

Human Sexuality – A Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of the Church of Ireland

In September, 2003 the House of Bishops of the Church of Ireland issued a carefully worded pastoral statement on the current crisis which the Anglican Communion is facing over the question of homosexuality. It is well written, and may be of special importance, since it is the Primate of all Ireland, Dr. Robin Eames, who has been given the job of chairing the commission which is supposed to come up with some answer to the current dilemmas which the entire Anglican Communion can live with. Meanwhile, the Church of Ireland Evangelical Fellowship has produced a response to the pastoral letter which is particularly insightful and deserves a wider circulation among Anglicans generally. Both texts are reproduced here unedited, although the paragraph numbering of the bishops' statement was not in the original. It was introduced by the CIEF in order to facilitate their collective response, and is retained here for the sake of clarity.

The Editor

1. Society is experiencing the breakdown of national, community and inter-personal relationships on a scale that none of us has experienced before. The problem is made more difficult because there is no universally agreed standard, religious or secular, social or ethical, by which to order our affairs.
2. One aspect of life in which this brokenness is most personally and painfully experienced is in the realm of human sexuality. While this has become the area of immediate concern, it is equally a matter of concern that the sexualisation of almost every area of life in today's world has seriously damaged the potential for deep and lasting enrichment that comes from close personal friendships between and within the sexes that do not have any sexual expression. Life today has become greatly impoverished as a result.
3. In the case of homosexuality, social attitudes range from complete acceptance through indifference to complete rejection. Within the Christian tradition, notwithstanding the pastoral care and compassion shown by many, the attitude has more often than not been one of non-acceptance and at times harsh condemnation. At its worst this has led to the demonising, demeaning

124 | Churchman

and oppression of those who, by inclination or in practice, have found themselves attracted to others of the same sex.

4. This has meant, among other things, that a wholesome engagement with, and open discussion of, the issues surrounding homosexuality has for too long been sidestepped by the Churches. It is a basic assertion of the Christian faith that God has created all that is, and that in Jesus Christ he has entered fully into, and redeemed, a broken world. Despite that affirmation, it has often been people of no particular religious affiliation, or religious people unsupported or opposed by their own institutions, who have been to the fore in engaging with the issues in a way they should have been dealt with by the Churches.

5. The current debate within Anglicanism has shown that harsh condemnatory attitudes on both sides in the current debate have not gone away. There is still no unanimity on the question itself across the Churches. In trying to discern the mind of Christ, the bishops believe that the Church of Ireland as a whole ought to address the question prayerfully, humbly, carefully and generously.

6. The bishops have been engaging in this pastoral issue, both individually and corporately, in a process of consultation and research that began before the Lambeth Conference of 1998, and has been continuing ever since. The fact that little has been said collectively is an indication of the pastoral sensitivities felt by the Bishops, together with the complexity of the issue, and of a considerable range of viewpoints among the bishops themselves.

7. It is evident that no clear-cut solution will be found independently of biblical reflection, mature thinking, and patient listening on the part of the Church as a whole. This process must involve prayerful and respectful consideration of views and insights within the Church and beyond it. The traditional Anglican concept of the *consensus fidelium* would seem to demand this.

8. Together the bishops:

- 8.1 Affirm the centrality and authority of the Scriptures for all Christian discourse.
- 8.2 Recognise that the interpretation of Scripture is itself an area of divergence among Christians.
- 8.3 Hold that the study of Scripture must also engage with the God-given

Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of the Church of Ireland | 125

gifts of the cumulative insights of the Christian tradition, and of human reason.

8.4 Remind the Church that since all people have been created in the image and likeness of God, no one should be understood solely, or even primarily, in terms of his or her sexuality.

8.5 Encourage an attitude of respect for one another.

9. In general, four main viewpoints may be identified within the Church of Ireland with regard to same-sex relationships. They are not so much clear-cut, isolated points of view as relative positions on a spectrum, and the views of the members of the present House of Bishops are to be found across this spectrum.

