

## **CSCS NEWS**

**The newsletter of the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality**

**35**

**Winter 2008**

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### **Editorial**

I must first apologise to our members for the long gap since the last issue of this newsletter. It does not reflect any shortage of matters of interest; after all, in the Church of England, we have had Synod approval of women bishops, and a Lambeth Conference in which the issue of lesbian and gay Christians was (if my LGBT brothers and sisters will forgive me for using the phrase) the elephant in the room, and which in turn followed hard on the “alternative Lambeth Conference” known as GAFCON where that issue was very much to the fore. We do indeed live in interesting times, when the need for the witness of CSCS has been demonstrated yet again.

But those issues have been widely commented on elsewhere. CSCS, meanwhile, has been quietly getting on with the plans laid at our last AGM, and with another new initiative to which I will return. For reasons beyond our control, such work is far slower than we would wish. Unlike Hamlet’s “old mole”, we cannot “work i’th’ earth so fast”. But by the time of our next AGM – by a happy coincidence on St Valentine’s Day 2009 – we expect to have solid progress to report.

Meanwhile, to show that we are far from inactive, I include a sermon preached by our Chair in Worcester Cathedral a few weeks ago. As she has said herself, there is nothing startling in it as far as the Christian understanding of sexuality goes. And yet the queue of worshippers wanting to talk to her afterwards detained her for an hour. She was giving permission for them to talk about things which they usually feel are taboo in church. Is not this what we should be about? Perhaps others of our members who have access to a pulpit will find help and inspiration in her words.

And to show that others are not inactive – and that CSCS is involved in their action – I also include an article on AIDS strategy by Martin Pendergast, and a review by John Cook of a recent Mothers’ Union initiative. This latter, which sounds particularly encouraging, is, I understand, to be the subject of a study day at Offa House (the Coventry Diocesan conference centre) next June, facilitated by John and Daphne Cook, and there could be opportunities in other Dioceses or centres at other times.

For my own part, with the timing of the AGM very much in mind, I offer some reflections on a minor cultural event which has nothing (directly) to do with either women bishops or gays in the Church, but may be closer to the core mission of CSCS.

At the beginning of November, BBC4 screened a drama entitled *Consuming Passions: 100 Years of Mills & Boon*. It is easy to dismiss that particular publisher of romantic

fiction as simply peddling fantasies irrelevant to the real world. The *Church Times* reviewer did exactly that. Yet in a fascinating way, the drama – really three plays set in different periods – explored the nature of “romance”, and forced its viewers to ask, not only Freud’s famous question “What do women want?”, but perhaps more fundamentally about the real nature of sexual desire.

What *do* women – and for that matter men, and those of all sexual orientations – really want when it comes to sex? And are they right to want it? A clue lies in the play’s title. For many (just heterosexual women?) whose own lives are devoid of “consuming passion”, Mills & Boon novels clearly fill a gap. Many of us seem to have a need to be “swept off our feet” by another person, and physical sex is usually experienced as a vital part of that (though not the whole of it). Perhaps that need is partly manufactured by society or even by economic interests; the word “consuming” has many layers of meaning. Perhaps it is a form of ultimate self-indulgence, notwithstanding the heights of altruism which can be attained in the best relationships. Perhaps it is a substitute for God – a nice simple equation which has often been used by religious people. But whatever it is, it exists. And it cannot simply be rationalised or spiritualised into something else simply because it is (frequently) inconvenient and even dangerous.

There used to be quite a market, in theological circles, for contrasting *eros* (bad) with *agape* (good). Two kinds of love (plus a couple of extra ones if you were C S Lewis) which really had nothing to do with each other. Real Christian love, whether between God and the believer or between one believer and another, should always be calm, self-giving *agape*. That was the only true basis even for sexual relationships – which in any case were essentially about bearing and rearing children and not primarily about the needs of the participants. *Eros* – lust – had little place in any of this. Still less had any dynamic of domination and submission of the sort that has quite often featured in “erotic” novels. About such a dynamic, for very understandable reasons, feminism has been particularly ambivalent; and, despite its frequent scepticism about marriage, has sometimes seemed as ready as conservative Christianity to condemn and to flee the “wilder shores of love”. The average feminist is no more likely to admit to reading Mills & Boon than the average conservative evangelical.

