



forward together

www.forwardtogether.org.uk

An organisation for evangelicals in the Church of Scotland. Editor: Ian M Watson Issue No.7 May 07

NOT WORTH THE WAIT!

Human Sexuality Report

At last year's General Assembly, during the Civil Partnership debate, Rev. Jock Stein of Kincardine asked the Commissioners to delay making a decision. His point was that the Legal Questions were asking the Assembly to decide on what was essentially a theological question without providing the Assembly with theological guidance. He argued that the Working Group on Human Sexuality would report to the 2007 Assembly. Better to wait till then, when Commissioners would benefit from the results of some deep theological reflection.

The Assembly rejected Jock's deliverance. "Now is the time," was the resounding chorus. And just as well. Now that we have received the report we regret to say that it was hardly worth waiting for. It is hard to resist the cliché that it is a classic fudge. For the report adds nothing new to the debate on homosexuality within the Church. It is merely descriptive of the two principle points of view, the "traditionalist" (ie. orthodox or evangelical) and "revisionist" (ie. the liberal).

To be fair, the Report is not entirely devoid of merit. Anyone coming fresh to the debate will find an accurate description of the different points of view. We are encouraged that the Report states clearly that homosexual practice is uniformly presented in Scripture as wrong. Indeed, the Report seems to have little time for those who would try to reinterpret Scripture to suit their own purposes:

Although the Group reflects different views on what the church's attitude to homosexuality should be, there was somewhat surprise at the degree of concord reached regarding the plain reading of Scripture in the specific mentions of same-sex sexual activity. There was almost a weariness with interested readings of certain key texts, which tortuously attempt to repudiate the writer's clear intention to condemn behaviour as bad. The Bible, when it occasionally takes up the subject of same-sex activity, presents it as a wrong choice. (para.4.13.18, page 4/27 in the Blue Book)

There appears to be little time for those who would argue that there was a lesbian relationship between Ruth and Naomi, and a gay relationship between Jonathan and (the rampantly heterosexual) David.

The report is also clear in stating that "*there is little consensus on the questions around the origins or causes of homosexuality.*" (para.4.7.3, page 4/15)

We agree with the view that homosexual orientation is not bar to ordination. Temptation to sin is not the issue: yielding to sin is.

The Bible, when it occasionally takes up the subject of same-sex activity, presents it as a wrong choice

However, having read the report, and having carefully considered the views of the "revisionists" we have to say that the statement (para.4.17.1, page 4/37) that "*on matters of sexuality the Church holds much more in common than that which divides us*" is wishful thinking. This report asks more questions than it answers and is bound to cause frustration, if not anger, in the Church at large, which had placed so much store in it.

Perhaps particularly depressing is that the Working Group probably had more evangelically minded members than any Working Group has ever had before. One shudders to think what might have been produced without their input.

The simple fact is that the "traditionalist" and "revisionist" views are incompatible. They flow from different views of God, Scripture, humanity and marriage. No amount of goodwill can ever lead to a united view. Once it is conceded that Scripture is uniformly hostile to

sexual relationships outside marriage—be they homosexual or heterosexual—the issue becomes one of whether the Church obeys Scripture, or sets itself above Scripture.

Our Presbyteries overwhelmingly rejected the proposal to allow ministers and deacons to mark a Civil Partnership with a religious ceremony. Those of an opposing view cannot ignore this. The Church can hardly be said to be split down the middle when the vote was 9 Presbyteries for and 36 against. Forward Together rejects any suggestion that there is an equal place in the Church for both points of view. Indeed, the Report does not suggest this.

Forward Together is relieved that Jock Stein's deliverance was not accepted by last year's Assembly. Another year of indecision would have most unhelpful; and this report would have done nothing to clarify matters. Our Church, through its courts, has spoken, and spoken decisively. We call on everyone, for the sake of the unity and peace of the Church, to accept the decision. Now let's get on with the real work of the Gospel!

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A HIERARCHY OF RIGHTS

**An exclusive article for Forward Together by Peter Kearny,
Press Officer to the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland**

Earlier this year, the news media was awash with the story of the proposal by the UK Government to introduce regulations, which would prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services on the grounds of sexual orientation (SORS). Not surprisingly since the substance of the matter was such a complex mouthful, the media looked for examples of how the measures might impact on society. They quickly found it in the form of Catholic adoption agencies.