9.1 The witness of the Scriptures is consonant with a view that rejects homosexual practice of any kind, and that marriage between a man and a woman in life-long union remains the only appropriate place for sexual relations. This must remain the standard for Christian behaviour.

9.2 The witness of the Scriptures is consonant with a more sympathetic attitude to homosexuality than has been traditional, but this would not at present permit any radical change in the Church's existing stance on the question.

9.3 The witness of the Scriptures is consonant with the view that a permanent and committed same-gender relationship, which, through its internal mutuality and support brings generosity, creativity and love into the lives of those around, cannot be dismissed by the Church as intrinsically disordered.

9.4 The witness of the Scriptures is consonant with the proposition that, in the light of a developing understanding of the nature of humanity and sexuality, the time has arrived for a change in the Church's traditional position on affirming same-gender relationships.

10. There is general agreement among the bishops that the mind of the Church must be discerned in relation to sexuality in general. The same requirement also applies to any form of new definition or new pastoral practice in relation to the question of ordination, appointments to positions of leadership, or to the blessing of same-sex unions.

11. The quest for a common mind is not simply an academic exercise. It has long been tacitly if not formally recognised, that homosexual people have held

126 | Churchman

positions of leadership, ordained and lay, within the Church. Their ministry has frequently been highly imaginative and characterised by great pastoral sensitivity that has deeply enriched the lives of those who have experienced it.

12. We believe that the search for a *modus vivendi* for the Church is more important than the assertion of abstract and disembodied decrees. This search should be undertaken regardless of the conclusions to which the exercise may take us all.

13. A process of understanding of these issues cannot be furthered without overcoming many of the fears and insecurities that surround this discussion. To that end, where there is discussion, it is most effectively undertaken in a safe space, where people are able to let go of their own agendas without betraying their deeply held convictions, where they are prepared to listen sensitively to one another, and where attitudes of condemnation are avoided.

14. Where it is felt that there is urgency for discussion to commence within the Church of Ireland, experience has shown that it is much more fruitful to spend time on learning how to listen and to grow in understanding than to move rapidly beyond that stage in a desire to reach conclusions as quickly as possible. For that reason, the conversation surrounding sexuality is not suited, at this stage, to large legislative assemblies.

15. Where there is dialogue within dioceses and between local communities, it should above all include those who are most immediately affected by the discussion. It cannot be sufficiently emphasised that the quest itself carries its own risks, and should not be undertaken lightly. This is an area of life where deeply held views, powerful emotions and the potential for causing great harm hold sway. We may have to learn how or whether we will be able to live peaceably and with integrity with very different viewpoints within the family of the Church and the household of faith.

Antrim
BT28 2TS

1. The Letter's Diagnostic Approach

The bishops' diagnostic approach is indicated in the Letter as:
trying to discern the mind of Christ (5)

Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of the Church of Ireland | 127

seeking the *consensus fidelium* (7)
making five affirmations of principle (8)
discerning the mind of the Church (10).

This diagnostic approach is a potentially constructive way of seeking a solution to the problem. We would caution, however, that the notion of the *consensus fidelium*, while useful, could also become a way of avoiding God's commandments. When Moses came down from Sinai, he found a *consensus fidelium*. The people wanted to enjoy sexual licence and worship a golden calf (Ex. 32). But God's requirement was obedience to commandments, not following of consensus. Sometimes God's law is uncomfortably counter-cultural.

Caution must also be extended to the implied assumption that 'the mind of the Church' is equivalent to 'the mind of Christ'—the bishops seem to use the two as though they were interchangeable. This is not necessarily so. The mind of Christ is to be discerned supremely in Scripture, which Article 20 refers to as 'God's word written'. And it is important to remember that the mind of the Church may err, as Articles 19 and 21 remind us.

The bishops' five affirmations of principle (8) are set out below:

Together the bishops—

- affirm the centrality and authority of the Scriptures for all Christian discourse.
- recognise that the interpretation of Scripture is itself an area of divergence among Christians.
- hold that the study of Scripture must also engage with the God-given gifts of the cumulative insights of the Christian tradition, and of human reason.
- remind the Church that since all people have been created in the image and likeness of God, no one should be understood solely, or even primarily, in terms of his or her sexuality.
- Encourage an attitude of respect for one another.