It is true that successive liturgical revisions, and even quite conservative marriage manuals, have given more acknowledgment to the place of desire and mutual pleasuring within relationships. But relating this to Christian (and other religious) tradition has been by no means easy. *Agape* still sits much more comfortably there than does *eros*, albeit a place is now conceded to the latter – as even St Paul just about managed to do.

Now I said that none of this seemed to have very much to do directly with women bishops or gays in the Church. Yet the Church’s problems with these have stemmed largely from failing to develop a theology of sexuality *as a whole*. If sexual desire is deeply suspect (whether that fact is admitted or not), then of course the homosexual form of it, seemingly to the outsider based exclusively on “unnatural” lust, is far more so. And if we have not got right the dynamic of relationships between women and men,

particularly in a heterosexual context, then we will never sort out how that dynamic might properly be played out within an institution such as the Church.

On the latter point I had better make myself clear. I have referred above to the dynamic of domination and submission. Mills & Boon novels are often associated with the idea of the strong man having his way with the reluctant woman and thus fulfilling what some (simplistically) would describe as fantasies of rape. The play to which I have referred shows that the novels have actually always reflected their time, and that more recent ones give mercifully greater recognition to the ideal of gender equality. Women are not unknown to take the initiative in every sense – and a good thing too. Yet there are always subtle dynamics going on. I can testify to the extent to which powerful women in public life still use those dynamics, including a sort of flirtatious submissiveness, to get their way. Heaven forbid that the next-but-one Archbishop of Canterbury should retain her influence over the Church primarily through flirtation. I am not sure, however, that this dynamic is simply the product of a patriarchal society which we can now easily and thankfully leave behind. I suspect that the true picture is a little more complex. It is not just a matter of dominating heterosexual men and submissive heterosexual women; but, one way or another, it may well be pretty central to sexual relationships as indeed it has often been in religion – and calling for intelligent but realistic critique in both cases.

In any event, pretending that “consuming passions” do not rule many lives does no-one any favours. At its best, Christian tradition has tried to see how to channel them for good, rather than merely repressing them. But it is rarely at its best. Rightly, it has challenged the idea (which certainly could be derived from aspects of the Mills & Boon culture) that such passions are wholly self-justifying. It has constantly warned of the danger of *eros* without *agape*. But, partly as a result, its celebrations of *eros* have often been less than convincing, and this has had an impact right across genders and sexual orientations. Jo Ind’s seminal book *Memories of Bliss*, which I have often commended on these pages as offering a Christian sexual vision and ethic which is genuinely for our time, is still not a work which can easily be fitted into the Christian mainstream.

That is the reason for the new initiative to which I referred earlier. All being well, *Consuming Passions* will also be the title of a day conference – perhaps even a regional series of day conferences – to be mounted in 2010 jointly by CSCS and Inclusive Church. The suggested subtitle, “Responsible Living on the Sexual Journey”, implies that the aim is to seek to find a new ethic for an age in which our journeys are both more diverse, and often more explicitly erotic, than the Church has acknowledged in the past.

More about all that, and our other activities, at our Annual Conference and AGM on **14 February 2009 in central London** – to be addressed by the Revd Clare Herbert of Inclusive Church, and (subject to confirmation) held in St Martin in the Fields. Further details to be posted out as soon as possible, but put it in your diaries NOW!

## 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Trinity

## Worcester Cathedral

*A sermon preached by the Revd Jane Fraser*

There have been times over the summer months when I've hardly dared open the newspaper in the morning for fear of what new, headline-grabbing piece I might find on the subject of women bishops or the role of gay clergy within the Church of England. And you'll be as aware as I am that the underlying theme has *not* been,

“See how these Christians love one another,”

but an almost gleeful,

“See how they love to hate one another!”