What has emerged in the UK is a hierarchy of rights where lip service is paid to all but priority given to some.

Following the enactment of the Regulations, Catholic agencies would not be able to refuse to place children with couples based on their sexual orientation as they do at present. There are several such agencies in England and Wales and two in Scotland. They carry out, by common consensus, a very valuable service to extremely vulnerable children. They have developed over many decades expertise in placing children with multiple difficulties. They would no longer be able to continue working in the field as a result of SORS.

While the adoption agencies provided a convenient example of the impact of the regulations, it is worth remembering that they will have a far wider impact. The measures create severe difficulties for Christians, since they make no distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual practice; nor do they recognise that providers of some goods or services would be participating in the facilitation or promotion of behaviour they could not morally support.

There are many areas where this may have particular impact; among them Church run services such as adoption, faith based education establishments and the hire and use of Church premises.

For example, a Church could be compelled to lease its hall to a homosexual group for its meetings, or to those wishing to celebrate a civil partnership. A Christian newspaper could be compelled to run advertisements for events such as 'Gay

Pride' or 'Glasgay'. A school could be challenged for teaching that homosexual relationships are wrong. A retreat centre could be challenged for refusing to offer double rooms to civil partners. A printer could be forced to print promotional materials for a 'gay' event. While it would of course be wrong to refuse to do printing work for a person just because that person were homosexual, the law will now compel a service provider to endorse the views of a customer, no matter how abhorrent they may be to the individual concerned.

This breaches the most fundamental of principles, namely, that freedom of conscience should be respected so that individuals are not compelled to participate in activities they deem to be immoral. Respect for the rights of individuals needs to be universal.

This real threat to religious freedom is ultimately what the recent adoption furore is about. What has emerged in the UK is a hierarchy of rights where lip service is paid to all but priority given to some.

Sexual orientation seen by the secular humanists in the media and political parties as biologically determined and therefore unchangeable is given weight over religious belief seen as an optional "lifestyle choice". It is a bizarre inversion, especially since the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) in Article 9 states that while, for example employers must pay regards to the gender, race and orientation of their staff, they must pay "particular regard" to their religion. The ECHR paradoxically prioritises faith commitments while the UK Government is intent on marginalising them.

Meantime, the SORS issue has brought us closer to the nub of the problem society faces: the complete normalisation of same sex practice. If the regulations concerned are imposed in due course and enforced with rigour and zeal as we can expect we will be in a situation where "tolerance" is enforced by tyranny!

I don't believe Christians can win this argument on the competing human rights ground, where we endlessly argue about where in the "rights hierarchy" religious belief should appear. Rather we must widen the debate into one about compassion and love for our fellow human beings who bear the cross of same sex attraction. We must

focus on the sad and often sordid realities of the homosexual lifestyle and how it robs God's children of their innate human dignity.

We need always and everywhere to highlight the underlying concern of the Church for the well being of the human person. Homosexual practice is by any measure profoundly and intrinsically harmful to the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being of those so engaged. Any society which so orders its laws and regulations towards not only permitting, but encouraging, promoting and facilitating such practice risks seriously harming its citizens.

This line of argument needs to be developed and expanded whenever possible with Christians explaining that we are driven by compassion and love for our fellow human beings and as a result we must urge them away from the path they are on and encourage society away from aiding and abetting them not because we DON'T care for them, but precisely because we DO.

Our concern therefore is at a far deeper level than the thoughtless "do as you please" platitudes of the politically correct secular humanists. If we don't start to make such arguments, we'll find ourselves in a ghettoised cul-de-sac of opt outs and exemptions which keep us from interacting with wider society. A society which now more than ever needs the moral and spiritual compass that only our Christian faith can provide.

Unfortunately, when it comes to a "routes out of homosexuality" approach the Christian Churches for a variety of reasons often have little in the way of pastoral back up to offer. We need desperately to develop support structures here, which mirror the help we give to alcoholics, drug addicts or the homeless.