We would make two points about these affirmations of principle. First, we accept them as a useful working summary of what we have referred to as the 'body of wisdom' to be used in the diagnosis.

128 | Churchman

Secondly, we note that the first affirmation insists on ‘the centrality and authority of the Scriptures for all Christian discourse’. We welcome this strong statement. If it is to be more than merely a token affirmation (and we believe that the bishops do mean it to be more than this), it requires that the Church sit under Scripture in a substantial and meaningful sense. The report on the Bible issued by the 1958 Lambeth Conference said, ‘The Church is not “over” the Holy Scriptures, but “under” them, in the sense that the process of canonization was not one whereby the Church conferred authority on the books but one whereby the Church acknowledged them to possess authority. And why? The books were recognized as giving the witness of the Apostles to the life, teaching, death and resurrection of the Lord and the interpretation by the Apostles of these events. To that apostolic authority the Church must ever bow.’ [*The Lambeth Conference 1958*, SPCK, Part 2, p.5].

This being so, there may be a risk that the bishops’ next affirmation, which says that ‘the interpretation of Scripture is itself an area of divergence among Christians’, may be understood too openly. Although there are divergences of interpretation of Scripture, not every interpretation is valid. We insist that proposed interpretations of Scripture must be tested by debate; this will mean that judgements must be made wherever possible between conflicting interpretations. And in particular, Scripture may not be interpreted in a way that is inconsistent with the rest of Scripture, as Article 20 teaches us: ‘[The Church may not] so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.’ This is a necessary corollary of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Evangelicals believe that ‘All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness’ (2 Tim. 3:16).

An important contextual point might easily be overlooked here: controversial new interpretations of Scripture have been advanced in recent years by protagonists of homosexual practice. It has taken time for substantial responses to be made to these by other scholars, and these are not so openly publicised in the media. It is essential that these responses should be heard and considered equally with the ‘new’ interpretations. We believe that the bishops are well acquainted with the new interpretations; it is not evident that they are equally familiar with the scholarly responses; we urge them to study the latter with equal care.

Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of the Church of Ireland | 129

In particular, if we are really ‘trying to discern the mind of Christ’ (5) it will be necessary to settle the controversy as to whether Christ’s silence on homosexual practice (at least as recorded in the gospels) indicates that he would have supported or rejected it. The view has been popularised by advocates of homosexual practice that Jesus’ silence indicates assent. We disagree. The bishops cannot sit on the fence here—this is a case where the Church needs their guidance. In the context of their third principle referred to above—that the study of Scripture must also engage with the God-given gifts of the cumulative insights of the Christian tradition, and of human reason - we ask them urgently to give their opinion as to whether or not Jesus would have supported same-gender genital acts. This issue must be the cornerstone of all Christian discussion of homosexuality. Since there is a lack of specific teaching on the subject in the gospels, our understanding of Christ’s mind must be informed by our knowledge of the beliefs held universally by the Jews of his day. Further, Bishop N. T. Wright argues that the principle of double similarity requires that if any teaching is held in common by both the Jews of Jesus’ time and the early Christians who came after him, it provides ‘a pincer movement by which we can go back towards Jesus himself with an excellent chance of finding solid historical ground’ (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 131). Such a teaching, we believe, is that all homosexual practice is contrary to God’s will.

We urge the bishops to give leadership by expressing an opinion on this simple but vital point as soon as possible.

1. The Letter’s Diagnosis of the Problem

A key statement in the bishops’ diagnosis of the problem is the observation that in our society ‘there is no universally agreed standard, religious or secular, social or ethical, by which to order our affairs’ (1). We believe this diagnostic comment to be a judicious statement of a major cause of the problem being addressed. We would comment here, anticipating our later conclusion, that a proposed solution which does not address the stated diagnosis will make the patient worse rather than better.

