

## **Reflections on the Issue of Remarriage and State of the Anglican Communion**

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### **Changing landscape**

The last time that Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui grappled with an issue related to human sexuality was some fifteen years ago, when the Synod of the Diocese of Hong Kong and Macao deliberated the issue of remarriage discipline with regard to divorcees whose former spouses are still living. The discussion in Synod ended rather with a whimper.

Looking back, as the Convenor of the Commission which produced the Report for the Synod debate fifteen years ago, it seems that the Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui community is as little prepared now to discuss issues on human sexuality as it was then. The community of faith was predominantly conservative in its outlook. Little headway was made in coming to grips with the theological issues involved in the discussion. Since then, there were some attempts in reviving the discussion on marriage discipline at both the Provincial and Diocesan levels. However, so far, the issue is still not resolved.

Meanwhile, the landscape has considerably changed. Fifteen years ago, the matter was deliberated in a rather academic fashion. Most Synod members, especially those from the Chinese churches, did not feel a sense of urgency to the matter. It was felt that by simply ignoring the issue, it will go away. Divorce rate was still relatively low in Hong Kong. This is no longer the case.

At the same time, the issue of marriage discipline in the church has taken a very acute turn in the wider Anglican Communion. Human sexuality became a very divisive issue in the worldwide church. Questions on homosexuality, same sex union, ordination of self-professed homosexuals find their way, often in sensational manner, into the agenda of the church, with the real possibility that they can tear the Communion apart. Some take a rigorist position. They worry that assent to one issue would open the dam, which leaves the church unprotected against the onslaught of other issues. To them, the stance on human sexuality (and in our case, among some of our own members, on remarriage) becomes the litmus test of orthodoxy.

### **What issues? Whose Communion?**

I think the present crisis in human sexuality goes beyond the familiar conflict between the theologically liberal and conservative camps. The conflict is much more profound. What is at stake is the assumption that the Anglican Communion is expected to reach a universally enforceable agreement on the issue of human sexuality, a task which it can never accomplish.

The reason is not difficult to see. Most members of the Anglican Communion live in the African sub-continent and South America, with little access to information technology, and live with material scarcity. At the same time, a decreasing number of Anglicans live in the technologically advanced West, which still dictates the agenda of the Communion by setting the pace of theological reflection, liturgical practices and policies by virtue of their financial power. There are two worlds in the Communion: one is still tied to the earth, whose livelihood is dependent on providence – “All good gifts around us, are sent from heaven above”; and the other lives in societies which are intrinsically bound with the suppositions of globalization. The point is that the

instruments of unity of the Communion – that is, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Consultative Council, and Primates’ Meeting – are increasingly exercised through, and dependent on, information technology, that is, the cultural assumptions of the fading minority in the Communion, which the majority in the South cannot meaningfully participate. There can never be real “give and take” if real time communication depends not so much on the Holy Spirit but on the bandwidth of the Internet Service Providers. The number of news flash one now receives on a daily basis from the Anglican Communion News Service is a case in point. Each news flash, with innovative theological statement here, and new policies on human sexuality there, come as missile launches to the South, to which they become unintelligible and unable to respond to. The news on the internet at the same time is meant to be selective, designed to shock, to achieve high hit rates, and thus be picked up by search engines. (Who would sponsor a website which carries news of ordinary happenings in a parish?) Put in other words, the Anglican Communion has unconsciously found itself to meet each other in a completely new forum, that of virtual reality, which it has not understood properly. Issues which affect all of us are not discussed face to face, but exploded upon different parts of the world in the most public way by means of a news flash on a web site. Each statement posted on the world-wide web puts undue pressure to leaders of the rest of the Communion to issue immediate response, because the “news has gone out”. Gone are the days when issues were deliberated with all British reserve in the cool recesses in Lambeth Palace, chapter houses in cathedrals, or common rooms in ancient universities, Every encounter becomes increasingly used for publicity rather than for fostering genuine dialogue.

### **New wine, new wineskin**

The days when we can consider the Anglican Church with the suppositions of an established church are over. In days of Christendom, when church and society were one, the laws of Christ were meant to be laws of the land; heads of the state were summoned to further the welfare of the gospel, and bishops to instruct the authorities the Word of God. That ideal had never materialized in any former colony of the British Empire, and now except in formality is not so visible even in the Church of England. We find ourselves today in a post-Christendom world in situations which bear more resemblance to the early church, before Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire.

What has all this to do with marriage discipline, which started off this reflection in the first place. The point is that our marriage discipline had been shaped by suppositions as if we still lived in a Christian society. In the early church, the church understood its role as simply pastoral and religious. It did not have, nor could it assume, any civil role in marriage. The situation only changed in western Europe in medieval times. The church was then required by law to be involved in the rites of passage: people got married in church, and their offsprings were brought to the church for baptism. The church through its marriage discipline had a hold on the social status of members of the community. Excommunication by the church had serious social repercussions for the member involved. The Roman Catholic Church began too to tighten its marriage discipline at the wake of the Reformation by requiring the presence of priest, and the reciting of prescribed form of blessing in marriage ceremony.