Ultimately, it is incumbent on us all as followers of Christ to constantly remind our brothers and sisters that certain actions and attitudes diminish their own development and should be avoided. Whether such actions are permitted by law or not does not matter. If the laws of God are broken we must point this out, if necessary saving our fellow citizens from themselves. Eternity will provide plenty of opportunity to reflect on our failure if we don't.

CHRISTIANS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Green issues are now at the top of the political agenda—and the theological agenda too. This article arose from a debate between Forward Together members via our web-site. We are happy to endorse the work of A Rocha, and to commend Alan Reid's Biblical reasoning for further thought.

A Rocha ('Christians in Conservation') has been founded on a biblical belief that our world has been lovingly made by God and entrusted to the care of humankind. A Rocha began in 1983, to carry these Christian perspectives into environmental work and, reciprocally, bring environmental awareness more fully into the Christian church.

An initial project was established in the Algarve (hence the Portuguese name). The region lies on a principle route of bird migration (one of nature's remarkable phenomenon) where intensive coastal developments have made little provision for habitat protection. Gradually, as A Rocha's mission developed in this situation, the example was recognised by Christians from elsewhere. A Rocha has now grown to be active in sixteen countries, across five continents, each working to show practical care for God's creation.

A Rocha Kenya is one such project. The coastal area in which it is based (Watamu-Malindi) has a concentration of beautiful and internationally-important habitats in urgent need of preservation. It also has a rural population facing daily struggles with poverty.

Biblical foundations are helpful here, as both these concerns (for nature's attractions, and for human survival) are spoken of in God's creation plan. The garden surroundings of Genesis 2 were designed to be 'pleasing to the eye' (for enjoyment) and 'good for food' (for the essentials of life). This twinned purpose, with neither element denying the other, is immensely valuable as a guiding principle.

The connection is clear to Stella Simiyu, an eminent Kenyan conservationist and A Rocha International trustee:

"If you look at Africa, for example, the rural poor depend directly on the natural resource base. This is where their pharmacy is. This is where their supermarket is. This is where their DIY store is. This is their fuel station. It is their power company. It is their water company. We cannot afford not to invest in environmental conservation..."

So A Rocha Kenya works for conservation

in a variety of ways, inspired by the wonder of God's creation and by the needs of the poor with a daily dependence on it.

A full-time programme is working to raise awareness among schoolchildren, teachers, churches and community groups. Practical projects are establishing tree nurseries and introducing 'conservation agriculture'. Fieldworkers monitor the health of local habitats and collect scientific data, to support informed debate. An imaginative eco-bursary scheme ('ASSETS') enables forest-based families to send a child to secondary school without exploiting their woodlands to pay for it. Visitor facilities, built by A Rocha at local wildlife-viewing sites, contribute their revenues to the fund, to show that preserving habitats might be as financially beneficial as cutting them down. And a busy Field Study Centre, 'Mwamba', provides facilities for education, research, administration and the hosting of visitors from around the world. The work is demanding, but making real progress. There is no finishing line!

Further information:

www.arocha.org, www.assets-kenya.org.
Or contact mwamba@arocha.org

David & Liz Jenner lived for sixteen years in the Borders village of Newcastleton, where they worshipped with Liddesdale Parish Church. Their management roles at the Whithaugh Park outdoor centre have been followed by similar assignments at A Rocha Kenya's field study centre, beside the Indian Ocean at Watamu.

ALAN REID'S CONTRIBUTION

Why Christians in conservation? There are at least four good reasons for Christians to be involved in conservation.

Love

Christians believe that God made the world. When we make something, whether it be as life-changing as giving birth, or as quick as sketching a picture, we care about what happens to our creation. So it's easy for us to understand that God cares deeply about all his creation. The Bible makes this clear in many passages, e.g. Psalm 50, verses 10 & 11, where God says "every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine."

Studying, thankfully enjoying and caring for the world that God has so wonderfully made is an obvious way for us to show our love for him.

Obedience

Christians are called to obey God in every part of their lives. In the Bible, we find that the first wish expressed by God, concerning men and women, was that they would rule over "the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" in a way that reflects his own image. Not just his power, but his unselfish love, mercy and tender compassion.

Tragically, because we are human, and sinful, our rule has often been characterised by cruelty, greed and short-sightedness, but this was clearly not God's intention. If we desire to obey God, then we must look for ways in which we can be good and responsible stewards of the natural world.