We have noted above that, although the Pastoral Letter emphasises the need to look at ‘sexuality in general’ (10), it focuses (from para 3 on) exclusively on homosexual sex. This narrow focus inevitably precludes the possibility of finding a solution to the wider problems (breakdown of human relationships,

130 | Churchman

brokenness in human sexuality, etc.) set out in the Letter. These are certainly not all related to homosexuality.

The Letter highlights the fact that homosexual people may give outstanding service to the Church (11). Two things need to be said about this. First, there is an imprecision of language as between people and practice, which runs the risk of ignoring the vital distinction that we have argued for in section 3 above. It may appear that the bishops are suggesting that because people give good service to the Church, their sexual practices are thereby legitimised; or that their contribution to the Church derives in some way from their homosexual practice rather than their qualities as persons. We note that those who engage in other unscriptural practices (adultery, paedophilia or theft, for example) may also give outstanding service to the Church. This does not exempt them from the need to repent of these sinful practices.

Secondly, the statement about outstanding service needs to be balanced by consideration of the equally true fact that those who engage in homosexual practice are disproportionately likely to be promiscuous and to fall into other dysfunctional problems in human relationships, which may dishonour Christ and his Church. This is borne out by many surveys. If facts such as these are not taken into account in the diagnosis the prescription for treatment will be faulty.

2. Possible Prescriptions Outlined in the Letter

Four main prescriptive viewpoints, all considered by their proponents to be consonant with Scripture, are set out (9). It is unfortunate that not a single Scripture reference is given in the Letter. If a proposition is declared to be consonant with Scripture, and if 'the centrality and authority of Scripture for all Christian discourse' (8.1) is affirmed, one would expect (not token 'proof-texting', but) substantial scriptural justification for this claimed consonance.

Further, as a result of the Letter's narrow focus noted above, these viewpoints address homosexual sexuality only, rather than the wider issues of human sexuality overall. We summarise the four positions below, applying our numbering system to the Pastoral Letter:

9.1 Lifelong marriage between man and woman is the only appropriate place for sexual relations and all homosexual practice is rejected.

Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of the Church of Ireland | 131

8.2 A more sympathetic view of homosexuality, but still not permitting any radical change at present.

8.3 Same-gender relationships cannot be dismissed as intrinsically disordered.

8.4 It is time for a change in the Church's traditional position on affirming same-gender relationships.

Subject to the comments below, we agree that they can be viewed as positions on a spectrum, and that they may blend into one another to some degree. It is impossible, however, that all these viewpoints could be correct. The Anglican way forward should be to decide these issues by debate, testing them against Scripture and taking due account of tradition and reason. We have reservations about all four of these positions, as noted below.

Position 9.1 (all homosexual practice is rejected) focuses on judgement without mercy. We recognise that there are some people who take this position, but we would highlight the fact that the viewpoint which would be supported by the overwhelming majority of members of the Church of Ireland Evangelical Fellowship is notable by its absence. This is the view which says that—

- (i) sexual acts outside heterosexual marriage are sinful
- (ii) but there is compassion for those who struggle and forgiveness for the repentant sinner.

A good biblical model would be Jesus' encounter with the woman caught in adultery (John 8:11). We regret the omission of this view to which most evangelicals would subscribe. It should be added as position 9.1(a). If this is not done, evangelicals will be disenfranchised and squeezed unwillingly and unfairly into the extreme 'judgement without mercy' position which is, rightly, abandoned later in the Letter.

Position 9.2 (a more sympathetic view of homosexuality) does suggest mercy but is unclear as to whether it implies sympathy towards the persons or the acts, a vital distinction for which we have argued in section 3 above. This is confusing. This option also rejects any radical change at present, which suggests that it may be open to incremental change now, and radical change in the future. But if Scripture permits radical change in the future, there seems to

132 | Churchman

be no reason why this should not be implemented now. The ambiguities associated with this position are such that it must be deemed unsatisfactory and should be deleted in favour of a new position 9.1(a) proposed above.