On the one hand we have those with a more conservative Christian approach to these matters saying,

“They're trying to make it impossible for us to stay,”

and on the other hand we have those with a more liberal Christian approach saying,

“We don't want you to leave or to be part of a separate structure within the church.”

And it's not just the Archbishop of Canterbury who despairs for the future health and mission of the Church of England!

But let me tell you of another side to all this.

One of the women priests in this diocese decided to invite a few male clergy, known to be opposed to the priesting of women, to an informal lunch. Over a very nice meal (she's a bit of a 'foodie') they each talked about their ministry and its impact on their lives and agreed to meet again – for a very nice lunch. As they got to know each other and their shared interests and vocations (apart from good food), their differences began to seem less important than their common enthusiasm to serve Christ and his church according to their understanding of their vocation. I won't say that all were converted to the cause of women as priests, but a mutual respect for each other's ministry was firmly established and some misconceptions demolished.

And there's another story.

My husband and I had got to know some friends from Canada who we'd met a couple of times on holiday and I'd maintained a lively correspondence with them since. When they were in England last month we invited them over to have a meal with us. Having shared some stories about bringing up teenagers and how, thank God, they eventually grow out of this syndrome, they then told us of their sorrow at finding first one and then the other daughter had 'come out' as lesbian and one was now living with her partner. Knowing that I was a priest (and they, too, were Anglicans), I was asked if I would ever conduct a 'Gay Marriage' as they called it. Now, although the Anglican Church in Canada has sanctioned the blessing of same sex unions, I was aware that this wasn't universally accepted over there but I explained the position within the Church of England, which is different. And, possibly fired up by the odd glass of wine, I added my own exposition of the parallels to be seen with our Christian approach to the faithful, exclusive, life-long

vows to be made in Christian marriage and how this is reflected in God's covenant with his church.

At this point I became aware of the look of surprise on the faces of our guests. Clearly, this was not what they had expected to hear! It was also clear that they'd not heard another priest say something affirming of their daughters' relationships or the potential for commitment and faithfulness within those relationships - and I was afraid I'd put my foot in it. Fortunately, that was not the case and, since then, I'm aware of a dialogue having been opened up between these parents and their daughters on a different level from that of disappointment and disapproval. The Spirit moves in mysterious ways!

These stories, and the Bible readings we've just heard all illustrate the basic Christian belief that we must be people who do not create barriers that isolate people from each other but, rather, build bridges between them. This is particularly true in the area of reconciliation, where we must seek to get *beyond* past hurts, difficulties and differences of belief and opinion and move toward a more positive, Christ-like attitude in our relationships with those we encounter on a daily basis.

In our gospel reading, Jesus gives instructions to his disciples about the proper methods for seeking reconciliation. OK, this does seem a bit legalistic in the way it sets out specific ways of proceeding if a first attempt at reconciliation isn't successful. Also, and this is a point that we might find difficult to swallow, Jesus goes on to say that if someone goes as far as to *ignore* what the church is suggesting, then he or she should be treated as a Gentile or a tax collector. In other words, if we can't achieve reconciliation, this person should be treated as one outside the community of Israel.

There's a pattern of behaviour we often encounter in the counselling role that goes like this. Very simply, it's when one person has a problem with another and instead of going directly to him, he complains to another and another and another, thus creating a triangle of confusion. Modern day counsellors are not the first people to warn us against such destructive behaviour. Jesus did so when he told his disciples to go directly and privately to a person with whom they might have a problem. And if that didn't work, to take it one step at a time until that person needs to be considered a "Gentile and tax collector."

Lest this final piece of advice be seen as exceptionally harsh, let's be clear that the thrust of the reading is to seek reconciliation with our brothers and sisters in the Christian community. Jesus certainly built bridges with all sorts of outside peoples: lepers, Samaritans, Canaanites, and various other marginalised peoples and, in particular, those regarded as ritually 'unclean'. Jesus didn't keep other people at arm's length, but rather embraced them, seeking to be a brother and neighbour to all he encountered. The only ones left out were those who had *placed* themselves outside Jesus' compassion and love by their refusal to listen and their inability to demonstrate forgiveness and reconciliation to others.

