state that study is important and should be conducted in the larger context of human sexuality, that the bishops accept homosexual persons as full humans made in the image of God and with

claims both to the care of the Church and to human rights, and that the bishops are unable to accept the blessing of same-sex unions or the ordination of non-celibate gays and lesbians.

In 1997, the House of Bishops made an important statement, in which they came to a new conclusion, that “no longer can we talk in the abstract. We are experiencing a growing awareness that the persons of whom we speak are among us. They are our sons and daughters. They are our friends and relatives.” This statement, in the midst of a much larger statement, is crucial, for it indicates a new attitude. No longer could the bishops speak of the “problem” of homosexuality; rather they would have to start speaking of real people living real lives, even if these people were not themselves members of the House of Bishops. Where previously the bishops had issued statements about problems and about theoretical people, now they were beginning to encounter, and recognize, real individuals who presumably turned out not to be so scary as they might have thought back in 1976. The bishops even went so far as to “recognize that some homosexuals live in committed sexual relationships for mutual support, help and comfort.” Note the similarity of that last statement to the analogous phrase in the wedding liturgy. It’s funny where study can take you if you let it.

Although the bishops have spoken repeatedly about the need to study homosexuality in the wider context of human sexuality in general, their statements consistently come back to the narrower question of how the church is to respond to the growing awareness that there are gay people in both society and church. Reading the various statements through the decades gives the impression that the bishops are trying to negotiate some sort of compromise in which gay people are affirmed as full human beings, but they are refused the sacramental recognition for their relationships. It is clear that there has been deep division among the members of the House of Bishops, even as they have tried to maintain a united front through it all. That division was to break into the open in 2002, as we will see in a few minutes.

Legislation and Quasi-legislation

It is worthwhile pausing for a moment to consider what species of document I have been discussing, and what manner of body has been issuing them, for it is an important aspect of the question of authority in the Church. From time to time in the debates over same-sex blessings, opponents have issued statements demanding that the rules or guidelines established by one or other of these two bodies be enforced. That is to misunderstand the nature of these documents and the bodies issuing them. Neither the Lambeth Conference nor the House of Bishops is a legislative body. Rather both are deliberative bodies. That is to say that neither has the authority to issue legislation, nor to establish rules. Guidelines, resolutions and statements from the Lambeth Conference and the House of Bishops are not legislation, but are a species of instrument called quasi-legislation. Both formal legislation and quasi-legislation are attempts to influence behaviour. Formal legislation uses the power of coercion to accomplish its ends. In other words, formal legislation says “do this” or “don’t do that” - “or else.” The “or else” - some form of punishment or sanction for breaking the law - is the use of coercive power. Quasi-legislation, by contrast, uses the power of persuasion to accomplish its ends. It says “we suggest that this would be a good thing to do for the following reasons” and it contains in it no “or else.” Quasi-legislation is a perfectly respectable instrument of governance, but

when push comes to shove, it is by its very nature unenforceable. It may be issued by a person or a body who has authority to choose other forms of instrument, some form of formal legislation, but in the case of episcopal collectivities, quasi-legislation is their only option, for they do not have the authority on their own to legislate. It is important to keep this distinction between formal legislation and quasi-legislation in mind when reading statements or resolutions or guidelines from the House of Bishops or the Lambeth Conference.

Bishops, especially when they are gathered in groups, are very fond of making resolutions and issuing statements, but an important question is, “who speaks for the Church?” We have already seen that resolutions and guidelines, important though they may be, are not of their very nature legislative. When it comes to the question of who speaks for the Church, the short answer is that we are governed by synods, and so the highest statements of the policy of the Anglican Church of Canada emerge from the resolutions of General Synod. So let us look for a moment at what the General Synod has had to say on the question of sexuality.

General Synod

In 1992, the General Synod began its own journey of deliberations by requesting both the National Executive Council and the House of Bishops to commission a study of homosexuality. Interestingly, the General Synod specified that this study should include modern scientific knowledge, the Church’s understanding of biblical teaching on homosexuality, human relationships and justice, as well as the experience of gays and lesbians who are committed Christians. The Synod requested that the study should conclude with specific recommendations to its next meeting in 1995.

