



**Essay written for A Fallible Church edited by Kenneth Stevenson, published by DLT**

However else you may wish to define and describe the Anglican Communion the reality is that it consists of a myriad relationships between Dioceses, Deaneries, Parishes and Provinces around the globe. Like a map from an in-flight magazine that shows the airline's routes criss-crossing the world so the Anglican Church offers a network of links that connect people from different cultures. It lacks the structured pattern of a spider's web because these connecting strands do not emerge from the strategic planning department of a central secretariat. Rather it resembles a spilled bowl of spaghetti! This image is not to belittle the Communion but to recognise that the shapelessness of the Communion is part of its history and its character.

Although there have been attempts to order and to organise the Communion the reality is that Dioceses, Deaneries and Parishes have over the years exercised great freedom in entering into relationships with one another. And again, although guidelines exist to steer these partnerships the fact is they are shaped much more by need, experience, enthusiasm and friendship. It means that whatever formal relationships exist between Primates and Provinces there exists at another level an untidy yet surprisingly strong set of mature relationships that have stood the test of time. The Diocese of Liverpool is in formal partnerships with two other Dioceses – Akure and Virginia.

The driving force behind me initiating a tripartite conversation on sexuality was the idea that the debate about contentious subjects is best located in already established relationships. It is better to deal with difficult ethical and doctrinal questions – in this case, sexuality - in a conversation between people who already know, trust and respect each other than through megaphone diplomacy between strangers across the oceans. The historic partnerships within the Anglican Communion can offer a different context for the debate about homosexuality where there can be a genuine dialogue between people whose mutual trust and affection protect them from jumping too soon to conclusions and keep them in conversation because a long time ago they learned to think the best and not the worst of each other.

One of the things that happens when conversations begin especially when they involve more than two people is that you begin to see that there are more than two sides to an argument. In a media dominated world everything is polarised in a most reductionist way and even the most complex issues reduced to whether you are for or against a particular subject. This treatment does not do justice to the complexity of ethical discourse and ill serves the people most affected by the debate. One of the discoveries I found in our conversation about homosexuality between the continents of Africa, Europe and America is that there was a variety of insights, perspectives and opinions that defied the way the media polarise the debate into simply two clear-cut oppositional positions and want always to reduce complex and nuanced positions into the half-truths of sound bites. This is not to deny that in the end an ethical decision has to be taken. What it recognises is that there needs to be more space along the way for people to view the terrain from different vantage points. But it is difficult to maintain this space especially under pressure from the world-wide media whose tendency is to dramatise, to polarise and to present every issue in terms of extreme opposites. This is not the place for an essay on the media, and there is much that is good about a communications industry that has raised international public awareness of global poverty and the environment. But one of the tensions that Christians struggle with in the modern world is that we live and move and have our being in a globe saturated by media that drive people apart through this polarising tendency and produce a dynamic in human relationships at odds with the reconciling and unifying movement of the Gospel.

Some will point to our history and to the Scriptures for the need to act decisively and will interpret this plea for space as a lack of courage and leadership. What I have found in our tripartite conversation is

that the space has yielded new insights, not least because that space has been protected by an established relationship in Christ of trust and affection.

In Acts 15 the Council of Jerusalem was dogged in a controversy. What was at stake was the essence of the Gospel. There was dissension and debate about the means of salvation. This was a first order issue. Some Christians were insisting that salvation required the Gentile converts to be circumcised. "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (15:1). What I find of special significance for how Christians handle controversy is that Luke describes these detractors as "believers". Even though the doctrine they were proposing undermined the doctrine of grace and of justification through faith the author included them within the body of believers. Within that space there was heated debate as they wrestled for the truth. This example has informed my own attitude and practice when it comes to theological and ethical debates, offering and in turn hoping for a generosity of spirit and the space to question and to listen to different interpretations and experiences of both first and second order issues.

It also makes me quizzical about the talk of "impaired communion" which itself seems to undermine the doctrine of grace and certainly shrinks the space within which to have frank theological debate. We are in Christ by the grace of God. None of us earns or merits that place. In Christ we find ourselves alongside and at one (whether we like it - or them - or not) with all others who by God's grace are also in Christ. We cannot take ourselves into Christ, neither can we remove another from being in Christ. It is all by grace. Now it is clear that controversy can impair friendship, can affect ministry and even undermine mission but only Christ can determine communion, with him and through him with one another. As in the Council of Jerusalem and the controversy over doctrine and practice so today in the Anglican Communion there may be impaired mission, impaired ministry, impaired friendship but as to "communion" that is only and forever in and through Christ alone.