Thus, Jesus clearly wants his disciples to know that their starting point should always be to build bridges between members of the community.

We're to be like my colleague who built a bridge between herself, as a woman priest, and those who found it impossible to accept that the ordination of women might be part of God's plan for his church – not to mention women in positions of authority over them as bishop.

We're to be like those friends of mine in Canada who began to move beyond their initial feelings of disappointment and disapproval to the kind of dialogue that arises from our calling to offer unconditional love to our children – however hard that might be.

Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans echoes Christ's message of being a bridge builder of reconciliation and takes it further. He tells us to,

"Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."

He goes on to repeat the second half of the Great Commandment, to

"Love your neighbour as yourself".

Paul realised that Jesus' central message of love demands that we go beyond the basics. For him, the one and only act of respect that all humans should ask of their brothers and sisters in Christ is to love. In order to be a great bridge builder between people who find themselves estranged for whatever reason, requires great love, persistence, and strength.

It's unfortunate, but nonetheless a reality, that our Christian community and local parishes are often in need of significant bridge building to reconcile individuals and groups who stand opposed on various issues, both theologically and socially. I have a great admiration for a couple I know who, when they retired and moved to a different town to be nearer to their family, decided not to go to the local parish church where they'd have been welcomed by lots of other couples who shared their professional interests and lifestyle.

Instead, they chose to attend another church, only a couple of miles away, that drew its congregation from an estate with a multi-ethnic population and few people from the professions. They felt they would have more to offer at such a church and, indeed this was the case. It was a strange experience for them and a bit of a culture shock, but what was more important was that they were able to learn to love and respect people whose experience of life was very different from their own.

Today's lessons call us to demonstrate love, as the one and only debt we owe to any person, by reaching out and seeking reconciliation with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Few people are not in need of reconciliation, whether it be with a member of our family, a friend, a co-worker, or even God. Today, our Dean and his wife are celebrating their Silver Wedding Anniversary. And it's right that we should always celebrate such an anniversary for it demonstrates what we mean when we say that Christian marriage is about our lifelong vows of commitment and faithfulness, reflecting *God's* commitment and faithfulness to us. For I'm sure that even in such a well-ordered household as the Dean's, there will have been times of testing and the occasional *frisson* of discord. Christian marriage has become counter-cultural in demanding that we resolve our

differences and difficulties *within* that relationship and seek reconciliation, rather than abandoning it.

The scriptures provide abundant evidence that God is not only present and seeking our reconciliation, but additionally, we have a significant responsibility to make sure that the bridges we seek to build are actually *constructed*. In order to do this, it's necessary to believe that God is there, waiting for us to return, and then transform God's forgiveness of *us* into our forgiveness and reconciliation of *others*.

As a Minister in Secular Employment, working in the field of sex education and sexual counselling, my ministry is largely with those who do not belong to a church. That's not to say that none of them identify as Christians – far from it. I daily come across people who call themselves Christians, have a prayer life that would put mine to shame, and perhaps even used to, once upon a time, attend church regularly. There may be one of a number of reasons for this but what stands out is the frequency with which I hear stories of a falling-out. Perhaps they didn't like the new vicar or a particular clique that had become dominant in the congregation. What saddens me most is to hear how many have fallen away because of a perception that the church (or God) wouldn't approve of a new relationship they'd formed or something they'd done.

The fact that I hear these stories, as a woman in a dog collar carrying out her daily work, is testimony to a crying need for reconciliation – for another Christian to hear their story in confidence – a link, somehow to Christ – like the woman suffering from an issue of blood who touched Jesus' robe, desperate for healing but, believing herself to be unclean, didn't dare to ask in public what might be refused.

A powerful image, I believe, that captures the confidence we must have that God is willing, able, and desirous for our return to him. He, in turn will send us forth to build bridges of reconciliation with our brothers and sisters.

## **Beyond the stand-off**

*Martin Pendergast*

Oh to have been a fly on the wall in the Clinton household last week! The former US President was quoted in a BBC interview that it was “very important” to change peoples attitudes in favour of more monogamy – though he noted this was not just a problem in Africa. “To pretend we can ever get a hold of this without dealing with that, the idea of unprotected sexual relations with unlimited numbers of partners, I think would be naïve,” he said.