The 1995 General Synod enacted three motions regarding homosexuality, the first “affirm[ing] the presence and contributions of gay men and lesbians in the life of the church and condemn[ing] bigotry, violence and hatred directed toward any due to their sexual orientation.” The other two motions encouraged ongoing study and dialogue. A fourth motion, which was tabled and thus not voted on, was a request to the then Doctrine and Worship Committee to consult across the Church regarding “the liturgical recognition of committed monogamous same-gender unions, and report to the next General Synod.”

By 2004, the General Synod was to enact a motion making a series of affirmations including the call to unity in the face of disagreement, the “value of continued respectful dialogue and study” of human sexuality, respect for varying cultural differences with respect to sexuality in indigenous and other communities in our church and country, the need to minister to all the baptized regardless of their views on the issue of same-sex unions, and, most controversially, “the integrity and sanctity of committed adult same sex relationships.”

The same General Synod deferred a section of the motion, which stated that any diocesan synod, with the concurrence of its bishop, had the authority and jurisdiction to authorize the blessing of same-sex unions. This was a response to the controversy in New Westminster regarding its synod’s decision to do just that, and its bishop’s decision to agree to the request of his synod. Opponents to same-sex unions had begun to suggest that the question of same-sex unions was a matter of doctrine,

and thus constitutionally in the exclusive jurisdiction of the General Synod. If so, then the actions of the Synod and the Bishop of New Westminster would have to be ruled *ultra vires* - in other words, that they had overstepped the bounds of their authority. The motion was in part an attempt to engage the General Synod in a discussion of authority and to make some form of definitive statement. But General Synod chose not to carry the discussion very far, instead deferring the question and requesting the Primate to ask the Primate's Theological Commission to provide an opinion as to whether the blessing of same-sex unions is a matter of doctrine.

We will come to the resulting report, the *St Michael Report* as it is known, in just a few moments, but first I would like to back up a bit and fill in a gap that I have jumped over, as we look at the actions of the Diocese of New Westminster.

New Westminster

In many ways New Westminster and its bishop have been at the centre of the recent storms in the Anglican Church of Canada, but in fact it is only because they have made the clearest and most definitive attempt to resolve the question of the place of gays and lesbians in the life of the Church. The same question faces the other 29 dioceses and a few have made attempts to take some form of action, but these attempts have been deferred until after the next General Synod meeting, leaving New Westminster apparently on its own.

To summarize, the Diocesan Synod of New Westminster approved resolutions three times requesting their bishop to authorize a rite for the blessing of same-sex unions. In 1998 the bishop withheld his consent to the first of these motions. In 1999, the bishop appointed theological and canonical commissions to provide opinions regarding the appropriateness and legality of the proposal. During the time these commissions were at work, 80 parishes in the diocese were twinned for the purpose of conducting a dialogue regarding homosexuality in the church. In 2001 the Synod approved a resolution regarding same-sex blessings for the second time; again the bishop withheld his consent on the ground that the margin was insufficient (56.5%). Finally, in 2002 the Synod approved a motion requesting the bishop to authorize same-sex blessings, this time by a margin of 62.5%. As you know, this time the bishop gave his consent, and conflict erupted with eight parishes taking steps that would ultimately lead to them separating themselves from the diocese and from the Anglican Church of Canada.

I won't delve into the conflict here, but I would note that the 1998 motion did not arise from a vacuum. There had been intensive study and dialogue regarding human sexuality, and specifically homosexuality, in the Diocese of New Westminster going back at least to 1987. By 1998, after more than a decade of discussion, a majority of the Synod, albeit a narrow one, had come to the conclusion both that there should be a rite of blessing for same-sex couples, and that it was time to take action. Whether you agree or disagree with the conclusions, it is clear that there was a lengthy and careful process, including the action of the bishop to overturn resolutions of his Synod on two occasions in order to create time for further study and dialogue regarding what is clearly, from any perspective, a controversial decision. I would note as well that the 1998 motion came on the eve of the Lambeth Conference, already twenty years after the Conference had first asked the member

Provinces of the Anglican Communion to study the question of homosexuality, a request that was made for the third time in 1998.

St Michael Report

Turning now to the St Michael report, I should note two things at the outset. First is that this report emerges from a request of the General Synod to provide a theological opinion on what is ultimately a constitutional question; second is that it stands out among the other documents we are considering this evening in that it is a theological report.