Position 9.3 (permanent same-gender relationships are not intrinsically disordered) prompts the question: So what? It is not a distinct 'position' at all; it tends to gravitate towards option 9.4 and should be combined with it.

Position 9.4 (It is time for a change) is at least clear. But we would press the question: If option 9.4 is held to be consonant with Scripture, with which Scripture passages that refer to homosexual practice is it consonant? We believe it is not consonant with Scripture at all. The German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg says that 'the biblical assessments of homosexual practice are unambiguous in their rejection' (Christianity Today, 11 November, 1996). This leads him to oppose changes in the Church's teaching. From the other side of the debate a leading American apologist for homosexual practice, Walter Wink, also acknowledges that 'efforts to twist the text to mean what it clearly does not say are deplorable. Simply put, the Bible is negative toward same-sex behaviour, and there is no getting around it' (The Christian Century, 5 June, 2002). He is forced to recognise that advancing his cause requires not merely a reinterpretation of Scripture, but avoidance of its authority—'The issue is precisely what weight that judgment [that the Bible is negative towards same-sex behaviour] should have in the ethics of Christian life.' Both Pannenberg and Wink are consistent in their positions. Where they differ is that one affirms and the other denies the authority of Scripture in the matter. While all the bishops affirm the authority of Scripture, some of them also deny what both Pannenberg and Wink affirm—that the Bible always rejects homosexual practice.

We do not believe that this position can be sustained; this adds urgency to our question as to which Scriptures are considered to be consonant with homosexual practice. We would like the bishops to affirm that the Bible consistently rejects homosexual practice, or to explain why they think otherwise. The onus is on those who want to change the Church's teaching to show how this can be consonant with Scripture.

Combining the options as proposed above would leave just two main

alternatives:

Option 9.1 and the new proposed 9.1(a) combined, expressing the Church's traditional laws together with mercy for repentant sinners and compassion for those in need of help.

Option 9.3 and 9.4 combined, requiring a change in 'the Church's traditional position'.

Incidentally, we note the expression 'the Church's traditional position'. It is sometimes said that the Church of Ireland does not have a 'position' on human sexuality, but this reference in the Pastoral Letter makes it clear that it does, a fact to which members of our Church born before the 1950's can testify from their upbringing.

9. The Pastoral Letter's Summary of the Positions

The Pastoral Letter homes in inexorably on the fact that, as suggested above, there are really only two distinct alternative options—to affirm homosexual practice, or to continue to proscribe it. The Letter characterises these two options in para 12 as, respectively:

- the search for a *modus vivendi* for the Church and
- the assertion of abstract and disembodied decrees

It envisages no other alternatives and clearly prefers the first position over the second.

The two main options are cast in an extreme form. The 'traditional' option is presented as being cold and unloving, with connotations of being 'abstract' and 'disembodied'. The bishops have been able to do this because they failed to include an option offering biblical firmness together with biblical mercy and pastoral care. The option-for-change, by contrast, is embodied within the *modus vivendi* model, which has connotations of peace and harmony.

Here we believe that the playing field has been tilted considerably and precariously in favour of change. Given a choice between 'abstract and disembodied decrees' and a cosy-sounding *modus vivendi*, who would opt for the former?

We are bound to respond that the proposed *modus vivendi* solution pre-judges the issue. The Letter in effect contradicts itself. While giving the impression of

134 | Churchman

opening the issues for discussion, it in fact proposes an outcome—the acceptance of two mutually exclusive integrities. The precondition for having a *modus vivendi* is that one must accept that there are (at least provisionally) two valid alternatives. If the Church must have a *modus vivendi* now, it must admit the legitimacy of homosexual practice now. And the purpose of the continuing debate must be to progressively erode the ‘abstract and disembodied decrees’ that are preventing harmony among God’s people. This treatment of biblical teaching sits very uneasily with the bishops’ stated commitment to the principle of ‘the centrality and authority of the Scriptures for all Christian discourse’. The Scriptures are not seen as central and authoritative in the discussion—they are marginalised and ignored.