Commentators see Clinton's remarks as evidence of a growing alignment between secular approaches to the HIV pandemic, and the values promoted by faith-based organisations (FBOs). A thawing of attitudes has occurred on both sides. Governments and international agencies have seen the quantity and quality of care given by FBOs, and also an increasing willingness from the latter to work within more comprehensive prevention frameworks. The need for fidelity in human relationships and its fragility is

seen in a broader systemic context, not just about personal choices or individual behaviour change but also subject to factors such as poverty and structural violence, gender inequality and homo-negativity. The 17<sup>th</sup> International AIDS Conference, just concluded in Mexico, found some tired arguments and mutual suspicions still pursued on both sides of the debate. There is a real need for everyone to begin to think and act outside their own doggedly maintained boxes, learning and respecting each others HIV languages. Many faith groups see a growing convergence between values of mercy, compassion, and justice, and the public health principles driving global programmes of HIV prevention and treatment.

In different places, diverse cultures, and various theological contexts, tensions still continue. Secular entities observe a development of teachings taking place in faith groups around safer sexual or drug use behaviour, including condom use, and syringe exchange. FBOs publicly debate these issues increasingly, and many senior religious leaders recognise that prevention of death is about the promotion of life. There is an emerging convergence between secular AIDS entities and some FBOs, both in common action and shared discernment in finding responses to the multiple faces of HIV, its prevention and treatment.

The Catholic network of social welfare and development agencies, Caritas Internationalis signed a Memorandum of Understanding with UNAIDS, the UN's HIV/AIDS coordinating body in 1999, renewed in 2003. UNAIDS recognises that as 70% of the world's people identify as members of faith groups, such communities play a very significant role in influencing people's behaviours and attitudes, and in providing care and support for people living with HIV/AIDS, with some 26.7% of HIV services worldwide provided by Catholic institutions. Acknowledging these positive interventions, UNAIDS encourages FBOs to tackle the negative impacts which can arise from some interpretations of doctrinal positions. Work remains to be done to eradicate stigma and discrimination, while some approaches to HIV prevention, and attitudes towards people at increased risk of HIV infection such as men who have sex with men, or injecting drug users, have sometimes hindered effective responses.

At the Mexico AIDS Conference, Peter Piot, UNAIDS' retiring Executive Director, praised FBOs' work, noting how his own attitude had changed over the past 13 years. "When I started this job I saw religion as one of the biggest obstacles to our work, particularly in the area of prevention, but I've seen great examples of treatment and care that came from the religious community, and lately in the area of prevention." This echoed Piot's challenge, issued at the 2006 Toronto AIDS Conference, to maximise the involvement of FBOs and religious leadership in the global AIDS response "and make sure this is part of your core business, because this is where it belongs, at the heart, at the core of what you do."

UNAIDS prioritises work at the global level with networks representing a huge interfaith diversity. It collaborates closely with a range of Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu groups, as well as the newly launched INERELA, an international,

interfaith network of religious leaders, lay and ordained, women and men, living with or personally affected by HIV - [www.anerela.org](http://www.anerela.org) .

Cynics might suggest that as national governments struggle to fulfil their financial commitments to the Global Fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, UNAIDS might count on FBO resources to supplement spiralling deficits in funding for AIDS treatment, support and research. That would be unfair, since UNAIDS far from discredits the ability of faith groups to reach the parts of some populations that other agencies can never touch.

So, a rich global tapestry of cooperation and commitment - but is this reflected in the domestic picture? In the UK, CAFOD and Christian AID were quick to respond to world-wide challenges, alongside secular agencies like ActionAid. The UK Consortium on AIDS & International Development was formed to share inter-agency knowledge, and to respond strategically to governmental initiatives. In October 2006, the Consortium, recognising the number of FBO's in its membership, launched a Faith Working Group ([www.aidsconsortium.org.uk/faith](http://www.aidsconsortium.org.uk/faith)) which seeks to improve the 'faith-literacy' of other non-governmental organisations as well as the UK's Department for International Development. In 2007, it produced a review, "DFID, faith & AIDS" to inform DFID's consultation updating "Taking Action", the UK Government's strategy for tackling HIV/AIDS in the developing world.