Justice

The environment is an issue of justice. Often it is the poor who suffer first when the environment is damaged.

Hope

Those who care about the environment can easily become depressed. The news is so often profoundly disturbing: the destruction of forests, the disintegration of coral reefs, the extinction of species, over-fishing, global warming and a multitude of other disasters and gloomy forecasts can cause us to wonder if there is any point in even trying to take action. But the Bible provides much-needed grounds for hope.

The Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Hosea foretell a time of human and environmental harmony. In the New Testament, Jesus is described not just as the Saviour of fallen mankind, but as the one for whom all creation was made - and as the one through whom all creation will one day "be liberated from its bondage to decay" (Colossians 1:15-17; Romans 8:19-23).

We do not know how all this will be accomplished, but we are given motivation and hope. We can be sure that the Almighty God who created and sustains his world wants all his people to be actively involved in his great plan to redeem the whole of creation.

EVANGELICALS IN SOCIETY

FORWARD TOGETHER
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
TEAR FUND and
THE EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

The legacy of Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect:
An evening of celebration and challenge.
With Joel Edwards of the Evangelical Alliance
and others.

The Assembly Hall
23rd May 2007 at 7.30 pm

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

This year our AGM will be at lunch time on Wednesday 23rd May. There is also a change of venue. We will be meeting at the Augustine United Church (where Christian Aid is based), 41 George IV Bridge. There will be the usual free lunch, but instead of a speaker we will deal with business. The Steering Group will propose a change to our Constitution to enable us to increase the membership of the SG to a maximum of 15. We require 80% of the members present to approve this change. Doors will be open from 12.30 and we plan to begin the meeting at 1pm.

Assembly time also means it is time for subscriptions. Membership costs £10 for those who are waged, £5 for those who are not. Cheques should be sent to

Mrs Isobel Berks
11 McKirdy Court
Kirkmuirhill
South Lanarkshire
ML11 9YL

Forward Together is an organisation for evangelicals within the Church of Scotland. Our stated aims are honour the name of our Lord Jesus Christ by obeying his commission to reach the people of Scotland and the whole world with the good news that he is Lord and Saviour. We seek to support and encourage all evangelicals in our Church in their witness to Jesus as Lord and Saviour. We want to promote effective unity among evangelicals in the Kirk. We aim to present a biblical perspective on the life and work of the Church of Scotland in order to maintain her evangelical heritage, especially on contemporary issues of debate.

Membership is open to anyone actively associated with a Church of Scotland congregation, either as a member, adherent or regular attender. There is a basis of faith which all members must subscribe to.

Application forms can be obtained from the Secretary: Rev. Ian M Watson,
The Manse, 2 Lanark Road, Kirkmuirhill,
ML11 9RB

or from our web-site at
www.forwardtogether.org.uk

ASSEMBLY TIME-TABLE AND NOTES

We have tried our best to discover items of particular interest to FT members. The feed-back is that apart from the Report on Human Sexuality it looks as if the Assembly of 2007 will be an uncontroversial affair. Let's hope so!

Saturday 19th May

Opening ceremony. This year's Lord High Commissioner is Prince Andrew.

Legal Questions Committee. Note joint report with Ministries Council regarding discrimination in the Church. The Committee feels obliged to remind the Assembly about the law making women eligible for ordination. Returns to overtures, when Barrier Act results will be given. Be alert to any attempt to high-jack the Civil Partnership debate.

Monday 21st May

**World Mission
Social Care.**

Tuesday 22nd May

Ecumenical Relations Some may wish to encourage the Committee to extend discussions with the Free Church.

Iona Community

Church and Society. As usually C&S feels obliged to comment on anything and everything, including Trident nuclear weapons. However, support the comments on human trafficking. Some may wish to strengthen the deliverances on gambling.

Wednesday 23rd May

Parish Development fund

Church Without Walls

Youth Assembly Report

Mission and Discipleship The Human Sexuality Report will come under M&D.

Thursday 24th May

Chaplain's to HM Forces

Church of Scotland Guild

HIV/AIDS Project

Parish Appraisal

Ministries Council

Friday 25th May

Nominations

General Trustees

Panel on Review and Reform