The Report is very helpful and should be read in its entirety. It concludes that the blessing of same-sex unions is a matter of doctrine, and calls for serious, respectful study, with the goal of discovering God's call to us at this time, rather than trying to prove a predetermined position.

The Report outlines the doctrines that the Commission believes need to be studied, including salvation, the Incarnation, the person and work of the Holy Spirit, human relationships and sanctification, theological anthropology - which is to say, what it is to be human, from a theological perspective, including importantly the question of how sexuality as part of the human condition is to be understood from a Christian perspective - and finally the doctrine of marriage.

The Report suggests that the similarity between same-sex unions and traditional marriage indicates that the one must be explored in light of the other.

I mentioned that the report concludes that the blessing of same-sex unions is a matter of doctrine, but very significantly, it concludes that it is not a matter of "core doctrine," that it is instead a matter of *adiaphora*, or matters about which faithful and authentic Anglicans can and may hold diverging opinions. Thus, the report says, it is not a matter about which we should break communion with each other - it is not a matter which warrants dividing the Church.

This leads us to a problem which is more in my field, and that is the constitutional question. As I mentioned a few minutes ago, the Constitution of the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada states that questions of doctrine are in the exclusive jurisdiction of the General Synod. But, and here is the question, does it mean that all matters of doctrine are in the jurisdiction of the General Synod, or only matters of core doctrine? In other words, if the General Synod decides to accept the opinion of the St Michael report that same-sex blessings are a matter of *adiaphora*, might it imply that this question may then be decided at a more local level, such as a diocese?

Windsor Report

We could spend a week on the Windsor Report, so I really only have time to scratch the surface of it a bit this evening. It is important to understand then, first what it is, and second what it is not. The Windsor Report is a document produced by a Commission on Communion which was set up by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the request of the Primates in 2003. The Commission was asked to

report on the implications, theological, canonical and relational, of the actions of New Westminster regarding the blessings of same-sex unions, and the actions of the Episcopal Church in consecrating an openly gay man as Bishop of New Hampshire. It is not a report on sexuality, nor on homosexuality. Rather it is an attempt to suggest a way forward for the Anglican Communion, in repairing and building relationships which have been strained since these actions.

The report notes the presenting issues of blessing same-sex unions and consecration of a gay bishop, as well as the reactions to those actions, with certain international primates and bishops declaring themselves out of communion with New Westminster and the Episcopal Church, and others actively intervening by illegally licensing dissident clergy and setting up missions to disaffected Anglicans in North America. But these presenting issues are only symptoms of some deeper problems in the Communion, notably: disagreement on the legitimacy of the theological developments that have led to the North American actions; disagreements about which level of the Church legitimately may make the decisions that have been made; disagreements about the limits of the diversity which may be included in authentic Anglican Christianity; disagreements about authority; and a profound breakdown of trust between provinces. Some of these disagreements have played themselves out with respect to the way in which we read and interpret scripture, each in our own cultural contexts, with accusations made about the misuse or ignoring of scripture.

Amidst the issues that the Windsor report addresses, the crux of all of them has to do with the question of the limits of diversity in the Anglican Communion. The report notes that the autonomy of individual provinces is fundamental to Anglican polity. However, autonomy should not be understood as sovereignty; it does not involve the authority to act without reference to the rest of the Anglican Communion. That seems rather obvious, in fact, for if it were a matter of unilateral action then the very term “Anglican Communion” would have very little meaning. Nevertheless, it does mean that each province is free to make decisions without interference from other provinces. It also means that there is no legislative body with authority to act for the Communion as a whole. It means that each province has the necessary freedom and authority to organize its own affairs in its own context, which inevitably means that there will be different ways of living out our faith as each province struggles with the question of what it means to be an authentic Canadian or Welsh or Nigerian Anglican. There is of course a certain tension between the terms “Canadian,” “Welsh,” or “Nigerian” on the one hand, and “Anglican” on the other. Most of the time this tension is creative, but at times it leads to conflict. This is indeed such a time.