The review suggested that DFID contacts in many countries provided a good understanding of the role of faith and faith groups in relation to HIV/AIDS. Others indicated that they had had to learn from scratch about the importance of faith in their particular geographical context. Many DFID staff in affected countries recognised faith-groups as important in the response to AIDS, and believed that the national strategy should include them for pragmatic reasons, rather than because they were religious bodies per se. This is based on the assessable impact of FBOs' work in education, prevention and care, as well as advocating against stigma and discrimination. There is often a greater trust placed in faith groups, working amongst the people, than in multinational organisations whose agenda appear to be directed from outside the country. However, DFID staff frequently expressed frustration with some of the attitudes and approaches in faith groups, subsequently identified in DFID's 2008 strategy document.

Despite the significant degree of support offered in many places, there are strong indications that DFID's financial assistance to faith groups is not remotely proportionate to their contribution in the response to the pandemic. Furthermore, DFID's support did not appear to be systematic, but fragmented, and probably dependent on the understanding and commitment of relevant DFID staff. It appeared that DFID was not seeing the best return from faith groups' potential, in spite of having Programme Partnership Agreements with a number of UK-based FBOs. Even though DFID supports a range of FBOs HIV programmes, this is a small percentage, both of DFID's budget and of FBOs' overall work on HIV, compared with activity levels of other secular development agencies. The scope for DFID to strengthen its

support to civil society organisations, and faith groups in particular, appears to be weakening as the pressure to reduce both its own and agencies' overhead costs increases. A key question is whether DFID understands faith entities as a distinctive part of civil society with their own modes of operation, underlying values, assumptions and motivation.

DFID's updated strategy, *Achieving Universal Access*, published in June 2008, gave new and welcome recognition to the role of faith leadership, and a more detailed comment: "Faith-based organisations (FBOs) form a distinctive part of civil society. As 70% of the world's people identify themselves as members of a faith community, FBOs can reach many people. They often provide a significant number of basic services in developing countries; in 2004, the World Bank estimated that faith groups account for half the education and health care provision in sub-Saharan Africa. They also have the potential to shape social norms that influence people's behaviour and attitudes towards someone living with HIV. However, some preach unhelpful messages around sex, condom use, homosexuality, and women's rights. Those that foster respect and understanding can have significant impact and should be supported."

'Faith-literacy' is not only an issue for those dealing with HIV and developing countries. On the home front, the Department for Communities & Local Government recently launched a framework for partnership in our multi-faith society, *Face to Face & Side by Side*, strongly encouraging government departments and local authorities to overcome fear or reticence in developing work with faith-groups. Faith-fear has certainly impacted negatively on the practical contribution that faith-based HIV groups in the UK can make to confront stigma and prejudice, promoting prevention, health improvement, or offering care and support.

Most local AIDS funding is now spent on HIV treatment costs; hence little, if any, supports faith-based initiatives. Some groups have benefited from limited National Lottery funding, or the government's Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund, and the new Faiths in Action programme, operational from August 2008 may offer further possibilities.

Nevertheless, faith matters have been recognised by HIV voluntary sector groups and research units. The Terrence Higgins Trust has focussed, nationally and regionally, on the links between faith and HIV. Its annual CHAPS conference for gay men has held sessions on HIV & Faith for the past two years. The leading sexual health research project, SIGMA, now routinely includes general faith questions in its surveys, as well as conducting specific studies examining links between faith and HIV.

As various secular groups have come to see faith's relevance as part of the solution in the struggle to stop HIV, rather than only a problem, so it is time for FBOs to develop an inclusive HIV-literacy. CAFOD has given a strong lead, expressing its comprehensive HIV policy with the image of the HIV Tree and showing the

interconnectedness of roots through an analysis of systemic factors such as stigma, poverty, gender inequity, structural violence, as well as individual behavioural choices. Similarly, INERELA promotes the SAVE prevention model - Safer practice, Available medication, Voluntary HIV testing, Empowerment through education - as a more comprehensive model than that of ABC: Abstinence, Be Faithful, and if not use Condoms.