We would like to see the bishops taking a more principled stand, promoting open debate rather than foreclosing the issue in advance. Why do God’s decrees have to be written off as abstract and disembodied? Why can they not be firm but compassionate? The psalmist wrote, surely with his sexual failings not far from his mind:

How can a young man keep his way pure?
 By living according to your word.
 I seek you with all my heart;
 do not let me stray from your commands.
 I have hidden your word in my heart
 that I might not sin against you.
 Praise be to you O Lord;
 teach me your decrees.
 I delight in your decrees;
 I will not neglect your word. Ps. 119: 9-16

We believe that the bishops have been less than convincing in their handling of Scripture. Although it is possible for God’s decrees to be used in an abstract and disembodied way, it is a distortion of the orthodox Christian view to suggest that this is the only alternative to a *modus vivendi* approach. The Church of Ireland Evangelical Fellowship, like the psalmist, cherishes God’s decrees as being intended for our good.

By the time the final paragraph (15) is reached, the *modus vivendi* model has

triumphed—it is the only one left on the table. The Letter states, ‘We may have to learn how or whether we will be able to live peaceably and with integrity with very different viewpoints.’ In promoting this model, the bishops can only be suggesting that the Church ought to embrace the option-for-change as a legitimate part of its teaching and practice—permitting a change in ‘the Church’s traditional position’ alongside the retention of that traditional position. Both points of view—the traditional and the innovative—must be allowed. By doing this the bishops have automatically excluded our view that the Church should follow the firmness/ compassion model as set out earlier in our option 9.1(a).

For us the words ‘or whether’ in para 15 are significant and vital. Evangelicals will not find it possible to live peaceably and with integrity with the terms set out in the Letter and will find themselves unable to accept the proposed *modus vivendi*. From our point of view, it is as though the bishops were arguing that if there is a reservoir of water and one of a liquid of uncertain properties, the best way forward for God’s thirsty people is to drink from a mixture of the two. Even on the bishops’ own terms, it is not appropriate to propose such a solution when no scriptural justification has been advanced for it.

9. A Better Way Forward

A better way forward would be to recognise that the remedy should follow logically from the diagnosis. The Pastoral Letter’s diagnosis, which says that a significant part of the problem is that ‘there is no universally agreed standard (1)’, suggests that a return to the previously agreed standard is likely to be a major part of the solution. If the lack of an agreed standard is defined as contributing to the problem, how can a *modus vivendi*—which by definition implies not seeking an agreed standard—be a satisfactory solution? It can only make the problem worse, causing confusion particularly amongst young people who will ask, ‘What does the Church teach? What am I allowed to do? Is there “post code” morality in the Church of Ireland?’

The bishops also need to give clearer advice as to the process which should be undertaken in the Church of Ireland. The final three paragraphs are too vague. People need to know what is happening in the near future and, if possible, what course the process is likely to take in the medium term. We see individual bishops making statements at diocesan synods, and writing articles in

136 | Churchman

newspapers. Is this the process or is anything more formal (which would involve the clergy and laity) envisaged?

In conclusion, we acknowledge with deep regret that there have been some major flaws in the application of the Church's traditional sexual standards in the past. Some homosexuals were forced to undergo distressing and degrading forms of treatment. Some unmarried mothers were forcibly deprived of their babies (a further reminder of the need to look at the totality of human sexuality rather than the narrow issue of homosexuality alone). These injustices must never be allowed to happen again. The way forward must not be just a return to the past, but must have the wisdom and humility to learn from our mistakes.

Given that safeguards against such things are now in place (not least in greater public and media awareness, and more openness on the part of social institutions), we believe that the historic, biblical standard of the Church in matters of sexual morality, mediated with compassion, is the logical way out of the problem of the breakdown of relationships that is so graphically set out in the opening sentences of the Pastoral Letter. And we believe that God's loving solution to the problem of sexual and societal brokenness is a return to the wisdom of his decrees by Church and by society.