These are the sentiments that have informed the debate about human sexuality in the Diocese of Liverpool and encouraged us to take the initiative to discuss it with our partner Dioceses. Within the Diocese of Liverpool I have called for the debate to be set within a new framework, within a forum of four walls, recognising that each of the four sides is a vital part of the forum of discussion. The first point of the quadrilateral is to recognise the authoritative Biblical emphasis upon the uniqueness of marriage as a divine ordinance for the ordering of human society and the nurture of children.

The second is to acknowledge the authoritative Biblical examples of love between two people of the same gender most notably in the relationship of Jesus and his beloved and David and Jonathan. The third is to register the role of conscience in the Anglican moral tradition; in the Church of England's oaths of canonical obedience the vow is to be obedient "in all things lawful and honest" which means that should you be pressed to do something which in good conscience you deem not to be honest then conscience would demand that you dissent.

The fourth point is to understand that disunity saps the energy of the church and to affirm the importance of unity to the mission of God. Each of these sides merits closer inspection and deserves its own essay. But the point I want to make is that holding these four together has produced space within the Diocese for us to have a genuine conversation.

The 1998 Lambeth Conference asked us to be in dialogue with gay and lesbian people and as a result of that in 2001 I invited Professor Ian Markham then Professor of Public Theology at Liverpool Hope University and now Dean of Virginia Theological Seminary to chair a group exploring "A Theology of Friendship". The group's membership reflected the diversity of opinion, theological, ethical and ecclesiastical and was inclusive of gender. The group worked for two years with occasional residential consultations and needed all that time to build trust so that honest discussion could take place. Although I was not part of the group my own thinking has been informed by their findings. In particular I have continued to reflect on the biblical material. The quality of the group's work has set the tone for the debate in the Diocese which is an important contribution to our common life and to the mission of God, for energy is not being sapped by internal strife.

"The Theology of Friendship" Report took me in particular to the relationship between David and Jonathan. Their friendship was emotional, spiritual and even physical. Jonathan loved David "as his own soul". David found Jonathan's love for him, "passing the love of women". There was between them a deep emotional bond that left David grief-stricken when Jonathan died. But not only were they emotionally bound to each other they expressed their love physically. Jonathan stripped off his clothes

and dressed David in his own robe and armour. With the candour of the Eastern World that exposes the reserve of Western culture they kissed each other and wept openly with each other. The fact that they were both married did not inhibit them in emotional and physical displays of love for each other. This intimate relationship was sealed before God. It was not just a spiritual bond it became covenantal for "Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:3). Here is the Bible bearing witness to love between two people of the same gender. I know that at this point some will ask, "Was the friendship sexual?", "Were they gay?", "Was at least one of them homosexual?", "Were they both heterosexual?", "Were they bisexual?" I want to resist these questions at least initially.

Immediately you start using such words you conjure up stereotypes and prejudices. Further, you assume that it is a person's sexual inclination that defines their personhood. Is it not possible to say that here are two men with the capacity to love fully, both women and men?

The intimacy between David and Jonathan is also evident in the relationship between the Son of David and his beloved John. We find the two at one with each other during the supper when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. The beloved disciple is found reclining next to Jesus. Translations are not adequate to the text. Two different phrases are used in verses 23 and 25. One of them says literally that John was leaning against the bosom, breast, chest of Jesus (kolpos).

No English word or phrase fully captures the closeness of the liaison. What is significant is that the word used in John 13:23 is found only on one other occasion in the Gospel of John. In John 1:18 the word is used to describe the intimate relationship between "God the only Son" and the Father. "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son who is close to the Father's heart (kolpos) who has made him known". It is difficult for a human being to conceive of a closer relationship than that between the Persons of the Holy Trinity. That this word is used of the relationship between Jesus and John is a remarkable expression of the love between the two men. This love finds expression on several occasions. On the cross Jesus makes his beloved friend his mother's son in an extraordinary covenant of love and on the day of the Resurrection love propels the bereaved and beloved disciple to outrun Peter and arrive first at the Tomb. Here is energising love, spiritual, emotional and physical.

It is with reflections such as these that I entered with anticipation into the dialogue with our partner Dioceses within the Anglican Communion. I also came as we all do to every encounter with a history. I had been one of the nine Diocesan Bishops to have objected publicly to the proposed consecration of Dr. Jeffrey John, now Dean of St. Albans. I deeply regret this episode in our common life. I regret too having objected publicly without first having consulted with the Archbishops of York and Canterbury and subsequently apologised to them and to colleagues in a private meeting of the House of Bishops. I still believe that it was unwise to try to take us to a place that evidently did not command the broad support of the Church of England but I am sorry for the way I opposed it and I am sorry too for adding to the pain and distress of Dr. John and his partner. I regret too that this particular controversy narrowed rather than enlarged the space for healthy debate within the church.