Even though the stand-off between faith and HIV shows signs of ending, it is regrettable that some people of faith have hardened their attitudes, promoting uncritical approaches to 'abstinence-only' programmes or denying validity to studies supporting alternative models. As research on different models of prevention, treatment and support filters down to grass-roots organisations, greater confidence is given that embracing a comprehensive approach to the challenges of HIV is not simply value for money, nor just that they work, but is a strong affirmation that they are the right thing to do, entirely consistent with believers' commitments to faith, compassion, and justice.

*A slightly edited version of this article appeared in The Tablet, 16 August 2008*

### **“We Are Created By God”**

*A review article by John Cook*

Lord Jesus,  
I am happy that you made my neighbour different from me:  
with a different coloured skin,  
from a different tribe,  
from a different island,  
with a different face,  
male and female,  
a different way of worshipping you:

I need all my neighbours to teach me about You  
For my neighbour knows many things I do not know.  
Help me to love my neighbour as I love myself.

This prayer was written in the South Pacific islands of Melanesia. A few years previously there were violent conflicts between different islands and different tribal groups.

The writer realised that God our Creator enjoys variety. God does not make clones, but millions of distinct individuals. The prayer acknowledges differences of gender and other circumstances: we also need to acknowledge and (as far as we can) understand differences of sexuality and other circumstances.

Not being able to cope with differences in other people suggests that perhaps we need to explore our *own* identity and relationships.

A new study guide has been published which looks at:

- Marriage and Cohabitation
- Divorce and further marriage
- Being single or widowed
- Lesbian and Gay Sexuality.

The aim of the study guide is not to achieve agreement on these matters. The aim is to help us explore our *own* identity and relationships in company with Christians of differing lifestyle and differing attitudes. To accept that they love, trust and seek to obey God as we do ourselves; to accept one another as *fellow Christians*.

The study course has been compiled and published by the Mothers' Union. This worldwide organisation of some 3.6 members has the objective of supporting and promoting marriage and family life. It has however been criticised for not condemning lesbian and gay people. A few years ago the MU Magazine contained an article by a mother whose adult son was gay. Because the magazine editor did not publish an article condemning gayness, a Church of England priest closed the Mothers' Union branch in his parish.

"We are created by God: exploring our identity and relationships" is the title of the discussion booklet for all participants to have and use. There is also a facilitator's guide. Each of the four topics has suggested opening and closing prayers and Bible readings.

Marriage and Cohabitation has an Introduction referring to changes in law and custom in the UK, to non-religious ceremonies, followed by a section on Marriage in Old Testament times and in Christian times.

After some marriage statistics (UK) there are sections on

- The history of marriage,
- Christianity and marriage ceremonies,
- Marriage laws and the Registration of Marriages.
- Cohabitation - as a substitute for marriage - as a preparation for marriage.

All these sections are factual, not judgemental. They are followed by four case scenarios based on real situations. Participants are invited to reflect on these, and to discuss them.

Divorce and further marriage

- Reasons for divorce,
- Attitudes of the Church
  - Early Church Fathers
  - St. Augustine
  - Reformers.
- Church context today.

Christian marriages after divorce (including in the Orthodox Church).

Bible context - teaching of Jesus.

Other considerations

- adultery,
- unreasonable behaviour,
- desertion,
- separation for 2 or 5 years.

These sections are factual, not judgemental. They are followed by four case scenarios for participants to reflect on and discuss.

### Being single or widowed

More people live alone in Britain than ever before. Being 'single' may be our situation prior to a relationship, an alternative to a relationship, or following a relationship (separation, divorce, or death).

Some people choose to live as a single person, some enter religious communities or follow celibate vocations. Some people are single because they have not yet met a suitable partner.