The Church must learn that all its members need to share the pain of those who suffer sexual stress, both homosexual and many other types, remembering that Christ (who was celibate throughout his life) knows, understands and shares the suffering of his loved ones.

Brief Summary of Comments and Requests
Raised in our Response to the Pastoral Letter

Comments

1. We are grateful for the Bishops' initiative in publishing the pastoral Letter, which creates a context in which the issues of human sexuality can be openly discussed in the Church.
2. We consider that the Letter suffers seriously as a result of isolating homosexuality from the wider context of human sexuality.
3. We repent of the inhuman and degrading treatment sometimes given in the past and present to people who experience a homosexual orientation, both

Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of the Church of Ireland | 137

in Church and in society.

4. We urge the bishops to distinguish carefully between practising and non-practising homosexuals, and to consider the effects of their discussion on the latter as well as the former; also to remember that very many more people live without sexual companionship than live in homosexual relationships.

5. We would like to see the Letter discuss the issues more specifically within the Anglican context. Lambeth 1998 resolution 1.10 is treated as though it were an abstract and disembodied decree rather than the mind of the overwhelming majority of Anglicans.

6. We broadly accept the bishops' definition of the symptoms of the problem (relational breakdown), and their diagnosis that a contributory cause is the lack of an agreed standard.

7. We welcome the bishops' intention to make Holy Scripture central and authoritative in seeking a solution, but are perplexed that the teaching of Scripture is entirely absent from their ensuing discussion.

8. We caution that 'the mind of the Church' is not necessarily 'the mind of Christ'. Moses had to oppose the *consensus fidelium* which inclined to calf worship and sexual immorality.

9. We regret that none of the four viewpoints set out in the Letter as representing the range of Church of Ireland opinion adequately expresses our own view. We hold that God's decrees are good, and that the best way forward is to work to recover the lost biblical moral standards of earlier generations. This does not imply merely a return to the past; we recognise that lessons must be learned from past mistakes as regards respecting the rights and dignity of homosexuals and others. We need to follow the example of Jesus who, when he came upon the woman caught in adultery, abrogated the Old Testament's punishment but affirmed the continuing reality of the sin. We should re-apply biblical standards, with compassion and help for those who struggle, and forgiveness for those who fall short but repent.

10. We regret that the bishops seem to imply that the final choice is between a *modus vivendi* model and an alternative which is portrayed in terms such as 'harsh condemnation', 'demonising, demeaning and oppression' and an 'assertion of abstract and disembodied decrees'.

11. We believe that promotion of a *modus vivendi* model puts the cart before the horse, requiring the Church to accept the option-for-change as a valid view, before it has followed any process of debating the issues.

12. We urge the bishops to give serious consideration to our proposed

138 | Churchman

firmness/compassion model referred to in 9 above.

Requests

We would request the bishops to assist the Church by giving their opinion on the following specific points:

1. Given what we know about Jesus' teaching on other moral matters, together with our knowledge of the universally held views of his Jewish contemporaries and the teachings of his subsequent followers who constituted the early Church, should his silence, at least as recorded in the gospels, be interpreted as favouring or opposing homosexual practice?
2. In the context of the bishops' commitment to the centrality and authority of Holy Scripture in this debate, what scriptural justification is there for each of the four main viewpoints set out in the Letter?
3. Do the bishops agree that the Bible consistently opposes homosexual practice? If not, would they assist the debate by setting out the reasons for their position?
4. Do the bishops acknowledge Lambeth 1998 resolution 1.10 as expressing the mind of the overwhelming majority of Anglicans today?
5. Is there any process by means of which the bishops would propose that discussions might proceed in the Church of Ireland?

Confusion on these matters hinders rational discussion; clarification would greatly assist the Church of Ireland in coming to a common mind.

REV. PETER GALBRAITH is Honorary Secretary, Church of Ireland Evangelical Fellowship, Broomhedge Rectory, 30 Lurganure Road, Lisburn, Co. Antrim BT28 2TS.