I have wrestled with writing the above for fear of opening old wounds but I cannot give a true account of my part in the continuing debate without acknowledging the history I brought to the table. In the same way (and they must speak for themselves) the Bishops and correspondents from Africa and America needed to acknowledge their own stories in coming to the conversation.

We have had two residential conferences within the tripartite conversation. In April 2005 Liverpool invited Akure and in November 2006 invited both Akure and Virginia. Agreed statements describe the process and the substance of our reflections to which I am not at liberty to add. In each case the conversation was facilitated by Stephen Lyon whose skills added indisputably to the quality of the conversation. These encounters in England together with my own visits to America and Africa have enabled me to study the Scriptures with greater cultural awareness. I have a deeper and more affectionate

understanding of both Africa and America. I can see how the Church of Nigeria's response to the sexuality debate is contextualised. The law of their land prohibits homosexual acts. It is therefore difficult for the church to be party to an international debate about a practice that is actually outlawed and illegal. Whatever moral view one takes and however much one denounces the persecution and oppression that has ensued it is possible to acknowledge the challenge of their cultural context.

Furthermore, in Africa as elsewhere in the world there is a battle with Islam for the hearts and minds of the masses of the population. African Christianity wants to guard itself from the charge that it is a front for Western Imperialism in decadent decline. Associating with the agenda and sexual mores of American

and European societies allows Christianity's Islamic critics to portray the church in Africa as compromised, weak and in moral decline. These are serious missiological issues which need to be recognised and understood, rather than pilloried and dismissed.

The same is true for America where the proposers of change are also subject to caricature. The Civil Rights movement has a much greater grip on the soul of America than it does on either England or Europe generally.

For many in the Episcopal Church the rights of gay and lesbian people are seen unequivocally akin to the rights of African-Americans. There is a poignant irony here for it is with Africans from contemporary Africa that many American Episcopalians are most at odds in a cause that they feel parallels the plight of and the fight for justice by their ancestors who came to America two centuries earlier. Gay rights are civil rights. It is a matter of natural justice. Failure to understand this at best mystifies and at worst angers the majority in the Episcopal Church that was once so guiltily complicit in slavery and is now so anxious to shake off the shackles of the past and prove its commitment to social justice which is such an important strand in the prophetic literature of the Bible. These are serious historical and contemporary moral and social perspectives that need to be understood in the international debate about human sexuality.

What I have learned from our on-going tripartite conversation is that we need to have and protect the space for genuine dialogue in the spirit of Lambeth 1:10. I worry about the Windsor proposals not because I doubt the courage and integrity of those who are working on them but because I fear that they will take us in the direction of narrowing the space and of closing down the debate on this and any future issue where Christians find themselves in conversation with their culture on some new moral development or dilemma. The result is that energy is sapped by internal definitions rather than released into engaging with the world so loved of God.

The description in John's Gospel of Jesus "full of grace and truth" presents us with a person who created space around himself for others to "see the Kingdom of God". He was neither truthless in his grace, nor graceless in his truth. I fear that in our debates with each other and with the world especially on the subject of homosexuality we have come over as graceless. Jesus was a pastor, as well as a prophet. He spoke commandments with compassion. And when in John 8 he was asked to judge an adulterer he said "Neither do I condemn you" before adding "Go away and sin no more". The Pastor spoke before the Prophet. Had it been the other way around she would not have been there to hear his words of mercy. I am not here equating homosexuality with adultery but simply registering the priority Jesus gave to the pastoral approach.

I know there are some – from all sides of the argument – who might feel that to be in conversation with those with whom you profoundly disagree is to legitimise their own position and compromise your own. I know too that the continuing debate does not alleviate the suffering of those most affected. In this time we are particularly dependent on the grace of those who are hurt by the words and actions of others.

All I know and can testify to through our own discussions within the Diocese and with our partner Dioceses is that entering the debate prayerfully in the company of the One who is "full of grace and truth" takes you to places beyond "all that you can ask or imagine". I know that many are pessimistic about the future but I find myself strangely and surprisingly optimistic that if we can maintain the space to listen to "the still small voice" there might emerge a new understanding and paradigm that none of us can yet imagine.

**This is a personal essay and has not been written on behalf of the other two Dioceses.**

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