Many people who have been widowed still regard themselves as married people rather than single. They have to face sadness, loneliness and trauma. The relationships of the widowed person with children, grandchildren, parents, in-laws, are all affected. Neighbours and people at church may not always know how to relate to the newly bereaved.

A central source of support for single people (as well as the married) is friendship. Jesus called his followers his friends. Soul friendship grew with early monasticism as older nuns and monks mentored or became as 'mother' or 'father' to younger nuns or monks.

Using Jesus' own way of life as an example single people can demonstrate and express their love by having non-exclusive relationships or friendships. Single people are not non-sexual beings. Chastity is affirmed as a way of life celebrating the whole of one's femaleness and maleness in healthy but 'non-erotic' ways. Though chastity does not deny or remove one's sexual struggles, it tries to place them in a positive and manageable framework.

In the Bible marriage and singleness are both affirmed. Jesus taught that in heaven there is no marriage. The resurrection holds out to the single, the married, the childless, and to those with children, the possibility of an enduring inheritance after the grave. Whether we are married or not will not be the most important thing in the end. People's value to Jesus was not dependent upon their marital status, their sex, or their position in society.

After considering Loneliness, Single men, Single parenthood, Single in church, Serving God and others, there are five case scenarios with their challenge of how would we react?

Lesbian and Gay Sexuality This section has been drawn up in consultation with the Facilitator of the Listening Process for the Anglican Communion. It points to further information available on the website [www.anglicancommunion.org/listening/index.cfm](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/listening/index.cfm).

The study guide acknowledges the disagreement within the Anglican Communion. It then has sections on

Society and homosexuality

Science and homosexuality

Genetics - Hormones - Social conditioning - Social pressure - Development in the family.

The Church. Responding to the Civil Partnership Act one bishop wrote

"It is in its careful mimicking of marriage that the Bill can be said to undermine the distinctiveness and fundamental importance to society of the relationship of marriage". Another bishop responded "I find this fear difficult to understand, since nobody has ever been prepared to tell me that their own marriage was threatened by the public recognition of gay relationships. My experience of gay and lesbian friends in relation to my own marriage is only of support and insight".

The Mothers' Union is a community of 3.6 million people from over 78 nations working within the Anglican Communion. Many branches will have links with members in countries all over the world, through parish and diocesan links. Many of these will be with families who live in countries where homosexuality is illegal, and discussing it is taboo.

Many Mothers' Union members have children, grandchildren, cousins and friends who are lesbian or gay. They may have learned to fear telling their friends. Some MU members are lesbian or gay. Others may be unsure about their sexual orientation, and are afraid to address this.

We then have the story of Susan, brought up as a Christian. She found that she was not attracted to boys, and prayed that God would change her. It did not happen. At University she joined the Christian Union and served on the committee. She continued to hide her sexuality and committed herself to celibacy.

She felt called to ordination and was accepted for training. At college the issues of homosexuality were taught and discussed in groups. Never did the speaker or the group consider that there might be a lesbian or gay person present.

After ordination she served in an evangelical parish. When a new rector was appointed, he frequently preached about the evil of homosexuals in the Church.

For years Susan had made Herculean efforts to re-orient herself, praying persistently for healing, always with a negative outcome. Now Susan began to contemplate the words that God spoke of Adam in Genesis: "It is not good for man to be alone". Could this be true of woman also?

Eventually Susan met other lesbian and gay Christians. The Bible was still her guiding light, but she found even evangelicals offering different interpretations based on differing understanding of biblical witness. This different interpretation argues that faithful and stable same-sex relationships were unknown by the writers of the Bible, and so do not fall under the prohibitions of abusive same-sex activity.

There is then a thorough examination of two understanding of the Bible, dealing with: Creation - Fall - The Life of Israel - The Ministry of Jesus - The Early Church - The New Creation.

This is followed by three case scenarios with their challenge of  
how would Jesus respond - how can the Church respond - how would we respond?

The Mothers' Union has produced this study guide for *all* Christians, not just for MU members (of whom I am one). For more information please contact:

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**The next issue is expected in Spring 2009 – contributions invited by 1  
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