Theologically, the Windsor Report, like the St Michael Report, raises the issue of *adiaphora*, or matters indifferent. The concept of *adiaphora* is crucial to Anglicanism, for we live in a church in which there are a range of theological opinions and practices on a variety of issues. We do not demand absolute conformity on every issue. The question the Windsor Report raises, however, is who can decide whether a given issue is a matter of *adiaphora*, and how can such a decision be taken? Next, once such a decision has been made, the Windsor Report notes that it does not necessarily imply freedom to act without restriction. Like St Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians, the report notes that the “strong” have a responsibility toward the “weak” with respect to matters of conscience. In other words, those who do not have scruples regarding, say, eating meat sacrificed to idols still have a responsibility to avoid scandalizing those who do have such scruples.

The question is, in this case, how do we maintain an appropriate dialogue, and for how long?

The Windsor report makes a number of specific recommendations. Notably, it asks all parties to the current conflict to step back from the barricades and say “sorry”. It asks the Diocese of New Westminster and the Episcopal Church to express regret for the hurt their actions have caused. It also asks the various international primates and bishops who have intervened to make a similar expression of regret. It asks everyone to call a moratorium on further actions which would feed the conflict. And it proposes that all provinces in the Communion consider the adoption of a covenant which would strengthen the bonds between provinces. Very briefly, the model for the proposed covenant is found in such agreements as the Waterloo Declaration of Full Communion between Anglicans and Lutherans in this country, and other similar ecumenical agreements.

Where might we go from here?

As we ponder where we go from here, allow me to make a few observations.

First, the question of how we are to understand human sexuality in all its glory, including the narrower question of homosexuality, is extraordinarily complex. As the St Michael Report makes clear, there are a range of theological themes touched on by human sexuality. I want to suggest that historically the Church has done very little work on the nature of sexuality as a theological theme, and has instead leapt rather too quickly into questions of sexual ethics. It is clear that our understanding of sexuality has been changing, but often in ways which are subconscious rather than intentional. This is an area in which we need much serious theological reflection.

Second, as the Windsor Report suggests, the question of the place of gays and lesbians in the Church, including liturgical recognition and celebration of their relationships, and ordination of non-celibate gays and lesbians, is really only a presenting issue. The conflict we are engaged in now, at both the level of the Anglican Communion, and the level of the Anglican Church of Canada, has little to do with homosexuality. It is much more about authority, about the limits of diversity, and about power. It is a power struggle.

Third, there is an expectation that the General Synod will take some action in 2007, and here we have a problem. Elsewhere I have suggested that the original question, whether either a diocese or the General Synod should authorize the blessing of same-sex unions, has now been overtaken by events in our society. Previously the debate was about the liturgical blessing of relationships which were not, and could not be called, marriage. Now, in the post Bill C-38 Canada in which we live, I believe the question has to do with marriage, pure and simple. That *is* a matter of the jurisdiction of General Synod, and I believe it must be on the table. The St Michael Report suggests the same thing theologically as I suggest canonically. Theologically, the question is whether we are prepared to see in committed same-sex relationships the same reflection of God’s love, grace and care for his people as we see reflected in marriage. In other words, are we prepared to understand same-sex relationships as sacramental in nature? Canonically, the question is whether we will then allow for the blessing or solemnization of same-sex marriages, much as the federal government has done. If so, then I think it would need to be done in the context of a conscience clause so that those who are

not prepared to take this step will not be required to. Such a clause would not be new in our development of the marriage canon.

Finally, the St Michael report leaves us with two questions:

- 1) Is it responsible for a Province to take a course of action which it believes may be destructive of the unity of the Anglican Communion?
- 2) Is it responsible to accept unity as the value which transcends all others, and this to refrain from making a decision when there is believed to be an urgent gospel mandate to proceed?

Whilst not minimizing the importance of the first question, the latter question is, I believe, of very great significance. For it is one thing to take our time leisurely to think about whether to publish a new prayer book. It is quite another thing to take our time while people are waiting on the outcome. For thirty years we have been either having, or trying to have, or avoiding this conversation. During that time real people have been waiting to get on with their lives, or doing so in spite of the church's inaction. It is easy for me as a heterosexual white male to say we should study some more, and in fact I believe we should. But meanwhile, for many of my fellow Anglicans the clock is ticking, and it has been for thirty years. Let us not allow it to tick for another thirty years.