Such is a far cry from today’s world, both in the West and in Hong Kong. We live in a designer culture which understands church membership, human relationships and sexuality in different ways. Patterns of human relationships and sexuality are understood today in terms of individual preferences, and hence can be tailor-made by technological design. (Note in this regard the messages in contemporary films “Basic Instinct”, “A.I.”, etc.). The growing number in our society which opt for cohabitation, same sex union, surrogate motherhood, etc. is a case in point.

The three “goods” or “ends” of marriage, as the Christian Church traditionally taught, are challenged in fundamental ways: that is, the concept of permanence, of bearing with each other’s sexual weakness and strength, and of the responsibility in child bearing and rearing, are increasingly incomprehensible to the contemporary world.

This is not to say that we are simply to give in to the currents of contemporary ethos. It is rather a sober reminder that we have to recognize this new missionary context, and have to learn to engage the society in a completely radical manner. The primary task of the church is not to provide legislations for the society, not to reach consensus with the wider community, nor to demonstrate our relevance to the wider world. We are called simply to demonstrate an inner integrity of our communal life: “Love one another. By this all will know that we are Jesus’ disciples.”

### **The Task of Love. A Plea for Theological Undertaking in the Church**

We can begin in a small way to overcome the present impasse in human sexuality by fostering true communion in the context of real community.

That takes place when we begin to love, as Saint John poignantly reminded us. The Compass Rose captivates this spirit. At the centre is the cross. True, it is the Cross of *Saint George*, in recognition of our historical link to England; yet this is perhaps only noticed nowadays by avid British football supporters! There is the *Cross* at the centre, with the encompassing words of Jesus: truth will set you free. This provides bearing for the episcopal church as it embarks to take the gospel to the four corners of the world. The emblem is dynamic rather than static. It holds out to the fulfillment in the future rather than to cling on to a fading past.

The name of our church, and indeed that of East Asian churches in our Communion, also captivate this spirit. The identity of “Sheng Kung Hui” (or “Sei Ko Kai” in Japan, “Sung Kong Hoe” in Korea), is much more profound than that of “Anglican Church.” Our future does not lie with the English (“Anglican”) past. The vision is the “Holy Catholic Church” of Christ, that lofty vision which is worthy of our Anglican forefathers. We should never conceive ourselves as simply a denominational church, as Bishop Stephen Neill more than a generation ago advocated. We are in the journey of becoming, willing to be changed and embraced into the wider whole as the truth of Jesus summons us to do so.

For a post colonial church to grow up, we are called not simply to subscribe to the Articles of faith of the Church of England, as if that were a complete product, which require no further engagement other than formal assent. Such is alien to the spirit of fellowship. I can still think of the days when the history of the early church was taught in seminaries as if all that matters in the early church were the major theological controversies. It came as a shock in my second year in seminary when I discovered that the church fathers were confused with what they meant by *homoousios* (“of one substance”) in the Council of Nicea in the fourth century. The fifth century church fathers in their doctrine of the Person of Christ did not end the discussion of further Christological reflection. They only set the *framework* for further discussion of the Personhood of Christ. Alas, post-colonial churches are often taught as if the past and the West have done all theological thinking, conveniently packaged and labeled as liberal, evangelical, catholic, and charismatic. All that is required for us to do is to choose the package, follow the instructions, and apply them to our context.

The sense of indignation in the face of what many young churches regard as moral and theological confusion in the West should serve as a timely reminder for them of the task of sustained theological reflections. In other words, churches should begin to consider setting up ways by which sustained theological reflections should feed into the lifeblood of the church. We need to move beyond the stage when we are forced to either condone or condemn positions taken by churches in the West.

Turning to the issue at hand, the question of remarriage – which our Province is presently involved in – and that touches on human sexuality, is theological in nature. We owe it to the community of faith and the wider society to share with them the Christian values in marriage and in what it means to be a human person. We begin to do that as the community of faith begins to seek clarification from the Word of God on the questions of human sexuality and marriage. For example, how we understand fulfillment? Is sexual experience the only route for human fulfillment; How we understand vocation? Is singleness to be regretted and is the second best? Is there a place for covenant relationship? Are all relationships reducible to contractual transactions?

At the last analysis, it does not matter whether the church decides at the end to allow divorcees to remarry in church. What is important is that we do have a position which arises from our reflection on our faith. There is no shying away from such task. It is easy, as Stephen Neill put it, to be a lazy Anglican. One can just sit back and acquiesce. To be a true Anglican demands the task of love, that summons our whole mind, with our whole soul, with our whole heart, and with our whole strength. We may find the temptation of hasty pronouncements, or siding with a party position as easy ways out, as if we can huddle behind dogmatic pronouncements of church leaders and experts, or to be overly excited by the latest sociological analysis. A member of the “Holy Catholic Church” in the main should not adopt such attitudes. The Communion today is in acute need of sharing from young churches in Asia and the South to participate in genuine fellowship. God calls us to this higher task, to be in fellowship with truth, and a doer of truth in the cotemporary world. I am full of hope for the continuing welfare of “Sheng Kung Hui” Communion (*pushi shenggonghui*).

January 2004, Macao